CHAPTER EIGHT

LIVING FIGURES OF REFERENCE

The movement today is made up of white collar workers, thinkers and religious scholars, but also by preachers who stand in a complex relationship to the MB movement. We shall observe a distinction between those who are located outside of Europe, most of these in the Muslim world, and those who live in Europe. The first group makes up a sort of referential framework in the largest sense, although this framework may sometimes be a bit abstract; it is the second group that has the most concrete effect upon the European scene. In the space between the two, just the same, certain personalities take on the role of a bridge between two worlds. From this point, we have just as much to do, and perhaps much more, with intellectuals who stand outside the organizational movement of the Muslim Brotherhood but not its ideas, who are more or less critical of the movement, and who have a direct effect upon Muslim thought, and by this means upon the thought of those members of the Muslim Brotherhood who are most open to innovation.¹

¹ We can cite for example personalities such as Abdelkarim Soroush, Nasr Abu Zayd, Muhammad Sharour, Abdelmajid Charfî, Mohamed Arkoun and also Abdelwahab Elmessiri, Fahmi Huwaidi, Munir Shafiq, Tariq Al-Bishri, Abdelhalim Ibrahim Abdelhalim, Bashir Nafi and many intellectuals associated with the International Institute of Islamic Thought (especially Ismail Raji Al-Faruqi and Taha Jabir Al-ʿAlwâni, Abdulhamid Abu Sulayman and Hisham Al-Talib), among others.

1. Figures of reference outside Europe

From where we stand at the beginning of the 21st century, we see that a few personalities enjoy a great notoriety and an influential image, even a certain authority with relation to European militants, despite their geographical remoteness. Some of these are organizational leaders and the others are thinkers.

As regards the first category of personalities, the most concrete physical representative of the movement is the leader of the Egyptian Mus-
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lim Brotherhood, Muhammad Mehdi ʿAkef, the seventh successor to Hassan Al-Bannā, named to his present position in January 2004. From our reading of articles written in Arabic which are available primarily as posted on the website of the Egyptian Brotherhood, his legitimacy rests upon three elements: first, his proximity to the founder (he is one of the last leaders to have been able to know him personally), second, his extensive overseas contacts (he has lived in Europe among other places and he developed the international network of the Brotherhood in Europe), and finally the fact that he was condemned to death in 1954, something that confers upon him a sort of valor, the legitimacy of the status of a hero, and which testifies to a kind of ‘bravery,’ an active form of resistance, and the toughness of his spirit, which has been able to keep going through adversity.

In some of our interviews, one or another European partisan recounts for us briefly his visit to this leader, typically accomplished during a stopover in Cairo prior to continuing on during a pilgrimage to Mecca. These are courtesy calls that allow the visitor and the guide of the movement to catch up on news, or more motivated visits whose purpose is to seek counsel, to ask the guide’s opinion or even his approval of a particular attitude or organizational strategy. However, in the eyes of members of the Brotherhood from Europe his role remains above all symbolic. For partisans from other national branches, it is first and foremost their national leader who constitutes the most authoritative reference, and in comparison the Egyptian leader appears more distant, even secondary. And the majority of them even end up abandoning that reference there, later making a commitment to local organizations or European national branches that have established their own structures and that recognize their own figures of authority, in relative independence.

This remark leads us to consider the question regarding the role of the leaders of various national branches. Some of them are mentioned from time to time in the interviews as figures of reference because they represent the movement and are involved in it. All of these persons are above all recognized for their activism within their respective national branches, activity which is perceived as the result of disinterested and even courageous altruism. Thus in order of importance we may mention the Algerian Mahfoud Nahnah (who occasionally traveled, especially to France, but who died in 2003), the Syrian Ali Sadr Al-Din Bayanuni (a legal expert, at the present time a refugee in London, but still categorized here as an extra-European figure, since his involvement is concentrated upon Syrian affairs), and even, surprisingly enough, the