EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: A dispute over the role of religion in government constitutes the main rift in the world of Sunni Islam. This controversy also defines the two main camps in that world with regard to Western countries in general and Israel in particular.

The Muslim Brotherhood was established in Egypt in 1928 to engage in three pursuits: to fight the British occupation of Egypt, to struggle against the influence of Western culture on Islamic societies (especially regarding the status of women), and to work for the implementation of sharia law in Islamic countries.

Hassan Banna, the founder of the movement, spread his ideas in the Islamic countries through conferences he arranged at which the Mufti of Jerusalem, Hajj Amin Husseini, was a regular speaker. Wherever the organization’s ideas were adopted, its members began to fight the foreign occupiers. Later, its propagandists began to refer to Muslim leaders themselves as members of a “foreign occupation” if they did not keep the commandments of Islam or apply sharia law. Muslim Brotherhood doctrine says it is permissible, even obligatory, to wage jihad against such leaders even if they are Muslims by birth. Believers are urged to rebel against governments and their officials if they do not uphold the precepts of Islam.

In 1932, four years after the Muslim Brotherhood’s founding, the Saudi kingdom was established in the Arabian Peninsula by its first monarch, Abdul Aziz ibn Saud. From the outset, this kingdom was based on an alliance between the royal family and several families of religious scholars who maintained on Islamic grounds that because rulers rule by God’s grace, it is forbidden for citizens to oppose them. As the Saudi religious scholars claim they are continuing the path of al-salaf al-salih (“the righteous founding fathers of Islam”), their religious outlook is known as salafiyah.
The religious scholars’ support for the government sometimes goes to astounding extremes. For example, a Saudi book entitled *The Relationship between the Ruler and the Subject* states that if a ruler causes a citizen to suffer, that suffering stems from the citizen’s sins against God, and it is up to the citizen to repent and free himself from the suffering the ruler has imposed. In other words, the ruler is the long arm of Allah, and Allah’s view of the citizen is manifested in the ruler’s treatment of that citizen. This notion reflects the strong alliance in the Saudi kingdom between the government and the religious scholars who have put religion in service to the government.

Whereas the Muslim Brotherhood’s Islamic thinking is revolutionary, Saudi religious thinking serves and entrenches the existing political order. Because there is no way to bridge between these mindsets, they are always in sharp tension.

The following facts reflect the struggle between the two sides in recent years:

- In mid-2012, Muhammad Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood was elected president of Egypt. A year later he was deposed by his defense minister Abdel Fattah Sisi, who later was elected president and remains in that post today. The Sisi government outlawed the Muslim Brotherhood and launched an all-out struggle against its activists. When Sisi ousted Morsi in 2013, Riyadh backed him and funneled billions of dollars into his depleted coffers as compensation for the cutoff of American aid by President Barack Obama, whose administration supported the Brotherhood.

- The Qatari leadership supports Brotherhood-linked organizations like Hamas, both financially and through propaganda (especially through Aljazeera). This is the main reason why Saudi Arabia, and the UAE and Bahrain in its wake, severed ties with Qatar. The rift has continued for three years.

- Saudi Arabia’s ties with Israel, which have existed for a considerable time, are based (among other things) on its support for Israel’s struggle against Hamas and Islamic Jihad, both of which were spawned by the Muslim Brotherhood.

- Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan espouses the Muslim Brotherhood’s revolutionary approach and therefore supports Hamas in Gaza, the Brotherhood in Egypt, and the Islamist government in Libya. Erdoğan caused great damage to Riyadh’s image by revealing what happened to Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in October 2018.

On November 10, the Saudi Council of Senior Scholars issued a religious ruling (fatwa) that stated:
Whatever undermines support for the Muslim leaders, such as spreading doubts and [evil] thoughts or establishing organized groups that express loyalty [to entities other than the ruler] or similar things, is banned according to the Qur’an and the tradition. At the head of these groups, of which we warn, is the Muslim Brotherhood—a deviant organization that is based on struggle and war against the leaders, sowing conflict in countries, disrupting social harmony in them, and portraying the Islamic societies as heretical. Since this organization’s founding it has not been interested in the Islamic faith or in study of the Qur’an and the tradition; it is concerned only with seizing power. Hence the history of this organization is full of evil and strife, and it has spawned radical terror groups that have spread corruption in countries and populations including well-known crimes of violence and terror around the world. All this makes it clear that the Muslim Brotherhood is a terror organization that does not represent Islam but pursues its own partisan ends that clash with our graceful religion. It hides behind the religion and works against it through factionalism, incitement, violence, and terror. All must be warned not to join this organization’s ranks and not to identify with it.

This document clearly articulates the depth of enmity and hatred between the Saudi government and the Muslim Brotherhood organizations and their supporters, particularly Turkey and Qatar, despite the fact that both sides are Sunni Muslims. That hatred explains why Brotherhood groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad turn to Shiite Iran to aid them in their struggle against Riyadh and its allies. Tehran is well aware of the rift in Sunni Islam and is glad to help these groups, thereby strengthening the coalition against their common nemesis, Saudi Arabia. That is why Iran gives refuge to leaders of al-Qaeda, which also had its origins in the Muslim Brotherhood.

This is an edited version of an article published in Makor Rishon on December 1, 2020.

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