INTRODUCTION: THE THOUGHT OF THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD, AT THE CENTER OF ORTHODOX ISLAM

As soon as one speaks about Islamism in the Arab countries and in Europe, the organization of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) draws fire because of popular stereotypes. Their image is one of troublemakers, and this image has stuck persistently to the organization. The characterization goes back, in fact, to the early 20th century, in a colonial context, when the Brotherhood challenged the institutional and traditional Islamic authorities: they considered them ineffective in the defense of Islam, because they were satisfied to do nothing other than transmit traditionalist knowledge. The Brotherhood held that this attitude is insufficient. It leads to the decline of Muslim societies: if the Islamic system of religious and cultural references was left to erode, these societies would be helpless to resist the aggressive policies of the Occident.

At length the Brotherhood began to be involved in Egyptian and Palestinian politics, and toward the end of the 1940’s it appears as a force, an armed one at that, strong enough to pose a threat to the authority of the State. In this case the State responded, and the Brotherhood was repudiated as regards both national politics and international diplomacy.

Ever since, the negative image of putschists has clung to the Brothers. This stereotyping is more or less incorrectly related to the appearance of hardline radical groups, in revolt against authority—Takfīr, Takfīr wa Al-Hijra¹ or Jihād. Since the beginning of the 1970’s these three groups, inspired in particular by Sayyid Qutb, the second great intellectual leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, have preached armed struggle against governments considered to be impious, while the Muslim Brotherhood tried to come out from the underground and enter the political playing field. This spurious connection this image of ‘seditious rebels’ continued to be alleged in the later 1970’s and its credibility increased in the 1980’s, reinforced by the emergence of Islamic nationalist movements across the Muslim world: a number are considered violent, like Hamas in Palestine, condemned in the western world because of its continuous

¹ Anathema and Retreat.
refusal to recognize the state of Israel and its endorsement of the use of violence even when civilians are placed at risk.²

The image of the Brotherhood was blackened as well for many when this connection to radicalism was developed into a perceived connection to contemporary international terrorism. In people's imagination, they are associated with the appearance of the many armed cells (in the late 1990's, and especially since 2000) which are more or less closely associated with the movement that came to be called Al-Qaida,³ Oussama Bin Laden himself and some of his mentors, such as the sheik Abdullah Azzam and Aymān Al-Zawahiri had at one time belonged to the Brotherhood.

When the discussion of political and media analysts turns to the intellectual source of revolutionary Islamism, jihadist, the name of the Muslim Brotherhood is likely to be mentioned, if only as a distant influence. This seems abusive, as, if the movement's founder, Hassan al-Bannā, has re-evaluated the concept of jihad, emphasising the importance of it's being carried out, taking this dimension into account hinders understanding of the numerous other facets of their militance, their commitment. Admittedly, they represent one of the intellectual roots of Islamism, understood as an ideology at once religious and political which attributes global pretentions to Islamic religion with regards to society. But this fact must imperatively be understood in a historical context, and this, so much more than the dissidence of certain radical groups means that there has been a doctrinal or organisational break with the structure of the Brotherhood.

In Muslim countries, at this the beginning of the 21st century, the Brothers use religious references to valorise their religious and political demands without it really being possible to distinguish if one or other of the principals weighs henceforward on the other. While more or less professing respect for existing legal frameworks, they look to introduce references from Islamic principals into the functioning of state and civil society all the while arguing against Arab political authorities when

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² However, Jean-François Legrain explains that since 1995, sheik Ahmed Yassine the movement's founder proposed living peacefully alongside Israel 'with no time limit, so long as all of the territories occupied in 1967 have been evacuated'. (J.-F. Legrain, 'Le Hamas sur la scène politique', Le Monde, 31 janvier 2006).
³ For an admirable piece of work that deconstructs this concept, made up out of whole cloth in the United States after September 11, 2001, see J. Burke (2003), who is not unaware that, a posteriori, certain individuals affiliated themselves in ideological terms with this movement.