Hasan al-Banna and the Political Ideologisation of Islam in the 20th Century

https://www.e-ir.info/2016/02/02/hasan-al-banna-and-the-political-ideologisation-of-islam-in-the-20th-century/

CAMILLE MULCAIRE, FEB 2 2016

The political ideologisation of Islam refers to the interpretation of Islam as a 'political ideology': a comprehensive 'system of ideas for social and political action' (Safire, 2008: 336) which serve as a functional tool for the ordering of state and society**,** whilst also outlining how this ideal socio-political order might be attained (Erikson and Tedin, 2003: 64). It is precisely this tendency to interpret Islam as a political ideology which scholars frequently attribute to the twentieth century Egyptian and founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hasan al-Banna. This essay will therefore assess the extent to which al-Banna's thought signifies the political ideologisation of Islam in the twentieth century. To do so, this essay will firstly combine a contextual appreciation with an explanation of al-Banna's call for the establishment of an Islamic State, rooted in his understanding of Islam as a perfect, all-embracing political solution. This essay will then proceed to explore al-Banna's political ideologisation of Islam, focusing on his calling for 'Islamic governance', his *Fifty-Point Manifesto*, his portrayal of Islam as an alternative to competing ideologies and his founding of the Muslim Brotherhood. Next, this essay will consider other twentieth century thinkers who have also contributed to Islam's political ideologisation, notably Sayyid Abu'l-A'la al-Mawdudi and Sayyid Qutb. Finally, this essay will conclude by outlining the notion that al-Banna's thought does indeed signify the political ideologisation of Islam, but must nevertheless be appreciated within a broader 'neo-revivalist' tendency to politically ideologise Islam.

Characterised by a conservative, Sufi influenced upbringing (Jones, 1960: 1018) and the backdrop of colonial encroachment, al-Banna's formative years coincided with an intense debate over Egypt's identity at the turn of the twentieth century (al-Anani, 2013: 44). Western hegemony, experienced by al-Banna first-hand in Isma'iliyya, continued implicitly despite Egypt's formal independence in 1922. This interference notably included a form of cultural domination manifest in the Egyptian nationalist elite's tendency to adopt secular, Western ideas at the expense of customary beliefs and practices associated with Islam (Commins, 1994: 127). The subsequent deviation towards a 'colonised, submissive and servile Islam that accepts its confinement to the private sphere' (Soage, 2008: 27), exemplified by Kemalist Turkey's abolition of the Caliphate in 1924, instilled in al-Banna a firm belief that Islam, and by extension Muslim identity, was still threatened by the 'devil of colonialism' (al-Banna, 1999a: 103). This formed the latter part of his view of Muslim history as a continuous decline from the 'true Islam' exemplified by the Prophet, his Companions and the Rightly Guided Caliphs. Deviation from such 'true Islam' had led to Muslim degeneration and vulnerability to the immorality of Westernisation, according to al-Banna. The solution to Muslim decline and Western intrusion, he therefore proclaimed, lay in reviving 'true Islam'. This required the *ummah*'s purification of its existing beliefs and practices, which, al-Banna stressed, must be facilitated through the gradual establishment of a creed-correcting, reform-inducing Islamic state that fully implements the *Shari'ah*. Significantly, al-Banna's proposed political solution 'marked a watershed in modern Muslim discourse by making the successful transition of Islam into a [political] ideology' (Lia, 1998: 72), as the first unambiguous call in the modern Muslim-majority world for the creation of an Islamic state (Turner, 2011: 220). According to Hamza Yusuf (2011: 1), this illustrates a shift away from the widely held belief amongst Muslims that 'Islam is *wahy*, a revelation from God', 'not a political ideology, and hence does not offer a political solution per se'.

Al-Banna's political ideologisation of Islam is rooted in his conviction that Islam is a 'perfect, "all-embracing system" that "covers all aspects of this world and the next one' (al-Banna, 1999b: 59; 1999a: 87; 1999c: 173). For al-Banna, religion itself formed part of, and was regulated by, the 'all-pervading system' of Islam which 'should control all

Hasan al-Banna and the Political Ideologisation of Islam in the 20th Century
Written by Camille Mulcaire

matters in life' (al-Banna, 1999d: 2; 1999c: 175). Far from being restricted to mere personal piety, 'Islam is an ideology and worship, country and nation, religion as well as government, action as well as spirituality and Holy Qur'an as well as sword' (al-Banna, 1999c: 173). Islam must therefore be embodied in actual social and political applications as the ideological foundation of society, based on its unique ability to provide solutions to *all* human issues. This key assertion stemmed principally from al-Banna's interpretation of God's divine *rububiyya* (dominicality) and *hakimiyya* (sovereignty) over 'all the nooks and corners in life' (al-Banna, 1999b: 78). Tellingly, al-Banna's calling for the *hakimiyya* of God in each and every section of society was even reflected in his novel campaign of coffeehouse preaching, through which 'a place of pleasure such as a coffee shop is transformed into a platform for the Islamic call' (Mura, 2012: 70). Al-Banna's understanding of God's universal *rububiyya* also crucially led him to interpret the Qur'an as the source for political philosophy and politics (Moussalli, 1993: 168). This interpretation therefore rendered Islam a political ideology which, combined with God's overarching *hakimiyya*, necessitated the *Shari'ah*'s regulation of every facet of state and society, be it political, social, economic, cultural, public or personal.

Since Islam was, for al-Banna, a political ideology that allowed for no distinction between religion and politics (Krämer, 2010: 51), he naturally held that the Qur'an provided scriptural authority for the legitimacy of 'Islamic governance' (Moussalli, 1993: 166). Specifically, a system of state governance based on constitutional rule and *shura* (consultation) was 'closest to Islam' in al-Banna's opinion (1999c: 199). The legitimacy of political authority was contingent on a ruler's commitment to the *Shari'ah*, defence of the *ummah* (Muslim community) against political and psychological domination and upholding of the 'Islamic call' (Moussalli, 1993: 167-170). Al-Banna also eschewed ideologically based multiparty politics under Muslim government because, in his view, it undermined the fundamental value of Islamic unity (Commins, 1994: 136). It must be noted, however, that al-Banna pragmatically perceived the state and its governance to be a necessary, but temporary, reform-inducing alternative, paving the way towards his ultimate ideological end goal: the restoration of the Caliphate.

Al-Banna's *Fifty-Point Manifesto*, as a blueprint for his socio-political solution, offers additional evidence for his tendency to politically ideologise Islam as a functional tool for social engineering. Sent to King Farouk, al-Banna's manifesto presents a detailed programme for societal reform through a top-down Islamicisation of Egypt grounded in 'true Islam'. The comprehensive programme for his envisioned Islamic state incorporates political, educational and even economic reform, including banking reform and the proper distribution of *zakat* to rectify socio-economic inequality. Moreover, his manifesto blurs the distinction between the public and private spheres by advocating the surveillance of government employees and café clients. This is coupled with a socio-cultural policy of imposing 'Islamic morality' through censoring songs, films and books, and banning gambling, drinking and ostentatious dress (al-Banna, 2009: 74-77). Al-Banna's manifesto also notably calls for his country's homes to be 'Egyptianized' in order to expel 'the foreign spirit' from Egypt's homes (al-Banna, 2009: 77), which seemingly contradicts his overarching theory of Islam, not Egyptian nationalism, as the comprehensive ideological 'cure' for Egypt's socio-political 'diseases' (al-Banna, 1999b: 61). However, this does not reduce the extent to which al-Banna's discourse signifies the political ideologisation of Islam. Rather, his statement reflects a pragmatic attempt to strategically address an audience particularly sensitive to the national claim (Mura, 2012: 74). In fact, al-Banna exhibits the absence of any tension between Islam and Egyptian nationalism within his discourse in stating that 'to separate Egypt from Islam is impossible' (al-Banna, 1999b: 74), which further highlights his all-embracing, ideological interpretation of Islam.

Further indication of al-Banna's political ideologisation of Islam lies in his emphasis on the absolute self-sufficiency of Islam vis-à-vis other competing political ideologies. In al-Banna's (1999c: 175-177) view, the 'Islamic alternative' overrode socialism, capitalism, nationalism and universalism, because Islam 'suits all the nations and all times' and 'never avoids borrowing from any good system, provided it does not clash with its general principles' (al-Banna, 1999c: 176-177). Consequently, the solution to Egypt's socio-economic injustices, political factionalism and cultural subordination lay in the comprehensiveness of the Qur'an (Jones, 1960: 1018), not in 'un-Islamic' ideologies such as capitalism and Marxism.

In founding the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928, al-Banna also significantly ensured an enduring political ideologisation of Islam. In order to realise his ideal Islamic socio-political order through a morally regenerative struggle against foreign domination, al-Banna founded the Muslim Brotherhood as a movement that would 'reformulate societal norms, values and practices to be more Islamic' (al-Anani, 2013: 46). Crucially, al-Banna injected his interpretation of

Hasan al-Banna and the Political Ideologisation of Islam in the 20th Century
Written by Camille Mulcaire

Islam as a political ideology that demands all-encompassing social and political activism into the movement he founded. This is clearly reflected in his multi-faceted definition of the Muslim Brotherhood as 'a Salafi invitation,…a Sunni way of thought,…a Sufi truth,…a political organisation,…an athletic team,…an institution of culture and knowledge,…a commercial firm…[and] a social system' (al-Banna, 1999c: 177-178). Hence, in sowing the seeds of arguably the 'most influential revivalist Islamic movement of the twentieth century' (al-Abdin, 1989: 219), al-Banna fundamentally entrenched his interpretation of Islam as a total way of life. This ideological legacy endures today through the Brotherhood's on-going aim of implementing the *Shari'ah* as the backbone of state and society (Muslim Brotherhood, 2012).

Nevertheless, as Husain (1997: 94) observes, the political 'ideologisation of Islam is neither monolithic nor homogenous, but polycentric, pluralistic, heterogeneous and multifaceted'. As such, it would be erroneous to characterise al-Banna as signifying the only source of Islam's political ideologisation by considering his thought in isolation from other so called 'Islamist' thinkers, who have also interpreted Islam as a political ideology. For example, Hartung (2013: 83) claims that it was the twentieth century Indo-Muslim intellectual and founder of the prominent *Jama'at-i Islami*, Sayyid Abu'l-A'la al-Mawdudi, who signified the earliest, systematic attempt to recoin Islam into a political ideology as 'a consistent and self-referential system of life'. This stemmed from al-Mawdudi's interpretation of Islam as a 'holistic' and 'comprehensive system that corresponds to the divine order of the universe' (Hartung, 2013: 22, 196). Similarly, Sayyid Qutb, a later leading Muslim Brother who drew inspiration from and radicalised al-Banna's ideas, also saw Islam as a total political ideology (Black, 2001: 322) and consequently embraced an Islamic socio-political order as the ultimate solution to the various challenges that the Muslim-majority world faced (Armajani, 2012: 55). It is therefore essential to understand al-Banna's thought as constituting one contribution to the above illustrated trend of twentieth century 'neo-revivalism', unified by a common espousal of "the total self-sufficiency of Islam" (Esposito, 2011: 175) and the advocacy of societal transformation based on an earlier 'purer' form of Islam, in order to counter Western domination.

It is equally vital to appreciate certain links between al-Banna's political ideologisation of Islam and that of other contemporary and later neo-revivalist thinkers. Euben and Zaman (2009: 49) illustrate this point lucidly, arguing that 'many of the positions and arguments associated with Qutb, Mawdudi and Khomeini are a systematic articulation of a worldview already evident in the model of…socio-moral reform Banna left behind'. In light of this valid observation, al-Banna's conception of Islam as a system of ideas for totally remodelling society can not only be portrayed as signifying Islam's political ideologisation, but can also be depicted, in some senses, as embodying the neo-revivalist tendency to politically ideologise Islam.

In conclusion, the thought of al-Banna does, to a great extent, signify the political ideologisation of Islam in the twentieth century. By interpreting Islam as a comprehensive system of ideas and ultimate solution that must be functionally employed to order every facet of state, society, and human existence more broadly, al-Banna's novel discourse clearly embodies an understanding of Islam as an all-embracing political ideology. This manifests itself particularly through al-Banna's assertions that Islam was the necessary foundation for state governance, a functional tool for social engineering and an alternative to competing political ideologies. Crucially, al-Banna's founding of the Muslim Brotherhood also ensured an enduring embodiment of his vision of Islam as an 'all-embracing system' (al-Banna, 1999a: 87) that regulates individual life and public affairs. However, it remains important to appreciate al-Banna's influential contribution within the wider neo-revivalist propensity to politically ideologise Islam in order to remedy perceived Muslim vulnerability to Western hegemony.

References

al-Abdin, A.Z. (1989) 'The Political Thought of Hasan al-Banna' in *Islamic Studies*, Vol. 28: 3

al-Anani, K. (2013) 'The Power of the Jama'a: The Role of Hasan Al-Banna in Constructing the Muslim Brotherhood's Collective Identity' in *Sociology of Islam*, Vol. 1: 1-2

Armajani, J. (2012) *Modern Islamist Movements: History, Religion and Politics* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell)

Hasan al-Banna and the Political Ideologisation of Islam in the 20th Century
Written by Camille Mulcaire

al-Banna, H. (1999a) 'Our Movement' in *Selected Writings of Hasan al-Banna Shaheed*, trans. Qureshi, S.A. (New Delhi: Wajih Uddin)

al-Banna, H. (1999b) 'Our Invitation' in *Selected Writings of Hasan al-Banna Shaheed*, trans. Qureshi, S.A. (New Delhi: Wajih Uddin)

al-Banna, H. (1999c) 'Fifth Conference' in *Selected Writings of Hasan al-Banna Shaheed*, trans. Qureshi, S.A. (New Delhi: Wajih Uddin)

al-Banna, H. (1999d) 'Basic Teachings' in *Selected Writings of Hasan al-Banna Shaheed*, trans. Qureshi, S.A. (New Delhi: Wajih Uddin)

al-Banna, H. (2009) 'Some Steps Toward Practical Reform' in Euben, R.L. and Zaman, M.Q. (eds.) *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought: Text and Contexts from al-Banna to Bin Laden* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press)

Black, A. (2001) *The History of Islamic Political Thought: From the Prophet to the Present* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press)

Commins, D. (1994) 'Hassan al-Banna (1906-1949)' in Rahnema, A. (ed.) *Pioneers of Islamic Revival* (London: Zed Books)

Erikson, R.S. and Tedin, K.L. (2003) *American Public Opinion*, 6th ed. (New York: Longman)

Esposito, J.L. (2011) *Islam the Straight Path* (New York: Oxford University Press)

Euben, R.L. and Zaman, M.Q. (2009) 'Hasan al-Banna' in Euben, R.L. and Zaman, M.Q. (eds.) *Princeton Readings in Islamist Thought: Texts and Contexts from Al-Banna to Bin Laden* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press)

Hartung, J-P. (2013) *A System of Life: Mawdudi and the Ideologisation of Islam* (London: C. Hurst and Co.)

Husain, M.Z. (1997) 'The Ideologisation of Islam: meaning, manifestations and causes' in Jerichow, A. and Simonsen, J.B. (eds.) *Islam in a Changing World: Europe and the Middle East* (Richmond: Curzon Press)

Jones, J.M.B. (1960) 'Hasan Al-Banna' in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, Vol. 1, 2nd ed. (Leiden: E.J. Brill)

Krämer, G. (2010) *Hasan al-Banna* (London: Oneworld)

Lia, B. (1998) *The Society of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt* (Reading: Garnet Publishing)

Moussalli, A.S. (1993) 'Hasan al-Banna's Islamist Discourse on Constitutional Rule and Islamic State' in *Journal of Islamic Studies*, Vol. 4: 2

Mura, A. (2012) 'A genealogical enquiry into early Islamism: the discourse of Hasan al-Banna' in *Journal of Political Ideologies*, Vol. 17: 1

Muslim Brotherhood (2012) 'Muslim Brotherhood Statement on Islamic Law and National Identity', *Ikhwanweb*, available at http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=30353, accessed 21/02/14

Safire, W. (2008) *Safire's Political Dictionary* (New York: Oxford University Press)

Soage, A.B. (2008) 'Hasan al-Banna or the Politicisation of Islam' in *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, Vol. 9: 1

Hasan al-Banna and the Political Ideologisation of Islam in the 20th Century
Written by Camille Mulcaire

Turner, C. (2011) *Islam: The Basics*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon: Routledge)

Yusuf, H. (2011) 'The Sin Tax of Ignoring Syntax', *Allahcentric*, available at http://allahcentric.wordpress.com/2011/04/01/shaykh-hamza-yusuf-islam-is-not-an-ideology-sandala-productions/, accessed 21/01/14

Written by: Camille Mulcaire
Written at: Durham University
Written for: Dr Colin Turner
Date written: February 2014