

A Century of the Muslim Brotherhood: Taking Stock

by Daniel Pipes

In *The Secret Apparatus: The Muslim Brotherhood's Industry of Death* (New York: Bombardier, 2022), an ambitious and powerful book by Cynthia Farahat, she argues that the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), founded nearly a century ago, presents a far greater threat than is usually perceived, being nothing less than “the world’s incubator of modern Islamic terrorism” and “the world’s most dangerous militant cult.” She traces leading Egyptian groups such as al-Takfir wa’l-Hijra, al-Jama‘a al-Islamiya, and Egyptian Islamic Jihad back to the MB, as well as non-Egyptian ones, including Ansar al-Shari‘a in Libya, Jama‘at al-Tawhid wa’l-Jihad in Jordan, Talai‘ al-Fateh in several countries, Hamas, the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and ISIS. With such an array of accomplishments, she concludes that the MB presents an “existential threat” to the United States. Those not alarmed by the MB, in brief, Farahat wants urgently to alarm.



*Hasan al-Banna (center), founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, with supporters, circa 1928. In her new book *The Secret Apparatus*, Cynthia Farahat calls the group an “existential threat” to the United States.*

The author is an Egyptian who immigrated a decade ago to the United States, where she has written on jihad for American publications, penned a column for an Egyptian newspaper, testified before Congress, and advised U.S. law enforcement about Islamism and jihad. Before that, in Egypt, she co-founded the Liberal Egyptian party, whose platform endorsed capitalism, separation of mosque and state, and peace with Israel. She studied Islamic jurisprudence and history and co-authored a book (in Arabic) titled *Desecration of a Heavenly Religion* in 2008. For her efforts, al-Azhar University banned the book while she herself was banned from Lebanon and landed on the hit list of an al-Qaeda-affiliated group.

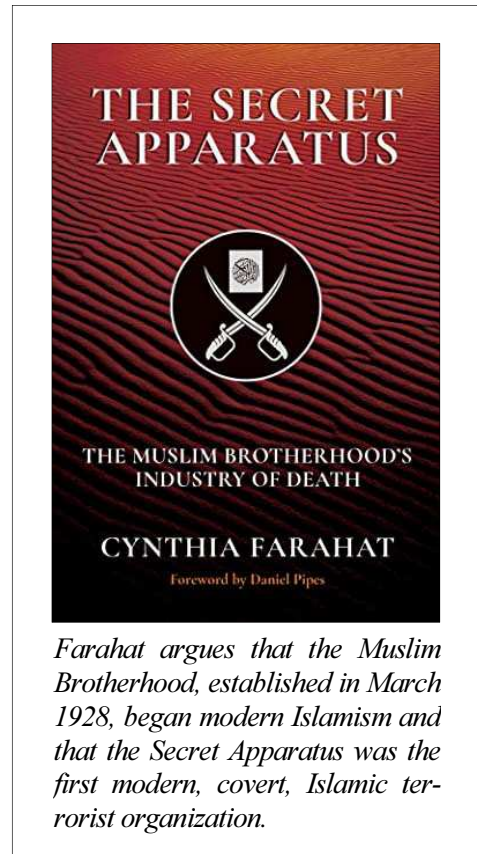
This book, *The Secret Apparatus*, contains a wealth of names, dates, events, and other granular facts, all needed to establish the author's case; accordingly, it is not a book to be speed-read but studied and returned to. Much of the evidence is original, Farahat having taken advantage of archives opened after the 2013 revolution in Egypt or relying on new sources, such as memories of the hyperthymestic Tharwat al-Kherbawy. To help the reader approach and appreciate the book, therefore, I propose to sketch out the main lines here, adding some reflections of my own.

The book has five main parts: background influences, the MB founder, deceptions, impact, and U.S. policy.

Background Influences

Farahat argues that the Muslim Brotherhood, established on March 22, 1928, began modern Islamism; and that the Secret Apparatus was “the first covert Islamic terrorist organization in modern history.” She traces the MB's origins to two main sources:

(1) Iran and the Shiite branch of Islam: the medieval Assassins served as “the biggest influence on the Brotherhood's formation,”



Farahat argues that the Muslim Brotherhood, established in March 1928, began modern Islamism and that the Secret Apparatus was the first modern, covert, Islamic terrorist organization.

something made possible by *taqrib*, the effort to narrow theological differences between Shiite and Sunni Islam, with the ultimate goal of reestablishing the caliphate and jointly waging jihad against their common enemies. The Iranian Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani, founder of the modern jihad project, may have been “the most important figure in the revival of Islamism” because he combined Western secret societies with Islamic clandestine proselytism. MB founder Hasan al-Banna drew heavily on this legacy to create a “twentieth-century equivalent of the order of the Assassins.”

Farahat reports the surprising news that Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini visited Banna in Cairo in 1938. She speculates that “Banna swayed Khomeini, as Banna's influence on Khomeini would become apparent years later.” In the mid-1960s, Ali Khamenei took

advantage of his time in an Iranian prison to translate two of the MB's key books by Sayyid Qutb into Persian. The Iranian revolution of 1978-79 saw an MB branch formally established in Iran. Also at that time, Khomeini apparently suggested the wording of the MB's key slogan, "Islam is the solution." During the Iraq-Iran war (1980-88), the MB used its influence to help Tehran; in turn, Tehran generously funded Hamas. When Khamenei became Iran's supreme leader in 1989, he included those two Qutb books in the curriculum of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' schools; in return, MB leaders included Khomeini among its most important teachers along with Banna, Qutb, and Abul A'la Maududi. The two sides forged new bonds following the overthrow of Husni Mubarak in 2011, when the MB fervently supported Iran's nuclear program.

From this long record, Farahat concludes, "The Muslim Brotherhood and Iranian cooperation is one of the most dangerous and complicated relationships in the world of international politics, jihadism, and transnational terrorism."

(2) Modern Western ideas and institutions: These many and eclectic influences included: the Freemasons (especially the idea of a clandestine organization) and a range of twentieth-century dictators: Kaiser "Hajji" Wilhelm II and his World War I propaganda (especially the subversive work of Max von Oppenheim), the Nazis (especially the brutality of the Sturmabteilung or S.A.), and the Soviets (especially Lenin's ideas, the Comintern's dual model of public party and secret apparatus, and Stalin's NKVD). Although Banna admired Hitler, and the MB personnel "continue to adhere to Hitler's values until

Cooperation between the Muslim Brotherhood and Iran "is one of the most dangerous ... relationships in the world."

today," Stalin had the most influence on the MB's structure, which copied his domestic and international institutions of power as well as the Comintern model. Indeed, "Banna modeled his organization after Stalin's governing apparatuses, a structure still used by the Muslim Brotherhood today." A more brutal model one cannot imagine.

Hasan al-Banna

In addition to these influences lies the character of the MB's founder, Hasan al-Banna, which remains dominant long after his death: his "paranoid, obsessive, and criminal vision endures through the chameleon-like entity he created." For example, the organization's by-laws demanded that members "prioritize the interest of the group over the interest of the individual" and the group viewed members' children as fodder for its ambitions. Ultimately, every member must vow total obedience to the leader, known as the General Guide. Lesser officers of the organization, known as emirs, then involve themselves in every aspect of a member's life, including marriages, illnesses, and hardships, with an eye to pressure, blackmail, or bribe the member. For example, MB operatives must marry within the organization and to someone from a family with a status similar to their own.

Beyond these internal matters, Banna stressed two themes especially: the caliphate and death. "The Muslim Brotherhood's raison d'être is to establish an Islamic caliphate" that will apply Islamic law, the Shari'a. That is because, for it, as for many

other Islamists, “the answer to every problem—from trouble with their in-laws, to health issues, to public policy concerns—is the return of the Caliphate.” Toward this end, the MB uses all methods, lawful or criminal.

Banna’s renowned definition of the MB’s principles hints at his peculiar preoccupation with death: “God is our goal, the Prophet is our model, the Qur’an is our law, jihad is our path, and martyrdom is our aspiration.” The mention of an “Industry of Death” (*sina‘at al-mawt*) in the title of this book refers to a memorably perverse article by Banna in which he discusses the glory of dying for Islam:

Death is an art, sometimes a beautiful art despite its bitterness, it might even be the most beautiful of arts if it is created by the hands of a masterful artist. The Qur’an honorably presented it to its believers and compelled them to cherish and love it more than others love life ... Muslims will not be saved from their reality unless they adopt the Qur’an’s philosophy of death and embrace it as an art, a truly beautiful art.

Banna exalted death over all else. He “believed that loving life was a deadly sin which prevented Muslims from entering paradise. He held that Muslims could only go to heaven if they ‘shed their blood as tax for [loving] life.’” His leading disciple, Qutb, then “continued Banna’s doctrinal principle that all Muslim who aren’t members in jihadists groups are infidels and deserved to get killed.” It gets worse:

While it is widely known that the Muslim Brotherhood believes in the extermination of all non-Muslims, it is not common knowledge that they also consider



The Muslim Brotherhood thrives on deception, directing members to found seemingly unrelated offshoots including Egypt’s Free Officers (above, 1953), Hamas, and al-Jama‘a al-Islamiya.

all Islamic nations houses of war, and the vast majority of Muslims as infidels whom they believe should be killed.

In short, the MB is a perfected killing machine.

Mixed together, influences of the Assassins, Stalin, and Banna created an organization summed up by Banna’s statement that “the laws and teachings of Islam are a total system complete unto itself as the final arbiter of life in this world and the hereafter.”

Three Deceptions

Farahat offers three key insights about MB methods to explain the institution’s success, all based on deception.

The first concerns a deception based on a duality, namely the existence of a somewhat benign public face, the General Apparatus, and a demonic, covert militia, the

Secret Apparatus. The organization has engaged in doublespeak about its two halves since 1951, with the one opportunistically spouting liberal democratic values and the other expressing “extremist and pro-terrorism rhetoric.” At the same time, it has been clear that the leader of the Secret Apparatus, known as the Secret Guide, has since 1971 been the MB’s ultimate leader; during this half-century, the General Guide merely “acts as a public relations figure.” Those public relations duties have included persuasively to perpetuate “the myth that the Secret Apparatus is no longer operational” when in fact it very much is. Both the public and clandestine divisions operate on the basis of Banna’s permanent jihad, thereby permitting all sorts of criminal and other illegal undertakings.

Part of this deception includes the pretense of having abandoned force in favor of legitimate politics: “every time the Muslim Brotherhood publicly renounced violence, it engaged in clandestine jihadist activities under a different banner.” Indeed, the MB cannot give up force under any circumstances:

If the Brotherhood were to give up violent jihad, it would mean the leaders had dismantled the organization, because the Muslim Brotherhood would lose its legitimacy and its sole reason for its existence.

The second deception concerns the MB practice of directing members formally to sever ties with it and to found seemingly unrelated offshoots. The Free Officers “perpetrated the 1952 coup d’état” that ended Egypt’s monarchy. Egypt’s various Salafi

Al-Azhar University spreads the MB message on “the theological legitimacy of inflicting pain upon infidels.”

organizations make the MB look moderate. Hamas so successfully infused the Palestinian-Israeli conflict with violence that it became “a model” for other MB franchises. Al-Jama‘a al-

Islamiya and the Muslim Brotherhood, Anwar Sadat once noted, “are one and the same.” Rif‘at Qumsan, an Egyptian general, includes more groups, stating,

We should not be fooled with names such as Daesh [ISIS], Nusrat al-Haq, Nusrat al-Islam, Hamas, etc. They are all one. We can say the Brotherhood is the frame for all these organizations, whether so-called peaceful ones, like Jam‘at al-Tabligh wa’l-Da‘wa, or the most violent ones, such as Al-Qaeda, Tanzim al-Jihad, and Daesh.

This pattern of “franchising the Brotherhood terrorism model” makes the MB a far greater menace than if it acted as a solitary organization, especially as each branch operates its own Secret Apparatus.

The third deception involves infiltration. The Secret Apparatus unit dealing with intelligence systematically

infiltrates and internally subverts political parties, militaries, intelligence agencies, media, educational systems, governmental and nongovernmental organizations, and other influential groups.

The Egyptian government has been the primary target of this campaign; other institutions include charitable organizations, Egypt’s Communist party, and al-Azhar University.

Indeed, al-Azhar University has a unique role in spreading the MB message, starting with “the theological legitimacy of inflicting pain upon infidels”; for example, the “Muslim is allowed to murder an apostate and eat him, [as well as] kill [an infidel] warrior, even if they are a child or female. It is permissible to eat them because they are not [granted] protection.” With such an education, it hardly shocks one to learn that jihadis sometimes “conceal their terrorism manifestos as masters and PhD theses” at al-Azhar. As a result, “Some of the world’s most brutal jihadis received their formal religious training” at one of al-Azhar’s many affiliated mosques, schools, learning centers, and universities around the world. Burhanuddin Rabbani, who had a major role in forwarding Islamism in Afghanistan, offers one such example.

Farahat considers in detail the case of Omar Abdel-Rahman, known as the Blind Sheikh. Remembered in the West for spending decades in prison following his inciting jihad against New York City monuments, she argues he had a much larger role, calling him “the most influential theologian for Sunni militant groups over the past fifty years” and “the Godfather of Islamic jihad.” Specifically, he was “the ideological founder” of al-Jama‘a al-Islamiya and al-Qaeda, both of which he mentioned in his doctoral thesis. She also reports that he received “direct institutional support and theological legitimization” from al-Azhar University for these activities and that he “couldn’t have created this massive wave of transnational terrorism without al-Azhar.” Finally, she speculates that al-Azhar was “directly involved” in the founding of al-Qaeda.

Infiltration has paid great dividends:

Decades of infiltration have allowed active Muslim Brotherhood members to control Qatar, Turkey, Sudan, and formerly Egypt. Western nations deeply



Omar Abdel-Rahman (above), the Blind Sheikh, imprisoned for inciting jihad. Farahat calls him “the Godfather of Islamic jihad” and “the ideological founder” of al-Qaeda.

affected by the Brotherhood’s destabilizing tactics include the United States, United Kingdom, and Germany.

In brief, funded by Egyptian taxpayers, al-Azhar “militarizes its students and turns them into jihadis.” Farahat concludes that not only infidels must fear al-Azhar’s teachings but “all Muslims are also in danger” from them.

Impact

Noteworthy MB acts of jihadi violence have included the assassination of Egypt’s Prime Minister Ahmad Maher Pasha in 1945, former Prime Minister Mahmoud Fahmi al-Nuqrashi in 1948, and President Sadat in 1981. In addition, it nearly assassinated Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1954. Also, MB members

actively participated in the burning of much of central Cairo in 1952.

But the MB's Civilizational Jihad Operation using lawful means to extend its influence, Farahat argues, is even "more damaging" than violence. Egypt, home of the MB, is the model for Civilizational Jihad. In Egypt, the MB since the late 1950s "has almost full control over al-Azhar University," the Cairo-based institution that enjoys worldwide prestige among Sunni Muslims. Within Egypt itself, al-Azhar's personnel effectively controlled the legislative branch of government by virtue of their ability to draft or vet laws prior to their being taken to parliament.

Both the first and second presidents of Egypt, Mohamed Naguib and Gamal Abdel Nasser, were clandestine MB members (Nasser had joined in 1942). Nasser may have been "a totalitarian dilettante who adopted far-left-wing ideologies" but he released all MB jihadis from prison and employed German Nazis to "dismantle the Egyptian education system and ideologically subvert the country." Nasser visited Banna's grave in 1954 along with his successor Sadat; there, they both pledged allegiance to the MB founder. Nasser swore, "As God is my witness, I will uphold [Banna's] values and wage a jihad on their behalf."

Sadat had long been an MB member, as was his successor Mubarak (who joined in 1944). Farahat describes the latter as someone "armed with the audacity of profound ignorance, the rigidity of the peasantry, and a lust for power." So complete was the MB infiltration of the military under Mubarak that Abbas Mukheimer, the army major general he appointed to oversee the purge of officers with MB or other Islamist affiliations, himself was an MB member. Also, during Mubarak's rule, the MB's

Egyptian presidents Naguib, Nasser, Sadat, and Mubarak were all Muslim Brotherhood members.

terrorism recruitment was state sponsored and broadcast around the clock on the Egyptian government's Radio and Television Union's communications satellite, Nilesat.

Muhammad Hussein Tantawi, who carried out a coup d'état in 2011 on the MB's behalf, probably was a member, and the military council he headed was openly Islamist, to the point of funding the MB and its affiliated Salafi political parties. Of course, Mohamed Morsi, who ruled Egypt in 2012-13 was publicly a member and, indeed, had been overtly chosen by the MB to run for president. In a key appointment, Morsi made Abdel Fattah al-Sisi his minister of defense, relying on the fact that Sisi came from MB royalty, being a descendant of MB co-founder Abbas al-Sisi.

Under Morsi, things changed radically, with the MB becoming

openly jihadist. The group installed torture and murder tents or camps across Egypt, where they abducted, tortured, and murdered protesters and sometimes random civilians.

Worse, it had drawn up plans for mass extermination of Egyptians, both Christian and Muslim, in keeping with Banna's eschatological doctrine of annihilating the Muslim population as a blood sacrifice, what he called a blood tax (*daribat ad-damm*).

With this, however, the MB finally went too far: "Widespread, indiscriminate torture and murder carried out by the Brotherhood resulted in wide opposition to it," spurring the largest political rally in all history on June 30, 2013, followed immediately by a revolution headed by Sisi, who came to power riding a massive wave

of popularity. Then, against nearly all expectations, Sisi turned on the MB and became Egypt's first anti-MB president. When the MB refused to accept this reality, instituting a wave of violence against the new regime, Sisi responded in December 2013 by designating it a terrorist organization.

In all, "From 1952 to 2012, each of Egypt's transitions of power resulted from a coup d'état by [military] officers belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood." More than that, for much of this era, they "were the power behind decision making" and, indeed, "dominated the country." During this time, MB influence in Egypt meant that most government institutions were but "decorative structures [intended] to give the country a superficially modern guise" even as the MB actually ruled. Also, the MB only pretended to fight the government during that 60-year period while in fact serving as the "government-sponsored fake opposition," which the government went so far as to subsidize via its business enterprises.

The MB also wields extensive power outside of Egypt. Amin al-Husseini, the mufti of Jerusalem, helped the MB establish itself in Mandatory Palestine and Transjordan. In Afghanistan, the MB "played a pivotal role" in the Soviet-Afghan war" by helping jihadis from the Middle East to reach Afghanistan. In the middle of that war, in 1985, three MB leaders (Abdullah Azzam, Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri) founded an organization that later morphed into al-Qaeda. Other MB figures had a key role in founding the Taliban. In Sudan, Omar al-Bashir seized power in 1989, making him "the first member of the Muslim



The Muslim Brotherhood wields power outside Egypt. In Tunisia (above), an MB coup d'état deposed Tunisia's president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in 2011, initiating the "Arab Spring" uprisings.

Brotherhood publicly and officially to rule a country." In Tunisia, an MB coup d'état deposed Tunisia's President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in 2011, initiating the "Arab Spring." Most remarkably, Farhat finds numerous indicators to suggest that the Turkish strongman, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, is both the General and the Secret Guide of the MB as well as head of its International Apparatus. Under his leadership, "Turkey became the command-and-control center for Islamic terrorism," while Istanbul has become "a haven for recruiting terrorists, smuggling jihadis in and out of Turkey, and plotting international terrorist attacks."

As Muslim immigration to the West has increased, so too have MB activities there, relying as usual on the dual structure of an overt organization, which operates benign-appearing schools, mosques, and the like, and a covert one that establishes, funds, and partially or fully operates violent jihadi groups. The Blind Sheikh, Omar Abdel-Rahman, is perhaps the most notorious MB exemplar of the latter strain.

U.S. Policy

Turning to U.S. policy, Farahat is dismayed to find that MB deceptions have succeeded: “veiled terminology was a contributing factor to the infiltration of the U.S. government, and led to policies that supported the Muslim Brotherhood.” To help fix this problem, she offers a guide to MB use of language. *Truth* means the implementation of the Shari‘a. *Freedom* means the freedom from transgressions against the Shari‘a. *Tyranny* means opposing the Shari‘a. *Justice* means Shari‘a over every aspect of life. *Peace* means accepting the rule of Muslims. *Islamic revival* means the subjugation of all people on earth to God. This coded Islamist terminology, entwined with infiltration, she concludes, “has allowed the world’s most violent jihadist group to gain power in America.”

She also finds that Washington has replaced its old approach of peace through strength with a “nineteenth-century, German-Ottoman strategy of employing jihadist mercenaries to carry out broken policies.” This has had devastating consequences: misguided Western policy vis-à-vis the MB has contributed to hundreds of thousands of deaths and the displacement of 2.7 million people by the Muslim Brotherhood’s regime in Sudan alone. Furthermore, the riots and protests that erupted across the Middle East in 2011 were a direct result of a lenient U.S. policy toward the Muslim Brotherhood.

During just the past decade, Farahat argues, mistaken U.S. policies “resulted in the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives and the displacement of millions of people in the Middle East.”

To sustain its “security and for freedom to thrive internationally,” she argues, Washington

The 2011 Middle East riots and protests were a direct result of a lenient U.S. policy toward the Muslim Brotherhood.

“must criminalize the Muslim Brotherhood” by designating it a terrorist organization. Doing so not only will clarify the identity of the enemy, but will also help with the crucial distinction between

Muslims and Islamists: Muslim Brothers

have desecrated their own religion by weaponizing theological terminology and poisoning it with violent and terroristic definitions that are alien to the vast majority of Muslims.

The Secret Apparatus ends with these sobering words:

Either you are with the overwhelming majority of Muslims, and every peaceful individual on earth, or you are with the Muslim Brotherhood.

Over two decades of research on the Muslim Brotherhood led Cynthia Farahat to a horrified appreciation of its achievement as “one of the world’s most complex criminal enterprises.” Her book makes a compelling case to see the MB not as one of many contending Islamist organizations but as a historic trailblazer and the source of untold misery.

Daniel Pipes (DanielPipes.org, @DanielPipes) is president of the Middle East Forum. The text above appears, in slightly different form, as the foreword to *The Secret Apparatus* © 2022. All rights reserved.

