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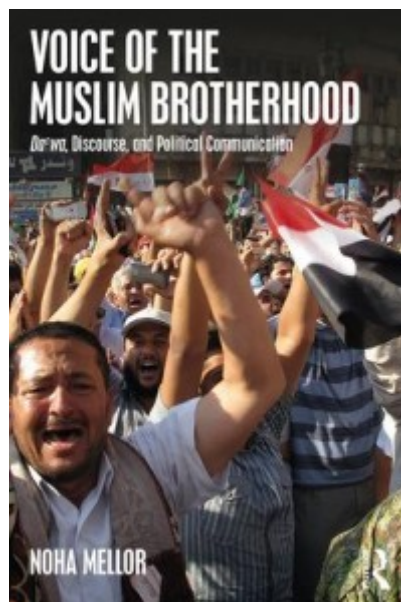
Voice of the Muslim Brotherhood. Da'wa, Discourse, and Political Communication

Mellor, Noha (2018): Voice of the Muslim Brotherhood. Da'wa, Discourse, and Political Communication. London and New York: Routledge. 240 pages. ISBN 9781138078659.

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The current political polarization in Egypt has also its effects on academia. It seems as if everyone feels the need to take sides when interpreting the events in the country, even scholars. Since 2013, the public discussion of issues and topics that are considered sensitive – which is somehow everything related to politics, media, military and culture – has often resulted in heated controversy. The polarization reaches its climax when it comes to the *Muslim Brotherhood* – a movement that had won the first democratic parliamentary and presidential elections after the fall of Mubarak in 2012 and thus governed Egypt for one year before being ousted by a military coup (as some see it) or a new people's revolution (as others see it) in July 2013. In the aftermath, on the one hand, Western observers often condemned the coup without necessarily praising the *Muslim Brotherhood's* rule. On the other hand, secular-oriented Egyptian scholars seemed to be very relieved about the end of what they interpreted as an Islamist threat to the country. Thus, the *Muslim Brotherhood* has provoked scholarship that is often as biased as the Egyptian public opinion about it.



In her recent book, Noha Mellor, a professor of media at the Universities of Bedfordshire and Stockholm and of Egyptian origin, sets out to trace the political discourse of the *Muslim Brotherhood* (MB) since its foundation in 1928 and to analyze its strategic communication tools. Although there had been several attempts to do this before (in German: Richter 2011, in English: Munson 2001, Breuer 2014), this book is indeed the most comprehensive compilation. While the first half of the book provides a conceptual understanding of the MB, its vast network and its media, the latter half is divided into six chronological chapters, such as “1928-1938 Branding the movement” or “1996-2010 Soul-searching stage,” in which she describes in detail the development of the MB’s discourses and communication in the context of specific political circumstances. Thus, the book should provide a valuable source for those who want to know more about the history of the MB’s political communication. However, what limits the validity of the book are its specific ideological perspective and its methodological approach. Mellor relies mostly on secondary literature to reconstruct the development of the MB’s political communication. In her own text, she then tends to reproduce only those parts of the literature that fit into her distinctive perspective of the MB. This somewhat arbitrary selection of topics and arguments supports the impression of a rather biased portrayal of the *Muslim Brotherhood*. In addition, she also investigates the content of selected MB media, but there is no transparency of why she chose respective articles to take quotes from and not others. Surprisingly, she has not carried out one single interview with a MB member although there would have been plenty of people available to shed light on the developments, in particular in the 1990s and 2000s.

Mellor describes the MB as an “interpretive community” (p. 5) and applies a theoretical social movement-approach that helps to make a distinction between their inward communication to ensure a collective identity and their outward communication to attract followers. She explains that the MB seized political opportunities to build an (international) network that is characterized by a clear hierarchy. Accordingly, political opportunities and available resources shape the discourses employed by the MB. This perspective is typical of the literature investigating the MB in the past decade, such as Wickham, Munson or Richter. Obviously, the MB has from the very beginning succeeded in creating a unique way of communicating through rituals and stories in order to form a collective identity. Mellor’s description is helpful in understanding how internal cohesion was generated. But how did this translate into strategic external communication? Mellor rightly points out that “MB activities cross over several fields (political, religious, social, and even economic)” (p. 7). It is clear that such diverse activities also need an adaptation of discourses and themes by the MB, thus not in every field the same strategies and themes can be applied.

Mellor, however, argues that the MB mainly positioned themselves as fighters against the West or Western influences, thus building a discursive wall against the

alleged intruders – and that this discourse was constitutive of all their various activities (p. 210). This actually fails to reflect the heterogeneity of the MB and its adaptability to different circumstances. The author excludes a variety of other narratives that were actually adopted by the MB and helped them become a successful political and social actor in Egypt. In particular in her review of the periods of 1996-2010 and 2011-2013 she excludes several crucial aspects, such as the “Knocking on doors” initiative in which the MB discussed their draft political program with societal opinion leaders in 2007 as well as their attempts to reach out to different kinds of societal groups such as workers or peasants. Very surprisingly, we find not one word about the Rabi’a Massacre in August 2013, in which hundreds of MB members were killed by the military, and likewise none about the extremely important discursive struggle before and after this date.

The selectiveness of what is included and not included in the portrayal of this movement is indeed problematic and thus portrays the MB as resembling the Islamic State or other radical Salafists, which it is definitely not. It thus fails to give credit to the political significance of the MB, in particular to the fact that it at several stages helped to pluralize the political discourse in Egypt – well beyond the religious lines of argumentation.

Those who know how to read this book against the background of the highly polarized opinions about the MB among Egyptians can still find interesting details in Mellor’s interpretation. Those who seek to read a more objective portrayal of the MB’s communicative strategies should look elsewhere.