

The Muslim Brotherhood's Conquest of Europe

Since its founding in 1928, the Muslim Brotherhood (*Hizb al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn*) has profoundly influenced the political life of the Middle East. Its motto is telling: "*Allah is our objective. The Prophet is our leader. The Qur'an is our law. Jihad is our way. Dying in the way of Allah is our highest hope.*"[1]

While the Brotherhood's radical ideas have shaped the beliefs of generations of Islamists, over the past two decades, it has lost some of its power and appeal in the Middle East, crushed by harsh repression from local regimes and snubbed by the younger generations of Islamists who often prefer more radical organizations.

But the Middle East is only one part of the Muslim world. Europe has become an incubator for Islamist thought and political development. Since the early 1960s, Muslim Brotherhood members and sympathizers have moved to Europe and slowly but steadily established a wide and well-organized network of mosques, charities, and Islamic organizations. Unlike the larger Islamic community, the Muslim Brotherhood's ultimate goal may not be simply "to help Muslims be the best citizens they can be," but rather to extend Islamic law throughout Europe and the United States.[2]

Four decades of teaching and cultivation have paid off. The student refugees who migrated from the Middle East forty years ago and their descendants now lead organizations that represent the local Muslim communities in their engagement with Europe's political elite. Funded by generous contributors from the Persian Gulf, they preside over a centralized network that spans nearly every European country.

These organizations represent themselves as mainstream, even as they continue to embrace the Brotherhood's radical views and maintain links to terrorists. With moderate rhetoric and well-spoken German, Dutch, and French, they have gained acceptance among European governments and media alike. Politicians across the political spectrum rush to engage them whenever an issue involving Muslims arises or, more parochially, when they seek the vote of the burgeoning Muslim community.

But, speaking Arabic or Turkish before their fellows Muslims, they drop their facade and embrace radicalism. While their representatives speak about interfaith dialogue and integration on television, their mosques preach hate and warn worshippers about the evils of Western society. While they publicly condemn the murder of commuters in Madrid and school children in Russia, they continue to raise money for Hamas and other terrorist organizations. Europeans, eager to create a dialogue with their increasingly disaffected Muslim minority, overlook this duplicity. The case is particularly visible in Germany, which retains a place of key importance in Europe, not only because of its location at the heart of Europe, but also because it played host to the first major wave of Muslim Brotherhood immigrants and is host to the best-organized Brotherhood presence. The German government's reaction is also instructive if only to show the dangers of accepting Muslim Brotherhood rhetoric at face value, without looking at the broader scope of its activities.

The Muslim Brotherhood

The situation in Germany is particularly telling. More than anywhere else in Europe, the Muslim Brotherhood in Germany has gained significant power and political acceptance. Islamist organizations in other European countries now consciously follow the model pioneered by their German peers.

During the 1950s and 1960s, thousands of Muslim students left the Middle East to study at German universities, drawn not only by the German institutions' technical reputations but also by a desire to escape repressive regimes. Egyptian ruler Gamal Abdel Nasser's regime was especially vigorous in its attempts to root out the Islamist opposition. Beginning in 1954, several members of the Muslim Brotherhood fled Egypt to escape arrest or assassination. West Germany provided a welcome refuge. Bonn's motivations were not simply altruistic. As terrorism expert Khalid Durán explained in his studies on jihadism in Europe,[3] the West German government had decided to cut diplomatic relations with countries that recognized East Germany. When Egypt and Syria established diplomatic relations with the communist government, Bonn decided to welcome Syrian and Egyptian political

refugees. Often, these dissidents were Islamists. Many members of the Muslim Brotherhood were already familiar with Germany. Several had cooperated with the Nazis before and during World War II.[4] Some had even, reportedly, fought in the infamous Bosnian Handschar division of the Schutzstaffel (SS).[5]

One of the Muslim Brotherhood's first pioneers in Germany was Sa'id Ramadan, the personal secretary of Muslim Brotherhood founder Hassan al-Banna.[6] Ramadan, an Egyptian who had led the Muslim Brotherhood's irregulars in Palestine in 1948,[7] moved to Geneva in 1958 and attended law school in Cologne.[8] In Germany, he founded what has become one of Germany's three main Muslim organizations, the Islamische Gemeinschaft Deutschland (Islamic Society of Germany, IGD), over which he presided from 1958 to 1968.[9] Ramadan also cofounded the Muslim World League,[10] a well-funded organization that the Saudi establishment uses to spread its radical interpretation of Islam throughout the world. The U.S. government closely monitors the activities of the Muslim World League, which it accuses of financing terrorism. In March 2002, a U.S. Treasury Department-led task force raided the group's Northern Virginia offices looking for documents tying the group to Al-Qaeda, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. In January 2004, the Senate Finance Committee asked the Internal Revenue Service for its records on the Muslim World League "as part of an investigation into possible links between nongovernmental organizations and terrorist financing networks." [11] This privileged relationship with the oil-rich kingdom granted Ramadan an influx of money, which he used to fund the powerful Islamic Center of Geneva and to bankroll several financial and religious activities. Hani Ramadan, Sa'id's son, currently runs the Islamic Center. Among its other board members is Sa'id's other son, Tariq Ramadan, who recently made headlines in the United States when the Department of Homeland Security revoked his visa to teach at Notre Dame University.[12] Sa'id Ramadan's case is not isolated.[13]

Following Ramadan's ten-year presidency of the IGD, Pakistani national Fazal Yazdani briefly led the IGD before Ghaleb Himmat, a Syrian with Italian citizenship, took the helm. During his long stewardship (1973-2002), Himmat shuttled between Italy, Austria, Germany, Switzerland and the United States.[14] Intelligence agencies around the world have long scrutinized Himmat's terrorist connections. He is one of the founders of the Bank al-Taqwa, a powerful conglomerate dubbed by Italian intelligence, "Bank of the Muslim Brotherhood," which has financed terrorist groups since the mid-1990s if not earlier.[15] Himmat helped Youssef Nada, one of the Muslim Brotherhood's financial masterminds, run Al-Taqwa and a web of companies headquartered in locations such as Switzerland, Liechtenstein, and the Bahamas, which maintain few regulations on monetary origin or destination. Both Himmat and Nada reportedly funneled large sums to groups such as Hamas and the Algerian Islamic Salvation Front[16] and set up a secret credit line for a top associate of Osama bin Laden.[17]

In November 2001, the U.S. Treasury Department designated both Himmat and Nada as terrorism financiers.[18] According to Italian intelligence, the Al-Taqwa network also financed several Islamic centers throughout Europe[19] and many Islamist publications, including *Risalatul Ikhwan*, [20] the official magazine of the Muslim Brotherhood. After the U.S. Treasury Department designation, Himmat resigned from the IGD's presidency. His successor was Ibrahim el-Zayat, a 36-year-old of Egyptian descent and the charismatic leader of numerous student organizations.

The fact that IGD leaders Ramadan and Himmat are among the most prominent Muslim Brotherhood members of the last half-century suggests the links between the IGD and the Ikhwan. Moreover, reports issued by internal intelligence agencies from various German states openly call the IGD an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood.[21] In particular, according to one intelligence report, the Egyptian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood has dominated the IGD since its early days.[22]

The Muslim Brotherhood—led by Ramadan and Himmat[23]—sponsored the construction of the imposing Islamic Center of Munich in 1960,[24] aided by large donations from Middle Eastern rulers such as King Fahd of Saudi Arabia who, according to a 1967 *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* article, donated 80,000 marks.[25] The Ministry of Interior of Nordrhein-Westfalen states that the Islamic Center of Munich has been one of the European headquarters for the Brotherhood since its foundation.[26] The center publishes a magazine, *Al-Islam*, whose efforts (according to an Italian intelligence dossier), [27] are financed by the Bank al-Taqwa. According to the interior minister of Baden-Württemberg, *Al-Islam* shows explicitly how the German Brothers reject the concept of a secular state.[28] Its February 2002 issue, for example, states,

In the long run, Muslims cannot be satisfied with the acceptance of German family, estate, and trial law. ... Muslims should aim at an agreement between the Muslims and the German state with the goal of a separate jurisdiction for Muslims.

The IGD, of which the Islamic Center of Munich is one of the most important members, represents the main offshoot of the Egyptian Brotherhood in Germany. But the IGD is also the quintessential example of how the Muslim Brotherhood has gained power in Europe. The IGD has grown significantly over the years, and it now incorporates dozens of Islamic organizations throughout the country. Islamic centers from more than thirty German cities have joined its umbrella.[29] Today, the IGD's real strength lies in its cooperation with and sponsorship of many Islamic youth and student organizations across Germany.

This focus on youth organizations came after Zayat's succession. He understood the importance of focusing on the next generation of German Muslims and launched recruitment drives to get young Muslims involved in Islamic organizations. But a Meckenheim police report on the sharply dressed Zayat also reveals alarming connections. German authorities openly say he is a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. They also link him to the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY), a Saudi nongovernmental organization that seeks to spread Wahhabism, the radical and intolerant Saudi interpretation of Islam, throughout the world with its literature and schools.[30] WAMY, which falls under the umbrella of the Muslim World League, has the stated goal of "arming the Muslim youth with full confidence in the supremacy of the Islamic system over other systems." It is the largest Muslim youth organization in the world and can boast unparalleled resources.[31] In 1991 WAMY published a book called *Tawjihat Islamiya* (Islamic Views) that stated, "Teach our children to love taking revenge on the Jews and the oppressors, and teach them that our youngsters will liberate Palestine and Al-Quds [Jerusalem] when they go back to Islam and make jihad for the sake of Allah." [32] The sentiments in *Tawjihat Islamiya* are the rule rather than the exception. Many other WAMY publications are filled with strong anti-Semitic and anti-Christian rhetoric.

Meckenheim police also link Zayat to Institut Européen des Sciences Humaines, a French school that prepares European imams. Several radical clerics lecture at the school and several European intelligence agencies accuse the school of spreading religious hatred.[33] German authorities also highlight the fact that he is involved in several money laundering investigations.[34] Zayat has never been indicted for terrorist activity, but he has dubious financial dealings and maintains associations with many organizations that spread religious hatred. The IGD may have changed leadership after the U.S. Treasury's designation of Himmat, but it did not change direction.

While the Egyptian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood has chosen Munich as its base of operations in Germany, its Syrian branch is headquartered in Aachen, a German town near the Dutch border. The former Carolingian capital, with its famous university, is now home to a large Muslim population including the prominent Syrian Al-Attar family. The first Attar to move to Aachen was Issam, who fled persecution in his native country in the 1950s when he was leader of the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. Other members of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood soon followed. With time, Islamists from other countries adopted Attar's Bilal mosque in Aachen as their base of operations.[35] From hosting exiled Algerian terrorists[36] to operating a charity designated by the U.S. Department of Treasury as a financial front for Hamas,[37] Aachen is well known to intelligence agencies throughout the world.

The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood base in Aachen kept close relations with their Egyptian counterparts. For example, confirming the tendency of important Muslim Brotherhood families to close alliance through intermarriage, Issam al-Attar's son married the daughter of Al-Taqwa banker Youssef Nada.[38] Links between the two Muslim Brotherhood branches are more extensive than a single marriage, however. The Aachen Islamic Center reportedly received funding from Al-Taqwa.[39] Staff members have rotated between the Islamic Centers in Aachen and Munich. For example, Ahmed von Denffer, editor of the Islamic Center of Munich's *Al-Islam* magazine, came to Munich from Aachen.[40] Nevertheless, some distance remains. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood has never joined the IGD, instead preferring to keep some form of independence.

Milli Görüş

Of all of Zayat's financial activities, the one that has attracted the German authorities' greatest suspicion has been his association with officials of Milli Görüş (National Vision, in Turkish). Milli Görüş, which has 30,000 members and perhaps another 100,000 sympathizers,[41] claims to defend the rights of Germany's immigrant Turkish population, giving them a voice in the democratic political arena while "preserving their Islamic identity." [42] But Milli Görüş has another agenda. While publicly declaring its interest in democratic debate and a willingness to see Turkish immigrants integrated into European societies, some Milli Görüş leaders have expressed contempt for democracy and Western values. The Bundesverfassungsschutz, Germany's domestic intelligence agency, has repeatedly warned about Milli Görüş' activities, describing the group in its annual reports as a "foreign extremist organization." [43] The agency also reported that "although Milli Görüş, in public statements, pretends to adhere to the basic principles of Western democracies, abolition of the laicist government system in Turkey and the establishment of an Islamic state and social system are, as before, among its goals." [44]

Milli Görüş' history alone indicates why the group should be considered radical. Former Turkish prime minister Mehmettin Erbakan, whose Refah Party was banned by the Turkish Constitutional Court in January of 1998 for "activities against the country's secular regime," [45] is still Milli Görüş' undisputed leader, even if his nephew Mehmet Sabri Erbakan is its president. The 2002 European Milli Görüş meeting held in the Dutch city of Arnhem, where Mehmettin Erbakan was the keynote speaker, provides a glimpse into Milli Görüş' ideology. After a tirade against the evils of integration in the West and U.S. policies, Erbakan declared that "after the fall of the wall, the West has found an enemy in Islam." [46] A Bundesverfassungsschutz report reveals Milli Görüş' real aims:

While in recent times, the Milli Görüş has increasingly emphasized the readiness of its members to be integrated into German society and asserts its adherence to the basic law, such statements stem from tactical calculation rather than from any inner change of the organization. [47]

Milli Görüş pushes an agenda similar to that of the IGD, even if its target is more limited. Nevertheless, both Milli Görüş and the IGD collaborate on many initiatives. There is also a family connection. Zayat married Sabiha Erbakan, the sister of Mehmet Sabri Erbakan. [48] The siblings' mother is also involved in politics and runs an important Islamic women's organization in Germany. The Zayat family is active as well. Ibrahim el-Zayat's father is the imam of the Marburg mosque; other members of his family are involved in Islamic organizations. As Udo Ulfkotte, a political science professor specializing in counterespionage at the University of Lueneburg and an expert on Islamic terrorism, notes, the Erbakans and the Zayats lead networks of organizations that aim at the radicalization, respectively, of the Turkish and Arab communities in Germany. [49]

IGD and Milli Görüş are active in their efforts to increase political influence and become the official representatives of the entire German Muslim community. With well-endowed budgets, their mosques provide social services, organize conferences, and distribute literature nationwide. As the Office for the Protection of the Constitution (Landesverfassungsschutz) in Hessen [50] notes:

The threat of Islamism for Germany is posed ... primarily by Milli Görüş and other affiliated groups. They try to spread Islamist views within the boundaries of the law. Then they try to implement ... for all Muslims in Germany a strict interpretation of the Qur'an and of the Shari'a. ... Their public support of tolerance and religious freedom should be treated with caution. [51]

It presents a problem that politicians and security services in Germany view the IGD and Milli Görüş so differently. But, as Ulfkotte wrote about Zayat in his book, *Der Krieg in unseren Staedten* (The War in Our Cities), [52] "politicians of all colors and parties try to reach out to him." [53] For example, the prestigious Berlin Catholic Academy invited Zayat to represent the Muslim point of view in an inter-religious meeting organized by the academy in October 2002. [54] German politicians and Christian institutions regularly partner themselves with Milli Görüş in various initiatives. Milli Gazete, the official journal of Milli Görüş, once stated that "Milli Görüş is a shield protecting our fellow citizens from assimilation into barbaric Europe." [55] Nevertheless, German politicians meet regularly with Milli Görüş officials to discuss immigration and integration issues. The fact that an official like Ahmed al-Khalifah, IGD secretary general, represents Islam before members of parliament who are discussing

religious tolerance,[56] shows the success of Brotherhood-linked organizations' efforts to gain acceptance as the representatives of German Muslims. The Office for the Protection of the Constitution well described these efforts, saying that Milli Görüş (and the IGD) "strives to dominate regional or nationwide federations and umbrella organizations for Muslims which are increasingly gaining importance as interlocutors for state and ecclesiastical authorities and thus to expand its influence within society." [57]

Zentralrat, the Islamist Umbrella

In 1989, under the auspices of Abdullah at-Turki, powerful dean of Bin Saud University in Riyadh, the Saudis created the Islamische Konzil Deutschland (Islamic Council of Germany). Turki assumed the presidency with other top positions held by Ibrahim el-Zayat, Hasan Özdögan, a high-ranking Milli Görüş official, and Ahmad Khalifa, an officer from the Islamic Center of Munich.[58] While an official German parliament report describes the Islamische Konzil as just "another Sunni organization," such an assumption indicates a dangerous misunderstanding of the Saudi relationship to German Islamists.[59]

The trend toward consolidation took a step forward in 1994 when German Islamists realized that a united coalition translated into greater political relevance and influence. Nineteen organizations, including the IGD, the Islamic Center of Munich, and the Islamic Center of Aachen, created an umbrella organization, the Zentralrat der Muslime. According to a senior German intelligence official, at least nine out of these nineteen organizations belong to the Muslim Brotherhood.[60] The German press has recently investigated the Zentralrat president, Nadeem Elyas, a German-educated Saudi physician and an official of the Islamic Center of Aachen. Die Welt linked Elyas to Christian Ganczarski, an Al-Qaeda operative currently jailed as one of the masterminds of the 2002 attack on a synagogue in Tunisia.[61] Ganczarski, a German of Polish descent who converted to Islam, told authorities that Al-Qaeda recruited him at the Islamic University of Medina where Elyas sent him to study.[62] Elyas said he could not remember meeting him but did not deny the possibility that Ganczarski, who never completed high school, might have been one of the many individuals he had sent over the years to radical schools in Saudi Arabia.[63] Saudi donors paid all of Ganczarski's expenses.[64] Ganczarski was not alone. Elyas admitted to having sent hundreds of German Muslims to study at one of the most radical universities in Saudi Arabia.[65]

The Zentralrat, which portrays itself as the umbrella organization for German Muslim organizations, has become, together with the IGD and Milli Görüş, the de facto representative of three million German Muslims. Even though the IGD is a member of the Zentralrat, the two organizations often operate independently. Their apparent independence is planned. With many organizations operating under different names, the Muslim Brotherhood fools German politicians who believe they are consulting a spectrum of opinion.[66] The media seek the Zentralrat's officials when they want the Muslim view on everything from the debate about the admissibility of the hijab (headscarf) in public schools, to the war in Iraq, and so forth. Politicians seek the Zentralrat's endorsement when they want to reach out to the Muslim community. Many German politicians are uninformed about Islam and do not understand that the view and the interpretation of Islam that the Zentralrat expresses, as does the IGD and Milli Görüş, is that of the Muslim Brotherhood and not that of traditional Islam. Accordingly, the Zentralrat expresses total opposition to any ban of the hijab, supports Wahhabi-influenced Islamic education in schools, and endorses a radical position on the Middle East situation.[67] While many Muslims endorse these views, the problem is that the Zentralrat neither represents nor tolerates those with divergent views. Moderate German Muslim groups lack the funding and organization of Muslim Brotherhood-linked groups. In terms of numbers, influence on the Muslim community, and political relevance, the Zentralrat and its two most important constituent parts, the IGD and Milli Görüş, dominate the scene. With ample Saudi financing, the Muslim Brotherhood has managed to become the voice of the Muslims in Germany.

Recently, the German public was shocked to hear what is preached inside Saudi-funded mosques and schools. In the fall of 2003, a hidden camera-equipped journalist from Germany's ARD television infiltrated the Saudi-built King Fahd Academy in Bonn and taped what it taught to young Muslim children. One teacher called for jihad against the infidels.[68] While the images elicited a rebuke from German politicians, the rather sterile debate about Saudi influence on German Muslims has not effected tangible change. Saudi officials and Saudi-run nongovernmental organizations continue to groom Muslim Brotherhood organizations.

First Germany, Then Europe

While the Muslim Brotherhood and their Saudi financiers have worked to cement Islamist influence over Germany's Muslim community, they have not limited their infiltration to Germany. Thanks to generous foreign funding, meticulous organization, and the naïveté of European elites, Muslim Brotherhood-linked organizations have gained prominent positions throughout Europe. In France, the extremist Union des Organisations Islamiques de France (Union of Islamic Organizations of France) has become the predominant organization in the government's Islamic Council.[69] In Italy, the extremist Unione delle Comunita' ed Organizzazioni Islamiche in Italia (Union of the Islamic Communities and Organizations in Italy) is the government's prime partner in dialogue regarding Italian Islamic issues.[70]

In parallel to European Union integration efforts, the Muslim Brotherhood is also seeking to integrate its various European proxies. Over the past fifteen years, the Muslim Brotherhood has created a series of pan-European organizations such as the Federation of Islamic Organizations in Europe, in which representatives from national organizations can meet and plan initiatives.[71] Perhaps the Muslim Brotherhood's greatest pan-European impact has, as with the Islamische Gemeinschaft Deutschland, been with its youth organization. In June 1996, Muslim youth organizations from Sweden, France, and England joined forces with the Federation of Islamic Organizations in Europe and the World Assembly of Muslim Youth to create a European Islamic youth organization.[72] Three months later, thirty-five delegates from eleven countries met in Leicester and formally launched the Forum of European Muslim Youth and Student Organizations (FEMYSO), which maintains its headquarters in Brussels.[73]

According to its official publications, FEMYSO is "a network of 42 national and international organizations bringing together youth from over 26 different countries." FEMYSO proudly stated in 2003 that over the preceding four years it had become

The de facto voice of the Muslim youth in Europe. It is regularly consulted on issues pertaining to Muslims in Europe. It has also developed useful links with: the European Parliament, the Council of Europe, the United Nations, the European Youth Forum, and numerous relevant NGOs at the European level.[74]

Ibrahim el-Zayat, who held the presidency until his commitments in Germany forced him to step down, even used the FEMYSO perch to address the European Parliament.[75] Because the Muslim Brotherhood provides the bulk of FEMYSO's constituent organizations, it provides the "de facto voice of the Muslim youth in Europe." While FEMYSO claims that it "is committed to fighting prejudices at all the levels, so that the future of Europe is a multicultural, inclusive and respectful one,"[76] such statements ring hollow given the position of sponsors like the World Assembly of Muslim Youth which believes that "the Jews are enemies of the faithful, God, and the Angels; the Jews are humanity's enemies. ... Every tragedy that inflicts the Muslims is caused by the Jews." [77]

The Muslim Brotherhood's ample funds and organization have contributed to their success in Europe. But their acceptance into mainstream society and their unchallenged rise to power would not have been possible had European elites been more vigilant, valued substance over rhetoric, and understood the motivations of those financing and building these Islamist organizations. Why have Europeans been so naïve? Bassam Tibi, a German professor of Syrian descent and an expert on Islam in Europe, thinks that Europeans—and Germans in particular—fear the accusation of racism.[78] Radicals in sheep's clothing have learned that they can silence almost everybody with the accusation of xenophobia. Any criticism of Muslim Brotherhood-linked organizations is followed by outcries of racism and anti-Muslim persecution. Journalists who are not frightened by these appellatives are swamped with baseless and unsuccessful but expensive lawsuits.

In some cases, politicians simply fail to check the backgrounds of those who claim to be legitimate representatives for the Muslim community. As in the United States, self-described representatives for the Muslim community are far more radical than the populations they represent. In other cases, politicians realize that these organizations are not the ideal counterparts in a constructive dialogue but do not take the time to seek other less visible but more moderate organizations, several of which exist only at the grassroots level, impeded by financial constraints.

What most European politicians fail to understand is that by meeting with radical organizations, they empower them and grant the Muslim Brotherhood legitimacy. There is an implied endorsement to any meeting, especially when the same politicians ignore moderate voices that do not have access to generous Saudi funding. This creates a self-perpetuating cycle of radicalization because the greater the political legitimacy of the Muslim Brotherhood, the more opportunity it and its proxy groups will have to influence and radicalize various European Muslim communities. The ultimate irony is that Muslim Brotherhood founder Hassan al-Banna dreamed of spreading Islamism throughout Egypt and the Muslim world. He would have never dreamed that his vision might also become a reality in Europe.

by Lorenzo Vidino, Middle East Quarterly
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