At 3:30 a.m. on May 22, 1986 (Ramadan 14, 1406 AH), ‘Umar al-Tilmisani, the third Supreme Guide (al-Murshid al-‘Amm) of the Muslim Brotherhood, died at the age of eighty-one. The following day, almost a million Egyptians mourned him with a massive gathering around Midan al-Tahrir (Cairo’s main square) that attracted Egyptian government officials, including Prime Minister ‘Ali Lutfi (representing President Hosni Mubarak), the Shaykh al-Azhar ‘Ali Gad al-Haqq (d. 1996), and delegations from all of Egypt’s major political parties. According to Muslim Brotherhood estimates, fifteen thousand cars took part in the funeral procession through the streets of Cairo to the cemetery in Nasre. This marked the first time in the history of the Muslim Brotherhood that the Egyptian people were allowed to publicly mourn the death of a Supreme Guide by their government. As one journalist wrote: “It was as though the Brotherhood and their many sympathizers, who had been denied two previous public funerals [i.e., Hasan al-Banna and Hasan al-Hudaybi], were making up in one go for all the past grief the movement had suffered.” The events of May 23, 1986, were, in this respect, remarkable. Al-Tilmisani was the leader of an organization that had been outlawed by the Egyptian government for over thirty years. It was subjected to numerous campaigns of suppression, mass arrests, torture, and executions. He himself spent over seventeen years of his life in Egypt’s prisons, and yet his public funeral attracted hundreds of thousands, including Egyptian government officials. How could
this be? As we will see, ‘Umar al-Tilmisani is a figure of significant importance. He rejected the way of violence, steered the Muslim Brotherhood away from revolutionary radicalism, and endured the brutal persecution of the regime while staunchly adhering to the non-violent pursuit of democratic reforms. Some have dismissively alleged that al-Tilmisani was simply an old man, tempered by age and fear of further torture rather than by any intellectual or religious substance, or that he was merely interested in power and thus compromised his “real” convictions. I contend that these dismissive accusations are without merit and overlook the significance of both al-Tilmisani’s character and his Islamist thought.

In popular Western discourse, the very mention of the Muslim Brotherhood seems to elicit uneasiness, hostility, or conjure up sensational images of terrorism or Taliban-like brutality. Such impressions are largely the imaginative products of the ever-popular, monolithic, and media-fed conception of the dark and monstrous entity known to us only vaguely as “Islamic fundamentalism.” The life of ‘Umar al-Tilmisani, however, reveals a far more complex picture and provides us with an important glimpse into the diversity of Islamism. For much of the first half of the twentieth century, the Muslim Brotherhood was largely synonymous with Islamism, although other groups did indeed exist both in Egypt and abroad (e.g., India). But the second half of the twentieth century was much different. In the 1960s and 1970s there was an explosion of Islamist groups, with violent, radical Islamist strains emerging on the periphery of the Muslim Brotherhood and splintering off into a range of separate factions. It is true that the Muslim Brotherhood established an underground anti-British militia (al-Nizam al-Khass or “The Special Order”) in the 1940s. However, armed militias were maintained by nearly every Egyptian political faction during this period, including secular-nationalists, socialists, and communists. Members of the Muslim Brotherhood’s militia also fought alongside Arab government forces in the 1948 Arab-Israeli War under the authority of the Arab League, and individual incidents of violence, as well as a rebellion against the Muslim Brotherhood’s leadership, occurred when those fighters returned home after the Arab defeat. As such, any characterization of the Muslim Brothers of this era as somehow uniquely violent (i.e., in contrast to other parties of the