Program on Extremism
THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

JULY 2025

The Muslim Brotherhood in America

A brief history

LORENZO VIDINO

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2000 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
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Little is known, and even less is uncontested, about the history of the Muslim Brotherhood in the United States (U.S.). Some, in fact, have even questioned whether the Brotherhood has ever operated in America. Yet ample evidence clearly demonstrates that the group has been active in the U.S. from the late 1950s. It is also fair to say that its presence has historically been substantial and well-organized, even compared to European countries like France and the United Kingdom, where the Brotherhood has a significant footprint.

This report seeks to trace the history of the Muslim Brotherhood in America based on a large body of literature, which includes academic writings, publications by Muslim Brotherhood-linked organizations and individuals, court documents, and trial exhibits. This evidence is supplemented by many personal testimonials of individuals who belong or used to belong to the group in America.

This information is the result of over 25 years of dedicated research by the author. The report draws heavily from the U.S.-focused chapters of his two books, *The New Muslim Brotherhood in the West* (Columbia University Press, 2010), and *The Closed Circle: Joining and Leaving the Muslim Brotherhood in the West* (Columbia University Press, 2020). The report does not seek to provide a comprehensive view of the Brotherhood in America, a task of herculean proportions. Rather, it aims to provide a succinct but informed overview of the group's history in America, tracing the origins of many organizations that have today achieved a high degree of influence within sections of the American Muslim community and with American policymakers.

The origins

Until the 1960s, the vast majority of Muslims living in the U.S. were African Americans. While present among West African slaves since the seventeenth century, Islam began to attract a significant following among black Americans in the first decades of the twentieth century, as charismatic Muslim preachers found a receptive audience among the masses of disenfranchised blacks who had immigrated from the South to the large industrial cities of the North. Movements founded at the time, such as the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam, blended tenets of the Muslim faith with teachings of other religions and fostered a strong message of racial pride, generating particularistic forms of Islam that have little in common with traditional Sunni Islam but that suited the identity needs of African Americans.[1]

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[1] Edward E. Curtis, *Islam in Black America* (Albany, NY: State University of New York University Press, 2002); Robert Dannin, *Black Pilgrimage to Islam* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002); Aminah Beverly McCloud, *African American Islam* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1995).

Small communities of Muslim immigrants from Lebanon and other Arab countries had been settling throughout the U.S. since the late 19th century, growing in subsequent waves and fully integrating into American society. By the 1950s some of the local organizations founded by Arab Muslim immigrants formed a national umbrella organization called the Federation of Islamic Associations (FIA).[2] Mirroring countless American organizations that cater to various ethnic or religious groups, FIA aimed to maintain the cultural heritage and the familial bonds among American Muslims of Arab descent, organizing a popular annual conference that brought together families from throughout the country.[3]

FIA's limited goals and activities, while satisfying the needs of fully Americanized Arab immigrants, were not sufficient enough for a new constituency that, by the early 1960s, had arrived *en masse* in America: Muslim students. Between the 1950s and the 1960s, in fact, more than half a million students from throughout the Muslim world, as well as other parts of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, arrived on hundreds of American college campuses, seeking to obtain internationally recognized degrees in medicine, engineering, and, for the most part, other scientific fields.[4] The phenomenon was widely encouraged by American authorities, who saw it as an excellent opportunity for the country to form friendly relationships with the future elites of newly independent and "Third World" countries. Lacking the historical links that many European countries had established during the colonial era, America saw the presence of hundreds of thousands of students on its campuses as the perfect way to form ties with potential allies. If, as part of the Cold War chess game, Moscow was opening the doors of its educational institutions to future leaders of countries it sought to influence, so was Washington.

As the scions of the urban elites of the Muslim world arrived on U.S. college campuses, they established the first student organizations that could fulfill their basic religious needs.[5] Since supporters of nationalism, at the time the leading ideology in the Muslim world, had little interest in religious organizations, it was individuals who had had experiences in various Islamist organizations in their home countries who

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[2] Aslam Abdullah and Gasser Hathout, *The American Muslim Identity: Speaking for Ourselves* (Pasadena, CA: Dawn, 2003), pp. 25-30; Ilyas Ba-Yunus and Kassim Kone, *Muslims in the United States* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006), pp. 46-9; Gutbi Mahdi Ahmed, "Muslim Organizations in the United States," in Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, ed., *The Muslims of America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). Pp. 12-4.

[3] Ba-Yunus and Kone, page 47.

[4] History of ISNA, documentary available at: http://www.isna.net/ISNAHQ/pages/Documentary.aspx (accessed March 22, 2009).

[5] Abdullah and Hathout, pp. 25-30; Karen Leonard, "South Asian Leadership of American Muslims," in Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, *Muslims in the West. From Sojourners to Citizens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), page 234.

became the main drivers behind the small student groupings that spontaneously formed on various campuses.[6] Realizing that FIA's apolitical nature did not fulfill their vision of Islam as a comprehensive way of life, Islamist students soon felt the need to form their own national umbrella organization. In the winter of 1963, one hundred students representing fewer than twenty Muslim student organizations from various parts of the country met on the campus of the University of Illinois in Urbana, a university town less than a hundred miles from Chicago, Indianapolis and St. Louis, in the heart of the American Midwest.[7] The result of the meeting was the creation of the Muslim Student Association (MSA), America's first national Muslim student organization.

MSA was the brainchild of a small group of student activists, who originated from various countries of the Muslim world, but were united by a common vision of Islam as inherently political. Founders of MSA included activists from various backgrounds, including several Shias, yet a crucial role was played by members and sympathizers of various national branches of the Muslim Brotherhood who had settled in America since the 1950s.[8] While MSA was not a "pure" Brotherhood organization, its links to it were strong.[9] From its inception, Brotherhood members held key positions, influencing its ideology and direction. Moreover, MSA became a sort of parallel structure of the Brotherhood, independent but, at the same time, represented an inexhaustible recruiting pool and a perfect avenue to disseminate its ideas.[10]

Initially affiliated with FIA, MSA soon overshadowed it, establishing branches on hundreds of campuses and recruiting thousands of new members and sympathizers. If FIA's activities were limited mostly to an annual meeting where members celebrated their common identity, MSA had a much more ambitious agenda. The organization's publication, *Al Ittihad*, tackled deeper issues, from political events in the Muslim world to theological controversies, often disseminating the positions and writings of top Islamist thinkers like Hassan al Banna, Abul A'la Mawdudi, and

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6 Gutbi Mahdi Ahmed, pp. 14-6.

7 Ba-Yunus and Kone, page 49.

8 Steve A. Johnson, "The Muslims of Indianapolis," in Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Jane Idleman Smith, eds., *Muslim Communities in North America* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994), pp. 270-1.

9 Noreen S. Ahmed-Ullah, Sam Roe and Laurie Cohen, "A Rare Look at Secretive Brotherhood in America," *Chicago Tribune*, September 19, 2004; "A Little Taste of History," MSA-National Website (Archive), http://web.archive.org/web/20060118061004/http://www.msa-national.org/about/history.html (Accessed October 29, 2007); Ikhwan in America, Government Exhibit 003-0089 in United States v. Holy Land Foundation.

10 Ikhwan in America, Government Exhibit 003-0089 in United States v. Holy Land Foundation.

Sayyid Qutb.[11] MSA's annual conference, often held during Labor Day weekend, attracted thousands of participants.

At a time when Islam was almost invisible in America, the conferences represented a unique occasion for Muslims from all ethnic backgrounds to come together, shop at an Islamic bazaar, purchase Islamic literature, hear prominent Muslim speakers, and meet other Muslims who held a similar interpretation of their faith. MSA also created professional subgroups, such as the Islamic Medical Association and the Islamic Association of Scientists and Engineers, and others based on ethnic origin, such as the Muslim Arab Youth Association and the Malaysian Islamic Study Group.[12] Entities such as the North American Islamic Trust, MSA's financial holding, the Islamic Book Service, and American Trust Publications were also set up to serve the growing needs of the organization.[13]

The "Three Kurds" and the creation of IIIT

Particularly active among the pioneers who settled in America were three young Iraqi Kurds: Jamal Barzinji, Ahmed Totonji, and Hisham al Talib. The three men had left Iraq as the regime began cracking down on the local branch of the Brotherhood; they studied in the United Kingdom and then moved to the U.S. in the 1960s.[14] Once in America the three Kurds involved themselves in high-profile roles in Brotherhood-linked organizations both in the U.S. and worldwide. Totonji and al Talib served as secretary general of the International Islamic Federation of Student Organizations (IIFSO), a Kuwaiti-based umbrella organization for worldwide Muslim student organizations and a forerunner of the Saudi World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY).[15] Al Talib later served also as secretary general of WAMY itself. IIFSO and WAMY constituted, until a few years ago, some of the most active and best funded youth multinational organizations sponsored by Gulf countries to propagate their ultra-conservative interpretation of Islam worldwide.[16]

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[11] Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, *Competing Visions of Islam in the United States* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1990). Page 26.

[12] Mohamed Nimer, Muslim Community Life in the United States and Canada (New York: Routledge, 2002). Page 64.

[13] Johnson, "The Muslims of Indianapolis," pp. 270-2.

[14] Larry Poston, *Islamic Da'wah in the West* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1992), page 79; interview with Yussuf Nada, Campione d'Italia, July 14, 2008; John Mintz and Douglas Farah, "In Search of Friends Among the Foes: U.S. Hopes to Work with Diverse Group," *Washington Post*, September 11, 2004.

[15] Ahmad Totonji, "World Assembly of Muslim Youth," *Impact International*, October 22-November 11, 1976; "IIFSO Conference: No Proclamations, No Self-Congratulations, Just Sharing of Experience," *Impact International*, 12-15 August, 1977.

[16] John L. Esposito, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). Volume 2, pp. 207-9.

Domestically the three Kurds were no less active. Aside from their involvement in the daily management of the MSA (of which Barzinji served as president and chair of its Planning and Organization Committee, Totonji as chairman, and al Talib as founding member), they also masterminded the creation of a web of affiliated organizations.[17] In 1973 they set up the North American Islamic Trust (NAIT), an entity initially headed by al Talib and Barzinji whose purpose was to financially support the activities of the MSA.[18] The MSA began developing a web of sub-organizations and professional orders, from the Association of Muslim Scientists and Engineers (AMSE) to the Association of Muslim Social Scientists (AMSS), which published the American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences.[19]

The three Kurds' success in building a myriad of entities is due largely to their activism and vision, but the financial angle cannot be overlooked. Throughout the 1970s and the early 1980s, the men worked for various companies owned by the late Yussuf Nada, a senior member of the Egyptian Brotherhood who, from his exile in Italy, played a crucial role in financing the Brotherhood's nascent presence in the West since the 1960s. It was Nada who introduced the three Kurds to his network of wealthy Arab Gulf donors.[20] The relationship was so close that Nada not only purchased a home in Indianapolis (and three of his four children were born in the U.S.) but even more than thirty years later, in an interview with the author, he still referred to the three—Barzinji, Totonji, and al Talib—affectionately as "my boys."[21]

In 1977, Nada and the three Kurds played a key role in establishing one of the most influential think tanks of the global Islamist revivalist movement by summoning some of its key thought leaders to a conference held in Lugano. The choice of the charming Swiss lake town was hardly casual, as Lugano had always been the headquarters of Nada's business activities and, by his own admission, the wealthy "foreign minister" of the Brotherhood played a key role in organizing the meeting.[22]

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[17] "ISNA Recognizes IIIT VP Dr. Jamal Barzinji for Pioneering Service," IIIT's website, September 8, 2008. (http://www.iiit.org/NewsEvents/News/tabid/62/articleType/ArticleView/articleId/90/Default.aspx, accessed September 24, 2008); Steven Merley, *The Muslim Brotherhood in the United States*, research monograph for the Hudson Institute, April 2009, pp. 9-10; "Muslim Students' Associations Hold Annual Convention," *Muslim World League Journal*, November/December 1965.

[18] NAIT's website (http://www.nait.net/ , accessed September 24, 2008)

[19] Barzinji, page 18.

[20] Interview with Yussuf Nada, Campione d'Italia, July 14, 2008. One of the companies was Nada International, one of the many entities set up by Nada in Liechtenstein. Both Barzinji and al Talib served on its board of trustees for years.

[21] Interview with Yussuf Nada, Campione d'Italia, July 14, 2008.

[22] Interview with Yussuf Nada, Campione d'Italia, July 14, 2008 and Mohamed Nimer, The North American Muslim Resource Guide: Muslim Community Life in the United States and Canada (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002). Pp. 161-62.

The conference, entitled the First International Conference on the Islamization of Knowledge, brought together some thirty leaders of the global Islamist movement.[23]

The 1977 Lugano meeting, which had been formally convened by the Association of Muslim Social Scientists, entrusted the three Kurds with an important responsibility. The attendees had agreed that, in order to solidify their position in the West, the Brothers had to develop a scientific methodology to refine the spread of Islamist thought. Acknowledging the Muslim world's inferiority in scientific, military, and cultural knowledge, they sought ways to close this intellectual gap.[24] Their answer laid in the concept of the "Islamization of knowledge," a quest for the creation of a scientific methodology that could aid Muslim scholars in scientifically analyzing social and political issues from an Islamic perspective.[25]

Crucial in this endeavor was the creation of a think tank, the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT), which the attendees of the Lugano meeting decided to base in the U.S.. IIIT's first board consisted of WAMY founder and University of Pennsylvania graduate Abu Sulayman, Barzinji, the American-based scholar and Muslim World League founder Taha al Alwani, and Anwar Ibrahim, who would later become Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia (1993–1998). IIIT was formally incorporated in Pennsylvania in 1980 (although it later moved to suburban Washington D.C.), and its first board meeting was held in Barzinji's Maryland home.[26] Along with the Islamic Foundation of Leicester and various Saudi and Gulf organizations, IIIT served as a catalyst for the spread of revivalist ideology, focusing on translating into various Western languages and disseminating the works of key Islamist thinkers.

From student organizations to the "adult phase"

By the late 1970s/early 1980s, MSA leaders realized that a student organization, even as sophisticated as MSA, was not enough to fulfill the needs of the growing number of Muslims who had decided to relocate permanently to America. As a consequence, they incorporated the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), an

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[23] Barzinji, pp. 13-21; Leif Stenberg, The Islamization of Science: Four Muslim Positions Developing an Islamic Modernity (New York: Coronet Books, 1996), pp. 157-8.

[24] Barzinji, pp. 13-21; Muhammad Shafiq, *Growth of Islamic Thought in North America* (Brentwood, MD: Amana Publications, 1994). Page 87.

[25] Ismail Raji al-Faruqi, "Islamizing the Social Sciences," *Muslim World League Journal*, August 1977.

[26] Shafiq, page 28; IIIT's website (http://www.iiit.org/AboutUs/AboutIIIT/tabid/66/Default.aspx , accessed September 8, 2008); Merley, page 26.

umbrella organization established to coordinate the activities of MSA and the other organizations borne out of the same milieu.[27] [28]

The evolution from student grouping to "adult" organization, serving the needs of a permanent Muslim community in the West, has characterized the evolution of Brotherhood networks in virtually all Western countries. A particularly interesting perspective on this passage in the U.S. comes from the internal writings and speeches of members of the Brotherhood operating in America that were introduced as evidence in the Holy Land Foundation (HLF) terrorism trial.[29] Among the various sources documenting the first years of the Brotherhood in the U.S., the most authoritative and comprehensive is a lecture given to other Brotherhood members in Kansas City in the early 1980s by Zeid al-Noman, a *masul* (official) of the Executive Office of the U.S. Muslim Brotherhood.[30]

One of the most striking aspects of al Noman's lecture is the level of organization he describes. While the group had only just established a presence in the country, al Noman outlines a formal and extremely complex structure. He explains that the group had no fewer than twenty collegial bodies and committees that operated according to a well-defined hierarchy and met regularly. While some of the committees discussed security or *dawa* methods, the organization's central bodies drafted and oversaw meticulous long-term plans of action. According to al Noman, in fact, the Brotherhood's Shura Council in the U.S. approved five-year plans for the group's activities and the Executive Office, to which al Noman himself belonged, put together annual work programs to implement the Shura Council's guidelines.

According to al Noman, the plan for the 1975-1980 quinquennium was simply "general work," but the 1981-1985 quinquennium unveiled a major shift in the American Brotherhood's views and perceptions of its goals. The Shura Council and the Executive Office understood that basing the movement's activities on a student organization was limiting and that a more permanent solution needed to be found. Only a permanent network of organizations and not a student group, which, by nature, changes in membership as its members graduate, could implement the quinquennial plans. "What the Movement should be," said al Noman, "is to become a Movement for the residents." Al Noman refers to this new phase as "the settlement of the dawa." The transition from MSA to ISNA, organizations that the

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[27] "Pangs and Process of Self-Discovery," *Impact International*, October 14-27, 1983; interview with ISNA official, Chicago, December 2002; Poston, page 104.

[28] Gutbi Mahdi Ahmed, "Muslim Organizations in the United States," in Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, ed., *The Muslims of America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). Pp. 14-8.

[29] More on the HLF trial later.

[30] Ikhwan in America, Government Exhibit 003-0089 in United States v. Holy Land Foundation.

Brotherhood indirectly controlled, has to be seen, therefore, in light of this change in the American Brotherhood's strategy.

Clarifications on what "settlement of the dawa" means come from another extremely detailed document introduced as evidence by the government in the HLF trial. Entitled *An Explanatory Memorandum on the Strategic Goals for the Group in North America*, the document is an 18-page internal memorandum sent by Mohammed Akram, a member of the Shura Council of the U.S. Brotherhood, to the rest of the Shura Council in 1991.[31] Akram, who later served as secretary general of the International al Quds Foundation, a Lebanon-based institution headed by Muslim Brotherhood spiritual leader Yussuf al Qaradawi, states that "it must be stressed that it has become clear and emphatically known that all is in agreement that we must 'settle' or 'enable' Islam and its Movement in this part of the world [America]." "Islam and its Movement," writes Akram referring to the Muslim Brotherhood's movement, are to "become part of the homeland it lives in." Writes Akram:

> *...The general strategic goal of the Brotherhood in America which was approved by the Shura [Leadership] Council and the Organizational Conference for 1987 is "enablement of Islam in North America, meaning: establishing an effective and stable Islamic Movement led by the Muslim Brotherhood which adopts Muslims' causes domestically and globally, and which works to expand the observant Muslim base; aims at unifying and directing Muslims' efforts; presents Islam as a civilization alternative; and supports the global Islamic state, wherever it is." ... The priority that is approved by the Shura Council for the work of the Brotherhood in its current and former session is "Settlement."...*

The step that Akram deems necessary in order to implement "the settlement of the dawa" is the shift from elite movement to a popular one. While some of the group's core activities and, most importantly, its aims, needed to remain secret, Akram believes that, in order to create a stable and widespread presence in the country, the Brotherhood needs to open up to the outside, and particularly towards Muslim communities in North America. Akram states, in fact, that "absorbing and winning them with all of their factions and colors in America and Canada" is crucial for the settlement project and that "the art of dealing with others" has to be learned. A mastery of "the art of coalitions, the art of absorption and the principles of cooperation" are also equally important. Akram understands that, in order to spread its message to other Muslims living in the U.S., the Brotherhood needs to become an open and public organization, reaching out to potential new members and allies.

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[31] An Explanatory Memorandum on the Strategic Goals for the Group in North America, Government Exhibit 003-0085 in United States v. Holy Land Foundation.

But, if on one hand Akram argues that the Brothers should become an "open" popular movement in order to attract new sympathizers, he also reminds the readers of his memorandum what the real aim behind the "settlement of the dawa" is:

> *...The process of settlement is a 'Civilization-Jihadist Process' with all the word means. The Ikhwan [Muslim Brothers] must understand that their work in America is a kind of grand Jihad in eliminating and destroying the Western civilization from within and 'sabotaging' its miserable house by their hands and the hands of the believers so that it is eliminated and God's religion is made victorious over all other religions. Without this level of understanding, we are not up to this challenge and have not prepared ourselves for Jihad yet. It is a Muslim's destiny to perform Jihad and work wherever he is and wherever he lands until the final hour comes, and there is no escape from that destiny except for those who chose to slack.*

Crucially important in order to advance this goal is the development of what Akram refers to as "the organizational mentality," examples of which, Akram says, can be found in the prophet Mohammed ("the first pioneer of this phenomenon") and Muslim Brotherhood founder Hassan al Banna ("the pioneer of contemporary Islamic Dawa"). "We must say that we are in a country which understands no language other than the language of the organizations," writes Akram to other members of the Shura Council, "and one which does not respect or give weight to any group without effective, functional and strong organizations."

At the local level, therefore, Akram argues that the Brothers should develop multifunctional Islamic centers, bases from which the Brothers will generate new followers like "a beehive which produces sweet honey." If the Islamic center/paramosque represents the local unit of the movement in the U.S., Akram believes that the Brothers should also operate at the national level. "In order for the process of settlement to be completed," says Akram, "we must plan and work from now to equip and prepare ourselves, our brothers, our apparatuses, our sections and our committees in order to turn into comprehensive organizations in a gradual and balanced way that is suitable with the need and the reality."

The last five pages of Akram's memorandum detail, in fact, how the Brotherhood can and must form organizations that would, operating on different levels, further the group's agenda. Akram notes that most of these organizations do already exist, yet operate without much central control. The goal of the Brotherhood must be that of merging them and coordinating their work in a cohesive manner. Finally, a one-page attachment lists 29 American Muslim organizations that belong to the movement and that Akram indicates as in need of centralized planning. Headlining the page with a hopeful comment ("imagine if they all march according to one

plan"), Akram mentions organizations such as ISNA, MSA, NAIT, IIIT, and many of their subgroups as entities belonging to the American Brotherhood network that the group should better coordinate in order to advance its goals.

Ample foreign funding fuels the growth of U.S. Brotherhood entities

While there is no available evidence suggesting that Akram's memorandum or any other similar plan was ever officially approved by the Brotherhood's Shura Council, what Akram outlined seems to mirror the development of the MSA/ISNA milieu over the last thirty years. Most of the 29 organizations listed in the memorandum have substantially expanded their reach and generated myriads of offshoots. Comprising only a few hundred core activists and a few thousand members, they constitute a tight-knit network of organizations that, despite some occasional disagreements, work together under an efficient distribution of roles and that has managed to overshadow competing Muslim trends and organizations to a degree that surpasses that of most European countries.

Crucial to developing this network—and to exerting influence over many individuals and organizations that espoused conservative interpretations of Islam but did not belong to the movement—was access to ample financial resources. To be sure, this success would not have been possible without the drive and organizational abilities of its members, but the guarantee of substantial funding is arguably the single most important determinant of the Brothers' expansion in America—as in other Western countries. "Since they were well-connected in the Middle East, they were able to bring money to build various institutions," argues Inamul Haq, a professor of religion at Benedictine University. "They were in a position to define American Islam." Without the Brotherhood, he continues, "we would have seen a more American Islamic culture rather than a foreign community living in the United States."[32]

While many actors played a role in this process, exemplary is that of the "three Kurds." In the late 1970s, they settled in suburban Washington D.C., where they established an intricate array of multi-million dollar financial, political, and religious activities. The development of the northern Virginia-based SAAR Foundation, the holding entity for these enterprises, is paradigmatic of the American Brothers' ample access to financial resources. Since its founding, in fact, SAAR received substantial financial backing from wealthy Arab Gulf donors and particularly by the al Rajhi family, one of Saudi Arabia's wealthiest. "We asked investors to give us one

[32] Noreen S. Ahmed-Ullah, Sam Roe and Laurie Cohen, "A Rare Look at Secretive Brotherhood in America," *Chicago Tribune*, September 19, 2004.

large lump sum rather than smaller amounts every year," stated SAAR vice president and former MSA president Yaqub Mirza, explaining the foundation's fundraising mechanisms in the early 1980s, "this way we were bringing in from $10 million to $20 million a year."[33] A 2002 investigative report by the *Washington Post* revealed additional details about SAAR's financial activities:

> *....In 1984, Yaqub Mirza, a Pakistani native who received a PhD in physics from the University of Texas in Dallas, used money from the Rajhis to start SAAR in Virginia, with the goal of spreading Islam and doing charitable work. Mirza also sought out business ventures for SAAR. By investing the Rajhis' money with Washington real estate developer Mohamed Hadid, he made SAAR one of the region's biggest landlords in the 1980s. The SAAR network also became one of South America's biggest apple growers and the owner of one of America's top poultry firms, Mar-Jac Poultry in Georgia. "The funds came very easily," said a businessman who dealt with SAAR. "If they wanted a few million dollars, they called the al-Rajhis, who would send it along..."*[34]

Abundant funding from Gulf countries was arguably a deciding factor in the American Brotherhood's growth. This stream has somewhat dwindled in recent years, as geopolitical events have led most Gulf countries, with the notable exception of Qatar, to abandon any support of the Brotherhood. But the American Brothers have managed over the years to create their own revenues through investments in the most disparate fields (from real estate to Islamic finance, from software companies to poultry factories) and the development of capillary fundraising networks nationwide. It should also be mentioned that Brotherhood-linked organizations have demonstrated a remarkable ability to obtain state and federal funding for many of their activities.

Entering American political life

Easy access to enormous sums made the "settlement of dawa" a smooth process and the U.S. Brothers quickly developed additional organizations. By the end of the 1980s, as the settlement phase was deemed to be completed, the American Brothers began to focus on influencing political life. In 1986, ISNA's Planning Committee stated that "in order to exert influence on the political decision-making

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[33] Harry Jaffe, "Unmasking the Mysterious Mohamed Hadid," *The Business of Washington*, March 1988 (available at: http://www.mohamedhadid.com/press.php?id=200403280001 , accessed April 15, 2009); Steven Merley, *The Muslim Brotherhood in the United States*, research monograph for the Hudson Institute, April 2009, page 28.

[34] Douglas Farah and John Mintz, "U.S. Trails Va. Muslim Money, Ties," *Washington Post*, October 7, 2002.

and legislation in North America, ISNA should launch a campaign to educate Muslim citizens about their voting rights and mobilize them to vote on issues affecting Islam and Muslims."[35] Within a few years, several organizations were established by the network to increase its participation in American political life. In 1990, Mahmoud Abu Saud, a prominent U.S.-based Egyptian Brotherhood leader and one of the fathers of modern Islamic banking, together with other activists, formed the American Muslim Council (AMC).

AMC was headed by Abdurahman Alamoudi, who until then had served as ISNA's representative in the Washington area and Executive Assistant to the president of SAAR.[36] Based in Washington, AMC took advantage of its leaders' wealth and connections to establish important links to Washington's elites. He soon became a regular visitor to the White House, establishing cordial relationships with both Republican and Democratic administrations. He held frequent meetings with members of Congress and even managed to successfully lobby Congress to host, for the first time in history, the opening invocation from an Islamic leader.[37]

By the mid-1990s Alamoudi had become a staple of Washington's political life.[38] His organization planned events with interfaith groups, dealing with the country's Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish leaders at the highest levels. Representatives and senators, bishops, and media personalities, eager to establish relations with American Muslims, enthusiastically attended AMC's events, which often were held in Washington's most prestigious hotels.[39] After extensive meetings the Department of Defense put Alamoudi in the powerful position of training and vetting the imams who attend to the religious needs of American Muslims serving in the military.[40] His organization was praised by the FBI as "the most mainstream Muslim group in the United States," and the State Department even appointed him as goodwill ambassador, routinely asking him to travel throughout the world representing American Muslims.[41]

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[35] Quoted in Steve A. Johnson, "Political Activity of Muslims in America," in Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, ed., *The Muslims of America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). Page 111.

[36] *American Muslim Council: Our First Five Years*, report by the AMC, 1996; Alamoudi's resume, introduced as evidence in U.S. v. Abdurahman Muhammad Alamoudi, U.S.D.C. of Eastern Virginia, Case 03-1009M, September 30, 2003.

[37] American Muslim Council: Our First Five Years, report by the AMC, 1996. Page 5.

[38] Mohamed Nimer, "Muslims in American Public Life," in Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, ed., *Muslims in the West: From Sojourners to Citizens*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). Pp 176-7.

[39] See, for example, "AMC Hosts Interfaith Heritage Banquet," *The AMC Report*, Volume 6, Number 1, January 1996.

[40] "Arrested Muslim Activist Helped Pick Chaplains for U.S. Military," *Washington Times*, September 30, 2003.

[41] Joseph Braude, "Moderate Muslims and Their Radical Leaders," *The New Republic*, February 27th, 2006; Ahmed Yousef, *American Muslims: A Community under Siege*, (Springfield, VA: UASR Publishing Group, 2004).

Washington's establishment considered Alamoudi a successful representative and moderate Muslim leader who could be a spokesman and model for the American Muslim community.

In 2003, however, an unexpected discovery during a routine customs screening at London's Heathrow Airport undid Alamoudi's accomplishments. Alamoudi was found to have concealed $340,000 in his suitcase. An investigation revealed that Alamoudi had been illegally importing funds from Libya since 1995 and that part of the money was intended to support a murky plot—conceived by the Libyan government and two London-based Saudi dissidents linked to al Qaeda—to assassinate Saudi Crown Prince Abdallah. A year later Alamoudi pled guilty to all charges and was sentenced to twenty-three years in jail.[42] The investigation also revealed Alamoudi's financial dealings with U.S.-designated terrorist organizations such as Hamas and al Qaeda, for which the Treasury Department accused him of fund-raising in the U.S.[43]

To many in Washington, Alamoudi's ties did not come as a complete shock. Since the 1990s, in fact, law enforcement agencies had been quietly monitoring his links to elements authorities suspected of terrorist ties.[44] In addition, over the years, Alamoudi had repeatedly made comments that clearly displayed his sympathies for Islamist outfits banned in the U.S.. Once, authorities intercepted a phone conversation in which Alamoudi told his interlocutor that the 1998 attacks perpetrated by al Qaeda against American embassies in East Africa had been "wrong," but only because "many African Muslims have died and not a single American died."[45] In other cases Alamoudi had expressed his political views in public venues. In October 2000, speaking at a rally in Washington's Lafayette Park, just a block away from the White House, Alamoudi proudly proclaimed: "Hear that, Bill Clinton, we are all supporters of Hamas! I wish they added that I am also a supporter of Hezbollah!"[46]

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[42] Department of Justice press release on the sentencing of Alamoudi, October 15, 2004.

[43] Treasury Department press release, July 14, 2005. Available at: http://www.treas.gov/press/releases/js2632.htm

[44] Interview with U.S. Department of Homeland Security official, Washington D.C., May 2008.

[45] As reported in the affidavit of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement Special Agent Brett Gentrup in U.S. v. Abdurahman Muhammad Alamoudi, U.S.D.C. of Eastern Virginia, Case 03-1009M, September 30, 2003. In reality, twelve American citizens died on that day, even though the majority of the 224 victims were citizens of Kenya and Tanzania.

[46] Original speech available at: http://www.investigativeproject.org/article/218.

The question of continuity of Brotherhood connections

MSA, ISNA, ICNA, IIIT, SAAR (now dissolved and subjected to extensive terrorism-financing investigations by U.S. authorities), AMC, MAS, and the jungle of acronyms and subgroups that have splintered from them form a cluster of organizations, each with its own magazine, website, annual conference, sub-departments and regional branches, whose unity is revealed by common financial sources, interlocking boards of directors, and occasional participation in common initiatives.[47] The few hundred individuals that run them form a small social network united by family, business, and, most importantly ideological ties. Affluent, well-connected, highly-educated and motivated, they constitute a clique of leaders with an ample clout but few followers. Despite the influence they have been able to obtain among American policymakers, in fact, their organizations have very limited membership numbers, mostly in the few thousands.

As for their counterparts in Europe, the links between these organizations and the Muslim Brotherhood are sometimes contested. In 2007, after being listed as an unindicted co-conspirator by the Department of Justice in the HLF trial, and after Akram's memorandum indicating it as one of the groups supposed to participate in the proscribed "Civilization-Jihadist Process" was introduced as evidence, ISNA issued a statement claiming that the organization had never been "subject to the control" of the Muslim Brotherhood.[48] In the past, other ISNA leaders had been more open about their group's ties to the Muslim Brotherhood. This is how Steve A. Johnson (also known as Faruq Abdullah), the former editor of *Islamic Horizons*, ISNA's official publication, described the organization's internal elections in 1986:

> *..Splits among Ikhwan factions constituting ISNA became apparent during the 1986 ISNA elections. It is alleged by some ISNA members that the nomination process was postponed several times until IIIT was able to rally enough support to ensure Ahmad's Zaki's (supposedly a member of the Egyptian Ikhwan) election. Evidently, some of the old guards in the more "orthodox" Ikhwan supported Shawki Zahran over Ahmad Zaki. The Sudanese, Tunisian, and more liberal factions of the Ikhwan supported past ISNA president Qutbi Mehdi. The Malaysian students were split with the Ikhwan-modeled MISG, supporting their champion Zaki. The members of*

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[47] An example of interlocking board membership is that of Sayyed Syeed. Holding a PhD in Sociolinguistics from Indiana University, Syeed has been president of MSA, Secretary general of IIFSO, founder and secretary general of ISNA, editor-in-chief of the American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences, member of the Board of Advisors of CAIR, Director of Academic Outreach at the IIIT.

[48] *ISNA Statement of Position: Who We Are and What We Believe*, ISNA's website (http://www.isna.net/Documents/ISNAHQ/ISNA-Statement-of-Position-Who-we-Are-and-What-We-Believe.pdf , accessed April 6, 2009).

> *the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM)—still bitter about what they took to be Ahmad Zaki's involvement in splitting the Malaysian students in America—supported Mehdi. The Sudanese attempted to rally several groups—including the American Muslims—behind Mehdi, but they had waited too long and the other factions of the Ikhwan had already launched a telephone and letter campaign to inform fellow Muslim Brotherhood members how to vote….*[49]

Similarly, Shaker Elsayed, a top MAS official and also ISNA's director of education, admits that roughly 45% of MAS activists are members of the Brotherhood, but highlights that MAS is operationally independent and "not administered from Egypt." "Ikhwan members founded MAS," specifies the Egyptian-born Elsayed, "but MAS went way beyond that point of conception."[50] Elsayed's explanation captures a common dynamic. Members and sympathizers of the Brotherhood played a key role in forming and leading organizations such as MSA, even though they did so independently, rather than as part of a centralized plot masterminded in Cairo or any other Middle Eastern city. As the years went by, these organizations adapted to the environment in which they operated, making their operational connections to the Middle East progressively more tenuous and, today, virtually non-existent.

"We really see that our methods and means are different from the Orient," argued American Brotherhood leader al Noman in his abovementioned Kansas City lecture, "we did not take or borrow a method or a means from the Orient unless it was compatible with the reality of the Islamic Movement over here."[51] As their European counterparts, American-based organizations that trace their origins to the Brotherhood have evolved independently, sharing the movement's general philosophy and interpretation of Islam, but contextualizing them to their new environment.

In 1992, in order to counter this phenomenon of partial erosion of Brotherhood control, the then self-avowed head of the U.S. Brotherhood's Shura Council, Egyptian physician Ahmed Elkadi, met with other top Brotherhood activists, including the future *murshid* of the Egyptian branch, Mohammed Akef, in a hotel on the Alabama-Tennessee border. Disenchanted with the direction some groups of the network had taken, the Brothers feared a loss of influence. U.S. Brotherhood leaders, in fact, had expressed particular concern about ISNA. "The ISNA has developed significantly in the eighties by the Ikhwan's leadership," stated a 1991 internal memorandum of the Shura Council, "and

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[49] Quoted in Johnson, "Political Activity of Muslims in America," page 121.

[50] Ahmed-Ullah, Roe and Cohen: for Elsayed's affiliation to ISNA, see http://www.islamonline.net/livedialogue/english/Guestcv.asp?hGuestID=dRJ4eJ (accessed April 3, 2009).

[51] Ikhwan in America, Government Exhibit 003-0089 in United States v. Holy Land Foundation.

direction of it started to gradually decrease due to their scarce presence."[52] A decision was therefore made to create the Muslim American Society (MAS), a new organization that would have represented more directly the thinking of the Brotherhood.[53]

The Philadelphia meeting and the birth of CAIR

In his 1991 memorandum, Akram theorized that "the success of the Movement in America in establishing an observant Islamic base with power and effectiveness will be the best support and aid to the global Movement project."[54] The statement seems to confirm what al Qaradawi had written the year before in his landmark book *Priorities of the Islamic Movement in the Coming Phase*, where he had argued that the Islamic Movement should have taken advantage of its position in the West to influence policies and public debates in those "societies that affect world politics," and that the presence of a strong and organized Islamist movement in the West is "required for defending the causes of the Muslim Nation and the Muslim Land against the antagonism and misinformation of anti-Islamic forces and trends."[55] Akram fully understood that the policies of no other Western country were more important to influence than America's, given its deep involvement in the Muslim world.

The writings of Akram, al Noman and other individuals that belonged to the U.S.-based Brotherhood network would have stayed secret had it not been for various searches conducted by the FBI against various individual members of the group. Many of these documents were introduced as evidence during the 2007 trial of the HLF, the Texas-based charity U.S. authorities accused of financing Hamas.[56] The documents, whose authenticity has never been contested, represent an unprecedented treasure trove of information on the otherwise extremely secretive organization.[57]

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[52] Muslim Brotherhood Shura Council, "Shura Council Report on the future of the Group," Government Exhibit 003-0003 in United States v. Holy Land Foundation.

[53] Interview with Yussuf Nada, Campione d'Italia, July 14, 2008; Ahmed-Ullah, Roe and Cohen; MAS' website: http://www.masnet.org/aboutmas.asp (accessed April 6, 2009); Testimony of Steven Emerson before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Terrorism, Proliferation, and Trade, July 31, 2008, page 24; Merley, page 60. Elkadi is married to Iman Abu Saud, the daughter of Brotherhood leader Mahmoud Abu Saud. Yussuf Nada claims to have arranged the marriage.

[54] An Explanatory Memorandum on the Strategic Goals for the Group in North America, Government Exhibit 003-0085 in United States v. Holy Land Foundation.

[55] Yusuf al Qaradawi, Priorities of the Islamic Movement in the Coming Phase (Swansea, UK: Awakening Publications, 2000).

[56] United States v. Holy Land Foundation et al., 3:04-cr-240 (ND, Tex.).

[57] Interview with Barry Jonas, trial attorney for the Department of Justice Counter-terrorism Section and prosecutor in the HLF case, Washington, June 2009. The most interesting documents, outlaying the history, structure, and aims of the Muslim Brotherhood in the United States were found by authorities in the home of Ismael Selim Elbarasse. Elbarasse, a resident of Annandale (Virginia), was detained in August 2004 by Maryland police after he and his wife were caught videotaping the Chesapeake Bay Bridge. Elbarasse is a close associate of Hamas leader Musa Abu Marzook.

One of the most riveting and eye opening incidents that the HLF documents brought to light is that of the creation of a Hamas infrastructure on American soil. In the months following the 1987 formation of Hamas, the self-proclaimed Palestinian branch of the Brotherhood, Brotherhood branches and offshoots throughout the world activated themselves to assist the newly formed organization.[58] According to documents released in the HLF trial, in 1988 the head of the Palestine Section of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Middle East travelled to the U.S., where he met with fellow Muslim Brothers to seek their support.[59] The result of the meeting was the formation of the Palestine Committee of the Muslim Brotherhood in America, a subgroup of the American Brotherhood made up mostly of members of Palestinian origin.

Reflecting the traditional pyramidal structure of Brotherhood organizations, the Committee was composed of the heads of three U.S.-based organizations that had been set up to aid the Islamic movement in Palestine: the general purpose Islamic Association for Palestine (IAP), the financial arm represented by the Occupied Land Fund (which later became the Holy Land Foundation), and the United Association for Studies and Research (UASR), a think tank on whose board Akram sat. The Committee was headed by Musa Abu Marzook, a native of the Gaza Strip who had obtained his doctorate in industrial engineering in Louisiana and currently serves as the deputy chairman of the political bureau of Hamas.

An October 1992 internal memorandum of the Committee clearly explained the Brotherhood's vision of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict:

> *...Palestine is the one for which Muslim Brotherhood prepared armies – made up from the children of Islam in the Arab and Islamic nations to liberate its land from the abomination and the defilement of the children of the Jews and they watered its pure soil with their honorable blood which sprouted into a jihad that is continuing until the Day of Resurrection and provided a zeal without relenting making the slogan of its children "it is a Jihad for victory or martyrdom"....*[60]

The document also called on the Committee to work to "increase the financial and the moral support for Hamas" to "fight surrendering solutions," and to publicize and focus on "the savagery of the Jews." Since Hamas had not yet been designated as a terrorist organization by the U.S. government, an action that would be taken in

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[58] Interview with former Muslim Brotherhood member, Boston, November 2008; Government's Trial Brief in United States v. Holy Land Foundation.

[59] Government Exhibit 1B33/0003188 in United States v. Holy Land Foundation.

[60] Government Exhibit 1B64/0000377-0000383 in United States v. Holy Land Foundation.

1995, the Committee and its organizations operated legally within the country, fundraising and propagandizing for Hamas without breaking the law. Things began to change in August of 1993, when PLO leader Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin signed the Oslo Peace Accords. The Palestine Committee went into fibrillation, strongly opposing the peace treaty and also fearing that Hamas could soon become the target of U.S. actions.

FBI officials, who had been keeping close tabs on members of the Committee, began to monitor alarmed conversations.[61] Realizing the huge repercussions that the Oslo agreement could have had not only on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but also on their activities inside the U.S., the members of the Committee decided to convene an extraordinary three-day meeting in Philadelphia. Held at a Marriott hotel near the city's airport, the closed-door meeting was attended by some twenty top leaders of the Hamas support network in the U.S.. Unbeknownst to the participants, the FBI had placed wiretaps inside the hotel, taping most of the conversations that took place behind the doors of the hotel's conference room. The transcripts of most conversations were introduced as evidence during the HLF trial.[62]

Attending the meeting were representatives of the three organizations making up the Palestine Committee. Following a common pattern, most of them were united by blood ties and lived in tight-knit communities in the three American cities that have traditionally hosted the largest clusters of Hamas supporters: Chicago, Dallas, and Washington D.C. IAP was represented by its president Omar Ahmed, its director of public relations Nihad Awad, and the head of its Washington office Akram Kharroubi, who would later become HLF's representative in Ramallah. HLF founder and president Shukri Abu Baker, whose brother Jamal was the head of Hamas in Sudan and later in Yemen, and Dallas-based treasurer Ghassan Elashi, whose cousin is married to Marzook, also attended.[63]

The meeting, which was organized with formalities resembling a board meeting of a large corporation, opened with instructions regarding security, as participants were urged to refer to Hamas as "Samah"–its name spelled backwards—or simply as "the movement" throughout the meeting and in phone conversations.[64] Then the participants began condemning the Oslo Accords, which Omar Ahmed called a

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61 Interview with former FBI official, Washington, June 2009.

62 The wiretaps of the Philadelphia meeting were introduced as evidence in the 2007 Holy Land Foundation trial through dozens of separate documents, publicly available at https://extremism.gwu.edu/legal-documents

63 Superseding Indictment, in United States v. Holy Land Foundation.

64 Government Exhibit 016-0049, in United States v. Holy Land Foundation.

treaty "between infidels and infidels."[65] While formulating a common position against the Accords was not difficult, the participants discussed ways to undermine them in the eyes of Americans. Fully aware of the environment in which they operated, some of the speakers stressed the necessity to frame their opposition to the peace treaty in terms that would have appealed to Americans.

"It does not benefit me to show to the American people that...I am against the accord because I hate Abou Ammar [Yasser Arafat] and hate the [Palestinian Liberation] Organization," argued Shukri Abu Baker. Instead of "attack[ing] the [Palestinian Liberation] Organization in a personal and direct manner," the Palestine Committee and its offshoots should speak about "democracy and freedom of expression," concepts that are dear to most Americans.[66] "Make people view the [Palestinian National] Authority as collaborators," agreed Omar Ahmed, "an Authority which doesn't care for people's interests and the interest of the national rights and the people's."[67] Another unidentified speaker further elaborated that the Committee members should be "playing a very important tune to the average American which is the issue of democracy, the issue of representation. When you tell an American individual that, '...this person is not elected. He is an oppressor...This is a dictatorial regime...' Bring up Saddam Hussein's name..."[68]

The participants also discussed the future of their activities, aware they could no longer openly state their support for Hamas. Not only, they argued, was the U.S. government going to soon ban the group, but publicly siding with an organization that was advocating the rejection of the U.S.-brokered peace and the use of violence would have been a public relations suicide. Abu Baker acknowledged that when talking to Americans, members of the cluster "cannot say...that I'm Hamas," argued Abu Baker, because for the Americans "if you're against peace, you're a terrorist."[69] Another participant elaborated that the Committee "must formulate the position of the Palestinians and the Muslims here in America to support the resistance...That's a problem by itself. In the same time, not falling under the accusations of terrorism and those who harbor terrorism or tend to according to the American [definition]...This, really, is a true problem."[70]

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[65] Government Exhibit 016-0071, in United States v. Holy Land Foundation.

[66] Government Exhibit 016-0087, in United States v. Holy Land Foundation.

[67] Government Exhibit 016-0051, in United States v. Holy Land Foundation.

[68] Government Exhibit 016-0087, in United States v. Holy Land Foundation.

[69] Ibid.

[70] Government Exhibit 016-0051, in United States v. Holy Land Foundation.

The debate on how to re-organize the Committee's activities dragged on, as the participants argued over how to incite American Muslims to support Hamas and its means while still maintaining a façade of moderation with American authorities and media. "If you want to [talk to] the Americans, you lose the Muslims," Ahmed explained, "if you address the Muslims, it means that you cannot reveal your address to the Americans."[71] "If someone asked you if you want to destroy Israel, what are you going to say on TV? If you give an inconclusive response which is like you didn't answer the question, someone will come to you and tell you that you have forsaken your principles."[72]

Faced with two conflicting needs, the participants opted for a two-pronged approach that differentiated between its internal and external strategy. Within the Muslim community, agreed the participants, the Committee should maintain its support for Hamas undeterred, engaging in various activities to aid the organization. "In the coming stage, the most important thing we can provide," said one speaker, "is to support Jihad in Palestine. I believe it is the only way if we want to bring the goals of the [Oslo peace] accord to fail."[73] Fundraising among local Muslim communities was immediately identified as one of the key activities the group should have engaged in. The newly created HLF, in fact, was to collect funds for Hamas while giving the impression that it was destining them to orphans and needy children. "We give the Islamists $100,000 and we give others 5,000," stated Abu Baker, outlining how HLF could maintain the semblance of being a charitable organization and avoid scrutiny from authorities. HLF, he argued, needed to "maintain a balance," avoiding attracting attention while "stay[ing] on its legal track as far as charitable projects are concerned without going after a sentiment which could harm the Foundation legally."[74] Using these expedients, U.S. authorities argue, HLF officials collected and funneled more than 12 million dollars to Hamas before the charity was shut down in December 2001.[75]

At the same time, meeting participants maintained, the Committee should have engaged in an extensive effort to educate the American Muslim community, convincing them that the peace accords harmed the Palestinians and that Hamas was the only force worth supporting. Several participants argued that the Committee should have been particularly active in spreading this message among the youth.

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71 Government Exhibit 016-0069, in United States v. Holy Land Foundation.

72 Ibid.

73 Government Exhibit 016-0063, in United States v. Holy Land Foundation.

74 Government Exhibit 016-0057, in United States v. Holy Land Foundation.

75 Department of Justice press release on the sentencing of HLF leaders, May 27, 2009 (available at: http://www.usdoj.gov/opa/pr/2009/May/09-nsd-519.html , accessed June 9, 2009).

"We don't want the children of the [American Muslim] community who are raised here in schools and in Islamic schools and non-Islamic schools to grow up surrendering to the issue of peace with Jews," stated one unidentified speaker, "I mean, we don't see in ten years the growing generation in America surrendering to peace with Jews. Therefore, there must be curricula and teaching materials which spread in Islamic schools and in weekend schools."[76] Another speaker argued that the Committee should have used the annual conferences and the network of Islamic schools run by affiliated organizations such as MAS, ISNA, and ICNA to disseminate books and introduce speakers who could raise awareness over the need to support Hamas.

If the internal strategy of the Committee aimed at mobilizing the American Muslim community to support Hamas, meeting participants understood that they could also play an important role in aiding the group by influencing American public opinion and policymakers. Ahmed, in particular, stressed the need to increase the Committee's "influence with Congress." "This can be achieved by infiltrating the American media outlets, universities and research centers," he continued, "it is also achieved by working with Islamic political organizations and the sympathetic ones such as...the American Muslim Alliance, such as the United Muslims of America, MPAC [*Muslim Public Affairs Council*]...if Muslims engage in political activism in America and started to be concerned with Congress and public relations we will have an entry point to use them to pressure Congress and the decision-makers in America."[77]

The development of a carefully-crafted media strategy, defending Hamas without giving the impression of supporting violence, was deemed to be one of the most important aspects of the Committee's public relations campaign. Ahmed spoke of the need of "broadcasting the Islamic point of view in U.S. media," adding that "when Nihad appeared on CNN and talked in the way he spoke, this greatly reduces the severity of allegations of radicalism."[78] Ahmed's statement referred to the appearance, a few weeks earlier, of IAP public relations director Nihad Awad on *CNN Crossfire*, when he advanced Hamas' point of view with words that were palatable to the American public.[79] The media-savvy Awad followed up on Ahmed's words with a presentation on the media strategy, stressing the importance of "training and qualifying individuals in the branches and the communities on media activism through holding special courses on media," and highlighting the importance

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[76] Government Exhibit 016-0067, in United States v. Holy Land Foundation.

[77] Government Exhibit 016-0075, in United States v. Holy Land Foundation.

[78] Ibid.

[79] *CNN Crossfire*, September 10, 1993.

of writing op-eds in prominent American newspapers.[80] Awad's strategy has long been heeded by U.S.-based Hamas activists upon their return to the Middle East. In fact, over the last few years, former U.S. Palestine Committee head Musa Abu Marzook and former UASR director Ahmed Yousef, who went on to become senior political adviser to Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniya, have published several editorials in prominent American newspapers such as the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and the *Los Angeles Times*, using tones that are quite different from those used in Arabic.[81]

Discussions at the meeting made it clear that participants fully understood that, if within the Muslim community they had decided to openly and unabashedly support Hamas, when dealing with the general public and policymakers they needed to take a more nuanced position. "We can't, as an American organization, say we represent Samah [Hamas spelled backwards]," explained Omar Ahmed. "Can we go to the Congressman and tell him," he asked sarcastically "I am Omar Yehya [Ahmed], Chairman of the Union [IAP], Yassir Arafat doesn't represent me, but [Hamas spiritual leader Sheik] Ahmad Yasin does?" Other participants agreed that dissimulating the Committee's real aims and feelings when dealing with Americans was a necessary tactic. "I swear by Allah that war is deception," said Abu Baker, "we are fighting our enemy with a kind heart. . . . Deceive, camouflage, pretend that you're leaving while you're walking that way. Deceive your enemy." "I agree with you, politics is a completion of war," said Ahmed, displaying a remarkable knowledge of Clausewitz. Ahmed further elaborated Abu Baker's position, comparing the deception the group was to use with the head fake used by basketball players: "He makes a player believe that he is doing this while he does something else."[82]

Ahmed and Abu Baker's calls for dissimulation were heeded by other participants. One argued: "In my opinion, we must form a new organization for activism which will be neutral because we are placed in a corner, we are placed in a corner. It is known who we are, we are marked and I believe that there should be a new neutral organization which works on both sides."[83] Another unidentified speaker agreed, highlighting the need for creating a new organization that will be "an official U.S. cover representing the Islamic community" and will also serve as a "cover for the

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[80] Government Exhibit 016-0069, in United States v. Holy Land Foundation.

[81] Ahmed Yousef, "Engage with Hamas: We Earned our Support," *Washington Post*, June 20, 2007; Ahmed Yousef, "Pause for Peace," *New York Times*, November 1, 2006; Mousa Abu Marzook, "Hamas' Stand," *Los Angeles Times*, July 10, 2007.

[82] Rob Dreher, "CAIR and Hamas," *Dallas Morning News*, August 8, 2007.

[83] Government Exhibit 016-0067, in United States v. Holy Land Foundation.

existing organizations in case they got dissolved."[84] Abu Baker further elaborated the idea, stating that the group "should start right now...begin thinking about establishing alternative organizations...whose Islamic hue is not very conspicuous."[85]

Abu Baker, worried about impending U.S. actions against Hamas and its support network inside the country, emphasized the need to camouflage the identity of the new organization the participants had decided to create. "Let's not hoist a large Islamic flag and let's not be barbaric-talking. We will remain a front so that if the thing [the U.S. government ban on Hamas] happens, we will benefit from the new happenings instead of having all of our organizations classified and exposed." "I was telling our brother Aboul Hassan [Abdelhaleem Ashqar] about Al Aqsa Organization," added Abu Baker, stressing the need to avoid Arabic names that could intimidate the public. "Why Al Aqsa Educational? When you go to Oxford they will ask you: 'Sir, what is Aqsa?' Make it the 'Palestinian General Education Academy.' Make yourself a big name like that and give it a media twinkle and there is no need for Al Aqsa, Al Quds, Al Sakhra and all that stuff."[86]

In order to be able to continue their activities in the U.S., the participants agreed that a new organization with no evident ties to Hamas and operating in ways that would have made it appear as moderate in the eyes of Americans should have been founded. The amended bylaws of the Palestine Committee, drafted in 1991, had already similarly expressed the wish to establish one additional organization in the future. "It is hoped that it will become an official organization for political work and its headquarters will be in Washington, God's willing," argued the document. "It represents the political aspect to support the cause politically on the American front."[87]

Basing their judgment on ample evidence, U.S. authorities believe that organization to be the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR), which was founded in Washington D.C. a few months after the Philadelphia meeting.[88] In fact, IAP president Omar Ahmed and public relations director Nihad Awad, both members of the Palestine Committee who had attended the Philadelphia meeting, became, respectively, CAIR's Chairman Emeritus and Executive Director. Rafeeq Jabar, who had been IAP president, also became a founding director of CAIR, while former

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[84] Government Exhibit 016-0059, in United States v. Holy Land Foundation.

[85] Government Exhibit 016-0067, in United States v. Holy Land Foundation.

[86] Ibid.

[87] Government Exhibit 1B64/0000377-0000383 in United States v. Holy Land Foundation.

[88] FBI Special Agent Laura Burns testimony in the HLF trial, quoted in Jason Trahan, "FBI: CAIR Is a Front Group, and Holy Land Foundation Tapped Hamas Clerics for Fundraisers," *Dallas Morning News*, October 7, 2008.

IAP's employee Ibrahim Hooper became CAIR's director of communications.[89] Ghassan Elashi, the treasurer of the HLF, became the founding board member of CAIR's Texas chapter, and, as evidence introduced in the Dallas trial showed, HLF also transferred funds to CAIR for "consulting services."[90] Finally, a July 1994 internal memorandum of the Palestine Committee recognized CAIR, together with IAP, UASR, and HLF, as a part of the Committee.[91]

Within a few years from its foundation as the latest addition to the Palestine Committee of the U.S. Brotherhood, CAIR achieved remarkable successes. Thanks to a combination of unrelenting activism, moderate public façade, and abundant funding, CAIR soon became the *de facto* representative of the American Muslim community, regularly contacted by media and policymakers on any issue related to Islam.

In November 2008, a Dallas jury found all defendants in the HLF trial guilty of providing material support to a designated foreign terrorist organization and a federal judge later imposed stiff sentences – including a 65 year prison term against Shukri Abu Baker and Ghassan Elashi – against them.[92] But the impact of the HLF trial was much wider. In the fall of 2008, in fact, the FBI formally cut its ties to CAIR, sending a communication to all its field offices urging them to stop all meetings with chapters of the organizations "until certain issues are addressed by CAIR's national headquarters."[93] In a letter sent to various Congressmen, the FBI specifically mentioned the evidence in the HLF trial as the reason for its decision, stating that until "we can resolve whether there continues to be a connection between CAIR or its executives and HAMAS, the FBI does not view CAIR as an appropriate liaison partner."[94]

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89 Text from Lawsuit Response, in *Council on American-Islamic Relations, Inc. v. Andrew Whitehead*, no. CL04-926, Virginia: In the Circuit Court for the City of Virginia Beach, Apr. 30, 2004.

90 Check from the Holy Land Foundation to CAIR introduced as evidence in *United States v. Holy Land Foundation*; Testimony of Matthew Epstein before the United States Senate Judiciary Committee, Subcommittee on Terrorism, Technology, and Homeland Security, September 10, 2003: CAIR's website: http://www.cair.com/PDF/urbanlegends.pdf (accessed April 8, 2009).

91 Government Exhibit 1B64/0000412 in United States v. Holy Land Foundation.

92 Department of Justice press release on the sentencing of HLF leaders, May 27, 2009 (available at: http://www.usdoj.gov/opa/pr/2009/May/09-nsd-519.html , accessed June 9, 2009).

93 Joseph Abrams, "FBI Cuts Ties with CAIR Following Terror Financing Trial," *Fox News*, January 30, 2009.

94 Letter from Richard C. Powers, FBI Assistant Director, Office of Congressional Affairs, to Senator Jon Kyl, April 28, 2009.

Testimonies of former members of the Brotherhood in America

The complexity and size of the American branch of the Brotherhood in its early days are confirmed by many internal Brotherhood documents retrieved by the U.S. government and published writings of members of the milieu. They are also detailed by various individuals who had intimate knowledge of the milieu and spoke about it. One very well informed insider is a former member of the American Muslim Brotherhood milieu named Hussien Elmeshad.[95]

Elmeshad grew up in a religious family in Cairo. In the 1960s, while in high school, he began to attend Brotherhood study groups. His interactions and fascination with the group continued while he pursued business studies at al Azhar. But it was only in 1978 that Elmeshad formally joined the Brotherhood (or, as he puts it, "became organized"). And, interestingly, his induction did not take place in Egypt but in Jersey City, New Jersey. Elmeshad, in fact, had moved to America to continue his studies and, before leaving Egypt, a local leader of the Brotherhood had told him to introduce himself to the late head of a Jersey City mosque "controlled by the Brotherhood" to continue his process of integration in the group.

Indeed, just a few weeks after connecting with the head of the Jersey City mosque, Elmeshad was formally inducted. "The process was fast," Elmeshad explains, "because I had already started it in Egypt and I had come recommended by prominent members in Egypt." Elmeshad's induction process, started in Egypt and formalized in America, indicates a high level of connectivity between the Brotherhood in the Arab world and that in the West.[96] And his case is hardly isolated. Mohammed Mursi, who served as the head of the Muslim Brotherhood-led government of Egypt after the Arab Spring, started his education in the Brotherhood in Egypt but formally joined the group in California while pursuing his doctorate in engineering and teaching as an assistant professor at California State University, Northridge in the 1980s.[97]

Upon induction, Elmeshad was inserted in a complex structure that mirrored, albeit on a smaller scale, that of the Brotherhood in Egypt. He became part of a local *usra* in New Jersey, which was part of a complex regional and national structure. The

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[95] The author interviewed Hussien Elmeshad in London in October 2018.

[96] For more on this aspect, with ample evidence of the ease by which Middle Eastern members of the Brotherhood "transfer" to a Canadian organization close to the Brotherhood (but that has always denied organic links to it), see Lorenzo Vidino and Sergio Altuna, The Muslim Brotherhood in the West? Evidence from a Canadian Tax Authority Investigation, GWU Program on Extremism, January 2025 (available at: https://extremism.gwu.edu/muslim-brotherhood-west).

[97] Richard Spencer, Magdy Samaan, Philip Sherwell, "Mohamed Morsi: from Cairo to California and back," *The Telegraph*, June 30, 2012.

naqib of Elmeshad's own *usra* was an Egyptian graduate of Columbia University who was the director of the Eastern region of the U.S. (which covered the eastern seaboard, from Boston to Virginia), one of the four the Brotherhood had divided the country in (the others were South, Midwest and West). Members of each region would meet regularly, often at outdoor camps. Elmeshad recalls that at some of these camps some 2500 people were present (although the number includes not just Brothers but also their family members).

According to Elmeshad, areas like Chicago, New York/New Jersey, Washington DC, and California have historically been the main Brotherhood hubs in the country, but the group had a presence also in secondary cities and remote areas. "Members of the Brotherhood in America all know each other," explains Elmeshad, "we are one big family, and everybody helps each other." While national leaders constantly interact with one another, national conferences of public organizations of the milieu are the occasion in which they all come together. Similarly, these gatherings serve the purpose of reinforcing the sense of belonging upon the cadres and further "bringing in" individuals who are in the process of joining the Brotherhood.

Elmeshad played an integral role in this milieu for around two decades. He was close to most of the top leaders of the American Brotherhood milieu and top Brotherhood leaders from abroad (former *murshid* Mashour and Akef, among them many) often stayed at his New Jersey home when visiting America. As it is common, membership in the "secret" structure of the Brotherhood coincided with roles in the "public" organizations of the milieu. Elmeshad, in fact, was a member of ISNA and served as treasurer of the Muslim Arab Youth Association (MAYA) for six years. Given his business background, he was involved in many financial activities of the American Brotherhood milieu, from fundraising for the local Brotherhood school in Jersey City to occupying key position in various businesses linked to the organization. "From 9 to 5 I worked as a deputy bursar at Columbia University," Elmeshad explains, "but all my free time was devoted to the Brotherhood."

By the late 1990s Elmeshad began to feel disenchanted about the Brotherhood. Elmeshad is still an ardent believer in al Banna's message, which he considers "the true Islamic thought." But he argues that the current leadership of the Brotherhood, in Egypt exactly like in America, has swayed from the right path, losing sight of spirituality and grassroots activism to concentrate on politics and power. Obsession with secrecy and blind obedience, argues Elmeshad, are just some of the many deviations from al Banna's true message implemented by the generation currently leading the Brotherhood. In 2003, while living in Bahrain, Elmeshad formally left the Brotherhood.

The prominence of Brotherhood networks on U.S. campuses throughout the last decades of the twentieth century is widely documented by the publications of various groups; to a lesser degree, evidence is provided by some academic writings and internal documents that have been introduced as evidence by U.S. authorities in various terrorism financing cases related to the milieu. But confirmation also comes from the testimony of a handful of individuals who—at different times, in different places, and with different roles—were active in Brotherhood circles on U.S. college campuses and who, after leaving the movement, decided to tell their stories.

One of them is Jamal al Hossani, a former member of the Muslim Brotherhood in his native United Arab Emirates who, in 2014, decided to tell his story to the Abu Dhabi–based television station *Al Emarat*.[98] Al Hossani recounted how he started to be active in Brotherhood circles in his own country as a teenager but understood that the groups were run by the organization only when he was summoned by the group's leaders in Abu Dhabi on the eve of his departure to the U.S. to study at a university. "You have reached a stage where you are one of us," he recalls being told on that occasion.

Once in the U.S., al Hossani claims to have become involved in various organizations and activities within the U.S. Brotherhood milieu. He used many of them, like the annual event organized during Christmas holidays by the Muslim Arab Youth Association and attended by some ten thousand people, to spot potential recruits among the Emirati students attending. "The conference attracted over 150 Emirati students studying in the United States," he says, and al Hossani organized outings just for them. "After I was appointed to the student union office for Emirati students in the USA," al Hossani adds, "I became in charge of maintaining the union's activity, managing its elections, and keeping communication lines open with organization members when preparing so-called religious seminars, conferences, and other activities with concealed political objectives set by the leadership." According to him the Emirati branch of the Brotherhood had a central "operations office" in the U.S. that had divided the country in zones determined by the distribution of Emirati students and had assigned one member to oversee each.

Al Hossani spent two decades with the Brotherhood, becoming active again in the UAE—a country that in 2014 designated the group as a terrorist organization—after returning from the U.S.. He has since become a vocal critic of the group, arguing that it deceives and manipulates young Muslims to adopt a narrative that is divisive and conducive to violence. "You become part of this organization and it's

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[98] "Former Muslim Brotherhood member reveals banned group's inner workings," *The National*, April 10, 2014.

then difficult to get out," he says. "It's like a kind of brainwashing, and you start to accept things that you did not accept ten years earlier."

While al Hossani travelled to America as an inducted member specifically tasked to run the activities of a Middle Eastern branch of the Brotherhood—in itself a telling indicator of the movement's extensive presence in America—Mustafa Saied has a very different story.[99] Born to an affluent family in India, Saied travelled to America in 1990 to attend the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. On the plane, he recounts, he made a to-do list: "learn to skateboard and bungee-jump, go on road trips, hang out with girls."[100] Once in America he thrived in class and outside of it, making friends from all backgrounds and experiencing as many aspects of American life as possible. In 1993 he spent a semester at Disney World, taking classes on Disney's business approach.

One day, back in Knoxville, he decided "on impulse" to stop at the mosque near campus—something he had never done before. He saw a group of students discussing Quranic verses and he joined the conversation. "I knew a couple of things," he recounts, "and they were so impressed." He was invited back and asked to join a study group. Within days he stopped shaving and began praying five times a day. Many of his old interests, such as movies, music, and dating, were abandoned. Saied began devouring Islamic texts, particularly those of Yussuf al Qaradawi, and participating assiduously in the activities of the study group along with a handful of other students. A gifted speaker, Saied was also allowed to give speeches inside the mosque, excoriating "Americans who indulged in alcohol and premarital sex, or celebrated 'false' holidays such as Halloween and Christmas." He also celebrated attacks against Israel: "Our view was that suicide bombings were fine."

Throughout 1994 Saied "sensed that his allegiance to radical Islam was being tested by members of his study group," although he did not understand why. Everything changed one afternoon, when a fellow student summoned him to the campus cafeteria. After sitting in a quiet corner, the student disclosed his affiliation with the Brotherhood and invited Saied to join the group. "It was a dream, because that's what you're conditioned to do—to really love the Ikhwan," he recalls. "Everything I had learned pointed to the Muslim Brotherhood being an awesome thing, the elite movement. I cannot tell you the feeling that I felt—awesome power."

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[99] Saied's story has been told by Paul M. Barrett is the book *American Islam: The struggle for the soul of a religion* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007) and in the long article "Student Journeys Into Secret Circle Of Extremism," *Wall Street Journal*, December 23, 2003. Quotes from him also appear in the article by Noreen S. Ahmed-Ullah, Sam Roe and Laurie Cohen, "A Rare Look at Secretive Brotherhood in America," *Chicago Tribune*, September 19, 2004.

[100] Paul M. Barrett, "Student Journeys into Secret Circle Of Extremism," *Wall Street Journal*, December 23, 2003.

As it is common, after being inducted, Saied learned the names of other Brothers in the local area and was surprised to discover that several prominent figures belonged to the group. “I was shocked,” he recalls. “These people had really hid the fact that they were Brotherhood.” In the following months Saied immersed himself in Brotherhood literature and activities. He also traveled throughout the country to attend Brotherhood-linked events. He remembers being particularly struck by a conference held in December 1995 at a hotel in Toledo, Ohio, that was organized by the Muslim Arab Youth Association, a now defunct organization of the U.S. Brotherhood milieu that was very active in the 1980s and 1990s.

Keynoting the conference was al Qaradawi, and Saied had the opportunity to meet the late Qatar-based cleric. “I was awestruck because he was the biggest Muslim Brotherhood figure in the world, and I had met him,” he recalls. During his speech, Qaradawi laid out a vision that critics of the Brotherhood have often cited as indicative of the group’s desire to work for a patient and gradualist, yet still disturbing, goal of conquering the West. “What remains, then, is to conquer Rome,” said Qaradawi, referring to a well-known hadith. “The second part of the omen, ‘The city of Hiraq [once emperor of Constantinople] will be conquered first,’ so what remains is to conquer Rome.' This means that Islam will come back to Europe for the third time, after it was expelled from it twice. . . . Conquest through Da‘wa, that is what we hope for. We will conquer Europe, we will conquer America! Not through sword but through Da’wa.”[101]

In Knoxville, Saied became a fund-raiser for Benevolence International Foundation (BIF), a Chicago-based charity that claimed to be raising funds for children and the poor in war-torn countries such as Bosnia and Chechnya. Saied managed to raise thousands of dollars in the community, but he later found out from an emissary of BIF who had come to Knoxville that some of the funds were destined for fighters. Saied immediately stopped fund-raising. In 2002 BIF was designated a terrorism financier by the U.S Treasury Department, and close ties between its founder, Enaam Arnaout, and Usama bin Laden were revealed.[102]

In 1996 Saied moved to Florida, where he continued his activism. But an encounter at a small gathering in a private home in Chicago the following year led Saied to reevaluate his choices. There two young American Muslims started questioning Saied’s views, basing their arguments on Quranic verses. The four-hour argument

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101 Available at: https://www.investigativeproject.org/profile/167/yusuf-al-qaradawi#_ftnref2 (accessed July 15, 2025).

102 Treasury Designates Benevolence International Foundation and Related Entities as Financiers of Terrorism, press release, November 19, 2002. Available at https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/po3632.aspx.

left Saied defeated, “out of arguments.” Later that night, rethinking the discussion, Saied concluded that he had been wrong all along. “Oh my God, what have I been doing?” he kept asking himself. Saied’s doubts were reinforced by the views of his new wife, an American Muslim of Pakistani descent, who was horrified by some of the husband’s positions.

By the late 1990s Saied left the Brotherhood and adopted a significantly more liberal interpretation of Islam. While still a devout Muslim, he worries about the politicization of Islam and the influence of the Brotherhood on American Muslims. “They have this idea that Muslims come first,” he says, “not that humans come first.” “Anti-American sentiment is usually reserved for closed-door discussions or expressed in languages that most Americans don't understand,” he adds. “While such rhetoric has been drastically reduced since 9/11, it is still prevalent enough to be a cause for concern.”

Conclusion

This report has briefly described how networks close to the Muslim Brotherhood arrived and settled in the U.S., establishing some of the first American Muslim organizations. This evidence, hardly exhaustive of the many dynamics related to the presence of the Brotherhood in America, should put to rest questions on whether the group ever existed in the country.

A different question is whether these networks have evolved and the organizations created by the Brotherhood pioneers in America have made an ideological shift, shedding their Islamist roots and fully adapting to American society and values. Over the years, many of the organizations described in this report changed substantially in size, personnel, tactics and partnerships, making them arguably unrecognizable to their original founders. The question that lingers, and that is beyond the scope of this report, is whether this Americanization and modernization involve only their modus operandi or go deeper, having altered their worldview.

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