Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought

TEXTS AND CONTEXTS FROM
AL-BANNA TO BIN LADEN

Edited and Introduced by
Roxanne L. Euben
and Muhammad Qasim Zaman

HASAN AL-BANNA
1906–1949

HASAN AL-BANNA is frequently characterized as the father of contemporary Islamism, and with good reason. In 1928 Banna founded al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun, or the Egyptian Society of Muslim Brothers, an organization that has spawned branches throughout the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, and beyond and has directly or indirectly inspired virtually every Sunni Islamist group now in existence. As Banna was assassinated in 1949, the tumultuous history of the Muslim Brotherhood and its offshoots extends far beyond the life of its founder by many decades. Yet, at the time of his death at forty-three, Banna had already built a formidable organization with deep roots in Egyptian society and a broad base of membership, ranging from civil servants to soldiers, urban laborers to rural peasants, village elders to university students. Although the appeal of the Brotherhood's message of Islamic "rearmament" had much to do with timing and specific political circumstances, it was also and crucially about Banna himself. A watchmaker by training and schoolteacher by profession, Banna exuded selfless religious devotion and unflagging energy and, by all accounts, was preternaturally gifted with remarkable personal charisma, rhetorical skill, and organizational acumen. More activist than theologian, Banna would largely leave the task of developing an Islamist theoretical framework to thinkers who came after him. Yet many of the positions and arguments associated with Islamists such as Qutb, Mawdudi, and Khomeini are a systematic articulation of a worldview already evident in the model of leadership and sociomoral reform Banna left behind.

Banna is so closely identified with the Brotherhood that its early history and his biography are almost indistinguishable. Banna was born in 1906 in Mahmudiyya, a village north of Cairo. His father was a shaykh, scholar, and imam for the local mosque as well as a watch repairer, and he conveyed his religious devotion, love of learning, and practical expertise to his son.[1] Throughout his life, Banna was drawn to a life of learning and study in addition to engagement and action—and precociously so. At thirteen, Banna was already deeply immersed in Hasafiyya, a Sufi mystical

[1] Banna's life has been amply documented in several excellent studies of the Muslim Brotherhood, and Banna himself also provides extensive (if occasionally self-serving) information about his early life and the founding of the Brotherhood in his memoirs. See R. Mitchell (1993), Banna (1974), and Harris (1964).

order, and active in the strikes and demonstrations of the 1919 Egyptian rebellion against British rule. From a very early age, he was also a fervent participant in several Muslim student associations devoted to self-discipline and moral reform, an agenda that included strident opposition to Christian missionary activity and any behavior deemed "un-Islamic."

When he was seventeen, Banna opted to study at the Dar al-'Ulum, a well-established state teachers' college in Cairo, rather than pursue an advanced religious education. Yet the understanding of education (*tarbiyya*) that he held throughout his life more closely resembled what Aristotle had called moral instruction than mastery of a particular set of skills or academic discipline. In Banna's view, the ultimate aim of all knowledge is neither personal advancement nor material success but rather inculcation of the Good Life as dictated by the truths of Islam, and this is equally true whether the subject of study is the Qur'an or economics. He similarly saw teaching as a vocation—in the sense of a religious calling—rather than just a profession: embracing the role of murshid (religious guide, teacher), Banna cast himself as a leader who, like his own teachers, instructs by argument and example; figures to his pupils much as a father does to his children; and commands the same kind of fierce loyalty, emotional attachment, and strict obedience from his followers as does a Sufi shaykh from his disciples (Harris 1964, 157; Commins 1994, 150; R. Mitchell 1993, 300–301).[2]

Banna graduated from the Dar al-'Ulum in 1927, and his first posting was as an Arabic instructor in a school in Isma'iliyya, a city in the Suez Canal Zone. There he honed his skills as an orator in mosques, clubs, and coffeehouses, adapting his rhetoric to suit different audiences in an effort to draw into his orbit elites and peasants, shaykhs and laborers, family elders and students alike. His lectures on the necessity of reviving the true Islam found a particularly receptive audience in Isma'iliyya, headquarters of the British-owned Suez Canal Company, site of several British military camps, and home to a substantial and conspicuously wealthy foreign population. Here, as in Cairo, Banna was repulsed by what he saw as the domination of materialism and secularism, the abandonment of Muslim virtue, widespread imitation of Western moral decadence, and the galling sight of native Egyptians laboring in their own country for the profit of foreign powers. In his memoirs, Banna characterizes Isma'iliyya as the stark embodiment of the evils besetting Egypt and all Muslim societies dominated by foreign capital and cultural influence (Banna 1974, 73).

Such was the setting of the birth of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928. As Banna tells it, the Brotherhood was founded when several Egyptian laborers from the British camps beseeched him to deliver them from the

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[2]Banna preferred to be called a *murshid* rather than *ra'is* (president) or *qa'id* (commander), although as the organization grew, he came to be known as *murshid al-'am*, literally "guide general" (R. Mitchell 1993, 299; Harris 1964, 154).

humiliation of foreign domination and guide them to the glory of Islam (Banna 1974, 74). From these modest beginnings, Banna worked relentlessly over the next two decades to build a broad base of membership for the Society of Muslim Brothers, along with a complex structure that facilitated tight discipline within the organization and mobilized members for continual outreach and indoctrination. This cadre would serve as the foot soldiers for a wide array of social welfare projects designed to improve the living conditions of ordinary Egyptians, such as establishing schools, providing sustenance for orphans as well as for the needy and sick, bringing electricity to villages, creating health clinics, and building mosques.[3] For Banna, such efforts were not only essential to sociomoral reconstruction but also critical for generating grass-roots support and recruiting new Brotherhood members.

The crises plaguing Egyptian politics at the time provided fertile soil for such efforts and strategies. A British protectorate since World War I, Egypt had been declared independent in 1922. Britain retained control over several domains of national politics, however, including security and foreign policy. Despite Egyptian independence then, actual power was split three ways between the often-conflicting interests of the Egyptian monarchy, the nationalist Wafd Party, and the British. The shifting alliances and animosities among these three poles of power frequently paralyzed the government, transforming what might have been an era of constitutional rule into a cauldron of intra-elite conflict and corruption (al-Sayyid Marsot 1977; 1985). The facade of Egyptian independence came under increasing strain during World War II, as nationalist agitation mounted and the British maneuvered aggressively to maintain control and facilitate Egyptian support for, or at least acquiescence to, the Allied cause.

While much of the Brotherhood's activities before 1936 were aimed at recruitment and social welfare programs, the years leading up to and during the Second World War marked Banna's ascendance as a powerful figure in Egyptian politics, as well as the expansion of Brotherhood activities to British Mandate Palestine in support of the Arab Rebellion (1937–39).[4] In 1941 Banna decided to run for elected office but agreed to withdraw when pressured by Wafdist officials. In exchange, Banna secured from the government a pledge to ease restrictions on the Brotherhood and curtail prostitution and alcohol consumption. In 1945 Banna again entered the field of electoral politics but was defeated along with

[3]The society also. pursued several commercial and industrial projects (Harris 1964, 154–57).

[4]The Arab Rebellion was a coordinated effort among Palestinian Arabs to fight British colonial rule and prevent the transformation of Palestine into a Jewish state. It was critical to articulating the Arab claim to Palestine as well as to the emergence of a Palestinian national identity that transcended clan, class, and sectarian divisions.

other society candidates in what one scholar characterized as the most "obviously dishonest" election held in Egypt to date (R. Mitchell 1993, 33).

As the reins of the Egyptian government changed hands over the years, the Brotherhood continued to agitate from outside the formal institutions of government, pressing demands to liberate Egypt from British control, reverse the tide of secularism, and restore Islamic sovereignty over both public and private domains. As relations between the state and the Brotherhood grew progressively hostile, the Society would add to its structure a "secret apparatus" designed to defend Brothers against government harassment and pursue extralegal and at times violent jihad operations (R. Mitchell 1993, 32). The Brotherhood now "operated on the edge of, or beneath the surface of, Egyptian political life" and increasingly took on the characteristics of a resistance movement (Harris 1964, 158, 180, 182). It was in this climate that the prime minister of Egypt, Nuqrashi Pasha, issued a 1948 proclamation dissolving the Muslim Brotherhood, only to be assassinated shortly thereafter by one of its members. The next prime minister arranged to have Banna shot to death on February 12, 1949, thereby assuring the transformation of the Brotherhood leader into "the martyr of the nation."

Under Banna's leadership, the Muslim Brothers disseminated an array of publications and propaganda and even established its own press. The centerpiece of these efforts was Banna's "Epistles" (*al-rasa'il*). These tracts were largely written in response to specific events and ranged from letters to various Egyptian officials to pamphlets detailing the ideas, duties, and purposes of the Society for its expanding membership (R. Mitchell 1993, 13). Along with Banna's memoirs, these epistles presage many of the features of later radical Muslim thought both rhetorically and substantively. Several of these features have become well-known components of an Islamist lexicon. There is, for example, an analysis of the conditions of the Muslim umma in terms of infection, disease, diagnosis, and cure. There is a narrative of history in which Western ascendance is characterized as the triumph of and vehicle for materialism and moral bankruptcy. There is an insistence on Islam as a comprehensive way of life, a set of religio-political imperatives distorted by foreign domination and Western cultural corruption on the one hand, and Muslim impotence, sectarianism, and indifference on the other. There is a rejection of pacific forms of jihad in favor of the armed fight against unbelievers, preparations for which include physical training, moral self-discipline, and cultivating the "art of death" (R. Mitchell 1993, 207–8). And there is a sharp contrast between righteous Brothers and the array of hostile forces conspiring to persecute them and destroy the truths they aim to restore.

Banna's work also presages many less obvious features of contemporary Islamist thought. For instance, as in much of later Islamist rhetoric, Banna's writing tends to transform women's bodies and sexual behavior

into symbols of moral purity or indices of cultural decay.[5] Like Qutb, Faraj, Bin Laden, and other Islamists without advanced religious training, moreover, Banna harbors bitter disappointment with members of the religious establishment, particularly those he claims place their own ambitions and interests above their vocation as custodians of Islam. In addition, Sufism is central to Banna's experience of Islam and his model of leadership, much as it would be to Qutb (although he would later disavow it) and Khomeini, whose own immersion in mysticism would undergird his claims for the special knowledge required for just Islamic rule (see chapter 1). Finally, by both argument and example, Banna insists that the multiple crises facing the Muslim umma require a commitment to action over words, deeds over slogans, practical over theoretical knowledge, unity over dissent. Untempered by Banna's love of learning, this emphasis on the primacy of action would devolve into the anti-intellectualist tendencies of Islamists such as Qutb and Faraj, those for whom the "life of the mind" is but a cowardly substitute for the "sweat and blood" of great deeds.

At the same time, there is a strain of pragmatism, compromise, and conciliation in Banna's thought and practice that differentiates him from many of the radical Islamists that followed, one that would serve as precedent and inspiration for such "moderate" Islamists as Nadia Yassine (see chapter 12). Here the contrast with Qutb in particular is instructive: in Qutb's later work, there is a pervasive sense of despair about a world enveloped by a new jahiliyya and a concomitant hardening of his thought around a stark polarity between good and evil, the solution to which is as radical as it is unspecific. By contrast, Banna's life and writing speak eloquently if didactically of his hope that individual and collective action in the service of concrete sociomoral programs might reform the world he was given. While profoundly critical of Egyptian politics, for example, Banna was not averse to playing by its rules, attempting to run for elected office not once, but twice. By the same token, much of the Brotherhood's early activities were geared toward gradualist transformation from the ground up rather than direct seizure of state power.

A man with astute political instincts, Banna insisted that the Brothers always calibrate action to circumstance. For much of his life, Banna sought with great effort to coax action out of acquiescence without acceding to the demands of (in his own words) "the overzealous and hasty," impatient to accomplish with force what could not be achieved through persuasion (Banna 1950, 22; Heyworth-Dunne 1950, 27–28). Hardly

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[5] Consistent with this view, Banna established an "Institute for the Mothers of the Believers" in Isma'iliyya, a school meant to mobilize women in their role as mothers for the moral reform of the family. This eventually became the first chapter of the "Muslim Sisters." Banna asked Zaynab al-Ghazali (see chapter 11) to merge her own "Muslim Women's Association" into the organization and assume its leadership; she declined.

opposed to violent action on principle—although he took different positions depending upon his audience—Banna refused to be pushed into it precipitously. He was quite explicit about the succession of phases integral to social transformation, insisting that "execution" may commence only after the prior stages of "propaganda, education, and preaching" and "selection, formation, and mobilization" (Banna 1950, 20, 21). Thus, when confronted by the hadith, "He among you who sees an abomination must correct it with his hand; if he is unable, then with his tongue; if he is unable, then with his heart. The last of these is the weakest of faith," Banna was known to respond with Qur'an 16:125: "Call unto the way of thy Lord with wisdom and fair exhortation, and reason with them in the better way. Lo! Thy Lord is best aware of him who strayeth from His way and He is best aware of those who go aright."

These aspects of Banna's life and work situate him politically, intellectually, and historically between the radicalism of much of contemporary Islamist thought and the reformism of such nineteenth-century Muslim thinkers as Muhammad 'Abduh (d. 1905) and Jamal al-Din al-Afghani [al-Asadabadi] (d.1897). Although quite critical of the reformists who preceded him, Banna's agenda is in many ways continuous with their earlier efforts to excavate Islamic foundations to serve as a bulwark against the encroachments of foreign power and the weakening of the umma from within. Much as Afghani and 'Abduh sought to meet this double challenge by recasting Islam and scientific truth as fundamentally harmonious, Banna insists that the neglect of science is a central cause of Muslim decline and repeatedly characterizes education in the natural and applied sciences as integral rather than antithetical to Islamic faith.

Indeed, despite the fact that the caliphate had been abolished in 1924,[6] the geopolitical landscape in which Banna found himself posed a challenge that his predecessors would also have recognized, one in which allegiance to an Islamic umma defined not by territory but by faith required increasing justification in the face of crosscutting national and ethnic loyalties. So understood, Banna's endeavors may be seen as confronting the

[6]The Caliphate is an institution of rule whose origins are located in questions about who would lead the Muslim community in the wake of the Prophet Muhammad's death and about the appropriate criterion for succession. Here, too, are the origins of what would become the sectarian division between Shi'a and Sunnis. Those who believed that the Prophet's son-in-law and cousin, 'Ali, had already been designated as successor became known as the Shi'a (literally: "partisans" of 'Ali). Those who believed that the question of succession was to be determined by the community were called Sunnis, or those who followed the sunna (the normative example of the Prophet). The evolution of the Caliphate both as an institution and a theory of political power over the centuries reflects various historical, political, economic, cultural, and regional transformations in different Muslim societies too complex to encapsulate. By the eighteenth century, however, the multiethnic Ottoman Empire had claimed the mantle of the Caliphate, but that was to be undone in the early decades of the twentieth century: the Ottoman Empire was dismembered at the end of World War I and the Caliphate abolished in 1924 by the architect of the Turkish state, Mustafa Kemal.

very question that had so preoccupied earlier Muslim reformists: to what extent and in what form can the Islamic tradition and the umma built upon it survive and flourish in a modern landscape increasingly defined by the authority of scientific rationality, the sovereignty of the nation-state, and the dominance of the West? It is in part because of Banna's efforts and example that, for generations of Islamists to come, the answer would be clear and the question itself unnecessary.