Preface and Acknowledgments

I first became interested in the Muslim Brotherhood in 2001, shortly after the tragic events of September 11. The ensuing investigation revealed various links between the attacks and a well-known mosque in my hometown of Milan, Italy. It was the same mosque that, in the early 1990s, had been the hub for hundreds of militants from all over the world who had gone to Bosnia to fight in the bloody conflict that had engulfed the Balkan country—tellingly the head of the Arab foreign fighters engaged in the conflict, Anwar Shabaan, was also the imam of the mosque in Milan.

What surprised me by digging into the Milan mosque was that it was financed not by a bunch of stereotypical gun-toting fanatics with bushy beards the media portrays Islamist terrorists to be—or at least did back then. Rather, behind it were a few high-profile Middle Eastern businessmen who also presided over a web of companies in various continents, controlled a bank incorporated in the fiscal paradise of the Bahamas, and had spent decades rubbing elbows with the elites of both the East and the West. They were Yussuf Nada, Ahmed Nasreddin, and Ghaleb Himmat, remarkably astute members of the Muslim Brotherhood in their countries of origin who had settled in the West in the previous decades to escape persecution and had played a crucial role in establishing the network of the Brotherhood in Europe and North America.

The U.S. government and the international community, which had long known about the mosque in Milan, acted swiftly—perhaps, actually, too

swiftly. In October 2001 Nada, Nasreddin, and Himmat were designated as terrorist supporters and their ample assets frozen. The designations led to criminal investigations in various countries, which ultimately led to the acquittal of the men. As one prosecutor involved in the investigation once told me, "to perhaps have a chance at proving what this network was about, we should have locked in one room for at least a year a team of top prosecutors and investigators from the dozen or so countries—many of them offshore paradises—where the men had interests and forced everybody to share information in ways that are rare in international investigations. Maybe that way we would have solved the puzzle."

The Milan case introduced me and, to some degree, many authorities throughout the West to the challenges related to the Muslim Brotherhood. Global jihadism, with its multiple ramifications in the West, was a relatively new and unexplored phenomenon back then. Yet despite its complexities and secrets, it was—and still is—fairly linear. Jihadists have, broadly speaking, a Manichean worldview and engage in violence to defeat those whom they openly declare to be their enemies. While back then many were surprised—and to a degree, some still are today—that jihadist ideology attracted young men who often were well educated and lived comfortable lives in the West, its message and tactics were relatively easy to understand and analyze.

But the Brotherhood, that's different. Every aspect of it is complex, never black or white, never prone to simplistic explanations—starting with its ambiguous relationship to terrorism, which first drew me to it. The Milan cluster and those connected to it, for example, provided a glimpse into the sophistication and transnationality of the Brotherhood—banks in the Bahamas, shell companies in Liechtenstein, a poultry factory and a software company in the United States, real estate investments in Africa and the Middle East, high-profile contacts all over the world. While investigators certainly found this complexity frustrating, from a researcher's point of view it was fascinating.

Another aspect gripped me with even greater intensity. While the Brotherhood was founded in Egypt and its original ideology focused on reshaping the Muslim-majority societies of the Middle East, it was clear that it had long established a presence in the West. It soon also became evident that it had created organizations that, while not calling themselves "Muslim Brotherhood" and actually refuting charges of being linked to the movement, were closely linked to the movement and played a crucial role

in the dynamics of Western Muslim communities. They controlled a large number of mosques and had become the de facto representatives (some would say gatekeepers) of said communities in the eyes of Western establishments. What were the implications of these developments that, albeit with some differences, had taken place in most Western countries?

Driven by these interests and concerns, I have spent the past nineteen years studying the Muslim Brotherhood in the West. In 2010 I published a book on it, which largely overlapped with my doctoral dissertation on the topic. In it I tried to describe how the Brotherhood arrived in the West (and to dispel the more conspiratorial theories about this passage), how it evolved, how it operates, and what its aims are. I also attempted to explain Western policy-making patterns toward the Western Brothers, highlighting how conflicting interests and overlapping factors have led all Western countries to struggle in finding consistency—not just among them but within each of them—in assessing and interacting with the movement.

The topic of the Brotherhood in the West gets strong attention from policy makers and the media at times yet has been severely overlooked by scholars (with some notable exceptions). As a senior British official explained to me, in an honest yet unflattering way, when I asked why the British government in 2014 had chosen to retain me to contribute to its official review on the Muslim Brotherhood, "if we want an expert on the Brotherhood in Egypt, there are at least forty; Brotherhood in Jordan, a dozen; Syria, a dozen; Brotherhood in the West: it's basically just you." It's a puzzling dynamic that I wish changed for the sake of a more informed debate on an important topic.

Over the years I repeatedly stumbled on individuals who had left Muslim Brotherhood networks in various countries. A few of them I met personally; others had written about their experiences in books or blogs. Their insider's perspective struck me as a unique way to deepen my knowledge of a proverbially secretive organization. I was also fascinated by the psychological processes that had led them to join and, even more, leave the Brotherhood.

I therefore decided to write a new book on the Brotherhood in the West that built on and expanded the accounts of the dozen or so former members of the movement who openly discussed their experience. It covers some of the same topics of the previous one (how the Brotherhood was established in the West, how it operates, what its aims are), but with substantial additional information coming from the knowledge of the

individuals profiled and an additional decade of research. It also includes a chapter describing how the Muslim Brotherhood in the West acted during and after the Arab Spring and assessing the impact of the tumultuous geopolitical events of the past decade on Western Brotherhood milieus.

Obviously, this book would not have been possible without the help of the former members of the Brotherhood who generously decided to tell me their stories. For this reason, it is to them that my first acknowledgment goes. I am aware of how difficult it is to share very personal and, in many cases, painful memories with a stranger. I also appreciate them taking, in some cases, entire days to talk to me in person and then replying to my many follow-up questions. I know it is impossible to capture the endless complexities of their lives, actions, and thought processes, but I hope I have done justice to these individuals by telling their stories as accurately as possible.

I would also like to acknowledge the many people who have contributed in different ways to this book. In writing it I counted on a stellar team of coworkers who help me run the Program on Extremism at George Washington University. First and foremost is Seamus Hughes, who is not just a great friend but also a phenomenal partner, masterfully manning the fort at the program during my long absences. Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Audrey Alexander, Bennett Clifford, and Mokhtar Awad have also helped in countless ways. Special thanks go to Roland Martial and Silvia Carenzi for their help researching the Brotherhood in France and Sweden, respectively.

Many scholars, researchers, journalists, investigators, and government officials in several countries have helped me in these years. To respect their privacy I do not want to list them, and I would surely forget some; they know who they are, and I take this opportunity to thank them all. I would be remiss if I did not personally acknowledge Bruce Hoffman, editor of the Columbia University Press series Columbia Studies in Terrorism and Irregular Warfare and a longtime mentor and friend, for his support of this project.

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