Hasan Al-Banna

Hasan al-Banna was the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood or Society of the Muslim Brothers, the largest and most influential Sunni revivalist organization in the 20th century. Created in Egypt in 1928, the Muslim Brotherhood became the first mass-based, overtly political movement to oppose the ascendancy of secular and Western ideas in the Middle East. The brotherhood saw in these ideas the root of the decay of Islamic societies in the modern world, and advocated a return to Islam as a solution to the ills that had befallen Muslim societies. Al-Banna's leadership was critical to the spectacular growth of the brotherhood during the 1930s and 1940s. By the early 1950s, branches had been established in Syria, Sudan, and Jordan. Soon, the movement's influence would be felt in places as far away as the Gulf and non-Arab countries such as Iran, Pakistan, Indonesia, and Malaysia. Driving this expansion was the appeal of the organizational model embodied in the original, Egypt-based section of the brotherhood, and the success of al-Banna's writings. Translated into several languages, these writings have shaped two generations of Sunni religious activists across the Islamic world.

Like many of the Islamic leaders who followed in his footsteps, Al-Banna enjoyed the benefits of a modern education, but had been raised in a traditional Islamic environment. He was born in 1906 in Mahmudiyya, a small town in the Nile Delta. His father, a watch repairman who also served as prayer leader and Qur'anic teacher in the local mosque, had been educated at Al-Azhar. Author of a few works on Islamic jurisprudence, he instilled strong religious values into Al-Banna. Even as a primary school student, Al-Banna joined several religious societies dedicated to the promotion of Islamic standards of moral behavior. It was also at that young age that he became a member of the Hasafiyya Brothers' Sufi order. His early participation in dhikr circles and avid reading of Sufi literature help explain why he always saw the moral reform of the individual as a precondition to the Islamization of society.

In 1923, at the age of 16, Al-Banna moved to Cairo to enter the famous Dar al-'Ulum college. The four years that Al-Banna spent in Cairo exposed him to the political ferment of the Egyptian capital in the early 1920s, and enhanced his awareness of the extent to which secular and Western ways had penetrated the very fabric of society. It was then that Al-Banna became particularly preoccupied with what he saw as the young generation's drift away from Islam. He believed that the battle for the hearts and minds of the youth would prove critical to the survival of a religion besieged by a Western onslaught. While studying in Cairo, he immersed himself in the writings of the founders of Islamic reformism (the Salafiyya movement), including the Egyptian Muhammad 'Abduh (1849-1905), under whom his father had studied while at Al-Azhar. But it was 'Abduh's disciple, the Syrian Rashid Rida (1865-1935), who most influenced Al-Banna. Al-Banna was a dedicated reader of Al-Manar, the magazine that Rida published in Cairo from 1898 until his death in 1935. He shared Rida's central concern with the decline of Islamic civilization relative to the West. He too believed that this trend could be reversed only by returning to an unadulterated form of Islam, free from all the accretions that had diluted the strength of its original message. Like Rida at the end of his life — but unlike 'Abduh and other Islamic modernists — Al-Banna felt that the main danger to Islam's survival in the modern age stemmed less from the conservatism of Al-Azhar and the ulama (which he nevertheless criticized) than from the ascendancy of Western secular ideas.

Al-Banna urged the rejection of all Western notions, emphasizing instead the need to return to the foundations and original purity of Islam. Indeed, through the organizational skills he would soon demonstrate, Al-Banna did more than any other thinker during that time to contribute to the eclipse of Islamic reformism and modernism by Islamic fundamentalism. Upon graduating from Dar al-'Ulum in 1927, at the age of 21, Al-Banna was appointed as a teacher of Arabic in a primary school in Isma'iliyya. At the time, Isma'iliyya served as the capital of the British-occupied Canal Zone and hosted the headquarters of the Suez Canal Company (SCC). British military camps and the homes of the SCC's foreign employees were as much a part of this rapidly expanding new town as the wretched conditions in which the majority of the SCC's Egyptian workers lived. Al-Banna's first assignment thus heightened his resentment of what he saw as Egypt's military occupation, economic exploitation, cultural domination, and loss of dignity. It strengthened his determination to rid Egypt of British and, more generally, Western influences.

From the moment he arrived in Isma'iliyya, Al-Banna involved himself actively in the life of the community. He made an effort to become acquainted with the town's notables while reaching out to the broadest possible public. He conducted night classes for his students' parents and led informal discussions in the mosque, coffeehouses, clubs, and private homes. His basic message was that Egypt had lost its soul; it had become politically sub-servient and economically dependent because it had strayed from the path that had been laid down by God. The only remedy to the decadence of state and society was to reassert Islamic values and ways of life.

It was to spread this message that Al-Banna launched the Society of the Muslim Brothers in March 1928. At first, the society was only one of the numerous small Islamic associations that existed at the time. Similar to those that Al-Banna himself had joined since he was 12, these associations aimed to promote personal piety and engaged in charitable activities. By the late 1930s, it had established branches in every Egyptian province. A decade later, it had 500,000 active members and as many sympathizers in Egypt alone, while its appeal was now felt in several other countries as well. The society's growth was particularly pronounced after Al-Banna relocated its headquarters to Cairo in 1932. The single most important factor that made this dramatic expansion possible was the organizational and ideological leadership provided by Al-Banna.

He endeavored to bring about the changes he hoped for through institution-building, relentless activism at the grassroots level, and a reliance on mass communication. He proceeded to build a complex mass movement that featured sophisticated governance structures; sections in charge of furthering the society's values among peasants, workers, and

professionals; units entrusted with key functions, including propagation of the message, liaison with the Islamic world, and press and translation; and specialized committees for finances and legal affairs.

In anchoring this organization into Egyptian society, Al-Banna skillfully relied on pre-existing social networks, in particular those built around mosques, Islamic welfare associations, and neighborhood groups. This weaving of traditional ties into a distinctively modern structure was at the root of his success. Directly attached to the brotherhood, and feeding its expansion, were numerous businesses, clinics, and schools. In addition, members were affiliated to the movement through a series of cells, revealingly called usar (families). The material, social and psychological support thus provided were instrumental to the movement's ability to generate enormous loyalty among its members and to attract new recruits. The services and organizational structure around which the society was built were intended to enable individuals to reintegrate into a distinctly Islamic setting, shaped by the society's own principles.

Rooted in Islam, Al-Banna's message tackled issues including colonialism, public health, educational policy, natural resources management, Marxism, social inequalities, Arab nationalism, the weakness of the Islamic world on the international scene, and the growing conflict in Palestine. By emphasizing concerns that appealed to a variety of constituencies, Al-Banna was able to recruit from among a cross-section of Egyptian society — though modern-educated civil servants, office employees, and professionals remained dominant among the organization's activists and decisionmakers.

As the society expanded during the 1930s, it quickly changed from a movement for spiritual and moral reform into an organization directly active on the Egyptian political scene. Concurrent with that transformation, radical tendencies asserted themselves within the organization. A "secret apparatus" (al-jihaz al-sirri) was formed that engineered a series of assassinations of enemies of the brotherhood.

Between 1948 and 1949, shortly after the society sent volunteers to fight in the war in Palestine, the conflict between the monarchy and the society reached its climax. Concerned with the increasing assertiveness and popularity of the brotherhood, as well as with rumors that it was plotting a coup, Prime Minister Nuqrashi Pasha disbanded it in December 1948. The organization's assets were impounded and scores of its members sent to jail. Less than three weeks later, the prime minister was assassinated by a member of the brotherhood. This in turn prompted the murder of Al-Banna, presumably by a government agent, in February 1949, when Al-Banna was still only 43 and at the height of his career.

Though the society never fully recovered from the loss of its charismatic founder, it survived. Since then, the brotherhood has remained a significant force in the politics of several Arab countries, either directly or through the movements it inspired. It appeals most to cultural conservatives who want their government and society to reflect and defend certain basic Islamic values and principles, and who favor a pragmatic and incremental approach to achieve these goals. The legacy of Al-Banna is thus still present, and will continue to shape the destiny of Arab societies in the new millennium.

Source : Guilain Denoelcx