

Article

Is the Muslim Brotherhood a Sect?

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Abstract: This article proposes the novel understanding of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood as a sect, going against the grain of the existing literature, which posits it as a political group, a social movement, or a religious movement (or some combination of all of the above). The sectarianisation occurs within the group via ideological build-up, organisational tactics, and internal socialisation of behaviour. The group is also a sect by constituting its unique identity in opposition to external actors. To make the argument, the analysis draws on the statements of key figures within the movement's history, such as its founder Hasan al-Banna, as well as a range of interviews with current and ex-members. My argument has two main consequences for our understanding of sectarianism in general and the Brotherhood in particular. First, sectarianism is a process of sectarianisation that operates beyond the state and at lower levels, such as groups and individuals. Second, the Brotherhood is not a mere victim of the sectarianising practices of the state. Its sectarianisation is partly of its own making.

Keywords: Islamism; Egypt; Muslim Brotherhood; sectarianism; sects

'Spending 20 years of my life inside the Brotherhood, I can confidently tell you it is definitely a sect'.¹

1. Introduction

Scholars examining the Muslim Brotherhood predominantly define it as a 'religious movement', devoting its energy to 'moral reform' (see [Munson 2001](#), p. 4), and/or as a 'power-seeking' ([Trager 2013](#)) political organisation. These significant definitions have failed to fully grasp the group's complexity, particularity, and multi-faceted character—as intended by its founder, Hassan El-Banna,² and as examined by a few scholars calling for new definitions.³ This article thus attempts to unravel one more layer of this complexity and introduce a new facet to the character of the Brotherhood, by defining it as a sect.

Identifying the Brotherhood as a sect could serve to address another pitfall in the literature on sectarianism in general. Scholars of sectarianism have maintained their main focus at the top-down level by taking the 'state' or its 'regime'⁴ as the main unit of analysis when they study sectarianism. They have paid attention to questions such as how states and regimes accentuate identity politics ([Saleh 2017](#); [Wedeen 1998](#)), how they translate socio-religious tension into violent conflicts (see [Haddad 2011](#)), how they enflame geopolitical competition for regional leadership ([Mabon 2012](#)), or how they target specific minority groups to maintain order and consolidate authoritarian durability ([Matthiesen 2014](#); [Potter 2013](#); [Albloshi 2016](#)). This focus leaves under-explored levels, below the state and its regime, with a few exceptions.⁵ Groups or individuals contributing to or benefiting from sectarianism are under-examined or ignored,⁶ leaving readers with a false perception that sectarianism is located only at the top level reserved for ruling elites or 'entrepreneurs' ([Lynch 2013](#)) as the only actors capitalising on the phenomena as a 'political resource' ([Matthiesen 2014](#), p. 18). The article thus seeks to fill this gap, going below the state, by examining sectarianism more as a dynamic 'process'⁷ of *sectarianisation*, operating also at lower levels, including groups, such as the Brotherhood, with its individual members as sectarianising agents. Where the Brotherhood is concerned, the dynamic multi-agent process of sectarianisation means that the group stands not just as mere 'victims'⁸ or recipients



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suffering from the state as a sole sectarianising agent or perpetrator, as the predominant literature argues (Al-Anani 2019a; Pratt and Rezk 2019). Indeed, the victimisation argument is valid, as several states and regimes in the Arab region maintain their oppressive sectarianising measures (Biagini 2017; Al-Anani 2019b). These measures include detention, torture, exile, and fully othering the Brotherhood by banning them in countries such as Egypt⁹ or manipulating them into intra-sectarian battles and geopolitical rivalry such as the Saudi-Qatari case (Mabon and Menshawy 2021).

However, the Brotherhood is also an agent in the process of its sectarianisation, as I argue below. Agency is defined as the ‘capacity to act’, and the ‘manifestation of this capacity’ (Stanford Encyclopaedia 2015; Davidson 1963; Brand 1995). The group can produce its own sectarian discourses and practices, in its internal interactions and interpretations, organisational tactics, and ideological build-up. The sectarianisation also manifests in the group’s external relations with the outside world, including the state and the wider surrounding society. The internal and external aspects pertaining to the group are thus studied as part of a continuous process, under which the Brotherhood takes shape as a sect. To argue that the Brotherhood is a sectarianising agent does not mean that it is no longer a sectarianised victim to more powerful entities such as the state. Rather, and to make the picture of our understanding of the group fully rounded, it can be *both* a victim and a perpetrator as part of the dynamic process of sectarianisation.¹⁰

In the first section, I define what is a ‘sect’, genealogically and comparatively. Comparing similarities among different sects and how they operate or originate, I identify two main criteria.¹¹ A group is a sect if it (a) opposes an outside world and its ‘established order’;¹² (b) adopts a unique ‘identity’ under which the sect can mark its oppositional nature through internal practices of *insulation*, in the sense of building a protective ‘bubble’¹³ around individual members, through practices such as endogamy and closed socialisation, and *isolation*, in the sense of separating those insulated individuals from the outside world through practices of established antagonism and othering. These two criteria are mutually inclusive, as they build the overall process of sectarianisation through drawing and re-drawing boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, both internally and externally. Furthermore, these boundaries can connect my definition with other definitions of the Brotherhood as a political or social or religious movement. All these definitions are part of the shifts in these boundaries in the sectarianisation process.

This article is written with the caveat that some leaders and members of the Brotherhood reject its identification as a sect, nowadays a term fully mired in ‘negativity’ (Haddad 2017, p. 364). They use the word ‘sect’ only as a derogatory term, to dismiss other Islamic groups such as Ismaili, Druze, and Nusayrism as ‘true apostates’ (Al-Qaradawi 1990, p. 25, quoted by Mellor 2017, p. 199). In an attempt to avoid enforcing labels,¹⁴ I depend on a method of concluding the sectarianisation of the Brotherhood through self-interpretation, as the analysis includes autobiographies by the group’s founder, El-Banna, and other leaders or members, some of whom admittedly borrowed practices from other sects. I triangulate the method with 50 interviews conducted over the past five years (2016–2024) with those who remained in or exited the movement in Egypt, Turkey, the UK, and Qatar.¹⁵ The interviews were conducted on a ‘snowballing’¹⁶ basis, where my conversations were non-structured as part of describing and understanding the Brotherhood both inside-out (with those still members of the group) and outside-in (with those who had exited).¹⁷ As such, the sectarianisation process is also partly examined from the perspective of the Brotherhood’s own frames of reference and through the interpretations and interactions of its members. In addition, the definition of ‘sectarianisation’ that I use is more value-neutral. It pays attention to the process of boundaries as they are made and re-made inside and outside the group, as well as to practices of inclusion and exclusion, without presuming or prejudging them as positive or negative, right or wrong.¹⁸

2. What Is a Sect? The Two-Criteria Approach

Defining a ‘sect’ has never been an easy task. Some scholars identified specific ‘characteristics’ to tick in and out groups, identifying which are sects and which are not (Beckford 1985). Such characterisation proved impossible; the lines of drawing these characteristics cannot be ‘clear’¹⁹, as they always shifting. A group can be characterised as a sect today and a non-sect tomorrow.²⁰ Scholars address this problem by expanding and grouping all these characteristics into ‘typologies’²¹ of sects or religious movements in general. This has also proved problematic, as sects are always changing and developing into different types as well as moving between them at the same time.²²

Others set religion as the point of reference in defining sects, thus drawing two opposite trends, where one defines sects as a type of ‘hierocratic organisation’ standing against the church, as classic definitions by Max Weber, Ernst Troeltsch, and Reinhold Niebuhr entail. Another ‘relational-social trend’ expands the term beyond religion, as contemporary sociologists have argued (Moss 2023, pp. 561–80). One solution is found in turning all characteristics and typologies into all-inclusive flexible ‘criteria’, drawn from the group’s relation with the outside world.²³ For example, Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridges argued for identifying a sect by the criteria drawn on the degree of its conflict between it and the outside world (Wilson 1990, p. 52). This approach has proved useful, as it avoids locating a group in a specific and inflexible type of movement or sect, to the exclusion of other types (Roy 1984). Rather, it traces the process under which this group gains its sectarian-ness, in managing its conflictual relationship with the outside world through different levels, which can include ‘rejecting’, ‘accommodating’, or ‘confirming’ it. Also, this variation makes sect-making more of a ‘continuum’ (Haralambois and Holborn 2013, p. 457), under which the group can modify or shift its positions across time and space, as part of attempts to oppose the outside world without losing its classification as a ‘sect’.²⁴ Criteria-based analysis can identify a ‘sect’ while it is in the action of sectarianisation by dominance and resistance. Sects are defined by the dominance of the established order of things—of the church or of the world—as well as by their resistance to this order. Resistance can include actions such as a mere ‘negative understanding’ (Phillips 2015, p. 359), ‘discrimination, hate or tension’ (Haddad 2011, p. 31), or extreme violent behaviours towards this established order. Within this range of actions, the boundaries with the outside world can expand, contract, or even blur, thus reflecting a very dynamic process of sectarianisation (Menshaw 2022b).

Furthermore, analysis drawn from the above-mentioned criteria can overcome another gap of equal significance in the literature, which has long differentiated between sects across different cultures, regions, or religions. Sects in Islam and Christianity would thus appear similar, although they emerged differently and the term itself gained different meanings across history (Beshara 2018). What all these different sects share is involvement in a process of oppositional interaction with the outside world and its ‘established body of doctrine’.²⁵ This argument accords with scholarly endeavours to examine sectarianisation less as religion or ideology and more as a process by which to draw and re-draw boundaries with the outside world (Geaves 2021, p. 26; Mabon and Ardovini 2016, p. 552). From this perspective, I set two criteria for identifying a group as a sect, with more examples of sects across regions and religions.

3. The External Criterion: The Group’s Oppositionality

The first criterion shared by many sects is opposing the outside world and its ‘established order’.²⁶ A sect is thus defined by actions of dominance and resistance in its relations with the outside world.²⁷ As mentioned above, what matters here is not religion,²⁸ as ‘Christian’²⁹ sects and ‘Islamic’ (Lincoln 1961) sects would relate by similarly opposing their outside or surrounding environment.³⁰ A sect can lose its sectarian-ness and can become more of a ‘denomination’ once it gives up its oppositional relation to the outside world by assimilation or accommodation.³¹

Opposition to the outside world takes different facets and forms, such as challenging societal marginalisation, as was the case with the growth of sects in the USA in the 1960s (Haralambos and Holborn 2013, p. 459), or class inequalities, as was the case in the Anabaptist sect, which broke out in 1525 in Zurich and sprang from marginal ‘rural masses’ (Troeltsch 1932, p. 703). It could be based on colour, such as the Black Muslim Movement—described as a ‘racist sect’ (McNall 1963, p. 61) given their practices of the ‘rejection of the white society’ (Ibid.). Within authoritarian contexts, the state and its ruling elites become the main target in the oppositional relationship. Scholars thus condense the oppositional relationship within such a binarism as the ‘sect and state stand in opposition to each other’.³²

In the oppositional relationship with the outside world, religion is a factor.³³ It sets the relationship with the outside world through multi-faceted oppositions and binaries, such as the ‘profane’ and the ‘secular’ (Durkheim [1912] 1961), ‘inclusion’ and ‘exclusion’ (Aldridge 2000), the ‘individual’ and the ‘collective’,³⁴ ‘uncertainty’ and ‘certainty’,³⁵ ‘order’ and ‘disorder’,³⁶ ‘personal’ and ‘impersonal’,³⁷ and ‘inside’ and ‘outside’.³⁸ Religion also fixes boundaries with the outside world by making them appear truer and more objective. If these boundaries with the outside world are false and illogical, nevertheless, they would persist, as they gain the status of ‘objective factivity’ through this process (Berger 1967, pp. 30, 32). Religion makes these boundaries part of an ‘ultimate reality’ grounded in the ‘sacred *realissimum*, which by definition is beyond the contingencies of human meanings and human activity’ (Berger 1967, p. 32). It also sets internal boundaries within the sect, by insulating its members from the outside world through a unique ‘group identity’³⁹ drawing on a special sense of harmony, integration and solidarity, as part of mobilising against the outside world, or, in Durkheim’s worlds, providing a ‘moral community’ in which all members know how to behave towards each other as ‘brothers’, as evidenced in the name of various social movements within Islam and Christianity.⁴⁰

4. The Internal Criterion: Unique Identity

The sectarianisation process also stands internally, where the ‘construction of boundaries or dividing lines’ (Jenkins 1996) inside the group informs its oppositional relationship with the outside world. Within these internal interactions, the sect acquires an ‘unique identity’⁴¹ by which it can ‘differentiate’ (Herriot 2018, p. 39) and ‘separate’⁴² itself from the outside world and can also encourage individual members to internalise such identity through everyday practices and values. Across most sects, part of the recruitment campaign includes sect leaders attracting potential recruits by claiming they ‘offer something distinctive’ (Herriot 2018, p. 39) at this internal level. A sect member has to internalise this unique identity by adopting ‘specified doctrines, beliefs, and sometimes behavioural requirement’.⁴³

The uniqueness of the sect’s internal identity can appear in ideas or practices, such as salvation. Salvation allows the group to claim for itself the status of being the one and only path towards God. Although some dismiss Islam as not being a ‘religion of salvation’;⁴⁴ what matters is not religion *per se*, but the monopoly of truth based on access to God or closeness to Him as a unique advantage denied to others (see Ramadan 2013, pp. x–xii). Against this understanding, scholars demonstrate how Islamic sects also take shape as they provide ‘salvation’.⁴⁵ The mission of salvation accords with the first criterion, since the sect seeks to preserve salvific truths from the outside world, which seeks to ‘degrade, forget, or destroy those truths’ (Gaiser 2017, p. 75). Furthermore, salvation arms sect followers with a sense of superiority over this outside world, stigmatised as ‘ignorant and deeply wretched’.⁴⁶ Salvation also presents a polar perception of reality, what Calvin Redekop calls a ‘dichotomy of a black-and-white world’.⁴⁷ It is a dual mission, both to ‘proclaim the message to the world’ and at the same time ‘protect’ the sect from the world (Berger 1967, p. 384). This protection can take forms such as separating sect members from an outside modern world that may appear ‘too materialistic, lonely and impersonal’.⁴⁸ It can also

provide certainty, by providing sect members with a ‘coherent perspective upon everything happening in the world’ (Howe 1982, p. 87).

Along with salvation, the sect gains its unique identity in socialisation. It adopts ‘behavioural rules calculated to protect sect values by reducing the influence of the external world when contact necessarily occurs’ (Wilson 1959, p. 11). These rules endow followers with a ‘unique style of living’,⁴⁹ evidenced in practices such as endogamous marriage patterns. For example, the Druze sect forbids both men and women from marrying outside of their community, helping to establish ‘exclusive kindred’ inside the sect and a ‘self-contained solidarity’ (Khuri 1990, p. 209). These social practices not only isolate members from the outside world by ‘setting them apart from the ‘world’ (Wilson 1959, p. 4), they also insulate members, driving their relations inward by controlling and restricting members’ access to external social networks such as family or friends.⁵⁰ Part of the insulation is applied through enforcing similarity, conformity, and uniformity. Sects deny their members ‘exhibiting a diverse range of behavior.’⁵¹ In Herriot’s words, the person is ‘a sect-member before he is anything else’ (Wilson 1959, p. 14). Insulation also portrays the battle with the outside world as more united, confirming ‘us’ as sect members and ‘them’ as the fragmented outside world.⁵²

The two criteria mentioned above are mutually inclusive. The oppositional relationship with the outside world operates with and through an internal relationship inside the sect itself, where boundaries are made and re-made in the form of ideas or practices of recruitment, indoctrination, and socialisation. Understanding the sectarianisation of the group thus requires, as some scholars also argue,⁵³ delving into its ‘inward orientation’ along with ‘outward orientation’ (Sedgwick 2000, pp. 190–98). Political, social, and religious aspects all come together as part of serving these two criteria under the broader sectarianisation process. In the next section, I detail the sectarianisation of the Muslim Brotherhood via identifying the two criteria that link all these aspects and orientations.

5. Is the Brotherhood a Sect? The External Criterion

If we examine the first criteria, the conclusion must be that the Brotherhood’s relationship with the outside world or a surrounding ‘established order’ is oppositional *par excellence*. This oppositional relationship is reflected in the very goal of founding the group. The group founder, Hassan El-Banna, set its ultimate goal in replacing the established order with an Islamic one, or as he put it, ‘politics is a part of religion, that Islam encompasses the ruler and the ruled’ (Mitchell 1969, pp. 102–3), and that there is ‘no authority in Islam except the authority of the state which protects the teachings of Islam and guides the nations to the fruits of both religion and the world’ (Mitchell 1969, pp. 102–3). Replacement of the established societal order is made necessary, as the outside world is threatening the group ‘with extinction’ (Ibid., quoting Ghazali, MHN (Faruqi tr.), 26, 14–15), threatening Islam, which the group proclaims to solely represent. The group’s ideology reflects this oppositionality to the outside world by rejecting and seeking to replace it. The group’s writings and rhetoric are based on a self-claim that it alone adopts a more viable and comprehensive alternative to the existing established order, Islam. This is best characterised by Omar Al-Telmissani, another leader of the group, as a ‘creed, worship, homeland, citizenship, creation, the physical, culture, law, forgiveness, and power’ (al-Tilmisani 1987, quoted in Abed-Kotob 1995, p. 323).

There are many practical examples to demonstrate this oppositional relationship. In its ideology,⁵⁴ the Brotherhood separates itself from the outside world by envisaging Islam as a comprehensive frame of reference and part of how the group can be ‘distinguished by our own values’ (Quoted by Mitchell 1969, p. 242). The group presents the concept of its foundation, *Rabaniyya* (which literally derives from *Rab*, God), as part of making itself the sole group with a salvation path, helping people ‘get acquainted with God’ (El-Banna 1990, p. 125), and obtaining His satisfaction. Potential recruits are convinced that it is the ‘only Islamic movement [they] should join’ (Al-Anani 2016, p. 77).

Upon its foundation, El-Banna called the Brotherhood ‘*Hezbollah* [Party of God] because they live for God’ (Mellor 2017, p. 99). *Rabaniyya* enhances isolation from the outside world as evidenced in the group’s established principle of *isti’laa bil-iman* [superiority by faith] and insulation by its other established principle of *uzla shu’riyaa* [conscious isolation].⁵⁵

‘We were inculcated by the group’s leaders and its teachings that we are *Muslim* individuals who will create *Muslim* society and *Muslim* state before we become masters of the world’, said ex-member Sameh Eid, interviewed at his home in 6th of October City, on the outskirts of Cairo (Eid 2024). The Brotherhood appears closer to God than other sects, claiming ‘closeness to God’⁵⁶ or exclusive access to Him.⁵⁷ For example, members of ‘conversionist’ sects, when they take the Bible as the only guide to salvation,⁵⁸ also internalise the message, with a full belief that the group constitutes ‘our only way to paradise’.⁵⁹

Rabaniyya serves sectarianisation by creating more of a ‘free play of antagonistic reactions’. The idea replaces any attempts of a ‘stable mechanism’ with a confrontational relationship with the outside world (Foucault 1994, p. 347). The new order, which the Brotherhood envisages under *Rabaniyya*, includes radical steps to replace features of the existing established order, such as replacing ‘man-made’ laws with a ‘positive law’ that can implement the ‘organisation of society and its direction’, under which Islam would achieve the total unity of man and thus of society (Mitchell 1969, p. 242). Further, the *Rabaniyya* would also challenge the established order by introducing an alternative ‘Islamic order’ based on the creation of a viable ‘Islamic state’ (Ibid., p. 245), which can be created through a number of principles identified by Mitchell in his seminal work on the Brotherhood as:

- (1) the Qur’an is the fundamental constitution; (2) government operates on the concept of consultation (*shura*); (3) the executive ruler is bound by the teachings of Islam and the will of the people. (Ibid., p. 246)

Along with ideology, the group has long taken specific practical measures to reinforce its oppositional relationship with the outside world. For example, it has long rejected the formation of a political party on basis of El-Banna’s rule, with ‘no *Hizbiyya* [being founders or members of political parties] in Islam’. It is based on a foundational belief that *da’wa* should not be confined to a party that would end up ‘aligned with patrons of the ruling authorities’ (Abed-Kotob 1995, p. 329). Although the Brotherhood changed this rule and established its own party after the 2011 revolution in Egypt, the step was short-lived and was widely dismissed inside the Brotherhood as a ‘betrayal’ (Menshaw 2020, pp. 127, 146) to its principles, based on a full zero-sum battle against the established order. Others were also suspicious of the step, as the group has adopted more of a ‘permanent opposition’ that is ‘far removed from governmental turnover’ (Sartori 1966, p. 152) especially as it is more of ‘anti-system opposition’ (Sartori 1966, p. 152), ready to tear the established order apart to make it accord with the group’s ultimate goals, i.e., creating an Islamic state and society.

Having said that, in the group’s 100-year history, there are moments of accommodation and compromise with the outside world. When it took power in Egypt in 2012–2013 after the fall of Mubarak’s regime, the group became involved in the existing politics, such as taking part in legislative and presidential elections. It could be also seen as a status quo actor after 2011, given its collaboration with the ruling SCAF (the Supreme Council of Armed forces), which assumed power after Mubarak’s resignation on 11 February 2011 and relinquished power on 30 June 2012 on the inauguration as president of Mohamed Morsi, a Brotherhood leader. These steps mean that the group was not necessarily oppositional or revolutionary. It was rather accused of being anti-revolutionary, and acting similarly to Mubarak’s regime (Menshaw 2020, pp. 144–50). Some scholars argue that the Brotherhood has not abandoned its ‘ghetto mentality’ (El-Sherif 2014) while in power, and the language of senior figures during this period supports this argument that, although having power, in character, the Brotherhood remains outside of the system and establishment and therefore sect-like.⁶⁰ Having said that, this was more of a period that validated rather than falsified its oppositional relationship with the outside world or established order. As some of its members testify, the group quickly fell out of power after less than a year in the party, due to the Brotherhood’s isolationist and oppositional nature with the outside world. Members

inside the group and ordinary Egyptians have both publicly shared sentiments that the group deliberately attempted not to be ‘inclusive or mainstream’ (Al-Qassas 2017) and not to cooperate with any surrounding political forces or win over the broader society to change it. They mention the ‘*Ikhwanisation*’—the process of ‘controlling different sectors of the state and its apparatuses by replacing existing officials with its own members’ (Aboul-Gheit 2017; see also Mohamed and Momani 2014). Even promises of compromise, including the group’s statements calling for creating a ‘civil state with an Islamic way’, meaning a compromise with the existing established political order, was taken to be deliberately vague, as the group ‘did not answer questions on how it will apply this idea’.⁶¹ Across history, there are moments witnessing the Brotherhood’s active engagement with the established order and its institutions, such as professional associations and syndicates in Egypt in the 1980s and 1990s. Nevertheless, this involvement was always transient, geared by the group towards changing the established order from within. One of the former leaders of the group, Mamun Huydabi, justified it along these lines:

I’ve said many times, we entered elections under the slogan ‘Islam is the solution’. How can it be said that we participate in the existing system when we are trying to change it in the preferred manner—by changing institutions with institutions? (Abed-Kotob 1995, p. 330)

Many interviewees reiterated that the group’s interaction with the surrounding society or politics ‘comes with the purpose of rejecting, changing and reforming it and by introducing those around us to the true understanding of Islam’ (Ubada 2024). Ahmad Ubada, a member of the group for over 40 years, referred to a constituent part of the duties of each member of the Brotherhood being *daawa fardiyya* (individual *daawa*), which includes recruiting new members, with the goal of changing those outside of the group ‘by awakening faith into their hearts, making them understand their Quraan in the right way’ (Ubada 2024).

It is fair to argue that the group’s oppositional relationship with the outside world is both active and reactive. The outside world produces resources, limitations, conditions, and opportunities for the Brotherhood to maintain its ‘oppositional’ relationship. State leaders such as former president Hosni Mubarak used oppression against the group as a scare-mongering tool.⁶² Such leaders have long warned Western countries against dealing with the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamist movements in general, since there ‘there is no spirit of reconciliation between Islamic fundamentalism and the modern world’ (Perlmutter 1992). The Brotherhood and Islamists were necessarily cast as ‘anti-Western, anti-American, or anti-democratic’ (Esposito 1992, p. 212), despite attempts or initiatives by some leaders of the group, which demonstrated the possibility for them to work within the ‘contours of the modern nation-state’ and reach a ‘peaceful co-existence’ with the established order (Abed-Kotob 1995, p. 322). Lucia Ardovini shows how the Brotherhood was part of the state-led sectarianisation process, drawing on official rhetoric in making the group the ‘other’ that should be dealt with using violence and systematic repression (Ardovini 2016, p. 582). The state also presented its own versions of Islam as more ‘moderate’ and accommodative of the established order, by setting it opposite the Brotherhood’s version of Islam, propagated as ‘radical’ (Ardovini 2016, p. 582) and confrontational with the outside world.⁶³

6. Is the Brotherhood a Sect? The Second Criterion

The Brotherhood’s sectarianisation may be based on applying the second criteria of becoming a sect: building a specific identity through which it can draw boundaries with the outside world and within its own ranks. This identity draws on a sense of uniqueness and distinction inculcated into the minds of the group’s members. The group posits itself as a ‘distinctive section of the Egyptian society’ (Abdel-Halim 1994, p. 111) or adopts a ‘society within a greater society’⁶⁴ mentality. The group members are always reminded that they are part of an exclusive, different group within this society (El-Hennawy 2011). This identity is unique enough to be called *Ikhwanism*, which emanates from the name of the group *Ikhwan al-Muslimoon*, literally meaning Muslim Brothers (Al-Anani 2016, p. 119). As

one female Egyptian member of the group told me, ‘we want to be fully distinct from the outside world across all fields and in many different ways’.⁶⁵ These fields and ways can include language, dress code, and social practices such as marriage, as detailed below.

6.1. Language

The founding members suggested calling the group a ‘society’, ‘a syndicate’, or a ‘club’. Founder El-Banna told members at their first meeting in March 1928, ‘We are brothers serving Islam, so we have to be ‘the Muslim Brothers’ (El-Banna 2021, p. 85). The title is sectarianising in the sense of combining being a ‘Muslim’ and a ‘brother’ as two dividing lines, setting boundaries with the outside world, implicitly othered as opposites: as ‘non-Muslims’ or ‘non-Brothers’. In discursive terms, the name carries ‘adversarial framing’ (Gamson 1995, pp. 85–106) or ‘boundary framing.’ (Hunt and Benford 1994, p. 194) El-Banna assumed the unique title *Murshid* (the guide), deliberately ‘eschewing other titles that he associated with the role of a leader seeking power’ (Ibid.). He is also known inside the group as ‘the Imam’—the same title adopted by leaders in sects such as the Shias, Druze, and Alawai. Indeed, the whole idea of an imam in many Islamic sects, such as the Ibadis and Zaidis, draws on making the group leader distinct, becoming ‘infallible, a *muqallid* (imitable model), the epitome of piety, and a manifestation of divine perfection’.⁶⁶ In this sense of being venerated by his followers,⁶⁷ El-Banna is similar to leaders of other sects who also took up the title of ‘imam’.⁶⁸

Members internalise this language of uniqueness and distinctiveness from the outside world. For example, the everyday language in expressing gratitude is not with a simple *shukran* (thank you), commonly used among ‘ordinary’ Egyptians, but with the more formal and less common *jazak Allah khair* (‘may God reward you with good’) (Kandil 2015, p. 73). This language is stabilised and sanctified, drawn on an ideological basis or specific interpretations of the Quraan or *Hadith* (the words of the prophet). Heba Zakariyya, a leading female member of the group, said that *jazak Allah khair* must be spoken by the members, as it is based on a *hadith* promising those who ‘say to her or his brother Allah’s blessings and benevolence if it is spoken’ (Zakariyya 2023). As astutely surmised by El-Tahawy, a member of the group for more than 20 years, ‘the Brotherhood has its own dictionary’ (El-Tahawy 2018). Many of those whom I interviewed across four countries agree that they can identify a member of the group ‘by his vocabulary’.⁶⁹ Again, the Brotherhood is similar to other sects who find part of their distinction is imposing distinctive linguistic norms and uses, such as Christian sects of Mennonites, Hutterites, and Doukhobors.⁷⁰ Distinctive language includes not only using certain words, phrases, or sentences, but also the way language is used and to which situations it may be applied. Article 7 of the group’s General Law states, ‘Bluntness, crudeness, and abuses in words or by hints must be avoided at all costs’ (Lia 1998, p. 110). Even joking has to abide by these rules sufficiently; as a member comments, ‘we throw jokes differently, in a way that an outsider would not even recognise or laugh at them’.⁷¹ The behaviour coheres with other practices such as restricting the member’s access to what to read from a controlled body of literature through a process of censorship.⁷²

6.2. Dress Code

Distinction in language also combines with distinction in other practices of social behaviour, such as ‘walking in a certain way’ (Zakariyya 2023) or even getting dressed in a certain way. Although many women in the Egyptian society also share with female members of the group the practice of wearing a headscarf, the latter is distinctively donned in the group, as ‘the rules inside the group are that the headscarf has to comply with specific aspects such as not being tight, not being transparent and being longer in size’ (Ghaniyya 2023). The Brotherhood institutionalise and codify these practices through rules based on discipline and punishment, as a ‘member can be warned or penalised if she or he does not abide by them.’ (Ibid.) In addition, and in alignment with the two criteria identified in the sectarianisation process, members took it upon themselves to expand these aspects of social

behaviour into the outside world, as part of challenging and reforming the outside world. For example, a member asked a male acquaintance, not a member of the society, ‘to stop wearing a gold ring since it contradicts with Islamic beliefs banning men from doing so’.⁷³

6.3. Marriage

The Brotherhood consolidates its identity of uniqueness and distinctiveness by drawing internal and external borders in social practices such as marriage. The Brotherhood encourages endogamy among its members,⁷⁴ an encouragement that turns into an order, with a warning that a male member must not marry a non-member female, as this would hamper efforts to reach the coveted ‘victory’ of the group, realising its overall goal of establishing Islam as a comprehensive order.⁷⁵ Based mostly on ‘husband–wife similarity’,⁷⁶ this type of marriage instantiates the group’s unique identity, as the family is held together by the single mission of creating the ‘Muslim house’ as the nucleus of the coveted ‘Muslim nation’ (El-Banna 1990, p. 394; Kandil 2015, p. 74) imagined as part of rejecting or replacing the established world outside of the group.

Endogamy serves the oppositional relationship with the outside world by seeing Brotherhood families as against other non-Brotherhood families. It also clarifies the mission of recruiting members of other families, treated as potential targets for recruitment.⁷⁷ As El-Banna constructed it, ‘general connectivity’ (Al-Anani 2016, p. 73) with the outside world is geared towards ‘spreading the teachings of Islam’ among family members who have not joined the group (El-Banna 1990, p. 214). Many members with whom I talked referred to tasks and campaigns to lure their relatives into membership in the group (Ayman 2023). This relates the Brotherhood to other sects, where relatives are treated as the ‘unsaved’ and targeted in attempts to convert them (Herriot 2018, p. 56). Furthermore, recruitment into and membership in the Brotherhood becomes more of a ‘family business’ (Eid 2024), similar to other sects, where membership is arranged by proving claims of personal merit to sect authorities, such as the ‘recommendation of members in good standing’, such as family members (Herriot 2018, pp. 1–5).

These practices further separate the Brotherhood from the outside world and insulates them, especially as children of parents who are members. (Menshawy 2020) As Ahmed Abdel-Gawad said, ‘I opened my eyes in life to find my parents and whole my family as members’;⁷⁸ many members could not identify a specific date for joining the group, as they were born into it. This has a significant social impact, as the ‘primary socialisation’ (that takes place within a family in infancy and childhood) and the ‘secondary socialisation’ (Fulcher and Scott 2011) (taking place in interactions outside the household) become one, as the two levels conflate within the unique identity of the Brotherhood, whose smallest unit is aptly called *usra* (family). As Mohamed Aboul-Gheit puts it, ‘The Brotherhood members are your family members, your colleagues at work, your neighbours, your friends’ (Aboul-Gheit 2017). This further supports the Brotherhood being a sect, especially as it relates to other sects, marked by their inward orientation towards the ‘fellowship principle’, under which members aim at direct personal fellowship through marriage, among other practices, unavailable in other institutions or the surrounding world (Troeltsch 1932, p. 331). Endogamy also increases insulation and isolation by the conflation of links between ‘real kinship’ based on blood family members and ‘imagined kinship’ based on membership in the group. This imagined kinship replaces and antagonises the real kinship. Members of the group also end up becoming closer to their Brotherhood members than to the members of their biological families, including their parents.⁷⁹ Islam Lutfy, a member for 16 years, anecdotally referred to how a leader of the group bragged, ‘I lived for 40 years without dealing, buying or selling anything with anyone who is not a Brotherhood member’ (Lutfy 2017). Ahmed Ayman, a 24-year-old member, explained the practice as part of effective insulation through intra-group solidarity:

...where we have to give priority to members of the group, to the extent if you are sick, you choose a doctor who is a member of the Brotherhood, and if you want

to have your hair cut, you have a barber who is a member of the Brotherhood. (Ayman 2023)

Ayman ironically remembers how all his Brotherhood friends and their fathers all went to the same barber, leading to noticeably similar haircuts (Ibid.). These practices also affirm the reality of drawing boundaries with the outside world. The reality is best described by a member of the group: 'We are part of the surrounding society, as we are working in professions as doctors, teachers or engineers, without necessarily being similar to this society' (Ibid.). A former Brotherhood member agreed, arguing that 'the group members observe the outside world but never live into it' (El-Tahawy 2018). The group ensures the durability of this reality by facilitating the creation of a 'full alternative social milieu for the members to interact and socialise among themselves and away from the outside world' (Affan 2017). A member can thus abandon any external social relations and erect complete boundaries against the outside world. Sameh Fayez, a member for 11 years until he exited it in 2011, comments,

You read Brotherhood literature, written by Brothers on Brothers. You pray in Brotherhood mosques, built and run by Brothers. You marry a Sister [female member of the Brotherhood] nurtured in a family according to Brotherhood guidelines. Even on recreational trips, you meet Brothers, ride buses owned by Brothers, and stay at a place administered by Brothers.⁸⁰

These intense levels of 'closed socialisation'⁸¹ also allow the individual member less space for challenging the group or its practices (including those of insulation and isolation). She or he performs her or his 'personal self' or 'personal identity' as always 'subsumed' into the collective identity of the group (See Menshawy 2022c, pp. 84–102). The Brotherhood has long called for members to avoid self-interest, get rid of 'individual whims', and sacrifice 'selfish desires'.⁸² Similar to other sects in Islam and Christianity,⁸³ the 'self' for the Brotherhood is a negative entity that has to be 'de-materialised', 'spiritualised', 'purified', and 'elevated' (El-Banna 1990, p. 125). The sect thus establishes a double mission: 'human betterment'⁸⁴ and protection from the world and its established orders, which members must resist or challenge (Wilson 1959, p. 6). This is in similarity with other sects, especially Sufi Islamic sects, whose influence and connection the group's leaders (such as El-Banna) have acknowledged.⁸⁵ These sects base their goals of eschewing on *dunya*—literally, 'the lower nearer realm', in order to cultivate the other world replacing it (*akhira*, 'the ultimate realm') and the need for individuals to search within the inner self (Karamustafa 2007, p. 2); the sect claims its mission is to help individuals realise this journey.

7. Conclusions

This article moves from concept to practice in a rather direct and systematic manner. The first section establishes two criteria, identified and grouped on the basis of examining sects in different contexts across regions and religions. Such enumeration is not meant to be rigorously exhaustive but rather illustrative of the generalities or commonalities in ways of thinking, acting, and existing shared by different sects. All the criteria are based on relations with the outside world, including how a sect can negotiate its opposition with this world through dissent or isolation, and through adopting a unique exclusionary identity, re-arranging internal relations to prioritise this battle.

In the example of the Muslim Brotherhood, the group's relationship with the outside world is set in oppositional terms, as its ultimate goal is replacing existing reality with another one, drawn from an imagined 'Islamic state and society'. The oppositional relation with the outside world empirically manifests in ideas such as *Rabaniyya* and in practices such as endogamy and linguistic propriety. They both set, normalise, and justify boundaries with the outside world, on the basis of which the process of sectarianisation takes shape.

The two criteria related within the sectarianisation process draw on rules and relations of boundary-making between the sect and the outside world, as well as between members of the sects themselves, and how they internalise these relations with the outside world

into their own lives. Practices of internalisation manifest in language use, dress/behaviour, or marriage norms. There are other key elements of boundary-setting to explore, at more physical levels, such as geographic spatialisation due to housing or working; it is to be hoped that the findings of this article provide a strong encouragement to pursue potential research projects in such areas in the future.

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Notes

- ¹ (Aboul-Gheit 2017) Aboul-Gheit (28 years at the time of the interview), a former journalist who died in December 2022, was a member of the Brotherhood for 22 years, until he exited the group in 2011.
- ² El-Banna described the Brotherhood as a ‘Salafi da’wa, Sunni pathway, Sufi reality, political organisation, sporting group, cultural-scientific network, economic company and social idea’, cited in (Adeeb 2022).
- ³ Stressing the group’s ‘ghetto mentality’ and its evolution into a ‘closed organisation’ and ‘opaque society’, Ashraf El-Sherif argued that the Brotherhood is ‘more than simply a political party, social association, or religious order, the Brotherhood became a society that supported its members through both vertical religious guidance and horizontal social solidarity’. See (El-Sherif 2014).
- ⁴ I follow scholars who conflate state, government, and regime. A regime refers to ruling elites setting ‘their own survival at the forefront of political projects’ (Mabon 2020, p. 10), and a state refers to a ‘political project shaped and reshaped by the context and contingency’ (ibid.) related to this purpose. One example of this top-down approach is (Valbjørn 2019).
- ⁵ For the focus on ‘everyday sectarianism’ in Bahrain and Kuwait, see (Fibiger 2018); for the bottom-up sectarianism in Lebanon, see (Nucho 2016).
- ⁶ Scholars even dedicate time and effort to understanding which types of states produce and reinforce sectarianism; see (Hashemi 2016).
- ⁷ A few scholars have paid attention to sectarianism as a process, henceforth renaming it ‘sectarianisation’. However, they have not gone into detail about the top-down/bottom-up levels of sectarianisation, inadvertently leaving the phenomenon examined at the top level of the state and its elites. See (Hashemi and Postel 2017). Others have admitted that sectarianism is too complex, elusive, and multi-faceted to be a ‘persistent intersectional issue’. However, they have engaged with the complexities and contingencies of the topic at the top level of the state or inter-state relations; see (Mabon 2022).
- ⁸ (Huzaifa 2021). Huzaifa (28 years old at the time of the interview), an Istanbul-based journalist, exited the movement in 2014 after more than 20 years as a member.
- ⁹ Some scholars draw the state behaviour as the independent variable in the sectarianisation process. They argue that sects develop where state repression is high and the political situation is fully divided; see (Overmyer 1976).
- ¹⁰ Ironically, state elites play the same ‘game’ the opposite way around. Some leaders who create and entrench sectarianism in countries such as Syria claim themselves victims of sectarianisation by radical Islamist movements; see (Menshaw 2022a), also (Menshaw 2022b).
- ¹¹ The two criteria also take into consideration the evolution of the term from its Latin/Greek origin. For example, following the ancient Christian redefinition of the term, a sect refers to a schism or departure from the ‘mainstream’ or ‘central’ locus of authority, i.e., the one and only Orthodox church. It also refers to self-alienation among members of the sects; see (Moss 2023, pp. 563–64). The criteria also informed following interpretations and redefinitions, such as the Weberian analyses of the church–sect dichotomy.

- 12 The analysis is based on the 'sociological turn' in the latter decades of the 20th century, by understanding the term as 'oppositional orientation against some form of social, religious, cultural, or economic establishment, which these scholars most often called a *church*, or *society*, or the *world*', (Moss 2023, pp. 561–80). For example, Johnson, identified the sect as the one which 'rejects the social environment in which it exists'.
- 13 Mahmoud El-Tahawy, Phone Interview, 5 June 2018. Mahmoud (52 years old at the time of the interview), a doctor and an academic, left the group in 1987 after six years of membership. Theories on sectarianism have highlighted insulation as a constituent factor defining a 'sect' as a smaller group that 'aspires after personal inward perfection' and seeks 'a direct personal fellowship' among its members'; see (Troeltsch 1932, p. 333). The insulation thus comes out of the inward group's focus on internal cohesion.
- 14 I am so grateful to Adam Gaise for the insight on this point; Adam Gaise (Professor, Department of Religion, Florida State University), in discussion with the author, 29 October 2021.
- 15 I held interviews in these countries, as thousands of members of the group in Turkey found sanctuary after the coup against Morsi in 2013.
- 16 I adopt this 'non-probability' technique to examine a group that can be still described as secretive and underground. It is also justified, as my sample does not merely depend on the 'apostate' type. This type includes those who have 'louder' voices, as they can dramatically and publicly narrate their experiences (and some of them even used this public-ness to 'reverse' their loyalties and even become 'professional enemies' of the movement they left). The snowballing thus allowed me to reach those who are 'hidden' and difficult to locate as well as their own narratives on their experiences inside the group. Practically, snowballing was made necessary especially in Egypt's current 'conflict environment' full of suspicion and mistrust, drawn from official anti-Brotherhood hostility and public outrage. I therefore changed the names of some interviewees at their own request.
- 17 Some of the testimonies of those who have exited the Brotherhood can be described as exaggerated and vindictive. I excluded these. Any arguments made in my interviews with ex-members are compared and contrasted with those of existing members of the Brotherhood. I also combined interviews with further methods, such as analysing the discourse of published autobiographies or biographies or other books written by existing or exiting leaders and members of the group. The triangulation of the published sources with unpublished sources, as well as interviews with discourse analysis, can thus add reliability and truthfulness, since any points mentioned in the text are confirmed and corroborated.
- 18 'The word *secta* in its original context carried neither negative nor exclusive connotations', (Moss 2023, pp. 563–67).
- 19 For example, Sedgwick calls the 'Shi'a' a denomination in their own right, see (Sedgwick 2000, p. 201).
- 20 Giddens and Sutton made a similar argument on cults, contending that 'cults resemble sects', including deviance from the mainstream. Still, as better phrased by Giddens and Sutton, 'what is a cult in one country may well be established religious practice in another' (Giddens and Sutton 2021, p. 749). Eileen Barker succinctly shows the variation between people and from place to place or time to time. As she puts it, 'one person's cult is likely to be another person's religion' (Barker 2011, pp. 212–26).
- 21 Typologies can be problematic, as the expanded and refined definitions would create a cyclical process of producing new types and subtypes as 'further research and reflection bring to light the independence of more elements in the original formulation', (Johnson 1963, p. 541).
- 22 See (Beckford 1985). For example, the Quakers started out as a radical egalitarian sect but evolved into a 'more moderate denomination', (Haralambos and Holborn 2013, p. 461).
- 23 Other scholars adopt the approach of reaching criteria for sects, albeit they treat them as static or classificatory, thus missing the dynamics of changes and evolutions and thus turn the criteria into another form of typology; see (Troeltsch 1932).
- 24 For example, Herriot divided the 'New Brethren' protestant sect into 'tight Brethren' and 'loose Brethren' to group the varied practices and beliefs inside the sect; see (Herriot 2018, p. 7).
- 25 (Sedgwick 2000, p. 197). Scholars such as Sedgwick agree and prove the point of treating sects in Islam and Christianity similarly. He stresses that Islamic sects are 'in conflict with its environment, just as in the contemporary West'; see (Sedgwick 2000, p. 202).
- 26 (Scott McNall 1963, p. 62; Johnson 1963, p. 542) 'the group the sect is the group that rejects the social environment in which it exists. The rejection varies at levels and degree as it could be partial and selective in some sects and complete in others.'
- 27 Some scholars set the political orientation at the more formal level of state politics, such as naming Trotskyites in the US as members of a 'political sect'; see (Howe 1982).
- 28 Scholars studying the Muslim Brotherhood might contest the whole comparative typology, on the basis that a dominant viewpoint in the Islamic world is that Islam does not recognise the conflict that occurred in Europe between the spiritual and temporal [powers], or the one between the Church and the state. Nevertheless, the fact that this separation was not as clear-cut and well defined as saying the church and the state can swap places, and that the Islamic world has its own moments of tension, thus making attempts to separate the religious from political as providing gaps between the two religions 'not realistic', (Mitchell 1969, p. 244).
- 29 References to Christian sects are based on general features, and they thus ignore differences and variations of evolution and relations with the outside world among them. See (Wilson 1959). For example, Wilson's differentiation of 'conversionist', 'Adventist', and 'Introversionalist' groups (Ibid., p. 8). Nevertheless, what is common among all these sects is that they all

emerged within moments and events of ‘stresses and tensions differently experienced within the total society’, be they economic changes or disturbances of resocialisation, industrialisation, or urbanisation; see (Wilson 1959, p. 8). It is here that sects gain their ‘oppositional’ feature, as McNall explains it as one of his criteria.

30 Fuad Khuri, studying several Islamic sects, found it sufficient to succinctly identify sects as ‘groups in rebellion’, (Khuri 1990, p. 19). This is in alignment with the earlier literature, which studied Sunnism as the representative, orthodox ‘dominant expression’ and the Shia as the ‘sectarian heterodox breakaway’ (See Wansbrough 1978). Geaves argues that sectarianism in Islam began with the Umayyad dynasty, where the Kharijites rebelled against the Umayyad state. See (Geaves 2021, p. 31).

31 Denomination ‘accepts the standards and values of the prevailing culture’ and ‘accepts the values of secular society and the state’; (Wilson 1959). Some scholars regard the ‘denomination’ as a sect that has ‘cooled down’ to become an institutionalised body rather than an active protest movement. Denominations gain their shape as they become recognised by the established order, including churches, and often cooperate harmoniously with them; see (Giddens and Sutton 2021).

32 (Khuri 1990, p. 17). Some, such as Michel Foucault, contend that the State replaced the Church and its tools, including a totalling ‘form of power’ and a ‘political power that ignores individuals, looking only at the interests of totality... of a class or a group among the citizens’ (Foucault 1994, p. 332). Evidence is provided by references to Hamadanis and the Fatimids. The latter has taken over power at certain points of Islamic history, but they failed to abandon their ‘oppositional’ nature, either by maintaining their minority status or by generally following non-assimilative, non-incorporative policies with regard to their surroundings; see (Khuri 1990, p. 19).

33 See Menshawy’s analysis of other factors, such as secularism, as one of these factors leading to sectarianisation. See (Menshawy 2022b). On the factor of religion in the oppositional relationship, see (Yinger 1957, p. 146).

34 Durkheim’s concept of ‘collective conscience’ includes permeating and shaping the behaviour of individuals. However, binarism takes shape within the rational choice theories of religion, adopting an ‘individualistic’ stance, where religion meets the needs of individuals, rather than those of social groups or society as a whole. Religion is perceived in terms of a market in which individual consumer choices are important in determining whether a particular religion prevails or not, and in terms of the ‘supply-side’, based on the availability of alternative products to choose from; see (Stark and Bainbridge 1985).

35 (Malinowski 1954). Uncertainty is drawn from emotions of anxiety towards life crises or events we cannot control, such as death; certainty draws on emotions of relief and a feeling of control and confidence.

36 Talcott Parsons pioneered this view, arguing that religion brings order as a mechanism for adjustment to unknown and uncontrollable events, uncontrolled by individuals, and a means of restoring the normal pattern of life. ‘In this way, religion maintains social stability by relieving the tension and frustration that could disrupt social order’; see (Parsons 1951, 1937).

37 This is the Marxist perspective on religion, where it is seen as a form of distortion of real relationships between people and inanimate objects; see (Dawson 2011).

38 For example, religious movements that arose in the 1990s under the name of ‘New Age’ were about a turn towards beliefs focusing on the ‘inside’, in the form of ‘self-spirituality’, focusing on a person looking inside themselves instead of outside. ‘Congregational activities related to traditional religious organisations’ (Heelas 2003).

39 A group or social identity is the ‘belief that one belongs to a specific category of person. It becomes an element of the self-concept when one internalizes the beliefs, values, and practices of that category and treats them as one’s own’, (Herriot 2018, p. 42).

40 E.g., the Congregation of Christian Brothers, De La Salle Brothers, the Christian Brotherhood and, of course, the Muslim Brotherhood.

41 Identity is defined from the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactions, where meanings are socially constructed and decided through interactions and interpretations as individuals decide. In this sense, ‘identity’ is discussed here, as individuals and the sect give meaning to it by defining and interpreting it in certain ways. The sectarianisation process is thus defined through the ideas that each sect and its members hold for it.

42 (Wilson 1959, p. 12). Separation can also operate at the level of relations with other sects. For example, the Open Brethren sect practiced separation in its congregations that ‘drew clear boundaries between themselves and surrounding congregations, whether of other Brethren or of ‘the sects’ so-called’ (Herriot 2018, p. 25). ‘Adventist’ sects are founded on the principle of separation from the world; see (Wilson 1959).

43 (McNall 1963, p. 62). McNall based his criteria on his analysis of Christian sects; still, these criteria also apply to most sects in Islam. For example, the Ismailis were a secret Islamic sect in the 12th century, ‘bound together by a system of oaths, rites and initiation ceremonies’, giving them distinction from the outside world; (Turner 1998, p. 88).

44 Weber took Islam as ‘never really a religion of salvation’ because it is a ‘religion of masters’ or a ‘warrior religion’ (Turner 1998, p. 138). He contended that the quest for salvation was reinterpreted through the notion of *jihad* (Holy War) to the quest for land, increasing community membership, and that it is less interested in ‘inner certainty’ or ‘personal conversion’ (Turner 1998, p. 138). On the opposite side, some trends in the Islamic ‘orthodoxy’ believe that there is ‘no salvation outside the Path of Islam’, to the effect that ‘in order to be saved you have to be Muslim’ or that people cannot be saved if they are Christians or Jews.

45 Turner demonstrated how Shia sects ‘won the imagination and loyalty of their followers through their ‘cultic emphasis on... messianism’, (Turner 1998, p. 88). The Ismaili sects in the 12th century sought a ‘messianic revolt’ and set themselves a ‘universal mission of justice’, (Turner 1998, p. 89).

- (Berger 1967, p. 384). Sect followers can ‘think better of themselves as a result of the high status that God has bestowed upon them’ (Herriot 2018, p. 45).
- (Redekop 1960, p. 80). Sects are identified by how far they divide people into the ‘saved’ and the ‘unsaved’; see (Herriot 2018, p. 56).
- (Haralambos and Holborn 2013, p. 458); This applies to New Age organisations that gained prominence in the 1980s; their appeal came from the failure of the modern world to deliver personal satisfaction or the church’s failure to satisfy the craving for spirituality, or ‘a response to the acknowledged failure of the scientific and materialist worldview to deliver the good’. Cited in (Haralambos and Holborn 2013, p. 458).
- (Khuri 2004, p. 4). Khuri drew his findings mainly from Islamic sects in authoritarian contexts. The case might be different in democratic or pluralistic societies, where they are not pushed into insulation. Still, the sectarianisation process could include insulation, as it always operates through tension with the outside world at other levels, such as class differences, social mobility, or migration. Sects thus insulate themselves as found by Wilson in his analysis of sects across history in the United States; see (Wilson 1959, p. 9).
- Martin Paldam differentiated between a branch and a sect through this criterion. ‘What sets a branch apart from a sect is perhaps the amount of external communication with other groups. If there is a lot, it is a branch. If there is little, it is a sect’ (Paldam 1993, p. 177).
- (Herriot 2018, p. 40). Tracing the evolution of the Open Brethren sect, Herriot writes: ‘In order to ensure clear differentiation, they had to maintain a high level of internal conformity of behaviour. Although there was no written constitution or set of rules, informal norms were enforced by social pressure. As a result, their religious and general social practice was uniform, and such visible differentiators as dress and appearance were closely adhered to’. (Herriot 2018, p. 41).
- (Herriot 2018, p. 40). As Herriot contends in his study of the ‘New Brethren’ sect, ‘To ensure conformity within the sect so that it may be clear to others [the outside world] in what respects they are different’, (ibid., p. 47). This ‘brotherdisation’ inside the sects can even appear at the level of naming them, such as the Congregation of Christian Brothers, De La Salle Brothers, the Christian Brotherhood and, of course, the Muslim Brotherhood.
- Sedgwick argues that making a sect is based on internal steps such as building a ‘coherent’ organisation based on the ‘fellowship principle’ at the internal level and ‘tension’ with the surrounding context. (Sedgwick 2000, p. 198).
- For more detailed analysis of the group’s ideology, see (Menshawy 2021).
- (Eid 2024). Eid (55 years old at the time of the interview), a former school teacher and a researcher, exited the group in 2000, after 22 years as a member of the group. For more details, see (Menshawy 2020). The principle is very close to that in other sects, under which groups isolate from others and insulate themselves as part of their ‘sectarian consciousness’ (Meeks 1972, p. 71), legitimated and justified by having a different religious and social identity.
- Berger traced Christian sects to found how they distinguish themselves based on the belief that the spirit is immediately present, and the church, on the other hand, may be defined as a religious grouping based on the belief that the spirit is remote; see (Berger 1967, p. 374).
- For example, the Open Brethren claims a ‘spiritual purity’ by reinforcing a particular version of biblical prophecy in the name of ‘dispensational premillennialism’. The latter locates the sect as the ‘true church’ firmly in the spiritual realm ‘as opposed to the sinful earthly one’ (Herriot 2018, p. 34). Thus, ‘Christ, they proclaimed, would soon return to rapture them away with Him into heaven, far from this evil world’ (ibid.) The sect thus shares with the Brotherhood separatist features and also emphasises its distinctive identity.
- For example, the Salvation Army and the Pentecostal sect adopt an ideology of extreme bibliolatry, i.e., the Bible is taken as the only guide to salvation (Wilson 1959, p. 5). The ‘New Brothers’ sect also believes as part of its ‘Biblical truth; that the ‘root belief is that the Bible is the Word of God’ (Herriot 2018, p. 80).
- (Affan 2017). Turkey, Mohamed (38 years old at the time of the interview), currently working as an academic and senior researcher in Istanbul, exited the group in 2011 after 14 years of membership.
- In particular, prominent media and political figures lamented Morsi’s use of the phrase ‘My family and my clan’, which they argued was a concealed reference to the Muslim Brotherhood and an indication that Morsi intended to exclude non-Brotherhood Egyptians from his political programme; see (Elmasry 2015).
- (Fouad 2017). Khaled (39 years old at the time of the interview), a writer and a researcher, left the group in 2015 after 16 years of membership.
- On the search for external legitimation and tools used to do so, see (Menshawy 2024).
- (Qutb 1990). Qutb was executed by the regime in 1966.
- (Al-Qassas 2017) Mohamed (42 years old at the time of the interview), a politician, left the group in 2011 after 24 years of membership.
- (Zakariyya 2023). Heba, a journalist, has been a member of the group for over 20 years

- ⁶⁶ (Khuri 1990, p. 124). Some scholars disagree, such as Adam Gaiser as Ibadis, for example, do not regard their imams infallible (Gaiser 2010).
- ⁶⁷ (Lia 1998, p. 117). The literature of the Brotherhood on El-Banna justifies and normalises a ‘personality cult’ evolving around the figure of El-Banna. He is described by some members and leaders as having a ‘superhuman capacity’, making people in his presence ‘dead bodies in the hands of someone washing their corpses’, and mastering over his followers in an inclusive and complete manner approaching ‘sorcery’; see (Pargeter 2013, p. 19).
- ⁶⁸ The Shias would prefer to be known as *imamiyun* (believer in the *imamate*), (Khuri 1990, p. 110).
- ⁶⁹ See (Mustafa 2024). Azza (52 years old at the time of the interview), a schoolteacher, left the group in 2000 after 26 years of membership.
- ⁷⁰ (Wilson 1959, p. 11). The survival of sects depends on isolating themselves from the outside world by speaking an ‘archaic’ language’, which makes communication with the outside world difficult; see (Bruce 2011; Haralambos and Holborn 2013, p. 460).
- ⁷¹ (Ayman 2023). (Not his real name. He has been a member of the group for more than 20 years); (El-Sharnouby 2024). Abdel-Galil (50 years old at the time of the interview), a columnist and former editor of the Brotherhood’s website Ikhwan Online, left the group in 2011 after over 20 years of membership.
- ⁷² (Ban 2024). Ban, a senior researcher on Islamist movements, was a member for 22 years, until his resignation in October 2011. The point is also mentioned and repeated in my interviews with Sameh Eid, Azza Mustafa, and Mohamed Aboul-Gheit.
- ⁷³ (Ubada 2024). The name was changed at the interviewee’s request. Indeed, the practice of men wearing gold rings, especially wedding rings, which had been common in previous decades, changed with the surge in Islamism in the 1980s; I remember my own dad abandoning wearing his gold wedding ring in the late 1980s amidst these shifts in social behaviour.
- ⁷⁴ (Essam-Eddin 2012). See also (Abdel-Hady 2011). This tendency for endogamy among members of the sect can be also found in other sects, such as the ‘Open Brothers’; see (Herriot 2018, p. 55).
- ⁷⁵ Subhi Saleh *yantagad zawaj al-Ikhwani min gheir al—Akhawat* [Subhi Saleh criticises a male member marrying a non-member who is not a sister], Youtube. Accessed 10 May 2019.
- ⁷⁶ The marriage types inside the Brotherhood belong more to the ‘husband–wife similarities’ theory (hypothesised on ‘birds of a feather’) rather than the ‘complementariness’ theory (hypothesised on ‘opposites attract’). As both share belonging to a more collectivised grouping, husband–wife correlations could be presumed to be higher, especially as they share the same activities, habits, and even personality traits nurtured by the group as part of identity-making processes. (Nias 1977).
- ⁷⁷ (Eid 2013, p. 34). The Brotherhood is thus not different from other sects such as the Plymouth Brethren, where ‘all social activities and nearly all friendships were Brethren-based. Where they were not, the conversion of the ‘unsaved’ friends was always lurking somewhere on the agenda’ (Herriot 2018, p. 3).
- ⁷⁸ He is not different from children of other sects where their parents engage them in the sect’s activities as well within weeks of their birth; see (Herriot 2018, pp. 60–61).
- ⁷⁹ The note was repeated in different interviews and autobiographies. See (Menshawy 2020).
- ⁸⁰ (Fayez and Al-Ikhwan 2011, p. 5). Al-Anani calls this intensive and exclusive level of communication ‘a society within a greater society’ that has its own distinctive ‘subculture’ (Al-Anani 2016, p. 81).
- ⁸¹ (Ayman 2023). Name was changed at the interviewee’s request.
- ⁸² (El-Qaradawy 2016). El-Banna wrote that ‘What is more faithful than a man forgetting his self for the sake of realising his goal,’ ‘stripping his self and oppressing its emotions, tendencies and whims’ for the sake of ‘pure *Jihad* for the sake of God,’ (El-Banna 1990, p. 61).
- ⁸³ *Rabaniyya* is therefore not different from other ideas, such as self-negation, common to Christian mystic sects in nineteenth-century Europe, under which a member is ordered to refrain from imposing one’s individual will on events, and that one has to be anti-egoistic by showing less attachment to her or his own will. See (Wilson 1959, p. 6). It is the same principle in Sufi sects in early Islamic thought, where some of their beliefs are situated in the area of ‘introspection, a rigorous inner probing and examination of the conscience (*muhasabat al-nafs*)’; see (Karamustafa 2007, p. 5).
- ⁸⁴ (Wilson 1959, p. 6). Some religious movements even prioritise this aspect by arguing that salvation does not come from being accepted by an external god; it comes from discovering and perfecting oneself. This viewpoint rejects authority that comes from traditional sources and focuses on individuals and their sense of who they are, as the ‘only genuine source of truth or understanding; see (Haralambos and Holborn 2013).
- ⁸⁵ Sufism is ‘a technical term to designate a group of people who belonged to clearly identifiable social movement in Baghdad that was based on a distinct form of piety’ (Karamustafa 2007, p. 6).

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