



Erdoğan's Soft Power Arm: Mapping the Muslim Brotherhood's Networks of Influence in Turkey

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Executive Summary

The Muslim Brotherhood (MB) organization enjoys a privileged position in Erdoğan's Turkey. Its members direct their activities against Arab governments with unprecedented freedom and with the active support and encouragement of the Turkish leadership. This is a far cry from Turkey's historic attitude to Arab opposition groups, particularly those of a political Islam persuasion. For decades Turkey, carefully maintaining cordial diplomatic relations with Arab governments and defining itself as a secular "European" state, largely turned its back on the politics of the Arab world. Now it hosts and sponsors a political Islam group that is considered a terrorist organization in five Arab states: Egypt, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain and Syria. This is a dramatic shift in strategy that has its roots in the ideology of the ruling party in Turkey, the Justice and Development Party or AKP, and the growing regional conflict following the Arab Spring from which Ankara has emerged as a major rival to an Arab alliance led by Saudi Arabia. The struggle to shape the new Middle East has accelerated Turkey's embracing of the MB, with the consequent mushrooming of Istanbul-based MB networks post-2013 and Turkey's increasing dependence on these networks to agitate in states targeted by Erdoğan's ambitious expansionist agenda.

The marriage between the AKP and the MB may have enjoyed a prolonged period of ideological flirtation, but it was consummated at a time and place when both parties desperately needed each other. Although both are Islamists, the MB remains a distinctly Arab phenomenon whose instincts are deeply conservative and at odds with the AKP's relatively more secular leaning. Despite being on the same side in the regional conflict, the MB organization has not always been able to fit neatly within Erdoğan's neo-Ottoman designs and has struggled to translate Turkey's foreign policy to Arab audiences without appearing slavish and subservient. The relationship between the two is most certainly not one of equals, and neither is it exclusive. The third partner in the relationship is Qatar, the Gulf state that funds MB networks worldwide, and particularly those operating in Turkey. Having done business with a wide array of governments in the past, mutual utilitarianism has been the defining feature of the MB's strategy. In its dealings with Erdoğan's Turkey it has demonstrated the same instincts for opportunism and survival and is likely to continue to do so as long as it furnishes the Turkish-Qatari agitation machine with the useful manpower that it so badly needs.

Mapping the Turkey-based MB networks helps to deconstruct and define this extensive and well-resourced machine. Far from being a monolithic and centralized operation, closer inspection reveals that it is diverse and sophisticated, with several layers of messaging and networking simultaneously at play. It also reveals conflicts and contradictions, both within the MB and between the MB and other actors operating within the same machine. Often the full extent of the MB's role is suppressed and the line between the official MB and ancillary groups is blurred and not well understood. The focus of this study is the MB networks most relevant to the regional struggle between the Turkey-Qatar alliance on the one hand, and the opposing Saudi-Egypt-UAE axis on the other. This involves prioritizing media and think-tank/academic networks over other types of networks; it also over-represents Egyptian and Palestinian MB networks, connected as they are to two of the region's key battlegrounds. While this study is by no means exhaustive, it is a useful entry point for a more extensive look at Turkey and Qatar's utilization of MB networks in furtherance of their ideological and geopolitical goals in the region.

The roots of Turkey's alliance with the MB

Before Erdoğan's arrival on the international stage, the MB organization had only a small presence in Turkey. Historically there was tension between the Turkish Islamic movement and the MB-led political Islamism prevalent in the Arab world. The former, led for decades by the late Necmettin Erbakan, was based on Naqshbandi Sufi orders, with Sufi leaders and lodges playing a critical role in the formation of the movement at the time⁽¹⁾. Naturally, there was skepticism toward the MB's political Islam ideology, which is known in Arabic as *al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin* or simply the *Ikhwan*⁽²⁾.

The Sufi approach to politics did not prove compelling enough as an ideology to inspire and mobilize a mass movement. With the translation and dissemination of the books of Seyyid Qutb, Ali Shariati and Abu Ala al-Mawdudi in the 1970s and '80s a new alternative political Islamism in Turkey began to take root⁽³⁾. In his youth Erdoğan was the product of a cultural milieu that read Qutb and Mawdudi, but especially Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, a Turkish Islamist poet and ideologue who developed an Islam-inspired political vision to counter the Kemalist secular narrative⁽⁴⁾.

After the 1980 military coup the Turkish Army treated political Islam as a useful antidote to the increasing power of the Communist movement, and Qutb and Mawdudi's books became

(1) Elisabeth Ozdalga, ed. *The Naqshbandis in Western and Central Asia*, (London: Curzon Press, 1999); M Hakan Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 133-150.

(2) For the MB and relations with Turkey see: T. Baban, *Müslüman Kardeşler Örgütü'nün çağdaş İslamcı akımlar üzerindeki etkileri* (Impacts of the Muslim Brotherhood on Contemporary Islamic Movements), MS thesis, (Gazi University, Ankara, 2006); Ali Bulac, *Müslüman Kardeşler'in Türkiye İslam'ı üzerinde etkileri* (Impacts of Muslim Brotherhood on Turkey's Islam), International Conference on Hasan El-Benna and Muslim Brotherhood, May 5–6, 2012, Istanbul: Artus Basım; S. Caglayan, *Müslüman Kardeşler'den Yeni Osmanlılar'a İslamcılık* (Islamism from Muslim Brotherhood to New Ottomanism). (Istanbul: İmge Kitabevi, 2010).

(3) Yücel Bulut, "Türkiye'de İslamcılık ve Tercüme Faaliyetleri", in *Türkiye'de İslamcılık Düşüncesi ve Hareketi* (Istanbul: Zeytinburnu Belediyesi, 2013). p. 339-368; "Islam and Islamism in Turkey: A Conversation with Ismail Kara," *Maydan*, 24 October, 2017, <https://themaydan.com/2017/10/islam-islamism-turkey-conversation-ismail-kara/>.

(4) For more on Erdoğan's intellectual engagement with the leaders of MB such as al-Banna and Qutb, see: Hüseyin Besli and Özbay Ömer, *Bir Liderin Dogusu: Recep Tayyip Erdoğan*. (Istanbul: Yeni Türkiye Yayınları, 2014). p. 28; Ruşen Çakır and Çakmak Fehmi, *Recep Tayyip Erdoğan: Bir dönüşüm öyküsü*. (Istanbul: Metis, 2001), p. 21–22; Murat Sevinç, "Kılavuzu Necip Fazıl Olanlar ve Başyücelik Devleti," *Diken*, December 8, 2015, <http://www.diken.com.tr/kilavuzu-necip-fazil-olanlar-ve-basyucelik-devleti/>; Murat Özbank, "Erdoğan'ın hükümetten isteyip de alamadığı şey 'Başyücelik' olabilir mi?" *T24*, 11 April, 2015, <http://t24.com.tr/haber/Erdoğanin-hukümetten-isteyip-de-alamadigi-sey-basyucelik-olabilir-mi,293252>; Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, "Necip Fazıl Kısakürek Awards Will Bring Us the Genuine Voice, Scent and Soul of This Land," *Official Turkish Government Website*, November 2, 2014, <https://tccb.gov.tr/en/news/542/3297/necip-fazil-kisakurek-awards-will-bring-us-the-genuine-voice-scent-and-soul-of-this-land>.

bestsellers among Islamic-oriented youth. MB ideas, particularly on the inseparability of religion and politics and the importance of *ummah*-based identity, began to permeate the Turkish Islamic movement. The translation of MB books and increasing ties with MB networks in the Islamic world played an important part in the slow but unmistakable *Ikhwanization* of the Turkish Islamic movement.

To understand Erdoğan's relationship with political Islam it is instructive to unpack the moral outlooks (*ahlaki*) that would have influenced a typical Imam Hatip student of the 1970s such as himself. Teachers and students at these religious schools believed that Kamal Atatürk's secularist reforms dismantled and nullified their power within the society and the state, making them feel alienated in their own country. They were alarmed by attempts to not only suppress but also eliminate the remnants of Ottoman sociocultural practices and Islamic communitarian institutions. Their moral worldview relied heavily on the binary "us" — Muslims who are marginalized and — "them" — the secular and pro-Westernization elites. The Imam Hatip code of morality taught to students is informed by an imagined trauma laid bare by the impact of the Kemalist reforms, which could only be confronted by intense nostalgia for an imagined Golden Age of Islam. This sense of nostalgia, ironically a product of Sultan Abdulhamid II's modernist reforms in the late 19th century and later reinforced by the Kemalist disruption, nourished and expanded the moral imagination of Imam Hatip students like Erdoğan.

The Imam Hatip youth of the 1970s were committed to overthrowing the secular political order. They were taught to consider Turkey as part of *dar al-harb* (the house of war), a designation in Islamic jurisprudence usually attached to non-Muslim lands at war with Muslim states. Given that the state was not Islamic, the youth understood that they would have to fight to achieve the right Islamic state and political order. They were motivated by their teachers to be religious, not just by way of engaging in Islamic rituals but also by being successful at their chosen professions and accumulating wealth and social standing. Such students often justified breaking the law and corrupt practices such as cheating at exams or avoiding paying tax because they believed they were working for a higher good. In their eyes, these actions become morally permissible as part of the wider struggle between Islamic and non-Islamic citizenry. Many of these young

Islamists had middle- and lower-middle-class family backgrounds, and their resentment and rage suggested a major socioeconomic dimension to the growing Islamic movement, the frustration of which was expressed in Islamic rhetoric. When cross-fertilized with the leftist struggle and anti-capitalist sentiments it created a potent reactionary force in Turkish politics, of which Erdoğan is the current expression. Today the AKP and the MB share many characteristics. They both reject the separation of the public and private spheres and regard as their goal the Islamization of the public sphere with a gradualist, bottom-up approach. The AKP and the MB contend that the current regimes in the Middle East are puppets of the West and non-Islamic. They also endorse an illiberal version of democracy where the aim is to game the system and win at any cost. The origins of today's AKP-MB alliance, therefore, have their roots in the evolving nature of the Turkish Islamic movement and the ideology of Imam Hatip schools.

Although both Erdoğan and the MB share a broad vision inspired by a certain understanding of Islam, there remain important differences. Erdoğan does not appear to favor the implementation of Sharia Law, a question that is settled in his mind: he has said that he hopes the new Egyptian regime and constitution will be secular, adding that while he personally is a Muslim, the nation that he heads is secular, emphasizing that secularism is no “enemy of religion”⁽⁵⁾, while in MB organizations the issue still resonates as a priority. Moreover, Erdoğan is a distinctly Turkish-Islamist nationalist with his role model less the early period of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula (as it is for the MB) than the classical age of the Ottoman Empire. Identifying as neo-Ottomanists, the AKP elite regard the fall of the caliphate as a political catastrophe for Turkey because it meant a loss of influence in the Muslim world. Erdoğan does not seek military conquest like his Ottoman forefathers, but rather the Muslim countries' political, economic, and cultural cooperation, with Turkey playing the leading role and gaining the lion's share of the benefits. While the MB are not ideologically wedded to this neo-Ottoman fantasy, they do support the revival of the spirit of the Ottoman Empire as part of a broad neo-Islamic revivalism. The MB's founding leader, Hasan Al-Banna, vehemently attacked Atatürk's reforms, especially the decision to abolish the

(5) Nimrod Goren, “If only Morsi had listened to Erdoğan.” *Hurriyet Daily News*, August 29, 2013, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/if-only-morsi-had-listened-to-erdogan-53409>; “Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood criticizes Erdoğan's call for a secular state.” *Al Arabiya News*, September 14, 2011. <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/09/14/166814.html>.

Caliphate, because it symbolized Muslim unity and a direct connection to the seventh-century state established by the Prophet Muhammad⁽⁶⁾. Despite these differences, the AKP and the MB did share one important social characteristic: both espoused the middle-class values of probity and self-improvement, and laid claim to family-friendly “respectable” politics. The social commonality of the AKP and the MB reinforced the ideological glue that existed between them, namely the idea that Islam is not only a faith but also a framework for organizing the state and society and a source of identity that is separate, and, in many ways antithetic to the West. To serve Islam, a vanguard of professionally successful and politically savvy Islamic activists must desecularize society and unite Muslims behind a powerful polity. This shared core foundational belief shared between the AKP and the MB helped to paper over any differences in outlook between the two traditions and to establish a long-term program of cooperation.

Erdoğan’s neo-Ottoman vision

While ideology may have brought Erdoğan and the MB closer together, it is Erdoğan’s goal of restructuring the Middle East that has created the terms for actual partnership with the MB. Erdoğan’s regional vision is informed by deep resentment of the post-World War I political order. In his early political indoctrination, Erdoğan was influenced by Necmettin Erbakan’s National Outlook Movement, which criticized the Kemalists for abandoning Turkey’s historic rights in the region. Erbakan preached that the West had only allowed Turkey to become an independent state in return for dismantling its Muslim identity. He also saw Turkey’s current borders, as well as those of neighbouring states, as “colonial inventions.” This line of thinking paved the way for his adoption of a more radical idea: that the entire state-system in the region was skewed against Turkey, and that Turkish secularism was primarily a concession to the West that could and should be reversed.

Erdoğan’s foreign policy on the Middle East region is based on four main assumptions. The first is that the source of the problems in the region was the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the formation of the Sykes-Picot borders, and the following installation of client regimes by the

(6) Richard P. Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 220.

colonial powers, with the states in the region artificial constructs that do not represent Muslim interests. Second, the only effective integrative force is political Islam. The region can only come together based on Islamic identity and not ethnicity through the work of Islam-inspired political parties such as the MB. Third, the current governments of the Middle East, especially the oil-rich monarchies in the Gulf, are the biggest problem barring reintegration of the region under Turkish leadership, as they function as garrisons of Western interests to perpetuate twenty-first-century colonialism. Fourth, the issue of Palestine exemplifies the worst possible outcome of the collapse of the Ottoman order. In a speech on July 11 2020, Erdoğan said: “The resurrection of Hagia Sophia heralds the liberation of Al-Aqsa Mosque”⁽⁷⁾. For Erdoğan and Turkish Islamists generally, the Palestinian issue is the “shame of the *ummah*,” symptomatic of the abject failure and treachery of Arab governments.

What constitutes a nation is key to understanding how Erdoğan defines Turkey’s interests. To his mind, Turkey is a Muslim nation whose interests are defined by its Islamic identity. His foreign policy is an expression of his political identity as a Turkish Islamist: he equates the conservative voter base that supports him to the true Turkish nation and regards secular Turkish opponents as alien to this imagined community. Erdoğan wants Turkey to become an autonomous and distinctly Muslim regional power pursuing its own interests, independent of those of the West, and sees only himself, his party, and his supporters as embodying that national will.

Like the MB, Erdoğan’s conception of Islam is not that of the universalist values of justice, mercy, and tolerance. For him, Islam is an instrument of mass mobilization, a useful shield to cover his kleptocratic and authoritarian practices, and a soft-power tool for enhancing Turkey’s position in the Muslim world. His Islam is historical, nationalist, and the basis of a form of supremacist thinking that fits neatly on top of the hypernationalism that already exists among many non-metropolitan Turks. It is an imperial Islam of which the Turks were and still are the masters. From Erdoğan’s perspective, Islam only reached its zenith and became a global force in the hands of Turks; his Islam is a heavily Turkified Islam, a practical Islam that is

(7) Seth J. Frantzman, “Turkey Vows to ‘Liberate Al-Aqsa’ after Turning Hagia Sophia to Mosque,” *JPOST*, July 20, 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/turkey-vows-to-liberate-al-aqsa-after-turning-hagia-sophia-to-mosque-634700>.

inseparable from the Turkish experience. As heir to the Ottoman Empire, the modern Turkish republic has the legitimate claim and right to reshape the Middle East today in the interests of the *ummah*⁽⁸⁾. To realize this ambitious regional goal, one of the main tools at Erdoğan's disposal is the MB, the most organized form of opposition to the Sykes-Picot regimes.

Turkey's pan-Islamic legitimacy

Despite the cleavages in Turkish society, it is the Islamists who are now the ruling elite in Turkey. This elite has been able to bend state institutions to its will and instrumentalize the state to further its ideological agenda. One of Erdoğan's main goals is to enhance Turkey's international standing, along with his own reputation, as the protector of Muslims from oppression the world over. He expects that this reputation will ultimately result in Turkey becoming the legitimate leader of a billion Muslims—a role that is part and parcel of the neo-Ottoman fantasy⁽⁹⁾. Erdoğan refuses to acknowledge that secular-minded Turks do not support such a role and that Turkey's weak economy cannot keep up with his expansionism. Indeed, key state institutions, including elements of the military and intelligence services as well as some of his own former colleagues, are reluctant to go along with his grand designs, given what they know about the risks of overreach⁽¹⁰⁾.

Taking a leaf from Erdoğan's playbook, the MB has similarly sought to capture power and utilize the instruments of the state to further its ideological aims. It has a notable presence in nearly every Muslim majority state from Malaysia to Morocco and from Turkey to Yemen. However, opposition to the MB's Islamist project is strong. In Egypt, the MB president, Mohamed Morsi, was ousted in 2013 after just a year in power. Influential states such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE have put considerable effort into confronting and rolling back the MB's influence. Despite their extensive presence and many decades of agitation, it is only in Turkey (and to a lesser extent Qatar) that the MB has managed to establish an important state-backed presence.

(8) "Ottoman Redux: Turkey is Wielding Influence All Over the Arab World," *The Economist*, August 1, 2020, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2020/08/01/turkey-is-wielding-influence-all-over-the-arab-world>.

(9) M. Hakan Yavuz, *Nostalgia for the Empire: The politics of Neo-Ottomanism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

(10) Yohanan Benhaïm, and Kerem Öktem, "The Rise and Fall of Turkey's Soft Power Discourse: Discourse in Foreign Policy Under Davutođlu and Erdoğan," *European journal of Turkish studies*, (2015), <https://journals.openedition.org/ejts/5275>; see also the statement by Nihat Ali Özcan, a leading military and foreign policy analyst in Turkey, in *The Economist*, 2020.

In choosing to give the MB a haven from which to operate, Erdoğan made not only an ideologically informed choice but also a geostrategic one. There are several factors at play here: the transnational MB network offers Turkey the opportunity for immense leverage should MB parties, nurtured and promoted in Turkey, return to power in their home countries⁽¹¹⁾. The post-Arab Spring initially succeeded in that regard, as Turkey was immediately able to deepen its relations with Egypt and Tunisia when Islamist parties were elected there. But even if those MB parties do not return to power, they will remain as the backbone of the opposition in many countries, allowing Turkey to continue to interfere in those countries' internal affairs⁽¹²⁾.

There is also the more immediate issue of manpower. Erdoğan regards MB members as his “soldiers”, and often this is meant literally. He has taken several concrete steps to raise a new generation of Arabs who are trained and educated at Turkish institutions and work for the advancement of Turkish interests. For example the Turkish Army has two Arabic-speaking units, totaling 1,500 soldiers. The command level is entirely staffed by Turks but the middle and lower ranks contain several hundred Syrian Arabs as well as Turkomans, many of whom currently serve in Libya⁽¹³⁾. Turkey has also resorted to private security firms who mainly hire Syrians via MB networks to augment those integrated Arab units in the army. Moreover, interviews with government officials confirmed that Turkish military academies have for the first time recruited 60 Arabs to study at the Army College, 15 at the Gendarmerie College, 10 at the Naval Academy and 5 at the Air Force College. The majority are Syrians granted

(11) Tariq Ramadan, “Democratic Turkey is the Template for Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood.” *Huffington Post*, February 8, 2011, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tariq-ramadan/post_1690_b_820366.html; Frankie Martin, “Turkey Can Model Democracy for the Arab World,” *CNN Opinion*, February 16, 2011, <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/OPINION/02/16/martin.egypt.turkey/index.html>; Benjamin Harvey, Gregory Viscusi, and Massoud Darhally, “Arabs Battling Repression see Erdogan’s Muslim Democracy as Model.” *Bloomberg News*, February 4, 2011, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-02-04/arabs-battling-regimes-see-erdogan-smuslim-democracy-inturkey-as-model.html>; “Muslim Brotherhood Debates Turkey Model,” *Hürriyet Daily News*, September 14, 2011, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=muslim-brotherhood-debates-turkey-model-2011-09-14>; “Egypt’s Islamists warn Turkish PM over regional role,” *Reuters*, September 14, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/09/14/us-turkey-egypt-idUSTRE78D2TD20110914>; Hassan Abou Taleb, “Following the Turkish model or forging our own?” *Ahram Online*, September 19, 2011, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContentP/4/21638/Opinion/Following-the-Turkish-model-or-forging-our-own.aspx>.

(12) Several websites in Turkey report developments about MB developments, for example: www.haksozhaber.net/müslüman-kardeşler-haberleri.htm.

(13) “300 Pro-Turkey Syrian Rebels Sent to Libya to Support UN-Backed Gov’t: Watchdog,” *Xinhuanet*, December 29, [Xinhuanet](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-12/29/c_138664951.htm), http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-12/29/c_138664951.htm; for further analysis of Turkish troops in Libya, see: “Turkey Wades into Libya’s Troubled Waters,” *Crisis Group*, April 30, 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-centralasia/western-europemediterranean/turkey/257-turkey-wades-libyas-troubled-waters>.

Turkish citizenship, as well as 35 Libyans, 10 Egyptians and 4 Yemenis. The Egyptians are all sons of MB members who live in Turkey. The Turkish intelligence agency, MIT, has for the first time created a separate department dedicated to monitoring and analyzing Arab World issues, the *Orta Dogu Arastirma ve Guvenlik Dairesi* (Middle East Research and Security Department), and has begun to target Arab university graduates, particularly those from MB backgrounds whose political loyalty can be counted upon. Allowing MB members into the armed forces and the intelligence service carries risks, but Turkey's political ambition and its lack of native Arabic speakers necessitates recruiting large numbers of naturalized Arabs for the day-to-day legwork. This means relying on MB networks in Turkey to plug the manpower shortage.

There is a third and perhaps more consequential benefit for Turkey in hosting the MB: the enhancement of Turkey's Islamic legitimacy. This is an acute issue for Erdoğan. Waddah Khanfar, a Palestinian living between Doha and Istanbul and carrying Turkish and Qatari passports, is a leading member of the MB who believes that Erdoğan is the only Muslim leader with the potential to create unity among Muslims. He heads Arabicpost.net and is the owner and founder of the Al-Sharq Forum. He said:

In a country with strong religious symbolism such as Saudi Arabia, religion serves an important function in the legitimization of authority. However, the religious foundation of the Saudi state, as manifested by Wahhabi ideals, is losing potency rapidly, especially with the reforms led by Mohammed Bin Salman. However, the fact that Saudi Arabia is distancing itself from Wahhabism while not looking for an alternative religious discourse from other schools has enticed Turkey to deepen its support for the MB, especially as the group embodies a rival religious ideology that challenges the legitimacy of other regional players not only in Saudi Arabia but also Iran, and that follows the minority Twelver Shiite doctrine. Turkey regards the MB as a source of influence by which to expand its own power⁽¹⁴⁾.

(14) Interview with Khanfar, Istanbul, July 1, 2020.

Yasin Aktay, Erdoğan’s advisor, said about the MB and its cooperation with the AKP that:

The MB is the only grassroots movement in the Arab world. It is a type of movement that moderates and radicalizes itself alternately, according to the changing circumstances. It is flexible enough to accommodate modernity, while Wahhabism and Twelver Shiism are rigid and isolationist. For us here in Turkey, having these networks means having hard and soft power that can be mobilized against governments and promote Turkey’s national interests⁽¹⁵⁾.

Finally, there is the issue of democracy. By supporting the MB, Erdoğan can position himself as an implacable enemy of military dictatorships and a champion of democracy in the Arab world. He calculates that he is supporting a group that is not only like-minded but also able to win democratic elections and gain power, just as the AKP and previous Islamist parties have done in Turkey since the early 1960s⁽¹⁶⁾. At the same time, unlike the European Union and other Western allies who incessantly criticize Turkey for the deterioration of its democratic climate, the MB is preoccupied with procedural democracy—meaning coming to office through a popular vote without the implied commitment to a pluralistic and inclusive agenda. The implication of this half-hearted commitment to democracy is access to high political office without necessarily compromising on political power afterwards. A verbal nod to democracy and free speech in places such as Egypt and the Gulf allows Erdoğan to position himself as a promoter of democracy and gain both Islamic *and* democratic legitimacy while portraying his rivals in the region as unelected elites disrupting the democratic process through coups and wars.

The Turkish-Qatari axis

As Erdoğan managed to strengthen the Turkish economy from 2002 to 2013, he also began pursuing a more assertive and often unilateral foreign policy. He sent troops to Syria, Iraq and Libya, and developed close ties with Russia against the wishes of NATO. This aggressiveness

(15) Interview with Aktay, Ankara, July 16, 2020; see also: “Yasin Aktay: İhvan’ı dışlamak İŞİD’e götürür,” *DUVAR*, July 3, 2017, <https://www.gazeteduvar.com.tr/dunya/2017/07/03/yasin-aktay-ihvani-dislamak-isiide-goturur/>; Yasin Aktay, “İhvan İçin 90 yılın muhasebesi,” *Yeni Safak*, April 2, 2018, <https://www.yenisafak.com/yazarlar/yasinaktay/ihvan-icin-90-yilin-muhasebesi-2045091>.

(16) Bethan McKernan, “How Istanbul Won Back Its Crown as Heart of the Muslim World,” *The Guardian*, April 18, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/18/how-istanbul-won-back-its-crown-as-heart-of-the-muslim-world>.

was a result of the regional scramble for influence that followed the Arab Spring, which shook the regional order to its foundations and offered those wishing to expand their influence, such as Turkey and Iran, the opportunity to do so. Erdoğan supported nearly every MB-led movement in the Middle East, including in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Sudan and Syria⁽¹⁷⁾.

His ambition to restore a new Islamic order under his own leadership is helped along by his only other state ally in the region, Qatar. The chaos created by the Arab Spring resulted in the emergence of two competing axes: Turkey-Qatar (sometimes also including Iran), and Saudi-UAE-Egypt. With the collapse of the Arab Spring, these two axes fueled a regional conflict in which Turkey continues to be a major player. The tension between the two axes is based on competing visions of the role of political Islam in the Middle East. The Saudi-UAE-Egypt axis regards political Islam as a threat to local and regional security and sees Islamist movements as deeply destabilizing. It is also concerned about Iran's expansionist policies and political Shi'ism, and support for MB parties in places like Egypt, Tunisia, and Gaza. The Turkish-Qatari axis, meanwhile, regards political Islam as a way of empowering society and an indigenous social force that can play a positive role in strengthening national and regional stability. The former axis sees the clash as a seminal one within the Islamic fold, while the latter believes in a version of the clash of civilizations, with Islam pitted against the West. Turkey seeks to occupy the moral high ground in this regional rivalry by supporting the MB and championing oppressed Muslims in places such as Kashmir, Crimea, Myanmar, and especially Palestine.

With the two axes in place, Erdoğan positioned himself as a shining knight, able and willing to rescue governments that were feeling bullied by the Saudi-UAE-Egypt alliance. In June 2017 Turkey sent troops to protect Qatar, after which Qatar's relationship with Turkey increasingly took on an existential dimension as Erdoğan leveraged military assistance to the tiny emirate to further co-opt it into his neo-Ottoman designs. Policymakers around Erdoğan believe that Turkey's relationship with Qatar will help it become a regional hegemon, not only because Qatar

(17) Gurpınar Bulut, "Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood: Crossing Roads in Syria," 2015, <https://eurasianpublications.com/Eurasian-Journal-of-Social-Sciences/Vol.3-No.4-2015-3.pdf>.

can bail Turkey out financially, as it did in the lira crisis in 2018⁽¹⁸⁾, but by also giving it access to the “Arab street.” In other words, Turkey cannot fully realize its regional ambitions without an alliance with influential groups in the Arab world that have the ability to rally public opinion in favor of Ankara. Thanks to its formidable media machine, Qatar can do this.

As well as significant interest in the construction and energy sectors and a distaste for Saudi Arabia and its allies, Turkey and Qatar share one other policy prescription: they both see the MB as a useful tool. One of the longstanding connections between Erdoğan and the Qatari leadership is their fondness for Yusuf al-Qaradawi, an Egyptian MB cleric who lives in Doha. He is perhaps one of the most famous clerics in the Muslim world, thanks to *Sharia and Life*, a weekly fatwa program on Al Jazeera on which he was a permanent guest⁽¹⁹⁾. In a direct challenge to clerical institutions such as Al-Azhar in Egypt and the Council of Senior Scholars in Saudi Arabia, Qaradawi heads the Doha-based International Union of Muslim Scholars, a global organization that claims supreme religious authority over Muslims worldwide. Qaradawi calls Erdoğan “the Sultan” and a defender of Islam and the *ummah*⁽²⁰⁾. He is widely regarded by MB insiders as a godfather figure who can convert his influence with the Qatari leadership into cash. Although Qatar disbanded its indigenous MB organization in 1999⁽²¹⁾, the government continues to support MB movements outside of Qatar and is widely considered the biggest financial contributor to the group to date⁽²²⁾. As this study shows, MB networks in Istanbul comprise only one side of a three-sided operation that includes Turkey, which provides the space, and Qatar, which provides the funding.

(18) “Qatar Defies US and Sides with Turkey with \$15bn Investment Pledge Amid Lira Crisis,” *Arab News*, August 16, 2018, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1357106/middle-east>.

(19) Bettina Graff and Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen, *Global Mufti: The Phenomenon of Yusuf al-Qaradawi*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

(20) “Qaradawi: Thanks to Turkey and to President Erdoğan,” *IUMS [International Union of Muslim Scholars] Online*, April 23, 2016, <http://www.iumsonline.org/en/ContentDetails.aspx?ID=6176>.

(21) Eric Trager, “The Muslim Brotherhood is the Root of the Qatar Crisis,” *The Atlantic*, July 2, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/07/muslim-brotherhood-qatar/532380/>.

(22) David Roberts, “Qatar, the Ikhwan, and Transnational Relations in the Gulf,” *Project on Middle East Political Science*, March 9, 2014, <https://pomeps.org/2014/03/18/qatar-the-ikhwan-and-transnational-relations-in-the-gulf/#fn5>; Ahmed Azem, “Qatar’s Ties with the Muslim Brotherhood Affect Entire Region,” *The National*, May 18, 2012, <https://www.thenational.ae/qatar-s-ties-with-the-muslim-brotherhood-affect-entire-region-1.408742>.

MB Media Networks in Istanbul

The Egyptian MB organization was dealt a big blow by the Rabia Square incident in August 2013. Under threat of arrest, MB leaders and activists were forced to flee Egypt *en masse*. Given Qatar's anti-Sisi position, many fled there and were initially welcomed, but several factors made the Qataris change their mind about hosting them: Qatar already had an Egyptian migrant worker population of around 300,000, and adding a large number of angry and well-organized Islamists threatened the emirate's internal stability. The position of other Gulf states proved another obstacle: in 2014, Saudi and Emirati officials gave the Qatari authorities a list of MB members whom they wanted expelled from Qatar, and most of the MB members who had arrived in the country were told to find alternative sanctuary⁽²³⁾. Today most of the remaining members of the Freedom and Justice Party, the pro-MB party now outlawed in Egypt, live in Istanbul.

Istanbul offered the MB an environment in which it could do as it pleased⁽²⁴⁾. An Egyptian working for the Turkish Anatolian News Agency, said that "Istanbul has provided Arabs and Muslims the opportunity to meet face to face and freely share their experiences, hopes and visions. Most importantly, we can organize and have an impact on back home."⁽²⁵⁾ In Istanbul, Islamists have managed to create a new public space with their newspapers, TV channels, news websites, publishing houses, schools and think tanks, all of which operate with unprecedented freedom and little to no interference from the authorities. The group of MB-linked Egyptian opposition figures and activists that have settled in Istanbul include Ayman Noor, leader of the Ghad al-Thawra Party; Tarek El-Zomor, former chairman of the Egyptian Al-Benaa Wa-l-Tanmiya Party; Muhammad Sultan, an activist; Amr Darrag, Muhammad Mahsub and Yehia Hamed, all former Egyptian ministers; Hamza Zawbaa, TV anchor, and the political activist Magda Refaa.

As well as granting them the freedom to organize and agitate, the Turkish state has gone further, offering many MB members Turkish citizenship⁽²⁶⁾. Those known to have received Turkish

(23) Louisa Loveluck, Qatar asks Muslim Brotherhood Members to Leave Country," *The Telegraph*, September 13, 2014, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/qatar/11094442/Qatar-asks-Muslim-Brotherhood-membersto-leave-country.html> Sept. 13 2014.

(24) "An Arab Haven in Turkey: Why Dissidents are Gathering in Istanbul," *The Economist*, October 11, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2018/10/11/why-dissidents-are-gathering-in-istanbul>, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2018/10/11/why-dissidents-are-gathering-in-istanbul>.

(25) "Interview, Istanbul, July 13, 2020."

(26) Interview with an MB-linked figure, Istanbul, July 14, 2020.

citizenship include the MB's (former?) Secretary-General, Mahmoud Hussein; a radical MB preacher, Wagdi Ghoneim; a former assistant to Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Essam Talima; the leader of the pro-MB National Alliance, Jamal Abdel Sattar; a leading MB figure, Ashraf Badr Eddin; and a former minister, Amr Darraj. According to Turkish government officials the decision to grant them citizenship was prompted by the MB's concern about their members' future should there be a government change in Turkey. In an interview with the Deputy Governor of Istanbul on July 11, 2020, he confirmed that Erdoğan had agreed to their citizenship request to secure their stay and attract MB investment in the Turkish economy. Turkey went as far as allowing many to adopt new identities, as MB members stated⁽²⁷⁾. A leading member of the MB revealed that only a small minority who had moved to Istanbul had moved on to settle elsewhere, most notably Muhammad Sultan, who now lives in the US, and Muhammad Mahsub, who has moved to France⁽²⁸⁾.

According to MB members, leaving Qatar to settle in Turkey rejuvenated the organization's media operations. The relative freedom afforded to them in Turkey has allowed them to establish their own satellite TV channels and social media platforms, at the top of which are Mekameleen TV, Al Sharq TV, Watan TV, and Rassd News Network. As the funding comes mainly from Qatar, these outlets support the Qatari and, to a great extent, the Turkish official line. The following section maps the MB's media outlets based in Istanbul.

1- Mekameleen TV

Mekameleen TV is a pro-MB TV channel based in Istanbul. Its founder is Azzam al-Tamimi, a British-Palestinian media executive based in London with long-established MB ties. The general manager is Ahmed al-Shanaf, an Egyptian media expert. Among the senior executives are Amr al-Nadri, head of programming; Amr Tawfiq, head of news; and Ahmed al-Nahri, who heads the technical department.

The popular shows on Mekameleen TV include *With Zawba*, hosted by Hamza Zawba, a former spokesperson for the pro-MB Freedom and Justice Party. The focus of Zawba's programme is

(27) Interview, Istanbul, July 17, 2020.

(28) Interview, Istanbul, July 14, 2020.

political analysis and it is broadcast for an hour each day, five times a week. Another popular program is *Egypt Today*, hosted by Muhammad Nasser, which airs for two to three hours a day, six days a week. The show discusses political, economic, and social development in Egypt. An employee of Mekameleen TV said that the program has access to an active underground MB network in Egypt that provides the show with a flow of information⁽²⁹⁾. The Egyptian authorities say that they are trying to stop this flow of information⁽³⁰⁾.

Mekameleen TV was established in 2013 by the first wave of media professionals arriving from Egypt, who were later joined by colleagues who had left Qatar. Mekameleen translates as “continuing”. Initially, it was a clear indication of the intention to continue the Egyptian revolution, this time against Sisi, until Morsi is restored as the legitimate president. However, it now is widely believed to mean the continuation of the revolution until the country rids itself of military rule. The channel describes itself as “a national, Egyptian, youth and political channel from the heart of Cairo and all the world’s squares.”

Mekameleen’s central message has developed over two stages. The first focused on a largely MB audience and concentrated on fermenting revolution on the streets with the aim of overthrowing President Sisi post-2013. It emphasized human rights violations by the military regime, with heavy use of religious and ideological discourses to convey an Islamist revolutionary message. Even though Egypt was politically polarized, the channel made no effort to open to the full spectrum of Egyptian society.

The second stage marks a shift from a revolutionary strategy to political realism. From mid-2016 onwards, the channel’s MB founders had to concede that President Sisi’s removal was not a realistic goal and that the revolution would not be accomplished within a space of weeks or months but would be a long-term struggle that might continue for years or even decades. The channel called on people to have a long-term project for change and began to appeal to a cross section of Egyptians besides those who supported the MB. Mekameleen TV began focusing

(29) Interview, Istanbul, July 12, 2020.

(30) “In pics: Terrorist cell arrested in Alexandria over ‘fabricated videos’ on Egypt,” *Egypt Today*, July 23, 2020, <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/90026/In-pics-Terrorist-cell-arrested-in-Alexandria-over-fabricated-videos>.

more on everyday issues that concerned citizens, such as the state of the economy and the Renaissance Dam crisis with Ethiopia.

A Mukameleen employee said that this shift had something to do with the experience of living in Turkey and the MB's ongoing relationship with AKP officials⁽³¹⁾. Parallels can be drawn between the current situation in Egypt and Turkey's recent past, when the military frequently interfered in politics and overthrew elected governments. Some members of the MB in Istanbul believe they can learn from Turkey's experience about how to take on and defeat the military by building a broad-based coalition front. The enthusiastic and somewhat extremist language adopted in Mekameleen's early days gave way to a nationalist, civil-society-friendly discourse of freedom and equality for all, with calls for opposition parties to unite against the military regime regardless of ideology. In part, this change reflects the strategy of the MB organization as a whole *vis-à-vis* the well-entrenched government in Cairo.

2- Al-Sharq TV

The founder of Al-Sharaq TV is Ayman Nour, a well-known Egyptian politician and lawyer known for his close ties with the MB. He ran against Hosni Mubarak in the 2005 presidential election, capturing 7.3% of the votes⁽³²⁾. Although Nour is a liberal figure, almost the whole of his network in Istanbul is composed of members or associates of the MB, including most of the channel's staff. The general manager of the channel is Ahmed Abdouh, an MB member. The signature program on Al-Sharq is *With Motaz*, hosted by Motaz Matar, one of the most widely viewed shows in the Middle East. Matar, lives in Istanbul and holds Turkish citizenship.

The channel initially faced difficulties with calibrating its messaging at a time when Egyptian society was so polarized, with little space for moderate and liberal voices opposing Morsi's ousting. Al-Sharq has never advocated violence, nor has it been drawn into using the kind of extremist religious discourse that Mekameleen TV employed in its first two years. The liberal

(31) Interview, Istanbul, July 15, 2020.

(32) Brian Whitaker, "Mubarak wins 88% of Egyptian votes," *Irish Times*, September 10, 2005, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/mubarak-wins-88-of-egyptian-votes-1.490749>.

values of Al-Sharq TV are further evident in the language of its news bulletins, which avoid the Islamist lexicon, and the attire of its female presenters, who do not wear the traditional *hijab* head covering.

Nour has adopted a diplomatic approach in his dealings with the MB, balancing the good relations he enjoys with the West with continuing to align closely with the MB and its allies. Because of its liberal leanings, Al-Sharq TV serves as a secular fig leaf for the MB organization. Instead of critiquing the MB's record in office and subsequent militancy in the post-Morsi period, Al-Sharq treats the MB with kid gloves, ensuring that it is rarely subjected to the kind of scrutiny that is meted out to the Sisi government. This is important for the MB, whose strategy is to remain at the center of the Egyptian opposition and to stop other opposition parties coalescing around an alternative, non-MB platform. Although Nour stopped short of calling for Morsi's restoration to the presidency—a key policy distinguisher from the MB—his goal is still to get Islamists to align with secular political groups and to set aside past differences for the purpose of unifying the opposition. If Mekameleen's aping of Al-Sharq's nationalist and civil society narrative is an indication, Nour would seem to be supporting the MB's new strategy for rehabilitation and an eventual return to power under a broad opposition front, in a repetition of the Tahrir Square event.

3- Rassd News Network

Rassd is an organized citizen news network established and run by MB members. Its name is derived from three Arabic words: *raqib* (observe), *sawwir* (record) and *dawwin* (blog). The founders of the Rassd network are Anas Hassan, Amr Farraj, Amr Al-Qazaz and Khalid Fahim. Rassd was established at the end of 2010 to cover the Egyptian parliamentary elections, but quickly built up a reputation for uncovering corruption scandals in Egypt's political system. Thanks to its social media platforms the network was able to continue broadcasting during both the 2011 revolution and the 2013 removal of Morsi despite media blackouts. Rassd prides itself on its capacity to deliver breaking news documented in photos and videos, which amplify its credibility as a first-hand observer at the scene. It is almost completely dependent upon Facebook, where it has 13 million followers, with a further 2 million on other social media platforms.

The network's messaging has evolved in three stages. The first was marked by anti-Mubarak agitation, with an emphasis on scandals and police brutality. The Tunisian revolution helped to bring it into Egypt's living rooms with the message that if the Tunisians could do it, so could they. Once Morsi won the presidency the second phase kicked in: unequivocally support for the MB government. The network did nothing to mitigate the mushrooming of political and social polarization during the Morsi era. The third stage of the network's message can be described as a return to revolution. Until July 2013, the network, like the MB, was fully confident of the army's support for Morsi. When Morsi was removed from office by the Egyptian army the network immediately reverted to a pro-revolution outlet stance calling for anti-Sisi demonstrations. Given its current base of operations, Rassd strongly supports Turkey's military intervention in Libya while denouncing President Sisi's support for Khalifa Hifter. The network has also devoted considerable effort to including anti-Saudi content, with the Saudi Crown Prince a favorite target.

It might be facile to generalize Rassd's audience as principally MB, but there is no doubt that the organization fully funded it and helped it to draw in massive numbers of followers. Other considerations such as the shuttering of public opinion platforms in Egypt create a captive audience for the network's anti-government message. Rassd remains a wholly MB-controlled outlet. Sensitive issues, however, such as internal Brotherhood disputes or orchestrated acts of violence against the Egyptian government, are only addressed in the format that MB leaders of the organization's traditional wing find acceptable. This has antagonized some of the network's founders, who have outgrown both the network and the MB. Anas Hassan has left Rassd and the MB and is now employed by Al-Jazeera to head its Midan platform.⁽³³⁾ Amr Farraj has also left after radical differences with the group's leadership on political messaging, and is believed to have sought asylum in Sweden after leaving the group entirely.

4- Watan TV (formerly Egypt Now)

As an official MB satellite TV channel, Watan TV exclusively represents the interests of the MB and is run by its members. The founder of Watan Network is Islam Akl and its general

(33) <https://www.aljazeera.net/midan>.

director is Musaad Al-Barbary. Funding for the channel comes from MB members, as well as from Kuwaiti-based MB networks, although in their interviews, the people running these entities insisted that their funding comes from Qatar, and to some extent from Kuwait. The network is not allowed to criticize the Islamist group's policies, whether on the channel or via their personal social media accounts. The original channel's message was of support for Morsi's legitimate election, even when other pro-MB channels such as Mekemleen TV had given up on that goal. Since the death of the former president in June 2019 the staff have been unable to define a coherent message besides general opposition to President Al-Sisi's military rule. The network is hampered by internal personnel disputes, which may well have affected its ability to develop sophisticated programming.

Watan TV offers a mixture of cookery, history and family-friendly content. Its exclusively political shows do not seem to receive the same level of attention as those of the other TV channels discussed above. When it does address political issues it tends to be ideologically driven, with little to no interest in presenting an objective view of the news. While Watan TV sees Mekameleen TV as its competitor for an MB-friendly audience, its output is far less sophisticated, reflecting the channel's primary mission to strengthen the core organization. By employing a cadre of MB media activists, it helps fly the flag for the official MB brand while keeping dozens of MB members and their families in salaried employment.

5- The New Arab and Al-Araby TV

The New Arab newspaper and Al-Araby TV are the crown jewels in Azmi Beshara's Qatar-funded media empire. Beshara is an Arab Christian, a former member of Knesset and a close adviser of Qatar's ruler, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani. He is the director of the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, and the Chair of the Board of Trustees of the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies. He also advises the Turkish Foreign Ministry on Arab affairs.

The New Arab is owned by UK-registered Fadaat Media Ltd., whose CEO is Abdulrahman Elshayyal, a London-based British Egyptian with close ties to the MB. It was launched in March 2014 as an online news website and went on to print copies in Istanbul, Beirut and London. It now operates globally, with more than 150 staff in four offices, the Istanbul office

being the largest in terms of employees. In January 2015, Fadaat Media Ltd. launched Al-Araby TV, a network seen as a counterweight to Al Jazeera. The acting editor-in-chief of *The New Arab* is Husam Kanafani, a Lebanese journalist who previously worked for *Al-Akhbar*, a newspaper considered to have close ties with Hezbollah. The head of Al-Araby TV is Abbas Nasser, a former Al Jazeera correspondent from Lebanon who made his reputation cheerleading for the terror group during the 2006 Israeli-Hezbollah war.

Beshara likes to think of himself as an enlightened, left-leaning Arab nationalist who believes in democracy and secularism while bearing no hostility toward Islam. His media empire, which includes a number of regional websites and TV channels, is meant to typify what he calls a “third way”, being neither Islamist nor supportive of strongman regimes but somewhere in the middle, with a sprinkling of anti-US, anti-Israeli, pro-*muqawama* rhetoric. His cachet with the rulers of Qatar has increased in recent years, due in part to the MB’s failures in Egypt, Libya and Syria, and rising voices close to the current emir in Doha urging greater reliance on secularist voices in the media war against Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt. For this, Qatar, via Beshara, has co-opted pro-Iran and Arab Left voices, as well as those of some ex-MB, in an eclectic mix of TV channels, newspapers and think tanks whose sole unifying goal is their hostility to the enemies of Qatar.

Having such an ideologically diverse group of journalists working for the same media group has led to embarrassments for Beshara. In one case, the head of one of his Istanbul-based regional channels, Syria TV,⁽³⁴⁾ was forced by pressure from Turkey to resign after a comedy show presenter mocked Turkey’s policy in Syria.⁽³⁵⁾ More recently, an employee at *The New Arab* was strongly attacked on social media by MB members after he poked fun at Erdoğan following the Hagia Sofia church’s conversion into a mosque.⁽³⁶⁾ Beshara is not considered pro-AKP by any measure, and his relationship with Turkey is based on Doha’s alliance with Ankara rather than his own fondness for Erdoğan’s pro-Ottoman policies. Nevertheless, his media empire is vast and represents a key node in the wider Turkish-Qatari agitation machine.

(34) <https://www.syria.tv/>.

(35) www.almodon.com/media/2019/4/29/استقالة-أنس-أزرق-من-إدارة-تلفزيون-سوريا/ Accessed August 26, 2020.

(36) <https://www.amad.ps/ar/post/361295>.

Like Ayman Nour, he has had to reach an accommodation with the MB. In Bashara's case, this involved appointing malleable, "open-minded" MB members and associates to key positions in his organization, which is also exactly what he does with groups such as Hezbollah. In doing so he buys immunity for Qatar, as it ensures that whatever disagreements the MB or Iran have with him or with Doha, the fallout can always be contained.

6- *The Arabic Post*

The Arabic Post is an online website providing news and in-depth analysis. It also covers entertainment, sports and cultural news. Its founder is Waddah Khanfar, the Palestinian former director-general of Al Jazeera and an MB member with close ties to Hamas. He is also a member of the International Crisis Group's Board of Trustees.⁽³⁷⁾ He is seen as the Islamists' answer to Azmi Beshara.

The CEO at *The Arabic Post* is Majed Al-Adwan, who also is CEO of SasaPost.com. The editor-in-chief is Muhammad Hussein, an Egyptian MB member. The head of news is Osama Abu Dhair, a conservative Palestinian journalist, and the news analysis section is headed by Gandhi Antar, another Egyptian MB member.

The Arabic Post's coverage caters mostly for younger web-surfing Arabs. The website includes sports, women's pages, lifestyle, travel, history, cinema, and television drama. A surfer unfamiliar with *The Arabic Post's* political line might be drawn in by content that appears open-minded and progressive, even secular. This is a clever strategy on the part of Khanfar and Al-Adwan to appeal to Arab youth who might be put off by Islamist-inspired content and would naturally gravitate to a more Western model of media consumption. The political content, however, is clearly supportive of Turkey and Qatar and takes frequent aim at the Saudi-UAE-Egyptian "counter-revolutionary" alliance, albeit in non-ideological language. Where there is an ideological message, it is delivered subtly. While the senior management of the site are undoubtedly MB or religiously conservative, some of the section editors are liberal or left-leaning, giving the site the appearance of open-mindedness and plurality. These include, among others Huzaifa Hamza and Mahmoud Shaaban

(37) <https://www.crisisgroup.org/our-trustees-make-case-conflict-prevention>.

(Egyptian), Nawwar Katao and Yumen Hallaq (Syrian), Younis Boujabha (Moroccan), and Mahmoud Abu Zaid and Obaida Zain (Palestinian), all of whom work on different sections of *The Arabic Post*, although none consider themselves Islamist.

Despite these appearances, the site is geared toward championing political change in places such as Egypt and the Gulf. This, by definition, means supporting the MB, the biggest opposition party in the region. In disseminating its pro-Arab Spring message, the website goes beyond the Egyptian case and deals with the entire Arab world, and more specifically North Africa. This is not surprising, given that most of the website's audience is in that part of the world, although this can be partly explained by the fact that the website is blocked in Egypt and many Arab Gulf countries apart from Kuwait, Qatar and Oman.

Khanfar defines editorial policy on sensitive issues. For instance, he invited a group affiliated to the pro-Turkey Tripoli government to the website's offices, where he made *The Arabic Post's* backing for Turkey's military intervention in Libya clear. On another occasion Khanfar informed editors about various red lines that must not be crossed, including reporting on Erdoğan's falling out with former Turkish prime minister Ahmet Davutoglu and former party leader Ali Babacan. He told the editors that these are purely Turkish political issues and outside the remit of *The Arabic Post*.

The site's predecessor was *The Huffington Post Arabic*, also founded by Khanfar and launched in 2015. However, it ceased publication in March 2018 when *The Arabic Post* was launched. Khanfar let it be known that Saudi Arabia and the UAE had pressured the owner of the parent company, Ariana Huffington, to terminate her contract with him because of concerns that the site had become a strong pro-Arab Spring voice. In reality, legitimate questions had been raised about how the *Huffington Post's* wider journalistic brand and journalists were being compromised by its MB-run Arabic-language affiliate.

7- SasaPost

The founder and general manager of *SasaPost* is Majed Al-Adwan, who is also the CEO of *The Arabic Post*. The editor-in-chief is the Egyptian journalist Muhammad Ezzat. The funding for the site is believed to originate in Qatar via Waddah Khanfar.

SasaPost is a news website that provides analytical, artistic, cultural, and historical content. In 2013–2014 it was the most popular platform for mostly Egyptian bloggers and activists to express their thoughts about the security measures against the MB. *SasaPost* allows a wide array of writers to contribute, including some still in their teens. Many of its contributors had their work published for the first time on this site, and it serves in this way as a talent spotter and incubator for Khanfar’s more significant media venture, *The Arabic Post*, and his think-tank, Al-Sharq Forum. However, as other sites have come online the impact of *SasaPost*’s army of young bloggers appears to be waning.

8- Noonpost

Noonpost is the smallest of the Istanbul-based MB-run news websites in terms of employees and funding. It can be considered the younger sibling of *SasaPost*. Its founder and editor-in-chief is Muhammad Bashir, an MB member and close associate of Khanfar.

Noonpost publishes some original investigations but relies heavily on translated material. It can be considered somewhat elitist because it does not follow current events or trends closely but rather focuses on specific “files”, mainly to do with Egypt and Palestine, that only news junkies would be interested in. Despite its attempts to appeal to a more highbrow readership, the bias is unmistakable. From a section entitled Sons of Zayid’s Mercenaries, which “exposes” Western contractors working for the UAE, to a section entitled The Shameful Agreement, which lambasts the announced normalization of relations between the UAE and Israel, the MB line is clear and consistent throughout.

9- Arabi21

Arabi21 is an Istanbul-based news website that provides extensive political content in terms of news, investigations, and opinion pieces. The founder and editor-in-chief is Yasir Za’atra, a well-known Palestinian MB member who lives between Doha and Istanbul. The CEO is Feras Abu Helal, also a Palestinian MB member. Its funding is believed to be Qatari.

Arabi21 is explicit and unapologetic in its adherence to political Islam, and it is considered one of the closest news sites to the MB leadership. It publishes articles from some of the MB’s

best-known figures, including Essam Taleima and Ahmed Abdul-Aziz. Little effort is made at balance or impartiality. For example, economic news section focuses on what it claims are the deteriorating economies of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt, with headlines such as “Profits at Saudi Banks Drop by 40.9%”, “Etihad Airways Continues to Hemorrhage Money with Staff on Unpaid Leave”, “Covid-19 and Oil Exacerbate the Economic Situation in the Gulf”, and “Austerity Measures Hit the Poor in Egypt”⁽³⁸⁾. *Arabi21* also has a section called Turkey21, with news stories that are, without exception, positive about Erdoğan and the AKP⁽³⁹⁾.

10- Al Sharq Forum

The Al Sharq Forum is an Istanbul-based organization that claims to be independent and non-profit and seeks to consolidate the values of pluralism and justice and contribute to mutual understanding between the peoples of the East and the rest of the world. The owner and founder is Waddhah Khanfar; the general manager is Muhammad Affan, an Egyptian MB member and a doctoral student at Exeter University in the UK. The funding is understood to emanate from Qatar, some of it from the Qatar Foundation.

Al Sharq Forum is not a think tank in the conventional sense. It has three main departments: Al Sharq Strategic Research is the research arm of the organization, Al Sharq Academia is an e-learning platform, and Al Sharq Youth is a self-described “network of committed and active youth leading change toward a more inclusive and just world”⁽⁴⁰⁾. The combination of research, e-learning and youth networking is an odd one, and yet it works for Khanfar because Al Sharq Forum’s unique value to the MB is its ability to promote certain researchers and activists by providing them with a seemingly credible and well-funded platform from which to build contacts and promote themselves to the West. Al Sharq Forum website plays up its “partners”, which include Chatham House, Foreign Affairs and ICG, but its actual research output reveals that it is mostly made up of blog posts and short reports that would not make the cut at world-class think tanks.

(38) <http://arabi21.com/stories/c/4/0/اقتصاد> Accessed August 25, 2020.

(39) <http://arabi21.com/stories/c/21/0/21تركيا> Accessed August 26, 2020.

(40) <https://youth.sharqforum.org/> Accessed August 26, 2020.

Al Sharq Forum is best known for the big conferences that it organizes in Istanbul, often attracting hundreds of participants. In order to access the student population, it has built relationships with universities in the Middle East which co-host its events, with conferences organized at the American University in Beirut and Sebahattin Zaim and Ibn Haldun universities in Turkey⁽⁴¹⁾. The Al Sharq Forum maintains close ties with the Brookings Doha Center via Tarik M. Yousef, a senior fellow of the Global Economy and Development program and the director of the Brookings Doha Center. Since 2018, the Forum has actively reached out to Iranian foundations and researchers to address the sectarian issue in the Arab world and to help solidify the front against Israel and the Gulf Arab monarchies.

Khanfar's foray into youth activism is especially interesting. Through Al Sharq Forum he has organized summer camps for young adults, who fly into Turkey from across the Arab world to discuss Arab issues. The latest of these took place in 2019 in the resort city of Trabzon, and involved 45 university students, mostly from North Africa, camping for two weeks and holding presentations and interactive dialogues. The Turkish government supported the camp, and each attendee received a free iPad. Al Sharq Youth network continues to expand: it claims to have 20 bureaus in seven different regions, with more than 600 active members and 250 events organized so far. The work of Al Sharq Youth is coordinated by Osama Al-Murabit, a Moroccan member of the MB.

(41) <https://research.sharqforum.org/events/seminar-on-political-islam-movements-in-a-changing-regional-order/>.

Educational and Academic Muslim Brotherhood Networks

One key Muslim Brotherhood networks that needs further exploration is the educational network across both schools and universities. Erdoğan's policy is directed toward the longer strategic game and he is investing in education in a way that indicates that he wants to transform Istanbul into a premium cultural center for Islamist-leaning Arabs. This sits very well with the MB's objectives in Turkey. As those members settled in Istanbul, they established a network of schools for their children and those of likeminded Arabs. While those MB-affiliated schools are open to anyone of any citizenship and background, they provide a vital service for the children of MB members who need schooling opportunities in line with their ideology and that does not require a transition from Arabic to Turkish. These schools are also an important source of profit for their founders, a means of extracting funding from MB supporters within and outside Turkey such as in Qatar, a useful patronage tool providing jobs and subsidized education for certain MB members, a means of further propagating MB ideology, and an enabler of MB leadership guardianship of the members of the group who benefit from the schools.

While the MB's school network is mainly useful to local MB members, its university network has global reach and impact. Sebahhatin Zaim University (SZU) and Ibn Haldun University are just two of the many Turkish universities working closely with the MB worldwide, especially at forging close ties with other Islamically-oriented centers and individuals in the US such as the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT), and Dr Jonathan A. C. Brown, the son-in-law of Sami A. Al-Arian (married to Laila Al-Arian), a former director of the Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University. SZU's Center for Islamic Economics regularly organizes conferences. The most active institution is the Center for Islam and Global Affairs (CIGA), led by Sami A. Al-Arian, a controversial scholar who was deported from the US and now lives in Turkey with Turkish citizenship. The Center organizes annual conferences on topics relating to Islamophobia. It also has a full master's degree program in Arabic and a large number of Arab students funded by the Qatar Foundation. Some of its Arab-speaking graduates end up working at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies (ORSAM), a government-funded think tank that explains the Turkish government's view on Middle East issues, thus potentially permeating it with an MB outlook to the region.

Schools

When MB members settled in Istanbul, they established a network of schools for their children and those of likeminded Arabs. As noted in the accompanying appendix, the lowest tuition fee at an Arab school in Istanbul is 2,000 USD per annum, which is equivalent to 13800 TL. Compared to the cost of Turkish state schools and middle-tier private schools, this is a high price. It places a great financial burden on Arab families in general, and Egyptian ones in particular, as they attempt to pursue the best institutions for their children's education. Families unable to afford such fees can send their children to Turkish state schools and run the risk of low-test scores due to the difficulty of transitioning from Arabic to Turkish. Often these families are forced to borrow or to take more than one job to be able to afford to send their children to modest private schools.

Many families depend on aid from the MB's Support and Integration Committee, and parents often work in stores and businesses owned by MB members. Monthly income ranges from 1,800–2,500 TL, which is not much in an expensive city such as Istanbul. Whereas middle-income MB families—whose monthly income ranges from 3,500–6,000 TL—send their children to schools whose fees vary between the equivalent of 2,000 and 3,000 USD and are the most modest of the available schools. These areas and schools do not have a variety of facilities, a spacious campus, high-quality teaching, or a disciplined educational environment: they are chaotic and rarely employ highly qualified teachers. Families usually try to obtain a reduction in the school fees through their social MB networks or obtain support from one of the business owners belonging to the group. As a last resort they may use their personal savings, but if they cannot do this, they borrow money from the well-off to fund their children's education.

Upper-class MB émigrés, including media professionals and business owners, send their children to expensive schools with a full range of facilities at an average cost of cost 4,500 USD per annum. Their children usually attend expensive private universities as well, except for top academic achievers who join prestigious public universities. However, most of these schools do not have a substantial campus to reflect their substantial fees, have poor discipline, and even the quality of the education varies from class to class depending on the teachers and staff, who change almost annually.

Schools founded by MB businessmen usually fill the senior management positions with their children, relatives or friends at the expense of efficiency and the quality of the education, as is the case of the most expensive institution of all: the Safir International Schools.

Not all Islamic schools, established with MB members' capital teach a curriculum informed by MB ideology or the kind of Islamic education, except for the religious studies classes taught in all Egyptian public schools. Indeed, many of these schools can only be described as Middle Eastern or religious in terms of appearance and uniform. Generally, there is a culture of openness between the sexes. Some "Islamic" high schools⁽⁴²⁾ do not offer the Islamic curriculum and allow behaviour codes and practices that are not strictly speaking Islamic, such as civil marriage. When parents have complained about the free mixing of the sexes, school administrations have responded half-heartedly by segregating classrooms according to gender. The MB-affiliated business leaders of schools founded by the MB and reap the lion's share of the profits from these schools.

The economic power of MB business leaders is accompanied by political clout. They dictate the policies of the group or at the very least, have the decisive word on what will be issued or declared by the group. They also have a decisive role in activating the social solidarity network among the Brotherhood's neediest members. This arrangement allows them to exercise a guardianship role over the members of the group, giving them not only economic but also political and social immunity from criticism of or objections to their opinions and decisions.

The cost of attending an MB school is set along stark lines of social differentiation. Al-Manar School takes the children of lower-middle class MB families, among them orphans deserving of support; it is only three kilometers from the most expensive Brotherhood School in Istanbul, the Safir School for children of upper-class MB families whose parents are business owners or media professionals.

It must be emphasized that there is no nationality barrier to admission to any of the MB-affiliated schools listed below; all that is required is that the family is able to cover the fees.

(42) When I refer to Islamic high schools and put quotes around the term "Islamic," I mean that these schools do not have any Islamic curriculum that distinguishes them from other schools, but their owners/administrators insist on marketing them as Islamic schools because their owners are Islamists and most of the students are children of Islamists. However, it is important to emphasize the absence of the Islamic curriculum from these schools, and the acceptance of behavior codes and practices that are not strictly-speaking "Islamic."

MB conferences in Turkey

Under Erdoğan's tenure Istanbul has become the most prominent center for Arab political Islamist activism. Many international conferences on Islam and Islamic issues have been held in Istanbul, something that Erdoğan and his inner circle regard as a display of soft Turkish power. Yasin Aktay, advisor to Erdoğan, sums it up:

The only grassroots force in the Arab world with some structure, ideology, leadership, and experience is the MB. The Saudis will regret turning against the MB. They add more to Turkey's external legitimacy and expansion than any other group. Imagine you are the protector of the major network in the entire Arab world. The governments are mostly against these democratic forces and, therefore, there will be a constant struggle between the monarchies and the MB⁽⁴³⁾.

The first major MB conference in Turkey took place on July 10, 2013 in Ankara⁽⁴⁴⁾. It featured leaders of the MB's international organization including Youssef Nada, the offshore tycoon and the MB's banker; Rashed al-Ghanoushi, head of the Ennahda party in Tunisia; Muhammad Riad Shafka, leader at the time of the Syrian MB organization, and Osama Hamdan of Hamas. Held in the shadow of a globally-popular Turkish Saadet Party conference held to support democracy in the region, the MB conference concluded by adopting a "strategy of patience", as recommended by a study prepared by the MB's International Center for Studies and Training, which recommends the launching of awareness campaigns, calls for civil disobedience, and besieging key government institutions in Egypt.

The second MB conference in Turkey took place in Istanbul on August 8-9, 2015. The Conference for Countering Despotism and Bloodshed brought together MB members and sympathizers from around the world and focused primarily on Egypt, with speakers labelling the Sisi government "illegitimate" and calling for the development of closer ties with other Islamic movements.

(43) Interview, Istanbul, July 16, 2020.

(44) Mohammad Abdel Kader, "Turkey's Relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood," *Al Arabiya Institute for Studies*, October 14, 2013, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2013/10/14/Turkey-s-relationship-with-the-Muslim-Brotherhood>.

The third and most recent major MB conference in Turkey took place on September 14–15, 2019 under the title Authenticity and Continuation⁽⁴⁵⁾. By order of Erdoğan, Turkey’s Directorate General of Foundations covered all the 500 invited delegates’ conference expenses. The MB’s spokesman, Talaat Fahmi, said that “the purpose was to prepare for the Brotherhood’s 100th anniversary [in 2028].” The first to speak was the group’s current Deputy Supervisor, Ibrahim Mounir, who said that their call to Islam runs parallel with the MB’s political agenda, stressing that the two are inseparable. He said that the MB would “resort to the sword” if needed to spread its message. “Over the past 91 years, we did not rest like other fighters do, fighting one storm after another,” he said. Imad al-Hout, a surgeon and MB parliamentarian from Lebanon, said at the same conference “We are not seeking power but will not shy away from our responsibility, if duty calls.”

Other ranking MB figures then took turns at the podium, attacking Egypt’s government while praising Erdoğan. They included Muhammad Hikmat Walid, the leader of the group’s outlawed Syrian branch; Abdulhamid Thnaibat and Humam Said, their ex-general supervisors in Jordan; and Mahmoud Hussein, the MB’s (former?) Secretary-General. Also present was Tarek al-Zummar, a notorious Egyptian Islamist arrested for the 1981 assassination of President Anwar Sadat. Following his release from prison in 2011 Al-Zummar first relocated to Qatar and is now a resident of Turkey.

The conference participants spent considerable time lashing out against two philosophical books that they saw as threatening their vision. One was *Al-Islam wa Usul al-Hukum* (loosely translated as Islam, a Religion not a State), published by the Azhar scholar Ali Abdul Raziq in 1925, which argues that the caliphate is not mandatory in Islam. The second book, *Mustaqbal al-Thaqafa fi Misr* (The Future of Culture in Egypt) by Taha Hussein, was published in 1938. Both works have long been on the Brotherhood’s hit list because they call for a modern secular state in Egypt with close ties to Europe. Zuhair Salem, a former spokesman for the MB’s Syrian

(45) Abduljalil Al-Sharnoubi, *Mu‘amar al-Ikhwan: Istirad al-Tamasuk La Yubadid al-Inshikakat* (The Brotherhood Conference: A Show of Solidarity Does not Dispel Cracks), *Al-Arab*, 16 September, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/yxr2nxvz>; “Muslim Brotherhood Holds Largest Intellectual Conference in Decades.” *Global Muslim Brotherhood Daily Watch*, September 19, 2019, <https://www.globalmbwatch.com/2019/09/19/egyptian-muslim-brotherhood-holds-largest-intellectual-conference-in-decades/>.

wing, went so far as to say that the decline in the sales and readership of both books was one of the MB's major achievements.

The conference wrapped up with a list of recommendations, including consolidating the legacy of Hasan al-Banna, standing up to military regimes across the region, and setting up a think tank for Muslim minority studies⁽⁴⁶⁾. The recommendations also included empowering women and youth—but only those “who carry the vision of the *jama'a* [MB].” There were no calls for new leadership or independent evaluation of the MB's record of involvement in politics. There were a few dissenting voices at the conference: Essam Talima, a former assistant to Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, was critical of some of the MB's strategies and asked for more coordinated effort to reach out to secular dissidents in the Arab world. Muhammad al-Bashlawi, a member of the MB's Shura Council, called on the MB's old guard to allow younger members to take their place in leadership bodies.

Regardless of rare instances of criticism, such conferences are carefully choreographed and do not reflect the reality of internal dissent within the MB, in which there is a major ongoing power struggle between younger members and the old guard. Figures such as the former planning minister Amr Darrag are critical of mistakes made during the Morsi presidency, but the old guard, represented by the MB's (former?) Secretary-General Mahmoud Hussein and former Deputy Supreme Guide Mahmoud Ezzat are simply not interested in listening. Interestingly, Erdoğan and his inner circle support generational changes within the MB and actively encourage the younger generation of leaders to play a more prominent role in the organization. This has something to do with the younger generation being more enamored of the AKP experience and therefore more susceptible to pressure from Erdoğan than the old guard.

(46) *Al-Bayan al-Khitami li Mu'tamar al-Ikhwan al-Muslimoun* (Final Communique of the Muslim Brotherhood Conference), *Ikhwan Online*, 15 September, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/y3y3eg7p>.

Non-Egyptian MB networks in Istanbul

Given its weight in the region and within Egyptian society, this paper has focused primarily on Egyptian MB networks in Turkey and their offshoots. However, there are also significant non-Egyptian MB networks active in Turkey that warrant attention.

Syria

Turkey began to host significant Syrian MB networks from 2011 onwards, when there was an opposition gathering in Istanbul in the September of that year to form the Syrian National Council. The Syrian MB were and continue to be split between a Damascus-Latakia faction that was close to Qatar, and an Aleppo-Hama faction that was closer to Turkey. Despite these internal divisions, both factions of the Syrian MB took full advantage of the state-sanctioned facilitation of their anti-Assad political, economic, media, humanitarian, and military activities to expand exponentially within Turkey.

Turkey-based MB members played an important role in cementing relations between the Syrian MB and the AKP. Ghazwan al-Masri, an Aleppine businessman, MB and AKP member and vice-chairman of the Turkish Independent Industrialists and Businessmen Association (MUSIAD), connected the Syrian MB leadership with Erdoğan's inner circle from the start of the Syrian crisis. Other Syrian MB figures who managed to develop particularly close ties to the Turkish government include Haytham Rahmeh, a veteran of the Syrian MB's military wing, whose association with the MIT shielded him from scrutiny after Swedish reporters uncovered his involvement in a major arms deal with Libya⁽⁴⁷⁾.

Since the start of the Syrian civil war the Syrian MB organization and its network of supporters have managed to establish a solid media and think tank presence in Turkey. These include the Nidaa Syria Network (<https://nedaa-sy.com>), the Shaam News Network (<http://www.shaam.org/>), and Aleppo Today TV (<https://halabtodaytv.net/>). In addition, well-known MB members have established several think tanks. The Istanbul-based Idrak Center for Studies was set up by MB member Basil Hafar; Muhammad Sarmini, another MB member, founded the Jusoor

(47) "Swedish Imam Smuggles Weapons to Syria: Report," *The Local*, October 31, 2013, <https://www.thelocal.se/20131031/swedish-imam-smuggling-weapons-into-syria-report>.

for Studies Center; and a third MB member, Amar Kahf, established Omran (<https://www.omrandirasat.org/>), also based in Istanbul. All are believed to be funded from Qatar, the latter by the Doha-based Syrian MB financier Mustafa Sabbagh who is said to have been used by the Qatari government as a channel for funding Syrian MB networks and their armed affiliates with a sum of several hundred million dollars⁽⁴⁸⁾.

Yemen

The Islah Party, the Yemeni affiliate of the MB, has invested a great deal of effort in cementing its relationship with the AKP. While the number of its members in the Yemeni diaspora increased after the war, especially in countries such as Egypt and Malaysia, many Islah-affiliated activists have preferred to relocate to Turkey. Salah Batais, the current head of the Yemeni community in Turkey, is a well-known Islah party figure. In January 2020 he met with the Turkish foreign minister to discuss issues related to Yemeni residents in Turkey. But Turkey has undeniable ambitions in Yemen, of which large parts were once part of the Ottoman Empire.

Among the most prominent figures promoting Ankara's ambitions in Yemen is the tribal leader, businessman and Islah leader Hamid al-Ahmar, who relocated to Istanbul after the Houthi coup in September 2014⁽⁴⁹⁾. Another Istanbul-based figure is the Islah-affiliated preacher Abdulmajid Al-Zandani, who made a YouTube video in which he weeps about the weakness of the Turkish lira and heaps flamboyant praise on Erdoğan as a fearless Muslim knight and courageous leader⁽⁵⁰⁾. Perhaps the most famous among the Yemeni diaspora in Turkey is the Nobel prize-winner Tawakkol Karman, who is strongly linked to the MB and has been granted Turkish citizenship. She has been playing a role behind the scenes advocating Turkey's more active involvement in the Yemeni conflict. She also established Belqees TV⁽⁵¹⁾, an Istanbul-based Yemeni TV channel. Shabab Yaman TV is another Islah-affiliated channel broadcasting out of Istanbul.

(48) "Syrian Expat Businessmen Announce Fund for Rebels," *France 24.com*, June 6, 2012, <https://www.france24.com/en/20120606-syrian-expatriate-businessmen-set-300-million-fund-support-uprising-against-assad-qatar>.

(49) "Turkey's Schemes in Yemen Follow a Familiar Pattern," *Arab Weekly*, August 19, 2020, <https://thearabweekly.com/turkeys-schemes-yemen-follow-familiar-pattern>.

(50) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y7ISODbKK28>.

(51) <http://www.belqees.tv/>.

Turkey supported President Hadi in the early period of the conflict, but Erdoğan changed his position after the journalist Jamal Kashoggi was killed and now appears to lend his political support to anti-Saudi forces, including the pro-Iran Houthi militia. Turkey appears to want to go beyond political involvement and increase its influence in Yemen, especially in areas of the country where Islah has a strong presence. In a leaked video on August 1, 2020, an Islah military commander speaks about the possibility of a Turkish intervention in Yemen, with Ankara supplying his group with weapons to fight UAE-aligned forces⁽⁵²⁾.

(52) “Islah leader calls Saudis ‘mice’ and says he will liberate Yemen’s Mocha from UAE,” *Middle East Eye*, August 12, 2020, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/islah-leader-yemen-saudi-arabia-mice-liberate-mocha-uae>.

Conclusion

For the past seven years the Muslim Brotherhood has diligently built up an infrastructure for agitation in Turkey that includes media outlets, think tanks and educational institutions. The MB hopes that this infrastructure, paid for largely from Qatar and facilitated and supported by Erdoğan, will safeguard the organization from future setbacks and serve as an area of “strategic depth” from which to relaunch their bid for power in Egypt and elsewhere. The MB appears to be happy digging its roots into Turkish society and reaping the economic benefits, helped by generous disbursements from citizens and a friendly president and ruling party only too happy to lap up its sycophantic praise. MB members may even be getting comfortable in the splendid surroundings of the old imperial capital, enjoying the European-style social freedoms denied them at home while anticipating with great excitement a neo-Ottoman era in which their tormentors are humbled and they themselves are restored to their rightful place in the corridors of power.

An overview of some of the major MB projects in Turkey and their linkages to the wider regional struggle reveals that the future may not be so rosy for the Islamist group. For a start, the funding stream that has allowed the mushrooming of its outlets in Turkey appears to be dangerously narrow. The MB’s reliance on Qatari cash to sustain most of its more significant projects risks putting it at the mercy of shifting attitudes in Doha. The country’s young Emir, Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, is not known to be particularly enamored of the MB and has cooled his government’s relationship with the group somewhat. The 2014 Gulf crisis, and more significantly that of 2017, compelled his government to seek assistance from the MB, but this was done out of desperation and despite serious reservations. Moreover, the new Emir is skeptical of his father’s activist and interventionist policies, believing that they have exposed his country to serious liabilities that it is now struggling to meet.

Within the wider Turkish-Qatari agitation machine, the MB has a serious rival. Azmi Beshara’s influence with the Emiri Court has expanded noticeably since Tamim succeeded his father in 2013. Beshara, too, is no supporter of the MB, and has worked quietly and methodically to prize open the group’s grip on Qatari funding and replace it with his own. So far he is succeeding: he

has managed to sideline the ageing Yusuf al-Qaradawi and has built genuine media and think-tank institutions avoiding the problematic Islamist label that has damaged Qatar's image in the West. His media empire can target different constituencies of the "Arab Street" including soft Islamists, leftist intellectuals, religious minorities and the pro-*muqawama* crowd, an important factor for Qatar as it seeks to expand its group of friends. The MB, by comparison, is a one-trick pony that is not particularly popular internationally. The extent to which it can count on sustained Qatari generosity going forward is therefore an open question.

The other major area of concern that should trouble the MB is a change of government in Turkey. Large segments of the Turkish population do not support Erdoğan's Islamist and adventurist policies. Many Turks have come to realize that his support for Islamists has ruined Turkey's traditionally cordial relations with Saudi Arabia and Egypt in a dramatic reversal of the "zero problems" strategy associated with bolstering Turkey's economic growth in the 2000s, something that Turks now look back on with nostalgia, given the recurring economic crises in which Turkey now finds itself. Erdoğan's support for MB-dominated opposition to Assad helped to turn Syria into a failed state, in turn empowering the Kurds, ISIS, and indirectly, Putin's Russia, not to mention the 3.6 million Syrian refugees now competing with Turks for state-funded services. If the Istanbul municipal elections of 2019 are an accurate indication⁽⁵³⁾, a serious shift in public opinion is taking place in Turkey, and the special treatment Arab Islamists have been enjoying may come to a sudden end should the likes of Ekrem Imamoglu win the presidency in 2023.

But even if Erdoğan manages to remain in power, his reliance on the MB as useful foot soldiers may slowly ebb away. Turkish state institutions are developing their own indigenous cultural and linguistic capacity to engage with the Arab world, and in time Turkey may dispense partly or entirely with the MB comprador class. Erdoğan himself is reliant on Qatari financing to sustain those same MB networks, and should Qatar undergo a change of heart about the Islamist group he may find he has lost the MB anyway.

(53) "‘People Could Feel That I Was Sincere’: How Istanbul's Elections Turned into a Heavy Defeat for President Erdogan," *Time*, June 24, 2019, <https://time.com/5613031/istanbul-elections/>.

Perhaps the greatest danger for the MB is that its operations in Istanbul are almost entirely predicated upon the continuation of the regional struggle between its patrons and the Saudi-UAE-Egyptian axis. The MB has taken full advantage of this struggle to position itself as a junior partner of Turkey and Qatar. In return for space and money, it furnishes the Turkey-Qatar alliance with hundreds of ideologically motivated, professionally trained and well-networked activists to attack and undermine their opponents. The worst-case scenario for the MB would be a regional détente, de-escalating conflicts over Libya, Palestine, Syria and Yemen and easing the embargo against Qatar, with Turkey and Qatar recognizing the Sisi presidency in Egypt. That would be a real nightmare for the MB, as with no state and little leverage, they would be the first to be sacrificed. This is more likely in Doha than in Ankara, and even then it would not be the entire MB organization that would be cut off but elements of it that are deemed dispensable, namely the Egyptian network. The strategic Gaza file, that is to say Doha's relationship with Hamas, is unlikely to be affected. Erdoğan, on the other hand, is an ideological beast with strong religious zeal and a burning ambition to attain global Muslim leadership. He may still want to keep the MB busy in their Istanbul offices extolling his virtues and waxing lyrical about his achievements. However, it will probably be a diminished MB organization, its most thoughtful and talented members having either departed the group or been poached by media empires with deeper pockets.

The MB is known to have made erroneous calculations over the years. Its Istanbul adventure may prove to be another failed maneuver based on false hopes and poor leadership.

Appendix I.

Key Muslim Brotherhood figures living in Istanbul

Mahmoud Hussein is the (former?) Secretary-General of the MB. Hussein is also the de facto head of the MB and its official representative in Turkey. He is the main contact point for international and domestic bodies wishing to engage with the MB.

Since his arrival in Istanbul in 2014, Mahmoud Hussein has been working to reunite the various factions of the MB, reorganizing the MB internally and establishing its religious, cultural, political and financial infrastructure. He fought a fierce internal battle with a rebel wing that tried to hold an election with the aim of removing him, and all indications are that he won it by expelling the wing from the Brotherhood. Hussein claims that he fought the battle to save the MB from disintegration and collapse.

Mahmoud Hussein performs the tasks of the Guidance Bureau, which is the highest authority in the Brotherhood organization after the group's General Guide. It supervises the establishment of "the family," the smallest unit in the internal Brotherhood organization, communicating with the Turkish authorities and meeting international delegations. In the media sphere, he has the authority to indirectly oversee and manage Watan TV, which is funded by MB members. It is rumored that most of the MB's economic investments both within and outside Turkey are in his name and under his supervision with a number of influential businessmen of the Brotherhood.

Hamza Zawba is the former spokesperson of the Freedom and Justice Party, the political party that acted as a front for the MB in Egypt's parliament from 2011–2013. He held the position from two months before Morsi's ousting until the internal disputes between the Brotherhood's leaders began to escalate. Zawba belongs to the rebel wing that opposes the policies of the traditional wing dominating the MB. His reputation began to grow with his appearance on the Al-Jazeera TV channel after Morsi's ousting as a spokesperson and defender of the MB's cause and against Morsi's ousting. When he arrived in Istanbul in the wake of the Qatari decision to expel the Brotherhood's leaders, Zawba was shocked by the way the MB was run by its leaders who, in his view, were bringing failure and defeat. After the traditional wing's victory over the rebellious wing mentioned above, Zawba devoted himself to media work, hosting the *With*

Zawba Show on Mekameleen TV five days a week. He is the founder-president of the Istanbul-based Association of Egyptian Media Workers Abroad.

Zawba is said to enjoy good relations with the official Turkish parties, and especially with Dr. Yassin Aktay, who has appeared on the *With Zawba Show* to speak about political updates in the Middle East and Turkish trends in the region. Although he was made unwelcome in Qatar, Zawba regularly appears on Al-Jazeera to talk about the situation in Egypt.

Mahmoud Ezzat (b.1944) is former Deputy Supreme Guide of the MB, with a Doctorate in medicine from Zagazig University (1985), a BSc (1975) and a Master's degree (1980) in medicine, and a diploma from the Institute of Islamic Studies (1998). He is a medical doctor and is married to the daughter of the former Supreme Guide, Mahdi Akef. He is an unknown element in the MB. He became the MB's General Guide following the arrest of the former general guide, Muhammad Badea, and his vice-general Khairat al-Shater. Although he occupies a position of great importance and sensitivity in the Islamic movement around the world, he did not appear in television interviews. His location was unknown, and some members of the MB had claimed that he lives in Yalavo, near Istanbul. He was, however, arrested in Egypt on August 28, 2020 after seven years on the run.

Talaat Fahmy was appointed as the MB's spokesperson in 2015 and has remained in that position ever since. He periodically issues statements on current events in Egypt and the Middle East region on behalf of the MB. He appears occasionally on Al-Jazeera and more periodically on Watan TV, commenting on political events. He does not play any specific political role, such as meeting foreign delegations, organizing a political movement, or unifying the Egyptian opposition front abroad, but his role is limited to conveying the Guidance Bureau and the MB Consultative Council. It is noteworthy that Fahmy is a businessman who owns a chain of large schools in Egypt which were confiscated by the government following Morsi's ousting in 2013.

Tariq Al-Zumor is a figure of the Islamic Group (*Al-Jama'a al-Islamiya*) in Egypt and was participated in the assassination of former President Anwar Al-Sadat. He was imprisoned for 29 years before the Egyptian Military Council released him in late 2011. Al-Zumor founded

the Building and Development Party, but after Morsi's ousting he fled Egypt for Doha, and then moved to Istanbul. He is trying to hold periodic meetings with the various parties across the Egyptian political spectrum located abroad and wants to build an Egyptian study center concerned with issues of society and the Egyptian state. Al-Zumor enjoys strong ties with Ayman Nour, the owner of the Al-Sharq TV channel. Since his arrival in Turkey his opinions and positions have changed significantly, abandoning many of his previous extremist and violent opinions in favor of more open-minded and liberal opinions and positions.

Essam Talima, a controversial figure, is one of the MB religious preachers. Before Morsi's ousting he was acknowledged only within religious scientific circles and circles close to Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, as he was a member of the Sheikh's secretariat and his close student, and he remained unknown to the majority of MB members. After Morsi's ousting Talima had the opportunity to appear on television through Al-Jazeera, and his reputation began to grow. Included in the Qatari list of MB leaders to be expelled, he moved to Istanbul. Like Hamza Zawba, he was surprised at how the Brotherhood was run and decided to join the rebel wing. A reader of Talima's writings can sense his ambition as he presents himself as a legitimate successor to Sheikh Yusuf Al-Qaradawi. This is clear in the program he co-hosts on the Mekamleen channel, *They Ask You For Fatwa* (which is very similar to Al-Jazeera's show *Sharia and Life*) hosted by Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, where he expresses his opinions on religious and world affairs. Talima's critical writings about the MB attempt to correct its course and recover it from its "kidnappers". In response the MB's leadership waged a war against him aiming to tarnish his image.

Bassem Khafagi is an international administration and education consultant and an international relations researcher dealing with issues of thought and success, management and education. He presented himself as a potential candidate in the Egyptian presidential elections in 2012 but withdrew from the nomination. He repeated his bid in 2014, before withdrawing again. With the arrival of the Egyptian opposition in Istanbul he founded the Al Sharq TV channel in its old format and promoted himself as the next president of Egypt following Sisi's government. But with the government surviving and seemingly thriving, Bassem Khafagi sold the Al Sharq TV

channel to Ayman Nour, who relaunched the channel in its new form. Since then Khafagi has left Egyptian political life to make human development videos, which he posts on YouTube, and to offer life coaching.

Muhammad al-Bishlawi is a member of the MB's Consultative Council and its Political Council. He frequently appears on Istanbul television channels, especially Mekamleen, usually to talk about the period between 2011 and 2013 and especially the MB's decision to run for the presidency and other decisions that led to Morsi's ousting. His continuous disclosure of information makes him a controversial figure in the eyes of the MB majority.

Khalaf Al-Rumaithi is an Emirati multimillionaire living in Agva, a small city on the edge of Istanbul, after an influential figure in the royal family advised him to flee from arrest in UAE. He was a close associate of the Zayed family and a friend of Mohamed bin Zayed before the latter launched his war against the MB and the Islamic movement in the region. Just after his departure from UAE the government confiscated his money, businesses and real estate, and his children are prevented from visiting him in Turkey. Al-Rumaithi was not a vital political actor by any measure, but he belonged to the Emirati Islah group, which represents the Brotherhood in the Emirates. He was no exception as many members of the royal family joined the group. The Zayed family and the Islah group enjoyed close ties until the Arab Spring, when the UAE turned against Islamists and banned Islah, accusing it of planning a military coup and designating it a terrorist group.

Appendix II. Muslim Brotherhood schools in Istanbul

Average

School Name	Curriculum	Owners	Tuition Fees (USD)
Al Fayez International School https://alfayezschool.business.site/	Lebanese + American	Jordanian businessmen	6000
Almanar School https://mis-tr.com/	American/funded by the Qatar Foundation	Egyptian MB members	2500
Aqsa International Schools https://aqsaschools.com/	Arabic + American	Egyptian MB members	2000
Huda schools https://hudaschools.com/ar/	Lebanese + American	Lebanese businessmen	4000
International Elite Academy https://eliteacademy.edupage.org/	American	Egyptian businessmen linked to MB	4000
International Elite Academy2	American	Egyptian businessmen linked to MB	4000
Rumeli International Schools https://american.ris-schools.com/	Jordanian	Jordanian businessmen	6500
Ihsan International Schools https://ihsan.school/	American, Turkish + Arabic	Islamist businessmen of multiple nationalities	3600
Safir International Schools https://safir-school.com/	American	MB	7000

About the Author

M. Hakan Yavuz is a professor of political science at the University of Utah. He recently led an interdisciplinary project on the history and politics surrounding the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and has co-edited three volumes encompassing the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. His body of scholarly work focuses on the politicization of Islam and its interaction with secularism. His recent books include *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey* (Oxford University Press, 2003), *Secularism and Muslim Democracy in Turkey* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), *Turkey's July 15th Coup* (University of Utah Press, 2018), and *Nostalgia for the Empire: The Politics of Neo-Ottomanism* (Oxford, 2020), among others.

Authors Note

The research for this paper was carried out by a trusted team of peer-reviewed scholars and individuals from well-established think tank organizations under my ongoing supervision and instructions, as I was not physically in Turkey. Team members gathered the information, which was checked for accuracy and further verified. All the research notes and collected information were compiled into a report authored by Professor Yavuz.



