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Hassan Al-Banna (Dr Lars Berger, University of Salford/Manchester, UK)

A contemporary of fellow Islamist thinkers Sayyid Qutb (1906) and Abdul 'A'la Mawdudi (1903), Hassan al-Banna (1906) is the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Arab world's most influential Islamist organization. He was also born into a well-established traditional family in a village in the Nile Delta to the north of Cairo. His father served as an imam at a local mosque. At the early age of ten, al-Banna is reported to have organized a 'Society of Moral Behaviour' which had fellow school children on the look for misbehaviour.

He graduated from al-Azhar's Dar al-Ulum, a higher-level teacher training institution, which Muhammad Abduh helped found in 1873 as a way of overcoming the objections against the introduction of modern curricula by conservative al-Azhar scholars.

Both his time in Cairo as well as his move to Ismailiyya at the Suez Canal where he accepted his first post as a primary school teacher profoundly shaped al-Banna's world view. Cairo's anarchy highlighted the need to make the issue of moral behaviour a central aspect in the battle against corrupting Western influences. The contrast between the luxurious colonial homes of the British and the abject poverty of many Egyptian inhabitants of Ismailiyya instilled a sense of urgency with regard to achieving genuine Egyptian independence.

The lack of enthusiasm felt by Egypt's traditional religious establishment towards his ideas contrasts markedly with the popularity al-Banna enjoyed among the younger generations. Like Muhammad Abduh before him he criticized Egypt's religious elite which he viewed as out of touch with the political and social realities of their time. Among the reasons for what al-Banna described as the 'new renaissance' of Islamic thinking were the failure of the materialist West to offer 'a ray of hope' or 'the smallest path toward rest and tranquillity', the discovery of Islam's 'noble, honourable, moral and perfect principles' by the Salafiyya around Muhammad Abduh and the social conditions under the political systems of democracy, fascism, and communism. In one of his most frequently quoted statements, al-Banna claims that Islam combines the 'best' aspects of Communist, Fascists and Democratic regimes. Reflecting his frustration with the poor living standards of most Egyptian peasants, al-Banna claimed that like Communism, Islam would reinforce the notion of equality, condemn class distinction and fight the claim to property as the main source of social problems. He also claimed that Islam resembled Fascism in striving for unity and order. The question whether this statement reflected the need to attract followers who, in the intellectual climate of the 1930s, might have tended toward radical secular European movements or rather a genuine inclination toward authoritarian internal power structures shapes academic discussions on the Muslim Brotherhood up until today. Lastly, Islam was deemed as incorporating the best of democracy by enjoining a leader to accept good advice and concede errors.

In contrast to the 19th century Salafi modernists like Muhammad Abduh, al-Banna was a life-long Sufi. This explains the choice of 'murshid' (engl. guide) as a title for his leadership role within the Muslim Brotherhood which he founded in 1928. Al-

Banna was assassinated on 12 February 1949 only three months after the assassination of Egyptian Prime Minister Nuqrashi Pasha.

Fast forward:

In contrast to Sayyid Qutb and Abu A'la al-Mawdudi, al-Banna refrained from producing elaborate ideological treatises and mainly reacted to the challenge of Western ideas and institutions by adopting the role of preacher and organizer. Here, al-Banna tried to help adults and children regain a deeper understanding and awareness of what Islam meant for their daily lives. He hoped that this would help many ordinary Muslims to slowly overcome their emotional detachment from the religion of Islam. What also set al-Banna apart from later Islamist thinkers was the fact that while he found much to be criticized within contemporary Muslim society, he regarded Western colonial domination as the main threat and the enemy to be coming from outside the community of believers. This contrasts with Mawdudi's and Qutb's exhortations of contemporary Muslim societies as falling under the category of Pre-Islamic ignorance 'jahiliyya'.

See also: Colonialism and Mandates, Egypt, Nationalism, Sayyid Qutb, Sufism

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Dr Lars Berger
Salford University/Greater Manchester, United Kingdom