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A rare look at secretive Brotherhood in America

Over the last 40 years, small groups of devout Muslim men have gathered in homes in U.S. cities to pray, memorize the Koran and discuss events of the day. But they

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by Noreen S. Ahmed-Ullah, Sam Roe and Laurie Cohen

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Over the last 40 years, small groups of devout Muslim men have gathered in homes in U.S. cities to pray, memorize the Koran and discuss events of the day.

But they also addressed their ultimate goal, one so controversial that it is a key reason they have operated in secrecy: to create Muslim states overseas and, they hope, someday in America as well.

These men are part of an underground U.S. chapter of the international Muslim Brotherhood, the world's most influential Islamic fundamentalist group and an organization with a violent past in the Middle East. But fearing persecution, they rarely identify themselves as Brotherhood members and have operated largely behind the scenes, unbeknownst even to many Muslims. Still, the U.S. Brotherhood has had a significant and ongoing impact on Islam in America, helping establish mosques, Islamic schools, summer youth camps and prominent Muslim organizations. It is a major factor, Islamic scholars say, in why many Muslim institutions in the nation have become more conservative in recent decades.

Leading the U.S. Brotherhood during much of this period was Ahmed Elkadi, an Egyptian-born surgeon and a former personal physician to Saudi Arabia's King Faisal. He headed the group from 1984 to 1994 but abruptly lost his leadership position. Now he is discussing his life and the U.S. Brotherhood for the first time.

His story, combined with details from documents and interviews, offers an unprecedented look at the Brotherhood in America: how the group recruited members, how it cloaked itself in secrecy and how it alienated many moderate Muslims.

Indeed, because of its hard-line beliefs, the U.S. Brotherhood has been an increasingly divisive force within Islam in America, fueling the often bitter struggle between moderate and conservative Muslims.

Many Muslims believe that the Brotherhood is a noble international movement that supports the true teachings of Islam and unwaveringly defends Muslims who have come under attack around the world, from Chechens to Palestinians to Iraqis. But others view it as an extreme organization that breeds intolerance and militancy.

"They have this idea that Muslims come first, not that humans come first," says Mustafa Saied, 32, a Floridian who left the U.S. Brotherhood in 1998.

While separation of church and state is a bedrock principle of American democracy, the international Brotherhood preaches that religion and politics cannot be separated and that governments eventually should be Islamic. The group also champions martyrdom and jihad, or holy war, as a means of self-defense and has provided the philosophical underpinnings for Muslim militants worldwide.

Many moderate Muslims in America are uncomfortable with the views preached at Brotherhood-influenced mosques, scholars say. Those experts point to a 2001 study sponsored by four Muslim advocacy and religious groups that found that only a third of U.S. Muslims attend mosques.

In suburban Bridgeview, Ill., some moderates say they quit attending the Mosque Foundation because the leadership became too conservative and dominated by Brotherhood members.

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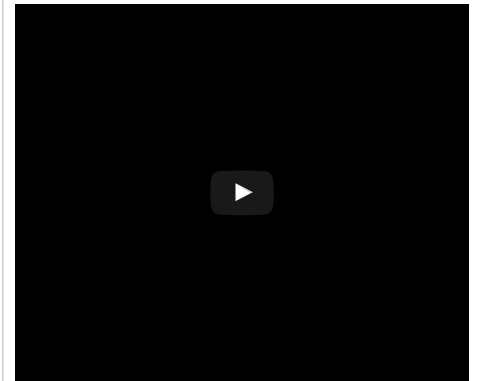
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Documents show that the U.S. Brotherhood has been careful to obscure its beliefs from outsiders. One document tells leaders to be cautious when screening potential recruits. If the recruit asks whether the leader is a Brotherhood member, the leader should respond, "You may deduce the answer to that with your own intelligence."

Brotherhood members emphasize that they follow the laws of the nations in which they operate. They stress that they do not believe in overthrowing the U.S. government but rather that they want as many people as possible to convert to Islam so that one day - perhaps generations from now - a majority of Americans will support a society governed by Islamic law. Muslims make up less than 3 percent of the U.S. population; an estimated 2 million to 7 million Muslims reside here.

Federal authorities say they have scrutinized the U.S. Brotherhood for years. Agents are investigating whether people with ties to the group have raised and laundered money to finance terrorism abroad. No terrorism-related charges have been filed.

Former leader Elkadi, who has been questioned at length by federal authorities about the inner workings of the Brotherhood, says the group has served Muslims in the United States well. He personally helped establish an Islamic community in the Florida Panhandle, with a mosque, school and health clinic. And though he eventually lost it all - even his medical license - some Muslims still view him as a great Islamic leader.

"Islam is for everyone," he says. "It's good for America, good for Muslims too. ... It's good knowledge, and good knowledge should be available to everyone."

Mohammed Mahdi Akef, head of the international Muslim Brotherhood, based in Egypt, lauds Elkadi and the activities of the U.S. Brotherhood.

"They have succeeded in saving the younger generations from melting into the American lifestyle without faith," he says. "They have saved their children."

Once one of America's most influential Muslims, Elkadi now spends most of his days in front of the TV in his two-bedroom condominium in Sterling, Va., across the Potomac River from Washington.

Earlier this year he was diagnosed with a neurological disorder that affects motor skills, speech and memory. He often has difficulty expressing himself and seldom speaks more than two sentences at a time. Sometimes, he says, he smiles for no reason other than to try to remain cheerful.

But on many days his memory is clear, and his statements about the major events of the U.S. Brotherhood have been confirmed by others associated with the group.

Elkadi, a 64-year-old with a closely trimmed white beard, says he is willing to speak about the Brotherhood because he believes he has nothing to hide. Both he and his wife, Iman, 60, say they have devoted much of their lives to the Brotherhood, and Elkadi says the reason for that is simple: "It's genetic."

Both of their fathers were early Brotherhood leaders in Egypt, where the group began in 1928 as an opposition movement to the British-backed Egyptian monarchy. Its founder and leader was schoolteacher Hassan al-Banna, who advocated a return to fundamental Islam as a way to reform Muslim societies and expel Western troops.

The Brotherhood slogan became: "Allah is our goal; the Messenger is our model; the Koran is our constitution; jihad is our means; and martyrdom in the way of Allah is our aspiration."

When Egypt imprisoned and executed some Muslim Brothers in the 1950s, many members fled the country and helped spread the philosophy throughout the Arab world. The group's ideological voice became philosopher Sayyid Qutb, who abhorred Western values and believed the Koran justified violence to overthrow un-Islamic governments.

Over time, the Brotherhood gained notoriety for repeatedly attempting to overthrow the Egyptian and Syrian governments and for spawning violent groups, including the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and the Palestinian group Hamas.

Today the Brotherhood remains based in Egypt, where it officially is banned but is tolerated. The group has renounced violence and now largely organizes political protests, runs professional unions and operates charities, providing social services that the government does not. Brotherhood supporters hold 15 of the 445 seats in the Egyptian parliament.

And while Brotherhood activities vary from country to country, and chapters are officially independent, international leaders in Egypt say that all chapters are united in their beliefs and that the Egyptian office gives them advice.

In recent months Akef, the international Brotherhood leader, repeatedly has praised Palestinian and Iraqi suicide bombers, called for the destruction of Israel and asserted that the United States has no proof that al-Qaida was to blame for the Sept. 11 attacks.

Iman Elkadi's father, Mahmoud Abu Saud, was particularly involved in the Brotherhood's beginnings in Egypt and remains well-known in the Arab world. An accomplished economist, he is widely regarded as a pioneer in Islamic banking, which requires that interest not be charged for loans.

He also was jailed repeatedly for his Brotherhood activities.

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"My grandfather would tell me that if my dad didn't come home for dinner, he would send someone to check the jails," Iman Elkadi recalls.

The Elkadi and Abu Saud families were linked in marriage in 1963 after Ahmed Elkadi, then a 22-year-old preparing to go into the Egyptian military, ran into his future father-in-law at a mutual friend's office. When the young Elkadi learned that Abu Saud had an unmarried daughter, he inquired about her. The father, familiar with the young man's family and its devotion to the Brotherhood, invited him to their home.

Soon after, the families arranged for Ahmed and Iman to marry. The wedding was held in Cairo, in a grandparent's garden. Only relatives were invited, though others were keenly interested: Soon afterward, Egyptian intelligence officials called the couple in for questioning.

Iman Elkadi says: "They asked my husband, 'Couldn't you find anybody else to marry except Mahmoud Abu Saud's daughter?'"

The Elkadis arrived in the United States in 1967, settling in the small Louisiana city of Monroe, where Ahmed Elkadi continued his medical training at a local hospital. By then the Muslim Brotherhood already was operating in the United States, though secretly.

A U.S. chapter of the Brotherhood, documents and interviews show, was formed in the early 1960s after hundreds of young Muslims came to the U.S. to study, particularly at large Midwestern universities, such as Illinois, Indiana and Michigan. Some belonged to the Brotherhood in their homelands and wanted to spread its ideology here.

But to protect themselves and their relatives back home from possible persecution, they publicly called themselves the Cultural Society and not the Brotherhood.

Many young Muslim professionals joined, including Elkadi. One of his daughters, Mona, recalls that when she was a teen, she often fielded phone calls from women who did not know that their husbands were in the Brotherhood and wondered where they were on a given night.

She says the husbands "put the fear of God in me about keeping this a secret. I'd get lectures from some of the men about how I was going to expose them."

Not anyone could join the Brotherhood. The group had a carefully detailed strategy on how to find and evaluate potential members, according to a Brotherhood instructional booklet for recruiters.

Leaders would scout mosques, Islamic classes and Muslim organizations for those with orthodox religious beliefs consistent with Brotherhood views, the booklet says. The leaders then would invite them to join a small prayer group, or usra, Arabic for "family." The prayer groups were a defining feature of the Brotherhood and one created by al-Banna in Egypt.

But leaders initially would not reveal the purpose of the prayer groups, and recruits were asked not to tell anyone about the meetings. If recruits asked about a particular meeting to which they were not invited, the response should be: "Make it a habit not to meddle in that which does not concern you."

Leaders were told that during prayer meetings they should focus on fundamentals, including "the primary goal of the Brotherhood: setting up the rule of God upon the Earth."

After assessing the recruits' "commitment, loyalty and obedience" to Brotherhood ideals, the leaders would invite suitable candidates to join. New members, according to the booklet, would be told that they now were part of the worldwide Brotherhood and that membership "is not a personal honor but a charge to sacrifice all that one has for the sake of raising the banner of Islam."

Mustafa Saied, the Floridian who left the Brotherhood six years ago, recalls how he was recruited in 1994 while a junior at the University of Tennessee. After Saied attended numerous prayer sessions, a fellow Muslim student took him to a quiet corner of a campus cafeteria and asked him to join.

"It was a dream, because that's what you're conditioned to do - to really love the Ikhwan," Saied says, using the Arabic term for Brotherhood members.

After he joined, he learned the names of other local members.

"I was shocked," he says. "These people had really hid the fact that they were Brotherhood."

He says he found out that the U.S. Brotherhood had a plan for achieving Islamic rule in America: It would convert Americans to Islam and elect like-minded Muslims to political office.

"They're very smart. Everyone else is gullible," Saied says. "If the Brotherhood puts up somebody for an election, Muslims would vote for him not knowing he was with the Brotherhood."

Saied says he left the group after several years because he disliked its anti-American sentiments and its support for violence in the Middle East.

"With the extreme element," he says, "you never know when that ticking time bomb will go off."

By the 1970s, Elkadi had moved to Missouri and, he says, become treasurer of the U.S. Brotherhood, collecting money from members from across the country. His wife was the unofficial bookkeeper, tracking who was behind on dues.

Members were required to pay 3 percent of their income per year, with the money going to travel, books and annual conferences, the Elkadis say. The conferences were held under the Cultural Society name, usually in large hotels and always on Memorial Day weekend. They were invitation-only, with word spread through the prayer groups. Some years, up to 1,000 people attended; every other year, elections were held.

While the U.S. Brotherhood was influential from its beginning - in 1963 it helped establish the Muslim Students Association, one of the first national Islamic groups in the U.S. - Elkadi thought the group could expand its reach.

And when he was elected president in 1984, he vowed to do just that.

Elkadi had a strategy to make America more Islamic that reflected a long-standing Brotherhood belief: First you change the person, then the family, then the community, then the nation.

By 1990, U.S. Brotherhood members had made headway on that plan. They had helped establish many mosques and Islamic organizations. Some of those efforts were backed financially by the ultraconservative Saudi Arabian government, which shared some of the Brotherhood's fundamentalist goals.

Elkadi himself helped create several noted Islamic organizations, including the Muslim Youth of North America, which attempted to draw thousands of high school students to Islam by sponsoring soccer teams, providing college scholarships and offering a line of clothing. He served as president of the North American Islamic Trust, a group that helped build and preserve mosques.

Some of those organizations eventually would distance themselves from the Brotherhood. The Islamic Society of North America, the umbrella group for the Muslim Youth of North America and the Muslim Students Association, says Brotherhood members helped form those groups but that their overall influence has been limited.

Groups that the Brotherhood helped form printed Islamic books, many of which were distributed at mosques and on college campuses. They included Sayyid Qutb's "In the Shade of the Koran" and "Milestones," which urge jihad, martyrdom and the creation of Islamic states. Scholars came to view his writings as manifestos for Islamic militants.

"These books had questionable paradigms, especially a dichotomous division between 'us' and 'them,'" said Umar Faruq Abdallah, a noted Islamic scholar who now heads a Muslim educational group in suburban Chicago. "It was very harmful. It helped to create a countercultural attitude in our community."

Inamul Haq, professor of religion at Benedictine University in Lisle, Ill., says the U.S. Brotherhood pushed Islam in a conservative direction. "They were in a position to define American Islam. Since they were well-connected in the Middle East, they were able to bring money to build various institutions."

Without the Brotherhood, he says, "We would have seen a more American Islam culture rather than a foreign community living in the United States."

In his own community, Elkadi practiced what he preached. After moving to Panama City, Fla., in 1979, he borrowed \$2.4 million from a Luxembourg bank managed by his father-in-law, Abu Saud, the early Brotherhood leader, and built a massive Islamic medical center just outside of town, real estate records show.

Called the Akbar Clinic, the two-story brick building had a surgery center, an emergency room and dental, psychiatry, nutrition and acupuncture services.

Inside the clinic, Elkadi set up a small mosque and an Islamic school. The school occupied several rooms on the second floor until the students became too loud and classes had to be moved to a trailer on clinic grounds.

In many eyes, Elkadi was a true Muslim leader.

"Everyone flocked to him whenever there was a problem," says Aly Shaaban, a Muslim leader in Panama City. "He was a father figure. He had this magnetism. You see his face and you just want to kiss his face."

But things were beginning to unravel for Elkadi. By 1995 he had lost virtually everything he had worked for: his clinic, the school, his medical license and the presidency of the U.S. Brotherhood.

First to go was the clinic. Elkadi had fallen behind on the bills, and by 1988 creditors had won thousands of dollars in judgments against him. To prevent a sheriff's sale, the Islamic bank in Luxembourg took over the property, and eventually it was sold to a drug rehabilitation clinic.

But Elkadi faced an even more serious professional problem: Florida regulators started disciplinary action against him for

performing unnecessary surgeries at a Panama City hospital and for doing major operations, including a mastectomy, at his clinic without proper precautions, such as an adequate blood supply.

Regulators determined that Elkadi had performed unneeded stomach surgery on nine patients. The Florida Board of Medicine concluded that Elkadi "exhibited a total lack of judgment" and was "not a competent physician." The board revoked his license in 1992.

At the time, Elkadi adamantly denied the allegations and accused Florida regulators of being "grossly unfair," according to filings with the state.

By the mid-1990s, his problems deepened. Not only was he forced to close his now-overcrowded and dilapidated school because of financial difficulties, he learned that Brotherhood leaders wanted him out as president.

It remains unclear why he lost his position. Current and former Brotherhood members say they do not know or that Elkadi simply was voted out of office. Elkadi and his wife say he was removed because he was not conservative enough. They say he had been pushing for women and other Islamic groups to be more involved in the Brotherhood, and some members did not like that.

"For some members, it's a very ingrown type of mentality," Iman Elkadi says. "You work only among Muslims, don't contact non-Muslims, so that your work is limited to a small circle." She says the Elkadis believed that "the message of Islam is for everybody."

Elkadi's daughter says he took the rejection hard. Elkadi now says he is not angry about his ouster and still loves the organization and its members. "They are good people because they follow Islam," he says.

In recent years, the U.S. Brotherhood operated under the name Muslim American Society, according to documents and interviews. One of the nation's major Islamic groups, it was incorporated in Illinois in 1993 after a contentious debate among Brotherhood members.

Some wanted the Brotherhood to remain underground, while others thought a more public face would make the group more influential. Members from across the country drove to regional meeting sites to discuss the issue.

Former member Mustafa Saied recalls how he gathered with 40 others at a Days Inn on the Alabama-Tennessee border. Many members, he says, preferred secrecy, particularly in case U.S. authorities cracked down on Hamas supporters, including many Brotherhood members.

"They were looking at doomsday scenarios," he says.

When the leaders voted, it was decided that Brotherhood members would call themselves the Muslim American Society, or MAS, according to documents and interviews.

They agreed not to refer to themselves as the Brotherhood but to be more publicly active. They eventually created a Web site and for the first time invited the public to some conferences, which also were used to raise money. The incorporation papers would list Elkadi - just months away from his ouster - as a director.

Elkadi and Mohammed Mahdi Akef, a Brotherhood leader in Egypt and now the international head, had pushed for more openness. In fact, Akef says he helped found MAS by lobbying for the change during trips to the U.S.

"We have a religion, message, morals and principals that we want to carry to the people as God ordered us," he says. "So why should we work in secrecy?"

But U.S. members would remain guarded about their identity and beliefs.

An undated internal memo instructed MAS leaders on how to deal with inquiries about the new organization. If asked, "Are you the Muslim Brothers?" leaders should respond that they are an independent group called the Muslim American Society. "It is a self-explanatory name that does not need further explanation."

And if the topic of terrorism were raised, leaders were told to say that they were against terrorism but that jihad was among a Muslim's "divine legal rights" to be used to defend himself and his people and to spread Islam.

But MAS leaders say those documents and others obtained by the Tribune are either outdated or do not accurately reflect the views of the group's leaders.

MAS describes itself as a "charitable, religious, social, cultural and educational not-for-profit organization." It has headquarters in Alexandria, Va., and 53 chapters nationwide, including one in Bridgeview, across the street from the mosque there.

Shaker Elsayed, a top MAS official, says the organization was founded by Brotherhood members but has evolved to include Muslims from various backgrounds and ideologies.

"Ikhwan (Brotherhood) members founded MAS, but MAS went way beyond that point of conception," he says.

Now, he says, his group has no connection with the Brotherhood and disagrees with the international organization on many issues.

But he says that MAS, like the Brotherhood, believes in the teachings of Brotherhood founder Hassan al-Banna, which are "the closest reflection of how Islam should be in this life."

"I understand that some of our members may say, 'Yes, we are Ikhwan,'" Elsayed says. But, he says, MAS is not administered from Egypt. He adds, "We are not your typical Ikhwan."

MAS says it has about 10,000 members and that any Muslim can join by paying \$10 a month in dues.

But to be an "active" member - the highest membership class - one must complete five years of Muslim community service and education, which includes studying writings by Brotherhood ideologues al-Banna and Qutb.

There are about 1,500 active members, including many women. Elsayed says about 45 percent of those members belong to the Brotherhood.

MAS' precise connection to the Brotherhood is a sensitive issue, says Mohamed Habib, a high-ranking Brotherhood official in Cairo.

"I don't want to say MAS is an Ikhwan entity," he says. "This causes some security inconveniences for them in a post-Sept. 11 world."

Elsayed says MAS does not believe in creating an Islamic state in America but supports the establishment of Islamic governments in Muslim lands. The group's goal in the United States, he says, "is to serve and develop the Muslim community and help Muslims to be the best citizens they can be of this country." That includes preserving the Muslim identity, particularly among youths.

MAS collected \$2.8 million in dues and donations in 2003 - more than 10 times the amount in 1997, according to Internal Revenue Service filings.

Spending often is aimed at schools, teachers and children, the filings show. The group has conducted teacher training programs, issued curriculum guides and established youth centers. It also set up Islamic American University, largely a correspondence school with an office in suburban Detroit, to train teachers and preachers.

Until 18 months ago, the university's chairman was Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a prominent cleric in Qatar and a spiritual figure of the Brotherhood who has angered many in the West by praising suicide bombers in Israel and Iraq. The U.S. government has barred him from entering the country since late 1999. He says that action was taken after he praised Palestinian militants.

In the Chicago area, MAS has sponsored summer camps for teenagers. Shahzeen Karim, 19, says a camp in Bridgeview inspired her to resume covering her hair in the Islamic tradition.

"We were praying five times a day," Karim says. "It was like a proper Islamic environment. It brought me back to Islam."

At a summer camp last year in Wisconsin run by the Chicago chapter of MAS, teens received a 2-inch-thick packet of material that included a discussion of the Brotherhood's philosophy and detailed instructions on how to win converts.

Part of the Chicago chapter's Web site is devoted to teens. It includes reading materials that say Muslims have a duty to help form Islamic governments worldwide and should be prepared to take up arms to do so.

One passage states: "Until the nations of the world have functionally Islamic governments, every individual who is careless or lazy in working for Islam is sinful." Another one says that Western secularism and materialism are evil and that Muslims should "pursue this evil force to its own lands" and "invade its Western heartland."

In suburban Rosemont, several thousand people attended MAS' annual conference in 2002 at the village's convention center. One speaker said, "We may all feel emotionally attached to the goal of an Islamic state" in America, but it would have to wait because of the modest Muslim population. "We mustn't cross hurdles we can't jump yet."

Federal authorities say they are scrutinizing the Brotherhood but acknowledge that they have been slow to understand the group.

In 2002, customs agents stopped Elkadi at Washington Dulles International Airport and questioned him for four hours. They wanted to know who was in the Brotherhood, where it gets its money and how the Elkadis invested their own money. A month later, agents came to Elkadi's home with similar questions. He recalls that he answered every one.

Elkadi remains highly regarded in some Muslim circles. An article in 2000 in the MAS magazine praised him as a great Muslim in the ranks of al-Banna and Qutb.

He and his wife say they hope the Brotherhood succeeds. After all, they say, everyone in the Brotherhood agrees on the main issue.

"Everyone's goal is the same - to educate everyone about Islam and to follow the teachings of Islam with the hope of establishing an Islamic state," Iman Elkadi says. "Who knows whether it will happen or not, but we still have to strive for it."

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Chicago Tribune correspondents Evan Osnos, Stephen Franklin and Hossam el-Hamalawy contributed to this report.

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