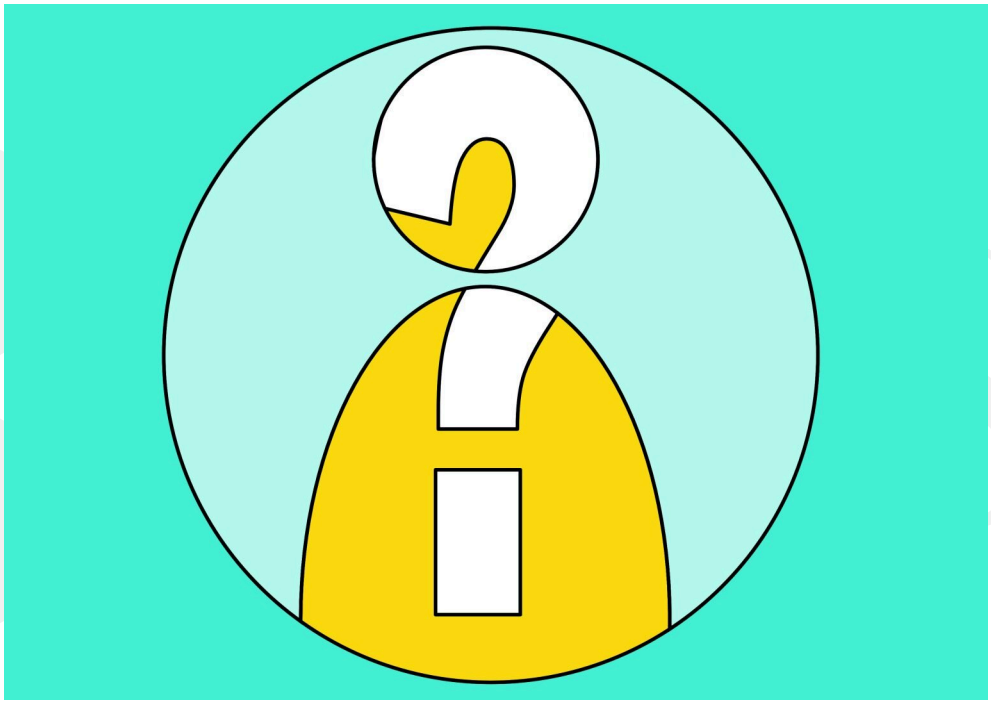
The Muslim Brotherhood as Hybrid Actor

29 OCTOBER 2024

Ralph Thiele



Ralph Thiele Abu Dhabi, 24 October 2024

The West under fire

The world has become a rougher place. The US and its democratic allies are under "heavy fire from a loose but increasingly tight front" consisting of China, Russia, Turkey, Iran and radical political Islam, as leading French philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy observed in a recent interview with Politico. At the heart of the conflict are power, prosperity and a new world order.

A hybrid front has emerged that operates in grey areas and is difficult to identify. Actors in political Islam, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, have positioned themselves to take advantage of the upheaval in the world order. They want to play a central role in shaping political, legal, social and cultural

systems worldwide with an all-encompassing, totalitarian interpretation of Islam.

The Brotherhood's mission is to islamise society through the promotion of religious law, values and morals. It has long combined preaching and political activism with social welfare to advance this goal. But it has a history of violence. Several countries, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt, have designated the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organisation because of its perceived destabilising influence and links to Islamist extremism. In other countries, however, the Brotherhood continues to operate legally and engage in political activism. Following Egyptian President Sisi's visit in April 2019, the White House instructed national security officials to pursue a terrorist designation for the Muslim Brotherhood. However, countries such as Qatar and Turkey have cultivated ties with the Brotherhood and its offshoots, and many exiled members of the Egyptian group have settled in these countries.

Hybrid threats aim to disrupt governments, societies and international alliances. Hybrid actors such as the Brotherhood operate in 'grey areas'. They use a wide range of social, political, economic, informational, technological and paramilitary tools to achieve maximum effect. The use of non-kinetic means in combination with violence is a key feature of hybrid conflicts. And modern, new and disruptive technologies, such as AI, cyber, robotics, space and many more, provide the Brotherhood with extended reach and high impact, not least on social media, where they attract a growing community of followers and supporters.

Monitored by European security services

Until now, the Brotherhood has generally been able to operate freely in the West within a democratic framework because it is not considered a terrorist organisation. While the Brotherhood's branches in the Middle East have historically kept many aspects of their activities secret, they haven't denied their own existence in the way that is common in the West. Here, most Brotherhood-linked activists and organisations not only shroud their inner workings in secrecy, but even refuse to admit any connection to the Brotherhood. In contrast, the still relatively small groups of full-fledged Brotherhood members in each European country in which they are active have created an extensive network of NGOs, mosques, schools, lobbying groups and other types of entities that exert a disproportionate influence both within Muslim communities and on European politics and civil society. Brotherhood activists and sympathisers also tend to attack those who highlight the existence of Brotherhood-linked networks in Europe and their problematic nature with accusations of shoddy research, conspiratorial views and bigotry.

The Brotherhood is not listed as a terrorist organisation by the European Union or by any European country. At the same time, however, the secu-

rity services of virtually every European country have long monitored the movement. With varying degrees of intensity, European security services have kept the Brotherhood under surveillance. Virtually all of them have taken a very negative view of the Muslim Brotherhood on the continent. They have publicly expressed their views on the Muslim Brotherhood in Europe over the past twenty years, stating that

The Handbook

Together with Thomas Jäger, I led a major research project and earlier this year published the Handbook of Political Islam in Europe: Activities, Means, and Strategies from Salafists to the Muslim Brotherhood and Beyond (Springer Handbooks of Political Science and International Relations) 2024. We have approached the field of political Islam from a European security perspective and found that

The Handbook contains a series of case studies and country reviews written by distinguished experts in the field. It offers a comparative perspective and a comprehensive overview of the ideology and spread of Political Islam and its actors in more than 20 European countries. The contributors identify the main actors of political Islam and the activities, means and strategies they pursue and employ across the continent. They also discuss whether and how Political Islam could undermine the Western liberal democratic order and its associated values in hybrid ways, with and without violence.

Muslim Brotherhood activities are reported in virtually all the countries and regions studied. A key finding for Spain is that the Islamist scene there is dominated, if not "monopolised", by the various variants of the Muslim Brotherhood. The contribution on the Netherlands notes that the Brotherhood has managed to gain more influence through practical cooperation with other organisations than its size in the Netherlands would suggest. Among the countries where political Islam is more extensively observed are European countries with large populations, such as Germany, the United Kingdom and Spain, as well as Austria, Switzerland and Sweden.

Conspicuously absent or barely present is Political Islam in countries such as Portugal and Greece. The article on Portugal notes that no state or transnational actors are known to be "promoting political Islamism" on Portuguese territory. And traces of political Islam in Greece are described as being in an 'embryonic stage of development'. The country chapter on Romania states that 'the risks of influence of Islamist practices on the current democratic establishment in Romania are currently low'. Similarly, the article on the Western Balkans notes that the region's Islamic communities 'remain moderate, with their official narrative only rarely fragile enough to succumb to radical influences'.

In terms of goals and means, Bassam Tibi identifies the creation of an Islamic state as the overarching, ultimate goal of political Islam. This

overarching goal is taken up in principle in several contributions, e.g. from Austria, Belgium, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

The article on Austria makes the general observation that the goals of Islamist actors in that country – but also in other European countries – have changed over time: For the first generation of Islamist activists, Western European countries thus served as a base from which they could support the parent organisations in their countries of origin and change conditions there in order to return to their home countries as soon as possible. Now, however, political Islam organisations seem to be concentrating more on influencing local politics. One goal, according to this article, is to build Islamic parallel societies and, in the long term, to spread their visions in Western societies. Another goal, repeatedly mentioned, is to gain (sole) interpretive sovereignty over the understanding of Islam vis-à-vis the Muslim community in the respective state.

Policy Recommendations

Political Islam challenges enlightened democratic states in many ways. In the coming years, the number of subtle, hybrid actors is likely to increase at the expense of those who are easier to categorise. New and disruptive technologies have become force multipliers for their actors to translate their objectives into action, including violent action. This is a challenge for the entire state and society, and must be met with nationwide and society-wide measures. Understanding this socio-cultural dimension and resisting its forces requires political education, defensible democracy and thus the self-organisation of democratic life. It is also an important task of the security services to keep track of the various vectors of attack on state stability and social cohesion. Recommendations for the future containment of Islamist threats in Europe include

Three vectors are important.

To sum up: Our fellow Muslims are not the problem. The Muslim Brotherhood and Islamists are the problem. And we need to do a better job of dealing with hybrid threats. Going forward, it will be important to improve cooperation between the police, judiciary, media, civil authorities, intelligence services and the armed forces so that anti-state and anti-democratic efforts by the Muslim Brotherhood can be promptly identified and prevented.

DOI 10.69790/epis05.81057