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American Brotherhood

The Muslim Brothers Are Present in the United States, But Not a Threat

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On May 15, 1953, [George Kennan](#) ^[1], speaking at the University of Notre Dame about a month before leaving government service for permanent exile at Princeton's Institute for Advanced Study, observed:

At the time of these remarks ^[2], the influence of the crusading anti-communist senator Joseph McCarthy was at its height, and Kennan's Washington colleagues, including President Dwight D. Eisenhower, were opting not to challenge the Wisconsin demagogue.

Today, the United States is confronted by a seemingly similar scenario, in which the anxieties of millions of Americans have been aroused by adversaries who threaten them at home as well as overseas ^[3]. And once again, a U.S. senator is pandering to those anxieties. On January 10, 2017, Ted Cruz (R.-Tex.) introduced legislation, the Muslim Brotherhood Terrorist Designation Act, that would require the U.S. secretary of state to investigate and report back to Congress as to why the Brotherhood should not be designated a foreign terrorist organization ^[4] (FTO). Meanwhile, the Trump White House is reported to be considering punitive executive action against activities and organizations within the United States deemed to be tied to the Brotherhood.

From a foreign-policy perspective, any such efforts would undoubtedly be ill advised. But their repercussions within the United States would also be disastrous. Worse, although these are bad ideas, they are bad ideas whose time may have come. For they are responding to the failure of U.S. intellectual and political elites not only to address the Brotherhood's ties to terrorism but even to acknowledge the organization's long and enduring influence on American Muslim life. More to the point, because the Brotherhood's modus operandi has long been characterized by secrecy, these elites have become complicit in the organization's deceptions and conspiracies. Worse still, even reasonable and articulate criticisms of American Muslims with presumed Brotherhood ties are routinely dismissed as racist, xenophobic, and Islamophobic. This has led to a leadership vacuum that all variety of populist tribunes, opportunists, and would-be demagogues have readily exploited. The resulting debasement of political discourse poses a more profound threat to U.S. democracy than any ties the Brotherhood has had to terrorism.

AN AMERICAN BROTHERHOOD

The Muslim Brotherhood ^[5] was founded in Egypt in 1928, with the goal of reviving and reinstating Islamic rule in response to Western Christianity's humiliating scientific, cultural, and military domination. To do so, the Brotherhood has at times resorted to political

assassination and terrorist attacks. But this long and blemished history does not necessarily mean that the contemporary Brotherhood is a terrorist organization. In the Arab nations where it has been rooted for generations, the Brotherhood today is more of a social and cultural movement [6] than a political party. And although the organization has never articulated a principled position against violence [7], neither has it relied primarily on violence to achieve its goals. Nevertheless, since the Egyptian military's 2013 coup against then President Mohamed Morsi's Brotherhood government, the new regime in Cairo, along with a few others in the region, has deemed the group a terrorist organization and urged Washington to do the same.

In the United States, the Brotherhood has never been directly tied to or involved with any terrorist threats or attacks, although some Islamists who have engaged in violent jihad against the country have gotten their start in foreign branches of the Brotherhood. Both Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the presumptive mastermind of the 9/11 attack [8], and Mohamed Atta, one of its operational leaders, had been members of the Brotherhood—in Yemen and Egypt, respectively. And Hamas, which has in fact been designated an FTO by the U.S. government and its allies, is the Palestinian affiliate of the Brotherhood. Hamas has never targeted Americans on U.S. soil, but it has pursued a policy of suicide bombings against Israeli civilians resulting in the death of at least one American. And until Washington cracked down after 9/11, Hamas also used the United States as a base for fundraising.

The American Brotherhood is not violent, but that is not to say—as Nathan Lean does in *The Islamophobia Industry* [9]—that “the Muslim Brotherhood does not exist in the United States.” There is, to be sure, no organization in the United States today bearing the name the Muslim Brotherhood. There never has been. Yet since the 1950s and 1960s, when Muslims began arriving as students at U.S. universities, individual Muslim Brothers and the Brotherhood itself have been critical in the establishment of the country's various Islamic institutions and organizations. These include virtually all of the major entities representing Muslims in contemporary American politics: the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), the Muslim Student Association (MSA), the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC), the Muslim American Society (MAS), and the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR). As the *Encyclopedia of Islam in the United States* [10], edited by French scholar Jocelyne Cesari, concludes rather blandly, “The Muslim Brotherhood in the United States has played an influential part in shaping the public face of American Islam.”

HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT

Today these Brotherhood-initiated organizations are the vanguard of the new generation of U.S.-born Muslims who are demanding their civil and religious rights as Americans. As Leila Ahmed of the Harvard Divinity School puts it in her 2011 book, *A Quiet Revolution* [11], “Islamists and their heirs and children are for the present no more than a minority of a minority [of American Muslims]. However, controlling most American Muslim institutions, they constitute the most influential and most publicly visible segment of this minority. And they are also quite visibly and publicly the most socially and politically committed and activist segment of the Muslim community.”

Consider the example of MAS. The society was founded in 1992, when immigrant Brothers from various countries realized that not only were they unlikely to be returning home but that they also needed to cease operating in the United States as separate national-origin groups (Iraqi Muslim Brothers, Egyptian Brothers, and so on) and come together in one Muslim American organization. Today on its website, MAS declares itself to be “an independent American organization” that “has no affiliation with the Ikhwan al Muslimoon (Muslim Brotherhood or the Ikhwan) or with any other international organization.” Nevertheless, the

site acknowledges that “many immigrant organizations that were established early on would likely have had some founders who formerly had some involvement or even membership in the Ikhwan.”

Yet as recently as 2004, an investigative piece in the *Chicago Tribune* ^[12] described a more direct tie between MAS and the Brotherhood. Drawing on documents as well as interviews conducted in the United States and Egypt, the *Tribune* concluded that “in recent years, the U.S. Brotherhood operated under the name Muslim American Society,” and that “while Brotherhood activities vary from country to country, and chapters are officially independent, international leaders in Egypt say that all chapters are united in their beliefs and that the Egyptian office gives them advice.” Finally, the *Tribune* cited an undated internal memo instructing MAS leaders on how to deal with inquiries: “If asked, ‘Are you the Muslim Brothers?’,’ the memo advised, “leaders should respond that they are an independent group called the Muslim American Society.” In a second article from that year ^[13], the *Tribune* reported on how a MAS mosque in the Bridgeview suburb of Chicago came to be dominated by a Brotherhood-affiliated faction in a nasty, divisive struggle over the board. The same mosque had been identified by the *Tribune* and others as a venue for fundraising efforts on behalf of Hamas.

Such evidence of the Brotherhood’s presence in the United States has, however, received remarkably little attention or scrutiny. For example, a recent ethnographic study ^[14] by two University of Chicago researchers on the Universal School, a well-established Islamic school in Bridgeview, describes the school as “one of a cluster of buildings including a mosque, a youth center, the Chicago headquarters of the Muslim American Society (MAS), and Aqsa School [for girls].” Yet the authors neglect to mention MAS’s ties to the Brotherhood. And although they do indicate that the surrounding community includes many Palestinians, they fail to note the Hamas connection.

This problem of selective attention is hardly confined to the academy. A 2010 study from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life ^[15] acknowledges that “MAS, which has dozens of local chapters across the U.S., was the organization most closely associated with the Brotherhood when it was founded in the early 1990s.” Pew goes on to note that the society’s “current leadership disavows ongoing ties to the movement and emphasizes the group’s civil rights and social justice agenda.” Yet in the face of so much controverting evidence, Pew offers no explanation as to why “current leadership” should be taken at its word.

Similar evasiveness has long been evident in Boston, home not only to some of the world’s leading research institutions but to a large, growing, and genuinely cosmopolitan Muslim community. In 2009 the Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center (ISBCC) opened the doors of its handsome new mosque not far from Harvard Medical School and the Museum of Fine Arts. Yet this was only after protracted controversy over charges that radical Islamists had long-standing ties to the mosque. Indeed, in 2004 Abdul Rahman al-Amoudi, a founding member of the mosque board, was sentenced to 23 years in federal prison for his involvement in a plot, funded by Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi, to assassinate Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah. And Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a globally visible imam based in Qatar who is widely identified as sympathetic to the Brotherhood and has provided a theological justification for Palestinian suicide bombers, was listed as a trustee on the society’s tax returns.

Throughout the controversy, the ISBCC has been managed by the Boston chapter of MAS, which proudly advertises its role on plaques plainly visible in the public areas of the impressive new edifice. Yet Boston’s media, academic, and political elites have refused to acknowledge any concerns about, much less the existence of, ties between the mosque and

the Brotherhood. Back in 2004, *The Boston Globe* was pleased to announce that questions about the ISBCC's ties to radical Islamists had been brought to "a satisfactory close," despite much evidence to the contrary. In June 2015, Boston's presidentially appointed federal prosecutor, U.S. Attorney Carmen Ortiz, told *The New York Times* ^[16] that charges repeatedly and persistently levied by a citizens group, Americans for Peace and Tolerance, concerning the ISBCC's connection to the Brotherhood were "incredibly racist and unfair." More recently, shortly after the election of Donald Trump to the White House, both Boston Mayor Martin Walsh and U.S. Senator Elizabeth Warren made a point of appearing at the ISBCC to express their solidarity with Muslims.

Statements such as the one made by Ortiz are often well intentioned—they come from people who are understandably concerned by, and wish to counter, the intemperate and sometimes paranoid fears about Islam that are expressed by alarmed Americans. Yet they invariably fail to address, let alone refute, evidence about the Brotherhood adduced by sober, respected analysts such as Ahmed.

Mohamed Nimer, the former research director of CAIR and currently a professor at American University in Washington, presents still more such evidence. Writing from the perspective of an insider, Nimer has written several revealing but dispassionate analyses of the Brotherhood's activities in the United States, whether building organizations to defend and advance the image of Islam in American public life or to raise funds for Islamist causes overseas, including in Palestine. In one article ^[17], Nimer traces and then criticizes the Brotherhood's gradual evolution into MAS:

In "The Americanization of Islamism ^[18]," which appeared in *The American Interest* in 2011, Nimer similarly argues that "we need to know whether... groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood have genuinely moderated their views as a result of their members' experiences of life in America, or not." He goes on to elucidate how the Brotherhood helped develop and sustain a U.S.-based financial support network for Hamas, both before and after the latter was designated a terrorist organization in 1996. He then discreetly but pointedly concludes: "The behavior of Islamists in America seems evasive because their statements and activities do not project a clear vision or define objectives that make sense within the experience of most Americans."

One caveat about such findings is that although the Brotherhood has affiliates scattered across the Middle East, Europe, and North (and South) America, it is hardly the Comintern. Indeed, it is not even the Roman Catholic Church. For although the Egyptian Brotherhood and its leaders enjoy a certain moral authority as heirs of the founder, Hasan al-Banna, they exercise no meaningful organizational control over the various affiliates. To be sure, there are informal personal and ideological ties between them and Cairo. But as British scholar Alison Pargeter concludes in her book *The Muslim Brotherhood: The Burden of Tradition* ^[19], as an international force the Brotherhood is "little more than a talking shop."

PLAYING PRETEND

In the United States, then, the Brotherhood does not pose a terrorist threat. Its presence, however, is undeniable. Why then have America's elites side-stepped reliable, responsible evidence of the Brotherhood's critical role among Muslims here? One reason is that for many, such findings and concerns have proved incompatible with their project of an emergent global regime of universal human rights ^[20] and weak, highly permeable borders ^[21]. Such observers and analysts have simply refused to acknowledge whatever complicates that scenario.

Yet in this instance, American elites have traveled too far down the road of cosmopolitan

liberalism [22]. Whether driven by pusillanimity or by principle, they have found it far too easy to ignore facts that trouble many of their fellow citizens, and have grown accustomed to disdainfully dismissing all concerns and fears about Islam and Muslims as irrational and hateful. Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton's ready inclusion of "the Islamophobic" among that "half of Trump's supporters" whom she dumped into her "basket of deplorables" is hardly the only such example. The resulting resentment and anger among so many Americans is directed not merely at Muslims but at such elites.

To be sure, these elites' efforts to dampen alarmism reflect some reassuring aspects of American political culture. Floating around in today's stew of professional ambitions and civic-minded inhibitions are certain admirable habits of self-restraint that, paradoxically, have developed under the free-speech protections of the First Amendment. Indeed, only a few years ago, when the European media insisted on running highly offensive and inflammatory cartoons of the Prophet, their American counterparts overwhelmingly chose not to. Apparently, the United States' laissez-faire culture has allowed it to develop a first-hand awareness of how hurtful and dangerous unfettered free speech can be. Strange to say, this capacity for self-restraint seems to persist, even in the midst of today's extraordinarily fetid political environment.

Yet in their efforts to protect and defend the rights of Muslims, American elites have embraced a bowdlerized version of Islam's complicated and checkered history in the United States. And so, Islam is routinely and repeatedly depicted as a misunderstood faith similar to Catholicism earlier in American history. There are, to be sure, some broad parallels to be drawn here, but Catholicism was never tied to global terrorism, much less an attack on American soil such as 9/11. Indeed, these elites have in effect conspired with Brotherhood leaders and their many sympathizers to the point where it is now routinely denied in popular discourse that the Brotherhood has any presence whatsoever in the contemporary United States.

As for conservative leaders, long gone are the days when, in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, President George W. Bush reached out to widely recognized Muslim-American leaders, some of whom had ties to the Brotherhood. Instead, the right today is dominated by cranky ideologues and populist zealots who, in their obsessive efforts to unmask Islamist terrorism, have assiduously overlooked the kind of evidence adduced here—evidence that would partly make their case, but that would also undercut their most alarmist claims. Instead, they have indulged in simplistic conspiracy scenarios that pander to public anxieties. Cruz's opportunistic legislative proposal is one result of this toxic atmosphere.

CALL THE FEDS

A final aspect of elite behavior toward the Brotherhood involves the direct dealings with Muslims of government officials, especially those in local, state, and federal law enforcement. Such officials have been extremely careful not to get involved in public discussions about the Brotherhood. And when confronted by aroused citizens, they have been noncommittal or downright evasive. This has certainly been true of high-ranking law enforcement in Los Angeles and New York City.

Here, the explanation for such caution and indirection is straightforward and compelling. For law enforcement and other government agencies, the stakes are much higher than for academics and journalists. The success of their missions depends on maintaining good relations with Muslim communities. And despite their many liabilities and shortcomings, the various Brotherhood-related organizations have unrivaled ties to American Muslims.

There has been one notable exception to this tendency of law enforcement to maintain

relationships to organizations with Brotherhood ties. Early in 2009, the FBI reported to members of Congress that it had recently “severed all formal outreach activities with CAIR,” citing ties between the organization’s founders and Hamas. Given that CAIR had by that time become the largest, most visible, and most dynamic Muslim advocacy group in the United States, this was definitely not an easy decision for the FBI to make. Its carefully worded public explanations made it clear that the FBI was distancing itself primarily from CAIR’s founding leaders, not all those involved with the organization. But it was also apparent that in the wake of the federal government’s prosecution and conviction of five Muslim leaders for their work with the Hamas-fundraising front the Holy Land Foundation, FBI headquarters in Washington felt that it could no longer countenance ties with another organization connected directly to Hamas. Out in the field offices, the responses from FBI special agents, who are most in need of maintaining ties and sources throughout the community, were mixed.

The FBI’s rebuke of CAIR has gone largely unnoted. In fact, most major media outlets continue to seek out CAIR spokespeople for comments—including about the current proposal to declare the Brotherhood an FTO—without ever mentioning CAIR’s history and provenance. And so, with a slight reshuffling of its national leadership, the organization has continued to grow, especially its local and state chapters. On the other hand, the Holy Land Foundation case has provided ammunition to anti-Brotherhood conspiracy theorists, who have discovered a critical source in a trove of transcripts of Brotherhood leadership meetings, unearthed by the FBI in 2004 in a secret sub-basement of the home of a Hamas leader living in suburban Washington, DC. This trove, used as evidence in the two separate trials that eventually led the federal government to shut the foundation down, included thousands of pages of records of meetings by Brotherhood leaders in the United States from the early 1980s up through the mid-1990s, a period when Hamas had still not been designated an FTO. Yet the organization was nevertheless grappling with the existential threat posed by the 1993 Oslo accords, which struck a deal between Israel and Hamas’s rival, the PLO.

At these meetings, convened in various places around the United States, Brotherhood leaders, including Hamas officials, expressed profound contempt for contemporary American culture and mores, especially with regard to consumerism, alcohol, drugs, and sexuality. Indeed, in their view such decadence would necessarily lead the United States to Islam. And their duty as leaders was to prepare for that inevitable—and presumably peaceful—outcome. Their other critical duty was publicity and fund-raising for the not-so-peaceful efforts of Hamas back in Palestine.

Unrelenting Brotherhood critics such as Frank Gaffney, former Assistant Secretary of Defense in the Reagan administration and current president of the Center for Security Policy, have written repeatedly about these materials since they surfaced during the trial. Gaffney and others warn that these Islamists were—and presumably still are—concerned primarily with waging “civilization-jihad.” This term, which was used in the documents, refers to the process of slowly and patiently building Islamist institutions—especially mosques, schools, and community centers—that will by their example constitute “a kind of grand Jihad in eliminating and destroying the [sic] Western civilization from within,” as it collapses from its own weaknesses and decadence.

Yet completely absent in the voluminous writings of the Brotherhood’s harshest critics is any sense of historical context or change. They never acknowledge, for example, that the individuals participating in these meetings were mostly unmarried young men in their twenties, away from home and family for the first time, and finding themselves in the free-wheeling environment of post-1960s America. Not unlike young men of any background

in such circumstances, these Brothers would have been prone to all variety of brash, intemperate, and outrageous words, deeds, and fantasies.

Nor do these critics' writings contain any acknowledgment or awareness that in the intervening 20 to 30 or more years, youthful Islamist fantasies—especially those of typically geeky science and engineering students—might have changed or evolved. Assuming they did not return home, which many did, these young men likely obtained their degrees, got married, pursued reasonably successful careers, and raised families here. The available socio-economic data certainly confirm this trajectory. But even if their fundamental views or values had not changed, such life-experiences would foster new circumstances and bonds that would presumably complicate any inclinations to act on them.

For their part, Brotherhood leaders appreciated the need to adapt their thinking and methods to circumstances in the United States. For example, in a session from the early 1980s, one leader analyzed for his colleagues the challenges and opportunities of their work there. He began by noting that because their members were overwhelmingly foreign university students intending to return home, the Brotherhood in the United States was suffering from 70 percent turnover every five years. On the other hand, the speaker emphasized that, compared to their peers back home, Muslim students visiting in the United States were much more self-reliant and independent because “they have no mother to wash their clothes or a father who gives them their allowance at the end of the month.” One reasonable inference is that such recruits were not well suited to the Brotherhood's notoriously rigid, top-down, non-consultative authority structure. One can only wonder how the Brotherhood today can attract and hold on to young Muslims born and raised in the United States, especially when many leaders still tend to be recent immigrants.

A QUESTION OF FAITH

The point here is that the daunting challenges confronting an organization such as the Brotherhood in the United States are never entertained by its most zealous critics. Moreover, these critics appear to have no faith that a vast and powerful society such as the United States—with its openness, its opportunities, its values, and its decency—might have more influence over Muslims in America than they can possibly have over it. Further, these alarmists never seem to ponder how three million Muslims (barely one percent of the population) are going to impose sharia law, much less a caliphate, on the United States. Indeed, such scenarios appear all the more far-fetched since, according to the authoritative Pew survey, 40 percent of Muslim women in America never wear a hijab, and more than 50 percent of American Muslims renege on one of their faith's primary obligations and fail to attend Friday prayers in a mosque.

The conservative and populist attacks on the Brotherhood also miss the real danger posed by the organization—one that is subtler than terrorism or jihad. This stems from the Brotherhood's ingrained secretiveness, which combines with the rigid, top-down, non-consultative style of its immigrant-origin leaders to produce what Pargeter refers to as “a culture of concealment.”

This deeply rooted trait can be traced directly to the repressive regimes in which the Brotherhood was spawned and matured. It has endured among Brothers in the United States in part because so many arrived planning eventually to return home, and their perspective continued to be shaped by events in their countries of origin. Even as they gradually came to settle down and make their lives in this country, these cadres understood that their words and deeds here would continue to have repercussions for their friends, comrades, and relatives back home. And now, with the failure of the Arab spring, the overthrow of the Morsi government in Egypt, and the military regime's outright ban on the

Brotherhood there, such considerations arise with renewed force, especially as new Islamist leaders arrive here from the Middle East.

The Brotherhood's enduring penchant for secrecy and the inevitable deception that results might in theory be put in the service of genuinely threatening deeds. But in the United States at least these deeds have yet to materialize. Nonetheless, the organization's culture of concealment has led to pervasive corrosion of trust. This arises in Muslim families when husbands are instructed by the Brothers not to tell their wives about their activities in the organization; or in institutions, such as the mosque in Bridgeview, when groups of Brothers conspire to take control. Concealment creates confusion, anger, and division among Muslim Americans—a population already divided along an extraordinary array of sectarian, ethnic, and racial lines.

Such secrecy also tends to strain relations between Muslims and non-Muslims. For as Edward Shils pointed out sixty years ago in *The Torment of Secrecy*, his penetrating study of McCarthyism, in a nation of immigrants such as the United States, questions of loyalty naturally and inevitably arise. And the subsequent demands for secrecy—whether mandated by the national security state or demanded by comrades—undermine the privacy and trust on which a liberal, pluralist democracy vitally depends.

Yet ultimately, the populist response to Islam in the United States indicates a profound social and cultural malaise, which displays little or no faith in American culture nor in the country's intellectual, political, and even corporate elites. There is shockingly little confidence in the resilience of its values and way of life. Too many Americans see their country as vulnerable and corruptible. They are not entirely wrong. But the United States will not likely be undone by Islam or by Islamists. Yet Americans are less willing to believe this when they feel that elites have condescended to them and not addressed their concerns honestly.

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