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A SPECTER OF ISLAMISM HAUNTING EUROPE: THE SOCIETY OF MUSLIM BROTHERS AND EUROPEAN GOVERNMENTS' SECURITY POLICIES

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As a genuinely “glocal” socio-political actor, the Society of Muslim Brothers (*jamāʿat al-ikhwān al-muslimīn*, henceforth – SMB) has been a staple in public debates on the perils of international Islamism in the past several decades. The perennial controversy surrounding this movement is completely understandable, though. On the one hand, although it emerged in 1928 as a local Egyptian social organization oriented towards charity and education, it got swiftly politicized by its confrontation with the authorities and eventually gave rise to a range of splinter groups with explicitly terrorist methodologies. On the other hand, since its arrival in Western Europe, leaders of the “new” SMB have gone out of their way to position the group as a bulwark of religious moderation and a champion for social adaptation of migrant Muslims in various secular European milieus.

In light of this ambiguity, it is not surprising that the current status of the SMB in Europe is rather paradoxical. Even a brief survey of the institutionalization of European Islam demonstrates that every major European country has a significant body which is viewed as in one way or another associated with the *ikhwān* ideology or their global network. This state of affairs has repeatedly raised security concerns from experts, political actors and the media. However, European governments have been notoriously reluctant to engage with this matter in a coordinated and decisive manner for fear of drawing criticism for violating religious freedom or spurring the radicalization of ordinary Muslims instead of completely expunging the root causes of political Islam’s popularity. Hence, European chapters of the SMB often continue to operate freely – albeit in the background – as a paragon of “legal Islamism”, actively drawing funding from foreign donors with vested interests.

One example of the aforementioned paradoxes and ambiguities of the SMB's status can be found in Scandinavia. In 2014 the Finnish Muslim organization "The Islamic Community of Finland" (Suomen Islamilainen Yhdyskunta, SIY) was included in the UAE's list of terrorist organizations. The primary reason for this step was the alleged connection of the SIY to the SMB, which was designated by the UAE as a terrorist entity in the first place. However, responding to these developments, the Finnish government merely expressed its surprise at this decision concerning the SIY, without acknowledging the bottom line reasons for the move. This incident is noteworthy because at the time the SIY was the key participant of the "Suomen Islamilainen Neuvosto", the state-endorsed umbrella structure for the Muslims of Finland.

Another notable case is Austria where in November 2020 the government authorized a massive police operation (under the code name "Luxor") aiming to expose and prosecute criminal activities of dozens of alleged SMB affiliates (such as *Islamische Liga Kultur*). The authorities argued that the suspects planned to create a network of Islamist enclaves with the view to financing terrorism or anti-state movements abroad. However, in the following years none of the individuals detained and searched during the operation was formally arrested or convicted, prompting a wave of acute criticism towards the law enforcement agencies from civil society actors and the media. Despite this, some security experts lauded the operation as a success on the path to suppressing of the trend of political Islam represented by the SMB.

Be that as it may, it is evident that the case of the elusive – and yet seemingly omnipresent – SMB demonstrates that developing specific policies regarding amorphous Islamist movements with complex links to violence presents a certain conundrum for many European governments. For some, this Islamist group constitutes a "safety valve" which allows converting the discontent and maladjustment of some marginalized European Muslims into moderate religio-political activism. Yet for others, the SMB is a "Trojan horse" or a "conveyor belt" entity disseminating detrimental ideological programs that create a deep pool of potential candidates for recruitment by jihadist groups. Hence, there is a need for a concerted effort of European state actors for shaping a single, fact-based policy framework for dealing with the SMB, rather than engaging in periodic security campaigns which merely perpetuate the ambiguous status of this Islamist movement in different societies.