

Have the Muslim Brotherhood Gone Global?



The relationship between the Egyptian authorities and the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) has once again entered a turbulent phase, after President Hosni Mubarak stated that the organization posed a security threat to Egypt. This is in addition to the transfer of various MB members' cases to a military tribunal, including second deputy [to Brotherhood leader Muhammad Akef] Khairat al Shatir.

This comes in the aftermath of the violent demonstrations that took place in al-Azhar University after dozens of Islamist students organized a military-style march. And yet the MB believes this escalation to be the outcome of the announcement of the Shura Council electoral results, which took place last April.

Since the 9/11 attacks, the Middle East has been going through considerable changes. These winds of change have brought about the review of the political, ideological and strategic outlooks of the world's largest Islamic organization internationally, the Muslim Brotherhood. Today there is unanimity over the fact that changes have been made within the organization's vision, changes that stress the necessity of reform, some reforms of which have already been implemented while others are in the process of being applied.

Asharq Al-Awsat spoke to Dr. Kamal al Helbawi, the MB's former 'official spokesman in the West' and a staunch political and ideological activist in addition to being a specialist in Islamic and strategic studies. Al Helbawi formerly managed the Centre for Islamic Research in Islamabad during the Afghan wars. His presence there at that time and his contacts with the Arab leadership and the Afghan activists has resulted in making him a reference for understanding the obscurities of this stage.

Moreover, Sheikh al Helbawi is also one of the founders of the 'Islamic League in Britain' and the 'Muslim Council of Britain'. Approaching 70 years of age, al Helbawi is an Islamic rights activist, and in addition to his work, he also manages the Center for the Study of World Civilizations and supervised last summer's conference, entitled 'What brings Islam to the West?' He has also most recently established a research unit dedicated to the study of terrorism from an Islamic perspective, which publishes a monthly bulletin in English titled 'Islamism Digest'.

Despite the numerous blows which al Helbawi says the MB have received of late, he remains optimistic, “as long as there is a pulse in the veins then hope from God is guaranteed,” he said. In his interview, al Helbawi stressed that he was not speaking on behalf of the MB in Egypt and moreover added that his personal opinion was not binding to any of the organization’s members.

For the duration of over three hours in his West London home, al Helbawi emphatically negated the existence of the so-called MB international organization, despite having established an office in London in 1995. He said that there was ‘MB international coordination’ and insistently referred back to the term whenever the notion of ‘international organization’ was mentioned.

He said, “When we refer to an organization, it is something similar to military factions that have a leadership and where its members heed commands and obey, whereas what does exist is international coordination. It’s almost like federal work; there are meetings, continuous consultations, exchange of experience, networking and joint efforts. This also includes education and its curricula for future generations, consultations over them and the exploitation of experts and specialists in the countries in which we live, or the ones where we spread our calling.”

In terms of the meetings that take place between the members of the MB’s international coordination, he said: “Consultation takes place on all levels; if a group of members meets during a seminar or conference that is not held by the MB it is natural and necessary for them to meet and discuss it afterwards. They hold meetings over meals and they also meet at weddings and funerals and on other occasions. The MB has an advantage and that is that they never waste time. It is something that is engrained in our hearts and we have learnt it from the late founder of the MB, Hassan al Banna. Whenever two members meet they always have programs to discuss and debate, as well as common thoughts. If they are three then they appoint one as a leader and immediately start to discuss and consult over all matters. Technological advancements have facilitated the exchange of information and expertise between members.”

Over the most opaque and controversial element, also arguably the most important dimension of the MB, which is the organization’s financial backing, al Helbawi said, “Firstly and lastly we depend on God, then on ourselves and our pockets. Imam Hassan al Banna used to advise that every member allocate a portion of their salary to the MB throughout their life and part of their wealth upon their death. There is no other organization that apprehends the meaning of solidarity and unity like the MB.”

There have been rumors circulating about moving the headquarters from Germany to London to which al Helbawi replied that he established the media center in London in 1995 and that the office was still in operation and that it publishes the MB’s weekly newsletter. He added that there were various Islamic organizations, the rescue and missionary among them but that the MB’s headquarters are in Egypt and that the supreme guide and leader is Muhammad Mahdi Akef and that all other organizations are independent outside of Egypt.

In terms of contacts with other parties abroad, al Helbawi said that as affiliates of an Islamic movement, it was natural to get to know members of other Islamic movements and that he personally attends all the conferences that he gets invited to; from the Bengali to the Pakistani and Egyptian. Most recently, he said he had attended an event organized in London by a Sufi movement, which is led by a young and well-known Saudi figure. Furthermore, he stressed the importance of maintaining close ties and getting to know others, as the Islamic religion stresses upon that, citing Quranic verses to support his words. He added that the MB’s conception and implementation of consultation [Shura] was also based on the Quranic example and that it was democratic in nature.

When asked about his view as to whether the MB's international coordination was weak or strong, he said, "That depends on the meaning of strength and weakness. From the MB's perspective, strength comes in three stages: first is the strength of faith, the second is the strength of brotherhood, solidarity, tolerance and friendship, as for the third, it is what has been referred to by the mentor al Banna as the physical arms and arms [weapons]. With this arrangement it becomes clear that the MB is in a state of constant power. If the creed is strong and has a solid foundation, whether they [members of the MB] are in prisons or outside of them or in the authority or outside of it or in unions or in the parliament, these are the standards that we rely upon."

Regarding the accusations leveled at the MB on various occasions such as the Brotherhood in Morocco and in Sudan and regarding an undemocratic international organization, al Helbawi said, "The MB leadership in Sudan, led by al Sadiq [Abdullah] Abdel Majid, and our brother al Hibr [another MB leader in Sudan], they do not say that and are part of the international Islamic movement. The one who said that and started this [conflict] in Sudan was Sheikh Dr. Hassan al Turabi. He had his personal ijtiḥad [Islamic interpretation]. He aspired to other arrangements that were not in the Brotherhood's curriculum, which led to differences and the independence of al Turabi. He has a considerable following in Sudan from within the Islamic movement. Generally speaking, no country is devoid of the MB, whether large or small, Arab or international. In the West, there is an Islamic movement that follows al Banna, but there are also others that have different references."

He added that he was a firm believer in the fact that MB members should declare themselves everywhere they go and that although that may be unrealistic it is also difficult due to the tightening of security measures. Al Helbawi added that there was no publicly declared MB organization except in Egypt, Syria and Sudan. In Syria, for example, a clear and decisive law has been placed that explicitly states upon the execution of any person affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood, he said. He argued that it was unfortunate that the regimes forced members of the MB to work secretly and resort to underground movement.

Some of the media outlets had stated that the MB recently held a conference in London and that one of the decisions reached was to move the main headquarters from Berlin to London. His response to this allegation: "I do not know. I was busy in another conference at the Center for Terrorist Studies in east London and then I traveled abroad."

Regarding international coordination, al Helbawi said, "Coordination usually takes place between states not individuals. Each state nominates whom it sees as most suitable for [the job]. Sometimes we are joined by distinguished figures, scholars and businessmen who serve the purpose of coordination. Generally, coordination exists in every state that has an Islamic movement, as for the countries where the Islamic movement is still fledgling, they are usually concerned with construction, education and training the cadres – preparing for the future."

In response to the claim stated by observers and Islamic experts that the MB organization is responsible for the birth of violent movements which it has failed to quell from the outset, al Helbawi said, "The impious and virtuous sons and fathers emerge from the same womb; the mothers and fathers are not responsible for this crime. This is why when the MB [members] found out that there were youth in prisons and detention centers who had radical extremist thoughts and takfir [denouncing others as disbelievers] tendencies, Brotherhood members who were also imprisoned clarified that they were not part of that movement. Imam Hassan al Hudaibi published his famous book, 'Doua laysa Qudah' (Advocates not Judges), which condemns violence and illustrates the MB's true path that was sought ... the MB has always adopted a moderate approach, which is followed by their youthful affiliates and which clearly has plans that are detached from violence." He added that extremist groups are in Egyptian prisons today.

In answer to claims that the MB operates in secrecy, al Helbawi said, "On the contrary, anyone who thinks we resort to secrecy is wrong. It is common knowledge that the MB has 88 MPs in parliament, their guide is known and the government knows the members of the guidance office and those in the Shura Council. All the MB figures and scholars are known, there is no obscurity or ambiguity."

Al Helbawi rejected the idea that the MB would resort to violence because of the pressures imposed on it. He said, "The organization has never resorted to violence, in fact, the message is to avoid violence because it is not in accordance with Islamic conduct, in addition to being unmanly. Changing things by force does not achieve the desired goals. There are sections in Islamic jurisprudence that strictly prohibit it. The MB sees that the focus must be on the education and preparation of the citizen – it's not about the fast rise to power because that would be wrong and it wouldn't be reform. Observers have predicted that the MB will peacefully rise to power in 10–15 years, but generally there is no rush because haste is of the devil's making. There is no desire to seize power, it is enough for us to see Mubarak and his aides controlling."

He added, "The MB do not place assuming power as a top priority, we are in no rush. The [MB] will cross as they have crossed time and time again, soldiers for he who guides the ship of reform."