The Theory, Theology, and Practice of Muslim Brotherhood Social Mobilization

A Political-Analytical Assessment

July 2025

Executive Summary

This report provides a comprehensive analysis of the transnational Islamist movement known as the Muslim Brotherhood (*al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun*), founded in Egypt in 1928. The study examines the ideological foundations, social mobilization strategies, and contemporary influence of the Brotherhood on geopolitical dynamics across the Middle East and beyond.

Core Sections of Analysis:

1. **Ideological and Theological Foundations** — Traces the evolution of Brotherhood doctrine from founder Hassan al-Banna through contemporary interpretations, including the organization's strategy of gradual implementation of Sharia through social institutions.
2. **Social Mobilization Strategy** — Details how the Brotherhood builds extensive grassroots infrastructure (mosques, schools, clinics, charitable networks) to cultivate popular support and examines the movement's organizational structure.
3. **Geopolitical Impact** — Analyzes Turkey and Qatar's roles as primary sponsors of Brotherhood-aligned movements, their regional influence, and support for Hamas in the Palestinian context.
4. **Bans and Underground Operations** — Details how the movement operates in states where it has been proscribed (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Russia, Central Asian republics) and explores its clandestine organizational forms.
5. **European Presence** — Examines Brotherhood ideological influence within European Muslim communities through civil society organizations and advocacy groups.
6. **Comparative Framework** — Contrasts the Brotherhood model with alternative forms of political Islam: Salafism, Iranian-style Shia political Islam, and traditional Sufi movements.

The report incorporates developments from 2024-2025, including post-Assad Syria, Jordan's recent Brotherhood ban, and European activities of Brotherhood-affiliated organizations. The findings are relevant for policy analysts, Middle East specialists, scholars of Islamic movements, and national security decision-makers.

Key Findings: Despite sustained repression, the Brotherhood continues to exert major regional influence; its social mobilization model continues to be replicated in various forms; the divide between Brotherhood supporters and opponents has become a key factor in shaping geopolitical alignments across the Muslim world.

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About Dor Moria Center: An independent research institute focused on social inequality, solidarity structures, lobbying dynamics, and the Human Development Index as a political analysis tool. The Center develops practical approaches to bridging social divides and building effective governance based on solidarity and ethical development principles.

Introduction

The **Muslim Brotherhood** (Arabic: *al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun*) is a transnational Sunni Islamist movement founded in Egypt in 1928 by teacher Hassan al-Banna[1]. From the outset, the movement sought to create a society governed by Islamic law and morality through gradual religious revival and social engagement[2]. For the Brotherhood, Islam represents not just a faith but a comprehensive system for political and social life. They pursue Sharia implementation through institutional reform, activism, and extensive social programs.

Today, Brotherhood branches operate worldwide, though coordination with the Egyptian center remains loose and largely symbolic. States have responded to the movement in starkly different ways. Turkey under Erdogan's AKP and Qatar embraced the Brotherhood model, emerging as the movement's key Middle Eastern patrons during the 2010s[3]. By contrast, Egypt (after toppling the Brotherhood government in 2013), Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Syria, Russia, and several Central Asian republics have banned the organization as terrorist or extremist, actively prosecuting its members[4].

Yet Brotherhood ideas and networks persist globally, often operating underground. This report examines the movement's ideological foundations and mobilization strategies, analyzes how Turkey and Qatar exploit its model for regional influence, assesses Brotherhood penetration in Europe, and compares it with other Islamist movements -- Salafism, Shia political Islam, and traditional Sufi Islam (with particular focus on Russia's Turkic and North Caucasian regions).

Ideology, Theology, and Social Mobilization

Ideological Foundations. As the Arab world's oldest political Islam movement, the Brotherhood began with an ambitious vision. Hassan al-Banna proclaimed the goal of reviving Islamic life comprehensively and establishing a just Islamic order -- potentially recreating the caliphate based on Sharia. The path lay through cultivating pious communities, spreading Islamic morality, and building parallel social institutions to attract the Muslim masses. While grounded in mainstream Sunni doctrine, Brotherhood ideologues introduced no radical theological innovations. Instead, they emphasized applying Islamic principles to modern governance and society. Al-Banna championed Islam's politicization -- creating institutions for Islamic self-governance, education, and charity that would gradually embed Sharia norms in state and society[5].

A later ideologue, Sayyid Qutb, took a more radical turn, advocating jihad against "un-Islamic" regimes. His writings inspired more forceful, militant approaches. Yet Egyptian Brotherhood leadership officially rejected violence. Following waves of state repression in the

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[1] brookings.edu
[2] aljazeera.com
[3] fdd.org
[4] reuters.com
[5] clingendael.org

late 20th century, the organization declared its commitment to peaceful methods. The movement maintains it abandoned violence decades ago, pursuing its goals through preaching and politics alone.

In theological terms, the Brotherhood follows orthodox Sunni principles but foregrounds **social ethics** and **political engagement**. Islam emerges not just as personal faith but as a blueprint for societal transformation.

Mobilization in Practice. The Brotherhood's enduring strength lies in its grassroots organizing capacity. Through charity and education, it has consistently attracted mass support. Where it operated legally or semi-legally (Egypt, Jordan, formerly Syria), the movement built impressive infrastructure: mosques, schools, clinics, charitable foundations, youth groups, and professional associations. This **Islamic social work** met urgent needs -- free healthcare, food aid, educational support -- winning loyalty from hundreds of thousands. The movement drew primarily from lower and middle classes (urban poor, devout professionals, small business owners) who responded to anti-corruption messages and calls for moral renewal.

The Brotherhood developed a tightly disciplined cellular structure with clear hierarchy and, when necessary, clandestine operations. Members internalized values of personal piety, social responsibility, and obedience to the Supreme Guide (*Murshid al-Amm*) and leadership council. Scholars often compare this cohesion to religious orders or even sectarian movements.

In more open environments (Jordan, Kuwait), the Brotherhood formed legal political parties and contested elections, seeking seats in parliament and local government. When forced underground, they focused on **da'wa** -- spreading Islam through preaching and personal example while quietly expanding their social influence. The Brotherhood's strategy thus blends *theology of service* (serving people equals serving God) with *pragmatic institution-building*. By 2011's Arab uprisings, decades of such work had made them the region's best-organized opposition force.

Despite officially renouncing violence, Brotherhood strategy has varied by context. Hamas in Gaza -- the Palestinian branch -- openly conducts armed resistance against Israel, framing it as legitimate liberation struggle. In late 1970s Syria, the local Brotherhood joined armed rebellion against Hafez Assad[6]. But in Egypt, Jordan, and Tunisia, the mainstream movement has pursued gradual reform through legal channels since the late 20th century. This evolution from underground militancy to electoral politics allowed the Brotherhood to present itself as **moderate** compared to Salafist jihadists. Such adaptability explains why governments still differ in their approach: some see potential partners for integrating Islamic opposition, others fear a hidden radical threat.

Turkey, Qatar, and the Brotherhood Model

The 2011 Arab revolutions gave the Brotherhood unprecedented opportunities for legitimate power -- most dramatically in Egypt's 2012 elections. Turkey and Qatar seized this moment, emerging as the movement's primary external sponsors to expand their regional

[6] brookings.edu

influence. Erdogan's **AKP** shares the Brotherhood's blend of Islamism and populism[7]. Though Turkey has no formal Brotherhood branch, Ankara saw allied movements' victories as a chance to build a friendly "Islamist belt" across the Arab world.

As revolutions unfolded, Turkey openly backed Brotherhood parties -- Egypt's *Freedom and Justice Party* under Morsi and Tunisia's Ennahda[8]. Istanbul became a refuge for Brotherhood exiles; after Egypt's 2013 coup, hundreds of Egyptian Islamists fled there. In Syria, Turkey supported Sunni rebels heavily influenced by former Brotherhood members. But Ankara's bet failed spectacularly. By the early 2020s, Brotherhood forces had lost everywhere -- crushed in Egypt, marginalized in Syria. Turkey found itself isolated, its Brotherhood support poisoning relations with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and especially al-Sisi's Egypt[9].

Recognizing this failure, Erdogan pivoted after 2021. Turkey curtailed Egyptian Islamist media and sought reconciliation with Cairo and the Gulf[10]. Still, Ankara remains the unofficial patron of moderate political Islam, with Turkish rhetoric on Palestine echoing Brotherhood themes.

Qatar plays a similar role. This tiny monarchy has bankrolled Islamist movements for decades, becoming political Islam's premier "sponsor"[11]. Though Qatar's own Brotherhood branch dissolved in 1999, Doha funds ideologically aligned groups abroad[12]. Al Jazeera long served as the Brotherhood's media megaphone. Qatar hosted prominent ideologues like Sheikh Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, the movement's spiritual guide who lived in Doha for decades. The emirate also funded Hamas-ruled Gaza extensively. With Israeli acquiescence, Qatari money paid salaries and bought fuel in Gaza, reinforcing Hamas control.

Both Turkey and Qatar view Hamas as a **legitimate resistance movement**, not a terrorist group. Qatar hosts Hamas's external political leadership, while Turkey allows the group's financial networks to operate freely[13]. Erdogan and Emir Tamim thus share the Brotherhood's regional vision, making them natural Middle Eastern allies.

This alignment triggered fierce backlash. In 2017, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt blockaded Qatar, explicitly demanding it stop supporting the **Brotherhood and Hamas**. Riyadh declared Qatar *"must cease all support for the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas."*

The crisis exposed a fundamental Sunni split: the **pro-Brotherhood axis** (Turkey, Qatar, briefly Morsi's Egypt and factions in Libya) versus the **status quo coalition** (Gulf monarchies and secular regimes like al-Sisi's Egypt). Saudi Arabia and the UAE designated the Brotherhood terrorist in 2014, while Qatar faced crushing pressure. The blockade ended in 2021, but tensions persist. Turkey likewise mended fences with the Saudis and Emiratis, scaling back overt Brotherhood support[14]. Yet Turkish soft power continues through religious institutions like Diyanet and Islamic cultural centers abroad.

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[7] washingtoninstitute.org
[8] arabcenterdc.org
[9] en.wikipedia.org
[10] arabcenterdc.org
[11] ispionline.it
[12] clingendael.org
[13] fdd.org
[14] arabcenterdc.org

Gaza, Israel, and Palestine. Turkey and Qatar give special priority to Palestine. Hamas, which controls Gaza, began as the Brotherhood's Palestinian branch in 1987[15]. Qatar became Gaza's financial lifeline in the 2000s, funding infrastructure and social services that keep Hamas in power. Turkey invested heavily in Gaza while championing Hamas diplomatically. During recent Gaza conflicts (especially 2023-2024), Ankara positioned itself as Palestine's defender, harshly condemning Israel while treating Hamas as a legitimate negotiating partner[16]. For the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, this Turkish-Qatari support for their Islamist rivals represents an existential threat. Through the Brotherhood model, Qatar and Turkey compete with traditional Arab states and Iran for Palestinian influence.

Banned Brotherhood: From Egypt to Central Asia.

Where outlawed, the Brotherhood operates underground or through ideologically similar groups. **Egypt** offers the starkest example. After 2013's military coup, al-Sisi's government crushed the Freedom and Justice Party, imprisoned thousands, and declared the Brotherhood terrorist. By the 2020s, virtually all Egyptian Brotherhood leaders were jailed or exiled to Turkey, Qatar, and Britain. Despite brutal repression, underground cells persist, occasionally staging small protests.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE took equally harsh stances after 2011. Beyond domestic bans, they pressured regional allies to suppress Brotherhood affiliates[17]. These monarchies see Brotherhood ideology as revolutionary -- it questions hereditary rule and demands popular sovereignty under Islamic law. For Gulf royals, political Islam equals existential threat.

Syria has executed Brotherhood members since 1980, when Assad imposed the death penalty after crushing the Hama uprising. The Syrian Brotherhood operated from exile until 2011's civil war partially revived its influence through rebel coalitions. Still, Damascus labeled all opposition -- secular and Islamist alike -- as "extremist."

After Assad's fall (December 2024), al-Sharaa took power and was proclaimed president on January 29, 2025. He relies on **Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)**, which evolved from Syria's former Al-Qaeda branch.

The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood seeks to register its party Al-Wa'ad. The Justice Ministry twice delayed approval, citing constitutional issues[18].

Jordan and other Arab states condition support for Damascus on blocking the Brotherhood, making al-Sharaa cautious[19].

In public speeches, al-Sharaa never mentions the Brotherhood, calling instead for "all patriotic forces" while advisors stress avoiding "Egypt's 2012-2013 scenario"[20].

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[15] brookings.edu
[16] fdd.org
[17] clingendael.org
[18] en.imarabic.com
[19] Worldcrunch
[20] FDD

The Brotherhood adopted conciliatory rhetoric, hoping for legal recognition. Al-Sharaa sees them as future rivals but maintains an uneasy truce. No direct HTS-Brotherhood organizational links exist[21].

Jordan long tolerated the Brotherhood-linked Islamic Action Front, which held parliamentary seats. In September 2024, the IAF won 32 seats in elections. But on April 23, 2025, the Interior Ministry banned the Brotherhood itself. Membership and spreading its ideology became illegal, though the IAF party technically remains legal[22]. This continues Jordan's gradual crackdown amid popular anger over Gaza.

Morocco integrated the Brotherhood-linked Justice and Development Party into politics -- it even led the government in the 2010s before losing the 2021 elections under palace pressure.

Russia banned the Brotherhood as extremist in 2003, alongside groups like Hizb ut-Tahrir[23]. Moscow fears these movements could *"ignite global jihad and establish a caliphate,"* potentially inspiring separatism or terrorism among Russia's Muslims. Brotherhood ideas reached the North Caucasus and Volga through literature, internet preaching, and Middle Eastern-educated migrants. No formal Brotherhood structures exist in Russia, but authorities lump their ideology with other "alien" radical influences.

In the 1990s, Russians attempted creating Islamic parties inspired by Brotherhood-style political Islam -- the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) had branches across republics. Tajikistan's IRP openly cooperated with the Brotherhood[24] until its 2015 ban. In January 2020, Tajik authorities arrested **113 alleged Brotherhood members**, including officials and professors[25]. Similar crackdowns occur in **Uzbekistan** and **Kazakhstan**. Under prohibition, the Brotherhood model either goes fully underground or morphs into looser ideological networks. Yet political Islam's appeal -- calls for Sharia governance, Islamic criticism of corrupt elites -- persists across these regions.

Brotherhood Penetration in Europe

In Europe, Brotherhood ideology spreads primarily through Muslim immigrant communities. Starting in the 1950s-60s, fleeing Brotherhood members established Islamic centers that evolved into influential diaspora organizations. Unlike Middle Eastern political parties, European Brotherhood supporters work through **civic, religious, and advocacy groups**. Intelligence services have long warned that beneath the rhetoric of Muslim rights, these groups advance fundamentalist agendas.

In 2025, a French government report alleged extensive Brotherhood lobbying in EU institutions[26]. Brotherhood allies allegedly sought stricter blasphemy laws and religious freedom interpretations incompatible with secularism. They masked this agenda as fighting "Islamophobia." The report named **pan-European networks** with Brotherhood ties: the **Council of European Muslims (CEM)** led by Brotherhood figures, and the **Forum of**

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[21] New Lines Magazine
[22] chathamhouse.org
[23] washingtoninstitute.org
[24] clingendael.org
[25] reuters.com
[26] politico.eu

European Muslim Youth and Student Organizations (FEMYSO) -- described as a Brotherhood talent pipeline. These groups allegedly received Qatari and Kuwaiti funding. While the organizations denied everything, EU governments grew alarmed. Macron ordered countermeasures against Brotherhood influence.

Austria mapped Islamic organizations linked to political Islam in 2020. Britain investigated the Brotherhood in 2015, concluding formal bans weren't necessary but monitoring should increase. Most European states **don't ban** the Brotherhood but remain wary. Politicians note the movement's double discourse: publicly defending Muslim rights, privately promoting separatism and Sharia-based parallel societies[27]. Some radical incidents -- anti-secular agitation, integration resistance -- stem from Brotherhood ideology that portrays the West as morally bankrupt[28].

Crucially, European Brotherhood activity remains **non-violent**. They reject terrorism and oppose ISIS and Al-Qaeda, allowing them to operate legally as NGOs and charities. Intelligence services worry about their **long-term strategy**: cultivating alienation among young Muslims who might later embrace political Islam. In Belgium and Austria, Brotherhood-linked officials gained local influence, shaping Islamic education[29].

Critics argue the "stealth Islamization" threat is overblown. They note European Muslims' diversity, declining religiosity across generations, and limited Middle Eastern influence. Yet an **extensive infrastructure** of historically Brotherhood-linked organizations spans Europe. Their ideology adapts al-Banna's concepts to European contexts, emphasizing **minority rights** and **anti-discrimination** in ways that complicate legal responses[30].

Comparative Analysis: Brotherhood vs Other Islamist Models

The Islamic world features multiple models for mixing religion and politics. We'll examine three major alternatives to the Brotherhood: **Salafism**, **Shia political Islam**, and **Sufism** (traditional Islam).

Salafism vs Muslim Brotherhood

Salafism demands return to the "pure" Islam of early generations (salaf). Salafists stress strict monotheism, literal scripture, and purging later "innovations." They're **far more conservative and literalist** than the Brotherhood. While the Brotherhood embraces modern institutions like parties and parliaments, many Salafists reject democracy as un-Islamic. Saudi *Wahhabism* justifies absolute monarchy through religious obedience doctrines[31]. Classical Salafism thus supports authoritarianism to avoid discord (fitna). The Brotherhood, by contrast, seeks *"Islamic democracy"* based on popular sovereignty. Al-Banna wanted Islamic norms embedded in modern institutions; Salafists often shun "impious" states entirely or demand theocratic rule. **These represent competing Sunni visions**: one backward-looking and often apolitical (except jihadists), the other forward-looking and institution-building.

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[27] thefp.com
[28] henryjacksonsociety.org
[29] trendsresearch.org
[30] politico.eu
[31] clingendael.org

Relations between the movements have been tense. The Brotherhood accused Salafists of ignoring society's real problems; Salafists saw the Brotherhood as too willing to dilute faith for power. In 1970s-80s Egypt, Salafists attacked the Brotherhood for joining elections and engaging secular regimes. After 2011, Egyptian Salafists formed al-Nour party to challenge the Brotherhood politically, offering a more rigid Sharia vision. Sometimes they allied tactically against secular forces. But **theological differences run deep**: Salafists reject popular Islam and Sufism, while the Brotherhood historically engaged Sufi orders and local customs flexibly.

In **Russia and neighboring regions**, these differences matter. *The Brotherhood never established organizational roots in Russia*, though their ideas circulated through books and Middle Eastern graduates. **Salafism/Wahhabism** gained far wider influence, especially in the 1990s North Caucasus[32]. Young Muslims trained in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf brought rigid Salafist views home, attacking local leaders for "innovations" and state collaboration[33]. Caucasus Salafists condemned Sufi practices -- saint veneration, group dhikr -- as heretical, demanding "pure" prophetic Islam. This sparked violent **Salafi-Sufi conflicts**. Through the 1990s-2000s, Dagestan, Chechnya, and Kabardino-Balkaria saw terror attacks inspired by Salafist jihadism drawing on Ibn Taymiyyah, radical Qutb, and Al-Qaeda -- not the Brotherhood. Russia equated *Salafism with terrorism*, though many Salafists were actually apolitical. Still, Salafists formed the ideological core of Chechen resistance (Basayev, Khattab preached Wahhabism) and Dagestan's insurgency.

Brotherhood vs Salafists in Russia: The Brotherhood barely existed in the North Caucasus, while their gradualist approach was discredited by violent conflict. *In Russian Muslim regions, Salafist movements, not moderate Brotherhood figures, led Islamist opposition*. In areas dominated by **traditional Sufi Islam**, the Brotherhood might have appealed to educated urbanites, but state control prevented this. In Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, political Islam ideas circulated in the 1990s before muftiate supervision tightened. **Hizb ut-Tahrir** -- more radical than the Brotherhood in demanding immediate caliphate -- also gained followers before crackdowns. Today, **state-backed Sufi spiritual administrations oppose all "alternative Islam"**, mainly underground Salafists but also other currents.

The Brotherhood differs from Salafists through its **developed social doctrine and political program**. Pure Salafism often remains apolitical (focused on personal piety); the Brotherhood demands active social transformation. Russian Salafists compensate for small numbers through youth mobilization -- **"more visible and active in society despite being outnumbered"** by the passive traditional majority[34]. Both movements recruit through study circles, but with different messages. Tellingly, Middle Eastern rulers fighting the Brotherhood often relied on Salafists! Egypt's al-Nour party backed the military against the Brotherhood in 2013. Saudi Arabia promoted Wahhabism regionally as an alternative to Brotherhood

[32] valdaiclub.com
[33] wilsoncenter.org
[34] valdaiclub.com

populism[35]. Saudi propaganda claimed **"the Brotherhood sows revolutionary chaos while true Islam demands order and obedience,"** legitimizing monarchy. The Salafist-Brotherhood clash is thus both theological and geopolitical: two Sunni models competing for the ummah.

Shia Political Islam vs Muslim Brotherhood

Shia political Islam finds its fullest expression in Iran's Islamic Republic and allied movements (Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraqi Shia parties, Yemen's Houthis). It developed separately from Sunnism but offers instructive comparisons.

The key difference is **confessional structure**: Shias rely on clerical hierarchy and the *velayat-e faqih* doctrine (rule of the jurisprudent). The Sunni Brotherhood lacks comparable religious authority (no global "muftiate," just Egypt's limited Guide council)[36]. Iran grants the Supreme Leader direct theocratic power as the Hidden Imam's deputy. *"The Brotherhood lacks a coherent legal framework for implementing Sharia, unlike Iran's elaborate velayat-e faqih system,"* analysts observe[37]. Brotherhood leaders speak **vaguely** about "establishing Sharia"; Shia ideologues like Khomeini created detailed Islamic state blueprints. This yields practical differences: Iran operates as an openly **clerical, anti-Western state** exporting revolution and confronting America and Israel. The Brotherhood also opposes Western hegemony and seeks a global Islamic order. But they're more **gradualist**: even when ruling Egypt (2012), they maintained Western ties, believing domestic consolidation should precede external ambitions. Iran positioned itself as the *"resistance axis"* from day one, accepting isolation.

Another contrast involves **organization**. The Brotherhood emerged bottom-up as a mass response to colonialism and Islamic decline. Shia movements can be mass-based too (*Basij* militia, Hezbollah's social wings) but integrate more tightly with state structures (Iran's IRGC, Iraq's ruling Da'wa party). **Shia political Islam appears more centralized and militarized**. Hezbollah exemplifies this: a party-militia earning Shia loyalty through Israeli resistance and social services. Like the Brotherhood, it provides welfare, but answers to Iranian clerical guides following *velayat-e faqih* doctrine. The Brotherhood's international organization merely coordinates; it can't dictate to branches[38]. Syrian and Egyptian chapters often disagreed; Jordan pursued independent strategies.

Brotherhood-Shia relations have been complex. Many Sunni Islamists initially welcomed Iran's 1979 revolution. But growing sectarian tensions (especially after Iraq and Syria wars) created distance. Syria's Brotherhood saw Iran propping up Assad against the Sunni majority. Egypt's Brotherhood under Morsi tried pragmatic outreach to Tehran but faced Salafist and clerical resistance[39]. Saudi propaganda portrays both the Brotherhood and Iran as twin extremist threats, though Saudis hate the Brotherhood more.

In **Russia's Turkic and Caucasian regions**, Shia influence remains minimal -- Muslims there are overwhelmingly Sunni (Hanafi and Shafi'i). Small Shia communities exist

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[35] clingendael.org
[36] brookings.edu
[37] washingtoninstitute.org
[38] brookings.edu
[39] washingtoninstitute.org

(Azerbaijani Shias in Dagestan) but lack political activism. In neighboring Azerbaijan (Turkic, Shia-majority), Iran tried spreading influence through religious schools before the secular regime's crackdown. Russia maintains friendly state relations with official Shia leaders and Iran. Domestically, Shias avoid the demonization Salafists face.

Ideologically: *the Brotherhood promotes pan-Sunni Islamic unity*, while Shia structures often display **sectarian priorities**, focusing on Shia communities and interests. Brotherhood rhetoric emphasizes unity against common enemies (the West, Israel), but Syria, Iraq, and Yemen proved alliance impossible. Sunni Islamists feel closer to Erdogan's Turkey than Iranian ayatollahs.

Sufism and Traditional Islam vs Muslim Brotherhood

Sufism represents Islam's mystical tradition expressed through orders (*tariqats*) under sheikh guidance. Historically important social institutions in rural and mountain areas, Sufi brotherhoods rarely engage politics directly. They preach humility, spiritual development, and often support rulers who permit religious freedom. Sufism embodies **"traditional Islam"** predating modern political movements.

Brotherhood-Sufi relations are ambiguous. Many early Brotherhood figures had Sufi backgrounds (al-Banna belonged to the Hasafiyya order). Initially, the movement didn't oppose Sufis, even borrowing organizational concepts. But as the Brotherhood modernized and radicalized, they criticized Sufi "excesses" -- grave worship, saint cults -- as distractions from social struggle. They embraced **worldly activism**; Sufis often retreated into spiritual exercises.

Politically, modern Sufi leaders frequently back **governments against Islamists**. Many states promote "traditional Islam" to counter radicals. This is pronounced in **Russia** and post-Soviet states. The Kremlin openly views **Sufism as the antidote to Salafism** -- it preaches submission and divides Muslims into competing orders, preventing anti-state unity[40]. Chechen leader Kadyrov belongs to the Qadiriyya order and made Sufism official regional Islam. Sufi sheikhs receive state funding in exchange for regime support. But this **state-Sufi fusion** risks making sheikhs look like regime puppets[41]. Their credibility suffers, driving youth toward "purer" protest movements like Salafism. In the Caucasus, educated young Muslims saw Sufi imams as the "corrupt old guard"; Salafism became their rebellion. **Sufism lost its role as resistance ideology** (unlike Imam Shamil's 19th-century movement) and became status quo.

Regarding the Brotherhood, Sufi leaders remain cautious about mass political movements threatening their traditional authority. Yet the Brotherhood doesn't target Sufism as the enemy (unlike Salafists). For the Brotherhood, Sufis err by avoiding social engagement but aren't Islam's foes. In 1980s Sudan, the Brotherhood even won some Sufi orders' support. Still, **the models diverge fundamentally**: Sufi brotherhoods center on local saints, kinship networks, and sheikh-disciple hierarchies. The Brotherhood is a modern political organization -- transnational and ideological. **Sufism remains largely socio-cultural; the Brotherhood is ideological-political**.

In Russia's Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, Sufism existed historically (Naqshbandi order) but less visibly than in the Caucasus. For Tatars and Bashkirs following Hanafi Islam, Sufi

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[40] ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu
[41] wilsoncenter.org

practices are private, not public movements. Soviet clergy distanced themselves from orders. Today, authorities promote *"traditional Islam"* blending Sufism, folk customs, and state loyalty. The Brotherhood faces total suppression; any independent Islamic study circles are quickly banned. **Russian traditional Islam operates through state-controlled Spiritual Administrations**, while political Islam remains illegal or marginal.

To summarize the comparison:

- *Muslim Brotherhood* -- mass transnational **political-religious movement** seeking Islamic states through social mobilization and electoral politics.
- *Salafism* -- **fundamentalist current** demanding literal scriptural adherence; ranges from apolitical quietists to ultra-radical jihadists. Clashes with Brotherhood over methods and theology.
- *Shia political Islam* -- **hierarchical clerical model** (Iran, Hezbollah) based on Shia theology and militarized structures; parallel alternative in different sectarian camp.
- *Sufism* -- **traditional spiritual practice** not seeking power; often allies with regimes against Islamists. Neither direct threat nor ally to Brotherhood given divergent values (mysticism vs activism).

Conclusion

Over nearly a century, the Muslim Brotherhood developed a unique model for mobilizing Muslim masses by fusing religious ideology with political practice. Their vision -- Islam as the comprehensive foundation for state and society -- proved compelling enough to spawn branches from Morocco to Southeast Asia. The Brotherhood's legacy shapes contemporary Middle Eastern politics: **Gaza, where Hamas employs Brotherhood methods** of parallel social services plus armed resistance, and **Turkey, where Erdogan blends Islamism with populism following the Brotherhood playbook**. Qatar turned support for Brotherhood-aligned movements into a tool of regional influence, facing isolation as a result. Even in Europe, governments worry about Brotherhood networks shaping Muslim communities and public discourse.

The competition between Islamic political models -- Sunni Salafism, Shia clericalism, popular Sufism -- shows **the battle for Muslim societies' future continues**. In Russia's Turkic regions and the Caucasus, this plays out as official traditional Islam (often Sufi-influenced) confronting new protest fundamentalism. Remembering Soviet collapse and Caucasus wars, Russia crushes any Brotherhood-style organizations, fearing religious movements will generate political demands. Central Asian autocrats do likewise, blocking even moderate Islamic parties. Yet root causes -- injustice, corruption, identity crises -- persist. The Brotherhood offered answers through religion; though organizationally weakened, **their ideas spread through other channels**. Salafists reject their flexibility but adopt calls to "purify" society; Shia revolutionaries share anti-Western rhetoric under different banners.

For strategic analysis, the Brotherhood model represents a reproducible scenario: religious organizations provide social services, build loyalty, then reach for power invoking Islam. Turkey and Qatar showed state actors can weaponize this model for geopolitical gain.

Other powers unite against Islamism in response, creating a **cold war within Islam**: pro-Brotherhood vs status quo, Sunni vs Shia, modernist vs traditionalist.

International observers should track the **institutional and theological mechanisms** enabling Brotherhood-style movements. These include: alternative education and charity networks, electoral participation when possible, religious legitimation of protests, tactical flexibility between radicalism and moderation. Theologically, the Brotherhood merges Islamic tradition with modern concepts (popular sovereignty, social justice), attracting youth. Socially, they fill voids left by weak states.

The **Muslim Brotherhood remains significant** as both active force and reference point shaping how supporters and opponents approach political Islam. Understanding their theology and practice helps predict Muslim society trajectories from the Middle East to post-Soviet spaces. History shows that ideas capturing mass imagination survive the harshest repression, reemerging in new forms under new leaders. Strategic analysis must therefore examine not just security dimensions but the **competition of ideas and identities** where the Brotherhood remains a key player with deep historical roots and global ambitions.