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‘Is there a problem with your car?’ I asked. A member of the Muslim Brotherhood in Amman, whom I had just interviewed, insisted on driving me home, but we were moving so slowly that I could not help but think that his car was not in mint condition anymore. We were certainly not going any faster than 40 kilometres per hour and other cars were passing us left and – this being Amman – right, often loudly sounding their horns. Moreover, the car was producing such an amount of noise that suggested it was being powered by a jet engine, which – given our lack of speed – was clearly not the case. Despite all this, my host answered my question by saying: ‘Oh, the car is fine. I am just driving slowly because Islam teaches us not to break the speed limit.’

At first glance, such a response may look odd. My sense was, however, that this was merely the umpteenth example of a member of the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan trying to reassure this non-Muslim researcher that Islam – despite what I might possibly think – was really a force for good and that the Brotherhood itself was a law-abiding organisation. Although I do not believe that I had given the group’s members the impression that I thought anything to the contrary, this reassurance, that the Muslim Brotherhood and Islam in general were not evil, was an almost constant refrain in my meetings with them, which should not come as a surprise. Despite its being repressed in much of the Arab world, the Brotherhood has a reputation of being a powerful and conspiratorial group, working behind the scenes to infiltrate Western governments such as the administration of former American president Barack Obama.1 As several scholars have pointed out, such a tendency to ascribe secret agendas and hidden conspiracies to the Brotherhood is by no means exceptional.2 This impression

has probably only grown since 2012, when the Egyptian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood rose to power through presidential and parliamentary elections, only to be overthrown in a military coup a year later.3

Such conspiratorial ideas about the Muslim Brotherhood being a unified international plot striving for world domination are belied by the far more complex reality on the ground, as many studies have shown. This book seeks to contribute to this growing body of analysis on the Muslim Brotherhood by concentrating on one context in which the organisation operates: the Kingdom of Jordan. As I will explain in greater detail later in this introduction, this study focuses on how and why the Jordanian Islamist movement (encompassing the Muslim Brotherhood and its political party, the Islamic Action Front (IAF)) has moderated its views and positions on the topics of the state, political participation and societal rights and freedoms in the period 1946–2016. Before delving into this, however, I will first give an overview of the academic literature on the Muslim Brotherhood and how this book contributes to these publications. I then explain the theoretical framework, methodology and sources used for this study and conclude with an overview of the rest of the book.

The Study of the Muslim Brotherhood

Founded in 1928 by an Egyptian school teacher called Hasan al-Banna (1906–1949), the Muslim Brotherhood (Jamaʿat al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin) quickly grew into a political force to be reckoned with in the 1930s and 1940s and, from then on, also spread to other countries in the Arab world and even beyond. At a time of colonial occupation and the dictatorial Arab regimes that followed British and French rule in the Middle East, the Brotherhood’s simple but activist slogan that ‘Islam is the solution (al-Islam huwa l-hall)’ motivated and mobilised many for the cause of Islamisation through missionary work (daʿwa), party politics (hizbiyya) and sometimes even jihad.

The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt has been dealt with extensively in the literature with regard to the organisation’s origins and early development,4 its conflictual relationship with the military rulers during the reign of Egyptian President Jamalʿ Abd al-Nasir (Nasser;
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r. 1954–1970) and its internal make-up and workings. The group has garnered further attention for its role in the so-called Arab Spring, the revolts against dictatorial rule in the Arab world starting in 2011, during which it moved to the forefront of the revolution against Egyptian President Husni Mubarak, a position it subsequently lost when a coup overthrew the Brotherhood-led government in 2013.

Egypt is by no means the only country whose branch of the Muslim Brotherhood has received academic attention, however. Other countries’ Brotherhoods or Brotherhood-like groups have also dealt with in the literature, such as those in the Palestinian territories.


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(including Hamas), the Gulf, Sudan, Tunisia and especially Syria, as well as the organisation’s branches outside the Muslim world, such as in


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various European countries (France, Germany, Great Britain, the Netherlands and Spain), and the United States. Some studies portray the Muslim Brotherhood as a fundamentalist movement that takes the Qur’an, the Sunna (the Prophet Muhammad’s example) and Islamic legal texts as its frame of reference and favours Islamic law (shari’a) over


Others view the Brotherhood as an organisation that is essentially the same as terrorist groups like al-Qa'ida, or at least bears a strong ideological resemblance to them. Most studies show, however, that the Brotherhood is dynamic, susceptible to societal changes, more democratic and willing to work within the systems of countries such as Egypt.


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Morocco,24 the Palestinian territories,25 Syria26 and Tunisia.27 Some


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studies have even focussed on ‘new’ or ‘post’-Islamist movements, which emphasise flexibility, the compatibility of Islam with democracy and full citizenship for non-Muslims and a general discourse of rights (rather than duties). 28

The Study of the Muslim Brotherhood’s Moderation in Jordan

While the trajectories of the Muslim Brotherhood in these rather diverse countries are all quite different, the situation is different still in Jordan, where the Brotherhood has always enjoyed a legalised and integrated spot in Jordanian politics, unlike in, for example, Egypt and Syria, where the organisation has suffered from military and political repression. With regard to the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood, too, many studies have shown that it has accepted the monarchy in its country, has shunned the use of violence, does not seek the revolutionary overthrow of governments and is willing to work within the system to achieve its goals. 29


29 This partly changed in 2016, as we will see later on.

Several of these studies on the Jordanian Brotherhood concentrate on the organisation’s integration in the country’s political system and its ideological flexibility or ‘moderation’. The latter is a tricky term, however, because it is not always clear what people who moderate their views should be moderating towards: does the term refer to subservience to the powers that be and a general unwillingness to upset the apple cart, thereby playing into the hands of dictatorial rulers who want to preserve the status quo, or does it denote a tendency to strive for liberal and democratic reforms, which may be quite destabilising? Given the fact that this book deals with Jordan, where the Muslim Brotherhood has been allowed to participate in a pluriform yet ultimately weak parliament in the framework of a dictatorial yet comparatively mildly repressive regime, it seems right to combine these different dimensions of ‘moderation’ for this study since the Brotherhood’s trajectory contains elements of both. For the purposes of this study, ‘moderation’ is split up into three different dimensions that do not necessarily correlate: a tendency towards a peaceful and non-revolutionary attitude to the state; an inclination towards a democratic view of political participation; and a move towards greater freedom on a societal level. This cluster of dimensions – as well as their ‘radical’ opposites: (support for) violent rebellion, less democracy and less societal freedom – will be fleshed out more specifically in the Jordanian political context later on.

In political science publications, the term ‘moderation’ is often treated in the context of the so-called inclusion-moderation thesis, which holds that strongly ideologically inspired groups are likely to moderate if they are included in the political process by allowing them to fully and fairly participate in the state’s institutions, specifically parliament and government. The cooperation with other political parties, the need to compromise, the desirability of setting realistic and attainable goals and the accountability one has to voters are, this theory holds, consequences of political inclusion and constitute incentives for groups to moderate. This, in turn, allows governments and regimes to provide more space for these...
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‘moderates’, which will then increase their number, while simultaneously decreasing the number of ‘radicals’, according to this theory. Conversely, the opposite – radicalisation – is likely to happen if groups are repressed and excluded through the arrest and/or imprisonment of their members, the closure of their buildings and media, electoral measures taken to reduce their parliamentary presence and bans on their activities.34

The inclusion-moderation thesis has been specified throughout the years, however, and scholars differ in their emphasis and approach to it. As Schwedler has pointed out, some political scientists focus on the moderation of groups’ behaviour, whereas others concentrate on the moderation of a group’s ideology, while still others direct their attention towards the ideological moderation of individual Islamists.35 Another difference among scholars pertains to the outcome of their research. While some conclude that inclusion can or does lead to moderation (or that repression leads to radicalisation) in certain countries,36 this same result is doubted in others,37 while some believe that repression and exclusion, rather than causing radicalisation, may even lead to moderation.38

Interestingly, political scientists dealing with the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan through the prism of the inclusion-moderation thesis do not even agree on whether this theory holds up in this context. Some approach the theory as a whole in a critical way, but do not dismiss its validity altogether.39 Those who have made an extensive effort to apply the thesis to the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan sometimes conclude that

35 Schwedler, ‘Can Islamists Be Moderates?’, 348, 352–64.
39 Brown, Victory, 3–5; Rosefsky Wickham, Muslim Brotherhood, 282–8.