From Ideology to Identity
The Western Metamorphosis of Post-Brotherhood Islamism
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This essay is not concerned with what the Muslim Brotherhood once was. Its founding in 1928, its ideological blueprint, and its oscillating fortunes in the Arab world have already been exhaustively narrated. Rather, I intend to draw attention to what the Brotherhood has *become*; not in Cairo or Khartoum, but in Washington, London, Toronto, and Brussels. Specifically, I want to examine how it has been *reconstituted* within Western liberal democracies: tactically, institutionally, and discursively. The Brotherhood's wager, and its remarkable success, has been to mutate from a revolutionary political movement into a civil rights formation—not an ideology to be confronted, but an identity to be recognized.

This transformation is not incidental. It is the product of a slow, deliberate, and adaptive strategy; one that learned to navigate the symbolic economy of liberal societies by internalizing their most potent currency: moral vulnerability.

No longer presenting itself as a transnational Islamic project seeking to reorder the world in accordance with divine sovereignty, at least not in the West, the Brotherhood now postures as a culturally marked subject of systemic injustice. It appears less as an agent of historical ambition than as a post-colonial casualty of racialization and exclusion. Its political theology has been partially sublimated into a politics of grievance, thereby gaining access to the institutional, symbolic, and financial capital of liberal democratic regimes—precisely those same regimes it once sought to dismantle.

This metamorphosis must be situated within a broader transformation of Western political life. Beginning in the 1960s, with the ascendancy of the New Left and the decentering of class as the primary axis of social antagonism, Western societies entered what might be called the *identitarian epoch*: a shift from universalist claims to the politics of position, where legitimacy is increasingly derived from one's place within structures of marginality. In this paradigm, the moral subject is not the autonomous citizen, but the wounded identity.

It is within this ideological landscape that Western Islamism learned to speak. The movement's rearticulation of itself as a racialized, minoritized constituency did not occur in a vacuum. It was the Western Left's turn toward expressive identity and epistemic

positionality—rather than structural critique or theological argument—that provided the discursive grammar through which Islamism could translate itself. Brotherhood-affiliated organizations, actors, and intellectuals gradually mastered this idiom, embedding themselves within institutions already calibrated to elevate voices that claim systemic victimhood.

October 7, 2023, did not simply mark a geopolitical crisis. It revealed the internal incoherencies—indeed, the moral ambivalences—of the Western progressive consensus. It exposed the degree to which Islamist violence could be misrecognized as resistance, and the degree to which Islamist rhetoric had become legible, even intelligible, within elite spaces. That a massacre of Jews could be met with equivocation—not only by campus organizations, but by self-proclaimed Muslim "representatives" with close Islamist ties—demands not just moral outrage, but analytical clarity.

Why has the boundary between "Muslim identity" and "Islamist activism" become so difficult to draw? Why are critiques of political Islam so readily framed as Islamophobic, even when issued by other Muslims? Why does the Brotherhood enjoy a representational monopoly in liberal institutions it never achieved in the Muslim world?

These are not accidental ambiguities. They have been cultivated. What we are confronting is the success of a long-term vision: the strategic moral naturalization of Islamism within the collapsing symbolic economy of Western liberalism. This project has been pursued through NGOs, student networks, interfaith platforms, academic centers, and foreign-funded policy institutes—all operating under the aegis of diversity and inclusion, yet often advancing a deeply anti-democratic ideological architecture.
My aim in what follows is to render that architecture visible.

Islamism Migrates: The Strategic Legibility of Islamism in the West

At its doctrinal core, Islamism is not a protest movement against imperial hegemony or a repository of postcolonial grievances. It is a teleological architecture—a vision of political sovereignty grounded not in the will of man, but in the sovereignty of the Islamist. It posits not a dialogical encounter with secular modernity, but its eventual overcoming through the reinstallation of the Islamist will, with appropriate theological decorum, as the organizing principle of public life. The Islamist project, in its classical formulation, is one of sacralizing the political by fusing governance with the Islamist interpretations of divine commands, subordinating procedural democracy to Islamist exegetical authority.

Yet from its inception, this project has been deeply contested within the Muslim world itself. Islamism has faced not only state repression, but profound theological, philosophical, and popular resistance. It has been opposed by traditionalist ulama, rival modernist movements, secular nationalisms, and popular pieties that resist the reduction of faith to ideology. **It has always been *a* claim on Islam, not *the* expression of it.**

But when Islamist ideologues—particularly those affiliated with or sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood—began to migrate westward in significant numbers during the latter half of the 20th century, often as political exiles, they entered a radically different sociopolitical matrix. The West was not simply foreign in culture; it was constitutionally and symbolically untranslatable. Islamism's conceptual vocabulary—soaked in Islamic eschatology and German metaphysical politics—found no ready interlocutors in the secular liberal regimes of North America and Western Europe.

This estrangement could have rendered the movement inert. It could have reduced Islamism to a diasporic artifact, an ideology out of place and out of time. But instead, this very dislocation became the condition for a strategic reframing. Deprived of its revolutionary telos, Islamism began to undergo a subtle but decisive discursive mutation: it did not renounce its ambitions, but it recoded them in the idioms of recognition, rights, and representation.

In short, Islamism became legible.

No longer an ideological insurgency challenging the liberal order from without, it reemerged as a minority identity seeking inclusion within it. In this guise, it spoke not in the language of divine sovereignty or prophetic revolt, but in the grammar of civil rights, multicultural inclusion, and systemic discrimination. Islamism did not cease to be ideological—it simply disguised its ideology as identity.

The transformation was remarkably effective. Within the West's already consolidated politics of position, which had elevated woundedness to moral capital, Islamism was able to re-inscribe itself not as a dangerous idea, but as an injured subject. What had once been the language of jihad, revival, and ummatic sovereignty was now reframed as "Islamophobia," "exclusion," and "misrepresentation." The theopolitical imaginary became a sociological grievance. Its bearers were no longer political actors, but Saidian cultural victims.

And Western institutions, themselves becoming theaters for the narcissistic performance of liberal decadence, proved more than willing to accommodate this shift.

Academia, media, philanthropic foundations, and even branches of the state increasingly came to see Islamist-linked organizations not as ideological entities, but as authentic representatives of the Muslim community. Brotherhood-affiliated NGOs were granted authority to speak *for* Muslims, their activists invited to panels on inclusion, their operatives installed as interlocutors between Muslim populations and the state. What in Arab capitals was one claim among many now became the sole voice recognized in liberal democracies.

This phenomenon was not merely rhetorical. As ISGAP's financial forensics have demonstrated, this transformation was underwritten—in a quite literal sense—by vast flows of capital, primarily from Qatar, one of the Brotherhood's most devoted patrons. Billions in unreported foreign donations poured into Western universities, think tanks, student organizations, and advocacy networks. These funds did not just support academic study or charity work; they constructed an ecosystem: one in which Islamism, now masquerading as cultural identity, could thrive within the normative architecture of liberal postmodernity.

And this is the strategic genius of the transformation. Islamism in the West did not flourish by rejecting liberal norms. It flourished by mimicking them—by donning the garb of equity, pluralism, and representation, while quietly retaining its eschatological core. It did not dismantle liberalism. It subtly colonized its conceptual terrain.

In this recoding, I**slamism became Muslimness**. Its institutions became "community organizations." Its advocates became "diversity consultants." Its critics became "racists." The theocratic was now the representational. The revolutionary was now the minoritized. What once stood as a challenge to the liberal order had become internal to its performance of inclusivity.

This is the paradox we must now confront: Islamism in the West has achieved a degree of symbolic and institutional legitimacy that it never attained in the Muslim world itself. There, it remains one movement among many—often marginalized, often feared, and always debated. But here, in the West, it has become the authorized interpreter of Muslim life, a role it acquired not through consent, but through capital, rhetoric, and strategic adaptation.

To fail to name this transformation is not only a conceptual error. It is a political abdication.

The Mechanics of Reframing: From Revolutionary Vanguard to Civil Rights Interlocutor

The metamorphosis of the Muslim Brotherhood in Western societies was not a passive adaptation to exile. It was a strategic recalibration—an ideologically conscious decision to embed itself within the moral coordinates of liberal modernity by shedding, or at least submerging, its teleological ends beneath the surface grammar of cultural grievance and democratic pluralism.

Islamism, in this configuration, ceased to appear as a transhistorical claim on divine sovereignty. It began instead to function as a minority discourse, intelligible within the architecture of Western moral-political speech. It is this reframing—not a revision of aims but a retranslation of claims—that permitted political Islam to migrate into the citadels of Western liberalism not as an adversary, but as a presumed interlocutor.
This transformation has operated through three mutually reinforcing vectors: semantic mimicry, institutional embedding, and coalitional alignment.

1. Lexical Translation: From Sharia to Civil Rights

The first vector of transformation was linguistic. The Brotherhood and its ideological kin underwent a profound rhetorical shift, abandoning the overt vocabulary of Islamic jurisprudence, prophetic authority, and caliphal restoration, and adopting instead the language of rights, equity, and systemic oppression.

This was not a superficial cosmetic change. It was an epistemic and grammatical reorientation designed to render Islamism legible within the post-1960s progressive imagination. The lexicon of "social justice," "marginalization," "inclusion," and "Islamophobia" provided the Brotherhood with a discursive bridge into the moral consensus of the post-civil rights West. It allowed Islamist actors to invert the verticality of their original ambitions: **no longer theocratic aspirants above society, they now positioned themselves as subaltern voices within it.**

This maneuver was more than tactical. It re-situated Islamism within the emancipatory telos of **the New Left**. By aligning itself rhetorically with the struggle against racism, colonialism, and, ironically, the so called white man's patriarchy, Islamism could present itself not as an ideological threat but **as an extension of Western liberalism's own**

unfinished project—a movement demanding not revolution, but recognition. (I do believe there is justice to such a claim, for Islamism is nothing if not one of the many bastards of Rousseau and Marx.)

The result was an extraordinary semantic achievement: the language of totalitarianism transfigured into the idiom of the injured. Islamism, once a contestation of the democratic principle of separation and division of authorities and powers, now claims to be its unfulfilled promise.

2. Institutionalization: Civil Society as Soft Power Terrain

The second vector of reframing was institutional. The Brotherhood's Western apparatus did not remain informal. It quickly built an infrastructure of NGOs, advocacy groups, legal defense funds, student organizations, and community centers—all strategically modeled on existing civil rights and ethnic lobbying groups.

Organizations such as CAIR (Council on American-Islamic Relations) in the U.S., and FIOE (Federation of Islamic Organizations in Europe), were not grassroots responses to spontaneous communal needs. They were deliberately constructed—often seeded by Gulf patronage or staffed by Brotherhood-trained cadres—to become the authorized intermediaries between "the Muslim community" and Western states.

Crucially, these organizations disclaimed theological leadership. They did not present themselves as religious authorities, but as identity-based advocates, thereby gaining access to the Western public sphere not as ideologues, but as "community representatives." In doing so, they activated one of liberalism's most powerful anxieties: the fear of misrecognizing or marginalizing the culturally Other.

The effect was twofold:
- First, the Brotherhood achieved institutional proximity to the Western policymaking class.
- Second, it consolidated its symbolic monopoly over Muslim identity, crowding out alternative Muslim voices—liberal, secular, traditionalist, or apolitical—from the public stage.

This is not civil society as pluralistic forum. It is civil society as vehicle of soft hegemony—Islamist ideology cloaked in procedural participation.

3. Coalition and Convergence: Intersectionality as Strategy

The third and final vector is coalitional alignment. Brotherhood-linked actors did not merely mimic the language of the progressive Left, they became indeed the progressive left. They embedded themselves within its institutional and symbolic networks. Through a process of intersectional coalition-building, Islamist activists aligned with Black Lives Matter chapters, anti-Zionist Jewish organizations, LGBTQIA+ advocacy groups, Indigenous decolonial activists, and the broader apparatus of academic postcolonial theory. This convergence was neither coherent nor ideologically consistent. But consistency was never the point of liberal postmodern or New Left politics. Power, performance, and moral coercion were.

Within this expanded field of identitarian struggle, Islamism was no longer a unique phenomenon to be scrutinized. It was one iteration of a larger moral structure: that of the Fanonian oppressed resisting the oppressor. Critique of Islamism, accordingly, was no longer political analysis—it became complicity with white supremacy, Zionism, or Eurocentrism.

In this matrix, Islamism acquired immunity:
- Immunity from critique by associating criticism with bigotry.
- Immunity from scrutiny, by presenting itself as a fragile identity.
- Immunity from accountability, by existing within the aegis of trauma, postcoloniality, and racial injustice.

This is how a theopolitical movement became embedded within a postmodern tyrannical moral economy of liberal guilt.

What we are witnessing, then, is not a retreat from political ambition. It is a strategic rebranding; a recalibration of political Islam in the visual and moral syntax of cultural grievance. The revolutionary telos remains. But it is now expressed not in the language of divine law, but in the idioms of recognition, equity, and inclusion.
This is not mimicry. It is political ingenuity; a form of ideological parasitism deployed not for concealment, but for power.

And it is working.

Follow the Money: The Financial and Institutional Infrastructure of Western Islamism

If the rhetorical rebranding of Islamism enabled its discursive legibility in liberal societies, it was an influx of foreign capital, above all from Qatar, that endowed it with institutional permanence. <u>The reconstitution of the Muslim Brotherhood as a civil rights formation in the West was not only ideational. It was infrastructural. It was funded</u>.

Indeed, Islamism in the West has not merely adapted to liberal democracy. It has been *financially* absorbed into it, subsidized into its moral and epistemic economy under the sign of inclusion.

1. Qatar: The Principal Patron of Western Islamism

ISGAP's "Follow the Money" project, launched in 2012, documents a staggering flow of undisclosed foreign funds into American higher education, with Qatar emerging as the dominant benefactor. By 2023, it had become the largest foreign donor to American universities in the post-9/11 era.

> Over $13 billion in foreign donations were withheld from disclosure by more than 100 U.S. institutions of higher learning—violating the transparency obligations of Section 117 of the Higher Education Act.

This financial patronage is not benign. Qatar is the primary state sponsor of Hamas, the host of the Muslim Brotherhood's leadership, and the global engine of a specific ideological project: political Islam translated into the language of Western grievance. <u>Qatar's funding strategy is a paradigmatic instance of ideological soft power; one that does not impose Islamic governance from without, but rather cultivates cultural hegemony from within. Its money flows into universities, think tanks, NGOs, student movements, and interfaith platforms, thereby shaping the very institutions tasked with producing knowledge, policy, and moral legitimacy in Western society</u>.

2. Georgetown University: A Case Study in Ideological Capture

No institution more clearly reveals the strategic logic of this funding than Georgetown University.

Between its Washington, D.C. campus and its satellite in Qatar, Georgetown has received over $1.06 billion from the Qatari regime—making it one of the most heavily foreign-funded universities in the United States. Of this sum, at least $318 million appears to have gone unreported to the Department of Education.

The lion's share of these funds has flowed into the School of Foreign Service, the Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding (ACMCU), and Georgetown's Qatar campus—all of which have become intellectual hubs for reframing Islamism as civic identity rather than political theology.

This is not merely a story of financial patronage. It is a case of ideological reconfiguration:
- These centers routinely present Islamist actors as "moderate," "representative," and "authentically Muslim," often dismissing critiques of political Islam as Islamophobic or orientalist.
- Students educated in these environments are socialized into frameworks in which Islamism is dehistoricized, deradicalized, and elevated as a legitimate expression of postcolonial authenticity.
- Graduates frequently move into diplomatic, journalistic, and policy-making positions, thus embedding these ideological assumptions into the very machinery of Western statecraft.

<u>What we are witnessing is not merely skewed scholarship. It is the emergence of donor-driven epistemic regimes, where the production of knowledge about Islam, Muslims, and Middle Eastern politics is increasingly filtered through the strategic interests of a foreign power with clear ideological aims.</u>

3. Students for Justice in Palestine: Grassroots Astroturfing

On the campus level, the ideological dividends of this funding model become even more visible.

Groups such as Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP), with hundreds of chapters across North America, are widely presented as organic student movements engaged in anti-racist and anti-colonial advocacy. In reality, they function as operational extensions of a broader Islamist ecosystem that includes:
- American Muslims for Palestine (AMP)
- The US Campaign for Palestinian Rights (USCPR)
- CAIR and ICNA, both with long-standing ideological proximity to the Brotherhood

These entities operate under the rhetorical cover of civil rights but are ideologically aligned with Islamist and often explicitly antisemitic currents. They are supported through a web of tax-exempt fiscal sponsors, foreign-linked NGOs, and loosely regulated university funding, enabling them to operate with impunity in elite academic environments.

Following October 7, 2023, many SJP chapters did not merely equivocate about Hamas's atrocities. They justified them. These justifications were not framed as religious mandates, but as liberatory resistance, tapping into the moral grammar of decolonial theory and the progressive valorization of struggle. <u>The result is a new kind of activist: Islamist in conviction, progressive in affect, and institutionally protected under the banner of diversity and equity</u>. In effect, there is no longer any meaningful distinction between these three categories.

4. A Closed Loop of Legitimacy

What we are observing is not merely the dissemination of ideas. It is the construction of a closed epistemic and institutional loop:
- Foreign capital funds academic centers that normalize Islamism.
- These centers train students, scholars, and policy professionals who internalize Islamist-adjacent frameworks.
- These graduates populate elite institutions, where they reproduce and legitimate these narratives.
- Meanwhile, NGOs and student groups amplify these same narratives to the public, presenting them as the authentic voice of Muslim civil society.

In this schema, critique is not refuted; it is delegitimized. Dissent is not engaged; it is pathologized. Islamism becomes hegemonic not through coercion, but through its seamless insertion into the liberal order's own performance of moral inclusion.
This is the brilliance—and the peril—of Western Islamism: it became genuinely and truly Western.

The Paradox of Representation: Who Speaks for Muslims?

One of the most striking, and perhaps most unsettling, consequences of the Muslim Brotherhood's strategic reconstitution in the West is this: the movement has accomplished in Washington, London, and Brussels what it failed to achieve in Cairo, Amman, or Rabat—to assume the mantle of *authentic Muslim representation*.

This is not a matter of electoral success, nor of grassroots religious authority. It is a question of symbolic monopoly—of who gets to be seen, heard, and institutionalized as the voice of Islam in the Western public sphere. It is a story not of persuasion, but of positionality; not of consent, but of discursive capture.

This is the paradox of Western Islamism: the less representative it is in the Muslim world, the more representational authority it acquires in the West.

1. From Contested Vanguard to Official Spokesperson

In the Islamic heartlands, the Brotherhood has never enjoyed uncontested legitimacy. It has always been one voice among many, resisted by traditionalist scholars, rival Islamist factions, secularists, nationalists, and apolitical Muslims alike. Its project has been repeatedly repressed, but also internally challenged, from within the matrix of Islamic pluralism itself.

But in the West, this internal contestation is almost entirely erased from view. <u>The Brotherhood's networks, once translated into the vernacular of minority rights, are no longer just another voice—*they become the voice*</u>. This representational monopoly is constructed through four overlapping mechanisms:
- <u>Institutional monopolies</u>: NGOs like CAIR or ISNA are consistently invited by state bodies and media outlets as the primary, and often exclusive, representatives of "the Muslim community."
- <u>Campus dominance</u>: Brotherhood-aligned students dominate Islamic student associations and campus coalitions (via SJP, MSA, etc.), crowding out non-Islamist Muslims who lack the ideological machinery and foreign patronage.
- <u>Media curation</u>: Journalists and commentators nurtured in Brotherhood-adjacent institutions frame Muslim identity through a narrow lens, often pathologizing dissenters as "house Muslims" or "native informants."
- <u>Academic anointment</u>: Centers like ACMCU at Georgetown or IIIT-endowed programs offer intellectual cover for a Brotherhood-inflected Islam, institutionalizing it as *the object* of serious study and *the subject* of presumed authority.

Thus, what Islamism could not do in Cairo—speak for the ummah—it has managed to do in liberal democracies: transmute itself from faction to folk, from party to people.

2. Islam as Identity, Islamism as Advocacy

This astonishing sleight of hand is made possible by the collapse of crucial conceptual distinctions—above all, the distinction between Islam as a religion and Islamism as a political ideology. It has to be absolutely clear that this is not primarily the work of Islamists but the work of 200 years of post-Enlightenment Western intellectual perversions, ignorance, power worship, and epistemic anarchy masquerading as liberal enlightenment or critical theory. The reason that a Bernard Lewis or a Sam Harris takes a look at Islamic texts and emerges with a reading of Islam identical to those of Islamists is that they all actually share the same modern epistemology, which cannot comprehend that there might be any gods to be worshiped but might, power, and sheer will. It is only a variation of this vision of the world that sees Islam as an inherently subversive force of humanistic revolution, which was the view of the young Salman Rushdie before the "humanistic revolution" claimed his head, Edward Said, and other radical Western scholars and intellectuals...