Universal Aspirations
The Muslim Brotherhood in Europe

Since its foundation in 1928, the Muslim Brotherhood has advocated a holistic vision of Islam as being both a political ideology and a social doctrine. This vision is now also propagated in Europe, where members and sympathizers of the Brotherhood form a largely informal but nevertheless quite influential movement. The author argues that the Muslim Brotherhood in Europe, while encouraging citizenship and integration within European societies, still promotes the totalizing discourse of the days of Hassan al-Banna.

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Members and sympathizers of the Muslim Brotherhood have migrated from Arab countries to Europe as political exiles or students since the end of the 1950s. At first, they organized inward-facing groups. But since the 1980s, they became a powerful force acting within the community as a whole: they established mosques, Muslim student organizations, Islamic charities and centres, national bodies, etc. aiming at full representation of Muslims within the European countries.

Today, the movement is mostly composed of a variety of secretive informal networks with low membership count (around a thousand for United Kingdom, France, and Belgium together). Nevertheless, they are quite influential: through inner circle education and open conferences, they continue to transmit an ethos of living as Muslims.

In Europe, the organization still considers the ten pillars as unalterable and the Brothers continue to endorse these principles. The most important of which is *shumuliyyat* al-Islam. It is mainly understood as a complete way of life that can solve all human problems and as a world-wide message addressed to all people because it is inclusive of all divine messages that are relevant for all times and places. A second concept, *fikr al-jihad*, calls for exerting one’s effort so as to change oneself. Altogether, they remind Muslims of the importance of devotion to God and perseverance and of getting involved in “Islamic work,” to bring about a “gradual reform” of society. These themes represent milestones that define the contours of behaviour that is supposedly authentically Islamic.

The European Muslim Brotherhood thus advocates the principle of the universal nature of Islam, but without fleshing out the principle in detail. Despite the fact that European societies are mainly composed of non-Muslims it still aspires to an Islam that could inform every single detail. Despite the fact that European societies are mainly composed of non-Muslims it still aspires to an Islam that could inform every single detail. Despite the fact that European societies are mainly composed of non-Muslims it still aspires to an Islam that could inform every single detail. Despite the fact that European societies are mainly composed of non-Muslims it still aspires to an Islam that could inform every single detail.

...it is precisely the fluidity of the discourse that allows its persistence.
Organizations & Activism

Some innovations are nevertheless noticed in France even if the claims expressed might finally be understood as radical stances as in Great-Britain. A first example refers to the public discourse of Mohsen N’Gazou a member of the Union of Islamic Organizations in France (UOIF), who is also a member of the FIOE. At the annual meeting of the UOIF, in Paris in 2003, he emphasizes the universal dimension of Islam as completely correlated to the modern context. After presenting spirituality as a fundamental dimension, he affirms that humanism is not sufficient in order to make human beings fully human. Faith, according to him, gives meaning to existence and is an irreducible universal imperative. Moreover because the world is global nowadays it is important that Muslims should undertake action on a global scale as well. Therefore, it is the context that “justifies” the global responsibilities that have been placed upon Muslims, that concern even non-Muslims. A new form of argument, of a contextual type, is thus applied by this speaker to the claim of the universal nature of Islam, initially only derived from the sacred texts, in order to reinforce its relevance.

A second example shows a paradigmatic change in the way to conceive the imperatives of the divine law, the Sharia, presented as not questioning the western system at first sight although it does so radically: when Abdallah Bennouar, influential member of the UOIF, affirms in 2005 that “Islam is involved in almost every insignificant thing,” he implies that Islamic prescriptions are ever-present for any person who pays attention to them. The divine hegemony is all the more in evidence, inasmuch as each action offers us the possibility of conforming to the Islamic way, whatever its importance may be. Instead of exhorting the faithful to modify current laws or to push for the adoption of political amendments that would make current laws and policies more compatible with the spirit of Islam, rather he challenges his listeners to realize that every human activity already presents, in and of itself, an occasion for action in conformity with Sharia. Implicitly, he lets it be understood that the perspectives of a utopian Islamic system should still be part of the present, and easily accessible for any individual. Every aspect of life, be it work, marriage, or finances is an opportunity to introduce Islam into life.

Old slogans in a new context

The differences in the concept of shumuliyat in the United Kingdom and in France are very relative however. In both countries the European Muslim Brotherhood adopts an unquestioning and totalizing discourse which maintains its long-term vision. Islam is still affirmed as a whole alternative system, probably under fear that any restriction to it would end up destroying the whole ideology. The tradition is kept alive, so is its utopia, even if its realization remains quite limited and their new modalities of action prove that they take changing circumstances into consideration.

The Muslim Brotherhood actively promotes citizenship and integration within the European societies (such as in their European Muslim Charter) but far from accepting the marginalization of their ideology after all its past failures in achieving their goals anywhere, some of the members are still also fully promoting their old slogans in quite a simple way. In doing so, they show the limits of their will and abilities to really develop a renewal of their ideology that would be adapted to the modern European pluralist context.

Notes
2. Tariq Ramadan, in his book Western Muslims and the Future of Islam, could only dare to express that this idea could be confusing.