



Book Review of Martyn Frampton, *The Muslim Brotherhood and the West: A History of Enmity and Engagement*

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The complex history between the Muslim Brotherhood, the world's oldest and most influential Islamist organization, and the West is a topic that has received too little attention until now. Martyn Frampton has written an in-depth and outstanding history of the Muslim Brotherhood's complex relations with Britain and the United States that promises to be the critical source on the issue. Frampton focuses on Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, and his controversial views of Western culture and his desire to expel the British from Egypt Utilizing extensive British, American and Muslim Brotherhood (MB) sources, Frampton shows how the MB and Western powers distrusted each other before and after WW II. Nevertheless, this did not prevent them from viewing each other as being useful in the context of the Cold War.

Founded by Hasan al-Banna (d.1949) in Egypt in 1928, the Muslim Brotherhood is the best-known Islamist organization in the world today. It has influenced nearly every Islamist organization, (including jihadist organizations such as ISIS and al-Qaeda) which believes that Sharia, Islamic law, should govern society. He wanted the Egyptian constitution expunged of all laws not sanctioned by Islamic law. The MB's famous motto, as stated by al-Banna, was: "Allah is our objective. The Messenger [i.e. Muhammad] is our leader. The Qur'an is our constitution. Jihad [i.e. holy war] is our way. Dying for the sake of Allah is our highest hope." (p.36) The MB's constant calls for jihad against various enemies over the years are cited throughout the book. Frampton notes that "Brotherhood leaders were clear that physical-force jihad -in some form- remained an eternal obligation for Muslims, prescribed in the Quran", and they often cited Sura 2:216 that "Fighting is ordained for you, though it is hard for you." (pp. 332 and 600, note 84)

One of the important factors that led al-Banna to found the MB was an intense fear of Western cultural influences. At the time, Great Britain was the predominant Western power in Egypt and viewed as the

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principal cultural threat. Frampton notes that the MB “was fundamentally a movement born in response to Western – specifically British – power.” (p.54) Al-Banna perceived that the Muslim world was witnessing a decline in morals that “was of foreign origin.” (p.15) A distinction was drawn “between a ‘purely materialistic’ West and an inherently more ‘spiritualistic’ East.” (p.18) He believed that for centuries Europe had been waging “ruthless war” against Muslims to dismember Islamic states. “This assumption of perpetual Western antagonism for Islam became an integral part of the Brotherhood’s belief system.” (p.19) The Western concept of secularism “was viewed as the foremost manifestation of cultural assault...of which the ultimate aim was the destruction of Islam.” (p.20) Al-Banna wrote that his ultimate objective was “the elimination of the foreign spirit in [Muslim] homes...and the abandonment of ...the evils of Western civilization.” (p.33) In a notable event entitled a “Day of Fire”, the MB burned English language books, magazines, and newspapers in Cairo’s main squares. (p.117)

On the other hand, the MB accepted Western technological innovations even as it viewed the West as being on its last cultural legs. This dichotomy in the MB’s value system perhaps symbolized the major problem in its view of the West: it never considered that the technological innovations could only have occurred in the type of system that ran counter to the MB’s ideal society under the Sharia. It never sought to explain why these innovations occurred in cultures it abhorred. The MB’s view on these issues is symptomatic of nearly all Islamist movements.

The British were very wary of the MB throughout the 1930s and 40s. British officials compared the MB’s organizational format to Nazi and fascist organizations. The Brotherhood had been receiving financial support from Germany. During World War II, the British received reports that al-Banna had boasted about “extensive railway sabotage” and that the Brotherhood was distributing pro-Axis pamphlets. (pp.79,80) Al-Banna had stated that an Allied victory “would mean eternal slavery for Islam....” (p.72) Before and after the war the MB had been responsible for stirring up anti-Jewish sentiment against Egypt’s Jews. It called on Arab and Islamic countries to form a union that would combat “international Judaism.” American diplomats identified the Brotherhood as inciting “religious fanaticism.” (pp.138, 139) As late as 2015, the British government “noted that senior members of the Ikhwan [i.e. the Brotherhood] have ‘routinely’ used virulent ‘anti-Semitic language.’ ” (p.403. See also p.336)

Following World War II, two events would shape the MB’s view of the West. The first was the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 on territory which was previously called Palestine. From 1947-1949 the MB had been militarily involved in attempting to prevent Israel’s establishment. During the war, al-Banna threatened: “If the Jewish state becomes a fact, [the Arabs] will drive the Jews who live in their midst into the sea.” (New York Times, August 2, 1948, p.4, not cited by Frampton) The loss of Palestine continues to dominate the MB’s discourse to the present. The second issue was the desire to see the British withdraw from the Suez Canal zone. The Brotherhood was also militarily involved in attempts to oust the British and had joined with the new revolutionary government that came to power in 1952 in these efforts. British intelligence reported that the Brotherhood volunteers “were of a ‘higher morale’ and standard than those loyal primarily to the government.” (p.219)

Despite the antipathy with which the MB held Western culture in general and the British in particular, in the 1940s its official publication began to show an interest in spreading Islam to Europe. In 1945 it spoke of sending preachers to the US “to bring [the people] to [the Islamic] religion...to defend their [local Muslim communities] existence and counter their enemies – especially as the Jews in America [had] a wide propaganda operation.” (p.363) As the MB fortunes in Egypt began to deteriorate due to its failed assassination attempt against President Nasser (1952-1970), it sought to make political inroads to the US by stressing its anti-communism. Tactically this made sense in the era of the Cold War. The principal Brother involved in this effort was Said Ramadan, Hasan al-Banna’s son-in-law. Ramadan argued that the greatest threat Islam faced was communism. (p.282) In 1966, Ramadan travelled to London where he announced that “[o]nly Moslem ideology can save the Middle East. It is either Islam or Communism.” (p.301) However,

the US did not see a great deal of benefit from dealing with the MB. American officials were aware that the MB saw the US as “materialistic and sinful” and concluded “that there was little to be gained from the empowerment of the Brotherhood.” (p.314) Nevertheless, Frampton does cite evidence that Ramadan was recruited by the CIA to contain Soviet influence. (p.282)

The US skepticism about the MB’s intentions turned out to be well founded. Frampton cites a now well-known 1991 MB memorandum which states that the Brotherhood “must understand that their work in America is a kind of grand jihad in eliminating and destroying Western civilization from within and sabotaging its miserable house by their hands and the hands of the believers [i.e. Muslims] so that it is eliminated and God’s religion [i.e. Islam] is made victorious over all other religions.” (pp.408-409) Surprisingly, however, Frampton does not mention a similar document written in 1982 that was retrieved from the computer of MB leader Youssef Nada (mentioned several times by Frampton) in Switzerland that called for the establishment of an “Islamic power on earth”, support for groups engaged in jihad and named Jews as “enemies of Muslims” with whom Muslims should refuse all coexistence. The document was examined in the journal *Terrorism and Political Violence*. (Vol.20, 2008, No.1, pp. 141-143)

We learn that al-Banna described Islam as a race. The present reviewer had always believed that such a view was of recent provenance promoted by leftists for political reasons. Banna described Islam as “creed as well as worship, homeland and race, religion and state, spiritualism and work, Quran and sword.” (p.21).

Frampton has utilized an extraordinary array of primary and secondary sources that will set the standard for future studies on this topic This valuable study should be at the top of the reading list for all students of the Muslim Brotherhood.