

MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD IN SAUDI ARABIA

Name: Muslim Brotherhood in Saudi Arabia

Year of Origin: Not determined.

Founder(s): Not determined.

Place(s) of Operation: Saudi Arabia

Key Leaders: Not determined.

Associated Organization(s):

Al-ikhwan al-muslimun al-saudiyyun¹

The Saudi branch of the [Muslim Brotherhood](#)—Al-ikhwan al-muslimun al-saudiyyun (i.e., Saudi Brotherhood)—has been banned from operating in the kingdom since March of 2014, when the government designated the Brotherhood as a terrorist organization.² Since then, there have been reports that the Brotherhood has been quietly removed from the Kingdom’s terrorism list. When asked, Saudi authorities have neither confirmed nor denied these claims.³ Nonetheless, Saudi Arabia joined the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Bahrain in June 2017 in cutting diplomatic ties with [Qatar](#) in response to that country’s ongoing support for the Muslim Brotherhood and other extremist and terrorist groups.⁴

The Saudi branch of the Brotherhood was founded in the 1940s and 1950s when Saudi Arabia reportedly served as a haven for Brotherhood members from other Arab countries.⁵ During a trip to Saudi Arabia in 1948, Brotherhood founder [Hassan al-Banna](#) was the target of an Egyptian-sponsored assassination plot that Saudi authorities uncovered and helped to thwart. The Saudi Brotherhood initially suppressed any theological differences with the local brand of Islam, adapting its global Islamist message to accord with Saudi Arabia’s conservative Wahhabi ideology.⁶ Nonetheless, the Saudi state remained officially opposed to the Brotherhood, which carried out its work in a clandestine manner.⁷

Until 2014, the lack of an official government sanction allowed the Saudi Brotherhood to form

¹ Stephanie Lacroix, “Saudi Arabia’s Muslim Brotherhood predicament,” Project on Middle East Political Science, March 9, 2014, <http://pomeps.org/2014/03/20/saudi-arabias-muslim-brotherhood-predicament/>.

² Stephanie Lacroix, “Saudi Arabia’s Muslim Brotherhood predicament,” Project on Middle East Political Science, March 9, 2014, <http://pomeps.org/2014/03/20/saudi-arabias-muslim-brotherhood-predicament/>.

³ Hussein Ibesh, “Saudi Arabia’s New Sunni Alliance,” *New York Times*, July 31, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/01/opinion/hussein-ibish-saudi-arabias-new-sunni-alliance.html>.

⁴ Patrick Wintour, “Gulf Plunged into Diplomatic Crisis as Countries Cut Ties with Qatar,” *Guardian* (London), June 5, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/05/saudi-arabia-and-bahrain-break-diplomatic-ties-with-qatar-over-terrorism>.

⁵ Lorenzo Vidino, *The New Muslim Brotherhood*, Columbia University Press (New York, US), 26.

⁶ Lorenzo Vidino, *The New Muslim Brotherhood*, Columbia University Press (New York, US), 26.

⁷ Stephanie Lacroix, “Osama bin Laden and the Saudi Muslim Brotherhood,” *Foreign Policy*, October 3, 2012, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/10/03/osama-bin-laden-and-the-saudi-muslim-brotherhood/>.

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four distinct organizations within the Kingdom: one in Saudi Arabia’s western province, called the Brotherhood of the Hejaz (*ikhwan al-Hijaz*); and three in the central region — two named after their alleged founder, the Brotherhood of al-Sulayfih (*ikhwan al-Sulayfih*) and the Brotherhood of al-Funaysan (*ikhwan al-Funaysan*), and one called the Brotherhood of Zubayr (*ikhwan al-Zubayr*).⁸

The influence of the Brotherhood in Saudi Arabia led to the emergence of an Islamist movement known as the Sahwa (Awakening). As part of the movement, a variety of Islamist groups, including the Saudi Brotherhood, propagated Islamist writings, especially at universities.⁹ The groups formally distanced themselves from foreign organizations in an effort to avoid arousing suspicion.¹⁰ Local financing helped conceive the formation of multiple Brotherhood-aligned organizations, including the Muslim World League (1962), the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (1972), and others.¹¹

It was during this period that [al-Qaeda](#) founder Osama bin Laden reportedly became a member of the Saudi Brotherhood. According to al-Qaeda co-founder [Ayman al-Zawahiri](#), bin Laden joined the Saudi Brotherhood but was later expelled from the group on account of his determination to fight with the jihadists in Afghanistan, a position at odds with the Brotherhood ideology at the time.¹²

Since then, the Saudi Brotherhood has encountered greater resistance from the government. In 2002, Saudi Prince Nayef bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud—then-minister of Interior—accused the Brotherhood of serving as the “source of all evil in the Kingdom.”¹³ After the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011, the Brotherhood formally aligned itself with the protesters, a position that prompted the Saudi monarchy to offer assistance to vulnerable governments. When uprisings upended the Mubarak regime in [Egypt](#) and replaced it with an elected Brotherhood government, the Saudi royal family increased its aid for Egypt’s military, which deposed the Brotherhood government a year after its election.¹⁴

⁸ Stephanie Lacroix, “Osama bin Laden and the Saudi Muslim Brotherhood,” *Foreign Policy*, October 3, 2012, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/10/03/osama-bin-laden-and-the-saudi-muslim-brotherhood/>.

⁹ Stephanie Lacroix, “Osama bin Laden and the Saudi Muslim Brotherhood,” *Foreign Policy*, October 3, 2012, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/10/03/osama-bin-laden-and-the-saudi-muslim-brotherhood/>.

¹⁰ Stephanie Lacroix, “Saudi Arabia’s Muslim Brotherhood predicament,” Project on Middle East Political Science, March 9, 2014, <http://pomeps.org/2014/03/20/saudi-arabias-muslim-brotherhood-predicament/>; Stephanie Lacroix, “Osama bin Laden and the Saudi Muslim Brotherhood,” *Foreign Policy*, October 3, 2012, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/10/03/osama-bin-laden-and-the-saudi-muslim-brotherhood/>.

¹¹ Lorenzo Vidino, *The New Muslim Brotherhood*, Columbia University Press (New York, US), 27.

¹² Stephanie Lacroix, “Osama bin Laden and the Saudi Muslim Brotherhood,” *Foreign Policy*, October 3, 2012, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/10/03/osama-bin-laden-and-the-saudi-muslim-brotherhood/>.

¹³ Stephanie Lacroix, “Saudi Arabia’s Muslim Brotherhood predicament,” Project on Middle East Political Science, March 9, 2014, <http://pomeps.org/2014/03/20/saudi-arabias-muslim-brotherhood-predicament/>.

¹⁴ Stéphane Lacroix, “Saudi Arabia’s Muslim Brotherhood predicament,” *Washington Post*, March 20, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/03/20/saudi-arabias-muslim-brotherhood-predicament/>.

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Brotherhood-aligned clerics in Saudi Arabia protested Saudi support for the Egyptian military. In a public letter dated August 8, 2013, 56 sheikhs—some of them known to be close to the Saudi Brotherhood—condemned the “removal of a legitimately elected president” in Egypt as a violation of “the will of the people.”¹⁵ The letter continued: “We express our opposition and surprise at the path taken by some countries who have given recognition to the coup ... thereby taking part in committing a sin and an aggression forbidden by the laws of Islam.” The letter ended on an ominous note: “[T]here will be negative consequences for everyone if Egypt enters a state of chaos and civil war.”¹⁶

The sheikhs’ public letter in support of the Egyptian Brotherhood broadly reflected national sentiment. In the wake of the August 2013 “Rabba massacre” in Cairo—in which Egyptian security forces raided camps of demonstrators—thousands of Saudis replaced their social media profile pictures with the Rabaa sign in solidarity with the Egyptian Brotherhood.¹⁷

National support for the Egyptian Brotherhood was soon met with a crackdown. On February 4, 2014, in a move largely believed to be targeted at Brotherhood supporters, a royal decree from the kingdom announced that “belonging to intellectual or religious ... groups that are extremist ... or showing sympathy for their ideas and methods” will be punished by a prison sentence “of no less than three years and no more than twenty years.”¹⁸ On March 7, 2014, Saudi Arabia formally designated the Brotherhood as a terrorist organization.¹⁹ As with the decree, the designation was widely viewed as a measure intended to marginalize the Brotherhood across the region and diminish support for the group from Western governments.²⁰

After the designation, Riyadh steadily clamped down on Brotherhood activity. In December 2015, for instance, Saudi authorities ordered schools to remove books by scholars affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood.²¹ Saudi Arabia has also been slow to arm and equip the Syrian rebels, reportedly out of fear of bolstering the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood aligned against the Assad

¹⁵ Stéphane Lacroix, “Saudi Arabia’s Muslim Brotherhood predicament,” *Washington Post*, March 20, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/03/20/saudi-arabias-muslim-brotherhood-predicament/>.

¹⁶ Stéphane Lacroix, “Saudi Arabia’s Muslim Brotherhood predicament,” *Washington Post*, March 20, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/03/20/saudi-arabias-muslim-brotherhood-predicament/>.

¹⁷ Stéphane Lacroix, “Saudi Arabia’s Muslim Brotherhood predicament,” *Washington Post*, March 20, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/03/20/saudi-arabias-muslim-brotherhood-predicament/>.

¹⁸ Stéphane Lacroix, “Saudi Arabia’s Muslim Brotherhood predicament,” *Washington Post*, March 20, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/03/20/saudi-arabias-muslim-brotherhood-predicament/>.

¹⁹ “Saudi Arabia designates Muslim Brotherhood terrorist group,” Reuters, March 7, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-security-idUSBREA260SM20140307>.

²⁰ “Under the Gun,” *Economist*, April 2, 2014, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/pomegranate/2014/04/muslim-brothers-and-gulf>.

²¹ “Saudi Arabia orders Muslim Brotherhood books removed from schools,” Middle East Eye, December 1, 2015, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/saudi-arabia-orders-muslim-brotherhood-books-removed-schools-302622603#sthash.q6325Oq4.dpuf>.

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regime.²² On March 5, 2014, Saudi Arabia withdrew its ambassador to Qatar in protest of the latter's support for the Muslim Brotherhood.²³ In December 2015, Saudi Arabia ordered schools to remove books by scholars affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, including [Yusuf al-Qaradawi](#), [Sayyid Qutb](#), and Brotherhood founder [Hassan al-Banna](#).²⁴

Nonetheless, there were also signs of a rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and the regional Muslim Brotherhood movement.²⁵ In June 2015, Saudi Arabia received a high-level delegation from [Hamass](#), the Muslim Brotherhood's offshoot in Gaza.²⁶ The kingdom also hosted a number of Brotherhood-affiliated leaders, including [Rached Ghannouchi](#), leader of the Brotherhood-linked Ennahda political party in [Tunisia](#), and [Abd al-Majeed al-Zindani](#), the leader of the al-Islah political party in [Yemen](#).²⁷ That month, Saudi-backed proxies in Yemen helped to bring the Brotherhood-oriented al-Islah party to power in the southern city of Aden.²⁸ In late 2016, Saudi officials reportedly met with Brotherhood leaders to discuss removing the Brotherhood from its terrorism list.²⁹ Saudi Arabia reportedly planned to normalize relations with the Brotherhood and provide the group with political support in exchange for unspecified understandings between the kingdom and the international Brotherhood.³⁰

However, in June 2017, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and Bahrain cut diplomatic ties with Qatar in response to that country's ongoing support for the Muslim Brotherhood and other extremist and terrorist groups.³¹

History:

- **1948:** During a trip to Saudi Arabia, Muslim Brotherhood founder Hassan al-Banna is the

²² Guido Steinberg, "The Gulf States and the Muslim Brotherhood," Project on the Middle East Political Science, March 9, 2014, <http://pomeps.org/2014/03/21/the-gulf-states-and-the-muslim-brotherhood/>.

²³ Stephanie Lacroix, "Saudi Arabia's Muslim Brotherhood predicament," Project on Middle East Political Science, March 9, 2014, <http://pomeps.org/2014/03/20/saudi-arabias-muslim-brotherhood-predicament/>.

²⁴ "Saudi Arabia orders Muslim Brotherhood books removed from schools," Middle East Eye, December 1, 2015, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/saudi-arabia-orders-muslim-brotherhood-books-removed-schools-302622603#sthash.q6325Oq4.dpuf>.

²⁵ Ali Al-Arian, "Is Saudi Arabia warming up to the Muslim Brotherhood?" Al Jazeera, July 29, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/07/saudi-arabia-warming-muslim-brotherhood-150727121500912.html>.

²⁶ Hussein Ibesh, "Saudi Arabia's New Sunni Alliance," *New York Times*, July 31, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/01/opinion/hussein-ibesh-saudi-arabias-new-sunni-alliance.html>.

²⁷ Ali Al-Arian, "Is Saudi Arabia warming up to the Muslim Brotherhood?" Al Jazeera, July 29, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/07/saudi-arabia-warming-muslim-brotherhood-150727121500912.html>.

²⁸ Hussein Ibesh, "Saudi Arabia's New Sunni Alliance," *New York Times*, July 31, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/01/opinion/hussein-ibesh-saudi-arabias-new-sunni-alliance.html>.

²⁹ "Saudi to remove Muslim Brotherhood from terrorist lists," Middle East Monitor, December 8, 2016, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20161208-saudi-to-remove-muslim-brotherhood-from-terrorist-lists/>.

³⁰ "Saudi to remove Muslim Brotherhood from terrorist lists," Middle East Monitor, December 8, 2016, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20161208-saudi-to-remove-muslim-brotherhood-from-terrorist-lists/>.

³¹ Patrick Wintour, "Gulf Plunged into Diplomatic Crisis as Countries Cut Ties with Qatar," *Guardian* (London), June 5, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/05/saudi-arabia-and-bahrain-break-diplomatic-ties-with-qatar-over-terrorism>.

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target of an Egyptian-sponsored assassination plot. Saudi authorities help uncover and thwart the plot.³²

- **1980s:** Osama bin Laden, later the founder of al-Qaeda, is reportedly evicted from the Saudi Brotherhood for his determination to wage jihad in Afghanistan.³³
- **August 8, 2013:** Fifty-six clerics, some of whom are sympathetic to the Saudi Muslim Brotherhood, publish a letter condemning the “removal of a legitimately elected president” in Egypt and a violation of “the will of the people.”³⁴
- **February 4, 2014:** A royal decree from the Saudi government announces that support for extremist organizations may result in up to 20 years in prison.³⁵
- **March 2014:** Saudi Arabia expresses its disapproval of alleged Qatari support for the Muslim Brotherhood by recalling its ambassador.³⁶
- **March 7, 2014:** Saudi Arabia formally designates the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization.³⁷
- **June 2015:** Saudi Arabia receives a high-level delegation from Hamas, the Gaza offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood.³⁸
- **December 1, 2015:** Saudi Arabia orders schools to remove books by scholars affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, including Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Sayyid Qutb, and Hassan al-Banna.³⁹
- **June 2017:** Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and Bahrain cut diplomatic ties with Qatar in response to that country’s ongoing support for the Muslim Brotherhood and other extremist and terrorist groups. Two weeks later, the four countries issue a list of demands to Qatar, including that it cut ties with the Muslim Brotherhood.⁴⁰

³² Stéphane Lacroix, “Saudi Arabia’s Muslim Brotherhood predicament,” *Washington Post*, March 20, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/03/20/saudi-arabias-muslim-brotherhood-predicament/>.

³³ Stephanie Lacroix, “Osama bin Laden and the Saudi Muslim Brotherhood,” *Foreign Policy*, October 3, 2012, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/10/03/osama-bin-laden-and-the-saudi-muslim-brotherhood/>.

³⁴ Stéphane Lacroix, “Saudi Arabia’s Muslim Brotherhood predicament,” *Washington Post*, March 20, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/03/20/saudi-arabias-muslim-brotherhood-predicament/>.

³⁵ Stéphane Lacroix, “Saudi Arabia’s Muslim Brotherhood predicament,” *Washington Post*, March 20, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/03/20/saudi-arabias-muslim-brotherhood-predicament/>.

³⁶ Saudi Arabia designates Muslim Brotherhood terrorist group,” Reuters, March 7, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-security-idUSBREA260SM20140307>.

³⁷ “Saudi Arabia designates Muslim Brotherhood terrorist group,” Reuters, March 7, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-security-idUSBREA260SM20140307>.

³⁸ Hussein Ibesh, “Saudi Arabia’s New Sunni Alliance,” *New York Times*, July 31, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/01/opinion/hussein-ibesh-saudi-arabias-new-sunni-alliance.html>.

³⁹ “Saudi Arabia orders Muslim Brotherhood books removed from schools,” Middle East Eye, December 1, 2015, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/saudi-arabia-orders-muslim-brotherhood-books-removed-schools-302622603#sthash.q6325Oq4.dpuf>.

⁴⁰ Patrick Wintour, “Gulf Plunged into Diplomatic Crisis as Countries Cut Ties with Qatar,” *Guardian* (London), June 5, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jun/05/saudi-arabia-and-bahrain-break-diplomatic-ties-with-qatar-over-terrorism>; “Saudi-led bloc modifies demands to end Qatar crisis,” BBC News, July 19, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-40654023>; Eric Trager, “The Muslim Brotherhood Is the Root of the

Violent Activities: Not determined.

Ties to Extremist Groups: Not determined.

Designations by Governments and Organizations:

Designations by Saudi Arabia:

Saudi Arabia

March 7, 2014

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia designated the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization.⁴¹

In Their Own Words: Not determined.

Qatar Crisis,” *Atlantic*, July 2, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/07/muslim-brotherhood-qatar/532380/>.

⁴¹ “Saudi Arabia designates Muslim Brotherhood terrorist group,” Reuters, March 7, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-security-idUSBREA260SM20140307>.