

The Muslim Brotherhood: Past, Present and Future (Conservatism, Extremism, or Violence?)

Minaret of Freedom Institute Tenth Annual Dinner
With **Esam Omeish, MD**, President of the Muslim American Society

May 31, 2008
[Edited transcript]

Imam Johari Abdul-Maleek:

The argument that is so fundamental to the work of the Minaret of Freedom Institute is the argument that there should be a party of people—some of them who might be Muslim, but among them there would be some who are Christian, and among them those who are Jews—from among them, people who would present the clear evidence. And so I would like to share with you this *sura* from the Qur'an, *Surat al-Bayyina*:

[recites in Arabic:]

Those who reject (Truth) among the People of the Book and among the Polytheists were not going to depart (from their ways) until there should come to them Clear Evidence,

An apostle from God rehearsing scriptures kept pure and holy:
Wherein are laws (or decrees) right and straight.

Nor did the people of the Book make schisms until after there came to them Clear Evidence.

And they have been commanded no more than this: to worship God offering Him sincere devotion being True (in faith); to establish regular Prayer; and to practice regular Charity; and that is the Religion Right and Straight.

Those who reject (Truth) among the People of the Book and among the Polytheists will be in hell-fire to dwell therein (for aye). They are the worst of creatures.

Those who have faith and do righteous deeds they are the best of creatures.

Their reward is with God: Gardens of Eternity Beneath which rivers flow;
They will dwell therein for ever; God well pleased with them and they with Him: all this for such as fear their Lord and Cherisher.

(Sadâq Allah al-'athîm)

Alhamdulillah

Imam Johari:

Allah is reminding us in this *sura* that when the clear evidence comes forward, this is the time that you will find that individuals who used to like you, who used to say that you were okay, will begin to have a difference of opinion with you. The prophetic examples will lay the groundwork between who is who. Some will have the reward of paradise. They are the best people who endured in this life the difficulties and hardships.

Among the people Allah described, from among the People of the Book, there will be some that will be a part of that work. And there will be others, who are rejecting. They are the worst creatures, perhaps even lower than the animals. To say even maybe that to be lower than animals is in insult to the animal kingdom. What people are capable of doing if they are not guided by this evidence!

For many of you who have been involved in a lifetime of sacrifice, of hard work, of standing up, of speaking the truth in front of those who don't like it, know that your reward *jazâ-uhum 'inda rabbihim jannât*, that your reward is not a reward in this life. But this book, the Qur'an is promising that that reward is in the next life, where you will live, not in the difficulties, but in the ease of paradise, that Allah will be pleased with you and you will be pleased with him, and that you will live there forever, and that you will see in this reality the face of your Lord.

So this is my prayer and opening this meeting today, that this clear evidence that is being presented by the Minaret of Freedom will continue to ring *walhamdulillah*, no matter how much those do not like it.

Dr. Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad:

I'm going to defend the title of our subject because it has raised some controversy: "The Muslim Brotherhood: the Past Present and Future (Conservatism, Extremism, or Violence)." Some have raised the question: Are we claiming that the only alternatives are conservatism, extremism, and violence? Well obviously not. As anyone knows anything about the Minaret of Freedom Institute, we are a libertarian organization; and therefore, we are neither conservative, nor extreme, nor—well, some people would say that's extreme, but not extreme in that sense! Nor are we violent by any means.

The point is that when you look at the Muslim Brotherhood's past, you see it as a social reform movement, somewhat conservative. You see how some of the members of it became extremists, and you see how it has been—rightly or wrongly—associated with violence. And the question is what is going to happen in the future? Will it return to its roots of conservative social reform? Or will it be taken over by extremism? Or will it become violent? And we want to answer that question, certainly not to advocate these things, but to understand what its history is—as I said in our promotional literature for tonight's event—to separate history from hysteria.

In that sense we are very, very honored and pleased and delighted to have as our speaker Dr. Esam Omeish. Dr. Omeish is a much respected and beloved figure in the local community. He is the Chief of General Surgery at the Alexandria Hospital and he

was in fact the surgeon on call on the night of the attacks of September 11th, and therefore was a first responder.

He is a graduate of Georgetown University where as an undergraduate he had a double major in both Biology and International Relations and Political Science. He got his M.D. from Georgetown University in 1993. He was formerly President of the Muslims Students' Association, national. And he is now the current President of the Muslim-American Society, and has been that since 2004. He also was a former member of ISNA's *Majlis Ash-shura*, which for the people again who don't speak Arabic and not familiar with Muslim institutions of the United States, it is like the parliamentary body of the biggest Muslim confederation of Muslim organizations in North America, the United States and Canada. He is also heavily involved with a very important charitable effort in the area, the Community Medical Clinic, which provides free health care for uninsured persons.

His knowledgability on the question we are going to look at tonight comes from the fact that the Muslim-American Society, of which he is the President, has been influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood. It was indeed was established by prominent former members of the Muslim Brotherhood. I don't know how many of you knew that. I did not know the last fact until told by Dr. Omeish. So he has a very profound insight into not only the history of the Muslim Brotherhood, but how it has influenced other organizations. Please join me in welcoming our speaker, Dr. Esam Omeish.

Dr. Esam Omeish:

The topic is indeed a vast one, but it's one of significant importance. And I think for us as Muslim-Americans and as Americans who are concerned about the future well-being of our country, and the strength and health of our foreign policy, I think it behooves us to pay attention and understand a movement of such preeminence in the Muslim world. The impact on our foreign policy cannot be overstated, but there is also an interesting extra component nowadays which is that a growing, vibrant Muslim community here in America has in fact had a lot of interaction and impact, if not necessarily by the organization, certainly by its ideas and certainly by its programs. These ideas and programs have been instrumental in several segments or in some segments of the community in forging our identity as Muslim-Americans and in forging that which is necessary for us to be the exemplary citizens and patriots that we aspire to see every Muslim-American to be. So I think it is very important again for us to gain that insight that will help us move forward as such.

It is also important for the observers of the interaction that has taken place over the years of how we define first, at some point, the Muslim world, and then the Islamist or the activist; and then the movers and shakers of Middle East; and on and on and on. There is this growing interest and essential need to learn more about it, and I think that over the past few years there has been a highly focused interest in the Muslim Brotherhood, their role and impact in the Muslim world, and also their role and impact on the different movements and the different organizations that are interacting with the

West, be it the different groups that are influenced heavily by the Muslim Brotherhood, the Arab world or the Muslim world, or be it organizations that are engaged with the government at different levels.

So, I think it is important for us to gain an appreciation and develop a sensitized or an educated way of reading or sifting through the large volume of articles, analyses, studies that are coming—and they will be coming more and more. Recently you see the think tanks and research centers at the major universities are paying attention to this. Even our national security organizations and the different governmental agencies are paying attention to these studies, whether it is of the Muslim community in general, or whether it is of the influences that are impacting the Muslim community and the Muslims of the world. And certainly central to that, and very much in the center of it, is the role of the Muslim Brotherhood.

I highlight a couple of studies that were seen in the *Foreign Affairs* Journal that talks about the Muslim Brotherhood. The Hudson Institute had a series of reports and books, most recently in March of '08, detailed studies of the ideology of the programs, of the different components, and the different manifestations, if I may, of the Brotherhood in different countries of the world. Of course, when you do that you always look into the studies of its past, certainly the present, and that will help us read into the future. But what is very important is for us to develop the depth of analysis to be able to sift through the hysteria and be able to identify fact from otherwise, because the implications of what we make in terms of assessment, and the implications of what we learn from these somewhat recent encounters, and knowledge that is being developed are of great proportions and of significant impact on the very lives of every American. So we, especially the Muslim Americans and our friends, who are very much engaged in the study of Islam and the study of the Muslim community, must take an interest in this. I want to highlight that because to me, that can be as patriotic an activity as a Muslim-American can do in order to forge a much more solid and a much stronger partnership and understanding, forged on real understanding, forged on a very deep appreciation of who is who and how we can move forward.

We ask the question “What is the Muslim Brotherhood?” in order for us to understand its past and gain a deep appreciation for what it is. Is it a social reform organization, is it a political organization, or as some people may claim, is it a terrorism export business? For us to understand the history and understand the very ideas upon which it was based will help yield effective and strong answers to these questions.

A good exercise to gain deeper understanding is to look at the lives or the works of people who were very influential in the establishment and the propagation of the Muslim Brotherhood's ideas, certainly at Imam Hassan al-Banna, the founder and the first supreme guide of the Muslim Brotherhood. The study of his works, the study of his ideas is extremely important in understanding the basics or how the Muslim Brotherhood is projected. He was actually a byproduct of a revivalist period of time that was building up in the Muslim community.

The Muslim world at that point had been in decline for hundreds of years. Even the tools that ensured the vitality of Islamic thought and Islamic discourse had been minimized or had been paralyzed, and so the Muslim world was unable to keep up with the times. So, there were waves of revivalists who came and tried to bring in ideas that would bring back the vitality of the Islamic thought and civilization that truly had been a minaret of knowledge for the rest of the world for hundreds of years. With “cohesive membership with a coherent message,” Imam al-Banna was able to do it very quickly. Very simple! He wasn’t creating in a very elaborate, very sophisticated thought process; but he was going back to the very roots of Islam.

The period from 1928, from the establishment of the Brotherhood, until 1949, the death of Imam al-Banna, was the period that experienced explosive growth, engaged all segments of society, articulated a relevant discourse of the people of the society he lived in, and articulated a very meaningful solution. It was truly a reform movement in the full sense of the word. It grew into hundreds of thousands in membership. It was in every locale across Egypt. According to some historical accounts, it was the backbone of the ability of the Free Officers to take on the revolution and truly affect a real change in Egypt soon thereafter.

The reason I mention this is because as you reflect on the Muslim Brotherhood, if you go back to the original writings of Imam al-Banna, and if you go back even to his reflections upon the organization that preceded the United Nations, the League of Nations, it is amazing how you can see there was a universal perspective, always. There was always a humanist perspective. There was always a perspective that we are part of one humanity, that this engagement of the other, and this tolerance and this diversity and this pluralism—the things that we are now saying the *Ikhwân* are only beginning to understand and beginning to go back to, in fact were the very fundamentals of what he believed in.

The last phase of the Muslim Brotherhood’s development, is the post-90’s into the present. That period of time has allowed enough normalcy and enough breadth of experience, whether it is the Jihadi experience in Afghanistan, or whether it is the parliamentary experience in the early 80’s in Egypt, or whether it is the Jordanian experience which has always been a reasonably stable experience, We begin to see the shaping really of the *Ikhwân* as we see it today, and, hopefully, as we move into the future. They have come to understand that the future is about genuine societal engagement, the societal reform which was very fundamental to their own definition of what they are as a movement. Now, they’re looking for effective solutions to major problems, economic and social. Now, instead of just saying *Islâm huwa al-Hâl* (Islam is the solution), now they’re coming up with political platforms; they’re coming with programs. Now, they are looking for effective and meaningful political participation—despite the fact that the political dictatorships are rampant in the Arab world. They are also looking into the engagement of the West. Again, as a challenge to a partnership in civilization build-up, the issue of terrorism and extremism comes up, and our share in how we combat these trends that are detrimental to the future of the relationship between

the Muslim countries, and of themselves, and their relationship with the West, they are things that are becoming and taking shape.

Now, we are seeing the Moroccan experience or the Turkish experience, where they have truly embraced the realities of their own countries, but they have not given up on their ability to articulate a relevant discourse that can impact their own societies, based on the values and understandings that they have. I find this degree of maturation a development worthy of our attention, worthy of our appreciation. If you put it into context, if you understand history well enough to see these trends, then clearly, the future is about meaningful engagement. It is about partnerships that we can move forward with. It is about a meaningful exchange of ideas and of principles that I think will put us as Muslim-Americans in the forefront of leading this dialogue and leading this discourse of seeing a future where truly there is no place for “clash of civilizations.”

Truly there is a place for us as Muslims to help develop our own ideas of how we engage pluralism and engage the diversity that our world is about and to discover well within our own heritage and our own understanding, that if we are to aspire to the glory of Islam, then the glory of Islam is about the civilization that Islam built, the Spain that was a minaret for the world, and that, in fact, it is well within our reach. It just requires from us effort to reach it. I think the Muslim Brotherhood is at the forefront of that experience. They have their shortcomings. They have a discourse that in fact may very well be anti-West because of its political context, and we as Muslim-Americans, should be at the forefront of advancing, possibly, that discourse in a way that will overcome the stigma and the difficulties that are a real challenge, and a difficulty that we encounter in the Muslim world.

In short, when I talk about the Muslim Brotherhood, the past, present, and future, I think it is very important for us to understand the past, to understand the original experience as espoused by Imam al-Banna, and to understand that it is truly a reflection of the depth and richness of that Islamic message that all of us can embrace as Muslim-Americans. When we understand it in the context of history, and the context of the fact that there are different facets to this very rich experience, then we can analyze and we can truly filter through the things that are us, and the things that really are not very relevant to our reality.

This is an experiment in progress for us in the Muslim-American society. We are very clear in our American identity. We are very clear in our ability to espouse Islam and its values, hand-in-hand with the values of our Constitution, and the values upon which our country here in America was based. But it is an experiment in the making, because as Muslims grow to appreciate and to understand their Americanism, they are pleasantly surprised and they are aware more and more that truly it is the very tenets of Islam that solidify and strengthen that experiment. I think that if I take that and apply it to the heritage of the Muslim Brotherhood that we share, or at least we have been impacted by, I see it along the same line.

So, for me, I would like to project that upon them, in their own context, and see how can we help the Muslim Brothers? How can we help these significant components of the Muslim society? They are present, and they are very meaningful to the whole Islamic awakening that is all over the Muslim world. How we can help mature that process, so that we can see that progress become part and parcel of the human endeavor to which we all aspire, *Insha-Allâh*? I'm very pleased and encouraged by what I see in Turkey, Morocco, other countries that I think have been able to articulate those lessons and inculcate them into their own programs so that they can create something meaningful and something impacting upon their society. If we help those trends, and if we help those ideas to mature, maybe even possibly by our own experience here as Muslim-Americans, I think we stand to create a very solid, very strong partnership that will very easily defeat the problem of extremism and terrorism as one of its early and good (*Insha-Allâh*) results. The fact is we are looking for a meaningful partnership that will fortify and that will ensure the health and the growth of the Western civilization hand-in-hand with the Muslim world's change in its own reality, a change in its own circumstance, to become a platform for civilizational growth. I am sure that we can see a very strong partnership that will go further, *Insha-Allâh*.

Insha-Allâh, we have a responsibility upon ourselves: we need to engage our policy-makers; we need to be very much engaged in the dialogue. The ambassadors will see to it that our country *Insha-Allâh* is a better country by having the better relations with the Muslim world and that the Muslims themselves in the Muslim *Umma*, in the Muslim countries, are leading the way towards taking care of the challenges that they have on their own, and in doing so we can *Insha-Allâh* see a brighter future for everybody.

Commentary.

Aly Abuzakouk.

First of all I would like to thank Dr. Esam Omeish for a very lively presentation. I enjoyed it as I always enjoy listening to his talks, but I have a few points I would like to share with him and with you all together. First of all the whole phenomenon of the Muslim Brotherhood is part of the reform movement in Muslims Societies. Shaikh Hassan al-Banna himself was a product of Muhammad Abda and a chain of movement that has been not only in Egypt but in the Arab speaking world, the so-called "political Islam." It is the reality of people who want Islam to play a role in their society. You cannot play a role in your society if you do not touch on politics, on economics, on all aspects of the society. The major genuine force in the movement of resistance to dictatorship in the Arab-speaking Muslim world in particular, and the Muslim World in general, is the Muslim Brotherhood, but there are other groups, either Sufi groups, politically oriented groups, sometimes, Salafi groups, but the whole notion that the only viable groups, or the most respected movement that resisted dictatorships and autocratic regimes is the Muslim oriented movement in the Arab world. They are calling, some of them, for democracy, and the question I would like Dr. Esam to talk about is the contention between the Muslim Brotherhood and the issue of democracy. The platform they recently brought in Egypt as a prelude to forming a political party has problems of

issues of democracy and equality of citizenship. The issue of democracy will be the litmus test of Islamic movements as to whether they will be willing to work with others, nationalists, secularists, as long as they all call for rule of law and for constitutional government.

If you listen to names like Hassan at-Turabi, who is one of the most intellectual thinkers from Sudan, or Rashid Ghannouchi, from Tunisia, both are associated with the Muslim Brotherhood even though they may espouse ideas beyond those adopted by the Brotherhood. If you talk about Issam al-Attar, originally from Syria, these are great Muslim minds and all of them have suffered from the autocrats of their societies. It is important to know that these are leaders—intellectuals, *par excellence*, but also social and political reformers in their societies.

It is interesting that Muhammad Akif, the guide (I prefer to say guide rather than “supreme guide”) of the Muslim Brotherhood, has made statements about bin Laden as a great mujahid and that is very contentious. To describe bin Laden a mujahid or sometimes call al-Qaeda mujahiddin needs to be revisited. I would like to hear your response to that.

The last point is that the platform of the Islamists working for social and political reform is the success of the Justice and Development Parties in Turkey and Morocco is that both have developed platforms of service not of ideology. The question will always be how can the Egyptian Brotherhood turn itself from an ideological movement into a movement of socio-political service. That is the question I put to you, Br. Esam.

Omeish.

Jazaakum Allah al-khair for these insights. These are very important questions that I wanted to address. The platform was a culmination of years of trying to engage in the political process in a meaningful way, moving from general slogans that Islam is the solution to specific political programs and ultimately to putting them down in a document that would serve as a potential platform for a political party that could contend for power and seek to implement its own programs. What they did was an experiment. Prior to formalizing it as “THE document,” they—not leaked it—but made an attempt to get feedback on it. Very interestingly, the most lively debate came from various leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood of various countries who looked at many tenets of that platform and raised many important questions about the role of women and of religious minorities in the rule of Muslim societies. They talked about constitutional representative democracy and how it can be manifested in a meaningful way. They talked about “the supremacy of the shariah” and what does that mean? If you followed the development of thought of the Muslim Brotherhood you know there were times when they talked about the *hakimiyyah Allah* that the rule of shariah is the rule of society and now we’re talking about a civic society with Islam being the primary source of authority as opposed to *dawlat-nadiniyyah*. I think that this volume of the livelihood, of the vigor of the ongoing debate within Islamic circles of these issues. There has to be a genuine tackling of these issues as we see more issues come upon us we engage those fundamental questions

reflecting our Islamic understanding. You raise very good points. I hope that the platform matures. Your questions are very much needed as the—not necessarily generational gap—but the experience of hizbul-wasat that took place in Egypt, we have yet to resolve that conflict. The movement started as a *da`wa* movement about taking Islam and applying it to our life. That's why Hasan al-Banna was able to move quickly, because it was a cohesive group with a coherent message, very easy. Now after all the challenges and tests of time, and the fact that you have to produce results and you have to cater to the masses, and you have to take care of their livelihood before you can deal with ideas; now we are put to the test as to how can you take these ideas as a comprehensive system and truly bring it in a meaningful relevant discourse that the average person would relate to and the average person would feel that it is solving his problems and addressing his concerns. And I think this experience is yet to come to fruition. I don't think we are seeing yet, I think when we see the example of the Turkish model, I think it's an advance in the right direction. It is something that will blossom even further. I think the Moroccan experience is trying a similar attempt, even though I think their success is not as much as the Turkish experience. But the fact of the matter is at the end of the day we need to be able to mature these ideas, same side along with our political, our societal reforms, that type of agenda. So I think it's healthy, I hope it continues and I think there is still more work to be done on it. Now this is something that hits home, especially with us as Muslim Americans, is the issue of, in one hand we relate to an experience of activism with the Muslim Brotherhood, in the other hand, how do we reflect and deal with them in current-day politics, in the world of post-9/11 and all this stuff. The fact of the matter is that Muslim Americans must identify and must realize that they need to define for themselves what their issues are and what their vantage point is on these matters. And no matter how much we cherish the Muslim Brotherhood and experience and no matter how much we have, some collective understanding, which applies basically to the general Islamic understanding. Not particularly to the Egyptian version of it, the Syrian version of it or otherwise. The fact is that when it comes to issues of the Bin Ladens and the issues of our stance on terrorism and things like this, I don't think we have any way to waiver, question or even think otherwise. And I would take it a step further. Because the issue of condemnation of terrorism I think across the board is something that we've gotten beyond and we're able to affirm without any... But the issue of the conflict of Islam and the west, the issue of the American project of imperialism and hegemony on the Middle East and how that goes very much in conflict with the aspirations of the Islamists who want to liberate... We as Muslim Americans must articulate a discourse that clearly does not acknowledge the correctness of that premise. I disagree. I do not agree with their characterization of this as being a hegemonic American project that is there to undo Islam. Clearly it may be represented by some segments of our foreign policy makers and it may come across like this in certain practices. And we can arguably... But we cannot accept it as the discourse by which we define ourselves or by which we accept and move beyond. So we must challenge. In fact I had the opportunity once to meet with Osama bin Laden[28:19??] and I was very much raising the issue of, if you are to see eye to eye with the west, so if you engage the west you must give up this notion of us versus them and you must really look beyond the issue. Again, we can look at certain conflicts that have deepened and have created the intensity of feelings in this issue. The issue of Palestine of course. But

we've got to be able to see beyond this. Bin Laden serves only as a very mild example of how we can very easily look beyond it. But I'm talking about even more than that. Their discourse, the way they articulate, the way they even see the world at times, from the Middle East I think is something that has to be challenged and something that needs to be placed on a platform that gives us our ability to articulate it from our own eyes. And again, the last comment is the platform of service. I agree with you completely. I think the challenge ahead of us is not the fact that we want to go back to Islam and we want to live by Islam. But in fact how we can translate it into a relevant discourse that will transform the society from within, that will acknowledge the very foundations of whatever the society may be. And it's interesting enough the part of the maturation thought I believe has been when we reflect upon a...

[29:32 end of Omeish-1]

[Omeish-2]

...our reality as Muslims here in America and identify this as home and said, you know, well how do we take this pure message of the divine guidance and apply it to our reality where we truly are part of a pluralism that's far bigger and greater than just us. And the fact is that there's a diversity and tolerance and there is a way for us to move beyond the insular limits of our own community. When you embrace that type of understanding you realize that in fact, and I'll conclude with this. [0:34??] Qur'an, the verse of ???. You know, there is no compulsion in religion. And I want to challenge an Imam brother, most of the Islamists, find me a better articulation, implementation, and development of a divine verse that I believe in as the word of God and as the divine guidance, being implemented within the context of human discourse and within an experiment of human living together in a society like ours. And I believe that the best implementation of the verse of the Qur'an is here in America. And I'm willing to take it upon it and let's look into it. Look in the concept of separation of state and religion and look at the concept of what does it mean for the state to stay away from religion. Not negate religion, not to fight religion. And let's put this into a test and relate that to our society as well. Societies who are dominated by Muslims by virtue of [1:30??]. But where religious minorities live. And why can't we articulate a discourse that will be very true to divine guidance, very true to the prophetic experience. Because I don't think we have done it justice by doing that. So by challenging ourselves to that level I think we can certainly move beyond and be able to insha Allah stand on our own.

Dr. Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad:

Now I'm going to remind you of the rules. You may make a comment. But if you ask a question or make a comment it's got to be short. I challenge you to try to get it under one minute. If it goes over a minute I'll cut you off at my discretion. And I guarantee I'll cut you off after three minutes no matter how brilliant or eloquent you are. I'm going to begin since his fellow Libyan had a chance to comment on his comments. But I think it's time to let the Moroccan have a question. Sister Fatima[2:16??].

Sister Fatima:

Thank you Dr. Esam. I have two quick questions. First, do you think, talking about the case of Asian???. In case the ??? doesn't feel to have achieved its goal, do you think it will turn violent and militant? That's my first question. The second question, when you study the Islamist movement, regardless, reformist, modernist, or extremist, they kind of tend to use Islam as a way to justify their actions. And at the same time coming from an Arab world, our government also our Islamic ideal is to justify their role. Do you think secularism will get answered?

Dr. Esam Omeish:

For one I think it's very important for us to highlight the fact that something needs to be done in order for them to be able to move beyond the stalemate that exists in Egypt today. And certainly not the violence. That's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about even if the way that they're actually articulating their own message and stuff. And I think we are seeing signs of that happening where they're identifying with issues that are very relevant. Social reform, economic development, human rights, this and that. Which has always been there, but now they're taking it to task and they're really engaging it. So to answer your question. If in fact they fail to break through the stalemate that exists, I think what they run the risk of is stagnation. And I think by definition and unfortunately, that, given the circumstances that exist in our countries, that can become a potential source of... Not necessarily again of violent action, but certainly it's a fertile ground for extremism that's bred by the severity of the conditions that are there. And I think they have yet to take the model into fruition. I think again, going back to the Turkish model. See, the Turkish model, you've got to realize, [4:52??] who is the forefather of this movement. He truly subscribes to a lot of the ideals and thoughts of the ???. I mean this is generally an Islamic awakening. But he tried repeatedly to engage and to get involved. But he was always doing it from more of a political platform. He was going through the parties, he was trying to go through the governments. And I think the second generation, the ??? and the Abdullah ??? were trying to institute the same reform that we're seeing manifesting itself in Egypt. Now Egypt has much depth and much history, so it's not maybe as easy for the second generation to take prominence. But the fact is that I think it's not about the generations and it's not about the individuals. It's about the need for the movement as a whole to move to the next level. And in Egypt it is about what Kefaya is doing on the street. They need to be doing ten times that since they have the organization and the infrastructure. And they're doing it, I think. Listen, there may be some hesitancy, there is some concern of not necessarily confronting the government all the way, but things of that sort. But the fact is they need to essentially align themselves completely with the interests of the average man in the street, to realize that the real problem is in the lack of freedoms, lack of democracy, lack of respect for human rights. That these are the fundamental issues that must transform themselves in order for them... So again, I'm not worried about them turning to violence, simply because I think they have the depth. But simply it's the stagnation that you worry about that will affect the whole Egyptian society. The other question, yeah. I think if I understand correctly sister is everybody is using Islam to... The Islamists are saying Islam is the solution. I think the answer to it is certainly secularism in the extreme sense,

the Turk type secularism or even the French secularism to a certain degree is not the answer, clearly. The answer really is an environment that would allow for the healthy development and interaction of ideas of programs, let the Islamists go through and get the power, let them prove themselves in their ability to further the programs of service. And in fact if they feel they will learn from their failures and they will go back to their... You know, we've witnessed recently, people are following what happened in Kuwait and what happened in Jordan. Very interesting developments if you look at the political arm of the Brotherhood in Kuwait, had significant setbacks in the parliamentary elections. And the ones who won are actually the more... I don't want to say extreme, but again, they're the more conservative possibly. Now interestingly in a society where to even have a woman in your platform is something that is considered... I mean the question is, that's more a testament of the state of the society, not necessarily of the movement itself. But the fact is that if you don't make yourself relevant to the very society you're in, you're bound to be sidelined. No matter how much history you can claim. So I think for the Islamists, they have this argument of trying to claim Islam as our banner to justify... I think we've got to get away with it. Because like you said, you know who beats us in doing that? The governments! And they're doing it far better than you and I! And they're getting with it their way. So enough of that. It's really about the issues, it's about standing up for it. And whether I sit next to an Atheist or a secularist. That's not the issue, that's not my issue. My issue is the end that I'm trying to get to.

Dr. Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad:

Now I think we should allow an Egyptian American to have a question. Omar.

Omar Atia:

I am Omar Atia, I founded and am a board member of the Islamic-American Zakat Foundation. Thank you for the insight. But I think I would like to mention something about Hassan al-Banna and the movement. Yes, I agree with you he is the leader of putting the social aspect of Islam together and propagated throughout the land. But one of the problems I think have led actually to his assassination was his engagement in spite of the government in fighting the British occupation by giving the [9:42??] and the ???. And that led actually to his assassination in 1949. So this idea really was enshrined into the thoughts of the Brotherhood since that time. And that was the things that were really exposing to the other countries is that, we will do whatever we wanted to do in spite of who is governing. And that is actually the dilemma that is happening in Palestine and the dilemma that is happening in many other countries. So unless this idea has got to be unified, they will be thinking about getting into the mainstream of politics, nothing is going to happen. I want to add to that and maybe this has a prerequisite that government in command should allow for all aspects of political sides to participate. Because if even they are allowed to get into politics, if at the moment with the current imbalance in politics, they will win. The popular vote, if you have an open vote. And maybe this win may not be good for the country as a whole because it was not really prepared for this type of election. So do you have any comments.

Dr. Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad:

For the record, the gist of the comment was pointing out that perhaps one of the reasons Hassan al-Banna was assassinated was that he wanted to go ahead and fight the British despite the position of the government at the time and that isn't it the case that in order for the Islamists to succeed, they really have to abandon this attitude that they can go ahead and do it their own way despite the situation of the government.

Dr. Esam Omeish:

That's actually a very good point to reflect upon. But I do have a slightly different perspective on it. The fact is that when we talked about the three words, we talked about conservatives in extremism or violence. Certainly the issue of violence factors in. One of the things that if you read the history of the Brotherhood that perplexes you a little bit is what they call [12:08???]. This special apparatus that they have created. Because it doesn't fit, it really doesn't flow with what I spoke about as the societal reform, agenda that Imam Banna espoused and in fact implemented in his experiment. But if you look at its specifics, it's very interesting to note that the Wafdis [12:30???] at that time had their own, I think they called them the reds, but I don't recall the specific history. There were four groups that were in existence. Like paramilitary type groups that existed in Egypt at the time. And in [12:45???]'s case they have tried to focus its activities on the resistance of the occupation. Which was, again, the patriotic thing to do and the thing to do really in the context of that historical period. And in fact towards the end of that development in that history of the apparatus itself, a lot of conflicts arose to the point where people were wishing to dismantle this whole thing. So clearly I think, in an objective reading, that it's never the intent, nor is it the system upon which that change is. Rather it's a product I believe of its time. I think even if we evaluate this whole history of the usage of violence, truly in the time of al-Banna, there was no incidents to speak of. Towards the end, again, with the special thing and the accentuation of the British rule in Egypt and the conflict and things like this, there was the killing of [13:40???] who was the Prime Minister and those were kind of blamed on people related to the Brothers, even though they were never condoned or given the permission to do it. Things like this. And then of course the ??? and attempting to assassinate the ??? Nassir, which until this day one side claims it was a fabrication and the other side says that it's a sign that they're... But the fact is I think if we do more of an analytical and deep history, we realize that this is not the mode of operation. Now having said that, I think the Islamic thought itself that lends itself the byproduct of the period of repression and the byproduct of the period of challenging the other and the byproduct can carry in it connotations that can further this issue of us versus them and the issue of the usage of violence as an extension of the means that are available for us to take. And I think we need to truly develop the thought, the intellectual discourse to appoint where that truly does not have its unrightful place. Again, it's the same idea when you talk about jihad. Jihad is about changing that which is wrong and not standing for injustice and things like that. So it's not just an internal struggle and all that stuff. But the fact is that unless it's applied in its totality, it can be certainly skewed and viewed as an extension of ideas that have no place really in the platform we're in the program. So I think again in fairness, evaluating the history, I think

it's been far exaggerated the extension of violence. But I don't think that we are completely innocent necessarily from that issue. I think that issue needs to be addressed and that issue needs to be contextualized as much as possible. I think the Palestinian experience is difficult, complex, it's an occupation and it's this and that. But is the use of violence appropriate? Is the civilian violence... Those are the things that we need to tackle head on and leave them in a context that is really reasonable as opposed to one that justifies all things. So I think it's a very valuable...

Dr. Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad:

I want to try to get in one more question. Well we have an American back there? Alright. We'll let two Americans ask questions. But make them short. Judith.

Judith:

I can make it very short. What are the major political [16:19??] of the Muslim Brotherhood even today?

Dr. Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad:

We'll take a second question and you'll answer both as succinctly as you can.

???:

My question has to do with, what was the discourse within the Brotherhood like as far as you know, when two major political developments took place within the Muslim world? The one in the early '90s in Algeria with the feast[16:48??] and then the development that took place more recently with Hamas in occupied Palestine. Then winning the elections by international western standards and then having what was done to them done to them. And in the case of Algeria with a defacto by the scenes imprint from the US government in the case of Palestine, moreover out in the open. What was that discourse like within the Brotherhood and what is your own view on the challenges that presents both to the more positive and democratic elements within the US government as well as to committed Muslims on the ground here in the United States and other parts of the world?

Dr. Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad:

I think the first question was I think the political goals of the Brotherhood in Egypt.

Dr. Esam Omeish:

I think that question cuts into the very discussion we had, which is this a social reform movement or is this a political movement and such. And I think the more appropriate answer is that it is a societal reform movement as opposed to a political. But because of the platform that they carry, which is the Islamic platform that implies the

comprehensive nature of it, and the fact that it has implications in every part of one's life, including the arena of politics, affects everything a person does. I think they're intertwined. And so the political goals are not necessarily in establishing a theocracy. I'm not necessarily in seeing that the rule of Sharia becomes the rule. And that's I think the development that has taken place that has been meaningful. I mentioned the word, you know, the concept of [18:45????]. Initially it was about the rule of Sharia and society must be ruled according to Islam and we want to live in an Islamic, you know... Now it's really more about a civic society that has its inspiration or it's basis on the Islamic authority. And then there's that extra-justification that because this is a Muslim society, this is about people living and aspiring to be guided, ruled and their lives ruled by the divine guidance and by the tenants of the Sharia and all this. And so I would say that there are aims that are understood by their development recently is in fact to establish a civic society where freedoms are respected, where democracy and the rule of law reigns supreme and where basic human rights and basic opportunity for people is given. What that will transpire into as their ability matures and becoming the politicians and the parliamentarians and the people who develop, I think we'll be predicated on their ability to solve the challenges that will face them and their ability to bring a meaning to the very words that they aspire. If they do that, then I think arguably you may see an experiment where the Sharia can become the discussion and things like that. I think that not's to be said that it's not going to happen. I think it may. But I think they're more ready based on the experience and the maturity that they have developed over the years to embrace the civic society as is with all of its tenants, as the thoughts of western liberalism and democracy I think are going to be, again, with some accustoming to the society itself. But I don't think their goal is this idea of establishing the caliphate. It's not. You cannot read it today in any of their engagement. Their political engagement as you see it develop, it's really pointing otherwise. Now as far as the tough questions that [20:56????] mentioned. I think there is a couple of things, again, this is just based on historical reading because when it happened, the Fist??? was not actually the representation of the Brotherhood in Algeria. I think for the person who reads deep enough, they were recognized. They had their own version in what's called Hamas today. It's not Hamas. I think some people are calling it Hamas. [21:21????] I was ??? to ??? was actually somebody who used to visit the United States frequently and he used to talk about their experience. And he's one of the most articulate I think and deep in terms of the political process, and engaging it and in civic engagement. And he was always keen on that. I think the challenge that they've had is that Algeria has reached a level where it was ready to embrace major change. And the Islamist in general, people who were in big numbers, and plus of course there was the dismal performance of the government and this and that. So when it call came, what they didn't do was engage the political process immediately. Whereas the members of the Fist[22:04????] did. And so by virtue of the growth and development that was there, they were able to embrace the whole platform. And so from the get go unfortunately, that experiment was a little bit polarized, even at the level of the Islamists in Algeria. And I think unfortunately they were unable to manage the mounting challenges from the international order. France intervened almost immediately. The US as well. And so I think the repercussions on us as Muslims observing all this, as activists, as Islamists, is very bitter, no doubt. It's the fact that even if that platform is allowed. Now granted, I don't agree with the Fist??? in some ways and this and that. The fact is

that if that's the attitude that is going to face us, then that unfortunately is very alarming and very disappointing. However, I think the real challenge is that for us to see that as a dead end, as the way to close the dialogue and that's it. We're done. I think is very wrong. Because I think we've got a long way to go. I think our societies are just plagued with major challenges that I think even if you bring the most Islamist of governments today and hand them the keys to the throne or whatever, you're not even beginning to deal with the issues at hand. And I think for us to think that it's either us doing it or... I think was not the proper... I think the Fist??? had very prominent, very capable individuals who if given the chance would have performed. And there were examples of it. However I think the magnification was on the other issues. So it left a bitter taste, but it shouldn't stop us certainly from moving. I think what Hamas has experience in Palestine is yet another testament to the challenge at hand. But I think it needs to be understood with the particulars of the Arab Israeli issue of vis-à-vis our eyes as Americans and stuff. And so I think if this was to happen in Egypt, let's say, where clear open elections were allowed and we saw the Islamists rising and they were able to produce a platform as effective as what Hamas has done, social service and an infrastructure to be able to truly rally the people's support behind. I don't think the reaction would have been the same. This whole crackdown, this whole nonsense of shutting down Gaza, this and that, that's gone to extremes that are beyond, you know... I was just talking to Mr. Beltier[24:35???], 12 Fulbright scholars get their scholarship and the reason they're stripped out of their scholarship is because they're not allowed to go through an exit because the Israeli authorities won't do it. And we turn the other way. It's to that extreme. And so what I'm saying, I think it's a different experience. So in short I think it's disappointing, it's something that will maybe elevate our sense of need to do more, to realize that the challenge is far bigger than just getting to the government seat or just ousting it. And then we kind of need to prepare ourselves for that kind of engagement and long-term need that we'll need to develop. Even within the Islamic movement. That it's not just about the one fight or the two fights, but rather it is about transforming the whole society. Taking care of its issues, making sure that as society, and again, I think the Turkish model really is inspiring in the sense that they were able to take on some of these issues and they were able to produce results. And so even today when we see a challenge about their legal status and the fact that the Army is going to use their own Supreme Court to strip them of their legality and things like this, that it's not the Islamist who's worried in the street, it is the average Turkish citizen who has seen the change and who wants that to continue. I think if we win that, then I think we don't need to worry about anybody else stripping us from [26:03???]. Thanks very much.

[Applause]

Dr. Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad:

Thank you very much.

???:

It is interesting. I kept it until the last moment. Today is the 80th anniversary of the establishment of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Arab world. 1928 it started and today it's 2008. So thank you.

Dr. Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad:

Thank you very much doctor. I appreciate your presentation. Now I'd like to close with some thoughts on this subject we've heard. I think the three things that I would take away from what we've heard here tonight. First off that the Muslim Brotherhood in the original vision of Hassan al-Banna and its original manifestation was a social reform movement. It was not a political movement. Hassan al-Banna believed that if you reformed society, politics would be reformed as a consequence. Not that you would change politics and that somehow was going to change society. That inversion is a mistake that unfortunately too many Muslims carry away today and it is very wrongheaded in my opinion. The second point that I think we should take away is now in its political manifestation the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt has turned to a platform that seems to espouse as the brother said, seems to espouse to a civil society rather than a theocracy. And this is consistent with the first point that I raise. If you have a group of people that want to do social reform for whom political reform is strictly incidental, then it makes sense that the direction they're going to move in is to establish the kind of civil society institutions that are a necessary part of a free society.

[Go to Minaret of Freedom Institute home page.](#)