Between Preaching and Judging: the Muslim Brotherhood and the Predicament of *takfīr* (1960s–1980s)

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**Abstract**

Both as a slogan and a book, “Preachers, not Judges” has long dominated academic narratives about the Muslim Brotherhood’s turn towards ‘moderation’ in the 1970s and 1980s. However, upon examination, several commonplace assumptions about “Preachers, not Judges” do not hold. Firstly, the Muslim Brotherhood never renounced *takfīr* as a basic doctrine. It only debated different ways of implementing this doctrine in practice. Secondly, “Preachers, not Judges” was much less clear and authoritative as a doctrinal statement than often assumed. It is better understood as a tactical manoeuvre aimed at avoiding splits within the movement. Based primarily on a new and comprehensive survey of contemporary sources from the 1970s, this article will propose a revised understanding of Muslim Brotherhood discourse on preaching, judging, and the doctrine of *takfīr* that remains relevant until the present day.

**Keywords**

Muslim Brotherhood – *takfīr* – excommunication – violence – apostasy – Islamic law – moderation

**Introduction**

Many critics of Islamism accuse the Muslim Brotherhood of disparaging and denigrating other Muslims, sometimes to the point of excluding them from the Muslim community (*takfīr*) by way of the *ridda* (apostasy) doctrine of classical...
Sunni fiqh. In the interest of differentiating between moderate and radical strands of Islamism, most academic literature on the Brotherhood questions such accusations and proposes a more nuanced picture. A widespread narrative goes as follows: When Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1966) and a radical current within the Brotherhood started deliberating on the idea of *takfīr* in the 1960s and 1970s, the Egyptian leader and general guide Ḥasan al-Huḍaybī intervened with his well-known treatise *Preachers, not Judges* (written in 1969, published in 1977) to settle the issue in favour of a “systematic exposition” of the principles of a non-violent, moderate approach. From this point on, the Muslim Brotherhood made a principled commitment to “preaching” to people and never “judging” other Muslims as unbelievers. Some scholars went so far as to claim that, according to the official doctrine of the Brotherhood, apostasy occurs only “when a person consciously leaves the community of Muslims.”

This academic narrative corresponds closely with Muslim Brotherhood self-descriptions since the 1980s: it assigns a pivotal role to al-Huḍaybī and *Preachers, not Judges* and glosses over some major omissions and inconsistencies in the treatise.

I argue that these common narratives have a blind spot because they conflate the Brotherhood’s position on *takfīr* with its position on a proactive and confrontational implementation of Islamic norms, *in extremis* violent rebellion against society or the state (Takfirism, Jihadism). Although the Brotherhood distanced itself from violence against the state and society, it never renounced *takfīr* as a basic doctrine. It only debated different ways of implementing this doctrine in practice. As I shall demonstrate, by the early to mid-1980s, Muslim Brotherhood leaders and thinkers came to strongly reject the ‘radical’ idea of a proactive implementation of *takfīr* by Islamist movements. Takfirism in this

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sense, as embraced by radical Islamists outside the Brotherhood, was from then on widely censured as a dangerous diversion, a 'slippery slope' that would lead the Islamic movement into isolation from society and violent repression by governments. At the same time, the Muslim Brotherhood generally upheld the 'moderate' vision of an eventual implementation of takfīr by the state after the latter's gradual Islamization, hopefully sooner than later. This vision was meant to draw clear boundaries between conservative Sunni Islam and dangerous deviations like secularism and Marxism, reinforcing the Muslim Brotherhood's claim to represent and defend 'Islamic identity'. Although it rarely appeared in official pronouncements, this understanding of takfīr was consistently reproduced in ideological and educational discourse far beyond the 1980s.5 Public intellectuals affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, such as Yusuf al-Qaraḍāwī and Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, openly used a 'moderate' notion of takfīr to intimidate Muslim liberals, leftists and 'heretical' Muslim minorities, impressing upon them that there will be no place for their views in a future Islamic society.6 For example, al-Ghazālī championed the public harassment of Muslim intellectuals critical of the Islamist paradigm, such as Farag Fūda and Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd.7 Phantasies of takfīr did remain part of the Muslim Brotherhood imaginary, even when members were taught to refrain from direct action against putative apostates.

In this essay, I propose a revised understanding of Muslim Brotherhood discourse on preaching, judging, and the doctrine of takfīr by drawing on previously unnoticed or underestimated sources. These are mainly articles and books that were in principle publicly accessible but were primarily geared towards and read by the officials, educators and propagandists of the Muslim Brotherhood itself. The authors are either high-ranking functionaries of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Lebanon and Syria, or intellectuals closely associated with the Muslim Brotherhood and its international networks. In the 1970s and 1980s, many of the authors resided in the Gulf countries of Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, where Muslim Brothers found a safe haven during

successive waves of persecution by Arab Nationalist regimes in Egypt and other countries. Most authors cited below are relatively well-qualified Islamic scholars (‘ulāmāʾ) with academic degrees in fiqh and other branches of Islamic studies, while some derive their authority to speak normatively on Islam solely from their leadership roles within the Brotherhood. Both sources of authority are of equal weight within the Muslim Brotherhood context, as the organisation generally respects traditional Islamic scholarship, but does not have any formal hierarchy of scholars that are entitled to speak on its behalf.

Together, this material provides a multi-faceted picture of the Muslim Brotherhood. While it documents a general agreement among Muslim Brothers on the importance of drawing and enforcing the boundary between ‘orthodox’ Islam and all sorts of alarming deviations, it also shows that individual Muslim Brothers had diverse and shifting ideas about the practical implementations of this basic conviction. In the 1960s and 1970s, ‘moderate’ and ‘radical’ tendencies within the movement were adopting increasingly incompatible views concerning the role of the Muslim Brotherhood in contemporary society and politics. While moderates were looking for some sort of coexistence with the political status quo, in order to continue and expand the ‘preaching’ (daʿwa) mission, radicals were pushing towards a confrontational showdown with ‘apostate’ nationalist regimes.

The ensuing internal debates about the proper meaning and implementation of the takfīr principle subsided in the early 1980s with the victory of the moderate trend, while the radical trend flourished outside the Muslim Brotherhood in the Egyptian Jamāʿa Islamiyya and in Jihadist movements worldwide. However, even within the moderate Muslim Brotherhood, the underlying ideational and behavioural tensions never lost their relevance, and the chronic ambivalence between radical pretentions and pragmatic actions remains a central point of contention until the present time. For this reason, a critical investigation of Preachers, not Judges and related writings on takfīr is an essential prerequisite for understanding the background of ongoing


ideological and strategic debates within Islamic movements and between them and wider Muslim societies.

**Classical fiqh and Early Muslim Brotherhood Doctrine**

The formative phase of the Muslim Brotherhood as a transnational Arab-Islamic movement was the 1940s and 1950s. A position on the issue of takfīr was first formulated by its founder Ḥasan al-Bannā (1906–1949) as one of the Twenty Fundaments (al-uṣūl al-ʿishrūn) of the Muslim Brotherhood’s ‘understanding of Islam’ (fahm al-islām). It appears in the 1938 “Letter of Instructions”, one of al-Bannā’s most well-known treatises and a central foundational text in the Muslim Brotherhood tradition – read and studied by all aspiring members and cited and commented upon frequently in ideological discourse:¹⁰

We do not consider a Muslim to be an unbeliever on the basis of an opinion or a sinful deed (maʿṣiya), provided he has spoken the creed, acts in accordance with it, and fulfils his religious duties. That is unless he professes a word of unbelief, denies what is necessarily part of the general knowledge of the religion (maʾlūm min al-dīn ḍarūratun), denies the truth of a clear Qur’anic statement (ṣarīḥ al-Qurʾān), interprets [the Qur’an] in a way that is incompatible with the rules of the Arabic language, or performs an act that can only be interpreted as unbelief.¹¹

This statement clearly forwards a certain notion of takfīr as one of the ‘fundaments’ guiding the Muslim Brotherhood’s understanding of Islam, while implicitly distancing the Muslim Brotherhood from unnamed radicals who might want to excommunicate Muslims on the basis of a controversial legal opinion (ra’y) or sinful deed. As al-Bannā’s wording contains many references to technical fiqh concepts, it suggests to the reader that the full understanding of this passage is to be found in the teachings of classical Sunni fiqh on apostasy (ridda). It is a matter of consensus in the Muslim Brotherhood commentaries on the “Letter of Instructions” that al-Bannā’s Twenty Fundaments are to

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be read in the light of classical Sunni fiqh. There, apostasy (ridda) is usually treated as a hadd crime, punishable by imprisonment and/or execution.

The two most significant fiqh compendia compiled by Muslim Brotherhood figures in the early period (1940s–1950s) specified that form of punishment with precision. ‘Abd al-Qādir ‘Awda (1906–1954), a jurist who served as a leader of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood from 1951 until his execution in 1954, meticulously lists the traditional opinions of the legal schools, including the non-Sunni ones, in his treatise ‘Islamic Penal Law compared to Positive Law’ (al-Tashrīʿ al-junāʿī al-islāmī muqāran bi-l-qānūn al-waḍʿi, late 1940s). In contrast, as-Sayyid Sābiq’s four-volume ‘The Jurisprudence of the Sunna’ (Fiqh as-Sunna, 1954) provides a synthesis of Islamic legal traditions, mentioning only in passing the divergent opinions of specific school traditions on certain details. Sābiq (1915–2000), an Azharite with strong la-madhhabī leanings, is the more influential figure in the general Muslim public: his dismissal from the Muslim Brotherhood in 1953 over a leadership struggle made it possible for him to avoid imprisonment under the Nasser regime; in the 1970s, he became one of the popular state-sanctioned faces of the ‘Islamic revival’.

Both authors outline a conservative albeit vague doctrine focusing on the potential apostasy of verbal transgressions against what they consider Sunni orthodoxy (variously circumscribed as the “consensus of the scholars” or “what is commonly known”). Their statements anticipate the main themes of the later debate, the most important of which can be summed up as follows:

a) Ordinary sinners do not fall under the purview of the doctrine, and Muslims should not bother each other with false accusations of infidelity. ‘We do not excommunicate a Muslim’ is the rule, while everything that follows is the exception.

b) With some minor exceptions, sinful deeds or transgressions (maʿāṣī, sg. maʿṣiya) do not constitute apostasy. They are only categorised as apostasy when accompanied by impious utterances that deny (inkār, jaḥd), scorn (istikhfāf) or make fun (istihzāʾ) of religious commandments or declare
forbidden things permissible (istiḥlāl). Impious utterances directed against the existence or dignity of God and the prophets are classified as blasphemy (sabb), a closely related crime that is sometimes subsumed under apostasy. However, the punishment is even harsher, because repentance is not permitted.

c) In classical fiqh literature, there is a broad spectrum of opinions on what constitutes punishable utterances against ‘religion’, in this context mostly limited to commonly known precepts, clearly established laws, or essential components of religion (mā ‘ulima min al-dīn ḍarūratūn). Most authorities provide non-exhaustive lists of examples. While the more lenient approaches take account of verbal contradictions to the profession of faith (al-shahādatān), stricter approaches also include the five pillars and other ‘trademark’ rules of Islam (e.g. prohibition of wine and pork). However, many scholars also include a wide array of other dogmas or Shariatic rules that they consider as somehow ‘consensual’ and thus beyond discussion and joking, for example the content of any of the broadly accepted theological creeds (ʿaqāʾid, sg. ʿaqīda). While Sābiq (1997: 182–183) follows the conventional approach by mentioning doctrinal items, such as the existence of angels, resurrection and punishment, as well as some well-known Shariatic rules, ‘Awda (1994: 706–711) includes additional phrases that are clearly taken from debates about the implementation of the Sharia in modern Muslim states.

d) Possible excuses for deeds and utterances that would otherwise be regarded as apostasy are ignorance (jahl) and constraint (ijbār).

e) The Islamic judge should conduct criminal procedure and carry out punishment as elaborated in the classical fiqh manuals. The judge and/or a group of scholars subject the accused to an inquisition, and asks him to repent (istitāba) by pronouncing the shahāda and solemnly recanting the impious utterances voiced before. If the accused refuses to repent, or if the judge considers his repentance insincere, he will be executed.

Neither ‘Awda nor Sābiq are specific about the possible applications of this doctrine in modern times. There had not been a ridda trial in Egypt for over
a century, but there had been controversy about new religious communities such as Bahāʾīs and Aḥmadīs and about the compatibility of Marxism with Muslim belief. Further afield, French naturalisation policies in North Africa in the 1920s and 1930s requiring Muslims to abandon Islamic law in favour of French law caused a backlash from conservative Muslims and nationalists.

Sābiq and ‘Awda address only one of these areas, namely, the application of positive law instead of Sharia law. According to both authors, “ruling/judging by that which God has revealed” (al-ḥukm bi-mā anzala llāh) is an axiomatic religious commandment, the denial of which constitutes unbelief. This means that anyone who willingly chooses or advocates positive law (al-qānūn al-waḍʿī) over Islamic law in any area of legislation is an apostate. According to this definition, Muslim liberals, secularists and Marxists are excluded from Islam almost by definition. It is important to note that these views predated Quṭb’s radical writings: they were part of the Muslim Brotherhood mainstream tradition, even though Muslim Brother functionaries usually refrained from openly denouncing their adversaries as apostates.

The Emergence of the Takfir Issue (1966–1973)

In the 1960s, some Muslim Brotherhood members began to discuss more intensively what they viewed as the apostasy of many post-colonial Muslim governments and the apparent acquiescence of the societies under their rule. Fierce repression of the Brotherhood by the Nasser regime in Egypt and by military-nationalist governments in other states had facilitated the growth of the radical current, which was inspired and invigorated by the prison writings of the great intellectual and ‘martyr’ Sayyid Quṭb, who was executed in Egypt in 1966. Many established Muslim Brotherhood members were sceptical of Quṭb and his novel ideological style of Islamist writing, but they were aware of and sometimes worried about his widespread appeal, especially to younger people. By the mid-1970s ‘Quṭbist’ groups were springing up inside and outside the Muslim Brotherhood and were starting to present serious competition to

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23 Ibid., 12.
25 Recent research emphasizes that the Qutbist current was a continuation of radical tendencies that were already present in the 1940s, especially in the tradition of the paramilitary Special Apparatus (al-nizām al-khāṣṣ): Ahmed Abou El Zalaf, The Muslim Brotherhood and State Repression in Egypt. A History of Secrecy and Militancy in an Islamic Organization (London: IB Tauris, 2023); Elsässer, Die Schule, 27–33.
the traditional Muslim Brotherhood identity. Their trademark style was subversion and armed rebellion, coupled with an expansive interpretation of takfīr. They based their reading of Islam and contemporary society on the principal ideological claims of Quṭb’s prison writings: that Muslim governments and societies were in a state of jāhilīya (pre-Islamic ignorance) and were flouting God’s sovereignty (ḥākimīya) by ruling according to un-Islamic constitutional and legal norms.26

Although Quṭb did not produce a new, more radical reading of the struggle between Islam and the impious advocates of secular nationalism and ‘positive law’ (al-qānūn al-waḍ‘ī), he did formulate these ideas in a more accessible and popular language and included instructions on how to implement them in his 1964 manifesto Ma‘ālim fi l-ṭarīq (‘Signposts’). As various sources show, Muslim Brotherhood moderates understood early on that the connection between the ongoing ideological struggle with Arab nationalism and Marxism and the idea of takfīr/ridda had the potential to promote self-empowerment and violence among young zealots.27 It was in response to this threat that a committee of Egyptian functionaries composed the treatise ‘Preachers, not Judges’ (Duʿāt lā quḍāt), which was circulated both inside and outside Egyptian prisons in 1969 and the following years. In 1977, the treatise was published as a book under the name of the deceased general guide Hasan al-Huḍaybi (1891–1973).28

The Quṭbist trend was celebrated by others for its dynamism and unapologetic radicalism. Sa‘īd Hawwā, the intellectual leader of the radical wing of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in the 1970s, published a manifesto called ‘Soldiers of God in Culture and Morals’ (Jund Allāh thaqāfatan wa-akhlāqan, 1971), in which he described the general state of Arab Muslim societies as ridda (apostasy), since Muslims who obviously had defected from Islam exercised power and influence. In this situation, he argued, Muslims had the right, nay the duty, to overthrow the government and purify society, if necessary using violent means.


27 See for example the contributions (cited later in this article) by ʿAbdallāh Abū ʿIzza, Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī and Salīm al-Bahnasāwī.

28 Zollner, Muslim Brotherhood, 64–75.
Building on the concepts of ḥākimīya and jāhilīya developed by Quṭb, Ḥawwā formulated a ridda doctrine that justified a range of violent acts.29 As long as power in Arab countries was in the hands of apostates – Arab nationalists, communists and secularists, as well as Alawis, Druze and Ismailis – Muslims had a duty to resist. Resistance could be directed not only against the government, but also against any citizen. If governments failed to enforce the rules of Islam in society, Muslims had the right to perform ḥisba themselves,30 that is to say, they themselves were permitted to punish infidels, heretics and atheists (mulḥidūn), and to ‘cleanse’ society of all forms of depravity, first by word and then by the hand.31 In exercising this right, they were not to be swayed by any complaints:

People will say about us: Terrorists! Bloodthirsty murderers! All this is part of the ‘reproach of the reproachers’ with which they want to dissuade us from Jihad in the way of God and to put psychological pressure on us to give it up. However, God has let us know that we should not fear the blame of him who blames: {... men who struggle in the path of God, not fearing the reproach of any reproacher} (Q 5: 54).32

Quṭb’s ideas were immensely popular and soon found their way into the educational curricula of Muslim Brotherhood chapters all over the Arab world.33 Among the well-known Quṭbists outside Egypt and Syria were the Lebanese general secretary Faṭḥī Yakan (1933–2009) and the Jordanian scholar and leader Muḥammad Abū Fāris (1938–2015).

The majority of the Muslim Brotherhood leaders considered the trend towards violence unwise and counterproductive. By the 1970s, they felt that the social and political momentum was slowly shifting in favour of the Muslim Brotherhood. With the decline of Arab socialism and Pan-Arabism, an Islamic revival was spreading in Arab societies and even among the ruling elites of some states. The Brotherhood continued to receive patronage from conservative regimes, especially the oil-rich Gulf states, and even Egyptian president Anwar al-Sādāt (r. 1970–1981) made overtures to religious conservatism and encouraged his own Islamic revival. Under these conditions, the

30 Hawwā, Jund Allāh, 443–455.
31 On ḥisba see Michael Cook, Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000).
32 Hawwā, Jund Allāh, 453.
33 Elsässer, Die Schule, 31–32.
only requirement for the future success of the Islamist mission was gaining the time and space to implement da‘wa and recruitment activities by avoiding open conflict with governments.

Against this background, the gulf between radicals and moderates continued to widen in the mid-1970s. The archives of the Lebanese Muslim Brotherhood magazine al-Shihāb provide a good impression of the strident tone that permeated internal discussions. At the time, Lebanon was an important hub in the international networks of the Muslim Brotherhood, being the site of regular meetings between high-ranking officials from all over the Arab world.34 Between 1965 and 1970, the exiled Syrian Muslim Brotherhood superintendent ʿIṣām al-ʿAṭṭār (b. 1927) and his Palestinian secretary ʿAbdallāh Abū ʿIzza (1931–2022) ran an international coordination office of the Muslim Brotherhood in Beirut, the so-called General Office (maktab ʿāmm) or Executive Office (maktab tanfīḍi).

In a series of articles published by al-Shihāb between December 1972 and February 1973, Abū ʿIzza, a trained historian, launched a scathing attack on the ideas of Sayyid Quṭb and those who claimed to emulate him. He accused Quṭb of misleading “many innocent young people” by insinuating that the Brotherhood (jamāʿa) and Islam were one and the same thing and that Muslims ‘outside’ it were not true Muslims.35 This was a direct attack on Quṭb’s ‘Signposts’, which stipulated that the Muslim Brotherhood was the kernel of a future Islamic society in a sea of ignorant unbelief (jāhilīya). An Islamic movement dedicated to reform and development, Abū ʿIzza argued, must not adopt a mindset of separation from and permanent conflict with Muslims and non-Muslims in its own societies and societies worldwide.

In the following months, the magazine printed more than a dozen responses, mostly negative, by readers from all over the Arab world and the Western diaspora of the Muslim Brotherhood. While a number of the readers concurred with Abū ʿIzza’s argument that Quṭb’s writings were flawed from a fiqh perspective,36 most of them objected to Abū ʿIzza’s obvious intention to exclude Quṭb from the Muslim Brotherhood intellectual canon. Many of

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34 Ibid., 24–27.
them vigorously defended Qutb’s status as an intellectual giant and martyr and celebrated what they regarded as his important contribution to the manhaj (method, approach) of the Muslim Brotherhood. Some went so far as to claim that this campaign against Qutb in an Islamic journal could only be the work of traitors and paid agents.

Some branches of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Arab world found this ideological infighting so threatening that they stopped the delivery of the magazine to their members. Faced with a widening rift, senior members of the Lebanese Muslim Brotherhood stepped in to close the debate and propose a compromise solution. Ibrāhīm al-Miṣrī, the editor-in-chief of al-Shihāb, penned an article suggesting that Islamic activists should focus on their preaching mission and set aside their deep disagreement over takfīr:

> Whether the societies in which we live today are deemed to be deviant (munḥarifa) from Islam or in a state of apostasy (murtadda) or unbelief (kāfira), our duty is not to demand their repentance (istitāba), or to establish proof against them (iqāmat al-hujja ‘alayhā) and declare their apostasy. Our duty is to call them (daʿwa) and guide (hidāya) them to the straight path of God.

The implied message is: If daʿwa is already sufficient to dispense one’s duty towards God, then Islamic activists need not use violence or plan a rebellion.

Finally, al-Shihāb printed a lengthy statement prepared by Fayṣal Mawlawī, a high-ranking cadre and an acting Sharia judge in Lebanon who was arguably the most authoritative person at hand to settle the question of takfīr. Mawlawī called on everyone to tone down the debate about Qutb. Whether or not Qutb’s opinions were correct, he deserved to be treated with the respect owed to all the leaders and great men (ʿuẓamāʾ) of the Islamic movement. As

39 Author interview with Ibrahim al-Miṣrī, Beirut, 10/9/2016.
for *takfīr*, Mawlawī counselled the Muslim Brothers to go back to the fundamentals and seek guidance from their ‘Imam’ Ḥasan al-Bannā and the legal scholars of the venerable *fiqh* schools.


On the pages of *al-Shihāb* in 1973, Mawlawī applied the traditional teachings in a similar fashion to the previous *fiqh* writings by ‘Awda and Sābiq. As he put it, most contemporary Muslims were still Muslims, ordinary sinners who profess the *shahāda* and are graciously accepted by God even if they fulfil “only 1% of His commandments”.42 However, in his view, an “influential minority” in Muslim societies are guilty of *ridda*. Such is the case for “Muslims by identity” (*muslimūn bi-l-huwīya*), those who profess belief in a Sharia other than that articulated in the Qur’an, for example Marxism. In addition, anyone who states that “the time of the Sharia has passed” or that the Shariatic injunction of amputation as a punishment for theft was meant figuratively, not literally, is beyond doubt an infidel.

An original aspect of Mawlawī’s argument is his claim that the *takfīr* issue has not only a *fiqh* side but also a “movement side” (*nāḥiya ḥarakīya*), which is determined by deliberations on strategy and opportunity. Mawlawī proposes the following rule of thumb: While the Muslim Brotherhood is justified in vigorously calling out the infidel character of particular utterances or whole ideologies and worldviews, its members should refrain from applying the epithet of apostasy to specific people or groups of people. In short, this is how Mawlawī defines the catchphrase ‘Preachers, not Judges’, which appears prominently in the title of his second article: “We are preachers, not judges ... who categorize people and pass judgment on them”.43

Mawlawī’s arguments for restraint may be summed up as follows:

a) The ‘stray camel’ logic: If you treat a stray camel harshly, it will shy and run away. If you treat it kindly, it will follow you. The same applies to people. They tend to react defensively when other people scrutinize their religion. A confrontational approach will hurt their pride and make them shy away from Islam even more than before. As long as there is the slightest hope that they can be swayed back towards the proper understanding

42 Fayṣal Mawlawī, “Mujtamaʿātunā ... hal hiya muslima am jāhilīya?” *al-Shihāb* 7(3), 1/7/1973.
of Islam, activists should adopt the path of persuasion and admonition (mawʿiza ḥasana).

b) However, the admonition rule applies only if there is a chance of success. As for arrogant, godless intellectuals, people who boast of their impiety and consider themselves to be ‘civilized and progressive’ because of it, the Muslim Brothers should expose them (ifḍāḥ) and warn people about them.44

c) Aside from clear-cut cases, determining the unbelief of particular persons is not a religious duty, and therefore refraining from it is not a sin or shortcoming. This is because (1) God will take care of it on Judgment Day and (2) it is not a practical necessity of the Islamic movement in its present phase.

d) There is a risk in judging people: If we err in our judgment, we fall into sin. It is wise to avoid this risk.

While Abū ʿIzza seeks to undermine Quṭb’s message by pointing out – among other things – the lack of congruence between his ideological language and commonly accepted fiqh concepts, Mawlawī has a different goal. He acknowledges the wide popularity of Quṭb and his ideas within the Muslim Brotherhood and proposes a simple solution: Quṭb’s ideas must be placed in the right context. They are intellectual statements, not Shariatic judgments, and are therefore not authoritative for the practice of Islam within the Muslim Brotherhood. Keeping the realms of ideology and fiqh separate in this manner is useful. Whenever overzealous members act violently on catchcries such as “society is in a state of jāhilīya” or “our rulers and elites are enemies of Islam” (phrases that also appear in Mawlawī’s writings), their superiors can confront them with an authoritative fiqh discourse that casts doubt on the Shariatic legitimacy of spontaneous action. By dissuading members from engaging in violence and rebellion, the leader may chart a measured course of takfīr that is mostly determined by strategic considerations – the above-mentioned ‘practical necessities’ of the ‘present phase’.

*Preachers, not Judges* features similar arguments against the practical implementation of radical ideas. It qualifies Quṭb’s core ideological concepts of

44 Here, Mawlawī probably hints at the Ṣādiq al-ʿAẓm affair, which had taken place in Lebanon about three years earlier. In reaction to the Marxist intellectual’s controversial book ‘A criticism of religious thought’ (*Naqd al-fikr al-dīnī*), the highest Sunni religious authority of the country, Dār al-Fatwā, called for the confiscation of the book and declared Ṣādiq al-ʿAẓm an apostate (*murtadd*). Al-ʿAẓm only escaped punishment because the Lebanese Interior Minister at the time, Druze leftist politician Kamal Jounblatt, refused to act on these accusations. See Stefan Wild, “Gott und Mensch im Libanon,” *Der Islam* 48 (1973), 2, 206–253, https://doi.org/10.1515/islm.1971.48.2.206
jahiliya and hakimya, i.e. his argument that the people and governments in the contemporary Muslim world are un-Islamic, but it never mentions Quṭb by name, thus avoiding taking sides with either his followers or his critics within the Muslim Brotherhood. In matters of takfir, the book repeats the same basic positions outlined above, with a slightly different emphasis:

a) All nominal Muslims are Muslims until the opposite is proven. One should not declare sinners who profess the shahada to be infidels on account of their sins, even if these sins are egregious.45

b) The only exception is when impious deeds are accompanied by impious utterances: “Without question, anyone who declares sins to be permissible rejects (jahada) the commandment (hukm) of God and is thus undoubtedly a kafir and a mushrik.”46 Unlike Sābiq and ‘Awda, al-Huḍaybī focuses almost exclusively on the concept of ‘denial’ (juḥūd), that is, what happens with ‘a person who denies something that God has made it a duty to believe (man jaḥada shay’tan mimmā iftaraḍa Allāh ta‘ālā al-īmān bihi).’47

c) Preachers, not Judges places great emphasis on the possible excuses for verbal acts of denial: ignorance (jahl), error (khata’) and constraint (ikrāh).48 Only if none of these applies does denial become apostasy.

d) As for the implementation of takfir, Preachers, not Judges is evasive.49 If someone’s words and actions seem to qualify as juḥūd, it is first necessary to interrogate him and present definitive proof (iqāmat al-ḥujja) in order to exclude ignorance and error; if he insists on his denial, then he is legally kafir and should be punished for apostasy. However, only a proper Islamic judge (qādī) may carry out this procedure and only in a proper judicial setting.50 The implicit conclusion is that the duʿāt, i.e. Islamist activists, do not have the authority to implement takfir.

It seems puzzling that Preachers, not Judges introduces this important principle only after more than 100 pages of discussion – one of the many “obvious deficiencies in terms of presentation and readability,” as noted by Barbara

45 The entire first chapter is dedicated to the point that sinners cannot be excommunicated on account of their sins: Hasan al-Huḍaybī, Duʿāt lā quḍāt (Cairo: Dār al-Tawzīʿ wa-l-Nashr al-Islāmīya, 1987), 16–57.
46 Ibid., 47.
47 Ibid., 58.
48 Ibid., 94–104, 125–135.
49 Ibid., 111–125.
50 Ibid., 104.
Zollner. The origin and history of the book provide the best explanation: It was an emergency response to an internal ideological challenge that threatened to split the organisation. By shifting the debate towards fiqh, the authors hoped to neutralize some of the most extremist interpretations of Quṭb’s writings with reference to authoritative Islamic doctrine. The chapters were probably written separately, each with a specific extremist position in mind, such as the collective excommunication of Muslim society (Chapters 1 and 2), the excommunication of contemporary Muslim rulers (Chapters 3 and 4) and the excommunication of those who do not join a specific Islamic movement (parts of Chapter 5). The absence of a single author accounts for the lack of a comprehensive and concise argument.

It is likely that the positions outlined in Preachers not Judges began to crystallize in the late 1960s and the early 1970s and acquired a semi-official tinge only following the formal publication of the book in 1977, when the Muslim Brotherhood needed to distance itself in a more decisive way from the growing Takfīrist scene in Egypt and elsewhere. The urgency of this moment is attested by Salīm al-Bahnasāwī’s book ‘Judgment on the Excommunication of a Muslim’ (al-Ḥukm wa-qaḍīyat takfīr al-muslim), also published in 1977, which is primarily a refutation of the thinking of Shukrī Muṣṭafā, a former Muslim Brother who became the leader of one of the Takfīrist splinter groups, Jamā‘at al-Muslimūn. Al-Bahnasāwī (1932–2006), a secular-educated lawyer, was a senior member of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood who was imprisoned twice under Nasser and emigrated in 1973 to work at the court of the Kuwaiti emir. In his view, the main disagreement between the Takfīris and the Muslim Brotherhood mainstream had always been the latter’s refusal to issue takfīr judgments on either rulers or ordinary Muslims. He argues that the Muslim Brotherhood position is based on the consensus of the Sunni legal schools: While it is permissible to point out kufr in general terms (“whoever does such-and-such is an infidel”), it is not permissible to condemn specific people as kāfirs, because that is a prerogative of the Muslim ruler or, by extension, the judge – following proper investigation and due process.

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51 Zollner, Muslim Brotherhood, 65.
52 Ibid., 64–75.
54 Sālim ʿAlī al-Bahnasāwī, al-Ḥukm wa-qaḍīyat takfīr al-muslim (Cairo: Dār al-Anṣār, 1977), 146, 156. A full exposition of the Muslim Brotherhood doctrine on takfīr is found on pp. 307–317.
55 Ibid., 166.
Al-Bahnasāwī also accuses the extremists of their ignorance of traditional Islamic doctrine. Sunni scholars have always differentiated between two types of unbelief (kufr): actual kufr and figurative kufr. Many Hadiths do not use the word kufr in its literal sense, but in the sense of ‘grave sin’, and scholars have recognized this distinction. According to al-Bahnasāwī, the same logic applies to Quṭb: When he calls society jāhilī, he does not mean that it has actually returned to the state of pre-Islamic paganism; rather, he uses the term figuratively, in the sense of sinfulness or disobedience against God.

These arguments certainly ‘take the edge off’ Sayyid Quṭb’s teachings, reducing them to intellectual musings that have no practical application in a Muslim society. But what about Muslim governments and their stubborn and unapologetic insistence on applying positive, man-made law – at least in some areas? Both al-Huḍaybī and al-Bahnasāwī are clearly looking for an accommodating position on this question. Al-Huḍaybī points out that a Muslim ruler has the right to re-interpret the Sharia within the boundaries of legitimate ijtihād; he may even create his own legislation in areas not covered by traditional Islamic law. Al-Bahnasāwī argues that contemporary Muslim leaders have inherited a situation in which important parts of the law, such as criminal law and commercial law, are not in accordance with the Sharia. Whether these leaders should or could have changed this state of affairs immediately upon assuming office is ‘an ongoing discussion’ among Islamists. However, there are many explanations other than unbelief why current rulers and state officials might be contravening the teachings of Islam: ignorance and error, duress, putative ijtihād, whim, bribery and personal interest. Who is in a position to determine the precise reason in any case?

In short, pious Muslims must tolerate their rulers, even if they are authoritarian, oppressive and erratic so long as they refrain from openly defending secular laws as such. If such rulers pay some degree of lip service to the idea of an Islamic state and the ‘application of the Sharia’, the Muslim Brotherhood will not encourage rebellion against them. Al-Huḍaybī and al-Bahnasāwī make it appear as if the moderate Muslim Brotherhood that emerged in the 1970s had abandoned any proactive use of takfīr. They do so by stressing and expanding the aspect that takfīr cannot be used in any circumstances against either nominally Muslim governments or Muslims who are ‘ordinary sinners’. However, this is not the complete picture.

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56 Ibid., 45–93.
57 Al-Huḍaybī, Duʿāt lā quḍāt, 79–111.
58 Al-Bahnasāwī, al-Ḥukm, 144–166.
59 Ibid., 144.
The Persistence of Contrasting Opinions into the 1980s:
al-Qaraḍāwī and Mashhūr

While there was growing agreement on the catchphrase ‘Preachers, not Judges’, the boundary between preaching and judging remained blurry and was interpreted in different ways. In the late 1970s, many of the negotiations between Muslim Brothers, conservative ‘ulāmaʾ and governments focused on the challenge posed by Takfiri groups and their extremist doctrines, but Mawlawī’s stipulation to take a measured course in takfīr remained on the table. Leading Muslim Brothers remained ambivalent on the question raised by Mawlawī: How much restraint in the practice of takfīr is required, commendable or strategically prudent?

A comparison between two important contributions made in the same period (late 1970s/early 1980) shows how far positions could diverge and follow an unexpected logic. On the one side, the well-known reformist Azhari scholar Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī (1926–2022), who was becoming the leading intellectual in the movement and considered a potential future general guide, proposed a remarkably proactive practice of takfīr. On the other side, ‘hardline’ Quṭbist ideologue Muṣṭafā Mashhūr (1921–2002), considered by many to be the real organizational strongman behind General Guides ‘Umar at-Tilimsānī (1972–1986) and Muḥammad Ḥāmid Abū Naṣr (1986–1996), advised followers against takfīr in all circumstances.

In al-Qaraḍāwī’s ‘The Phenomenon of Exaggeration in Takfīr’ (Ẓāhirat al-Ghulūw fī t-takfīr, 1977), the rejection of Takfīrist extremism, which makes up the first part of the book, leads directly into a vindication of takfīr proper as prescribed by Islamic law. According to al-Qaraḍāwī, extremism is a direct result of rampant moral corruption and political oppression in Muslim societies. In his view, not only are unbelief and apostasy encouraged by the toleration of rulers and the apathy of Islamic scholars, but even worse, the state harasses and persecutes the Islamic activists and preachers who are resisting this development. Al-Qaraḍāwī apparently hoped to change this situation by empowering duʿāt and using takfīr as an instrument to push back the tide of unbelief in Arab societies. He had good reason to be optimistic, as he was writing from a secure position as a close associate of the ruling family of Qaṭar, who had put him in charge of the establishment of an Islamic higher education system. Like many other members of his generation of the Muslim Brotherhood, he benefited from the rise of the newly wealthy Gulf states, which not only

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provided him with an escape from political oppression, but also offered an ideal setting from which to promote conservative Islam and the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The growing da’wa movement, as al-Qaradāwī explains in the second part of the book, must avoid the mistakes of the extremists and restrict takfīr “to those who deserve it.” Much more openly than previous Muslim Brotherhood statements, the text offers a comprehensive list of those groups of people who deserve to be charged with and tried for apostasy. After excluding dissemblers who outwardly pretend to be Muslims (they will be punished in the Hereafter), the following remain:

1) Communists who insist on communism, which means they believe in it as a philosophy and life system [...].
2) Secularist (ʿalmānīyūn) rulers and members of the secularist parties who openly (jahratan) reject God’s law (sharʿ Allāh) and call for the state to separate itself from religion [...].
3) ‘People of the sects’ (ahl al-niḥal) who have openly strayed and defected (murūq) from Islam, i.e. Druze, Nusayris [Alawites], Ismailis and similar esoteric groups (firaq bāṭinīya) [...]. As well as their equivalent in our age: Bahaism, which is a new, perverted religion, and close to them the Qadiyāniyya [Ahmadiyya], who brought forth a new prophet after Muḥammad, with whom God sealed (khatama) the line of prophets.

However, as collective takfīr is not permissible under Islamic law (and, one assumes, attempting to persecute or kill such a large number of citizens might cause a backlash), these people should be treated as individuals: they must be held and questioned individually and confronted with the evident religious truth ‘until they have no excuses’: Al-Qaradāwī does not mention what should happen after that, but the informed reader understands that the consequence should be either repentance and retraction or execution.

Al-Qaradāwī explains why declaring whole groups of people apostates is consistent with the espoused distinction between preachers and judges: Islamic scholars distinguish between kind/type (nawʿ) and person, and voicing a Sharia-inspired judgment (ḥukm) on types of people is not considered ‘judging’ in the proper sense. Consequently, the preachers may state, for example, that “communists are unbelievers” or that “secularist rulers who reject the rule of God” are apostates. However, judges are not allowed to make such declarations, as it would be an act of takfīr.

61 Ibid., 25.
62 Ibid., 27.
63 Al-Qaradāwī fills this gap in a later, more detailed book on apostasy: Jarīmat al-Ridda ... wa-ʿuqūbat al-murtadd (Cairo: Maktabat Wahba, 1996). On this later work, see Krämer, “Drawing Boundaries.”
64 Al-Qaradāwī, Zāhirat al-Ghulūw, 28–29.
of God’s law are infidels” or that “whoever calls for such-and-such is an unbeliever”, but they may not call a specific person an unbeliever until that person has been tried and sentenced in the proper Islamic way. It is implied that this procedure is the prerogative of judges. The rest is simply da’wa.

While he was writing these lines, al-Qarâdâwî’s musings about the punishment of apostates by an Islamic judiciary were more than pure speculation. In different parts of the Muslim world, there were signs of an emerging collaboration between governments, conservative establishment scholars and Islamists. In 1975, the Egyptian government announced an – ultimately abortive – drive to codify the Sharia. By 1977, both the government and al-Azhar had produced draft laws that would have turned apostasy into a capital crime as in the classical doctrine. In his memoir, al-Qarâdâwî’s writes that the Egyptian government was making friendly overtures to him and allowed him, together with Muḥammad al-Ghazâlî, to appear at a huge Ramadan Friday prayer rally organised by the Islamic student movement in central Cairo. That was only three months before Sadat’s state visit to Israel in November 1977, which started the peace process between Egypt and Israel and triggered furious reactions within the Islamist scene (and from other opposition movements). After that, relations between Islamists and the Sadat regime deteriorated and acts of violent rebellion escalated.

In the late 1970s, the stunning success of the Islamic revolution in Iran reignited debates over the choice between da’wa (in the sense of non-violent activism) and rebellion. It was not until the failed Islamist uprising in Egypt in 1981, which the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood had opposed from the beginning, and the catastrophic defeat of the Islamist rebellion against the Asad regime in Syria (1979–1982), which the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood had only hesitantly and belatedly joined, that the victory of the da’wa strategy was

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67 Yūsuf al-Qaraḍâwî, Ibn al-Qarya wa'-l-kuttâb (Cairo: Dâr al-Shuruq, 2006), 3:397. According to Al-Arian, Answering the Call, 94, Sadat had been in dialogue with al-Qaraḍâwî and other Muslim Brotherhood exiles since 1971; as early as 1973, al-Qaraḍâwî attended a Cairo University summer camp and gave a lecture to the students.
68 In Egypt, Muslim Brotherhood leaders campaigned among student radicals to convince them of the superiority of the non-violent strategy and were finally successful in the early 1980s. Cf. Al-Arian, Answering the Call, 146–175; Willi, Fourth Ordeal, 85–99.
sealed. During this period, Muṣṭafā Mashhūr was the leading strategist of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, and his programmatic statements, first published in the Muslim Brotherhood magazine al-Da’wa between 1976 and 1981 and later compiled in the book Min Fiqh al-Da’wa, show how the overriding aim of ’keeping the field of da’wa open’ determined his position on takfīr.

Mashhūr introduces takfīr as a ‘slippery slope’ and ‘aberration’ that seduced some Islamic activists due to their inexperience and lack of patience and sober deliberation.71 He does mention the standard Islamic legal position on takfīr, but only in the most general terms: Any person who pronounces the shahāda is a Muslim, unless he denies axiomatic articles of faith (ankanā ma’līmūn min al-dīn ḍarūratūn) or commits an act that can only be explained by unbelief (ata’ ‘amāla’ān lā yaḥtamil illā al-kufr).72 Mashhūr downplays the practical implications of this doctrine by arguing that, for the individual Muslim, only preaching and enjoining good and forbidding evil are Shariatic duties (wājib, fard). It is not incumbent on any individual to judge the belief of another person:

We will all be asked before God, “Have you brought your family, your neighbours, your acquaintances and all those with whom you associate to God and to acting according to the Qur’an and the Sunnah of the Prophet, or not?” You will not be asked: “Did you judge this one or that one or not, and why did you not judge him?” This is not part of the Sharia duties.

Mashhūr does not put forward a new and different interpretation of kufr and ridda. Rather, he distinguishes sharply between duty and permission. While God may have given permission to Muslims to accuse others of apostasy and prosecute them, He did not make this the duty of every individual Muslim, and that is why Muslim Brothers are not required to practice takfīr, even if they could, legally.

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69 The rebellion in Syria was inspired by the radical writings of Sa’īd Ḥawwā, but led by the Fighting Vanguard (al-ṭalīʿa al-muqātila), a radical breakaway group from the Hama branch of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. See Raphael Lefèvre, Ashes of Hama (London: Hurst & Company, 2013), Dara Conduit, The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019).


71 Mashhūr, Min fiqh, 1:31–42, 94.

72 Ibid., 47–48.

73 Ibid., 45.
Considering the religious risk, Mashhūr proposes, like Mawlawī that restraint is the safer choice: An activist who does not judge others will not be punished by God. However, an activist who judges someone and calls that person an apostate causes that person to lose all protection of property, honour and life. (Technically, this should happen only after a trial by an Islamic court. But Mashhūr ignores this part of the ‘preachers, not judges’ argument.) If the activist wrongly accuses someone, he will face a similarly harsh retribution from God in the Hereafter: “Therefore, we hold that the step (al-iqdām ‘alā) of condemning a Muslim of disbelief leads to a dangerous place (al-mahlaka), with no prospect of divine reward (thawāb) [...].”74

Whereas Mawlawī considered it a duty to expose and scandalise the most shameless apostates in Muslim society, Mashhūr limits himself to advising Islamic activists to avoid the company of such people: If you suspect that a person is an “atheistic communist” or an apostate, then avoid this person in your daily dealings: do not do business with the person and do not marry into the person’s family: “That is enough; you are not obliged to judge him.”75

Like Mawlawī, Mashhūr links the ‘lack of obligation’ argument with considerations concerning the most effective daʿwa strategy. Confrontation by takfīr is not a very effective way to get into the minds and hearts of the people. The social outreach of the Muslim Brotherhood will be more successful and less risky without it:

The Muslims among whom we live, and whom […] we call to Islam and to act according to it and for it – they are the ‘field’ of daʿwa on which we work and from which we bring forth the believing and active elements [i.e. new members]. If these people notice and learn that we consider them unbelievers, they will hate us and ignore us. Thus, we acquire their enmity, destroy [literally: blow up, tafjīr] the field of daʿwa and reach a dead end: we have isolated ourselves from the people, without benefiting Islam and Muslims in the process.76

This quotation sums up the main argument against Takfiris in Muslim Brotherhood literature: Their approach is counterproductive and results in isolating the Islamic movement from the masses, instead of rallying the masses to Islam and allowing the Islamic movement to assume their leadership.

74 Ibid., 47.
75 Ibid., 45.
76 Ibid., 48.
Conclusion

Despite the ‘preachers, not judges’ rhetoric, the moderate consensus of the Muslim Brotherhood that took shape between the late 1960s and early 1980s was never about a definitive choice between preaching and judging. It was about prioritizing the medium-term survival of the preaching mission by avoiding a violent confrontation with powerful regimes. To the extent that judging other Muslims as infidels (takfīr) became an element in that confrontation, it had to be toned down, restricted to the realm of ‘theory’, and deferred until the coming of more favourable political circumstances.

The problem recognized by moderate Muslim Brotherhood voices since the 1960s was that the fight against the growing ‘impiety’ of Muslim populations and rulers – a cause that the Muslim Brotherhood embraced in principle – had become a rallying cry for excessively militant Islamist currents – first inside the Muslim Brotherhood, then increasingly independent from it. To counterbalance the ‘slippery slope’ of violent rebellion and civil war, the mainstream majority in the Muslim Brotherhood chose to reinvigorate the political conservatism of traditional Sunni doctrine and turn it against Quṭb and radicalized Quṭbists in their ranks, such as Saʿīd Ḥawwā. Harnessing Quṭb’s prestige as a martyr and keeping his posthumous followers within the fold, while simultaneously neutralizing their powerful case for rebellion, obviously required a delicate balancing act.

When al-Shibāb magazine initiated an open debate about the legacy of Quṭb and his reading of Muslim governments and societies, it exposed deep rifts within the movement and among its sympathizers. Preachers, not Judges offered a face-saving compromise to both sides of the debate. It avoided any explicit criticism of the ‘elephant in the room’, the martyr Sayyid Quṭb and his ideological legacy, but pushed back against the idea of the revolutionary implementation of his ideas, especially against nominally Muslim governments. It seems that the circumlocutory arguments put forth in Preachers, not Judges and developed further by Mawlawī, al-Bahnasāwi, al-Qaraḍāwī and Mashhūr, became popular among Muslim Brotherhood leaders not so much for their intrinsic value, but because they were useful in glossing over the core ideological disagreements that threatened to divide the Muslim Brotherhood.

77 As noted by Egyptian sociologist Ḥusām Tammām, most chapters of the Muslim Brotherhood became very adept at avoiding involvement in the escalating conflicts between Jihadists and Arab governments, at the cost of observing the red lines drawn by these governments. Ḥusām Tammām, al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn: Sanawāt mā qabla l-thawra (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 2012), 137–162.
Most of the recurring arguments used to consolidate the ‘moderate’ preaching approach are entirely utilitarian: Violence conducted in the name of takfīr will cause a backlash against Islamic movements, not just on the political level, but also on the level of the ‘Muslim street’. Hence, on the grounds of political expediency and a thorough cost–benefit analysis, Muslim Brothers should act with utmost caution and restraint in the face of heresy and apostasy: “Avoid takfīr because it might destroy the field of daʿwa.”

In consequence, the Muslim Brotherhood must temporarily leave the implementation of takfīr (the ‘judging’ part) to governments and state courts, even if these institutions are not properly Islamic. ‘Judging’ is desirable, and indeed necessary, for preserving Islamic identity, but must be deferred until the coming of a truly Islamic system, whenever that will happen.78 When Muslim Brothers like Mawlawī or al-Qaraḍāwī see a window of opportunity for a proactive application of takfīr, it is exclusively against the weaker elements in society, such as intellectuals or religious minorities, never against the governments they are living under.

Even for the most committed moderates and anti-Quṭbists, the focus on preaching mission did not mean revising the concept of takfīr or developing a doctrine that would be less amenable to extremist misuse. There was no legal-theological development on takfīr within the Muslim Brotherhood, let alone any mention of ijtihād or contemporary adaptation. Before and after Preachers, not Judges, all Muslim Brotherhood sources share a broad consensus that the authoritative position of Islam concerning takfīr is to be found in the ridda doctrine of the classical fiqh manuals. In addition, all Muslim Brotherhood sources agree to interpret this doctrine in a traditionalist if not reactionary way that would allow the persecution of a broad section of non-conservative and non-Islamist Muslim intellectuals and political activists, especially Marxists, secularists and reformist theologians.

Like the conservative majority of the Sunni scholarly establishment in the Arab world, Muslim Brotherhood authors remained vehemently opposed to broadening the scope of acceptable Muslimness beyond the narrow limits of classical Sunni doctrines.79 The strengthened alliance with the conservative ‘ulāmā’ on this and similar issues was one of the constitutive elements of the ‘Islamic revival’ in the 1970s and 1980s, and it allowed Muslim Brothers to become an entrenched part of the scholarly establishment in many countries.

in the Arab world. Some of the harassment and persecution experienced by non-Islamists intellectuals and reformist or otherwise ‘unorthodox’ theologians in Egypt and other Arab states in the 1980s and 1990s was a direct result of this alliance, combined with the collaboration of likeminded judges and bureaucrats: “Takfir (the charge of apostasy) is now wielded by representatives of the state and official Islam.”

Until the ‘Arab Spring’ protests and revolutions in 2011, the preaching mission of the Muslim Brotherhood seemed to make significant social progress and contributed to the cultural hegemony of ‘conservative Islamism’ in many Arab countries. If this period did not witness any wider campaigns of judicial or public takfir for infringements on religious ‘orthodoxy’, it was because regimes effectively stopped the further Islamization of laws and state institutions.

In contrast with the language of public declarations and political reform initiatives, Muslim Brotherhood literature proper – designed for internal ‘educational’ purposes and directed at the rank and file – continued to offer a distinctly intolerant and repressive vision of Islam and its boundaries. This involved the denial of any legitimate disagreement among Muslims over key aspects of religion and its role in society, and the use of open and veiled threats of takfir against those who might dare to challenge Islamist views on these issues. Against this background, it is understandable that critics of the Muslim Brotherhood in Arab societies often remained deeply sceptical about the nature of the Brotherhood’s moderation.

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80 Meir Hatina, “The Clerics’ Betrayal? Islamists, “Ulama” and the Polity,” in Guardians of Faith in Modern Times: ‘Ulama’ in the Middle East, ed. Meir Hatina (Leiden, Brill: 2009), 247–264. Beginning in the 1960s, many Muslim Brothers made academic careers at Saudi Arabian state universities. See Lacroix, Awakening Islam, 40–51. On the situation in Egypt during the Sadat years, see Al-Arian, Answering the Call. During the Mubarak era, the symbiosis between Islamist intellectuals (not necessarily members of the Muslim Brotherhood) and official Islam became even tighter, see Salwa Ismail, Rethinking Islamist politics: culture, the state and Islamism (London: IB Tauris, 2006).

81 Ismail, Rethinking Islamist Politics, 46–47.

82 Wickham 2013: 68–75.