

MOHAMMED LOUZI

Muslim Brotherhood's silent conquest of Europe

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At a time when Italian and European institutions, as well as religious institutions, are increasingly open to Islamic organizations linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, the interview presented here is an additional point for reflecting on the processes of radicalization and Islamic political operation. Mohammed Louzi, born in Morocco and now a resident of Lille, France, is an ex-member of the Muslim Brotherhood. He was part of the Brotherhood in both Morocco and France, as president of the organization Etudiants Musulmans de France (Muslim Students of France), and as a member of the Forum of European Muslim Youth and Student Organization (FEMYSO). Louzi had the courage not only to leave his responsibilities and his affiliation with the Brotherhood, but also to speak out against its global project. The purpose of this long interview is to contribute to the arduous and delicate debate regarding Muslim representation in Italy and Europe, which is quite frequently monopolized by political Islam, to the detriment of the political Islam Louzi refers to in his book.

Your autobiography *Pourquoi j'ai quitté les Frères Musulmans. Retour éclairé vers un islam apolitique* (Why I Left the Muslim Brotherhood. An Enlightened Return to Apolitical Islam, Paris: Michalon, 2016) is on one hand the story of your relationship to Islam, and on the other to the political Islam of the Muslim Brotherhood. What are the differences between the two?

My book is the story of my more or less normal life, which between the ages of 13 and 28 revolved around a particular version of the Muslim faith, the ideological story of the Muslim Brotherhood. First of all, I want to clarify something. Just as Reza Aslan did in his

book "No God But God: The Origins, Evolution and Future of Islam," I make a vital distinction between "faith" and a "story of faith." As Aslan stated, "Religion, it must be understood, is not faith. Religion is the story of faith." If "faith" remains "mysterious and ineffable," then religion – in my case, Islam – is a "story of faith" or of several faiths, through various doctrines, the institutionalization of symbols, myths, rituals, and practices, to give meaning to the existence of a community that shares the same Muslim faith; sometimes it also causes intra- and extra-communal conflicts. That said, the story of the Muslim Brotherhood and of political Islam in general, beyond just "kidnapping" faith, makes faith a tool offered to political and military power for the purpose of dominating and subjecting the other. This applies to the other who is within this virtual community and does not share the same story as the Muslim Brotherhood; it also applies to the other who is outside and does not recognize herself in this story because she is faithful to another religion, as well as to one who is outside all religion and lives his life without God or master. In this sense, one of the main differences between "Islam" and "political Islam" lies in the need to more clearly differentiate the two. Islam – I might dare to say "Islams" in the plural – is a collection of stories rooted in history since the advent of the Prophet Mohammed, which in some cases includes politics as an internal element of the religion (political Islam), and in other cases considers it an external element (social Islam and Sufism). Islamism erases these subtleties and differences in order to impose its own totalitarian vision and oppressive politico-religious doctrine, unfortunately inserting itself into a historical continuity rooted in the events immediately following the death of the Prophet in 632 CE. I illustrated this and other differentiations in my book, contrasting them with another enlightened vision, another story of the Muslim faith, that is absolutely apolitical; its main ingredients are simplicity, humanity, non-violence, and a certain idea of progress that reconciles faith and reason, doubt and truth, human nature, knowledge, and peace.

You lived as part of the Muslim Brotherhood in Morocco and France. In your book you emphasize the difference in their goals, which are on the one hand "taking power," and on the other "integration," which corresponds with institutional infiltration...

In all the countries in which the Muslim Brotherhood is present, both in the East and in the West, the Islamist project has not changed from the time the movement was founded by Hasan Al-Banna in 1928. The goal is to retake the Islamic Caliphate to its historical boundaries, including the places in which Islam had settled in Europe. This project has a name: tamkin, or "put into action." In the Arab-Islamic world the movement has had its ups and downs. Sometimes it has been able to break through. At other times

it has had its difficulties. But it has never disappeared. The Muslim Brotherhood itself describes its influence as successive cycles: birth, ascent, apogee, decline, latency, then again ascent, and so forth. Here in Europe and the West the situation is different. Indeed, while the Arab-Muslim world is already considered an acquired "territory," this is certainly not the case in the West. Since the early 1980s the Muslim Brotherhood has been working in Europe to acquire various private "territories" for the purpose of introducing their Islamist story over time as an element of the national story of each European country. This operation is called tawtin, or "become citizens, integrate"; it is put into practice by building mosques, purchasing various developed properties, building private schools, and so forth. This is because without tawtin, the tamkin project cannot be effectively brought to fulfillment. While tawtin is the territorial goal of one stage, tamkin is the final goal so that the law of Allah, as understood by the Brotherhood ideologues and ulema, may dominate Europe in order to annex it to the Islamic state the Brotherhood so longs for. Chakib Benmakhlouf is the ex-president of the FOIE (Federazione delle Organizzazioni Islamiche in Europa, or the Federation of Islamic Organizations in Europe), to which the Lega Islamica (Islamic League) belongs and to which the UCOII (Unione delle Comunità e Organizzazioni Islamiche in Italia, or the Union of Islamic Communities and Organizations in Italy) also refers. In a 20 May 2008 interview with the Arab daily Asharq Al-Awsat he stated: "within the FOIE we have a plan of action; we have a plan of action over twenty years: we have short, medium, and long term plans. Unfortunately, some events that happen from time to time negatively impact the progress of our operation. Some Muslims have quickly felt attracted to marginal skirmishes, and all that has disturbed our global action plan." [translated from the Italian, Trans.]

The Muslim Brotherhood chooses who will be a part of the organization and not vice versa. True?

The predator/prey coupling assures balance in the food pyramid in an ecosystem. Predators select their prey according to criteria dictated by nature. The Muslim Brotherhood pyramid that describes the phases of tamkin also has its "predators"; they select their prey based on criteria dictated by ideology and by the need for human resources in the global tamkin project. In the Muslim Brotherhood, those who join themselves to the project do not choose that association. As an obscure sect the Brotherhood chooses them, and its oldest members co-opt them at the end of a highly particular path of initiation.

What is the significance of the oath to the Brotherhood that represents the final moment of initiation?

Beyond just a territory, the tamkin project needs a solid human base. This is an ideological concept, frequently used in the writings of Sayyid Qutb, one of the principal ideologues of the Brotherhood, particularly in his exegesis of Suras VIII and IX of the Qu'ran. According to Qutb, the creation of an Islamic state in any territory has a superior preliminary educational, ideological, and organic phase that first and foremost establishes a solid human base made up of persons, brothers and sisters, who are well instructed and convinced about the idea and necessity of the creation of the Islamic state – persons who are ready at any moment to sacrifice everything, including their lives, in order to actualize and defend it, for good or for ill. Qutb cited the example of the Prophet Mohammed, who was able to found a human base of convinced companions in Mecca before emigrating and settling in Medina, his new territory for establishing the first conquering Islamic state; that is the political interpretation of this Brotherhood ideologue. These predator-Brothers work to identify recruits to form a solid base, a firm core, in every country. During ideological initiation, the ten pillars of the loyalty oath as envisioned by Hasan al-Banna are illustrated, which are “understanding, sincerity, action, jihad, sacrifice, total obedience, endurance, faithfulness to the commitment, brotherhood, and total trust”; the candidates who respond to the ideological standards pass to the phase of the loyalty oath, in which they explicitly commit themselves by repeating the following declaration: “Before Allah the Omnipotent, I commit myself to rigorously observe the dispositions and the precepts of Islam and to conduct jihad to defend its cause. Before Him I commit myself to respect the conditions of my faithfulness to the Muslim Brotherhood and discharge my duties regarding our confraternity. Before Him I commit myself to obey his directors in times of prosperity and in times of difficulty, to the limits of my strength, to the extent that the orders given to me do not require me to commit a sin. I swear this oath of loyalty, to which Allah is a witness.” From that moment on, the new recruit has the mission to work for the tamkin project, enlightened by the legendary motto of the movement: “Allah is our final goal, the Messenger is our example and guide, the Qu'ran is our constitution, jihad is our life, dying on Allah's path is our highest hope!”

Is the loyalty oath indispensable, or are there different levels of belonging to the Brotherhood, particularly in Europe?

An outside observer of the Muslim Brotherhood's operations in France might think there are tens of thousands of active brothers and sisters. The reality of the numbers is

different. Even being generous, the total is not above a thousand persons scattered throughout France. It is decidedly small with respect to the weight they carry in the Muslim faith community, but it is sufficient to constitute the solid base around which other and apparently independent networks and associational structures can gravitate. The Muslim Brotherhood is an organization that has uninterruptedly modernized its strategic action for eighty-eight years. Initially the ideology was spread according to an archaic model similar to a spiderweb, which ran the risk of weakening or actually disappearing in the case of a counterstrike; cutting off the head of the spider, the Brotherhood – in this case the Supreme Guide who is officially in Cairo – would decapitate the entire structure of the Muslim Brotherhood. Today this way of operating has been surpassed. The organizations in the Brotherhood look like a starfish, in that you can cut an arm off, but it does not die; rather, it grows a new arm. Better yet, when you cut off an arm a new, independent starfish is born, and so forth, in a sort of impressive and infinite multiplication. If in every starfish the Brothers place one or more members infected with the Islamist virus, that is enough to contaminate everyone around them. In this way the Brothers aim to guarantee an ultra-indoctrinated human base for the purpose of spreading themselves and infiltrating every structure with a single coup that brings great benefits, including benefits that have no organic link with the main headquarters.

The Saudi intellectual Turki al-Hamad stated in a recent interview that young Arabs “have grown up with an overdose of religion,” which has led some of them to become radicalized. Can the Muslim Brotherhood organizations be identified with this “overdose of Islam”?

The notion of “globality” in the Islam of the Brotherhood is sufficient to give one reason to accept Turki al-Hamad’s statement. The Islam of the Brotherhood concerns itself with everything from cradle to grave. No moment, no gesture, no thought, no dream must escape from this totalizing and totalitarian Islam. And yet, beyond this onerous quantitative aspect, there is another qualitative aspect that is even more powerful and perilous. It concerns the ideological content of the indoctrination, a content that creates a sentimental and emotional divide between the subjects and the environments from which they come. Two examples. When the Brothers teach the theological dogma called “al-walà wa-al-barà,” that is, “faithfulness [to all that is Islamic] and disapproval [of all that is not],” they instill a deadly binary logic into a young person’s spirit that there exists a “we” and a “they” in society. “We,” the saved group, and “they,” the damned group. “We,” the victims, and “they,” the oppressors. “We,” the best community, and “they,” the depraved community. Worse yet, they communicate to the young person that, in the

name of Islam, it is forbidden to love “them” and that, in the name of the faith, we must hate “them.” Hatred towards the other becomes an act of faith, an act of adoration. In the educational program of the Brothers there is a foundational chapter entitled “Love for Allah and Hate for Allah.” The second example is the ideological construction around armed jihad. The Brothers consider this jihad as a religious obligation for all Muslims unto the Last Day. Everything becomes a means to keep the flame alive in the mind. I leave to the reader the translation of Hassan al-Banna’s jihad letter that I discovered in France when I was a Muslim Brother.

One tends to believe that the Muslim Brotherhood is concerned only with religion, but in your book you explain that there is also business and money that originates outside the country...

The Muslim Brotherhood considers money a powerful weapon for the tawtin project and for acquiring new private territories that function as supports for the project itself. They have highly lucrative businesses. For example, the president of the UOIF manages or co-manages various transportation and real estate companies. They count on the money of the deceived faithful in the mosques colonized by the Brothers. But all this is not sufficient. Prior to 11 September 2001 they depended greatly on Saudi donors. In the last few years they depend on the finances of the Qatar Charity and Kuwaiti donors. Furthermore, in France and other countries the Brothers benefit from public subsidies. In France the remuneration of teachers and the managing members of four private schools – in which the UOIF counts on Islamizing and indoctrinating the human resources of the future – comes from State coffers.

What are the books and texts the members of the Brotherhood study? What role does the thought of Hasan al-Banna play today?

The Brothers do not read or write much. Apart from the writings of Tariq Ramadan, I am not in a position to list other members of the UOIF that have written something, apart from rare exceptions. Furthermore, the Brotherhood preachers read only other Brothers and their ancestral and contemporary sources. I do not know if they read the Qu’ran. Among the ancients, we find al-Bukhari, Ibn Taymiyah, and al-Ghazali. Among the moderns and contemporaries, Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, Hasan al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb, and Qaradawi. In any case the literature of the Muslim Brotherhood, among which are several letters by Hasan al-Banna, is essential and fundamental.

What organizations and which individuals of the Muslim Brotherhood worry you the most?

That depends on what you mean by dangerous. As far as I know, I can confirm that there are not arms caches in the mosques colonized by the Brothers. In the absence of an immediate danger relative to armed jihad, there is the ideological danger linked to the indoctrination of young Muslims, in particular, to subjugate them to a totalitarian project. Should we continue to close our eyes and feed the beast with public funds? Should we continue to open the doors of European institutions to the representatives of the Brotherhood? Should we continue to facilitate the march of Islamism and the global tamkin? In this sense, together with what I explained about the spread of Islamist ideology in a modernized form, regarding the example of the starfish I am not in a position to identify all the Brotherhood "starfish." It is not difficult to identify the principal structures of the Muslim Brotherhood engaged in forming and maintaining the base, not only in Europe but in every country, starting with the "Federazione delle Organizzazioni Islamiche in Europa" (Federation of Islamic Organizations in Europe, or FOIE), the "Institut Européen de Sciences Humaines" (European Institute of Human Sciences, or IESH) and the Consiglio Europeo per la Fatwa e la Ricerca (European Council for Fatwa and Research).

The British government published a recap of a report on the activities of the Muslim Brotherhood in the United Kingdom, in which they state that the ideology of the Brotherhood represents fertile ground for radicalization. Do you have suggestions for the European institutions that have projects and relationships with organizations linked to the Brotherhood?

A security response against radicalization is necessary, but it is not sufficient. It may be necessary for the highest levels of Europe to begin considering the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood, in addition to the Wahhabi and jihadist ideologies, as generating radicalization in the medium and long term. Europe should monitor the flow of money in and out from Islamists. European countries should establish transparency rules regarding monies collected in Muslim places of worship. Some organizations should be reclassified as "sects" and, whenever necessary, dissolve them to protect young people and vulnerable persons. If it is not possible to forbid the Brotherhood from opening private schools, they should at least stop being subsidized with money from contributors. Europe should draw up a blacklist of all the international leaders of the Brotherhood who are noted for inciting jihad and misogyny and block them from living or acting within their own territories.

Translated by N. Michael Brennan.