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Russian-Ukrainian War.. Muslim Brotherhood's Gateway to Reconciliation with West



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Introduction

On March 11, 2022, the Muslim Brotherhood's "Mekameleen" TV broadcasted a TV show with Dr. Yasser Al-Najjar, an Egyptian researcher affiliated with the group and residing in Turkey. The episode was about "Muslims joining the war between Ukraine and Russia from the Islamic law's perspective." Al-Najjar considered this permissible on condition that they "raise the word of God and inflict harm on the infidels on both sides (...)".¹

Undoubtedly, this proposition represents a departure from the familiar discourse of the Muslim Brotherhood and its ideologues, accustomed to the principle of „taqiyya“, which permeates the group's declared and hidden practices². On the ground, the Muslim Brotherhood and its European affiliates took advantage of the Russian invasion of Ukrainian lands to restore its luster, which began to fade due to the exposure it is now suffering from in most European countries, and the painful blows it received in the MENA region. Not to mention the rampant conflict situation between the two wings of the organization in London and Istanbul.³

In this article, we discuss the position of the Muslim Brotherhood on the war between Russia and Ukraine through several axes: First, through a historical review of the group's position on the Western and post-Soviet perceptions. Then examine the nature of the Muslim Brotherhood's presence in Russia and Ukraine. Finally, determining the reasons for the group's current positioning and the desired goals of engaging in this conflict.

The Muslim Brotherhood's position on the two factions in a historical context:

Historical events during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries reveal that the Muslim Brotherhood has always sided with the position of the United States and the West in general, against Russia and the Soviet

1 <https://cutt.us/271Tw>

2 <https://cutt.us/4Pu8X>

3 <https://cutt.us/JShmy>

Union before. This is due to many reasons, the most important is the pragmatism that characterizes Western politics and its ability to employ the group in the right places.

Relations between the US and the Muslim Brotherhood go back to the fifties of the last century, when US President Eisenhower met with senior leaders of the Islamic movement around the world, including Saeed Ramadan, Hassan al-Banna's brother-in-law, and the father of the current Muslim Brotherhood ideologist Tariq Ramadan. The United States embraced the activities of Said Ramadan in Europe in the fifties and sixties, considered the Muslim Brotherhood an advanced tool and spearhead in the Middle East to confront communism and the Soviet influence. From the mid-fifties until the invasion of Afghanistan, the relationship between them was hidden. However, it became public with the American support for the Afghan mujahideen in 1978, where the Muslim Brotherhood's ideology represented an ideological starting point for many of these mujahideen, before they turned to a more extremist ideology. ⁴

During the armed rebellion in Chechnya in December 1994, the Muslim Brotherhood also played a major role in the operations of financing and logistical support for the Chechen fighters⁵. That was orchestrated through the guise of humanitarian relief operations, which were carried out under the supervision of the mother group in Egypt and within several countries, such as Jordan, which had hosted a large number of Caucasian migrants back in the nineteenth century.

With the Chechen presence in Jordan, the conservatives got closer with the Muslim Brotherhood, to that extent that their leaders became members of the organization. When some Chechens of Jordan returned to their country, they "clung to the principles of the Muslim Brotherhood, which they had learned in jihad, altruism, and self-sacrifice for the sake of religion and the homeland," according to the group's references⁶.

4 <https://www.orsam.org.tr/ar/--36/>

5 <https://www.orsam.org.tr/ar/--36/>

6 <https://www.orsam.org.tr/ar/--36/>

US officials viewed the Muslim Brotherhood as the secret weapon in the shadow war against the Soviet Union, according to Robert Baer, a retired CIA officer, in his book “Sleeping with the Devil”, in which he explained how the US could make common cause with the Muslim Brotherhood, using them to do its dirty work in Yemen, Afghanistan and other places⁷.

On the other hand, the Muslim Brotherhood considers Russia its official enemy. The movement exploits the historical hostility of fundamentalist groups to the Russian side, creating a situation similar to the alliance of jihadist groups against the Soviet Union, as it happened in Chechnya, Afghanistan and Bosnia, settling the group’s ideology against Moscow, which in the result contributed to the elimination or weakening in some countries such as Syria and Libya⁸.

The Muslim Brotherhood presence in Russia and Ukraine

The Muslim Brotherhood is present in both countries, but differently; public in Ukraine, ‘ambiguous’ in Russia:

In Russia:

Available information on the relationship between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Russian government is largely incomplete. Official sources state that the banned group is prohibited from carrying out any activity within the Russian Federation’s territory due to its involvement in financing some separatist movements in the Caucasus. While several media reports and statements issued by the „Union of Islamic Organizations in Russia“, linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, reveal the extent of the group’s penetration inside the country, and a number of its symbols occupied official presence within the Russian Federation’s territory and on its propaganda platforms, such as the state-owned Russia Today channel⁹.

Wissam Al-Bardawil, an Islamic activist of Palestinian origin, conducts the activities of the Islamic Federation in Russia. He is related to Salah

7 <https://www.orsam.org.tr/ar/--36/>

8 <https://rcssegyp.com/9204>

9 <https://www.akhbaralaan.net/?p=642606>

al-Bardawil, a member of the political bureau of the Palestinian Hamas movement (Muslim Brotherhood branch). Wissam studied medicine and moved to Russia at the beginning of the nineties and obtained citizenship, then began his organizational activity in 2006, accompanied by his friend and fellow Palestinian student, Nidal Awad Allah Al-Hayh, born in the Hebron Governate. Then he became the head of the “Union of Islamic Organizations” in Russia and Belarus, in parallel with his position of advisor on international relations to the Mufti of the All-Russian Federation. This reveals an important part of the relationship nature that exists between the Muslim Brotherhood and official authorities in Russia¹⁰.

The Russian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood operates according to the principles of the movement regarding public visibility and organizational secrecy. While it continues in its various activities such as fundraising, engaging in community work and recruiting members, the Russian branch of the group hides any information about its structure, effective leadership, the size of its budget and the donations it collects. Its website does not include any definition of the structure or the members and those responsible for it, and only publishes an e-mail address to communicate with.

The Russian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood benefits from its cooperation with the Council of Muslims in Europe (the „Federation of Islamic Organizations in Europe“) in training and qualifying organizational cadres. The two sides hold periodic meetings and the leaders of the Russian Muslim Brotherhood are keen to participate in the annual Forum of European Muslims, always held in a European countries¹¹.

In Ukraine:

The Muslim Brotherhood enjoys a strong position inside Ukraine through the Association of Social Organizations Alraid, an umbrella for 17 associations in Ukraine, such as “Al-Fajr” belonging to the international organization of the Muslim Brotherhood in Eastern Europe.

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Alraid officially represents the Muslim Council of Europe in Ukraine, and has been based in Kyiv since February 1997, six years after Ukraine's independence. This union adopts all the goals of the group and is headed by Syran Arifov, a Ukrainian citizen born in the suburbs of Novorossiysk in Russia in 1979¹².

The federation also supervises Islamic centers country-wide, such as in Vinnytsia, where the organization sponsors the Islamic Cultural Center and the Isra Association. In Kharkiv, there is another branch of the Islamic Cultural Center located. Odessa hosts one of the Islamic Cultural Center branches and the "Al-Massar" Association. In addition, the branches of the Islamic Cultural Center are spread in each of Dnepropetrovsk, Zuburiga, Sumy and Lviv.

Prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the "Alraid" Union was organizing several camps to attract Muslim and Arab youth residing in Ukraine, indoctrinating them to join the Muslim Brotherhood. The camps include a number of daily educational, cultural, sportive and recreational activities, religious lessons given by leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood's international organization.

The federation also focused its activities in the city of Dnipro, which belongs to the Dnepropetrovsk region, one of the largest Ukrainian cities and one of the main destinations for foreign students¹³.

The Muslim Brotherhood positions towards the Russian invasion in Ukraine

During the first weeks of the Russian war in Ukraine, statements and messages were issued by associations and entities linked to the group in Europe about their position, condemning Russia and supported Ukraine;

- The first public position was published by the "Muslim Council of Europe" on February 24, saying that it "sees this military assault on the

12 <https://www.akhbaralaan.net/?p=642606>

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sovereignty of Ukrainian territory as a deepening of the crisis and that its consequences will be catastrophic for the humanitarian situation on the one hand and for the future of regional relations and between peoples on the other hand¹⁴.”

- The Ukrainian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, “The Council of Ukrainian Muslims/Al-Raid Organization”, announced that it fully supports Ukraine “in defense of its unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity, while condemning all manifestations of Russian intimidation and aggression.”

In a video clip on February 25, 2022, Arifov considered that Russia’s military “inevitably aims at destroying the infrastructure, political, economic, social and other foundations on which Ukraine is based as an independent state and weakening its citizens”.

He also called on Russia’s Muslims “to play positive roles by peaceful means, to prevent any armed aggression, in a way that avoids civilian and innocent victims¹⁵.”

- On February 25, 2022, the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), headed by Nihad Awad, expressed a position that intersects with Abu Marzouk’s position, and underlined his condemnation of Russian interference in Ukraine. He confirmed his joining with the axis condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine, describing Russian President Vladimir Putin as a “war criminal” responsible for the deaths of countless Chechens, Syrians and even Russians¹⁶.

- On February 27, the “Union of Islamic Organizations and Communities in Italy” (UCOII), the arm of the Brotherhood in Italy¹⁷, issued a call, urging Muslim communities in the country and across Europe to “open the doors of their centers so that they become sanctuaries for those fleeing the war in Ukraine¹⁸.” In response, Muslim communities across Italy organized local initiatives to collect food and medicine that would be donated to

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the Muslims of Ukraine.

- On March 3, 2022, the pro-Muslim Brotherhood „Islamic Council“ of Great Britain expressed its “deep concern over the humanitarian crisis that was revealed by the Russian invasion of Ukraine¹⁹.” It called for an immediate cessation of hostilities and a return to peace. “We stand with the Ukrainian people, including hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian Muslims, most of whom belong to the Crimean Tatar community, a people who already faced genocide and persecution under the Soviet Union”, the council said in a statement²⁰.

- On March 4, 2022, the German „Zentralrat der Muslime in Deutschland (ZMD)²¹“, linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, called on the associations and organizations that are members of the Council to provide aid and donations to Ukrainian refugees. “We pray to God that this terrible war against Ukraine ends as soon as possible so that the bloodshed does not continue. Many may not realize that many local Muslims live in a war zone now. In our prayers we are with you and everyone else,” said Ayman Mazyek, head of the council²².

- In mid-March 2022, “Islamic Relief Worldwide - US Branch” issued an appeal “to help the people of Ukraine.” It said that it met with UNHCR staff on this matter. It also said that since “Islamic Relief” does not have a presence inside Ukraine, it is working with an international NGO on the ground now, looking forward to increasing relief efforts,” referring to the Ukraine Muslim Council/Alraid Union²³.

- On March 25, 2022, about a month after the start of the Russian invasion, the Muslim Brotherhood Imam Ibrahim Munir in London issued a statement entitled “A call to the sane people of the world to stop the Russian-Ukrainian war”, as part of the weekly series of messages that the group dedicates to its cadres. In the statement, Munir called on the

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international community to intervene to stop this war and to search for a peaceful solution to the conflict, which he described as on the verge of turning into a third world war. Mounir also criticized what he called “the West’s shameful attitude towards refugees in the Ukrainian war.” He considered that the war revealed “the abhorrent fanaticism in separating them in view of the colors of their skin and their beliefs. White Europeans often received care and attention, while people of color and Muslims were treated otherwise²⁴”.

- In early May 2022, Musa Abu Marzouk, a member of Hamas’ political bureau, considered that the Russian war in Ukraine “could help create a new, more just world order, especially for the Palestinian people,” in tacit support for the operation. In an exclusive interview with the Russian “Sputnik” agency, he added, “With the Russian military operation, and the attempt to find a more just world order, all oppressed peoples will be at a stage where they can break away from this system and be freed from its exploitation²⁵.”

Note: The Union of Islamic Organizations in Russia has not issued any declared position regarding the Russian invasion. Rather, the Union’s website has been offline for months²⁶, which some linked to pressure from the Russian federal security services, as a result of the position of the MB and its European branches, identity with Western countries and anti-Russian²⁷.

Basic determinants in understanding the Muslim Brotherhood’s position on the ongoing conflict

All statements indicate that the Muslim Brotherhood’s branches in Europe were identical with the position of the countries’ official positions in which the movement is active, whether by recording media stances

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rejecting the Russian military operation, or through the relief activity that targeted those affected by the war, for a number of identifiable reasons. Subsequently:

- The Muslim Brotherhood and its European affiliates seek to improve their image in front of the societies in which they are active, to present themselves as a reliable and consistent ally with the positions of Western governments.
- The group's efforts to ease the pressure campaign and security pursuits that affect the group's branches and networks in a number of European countries²⁸.
- At the local Ukrainian level, there is a state of historical hostility between most of the Muslims of Ukraine and Russia since the Tsarist Russian wars with the Crimean Khanate and even after that in the Soviet era, because the Ukrainian Muslims were living in the southern regions near the Crimea, their main home in previous centuries²⁹. It goes without saying that the Muslim Brotherhood has managed, during the years of its activity in Ukraine, to expand its popular base within this particular ethnic group.
- Putin's position on the Egyptian revolution: From the first moments, he was a supporter of the June 30 revolution, which overthrew the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood, as no hostile discourse against Egypt came from Russia during the past years. Russia's support for the regime was more evident in its arms deals with the Egyptian government. ³⁰At the same time, the Egyptian-US relations were characterized by a coolly due to the human rights situation³¹.
- Russia's policy in Libya, and its declared support for Marshal Khalifa Haftar in his war against the Muslim Brotherhood and its armed militias there³².

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- The Russian official position, which considers the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization since 2003.³³ The Russian Federal Security Service renewed this status in March 2015 with the aim of restricting the group's activity in Russia, based on internal concerns about it and to take advantage of the frosty bilateral relations between Egypt and Western countries at that time.³⁴
- The status of escalating hostility between the Muslim Brotherhood and Ramzan Kadyrov³⁵, President of the Chechen Republic, a main supporter of President Vladimir Putin in his war on Ukraine, given his ethnic and religious affiliation and his position as President of a state within the Russian Federation³⁶.

The Muslim Brotherhood's gains from getting involved in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict

Through its involvement in the Russian ongoing war in Ukraine and the West's positioning, the Muslim Brotherhood seeks to achieve the greatest political and strategic gains, whether for its local branch, "Al-Ikhwan Union", or the international organization and the networks it manages. The most notable of these gains are:

- Strengthening its presence in Europe and in alignment with the perceived expectations of European policy makers, by claiming that the community is compatible with European values and rejects violence. This is evident in the various statements issued by the group's branches and organizations regarding the Russian-Ukrainian war.
- Strengthening relations and tactical partnerships with European non-Muslim Brotherhood associations and institutions, which provides the group an immunization against social criticism.
- Employing the charitable and humanitarian works carried out by the

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Brotherhood's arms of the Ukrainians affected by the war in the service of the political and ideological goals of the group. Especially since the "Al-Raid" union is attracting a lot of material support through donations that are not subject to audit and accountability.

- Reactivating cooperation between the Muslim Brotherhood and Turkish associations and institutions. Naturally, the Turkish-Egyptian and Gulf reconciliation steps had a negative impact on Ankara's relationship with the group.

- Providing the appropriate atmosphere for the return of the "Al-Raid Union" after it was placed under the radar of Ukrainian security services years ago because of banned books and publications calling for hatred and violence.

Conclusion

The Muslim Brotherhood is keen to improve its relationship with European governments through the current situation in Ukraine. This is done through pragmatic practices, represented in conjunction with the European political position regarding the Russian invasion in Ukraine, and mobilizing support and funding for the group's branch in Ukraine, the "Al-Raid Union", which is structurally linked to the so-called "Ukrainian Muslim Council."

Through this, the group aims to improve its image after European countries became aware of the danger of its thought and ideology, also to secure a foothold in Ukraine, which is now closer to joining the European Union.

On the Russian side, a broader issue is the state's relationship with Islam. The damage done to Muslims' perceptions of Russia after Chechnya and Syria is serious, and the mistreatment of the Tatars in Ukraine will exacerbate this, creating a state of internal instability. This is what the Muslim Brotherhood may exploit to direct the compass of global jihad towards Russia again.