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Engineering the “Islamic personality”: Muslim Brotherhood education between theory and practice

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Abstract: The Muslim Brotherhood’s ideological belief in Islam as a comprehensive system (*šumūliya*) implies ambitious ideas about forming and re-forming the minds, spirits and bodies of Muslim individuals through educational activities within the organisational framework of the Brotherhood. Internal debates reveal that actual educational practice in the Muslim Brotherhood balances different priorities and goals and allows a range of different expressions of Muslim subjectivity. Tensions between different, sometimes contradictory goals are solved theoretically by the concept of balancing (*tawāzun*) and practically by a division of labour within the movement that only requires a small elite to reach the highest levels of an “Islamic personality” (*šaḥṣīya islāmīya*). This article traces debates in programmatic and educational writings, in memoirs and in weblogs and social media outlets in order to reach a critical assessment of Muslim Brotherhood education in the Arab world, primarily between the 1980s and the mid-2010s and focused on Egypt and the Arab East.

Keywords: education; Islamic subjectivity; Muslim Brotherhood.

1 Introduction

In 2015, Ayman al-Miṣrī, a leading functionary of the Lebanese Muslim Brotherhood, wrote a disappointed blog entry about internal problems of the movement in light of the latest political setbacks. One of his remarks drily points out that Muslim Brotherhood activists have too long thought of themselves as “angels”, while they are in fact nothing but humans, in spite of their noble intentions and aims. The education they have received inside the movement does not cancel out their

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weaknesses and bad character traits and never will.¹ During my research about education in the Muslim Brotherhood, I came across a number of similar statements from people within the movement or close to it.² There was a striking contrast between the ambitious and overly confident tone of the educational manuals written by well-known Muslim Brotherhood figures such as Yūsuf al-Qaraḏāwī, Muṣṭafā Mašhūr, Faṭḥī Yakan and others, and between what seemed to be glimpses of the actual reality of Muslim Brotherhood education on the ground. But – being unable to make first-hand observations about the inner life of Muslim Brotherhood cells or “families” (*usar*, sg. *usra*) – how could I go about explaining and analysing this apparent contradiction? Does it boil down to the usual discrepancy between theory and practice that accompanies any human endeavour, or might there be something intrinsic to the educational philosophy of the Muslim Brotherhood that leads into practical contradictions?

Since its establishment in 1928, the Muslim Brotherhood has prided itself for its capacity to educate and transform young people into better Muslims and lifelong activists for the Islamic cause. As Yūsuf al-Qaraḏāwī (*1926), arguably the most well-known propagator of Muslim Brotherhood thought worldwide, claims in his works on education and activism (*daʿwa*), the “school of Ḥasan al-Bannā” has delivered an effective and successful blueprint for fostering an “Islamic identity” and produced a continuous and growing stream of virtuous believers and dedicated Islamic activists.³ On an ideological level, the Muslim Brotherhood’s belief in Islam as a comprehensive system (*ṣumūliya*) has spawned ambitious ideas about forming and re-forming the minds, spirits and bodies of Muslim individuals through educational activities within the organisational framework of the Brotherhood. Membership recruitment as such is envisaged as a lengthy process of “formation” (*takwīn*) and “education” (*tarbiya*) through which individuals acquire an “Islamic personality” (*aš-šaḥṣīya al-islāmīya*) and are turned into active and committed “soldiers” of the movement.⁴

Observers broadly acknowledge that this process has indeed enabled the Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwan) to establish a highly disciplined and committed membership base across the Arab world, and has helped it to maintain a degree of ideological and organisational coherence despite recurrent state persecution and

1 al-Miṣrī 2015.

2 ‘Abdallāh (member of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood), interview by the author, Istanbul, 4 August 2016; Azzam Tamimi (journalist), interview by the author, London, 11 July 2016; Fadi Hajar (researcher), interview by the author, Beirut, 16 February 2016; az-Zaʿfarānī 2016.

3 al-Qaraḏāwī 2010; al-Qaraḏāwī 1999: 207–215.

4 After Ḥasan al-Bannā, the most important contributors to this field of Ikhwani thought are the Egyptians Muṣṭafā Mašhūr (1921–2002) and ‘Alī ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd (1928–2014), the Syrian Saʿīd Ḥawwā (1935–1989) and the Lebanese Faṭḥī Yakan (1933–2009).

rapid social change.⁵ However, relatively little is known about the various effects which Muslim Brotherhood-style Islamic education has on the individuals who go through it, beyond fostering a sense of belonging and commitment to the organisation itself. How does it change their religious practice and spiritual experience? Does it shape a comprehensive intellectual outlook on life, politics and society? Does it help them master the difficulties of private life – work and marriage – in a similar way? Globally speaking, is there a shared “personality” – or might we say in the parlance of modern social science “subjectivity” (see the introduction to the thematic issue) – that is a recognisable product of Muslim Brotherhood education?

Indeed, there are some reasons to be sceptical as to what extent the declared aims of Muslim Brotherhood education have found a manifestation in real life. Muslim Brotherhood members and sympathisers generally *want to believe* that the formation provided by the organisation both to recent recruits and to long-term members in the so-called family system (see below) leads to the cultivation of an “Islamic personality”. It’s a central part of the ideological “claim” of the Ikhwan and thus a matter of unassailable dogma. Whoever questions the idea that the Muslim Brotherhood is the community of the *more* God-fearing, *more* virtuous and *more* committed Muslims (as compared to the rest of Muslim society) opens the door to fundamental doubts about the *raison-d’être* of this community and the legitimacy of its claim to represent the authentic way of living Islam. There is a huge bulk of literature by the Muslim Brotherhood describing its educational ideals and detailing their implementation, but these writings contain almost no direct critical evaluation of the actual results.⁶

The Muslim Brotherhood’s numerous critics in Arab societies may also have contributed to exaggerating the actual impact of Muslim Brotherhood education on the subjectivity of human individuals, notably by cultivating negative stereotypes about the behaviour of Muslim Brothers. In the political struggles following the Egyptian revolution of January 2011, for example, the movement’s followers were often stigmatised by their political opponents as a shapeless and mindless mass of sheep (*ḥirfān*) “resembling one another in dress code, body language, tone of voice, vocabulary, and temperament.”⁷ Academic investigations into Muslim Brotherhood organisational culture, most importantly by political scientists Khalil Al-Anani and Hazem Kandil, have shown that these are not just baseless allegations. Both studies reveal a great deal about the inner life of the movement and its

5 Cf. Tammām 2012; Wickham 2013; Kandil 2015; al-Anani 2016; Zollner 2019; Willi 2021.

6 For a representative selection that demonstrates this general pattern see Ḥawwā 1980; al-Hilālī 1995; Maḥmūd 2011; Mašhūr 1995; al-Qaraḍāwī 1999 and 2010; Quṭb 2004; and Yakan 2000. Some notable exceptions, for example in the writings of Fathī Yakan, will be mentioned below.

7 Kandil 2015: 110; see also Schielke 2017: 205–220.

“ideology as a subject-producing process that structures the thoughts and temperaments of members through a matrix of discursive and non-discursive processes”.⁸ However, it can be questioned whether the organisational culture of the Muslim Brotherhood, for example the strong authoritarianism and the paranoid cognitive structures diagnosed by Kandil, is actually the result of an intentional process of education or rather to a larger degree a by-product of social circumstances and organisational dynamics that lie beyond the intention of Muslim Brotherhood educators.

In addition, looking at the “inside” of the movement is not sufficient when dealing with the question of education specifically. It means focusing on those people whose education was successful in the sense that they ended up as active members or functionaries of the Muslim Brotherhood, and excluding those – possibly significant numbers – who did not respond positively to Ikhwani education and were not promoted into the ranks of active membership. A series of memoirs by “exiters” published in the wake of 2011 shed light on this *other experience* of Muslim Brotherhood education: some left because they felt that the Muslim Brotherhood was betraying its own ideals, others because of growing doubts about the “Islamic personality” that Muslim Brotherhood educators wanted them to become, and still others dropped out because they simply did not fit in.⁹ Indeed, Muslim Brotherhood educators themselves often passingly acknowledge that the education they are giving is actually rather a process of selection, by which individuals who fit the desired mould get promoted to advanced membership levels, while the others get more or less sidelined.¹⁰

Looking at a comparable case of Islamic education and movement-building in contemporary Egypt, Richard Gauvain points out the high dropout rate in Salafi circles in Egypt and argues that the process of moral formation that individuals undergo within religious groups more often than not remains incomplete or fails.¹¹ A similar case is made by Samuli Schielke in his critical engagement with Saba Mahmood’s and Charles Hirschkind’s studies on the Islamic revivalist movement in Egypt. He cautions against an approach that only looks at the declared attempt, but not at the outcome of projects of ethical (self-)improvement, and against understating the complexity, reflectivity and openness of the world-view and life experience of actual pious people.¹² Many people in Egypt in the 2000s, he argues,

8 Kandil 2015: 180.

9 A recent study by Mustafa Menshawy (2021) explores the phenomenon of “exiters” in depth. Important primary sources are Durra 2011; ‘Abd al-Barr 2012; Abū Ḥalīl 2012; Fāyiz 2013.

10 al-Bannā et al. 2009: 341–342; Ḥawwā 1980: 65–74; Mašhūr 1995: 325–345; az-Za‘farānī 2016.

11 Gauvain 2013.

12 Schielke 2009a; Schielke 2009b.

joined the Muslim Brotherhood or a Salafi circle or both at some point of their lives, but their religious or existential search very often did not end at that.¹³

Unfortunately, studies that apply such insights to the question of Muslim Brotherhood education are very rare. One notable exception is an empirical investigation by Emin Poljarevic based on in-depth interviews with a cohort of young Muslim Brotherhood recruits in Egypt in the late 2000s. Its conclusion turns the conventional assumption partly on its head: rather than being fundamentally re-shaped by Muslim Brotherhood education, all of the young activists surveyed had already been highly religious and active before joining the Brotherhood.¹⁴ According to Poljarevic, they entered the movement “in pursuit of self-enhancement” and motivated by the desire to associate themselves with a morally superior community. From this perspective, they were less the recipients of a process of education than agents whose existing Islamic subjectivity was only reinforced by the Muslim Brotherhood.

In order to get a more nuanced view on Muslim Brotherhood education and its relative potential and limits, this article proposes to take a second look at what Muslim Brothers *themselves* have had to say about education during the past decades, beyond the stereotypical ideological statements. A careful reading of the sources shows that there has been a space for reflections and debates among Muslim Brothers themselves (including loosely affiliated individuals and “exiters”) about the educational process, its goals and effects, and its general success in producing people with an “Islamic personality”. Traces of such debates appear in programmatic (Da‘wa) and educational writings, in memoirs and articles in Islamist magazines, and, more recently, in weblogs and social media outlets. In addition, I have conducted a number of personal interviews with Muslim Brotherhood members in Egypt and the Arab East. This article will primarily use these “inside sources” in order to reach a critical assessment of Muslim Brotherhood education in the Arab world (between the 1980s and the mid-2010s and focused on Egypt and the Arab East).¹⁵ The voices that appear through these discourses do not make up a homogeneous camp of “dissidents” or “reformists” within the Muslim Brotherhood.

¹³ Schielke 2015: 128–148. Some published memoirs also confirm this point, e.g. Abū Ḥalīl 2012 and ‘Izzat 2018.

¹⁴ Poljarevic 2012: 234.

¹⁵ Most of the books used for this study were collected in Muslim Brotherhood bookstores and in independent Islamist bookstores in Egypt, Lebanon and Jordan between 2004 and 2016. In Egypt, Dār at-Tawzī‘ wa-n-Našr al-Islāmiya in Cairo and Dār ad-Da‘wa in Alexandria were considered “official” publishing houses of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood between the 1980s and 2013. All of the books considered “Muslim Brotherhood” writings in this article were either published by those publishing houses or under the name of leading members of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and other countries.

The investigation will show that there is more than one way of being unsatisfied about the actual results of Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwani) education, and that being unsatisfied with one aspect does not mean questioning the whole edifice. Importantly enough, however, all of the voices mentioned here recognise in some way that important educational goals stated in the ideological discourse of the Muslim Brotherhood are mutually exclusive or simply unattainable. Moreover, they also share a sobering view concerning the extent to which Ikhwani education has the capacity to re-shape human beings and engineer a desired type of Islamic activist.

2 Balancing aims and moral imperatives

In order to get a grip on internal discussions about Muslim Brotherhood education, it is necessary to take a closer look at how it works in practice and to single out aspects that are worthy of closer investigation. In Muslim Brotherhood jargon, the terms formation (*takwīn*) and education (*tarbiya*) are used interchangeably. Together, they describe – in theory – a comprehensive programme of personality formation, which includes aspects of spiritual deepening, control of drives and emotions, physical training, behavioural conditioning, intellectual training and purpose-oriented management thinking.¹⁶ Since the introduction of the “family system” (*niẓam al-usar*) in 1943, the practical implementation of this programme has taken place primarily within the framework of the “educational families” (*usar tarbawīya*), groups of about a dozen prospective members in which young people are trained and socialised for years before they can move up in the organisation.¹⁷ The typical educational setting is the weekly meeting of the “families”, which is headed by an “educator” (*murabbī*). The weekly meetings are usually supplemented with night vigils (so-called *katība*, “battalion” meetings), topical seminars, speeches and summer camps. This is the core repertoire of educational means (*wasā’il at-tarbiya*), which was laid down by Ḥasan al-Bannā in his authoritative letters (*rasā’il*) and has more recently found a quasi-canonical expression in the writings of ‘Alī ‘Abd al-Halīm Maḥmūd (1928–2014), a senior functionary of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.¹⁸ It is important to note that, although al-Bannā also addressed the *schooling* aspect of education in one of his most well-known

¹⁶ On the theoretical side, Ḥasan al-Bannā’s ideas of the “new Muslim man” have been discussed extensively by Gudrun Krämer and need not be repeated in detail here; see Krämer 2010: 107–112; Krämer 2015.

¹⁷ On the origins and development of the family system see Mitchell 1969: 185–208; Kandil 2015: 7–10; Al-Anani 2016: 82–98; Elsässer 2021: 11–50.

¹⁸ Maḥmūd 2011.

Tracts, “Towards the Light” (*Naḥwa n-Nūr*), the “family system” of the Muslim Brotherhood and the activities of the “education department” (*qism at-tarbiya*) of each branch of the Brotherhood were never conceived as a replacement for formal schooling. If anything, they emulate the activities of Sufi brotherhoods on the one hand and Boy Scouts on the other hand. They serve as an addition to education in biological families and schools and are geared towards recruiting young adolescents into the Muslim Brotherhood organisation. Education and recruitment typically go through a number of stages, from loose “study circles” (sing. *ḥalqa*) offered to targeted sympathisers to different levels of family membership (associate member/*muntasib*, then organised member/*muntaẓim*). Committed activists can reach full membership after 3–5 years of formation. As major theorists of Muslim Brotherhood education such as Sa‘īd Ḥawwā and Muṣṭafā Mašhūr have pointed out, the education process is as much about forming individuals as it is about selecting those who show the readiness and potential to become active members, and de-selecting those who lack the necessary qualities.¹⁹

A defining feature of Muslim Brotherhood education is, as mentioned, its aspiration towards comprehensiveness. In this context, it is useful to remember Samuli Schielke’s critical reminder that the study of modern Muslim subjectivities must avoid the danger of overstating the coherence of Muslim subjectivities and of confusing the perfectionist and totalising pretensions of Muslim pietism with the much more ambivalent and fragmented experience of Muslim individuals.²⁰ While Schielke’s writings explore how pious Muslims negotiate between religious norms and ideals on the one hand and other “moral registers” on the other hand, such as social justice, family obligations, good character, romantic love and self-realisation, I intend to draw attention towards ambivalences and competing registers *within* the subjectivity model set by the Muslim Brotherhood. Precisely because this model has a comprehensive claim, people who try to implement it and live by it face the challenge of balancing a number of different goals and priorities that do not always go together neatly and easily.²¹ In the following, I will focus on three axes of this balancing process that have left many traces in educational literature and personal accounts and can therefore be considered central to the question of Muslim Brotherhood education.

The first axis is the tension and possible trade-off between religious deepening and action-oriented faith. Muslim Brotherhood educational literature revolves a great deal around the importance of “spiritual education” (*tarbiya rūḥīya*, *tarbiya imānīya*) and insists that the power of faith is an essential motivating force for any

¹⁹ Ḥawwā 1980: 65–74; Mašhūr 1995: 325–345.

²⁰ Schielke 2009a; Schielke 2009b.

²¹ See e.g. al-Qaraḏāwī 2010.

kind of social and political action. It also presupposes that strong faith shields the activist from temptations of any kind and assures a loyal and enduring commitment to the cause. However, the Muslim Brotherhood is at the same highly sceptical of approaches that cultivate prayer, meditation and religious learning *as ends in themselves* – the concern is that an excessive involvement in “merely” spiritual activities might lead to passivity and inaction. According to Ḥasan al-Bannā’s slogan “Monks by night, knights by day”,²² daytime is the time of action, not contemplation! A similar logic of timekeeping constrains the pursuit of both religious and secular knowledge, which are in principle highly valued, but also somewhat suspected for their potential to divert the attention of people away from action and towards “passive contemplation”.

The second axis is the need to balance militancy and restraint. Based on the political and social behaviour of the Muslim Brotherhood in Arab countries between the 1980s and the 2000s, observers have placed the movement firmly in the camp of moderation, as opposed to the violent extremism of Jihadist groups. However, a look at educational and strategic debates reveals that the Muslim Brotherhood has been surprisingly hesitant to resolve its ideological relationship with violence in a clear-cut manner and has been cultivating a potentially militant concept of Jihad that stands against ruling out violence as an option. The resulting dissonance between radical ideals and restrained action also presents an important balancing challenge to Muslim Brotherhood educators and individual followers.

The third and final axis revolves around the need to balance the activist commitment with the requirements of job and family. The political and social project of the Muslim Brotherhood relies on the precondition that Muslim Brothers must work hard and be productive in order to create funding for the movement. It also requires activists to marry and set up families; this is an important duty because the Muslim family is considered the foundation of an Islamic society and an Islamic state. In theory, a proper ideological education assures that the activists will always prioritise their commitment to the organisation, but in real life, the issue is expectedly more complex.

3 Religious deepening versus activism (1): spiritual education

One problem that runs through Ikhwani educational writings is the question of the right balance between individual religious perfection or deepening and activism in

²² al-Bannā et al. 2006: 48.

the name of Islam. In principle, religious knowledge and a personal spiritual relationship with God, which are both established and cultivated through a process of *tarbiya* (education), are considered normative prerequisites for Islamic activism. Activism can only be Islamic if the activists embody the “Islamic personality”. In this respect, religion and activism seem to permeate each other as two inseparable moments of the one godly life, like a pure heart and a sound mind on the one hand and good deeds on the other.

However, the combination does not always seem to work as harmoniously as it should. Implicitly, religion and activism often appear as conflicting claims on the believer, because on the everyday level they rival for the scarce time of the Muslim activist.²³ The time that Brothers expend on increasing their religious learning and on cultivating their spirituality is inevitably lost for charity and neighbourhood work, preaching, and the management of collective Brotherhood activities and public campaigns. Indeed, Muslim Brotherhood discourse is brimming with negative stereotypes about traditional models of Islamic piety that exaggerate the pursuit of religious perfection and neglect the “worldly affairs” of Muslims. The culture of the Sufi orders and the popular religion of saint-worship, on the one hand, stand accused of promoting unproductive asceticism and passivity (*salbiya*) in the face of social and political challenges.²⁴ On the other hand, Ikhwani writings censure the traditional schools of dogmatic theology (*kalām*) and Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) for dividing the Umma – the community of believers – into bickering factions and for their overly sophisticated indulgence in irrelevant theological and legal questions (*takalluf*).²⁵ This explains why Muslim Brotherhood educators do not take a “the more, the better” approach to the religious interests of Muslim individuals but seek to delimit the proper role and the limits of individual religious pursuits, in the direction of both religious learning and spirituality.²⁶

As religious learning and spiritual practice are distinct, alternative and sometimes even conflicting ways of religious deepening, I will discuss their respective roles in Muslim Brotherhood education separately. Spiritual education (*tarbiya nafsīya*, sometimes also: *tarbiya imānīya*) is a major theme in Ikhwani educational literature. Its roots go back to Ḥasan al-Bannā’s incorporation of a set of Sufi rituals and practices into the guidelines for the communal and personal life of the Muslim Brothers. Typical tools of spiritual education in Ikhwani culture include

23 Yakan 2001[1967]: 108–117.

24 Amīn 1990: 56–63; al-Ġazālī 1997: 28–33, 118–122; al-Ḥaṭīb/Ḥāmid 1990: 159.

25 Al-Ḥaṭīb/Ḥāmid 1990: 22–24; al-Ġazālī 1997: 42–51, 73–79; Ğum‘a 2007: 73–80, 169–178; al-Qaraḍāwī 2001: 258–300.

26 Cf. Kandil 2015: 12–19. One Egyptian “exiter”, Sāmiḥ Fāyiz, sarcastically mentions being scolded by a supervisor for buying a biography of Ḥasan al-Bannā without prior consultation (Fāyiz 2013: 27).

daily Quranic recitation, prayers and techniques of “remembering God” (*dīkr*), as well as community activities such as group vigils (*qiyām al-layl, tahaḡḡud*).²⁷

In Sufi Islam, spiritual education means embarking on a mystical path towards spiritual enlightenment that passes through a complex succession of emotional and cognitive “states” (pl. *aḥwāl*) and “places” (pl. *maqāmāt*) under the supervision of an experienced spiritual guide.²⁸ This implies an intensive and time-consuming programme of spiritual growth. In the educational literature of the Brotherhood, there is a general – if implicit – acknowledgement that spiritual education in the Muslim Brotherhood seeks a more modest goal, which is to “purify the heart” with the aim of achieving a religiously dedicated state of mind and self-discipline in the observation of religious rules and behavioural codes.²⁹

The general pattern is a “flattening” of Sufi concepts, although many of them are still used in educational jargon.³⁰ One typical example is the development of the concept and practice of self-examination (*muḥāsaba*). Self-examination is an important theme in Sufi literature, and Muslims – predominantly, but not exclusively, Sufi – have been practising it in many different ways. Ḥasan an-Bannā and other educators in the Muslim Brotherhood invented and popularised a specific tool of self-examination for the members of the families, the “*muḥāsaba* form” (*ḡadwal al-muḥāsaba*).³¹ It typically consists of a schedule featuring the days of a week or a month on one axis and a list of dos and don’ts on the other axis, allowing the person to keep record of how regularly she or he performed certain duties or observed certain behavioural rules. Among the elements tested frequently are the observance of ritual and supererogatory spiritual acts such as fasting and night-time prayer (*tahaḡḡud*), a general God-fearing attitude (*taqwā*) and patience with trials from God (e.g. illness). The schedules also use real-life examples to check on the implementation of virtues such as truthfulness, modesty and politeness, deference towards persons of authority, suppression of anger and jealousy, and commitment to collective action within the Muslim Brotherhood.³²

27 For a detailed description and analysis of Sufi elements within the Muslim Brotherhood, see Elsässer 2019.

28 See Elsässer 2019: 282–284.

29 For an exemplary discussion of this commonplace topic in Ikhwani literature cf. Amīn 1990: 60–63; see also Abū Fāris 2005: 105–136; Maḡmud 1995; Quṭb 2004; al-Hilālī 2009; Ḥawwā 1980: 65–81.

30 For a detailed analysis of the transformation of Sufi practices and concepts in Muslim Brotherhood education, see my article “Sufism and the Muslim Brotherhood. Ḥasan al-Bannā’s *wird* and the transformation of Sufi traditions in modern Islamic activism” (Elsässer 2019).

31 See Elsässer 2019: 298–302.

32 Muslim Brotherhood textbooks from the 2000s abound with standardized *muḥāsaba* forms of this type, see Mursī 2003; Labbān 2003; Ḥumayda 2003.

Internal critics and exiters have pointed out that the moral effects of this rather formalistic tool may be somewhat superficial: Sāmiḥ Fāyiz, a member of the Egyptian Ikhwan in the 1990s and 2000s, recalls that adolescent *usra* members often lied in their *muḥāsaba* forms to avoid awkward encounters with the family leaders and shameful confrontation with their peers.³³ Some of the interlocutors of political scientist Hazem Kandil portray the *muḥāsaba* process as a tool used by superiors simply for “keeping people busy”.³⁴ In any case, it seems fair to conclude that *muḥāsaba* in its established form does prioritise a collective model of behaviour (*sulūk*) over individual spiritual deepening.

Concerning the challenge to maintain an inner state of purification and dedication, Ikhwani educational literature typically recommends the pursuit of a personal ascetic programme, on top of the communal activities of the Muslim Brotherhood. Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Qādir Abū Fāris (1938–2015), an influential educator in the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood, describes the lacking spiritual education of many activists as one of the cardinal problems of the Muslim Brotherhood and suggests that humans need a strict regimen of innerworldly asceticism (*az-zuḥd fī d-dunyā*) to put them on the right track.³⁵ Abū Fāris urges activists to increase their daily regimen of Quran recitation and prayers and additionally proposes constant *dīkr*, sleep deprivation, fasting and crying as essential spiritual practices. He also expresses concerns about the overly lenient lifestyle of other activists and warns that too much involvement in public activism (*da‘wa*) and “serving the people” will eat away at their “soul time” and ultimately weaken their character.³⁶

The Egyptian ‘Alī ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd draws up a similar programme, which aims at the multiplication of supererogatory prayers and pious acts (*nawāfil*), most of which are to be performed individually and integrated into each activist’s daily schedule.³⁷ For example, he provides a long list of prayers and *dīkr* formulae (*awrād*, *aḍkār*) derived from the canonical Hadith collections. While stressing the need for continuous spiritual “practice”, he appears less concerned than Abū Fāris about the possible trade-off between activism and spirituality and confidently argues that *da‘wa* and organisational activities consist in the execution of a religious duty and are therefore part of spiritual education itself. This goes in line with the strong tendency in educational literature to stress the ultimately

33 Fāyiz 2013.

34 Kandil 2015: 15–17.

35 Abū Fāris 2005: 105–136.

36 “It is worth mentioning that the activists who engage in public affairs, serving the people and political affairs need to take care of their hearts and souls and their purification. [These pursuits] eat away at their time and affect their spiritual posture and weaken it.” Abū Fāris 2005: 113.

37 Maḥmūd 1995: 105–181.

thisworldly orientation of spiritual education. Muḥammad Quṭb (1919–2014), a major theorist of Islamic education, explains that the ideal Muslim should learn to control his carnal soul, but not turn away from life itself; he should aim towards cultivating a thisworldy-oriented “asceticism of power” (*zahādat al-quwa*).³⁸

The same impulse is expressed eloquently in an educational manual by Egyptian educator Māḡdī al-Hilālī:

The concept of turning away desire (*raḡba*) from this world does not mean abandoning it or not interacting with it, but that the person who has reached this stage treats it as an investment (lit. farm, *mazra‘a*) in the Hereafter. [...] In other words: The desire and longing for this world leaves his heart and he deals with it in a rational, rather than emotional way. In this way, he attains his real interest in both worlds, and he can benefit his soul and his Umma and leave a positive trace on earth. *He has the world in his hand and controls it*, rather than being controlled by it.³⁹

But what if people are not cut out for a strict ascetic lifestyle? If they fail to reach the promised state of “rebirth” (al-Hilālī) and empowerment? Where do they turn for spiritual and emotional comfort and motivation? Many accounts indicate that, rather than the routine family meetings, additional group activities such as night vigils and summer camps do offer a certain spiritual benefit to many of those who participate. A member of the Lebanese Muslim Brotherhood related to me the following experience:

I recall that I once was in the Cedars area in North Lebanon driving my car with three MB friends (Lebanese, Egyptian and Palestinian). Just before the sunset, both the Egyptian and Palestinian Brothers started the recitation of the *wird* by heart, while the third brother and myself started to repeat after them. [...] Back when I was in Lebanon, we used to conclude our camps with *rabīṭa* prayer. All participants made a big circle holding hands and repeated the recitation after the camp leader. This particular part [...] is high in spirituality and gives a special feeling of bond and belongingness.⁴⁰

In this account, the uplifting experience of brotherhood and of feeling a connection with a worldwide community of exemplary Muslims culminate in the *rābiṭa* prayer, a ritual performed collectively by congregations of Muslim Brotherhood members at the time of sunset.⁴¹ The experience of brotherhood (*uḡūwa*), and how it generates an emotional state of “love in God” (*al-ḡubb fī l-llāh*), is in fact a

³⁸ Quṭb 2004: 118–119; A similar description of innerworldly asceticism is found in Yakan 2001 [1967]: 57–64.

³⁹ al-Hilālī 2009: 71 (my emphasis). All quotations from Arabic sources are translations by myself.

⁴⁰ Mazen (member of the Lebanese Muslim Brotherhood). E-mail to the author. 20 June 2015.

⁴¹ On the origin and development of the *rābiṭa* prayer, see Elsässer 2019: 295–298.

recurrent theme in Ikhwani discourse.⁴² According to a booklet entitled “The Ritual of the Hearts” (*wird al-qulūb*) written by the Egyptian Ğamāl Māḍī (1956–2013), night-time is the time when the world calms down and hearts are ready to meet God, their loved one, who then descends to the lower sky.⁴³ In the proximity of God, the hearts experience a condition of happiness and joy. It is within this state that God joins the hearts of the active and righteous brothers. From this perspective, it becomes clear why Muslim Brotherhood spiritual education does not place particular emphasis on individual spiritual growth: its more important goal is the activation of a strong group spirit that fosters an emotional attachment to the movement.

4 Balancing religious deepening and activism (2): intellectual education

The Muslim Brotherhood idea of Islam as a comprehensive system (*šumūliya*) and the related idea of “implementing the Islamic sharia” rely on the call to preserve and revitalise the traditional Islamic science of law (*fiqh*). There is no conceivable Islamic system outside the large and intricate body of interpretations and rulings represented by the *fiqh* tradition. The Ikhwan generally embrace a conservative interpretation of the religious sources that is in strong continuity with the heritage of the legal schools (*madāhib*), which is why they are eager to defend the authority of the traditional scholars (*‘ulamā’*, *fuqahā’*) against modernist and Salafist critics.⁴⁴ However, the Muslim Brotherhood has also been under the influence of reformist views about the “decline” and “corruption” of traditional Islamic learning.⁴⁵ Ḥasan al-Bannā criticises the pursuit of religious knowledge purely for its own sake and denounces excessive interest in hypothetical and therefore irrelevant questions of Islamic law and theology as sophistry or “stiltedness” (*takalluf*).⁴⁶ Da‘wa writings stress that the Muslim Brotherhood should be “a military camp (*tukna*) that produces fighters and heroes, rather than a mere intellectual institute that spreads Islamic culture and thinking among the people.”⁴⁷

⁴² al-Hilālī 1995: 111–115; ‘Ulwān 2009 [1982]: 19–22; Ḥawwā 1980: 118–119; al-Ḥaṭīb/Ḥāmid 1990: 295–298.

⁴³ Māḍī 1995.

⁴⁴ Ḥawwā 1981: 60–67; al-Ḥaṭīb/Ḥāmid 1990: 104; al-Qaraḍāwī 2001: 62–127; al-Ġazālī 1997: 94–103.

⁴⁵ Cf. Mitchell 1969: 209–217; Krämer 2010: 97–99.

⁴⁶ Krämer 2010: 109–111.

⁴⁷ Yakan 2001[1967]: 154.

Ikhwani educational literature often argues that religious learning should strive for an ideal of purity and simplicity. It should adopt a practical mindset that does not ask sceptical questions and stays clear of any intellectual speculation.⁴⁸ One expression of such a mindset is “avoid lists” of topics and fields of religious inquiry that are considered useless and sinful, for example in this exhortation from Sa‘īd Ḥawwā to eschew

[...] all things that do not belong to the area of the dogmas of faith that God has imposed on us, not to the matters of Islamic law (*al-fiqhīyāt*) that we Muslims are in need of, and not to the area of practical rules of conduct (*sulūkīyāt*), on which the [right] understanding of the Koran and Sunnah does not depend and which are not necessary in matters of religion or this world. These are all things on which we should not waste our time, because they tire the soul and spirit and are nothing but a waste of time.⁴⁹

Educational manuals often include alarmist warnings about the dangerous consequences of prioritising thinking over action:

Our Umma is going through a [decisive] time: either life – we return to our religion – or death – we remain in our present state and retreat further. Wasting time on things that do not move the blood of life in the veins of the Umma will bring about its death. Therefore we have no need for any theoretical discussion at this time – in matters of religion or life. [...] We find many lazy people who take refuge in such philosophical discussions to make themselves important and distract from their laziness, and we find others who maliciously involve the Umma in such debates to distract it [from important things].⁵⁰

These statements illustrate the culture of “anti-intellectualism” (Kandil) in the educational system of the Muslim Brotherhood that has been criticised by many exiters after the 2011 revolution and scrutinised in recent research.⁵¹ However, I argue that it is necessary to add another important aspect to the description of Muslim Brotherhood ambiguity concerning learning and intellectualism, which becomes clearer when considering the logic of balancing different educational goals against each other and against the overarching aims of the movement.

Looking more closely at how Muslim Brotherhood educators and functionaries discuss the issue of religious learning and authority, it becomes clear that their anti-intellectual penchant is not motivated by a rejection of learned religious authority as such. Rather, they approach the issue of education and learning from a

⁴⁸ Ḥawwā 1980: 97; al-Ḥaṭīb/Ḥāmid 1990: 118; al-Qaraḍāwī 2001: 258–294; Ğum‘a 2007: 169–178.

⁴⁹ Ḥawwā 1980: 97.

⁵⁰ Ğum‘a 2007: 178.

⁵¹ The scholarly literature on this point includes Al-Anani 2016: 118–134; Ali 2020: 90–95; Kandil 2015: 9–47; and most notably Menshaway 2021. Personal accounts can be found in Durra 2011: 15; ‘Abd al-Barr 2012; and Fāyiz 2013: 43–62.

deeply entrenched hierarchical point of view that distinguishes in terms of education and social function between the educated (*al-muṭaqqafūn*) and the common people (*aš-šaʿb*). On the one hand, there are the “people of knowledge” – who can be subdivided into an elite of independent *muḡtihad*s and a majority of lesser scholars who follow a given authority or school – and on the other hand, there are the laypeople (*al-ʿamma*) who are required to follow the guidance of “people of knowledge”.⁵² From this follows that, even though Muslim Brothers generally advocate the improvement of general religious education, they do not regard it as a particularly high priority. They presuppose a division of labour within society and within the movement and assume that the normal members of the movement will never have to make up their own mind about religious injunctions, because they will follow the directives and the guidance of qualified religious scholars and of their superiors within the Muslim Brotherhood hierarchy.

The sharp distinction between the cadres and the “rank and file” in terms of educational standards is reflected in the semantic distinction between *tarbiya* (education) and *taṭqīf* (cultivation). While the term *tarbiya* denotes the basic Islamic education that all Muslim Brotherhood members should receive, the terms culture (*taqāfa*) and cultivation (*taṭqīf*) refer to additional and separate programmes that are only open to the advanced cadres of the Ikhwan.⁵³ This common understanding of elite cultivation (*taṭqīf*) is reflected in a course manual published in 1989 by Ḥilmī ʿAbd al-Maḡīd, then a senior functionary of the Egyptian Ikhwan. The booklet describes the outlines of a cultivation course in the Islamic sciences for aspiring young members of the Brotherhood, who are required to have reached the final stages of secondary education. The subjects of the course include Quran exegesis, Hadith, Islamic law, Sufism, ethics and philosophy. The Brothers who enter the course must vow “that they will use this knowledge to spread the Islamic call (*našr ad-daʿwa al-islāmīya*)”⁵⁴; if they succeed, they will obtain a certificate to become official “preachers” or propagandists (*duʿāt*) of the movement. Similar efforts for the comprehensive cultivation of preachers or propagandists go back to the foundational era of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, as reflected for example in the life story of Fathi Osman (1928–2010) – one of the many rising young intellectuals of the 1940s who later distanced themselves from the Brotherhood as an organisation.⁵⁵

⁵² Amīn 1990: 91–121; Maḥmūd 1994: 89–91; Ḥawwā 1981: 62; al-Ḥaṭīb/Ḥāmid 1990: 106–110; Ğumʿa 2007: 147–156; al-Qaraḍāwī 2001: 72–127.

⁵³ Maḥmūd 2011: 505–519: only a small group of chosen people (*muṣṭafūn*) enters the process of cadre formation.

⁵⁴ ʿAbd al-Maḡīd 1989: 9.

⁵⁵ Osman 2011.

The concept of cultivation often encompasses not only the religious sciences, but also general knowledge in other areas, including the social sciences and political theory.⁵⁶ While reformist-minded Brothers like Muḥammad al-Ġazālī and Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī typically stress the importance of acquiring secular knowledge from outside the Islamic circle, Qutbists and traditionalists tend to emphasise traditional Islamic learning (*turāt*) and modern Islamist writings.⁵⁷ To conclude, there is no agreement on the precise meaning and content of cultivation and the role of the religious sciences within it, but there is a tacit agreement that the Muslim Brotherhood does need to “cultivate” its whole membership base – in the sense of providing access to a proper intellectual formation –, but only those in leadership roles.

In internal discussion, the dividing line runs between people who are satisfied with this model and believe that it is the proper and sufficient way of spreading Islamic subjectivity in Muslim societies, and people who believe that it has serious deficits. The debates go back at least to the 1980s. A reform memorandum from within the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (dated 1986, but only published in 2012) criticises that the education process within the family system severely under-emphasises the intellectual development of the members:

It is good that the problem of illiteracy in Islamic culture (*al-ummīya at-taqāfiya al-islāmīya*) has now been solved for many Islamic activists, but unfortunately their Islamic education moves within a narrow framework. A “balanced Islamic personality” is grounded in an expansion of the intellect through the study of society, literature and politics. However, there are no programmes for these aspects, only a few scattered courses in political education (*taṭqīf siyāsī*). There are virtually no studies that deal with the problems of reality, such as the Copts, nationalism and patriotism, women, class antagonisms, economic problems, political change and revolution. The result is a universe of lofty ideals (*tūbāwiyāt*) isolated from society, in which any intellectual effort to understand reality is absent.⁵⁸

A collection of articles edited by Kuwaiti scholar ‘Abdallāh an-Nafīsī (ostensibly not a member of the Muslim Brotherhood) in 1989 advances similar arguments. An-Nafīsī applauds the Islamic revivalist movements: the existence of the “modern Muslim” in this materialistic, hostile world is already a considerable achievement. Nevertheless, he argues that Islamic movements need to upgrade the intellectual formation of their members and provide them with a realistic vision for the future.⁵⁹ Most crucially, Islamic movements need to distinguish between thinking

⁵⁶ Cf. Kandil 2015: 2–3.

⁵⁷ For the reformist view, see al-Qaraḍāwī 2009, al-Qaraḍāwī 2011: 35–44 and al-Ġazālī 1997: 150–166; for the opposing view, see Ḥawwā 1980: 75–81 and al-Hilālī 1995: 123–134.

⁵⁸ Abū Ḥalīl H 2012: 31.

⁵⁹ an-Nafīsī 1989: 13–19, 28–29. The lacking intellectual development of the Muslim Brotherhood is also a major theme in the writings of ‘Abdallāh Abū ‘Izza, see Abū ‘Izza 2014.

and mere rhetoric and strive to produce more thinkers rather than orators (*du'āt*). In the same volume, Tunisian Islamist Ṣalāḥ Ğurṣī argues that Muslim Brotherhood-style education produces an “Islamic personality” with serious imbalances:⁶⁰ It reduces Islam to a moralising and emotional discourse that is incapable of recognising, analysing and ultimately changing social and political realities. By attempting to curb the individualism of its members and producing uniform patterns of thinking and behaviour, Muslim Brotherhood *tarbiya* confines its members to a low intellectual level, because it simply does not allow any independent inquiry and reflection.

In conclusion, the anti-intellectualist streak in Muslim Brotherhood education does have certain ideological roots, such as an aversion to religious learning for the sake of itself and to certain fields of secular knowledge, especially the social sciences.⁶¹ However, it also goes back to how the leaders of the movement think in terms of hierarchy and division of labour. Being “cultivated” – whether in the religious sciences or in the field of general knowledge – is a desirable ideal for the cadres and many of them strive to broaden their education in their respective field of specialisation. However, their view of the “rank and file” is that their exclusive role is in implementing the Muslim Brotherhood activities, not thinking for themselves or improving their insight into religious and secular knowledge. Ultimately, the desired Islamic subjectivity is not an aim in itself, but a function of a person’s role in the movement.

5 Balancing militancy and restraint

Strategic considerations concerning the strength and survival of the movement also define the twin educational goals of militancy and restraint, drawing the “Islamic personality” in different, if not mutually exclusive directions. Although the Muslim Brotherhood has primarily operated as a non-violent reform movement, its educational ideals are partly rooted in an ideology of violent struggle, or Jihad.⁶² The emphasis on military virtues and their rootedness in Islam is an essential and irreducible aspect of the message of Ḥasan al-Bannā, as for example in the “Letter of Instructions”, which sums up his core teachings and the principles of the movement.⁶³ The ideological “pillars” (*arkān*) of *Jihad* (No. 4), sacrifice

⁶⁰ an-Nafisi 1989: 132–134.

⁶¹ Kandil 2015: 10–22.

⁶² Tammām 2012: 137–162.

⁶³ al-Bannā et al. 2006: 273–290. For an in-depth analysis of the foundational ideological document, see Elsässer 2021.

(No. 5) and steadfastness (No. 7) sanctify and celebrate struggle and sacrifice, privation and death as the deepest truths of human existence – and of Islamic faith. Al-Bannā insists that struggle (*ḡihād*) is a general Islamic duty, and that its highest and purest form is military combat: “The Prophet said: Whoever died without going into the battlefield (*lam yaḡzu*), or having the intention to go into the battlefield, died as a heathen (*māta mīta ḡāhiliya*).”⁶⁴

Close observers of the Muslim Brotherhood like Egyptian researcher Ḥusām Tammām and Palestinian historian ‘Abdallāh Abū ‘Izza have argued that Jihad remained a central idea in Muslim Brotherhood ideology and education even after the strategic turn to peaceful *da‘wa* in the 1970s and 1980s that led to the split with the Jihadist wing.⁶⁵ Commonalities and mutual sympathies with more radical Islamist movements were always present, even though the Muslim Brotherhood successfully managed to contain its own radicals like the followers of Sayyid Quṭb.⁶⁶ According to Tammām, the unique “achievement” of the Muslim Brotherhood is how it managed to “frame the Jihadist idea socially and culturally in a way that allowed the Muslim Brotherhood to avoid being drawn into the struggles [between Jihadists and Arab governments] – whether ideologically or as an organisation – even during times of the most intense political impasse.”⁶⁷

These observations point to a delicate balancing process between militancy and restraint without which the Muslim Brotherhood could not have navigated the gap between its own aspirations and political realities on the ground. We can trace this balancing process in educational writings as well as personal memoirs. Even when they are writing in a situation in which the Muslim Brotherhood is not seeking any violent confrontation with the government and not entertaining a paramilitary wing, Muslim Brotherhood educators are generally not comfortable with describing the Muslim Brotherhood as simply a peaceful or non-violent movement. On the contrary, they stress the importance of keeping the “Jihad spirit” alive and criticise other Muslims for neglecting Jihad and adopting too pacifistic or defensive interpretations of Islam, presumably to “please the enemies of Islam”.⁶⁸ The Muslim Brotherhood itself and its activities are routinely referred to in a military language: The members are called “soldiers” (*ḡund/ḡundiya*) or “rank and file” (*aṣ-ṣaff*), larger group meetings are called “battalions” (*katība*) and

⁶⁴ al-Bannā et al. 2006: 280.

⁶⁵ Tammām 2012: 137–162; Abū ‘Izza 2014: 216–223.

⁶⁶ On the shared origins and subsequent split between the Muslim Brotherhood and contemporary Jihadism, see Elsässer 2021: 27–33, 38–44.

⁶⁷ Tammām 2012: 160.

⁶⁸ al-Ḥaṭīb/Ḥāmid 1990: 241; Mašhūr 1995 I: 255–263, II: 639–692.

excursions are called camps (*mu'askar*), a term that contains the Arabic word for military, *'askar*.

Jihad education also involves cultivating certain feelings surrounding the imagined state of war between Islam and its enemies. In this context, Muslim Brotherhood educators like to draw from al-Bannā's fiery motivational speeches, citing passages like the following:

Jihad, my dear, is a strong, vivid feeling: You overflow with tender concern for the pride and honour of Islam, you are consumed with longing for its rule and strength, you weep with grief at the weakness of Muslims and the humiliation they experience, and you feel a stinging pain in the face of this state that God and the Prophet cannot approve [...]. When the honour of Islam is threatened and the dignity of Islam is trampled, and the trumpet (*naḥr*) sounds for mobilisation [...], then you are the first to answer the call and the first to join the Jihad.⁶⁹

The theological significance of struggle and sacrifice is buttressed by a specific selection of Koran passages and hadiths on the subject of Jihad. The reading and interpretation of Sura 9 (at-Tawba), a Medinan Sura, plays a major role in this context.⁷⁰ It deals mainly with the struggle between the congregation of Muḥammad and various groups of "hypocrites" (*munāfiqūn*) and unbelievers and contains promises to the religious fighters as well as sharp threats to the "sitters" (*al-qā'idūn*) – those who are unwilling to fight.

The tension is evident and remains unresolved: While military Jihad appears as the purest and most prestigious form of Jihad, Muslim Brothers must nevertheless restrain themselves and wait for the right moment – which quite possibly might never come in their lifetime. Muslim Brotherhood educators routinely balance the call for mobilisation and constant readiness with a stern warning against the misled zeal and fanaticism of young idealists.⁷¹

It is the duty of Muslim youth to calm their zeal and excitement, because a man of the word is not yet a man of action. A man of Jihad alone is not yet a man of well-considered, productive Jihad, which brings the greatest profit and the best results [...].⁷²

Discussing the Islamic revival of the 1970s and 1980s and its violent tendencies that gradually coalesced into the global Jihadist movement in the 1990s, Ikhwani literature always applauds the enthusiasm and good intentions of "Islamist youth" but proposes that the Muslim Brotherhood will turn their misguided idealism into solid organisational structures and strategic planning. Muslim Brotherhood

⁶⁹ al-Bannā et al. 2006: 244, 246 (cited in al-Ḥaṭīb/Ḥāmid 1990: 239–252).

⁷⁰ Cf. Abū 'Izza 2014: 220.

⁷¹ Yakan 1984: 85–88, 101–110; Mašhūr 1995 I: 31–49; al-Qaraḍāwī 1985.

⁷² al-Ḥaṭīb/Ḥāmid 1990: 250.

functionaries are very ingenious in finding tactical arguments against the “hands-on” forms of activism that have been practised by more radical Islamist movements since the 1970s.

The treatment of *ḥisba*, the Islamic duty “to command right and forbid wrong”, is a case in point.⁷³ Theoretically, Muslim Brotherhood education stresses that it is a duty for every activist and an important part of the all-encompassing struggle to re-establish an Islamic state and society. Muslim Brothers should in principle act against vice in the shape of bars, nightclubs and video stores, or deviant practices such as saint worshipping and raucous *moulids* (popular festivals celebrating the birthdays of Muslim “saints”). However, weighing the benefit of direct action against the possible consequences, Ikhwani literature consistently concludes that restraint is the wiser choice, just like the Prophet practised restraint during the Meccan phase of his calling.⁷⁴ Often-used arguments are that the movement is not yet stable enough to take action, that its enemies are still too powerful, or that the Muslim people are not yet fully ready for the implementation of Islam.

Activist are urged to control not only their actions, but also their words. From the 1980s on, Da‘wa literature widely adopts the view that radical Islamist rhetoric that reproaches other Muslims for their errors and sins has proven counterproductive and that those Islamist movements which practised it alienated themselves from the Muslim masses.⁷⁵ Therefore, the functionaries plead for a gradual approach towards removing sinful behaviour that starts with embracing the common people through kind words and social services. They are optimistic that through “serving the people”, Muslim Brotherhood activists will be able to gradually guide them back towards the proper understanding of Islam.⁷⁶

With these and similar arguments, Muslim Brotherhood education emphasises that Jihad must be embedded in a system of collective action and a strategic plan, which in turn is conceived and implemented top-down by the organisation of the Muslim Brotherhood. The practical implementation of the Jihad, they argue, will take place only within the framework of obedience and trust in the leadership, according to the phases and steps strategically planned by it. According to this logic, whether “hands-on” Jihad becomes a practical option, military or otherwise, for the Muslim Brotherhood depends on the phase (*marḥala*) in which the leadership sees the movement. The so-called “doctrine of the phases” (*marḥaliya*) or gradualism (*tadarruġ*) is a pivotal concept in Da‘wa literature because it allows the leadership of the movement flexibility in determining the course of action.

73 For an overview of the legal-theological tradition see Cook 2003.

74 Mašhūr 1995 I: 40–42, 577–582, 589–593.

75 Mašhūr 1995 I: 44–49; Yakan 1985: 27–68.

76 Mašhūr 1995: I: 22; Yakan 1984: 85–88; Yakan 1985: 22–64.

Although it serves as a tool of moderation and pragmatism, its message concerning the question of violence itself is deeply ambiguous, because the last phase is always the phase of action, battle and empowerment.⁷⁷ According to their own logic, Muslim Brotherhood leaders have been continuously “deferring” militant action to an unknown future, as explained by Muṣṭafā Mašhūr in this quote from 1980:

Know that Jihad on God’s way will be the predominant feature of Islamic activism in a future phase in the life of mission. The youth of today will experience this phase, provided they continue with preaching and education. This phase will be full of trials by the enemies of Islam and their helpers.⁷⁸

This type of mental preparation for a struggle whose time and circumstances are yet unclear fosters conflicting impulses; it evokes a sense of embattlement and alarm but also constantly urges patience and restraint. Mašhūr’s citation hints at the most common solution to this dilemma: a “sublimation” of aggressive impulses into the celebration of determination and steadfastness in the face of trials. Muslim Brotherhood educational discourse highlights the sacrifices made by previous generations of activists under conditions of government persecution and repression, in the case of Egypt primarily the great trial (*miḥna*) of the Nasser era (1954–1970).⁷⁹ An educational manual written by Egyptian functionary ‘Abduh Dasūqī (b. 1975) contains episodes from the life of Muslim Brotherhood volunteers who fought in Palestine in the 1940s, obviously because this was the only (official) fighting engagement involving the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.⁸⁰ For the later period, it narrates episodes illustrating the strong faith and patience of the imprisoned Muslim Brothers and the heroic struggle of their wives and sisters to support and comfort them, the so-called “Jihad of the women”.

Some of the post-2011 memoirs demonstrate how young Egyptian Muslim Brothers in the 1990s and 2000s lived and struggled with this aspect of Islamic education. For them, the Muslim Brotherhood provided little in the way of serious physical or military training and did not offer any practical way of participating in militant Jihad. Nevertheless, it raised them with a sort of “romantic Jihadism”, which indulged in the veneration of militant Jihad as a towering but somewhat elusive ideal. Sāmiḥ Fāyiz describes how, as a teenager in the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1990s, he knew everything about the Palestinian struggle and its heroes, such as Hamas activist and bomb-maker Yaḥyā ‘Ayyāš (1966–1996), but

⁷⁷ For an in-depth analysis of the *marḥaliya* concept see Elsässer 2021: 187–219.

⁷⁸ Mašhūr 1995 II: 668.

⁷⁹ Cf. Kandil 2015: 58–70.

⁸⁰ Dasūqī 2012: 47–119.

little about his own country, Egypt.⁸¹ Young activists who took the militant narratives and the duty of Jihad seriously developed a sense of guilt, frustration and impotent rage in the face of their forced inaction due to the strategic choices of the leadership. After the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza in 2005, Egyptian–Gazan relations became a major issue in Egyptian politics. Opposition against the Egyptian government’s apparent indifference towards the Gazan population was building up, but the Muslim Brotherhood refrained from any active engagement, even when its sister organisation Ḥamās seized power in Gaza in 2007. Aḥmad Abū Ḥalīl, a young member of the Muslim Brotherhood at the time, describes his deep sympathy with the population of Gaza and his admiration for Ḥamās leader Nizār Rayyān (1959–2009), who was a Salafist scholar and guerrilla fighter at the same time. When Egypt briefly opened the border to Gaza in 2008, Abū Ḥalīl travelled to Gaza to meet Abū Rayyān and other Hamas members. Shortly after, in January 2009, Rayyān, his four wives and 11 of their children were killed in an Israeli airstrike. Abū Ḥalīl was appalled that the Muslim Brotherhood could not or would not do anything to revenge this horrendous act:

[...] I felt that the Islamists [– in spite of the material support they were giving –] were neglecting their duty towards Gaza and its people. Dozens are being martyred every day and we do not lift a finger? I always imagined: What if we went out marching in thousands towards Rafaḥ [the border crossing between Egypt and Gaza], what if dozens or hundreds or thousands of us were killed for the cause of God and Palestine? Why have we not shed any blood for this cause since 1948?⁸²

As similar desire to live up to the elusive ideal of Jihadism by self-sacrifice probably motivated many followers of the Muslim Brotherhood to risk their lives in the street fights against the Egyptian army in the summer of 2013. Even when the situation was already hopeless – the army had assured the support of all major political power centres and was firmly in control of the country – Muslim Brotherhood supporters refused to withdraw from the streets of Cairo; more than a thousand of

81 Fāyiz 2013: 16–17, 46–47. Similar tendencies can be observed in other branches of the Muslim Brotherhood: In Jordan, where the Muslim Brotherhood has been a mode case of political pragmatism, the Ikhwan still uphold the memory of ‘Abdallāh ‘Azzām (1941–1989), an intellectual and activist who briefly fought in the guerrilla war against Israel between 1968 and 1970 and joined the Afghan Jihad in 1985. The fact that his writings are today considered foundational for al-Qaida terrorism and other types of violent jihadism does not seem to have tainted his reputation, cf. Ḥusnī Adham Ġarrār, *aš-Šahīd ad-Duktūr ‘Abdallah ‘Azzām* (Amman: Dār al-Ma’mūn, 2013) and Kamāl Hilbāwī, “Murāḡa‘āt”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XNnBPcTzm2o>, from 7:40 (22/08/2019).

82 Abū Ḥalīl A 2012: 162.

them were killed in several brutal crackdowns.⁸³ In a way, Jihadist education was clearly carrying fruits in these circumstances, but not in the shape of carefully planned and preconceived action as the doctrine of gradualism would suggest, but – once again – in the shape of suffering and self-sacrifice.

6 Balancing everyday life and activism

The third and final spotlight on Muslim Brotherhood education concerns the relationship between everyday life and activism. Muslim Brotherhood educators stress an ethics of duty and dedication: any Muslim Brother should subordinate his personal plans and goals, wishes and interests, thoughts and emotions to the success and cohesion of the movement. However, a successful personal life is also considered very important, even if mostly as a function of the collective: Muslim Brothers must be able to support themselves and contribute to the funding of the movement by earning their own money. In addition, it is their duty to marry and set up a “Muslim home”, the basic building block of Islamic society.

Muslim Brotherhood educational literature seldom takes into account how challenging these tasks might become for the individual members, or how they should deal with difficult choices between the requirements of a stable social and marital life and movement duties. As Poljarevic remarks, Ikhwani education aims at overcoming fear and reluctance concerning the possible consequences of the activist path, not at encouraging doubts.⁸⁴ However, the more self-critical functionaries have not been able to ignore the problem that, while the Muslim Brotherhood has always been relatively successful in recruiting young people, it has been struggling with the problem of keeping people engaged in a continuous way after the initial process of recruitment and formation. Lebanese leader and Da‘wa theorist Fathī Yakan stated in 1984:

In some areas, the movement [is successful] in harnessing the energies of its members in their school years and their adolescence. However, as time passes and the individual moves on from school to work and from adolescence (*ṣabāb*) to manhood (*ruḡūla*) and becomes the head of a family or assumes an elevated social position, the relationship between him and the movement begins to falter. [This can happen] because he is busy or because the movement does not find an occupation for him that fits his new circumstances.⁸⁵

83 Kandil 2015: 137–145. Schielke 2017 makes the important observation that the followers of the Muslim Brotherhood were not the only group in society expecting and even desiring violence during the post-revolutionary showdown in 2012–2013.

84 Poljarevic 2012: 224–229.

85 Yakan 1984: 62–63.

It is with these problems in mind that some voices in the Muslim Brotherhood have discussed the issue of marriage and – to a much lesser extent – professional life. The guidelines for a successful marriage after often laid down in a rather simplistic and stereotypical way, focusing on the perspective and choices of the male activist and the constant admonishment to apply Islamic rules to the “challenges” of marriage and family life. The general approach reflects two different, but related aspects. Firstly, the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamic movements have been upholding a conservative gender ideology with and against social change in the Arab world. While actual lifestyles and gender relations within Muslim Brotherhood families differ considerably, symbolic commitment to conservative social norms such as gender segregation, veiling and male guardianship (*qiwāma*) remain important markers of Islamic identity.⁸⁶ Secondly, the discourse on marriage reflects the dominant role of men within the movement. It is *their* activist ambitions that need to be buttressed by a solid marriage and family life. Women, in contrast, are relegated to a supporting role, which only becomes more crucial when their husbands and relatives become imprisoned or exiled. Education and Da‘wa literature often pass over in silence the important role of women in the everyday functioning of the movement and treats the Muslim Sisters and female education as a separate and somewhat secluded realm that has little relevance to the general concerns of the movement.⁸⁷

A booklet by the Syrian ‘Abdallāh ‘Ulwān (1928–1987), for example, celebrates the role model of the ascetic warrior, who cannot be tied down by any sentimental attachment to his worldly belongings and people.⁸⁸ Love and attachment towards wife and children, family and friends, are acceptable as long as they remain second to the “highest love”, the one towards God and his religion, Jihad and martyrdom. In one of his popular Da‘wa manuals, Fathī Yakan urges the activist to be aware of the hidden traps of marriage:⁸⁹ A wife can be a blessing, but also a curse. A man needs a good marital relationship in order to fulfil his sexual needs, but he must not be carried away by the pleasures of love and never become subservient to the whims and wishes of his wife. He must preserve his dominant role (*qiwāma*) and act as the decision-maker of the family.

The right choice of spouse is crucial: Ikhawni discourse uses piety and virtue as keywords for stressing that a bride should come from a background that guarantees shared commitment to an Islamic way of life, possibly even attachment to the activist ideals of the Muslim Brotherhood. It is common knowledge that Muslim

⁸⁶ Krämer 2010: 111; Tadros 2012: 136–155.

⁸⁷ Cf. Abdel-Latif 2008; Tadros 2012; Biagini 2017.

⁸⁸ ‘Ulwān 2009 [1982]: 19–42.

⁸⁹ Yakan 2001 [1967]: 48–56.

Brothers often opt for arranged marriages within the movement.⁹⁰ Arguably, reliance on the stability of traditional social norms concerning marriage and family and the supportive role of women in upholding them could work together well in defusing possible conflicts between activism and married life. A marriage advice manual published in 2008 by ‘Āmir Šammāḥ, a Muslim Brotherhood functionary in Egypt, shows that, while outwardly stressing piety as the most important guideline for personal conduct, in practice Muslim Brothers would easily fall back on a no-nonsense approach to love and family.⁹¹ Šammāḥ advises his readers strongly against divorce and polygamy, arguing that the stability of the Muslim family must not be measured against idealistic expectations and self-realisation.

However, from the 2000s on, the issue of personal happiness and fulfilment starts popping up now and then in Muslim Brotherhood writings. Published in 2011, the memoir of Muslim Sisterhood veteran Fāṭima ‘Abd al-Hādī (1917–2015), contains a surprisingly frank account of her marriage with Yūsuf Hawwāš (1923–1966), a close associate of Sayyid Quṭb.⁹² Their marriage was a rather untypical match: ‘Abd al-Hādī was already 35 years old and an experienced activist in the Muslim Sisters when she was married to Hawwāš, who was considerably younger than her. Their marriage was arranged by mutual friends and relatives within the Muslim Brotherhood. In line with her own conservative convictions, ‘Abd al-Hādī refused to meet Hawwāš before they got married, even during their engagement period. The first years of the marriage were nevertheless disappointing for ‘Abd al-Hādī. One problem was the difference in culture and upbringing: while ‘Abd al-Hādī was an educated urban woman, Hawwāš’s expectations towards marriage had apparently been shaped by his rural upbringing; from his wife, he expected service and silent submission. In addition, ‘Abd al-Hādī was dismayed that Hawwāš was apparently not even interested in leading what appeared to her to be a “normal” family life, such as common meals and some private time together. Hawwāš was out all day with the Brothers and often did not return before the early hours of morning. He invited strangers to eat and stay over without even consulting his wife. Only his long years in prison, according to ‘Abd al-Hādī, changed Hawwāš’s character and made him more considerate of her feelings.

This example shows that the picture painted in Da‘wa literature, according to which shared commitment to Islamic activism and the meticulous observation of Islamic norms guarantee private harmony, does not always hold up to reality. In the 2000s, when motivational training and techniques of self-improvement, often

⁹⁰ Abū Ḥalīl 2012: 101; Kandil 2015: 70–76. A refreshingly frank account of his own protracted search for a bride is given by al-Qaraḍāwī 2004: 260–270.

⁹¹ Šammāḥ/Ḥalīl 2008.

⁹² ‘Abd al-Hādī 2011: 45–52.

in combination with Islamic norms and lifestyles, became a general trend in Muslim societies, the topic of marital happiness became more visible in Muslim Brotherhood circles, too.⁹³ The Muslim Brotherhood publishing house in Cairo ran a series of books by Ğamāl Māḍī, previously mentioned for his publications on spirituality and brotherhood, with titles such as *Enjoy Life*, *Loving Couples* and *How to be a Happy Home*. Obviously influenced by contemporary ideas of romantic love and companionate marriage, Māḍī paints a hopeful and romantic picture of the Muslim marriage, in which both spouses can grow towards overcoming their weaknesses and petty needs and find fulfilment within an Islamic ethics of love and marriage.⁹⁴ The interesting development is how this approach recognises an independent human need for a “good Islamic life” and does not attempt to solve personal problems with the call to activist duty. It underlines what Faṭḥī Yakan already discussed 30 years before: Muslim Brotherhood members may generally be committed activists, but they might also aspire to private fulfilment in an Islamic way of life. Especially when reaching the life phase of marriage, parenthood and possibly professional advancement, they may not be as ready to subordinate their personal life to the demands of the organisation as they theoretically should be after undergoing a process of activist education.

7 Conclusion

Considering individual testimonies and reading between the lines of educational and organisational literature, this article has unfolded a tentative picture of Muslim Brotherhood education that differs significantly from the image of uniformity and cohesion painted by both friends and foes of the Ikhwan. Within the Muslim Brotherhood, the “Islamic personality” is contested territory between different self-declared aims and ideals that simply do not fit together as neatly as the ideological rhetoric of a seamless Islamic system suggests. Regarding the three aspects examined in this study, several tensions and ambiguities remain unsolved. In spite of the declared importance of religious belief and spiritual purification as a foundation for any kind of Islamic activism, Muslim Brotherhood education offers only a limited amount of spiritual guidance, probably less than alternative Islamic communities, such as Sufi groups and the circles around charismatic preachers. Group rituals may provide a surrogate experience of emotional elevation and “closeness to God”, but even Muslim Brotherhood literature on spiritual education suggests to a degree that belief is personal and needs to be cultivated individually.

⁹³ Haenni 2005; Kreil 2015.

⁹⁴ Māḍī 2011.

The tensions are more acute when it comes to the question of learning and knowledge. Although the books written by Muslim Brotherhood scholars and intellectuals such as Muḥammad al-Ġazālī, Yūsuf al-Qaraḏāwī and others acknowledge the importance of a rational and intellectual approach to religion and the need to combine religious learning with secular knowledge about the modern world, Muslim Brotherhood education does not make it a priority to apply this insight to the lower ranks of the movement and the less educated parts of society. Cultivation (*taṭqīf*) programmes that can include Islamic law and theology, as well as secular areas of knowledge, only target a chosen elite. This strongly hierarchical mindset also plays a major role in the field of Jihadist education, where young recruits are educated to adopt a militant mindset towards the challenges faced by “Islam” or the movement but need the permission of their superiors to take any kind of concrete action. The functionaries, in turn, have adopted a sophisticated jargon of strategic reasoning that has allowed them to pursue political strategies that were the practical opposite of militant Jihadist action.

The sheer comprehensiveness and ambition of the educational goals and of the “Islamic personality” ideal requires a process of balancing that is by default always incomplete and in process. The more realistic inside observers recognise this dilemma, but their critical remarks have not yet fed back into Ikhwani educational theory so far. Seen from a wider angle, Muslim Brotherhood education is not a closed system of subjectivity formation at all, but rather a matrix that overlaps with other Muslim subjectivities, such as those focused on religious learning or Sufism, and those that attempt to lead a good Islamic life within society without any organisational bond. There are also areas of agreement with more radical forms of activism, such as Salafism and Jihadism. Within the general matrix of Ikhwani subjectivity formation, individuals may follow different ways and place different accents, which is the case both among the regular members and among the educators themselves.

Contradiction between educational goals is not necessarily a structural problem for the Muslim Brotherhood, because the very ambiguity and broad reach of its declared goals allows it to incorporate a wide range of Islamic subjectivities, as long as they overlap in one crucial aspect, the commitment to being part of a hierarchical organisation with a political project. Rather, the collision and conflict between educational goals seems to be an individual problem for *some* people, especially those who are – paradoxically – highly committed and motivated to live according to the ideals preached by the Muslim Brotherhood. Accounts of defections often involve ambitious and talented individuals who are in principle committed to the movement but also strive to excel in a particular field of “education”, for example religious learning and intellectual growth. In some cases, such a personal commitment increases to an extent that it clashes with the boundaries of movement

work and organisational discipline. As Menshawy explains in his study of post-2011 “exiters”, leaving the Brotherhood often starts with doubts about whether “satisfying God [really] equates to [...] satisfying the movement” in all circumstances.⁹⁵ A similar process is at work when people turn their backs on the Muslim Brotherhood in order to practice actual militant Jihad – as happened in some instances after the 2013 military coup and subsequent repression of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. The reason for their “defection” is not a lack of commitment to the goals of the Muslim Brotherhood, but a single-minded urgency to implement one of these goals – Jihad – regardless of the possible consequences.⁹⁶

In general, people with an average commitment to cultivating a comprehensive “Islamic personality” probably find it easier to balance between the different aims. The organisation neither demands of them to excel in any of the fields, nor does it require them to reflect on their actions and choices on a fundamental level. Within the hierarchical structure of the Muslim Brotherhood, there is plenty of room for people to fill the lower ranks of the movement. However, the question of how much people expect from following the guidelines of an Islamic system in their private lives and how much of their life they are willing to dedicate to activist duty is relevant to the Muslim Brotherhood on all levels. The image of the Muslim Brotherhood activist as an “ascetic warrior” who is willing to give up everything for the cause never reflected the reality of different degrees of commitment. Given the fact that recent social trends stress the “benefits” of an Islamic lifestyle for a happy marriage and professional success, this might become a bigger educational and organisational issue for the Muslim Brotherhood in the future. Muslim Brotherhood education is to a considerable degree built on selecting people from the existing social environment and honing their commitment to organised Islamic activism. While this has been capable of adding to the crucial element of organisational discipline, it does not work and never has worked independently of Muslim subjectivities in Arab societies at large.

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⁹⁵ Menshawy 2021: 6.

⁹⁶ Fahmi 2018.

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