The Muslim Brotherhood (MB), the world’s oldest and most significant Islamist movement, was founded in 1928 by Egyptian-born Hassan al-Banna (1906–1949), the “father of Islamism.” His thinking and the organization were rooted in the ideas propagated by such Ottoman-era Arab-Islamic thinkers as Rifa’a Tahtawi (1801–1873), Khairuddin al-Tunisi (1810–1899), and Abdurrahman al-Kawakibi (1849–1903). These three men, who held senior positions in the Ottoman bureaucracy, played a key role in trying to effect an intellectual revival in the long-stagnant Arab-Muslim world. Faced with the rise of European modernization and Western political thought, they sought to balance modernity with Islamic traditions.

Their work was built upon by a second generation of thinkers led by the Persian Shia Jamal al-Deen al-Afghani (1838–1897) and his two prominent followers: Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905), the former Mufti of Egypt, and Rashid Rida (1865–1935). Hassan al-Banna, a disciple of Rida, laid the foundation for the MB, which we now identify with the current concept of Islamism. In sharp contrast with the existing religious currents, this new trend was about Islamic reformism (Salafiyyah, not to be confused with Salafism, which we will discuss in chapter 5) and Islam’s role in public affairs (mu’amalaat) as opposed to personal ritualistic practices (‘ibadat). The MB has gone far beyond Banna’s original vision. In fact, its ideology has spread throughout the Muslim world and into Western Europe and the United States.

This chapter traces the MB’s activism within the context of hybrid authoritarian Arab regimes with limited democratic openings. As these regimes give way to more democratic systems, the MB and like-minded forces in Tunisia, Morocco, and Libya emerged as the leading electoral forces. The MB in Egypt has been the most important player in the midst of this dynamic evolution. As this book goes to print, Egypt’s military regime has once again outlawed this organization. A more detailed discussion of the implications for the MB and its brand of participatory Islamism will be dealt with later in this chapter. The MB’s historic decline will undoubtedly reverberate throughout the region and will likely impact its sister organizations.

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In order to understand the direction in which the wider MB movement is headed, we need to evaluate the historical evolution of this particular trend. These include groups (that refer to themselves as MB) in Jordan, Syria, and Libya, as well as those that espouse the same ideology and approach (e.g., Tunisia’s Ennahda, Morocco’s Justice and Development Party, Yemen’s al-Islah, Iraq’s Hizb-i-Islami, Kuwait’s HADAS, Algeria’s Movement of Society for Peace, the Palestinian Territories’ HAMAS, and Pakistan’s Jamaat-i-Islami). Considering its origins in the 1920s and the country’s geographic proximity to Jordan and Syria, the MB’s principal manifestations developed in these neighboring countries. Each one faces its own unique geopolitical circumstances and trajectories, despite the common goal of achieving their political objectives via electoral means. As each of them had to deal with different types of autocratic states, this is hardly surprising.

Despite decades of suppression, Egypt’s MB never abandoned its approach to transforming the state via a gradual bottom-up strategy. Thus each country’s MB organization continues to operate in a pragmatic manner by following tactics and strategies appropriate for its specific circumstances and according to its leaders’ preferences. Even though it proved short-lived, the 2012 election of MB leader Mohamed Morsi as Egypt’s first-ever elected president was a culmination of this decades-long strategy. In Syria, the MB opted for confrontation in large part due to the state’s use of military force against the opposition—similar to what is currently happening. Staging an armed uprising during the late 1970s, it experienced a harsh crackdown by the Assad regime in 1982 and an ensuing organizational collapse from which it never fully recovered. In sharp contrast, the MB branch in Jordan has enjoyed a relatively cordial working relationship with the monarchy ever since its inception in the late 1940s.

This chapter examines the MB as an organization, an ideology in terms of the wider movement, and an approach (participatory Islamism) to bringing about political change in an increasingly volatile democratization process. In particular, we assess the organization in three different decades and then analyze its behavior since the 2011 Arab Spring. Each MB organization is independent, shuns violence as a tactic, and seeks to establish a democratic political system within an Islamic framework. We examine each branch’s behavior while keeping the focus on the parent organization.

The 1990s

Several key international and domestic developments during the 1990s shaped Egypt’s strategy for managing the MB, its largest—officially outlawed but in practice tolerated to varying degrees—opposition movement and the country’s wider Islamist landscape. The Soviets were forced out of Afghanistan in 1989, and the Cold War ended with the Soviet Union’s collapse in 1991 and the beginning of democratization in Eastern Europe. Many Arab war veterans, emboldened by the Soviets’ defeat and subsequent crumbling of their empire, chose to ignore the fact that the United States-led international campaign was instrumental in their victory. Many of these battle-hardened and radicalized Islamists returned home believing that they could initiate similar transformative changes and overthrow