

# The Muslim Brotherhood and Saudi Arabia: From Then to Now

by [Mohamed Mokhtar Qandil \(/experts/mohamed-mokhtar-qandil\)](/experts/mohamed-mokhtar-qandil)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Mohamed Mokhtar Qandil \(/experts/mohamed-mokhtar-qandil\)](/experts/mohamed-mokhtar-qandil)

Mohamed Mokhtar Qandil is an Egyptian author and researcher who specializes in political Islam and extremist groups. He is also a researcher in Trends Research and Advisory in Abu Dhabi. He has authored several books, including "Contemporary Islamic Jihadist Thought," the "Apostate Brothers," and "The Salafist Dawa." Mohamed is a contributor to Fikra Forum.



## Brief Analysis

Many debates raged on Saudi Arabia's relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood when King Salman bin Abdulaziz first came to power. Some say that Salman's ascension represented a revolt against the Brotherhood, while others claimed that some aspects of Brotherhood thought remained influential in the country. In early 2015, the late Saud al-Faisal, as the Kingdom's Minister of Foreign Affairs, delivered an ambiguous diplomatic address in which he said, "We do not have any problem with the Muslim Brotherhood. Our problem is only with a small group affiliated with this organization. They are the ones who bow their heads in homage to the Supreme Guide." This statement came nearly a year after the Muslim Brotherhood was classified as a terrorist organization by the Saudi Kingdom. In sharp contrast, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman stated that the harmonious period between the Brotherhood and the Kingdom has ended.

Understanding this situation requires grasping the historic changes that have occurred in the relationship between the Saudi state and the Muslim Brotherhood. A brief examination of the facts reveals that the conflict is not only a conflict with the Brotherhood, but also a conflict between Saudi Arabia's past and its future –between the Kingdom's Islamic roots and drive for Muslim unity and the Crown Prince's reform-minded vision for Saudi Arabia.

"We are all brothers," was the response of the kingdom's founder, King Abdulaziz, when a request from the Brotherhood's founder, Hassan al-Banna, asking to establish a branch of the organization in Saudi Arabia. This rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and the Brotherhood came after Egypt refused to recognize the kingdom when it declared its establishment in its present form. As a result, al-Banna was welcomed in Saudi Arabia with open arms. Saudi newspapers ran favorable headlines, such as "Hassan al-Banna, you are welcome" printed in Um al-Qura. When the organization was dissolved in 1948, al-Banna was invited to move to Saudi Arabia. However, he was assassinated abroad in February 1949. Afterward, the relationship between Saudi Arabia and the Brotherhood became increasingly intertwined, as the Kingdom allowed them to hold their meetings during the Hajj pilgrimage season to choose their new Supreme Guide or leader.

Saud bin Abdulaziz followed the same path as his father, while the Brotherhood's second Supreme Guide Mohammed al-Hudaybi followed in al-Banna's footsteps, and the close relations between the two institutions

continued. Those relations were clearly manifested in Faisal bin Abdulaziz's position on the organization, as the king and his "Islamic unity" project were in direct confrontation with "Pan-Arab nationalism" and Nasserist ideology.

Moreover, from the late 1950s through the mid-1970s, the ideology of the Saudi state and the Brotherhood converged on the Palestinian issue, which dominated both entities' speeches and discourse at the time. King Faisal opened the kingdom's doors wide to the Muslim Brotherhood. Faisal depended on Brotherhood symbols in Saudi Arabia's educational process, to the point that Muhammad Qutb, the literal brother of the extremist Brotherhood theorist Sayyid Qutb, appeared in the kingdom to work in the field of education. Faisal's reign was one of the closest in Saudi-Brotherhood relations. Even after Faisal was assassinated in 1975, and well into this century, some Saudis argued that, compared to the most extreme and violent fundamentalists, the Brotherhood was at least relatively moderate.

But in the past decade or so, during the reign of Abdullah bin Abdulaziz, Saudi-Brotherhood relations were turned upside down. During his first years on the throne, he did not differ much from his predecessors. Over time, however, especially after the spread of the 2011 Arab revolutions, the kingdom began to adopt a new approach towards the Brotherhood. During this period, some demands for reform were adopted by Brotherhood affiliates, which pushed the Saudi regime to turn against them. This was especially the case regarding neighboring Egypt, where the kingdom applauded the removal of the Brotherhood president Mohamed Morsi and supported the current regime's firm stance against them.

Most recently, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's plans to push Saudi Arabia in a new direction, even further against the Brotherhood, became clear over a year ago, in statements to both domestic and foreign media. In an interview with the journalist Dawood al-Sherian, the Crown Prince stated that the Brotherhood media was the reason for the fracture in Saudi-Egyptian relations and accused them of assassinating his uncle, King Faisal bin Abdulaziz. Last April, the Crown Prince also stated to The New York Times that the Brotherhood was always the basis of terrorism, saying, "If you look at Osama bin Laden, you will find that he was a Muslim Brother. If you look at al-Baghdadi of IS, you will find that he too was a Muslim Brother. In reality, if you look at any terrorist, you will find that they were a Muslim Brother. Their main goal is to radicalize Islamic communities in Europe. They hope that Europe becomes a Brotherhood continent in thirty years. They want to rule the Muslims in Europe."

In response, the Brotherhood issued a statement opposing Mohamed bin Salman. In its introduction, it stated, "What the Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman is doing, by continuously lying and spreading falsehoods against the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as connecting it with the lies of terrorism, is merely a vain attempt to win the throne through the good graces of American Zionism, not by his own well-deserved merits, but rather through humiliating concessions."

There are several explanations for recent steps taken by the kingdom towards the Brotherhood. One reason is that Saudi Arabia fears that this organization has become a competitor for control in the region since the onset of the Arab Spring and after its successful rise to power in Egypt. The Kingdom realizes that the Brotherhood was a key player in igniting the January Revolution that deposed former president Hosni Mubarak. Thus, if they were able to rise to power, then they might also be able to call for overthrowing other regimes and threaten the stability of the Kingdom and the wider region.

There are those who believe that Mohamed bin Salman's position towards the Brotherhood is connected with his vision to combat extremism and the reform movement that he has recently begun to implement, which includes allowing women to drive cars, licensing movie theaters, hosting music concerts, (and at times even allowing women to enter them!), and so on. However, this assessment is not entirely sufficient, since Saudi Arabia is accustomed to confronting extremism by supporting a more moderate interpretation of Islam (from their perspective, at least). And at one point in time, the Muslim Brotherhood had represented that moderate interpretation. So Mohammed bin

Salman does not intend to neutralize the role of religion in politics, nor is it in his interest to do so. Rather, he hopes to use a different version of Islam as a tool for confronting the old guard that refuses to change.

Thus the position of Saudi Arabia and its Crown Prince does not differ in principle from that of the kingdom's founder. The founder exploited the Muslim Brotherhood politically as a part of his project for Islamic unity, based on the reality at that time. Now comes his grandson, who has made the decision, also based on reality but in the context of his own political project, to end the presence of the Muslim Brotherhood. They clearly do not serve any purpose in his project, nor do they suit his current allies' policies and attitudes. As an alliance based on shared interests, the organization and its many branches simply do not share any of his priorities -- especially in light of the challenges his project faces both at home and abroad. ❖

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