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Islam is not the Answer

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You probably heard of Osama Bin Laden and al-Qaeda, but have you heard of Mohammad Badie and the Muslim Brotherhood?

If not, you should reconsider all your assumptions about Islam and al-Qaeda's terrorism and whether confronting or reforming Islam is the answer to the al-Qaeda challenge.

The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood that boasts an estimated half a million members and commands the support of about one third of the country's population (no accurate public figures), has over the weekend elected Badie, a 63 year old scientist, as its leader or "guide".

Imprisoned 4 times for a total over 13 years over the last four decades, the new leader belongs to the conservative wing of the movement who began his journey in prison with its hawkish leadership in the 1960s. However, pragmatic and disciplined, the movement's reformists and conservatives have rallied around the new leader.

After his election, Badie spoke unequivocally about the Brotherhood's peaceful pursuit of social and political agenda, and how under no circumstance it would seek power through violence.

Most of the other branches of the World's Organization of the Muslim Brotherhood adhere to the same principles as their Egyptian counterparts, except in cases of direct foreign military assault or occupation.

Two Interpretations of Jihad

For all practical purpose, al-Qaeda's jihadi doctrine was established by disenfranchised members of the Muslim Brotherhood, such as Abdullah Azzam the former head of the Jordanian Brotherhood who rejected the Brotherhood's peaceful jihadi doctrine.

They abandoned the mother group after its leaders renounced revolutionary violence following painful confrontations against Arab regimes, and instead adopted religious, social and political preaching as a way to win hearts and minds in the Muslim world.

Many of these radical 'brothers' found their way to Afghanistan through the Brotherhood's networks and later through their own "services bureau" all of which was supported by the CIA's effort to reverse the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan at the height of the Cold War.

Once fully organized, al-Qaeda leaders like Ayman al-Zawahiri, formerly of the Egyptian Jihad, accused the Muslim Brotherhood of betraying the cause of Islam and abandoning their jihad in favour of forming political parties and supporting modern state institutions.

With the Soviet withdrawal at the end of the Cold War, al-Qaeda turned against secular or "apostate" Arab regimes and against any form of Western presence (crusaders and Jewish) in the Muslim world, from Andalusia in Spain to Kashgar in China, in order to establish an Islamic caliphate.

On the opposite side, the Muslim Brotherhood maintain that Arab regimes are not their nemesis, even if they suppress and oppress it all too frequently.

Instead, they seek constitutional reform and equality for all citizenship for all religions in rights and responsibilities.

However, totalitarian and authoritarian Arab regimes have consistently pursued policies of containment or crackdown against the Muslim Brotherhood which they accuse of deception and the pursuit of Islamic rule.

The violent suppression of the Islamist movement has predictably produced radical elements that seek and adopt extreme means in dealing with Arab regimes and their backers. And since 9/11 Arab regimes have exploited the "War on terror" to further isolate their Islamists.

Resistance Islamists

The Muslim Brotherhood and al-Qaeda have been vocal about Islamic resistance movements in the region because of the challenge and opportunity they present to political Islam.

The Muslim Brotherhood has supported various resistance movements against foreign occupation, including Palestinian Hamas (offshoot of the Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood), the Lebanese Hezbollah, and the Islamist Iraqi resistance groups. But it also supported their attempts to join the political processes in their countries.

Al-Qaeda on the other hand, has supported only the violent expressions of these groups, and whenever they turned to politics, al-Qaeda rejected all their political overtures as surrender to the enemies of Islam.

A Sunni group, al-Qaeda has expressed hostility towards the Iranian supported Shia-based Lebanese Hezbollah despite its victory against Israel in the 2006 war.

However, al-Qaeda inspired militants who declared themselves "Fath Al Islam" were defeated by the Lebanese army, leaving Hezbollah as the most potent armed group in the country.

Likewise, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, then head of Al-Qaida affiliate in Iraq targeted the Islamic party, a branch of the Brotherhood, when it joined the post Saddam Hussein coalition government.

And in Gaza, Hamas crushed the self-declared al-Qaeda inspired fringe group ("Army of Islam") leaving little room for al-Qaeda to establish base in Palestine.

Though restricted to Gaza and big clans, Palestine has put Hamas in direct confrontation with leaders of "al-Qaeda Central" whose leadership accused it of abandoning its faith and surrendering four fifth of Palestine to the Jews.

However, the centrality of the Palestinian cause and Hamas's victory in the elections and its steadfastness against the superior Israeli military have further weakened al-Qaeda appeal among radical Islamists.

Paradoxically, the stronger Islamist Hamas comes out of its confrontations with Israel, the less chance al-Qaeda has to play a role in the Palestinian cause it has long invoked to gain popularity in the Muslim world.

But for the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas have given its Arab and notably Egyptian counterpart the honor of championing the "central cause" of Arabs and Muslims, while at the same time maintaining non-violent agenda in their countries.

All of these traditional, reformist, resistance groups of Islamists who balance between religion and politics and between soft power and hard power, in addition to the even larger Islamic

groups who maintain a distance from politics, whether Sufists or Salafists, not to mention the absolute majority of secular and liberal Muslims, reject al-Qaeda's activist political interpretation of Islam and its violence against civilians.

So what makes al-Qaeda so dangerous?

Clearly, Islam is not the answer.