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# **The Muslim Brotherhood in Germany and Austria:** Documenting Testimonies of Four Insiders

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Vienna, November 2022

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# Introduction

The Muslim Brotherhood is a proverbially secretive organization. This is particularly true in Europe, where most among the small and selective clique of members who belong to it deny any affiliation to the group and go to great lengths to hide any connection to it. Many even deny the very existence of the group in Europe, accusing those who argue the opposite of fabricating conspiracy theories.

These dynamics pose a severe challenge to the ability of researchers, reporters, law enforcement and policymakers to understand even the most basic features of the group. Moreover, the same problem applies to members of local Muslim communities, who might attend mosques, participate in activities organized by, and be represented in official institutions by Muslim Brotherhood-linked organizations without being aware of the full picture.

This problem is common to all European countries, including in the German-speaking world. Individuals close to the Muslim Brotherhood represent a statistically fairly small yet very active and vocal cross-section of any European country's Muslim community. They have also been a source of endless debate among European policymakers and commentators due to three overlapping factors: their allegedly extremist nature, the legality of most of their actions and the disproportionally influential status they have obtained.

Views on the nature of the Brotherhood in Europe are not homogeneous among policymakers, scholars, and commentators. Some adopt an optimistic approach, arguing that European Brotherhood networks simply espouse conservative views that might be at odds with those of most Europeans, but are nonetheless legitimate and harmless. Some also argue that European networks linked to the Muslim Brotherhood encourage the integration of Western Muslim communities and offer a model in which Muslims can live their faith fully and maintain a strong Islamic identity while becoming actively engaged citizens.

Others, starting with most European intelligence agencies, have a more pessimistic assessment. Critics argue that European Brotherhood organizations propagate an interpretation of Islam that drives a wedge between Muslims and non-Muslims, therefore contributing to polarization and harming integration. According to pessimists, officials of Brotherhood-linked organizations 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 jihadist groups lead nowhere. By becoming the privileged partners of the Western establishment, they are taking advantage of the Western elites' desperate desire to establish a dialogue with any representatives of the Muslim community and put themselves forward as the voices of Western Muslims, subsequently using the power and legitimacy that comes from such interactions to strengthen their position inside the community. Pessimists also point to a constant discrepancy in the Western Brothers' discourse: moderate and expressing their adherence to democracy externally, radical and spewing hatred towards the West internally.

The second challenge posed by Islamists stems from the fact that most activities of these groups fall within the law. At times, depending also on local circumstances, some of their rhetoric violates laws on discrimination, incitement or anti-Semitism. The cases in which Brotherhood-linked entities provided various forms of support to groups, such as Hamas or various milia fighting in the Syrian civil war, engaged in violent activities outside of Europe are not infrequent.

Yet, while it might be argued that they are problematic, the vast majority of the activities in which European Islamists engage in (preaching, engaging in political activities, raising funds, building mosques and schools…) are not illegal per se. Laws in certain countries might punish these behaviours if characterized as part of a larger subversive strategy. However, generally speaking, Islamists operate largely within the boundaries of the law and enjoy a constitutionally sanctioned right to advocate and work for an Islamic order.

To distinguish them from terrorist/violent groups, German authorities use the term "legalistic" for those groups that "attempt to enforce what they interpret as an Islamic order through political and social influence."[1] The distinction has practical implications: while the former are illegal and joining or providing support to them is illegal, the latter are tolerated but kept under observation. While few other countries have formalized the distinction the way Germany has, there is a growing awareness among European authorities of the problematic nature of Islamist groups. Yet, their legalistic nature makes them almost immune to many of the measures (bans, arrest of members…) that governments generally take to tackle violent groups.

The third challenge posed by Brotherhood entities is represented by their disproportionate influence. Number-wise, in fact, the Brothers constitute a small minority. Yet, thanks to their commitment to their cause, the capabilities as activists, and the ample financial resources upon which they have been able to draw for decades, they have been able to punch significantly above their weight. This dynamic plays out in two separate yet related contexts: within European Muslim communities and with European establishments.

As for the former, while dynamics somewhat differ from country to country, it is fair to say that throughout Europe the Brothers have been able to create a sophisticated web of mosques, charities, schools, lobbying and civil rights organizations, and many other kinds of entities that cater to the local Muslim community. From day cares to funeral parlours, from halal certification providers to media outlets, the Brothers seek to provide for all the possible needs of European Muslims. These efforts have not necessarily swayed the majority of European Muslims to their worldview, arguably their ultimate goal. Nevertheless, it is unquestionable that most non-Islamist organizations do not possess the resources (nor, in many cases, the inclination) to compete with the Brothers in terms of efforts to influence European Muslim communities.

By the same token, the Brothers have often achieved a disproportionate influence with European establishments: politicians at all levels, governmental agencies, local administrations,

[1] Bundesministerium des Innern: *Verfassungsschutzbericht 2014*, p. 86. Berlin. Retrieved from: https://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/downloads/DE/publikationen/themen/sicherheit/vsb-2014.html (Accessed: October 8, 2021).

media outlets etc. Although circumstances vary from country to country, when Western establishment reach out to the Muslim community, it is quite likely that many, if not all, of the organizations or individuals that are engaged belong, albeit with varying degrees of intensity, to Brotherhood networks. 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 European elites that the Brothers have obtained over the last decades.

These matters are common to all European countries, including Germany and Austria. The security services of both Austria and German have publicly described the presence of Muslim Brotherhood networks in their countries, outlining structures, affiliated organizations, *modi operandi* and analysing what they assess to be the movement's goals.[2] The picture painted by

[2] Every year, the security services of each German Land and the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution publish an annual report (Bericht), built on a regular monitoring of the milieu, that identifies the various organizations linked to the Brotherhood operating in the country and describes their activities—the reports even provide an estimate of Brotherhood members in the country (1.350 in 2019). To distinguish them from terrorist/violent groups, German authorities use the term "legalistic" for those groups that, like the Brotherhood, "*attempt to enforce what they interpret as an Islamic order through political and social influence*." The distinction has practical implications: while the former are illegal and joining or providing support to them is a crime, the latter are tolerated but kept under observation. German intelligence agencies openly identify Islamische Gemeinschaft Deutschland (IGD)/Deutsche Muslimische Gemeinschaft (DMG) as "*the largest and most influential organization of Muslim Brotherhood supporters in Germany*," "*the most important and central organization of supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood in Germany*" or similar formulations. German intelligence reports are also extremely specific in their assessment. The Brothers and other "legalistic Islamist groups," argues a 2005 Bundesverfassungsschutz report, "*represent an especial threat to the internal cohesion of our society*." "*Among other things*," it continues, "*their wide range of Islamist-oriented educational and support activities, especially for children and adolescents from immigrant families, are used to promote the creation and proliferation of an Islamist milieu in Germany. These endeavours run counter to the efforts undertaken by the federal administration and the Länder* [states] *to integrate immigrants. There is the risk that such milieus could also form the breeding ground for further radicalization.*": Bundesministerium des Innern (2006): Verfassungsschutzbericht 2005, p. 194. Berlin. Retrieved from: https://publikationen.uni-tuebingen.de/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10900/63244/Verfassungsschutzbericht_2005_de.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y. (Accessed: October 8, 2022). One of the most recent and complete public assessments of the group and its impact on German society comes from the 2018 annual report of the Verfassungsschutz of Nordrhein-Westfalen, Germany's most populous state. It reads: "[…] *The relatively small number of sympathizers* [of the Muslim Brotherhood in Germany] *must not obscure the fact that some of them have considerable influence. They can usually boast an academic education, are employed in well-paid and responsible occupations and well-connected both in Germany and internationally*.": Ministerium des Innern des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen (2019): *Verfassungsschutzbericht des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen über das Jahr 2018*, p. 217-218. Düsseldorf. Retrieved from: https://www.im.nrw/system/files/media/document/file/VS_Bericht_2018.pdf (Accessed: October 25, 2022). By their own understanding, the Muslim Brotherhood represents an "Islam of the Middle," which separates itself from the two poles of Jihadism on the one hand and a liberal, on the other hand, Western Islam adapted to Western ideals. Their goal is an Islamist society in which political interests are ultimately regulated according to the religion. For this purpose, a strategy of "Islamization from below" is pursued, which first addresses the individual and aims at a change of consciousness towards a lifestyle shaped by religion. The individuals trained in this way should then work their way into society and make sure that in the long term it approaches the religious understanding of the Muslim Brotherhood. The report goes further, arguing that "*In the long run, the threat posed by legalistic Islamism to the liberal democratic system is greater than that of jihadism, which will always outnumber numerically. They aspire to an Islamist order, but are prepared to allow certain democratic elements within that framework. For this reason, their extremism is often barely recognizable at first glance*.": Ibid. p. 221. Assessments from agencies from most other German states substantially concur.
As for Austria, the former Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz und Terrorismusbekämpfung (BVT) first publicly expressed its position in 2016 in a document filed with the court in Graz deciding on whether to grant political asylum to Ayman Ali's relatives. It stated that "*The Muslim Brotherhood is not institutionalized under this name in Austria; however, it characterizes the public depiction of Islam through its intellectual and personal strength. The Muslim Brotherhood does not maintain membership registers; its members are kept secret in all countries to protect them from being identified by the authorities*.": Landesverwaltungsgericht Steiermark: cases LVwG 70.8-3597/2015-34, LVwG 41.8-37/2016-34 and LVwG 41.8-39/2016-34, Graz, p. 15. September 9, 2016. Retrieved from: https://rdb.manz.at/document/ris.lvwg.LVWGT_ST_20160909_LVwG_70_8_3597_2015_00/formats/ris.lvwg.LVWGT_ST_20160909_LVwG_70_8_3597_2015_00.pdf (Last Access: October 25, 2022). The document continued assessing the Brotherhood's goals and compatibility with the Austrian state and society. "*The political system aimed for* [by the Muslim Brotherhood]," it argued, "*is reminiscent of a totalitarian system, which guarantees neither the sovereignty of people*

German and Austrian security services is a very negative one. Yet this information and analysis are at times challenged by those accused of being linked to the Brotherhood and doubted by various supposedly neutral stakeholders (politicians, journalists, church organizations, civil society activists…). In substance, there is no unanimity on the fact that the Muslim Brotherhood operates in the German-speaking world and, even assuming it does, through what organizations and activists and what its aims are.

This debate has very practical implications on a broad array of policy fields, from integration to security, from education to politics. For example, should the Brothers be allowed to run private schools? Should European governments partner with Brotherhood organizations, which often control a larger and better organized cadre of teachers than other Muslim organizations, to teach Islam in public schools? Should they be the partners of European governments in training and selecting chaplains for the prison system, the military, the police and other similar bodies? Should they receive public funding to conduct outreach, education and integration activities with the Muslim communities and the recent large numbers of refugees arrived from Muslim majority countries? Should they be made partners of a domestic counter-terrorism and counter-radicalization strategy?

These are just some of the many issues related to Islamists that European policymakers have been debating for decades and with even greater intensity over the last few years. Needless to say, the dynamics and the intensity of these debates change to some degree from country to country, as each has its own political, cultural, social, and legal peculiarities. Yet this debate is often characterized by a lack of knowledge on how the Brotherhood in Europe operates.

One way to partially obviate to this dynamic is to access the few individuals with direct, inside knowledge of the group who are willing to speak publicly. This study seeks to follow this path by publishing the extensive interviews with four high-profile individuals from the German-speaking world who for decades were active in Muslim Brotherhood circles. This is the first time a study of this kind has been done in the German-speaking world.[3]

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*nor the principles of freedom and equality*.": Ibid. p. 34. "*Such a fundamental position*," it continued, "*is incompatible with the legal and social norms of the Republic of Austria*.": Ibid. p. 11. It went in further detail, expressing its views on one of the core organizations of the Austrian Muslim Brotherhood milieu. "*The X Y Verein für Multikulturellen Brückenbau in Graz,*" it stated, "*is an association of the Muslim Brotherhood, in which it is allowed to spread only their ideology, which in its core contradicts the Western democratic understanding of coexistence, equality of men and women, the political order and the fundamental principles of the Constitution of the Republic of Austria*.": Ibid. p. 35. In its 2018 annual report the BVT provided further analysis, describing the Brotherhood in Austria as "*a network of associations and front organizations as well as, in its inner core, a hierarchically structured organization. Due to its perception of Islam as holistic system of society, it is school of life, cultural association, social idea and economic enterprise in one*." The report also noted "*in the past, there have been occasional individual cases of Salafi and Jihadi radicalization out of the environment of the Austrian Muslim Brotherhood*.": Bundesministerium Inneres, Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz und Terrorismusbekämpfung (2019): *Verfassungsschutzbericht 2018*, p. 16. Vienna. Retrieved from: http://www.bvt.gv.at/bmi_documents/2344.pdf (Accessed: October 24, 2022).

[3] For a study structured in a similar way, based on interviews with former members of the Muslim Brotherhood in Europe, see Vidino, Lorenzo (2020): *The Closed Circle: Joining and Leaving the Muslim Brotherhood in the West*. New York: Columbia University Press.

The interviews were conducted in person between December 2021 and June 2022, each of them lasting from a few hours to multiple days. The semi-structured interviews[4] were recorded and transcribed, and each interviewee consented to their names being used, a necessary condition set forth by the authors in order to guarantee transparency and full accountability. Given the length of the interviews, this report cannot include them in their entirety. Rather, the authors utilized the most relevant sections, making sure to provide the direct quotations and the correct contextualization within the interview. Parts of the interviews are accompanied by explanations and analyses that seek to help the reader's understanding of the interviewees' recollections.

The first interview was conducted with Mohammad al Shawaf, a long-time member of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood who was active in various countries. Most notably, in the 1980s he lived between Pakistan and Afghanistan, where he served as Abdallah Azzam's right hand man, as well as a member of Executive Committee of MAK (the *Maktab al Khadamāt*, Office of Services, the organization founded by Azzam and Osama bin Laden to recruit volunteers for Afghanistan), as head of MAK's Security Committee and as Director and Manging Editor of *Al Jihad*, the magazine Azzam used to mobilize *mujaheddin* for the Afghan cause. After years in Saudi Arabia, Al Shawaf moved to Germany in 2015, where he has since lived. In his interview, Al Shawaf spoke openly and proudly about his decades as a member of the Brotherhood in various countries, from his close relationship with Abdallah Azzam and Osama bin Laden to his more recent time in Germany.

The second interview is with Salah Eddine el Gafrawi, a very high-profile Islamic activist who moved to Germany from his native Egypt in 1986. While claiming to have never been a formal member of the Muslim Brotherhood, El Gafrawi occupied senior positions in a variety of organizations close to the movement both in Germany and internationally (most tellingly, he served as first secretary general of the Federation of Islamic Organisations in Europe/FIOE). In his interview, El Gafrawi describes his interactions with top Brotherhood members in Europe and why the continent served as the movement's "lungs." He also provided extensive information on FIOE's inner functioning in its early days, its strategy when it came to federating Islamic centers and organizations across Europe, its financing channels, its internal conflicts and several other aspects.

The third interview is with Samir Abullaban. Syrian born, Abullaban joined the Muslim Brotherhood in the late 1970s. In 1981 he moved to Vienna, where he has since been a resident. For decades, he was very active in the Austrian Muslim scene, serving in top positions in Brotherhood-adjacent organizations such as the Liga Kultur Verein. Since the beginning of the Syrian civil war, he has shifted his focus more on his native country, serving openly as a member of the political department of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and of the group's representatives

[4] All the interviews followed a similar structure, beginning with a detailed description of the interviewee's personal history, their involvement in Islamist activism. Then switching the focus of the interview towards their involvement and/or knowledge of the different structures or entities related –or belonging– to the Muslim Brotherhood in Europe, its local internal dynamics, its objectives, the reason for its secrecy, and its ties with other structures both at a European and an international level.

in Europe. In his interview, Abullaban spoke about many of the inner workings of the Muslim Brotherhood in Austria.

The fourth interview is with Amir Zaidan. Also Syrian-born, Zaidan does not claim to have been a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, unlike Al Shawaf and Abullaban. Yet during his forty years in Germany and Austria, Zaidan was very close to Muslim Brotherhood milieus. In his interview, Zaidan spoke about his knowledge of Muslim Brotherhood networks in both countries and expressed his concerns about the organization's ideology and aims.

The authors are fully aware that these testimonies do not provide the full picture of how the Brotherhood functions in the German-speaking world. Rather, the interviewees provide their own views and perspectives, which are inevitably inherently subjective and do not in any way represent the views of the authors or those of the Austrian Fund for the Documentation of Religiously Motivated Political Extremism. In addition, as for any interview, there are risks related to the difficulties any individual might have in recalling events and psychological processes that took place years, if not decades, earlier. Moreover, there are inevitable risks that the recollections might be partial, distorted, or even deliberately fabricated. All these concerns were not lost on the authors, who made an attempt to verify all information provided in the interviews, including an extensive process of documentation in different languages, a cross-reference verification process, and several external interviews and mail exchanges with third parties familiar with the topic.[5]

Despite these caveats, it is apparent that a micro-sociological analysis based on the testimonies of members of the Brotherhood or its larger milieu offers unique value. El Gafrawi, Al Shawaf, Abullaban and Zaidan provide a rare glimpse into an otherwise impenetrable movement and they constitute unparalleled sources of information over the inner workings, modus operandi, and ideology of a highly mysterious organization.

[5] For some literature on the use of interviews in scholarly work, see Edwards, Rosalind; Janet Holland (2013): *What Is Qualitative Interviewing?* Edited by Graham Crow. London: Bloomsbury Academic; Karnieli-Miller, Orit; Roni Strier; Liat Pessach (2009): "Power Relations in Qualitative Research". *Qualitative Health Research* 19 (2); Nunkoosing, Karl (2005): "The Problems with Interviews". *Qualitative Health Research,* 15 (5); Dawson, Lorne L.; Amarnath Amarasingam (2017): "Talking to Foreign Fighters: Insights into the Motivations for Hijrah to Syria and Iraq". *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism,* 40:3; Crouch, Mira; Heather McKenzie (2006): "The Logic of Small Samples in Interview-Based Qualitative Research". *Social Science Information* 45 (4); Matteson, Hirley M.; Yvonna S. Lincoln (2009): "Using Multiple Interviewers in Qualitative Research Studies, The Influence of Ethic of Care Behaviors in Research Interview Settings". *Qualitative Inquiry* 15 (4); Khalil, James (2017): "A Guide to Interviewing Terrorists and Violent Extremists". *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism,* 7.

## From the Afghan jihad to Germany: The life path of Mohammad al Shawaf, a senior member of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood

*Mohammad al Shawaf constitutes a perfect example of a senior member of the Muslim Brotherhood who has lived some of the movement's most intense vicissitudes in various countries and now lives in Europe. After joining the group in Syria, Al Shawaf lived in different countries before moving to Peshawar during the Afghan-Soviet war. Having occupied some of the most important positions in the Arab mujahidin support system, he describes his close interactions with founders of the global jihadist movement like Abdallah Azzam and Osama bin Laden, and the significant role played by members of the Brotherhood in their networks. In 2015, Al Shawaf moved to Germany, from where he remains engaged with the movement involved in Brotherhood activities worldwide. In his interview, he expressed his views on the Brotherhood's goals; its presence and tactics in Europe; the importance of secrecy for the organization; and various geopolitical events of the last few decades.*[6]

Mohammad Abdel Qader al Shawaf was born in the early 1950s in the Syrian city of Hama into a religious family. His father, an Islamic scholar, "*sympathized with the Muslim Brotherhood but never entered politics*." Yet it was his father who, according to Al Shawaf, "*took me to the Brothers when I was a kid*." "*He took me to shaykh Marwan Hadid*,"[7] recounts Al Shawaf, "*a very well-known Islamist member of the opposition in Syria, later considered a jihadist, which at that time was part of the Brotherhood and had not yet adopted jihadist positions. It was he who introduced me to the Muslim Brotherhood*."

Al Shawaf was in third grade when he first entered the Brotherhood's world. "*My first steps in the Brotherhood*," he fondly reminisces, "*were a great period, we studied the manhaj* [methodology] *of the Brotherhood, the books of* [Muslim Brotherhood founder] *Hassan al Banna, da'wa* [proselytism] *and its methods, the construction of the usra* [family, also the nuclear unit of the Brotherhood's pyramidal structure] *and society… everything*." Al Shawaf recalls those early steps with nostalgia: "*when I joined the Brotherhood I did it with eagerness and full of joy and enthusiasm. Becoming a soldier of the Brotherhood was for me a dream come true, an ambition I had pursued*."

Joining the Brotherhood is a complex and gradual process. Individuals who are selected as potential future members are slowly introduced to some preliminary aspects of the group's ideology and inner workings. They are also constantly tested so that senior members can gauge key skills of the aspiring Brothers, such as obedience and trustworthiness. Only at the end of

[6] The interview with Mohammad al Shawaf was conducted in Arabic by Sergio Altuna and Lorenzo Vidino in Germany in December 2021.
[7] Marwan Hadid (1934-1976), was the founder of the Fighting Vanguard, a violent offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria.

this complex process, which normally lasts between two to five years, is a person made an offer to formally join the group by swearing an oath (bayʿa).

Al Shawaf underwent this phase of his long life in the Brotherhood in the 1970s, just as Hafez al Assad had reached power in Syria. "*It was at that time that the seeds of the revolution began to flower*," recounts Al Shawaf. He describes how, as a young boy, he was assigned small tasks, such as making deliveries of documents between Brotherhood members or vandalizing Baath Party posters. Al Shawaf recounts the thrill felt at carrying out these activities but, he says, "*I was still very young and during that stage I could not yet participate in political issues*."

Soon Syrian authorities began to take notice of young Al Shawaf's activities and "*opened a security dossier*" on him. He was once briefly detained and another time managed to escape arrest. However, in 1975, as tensions in Syria increased, authorities arrested Marwan Hadid and other Brothers close to Al Shawaf. "*When these people were arrested*," he recounts, "*some of them mentioned my name, so I had to flee to Jordan*."

"*The Brothers helped me flee Syria*," he continues. "*I arrived in Amman and got in touch with some of the people I had met in previous Brotherhood's summer camps for the youth I had attended.*" In previous years, in fact, Al Shawaf had attended Brotherhood summer camps in Jordan. "*It was then that I met Abdallah Azzam, who was a professor at the time and lectured us.*" Al Shawaf speaks fondly of his first interactions with Azzam, then a budding Islamist scholar and soon to be one of the towering figures in the history of global jihadism, the man who spearheaded the mobilization of Arab volunteers to fight the Soviets in Afghanistan and who mentored Osama bin Laden.

"*Unlike other people*," reminisces Al Shawaf, "*I was like a friend to him. We had a particular relationship for a student and his professor. He remained my professor until the day of his martyrdom. I loved him and respected him very much. And he also loved me and respected me.*" The relationship with Azzam shaped the next decade of Al Shawaf's life and memories of the late Palestinian militant accompany him still to this day.

Al Shawaf's time in Jordan was short, as he soon relocated to Kuwait to live with his sister. While there, he worked odd jobs but kept "*in contact with the Brotherhood*." He then moved to Saudi Arabia to live with his uncle, eventually enrolling at the Arabic philology faculty of Al Imam University. It was during Al Shawaf's university days that the Syrian Brotherhood was involved in one of the bloodiest events in recent Middle Eastern history. In 1982, in fact, the Syrian regime bombarded the city of Hama, Al Shawaf's hometown, to quell an uprising led by the Muslim Brotherhood. Several thousand people (the exact number is contested) died during the brutal repression.

"*This is something that had a strong psychological impact on me*," confesses Al Shawaf. The events in Syria were a contributing factor in his decision to travel to Afghanistan during the summer break from university. The country had been invaded by the Soviet Union in December 1979 and in those early days of the conflict, scattered groups of Islamists from the Arab world

ventured inside Afghanistan to assess the conflict and, occasionally, fight. "*I traveled to Afghanistan for about a month and a half*," Al Shawaf recalls, "*there I visited Afghan mujahidin leaders Abdul Rasul Sayyaf,* [Gulbadin] *Hekmatyar… And we even arrived to Kabul. We had great determination and it was an eye-opening trip… A journey that was not without its dangers… Just to mention a 400,000 kg missile that fell very close to us*."

After this first trip to Afghanistan, Al Shawaf returned to Saudi Arabia, where he continued his studies. Upon graduation in 1985, he recalls, "*Shaykh Abdallah Azzam sent me a telegram. A friend who had studied with me went to Peshawar and shaykh Abdallah Azzam asked him about me. When he found out about me he sent me a telegram that said 'join us, you and your family, you can come with your wife and children, there is a place for you here, we need you'.*" Without thinking twice, Al Shawaf, his wife and three daughters moved to Peshawar, the Pakistani border city that served as a hub for foreign mujahidin entering Afghanistan.

Immediately upon arriving in Peshawar, Al Shawaf worked directly under Azzam at the *Maktab al Khadamat* (MAK),[8] the entity created by Azzam to raise funds, serve the various needs of Arab fighters traveling to Afghanistan, and to propagandize the jihad in the country. The importance of MAK in contemporary jihadism cannot be overemphasized, as Azzam's brainchild was the first entity to bring together jihadists from all over the world and create connections that lasted for decades to come. In particular, MAK was the embryo of what later became al Qaeda, as many of the terrorist group's founders had served in various positions within MAK or had close interactions with it.

Al Shawaf soon joined MAK's *Majlis al Shura* [Consultative Council] and Executive Committee. "*MAK's Majlis al Shura was heterogeneous,*" he explains, "*there were members of the Brotherhood among its components, but the Brotherhood had no power over the Majlis whatsoever. There were* [Majlis members] *from different currents of thought, they were elected by the people.*" "*However,*" Al Shawaf clarifies, "*in the Executive Committee there were only people whom the shaykh* [Azzam] *trusted. There was a Saudi, a Palestinian, a Jordanian… Shaykh Abdallah Azzam said I want Abu Ahmad, Abu al Qaaqa… He was not interested in our nationality or our passport. He said: 'I know him, I know his family, his relatives'* […]. *There were no strangers, in the Executive Committee there were only well-known people. All the important decisions were made by the Executive Committee, five people and shaykh Abdallah. And we met with the shaykh very often. This is how MAK's Executive Committee functioned.*"

Al Shawaf's main responsibility within MAK's Executive Committee was being in charge of the media, "*Al Jihad magazine to be precise*." The brainchild of Azzam, Al Jihad magazine was an Arabic-language monthly launched in December 1984. Aimed at raising awareness of the Afghan cause, by the end of the 80's, thousands of printed copies had been distributed worldwide. Al Shawaf's tasks included "*establishing relations with communication ministries throughout the Arab world, opening offices… I even traveled to the United States twice. We normally printed 120,000 copies* [of each issue of the magazine], *which is not little. Some of our patrons*

[8] *Maktab Khadamāt al Mujāhidīn al 'Arab*, also known in English as the Afghan Services Bureau.

*told us, 'print that many more, I'll pay'. But mailing was expensive, we couldn't print and ran out of budget to distribute them*."

"*My experience as Director and Managing Editor of al Jihad Magazine was very positive*," he continues. "*At first I wrote almost all the articles, then other brothers as good as me or better began to contribute* […]. *I chose many of those who collaborated with us, but we did not have a budget. Ahmad Muwaffaq Zidan was a student when he came, he was an assistant editor and that's why he accepted. Fadhel al Hadi Wazin was a university student* […]. *He ended up becoming one of the best of us, he surpassed the rest. He had carte blanche to choose the new pens.*" After working for *Asharq Al-Awsat* and *Al-Hayat*, Ahmad Muwaffaq Zidan ended up becoming *Al Jazeera* Pakistan bureau chief.[9] Fadhel al Hadi Wazin became a senior member of Hezb-e Islami and recently ran for vice presidency in the 2021 Afghanistan elections under the candidacy of veteran Afghan mujahidin leader Gulbadin Hekmatyar.

But Al Shawaf's role during his Afghan days was not limited to managing *Al Jihad* magazine. "*A fact that is unknown to this day*," he reveals, "*is that shaykh Abdallah Azzam entrusted me with the direction of the Security Committee. That is to say, I was in charge of the spies and the secret services that came from Arab countries*." "*I dedicated myself to discovering and uncovering who the spies were,*" he adds. "*My job consisted in analyzing and pointing at some people saying 'this is a spy for this or that country'* […]. *Sometimes they didn't believe me… I told them, I hope I'm wrong, but I always follow strict verification steps, and these are my conclusions. And very often, unfortunately, I was right. In fact, we came to discover inside the security committee an infiltrator who had been trained by the FBI.*" "*There were a lot of spies at that time*," Al Shawaf explains, "*a lot of Egyptians and a lot of Jordanians, who were the best.*" Al Shawaf claims that he refused to use violent means to uncover and punish spies. "*When interviewing them,*" he explains, "*I asked the suspects many things, a lot of questions* […] *and I would let time pass to see if what they told me was true, even with things such as with coffee or tobacco. Until I could expose their contradictions. And then I asked them, Why don't you confess? And they ended up confessing* […]."

Al Shawaf claims that his skills at uncovering spies derived from his personal inclination but was honed during his early days in the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria. "*All Islamist organizations have moles, including us,*" he explains. "*Retired or dissident* [military/intelligence] *officers that had embraced the Brotherhood's ideology gave us courses* [when we were young]. *The truth is that I ended up specializing, I like it very much. I've also read books about it. A close relative worked as an inspector at the* [Syrian] *Ministry of the Interior, in the Criminal Security Department, and I found a book of his entitled 'Detective's guide'. At that time, I was 13 years old and it is the book that most influenced my personality in this regard. You will not find it for sale, because it said 'Ministry of the Interior only'* […]. *It is a book that has many examples of how to make a criminal confess*."

"*I served as head of the Security Committee for about one year,*" he clarifies. "*After that I resigned from my responsibilities. But I was the first one to head the Committee: I was in charge of the*

[9] Muwaffaq Zidan, Ahmad. (2021): *Afghanistan's Long Summer, from Jihad to the Emirate* [ *صيف أفغانستان الطويل.. من الجهاد إلى الإمارة*]. Beirut Dar Al Banan for Publishing.

*planning, of the interrogations, and I did everything possible so that there were no mistakes.*" As most Arab fighters in Afghanistan, Al Shawaf adopted a *kunya*, or *nom de guerre*, to disguise his identity. *"Some of the kunyas I used were Abu Ahmad al Suri and Nidhal al Shihabi. I had to use many pseudonyms due to my activity. Although the best known is Abu Ahmad al Suri. Under that pseudonym, for example, I ran the Social Affairs Office to help families in Peshawar*."

As a senior member of the MAK, Al Shawaf got to know some of the figures that would later end up becoming some of the most prominent names of global jihadism. While serving as head of the Security Committee, Al Shawaf explains, "*one of my tasks was to prevent people from embracing extremist ideologies*." At that time Osama bin Laden was outlining the structure of a new organization of his own, Al Qaeda. "*Shaykh Abdallah Azzam put me in charge of a delegation and entrusted me to meet him* [bin Laden] *and convince him to abandon his idea*," narrates Al Shawaf. "*We met with him and I told him: 'our mission is to work for the Afghan cause. Any other activity that involves Arab countries and exceeds our goal is going to generate problems for us. So, if you are convinced* [of what you are doing]*, you must accept your responsibility'*." As per Al Shawaf memories, Bin Laden told him "*I accept my responsibility*." After that, "*he completely left MAK and ended up creating his organization* [Al Qaeda]. *That eased a bit the pressure on MAK.*"

"*When I felt that Bin Laden began to implement takfir,*[10] *I couldn't believe it. I only saw it once after he left the MAK*," Al Shawaf brings to mind. "*It was two months later, on the road to Peshawar. 'How are you Abu Abdullah?' I told him. But I don't like to keep things for myself and I told him again the same thing: 'if you lead an extremist organization it must not have any relationship with us'.*"

Bin Laden was not the only jihadist leader that Al Shawaf knew closely. Ayman al Zawahiri, Bin Laden's successor as leader of Al Qaeda and former Muslim Brotherhood member, is another prominent figure: "*He is an extremely intelligent person, a pioneer,"* Al Shawaf describes*.* "*I thought he was dead. To be honest, my manhaj is different from his*. *When I found out that Zawahiri had deviated, I didn't give it a second thought. I did not follow up on the issue.*"

Al Shawaf interacted also with many jihadist leaders who, unlike Bin Laden or Zawahiri, only visited Afghanistan for a short time. One of them was Omar Abderrahman, commonly known as The Blind Shaykh. Abderrahman was the leader of Al Jama'a al Islamiyya, the Egyptian terrorist organization of which Ayman al Zawahiri was also a part, and mastermind of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. "*Omar Abderrahman also visited us in Peshawar, he came to visit the magazine,*" Al Shawaf recalls, "*He is a person I like very much*." Al Shawaf, dedicated body and soul to promoting the Afghan cause, took advantage of the Egyptian cleric's presence in his offices: "*He* [Omar Abderrahman] *doesn't like photography, he considers it haram. I convinced him by saying: people respect you in the Arab world, you are an important person. Don't*

[10] The action or practice of declaring that a fellow Muslim guilty of apostasy and therefore an infidel. Since according to the traditional interpretations of sharia law the punishment for apostasy is the death penalty, starting in the mid to late 20th century some individuals and organizations began to apply *takfir* against those that they perceived as deviant in order to legitimize their actions against them.

*you think that if your photograph appeared in the magazine it would have a great impact for the Afghan cause? And he told me, 'you can take the picture'*."

The Afghan cause was indeed very dear to Al Shawaf, who embraced it with enormous enthusiasm: "*I was very excited when I arrived in Afghanistan. And I really wanted to serve the Afghan cause. I already followed what was happening in Afghanistan before traveling*." In fact, Al Shawaf ended up forging very close relationships with some of the most prominent Islamist figures of the country during the last decades. Among them, Borhanuddin Rabbani, founder of Jamiat-e-Islami, arguably one of the strongest Afghan mujahideen groups. Rabbani later became President of Afghanistan (1992-2001). "*My relationship with Borhanuddin Rabbani was very good, he even visited me at my place and I visited him at his* […]. *Although we ended up developing a good friendship, during some time he did not know that I belonged to the Brotherhood*."

It was, however, then mujahidin leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, later Prime Minister of Afghanistan, who inspired him the most. "*Hekmatyar's personality influenced me a lot. I love him, I support what he does,*" recounts Al Shawaf fondly. "*I once had breakfast with Hekmatyar, he was an austere person. We prayed the fajr*[11] *and had breakfast afterwards: unsweetened tea and bread. Nothing more. That was the meal of a commander who had 400,000 combatants under his command*." "*We prayed in his camp together with some 12,000-14,000 of his soldiers. He* [Hekmatyar] *served as imam. He was an exemplary leader, a frightening leader and a very tough one*." Such was Al Shawaf's captivation that he even weighted switching his allegiance: "*His personality fascinated me. If I didn't belong to the Muslim Brotherhood at that time, I would have certainly sworn allegiance to him immediately and I would have become one of his soldiers forever*. *I don't know if the Brotherhood would have allowed me had I asked for permission. In any case, Hekmatyar is considered part of the Islamic movement, a friend of the Brotherhood and close to the Brotherhood's ideology, much more than Sayyaf.*"

Nevertheless, Al Shawaf remained loyal to the Muslim Brotherhood, whose role in the Afghan cause was, according to him, quite pronounced. "*There was a strong Brotherhood presence in Afghanistan. Many of us* […]*: many Syrians, many Egyptians, quite a few North Africans… Also Jordanians. Well, not really Jordanians, they were Palestinians with Jordanian passports*. *Even the son of a Jordanian minister was with us, but I don't remember his name.*" According to him, "*the Brotherhood did not ask its members to go to Afghanistan; they left it to the free choice of each one. Shaykh Abdallah* [Azzam] *was the one who issued a fatwa on this, but it is a fatwa that does not represent the Brotherhood, but himself alone*."

"*We gathered as part of the international apparatus*," Al Shawaf continues, "*even Ahmad Mansour from Al Jazeera was with us, he was a friend*."[12] "*Some of the meetings were even attended by the Deputy* [General] *Guide* [of the Muslim Brotherhood] *and we used to discuss the*

[11] One of the five daily mandatory prayers in Islam, to be performed anytime starting from the moment of dawn, but not after sunrise.

[12] Ahmad Mansour is one of al Jazeera's best-known reporters, having worked at the Qatari TV station since 1997 and having hosted some of its most prominent shows.

*problems on the ground, the problems of the youth and so on* […]." Regarding the level of presence and organization of the Brotherhood, Al Shawaf also clarifies that "i*n Peshawar the international apparatus worked in an organized manner,*" and remembers, among other stories, "*a meeting attended by Mohammad Abderrahman Khalifa, Jordan's General Supervisor* [of the Brotherhood], *who also held the position of Egyptian Deputy Guide, so basically the Deputy Guide of the Brotherhood worldwide"* in which he "*foiled an operation that sought to create fitna* [within the Brotherhood members in Afghanistan], *by trying to portray shaykh Azzam as a leader that had remained in the past*."

Often overlooked, the Brotherhood's pronounced presence during the Afghan war is confirmed by another prominent member of the group who spent those years there (and whom Al Shawaf knows well): Kamal Helbawy. A member of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood since the early 1950s, Helbawy rose to the position of Shura Council member and opened the group's first official office in the West out of London, before leaving the group in 2012. The Brotherhood's first envoy to Afghanistan was, according to Helbawy, Kamal al Sananiri, a prominent Egyptian Brotherhood leader who was married to Sayyid Qutb's sister Aminah. During the first months of the Afghan conflict Sananiri reportedly traveled to the Arab Gulf to mobilize support for the cause. During a visit to Jeddah he met Azzam, who at the time had just obtained a post at Jeddah's King Abdul Aziz University after having been expelled from Jordan for his radical rhetoric. It was during this meeting that Sananiri convinced Azzam to travel to Afghanistan and, consequently, set in motion a chain of events whose consequences are still very much at play today.

Another of the high-ranking officials of the Brotherhood among the many that punctuate Al Shawaf's story of those days is Zaynab al Ghazali, the founder of the Muslim Women's Association and arguably the most important female icon of the Brotherhood, who "*visited us several times, and also visited Al Jihad* [magazine offices]." "*She* [Zaynab al Ghazali] *once invited shaykh Abdallah Azzam, Hekmatyar, Rabbani and Sayyaf to meet her at the Continental Hotel in Peshawar* […] *where she gave each one* [of the aforementioned Islamist leaders] *an envelope with a financial contribution and said: 'this is a contribution from the Muslim sisters of the Arab countries for defending the Islamic Umma*'." From the same meeting Al Shawaf also recalls how Zaynab al Ghazali shared with the group a vision she had had. "S*he approached Hekmatyar and said: 'Good tidings, I bring you good news: I had a vision in which you were riding a horse and you looked like Salahuddin al Ayubi',"* pointing to the role that Hekmatyar would have in the future leading Hezb-e Islami and the Afghan cause, all the while comparing him to famed medieval sultan Saladin.

In any case, the event that arguably most marked Al Shawaf, and the one that put an end to his days in Afghanistan, was the death of Azzam, which occurred on November 24, 1989, when a car bomb killed the Palestinian militant under mysterious circumstances. Being the head of the MAK security committee and well connected as a member of the Brotherhood, Al Shawaf provides a first-hand account of what remains the biggest murder mystery in the history of jihadism. "*When the conspiracy began* […] *we knew about the plan to expel the Arabs from Afghanistan*," he recounts, referring to an alleged consensus among various Western and Arab governments to have Arab mujahidin leave the Central Asian country. "*Abdelazziz Ali, one of the*

*Muslim Brotherhood's training senior officers as well as one of the leaders of the* [Muslim Brotherhood's] *secret apparatus since the time of Gamal Abdel Nasser came to Peshawar.*" "*Shaykh Abdallah, you have to gather the Shura*," he told Azzam, "*the decision has been made to eliminate the Arabs from Afghanistan, they are going to kill you*."

However, according to Al Shawaf's testimony, this was not the only notice he received. "*Even the Palestinian ambassador, with whom I was in close contact, sent us information* […], *since Azzam was Palestinian, telling us that they were going to kill him. That we should tell him to leave*." Nevertheless, after gathering the *Shura,* of which Al Shawaf was a member*,* Azzam, "*as if God had inspired him to utter that epitome he said 'this is our place, it is here we belong'. And so it was, he stayed there until his death. He remained while knowing that he would not return*."

According to Al Shawaf's account Azzam was not only convinced to stay, but he also planned to continue carrying out his tasks as usual, despite the warnings. "*I told Azzam, you need a security plan. I told him that Khomaini –whose manhaj we consider to be wrong– had managed to carry out his revolution through communication, with cassettes*." However, according to Al Shawaf's distressed testimony of the events, "*Azzam wanted to attend Friday prayers. How could I ensure his safety during Friday prayers?*" "*In Pakistan*," Al Shawaf explains, "*even if you have the intelligence services of a state, it is very easy to be assassinated."*

Contrary to most versions, which describe an explosive device placed beneath the pulpit from which Azzam was about to deliver sermon that failed to detonate, Al Shawaf claims that "*The first time they placed an explosive under the minbar it was discovered.*" The second attempt, however, "*they planted a mine on the road, on the only road to the mosque*. *He was with two of his children* [when it exploded]. *Everything happened near my house. I heard the noise of the explosion* […]."

Following Abdallah Azzam's assassination, after four years of carrying out tasks of the highest responsibility within the Afghan jihad, Al Shawaf returned to Saudi Arabia. "*I left basically due to the chaos that erupted after his death, because I don't like chaos. I like organized work*." Following Azzam's death, the Afghan Arabs and their return to their respective countries was under scrutiny by many intelligence and security agencies worldwide. "*The situation had changed and my conditions had worsened. It was not possible for me to remain in an organization at a time when several courts and several judges were refusing to grant* [Afghan] *nationality to members of the Muslim Brotherhood."* Al Shawaf had to pull his own strings to get his life back on track: "*I had to make some arrangements through my uncle, who called an Emir friend of his so he could facilitate my visa to return to Saudi Arabia*." Once in the kingdom he reactivated some of his contacts and continued orbiting in organizations and initiatives of the Brotherhood to the extent of his possibilities.

"*Upon my return to Saudi I worked for WAMY, where people already knew me from my previous time in Saudi Arabia*." That Al Shawaf would find a job at WAMY (World Assembly of Muslim Youth) is not surprising. Founded in 1972, WAMY was the result of the cooperation between the Saudi governments and some of the first Brothers who had escaped their countries of origin and settled in the oil-rich Gulf country. Kamal Helbawy, who served as WAMY's first executive

director, has openly recounted how it had been Tawfiq al Shawi, a member of the Brotherhood's founding committee whom Helbawy calls "*one of the great senior Brothers*" who had convinced King Faysal of Saudi Arabia that Saudi-funded, but largely Brotherhood-run and staffed organizations were the best vehicles to spread their ultra-conservative interpretation of Islam worldwide.[13] WAMY, together with the Muslim World League and other Saudi-based and Brotherhood-run entities for decades pumped millions of money to Islamist entities worldwide, including in the West. Tellingly, in the words of the Pew Research Center, "*Between the 1970s and 1990s, the European activities of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Muslim World League and the World Assembly of Muslim Youth became so intertwined that it was often difficult to tell them apart*."[14]

"*You know,"* confirms al Shawaf, *"WAMY is a purely Ikhwani organization. Saudi Arabia also takes advantage of this: it gains visibility and presence so it can advance its foreign agenda while the Brothers can advance their political goals, pursue da'wa, etc.* […] *I worked at WAMY for 2 years, both as director of the research department and as technical director*."

On the other hand, Al Shawaf had acquired debts during his years in Pakistan and "*the salary WAMY paid me was very low.*" His professional relocation in the kingdom was not easy considering his skills and his background, but he succeeded in finding a new professional niche. "*I was not allowed to continue practicing journalism in Saudi Arabia and I ended up working in education for ten or eleven years. During that time, I taught at the Al Hariri Schools* [Najd National Schools]*, where the elite of the country are trained. In fact, among others I was the teacher of the son of King Abdallah*." Years later, his professional life would take another turn and he ended up working in the private sector as a senior consultant in development.

Al Shawaf's time in Saudi Arabia came to an end in 2015. In the wake of the Arab Spring, in fact, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries took markedly anti-Brotherhood positions, a dynamic that personally affected Al Shawaf. "*I only have problems with Syria. Well, and with the* [United Arab] *Emirates, who help Syria. The Emirates asked Saudi Arabia to prevent me from entering the country. And since then I cannot enter.*" Al Shawaf then traveled to Germany, where he has since resided. "*They* [Emiratis and Saudis] *always wanted revenge on me and sent documents claiming that I was a terrorist. But the Germans are smart and did not give in* […] *although they kept me waiting for two and a half years to get my papers. Syria, of course, has always wanted revenge on me and sent documents claiming that I was a terrorist. Then I was granted asylum."*

"*Here in Germany I can find peace and retire,"* he continues. "*Here in Germany there is no problem and I have told* [the authorities] *that I am a Muslim Brother.*" According to his account, he has not done much on his part to integrate into the European structures of the Brotherhood. "*I can't start from scratch working with people I don't know. The old members know me and respect me* […]. "*But there is another reason why I have not contacted the organization* [in Europe]. *It is*

[13] Vidino, Lorenzo (2020): *The Closed Circle: Joining and Leaving the Muslim Brotherhood in the West*. New York: Columbia University Press.
[14] PEW Research Center – The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (2010): *Muslim Networks and Movements in Western Europe*. Pew Research Center. Available at: http://www.pewforum.org/2010/09/15/muslim-networks-and-movements-in-western-europe-muslim-world-league-and-world-assembly-of-muslim-youth/ (Accessed: August 28, 2022).

*the international apparatus that is implanted here* [in Europe], *with different nationalities integrated…*"

However, being currently based in Germany, he did visit Issam al Attar, second Supreme Guide of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood before going into exile in Germany and creating his own organization, the Islamic Vanguard. "*Issam al Attar is a great teacher, a thinker* […] *and* [his organization, the Islamic Vanguard] *operates from the Bilal Center in Aachen, although there are not many members. His organization is not as strong as it used to be." "When the Brotherhood* [in Syria] *changed supervisor, he and his disciples did not accept it. The organization was divided. Unfortunately, they are divisions that end up causing melting* [of the Syrian Brotherhood]." *"At the time Professor Issam al Attar created an organization after the split-up: but you know, these are Brothers and those are Brothers too*." "*When I last visited him some years ago I told him: 'you have to be a symbol'.*"

Al Shawaf also expressed various views about the role of the Muslim Brotherhood in Europe.[15] "*It is difficult to predict the future of the Brotherhood in Europe because of the contradiction in the policies of European countries and their lack of agreement on a specific policy towards Islam in general or the Brotherhood in particular. It is clear,"* he denounces, "*that in their real strategy European countries originally reject Islam, and they oppose it by fighting some organizations and demonizing them, and among these organizations there is the Brotherhood.*"

"*The presence of the Brotherhood in Europe is legitimate and normal, and it engages with legal organizations, and contributes to building the countries in which it works. However, from time to time some countries try to accuse them of terrorism or of supporting terrorism, arguing they may help orphan organizations in Palestine or putting forward its affiliations with Hamas or other organizations. As long as war is declared against the Brotherhood in Europe, they have the right to defend themselves within legal, media and other channels. I do not understand the reason for demonizing the Brotherhood in Europe, chasing its symbols, and trying to stigmatize the institutions to which some of their members belong, relating them with terrorism supporting. Due to the fact that Europe is governed by law, I believe that the Brotherhood will prevail: its records are clean and the war on them is, in my opinion, unjust and unjustified.*"

"*The Brotherhood*," he concludes, "*through the organizations with which they engage, calls Muslims in Europe to moderation* [Wassatiyya] *while adhering to their religion and fighting extremism and terrorism. As for* [European] *Muslims having knowledge of who their representatives in Europe are, I do not see it as important at all. The Brotherhood works with sincerity and silence and does not care about appearance. Perhaps they* [European Muslims] *do not want to know, because the media distorts their image* [that of the Brotherhood]. *The media is a strong power with the capacity to influence people. Therefore, I do not think the Brotherhood will deliberately act in public unless injustice disappears and justice is done and when they stop unfairly and aggressively defaming them*."

[15] Part of Al Shawaf's views on the Brotherhood in Europe was provided in an email exchange dated May 2022.

Throughout his life and after settling in Germany, Al Shawaf has always maintained close contact with his native Syria and the Islamist scene there, keeping his oath of allegiance with the local branch of the Brotherhood and continuing his activism from outside the country. According to the information that he himself shares on social networks, Al Shawaf continues his activism with the Syrian cause, participating in television programs as a member of the Syrian Human Rights Committee, "*one of the best organizations born from the da'wa of the Brotherhood,*" or leading demonstrations in Germany against the Bashar al Assad regime and foreign interference in Syria.

However, when the situation allowed it, in the early 2010s, "*my activities and involvement in the Syrian Revolution led me to travel to Syria and visit the liberated places for a week. There I visited different places and met with different brigades before returning to Saudi Arabia*." "*I could have remained there and utilized my knowledge for the cause*," claims Al Shawaf, "*but the reigning chaos made me drop the idea. The existing initiatives had mixed* [external] *allegiances and this is something that I would not have been able to deal with.*" Despite the frustration caused by the unfolding of events, he continues to closely follow everything that happens in Syria and remains in contact with people inside the country. "*It is no secret to anyone that I am a security man, a security man in the Islamic da'wa, a security man in the Muslim Brotherhood.*"

Even from afar, Al Shawaf closely continues to follow the evolution of the situation of the Syrian Brotherhood. "*In Syria, an issue over which there is an open debate right now is the name change of the Brotherhood. We're going to change it, it's over. It is not possible to continue like this. In Jordan they have already changed it. We have reached a point where it cannot be otherwise. And I have been one of those who has repeated it ad nauseam: change the name, change the name, change the name…*" In addition, he points at some examples he considers to be successful: "*now there is the 'Waad' party and it is a party of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Syrian Islamic Council also belongs to the Brotherhood. All this paid out of our pockets and established thanks to our effort so that in the end others who are not from the Brotherhood take it. Who founded The Syrian Human Rights Committee? The Brotherhood did. It is not a secret that this is one of the best organizations born from the da'wa of the Brotherhood* […]."

Al Shawaf is also keen to reflect to his life-long membership in the Muslim Brotherhood as a global organization. "*In order to contribute to the aims of my religion,*" he says, describing his thoughts from an early age, "*I must channel my efforts through an organization*. *I liked Hassan al Banna's manhaj, it influenced me a lot and I embraced it strongly. I fell in love with his da'wa.*" Having said that, Al Shawaf describes himself as an independent individual. "*I saw some differences* [between the different branches of the Brotherhood], *but I said to myself, I will be a soldier even if I become an unknown soldier.* [Throughout my life] *I have gone through different stages, from activism in university, to a stage in which I got close to Salafism –to Sufi Salafism to be more precise–, I also approached Tabligh later, and Hizb ut-Tahrir…*" However, "*my belief is that the Muslim community is not represented by the Muslim Brotherhood or any other organization alone; at this moment of history it is represented by the best men that can better serve the Umma* […]. *There are fanatics in every organization, I am not saying the Brotherhood is an exception* […] *but I serve my religion through the Muslim Brotherhood*."

Al Shawaf describes the Muslim Brotherhood as "*a da'wa (a call in this context) that aspires to lead. It's not about humble aspirations, no! There are those who say the Brotherhood is authoritarian and seeks power… Yes! Of course, they want power* […]*. Which political party does not aspire to attain power?*" However, Al Shawaf does not "*understand the exaggerated attention the Brotherhood gets and the permanent focus over it*. *Although if you want my opinion, it is because the Brotherhood is very strong, it works for the Umma, and if Islam triumphs it will be thanks to them* [the Brotherhood] *or to a similar organization.*" After years of militancy his convictions remain rock solid "*There is no doubt Islam is coming. What takes place now only serves to delay its* [Islam's] *arrival* [to the whole world]."

The proverbial secrecy that surrounds everything related to the organization is one of its key features, a relatively understandable aspect if we take into account most of the contexts in which it has historically developed its activity. Admission is highly selective and secretive, and those who are admitted to the position of full-fledged members take an oath of secrecy. Al Shawaf speaks frankly about it: "*the oath comes at a different time for each person. Always after having developed da'wa activities, politics…* […] *You must study and carry out certain activities and if you feel comfortable, you swear allegiance.*" "*All parties have secrets. But as far as the Brotherhood is concerned, from our very early childhood we have to keep in mind two important things: the secrecy of the organization and the openness of the da'wa*." This means, on the one hand, openly pursuing proselytizing efforts and, on the other hand, "*as far as the organization is concerned, keeping the structure secret. If the State has knowledge this can be troublesome.*"

However, according to Al Shawaf, "*the secrets are very few, such as the name of people who work with the group. If I know the names of some members, or if I am entrusted with certain information, I should not reveal them to prevent the Brothers from being arrested.*" "*The secrecy surrounding the Brotherhood has been exaggerated,*" he states before clarifying that "*here in Europe the members of the Brotherhood enter with another identity, using false names, but everyone knows that they are Brothers. But of course, if I am in Saudi Arabia, for example, I cannot say that I am a member of the Brotherhood because the Brotherhood is a terrorist organization*."

As far as he is concerned, "*the Brotherhood is entitled to have its own tactics. And at this moment in history, when everyone is playing their cards, they also have the right to play theirs* […]. *In my opinion, the Brotherhood does well* [in not exposing all of its reality, its organizational chart, its objectives…]. *If they revealed all their cards, they will be fought with violence and without mercy* […]. *In any case, if all that became public, the Brotherhood would change tactics or change its roadmap, I tell you in all honesty. The Brotherhood has thinkers, cadres… The Brotherhood has always been distinguished by* [the high level of education/training of] *its key members*."

The issue of secrecy becomes thorny when the conversation turns to the secrecy of the Brotherhood in the West. "*It is an issue of pragmatism, a matter of interests* […]. *If I told you that there are no Brotherhood networks in Europe, I would be lying to you. There are members of the Brotherhood everywhere, new organizations, and there is a will to prevent* [those networks] *from being infiltrated/bugged*." "*The most important difference between the Brotherhood in Arab countries and those in Europe or America is that organizations, such as CAIR (Council on American-Islamic*

*Relations), have many Brothers within them, but also individuals who are not part of the Brotherhood.*[…] *I see that the Brothers openly engage in different organizations and federations* [in the West], *organizations in which Brothers and non-Brothers enter alike*." The problem of the Brotherhood, according to Al Shawaf, arises "*from the many rumors that have been spread, people are afraid of the word Ikhwan* [Brothers]." In any case, he argues, *"the Brotherhood is the most powerful Islamist organization in the world; they are present everywhere under their name and under other names.*"

Providing further examples of this complex balance between secrecy and openness, Al Shawaf explains that "*It may happen that a political party close to the Brotherhood, convinced of the Brotherhood's work, ends up taking an oath of loyalty to the Brotherhood without making it public. And that because if they did so they will be confronted ruthlessly*.[…] *The bad image of the Muslim Brotherhood is an important reason to explain secrecy,*" he sentences, "*but all the European secret services know about the* [internal] *organization of the Brothers*." By now, it is widely known that the Brotherhood has forged and undone alliances with different actors throughout history. "*A country may take advantage of the Brotherhood for a certain time and collaborate in some way. But that does not mean that the Brotherhood is an agent*[16] *of this or that country*." Nevertheless, "*if we talk about the general image of the Brotherhood [in Europe], I do not consider it to be a secret organization. It is a very strong organization with presence all over the world that has to deal with infiltrations, betrayals…*"

In fact, provided Al Shawaf's professional background as well as the secrecy permeating everything related to the Brotherhood, infiltration appears as one of the main topics throughout the entire conversation. "*What can be done? If you are killing me, simply because you know I am from the Brotherhood… This is an international agreement against the Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood stands against the crusaders, the Brotherhood stands against Zionism, against Masonry* […] *The secret services of all the countries have succeeded in infiltrating the Brothers. Elements have entered and have taken the oath, and have even made progress in the organization*."

Throughout the interview, Al Shawaf expressed opinions on a broad range of geopolitical matters, often with conspiratorial overtones, with America and Israel playing a particularly prominent and negative role in his explanation of several modern historical events. For example, discussing his early days in Syria, he says "*When we were in Syria we thought that if Hafez al Assad fell the country would become an Islamic State, but we found out that America was ready to destroy the entire country before this happened. And, of course, nothing of what Bashar al Assad has done would have been possible without the green light from the United States*."

[16] The term used is *ʿamīl* [عميل], a highly pejorative term in Arabic that can also be translated as spy, an actor working on the collection of classified intelligence information, usually from another country.

## The Dawn of Institutionalized Islamism in Europe: FIOE's first steps through the account of Salah Eddine el Gafrawi its first secretary general

*Salah Eddine el Gafrawi is a very high profile Islamic activist who in 1986, shortly after moving to Germany from his native Egypt, became the first secretary general of the FIOE. This interview constitutes a unique testimony that contributes to shedding light not only on the foundation of the Brotherhood's umbrella federation in Europe, but also of its inner functioning during those first stages, its strategy when it came to federating Islamic centers and organizations across Europe, its financing channels, its internal conflicts and several other aspects. It should be noted that despite his important roles in Brotherhood-linked organizations Salah Eddine el Gafrawi categorically denies having ever been a member of the group.*[17]

Salah Eddine el Gafrawi was born in Rashid (Rosetta), a port city of the Nile Delta, in 1954. "*My father was a teacher, and I learnt from him to love my country, to love my beliefs, Islam, and also to build good contacts with everybody,*" narrates El Gafrawi recalling his childhood days. "*My father had good connections both among Muslims and Christians,*" a very useful set of soft skills that, as we shall see, El Gafrawi inherited.

The Six-Day War and the Yom Kippur War, a turbulent period in Egypt marked his younger years. "*When I was in secondary school, I signed up at the Socialist Youth Organization*," he recalls, "*in 1967 we thought that we were going to put Israel in the Mediterranean Sea*." "*Before the* [Six-Day] *War, when I was 16 or 17, we had already created a committed group of Muslims* […] *and we went to clean mosques, organize iftar meals during Ramadan*," making it clear that from a very young age he had a particular inclination for political and religious activism.

Following Nasser's era of repression, "*by 1970 the Muslim Brotherhood had adopted a defensive stance*." While the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt did not recover its legal status as an organization, Sadat's initial policies contributed to its re-emergence by gradually releasing imprisoned Brothers. During the mid-1970s "*members of the Brotherhood approached us and spoke regularly to members of our group* […]. *Nobody told us to become Ikhwan, but we ended up having good contacts among them*," asseverates El Gafrawi. In what constitutes a constant in his story, El Gafrawi distinctly distances himself from the Brotherhood, particularly those from the Brotherhood milieu that ended up embracing violence: "*Unfortunately, many of these students* [amnestied by Sadat] *found no one to guide them towards the right path and ended up making mistakes. Some began to talk about the Caliphate; others murdered some young soldiers just to take their weapons and try to impose Islam by force….*"

[17] The interview with Salah Eddine el Gafrawi was conducted in English, German and Arabic by Sergio Altuna and Lorenzo Vidino in Cairo (Egypt) in June 2022.

It was 1980 when El Gafrawi left his native Egypt for Munich. The Bavarian city plays an important role in the establishment of the Muslim Brotherhood in Europe. In the 1950s, in fact, Said Ramadan, Hassan al Banna's son-in-law and one of the most important pioneers of the Brotherhood in Europe, played a key role in the construction of a large mosque in Munich, one of Europe's first.[18] Since then, the Islamic Center of Munich (IZM) has become a key hub for the Brotherhood not just in Germany but worldwide. Tellingly three of the eight General Guides of the Egyptian Brotherhood have spent extensive time in Munich.[19]

Equally important in the history of the Brotherhood both in Germany and Europe is the role that the organization (in its various iterations: first Islamische Gemeinschaft Süddeutschland, then the Islamische Gemeinschaft Deutschland, IGD, and finally, in 2018, the Deutsche Muslimische Gemeinschaft, DMG) that first started out of the Munich mosque has come to occupy over time as the Brotherhood's main public organization in Germany.[20] German security services openly identify IGD/DMG as "*the largest and most influential organization of Muslim Brotherhood supporters in Germany*,"[21] "*the most important and central organization of supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood in Germany*"[22] or similar formulations, also assessing the name change from IGD to DMG as entirely nominal and inconsequential.[23]

El Gafrawi recounts that he was contacted by "*a friend of my brother who was working as a secretary or something like that in an Islamic center. The idea was to work there, so I got an invitation from the Islamic center in Munich*." At that time, he continues, "*I was not interested in living outside Egypt. They told me 'Stay for a couple of months or three and then return.' In the end I remained there for more than 30 years*."

It did not take long for El Gafrawi to start engaging actively in Islamic student activism. "*Only several weeks after arriving in the city*," without even knowing the language, he could be recognized among the activists that contributed to reconstituting the Islamic Students Organization in Germany. "*The organization had been formed in the 1960s and was no longer active. At that time, we received a letter from the Government* […]. *As per German laws, when an organization is not active it has to be closed and pay 2000 Deutschmarks. We thought we could transform the organization into something more dynamic and so we did*," he recapitulates proudly. "*We needed to be several people to avoid paying the 2000 marks. We reconstituted the organization*

[18] Johnson, Ian (2010): *A Mosque in Munich: Nazis, the CIA, and the Rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in the West*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin; Meining, Stefan (2019): *Zwischen Halbmond und Hakenkreuz*, ARD documentary; Filing of the Moscheebau Kommission, Munich Amtsgericht, March 29, 1960.
[19] Innenministerium des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen (2007): *Islamistische Organisationen in Nordrhein-Westfalen*, pp. 40–44. Retrieved from: https://e-pflicht.ub.uni-duesseldorf.de/download/pdf/7177?originalFilename=true (Accessed: October 25, 2022); Johnson, Ian (2008): "The Brotherhood's Westward Expansion". *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*.
[20] Ministerium für Inneres, Digitalisierung und Migration Baden-Württemberg: *Verfassungsschutzbericht 2018*. Retrieved from: https://im.baden-wuerttemberg.de/de/service/publikation/did/verfassungsschutzbericht-2018/ (Accessed: August 10, 2022).
[21] Ibid.
[22] Bundesministerium des Innern, für Bau und Heimat (2019): *Verfassungsschutzbericht 2019*. Berlin. Retrieved from: https://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/downloads/DE/publikationen/themen/sicherheit/vsb-2019-gesamt.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=5 (Accessed: August 10, 2022).
[23] Ibid.

*with Ahmad al Mahgari as the President and me as Secretary General. Other members were Ibrahim el Zayat's father* [of which, later]*, Farouq el Zayat, Abdelkader Rachidi and Mahmoud al Machaikh."*

"*Ahmad al Mahgari soon left and I became President*," marking the beginning of El Gafrawi's career as a top official in leading positions of different Islamist institutions in Europe. After a year and a half in Munich, in 1982, El Gafrawi moved to Frankfurt, "*that was the new address of the Islamic Students Organization*." By 1983, he was appointed chair of the board of directors of the Islamic Center in Frankfurt.

"*Later, when Ibrahim el Zayat grew up, he became Secretary General of the organization* [the Islamic Students Organization in Germany]*, and we organized many events together*." Born in 1968 in Marburg, Ibrahim el Zayat is a central figure in Muslim Brotherhood networks in Europe. He has occupied leadership positions in various German Brotherhood-linked organizations, including, most prominently, chair of IGD. He also held positions in entities of the pan-European structure of the Brotherhood, such as the Forum of European Muslim Youth and Student Organizations/FEMYSO (of which he was president from 1996 to 2002), the Europe Trust and the Institut Européen des Sciences Humaine/IESH.

El Zayat is married to Sabiha Erbakan, the niece of Turkish Islamism's godfather, Necmettin Erbakan, and the sister of Mehmet Sabri Erbakan, the former leader of Millî Görüş in Germany. El Zayat runs a successful real estate enterprise managing many of Millî Görüş' mosques, something that has led German media to dub him "*lord of the mosques*."[24] Hartwig Möller, the former head of the security services in North Rhine-Westphalia, has called El Zayat the "*spider in the web of Islamist organizations*" due to El Zayat's extensive connections.[25] El Zayat strongly denies being a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. In addition, he has sued some who accused him of being one. In April 2008, he was sentenced in absentia to 10 years in prison by an Egyptian military court, which had accused him of being an overseas leader of the Muslim Brotherhood.

El Gafrawi's connections in those days went well beyond Muslim Brotherhood milieus. "*During my time at the Islamic Students Organization I made very good contacts with a lot of universities and ambassadors. And that made some people, Ikhwan and not Ikhwan, angry*," chronicles El Gafrawi. "*Unlike me, a lot of these people were against the governments of their countries of origin and had trouble with them*." Looking back on those days, "*we had a lot of problems with Iran and with Iranians. Relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran were very bad*." It was a time of expansion of religious influence and Dr. Abdallah al Turki, then director at the University of al Imam Mohammad Ibn Saoud in Riyadh, later appointed General Secretary of the Muslim World

[24] Frangenberg, Helmut; Detlef Schmalenberg (2009): „El-Zayat, der Herr der Moscheen". *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger*, March 20, 2009.; "Islam and Europe: Ibrahim El-Zayyat Discusses the Future." *Islamism Digest*, Volume 3, Issue 2, February 2008, p. 16; Rasche, Uta (2007): „Spinne im Netz der Muslime in Deutschland: Die Macht des Ibrahim El Zayat". *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, May 11, 2007.

[25] Rasche, Uta (2007): „Spinne im Netz der Muslime in Deutschland: Die Macht des Ibrahim El Zayat". *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, May 11, 2007; Brandt, Andrea (2008): „Wendiger Weltmann". *Der Spiegel*, March 25, 2008; Frangenberg, Helmut; Detlef Schmalenberg (2009): „El-Zayat, der Herr der Moscheen". Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger, March 20, 2009.

League, travelled to Germany to meet El Gafrawi. Together with Dr. Al Turki "*we created the Islamisches Konzil, a very strong institution at that time as we had Millî Görüş together with us*." Sketching out the different Islamist initiatives in Germany at that time, he recounted, "*Serdar Musa Shalabi was with us, and this meant one part of the Turkish Verein. And I also had very good contacts with the Sulaymaniyah and with Issam al Attar's Islamic Vanguard, which controlled the Islamic Center in Aachen*." Issam al Attar is the historical leader of one of the main wings of the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, and has been based in Aachen since the 1970s. Other activists he was close to include Hasan Özdoğan and Nadeem Elyas, who in the past served as head of the Zentralrat der Muslime in Deutschland.

During his first years as head of the Islamic Council in Frankfurt "*we made very good contacts in Qatar, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia*," something that would later prove tantamount for the Brotherhood's structure in Europe. "*Since 1984 till when I left Germany, anybody travelling to these countries in seek of* [economic] *help to build a mosque had to take a recommendation letter from me*."

Despite these important roles in heading Brotherhood-linked organizations and helping them to obtain important funding from donors in the Gulf, he categorically denies having ever been a member of the group. "*You know, many people think I am a member of the Brotherhood*. *Do you know Abbas al Sissi?*" he asks. "*He is a member of the Brotherhood's Guidance Office* […] *and he is from Rashid, my hometown*." "*When Sadat was killed, he* [Abbas al Sissi] *was in Saudi Arabia with other members of the Brotherhood, then they all came to Germany as they couldn't return to Egypt*." After helping Abbas al Sissi find accommodation in Germany, El Gafrawi remembers in an anecdote, Al Sissi told some members of the Brotherhood in a meeting to "*leave Salah alone, he is like a free bird, nobody can catch him. Don't bother him, he is a very good and hard-working person. He has a lot of good contacts from which we can take advantage*." During Al Sissi's stay in Germany, until 1985, "*I was with him all the time: he knew nobody and we were both from Rashid. And because of that reason many people think I am a member of the Brotherhood*."

Despite categorically denying his membership in the Brotherhood, El Gafrawi's close relations to its upper echelons both in the Middle East and Europe is remarkable. Shortly after settling in Germany, in fact, El Gafrawi was already in contact with the historical leaders of the Brotherhood in the country. As seen, he occupied leadership positions in Munich and Frankfurt, but was also connected with the leadership of the Syrian branch of the Brotherhood in Europe, which historically has been based in the northwestern German town of Aachen. "*Few months after my arrival in Germany I went to visit Issam al Attar. Some members of the Muslim Brotherhood were angry due to my visit to al Attar* […]. *When I first came to Germany there was a problem among the Syrian Ikhwan, Aachen vs Munich*."

His contacts with top Brotherhood leaders were not limited to Germany. Shortly after arriving in Europe, in 1981 "*I attended the funeral of Nizar al Sabbagh in Granada, I took the plane and traveled to Granada. I had been in Europe for about a year or a year and a half*." Nizar Ahmad al Sabbagh was a Syrian national broadly recognized as the first representative of the Muslim

Brotherhood in Spain and a key figure in the institutionalization of the Brotherhood's presence in Spain.[26]

El Gafrawi's relationship with the Spanish Brotherhood in the early 1980s serves to explain his rapid rise to become FIOE General Secretary. Nizar Al Sabbagh was murdered in strange circumstances in 1981; another Syrian, Bahige Mulla Huech,[27] was his successor at the head of the Spanish Brotherhood. "*Bahige Mulla Huech was an extraordinary person. I learned everything I know from him; he was a member of the Syrian Brotherhood*." When they first met, in 1981, "*he had a more important position than mine*; *he was basically my role model, the mirror to look myself in, just like Nizar al Sabbagh*." El Gafrawi sentimentally remembers the figure of Mulla Huech, "*he was a different person, he was certainly a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, but he advocated openness, he had a very good relationship with the Spanish authorities and with the representatives of the Muslim community, both those who belonged to the Brotherhood and those who didn't*."

According to different biographies written by Brotherhood affiliated individuals, Dr. Mulla Huech led some of the debates and coordination meetings in different European countries that would crystallize in the founding of the Association of Muslim Students of Europe, the seed of the Federation of Islamic Organizations in Europe (FIOE).[28] "*Bahige Mulla Huech was supposed to be elected first FIOE's Secretary General*. *Along with Ahmed al Rawi and Al Mawlawi, he was one of the most committed individuals to the project*," he elaborates, "*he was the one who organized everything, the one who developed the ideas. Even ahead of Ahmed al Rawi, he was the person entirely responsible for the creation of FIOE*."

The two individuals El Gafrawi mentions as being instrumental in setting up FIOE are two of the most prominent leaders of the Brotherhood's pan-European structure. The first is Iraqi-born and UK-based since 1975, Ahmed al Rawi, who, like El Zayat, has occupied leadership positions in his country (having served as Chair of the Shura Council of the Muslim Association of Britain) and in Europe (director of Europe Trust and member of the European Council for Fatwa and Research). The second is the late Fayçal Mawlawi, who was the head of the Lebanese branch of the Muslim Brotherhood but was also for decades one of the most influential clerics of the European Brotherhood network and served as deputy chairman of the European Council for Fatwa and Research (ECFR).

"*We are talking*," continues El Gafrawi on Bahige Mulla Huech, "*about an individual with a privileged intellect* […]*. He was respected by European institutions* […] *and was also well known in*

[26] Al 'Aqil, Abdullah (2009): *About the Call and the Contemporary Islamic Movement* [*من أعلام الدعوة والحركة الإسلامية المعاصرة*]. Dar al-Bashir li-l-Nashr.

[27] Among other positions, Bahige Mulla Huech was a member of the World Supreme Council for Mosques of the Islamic World League, WAMY's representative in Europe and Secretary General of the European Council for Mosques.

[28] Dhuihi, Bassam (2015): "About the Life of the Deceased Dr. Bahige Mulla Huech" *[موجز عن حياة المرحوم د. بهيج ملا حويش]*. Sham Writers Association. Retrieved from: https://islam-syria.com/ar/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%83%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B7%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B9%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D9%87%D9%8A%D8%AC-%D9%85%D9%84%D8%A7-%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%B4/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AC%D9%85 (Accessed: August 10, 2022).

*the Gulf, which was very important."* Certainly a talented individual when it came to soft skills and diplomacy, Mulla Huech "*also had an unusually good relationship with Saudi Arabia, and in particular with Abdallah al Turki. With the Kuwaiti authorities his relationship was also excellent*. *Bahige Mulla Huech brokered and developed relations with all the embassies of the Gulf countries*." "*I learned from him and I followed his footsteps*," El Gafrawi proudly states.

El Gafrawi describes how in those years Europe played an important role for Middle Eastern branches of the Brotherhood as a place where their leaders could settle and avoid persecution in their home countries. "*One member of the Brotherhood once put it to me in the following terms: 'Europe for us is like our lungs'*," a place where the group could operate freely without the constraints it suffered in the Arab world. One of the main freedoms it enjoyed in Europe was the organizing of conferences in which Brotherhood leaders from various Arab countries could meet freely, something close to impossible in the Arab world. "*At that time the Brotherhood controlled many* [Islamic] *centers in Europe*, *so they could invite a lot of people* […]. *People like shaykh Youssef al Qaradawi, Ali Qaradaghi, Omar al Tilemseni, Moustafa Mashhour, Abdelmoutaal al Gabri, Mohammed Mahdi Akef… were invited on a regular basis*."

El Gafrawi also indicates that Germany was the place where leaders of various branches of the Muslim Brotherhood met to establish the International Apparatus. Uniting some of the top leaders of Brotherhood branches from several countries of the Arab world –but with the Egyptians always dominating it– the International Apparatus (or Organization) aimed at crafting a unified strategy for the movement, arbitrating internal conflicts, and dividing funds. The experiment failed, however. Travel bans and other security restrictions prevented members of the various branches from traveling freely and meeting regularly. Most importantly, the attempt to create a multinational organization failed because of the reluctance of all branches to accept the leading role the Egyptians had reserved for themselves. If the Egyptians had in mind a sort of Soviet-style 'Muslim Comintern,' with Cairo in place of Moscow, other branches and affiliates rejected the idea, opting for more decentralization.

Nevertheless, it is telling of the importance Europe played for the movement. According to El Gafrawi, the meeting to establish the International Apparatus took place in Germany, to be exact in Nuremberg in either 1982 or 1983. "*It is not a secret*," El Gafrawi asserts, "*Dr. Al Mahgari was based in Nuremberg."* El Gafrawi is referring to Mohamed Ali Al Mahgari, an Egyptian who arrived in Germany in 1954 and has since been one of the most visible Islamic activists in Nuremberg.[29] Al Mahgari has over the years occupied various leadership positions in the Islamisches Zentrum Nürnberg, the local affiliate of the Islamische Gemeinschaft in Deutschland, the organization German authorities dub as "*the largest and most influential organization of Muslim Brotherhood supporters in Germany*."[30]

As for FIOE, El Gafrawi recounts that Mulla Huech was going to be elected first Secretary General, "*but just before the name of FIOE was chosen officially, due to the conflicts that existed*

[29] Nordbayerischer Kurier Bayreuth: "Grenzen Müssen Nicht Sein." *Nordbayerischer Kurier Bayreuth,* March 6, 2001.
[30] For Al Mahgari's role, see Gründungsprotokoll of the Islamisches Zentrum Nürnberg, May 30, 1997. Copy in possession of the authors.

*within the Syrian Brotherhood, he was not chosen for the position."*[31] "*Ahmad al Rawi, shaykh Fayçal Mawlawi,* [prominent leader of the French Muslim Brotherhood milieu] *Ahmed Jaballah and others wanted to create FIOE no matter what. I don't know who, but somebody told them 'Take Salah el Gafrawi with you* [to replace Mulla Huech]*, he has good contacts, he can push this organization'*." El Gafrawi was 32 years old when "*Ahmad al Rawi and Fayçal Mawlawi came to me and said, 'we want you to be part of the project.' I became FIOE's first Secretary General in 1986*."

"*At that time there weren't too many Islamic centers in Europe*," El Gafrawi clarifies, "*and we also did not know which ones belonged to the Muslim Brotherhood, to the Salafist current, or to other sensibilities. We didn't talk about it and I didn't ask anyone if they were Ikhwan, Salafists, Tablighi…"* Regarding the accusations that point to FIOE as an organization of the Muslim Brotherhood, El Gafrawi states "*among the institutions that founded FIOE there were some members of the Brotherhood*, *but we worked together, and we created this Federation together*."

Delving deeper into FIOE's relation with the Muslim Brotherhood, he explained, "*Some people said this or that center belongs to the Brotherhood* […], *but I think this is wrong* […]. *A mosque hosts hundreds of people, each individual embracing a particular ideology… I can't really know who belongs to each current of thought*." "*So I can't say that FIOE belongs to the Brotherhood*," he affirms, "*I was Secretary General of the Federation and I have never belonged to the Brotherhood*." Digging into the very detail of it, he further clarified: "*the question of the Brotherhood is a question of ideology. Some belong to the organization and embrace everything it represents while others among us do not embrace the ideology but work within the framework of FIOE or other organizations*." "*There may be some members, maybe many, but not FIOE as such. Maybe some of its member associations, maybe even FIOE's board does belong to the Brotherhood, or shares its ideology. But FIOE has many members who have no relation to the Brotherhood*," he concluded.

As for labeling FIOE as a Brotherhood entity, "*I consider it as a big mistake when politicians describe some centers or federations like FIOE as part of a particular ideology. It is something that can also be counterproductive with respect to the objectives that are sought*." Further elucidating his stance, denomination seems to have a clear impact: "*I am personally against the use of the term 'political Islam'. These are people intending to achieve power in some countries using Islam as a tool*. *Whoever uses this term also seeks to fulfil some objectives, as it happened in Egypt after the revolution. The revolution brought together many sensitivities, but as soon as it was labeled as political Islam, everything broke to pieces*."

[31] The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood has undergone different processes of splitting, something that has had a toll among the Syrian members of the Brotherhood in Europe. Examples of this were the conflicts between Issam al Attar and Abdefattah Abu Guddah, second and third Supreme Guides of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood respectively, and later between Adnan Saadeddine and Hassan al Huwaidi. Following this last conflict, the International Apparatus had to intervene, siding with Hassan al Huwaidi. Bahige Mulla Huech was part of Saadeddine's wing in 1986.

Discussing FIOE's initial structure, "*when I was Secretary General, there was the student department, the education department, the finance department and the da'wa department, which was initially linked to the education department*." Over time both the organization's structure and its strategy evolved, "*later came the department of general relations when the strategy incorporated nuances and FIOE started opening towards the outside. When I left, the student department was changed to the youth department and the women's section was also created*."

El Gafrawi also sheds light on FIOE's efforts to develop other pan-European structures under its umbrella. "*Ibrahim el Zayat created FEMYSO in FIOE for the youth, but this happened when I had already left. I left and then he came. I had known him since 1980, when he was 11 years old or so* […]. *Before I left FIOE I had already told him* '*Come, we can work together at FIOE, it is a good organization, and we can build a better future together*'. *But he had refused*." "*Al Rawi was FIOE's president at that time* […]*, I think he is Ikhwan*." In media interviews, Al Rawi has denied being a member of the Brotherhood.[32]

As for the founding of the European Council for Fatwa and Research (ECFR), the Muslim Brotherhood dominated jurisprudential body created by FIOE and based in Dublin, initial funding came from the Al Maktoum Foundation, in particular from the late Shaykh Rashid Hamdan. Before creating ECFR "*Al Maktoum's Islamic Center in Dublin invited preachers many times, among them Youssef al Qaradawi, Bin Bayya, Fayçal al Mawlawi and some others from France like Jaballah*." Shaykh Hamdan was a very dear acquaintance of El Gafrawi "he *was open to everybody and didn't know anything about them being Ikhwan or not*. *When he heard about them, about Ahmad al Rawi, Nouh al Kaddo and the others, he heard only good things*." When the idea of creating a center to become a key reference for European Sunni Muslims by issuing collective fatwas had taken shape, "*Nouh al Kaddo was the director of Al Rawi's office at FIOE. Merza Sayegh* [the director of Shaykh Hamdan's office] *knew Al Kaddo was in London, so he was appointed chief executive at the Islamic Cultural Centre of Ireland*," the headquarters hosting ECFR premises.[33] However, "*since Shaykh Hamdan died* [in March 2021] *the relation changed and their funding was cut. The money that used to be there on January 1st was cut to half. Things were never again like they used to be*."

With regard to general functioning of the organization, "*FIOE unites all these national councils and federations and establishes the general policy to be followed. However, although there is collaboration between the parties based on the general policy, the member federations and national organizations enjoy full freedom to make their own decisions. During my time* [as Secretary General] *there was no guidance, since each country has different particularities*." Although now in most cases FIOE only recognizes one member organization per country, "*before it was not like that*," explains El Gafrawi, "*but so that overlaps did not occur FIOE sent guidelines to the different associations so that they could join together in order to have only one interlocutor or representative in each country*. […] *For example, in Germany there were several FIOE members at*

[32] Norfolk, Andrew (2015): "The money trail: from student digs to 'mothership of Islamism'". *The Times*, July 10, 2015. Retrieved from: http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/news/uk/article4493452.ece (Accessed: August 10, 2022).
[33] Al Kaddo would later become director of the Al Maktoum Foundation Ireland and has also served as FIOE's head of Planning and senior advisor for FIOE's Development Program, as well as director for the Europe Trust, the financial arm of the pan-European network.

*the beginning, such as the Islamic Organization of Southern Germany, the Islamic Organization of Germany and many other independent ones such as the Islamic Federation of Students, the Islamic Council, etc. They finally accepted to coalesce under the Islamic Council; all of them continued to exist and kept their name, but under a single representative who dispatched with the different representatives of the smaller entities*."

The relationship between FIOE and its national branches *"could start from both sides. When I was secretary, there were federations and organizations that came, considering our size, because we had funds and the possibility of making letters of recommendation to request funds in other places. For this reason, some small initiatives sought to belong to FIOE*," El Gafrawi clarified. "*But it also happened the other way around, there were organizations and federations that we approached* […] *because they were carrying out very interesting activities. When they came to request financial support, we told them that we could help them, but that there should be a certain level of collaboration between the parties and that they should become part of FIOE*."

"*Some countries such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait or the Emirates had envoys among FIOE board members*," El Gafrawi pursues. "*I, for example, served as an envoy for the Ministry of the Awqaf of Kuwait, and there were many of us who held similar positions, such as Ahmad al Rawi*." "*When FIOE was created, things became simpler since the recommendations to finance projects were centralized* […], *performing as a bridge to accredit the honorability of other institutions in order to receive funds to develop projects and initiatives*."

Continuing with his explanation of FIOE's role for channeling funds from the Arabian Peninsula, El Gafrawi explained that "*the countries that finance Islamic projects want it to be carried out in an orderly manner. If an unknown organization appears, it must make different trips to Gulf countries to seek financing; however, if it belongs to an institution like FIOE and FIOE endorses it, that confers the necessary trust*." El Gafrawi describes his role as indispensable for the proper functioning of the financial system: "*Since 1984 till when I left Germany* [in 2009]*, anybody travelling to these countries in seek of help to build a mosque had to take a recommendation letter from me."* Further articulating on the matter, he recounts that "*some people I knew* […] *when they went to Saudi Arabia or Qatar, they carried a lot of documents with them from* [Germany-based Syrian Brotherhood leader] *Issam al Attar and from other important people. But when they arrived they told them 'Where is the document from Salah Eddine el Gafrawi?'"*

"*Some of them even returned only to try to get a document from me*," he continues. "*They accepted my recommendation letters because I am a straightforward person* […] *I just describe what I see*. […] *So people who had been denied funding invited me to their centers to see if I could help them*," and so El Gafrawi travelled around Europe to oversee the activities and the functioning of centers seeking funding for their projects. "*Nobody really knew me, and so I could write my reports. Sometimes things were OK and I agreed to sign the recommendation letter, sometimes not*."

After having worked for 20 years in entities closely related to the Brotherhood both in Germany and at a European level, "*what I have heard from some members of the Brotherhood is that Europeans do not understand well what Islam is. They say that when we manage to explain to them*

*what Islam is and they understand it, they will all convert to Islam in the future. But it doesn't just work like that*," he considers. "*When trying to protect Muslims we should not try to change the creed of others or their type of government in their own countries. Some European officials think that any Islamic activity aims at altering the idiosyncrasies of their societies. That is why they have created an incorrect image of us*."

Further elaborating on the Brotherhood's secrecy surrounding all its enterprises in Europe, "*I have told this to a lot of people. Why are there still many* [members of the Brotherhood] *who prefer to work undercover?* […] *Ibrahim El Zayat even told me that he did not like Muslims mixing with members of the Brotherhood*." However, El Gafrawi says to hold to a different approach, "*When you carry out an activity that you are proud of and that you consider positive, you must do it openly*." "*I don't know why they* [members of the Brotherhood] *do it*," he sentences, "*I don't like to work in secret. I have never liked it and I have been involved in Islamic work since the 70's* [….]. *I always thought the same thing, if something has to be done in secret, it's probably not good*."

"*In 1996 I left FIOE,"* relates El Gafrawi, "*but I remained at the Islamic Council*." "*There were some Egyptian individuals in FIOE who belonged to the Brotherhood back then. They were critical of my performance and they started a campaign against me. Ibrahim el Zayat was not with them, but their names are not important. I left FIOE but I didn't leave the Center in Frankfurt*." The Brotherhood-led smearing campaign that pushed him to quit the general secretariat of the FIOE continued in Germany: "*there were about 80 Moroccans and only 10 Egyptians, and they turned the Moroccans against me* […], *they wanted to throw me out of the Islamic Center in Frankfurt and problems started to arise."* "*Ibrahim el Zayat appeared to advise me and said: 'You better leave, problems are about to start. I can get you a place in Millî Görüş in the Islamic Council'*."

Following El Zayat's advice, "*I took the position within the Millî Görüş-dominated Islamic Council in Frankfurt to continue his enterprise*. *You know, at that time Ibrahim el Zayat was married to Sabiha Erbakan, the daughter of Hassan Erbakan, the brother of* [Millî Görüş founder] *Necmettin Erbakan*. *Necmettin Erbakan liked me a lot and invited me to every event he could in Istanbul or elsewhere, also to Stadt Arena in Rotterdam or to Germany. He even told me to write a 10-minute speech addressing the necessities of the Turkish community*."

While still fully involved with the Islamist milieu in Germany, El Gafrawi continued working for the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY). With a staff largely dominated by Brotherhood members, WAMY was one of the main technically non-governmental organizations created by Saudi Arabia in the 1970s to spread its ultra-conservative interpretation of Islam through generous funds provided by Saudi government and wealthy Arab Gulf donors. "*I started working for WAMY in 1990, although after the first years my commitment decreased and I only held the title. WAMY was a very active organization in Europe*." El Gafrawi served as director of WAMY's office in Germany until 2001: "*We traveled to Saudi Arabia very often*," unfolds El Gafrawi, "*During the last years the director was Abdallah al Turki, with whom I have a very good relationship and who was also Minister of Awqaf. At that time the person in charge for Europe was Mustapha Othman Ismail, former foreign minister of Sudan*." "*They chose me because of my relationship*

*with Ahmed Totonji*. *At the time, problems arose between Ahmad Totonji and the Muslim Brotherhood. They were not able to reach agreements at a time Ikhwan were a big component of WAMY*." First UK and then US-based, Ahmed al Totonji is one of the most important pioneers of the Muslim Brotherhood in the West, having founded some of the first and largest Muslim organizations in America and having served as secretary general of the International Islamic Federation of Student Organizations.[34]

El Gafrawi also spent time in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the 1990s. In Bosnia, the Muslim Brotherhood succeeded in establishing NGOs that provided humanitarian services and, in some cases, provided support to fighters involved in the conflict that bloodied the country at the time. Most Brothers who operated in and around Bosnia during the war left after the conflict ended. Furthermore, the Brotherhood networks found allies in prominent local personalities, such as former president Alija Izetbegović and former and current Grand Muftis of the country, Mustafa Cerić[35] and Husein Kavazović[36] respectively, who also served as ECFR members.

A prominent player in the organizations set up by the Brotherhood during the Bosnian conflict was one of the most important figures of the Austrian Brotherhood milieu, Ayman Ali. Ali, former FIOE's vice chair and secretary general, also travelled to Bosnia in the 1990s allegedly to conduct charitable work during the Bosnian war (the charity he ran, the Albanian-based Taibah International Aid Agency was designated as a terrorist organization in 2004).[37] After the war, Ali settled in Graz in Austria, where he became the head of the al Nur mosque, which serves as the headquarters of the Liga Kultur Verein für Multikulturellen Brückenbau, one of the most prominent organizations of the Austrian Brotherhood milieu.[38]

"*Of course I know Ayman Ali*," recounts El Gafrawi, "*back in time I knew everybody in Austria: Jamal Morad, Aiman Morad, Zahar al Attassi, Hassan Moussa, Samir Abullaban* [also interviewed

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[34] Poston, Larry (1992): *Islamic Da'wah in the West*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 79; Interview with Yussuf Nada, Campione d'Italia, July 14, 2008; Mintz, John; Douglas Farah (2004): "In Search of Friends Among the Foes: U.S. Hopes to Work with Diverse Group". *The Washington Post*, September 11, 2004; Totonji, Ahmad (1976): "World Assembly of Muslim Youth". *Impact International*, October 22-November 11, 1976; IIFSO Conference: No Proclamations, No Self-Congratulations, Just Sharing of Experience, *Impact International*, 12-15 August, 1977.

[35] Globsec/Counter Extremism Project: *CEE Activities of the Muslim Brotherhood - Final Report: North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Conclusions for the Region*. Globsec National Security Programme. Pp. 13-14. Retrieved from: https://www.globsec.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/CEE-activities-of-the-Muslim-Brotherhood-Final-Report-1.pdf (Accessed: September 11, 2022).

[36] Shaykh Dr. Husein Kavazović profile as a member of the European Council for Fatwa and Research. The European Council for Fatwa and Research Official Website. Retrieved from: https://www.e-cfr.org/blog/2019/01/15/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%AE-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%83%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%AD%D8%B3%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%83%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B2%D9%88%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%AA%D8%B4/ (Accessed: September 11, 2022).

[37] Ali served as director of the Albanian-based Taibah International Aid Agency. In 2004, Taibah's Bosnian branch was designated as a terrorist organization, while local authorities raided the Albanian branch. Ali and the charity were thereafter accused of terrorism financing, but never formally charged. A German police report related to the investigation stated that "*the constellation of accounts, money flows and persons indicate that the accounts in Germany of Ibrahim El-Zayat and Ayman Sayed Ahmed Ali were used for carrying out fundamentalist Islamic activities in Europe*." As cited in Johnson, Ian: "How Islamic Group's Ties Reveal Europe's Challenge", *The Wall Street Journal*, December 29, 2005. Retrieved from: https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB113582317237133576 (Accessed: October 27, 2022).

[38] Vidino, Lorenzo; Sergio Altuna (2021): *The Muslim Brotherhood's Pan-European Structure*. Austrian Fund for the Documentation of Religiously Motivated Political Extremism (Documentation Centre Political Islam). Retrieved from: https://www.dokumentationsstelle.at/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Report_EU_Strukturen_final.pdf (Accessed: August 10, 2022).

for this study], *Mahmoud al Abiary*…." "*Once I met Ibrahim el Zayat during some weeks in Turkey and he told me that he was not happy with the fact that Ayman Ali and Issam el Haddad had joined the government in Egypt. He said: 'I would have preferred them to remain in Europe'*." In saying so, El Gafrawi is referring to the fact that Ali and Issam el Haddad, one of the co-founders of Islamic Relief in the UK, left Europe in the early days of the Arab Spring and eventually occupied senior positions in the Muslim Brotherhood government of Mohammed Mursi.

El Gafrawi remained a few years with *Millî Görüş*, "*till 9/11 when everything happened in America. Then I told them: 'I am not the right man for this time. I am not German, nor European.' I talked with everybody and told them: 'I need a rest.'* Shortly before, in 2000, El Gafrawi had been appointed adviser to the Al Maktoum Foundation in Europe. At that time, "*we were finishing the project of the Essalam Mosque* [in Rotterdam] *with Shaykh Hamdan*." "*Before everything was very easy, now it is the contrary. Before I could go and visit any shaykh, all of them wanted to speak to us, like shaykh Sultan al Qassimi, I met him many times, he even stayed with me for hours in his palace. We talked about Islam in Europe*." "*I also met King Salman when he was prince of Riyadh. When Dr. Al Turki was minister in Saudi Arabia, he told me he had organized a meeting between King Salman and me* […]. *When I was with Salman, he looked at me and said: 'I need Muslims like you not only in Europe, but all over the world'*."

"*I know well the ins and outs of diplomacy*," he says proudly "*I have always been invited to many conferences and meetings: ambassadors, commissions, groups*." "*I have met many people over the years, in my office I have some old pictures, not many, because I don't like them very much, but I have picture with Gaddafi, with Mohammed VI, Saddam Hussein, the president of Singapore, the president of Slovenia, the president of Croatia… It has been a very long journey. And I keep good relations with a lot of people* […] *And I still do not mind if they are from the Brotherhood, or if they are Salafist or else. I usually tell them: 'Islam in Europe must be European, it cannot come from outside'. I have told them many times: 'When Muslims in Europe are instrumentalized from abroad, this has a very negative impact for Islam and also for European countries. It is a personal conviction'*."

In 2009 Salah Eddine el Gafrawi resettled in his native Egypt from where he served as the representative of the Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization/ISESCO at the Arab League until 2019 after previously working ten years as General Coordinator for the Cultural Strategy in the West for the same organization.

# Samir Abullaban and the Muslim Brotherhood in Austria

*Samir Abullaban joined the Muslim Brotherhood as a student in his native Syria and then found asylum in Austria in 1981. He occupied leadership positions in various Austrian-based (Islamische Vereinigung in Österreich and Liga Kultur) and pan-European (FIOE) organizations that are close to the Brotherhood's line of thinking. In this interview, he talks about the role of FIOE, the difference between belonging to the Brotherhood in the Middle East and in Europe, secrecy over Brotherhood membership, and Operation Luxor. The interview ends with Abullaban's reflections on the situation in Syria.*[39]

Born in Homs, Syria, Samir Abullaban had his "*first contact with the Muslim Brotherhood in 1976, 1977,"* when *"still in high school."* He recounts that he then pledged allegiance to the group *"in the year 1978, I was in the second year of studying at the faculty of engineering in Aleppo*."

Abullaban argues that the pledge of allegiance (*bayʿa*) to the Muslim Brotherhood entails more than merely joining an organization. He carefully distinguishes between those who are part of the broader movement and those directly involved in its organizational leadership. Based on this distinction, he stresses that he had pledged a general allegiance to the Brotherhood while studying in Syria but renewed his pledge when he joined the Syrian Brotherhood's leadership some thirty years later, in the wake of the Arab Spring. "*Bayʿa with the Ikhwan is a sort of homage to serve Islam and not only an organizational aspect, and there are several steps. The first bayʿa is to serve Islam, I already did that in Syria, but the real bayʿa, joining the Muslim Brotherhood organizationally, I did that in the past ten years*."

In the late 1970s, Abullaban started engaging in demonstrations against Hafez al Assad's rule, a behavior that put him on the regime's radar and forced him to leave his home country and flee to Austria. *"Back then, we were* […] *going out on the streets, demonstrating against Assad, the Assad regime, and I was persecuted as a result. So, overnight I had to leave the country and I went to Austria.* [After that] *I did not have contact with the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria for more than thirty years*."

After coming to Austria, he argues that for "*the first 30 years it was quite calm* […] *here in Austria, meaning from 1981 to 2010*." In his early days in Austria, Abullaban, together with other Muslim Brotherhood activists from various Arab countries such as Mahmud al Abiary, played an active role in Islamist-leaning milieus in Vienna. Abullaban was in fact active since the early days of two prominent Austrian organizations, the Islamische Vereinigung Österreich (IVÖ) and the

[39] The interview with Samir Abullaban was conducted in German and English by Lorenzo Vidino in Vienna in December 2021.

Liga Kultur Verein. Both the IVÖ and the Liga Kultur actively disseminate the Brotherhood ideology, and the latter is also closely tied to the Brotherhood's international structures.[40] *"We* [meaning Abullaban and Al [Abiary] *were active here until* […] *1988, then he had to leave the country and moved to Great Britain. But for the first 6, 7 years, we were together within the Islamische Vereinigung Österreich and before that, there was another organization in Lindengasse*[41] […] *the Islamische Union. Then* [came] *the Islamische Vereinigung in Österreich, then the Liga Kultur*." It should be noted that Al Abiary, an Austrian citizen, currently occupies a prominent role in the Egyptian Brotherhood's milieu in London, one of the group's main hubs since the fall of the Mursi regime.[42]

For "*the first 30 years* [in Austria]*,"* explains Abullaban, *"I was islamically active within the Liga Kultur and the FIOE as an umbrella organization."* Abullaban, in fact, became one of the Austrian Muslim Brotherhood milieu's leading figures and served as the Liga Kultur's president. He stresses that the Liga Kultur was not organizationally bound to any specific Brotherhood branch from the Middle East but acts "*independently, it's Austrian.*" Abullaban explains that this autonomy is essential for the Liga Kultur as an organization: "*For the first 30 years, there was no* [consideration of] *the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, the Lebanese Muslim Brotherhood, nothing of that sort. There was* [only] *the Liga Kultur. Everybody who wanted to join was welcomed."*

Abullaban emphasizes that the relationship between various Brotherhood branches is comparable to socialist organizations that are part of the same ideological movement, often cooperate, but as organizations act independently: "*The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in Europe has as many good contacts to the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan as a German socialist with an Italian socialist. Sometimes they have the exact same interest, sometimes they completely clash. We have these problems. That is why we said from the beginning that we* [Brotherhood activists in Europe] *are autonomous, we do not need an organization like that for Europe and the Muslim*

[40] For more on the Liga Kultur, see Heinisch, Heiko; Lorenzo Vidino (2021): *Organisationen des politischen Islam und ihr Einfluss in Europa und Österreich*, Austrian Fund for the Documentation of Religiously Motivated Political Extremism (Documentation Centre Political Islam). Retrieved from: https://www.dokumentationsstelle.at/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Bericht_Strukturen_ES_Web.pdf (Accessed: August 26, 2022). The Islamische Vereinigung Österreich is another Muslim Brotherhood-influenced organization in Austria that had close personal and organizational ties to the Liga Kultur. However, the two organizations split up in 2014 due to financial conflicts: Austrian Fund for the Documentation of Religiously Motivated Political Extremism (Documentation Centre Political Islam) (2021): *Der Liga Kultur-Verein in Österreich*. Retrieved from: https://www.dokumentationsstelle.at/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Liga-Kultur_WEB.pdf, pp. 61-63. (Accessed: August 26, 2022).

[41] Abullaban probably refers to the Sahaba Moschee located at Lindengasse 1, which was formerly led by the Muslim Brotherhood leaning Sami Mahmoud, father of the latter Austrian ISIS member Mohamed Mahmoud, and which was eventually closed in 2012. For further information see: Schreiber, Dominik (2014): „Radikalisierung in Wiener Hinterzimmer-Moschee". *Kurier*. Retrieved from: https://kurier.at/chronik/wien/radikalisierung-in-wiener-hinterzimmer-moschee/95.850.817 (Accessed: August 26, 2022).

[42] His crucial role in the London cluster of the Brotherhood is confirmed not only by personal interviews conducted by the author with other senior Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood leaders, but also by corporate records revealing Al Abiary's direct involvement in various Brotherhood companies registered at London's Brotherhood official headquarters (he is listed as director of Nile Valley Trust and Alamat Media Services, both registered at 113 Cricklewood Broadway, London). For further information see Vidino, Lorenzo (2017): *The Muslim Brotherhood in Austria*. Program on Extremism, The George Washington University and Universität Wien. Retrieved from: https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/MB%20in%20Austria-%20Print.pdf (Accessed: August 26, 2022).

*Brotherhood* [organizations] *in the Arab countries are independent anyway, there is cooperation and that is it. But there is no interest in creating a Muslim Brotherhood in Europe*."

During his time as president of the Liga Kultur, Abullaban was also actively involved in the FIOE. "*For example,"* he explains, *"as president*[43] *of the Liga Kultur I was automatically a member of the shura council, meaning the parliament of the FIOE. And it* [FIOE] *has various institutions and organizations for specific tasks throughout Europe that you could join*." Abullaban describes the goal behind creating the FIOE in Europe as follows: "*The idea of the FIOE was that if Muslims on the continent did not organize, then they would not have any influence in Europe.*"

According to Abullaban, the relationship between the FIOE and the Liga Kultur was one of co-operative autonomy, stressing that the pan-European FIOE would respond to the specific needs for partner organizations at the local/national level: "*Every country acts autonomously, we consider what is suitable for us as Muslims in Austria and act accordingly, based on our interests. The FIOE should have the role that whenever Muslims in Austria need theoretical knowledge, how could we offer that? If Muslims, for example, in Italy, needed scholars, how could we provide them with that? So that we do not import scholars from Arab countries who are going to make mistakes for 3, 4, 5, or 6, years and then say: "Okay, I am sorry. I messed up. We have to reconsider this* [aspect]*." We wanted to save us this test; from the beginning on, we were considering what Muslims need. How can we integrate into society without creating ghettos?"*

Despite emphasizing the notion of independence, he clarifies that there is an ideological exchange between European Brotherhood milieus and Brotherhood branches in the Middle East, explaining that, for example, *"whenever we* [the Liga Kultur] *invited guests to Austria, we invited people from the Muslim Brotherhood, whenever we needed literature, books, anything*." Moreover, he stresses that "*it would be out of the question that the Liga Kultur invites a Salafi shaykh or somebody from Hizb ut-Tahrir*."

Abullaban argues that members of the Muslim Brotherhood in Europe are sometimes unwilling to talk openly about their relationship with the movement, fearing repercussions. In this regard, he references Syrian law No. 49,[44] which instituted the capital punishment for membership in the Brotherhood. "*In Syria,"* he elaborates, *"for example, if somebody says that he is Muslim Brotherhood, you know that law 49 from 1980? So we have imprisonment, capital punishment, and confiscation immediately. Who wants to have that? That is why people prefer to say we do not want anything to do with this. Until somebody trusts the system in Europe, it takes 10, 20, or 30 years. I came out* [openly about membership in the Muslim Brotherhood] *after 30 years; before that, I had to protect my family so that when my children would travel to Syria, they would be able to return and not be imprisoned. The problem is that when I tell someone that I am Muslim Brotherhood does that stay with that person? Or is it being transmitted from here in Austria to the intelligence services in our beautiful countries? That is the problem*."

[43] The German word used is "Obmann."

[44] Criminal Code of the Syrian Arab Republic, article no. 49/1, July 7, 1980, states in its first article that "*any individual belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood Movement is considered a criminal and will be sentenced to death*"

Abullaban identifies an ideological divide between the older generation of Brotherhood members and the younger ones, those born and raised in Europe. On one hand, Abullaban praises the Brotherhood's educational model and argues that it has been effective in passing on the organization's ideology in Europe: *"We have invited many to* [join] *usras,*[45] *they stayed with us for 5, 7 years* […] *and then left and got married and had children. Then after 10 or 20 years, they come back with their children and want us to proceed* [to educate the children] *in the same manner we did for them. In other words, they trust the Muslim Brotherhood mindset and want this way of thinking to be passed on to their children*."

At the same time, Abullaban also criticizes the younger generation for not having fully grasped the correct understanding of the Brotherhood's teachings. "*The goal is to have a unified understanding of Islam. After that* [is achieved]*, the problems will solve themselves. The young generation here in Europe does not work according to this pattern. They consider themselves European and they cannot understand the breadth*[46] *of this education. We* [the older Muslim Brotherhood generation] *are much too rigorous, much too slow, the younger generation wants to do many things faster* […]*. The best solution,* [however]*, will be always with the Muslim Brotherhood, because of its flexibility, broad horizon, understanding, and incorporating life here in Europe*."

Although Abullaban is skeptical of the youth's wish for quick action, he also stresses that they were correct in not admitting publicly their connections to the Muslim Brotherhood. He points in this regard to Operation Luxor, a series of raids carried out by Austrian authorities in November 2020 against more than thirty individuals accused of being linked to the Muslim Brotherhood. Abullaban is very critical of Operation Luxor, arguing that it was an unfair action that has profoundly changed how he perceives Austria. And to him, it has also been the proof that the younger generation was correct in being circumspect about displaying their Brotherhood connections. "*We always quarreled with them* [over this]*, but they were right,"* he says with a sad smile.

"*For example,"* he adds, *"*[Austrian activist and Operation Luxor target] *Farid* [Hafez] *studied all Islamic currents. For some time, he studied the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood but also that of Salafis, Hizb ut-Tahrir, and others. That somebody now comes and says: 'You are Muslim Brotherhood' – that is too much. But regarding the school of the Muslim Brotherhood, yes, I would say that is where he feels most comfortable.* [Why] *he* [Farid Hafez] *does not say anything about it now, I have no idea. However, the raids from 2020 demonstrated that the youth was right and our generation was wrong* […] *That they* [Austrian authorities] *used the Cobra* [Austrian police tactic unit] *to break into houses proved that the youth was more awake than we were."*

In any case, since the beginning of the revolution in Syria, Abullaban's energy has been almost exclusively focused on his country of origin. Abullaban stresses that he was not allowed to be

[45] Literally "family," it is the core unit of the Muslim Brotherhood, a small unit of generally less than ten members active at the local level. Plural form naturalized following the rules of the English language. The correct transliteration would be *usar* [أُسَر].
[46] Abullaban uses the German word "Intensität," which literally means intensity.

part of the organizational leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria while holding leadership positions in European Brotherhood-leaning institutions, which is why *"I left the FIOE to focus on Syria"* and "*I reactivated my contacts with the* [Syrian] *Muslim Brotherhood."*

He describes his current role as follows:

"*I am a member of the political department of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood* […]. *The political life in Syria has been completely destroyed; for 40, 50 years, the situation has been agitated, and we have forgotten how we can have a normal political life within the country. There are no real parties and there is no contact with the opposition. We have no idea how we can rebuild such a country. We currently have 300 parties in Syria, and nobody talks with each other. For us* [Muslim Brotherhood]*, the greatest task was how it is possible to act in concert and return to democratic life in Syria."* […] *"We were pretty successful in the beginning until Jabhat al Nusra and Al Qaeda appeared. At that point, it was not a popular revolution anymore, but heavy weaponry was delivered from various countries. Our opportunities ended at that point when the Syrians were pushed to the brink. After that, you could only hear the talk of the weapons."*

*"Without dialogue,"* he adds, *"you cannot solve such problems, and that is why dialogue is so important. We, the Muslim Brotherhood, have not opened up yet and also our mass media is not the best; media-wise, we are weak. And for 8 years we were hoping for help from the West* […] *We need strong democracies that assist us and the time is pressing*." "*We have been waiting, for example, for the revolution for 30 years. We* [the Muslim Brotherhood] *were 30 years too early*[47]*, but we always said that it does not have to continue like this. At some point, the people will become active; 30 years later, it took 30 days until the people moved. We live in a difficult region; there are many problems and political life is a stranger to us*."

With these political developments in Syria in mind, Abullaban argues that a closer relationship between the Brotherhood and the Austrian government would be desirable, so that Austria and other European countries could play a role in supporting the Brotherhood's role in post-revolutionary Syria. He describes the relationship with the Austrian government as follows: "*We were always invited to the Ramadan celebration by the president, the mayors, the foreign minister* […]. *But when, for example,* [Austrian-based activists close to the Muslim Brotherhood] *Aiman Morad or Jamal Morad*[48] *say 'I am the Muslim Brotherhood king' and that he has contacts, that is something, but a relationship between the Muslim Brotherhood and Austria is something*

[47] Abullaban is referring to the uprising against the Syrian regime started by the Muslim Brotherhood in the early 1980s.

[48] In early 2013, Jamal Morad gave a long interview to the Egyptian European television channel EgyUro TV. Possibly, because he gave the interview at a time where the Muslim Brotherhood was enjoying important successes in various countries during the early days of the Arab Spring, Morad answered the TV show's host, Manal Aboulela's questions about his role in the Muslim Brotherhood and the presence of the Brotherhood in Austria, all with remarkable candor and enthusiasm.
The interview was published in September 2021 and has since been taken offline. For an article on the public reaction to the interview's content, see: Redaktion Exxpress: „Interview über Muslimbrüder sorgt international für Aufsehen", *Exxpress,* July 23, 2021. Retrieved from: https://exxpress.at/exxpress-interview-ueber-muslimbrueder-sorgt-international-fuer-aufsehen/ (Accessed: August 26, 2022).

*else. Is it possible to change that? It would be desirable. How would it be possible to slowly create such a relationship?* […] *Without the help of the West, Syria cannot be a democratic country."*

## From proximity to animosity: Amir Zaidan's journey inside the German and Austrian Brotherhood milieus

*Born in Syria, Amir Zaidan moved to Germany in 1983 to pursue technical studies. While in Germany, he became involved in Islamic activism, becoming very close to organizations and top leaders of the German Muslim Brotherhood milieu. In 2003, he moved to Austria, where he taught Islam and became similarly involved in the local scene. While stating that he was never a member of the Brotherhood, despite accusations to the contrary from authorities, Zaidan acquired intimate knowledge of both the German and Austrian Brotherhood milieu and over the years has become their vocal critic, something that has caused him substantial legal troubles. In this interview, he describes his forty years of activism in Europe and puts forward his views on the Brotherhood in Germany and Austria.*[49]

Amir Zaidan was born on June 22, 1964, in *"Ruhayba, a small town north of Damascus."* He was born into *"a normal, religious family, middle-class, and I have seven siblings. My father prayed,* […] *but it was a very open family. My father, for example, had Christian friends; they were close friends and visited each other and were work colleagues*." Although he had a religious upbringing, studying "*Imam Ahmad* [Ibn Hanbal] *and Imam Schafi'i, I also smoked secretly at the beginning*."

Zaidan emphasizes that he "*was outstanding in school. When I graduated in 1982, I wanted to leave the country because in 1982 there were many problems in Syria with the Muslim Brotherhood in Hama.*[50] *But we did not have any information, but imprisonment, torture, and problems were ubiquitous; that is why I wanted to leave*." However, he stresses that his reasons for wanting to leave were not due to any political affiliation, nor did he ever become a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. Instead, he took advantage of an initiative of the Syrian International Atomic Energy Agency to send high-achieving Syrians with a scholarship abroad and was eventually selected to leave for Germany: "*I wanted to leave* […]*, but I do not have any political affiliation or something like that. They wanted to send people as scholarship holders* [to other countries] *because Assad said he wanted to create the atomic bomb. So I applied and was chosen from a group of 8 people because I had a high score in math, physics and chemistry* […]. *They eventually chose me and told me, 'You are going to Germany to study math'. And so I came to Germany in 1983 as a scholarship holder of the Syrian International Atomic Energy Agency*." Zaidan stresses "*of course, in 1983 they* [the Syrian government] *checked any Muslim Brotherhood affiliation* […] *but there was no problem. Otherwise, I would not have come* [to Germany]."

[49] The interview with Amir Zaidan was conducted in German and English by Lorenzo Vidino over multiple sessions in Vienna between October 2021 and April 2022.
[50] Zaidan is referring to the Muslim Brotherhood-led uprising that took place in that year in Hama and other cities and the subsequent brutal repression by the Syrian regime.

His first stay was in Heidelberg, a university town in southwest Germany. "*First I was in Heidelberg, then I learned German and I did the Studienkolleg-program*[51] *because they did not accept the Syrian high school diplomas* [as a higher education entrance qualification] *yet* […]. *Afterwards, I went to Karlsruhe to study math*."

During his time in Karlsruhe, Zaidan got to know various Muslim organizations active in Germany and gradually familiarized himself with the religious landscape. "*In Karlsruhe, there was a Turkish mosque from Millî Görüş. Back then, I did not know what Millî Görüş was. And there were two other groups who had meetings every Saturday. One of them was from the Islamisches Zentrum München* [IZM] *and another one was with the Islamisches Zentrum Aachen* [IZA]*."* As seen in the chapter dedicated to Salah Eddine el Gafrawi, since their foundations the IZM has been a major hub for the Egyptian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood and the IZA for the Syrian branch –an assessment that has been made consistently and publicly by German security services.

In the following years, Zaidan continued to familiarize himself with Germany's Islamic and Islamist scene. "*I was in Aachen, and I saw that those were the people of Issam al Attar who came from all over Syria, mostly Syrians, some Moroccans* […]. *I am not sure if the people know that that is a political thing* […] *and then I went to Munich, and I saw the other Syrians, from Aleppo and Homs. They were always divided. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood from Damascus were with Issam al Attar and the others from Aleppo and Homs were in Munich with the Egyptians* […]. *And in Munich, there were Egyptian and Tunisian Brotherhood members and those Syrians*." According to Zaidan, the IZM and the IZA were at odds with each other: "*They were against each other: on the one side was Aachen, Issam al Attar, who used to be a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, but they froze him out.* [On the other side] *schemed against him and in Munich were the members of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. I did not know this at the time, I had no background* [in these issues] *and these people fought intensely against each other. We came to this mosque* […] *and did not know what was going on and why these people fought against each other, insulted each other. It took a while until I understood* [what was going on]*, I was naive*."

After some time, Zaidan stopped studying math and dropped his scholarship, a decision for "*which I was sentenced to prison* [in Syria] *because I was a deserter*." Instead, he decided to go to Darmstadt, a mid-size city in the *Land* of Hessen, to study plastics engineering. However, his decision to change his field of studies also voided his resident permit, and the German government rejected an extension. Hence, Zaidan applied for asylum and told the German authorities "*that I cannot return to Syria because I am in danger. Moreover, I had been active in Munich, the people knew that I was active there. So if I go back to Syria I would be sentenced to death, even if I am not a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, simply on suspicion. So I applied for asylum and during the application, they asked me: Are you a member of the Muslim Brotherhood? And I told them: No, I am not a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. If I had said that I am a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, I would have gotten asylum, because all Muslim Brotherhood members got asylum* [in Germany]*. But I told them that I support their* [the Muslim Brotherhood's] *ideology,*

[51] A German studying admission program.

*meaning their ideas regarding the regime, because the question was why I am against the regime. I told them* [that I was against the regime] *because they kill and imprison people but also that I am not a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. That is why they rejected my asylum application and had ten years of continuous lawsuits until I was granted a humanitarian resident permit."*[52] Due to these statements and his close ties to organizations and members of the Muslim Brotherhood, Zaidan started to be monitored by German security services.[53] Revealingly, his application for the cancellation of his data from the intelligence service in Hessen was, according to official records, rejected due to his "*many close contacts to Muslim Brotherhood members in Germany as well as other countries, especially his contact to leading personnel of the Muslim Brotherhood*."[54]

In Darmstadt, Zaidan became active with the Muslim Student Association in Germany (Muslim Studenten Vereinigung in Deutschland/MSV), an organization ideologically close to the Muslim Brotherhood where many future leaders of the German Brotherhood milieu have historically occupied leadership positions in their youth. During his studies and involvement with the MSV, Zaidan got to know and worked closely with the abovementioned Ibrahim el Zayat, whom German authorities identify as a key player in the German Brotherhood milieu. "*During my studies in Darmstadt, I got to know Ibrahim el Zayat because El Zayat* […] *studied economics at the university. He lived in Marburg but studied in Darmstadt. I got to know him because of the Muslim Student Association in Darmstadt, which, for example, organized halal food in the university canteen, organized praying rooms, so no political activities. And Ibrahim El Zayat was not a Muslim Brotherhood member. Nobody talked about Muslim Brotherhood* […]. *In the MSV there was no ideology, and I was active there. In 1990 I think El Zayat became the leader of the MSV and I was part of the board*."

Because of his uncertain legal status, being a student, and having to support his growing family, Zaidan found himself in a financially difficult situation and was forced to find work. He moved to Frankfurt, where he met Salah Eddine el Gafrawi, then general secretary of the FIOE (also interviewed for this study). "*I was almost finished with studying plastics technology* […] *and I had to work* […] *this was in 1992 and I moved to Frankfurt. In Frankfurt, I lived in the same street as Salah Eddine el Gafrawi. Gafrawi was general secretary of the FIOE, the Muslim Brotherhood, but I, of course, did not know what the FIOE was* […]. *So I got to know him* [Gafrawi]*, I had to work* […] *and he could not drive, he did not have a driver's license. Then he told me: You have a driver's license, a car and, as student, time: can you sometimes drive me places?* […]. *I told myself it's a favor among neighbors and a job* […]. *But there never was any talk about the Muslim Brotherhood*." According to Zaidan, in those years he got to intimately know the El Zayat family and their relationship to members of the European Muslim Brotherhood milieu, such as Kamal

[52] The legal institution of Humanitäres Bleiberecht grants people a temporary residence permit, although they do not have an official legal status within the country and do not fulfill the criteria for asylum or subsidiary protection status.
[53] Verwaltungsgericht Wiesbaden [Wiesbaden Administrative Court]: file number 6 E 2129/04, September 14, 2005. Retrieved from: https://web.archive.org/web/20071130230852/http://web2.justiz.hessen.de/migration/rechtsp.nsf/4dd04a17de79c763c1257249004a7703/5df5a83d12cd8accc12572e50036d49a?OpenDocument (Accessed: August 26, 2022).
[54] Ibid.

Helbawy, a long-time leader of the Egyptian Brotherhood who opened the group's only (and short-lived) public office in London in the 1990s.

"*Ibrahim el Zayat and Gafrawi knew each other through El Zayat's father, Farouq el Zayat. He* [Farouq el Zayat] *was blind and came to Germany at the beginning of the 1960s and married a German woman. I know the family well because I visited them often, they include: Ibrahim, Yassir, Bilal, Muhammad, these are the four boys, and two girls, Amena and Manal. Manal married the son of Helbawy* […] *Amena I knew very well* […] *when she married she was over 30, around 2003-2004 and I knew her since the 1990s*." Amena el Zayat is currently married to Ammar Shakir (and therefore goes by Amena Shakir) and lives in Austria, where for years she headed the Islamische Religionspädagogische Akademie (IRPA). Before moving to Austria, she was involved in several organizations in Germany, including the Muslim Youth in Germany (Muslimische Jugend in Deutschland/MJD) and the German-Islamic school (Deutsch-Islamische Schule) in Munich, which was affiliated with the IZM.[55] The school was closed in 2005 by German authorities for teachings that went against the German constitution.[56] Amena Shakir subsequently led the IRPA (of which later) from 2009 to 2016.[57]

"*By 1993,"* continues Zaidan, *"I no longer worked with El Zayat because he had ended his studies and moved to Cologne and then married Sabiha Erbakan. I stayed in Frankfurt, and we did not have much to do with each other*."

It was at that time that Gafrawi raised the idea to Zaidan to enroll in the European Institute for Human Sciences (IESH, from its French name Institut Européen des Sciences Humaines). Located in a castle in the bucolic Bourgogne-Franche-Comté region of France and purchased by the Union des Organisations Islamiques de France/UOIF, the main organization of the French Brotherhood milieu, since its foundation in 1992 IESH has been the European Brotherhood network's main centre of higher learning.[58] "*One day,"* recounts Zaidan, *"he told me there is a faculty in France, Château-Chinon. I thought that this would be a great thing; I will study there in distance learning and work, so that I have a degree and so I started studying there* […]. *And they sent books, and there was a center in Munich where I could hold the exams, but I was never in Château-Chinon,* [only] *distance learning. But other people were studying there* […]. *After four years, the graduation certificate was sent, because I did not have a passport and could not travel* […] *in 1994*." According to Zaidan, IESH's study program included "*normal courses: Islam, Quran, Hadith, history… But the Muslim Brotherhood was not a topic, no word about the Brotherhood*." Since he was studying from abroad, Zaidan did not have the opportunity to meet leading IESH figures, such as its director Ahmed Jaballah. "*I met Jaballah later here in Vienna. He came to the imam conference*." After finishing his studies in IESH, Zaidan "*did my masters in*

[55] Op. Cit. Heinisch, Heiko; Lorenzo Vidino (2021), p. 23.
[56] Maier-Albang, Monika; Jan Bielicki (2010): „Ein Tarnverein für modernen Islamismus". *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. Retrieved from: https://www.sueddeutsche.de/muenchen/freimann-ein-tarnverein-fuer-modernen-islamismus-1.858651 (Accessed: August 26, 2022).
[57] Op. Cit. Heinisch, Heiko; Lorenzo Vidino (2021), p. 23.
[58] Vidino, Lorenzo; Sergio Altuna (2021): *The Muslim Brotherhood's Pan-European Structure*. Austrian Fund for the Documentation of Religiously Motivated Political Extremism (Documentation Centre Political Islam), pp. 85-97. Retrieved from: https://www.dokumentationsstelle.at/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Report_EU_Strukturen_final.pdf (Accessed: August 10, 2022).

*Hayderabad* […] *in Quran-interpretation* […]. *In 2016, I did my doctoral thesis in Novi Pazar, Serbia*."

During his studies at IESH, Zaidan created the "*Islamic Working group Hessen to try to bring together the Muslim organizations so that we can have religious education in schools. My idea was to teach the things that I am writing in German. And I started immediately and because I knew that we Muslims could not do this on our own, I contracted Dr. Miksch from Germany, who also created the Abrahamic Forum* […] *and we created the Islamischer Arbeitskreis* […] *and we started holding meetings* […]. *But I saw how the Muslim Brotherhood* [in both Munich and Aachen] *were working against me in the background*."

After his father died, Zaidan started thinking more about religion and realized that "*in German, there is a lack of many things, there is no book on hadith science, no book about uṣūl al fiqh, no book about fiqh, praying, fasting. There was almost nothing available in 1994, so I thought I would write these books. And that was the original idea* […]*."* He started writing the first book of his Islamic Encyclopedia*: "That is how it started with the Islamic books, and in 1996 I published the first book, 'Introduction to prayer, fasting'. That was the first book in German on this issue, Fiqh al Ibādāt* […] *At this time, when the book was published, who saw it? Ahmad Khalifa from the Islamisches Zentrum München. He did not even say congrats,* [but] *I saw how angry he was. Because the people knew that I was a critic of the Muslim Brotherhood, I am not one of them*."

Zaidan was eager to continue his activities in providing religious education but claims that once the CDU won the state elections and Robert Koch became Minister-President, there was no longer interest in his teaching initiatives. "*The SPD in Hessen was thrilled; they said that they supported me* […]*. Unfortunately, in 2000, the SPD lost when we wanted to do the project. And, unfortunately, the CDU* [came to power], [Robert] *Koch came* […]*, and he hated me* […]*. And I tried to contact some of my friends from the CDU and then they went against me. They saw that I would continue and they wanted to stop the project and destroy my reputation."* According to Zaidan, CDU operatives tried to undermine him by inventing a fatwa under his name, according to which a woman may not travel more than 81 kilometers without a male guardian –the distance a camel can cover in a day. *"So they invented this thing with the Camel-Fatwa* […]*. That was not the opinion of Amir Zaidan* […]*, so they brought this to the media that I am a sexist and extremist so that they can destroy my reputation and they succeeded in fact and then they also said that I am a Muslim Brother. If I were a Muslim Brother, then I would have gotten asylum in 1989, I would have received citizenship because all Muslim Brotherhood members are German citizens*."

According to Zaidan, the German Muslim Brotherhood milieu was also going against him because of his increasing influence within institutions providing Islamic education in Germany: *"And then I saw the Muslim Brotherhood started* [to work against me]*, especially those from Aachen, they started to agitate against me. Because Zentralrat der Muslime controls all Islamic activities in Germany* […]*. And they went to the Catholic Church and the Evangelic Church and told them 'Amir Zaidan is an extremist, do not work with him.'"* Zaidan argues "*in Germany, they started to cause increasing problems* […] *and I decided to go to Austria*."

In 2002, Zaidan applied for a job at the Islamic Academy for Religious Education (Islamische Religionspädagogische Akademie/IRPA), founded in 1998 as a part of the Islamische Glaubensgemeinschaft in Österreich (IGGÖ). During his interview, he got to know Jamal Morad and Aiman Morad. They both held leading positions within the IGGÖ in the early 2000s, with Jamal Morad also being the former financial director of the IRPA. "*I came in 2002,"* explains Zaidan, *"and they had the IRPA* […] *and they had an open position for which I applied. And I came for the job interview in September 2002* […] *and I got to know Jamal Morad and Aiman Morad because both of them were in the Glaubensgemeinschaft* (IGGÖ), *in the high-council* (Oberster Rat) *and Ayman Morad was an employee in IRPA* […] *and Jamal is a self-declared Muslim Brotherhood member. I saw that Schakfeh was not a member of the Muslim Brotherhood* […] *but Morad was* […]. *I knew back then –because he said so."* Indeed Jamal Morad openly professed his membership in the Brotherhood in a 2013 Egyptian TV program.[59]

After the interview, in 2003 Zaidan was appointed department manager at IRPA. At that point, Zaidan also came in contact with central institutions of the Austrian Muslim Brotherhood milieu: "*And when I came from the IRPA, I also got to know the Liga Kultur, and that was new to me, and all of them told me that this is where the Muslim Brotherhood meets and it belongs to them. Moreover, I also saw Samir Abullaban there because they invited us to iftar. For example, I even taught some religious teachers who were active in the Liga Kultur. Aiman Morad also invited me to public events in the Liga Kultur*." Yet, Zaidan stresses "*it was known that they* [meaning the Liga Kultur] *are Muslim Brothers and that is why I was very reserved with them*."

According to Zaidan, he quickly identified various structural problems within the Austrian system for teaching Islam. Chiefly among them, he realized that members of the Muslim Youth Austria (Muslimische Jugend Österreich/MJÖ) played an important role in the educational efforts. *"In 2003, 2004,"* elaborates Zaidan to explain his concerns about the role of MJÖ leaders in teaching at IRPA, *"I started to realize that there are many religious teachers from MJÖ* […]. *Ammar Shakir was there, Farid Hafez, all of them were religious teachers. And I told Schakfeh, president of the Glaubensgemeinschaft back then, I told him that I would make the additional education compulsory because I told him that none of these people are educated in Islamic studies. Normally I teach the additional education program for people who already have an education, but what can you do if people do not have an education at all? I saw that, for example, Farid Hafez, what sort of education does he have in Islamic studies? Or Ammar Shakir, Abdullah Osman?"*

"*So I told Schakfeh* [the president of the IGGÖ] *that I will establish an institute for teachers training. He was against the idea* […]. *But I prepared everything and created the IRPI, the Islamic Religious-Pedagogic Institute (Islamische Religionspädagogische Institut/IRPI), and became the director and I left my post as a department manager in the IRPA, but I continued teaching there. All in German* […]. *So I started doing all of the advanced training courses for ten years and in the*

[59] In early 2013, Jamal Morad gave a long interview to the Egyptian European television channel EgyUro TV. Possibly because he gave the interview at a time where the Muslim Brotherhood was enjoying important successes in various countries during the early days of the Arab Spring, Morad answered the TV show's host, Manal Aboulela's questions about his role in the Muslim Brotherhood and the presence of the Brotherhood in Austria, all with remarkable candor and enthusiasm.

*end, I said to myself that it does not make sense, because we are educating people but they do not have* [studied] *a correct curricula, no books, those are no teachers* […]. *After ten years, I did not want anymore. But in 2010 Schakfeh left and instead Fuat Sanaç* [became president of the IGGÖ]*, and then it really clashed. They deregistered me in 2013, not even fired me or kicked me out."*

During this time inside the structurea and even more intensely afterwards, Zaidan has been an ardent critic of the organizations and individuals he previously interacted with. In September 2021, he gave an interview to Austrian publication *Exxpress* in which he accused some of them of being "members" of the Muslim Brotherhood. This has led to a flurry of both criminal and civil cases being filed against him, and, in July 2022, he lost the first one in the first degree (at time of writing, he has expressed his intention to file an appeal).[60]

While the merits of the cases filed against him are beyond the scope of this study and the interview conducted with him, Zaidan's legal vicissitudes revolve around definitional and evidentiary challenges that are common when examining Brotherhood-adjacent milieus. As a general rule, it is fair to say that, in Austria as in all European countries, operate young activists who received various forms of training and support from well-established Brotherhood structures, at least in the early days of their careers. That proximity has also inevitably led to some ideological influence, although it might not be the only one. That is, for example, how Samir Abullaban describes Farid Hafez, one of the individuals who sued Zaidan for defamation. Abullaban describes Hafez as somebody who studied Muslim Brotherhood ideology in Brotherhood circles and has been active in Brotherhood-linked organizations but that cannot be identified as a "Brotherhood member" "*–that is too much,"* using Abullaban's own words. Indeed, short of having an admission or documentary proof of membership –both extremely rare dynamics– it is not correct to identify an individual as a Brotherhood member. Rather, when the evidence of consistent engagement sustains the assessment, it is more appropriate to identify that person as being part of a Brotherhood milieu.

Due to his decades very close to the milieu, Zaidan has a wealth of information that indeed shows that many of the entities and individuals he has spoken about have a history of personal and ideological connections to the Muslim Brotherhood, but, as said, proving membership is a different and more arduous endeavor (assuming, of course, that any of the individuals he identifies as such are indeed Brotherhood members, something that the authors have no way of proving). Some of the pieces of evidence Zaidan points to date back to the 1990s, when MJÖ leaders made their first steps in Islamic activism, and show regular connections from well-established Muslim Brotherhood milieus.

[60] The interview was published in September 2021 and has since been taken offline. For an article on the public reaction to the interview's content, see: Redaktion Exxpress: „Interview über Muslimbrüder sorgt international für Aufsehen", *Exxpress*, July 23, 2021. Retrieved from: https://exxpress.at/exxpress-interview-ueber-muslimbrueder-sorgt-international-fuer-aufsehen/ (Accessed: August 26, 2022).

Among them, particularly noteworthy are older versions of the *Lisan al-Umma* magazine,[61] a sort of parish review for Muslims in Upper Austria, and screenshots of older versions of the MJÖ's website.[62] According to these documents, the origins of the MJÖ go back to the Islamic Group of Upper Austria (Islamische Gruppe Oberösterreich/IG),[63] which was founded in 1996. The documents illustrate that the IG cooperated with organizations from the Brotherhood milieu, such as for example the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY),[64] receiving at least 13.000 Austrian Schilling[65] for a charity event for Palestinian children which the IG hosted together with the Palestinian Association in Austria[66] (Palästinensische Vereinigung in Österreich/PVÖ).[67] One of the articles in the 34th edition of the *Lisan al-Umma* magazine[68] was written by Farid Hafez and shows his involvement in the IG and his participation in a leadership training camp in Hungary. The leadership training camp was organized by the Dawa Academy Pakistan as well as the Muslim Youth Germany (Muslimische Jugend Deutschland), the youth organization of the Islamische Gemeinschaft in Deutschland e. V. (IGD), the organization German security services consistently identify as the Muslim Brotherhood in the country.[69] In the article, Hafez stresses that Ahmad von Denffer (from the IZM) was giving lectures at the training camp[70] and recounts that "*the participants were divided into three usras* (families).[71] *Every day one of the usras had to lead the camp, so we learned many practical aspects*."[72] The article was later

[61] The magazine was published in collaboration with the Islamische Gruppe Oberösterreich from 1997 onwards. The 24th edition of the magazine states that part of the IGÖ's activities include "contributing to the creation of the local magazine (Gemeindezeitung in German) 'Al-Lisan'.": Islamische Religionsgemeinde Linz für OÖ. u. Sbg. (Ed.): „Gemeindenachrichten", *Lisan al-Umma magazine*, issue 24, February 1997, p. 3. Retrieved from: https://www.islamheute.ch/lisan24.pdf (Accessed: August 26, 2022).

[62] All documents are available online.

[63] This relationship between the IG and the MJÖ was stated in the 35th edition of Lisan al-Umma, where it states in a section called "A Self-Portrayal": „‚Muslimische Jugend Österreich' [formerly IG Islamische Gruppe]. Eine Selbstdarstellung" in Islamische Religionsgemeinde Linz für OÖ. u. Sbg. (Ed.): *Lisan al-Umma magazine*, issue 35, April 1999, p. 6. Retrieved from: https://www.islamheute.ch/lisan35.pdf (Accessed: August 26, 2022); This portrayal also corresponds with an earlier version of the group's history as mentioned on its official website: https://web.archive.org/web/20050212170308/http://mjoe.at/ueber_uns_history.htm (Accessed: August 26, 2022).

[64] Steinberg, Guido (2010): "The Muslim Brotherhood in Germany", in R. Barry (Ed.): *The Muslim Brotherhood. The Organization and Policies of a Global Islamist Movement*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 156-157; Vidino, Lorenzo (2020): *The Closed Circle. Joining and Leaving the Muslim Brotherhood in the West*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 37-40.

[65] The Schilling was the official Austrian currency until 1999.

[66] The US Department for Treasury designated the PVÖ for Treasury for its Hamas support in 2003. Op. Cit. Vidino, Lorenzo (2017), p. 27-29.

[67] Islamische Religionsgemeinde Linz für OÖ. u. Sbg. (Ed.): „Gemeindenachrichten", *Lisan al-Umma magazine*, issue 28, January 1998, p. 2. Retrieved from: https://www.islamheute.ch/lisan28.pdf (Accessed: August 26, 2022).

[68] Islamische Religionsgemeinde Linz für OÖ. u. Sbg. (Ed.): „Leadershiptraining in Ungarn", *Lisan al-Umma magazine*, issue 34, March 1999, p. 7. Retrieved from: https://www.islamheute.ch/lisan34.pdf (Accessed: August 26, 2022).

[69] Sarhan, Aladdin (2014-2015): „Die Muslimbruderschaft in Deutschland". In Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (Ed.): *Islamismus*. Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, pp. 45-46. Retrieved from: https://www.kas.de/de/web/extremismus/islamismus/die-muslimbruderschaft-in-deutschland (Accessed: August 26, 2022); Breuer, Rita (2019): Die Muslimbruderschaft in Deutschland. *Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung*. Retrieved from: https://www.bpb.de/themen/islamismus/dossier-islamismus/290422/die-muslimbruderschaft-in-deutschland/ (Accessed: August 26, 2022).

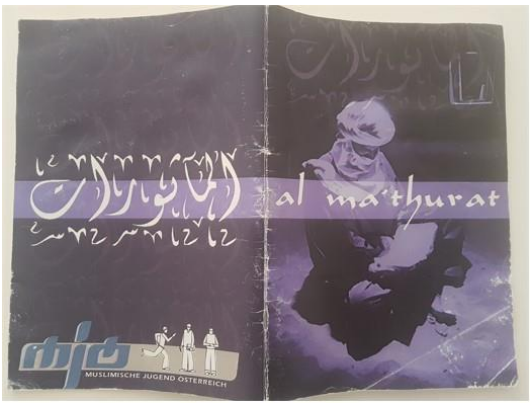
[70] Op. Cit. *Lisan al-Umma magazine*, issue 34, p. 7.

[71] Plural form naturalized following the rules of the English language. The correct transliteration would be *usar* [أُسَر]

[72] An older version of the 34th edition of Lisan al-Umma containing Hafez article can be found under: https://www.islamheute.ch/lisan34.htm (Accessed: August 26, 2022).

redacted by the magazine's editors based on a request by Hafez as he was "*fearing for his reputation.*"[73] However, an older non-redacted version of the article is still accessible online.[74] In 1999, the MJÖ was created as the IG's successor organization.[75]

To highlight a certain ideological influence of the Muslim Brotherhood on the MJÖ, Zaidan points to the fact that the Austrian organization regularly organized trips to various European and Arab countries in which they consistently met with Muslim Brotherhood leaders. And he highlights the fact that MJÖ published a translated version of *Risālat al-Ma'thurāt*, a short collection of daily supplications, Quranic verses and traditions ascribed to the prophet originally compiled by Muslim Brotherhood founder Hasan al Banna and commonly used on a daily basis by Brotherhood members worldwide.[76] Pictures from old MJÖ publications show MJÖ members holding their version of al Banna's *Risālat al-Ma'thurāt* during a trip abroad.[77]

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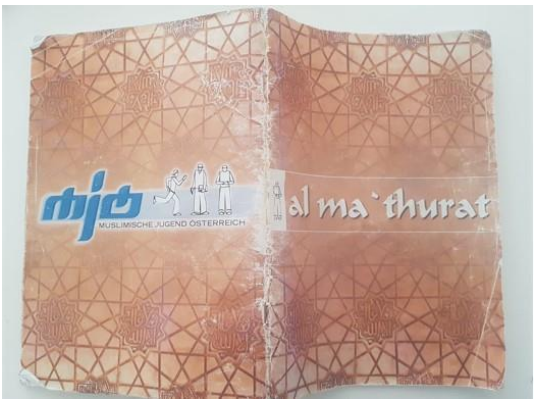


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[73] Islamische Religionsgemeinde Linz für OÖ. u. Sbg. (Ed.): Lisan al-Umma magazine, issue 34, March 1999. Retrieved from: https://www.islamheute.ch/lisan34.pdf, p. 7 (Accessed: August 26, 2022). In the current version available on the Lisan al-Umma website, the entire article on the Leadership Training Camp in Hungary is blackened. An editor's note explains that "this article was blackened due to personal concerns and based on the author's request, as he [the author] fears for his reputation." Ibid., p. 6.
[74] Op. Cit. *Lisan al-Umma magazine*, issue 34.
[75] An older version of the MJÖ's homepage states that the MJÖ originated from the IG and was founded in 1999. https://web.archive.org/web/20050212170308/http://mjoe.at/ueber_uns_history.htm (Accessed: August 26, 2022).
[76] In her biography on Hasan al Banna, Krämer stresses the importance of al Banna's *Risālat al-Ma'thurāt* and illustrates its central role at the camps of Muslim Brotherhood battalions (*katā'ib*). See: Krämer, Gudrun (2022): *Der Architekt des Islamismus*. Munich: C.H. Beck, p. 220.
[77] Muslimische Jugend Österreich: *Spanienreise*, Muslimische Jugend Österreich [former official website]. Retrieved from: https://web.archive.org/web/20050218091634/http://mjoe.at/photos_reisen_spanien2003_2.htm (Accessed: August 26, 2022).
[78] Scan provided by Amir Zaidan.
[79] Ibid.

## Conclusion

Each of the four individuals interviewed for this study spent most of their lives in Muslim Brotherhood milieus, and for three of the four that activism took place mostly in Germany and Austria (most of Al Shawaf's time in the Brotherhood has been in the Middle East and Pakistan/Afghanistan, even if he has been Germany-based since 2015). All of them therefore acquired substantial knowledge of how these milieus work: their structure, *modus operandi*, key players, views and goals. Each of them has a personal life and activism trajectory with unique specificities that fully reflect only their experience. Yet, their stories and recollections also reveal several commonalities, which provide important insights into the complex world of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Firstly, all four interviewees describe some sort of Muslim Brotherhood milieu existing in both Germany and Austria. They all describe a "scene" in both countries in which are active both full-fledged Brotherhood members and a broad array of fellow travelers –that is, Islamic activists who, while not being Brotherhood members, largely share the movement's worldview and are operationally integrated with it. In substance, all four interviewees are adamant that both Germany and Austria have been an active operational base for individuals affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood for decades.

All four interviewees also provide revealing details about how these Muslim Brotherhood milieus in Germany and Austria operate. First, they all detail that Germany and Austria-based Brotherhood activists have, since the early days of their presence, established a variety of organizations registered under local laws. They range from mosques, such as the Islamisches Zentrum München, to national organizations, such as the Liga Kultur Verein. None of these entities identifies as being part of the Muslim Brotherhood. Indeed, both El Gafrawi and Abullaban, arguably the two interviewees with the most intimate knowledge of how they work, argue that these organizations are not formally part of the Brotherhood. They are independent organizations that are not hierarchically inserted in a structure dominated by any Middle Eastern branch of the Brotherhood. However, at the same time, all interviewees agree that they are organizations founded and dominated by Brotherhood members whose main goals are those of advancing the movement's aims.

One of these aims, all interviewees agree, is to provide a safe haven to Brotherhood activists from the Middle East. In many cases, this entails offering a support system to Brotherhood members who have fled Arab regimes and have found asylum in Europe –whether on a temporary or permanent basis. The interviewees also recount many instances in which Germany and Austria hosted short visits from prominent Brotherhood leaders from the Middle East. These visits could be to give lectures or to host meetings among them, something they generally could not do in the Arab world. Particularly revealing in this regard is the story, to be confirmed, told by El Gafrawi of how the meeting among top Brotherhood leaders from all Middle Eastern branches to set up the movement's International Apparatus, a seminal moment in the Brotherhood's history despite the limited successes of the structure in the following years, took

place in Nuremberg. Germany and Austria, as Europe in general, constituted what El Gafrawi refers to as "the lungs" for the global Brotherhood movement, a place where its top members could meet securely and, if in need, safely resettle –in substance, breathe.

All interviewees also point to education as being one of the main goals of Brotherhood milieus in Germany and Austria, as elsewhere in Europe. Disseminating the movement's socio-political and religious worldview among local Muslim communities is seen as extremely important, a duty to guide them in the correct version of Islam in order to prevent them from "melting" within non-Muslim majority societies. Even more important is the education of a small, elite cadre of European-born Muslims. All interviewees discuss how Brotherhood milieus set up educational efforts that, aside from general teaching for all local Muslims, focused also on a selected group of young activists that are brought to the Brotherhood's fold and will have to eventually bring forward the Brotherhood's vision in the West.

The interviewees disagree on whether the young, European-born activists educated and organizationally supported by the first generation of Brotherhood members who came to Germany and Austria from the Middle East can be considered full-fledged Muslim Brothers. While Zaidan thinks so but has incurred legal consequences for his inability to prove it, Abullaban disagrees and, in somewhat ambiguous terms, argues that, while they have been groomed by the Brotherhood and adopt at least part of its ideology and *modus operandi*, they should not be seen as full-fledged Brothers, a term that should be reserved only to sworn members of Middle Eastern branches. The issue remains a contested one and is often debated, albeit without much of a consensus, in both German and Austrian contexts.

Finally, all interviewees agree on the crucial role of secrecy in every aspect of the Muslim Brotherhood. Secrecy is a defining element of the interview with Al Shawaf, particularly when he discussed his time serving in high-risk positions during the Afghan war. "*As far as the Brotherhood is concerned,*" he explained, "*from our very early childhood we have to keep in mind two important things: the secrecy of the organization and the openness of the da'wa*." He elaborated that "*as far as the organization is concerned, keeping the structure secret*" is a top priority.

All interviewees discuss how secrecy is a defining feature of the movement's functioning also in Europe. Al Shawaf defended this approach, arguing that, like any other political actor, the Brotherhood is entitled to use all tactics that guarantee its survival and success. "*It is an issue of pragmatism, a matter of interests,*" he elaborated. "*If I told you that there are no Brotherhood networks in Europe, I would be lying to you. There are members of the Brotherhood everywhere, new organizations, and there is a will to prevent* [those networks] *from being infiltrated/bugged*."

El Gafrawi takes a decidedly different position from Al Shawaf's. He states that, while admiring many aspects of the many European-based Brothers he worked with over decades, he always disliked their excessive secrecy. "*When you carry out an activity that you are proud of and that you consider positive, you must do it openly,*" he stated. "*I don't know why they* [members of the Brotherhood] *do it*," he sentences, "*I don't like to work in secret. I have never liked it and I have been involved in Islamic work since the 70's* [….]. *I always thought the same thing, if something*

*has to be done in secret, it's probably not good*." It should be noted that Al Shawaf proudly admits of having been a full-fledged member of the Muslim Brotherhood for most of his adult life while El Gafrawi says he was never a member.

On the issue of secrecy, Abullaban, who also openly admits having been a member since his youth, takes a position somewhere in between Al Shawaf's and El Gafrawi's. On one hand, he takes the line that, unless there are cogent security concerns, Brotherhood members should be open about their affiliation, as he is. But he also highlights how openness about Brotherhood membership in the West can have security repercussions in Arab countries, as relatives live or travel there. Moreover, he states that he had always reprehended young, Austrian-based activists linked to the Brotherhood for denying any connection to the movement, arguing that it was dishonest but had recently come to think they might have been right in doing so, as Operation Luxor showed, from his point of view, that also in Austria openly admitting Brotherhood ties might not be safe.

This difference of views is indicative of the complexity that characterizes the Brotherhood, in Germany and Austria as elsewhere. The four interviews here provided offer some glimpses into these and other dynamics, constituting important primary sources on a controversial subject that often lacks them. As said, they do not provide definitive proof on any aspect, but they unquestionably help further the general understanding on what the Muslim Brotherhood in Germany and Austria is and how it operates.

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