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The debate over the use of violence within the Muslim
Brotherhood in Egypt after 2013

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ISSN 1830-1541

© Georges Fahmi, 2018

Printed in Italy, March 2018

European University Institute

Badia Fiesolana

I – 50014 San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)

Italy

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Abstract

Since the Muslim Brotherhood rule was overthrown in 2013, Egypt's largest Islamist organisation has been witnessing an internal debate over how to face the new regime: whether to continue its non-violent political approach or to turn to violence to achieve its political goals. The majority of the movements' members remain undecided, however. This policy paper seeks to look closely at the debate over the use of violence within the Muslim Brotherhood. Whose are the voices calling for violence and whose are those rejecting it? What is each group's strategy to advance their respective approaches? And on which resources are they relying? What is the balance of power between the two groups, and is it likely to change in the future? The answers to these questions are expected to have a profound impact on stability in Egypt.

Keywords

Egypt- Muslim Brotherhood- Violence- Youth- Jihadi groups

Executive Summary*

The Muslim Brotherhood has been facing one of its most serious internal disputes since its establishment in 1929 with two Guidance Bureaus, the top executive body that formulates the policies of the organization, each claiming to be the legitimate authority.

The debate over the use of violence represents one of the main points of disagreement between the two groups. The historical leadership led by Mahmoud Ezzat, the deputy supreme guide, rejected any use of violence and insisted on non-violent methods as the only approach to be followed. However, the new leadership has adopted a more pragmatic approach that condones the use of violence under certain limits in order to weaken the current regime and drain its forces.

Although the historical leadership has managed in recent years to restore its authority over most of the Brotherhood's administrative offices across Egypt, the majority of the movement has been disappointed by the attitudes of the two groups and has decided to take a step back from the current struggle.

There is little risk that the group calling for the use of violence within the Brotherhood will prevail. However, there is a risk that some of the Brotherhood youth might give up on the two camps altogether and join Salafi jihadi groups.

The defection of members from the Muslim Brotherhood to Salafi Jihadi groups is a threat to both the regime and the Muslim Brotherhood. Despite their current struggle, both the regime and the Muslim Brotherhood have interest in preventing the aggravation of this phenomenon.

In order to prevent further radicalisation within the Brotherhood, both the regime and the movement need to consider a number of measures. First, the Brotherhood needs to find a compromise to end the current dispute between the two leaderships in order to re-establish the legitimacy of the Brotherhood in the eyes of its members. Second, the regime also needs to adopt a different strategy to isolate the violent branches of the Brotherhood from the wider movement. Finally, both the regime and the Brotherhood need to allow credible non-violent voices to meet and discuss with undecided groups in order to prevent them from joining the jihadi path, particularly those inside the prisons.

* The information and analysis presented here are drawn from the author's fieldwork in Egypt from 2015 to 2017.

The Muslim Brotherhood after Rabaa al-Adawiya

Over the past four decades, the Muslim Brotherhood has often insisted that it rejects the use of violence. It condemned the violent approach adopted by Jihadi groups in Egypt during the 1980s and 1990s and insisted on a non-violent approach to change both the state and society. Even after the Muslim Brotherhood was ousted from power by the military in July 2013, the Brotherhood's supreme guide, Mohammed Badie, stressed – in his famous speech at the Rabaa al-Adawiya sit-in to protest the military intervention – that “our revolution is peaceful and will remain peaceful. And our peacefulness is stronger than bullets”¹. This intended to close the door on any calls to militarise the Brotherhood resisting strategy.

Security forces forcefully dispersed the Brotherhood's demonstrations in August 2013 pushing the Brotherhood to operate covertly under even worse conditions than before the 25 January 2011 popular uprising. This marked a new phase in the relation between the Brotherhood and state institutions where only the security approach prevailed. The new political regime declared the Brotherhood a terrorist organisation, dissolved its political party (Freedom and Justice, *Al-huriya wa'l-'adala*), and froze the assets of more than 1,000 religious organisations and private sector companies, accusing them of being affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood.

In the second half of 2013, members of the Muslim Brotherhood continued to protest against the new political rule, in particular on university campuses at the beginning of the academic year 2013/2014. In this phase, these members' action was mainly inspired by the *Shura* council decision taken during the Rabaa al-Adawiya sit-in to follow a non-violent, creative approach to face the new regime. This approach insisted on non-violent means to resist the regime but condoned a limited level of violence within the frame of self-defense, which does not include bloodshed.

However, by the end of 2013 as the regime was consolidating its power, some of the Muslim Brotherhood youth began to question the utility of this approach as a tool to face the regime. The idea of using violence to deter security forces surfaced among some of these youths and some took a quick decision to act without waiting for leadership approval. The third anniversary of the 25 January revolution witnessed some violent incidents that targeted security forces in Fayoum, Cairo, Alexandria and Giza.

The majority of the Brotherhood leadership were either arrested or had to flee the country, creating a leadership vacuum. Some of the leaders who remained in Egypt worked clandestinely to fill this vacuum, as was the case with Mohammed Kamal, a member of the Guidance Bureau who took a de-facto leading position during this period. To fill vacant positions, the Brotherhood held internal elections and promoted several of its young leaders to lead the Brotherhood's activities on the ground. These changes amounted to the replacement of more than 65 percent of the organisation's previous leadership². In addition, an administrative committee tasked with running the brotherhood was approved by the movement's *Shura* council in February 2014 under the leadership of Mohamed Kamal. The administrative committee established a new plan that was in line with the creative non-violent approach. However, this plan was rejected by a large part of the youth on the ground; they refused to follow the same approach that caused no harm to the regime, despite the killing and arrest of thousands of movement members.

¹ The full Speech of Mohammed Badie, the supreme guide of the Muslim Brotherhood on 5 July 2013 is available in Arabic at the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mAuHkmXDIxg> [Accessed 5 February 2018].

² Interview with Ahmed Abdel Rahman (head of the Brotherhood's administrative office abroad), Al-Jazeera channel, 22 April 2015, Available at: <http://www.aljazeera.net/programs/withoutbounds/2015/4/16/> [Accessed 16 February 2018].

The leadership dispute over the use of violence

At the end of 2014, Mohammed Kamal proposed a new plan to escalate violent attacks, starting in January 2015 with the aim of reaching its peak within twelve months. The plan intended to pave the way for what he thought might be an opportunity to bring down the regime. The new leadership framed this strategy within an ideology based on a document called “The Jurisprudence of Popular Resistance to the Coup”, issued by a religious committee within the Brotherhood³.

The document offers religious justification for the use of violence against security forces by underlining the religious concept of “*Dafa’ al- Sa’el*” or “Repelling the Assailant”, which according to this document, is an equivalent to the modern concept of the right to self-defense. This ideological framework insists on the wide range of degrees and choices between non-violence and full-armed confrontation. According to its religious approach, the assailant should be resisted in a gradual manner starting by the least costly measures (threatening/beating up). However, if only killing him would stop his assault, he can be killed. The authors of this document insist that it does not constitute a shift in the Muslim Brotherhood approach, but only a shift in its attitudes, which may change according to the circumstances as long as it remains within the religious limits. The document has also placed a number of limits on the use of violence, for example: The rejection to attack security officers that are not involved in attacking the protesters, as is the case with border control forces or road check points, as well as the families of police officers involved in violence against the protesters. This new ideological framework is distinct from the Salafi Jihadi ideology, which relies on the principle of *takfir* – the process of excommunication as the basis for the military struggle against state institutions to achieve Islamic governance. This new approach does not excommunicate members of the security forces and insists that they should be resisted not because of their faith but for their actions.

However, the historical leadership both in Egypt and abroad interfered in order to put an end to this violent approach and accused Kamal of seeking to militarise the Muslim Brotherhood. Members of the historical leadership represented by Mahmoud Ezzat, the deputy of the supreme guide, and Mahmoud Hussein, the secretary general, rejected Kamal’s new strategy to escalate violence and tried to reassert their control over the movement. Mahmoud Hussein issued a statement insisting that the Brotherhood operates with its apparatuses and institutions in accordance with the movement’s internal regulations and with members of the Guidance Bureau. The Brotherhood has supported its activities by providing a number of assistants, adhering to the movement’s regulations and the decisions of its institutions; accordingly, its deputy leader acts as a supreme guide [head of the organisation] until the supreme guide is released [from prison] God willing, and the Guidance Bureau is the one that manages the organisation. The historical leadership also rejected the document on popular resistance and refused to formally recognise the committee that drafted it. Mahmoud Hussein claimed that there is no committee within the Brotherhood that was tasked with the mission of writing such a document⁴.

The previous historical leadership has insisted on its commitment to non-violent methods in facing the political regime in Egypt. Many of them would often quote the Brotherhood supreme guide Mohammed Badie’s sentence in his famous speech at the Rabaa al-Adawiya sit-in: “Our peacefulness is stronger than bullets”. Other Muslim Brotherhood figures also argued that the Muslim Brotherhood doctrine does not allow the use of violence. Among these figures is Mahmoud Ghozlan, member of the Guidance Bureau, who wrote an article in May 2015 stating that:

“He who believes in the call of the Muslim Brotherhood must be committed to the general fundamentals of Islam, and on top of those, to the fundamentals of the Muslim Brotherhood, and should not deny or stray from them. These constants include: the need for teamwork, education as

³ Interview with Magdy Shalash (member of the second administrative committee) on Mekamleen channel, 6 October 2016. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ffxvHduo064> [Accessed 16 February 2018].

⁴ Mahmoud Hussein, *Rodoud A’la ba’d al-tasa’oulat* (Answers to some questions), 9 February 2016, available online (Arabic) at: <http://alamatonline.com/archives/7083> [Accessed 10 February 2018].

a means for change, peace and nonviolence as our chosen way, commitment to *shura* [consultation], the rejection of tyranny and individualism either within the group or outside, and a refusal to resorting to the *takfir* [excommunication] of Muslims.”⁵

The historical leadership’s position was not only driven by ideological factors, but also by two further practical ones: first, pressure from the Muslim Brotherhood outside Egypt to renounce any level of violence in order to protect the international image of the Brotherhood as a non-violent movement, and second, the desire to prevent the new leadership from extending its control over the organisation.

In order to decrease the level of tension between the two groups, Mohammed Kamal agreed to step down as leader of the administrative committee. In October 2015, the two camps agreed to form a second administrative committee directed by Mohammed Abdel Rahman, a member of the Guidance Bureau known for being close to the historical leadership. Mohammed Kamal kept his position as a mere member of this new committee. However, this attempt soon failed as Mohammed Abdel Rahman accused the committee of acting without consulting him, while the committee accused him of trying to block all its decisions without explanations.

Throughout 2016, the historical leadership used its organisational skills to regain control over the administrative structure. On the one hand, the historical leadership formed an investigation committee that froze the membership of a number of key figures in the new leadership, including former Minister of International Cooperation Amr Derrag, former Investment Minister Yehia Hamed, and the head of the Brotherhood’s administrative office abroad, Ahmed Abdel Rahman. On the other hand, it promoted its own men to higher positions in order to control the various 27 administrative offices, the executive body of the movement tasked with implementing its plans on the governorate level. In addition, it played the financial card to put pressure on those who were supporting the new leadership strategy to renounce their support and plead allegiance to the historical leadership. As most of the movement’s assets in Egypt have been frozen, the movement depended mainly on its economic activities outside Egypt. These projects are only known and administrated to a few members of the Guidance Bureau that are aligned with the historical leadership. For example, the historical leadership refused to deliver money allocated to the families of imprisoned members of the administrative office in Alexandria as they considered it part of the Mohammed Kamal camp.

In April 2016, Mahmoud Ezzat declared that the *Shura* council met and selected a new administrative committee. The new leadership refused to formally recognise the new committee. In May 2016, Mohammed Kamal announced his resignation in an audio message from his position as administrative committee member, and called upon all the administrative offices to be united, and to support the efforts to elect a new leadership. Five months later, security forces killed Kamal. In December 2016, the new leadership elected a temporary Guidance Bureau under the name of the General Bureau of the Muslim Brotherhood. From its side, the historical leadership refused to recognise this new Guidance Bureau.

Parallel to this leadership struggle, some Brotherhood members who were engaged in the limited violence activities had become disappointed by the two camps and established two armed groups outside the Brotherhood: *Hassm* (the Arabic for ‘determination’, and abbreviation for the ‘Movement of Egypt’s Forearms’) established in July 2016, and *Lewaa al-Thawra* (‘The Banner of the Revolution’), formed in August 2016. The two groups claimed responsibility for several operations targeting security forces, including the assassination of National Security Agency officer Ibrahim Azazy in July 2017 and the assassination of Brigadier General Adel Ragaie, a senior officer in the armed forces in October 2016. These groups also targeted figures who did not belong to the security forces, as occurred with the attempt to assassinate former Mufti of Egypt Ali Gomaa in August 2016.

⁵ Mahmoud Ghouzlan (member of the Guidance Bureau of the Muslim Brotherhood), on the 87th anniversary of the establishment of the Muslim Brotherhood our call is persisting and our revolution is progressing, 22 May 2015, available online (Arabic) at: https://old.egyptwindow.net/Article_Details.aspx?News_ID=80417 [Accessed 16 February 2018].

Currently, as a result of these struggles, three main groups stemming from the Brotherhood can be identified: first, the historical leadership camp that has managed to restore its control over most of the administrative offices; second, the new leadership now known as ‘the General Bureau’; and third, the armed groups such as *Hassm* and *Lewaa al-Thawra*.

The debate among the Muslim Brotherhood’s grassroots: to take up arms or not?

The struggle between the Muslim Brotherhood’s two leaderships over the use of violence has also been reflected in the debate among its grassroots. In addressing questions over using violence against security forces, the debate among the grassroots has revolved around two main questions. The first is ideological: is it religiously permissible? And the second is more rational: would it achieve its goal of bringing down the regime?

Ideologically, the rejection of violence marks the ideational frame of the Muslim Brotherhood as it has been institutionalised over the past four decades. While a debate exists over whether the ideological frame of the Muslim Brotherhood condones the use of violence or not, since the 1970s the Brotherhood has preached against the Jihadi groups’ approach of using violence to achieve their political goals. Moreover, it has institutionalised these ideas into its membership rules. Excommunication and the use of violence were the main two issues according to which one can become a regular member of the Brotherhood or not. There were clear orders to not promote any sympathiser to the level of official member if there were any doubts over his views on these two issues. Although Mohammad Kamal and his group developed a new ideological frame to justify the use of violence under certain conditions, the historical leadership’s rejection of the document has left a large part of the Muslim Brotherhood grassroots unsure about this ideological justification, as it contradicts their previous religious formation within the Brotherhood including the strict hierarchy when it comes to receiving orders.

In a rational manner, the cost/benefit analysis of taking up arms has also been discussed. While a large part of the Muslim Brotherhood youth refused to protest in places where they can easily be arrested or even killed, another part of the movement’s rank-and-file members doubted the idea that using violence against Egyptian state institutions would destabilise the political regime: for many of them, it might only push it towards a more violent approach. They believe that being dragged into military confrontation with the regime would only mark the end of the movement. They would often highlight the experience of Islamist groups that tried to challenge the Mubarak regime in the 1980s and 1990s, such as *Jama’a Islamiya* and *Al-Jihad*, which ended in military defeat for both groups. The *Jama’a Islamiya* revised its entire religious approach and renounced the use of violence in its famous ideological revisions that started with its call to stop violence in 1997. The experience of other Islamist movements outside Egypt has also framed some of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood’s choices, such as the confrontation between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Syrian regime in 1980s, during which the Syrian regime violently defeated the movement. In addition, many members believe that their leadership’s lack of support makes the cost of using violence much higher than its benefits. The lack of support from the leadership also implied a lack of financial support, which goes beyond the supply of the arms and materials required to also include support for the families of the victims or imprisoned members who will decide to use violence. The historical leadership has threatened to cut funds for the families of prisoners who will engage in violent activities. As a result, being unsure of the ideological justification for the use of violence, and doubting the benefits that it might bring, a large part of the Muslim Brotherhood youth has decided to take a step back from the current debate. They came to the conclusion that the two strategies proposed by the two leaderships, either protesting peacefully or using violence, will not achieve the goal of bringing down the regime.

However, this does not seem to be the case for a part of the Muslim Brotherhood youth who were jailed after 2013. In this case, these youth are less likely to follow the path of groups like *Hassm*, but they might drop out the Muslim Brotherhood altogether and join Salafi Jihadism, like the self-

proclaimed Islamic State (IS). Testimonies from prisons show that the percentage of Muslim Brotherhood members who became more willing to join Salafi jihadi groups while in jail rose to more than 20 percent of the detainees.

Unlike the majority of the Muslim Brotherhood grassroots, this group of youth seems to have different answers to both the ideological and rational questions.

With regard to the ideational factor, a large part of this group joined the Brotherhood after 2011, when the movement was focusing on the political struggle of the transitional period and paid little attention to the religious formation of the newly joining members. Hence, these youths did not follow the same religious formation, stressing the rejection of using violence. In addition, because many of them currently share prisons with Jihadi prisoners, they are exposed to Jihadi ideology, which offers a strong ideational frame to the practice of violence. One Egyptian newspaper called one of the prisons “a governmental centre to recruit members for IS”⁶.

As for the cost/benefit question, members of this group dropped out of education and they believe they no longer have a future even if released from prison. This makes the cost of turning to violence much cheaper for them, even if it does not lead to the collapse of the regime.

How to prevent radicalisation within the Brotherhood?

The Muslim Brotherhood has experienced one of its most serious internal disputes since its establishment in 1929, with two Guidance Bureaus each claiming to be the legitimate authority. The debate over the use of violence represented one of the main points of disagreement between the two groups. On the one hand, the historical leadership led by Mahmoud Ezzat rejected any use of violence and insisted on peaceful methods as the only approach to be followed. On the other, the new leadership adopted a more pragmatic approach that permits the use of violence within certain limits in order to weaken the current regime and drain its forces. Although the historical leadership has managed in recent years to restore its authority over most of the Brotherhood administrative offices all over Egypt, the majority of the movement has been disappointed by the attitudes of the two groups and has decided to take a step back from the current struggle.

There is little risk that the group calling for the use of violence within the Brotherhood will prevail. Even groups like *Hassm* and *Lewaa al-Thawra* do not involve more than a few hundred members. However, there is a risk that some of the Brotherhood youth might give up on the two camps altogether and join Salafi jihadi groups, particularly with the growing popularity of Jihadi figures such as Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani (the head of the Syrian militant group Tahrir al-Sham, previously *al-Nusra* Front) among the Muslim Brotherhood's youth. Al-Jawlani has already called on the Muslim Brotherhood to abandon its non-violent ways and bear arms. This pattern has been clear inside Egyptian prisons, where many Brotherhood members could meet and exchange ideas with Salafi jihadi prisoners.

The defection of members from the Muslim Brotherhood to join Salafi Jihadi groups is a threat to both the regime and the Muslim Brotherhood. Despite their current struggle, both the regime and the Muslim Brotherhood have interest in preventing the aggravation of this phenomenon. For the Brotherhood, Salafi Jihadism is a challenge to both its ideology and its organisation. Ideologically, IS accuse the Muslim Brotherhood of being apostate, and organisationally, they are calling upon their youth to join their ranks. For the regime, IS's growing presence in Sinai represents the main security challenge to both police and the military.

⁶ Mohamed Khayal, *Hona Toura: Markaz Hikoumi li-tajnid al-dawa'sh* (“Here is Torah: a governmental centre to recruit members for IS”), Shorouk newspaper, 21 April 2016, available online (Arabic) at: <http://cms.shorouknews.com/news/view.aspx?cdate=21042016&id=2b8f13ca-e5d8-4b0f-8868-d24288fa4161> [Accessed 10 February 2018].

In order to address this threat, both the regime and the Brotherhood could consider a number of measures. First, the Brotherhood needs to find a compromise to end the current dispute between the two leaderships in order to re-establish the legitimacy of the Brotherhood in the eyes of its members. Second, the regime needs to also adopt a different strategy to isolate the violent branches of the Brotherhood from the wider movement. Finally, both the regime and the Brotherhood should allow credible non-violent voices to meet and discuss with undecided groups in order to prevent them from joining the jihadi path, particularly those inside the prisons

Bridging the gap between the two camps within the Muslim Brotherhood

The current struggle over Brotherhood leadership has left many of the movement's members lost. The failure of the two competing camps to reach an agreement over the leadership of Egypt's largest Islamic movement, in addition to their inability to offer a clear political strategy, has left many of its youth vulnerable to the Salafi Jihadi propaganda, particularly those inside the prisons. If the leadership is to regain its legitimacy, a starting point should be to encourage dialogue between the divided leadership to end this struggle and agree on a common frame to lead the movement during this phase. In the past, some religious figures from both inside and outside the Muslim Brotherhood sought to bridge the gap between these two groups. This has been the case with Yusuf al-Qaradawi, chair of the International Union of Muslim Scholars, who in January 2016 called for both leaderships to take a step back and allow for a new election to take place. His attempt failed on that occasion, but the growing concern over the disappointment among the grassroots might make a new attempt at reconciliation easier to succeed.

Strengthen credible non-violent voices within the Brotherhood

Youths who are either practicing violence or supporting it have lost faith in many Muslim Brotherhood figures, in particular those who have been engaged in the struggle for leadership. Even if voices like Mahmoud Hussein or Mahmoud Ezzat are preaching for non-violence, they do not have enough credibility, if any, to convince those youth groups who are supporting or practicing violence to renounce it. On the other hand, these groups hold great respect for other Muslim Brotherhood figures who are known for their revolutionary positions within the Brotherhood. Such was the case with Mohammed Al-Beltagi, one of the few leaders who stayed at the Rabaa al-Adawiya sit-in during the security operation to end it, despite losing his daughter that day. Unlike other leaders of the Brotherhood, Al-Beltagi who is currently in prison, is often referred to by the angry Muslim Brotherhood youths as one of the voices they can listen to. Both the Muslim Brotherhood leadership and the Egyptian regime have interest in strengthening these credible non-violent voices by allowing these actors the freedom to meet and convince the Muslim Brotherhood youth that a violent path is not the answer.

Adopting new policies towards the Muslim Brotherhood

In order to face the wave of violent Islamist movements in the 1980s and 1990s, the Mubarak regime used what Robert Bianchi termed a policy of "selective tolerance"⁷. According to the term, the regime authorised its security forces to deal harshly with militant Islamic groups, while permitting non-violent Islamic groups and associations to expand their presence in Egyptian public life. By adopting this approach, the regime managed to isolate violent groups from the larger Islamist spectrum, which made it easier for the regime to defeat it.

⁷ Bianchi, R. (1989). *Unruly corporatism: associational life in twentieth-century Egypt*. New York: Oxford University Press, p.200.

It is in the current Egyptian regime's interest to learn from this strategy. Treating the Muslim Brotherhood with all its members as a terrorist organisation will only encourage undecided individuals to join the violent branch. Alternatively, the regime needs to offer greater incentives for the grassroots to join the non-violent branch within the brotherhood. These incentives could begin with improvements to their conditions inside the prisons for the duration of their sentence and granting them access to the public sphere through either religious or political activities.

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