

The Muslim Brotherhood: What It Is and Why It Threatens the United States

Hussein Mansour
JINSA Fellow

For most of its history, the Muslim Brotherhood, the transnational Islamist movement and the pioneer of political Islam, was a subject for regional experts and academics. It has now become a subject of American policy and politics. Yet, most Americans who hear the name have no clear idea of what it describes.

The reason for the Brotherhood's political prominence is a sequence of government decisions taken over the past year. On November 24, 2025, President Donald Trump signed an [executive order](#) directing Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent to assess particular Brotherhood chapters for terrorist designation. On January 13, 2026, the State Department designated the [Lebanese chapter](#) as a Foreign Terrorist Organization and the [Treasury Department](#) designated the Egyptian and Jordanian chapters as Specially Designated Global Terrorists for their material support to Hamas, the Brotherhood's branch in Gaza and Palestinian terrorist organization responsible for the massacres of October 7. On March 9, the State Department added the [Sudanese chapter](#), whose fighters receive training and support from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. [Secretary Rubio](#) described the January actions as the opening moves of a sustained campaign.

Since then, concerns over the Brotherhood have moved from foreign policy into national politics. The governors of Texas and Florida, [Greg Abbott](#) and [Ron DeSantis](#), respectively, have issued their own designations of the Brotherhood. Now, the movement's name circulates in the closing weeks of the midterm elections, usually without definition.

These old and new concerns raise a broader question: what the Brotherhood stands for; how it pursues institutional power; and what it would do with that power, a question that cannot be separated from its record of incubating, although disavowing, violence and propagating antisemitism. This insight supplies a definition and explains what the Brotherhood is, how it grew from an Egyptian political society into a transnational movement, how it relates to international jihadist violence, why Arab and European governments moved against it before Washington did, and why it constitutes a threat to American national security.

What the Brotherhood Is

The name "Muslim Brotherhood" designates two related, overlapping, yet distinct things. The first is a specific Islamist political organization: a set of formal national chapters, organizations, and political parties with sworn members, guidance councils, budgets, and a chain of command, which governments can name, sanction, and prosecute. The second is the worldview that the organization created and propagated, which has spread far beyond its membership and now constitutes the larger world sometimes known as "political Islam" or "Islamism."

Arabic marks the difference with two words. An *ikhwani* is a brother, a cadre, and a member of the organization. An *ikhwani* is a brotherist, someone loyal to the worldview or to its culture, but who is not a member. The nearest American parallel is communism during the Cold War: The Communist Party had

its card-carrying members while around it stood a far larger milieu of fellow travelers who shared its view of the world and served its purposes without ever joining.

The Brotherhood's worldview is Islamism, a modern political ideology that must be distinguished from the faith most of the world's Muslims practice, and it rests on one claim: that Islam, as the Brotherhood conceives it, is a total order and should govern faith, law, economy, government, and private life together. The Brotherhood also believes that this order is a rival civilization to the liberal and democratic West, destined to supersede it.

Hassan al-Banna, the Egyptian schoolteacher who founded the movement, gave the claim its [canonical form](#) in 1939: Islam is "creed and worship, homeland and nationality, religion and state, spirituality and action, Quran and sword." In this reading Islam stops being a religion in any classical sense. It becomes the romantic Volksgeist of a global Volk, the community of believers called the *umma*, whose collective spirit must realize itself in history by triumphing over its rivals through struggle, which the movement calls jihad.

The Brotherhood states its program in its [own motto](#). "Allah is our objective; the Prophet is our leader; the Quran is our law; jihad is our way; dying in the way of Allah is our highest hope."

Just like the ideas, the Brotherhood's political organization comes from the same era. Founded by al-Banna in Egypt in 1928, it organized itself as the mass movements of interwar Italy and Germany did: a Supreme Guide to whom members swore an oath of obedience; uniformed youth formations; and open hostility to parliamentary pluralism, carried to the point of petitioning [King Farouk](#) in 1936 "to prohibit political parties and to direct the forces of the nation toward the formation of a united front." It absorbed European antisemitism along with the rest.

The Brotherhood's program for realizing that order runs on two methods. The first is formation, *tarbiya*: the transformation of society from below in fixed stages, from the individual to the family, then to society, then to the government, and finally to a restored caliphate and what [al-Banna called](#) "mastership of the world." The sequence comes from al-Banna's writing and it was restated by the movement as recently as December 2011.

In practice, this means capturing a society's institutions as the means of capturing its state. In Egypt during the 1980s and 1990s, while the Brotherhood was barred from forming a party, its members won control of the [professional syndicates](#) of doctors, engineers, and lawyers through internal elections.

The second track is the pursuit of state power by whatever means are available. Where elections were open, the Brotherhood contested them. In 2012, it carried Mohamed Morsi to Egypt's presidency. Where the army offered a shortcut, it took the army: in Sudan in 1989, Hassan al-Turabi's National Islamic Front brought [Omar al-Bashir](#) to power in a coup, founding the regime from which the Sudanese chapter designated this year descends. Where neither path existed, it took up arms, as the [Syrian Brotherhood](#) did in the insurrection that ended at Hama in 1982. The means changed with circumstance; the goal never did.

How the Brotherhood Outgrew Egypt

The relation between the organization and the wider world of Islamism is one of descent. The Brotherhood largely invented political Islam as a modern program, and the Islamist movements that followed derive from it, including those that later broke with it or turned against it. Hizb ut-Tahrir, which campaigns for a restored caliphate across Europe and Asia, was founded in 1953 by Taqi al-Din al-Nabhani, who came out of the Brotherhood's orbit in Jerusalem. Saudi Arabia's Sahwa movement, the clerical opposition of the 1990s, grew from Brotherhood exiles teaching in Saudi universities. Even Shiite

revolutionary Islamism drank from the same source: Ali Khamenei, the late Supreme Leader of Iran, translated Egyptian Brotherhood writings into Persian before the 1979 revolution.

Thus, the Brotherhood's Egyptian origin explains less about it today than the three phases of expansion that followed, each of which changed what the movement was.

The first phase was exile into the Arab world. In 1954, a [Brotherhood member](#) fired on Egypt's leader, Gamal Abdel Nasser, at a rally in Alexandria, and the crackdown that followed, which ended with Qutb's execution in 1966, drove the [movement's cadres](#) out of Egypt. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, and the smaller Gulf states received them [as allies](#) against Nasser's revolutionary pan-Arabism. The exiles staffed the [new universities](#) and ministries of education of states that were building their bureaucracies from nothing. Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a Brotherhood loyalist since his youth who was jailed three times in Egypt and in 2004 [turned down](#) the movement's top post, arrived in Qatar in 1961 and became the emirate's most [influential cleric](#) and, through Al Jazeera, the most widely heard Sunni preacher of his generation. In Saudi classrooms, the Brotherhood's political doctrine met Wahhabi theology, and the fusion produced first [the Sahwa](#), a mass Islamist indoctrination movement starting in the late 1970s, and then, at its violent edge, the milieu from which [al-Qaeda recruited](#).

The second phase was migration into the West. As Muslim students and émigrés settled in Europe and North America from the 1960s onward, Brotherhood figures built their first institutions. Said Ramadan, al-Banna's son-in-law and a Brotherhood leader in exile, founded the Islamic Center of Geneva in 1961 and, according to the [French government](#), the Islamic Center of Munich. In the United States, students founded the Muslim Students Association at the University of Illinois in 1963; the Brotherhood's own 1991 memorandum, discussed below, lists it among "our organizations and the organizations of our friends." Mosques, student associations, charities, and publishing houses followed, and for decades they constituted much of the organized civil society infrastructure available to Western Muslims. The movement's intentions for that infrastructure are a matter of record. A 1991 internal memorandum by [Mohamed Akram](#), seized by the FBI and entered into evidence at the Holy Land Foundation terror-financing trial, described the movement's work in North America as a "civilization-jihadist process" aimed at destroying Western civilization from within.

The third phase, which began after the Cold War and accelerated after September 11, 2001, was the merger of Islamism with Western identity politics. Brotherhood-derived organizations recast their program in the vocabulary of [minority rights](#), anti-discrimination, and "Islamophobia." They positioned themselves as the defense league of Muslims as a minority, a Muslim counterpart to the Anti-Defamation League, claiming to speak for the [whole community](#) and treating criticism of Islamism as bigotry against all Muslims. For many Western Muslims, and for many of their non-Muslim allies, Islamism thereby became simply the form that Muslim identity politics takes.

This position reached its clearest manifestation in an American journalist calling Muslim countries that fight the Brotherhood, "the world's most [powerful islamophobes](#)." This use of anti-discrimination claims succeeded in insulating Islamist institutions and political projects from scrutiny whenever it took hold.

Aside from the simpler convergence of positions with the academic left, this latest phase enlarged the ikhwanji world more than any other. Doctrinal commitment to explicit Islamist ideology was no longer required, only to fashionable notions of social justice that can be mobilized through the activist notion of intersectionality: a student or an activist could advance the movement's positions on Hamas, on the United Arab Emirates, on Egypt, on Israel, and on what counts as Islamophobia without ever having been in contact with the organization. In Europe, the clearest instance is the Forum of European Muslim Youth and Student Organizations, whose permanent exclusion from the European Union's institutions was demanded this month by the [European Parliament](#).

Jihad Is Our Way

The Brotherhood's [official position](#) today is that it renounced violence decades ago. But its history shows that it built violence into its structure at the founding, supplied the doctrine that licensed the jihadist movements of the late twentieth century, and continues to endorse violence it classifies as resistance, notably against Israel. In the simplest terms, the Brotherhood produced an ideological and organizational environment from which jihadist movements emerged, while later generations of jihadists broke with and attacked it.

Already, the founding generation maintained an armed wing, the [Special Apparatus](#), which in 1948, assassinated an [Egyptian judge](#) and a [prime minister](#). The 1954 attempt on Nasser's life came from the same tradition. The more consequential contribution, however, was doctrinal. In the [movement's writings](#), notably those of Qutb, an Islamist theory of society was constructed that explicitly justified violence against those who resist the movement's aims. [Qutb's Milestones](#), published in 1964, defined jihad as a struggle "against every obstacle that comes into the way of worshipping God and the implementation of the divine authority on earth," to be waged by a believing vanguard. These writings served as the nucleus from which modern jihadism emerged in the form of the group's many offshoots, and they led the mother organization to repudiate them and denounce violence for fear of government repression. The result was a division of labor that has persisted for half a century: the organization presents itself as the moderate face of Islamism, and those who take its doctrine to its conclusion leave to act on it.

Ayman al-Zawahiri, later the leader of al-Qaeda, joined his first underground jihadist cell in 1966, at fifteen, the year Qutb was hanged, and later wrote that [Qutb's call](#) "was the spark that ignited the Islamic revolution." Egyptian Islamic Jihad assassinated President Anwar Sadat in 1981, and the Gama'a al-Islamiyya massacred tourists at Luxor in 1997; the [State Department](#) lists both as violent offshoots of the Egyptian Brotherhood. Abdullah Azzam, a member of the [Jordanian Brotherhood](#), organized the [Arab volunteers](#) in Afghanistan during the 1980s and mentored Osama bin Laden. Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, who conceived the September 11 attacks, joined the Brotherhood in Kuwait at sixteen, according to the [9/11 Commission](#). Hamas was founded in 1987 as the Brotherhood's [Palestinian branch](#), and the Treasury Department's [January 2026 findings](#) describe it as a branch of the movement to this day.

Violence against Israelis, finally, the Brotherhood has never treated as terrorism at all. Qaradawi, the Brotherhood's most notable preacher, issued [religious rulings](#) sanctioning suicide bombings against Israeli civilians and, after October 7, the Lebanese chapter's armed wing, the [al-Fajr Forces](#), fired rockets into northern Israel alongside Hezbollah. In April 2025, Jordanian authorities arrested sixteen people linked to the Jordanian Brotherhood on charges of [manufacturing rockets](#) and drones for attacks inside the kingdom.

Antisemitism as Doctrine

Antisemitism sits at the center of the Brotherhood's worldview, and its place there follows from the structure of that worldview. A movement that imagines the umma as a single body destined to triumph needs an enemy whose hidden agency can explain each defeat. The Brotherhood assigned that role to the Jews. The theme entered the movement in the 1930s, together with the rest of the political vocabulary it borrowed from interwar Europe. The movement's agitation over Palestine soon reached Egypt's own Jews: in May 1936, the Brotherhood called for [a boycott](#) of Jewish-owned shops in Egypt.

Sayyid Qutb gave the theme its doctrinal form. His essay, "[Our Struggle](#) with the Jews," written in the early 1950s and reprinted throughout the Arab world ever since, presents the Jews as Islam's permanent enemy. That enmity runs, in his telling, from the Prophet's conflict with the Jewish tribes of Medina to the present day, and he holds the Jews responsible for the ideas that corrode modern Muslim society. Two consequences follow. The Jew becomes a metaphysical adversary whose malice accounts for Muslim

misfortune in general. And the political dispute over Israel becomes a religious war, which by its nature admits no settlement.

The doctrine passed intact into the movement's institutions. The 1988 founding charter of Hamas calls Hamas "one of the wings of Moslem Brotherhood in Palestine." It quotes the tradition that the Day of Judgment will not come "until Moslems fight the Jews (killing the Jews)." It claims the Jews "were behind the French Revolution, the Communist revolution," and both world wars. And it cites the [Protocols of the Elders of Zion](#) as proof of a Jewish plan for world domination.

The movement's leaders have said the same in their own voices. In early 2009, Yusuf al-Qaradawi told his Al Jazeera audience that Hitler had been God's punishment of the Jews, and added: "Allah willing, the [next time](#) will be at the hand of the believers." In 2010, Mohamed Morsi, then a senior Brotherhood leader and two years later Egypt's president, urged Egyptians to "nurse our children and our grandchildren on hatred." In a later interview, he called Zionists "the [descendants of](#) apes and pigs." Western governments that studied the movement reached the same conclusion. The British government's 2015 review found that "senior members of the Muslim Brotherhood routinely use [virulent, anti-Semitic](#) language." The French government's 2025 report traced antisemitic [conspiracy theories](#) through the movement's leading figures.

Why Governments Moved Against It

The governments that know the Brotherhood best, because they once sheltered it and later fought it, were the first to reach their verdict against it. Each concluded that since the movement advocates loyalty to an abstract umma whose interests supersede those of national loyalties, it is a competitor for the state itself, and that its terrorism is one expression of that competition. [Egypt's government](#) declared the Brotherhood a terrorist organization on December 25, 2013, six months after Morsi's removal and a day after a suicide bombing of a police headquarters in Mansoura. Saudi Arabia, which had hosted the Brotherhood's exiles for two generations, [followed suit](#) in March 2014. The United Arab Emirates [listed it](#) in November 2014 among 83 designated organizations, a list that also named two American Brotherhood-linked groups, the Council on American-Islamic Relations and the Muslim American Society. Jordan, which had tolerated the Brotherhood as a legal opposition for decades, banned it in April 2025 after the rocket plot, and the Interior Ministry's order reached beyond the organization to outlaw the promotion of its ideology, an explicit recognition that the ikhwanji world is part of the threat.

Europe moved later and more slowly, and no member state of the European Union has yet enacted a general ban. It has nevertheless recently shifted from monitoring the Brotherhood to legislating against it. Austria has prohibited the display of Brotherhood symbols since 2019 under its [symbols law](#), alongside those of Hamas and the Islamic State. In May 2025, the [French government](#) released a report on Brotherhood "entryism" that identified Musulmans de France as the movement's national branch and called the Brotherhood a threat to national cohesion, and in January 2026, the [National Assembly](#) passed a resolution urging the European Union to list it as a terrorist organization. In March 2026, the [Dutch House of Representatives](#) adopted a motion calling for a ban on the Brotherhood and its affiliates. On October 8, the European Parliament voted 381 to 167 for a resolution asking the Council of the European Union to apply its terrorist-listing criteria to Brotherhood entities.

Washington was the last to act, because during the Arab Spring, American policy treated the Brotherhood as a [potential partner](#) with which the United States could do [business](#), a judgment that reached its height in the Obama administration's engagement with Morsi's government. The theory, stated most plainly by Director of National Intelligence James Clapper, who [told Congress](#) in February 2011 that the Egyptian Brotherhood was "a very heterogeneous group, largely secular, which has eschewed violence" (a description his office hastily corrected), was that the Brotherhood represents the populist impulse of the Muslim world and that it could be an effective mediator able to control more extreme Islamist and jihadist groups.

Only with the second Trump administration did the United States move towards seeing the Brotherhood as a danger to its national security. The present approach of the administration is that of disaggregation: designating chapter by chapter, aiming to answer the legal difficulty that defeated earlier efforts. A Foreign Terrorist Organization designation requires an evidentiary record that a specific organization engages in terrorist activity. But the Brotherhood's decentralized structure makes it a wide umbrella that allows any chapter to deny responsibility for the conduct of another. By building a record chapter by chapter, beginning with those most deeply integrated into the Hamas and Iranian networks, the administration has made designations that can survive judicial review. Two states have gone further: Texas, under Governor [Greg Abbott](#), and Florida, under Governor [Ron DeSantis](#), designated the Brotherhood itself, together with the Council on American-Islamic Relations, under state law, designations that the Council is now contesting in court.

Why the Brotherhood Threatens the United States

The Brotherhood threatens American security through three concrete issues.

The first is material support for terrorism, including support raised on American soil. In the late 1980s, the Brotherhood's American network established a [Palestine Committee](#) to sustain Hamas, and the committee's principal fundraising arm, the Holy Land Foundation, which grew into the largest Muslim charity in the United States. In November 2008, a federal jury in Dallas convicted the foundation and five of its leaders of providing material support to Hamas, and the [Justice Department](#) established that the Foundation had channeled approximately \$12.4 million to Hamas-controlled entities after 1995. The prosecution's list of unindicted co-conspirators named several of the most prominent American Muslim organizations, among them the Council on American-Islamic Relations and the Islamic Society of North America. The same pattern continues abroad today. The Treasury Department's [January findings](#) document that in 2024, those seeking to fight for Hamas in Gaza needed Brotherhood connections to get there and that Brotherhood members raised money for the organization.

The second is strategic. The Brotherhood works, in every country where it operates, against the regional order on which American strategy rests, an order anchored by Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel. The designated chapters stand on the opposing side of every contest that matters to the United States in the Middle East. The Lebanese chapter fights alongside Hezbollah; the Sudanese chapter fields fighters trained by the Revolutionary Guard; the Jordanian network plotted rocket attacks inside Jordan and against Israel; and the Egyptian chapter coordinates with Hamas. Each of these is a tactical problem but taken together, they reveal a strategic one: the Brotherhood is the bridge through which Sunni Islamists enter a war coalition led by Iran.

A major part of the strategic challenge is that the movement's two principal state patrons are American partners: Qatar, which hosted Hamas's political leadership a short drive from [Al Udeid](#) Air Base, the largest American military installation in the region, and Turkey, a NATO ally that hosts much of the [exiled Egyptian](#) Brotherhood's leadership and media. Their patronage turns the American alliance system against itself: Washington's partners in Doha and Ankara shelter a movement that seeks to overthrow Washington's partners in Cairo, Amman, Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi, and that wages war on Israel. Every Brotherhood gain therefore enlarges the space in which Iran and its proxies operate and weakens the very states on which American strategy in the region depends.

The third is the most challenging to address. The Brotherhood's most durable achievement in the United States is the infrastructure built during its identity-politics phase: student associations, advocacy organizations, and an activist vocabulary that classifies criticism of Islamism as hatred of Muslims. Through that infrastructure, the movement's positions on Hamas, on Israel, and on political Islam enter American universities, nonprofits, local governments, and party politics without being recognized as Brotherhood positions, carried by people who would deny, often sincerely, any connection to the organization. This is

also why the movement's name has entered American electoral politics without a definition. Americans lack a working criterion for distinguishing ordinary Muslim religious and civic life from the Brotherhood's worldview, and the Brotherhood's world depends on their continuing to lack one.

Recommendations

The Brotherhood is at once an organization that can be designated and a worldview that cannot. The January and March designations struck the organization where its terrorist record is clearest, and Secretary Rubio was right to call them an opening. A durable policy must reach the chapters that remain, the states that shelter them, the financial channels that connect them to the United States, and the conditions under which the Brotherhood's worldview passes unrecognized in American public life.

First, the administration should complete the chapter designations it began. The Egyptian and Jordanian chapters currently hold only the Specially Designated Global Terrorist designation, although the Treasury Department's own findings of material support to Hamas meet the standard for Foreign Terrorist Organization status. Upgrading them would make material support to either chapter a federal crime for any person under American jurisdiction. Further chapters should be reviewed against the same evidentiary standard, beginning with those most deeply embedded in the Hamas and Iranian networks.

Second, Washington should make the Brotherhood a standing item in its relations with Qatar and Turkey. Both states host the leaders, media operations, and finances of designated chapters, and both depend heavily on American defense cooperation. The United States should require the expulsion of designated individuals and the closure of their financial channels, making clear that continued defense cooperation depends on compliance.

Third, the Treasury and Justice Departments should trace the domestic channels through which money reaches designated chapters and their partners. The Holy Land Foundation prosecution showed that such networks operate inside the United States under the cover of religious charity. Enforcing existing law will not reach that money in the universities, because Section 117 of the Higher Education Act requires them to report foreign gifts and contracts only above \$250,000 and attaches no fines to a failure to report. The Senate should therefore pass the [DETERRENT Act](#), which the House approved 241 to 169 in March 2025 and which has stalled in the Senate since: it lowers the reporting threshold to \$50,000, removes it entirely for countries of concern, and imposes penalties for noncompliance. Paired with rigorous enforcement of the Foreign Agents Registration Act against organizations acting on behalf of foreign Brotherhood entities, it would expose the movement's money where it is most effectively disguised.

Fourth, Congress should give the designation policy a statutory foundation. The bipartisan Muslim Brotherhood Terrorist [Designation Act](#), sponsored in the Senate by Ted Cruz and in the House by Mario Díaz-Balart and Jared Moskowitz, would establish a standing process for designating Brotherhood chapters, members, and affiliates, ensuring that the policy survives changes of administration.

Fifth, the United States should arm its European partners with evidence. The European Parliament's October resolution asked member states to supply the information the Council needs to list Brotherhood entities. Sharing intelligence with European governments and the Council would give Europe the evidentiary basis it currently lacks and would align the transatlantic response to a movement that has always operated globally.