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*Developments in Radicalisation  
and Political Violence*

# The Muslim Brotherhood in the West: Evolution and Western Policies

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## Developments in Radicalisation and Political Violence

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## Summary

Over the last few years Western policymakers, scholars and commentators have engaged in often heated debates about the Muslim Brotherhood in the West. Despite this attention there is no consensus on virtually any aspect of the issue, starting with whether the movement actually has a presence in Europe and North America. This paper, which summarises sections of the author's recent book on the subject (*The New Muslim Brotherhood in the West*, Columbia University Press, 2010), seeks to provide an overview of this highly controversial movement and the debates surrounding it.

The first section of this paper will outline the history, evolution, *modus operandi* and aims of Muslim Brotherhood offshoots in the West. It is important to point out that the arrival of the first Brothers to Europe and North America in the 1950s and 1960s was hardly the first phase of a concerted and arcane plot of the Muslim Brotherhood to Islamise the West, as it is sometimes portrayed. They initially represented a small, disperse contingent of militants whose move reflected not a centralised plan but rather personal decisions that fortuitously brought some Brotherhood figures to spend some years or the rest of their lives in the West. Yet, the small organisations they spontaneously formed soon developed well beyond their most optimistic expectations.

Today, thanks to a combination of ideological flexibility, unrelenting activism, large funding, and poor organisation of competing trends, the networks originally established by the Brotherhood pioneers in the West have grown exponentially. Even if their membership has remained fairly small, the Western Brothers have shown an enormous ability to monopolise the Islamic discourse, making their interpretation of Islam perhaps not yet mainstream but at least the most readily available, and putting their ideological stamp on any Islam-related issue, be it strictly religious or more properly political. Moreover, in many countries the Western Brothers have positioned themselves at the forefront of the competition to be the main interlocutors of local establishments.

The first section also seeks to address a frequently recurring terminological conundrum. In essence, there is no formal Muslim Brotherhood organisation in any Western country. Yet it is fair to say that in virtually all Western countries operate organisations and networks with historical, financial, personal, organisational and ideological ties to the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamic revivalist movements worldwide (Jamaat-e-Islami and Milli Görüş for the South Asian and Turkish diaspora communities respectively). What is being termed as the “New Western Brotherhood” is essentially a fairly small, informal network of activists tied together by marriage, business ties, old friendships, and, most importantly, a shared vision. Each organisation belonging to the movement acts independently, adapting its actions to the environment in which it operates, but a foundation of commonly accepted principles and goals unites all of them.

The second section of the paper will look at general patterns of how Western governments perceive and engage with Western Brotherhood organisations. Assessments of the New Western Brothers closely resemble those of the global Islamist movement, with analysts split between optimists and pessimists. More specifically, optimists argue that the New Western Brothers are simply a socially conservative force that, unlike other movements with which they are often mistakenly grouped, encourages the integration of Western Muslim communities, offering a model in which Muslims can live their faith fully and maintain a strong Islamic identity while becoming actively engaged citizens. Moreover, argue the optimists, Western governments should harness the New Western Brothers’ grassroots activities and cooperate with them on common issues, such as unemployment, crime, drugs, and radicalisation.

Pessimists see a much more sinister nature in the New Western Brotherhood. Thanks to their resources and the naiveté of most Westerners, they argue, the New Western Brothers are engaged in a slow but steady social engineering program, aimed at Islamising Western Muslim populations and ultimately at competing with Western governments for their allegiance. The pessimists accuse the Brothers of being modern-day Trojan horses, engaged

in a sort of stealth subversion aimed at weakening Western society from within, patiently laying the foundations for its replacement with an Islamic order. According to pessimists, officials of Brotherhood-linked organisations have astutely realised that their most fruitful approach is to cozy up to Western elites and gain their trust. They are taking advantage of the Western elites’ desperate desire to establish a dialogue with any representatives of the Muslim community and putting themselves forward as the voices of Western Muslims, then using the power and legitimacy that comes from such interaction to strengthen their position inside the community.

Government officials and experts are irremediably split on the assessment of the movement, creating a complex, often chaotic situation in which institutions swing erratically between actions that reflect both optimistic and pessimistic views of the movement. In substance, no Western country has adopted a cohesive assessment followed by all branches of its government. There is no centrally issued white paper or set of internal guidelines sent to all government officials detailing how New Western Brotherhood organisations should be identified, assessed, and eventually engaged. This leads to huge inconsistencies in policies, not only from one country to another but also within each country, where positions diverge from ministry to ministry and even from office to office of the same body.

It should be noted that there are significant differences from country to country in terms of both presence of Muslim Brotherhood offshoots and attitudes of local governments towards them. While the above mentioned book deals more specifically with such differences, this paper is inevitably limited to an observation of overarching trends.

## About the Author

Dr. Lorenzo Vidino is an academic and security expert who specialises in Islamism and political violence in Europe and North America. Currently a visiting fellow at the RAND Corporation in Washington DC, he previously held fellowships at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, the U.S. Institute of Peace, and the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. He is the author of two books (his latest, *The New Muslim Brotherhood in the West*, was published by Columbia University Press in the fall of 2010), congressional testimonies, and frequent articles in several prominent newspapers and academic journals. He has testified before the U.S. Congress and consults with governments, law firms, think tanks and media in several countries. A native of Milan, Italy, he holds a law degree from the University of Milan Law School and a Ph.D. in international relations from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy.

# The Muslim Brotherhood in the West: evolution and Western policies

## 1.1 From pioneers to mainstream

The first active presence of Brothers in the West can be dated to the late 1950s and the early 1960s, when small, scattered groups of militants left various Middle Eastern countries to settle in cities throughout Europe and North America. A handful of these pioneers, like Said Ramadan and Yussuf Nada, were hardened members of the Egyptian Brotherhood fleeing the crackdown implemented by Nasser in the mid-1950s. In the following decades, Brotherhood members from other Middle Eastern countries similarly found refuge in the West from the repression of local regimes. Yet, the majority of Brotherhood-linked activists relocating to the West were students, members of the educated, urban middle classes of the Middle East who had already joined or flirted with the idea of joining the Brotherhood in their home countries. Settling in the West to further their studies in local universities, these students continued their involvement in Islamic activities in their new environments.

The combination of experienced militants and enthusiastic students bore immediate fruits, as Brotherhood activists formed some of the West's first Muslim organisations. Most Western cities at the time lacked Muslim places of worship and the Brothers' mosques, generally little more than garages or small meeting rooms on university campuses, often became the first religious facilities for Western Muslims. The West's freedoms allowed the Brothers to openly conduct the activities for which they had been persecuted in their home countries; with little funds but plenty of enthusiasm they published magazines, organised lectures, and carried

out all sorts of activities through which they could spread their ideology. Their activism soon attracted other Muslim students and small numbers of Muslim immigrant labourers who had not had contact with the Brotherhood in their home countries.

It is important to point out that the arrival of the first Brothers to Europe and North America was hardly the first phase of a concerted and arcane plot of the Muslim Brotherhood to Islamise the West, as it is sometimes portrayed. They initially represented a small, disperse contingent of militants whose move reflected not a centralised plan but rather personal decisions that fortuitously brought some Brotherhood figures to spend some years or the rest of their lives in the West. Yet, the small organisations they spontaneously formed soon developed beyond their most optimistic expectations. The Brothers' student groupings evolved into organisations seeking to fulfill the religious needs of the West's rapidly growing Muslim populations and their mosques – often structured as multi-purpose community centers – attracted large numbers of worshippers. Following Hassan al Banna's organisational model, they established youth and women branches, schools and think tanks.

By the late 1970s the Brothers' isolated clusters throughout the West began to increasingly interact with one another, establishing formal and informal networks that spanned Europe and North America. Yet most of the pioneers' hearts were still in their native countries, viewing their sojourn in the West as only a temporary exile in a convenient sanctuary before returning home to continue their struggle to establish an Islamic state. Nevertheless, some Brotherhood activists slowly started to perceive their situation differently. Redefining some centuries-old religious qualifications, they increasingly stated that the traditional distinction between *dar al Islam* (land of Islam) and *dar al harb* (land of war) did not reflect the current reality.<sup>1</sup> While the West could not be considered *dar al Islam*, because *sharia* was not enforced there, it could not be considered *dar al harb* either, because Muslims were allowed

1 Muslim scholars have traditionally debated the two concepts, often developing subcategories and diverging opinions. See, for example, Khaled Abou El Fadl, "Striking a Balance: Islamic Legal Discourse on Muslim Minorities," in Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and John L. Esposito, eds., *Muslims on the Americanization Path?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

to practice Islam freely and were not persecuted. The scholars decided, therefore, that it was possible for them to create a new legal category. They concluded that the West should be considered *dar al dawa* (land of preaching), a territory where Muslims live as a minority, are respected, and have the affirmative duty to spread their religion peacefully.<sup>2</sup>

The implications of this decision go far beyond the realm of theology. By redefining the nature of the Muslim presence in the West, the Brothers also changed the nature of their own role in it. While still supporting in words and deeds their counterparts' efforts to establish Islamic states in the Muslim world, they increasingly focused their attention on their new reality in the West. Having redefined the West as *dar al dawa*, in fact, they intensified their efforts at spreading their interpretation of Islam in it.

Moreover, in many countries the Western Brothers have positioned themselves at the forefront of the competition to be the main interlocutors of local establishments. Although circumstances vary from country to country, today, when Western governments or media attempt to reach out to the Muslim community, it is quite likely that many, if not all, of the organisations or individuals that are engaged belong, albeit with varying degrees of intensity, to the network of the Western Brothers. It is not uncommon to find exceptions to this situation and things have changed in various countries over the last few years, but, overall, it is apparent that no other Islamic movement has the visibility, political influence and access to Western elites that the Western Brothers have obtained over the last twenty years. In light of these facts, it is fair to portray the competition for the representation of Western Muslims as the relative victory of a well organised minority over other less organised minorities for the voice of a silent majority.

2 Wasif Shadid and Sjoerd van Koningsveld, "Loyalty to a non-Muslim Government," in W.A.R. Shadid and P.S. van Koningsveld, eds., *Political Participation and Identities of Muslims in Non-Muslim States* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996); Xavier Ternisien, *Les Frères Musulmans* (Paris: Fayard, 2005), pp. 190-2.

## 1.2 The New Western Brothers

Can we then properly speak of Muslim Brotherhood in the West? If with this expression we seek to identify offshoots of any Middle Eastern branch of the Brotherhood linked by a dependant relationship, the term is arguably incorrect. Yet, the lack of formal ties should not be overstated. Yussuf Nada describes the Muslim Brotherhood as a “common way of thinking,” while Abd El Monem Abou El Fotouh, a member of the Egyptian Brotherhood’s Guidance Council, refers to it as “an international school of thought.”<sup>3</sup> Mohammed Akef, former *murshid* of the Egyptian Brotherhood, confirms that “a person who is in the global arena and believes in the Muslim Brotherhood’s path is considered part of us and we are part of him.”<sup>4</sup> While a formal organisation does exist in Egypt and in several Muslim countries, worldwide the Brotherhood is not a structured organisation of card-carrying members, but rather an ideological movement that transcends formal affiliation. Membership comes by adopting certain ideas and methods, not by swearing allegiance or inserting one’s name in a secret registry.

In essence, there is no formal Muslim Brotherhood organisation in any Western country. It is also technically incorrect to speak of organisations such as the Union of Islamic Organisations in France (UOIF), the Islamic Society of Germany (IGD), the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB) or the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) as “Muslim Brotherhood organisations” and their leaders as “members of the Muslim Brotherhood.” Yet, taking a non-formalistic approach, it is fair to say that in virtually all Western countries operate organisations and networks with historical, financial, personal, organisational and ideological ties to the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamic revivalist movements worldwide (Jamaat-e-Islami and Milli Görüş for the South Asian and Turkish diaspora communities respectively).

In essence, the Western Brotherhood is composed of connections and collaborations established around a

3 Interview with Yussuf Nada, Campione d’Italia, July 14, 2008; interview with Dr. Abd El Monem Abou El Fotouh, Cairo, December 2008.

4 *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* (London), December 11, 2005.

network of personal relationships.<sup>5</sup> It hardly corresponds to a well-defined master plan or a finely tuned conspiracy, but it originates from the interaction of a small group of smart, educated, and motivated individuals. It is essentially a fairly small, informal network of activists tied together by marriage, business ties, old friendships, and, most importantly, a shared vision. Each organisation belonging to the movement acts independently, adapting its actions to the environment in which it operates, but a foundation of commonly accepted principles and goals unites all of them.

It might therefore be more correct to speak of Brotherhood legacy groups in the West as “New Western Brothers.” The term “Brothers” indicates that these networks have various connections to the Muslim Brotherhood, but does in no way indicate that the organisations operating in the West are linked by a dependant relationship to the Egyptian or any other Middle Eastern branch of the Brotherhood. “New” indicates that these networks subscribe to the gradualist, participationist line adopted by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood around the 1970s, when it substituted violent confrontation with the secular regime with participation in it, seeking to slowly change society from the ground up rather than seizing power through violence. Finally, the word “Western” encapsulates the geographic peculiarity of these organisations. While drawing significantly from the intellectual heritage of the Brotherhood, these networks operate independently, having adapted their goals and *modus operandi* to their particular environment.

Identifying these organisations as Brothers lends itself to inevitable criticisms. Firstly, it does not give full credit to the contribution of groups such as Jamaat-e-Islami or Milli Görüş, which are integral to, yet separate from, the movement. Secondly, if not correctly explained, it could give the impression of a structural link with the organisation of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Middle East or of a formal structure in the West. Nevertheless, with the appropriate caveats, the term New Western Brothers is the one that best encapsulates the history and the methods of the movement.

5 Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 110-3.

### 1.3 The New Western Brothers' aims

Since reinterpreting their role in the West in the late 1970s/early 1980s, Western Brotherhood networks have understood the need to adapt their rich intellectual heritage to their new environment. Over the last thirty years, in fact, the New Western Brothers have tried to find ways to contextualise the teachings of their ideological forefathers to their reality of movement operating freely in non-Muslim societies. It soon became obvious to a movement as pragmatic as the Brotherhood that blindly applying in modern Europe and North America what al Banna and Mawdudi had proscribed in Egypt and India in the 1930s made little sense. The ideas of these and other leading thinkers that came after them still provide invaluable guidance on several aspects of their faith and activism, starting with the immutable idea of Islam as a comprehensive way of life and a full methodology.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, they can be discussed, reinterpreted, adapted, and even challenged and dismissed, as times, places and circumstances change. The Brotherhood, in the West as elsewhere, is not a stagnant movement, but, rather, makes flexibility and continuous evolution two of its core characteristics and strengths.

Moreover, as any large movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, both in the West and worldwide, is hardly a monolithic block. Personal and ideological divisions are common. Divergences emerge on how the movement should try to achieve its goals and, in some cases, even on what those goals should actually be. Issues such as the First Gulf War or the *hijab* controversy in France have spurred strong internal debates, which in some cases have degenerated into personal feuds. Senior scholars and activists often vie with one another over theological issues, political positions, access to financial sources, and leadership of the movement.

Despite these differences, it is nevertheless possible to identify some goals that are common to all “members” of the Western Brotherhood. Foremost among them is the preservation of an Islamic identity among Western Muslims.

6 Interview with Kamal Helbawy, London, December 2008; interview with UOIF president Lhaj Thami Breze, La Courneuve, May 2009.

As any religiously conservative movement, Islamists worldwide are concerned with maintaining the morality and piousness of their communities. Such defensive posture becomes even more important when referred to Muslim minorities, as they incur the risk of being culturally absorbed by the host society. “It is the duty of the Islamic Movement,” wrote Yussuf al Qaradawi, the undisputed spiritual leader of the global and Western Brotherhood, “not to leave these expatriates to be swept by the whirlpool of the materialistic trend that prevails in the West.”<sup>7</sup>

Yet, unlike Salafists and other Islamic trends that seek to strengthen the Islamic identity of Western Muslims, the Brothers do not advocate isolation from mainstream society. To the contrary, they urge Muslims to actively participate in it, but only in so far as such engagement is necessary to change it in an Islamic fashion. According to al Qaradawi, Muslims in the West should adopt “a conservatism without isolation, and an openness without melting.”<sup>8</sup> Finding the balance between cultural impermeability and active socio-political interaction is not easy, but the Brothers see themselves as those capable of defining how Muslims can be loyal to their faith and yet active citizens of European secular democracies.

This guiding role is seen by the Brothers as an unprecedented opportunity for the movement, which, in the words of al Qaradawi, can “play the role of the missing leadership of the Muslim nation with all its trends and groups.”<sup>9</sup> While in Muslim-majority countries the Brotherhood can exercise only limited influence, as it is kept in check by regimes that oppose it, al Qaradawi realises that no such obstacle prevents it from operating in the free and democratic West. Moreover, the masses of Muslim expatriates, disoriented by the impact of life in non-Muslim societies and often lacking the most basic knowledge about Islam, represent an ideally receptive audience for the movement’s message. Finally, no competing Islamic trend has the financial means and organisation to compete with the Western Brothers. The combination of these factors leads al Qaradawi to conclude

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

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

that the West is a sort of Islamic *tabula rasa*, a virgin territory where the socio-religious structures and limits of the Muslim world do not exist and where the Brothers can implement their dawa freely, overcoming their competition with their superior mobilisation skills and funds.

A second goal common to all New Western Brotherhood organisations is the designation as official or *de facto* representatives of the Muslim community of their country. Becoming the preferred—if not the exclusive—partners of Western governments and elites would serve various purposes. One, publicly and proudly declared by the Brothers, is to positively contribute to the future of Western society. Highlighting common values, the Brothers, in fact, present themselves as a moderate force encouraging Muslims to simultaneously participate in society and spread their Islamic principles, which, ultimately, benefit everybody. They can, unlike competing Islamic trends, lead the Muslim community on the path of integration while, at the same time, contributing to a moral revival of the rest of society.<sup>10</sup>

Yet, the New Western Brothers seem to have additional purposes attached to the establishment of a preferential relationship between them and Western governments. Despite their unrelenting activism and ample resources, in fact, the Brothers have not been able to create a mass movement and attract the allegiance of large numbers of Western Muslims. While concepts, issues, and frames introduced by the Brothers have reached many of them, most Western Muslims either actively resist the Brothers' influence or simply ignore it. The Brothers understand that a preferential relationship with Western elites could provide them with the financial and political capital that would allow them to significantly expand their reach and influence inside the community. By leveraging such a relationship, in fact, the Brothers aim at being entrusted by Western governments with administering all aspects of Muslim life in each country. They would, ideally, become those whom

10 For an overview of what, according to the Brotherhood, Muslims can contribute to the West, see, for example, Kamal el-Helbawy, "Cementing Relations between Muslim Citizens and Governments in the West: The United Kingdom as a Case Study," *Islamism Digest*, Volume 3, Issue 9, September 2008.

governments task with preparing the curricula and selecting the teachers for Islamic education in public schools, appointing imams in public institutions such as the military, the police or in prison, and receiving subsidies to administer various social services. This position would also allow them to be the *de facto* official Muslim voice in public debates and in the media, overshadowing competing forces. The powers and legitimacy bestowed upon them by Western governments would allow them to exert significantly increased influence over the Muslim community. Making a clever political calculation, the New Western Brothers are attempting to turn their leadership bid into a self-fulfilling prophecy, seeking to be recognised as representatives of the Muslim community in order to actually become it.

Finally, the position of representatives of Western Muslims would allow the Brothers to influence Western policymaking on all Islamic-related issues. While having their say on the crafting of domestic policies can be very important, the Western Brothers seem to have placed an even higher value on influencing foreign policies. Once again the writings of Yussuf al Qaradawi perfectly encapsulates this vision. Understanding the crucial role that the policies of Western governments play in the struggle between Islamist movements and their rivals for the control of Muslim countries, al Qaradawi declares that "it is necessary for Islam in this age to have a presence in such societies that affect world politics" and that the presence of a strong and organised 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."<sup>11</sup>

In other words, al Qaradawi argues that the New Western Brothers find themselves with the unprecedented opportunity to influence Western public opinion and policymakers on all geopolitical issues related to the Muslim world. And indeed, over the last twenty years, the European Brothers have consistently tried to take advantage of their position of influence to advance Islamist causes. From private meetings with senior policymakers to mass street protests, from

11 al Qaradawi, *Priorities*.



editorials in major newspapers to high profile conferences, they have used all the material and intellectual resources they possess in order to advance the Islamist point of view on several issues, from Palestine to Afghanistan, and on the nature of the Islamist movement itself.

## 2.1 Western policymaking

In substance, the New Western Brothers are rational actors operating within the democratic framework to achieve their political goals and as main candidates, thanks to their resources and activism, for the role of representatives of Western Muslim communities. It is now important to see how the New Western Brothers fit into the Western governments' search for interlocutors within the Muslim community. Do the governments perceive the Brothers' desire to participate in the democratic process as based on heartfelt convictions or on tactical calculations? Do they think that the Brothers' ideology is compatible with life in a secular Western democracy? Can they be government interlocutors, reliable middlemen who can help integrate immigrants and the children of immigrants into mainstream society?

The answers to these questions have enormous repercussions on the policies of Western countries determining how to approach Western Muslim communities. Whether the New Western Brotherhood is considered a potential friend, a deceitful enemy, or something in between will shape both short and long-term decisions on domestic policy. Yet the policy making of virtually all Western countries on the issue can only be described as schizophrenic, apparently unable to reach a firm judgment about the Brotherhood's nonviolent Islamism. "The complication is that they [the Muslim Brothers] are a political movement, an economic cadre and in some cases terrorist supporters," stated Juan Zarate, one of America's most senior counterterrorism officials, in a 2004 interview for the *Washington Post*. "They have one foot in our world and one

foot in a world hostile to us. How to decipher what is good, bad or suspect is a severe complication."<sup>12</sup>

Zarate's comments reflect the bind in which most Western officials find themselves when assessing the New Western Brothers and, even more, when devising policies toward them. Assessment and engagement are the two components of Western policy making towards Western Brotherhood organisations. Assessment is the first activity, logically and chronologically, within Western governments as they try to determine the nature of the movement. Engagement is the series of decisions taken, in theory following a predetermined assessment, on how to interact with the movement. Policy toward the New Western Brotherhood is complex and characterised by significant differences from one country to another. Nevertheless, common patterns, albeit with differing degrees of intensity and within different time frames, influence it throughout the West.

## 2.2 Assessing the New Western Brothers

Assessments of the New Western Brothers closely resemble those of the global Islamist movement, with analysts split between optimists and pessimists. More specifically, optimists argue that the New Western Brothers are no longer preoccupied with creating Islamic states in the Muslim world, but rather focus on social and political issues concerning Muslims in the West.<sup>13</sup> Their main goals are simply to defend the interests of Western Muslims and to diffuse Islamic values among them. The New Western Brothers are a socially conservative force that, unlike other movements with which they are often mistakenly grouped, encourages the integration of Western Muslim communities, offers a model in which Muslims can live their faith fully and maintain a strong

12 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.

13 See, for example, Alexandre Caeiro and Mahmoud al-Saifi, "Qaradawi in Europe, Europe in Qaradawi? The Global Mufti's European Politics," in Bettina Gräf and Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen, eds., *The Global Mufti: The Phenomenon of Yusuf Al-Qaradawi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009). Page 111.

Islamic identity while becoming actively engaged citizens.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, argue the optimists, the New Western Brothers provide young Muslims with positive affirmation, urging them to convey their energy and frustration into the political process rather than into violence or extremism. Governments should harness the New Western Brothers' grassroots activities and cooperate with them on common issues, such as unemployment, crime, drugs, and radicalisation.

Pessimists see a much more sinister nature in the New Western Brotherhood. Thanks to their resources and the naiveté of most Westerners, they argue, the New Western Brothers are engaged in a slow but steady social engineering program, aimed at Islamising Western Muslim populations and ultimately at competing with Western governments for their allegiance. The pessimists accuse the Brothers of being modern-day Trojan horses, engaged in a sort of stealth subversion aimed at weakening Western society from within, patiently laying the foundations for its replacement with an Islamic order.<sup>15</sup> The fact that the New Western Brothers do not use violence but participate with enthusiasm in the democratic process is seen simply as a cold calculation on their part. Realising they are still a relatively weak force, the Brothers have opted for a different tactic: befriending the establishment.

According to pessimists, officials of Brotherhood-linked organisations have understood that infiltrating the system, rather than attacking it head on, is the best way to obtain what they want; after all, in the West, at least for now, the harsh confrontations mounted by *jihadi* groups such as al Qaeda lead nowhere. New Western Brothers have astutely realised that their most fruitful approach is to cozy up to Western elites and gain their trust. By becoming the privileged partners of the Western establishment, they can gain significant power that will help them further their goals. They are taking advantage of the Western elites' desperate desire to establish a dialogue with any representatives of the Muslim community and putting themselves forward as the

14 Olivier Roy, *Secularism Confronts Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007). Pp. 94-8.

15 The expression is used, for example, by the British MP Michael Gove in his book *Celsius 7/7* (London: Phoenix, 2006), pp 84-113.

voices of Western Muslims, then using the power and legitimacy that comes from such interaction to strengthen their position inside the community.

Pessimists also point to a constant discrepancy between the New Western Brothers' internal and external discourses as a sign of their duplicitous nature. In the media and in dialogues with Western governments, Brotherhood leaders publicly avow the group's dedication to integration and democracy, tailoring their rhetoric to what they know their interlocutors want to hear.<sup>16</sup> Yet, speaking Arabic, Urdu, or Turkish before fellow Muslims, they often drop the veneer and foster an "us versus them" mentality that is the antithesis of integration and tolerance. Even as Brotherhood representatives speak about interfaith dialogue and integration on television, the movement's mosques preach hate and warn worshippers about the evils of Western society. While they publicly condemn the murder of commuters in Madrid and schoolchildren in Russia, they continue to raise money for Hamas and other terrorist organisations. In the words of Alain Chouet, former head of French foreign intelligence, "Like every fascist movement on the trail of power, the Brotherhood has achieved perfect fluency in double-speak."<sup>17</sup>

Chouet's position seems to encapsulate the views expressed, publicly or privately, by most intelligence and security agencies throughout continental Europe. Belgium's domestic intelligence agency, for example, described the activities of Muslim Brotherhood offshoots in the country in these terms:

*... The State Security (Sûreté de l'État) has been following the activities of the Internationalist Muslim Brothers in Belgium since 1982. The Internationalist Muslim Brothers have possessed a clandestine structure in Belgium for more than twenty years. The identity of the members is secret; they operate with the greatest discretion. They seek to spread their ideology within Belgium's Muslim*

16 Antoine Steir, *Les Réseaux d'Allah: Les Filières Islamistes en France et en Europe* (Paris: Plon, 2001). Page 51.

17 Alain Chouet, "The Association of Muslim Brothers: Chronicle of a Barbarism Foretold," available on Chouet's personal website: [http://alain.chouet.free.fr/documents/M\\_B.htm](http://alain.chouet.free.fr/documents/M_B.htm), accessed July 21, 2008.

*community and they aim in particular at young, second – and third – generation immigrants. In Belgium as in other European countries, they seek to take control of sports, religious, and social associations, and they seek to establish themselves as privileged interlocutors of national and even European authorities in order to manage Islamic affairs. The Muslim Brothers estimate that national authorities will increasingly rely on the representatives of the Islamic community for the management of Islam. Within this framework, they try to impose the designation of people influenced by their ideology in representative bodies. In order to do so they were very active in the electoral process for the members of the body for the management of Islam [in Belgium]. Another aspect of this strategy is to cause or maintain tensions in which they consider that a Muslim or a Muslim organisation is a victim of Western values, hence the affair over the Muslim headscarf in public schools.*<sup>18</sup>

The AIVD, the Netherlands' domestic intelligence agency, is even more specific in its analysis of the New Western Brotherhood's tactics and aims:

*...Not all Muslim Brothers or their sympathisers are recognisable as such. They do not always reveal their religious loyalties and ultra-orthodox agenda to outsiders. Apparently co-operative and moderate in their attitude to Western society, they certainly have no violent intent. But they are trying to pave the way for ultra-orthodox Islam to play a greater role in the Western world by exercising religious influence over Muslim immigrant communities and by forging good relations with relevant opinion leaders: politicians, civil servants, mainstream social organisations, non-Islamic clerics, academics, journalists and so on. This policy of engagement has been more noticeable in recent years, and might possibly herald a certain liberalisation of the movement's ideas. It presents itself as a widely supported advocate and legitimate representative of the Islamic community. But the ultimate*

18 Report of the Comité Permanent de Contrôle des Services de Renseignements et de Sécurité (Comité R) to the Belgian Parliament, July 19, 2002. Available at: [http://www.senate.be/www/?Mlval=/publications/viewPubDoc&TID=33618007&LANG=fr#2-1171/1\\_112](http://www.senate.be/www/?Mlval=/publications/viewPubDoc&TID=33618007&LANG=fr#2-1171/1_112) (accessed November 12, 2008)

*aim – although never stated openly – is to create, then implant and expand, an ultra-orthodox Muslim bloc inside Western Europe.*<sup>19</sup>

The position of most intelligence agencies in continental Europe is clear. But governments, lawmakers, and bureaucrats of all levels are not bound by the assessment of their countries' intelligence agencies and often espouse different ideas. Experts within and outside government often influence the policy makers' opinions, leading to a complex, often chaotic situation in which institutions swing erratically between actions that reflect first optimistic and then pessimistic views of the movement. In substance, no Western country has adopted a cohesive assessment followed by all branches of its government. There is no centrally issued white paper or set of internal guidelines sent to all government officials detailing how New Western Brotherhood organisations should be identified, assessed, and eventually engaged. This leads to huge inconsistencies in policies, not only from one country to another but also within each country, where positions diverge from ministry to ministry and even from office to office of the same body.

## 2.3 Engaging the New Western Brothers

An inherently vague term, engagement stands for a variety of forms of contact, from an inconsequential one-time meeting to a stable partnership. The institutions that need to engage representatives of the Muslim communities range from prime ministers and other top government officials to bureaucrats at the local level. Each of them has different aims and priorities and must take into consideration various factors. In some cases they seek to find a range of interlocutors representing the whole spectrum of the Muslim community; whether the given institution adheres to the optimistic or pessimistic point of view, the local New Western Brotherhood offshoot is likely to be engaged as one of the representatives. Other institutions might have a more limited aim, to find

19 *The Radical Dawa in Transition: The Rise of Islamic Neoradicalism in the Netherlands*, AIVD, February 2008 (<https://www.aivd.nl/actueel-publicaties/aivd-publicaties/the-radical-dawa-in>). Page 51.

just one partner in the Muslim community to help them on a certain project or goal. In this case the institution's assessment of the New Western Brothers is likely to influence its decision about whether to engage them or not.

At first glance, it would be fair to assume that institutions that adopt the optimistic point of view tend to consistently engage New Western Brotherhood organisations as partners, while those in the negative camp are opposed to any form of contact. In reality, in most cases the relationship between assessment and engagement is not linear but rather conditioned by a myriad of external factors and considerations. A governmental body that takes the optimist position, for example, could decide to refrain from partnering with a New Western Brotherhood organisation in order to avoid being criticised by the press. Institutions that adhere to the pessimist point of view could end up working with them due to political pressures from other sections of the government or to achieve short-term goals for which they deem the Brothers' participation necessary.

Given the lack of centralised directives, most governmental bodies have a large degree of latitude in drafting their own attitudes and policies toward New Western Brotherhood organisations. Several factors, often operating concurrently, influence engagement decisions.

### *Knowledge/Access to Information*

In 2006, Jeff Stein, the national security editor at the Washington-based *Congressional Quarterly*, began to conduct a series of interviews with top U.S. officials about the terrorist threat facing the country. Sensing that most of the interviewees knew little about the ideology of groups like al Qaeda and Hezbollah, Stein decided to quiz them about their knowledge of Islam and Islamism.<sup>20</sup> The results were staggering. Congressman Silvestre Reyes, chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, the body supposed to oversee most terrorism matters, was unable to tell the difference

20 Jeff Stein, "Democrats' New Intelligence Chairman Needs a Crash Course on al Qaeda," *Congressional Quarterly*, December 8, 2006.

between Sunnis and Shias and argued that al Qaeda's members belonged to both sects, adding, in an attempt to be precise, that it was "predominantly, probably Shiite." Scores of top counterterrorism officials interviewed by Stein were equally unable to tell the difference between Sunnis and Shias and some, like the chief of the FBI's national security branch, Willie Hulon, identified Hezbollah as a Sunni organisation.<sup>21</sup>

In 2007, reporters at the *Times* of London, suspecting that many British policy makers would not have performed better than their American counterparts, posed them similar questions.<sup>22</sup> Asked whether al Qaeda was Sunni or Shia, Labour MP Brian Iddon, secretary of the British-Palestine parliamentary group, answered, "it attracts all sorts." Conservative MP Gary Streeter, chairman of his party's international office and vice-chair of the All-Party Friends of Islam parliamentary group, confessed he did not know what the difference between Sunnis and Shias was and failed to identify Mahmoud Ahmedinejad as president of Iran.

Although informed and knowledgeable policy makers do exist in both the United States and Great Britain, these investigations revealed a pervasive ignorance among many of the top officials in charge of issues that have closely to do with Islam and Islamism. The problem, which is safe to assume as common to all Western countries, has severe consequences on engagement issues. Policy makers who ignore the most basic features of Islam and Islamism are hardly in a position to assess a movement as complex as the Muslim Brotherhood, understand its nuances, and decipher its often ambiguous language. Yet they are often the ones who decide whom to engage.

Western governments do have analysts and experts who possess an extensive understanding of Islamism, but a series of factors impede the formation of a complete body of knowledge on the subject available to all public officials. First, in most countries such analysts are few and overburdened, struggling to keep up with the ever-evolving

21 Jeff Stein, "Can You Tell a Sunni from a Shiite?" *New York Times*, October 18, 2006.

22 Maurice Chittenden and Tom Baird, "MPs Don't Know their Sunnis from their Shi'ites," *Sunday Times*, January 7, 2007.

universe of Muslim organisations. According to an Italian government report, for example, the number of mosques and Islamic organisations went from 351 in 2000 to 696 in 2006; 39 were set up just between January and May 2007, an average of one every four days.<sup>23</sup> In Italy, as in all other Western countries, only a few analysts are able to navigate the complex jungle of Islamic organisations and assess their ideological nature. Worsening these capacity problems, in several countries the most gifted and experienced analysts are often lured to the private sector by higher salaries, leaving security agencies with severe gaps in institutional knowledge.

Moreover, Western intelligence agencies tend to devote only limited attention to Brotherhood offshoots. Some of them, like the FBI, Britain's MI5, and Denmark's PET, are subject to legal limitations that force them to focus only on direct threats to their countries' security. Aside from their suspected fund raising for Hamas, New Western Brotherhood organisations are generally not engaged in any activity that falls within that mandate; therefore, the agencies have only limited knowledge of them.<sup>24</sup> Others, like Holland's AIVD and Germany's Verfassungsschutz, do have a broader mandate to investigate not just security threats but all activities that could be considered a threat to the country's democratic order and social cohesion. These agencies do devote more attention to the Brothers, but particularly after 9/11, they have understandably directed most of their focus and manpower to the prevention of terrorist attacks.

An additional factor that prevents the formation of a widely accessible intragovernmental body of knowledge on the New Western Brotherhood is the very nature of large bureaucracies. The studies of Graham Allison, one of America's most renowned political scientists, are particularly useful in explaining the convoluted nature of government decision-making processes. Allison argues that it is often assumed that a government is a unified body that has all possible available information and makes its decisions

23 59th Report of CESIS (Executive Committee for the Intelligence and Security Services) to the Italian Parliament, 2007, page 71.

24 This is a frank admission that has been made to the author, on several separate occasions, by American, British and Danish intelligence officials.

rationality, after a straightforward process that has identified the state's interest and how best to pursue it. In reality, no government corresponds to this ideal "centrally controlled, completely informed and value maximizing" rational decision maker. Rather, Allison argues, a government is a "conglomerate of semi-feudal, loosely allied organisations," each with its own procedures, customs, priorities, and personalities.<sup>25</sup>

Applied to the assessment and engagement of the New Western Brothers, Allison's theory explains why information does not circulate among various governmental institutions. In many cases, intelligence agencies do not share their knowledge unless prompted, due to an institutional bias that stresses sometimes excessive secrecy. In other cases, government officials do not bother to contact intelligence agencies for an assessment. Bureaucratic sluggishness, jurisdictional obstacles, and intragovernmental rivalries also contribute to enormous problems in information sharing. Countries with large populations and, consequently, large bureaucracies experience particular difficulties. In the United States, for example, the overlap between state and federal authorities, geographic distances, and the enormous size of the government makes information sharing particularly challenging.

The result of all these problems is that the choice of which Muslim organisation to engage might be made by a handful of individuals who lack any expertise on Islam and Islamism. In many cases governmental institutions will engage New Western Brotherhood offshoots after a complete and well-informed assessment process, fully aware of the nature of their interlocutor. Such a decision might be taken either because the institution is optimistic or because, whatever its assessment of the New Western Brothers, it believes that engaging them could achieve the institution's aim. But often the decision to engage New Western Brotherhood organisations is made after an uninformed assessment of their characteristics. In fact, cases in which governmental

25 Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Harper Collins, 1971). Page 67.

institutions engaged such organisations and later backtracked after discovering more information are not unusual.

One mistake commonly made, particularly at the local level, is to overestimate the representativeness of New Western Brotherhood organisations. Over the last few years most authorities have developed an understanding of the extreme heterogeneity of Western Muslim communities, but in the past some relied only on the most religiously orthodox cross-sections of their Muslim communities to be the spokesmen for the entire community.<sup>26</sup> Affected by what Danish politician Naser Khader sarcastically calls the “mullah syndrome,” policy makers therefore engaged predominantly conservative Muslims, ignoring the large masses of secular and sociological Muslims.<sup>27</sup> This attitude only played into the hands of New Western Brotherhood organisations, which, thanks to their activism and resources, could easily persuade Western governments and publics to regard them as spokesmen for the Muslim community.

Sometimes, politicians simply fail to check the backgrounds of organisations they decide to engage, only to hastily retrace their steps after they are provided with more information. In his testimony before the Congressional Human Rights Caucus, for example, *Wall Street Journal* reporter Ian Johnson recounted how in an interview, a British member of the European Parliament told him that she enjoyed meeting with representatives of FIOE, the Brussels-based pan-European umbrella organisation for the New Western Brotherhood.<sup>28</sup> She considered FIOE a very moderate organisation, unlike the Muslim Association of Britain (MAB), whose extremism troubled her. When Johnson pointed out that MAB was a founding member of FIOE, the MP was astonished, embarrassedly admitting she had failed to make such a basic connection.

In other cases policy makers possess the necessary information but fail to process it correctly, as did former

26 Gilles Kepel, *The War for Muslim Minds* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004). Pp. 286-7.

27 Conversation with Naser Khader, Boston, April 2007.

28 “The Muslim Brotherhood in Europe,” Testimony of Ian Johnson before the Congressional Human Rights Caucus, February 9, 2006.

Dutch Minister of Integration Ella Vogelaar. In 2007, the Dutch newspaper *De Telegraaf* alleged that Yahiya Bouyafa, a local Muslim activist, was linked to various organisations of the global Muslim Brotherhood network and was receiving money from the Europe Trust.<sup>29</sup> The story was particularly important because Bouyafa had been engaged by the Dutch Ministry of Integration as a partner in its efforts to promote integration and combat radicalisation within the local Muslim community. Some members of the Dutch Parliament asked Vogelaar to publicly explain her decision to work with Bouyafa.<sup>30</sup>

Vogelaar’s response, given during a parliamentary session, perfectly exemplifies the inability of many Western policy makers to understand the very nature of the New Western Brotherhood.<sup>31</sup> First, the minister responded that there was no information indicating that Bouyafa belonged to the Brotherhood, just that he was connected to a large number of Muslim organisations that sympathised with the Brotherhood. This demonstrated that Vogelaar did not understand how affiliation to the Brotherhood can be determined. Whether Bouyafa is or is not a Muslim Brother, however defined, is here irrelevant. But Vogelaar’s statement clearly identifies such an affiliation as some kind of formal membership, not understanding that it is determined by personal, ideological, and financial connections.

Furthermore, Vogelaar assured the legislators that she had been informed by the security services that the organisations to which Bouyafa was linked did not “pose a threat to national security” and, therefore, had intended to keep engaging Bouyafa. By saying so, she appeared to divide the candidates for her efforts in two categories. Individuals involved in terrorist activities, who therefore pose a threat to national security, should not be engaged; all others can be used as partners. Vogelaar seemed to ignore that there could

29 Joost de Haas, “Moskeeen in de ban van Moslimgroep,” *De Telegraaf*, March 24, 2007.

30 Questions from the PVV MPs Geert Wilders and Raymond de Roon and answers from Ella Vogelaar, August 7, 2007. Available on the PVV’s website at [http://www.pvv.nl/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=737](http://www.pvv.nl/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=737) (accessed September 5, 2008); interviews with Dutch officials and journalists, Amsterdam and The Hague, May 2008.

31 Ibid.

be a third category, composed of individuals and organisations that, while not involved in any terrorist activity and posing no direct threat, might have an agenda and an ideology incompatible with the Dutch government's goal of encouraging integration.

### *Insiders' Influence*

In some cases, acknowledging their lack of expertise on Islam and Islamism, public institutions have resorted to hiring advisors from the Muslim community to fill the gap. With an understanding of the community that few people in government can match, such advisors have often been listened to with particular attention by many policy makers. The idea is obviously a good one, but it is not uncommon for advisors, in this as in any other field, to attempt to influence policy according to their own views. Given their high level of education and close ties to political establishments, it is not surprising that in several Western countries Brotherhood sympathisers have obtained such positions and have used them to further the influence of Brotherhood-linked organisations.

### *Personal and Political Considerations*

Bureaucracies are deeply influenced by the views of some of their key personalities. Allison uses "parochial priorities and perceptions" to describe the tendency of certain individuals to sway the decisions of a bureaucracy according to their personal ideological positions and political goals.<sup>32</sup> The issue could not be more relevant in the field of engagement with Muslim communities. Policy implementation has often been based on the decision of a single minister or a single official; consequently, the personal views and considerations of a few powerful individuals can play a crucial role in determining which Muslim organisation is engaged and how the New Western Brothers are perceived. In many cases, government officials form their opinions, along either the optimist or the pessimist line, after an intellectually honest analysis of the nature of New Western Brotherhood organisations and how best to engage the Muslim community. Nevertheless, it is not uncommon for policy makers, particularly those who participate in elections, to factor in considerations about the possible consequences of their decisions on their political careers.

One factor that clearly influences such decisions is the effect of their actions on the electorate and, more specifically, on their constituencies. The factor can work both ways. In some cases policy makers may be wary of engaging certain organisations for fear that the media and the general public might react negatively. An example of such a dynamic took place in Italy in 2007. After leaders of the Union of the Islamic Communities and Organisations of Italy (UCOII) made a series of statements that drew strong criticism from all sides of the Italian political spectrum and most of the media, mayors in various large cities that had previously entered into negotiations with UCOII to authorise the construction of new mosques suddenly withdrew their support. They officially attributed the change of heart to contractual technicalities and zoning regulations, but the move is widely believed to have been dictated by the realisation that large segments of

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<sup>32</sup> Allison, page 81.

the media and the public viewed UCOII in extremely negative terms.<sup>33</sup>

Policy makers may also be influenced by their desire for electoral success in the Muslim community. The “Muslim vote” can already determine the outcome of contested national elections in several Western countries and is likely to increase in importance, as Muslim populations are growing at a remarkably fast rate. This phenomenon is particularly significant at the local level, given the tendency of Muslims to concentrate in urban areas. In cities like Rotterdam, Amsterdam, Bradford, Malmö, and certain boroughs of London and Paris, the Muslim vote is fundamental and actively sought by all political forces. In Brussels, Muslims currently constitute 17 percent of the population, but various projections estimate they will become a majority by 2025.<sup>34</sup> In a country like Belgium, where Brussels’ vote is often the tie-breaker in the political struggle between various political parties and between Flemings and Walloons, it is natural that all forces compete to attract Muslim voters.

Sensing an opportunity, the New Western Brothers have often tried to portray themselves as the key to this growing electoral block. Brotherhood organisations distribute guides on how to vote, organise voter registration drives, and indicate what candidates should be supported throughout their network of mosques. Western politicians running in districts with significant Muslim populations cannot be indifferent to such initiatives, and many engage in various forms of mutual support with Brotherhood organisations. In many Western countries, in fact, the Brothers have managed to establish clientelistic relations with political forces, either at the national or the local level, in which the Brothers promise to mobilise

33 See, for example, Alessandra Arachi, “Stop alla Moschea: ‘Chi la Finanzia?’ Genova Chiama Amato, Unione Divisa,” *Corriere della Sera*, September 25, 2007; Magdi Allam, “La Moschea di Bologna e i Cedimenti di Cofferati,” *Corriere della Sera*, December 6, 2007; and Diego Pistacchi, “Ronchi: No alla Moschea degli Intolleranti,” *Il Giornale*, February 3, 2009; interviews with members of the Federazione dell’Islam italiano, Rome, May 2009.

34 Corinne Torrekens, “La gestion locale de l’Islam à Bruxelles,” *Cahiers de la sécurité*, P 8° 5663. - (2006-07/09) n°62, p.139-160; Stéphane Kovacs, “L’Islam, première religion à Bruxelles dans vingt ans,” *Le Figaro*, March 21, 2008.

their resources in support of the party in exchange for financial and political rewards.

Many have questioned the existence of a monolithic “Muslim vote.” Undoubtedly some voting patterns do exist. Muslims in Europe have traditionally voted for parties of the Left, a tendency common to most immigrant groups. But Muslims do not necessarily vote as a predetermined block, blindly casting their ballots as their coreligionaries do. Rather, their political preferences mirror the sociopolitical diversity of their communities. And it is likely that second – and third – generation Western Muslims will vote in more diverse ways in the future. Even more questionable is the New Western Brothers’ claim to be able to deliver the Muslim vote. Have Muslims voted for certain parties because local Brotherhood organisations told them to, or would they have made that choice anyway? Without a definitive answer to the question, many policy makers lean toward a safe strategy and maintain their clientelistic relationships with the Brothers.

What is unquestionable is that the New Western Brothers can severely damage the standing of politicians and other public figures by accusing them of anti-Muslim sentiments and, more specifically, of Islamophobia. First used by French orientalist Etienne Dinet in 1922, the term has become common in today’s political jargon.<sup>35</sup> Defined as “an outlook or worldview involving an unfounded dread and dislike of Muslims, which results in practices of exclusion and discrimination” in the influential 1996 report by the British-based Runnymede Trust, “Islamophobia” describes an unpleasant phenomenon that exists in all Western countries.<sup>36</sup>

Parts of Western society do indeed harbor an unjustified fear of Islam, and Muslims have unquestionably been subjected to acts of discrimination and racism that warrant attention. But today Islamophobia has also become a useful political weapon in the New Western Brothers’ quiver. Within

35 Jocelyne Cesari, *Securitization and Religious Divides in Europe: Muslims in Western Europe after 9/11*. Available at: [http://euro-islam.info/ei/wp-includes/pdf/securitization\\_and\\_religious\\_divides\\_in\\_europe.pdf](http://euro-islam.info/ei/wp-includes/pdf/securitization_and_religious_divides_in_europe.pdf) (accessed February 14, 2009).

36 *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All*, Runnymede Trust, 1997.



the Muslim community, the Brothers often exaggerate episodes of actual or perceived Islamophobia to reinforce the feeling of a “community under siege” and portray themselves as the only defenders of that community.<sup>37</sup> Externally, it has become an extremely effective tool to silence critics and force policy makers to work with Brotherhood organisations. The charge of Islamophobia is brought not just against those who criticise Islam. Any criticism of a New Western Brotherhood leader or organisation is met with an accusation of racism and Islamophobia. In some cases the Brothers, always aware of what chords to strike, tailor their charges according to the country in which they operate. Therefore, in the United States those who criticise them are guilty of McCarthyism, in Italy of fascism, and in most others, of a postcolonial mentality.

The use of the Islamophobia weapon has unquestionably silenced many critics of the New Brothers and led many policy makers to engage them. The label of racist and Islamophobe, whether deserved or not, is hardly something that any public figure and, in particular, any politician would take lightly.<sup>38</sup> The result of such a tactic is perfectly exemplified by the discussion that surrounded a 2008 hearing before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs, on whether the State Department was inadvertently funding Islamist organisations in the Middle East. Several U.S.-based New Brotherhood organisations criticised the committee’s choice of witnesses and demanded that one of their experts be included, stating that doing otherwise would signal Islamophobia. Democratic Congressman Brad Sherman, the committee chairman, refused to cave in and addressed the demands during the hearing. “I think one of the greatest fears of people in the United States is somebody may call you a racist . . . they may call you an Islamophobe,” stated Sherman. “And what we’ve seen with some of these organisations is their message is

37 Munira Mirza, Abi Senthikumar and Zein Ja’far, *Living Apart Together: British Muslims and the Paradox of Multiculturalism*, report for the Policy Exchange, 2007. Page 18.

38 Bassam Tibi, *Islamische Zuwanderung, Die gescheiterte Integration* (Munich: DVA, 2002), page 135; interview with Bassam Tibi, Boston, October 2008.

clear: ‘Give us money or we’ll call you an Islamophobe.’”<sup>39</sup> Although Sherman did not budge, other politicians might determine that the political costs of not doing so are too high.

## *Satisficing*

Graham Allison defines “satisficing” as the tendency of overburdened bureaucracies to satisfy themselves with finding “a needle in the haystack rather than searching for the sharpest needle in the haystack.”<sup>40</sup> Rather than seeking the optimal solution, bureaucracies often opt for those that meet the criteria of adequacy and solve pressing needs, ignoring long-term repercussions. Applied to engagement with Muslim communities, satisficing explains why in some cases Western governmental institutions decide to engage with New Western Brotherhood organisations rather than competing groups.

Western policy makers have often seen their wish to find representative, reliable, and moderate partners within the Muslim community crushed by the realisation that no organisation is able to meet even the first of the three requirements. As a consequence, they have often concluded that the choice was between engaging organisations that seemed vaguely close to meeting the requirements or not engaging anybody. Therefore, New Western Brotherhood organisations, which have consistently claimed to represent the majority of Western Muslims, have often been accepted as dialogue partners. “The government is always looking for organisations to talk to,” explains Ursula Spuler-Stegemann, the dean of German experts on Islam, “and the Islamists are the ones coming.”<sup>41</sup> The New Western Brothers have often been the lowest hanging fruit, the most visible and loud among Muslim organisations, and as such have been

39 Foreign Aid and the Fight Against Terrorism and Proliferation: Leveraging Foreign Aid to Achieve U.S. Policy Goals, Hearing held by the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade, July 31, 2008.

40 Allison, page 72.

41 Carla Powers, “New Imams,” *Newsweek*, January 17, 2006.

engaged by Western governments looking for the next best thing to a fully representative interlocutor.<sup>42</sup>

In many cases, policy makers agree with at least parts of the assessment made by pessimists and look at the New Western Brothers with a degree of suspicion. But the need to find a partner overrides such doubts. Moreover, bureaucracies tend to prefer to work with established organisations that in some way reflect their own structure. For the most part, only New Western Brotherhood organisations have the resources to be structured in a way that resembles a bureaucracy, with a legally registered status, a predefined structure, a headquarters, and a full-time professional staff. Competing organisations, lacking such structure and the visibility of the New Western Brothers, experience more difficulties in obtaining access to governments.<sup>43</sup> New Western Brotherhood organisations are therefore sometimes engaged as sole partners in order to satisfy the short-term need of interlocutors in the Muslim community, and only limited thought is given to what the long-term repercussions of such a relationship could be.

### *Change Through Engagement*

Despite all the difficulties in policy making on the issue, in many cases the decision to engage New Western Brotherhood organisations is reached after a fully informed assessment, independently from personal and political considerations, and as part of a carefully thought-out plan that takes into consideration long-term implications. In many cases, in fact, a gradual engagement of New Western Brotherhood organisations is seen as the only possible way to deal with them and to influence their development in the direction desired by the government. Most government officials, while perhaps not fully embracing the pessimist point of view, recognise that there are aspects of the New Western

42 Brigitte Marechal, "Dealing with European States," in Brigitte Marechal, Stefano Allievi, Felice Dassetto and Jørgen Nielsen, *Muslims in the Enlarged Europe* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2003). Page 180.

43 Stefano Allievi, "Muslims and Politics," in Brigitte Marechal, Stefano Allievi, Felice Dassetto and Jørgen Nielsen, *Muslims in the Enlarged Europe* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2003). Page 198.

Brotherhood's ideology that they find troubling. Yet they find themselves in front of a dilemma: how is the state to deal with organisations that do not fully recognise core Western values, yet do not advocate violence in the West and have achieved a position of significant influence?

Most government officials believe that refusing any dialogue with the New Western Brothers is an ideological and impractical position. Not only have the Brothers a position of influence that cannot be ignored, but pushing them aside could also lead to a radicalisation of the movement. At the same time, they acknowledge that it is at least unclear whether the New Western Brotherhood's social agenda is compatible with the goal of a cohesive society and believe that empowering them by selecting them as partners is a dangerous choice. Often government officials seem therefore to opt for a sort of middle ground; they believe that they should establish forms of permanent dialogue with Brotherhood organisations while refraining from granting them financial and political support.

Some proponents of this practical approach argue that gradual engagement enables the government to know more about the Brothers' activities and aims, cynically applying the doctrine of "keeping your friends close but your enemies closer." For the very reason that they question some of the Brothers' goals, they should maintain an open dialogue. Moreover, it is often argued that participation in the political system can have a moderating effect on the New Western Brothers.<sup>44</sup> In the Muslim countries where they have participated in the process, Islamist groups have abandoned, at least publicly, some of their more ideological positions. Being forced to deal with practical issues, Islamists must leave their ideological bubble, review their positions, and compromise.<sup>45</sup> Many policy makers at least hope that a similar process will take place with the New Western Brothers. French President Nicolas Sarkozy is among the firmest believers in this. "I am [also] convinced," he argued

44 Jonathan Laurence, "Integrating Islam: A New Chapter in 'Church-State' Relations," report for the Transatlantic Task Force on Immigration and Integration, October 2007.

45 See, for example, Amel Boubekeur, "Political Islam in Algeria," Centre for European Policy Studies working paper no. 268, May 2007.

in his 2004 book on religion and the state, discussing his approach to French-based New Western Brotherhood organisations, “that once a ‘radical’ is integrated in an official structure, he loses his radicalism because he becomes part of a dialogue.”<sup>46</sup>

French scholar Gilles Kepel, one of the foremost European experts on Islamism, while being very critical of the New Western Brothers’ aims, also believes that a graduated engagement will eventually change the movement. He compares the New Western Brothers to the Euro-Communists, the various Western European Communist movements that broke with the Soviet Union in the 1970s. As the Euro-Communists began a process of moderation that made them abandon their dream of creating the dictatorship of the proletariat, the same might happen with the New Western Brothers, who will eventually abandon the dream of a global caliphate and break with the parts of their heritage that are incompatible with life in a Western democracy. “In the same way,” argues Kepel, “several decades ago, the children of proletarian and communist immigrants to France from southern and eastern Europe fell under the influence of the Communist party and the trade unions, while all the time engaged in a process of gradual integration and advancement in society. Today, these French citizens belong to the *petite bourgeoisie*, having lost all links with both Marxism – Leninism and their parents’ native countries.”<sup>47</sup>

It is, of course, impossible to predict whether the New Western Brothers will undergo the same evolution. The rhetoric of some of the leaders of the new generation of Western-born Brothers seems to reinforce this view, though pessimists might argue that they are simply better skilled at deceiving Westerners. In any case, graduated engagement leading to a dilution of Islamist ideology seems to be the idea guiding many policy makers in their approach to New Western Brotherhood organisations.

46 Nicolas Sarkozy, *La République, les Religions, l’Espérance* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2004). Page 100.

47 Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002). Pp. 369-70.

## *Necessity or Perception of Necessity*

Occasionally, government officials engage New Western Brotherhood organisations because, independently from their assessment of the group, working with them on a certain issue can achieve an institutional goal. Even intelligence agencies that hold some of the most negative views on the Brothers recognise that, in some cases, it is in the state’s best interest to establish forms of limited cooperation, as the Brothers are believed to be in a unique position to help the state. For the most part, such cooperation has taken place over security and terrorism issues, where some governments try to turn to their advantage the reach and legitimacy that the New Western Brothers have in the Muslim community and in particular, among its most radical fringes. Based on a cold *realpolitik* approach, this analysis argues that, even if the Brothers are viewed negatively, they can be used as limited partners.

Over the last few years, for example, various governments have occasionally felt the need to seek the support of New Western Brotherhood organisations in order to diffuse tensions inside local Muslim communities. Danish authorities, for example, believe that Brotherhood-inspired networks in Denmark were crucial in keeping the calm inside the country during the 2006 Mohammed cartoon crisis. Although those very networks helped internationalise the issue by mobilising Brotherhood groups worldwide and most Danish policy makers consider their influence on Danish Muslims in highly negative terms, Danish security services acknowledge that cooperation with the Brothers was fundamental in preventing violence inside Denmark at the height of the crisis.<sup>48</sup>

In some cases, the cooperation on security issues has gone beyond emergency situations and has become, if not a permanent policy, an established pattern. Some Western

48 Interview with Hans Jørgen Bonnichsen, former head of operations of Danish domestic intelligence (PET), Copenhagen, November 2008; John Hansen and Kim Hundevadt, *Provoen og Profeten: Muhammed Krisen Bag Kulisserne*, (Aarhus: Jyllands-Postens Forlag, 2006); Pernille Ammitzbøll and Lorenzo Vidino, “After the Danish Cartoon Controversy,” *Middle East Quarterly*, Volume XIV, Number 1, Winter 2007.

governments try to establish a relationship with New Western Brothers in order to create a rapport with Islamist groups in the Muslim world, seeing the former as a key to the latter. In other cases, New Western Brotherhood organisations have been engaged as partners in the fight against terrorism. Some Western governments, in fact, believe that non violent Islamists can lend a significant hand in fighting violent extremism among Western Muslim communities and have established various forms of cooperation with them. A similar argument has been made that the New Western Brothers can help governments fight the problems of crime and gang activities in urban areas with high concentrations of Muslim residents.

The effectiveness of these strategies is highly debated and quite difficult to determine, particularly in the long term. In implementing them, governments often seek to find a difficult balance between engaging Brotherhood organisations to achieve essential goals and avoiding empowering the Brothers' social agenda. In any case, the efforts at engagement represent an important political opportunity for the New Western Brothers, who seek to exploit all possible openings to increase their access to power and consequently their legitimacy and influence.

## The way forward

The difficulties experienced by most Western governments in assessing and engaging New Western Brotherhood organisations are paradigmatic of the challenges posed by such a complex movement. Conceptualising a movement that mixes politics and religion, particularly a religion about which most policy makers know little, has proven extremely difficult. In some cases, the Brothers' actions seem to reflect the moderation and pro-integration stance that Western governments are desperately looking for in their Muslim interlocutors. In others, they seem to harbor an agenda and embrace values diametrically opposed to those of a Western liberal democracy. Policy makers, eager to find solutions to urgent problems involving the Muslim community, find themselves in a bind.

Many among the pessimists call for policies that would exclude the New Western Brothers from any engagement. Considering them deceitful actors seeking to destroy the very same freedoms that have allowed them to flourish, critics argue that their organisations should be marginalised or even outlawed as subversive, the political wings of a global Islamist insurgency. While highlighting troubling aspects of the Western Brothers' nature and agenda that unquestionably need to be addressed, this position is unrealistic and, arguably, dangerous.

Although their claims of representativeness are often overblown, New Western Brotherhood organisations do represent a significant cross-section of the Muslim community. If the aim of a government is to hear all voices, it makes little sense to exclude an important one. Talking only to those Muslim leaders whose positions square with the government's and pretending that more confrontational voices do not exist is hardly a constructive policy. When they act outside of the law, as when they provide financial support to groups designated as terrorist, Western Brotherhood organisations should be prosecuted. But since most of their activities are abundantly within the law, nonviolent Islamists are a reality that cannot be ignored and should be engaged. Moreover, more pragmatically, marginalisation could trigger a dangerous radicalisation of the movement, pushing it to embrace more extremist positions and perhaps even violence.

A diametrically opposite approach, advocated by some optimists, sees the New Western Brothers as reliable partners the state should engage in order to favor integration and stem radicalisation among Western Muslims. Only the Brothers, according to some, possess the grassroots reach and the credibility to effectively influence large segments of the Muslim community. On this account, the Brothers, while seeking to maintain the Islamic identity of Western Muslims, have views and aims compatible with those of Western governments.

This approach is also problematic. There is ample evidence showing that the aims of the New Western Brothers do not necessarily correspond to those publicly stated in dialogues with Western establishments. Assigning an almost

monopolistic control of the community to a handful of self-appointed leaders whose aims are, at best, unclear seems naïve. It would reinforce the position of the movement within Western Muslim communities, aiding its effort to make its interpretation of Islam mainstream. There is the risk that, thanks to the support of the government, a vocal minority would be able to further marginalise competing forces and exercise undue influence over a community that, for the most part, does not embrace the Brothers' conservative and politicised version of Islam. The potential repercussions of this hypothetical shift for security and social cohesion are debatable, but providing the New Western Brothers with a blank check seems overly optimistic.

The experiences of the last few years have led some Western policy makers to consider a third option, which entails cautious engagement of New Western Brotherhood organisations. Most governments are now refuting the monopolistic approach. Increasingly aware of the extreme diversity of Western Muslim communities, they try to speak to a wider range of voices, proactively seeking to connect with traditionally underrepresented groups. Looking beyond the "bearded communalist shepherds" who have often monopolised access to institutions, policy makers are progressively trying to broaden the spectrum of government interlocutors.<sup>49</sup> New Western Brotherhood organisations do represent a section of the community, but their activism and visibility should not be mistaken for universal representativeness.

Moreover, there is a growing awareness of the need for a more refined approach. There are indeed significant advantages in not isolating New Western Brotherhood organisations, for example, good results in the security field. And, even though nobody can exactly predict long-term developments, it is arguable that engagement can lead to a moderation of the movement, as Sarkozy believes. Isolation, in contrast, could have negative repercussions, further radicalising the organisations and allowing them to be seen as "martyrs" in the Muslim

49 Giles Kepel, *The War for Muslim Minds: Islam and the West* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004). Page 274.

community.<sup>50</sup> But engagement needs to be based on a firm understanding of the history, characteristics, connections, *modus operandi*, and, most important, aims of the Brothers. Only an informed engagement can lead to a realistic and constructive rapport.

Finally, many policy makers increasingly understand the difference between engagement and empowerment. Establishing a permanent dialogue and even occasional and limited forms of partnership with New Western Brotherhood organisations can produce several positive outcomes. But entrusting them with undue powers that would give them the keys to the Muslim community appears to be an option that most Western governments are no longer willing to choose. Striking the right balance between engagement and empowerment is not easy, but necessary in order to avoid granting legitimacy and influence to organisations with limited representativeness whose agenda is not necessarily compatible with those of Western governments.

Crucially important in policy development is the uncertain evolutionary path New Western Brotherhood organisations will follow. The organisations established some forty years ago by the pioneers are undergoing a significant change, as leadership is slowly being passed to a new generation of Western-born activists, who will inevitably add their perspectives. Today it is not unreasonable to speak of some of these organisations as "post-Brotherhood," even though the real meaning of this expression is still to be defined. Will the New Western Brothers become a "Muslim church in Europe, which will pose little or no security threat, but will

50 Sarkozy's comments on his decision to include the UOIF in the Conseil Français du Culte Musulman (CFCM, the government-created body designed to unite the representatives of the most important French Muslim organisations) further clarifies this position. "I wanted," said Sarkozy in a 2005 speech at the Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques, "to have inside the CFCM the representation of the diversity of the practicing Muslim world, included the UOIF. And I have never regretted it. The UOIF has always respected its word. The partisans of a 'spicier' Islam have their place inside this institution, where they have brought their representativeness, without ever betraying the spirit of the authority. If the UOIF had refused to take part in it or had left it, it would have been the representativeness of the CFCM that would have been challenged. And in the banlieues, we would have made the UOIF an organisation of martyrs, and CFCM a shell only half full. I did not want that and I assumed this responsibility."

push for conservative moral and social values," as French scholar Olivier Roy theorises?<sup>51</sup> Or are the pro-democracy and pro-integration statements of the new generation just a carefully devised smokescreen for the movement's real and more nefarious aims? Only time will tell, and it is not unlikely that different wings of the movement will go in separate and even opposing directions. But for the time being, given this uncertainty, a policy of cautious and informed engagement appears to be the most appropriate.

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51 Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004). Page 276.

## About ICSR

ICSR is a unique partnership of King's College London, the University of Pennsylvania, the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya (Israel) and the Regional Center for Conflict Prevention at the Jordan Institute of Diplomacy. Its aim and mission is to bring together knowledge and leadership to counter the growth of radicalisation and political violence. For more information, see [www.icsr.info](http://www.icsr.info)

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