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Egypt's New Radicalism
The Muslim Brotherhood and Jihad
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On a cold night in January, two young Cairene men stormed the [Bella Vista hotel](#) ^[1] in the resort town of Hurghada, in Egypt. They were looking for [Russians](#) ^[2] to kill or kidnap in the name of the Islamic State (also known as [ISIS](#) ^[3]). One attacker drew out a knife and put it to the throat of the first tourist he encountered, wounding him just before the police arrived, guns blazing. The second assailant, carrying the ISIS banner, cried out that he had a suicide belt and was ready to blow. But the police swiftly shot at his knees. It turned out that the belt was nothing more than a string of [deodorant bottles](#) ^[4] wrapped together with black duct tape.

The assailants, Ali and Muhammad, were in their twenties. They became friends through Egypt's hard-core soccer fan group, known as the Ultras, which played a role in protesting during the 2011 revolution and have participated in other demonstrations since. As the case of Ali and Muhammad reveals, some of the Islamists in Egypt have [succeeded](#) ^[5] in channeling some of these youths' anger and energy to their cause by [imitating](#) ^[6] their popular style of protest, for example.

A few days after the attack, an Egyptian ISIS fighter, Abu Dujana al-Mohajer, [revealed](#) ^[7] online how the two had reached out to him. He posted their story and a photo of the two young men posing in front of a makeshift ISIS banner. Ali and Muhammad had even adopted the noms de guerre Abu Musab and Abu Yassin as part of their transformation into "soldiers of the Caliphate." After months of failed attempts to join ISIS in Syria because of stricter government controls on travel to Turkey, the duo decided to carry out their own operation. There is no evidence so far that ISIS command played a role in orchestrating the failed attack. The group did not claim responsibility, and in fact appears to be doing what it can to distance itself from the flop. Soon after, Abu Dujana took down his post without explanation.

The attack, haphazard and absurd as it was, gives an indication of the depth of anger and desperation shared by thousands of Islamist youths across the country. But Egypt's rising [Islamist insurgency](#) ^[8] is more complex and multifaceted than the attack in Hurghada reveals. For one thing, although Salafi jihadism has produced the likes of al Qaeda and ISIS, it is not the only path for violent Islamism in Egypt today. Some youths that have joined violent groups, or formed their own, do not subscribe to Salafi jihadism and are instead aligned with factions inside the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as with other Islamists fighting to overthrow Sisi.

Although this evolving strain of Islamist violence is far less lethal than that of Salafi jihadism, it still represents several serious challenges to Egypt's national security and has negative implications for Islamist groups in the Middle East and beyond.

Until now, Salafi jihadists have largely been the only Islamist faction to legitimize wholesale use of violence as a way to enact change—that is, to establish an Islamic State and implement Islamic law. Their counterpart has long been the Muslim Brotherhood, the largest organized Islamist group in the world. It has a number of international chapters, but the one in Egypt is the base, and it holds the most influence over the other branches. Despite episodes of violence in the distant past, the Egyptian Brotherhood has since disavowed the use of violence [9] and for decades turned to politics as a vehicle for change. But this has begun to shift. A new revolutionary wing has emerged within the Egyptian Brotherhood, and it has violent elements within its ranks.

This new wing [10] rose largely out of the ashes of the Rabaa and Nahda Square massacres in August 2013, when nearly 1,000 Islamists and their supporters were killed following the coup that ousted Mubarak's successor [11], the Muslim Brotherhood–affiliated President Mohamed Morsi [12]. Young Islamists looking for revenge responded with violence, beginning mostly with acts of sabotage, such as tossing Molotov cocktails at police cars and committing arson, but they gradually moved on to assassinating security officers. After Sisi shut down Islamist media outlets, the Brotherhood moved its operations to Turkey. There, it set up a number of satellite networks [13], some of which were used to broadcast violent messages, such as the Brotherhood-owned Misr al-An (Egypt Now). Ironically, it was set up with the help of some of the old guard who now disavow this turn towards violence.

This trajectory has worried the Brotherhood's old guard, which knows that the organization cannot survive an armed insurgency against the state and has thus condemned the escalating call for violence. The old guard, mainly represented by the acting Supreme Guide Mahmoud Ezzat [14], the London-based Deputy Supreme Guide Ibrahim Munir, and Secretary-General Mahmoud Hussein, thus began to push back last year by trying to reassert its leadership over the group after tolerating lower levels of violence. The old guard also issued a number of statements disavowing armed violence and dismissed the Brotherhood's new incendiary spokesperson, Muhammad Montasir, who is aligned with the revolutionary wing. The revolutionary wing, in turn, challenged the authority [15] of the Brotherhood's senior leadership, blaming the group's inefficacy on a rigid leadership [14] style and insistence on nonviolent protests.

The old guard has made some strides, however, by controlling the Brotherhood's international financing, which became far more important following Sisi's severe crackdown on the group's domestic financial operations. With the money inside Egypt reportedly [16] dwindling, there were fewer resources available to finance violent operations. Indeed, since the fall of 2015, there has been a noticeable dip [17] in violence perpetrated by these new violent groups in the Egyptian mainland, which is only starting to pick up again.

Still, the seeds for a radicalized Muslim Brotherhood, a sort of Brotherhood jihadism, have been planted. During the height of the revolutionary wing's influence in early 2015, some of its leaders, as it is believed, informally commissioned a group of Islamic scholars [18] to write a sharia-based manual on the question of violence. The result was a 93-page book [19] titled *The Jurisprudence*

of *Popular Resistance to the Coup*. It was an obvious attempt at *ijtihad*, or legal reasoning, by non-Salafi jihadist scholars to reconcile Brotherhood creed with a methodology of violence. These scholars declared that neither Sisi nor his government were apostates but were instead *ahl baghy*, or seditionists, who had turned against the religiously legitimate leader: Mohamed Morsi. And since Sisi and his government had used violence against Muslim believers, they were considered enemy combatants who should be slain, according to sharia law.

This theoretical dance around the issue of apostasy is an attempt by the authors to reconcile Brotherhood teachings with violence without inviting damaging comparisons to Salafi jihadism. Egyptians, and most Islamists, in fact, hold very negative views toward those who declare other Muslims apostates, or *takfiris*. The authors of the book are so careful that the text does not once mention Sayyid Qutb, the infamous Brotherhood ideologue whose *takfirist* ideas helped inspire modern-day jihadism. Instead, the authors reference the Brotherhood founder Imam Hassan al-Banna and use his selection of two swords in the group's logo, as well as his talk of "strength," as a justification for violence against the state.

The authors also make a convoluted attempt to stay within certain boundaries, to keep in line with the group's self-professed moderation. For instance, it warns against kidnapping and sexual assault of the women and children of security officers, but says there is no harm in threatening to do such things to scare them. The text states that an officer should only be killed if he has, for a fact, killed or raped, but the scholars sanction targeting the police station that houses the offending officer.

There is evidence to suggest that this treatise may be informing new violent groups on the ground. One in particular, the Revolution's Guard, which is based in the central Delta province of Menoufia, has adapted *The Jurisprudence of Popular Resistance* and written its own manifesto, similarly emphasizing that Sisi and his associates are *ahl baghy*, not apostates. Another group, Revolutionary Punishment, carried out over 150 attacks in 2015 and recently claimed responsibility for a blast at an apartment-cum-explosives factory that killed at least nine policemen [20]. ISIS' local cell also took credit for the attack, suggesting a possible overlap [21] in operations. Revolutionary Punishment claimed the attack was a suicide mission and was apologetic about having possibly killed civilians, promising to pay them blood money.

This attempt at retheorizing jihad is still new, and it is not clear whether it will go anywhere. Indeed, Egyptian Islamism is going through a transformational phase no less significant and unpredictable than that which gave birth to the first jihadi cells that eventually became al Qaeda. Some of the Egyptian youth may not be satisfied with the Brotherhood's attempt at "incremental jihad," and instead join or form more serious and committed factions. But one thing is for sure: the reservoir of angry Islamist youths who are susceptible to recruitment will only deepen if the violent faction of the Brotherhood continues to indoctrinate thousands of Brotherhood youth with its new treatise and if the government continues with its extreme repression of Islamists. Then, the leap between declaring Sisi and his administration seditionists or apostates won't be too great. ISIS has already been claiming low-intensity attacks in Giza Province since last fall, though the recruits are still amateurs. If or when ISIS does gain a stronger foothold in Egypt, it could turn the newly radicalized into a formidable force and may push more Islamist youth from the Brotherhood to the Caliphate.

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- [3] <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/belgium/2015-11-23/preventing-next-attack>
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- [11] <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/egypt/2011-02-03/muslim-brotherhood-after-mubarak>
- [12] <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/egypt/2013-07-11/muslim-brotherhood-after-morsi>
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