In recent years, interest in the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in Europe has increased. This trend was mainly due to the view that the Egyptian MB and most notably Sayyid Quṭb (1906-1966), one of its main theoreticians, had played an important role in the events leading to the emergence of modern Jihādism. At the same time, however, the growing body of academic and journalistic literature reflected a genuine interest in the role the MB might play in the future of Muslims in Europe. Especially academics are quite optimistic about the possibility of a European Islam emerging in the thought of thinkers who are part of the MB tradition. Ḥasan al-Bannā’s grandson Tariq Ramadan is a case in point.

Unfortunately, a comprehensive survey over the MB in Europe is still lacking and many aspects of the phenomenon are seriously understudied. Brigitte Maréchal takes a step in the right direction. But although the title of her book might suggest that it gives an exhaustive overview of the emergence of the MB and its ideology, this is not the case. Most importantly, perhaps, she focuses on the MB in Belgium, France and Great Britain. And although she touches on the situation in Switzerland, Germany and Italy, all countries with a substantial MB presence, these are widely ignored. The “Muslim Brothers in Western Europe” or “in France, Great Britain and Belgium” would have been a more honest title for the book.

In a first part, Maréchal gives an overview of the roots and the emergence of the MB in Europe. However, one might have expected a more detailed and systematic overview of the way the MB entered Europe through Switzerland and Germany. As the early history of the MB in Europe has not been written yet, that would have been a valuable service to less well-informed readers. Those will have to continue relying on journalistic accounts like the one by the American writer Ian Johnson (“How a Mosque for ex-Nazis became Center of Radical Islam”, in: The Wall Street Journal, July 12, 2005), who is harshly and unfairly criticized by Maréchal, most likely because of his critical attitude towards the MB. Adding some more basic information about the formative period would have made the first part of Maréchal’s book more valuable. The interested reader will have to wait for Johnson’s forthcoming book A Mosque in Munich (Harcourt, 2009) for a more accessible text on the early history of the MB in Europe. As this book will concentrate on the early history of the movement in Germany, a more comprehensive and academic survey of history, structures, aims, ideology, strategies and tactics of the movement in Europe will however remain an important desideratum.

In part two, Maréchal lists those authorities of the MB tradition, who constitute important influences on its European followers. Again, the less well-informed reader will have problems grasping the importance if not of Ḥasan al-Bannā (1906-1949) and Sayyid Quṭb, who are both dealt with quite extensively, but of the less prominent figures like Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, Muṣṭafā al-Sibāʿī, Saʿīd Ḥawwā, Sayyid Sābiq, Saʿīd Ramaḍān, Zainab al-Ghazālī, Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, Faiṣal al-Mawlawī, Saʿīd
Ramaḍān al-Būṭī, Rashīd Ghannūshī and ʿIssām al-ʿAṭṭār, Tareq Oubrou and Ṭāriq Ramaḍān. By relying on qualitative interviews with MB leaders, thinkers and supporters, Maréchal tries to measure the importance of these authorities. However, she does not succeed to present the reader with a clear picture. In the case of some scholars, she presents extensive quotes, in other cases none; sometimes, she gives a lengthy introduction into the person's background, sometimes she does not. Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, for instance, does not figure very prominently on this list. Even if this reflected a European reality, it would have to be discussed simply because it contradicts conventional wisdom about this figure and his influence on young European Muslims. Therefore, she leaves the reader more puzzled than enlightened. This effect is aggravated by the esoteric structuring of part two.

In part three, Maréchal analyses how the European MB develops the ideology as defined by the above-mentioned authorities into distinct European discourses. It is in fact in those passages, where Maréchal describes the trend towards the European Brothers’ emancipation from their mother organisations, where the text is strongest and where the author substantially adds to our knowledge. In part three, she touches on the European Brothers’ attitudes towards Islam as a way of life, notions of reform and revolution, the unity of Muslims and different forms of organisation, morals and social life, relations to non-Muslims and the West and different Islamic trends like the classical Salafīya of Afghānī, ʿAbduh and Riḍā and the “Wahhābī-Salafists”. According to Maréchal, notions like that of an Islamic State and even the idea of re-establishing the caliphate have their importance for members and leaders of the movement, but rather as a MB myth, which is too dominant in the MB tradition to get rid of, but too unrealistic to follow and propagate in a European context. In the words of Brigitte Maréchal: “They limit their pretensions while attempting to maintain the viability of the myth of the Islamic project, but they know that the illusion is less and less convincing among the members of the movement in Europe.” In these chapters, the author describes the wide array of differing attitudes typical for the MB in Europe—quite in contrast to the notion widespread in circles critical of the MB, where the European brothers are rather depicted as subordinate to the mother organisation.

Nevertheless, it never really becomes clear to what extent the results presented here actually give a comprehensive overview of MB thinking in Europe. Maréchal bases her study on 73 interviews with Brothers and people close to the organisation in Britain, Belgium, and France and in two exceptional cases in Germany. Furthermore, she uses printed material written by more prominent brothers. The question of why these sources are considered to be the basis for a representative overview is not systematically addressed. Although this is a common problem when research is mainly based on qualitative rather than quantitative sources, the reader is left wondering whether all the results presented do indeed give a comprehensive insight into MB discourses.

The book has some other shortcomings. The text is an English translation from the original French and this is obvious throughout the book. In fact, reading the book is quite an unpleasant experience and it seems as if this was mainly due to the quality of the translation. Some translations are even misleading. A good translator should know