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The Ambiguity of the Quest for Mastership of the World: The Concept of *Ustāḏiyyat al-ʿĀlam* in the Doctrine of the Muslim Brotherhood

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Abstract: This article examines the idea of *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* (mastership of the world), in the political thought of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). *Ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* was formulated by the movements' founder, Ḥasan al-Bannā, as the ultimate goal of the MB, the last of a gradual seven-stage plan to Islamize the individual, the family, society, the government, and the state, and restore the caliphate. In an attempt to unpack this abstract concept, this article offers a contextualized reading of its use in the foundational tracts of the MB general guides, and in pertinent commentaries on some of these tracts. We point to an inherent ambiguity in the concept, which intertwines ideational and active elements of domination, ranging between the homiletical task of propagating Islam to the world and striving to rule the world. Within the MB, *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* is found to serve alternately as a privileged status of the Islamic nation, a duty, a mechanism of power legitimation, and as a source of motivation in times of despair, while utilized in anti-MB campaigns to discredit the MB and curb its internationalization.

Keywords: Egypt; Muslim Brotherhood; caliphate; Arab uprising; Hasan al-Banna; political Islam; ambiguity

1. Introduction

Founded in Egypt in 1928, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) is one of the most enduring and influential socio-political movements in the Middle East and a central pillar in the contemporary Islamic resurgence. Since its inception, the status of the Egyptian mother movement and its sister movements in other countries around the world has fluctuated between a legitimate, political actor, and an outlawed entity, even a terrorist organization, in some places. Most recently, the Egyptian MB has experienced dramatic upheavals, turning from a politically marginalized and illegal group into the ruling party after the 2011 uprising against Mubārak (d. 2020), when its senior member, Muḥammad Mursī (d. 2019), was elected president in 2012. After a year in power, he was ousted in a military coup. The MB in Egypt has been designated as a terrorist organization, and its leadership operates underground or in exile and is embroiled in internal power struggles over the path to be taken, whether a gradualist reform should take place, in line with the decades-long tradition of the movement, or violence (Brown and Dunne 2015; Awad 2017).

The historiography of the MB is marked by an inherent conflict between categorizing the movement as moderate or extreme.[1] Some scholars and commentators describe the MB as a radical, reactionary organization with expansionist pan-Islamic and transnational aspirations.[2] This approach is based mostly on the experience of the 1940s, when the MB established a 'Special Apparatus' that was involved in violent operations against vital targets of the regime and British colonialism, and controlled paramilitary battalions, which sent volunteers to fight in Palestine following the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 (e.g., Ingram 2013).[3] Moreover, the view of the MB as a zealot movement relies to a large extent on the ideas of Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1966) and the 1965 organization, which he

inspired, and whose aim was to violently topple the Nasserite regime (e.g., Kepel 1985).[4] In addition, the MB's global aspirations relate to an attempt made during the early 1980s to form an international body to coordinate between the MB branches around the world (Pargeter 2013, p. 111). Besides, to use Alison Pargeter's words, the MB "has been accused as acting as an incubator for more radical ideas and of spawning terrorist recruits" (Pargeter 2013, pp. 179–80). Barry Rubin, for example, described the MB as "sources of violence and terrorism indirectly, even when they disdain or disavow such measures themselves" (Rubin 2010, pp. 1–2).

Conversely, a counter approach portrays the MB as a collection of centrist movements, whose ambitions do not go beyond the local context in which each branch operates, and which shapes its interests and behavior.[5] According to this perception, as an anti-imperialist movement, the MB strives to progressively reinvigorate Islam in all spheres of life through an evolutionary, non-revolutionary process of preaching (*daʿwa*) and persuasion.[6] Such views, rest on the premise that since the 1970s, the internal struggle between a militant wing of the MB and a non-militant one started to favor the latter, and shifted the movement to the mainstream during the 1980s and 1990s, while adopting post-Islamist positions.[7] The more the movement became involved in politics, the more it moved away from its revolutionary aspirations (e.g., El-Ghobashy 2005, pp. 377–81; Al-Awadi 2004).[8]

Carrie Rosefsky Wickham has presented a third interpretation of the MB's tendencies toward extremism or moderation, suggesting that the MB cannot be described either as "moderate" or as "extremist". Pointing to inconsistencies and contradictions in the MB's various agendas, she argues that the MB should not be seen as a monolith in its worldview, and its trajectory should not be seen as "a linear, unidimensional progression toward greater 'moderation'" (Wickham 2013, p. 2).[9] Other scholars have also pointed out "gray zones" in the rhetoric and conduct of the MB, which increase suspicion and skepticism about the movement's motives (Brown et al. 2006). This behavioral pattern is apparent not just in the movement's attitude toward violence or extremist ideas, but also toward other controversial issues, such as democratic norms, human rights (including women and minority rights), and the concept of a civil state as an ideal model of statism (Rohe and Skovgaard-Petersen 2015, p. 210; Meijer 2012; Lavie 2017).

This paper offers an insight into another ambiguous and yet under-researched concept that is central to the doctrine of the MB, the concept of *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* (mastership of the world), which can shed new light on the movement's aspirations from an angle rarely explored. The idea of *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* was formulated by the movement's founder, Ḥasan al-Bannā (d. 1949), as the MB's final goal after the establishment of a pan-Islamic international union (Al-Bannā 1965). Scholars referring to the MB's ultimate goal normally point merely to the restoration of the caliphate or the enactment of *šarīʿa*, while ignoring the phase of *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam*. Moreover, they even view the re-establishment of the caliphate as far-fetched, claiming that MB leaders and theoreticians just paid this objective lip service.[10] The notion of *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* is unique to the precepts of the MB, from its inception to the present, and is not prevalent in other Islamist organizations aspiring to revive the caliphate, even though the ideology of the MB is known to affect other Islamist organizations, perhaps due to the notion's obscurity.

This article seeks to examine the use of the concept of *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* through an analysis of the doctrinal texts of the MB, mostly tracts (*rasāʾil*) of MB general guides, from al-Bannā to the current general guide, Muḥammad Badīʿ (b. 1943), available from the MB's online archive, ikhwanwiki.com, and commentaries (*šurūḥ*) on these tracts from inside and outside the MB. The tracts are a genre adopted by al-Bannā and resurrected as a central tool for spreading the movement's message and official position during the last decades, mainly in the form of a periodically written sermon. Research on modern sermons as a tool for the study of society and politics has regained its importance in recent decades, after this genre of sources was neglected, both as a literary text and as a historical event in itself (Morrissey 1999).[11] Indeed, while research on the MB largely relies on al-Bannā's tracts and memoirs, which were compiled after his death, later tracts have not been comprehensively and

thoroughly examined so far. These sources will be used critically, while cross-referencing other sources, including MB periodicals, websites, and non-MB-affiliated Egyptian media sources.

The paper aims to explore how the concept of *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* is perceived in different contexts and political circumstances in the annals of the movement, in an attempt to depict variations in its meaning and interpretations, and to understand its nuances, evolution, and implications. To this end, the subsequent chapters will follow the Egyptian MB discourse on *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* in chronological order. The first section will conduct a contextual analysis of the use of the term in al-Bannā's tracts. The second section will focus on the period between al-Bannā's assassination and the 2011 uprising, and the last section will concentrate on the development of the concept in the post-uprising period, including during the MB's rise to power and the aftermath of the June 2013 debacle. Drawing on this analysis, we will contend that within the MB discourse, *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* is found to serve alternately as a duty invested in the Muslim community; a privileged, exalted state bestowed upon the Islamic nation for being entrusted with the divine message; a far-off goal; a means to a goal; a mechanism of power legitimation; and as a source of encouragement in times of despair. Conversely, in the post-revolutionary, anti-MB counter discourse in Egypt and among its allies, the concept is being utilized unequivocally to discredit the MB, justify its current political exclusion, and deter Western countries from allowing the movement to establish an alternative base in their territory.

2. The Seeds of Obscurity: *Ustāḏiyyat al-ʿĀlam* in Ḥasan al-Bannā's *Rasāʾil*

The conception of *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* is to be found in one of al-Bannā's most famous and influential tracts, called *Risālat al-Taʿālīm* (often translated as "the tract of instructions" or "the message of the teachings"). Published in the late 1930s or early 1940s[12], a period in which the movement was constantly expanding and maintaining a high level of social, communal, and paramilitary engagement, and when it was under internal pressure to adopt a militant course, this tract was one of the pillars of the MB curriculum. It outlined dozens of detailed instructions for members of the battalions of the paramilitary youth to memorize and follow in their everyday lives, ranging from eating habits, leisure, and manners, to religious and spiritual practices. Lia depicts this tract as representing "a kind of covenant between the leadership and the individual member", which expressed the "spirit of the Brothers" (Lia 1998, p. 174). Khalil al-Anani adds that the merit of this tract lies in the "master framework and ideology" that al-Bannā articulated in it and that, therefore, this tract "remains influential and operative among its members to this day" (Al-Anani 2016, p. 45).

Within this tract, al-Bannā delineated seven sequential phases that each member of the MB, or the Brotherhood as an entirety, should gradually undertake. First, at the individual level, each brother is asked to reconstruct himself so as to become morally and physically strong, efficiently working and earning a living, and righteously fulfilling their religious duties. Second, at the familial level, the brother is instructed to establish a proper Muslim home and raise, educate, and discipline his wife, children, and servants, according to the principles of Islam. Third, at the societal level, it is the duty of each MB member and the Brotherhood as a group to guide and instruct society through preaching to embrace the virtues of Islam, do good, and avoid evil. Fourth, at the national level, the MB must liberate the homeland from any foreign, non-Islamic rule, whether political, economic, or spiritual. The fifth stage obligates complete reform at the governmental level through a true Islamization of the government. The sixth step refers to the transnational level and commands the re-establishment of the international embodiment of the Muslim *Umma*, meaning the restoration of the caliphate after its abolishment in 1924 by Atatürk. The seventh step constitutes the MB's ultimate goal, *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam*, which is at the center of this study (Al-Bannā n.d., p. 356).

What does *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* mean? According to the inductive logic framework of the seven-stage plan outlined above, one can deduce that the concept refers to the global level

and indicates a worldwide entity broader than the caliphate. The word *ustāḏiyya* in modern Arabic is usually used in academic and professional contexts, implying professorship, expertise, and specialization. Morphologically, as an artificial maṣdar (*maṣdar ṣināʿī*), *ustāḏiyya* is an abstract noun derived from the word *ustāḏ*. *Ustāḏ* can be used as a general, honorary title for a highly respected intellectual, like a writer or a poet. More specifically, it means a teacher or a master. Therefore, the implications of *ustāḏiyya* range between teachership, leadership, and mastership. After mentioning *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam*, al-Bannā elaborates briefly and adds that this goal will be accomplished by spreading the message of Islam throughout the world (*našr daʿwat al-Islām fī rubūʿihi*); a supplement instructs al-Bannā's followers to benignly uphold the missionary, homiletical task of preaching and propagating Islam to the entire world through education, consultation, and persuasion. However, two Quranic verses that are partly cited thereafter support a more belligerent interpretation and may imply using coercive measures to expand beyond Islamic boundaries and rule the entire world according to the directives of Islam in all areas of life. The first is "Fight them until there is no dissension and the religion is entirely Allah's" (8:39) (Bell 1960, p. 166) and the second is "Allah refuseth to do otherwise than perfect His light, though averse are the unbelievers" (9:32) (Bell 1960, p. 177).

Examining scholarly interpretations of this concept can be instructive. Efraim Barak suggested that the intention of *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* is to "teach the world through spreading the Islamic message in all corners of the globe" (Barak 2021, p. 307), thereby clearly inclining toward the teachership end of the spectrum of the possible implicit meanings of this concept. Victor Willi recently defined *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* as "the age of 'the global guidance' of Islam, referring to a state of supreme enlightenment ruled by Islam," thus inclining to conceive *ustāḏiyya* as both guidance and rule (Willi 2021, p. 401). Other interpretations of *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* tend toward political world domination. Lia mentions that the final goal of the MB is to obtain "the universal brotherhood of mankind and the global hegemony of the Islamic nation" (Lia 1998, p. 80). Quite similarly, though in reference to another tract by al-Bannā (*Daʿwatuna*) and not to *Risālat al-Taʿlīm*, Gudrun Krämer depicted the eventual mission of the MB as "the establishment of Islamic hegemony and the brotherhood of humankind" (Krämer 2010, p. 105). Laura Guazzone and Daniela Pioppi translated the seventh stage as: "mastering the world by spreading the *daʿwa* throughout its territories" (Guazzone and Pioppi 2021, p. 57). Shmuel Bar understands *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* as the "mastership of the world" (Bar 2007, p. 40). Khalil al-Anani, too, seems to grasp *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* in a broader sense than edifying the world, "namely to 'dominate the world and [master] humanity according to the teachings of Islam'" (Al-Anani 2016, p. 45).

A close reading of two other tracts by al-Bannā in which he used the word *ustāḏiyya* (though without *al-ʿālam*) can help unpack this concept. A 1936 tract called *The Military Way Is a Necessity* (*al-ʿAskariyya ʿAhd*) states that when Allah wanted to bring joy to all of humanity by spreading his mercy and providing a comprehensive way of life that would ensure everyone's happiness, he sent his messenger with the Qurʾān and gave him (or the Qurʾān) *ustāḏiyyat al-dunyā* (a phrase similar to *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam*). Then, every Muslim had to keep this valuable treasure and carry on the task that *al-ustāḏiyya al-kubrā* (the greatest *ustāḏiyya*) entails. Thus, *ustāḏiyya* means a status that every Muslim inherits that is linked to an ambiguous mission, which ranges from preaching the teachings of the Qurʾān globally to making the all-encompassing way of Islam reign over the entire world. The tract is of a combative character and does not rule out the use of force, military might, and self-sacrifice for the sake of spreading Allah's word, and promises the soldiers of Islam a heavenly reward (Al-Bannā 1936).

In a later tract, *Our Problems in Light of the Islamic Rule* (*Muškilātunā fī Ḍawʾ al-Niẓām al-Islāmī*), al-Bannā foresaw a third world war unless *Ummat al-daʿwa* (the nation of *daʿwa*) rose, that is a nation that conveys the message of Allah. Otherwise, an undesirable, futile revolution would take place. Here, *ustāḏiyya* is used to describe the status (*martaba*) of the Islamic *Umma* (and not the status or private duty of every single Muslim, as in the former tract), which is given to the *Umma* by virtue of serving as the carrier of Allah's message on

earth. It is described as a status that is different and apparently superior to the status of sovereignty (*siyāda*). Moreover, the *Umma* that has such a status cannot succumb to anyone or be enslaved or subject to any oppressor. Hence, according to this tract, *ustāḏiyya* is a privileged, exalted state of the Islamic nation, bestowed upon them for being entrusted with the divine message.[13] In this context, the concept seems to serve as a claim for the universal legitimacy of a system of values said to be exclusively embodied in Muslim society.[14]

After al-Bannā's assassination in 1949, his tracts turned into a canon for his successors and generations of followers. In the constantly changing socio-political circumstances, this yielded a plethora of references and reinterpretations of his principles and instructions, to be surveyed in the following section.

3. Towards Moderation: Post-al-Bannā MB Interpretations of *Ustāḏiyyat al-ʿĀlam*

With al-Bannā's assassination, the heyday of the MB during the 1930s and 1940s ended abruptly, as the movement experienced what became known in its collective memory as an ordeal (*miḥna*). In these circumstances, a commentary (*šarḥ*) on *Risālat al-Taʿālīm* was issued by Sheikh ʿAbd al-Munʿim Aḥmad Tuʿaylib (1921–2010), an Azharite preacher affiliated with the MB. According to this commentary, the MB's goal was "not merely to bestow happiness upon the Muslims; it expands to the guidance of all people" (Tuʿaylib 1952, p. 54). This reading of al-Bannā's tract is grounded in the conception of Islam as a guardianship religion (*dīn al-wiṣāya*) over the universe. It can be assumed, therefore, that Tuʿaylib conceived the role of the MB to be one related to conveying the message of Islam and its teachings on a worldwide scale, without binding the domination of Islam over the world to a concomitant, political supremacy. Tuʿaylib's commentary appeared amidst the aftershock of al-Bannā's assassination and the internal MB debate over his succession, as well as the ascendance to power of the Free Officers in the 1952 military coup. These circumstances may have contributed to Tuʿaylib's reluctance to provoke antagonism, and perhaps his commentary was meant to lay the ground for future collaboration between the MB and the new ruling elite.

However, the MB and the Free Officers clashed soon after Ǧamāl ʿAbd al-Nāṣir (d. 1970) rose to power. The dissolution of the MB in 1954, which was accompanied by a wave of unprecedented repression, pushed parts of the movement to radicalize. Among these, al-Bannā's evolutionary program and ambiguous concepts about power and domination gave way to univocal statements on expansionist imperial ambitions and perceptions of immediate insurgency as a preferable reaction to the essentially anti-Islamist and tyrannical Nasserite regime. The nebulous concept of *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* was sidelined, and the MB's well-known theorist, Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1966), conceptualized the explicit notion of launching a holy war for the sake of imposing Islamic law (*šarīʿa*), under the absolute sovereignty of God (*ḥākimiyyat Allah*) (Khatab 2002). During the second half of the 1960s, the MB general guide at the time, Ḥasan al-Huḍaybī (d. 1973), sought to dismantle the Quṭbian effect and re-orient the MB to the gradualist path of non-violence (Al-Huḍaybī 1977; Johnston 2007; Zollner 2007), while also avoiding al-Bannā's *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam*, perhaps out of concern that the concept would be misconstrued and utilized by the Nasserite regime to portray the MB as radicals, thereby, legitimizing their persecution.

During the 1970s, with President Sādāt's (d. 1981) encouragement, the MB turned from a classical anti-system movement into an actor in the political scene. In the 1980s, the MB played an increasingly influential parliamentary role, in collaboration with secular parties.[15] With the resurgence of the MB, the notion of *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* reappeared in the 1986 tract by the third MB general guide (r. 1973–1986), ʿOmar al-Tilmisānī (d. 1986), *We are in the Best Shape* (*Naḥnu ʿalā Ḥayr Ḥāl*). Through *daʿwa*, al-Tilmisānī noted, the MB has proved its resilience, which deems the MB as most worthy of *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam*. Al-Tilmisānī emphasized that the interest of the MB is in filling the role of educators and guides who bring Muslims closer together and closer to Allah (Al-Tilmisānī 1987). In his memoir, al-Tilmisānī explicitly clarified that *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* does not imply (political)

superiority (*ta'āl*) or hegemony (*tasalluṭ*), but rather the mastership of educating (*tarbiya*), guiding (*tawǧīh*), and teaching (*taʿlīm*) all mankind according to Islam (Al-Tilmisānī 1985). His use of *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* was in line with his support of the fledgling reformist current of the movement in the face of the conservative old guard within the internal divide that characterized the movement at that period.[16]

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, numerous commentaries on *Risālat al-Taʿālīm* were disseminated by MB affiliates. Some of them failed to acknowledge the concept of *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* altogether.[17] However, this does not necessarily imply an abandonment of the concept or its degradation, as others kept citing the idea from al-Bannā's tract.[18] A handful of prominent MB figures, however, delved deeper into the matter, thereby offering additional insights into the development of the subject, among them Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī (d. 2022), who no longer played an official part in the movement but is known for his enduring influence on its ideology and as one of the MB's spiritual leaders (Benthall 2016, pp. 180–84; Shaham 2018). In a 1991 commentary, al-Qaraḍāwī discussed the relations between the Islamic nation and the rest of the world in hierarchical terms, linking the uniqueness of Islam to its *wasaṭiyya* (literally "centrism"). According to him, by virtue of the *ustāḏiyya* given to the Islamic nation, as the best of all nations, it assumes the role of inviting humanity to share with it the good of Islam and emigrate to Islam from the world of heresy (Al-Qaraḍāwī 1991, p. 63). For his part, what grants the status of *ustāḏiyya* to the Islamic nation is its *wasaṭiyya*, which is unique to the Islamic nation, and which qualifies Muslims to be witnesses for humanity in front of God (Al-Qaraḍāwī 1991, p. 90).[19] Hence, al-Qaraḍāwī gave the notion under discussion an additional dimension dialectic to the wasaṭī trend that evolved among Islamist religious scholars and was later adopted by the MB.

It is worth mentioning Tariq Ramaḍan's (b. 1962) perspective on al-Banna's *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam*. Ramaḍan, a controversial yet influential figure within European Muslim communities, is frequently identified "as a spearhead of the MB", not just because his maternal grandfather was Ḥasan al-Bannā, and his father was a prominent MB member, who settled in Geneva when the MB was banned in Egypt. Ramaḍan is an activist, pedagogue, and preacher in his own right, with a high media profile (Benthall 2016, pp. 164–70). In one of his numerous audio recordings directed at Western Muslims, as elucidated by Caroline Fourest (2008, p. 20), Ramaḍan presents his grandfather's seven-stage plan as a contemporary obligation for Muslims. This plan aims "to rebuild the Islamic Empire, that was founded on justice and equality and that spread the light of the true way among the people". Ramaḍan advocates for the liberation and unification of all Muslim lands based on faith. The seventh and final stage, which is particularly relevant here, is, according to Ramaḍan, intended "to disseminate our Islamic message to the entire world" and "overcome the tyrants until the day when agitation ceases and religion is entirely devoted to God." Consequently, Ramaḍan perceives all Muslims, including those residing in the West, as individuals responsible for promoting Islam and acquainting both Muslims and non-Muslims with Islamic values.

Later on, the fifth MB general guide (r. 1996–2002), Muṣṭafā Mašhūr (d. 2002), specifies at what point the MB was standing at regarding al-Bannā's seven-stage plan, and where the movement should put its efforts in order to realize its goals.[20] In a tract titled *Clarity of Vision on the Way of Daʿwa* (*Wuḍūḥ al-Ruʾya ʿalā Ṭarīq al-Daʿwa*), Mašhūr stated that the MB was at the third stage, which meant at the level of reforming society through enhancing the movement's public activity and reaping success in professional syndicates, municipal authorities, and student unions. *Ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* remained the movement's ideal. However, Mašhūr concentrated only on the first three levels of al-Bannā's gradual plan, stressing that preserving the Islamic identity of society and of the families and individuals that make up society was the most effective way to combat the enemies of Islam. These enemies, he added, enjoy military, political, economic, and scientific superiority over Muslims, yet cannot overcome the advantage of the Islamic spirit, despite their attempts to diminish it (Mašhūr n.d.). Mašhūr may have been referring to the crackdown on the MB by the Mubārak regime, and to the generational rift that culminated in the 1996 defection of MB members to form the relatively liberal Islamic al-Wasaṭ party. At this low point,

Mašhūr emphasized that a fundamental change can occur only gradually, from the bottom up, through endurance and preaching, and from within society's institutions. He presented the endeavor to paint society in the color of Islam as a precondition for the domination of Islamic thinking on a world scale, contrary to the communist idea that prevailed at the time,[21] construing *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* as an all-embracing civilizational paradigm, however far into the future its realization may be.[22]

In his first tract as the MB's sixth general guide (r. 2002–2004), Maʾmūn al-Huḍaybī (d. 2004) also adhered to the need to concentrate the main effort of Islamization at the level of society, emphasizing the fields of education and science as the basis for the long-awaited resurrection of the Muslim nation. Particularly prominent in the tract was his emphasis on the need to avoid violence and hold fast to the path of Islamic *wasaṭiyya*, while cooperating with other currents. Although he expressed support for the Palestinian jihad during the Second Intifada and for the Iraqi opposition to the US invasion following 9/11, he maintained that the way of the MB is to collaborate, counsel, propagate, and preach through *daʿwa*, whose objectives range from shaping the individual to *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* (Al-Huḍaybī 2012). This announcement was meant to distance the MB from any radical image, so as not to be identified with militant Islamist movements, such as al-Qāʿida, and so as not to be targeted by the global war on Islamic terrorism. The policy of the MB during the first decade of the 2000s was to seize the new opportunity created in the aftermath of the 9/11 events and the American "inclusion–moderation" thesis, which led to pressure from the US administration for reform and democratization in the Middle East and culminated in the temporary liberalization of the Egyptian public arena (Dalacoura 2010).

Along with this agenda, the MB introduced in 2004 a political reform initiative that embraced the rhetoric of democratization and human rights, while also promoting Islamic values and implementing *šarīʿa* law. The following year, the MB's representation in parliament reached 88 seats, 10 times more than all the other opposition parties combined (Masoud 2014). This electoral achievement put an end to the relative freedom granted to the movement in the early 2000s and led to another wave of repression (Zahid 2010). Annette Ranko observed that in that period, the MB changed its traditional prioritization and deviated from the well-known gradual plan by al-Bannā. Instead of slow progress from the micro-level to the macro-level, now the MB preferred to bring about a change to the political system first and, from there, to change society: "The sequence was reversed, as a change of the political order was argued to have to come first and to precede the reform of the individual and society" (Ranko 2015, p. 197).

Still, the notion of *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* endured in the tracts by the MB's seventh general guide (r. 2004–2010), Muḥammad Mahdī ʿĀkef (d. 2017). In a 2007 tract, he cited al-Bannā's ambiguous reference to this concept, explaining that *ustāḏiyya* does not mean sovereignty (*siyāda*) but a special status assigned to Muslims for carrying God's message (ʿĀkef 2007, n.d.). Elsewhere, Ākef linked *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* with world leadership (*qiyāda*), arguing that as long as Islam does not take humanity under its wing, and world leadership remains in the possession of a handful of people who lack values and work only for their own interests, humanity will not enjoy security, stability, and the cessation of bloodshed (ʿĀkef 2008; Altman 2007, p. 15). Muḥammad Badīʿ (b. 1943), the eighth general guide (r. 2010-), used *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* in the sense of global humanity (*insāniyya ʿālamiyya*) at the mercy of Islam, in which no one patronizes anyone else. Badīʿ contrasted this Islamic way with the path taken by dozens of states, headed by the United States and oppressive Arab regimes, which in his view use force against their people or other countries (Badīʿ 2010).

In the wake of the popular uprising of January 2011 in Egypt that brought about President Ḥusnī Mubārak's downfall after more than three decades in power, the MB recorded a series of unprecedented political achievements. These brought the movement one step further, beyond the reform of society in al-Bannā's gradual plan, to the national and governmental level. With the election of Muḥammad Mursī as president in June 2012, the MB became the ruling party. With the parallel electoral success of the Tunisian al-Nahḍa party and the general rise of political Islam, the regional and global stages in

al-Bannā's program no longer seemed like far-fetched, intangible goals. The next section will examine occurrences of the concept of *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* in the discourses of the MB and the movement's opponents since the 2011 turmoil.

4. *Ustāḏiyyat al-ʿĀlam* as a Bill of Indictment in the Post-Arab Uprising Anti-MB Discourse

In the new circumstances following Mubārak's downfall, the appearance of the term in Badīʿ's 29 December 2011 weekly tract caused an uproar outside MB circles and worked in a way that confirmed the worst suspicions of its critics. Badīʿ indicated that *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* refers to the mastership of right guidance, truth, and justice (*hidāya, rašād, ḥaqq, ʿadl*). He maintained that the way to this end remains persuasion (*iqnāʿ*), not coercion (*iǧbār*), love (*ḥubb*), not oppression (*ǧabarūt*), and urged all political factions to unite around the joint aspiration to realize the demands of the revolution and avoid schism (Badīʿ 2011b). In the new context, even before the meteoric success of the MB in the parliamentary elections and later in the presidential elections, Badīʿ's rhetoric was considered alarming.

The results of the March 2011 referendum for minor changes to the 1971 constitution showed a considerable electoral gap in favor of the Islamist forces. The approval of the changes to the constitution by a majority of 72.27% was considered a win for the Islamists and marked the beginning of their journey to take over parliament. What reinforced this forecast was the MB's sweeping victory in the elections for the teachers' and doctors' syndicates, held in September-October 2011. The MB tried to allay public concerns that it intended to kidnap the revolution and, therefore, announced that it did not intend to run for a majority in parliament, nor run for president (Badīʿ 2011a; CNN 2011). However, in May 2011, the MB announced its intention to run for a larger part of the seats (Bradley 2011). Badīʿ's aforementioned tract was published amid the early rounds in the parliamentary elections, in which the MB had a strong showing. Thus, the dismay at Badīʿ's reference to the idea of *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* reflected the growing public uncertainty and skepticism about the MB's electoral ambitions, caused by the inconsistent statements on the part of the MB.

Commentators and scholars referred to Badīʿ's tract in accordance with their perception of the MB in general, between "moderate" and "radical" tendencies. Those who viewed the MB as representing an extremist worldview found this reinforced in Badīʿ's tract.[23] ʿAlī Mabrūk (d. 2016), a columnist for *al-Ahrām*, interpreted Badīʿ's tract as a revelation on the MB's genuine orientation, one that still aligns with Quṭb's ideological framework. According to Mabrūk, Badīʿ's reintroduction of the concept of *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* signifies a display of exclusionary and bellicose rhetoric. In his view, this reiteration indicates that the MB perceives the world in hierarchical terms, with the Muslim *Umma* positioned at the apex, exerting dominance over the rest of humanity, even through violent means (Mabrūk 2013). In a 16 August 2013 interview with *al-Ahrām*, Egyptian political and social writer and intellectual al-Sayyid Yasin (d. 2017), even stressed that the MB's aspiration to reach *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam*, as manifested in Badīʿ's tract, was in fact what forced the Egyptian Armed Forces to intervene and oust Mursī. Sameh Egyptson, too, referred specifically to this tract by Badīʿ, presenting it as evidence of the MB's use of "white lies" to realize the aim of their strategies (Egyptson 2018, p. 248). Saudi columnist Mašārī al-ḏāyidī dedicated one of his columns in the London-based daily, *al-Šarq al-Awsaṭ*, to Badīʿ's revival of the vision of *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam*, viewing it as an indication of the Arab uprisings' turn from civil, non-religious revolutions into a celebration of the exclusivist policies of the fundamentalist Islamist currents. In his view, such statements reflected the deviation of the revolution from its initial character, which lacked religious zeal, or an aspiration to replace the tyrannical regime with a theocratic state or caliphate, turning into a disaster for the secular currents in society (Al-ḏāyidī 2012).

On the other hand, when referring to Badīʿ's controversial tract, Carrie Rosefsky Wickham classified him with segments inside the MB that "have struck a triumphalist note, invoking themes of domination carried over from the movement's anti-system past." However, trying to avoid generalizations, she dismissed the claim that this testifies to the MB's

radical intentions, claiming that the "Supreme Guide does not speak for the movement as a whole" and predicting that "those representing the Brotherhood in the domain of electoral politics" will not pursue a radical agenda, out of pragmatic considerations (Wickham 2013, pp. 276–77).

In April 2011, Ḥayrat al-Šāṭer, a prominent MB figure, the vice guide to Badīʿ, known as the most famous and richest Egyptian MB businessman, and the first choice of the MB to run for presidency, announced during a conference in Alexandria that the MB is pursuing the goal of reforming the individual, the family, and society, while getting ready for the stage of the establishment of the Islamic government and looking forward to the stage of ruling the world (*siyādat al-ʿālam*) (ʿAlī 2011). This statement caused an even greater uproar than Badīʿ's tract, since al-Šāṭer used the unambiguous term *siyāda*, in place of the nebulous concept of *ustāḏiyya*, thus ostensibly revealing the true intention behind the euphemism of the latter.[24] This statement was found especially disturbing after the MB won 47% of the seats in the People's Assembly and renounced its previous promise not to run for the presidency (Kirkpatrick 2012).

After Mursī came to power, *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* was more commonly used in the anti-MB campaign. In another column, ʿAlī Mabrūk, who was mentioned previously, identified the fingerprints of Quṭb's thought in Badīʿ's tract, although Quṭb is not mentioned, and indeed did not use this concept at all. According to Mabrūk, although al-Bannā was the first to present this idea, Quṭb had actually formulated the content and the implications of this perception, based on expressions of hegemony, exclusion, and division. Mabrūk presented Badīʿ's view as an approach that discourages novelty and creativity, since *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* relies on God's virtue. He described *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* as the opposite of Quṭb's notion of *ǧāhiliyya*, a state of ignorance in Islam, which he had ascribed to secular regimes, similar to the pre-Islamic society. Mabrūk saw a correlation between Badīʿ's rhetoric on *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* and Quṭb's rhetoric on *ḥākimiyyat Allāh*. Such rhetoric, he warned, entails violence (Mabrūk 2012, 2013).

This trend was also evident in the book *Fatḥ Miṣr: Waṯāʾiq al-Tamkīn al-Iḫwāniyya* (*The Conquest of Egypt: The MB Empowerment Documents*), which was published during Mursī's tenure, in 2013, by Ḥamdī Rizq. In his book, Rizq brought back to the public consciousness an affair from the past, known as the "Salsabīl affair", in order to indicate the danger posed by the MB rule. In 1992, against the background of the growing political and social influence of the MB, the Mubārak regime began suppressing the movement and, especially, draining its economic resources, including closing the Salsābil computer company owned by the movement's capital tycoons, Ḥayrat al-Šāṭer and Ḥasan Mālik. The pretext for their arrest and imprisonment was documents found in al-Šāṭer's house, outlining an "Empowerment" (*Tamkīn*) plan which the authorities claimed was a plan to seize power in the country. As part of the attempt to justify this move and delegitimize the MB, some of these documents were published at the time in the state-run weekly *al-Muṣawwar*, highlighting the fact that *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* appeared as the supreme goal of the movement (Rizq 2013, pp. 90–92, 129, 265, 317; ʿAskar 2013).

Since Mursī's removal from power in July 2013, the concept of *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* continues to be raised within the wide anti-MB campaign that was generated to support and justify Mursī's overthrow and the subsequent, unprecedented exclusion of the MB from public life. According to this narrative, the MB has no desire to pursue the interests of Egypt and the Egyptians, as its notion of *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* indicates that Egypt is a mere step in the MB's path to fulfill its imperial ambitions to rule the entire world (Ḥasan 2020a, 2020b; Maʿrūf 2020). In this context, the concept serves as proof of the MB's intolerance of other worldviews, its exclusivity, and rejection of pluralism and the vision of a civil state (Fuʾād 2016; Ṭūlān 2021; Musʿad 2019; ʿUṣfūr 2014, 2017). This propaganda is intended not merely to support the oppression of the MB in Egypt itself, but also to encourage other countries around the world to treat the MB in the same manner, and not to serve as a safe refuge or a new base for MB exiles, let alone allow the movement's globalization.[25]

In an unusual move, in February 2020, the MB website https://www.ikhwanonline.com/ (accessed on 5 August 2023) issued an English translation of *Risālat al-Taʿālīm*. The translation of the seventh stage reads as follows: "Guiding the world by spreading the call of Islam to all corners of the globe '…until there is no more tumult or oppression and the Religion of Allah prevails.' Al-Anfāl: 39. '…but Allah will not allow but that His Light should prevail.' At-Tawba: 32."[26] It is quite possible that its intention is to correct the impression created in Western countries that the MB poses a threat to their governments and societies and strives to infiltrate and take them over, assigning the movement a homiletical role only. On social media, however, *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* now serves anti-MB online activists who gloat over the MB's 2013 debacle and the movement's current political decline.[27]

5. Conclusions

This article sought to shine a spotlight on the idea of *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam*, which prevailed in the political thought of the MB from the early days of the movement to contemporary times. The concept of *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* was crafted by al-Bannā as the ultimate goal of the MB, the last phase in a seven-stage plan in which he gradually moved from a detailed prescription of the Islamization of the individual, the family, society, the government, and the state, to a much less defined goal of the restoration of the caliphate. The MB does not offer a unified, extensive discussion on *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* in a systematic fashion or a straightforward manner. Rather, its approach to this concept is scattered throughout the movement's epistles. This article offered a contextualized, close reading of its occurrences.

Drawing on this analysis, we pointed to an inherent, and perhaps intentional, ambiguity in the usage of the term, intertwining ideational/intellectual and material/active elements of domination, which is consistent with the haziness that characterizes the rhetoric and ideology of the MB. In some instances, this concept is perceived as an innate stance that legitimizes Muslims' claim for the mastership of the world. *Ustāḏiyya* is perceived as a God-given designation that Muslims assumed by virtue of being the carriers of Allah's message to the world. *Ustāḏiyya* is portrayed as a privileged status that grants Muslims supremacy. It is a claim for the universal legitimacy of a value set said to be embodied particularly in the society of Muslims. Thus, the prestigious position of *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* serves as a complex and ambiguous mechanism of power legitimation.

After al-Bannā, the MB did not completely relinquish this concept, but it remained abstract and weakly specified, ranging between a homiletical task of preaching and propagating Islam to the entire world through persuasion, guidance, and consultation, and striving to rule the world according to Islam in all areas of life, including the political, military, and economic spheres. If anything, most post-al-Bannā interpretations of the concept of *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* were less aggressive than al-Bannā's, as the MB increasingly moved away its violent manifestations of the 1940s and became more engaged in Egyptian politics. Moreover, on other occasions, this concept plays a motivational role, giving MB followers comfort and hope for a better future, to rely on in times of distress. The MB did not make a theoretical effort to construe the long-term goal at the global level. Rather it focused on short-term, practical, and attainable aims in the narrow local context, even when the movement's electoral success gained momentum regionally following the Arab uprisings.

Despite the benign use of this term in post-al-Banna MB statements, the adherence to *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* in the official speech of prominent MB figures since the 2011 popular uprising and the MB's ascent to power has adversely affected the public perception of the MB. In this new political atmosphere, *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* no longer serves as a mobilizing tool, a legitimizer, or a motivator in the hands of the MB, but as a de-legitimation tool at the hands of its opponents. It is frequently used not as a positive quality that distinguishes Muslims and gives them an edge, but as a theme in a campaign intended to present the MB as an extremist movement in order to justify its removal from power in Egypt and its political exclusion, while deterring Western countries from allowing the movement to form an alternative base in their territory. In the anti-MB propagandist offensive, *ustāḏiyyat*

al-ʿālam is being presented as part of an illusory MB power discourse that transfigures, dissimulates, and euphemizes relations of force and dominance. It is portrayed as the representation of a visionary world order, a concept that is based on cultural superiority, and a historical purpose that underlies and upholds international hierarchy.

The article introduces an additional concept to the array of double meanings adeptly employed by the MB, particularly exemplified by al-Bannā, as a recurrent pattern in its rhetoric and ideology. However, the ambiguity surrounding *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam*, vacillating between the notions of world teachership and global domination, has proven to be a double-edged sword. On one hand, such ambiguity offers the movement a degree of flexibility and pragmatism at the ideological level. Consequently, this contributes to the movement's capacity to attract and mobilize individuals, possibly serving as a vital factor in the effectiveness of al-Bannā's teachings. This practice largely works to the advantage of the movement by facilitating widespread recruitment at the grassroots level, since followers can imbue these concepts with their own individual worldviews. Conversely, this same ambiguity provides a platform for the movement's adversaries to question its intentions and credibility, thereby complicating the MB's efforts for survival and resurgence.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

1   For a critical account of the classification of Muslim movements and individuals as "radical" or "moderate", and how such distinctions are changing, depending on time, place, and political factors, see: (Lindgren et al. 2022).

2   For example, Nawaf Obaid (2020, p. xiv) goes so far as to claim that "violent revolution . . . is hard-wired into the genetics of the Brotherhood".

3   Brynjar Lia (1998) disagrees with this notion, stressing that MB leaders discouraged those violent actions, which were pursued by dissident radical members of the movement.

4   On the effect of Sayyid Quṭb's thinking on the formation of al-Qāʿida, see: (Liebl 2009).

5   For example, Jason Brownlee (2010) claimed that the MB should not even be regarded as an opposition group with a quest for power, but rather as a pressure group.

6   On the concept of *daʿwa* as the essence of the mission of the MB, see (Weismann 2015).

7   For a detailed account on the concept of post-Islamism, see: (Bayat 1996; Bayat 2013, pp. 8, 25).

8   Mariz Tadros (2012) disagrees with this assertion, claiming that the MB has actually gone through a process of Salafization (pp. 159–60).

9   The debate surrounding the Muslim Brotherhood's positioning on the spectrum between moderation and extremism is an integral part of a more extensive discussion regarding the connection between government policies of inclusion or exclusion and the inclination of Islamist groups toward moderation. For instance, scholars like Shadi Hamid (2014) and Jillian Schwedler (2013) challenge the assumption that the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's involvement in politics led to moderation and that state repression resulted in radicalization. They argue that it was actually the regime's repression dating back to the late 1960s that compelled the Brotherhood to adopt a more moderate stance. Furthermore, the processes of politicization and democratization that the movement underwent during the 1990s, 2000s, and especially after the 2011 uprising, did not result in a shift towards liberal democratic values. Instead, it created a need for the Brotherhood to align with the expectations of its Islamist base.

10   Ana Belén Soag (2009), for example, stresses that "al-Banna and Qutb did not pay particular attention to the question of the caliphate, probably because they did not see its reestablishment as feasible. Al-Banna vaguely alluded to it as a final goal, the culmination of a long process" (p. 310, footnote 98). Similarly, Richard P. Mitchell (1969) ignored the seventh phase of *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* and commented that al-Bannā's "talk of the institution of the caliphate was so nebulous and far in the future as to be without real meaning" (p. 40).

11   On the genre of tracts/epistles in the history of Islamic society, see: (Gully 2008).

12   There is no generally acceptable periodization of *risālat al-taʿlīm*. Gudrun Krämer (2015, p. 197) and Sebastian Elsässer (2014, p. 2) mention that it was published in 1938, Efraim Barak (2021, footnote 412) points to 1940 as the year of publication, Sagi Polka (2019a, p. 684) dates this tract to the early 1940s, and Guazzone and Pioppi (2021, p. 49) estimate that the last version was issued in 1943.

13. This tract was published as part of a series of articles in *Maǧallat al-Iḫwān al-Muslimīn* and *al-Šihāb* starting in November 1947 and compiled into a volume with the same title. See: (Al-Bannā 1990?).

14. In the tract "Ilā al-Šabāb" ("To the Youth"), al-Bannā did not use *ustāḏiyya*, however, he reiterated the notion that by the virtue of the MB youth's belief in God, God has granted them the precedence (*ṣadāra*) in the world, the status of the leadership of this world and the next, and the honor of a master (*ustāḏ*) among his disciples.

15. The political engagement of the MB was sanctioned in another commentary on *Risālat al-Taʿālīm*, authored by the "leading ideologue of the Islamic movement in Syria under the Baʿath" and "the mouthpiece of [the MB's] principles and aims", Saʿīd Ḥawwā (1935–1989). In this "defensive statement", Ḥawwā endorsed the peaceful path of education and preaching, as well as acting through parliament, mass media, education, and elections; yet, he did not rule out taking up arms as a last resort. He interpreted *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* as the mastery of Islam over the world (*sayṭarat al-Islām ʿalā al-ʿālam*). His reading of the seventh stage in al-Bannā's blueprint directs the MB to subjugate the entire world to Allah's word (*iḫḍāʿ al-ʿālam kullihi li-kalimat Allāh*) and establish a global Islamic superpower (*marḥalat al-quwwa al-Islāmiyya al-ʿālamiyya*). See: (Ḥawwā 1980, pp. 3, 42–43). For an analysis of the ideological and conceptual framework of Ḥawwā's thought, see: (Weismann 1997, 1993).

16. On the intra-organizational currents and the question of the intergenerational gap, see: (Samir 2018).

17. Already in 1983, Muḥammad al-Ġazzālī (d. 1996), a religious scholar close to the MB, issued a reformist and exceptionally pluralistic interpretation of this tract. Al-Ġazzālī did not mention *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam*. Instead, he emphasized that Muslims spread their *daʿwa* only through persuasion and do not mean to harm a soul, while maintaining good relations with other nations in the international community and learning from other civilizations. See: (Al-Ġazzālī 1983, p. 186); See also commentary by Maǧdī Al-Hilālī (1995, pp. 58–72) (b. 1961), a young MB scholar representing Quṭbian tendencies. He concentrates on the individual level, as part of a conception on the need to form a vanguard of devoted Muslims that will constitute a "solid base" (*qāʿida ṣulba*) for the formation of a Muslim society and ultimately an Islamic state, a notion generally associated with ʿAbdāllah ʿAzzām and al-Qāʿida.

18. See a 1990 commentary published jointly by the Egyptian, MB-affiliated scholar Muḥammad ʿAbdallāh al-Ḫaṭīb (1929–2015), a former member of the Guidance Bureau (1990–2010) who was considered the unofficial mufti of the MB from the 1980s until the mid-2000s, and Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm Ḥāmid, a historian of the Egyptian MB and a chronicler of the MB general guides (Al-Ḫaṭīb and Ḥāmid 1990, pp. 174–211).

19. For an instructive analysis of al-Qaraḍāwī's wasaṭī perceptions, see: (Polka 2019b).

20. The fourth MB general guide (r. 1986–1996) Muḥammad Ḥāmid Abū al-Naṣr (d. 1996), ignored al-Bannā's notion of *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* in the tracts examined. He considered the establishment of an Islamic state and the restoration of the caliphate to be the MB's goal. See: (Abū al-Naṣr 1990).

21. Mašhūr (1990) employed the term *ustāḏiyyat al-bašariyya* (the *ustāḏiyya* of humanity) in a similar manner in his book, *Munāǧā ʿalā Ṭarīq al-Daʿwa*.

22. In another tract by Mašhūr (n.d.), he used *ustāḏiyyat al-ʿālam* to encourage a group of Muslims experiencing distress and gave them hope for a glorious future. This tract was addressed to the Palestinians, possibly during the Second Intifada, which broke out in October 2000.

23. See, for example, an interview with al-Sayyid Yasīn, *al-Ahrām*, 16 August 2013.

24. For commentary on al-Šāṭer's statement by Egyptian anti-MB elements, see: (Ǧamiʿ 2012). For commentary on al-Šāṭer's statement by anti-MB elements outside Egypt, see: (Al-ʿUṯmān 2011; Muʿammar 2012).

25. For recent works on the MB in Europe and North America, see: (Vidino 2010, 2020).

26. The Massage of the Teachings 1. 2020. Available online: https://tinyurl.com/y7vzdwst (accessed 31 August 2023).

27. For example, @DrHesha59590104, *Twitter*, 22 August 2019 [in Arabic], accessed 13 March 2022.

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