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BETWEEN MILITANT ISLAMIST GROUPS AND THEIR
CONSTITUENCIES. THE CASE OF AL-JAMAA
AL-ISLAMIYYA IN EGYPT, 1986-1998

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*Dynamics of Radicalisation in the Relationship between Militant Islamist Groups
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The Case of al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya in Egypt, 1986-1998*

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ISSN 1830-7728

© 2012 Stefan Malthaner
Printed in Italy
European University Institute
Badia Fiesolana
I – 50014 San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)
Italy
www.eui.eu
cadmus.eui.eu

Abstract

Research on political violence has increasingly adopted relational approaches to analysing processes of radicalisation and escalation, focusing mainly on interactions between protest movements and the police, and the effects of repressive state policies. Drawing on an analysis of the Egyptian militant Islamist group al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya between 1986 and 1998, this paper argues that, beyond this dyadic relationship, in order to expand our understanding of violent processes, we have to take into account interactions between militant groups and their constituencies, that is, their supportive social environment. Thereby, two basic mechanisms of escalation and radicalisation can be identified in the case of al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya. Firstly, the militants' agenda of transforming the Muslim community's social and cultural order (fighting moral corruption in society) caused resentment and triggered a cycle of rejection and radicalisation, culminating in attempts to impose norms of moral conduct by force. Secondly, the weakening of support during the violent insurgency triggered a dynamic of social isolation and radicalisation, including a violent struggle over controlling the population, in which the militants reacted to the withdrawal of support by trying to coerce and terrorise local communities into compliance and non-collaboration with their enemy. Interactions between militant groups and their social environment, thereby, are closely intertwined with the dynamics of state-repression and resistance, forming a triangular relationship that shapes the trajectory of the processes of political violence.

Keywords

Political Violence; Radicalization; Islamism; Egypt.

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1. Introduction

Khaled al-Berry was a teenager of barely 15 years old when he joined al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya, a militant Islamist group, in the Upper Egyptian city of Assiut in 1987, some years before the area became the site of a violent insurgency that would ultimately claim more than 1,500 lives. He became part of a group of young activists around a local mosque, and, having shown devotion and intelligence, was put in charge of activities at his secondary school and later at his university. Mobilising students around al-Jamaa's call for a return to Islam and an Islamic society soon brought him into conflict with the school administration and later the police (Al-Berry 2002, pp. 58-61). Al-Berry was expelled from school and arrested, experienced maltreatment at the hands of the police, and, in the following months, witnessed an escalation of confrontations between his fellow activists and the security forces. Yet, his story, which reflects the rise of al-Jamaa in a neighbourhood of Assiut, also points to another form of conflict and radicalisation which involved violent incidents well before the start of clashes with the police. Cultivating a feeling of moral superiority and following the theological concept of "Commanding the good and prohibiting the evil", al-Berry and his friends reprimanded and threatened female students for not dressing "properly", severely beat up a boy they were told was homosexual, harassed Christians, and violently punished a man for allegedly having insulted Islam (Al-Berry 2002, pp. 29-32, 55/56, 114-116). These violent actions created resentment and fear towards the group, and later became intertwined and exacerbated by state repression and the militant group's violent insurgency.

In recent years, a change of perspective has become discernible within research on political violence. Scholars studying militant groups and violent conflicts have increasingly adopted concepts and theoretical approaches from social movement studies, including the "classical" paradigms of political-opportunity structures, resource mobilisation, framing-processes, and protest-repertoires, as well as elements of the "contentious politics" agenda as pioneered by Charles Tilly, Sidney Tarrow, and Doug McAdam.¹ Among the contributions of social movement theory to the study of political violence for which it has been credited is that it contextualises (and de-exceptionalises) violence by analysing it within its social and political setting and as part of broader political processes (Della Porta 2008/2009/forthcoming; Gunning 2009).² In particular, increasing attention has been paid to the *relational* quality of violent processes, that is, to interactions between various actors participant in a conflict, whose mutual relations, reactions, and adaptations shape the escalation and development of political violence. Research on social movements, thereby, has identified and analysed several relationships which shape processes of mobilisation and radicalisation. These include interactions between movements and counter-movements (Rucht 2004; Meyer/Staggenborg 1996) and competition between different movements and movement-organisations (see Alimi 2011; Della Porta forthcoming). The cardinal relation, however, is the one between social movements and the state, in particular, interactions between movements and the police, and the effects of different levels and forms of repression on mobilisation and modes of protest. Whereas political-opportunity models tended to view the state's "repressive capacity" more or less as a contextual factor determining the costs of protest (see, for a review, Meyer 2004), it increasingly became clear that state responses influence strategic decisions by movement actors (and *vice versa*), and repertoires of action are shaped in mutual adaptation (McAdam 1982/1983). In particular, since the mid-1990s, a growing number of

¹ See, in particular, Della Porta (1995/2008/2009/forthcoming) and Gunning (2008/2009); also Alimi (2011); Bosi (forthcoming); Bosi/Demetriou/Malthaner (forthcoming); in the literature on Islamist militancy, this trend is exemplified in the works of Hafez (2004a/2004b); Hafez and Wiktorowicz (2004); Wiktorowicz (2004). On the "classic" paradigms of social movement study, see Della Porta and Diani (2006) and Tarrow (1998); on the "contentious politics" agenda, see McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001) and Tilly and Tarrow (2006).

² It should not be overlooked, however, that important works in the field of research on political violence and even the much criticised "terrorism studies" have stressed the need for analysing these phenomena in their social, political, and historical context well before that – and with their contributions have laid the foundation on which current debates build upon (see Crenshaw 1995; Rapoport 1988/2001; Della Porta 1995; Waldmann 1989/1998).

studies have examined the way in which police-responses affect the development of social movements, including their radicalisation and the emergence of violent groups (Della Porta 1995a/1995b; Merkl 1995),³ which then expanded into a distinct line of research on the styles and effects of protest-policing (see Della Porta and Reiter 1998) and state-repression (see, for example, Davenport 2000; Davenport/Johnston/Mueller 2005). Whereas most of these works focused on protest-movements and militant groups in Western democracies, several studies have begun to examine the specific conditions of state-repression in authoritarian regimes and applied social movement theory to the study of militant Islamist movements (Boudreau 2004; Wiktorowicz 2004; Hafez 2004a/2004b).

Yet, as the story of Khaled al-Berry makes clear, the relational dynamics of political violence involve interactions beyond the dyadic relationship between militant movements and the state. This paper argues that, to expand our understanding of the processes of radicalisation and the effects of state repression, we must take into account the relationship between militant groups and their immediate social environment.⁴ Of particular relevance, thereby, are the interactions with those parts of the population addressed by the militant groups as their constituencies, that is, with whom the militants identify, for whom they claim to fight, and from whom they expect (and sometimes receive) support (see Malhaner 2011a, 2011b). Militant groups respond to reactions from this social environment with shifts in their attitudes as well as changing patterns of behaviour which, in turn, re-shape their relationship with the local population. Drawing on an analysis of interaction-patterns and processes of violent escalation in the case of the militant Islamist group⁵ al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya between 1986 and 1998, this paper seeks to demonstrate, firstly, that the group's radicalisation involved – and was re-inforced by – several characteristic patterns of aggressive interaction between the militants and their constituencies. Secondly, it traces the ways in which these interactions were intertwined with the effects of state repression and interactions between al-Jamaa and the police, forming, as I argue, a triangular relationship in which each relation affected the others and combined, creating a causal dynamic that shaped the trajectory of the violent conflict.

2. Al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya and its social environment

As Roel Meijer (2009, p. 190) points out, al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya is an exceptionally interesting case; moreover, it is so in particular with respect to the question examined here. It illustrates the development of an Islamist movement which was closely embedded in its social environment, but then underwent a process of radicalisation which affected – and involved – the very social ties that the group had built with parts of the population.⁶

³ See, also, the earlier works of Baeyer-Katte *et al.* (1982) and Neidhardt (1981, 1989) on the protest movement and terrorist violence in Germany, which were among the first to adopt an explicitly interactional perspective on the relation between protest-movements and the state/police, but were (possibly because they were published in German) of limited influence on the international discussion in the field.

⁴ In the literature on political violence, the relationship between insurgent groups and “the population” has been analyzed mainly with respect to the question of how the militants can mobilize support among certain audiences or groups, rather than as part of interactive dynamics. Examples from the field of research on guerilla groups include Wolf (1969), Scott (1976), Paige (1975), and Wickham-Crowley (1992). Exceptions include Migdal (1975), who examines support as the result of exchange relationships between insurgents and the local populations, and Kalyvas' (2006) more recent work on violence in civil wars, which emphasizes the role of territorial control and collaboration in processes of violence. Another line of research analyses the militants' relations with broader audiences in terms of framing and frame-alignment processes (see, *inter alia*, Hafez 2004a/2004b; on framing and frame alignment, see Snow/Rochford/Worden/Benford 1986 and Benford/Snow 2000).

⁵ Islamism is understood here according to the definition of Hafez (2004a): “By Islamist I mean individuals, groups, organizations, and parties that see in Islam a guiding political doctrine that justifies and motivates collective action on behalf of that doctrine” (2004a, pp. 4/5).

⁶ The sources of this analysis are, firstly, autobiographical accounts from al-Jamaa members, such as the story of Khaled al-Berry (Al-Berry 2002). A second type of sources are anthropological studies on villages and neighborhoods in Egypt, such as Haenni (2005) on a Cairo suburb, Gaffney (1997) on al-Minya, or Toth (2003) on an Upper Egyptian village. Thirdly, and particularly, it is based on a series of interviews with (former) al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya members, residents of

The Islamist current in Egypt has its origin in the Muslim Brotherhood, founded by Hassan al-Banna in 1928, which developed into a mass movement with more than a million members during the 1930s and 1940s (Lia 1998). Under Gamal Abd al-Nasser, who took over power in the “Free Officers”-*coup d'état* in 1952, the Brotherhood was severely suppressed and disappeared from the political landscape, but the Islamist current gradually re-emerged after the Six-Day War of 1967. Al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya developed at the radical fringe of a broader (non-militant) Islamist student movement which began to spread at many Egyptian universities in the early 1970s, and, by the late 1970s, had gained considerable strength in numbers and in political influence. Nasser's successor, President Anwar al-Sadat, had initially facilitated Islamist activity after he took power in 1970, because he considered the Islamists to be a counterweight to the leftist and Nasserist current. But facing increasingly open opposition over decisions such as the Egyptian peace treaty with Israel and offering refuge to the Shah after the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, the government began to restrain the movement, and a cycle of protests and arrests began (Kepel 1985, Ramadan 1993). As a result of increasing confrontations with the government, open activities of the Islamist student movement in Cairo and Alexandria gradually ceased, and numerous student leaders from these cities joined the Muslim Brotherhood and focused on non-militant political work. In contrast, parts of the movement in Upper Egypt radicalised. A core of activists at the universities of Assiut and al-Minya formed a militant organisation and began to co-operate with a terrorist group from Cairo called al-Jihad, culminating in the assassination of President Sadat in October 1981. The assassination provoked a major crackdown and a wave of arrests which eliminated any open presence of the militant Islamist movement until the mid-1980s. After a number of middle-ranking leaders were released from prison in 1984, al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya re-organised at the university of Assiut, but also began to build a presence around neighbourhood mosques in Upper Egypt towns as well as in poorer neighbourhoods in the suburbs of Cairo. Establishing a following among university students and gradually winning support around neighbourhood-mosques and among local residents, the group's members and supporters probably counted in the thousands in the late 1980s.⁷

In contrast to smaller militant groups such as al-Jihad, which operated clandestinely and in almost complete social isolation, al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya was a movement closely embedded in its social environment. As one leader from Assiut emphasised, the group's project was, from the beginning, one of *al-dawa* – calling people to Islam – and grass-roots mobilisation:

The Dr. al-Zawahiri group [al-Jihad], they [were] believing in secret underground work. But al-Jamaa believed in the public work. In the universities, in the towns, in the streets. [...] The public revolution. How can we move the public!⁸

In other words, al-Jamaa's relationship with its social environment, was characterised by the group's approach of open and direct engagement with the population, which included activities of “ideological outreach” (Wickham 2002, p. 119), as well as social-welfare services and other forms of involvement with local communities. At the University of Assiut, for example, al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya invited students to lessons on Islam, held speeches in the auditorium, and gave sermons at the university mosque, which they combined skilfully with offering help to poor students and providing services such as free lessons, cheap textbooks, and separate bus-transport for women, or organising summer

(Contd.) _____

neighborhoods and towns known as al-Jamaa “strongholds”, as well as with local journalists, human-rights activists, and other observers, which were carried out during several periods of field-research in Cairo and Assiut between December 2003 and March 2005, and in England in April 2005 and in June/July 2005. To protect informants, no names are given and the place and date of interviews are identified only in relatively general terms.

⁷ In elections for student councils, which give a rough indication for the influence of al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya on campuses, the group won a majority of seats in 1985/86. Interview with al-Jamaa student leader in Assiut, England, March 2006. See, also, Springborn 1989 (pp. 226-27); Fariborz (1999, p. 149). Al-Jamaa's weekly religious lecture was allegedly attended by between 1,000 and 2,000 students, and a demonstration in protest of the killing of a student in May 1986 drew an estimated 15,000 people (Fariborz 1999, p. 150).

⁸ Interview with former al-Jamaa leader, London, July 2005.

camps for students.⁹ In neighbourhoods, such as Ayn Shams and Imbaba in the suburbs of Cairo, which had largely been neglected by the Egyptian government, the Islamists not only preached and formed study-groups at local mosques, but also collected money to support needy families, offered basic medical care, and gave out free meals on the Feast of Sacrifice, moved against criminal gangs, patrolled the areas at night, organised and regulated the local open market activities, and mediated in family-conflicts.¹⁰ In sum, al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya formed relationships with various parts of its social environment, which entailed different kinds of support and approval. Its young followers around university groups and local al-Jamaa sheikhs were directly involved with the group and identified with its political and cultural programme. They adopted a distinct attire and lifestyle, forming the core of an Islamist sub-culture which conveyed a strong sense of belonging and identity, which was held together by close personal bonds. Relations with local residents rested, to some degree, on sympathy for al-Jamaa's political and cultural message, too. People shared the group's disdain for the government's corruption and arbitrary police harassment, and many respected their emphasis on Islamic values. But approval among the local population was also based upon al-Jamaa's social-welfare services, and on the fact that the group provided some sort of order to the neighbourhoods. In turn, al-Jamaa received donations from merchants, as, for example, in Imbaba (Haenni 2005, pp. 33-35, 105, 115-118), which enabled them to expand their welfare activities.

Confrontations between al-Jamaa and the police began in the late 1980s. They started at local level, for example, at the University of Assiut, where confrontations developed out of clashes between al-Jamaa and other students, forcing university authorities, and finally the police, to intervene. Similarly, in neighbourhoods such as Ayn Shams in 1987, conflicts with neighbourhood-residents and local policemen triggered a major police operation. In Imbaba, the police intervened when the Islamists openly began to challenge the government's authority, after they publicly announced the birth of the "Islamic Republic of Imbaba" at a makeshift "press-conference" in July 1991.¹¹ These local confrontations gradually escalated into a violent conflict at national level. After one militant leader was killed, al-Jamaa retaliated by assassinating politicians and then started a campaign of terrorist attacks against policemen, Christians, and foreign tourists, mainly in Upper Egypt, which lasted until 1998 and cost about one and a half thousand lives (Hafez 2004a, p. 34).

3. Interactions between militant groups and their constituencies: dynamics of radicalisation and violent escalation

"Radicalisation" is understood here to denote a shift in the perspectives and attitudes of political actors, as well as changes in repertoires of action, towards, as Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow called it, increasing "assertiveness" (Tilly/Tarrow 2006, p. 217), that is, towards uncompromising attitudes and towards the increasing acceptance and adoption of confrontational and violent means.¹² As Sedgwick notes, radicalisation is not an unproblematical concept, because it is used with very different meanings, and because it focuses analytical attention on the "radical" actor:

The concept of radicalization emphasizes the individual and, to some extent, the ideology and the group, and significantly de-emphasizes the wider circumstances [...] (Sedgwick 2010, pp. 480/481).

In other words, radicalisation is often understood as something that happens with a "deviant" actor, rather than between the actors involved in a conflict. However, this de-contextualisation is misleading, not only because radicalisation is often the result of interactions between militant groups and their adversaries (see Della Porta 1995, Neidhardt 1989, Hafez 2004a), but also because, as this paper seeks to show, radicalisation entails the transformation of relationships with their social environment: it

⁹ Interview with al-Jamaa student-leader from Assiut, England, March 2006.

¹⁰ Interviews with residents of Ayn Shams, Cairo, December 2004, March 2005; on Imbaba, see Haenni (2005: 40-42, 73-78), report in *Al-Ahram*, weekly ed. 17-23 December 1992.

¹¹ AP, 19 July 1992.

¹² On the concept of radicalisation, see, also, McCauley and Moskaleiko (2008), and Sedgwick (2010).

involves changes in the attitudes of those who are militant and changes in the forms of engagement with a population, and is accompanied and re-inforced by dynamics of interaction between the militant groups and their constituencies.

In the case of al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya, two main development patterns can be identified which entailed a mutually re-inforcing dynamic of increasing resentment, hostility, and violence. The first regards the Islamists' agenda of fighting "moral corruption" and imposing an Islamic moral order in neighbourhoods and towns under their (partial) control, which gradually evolved into a campaign of violently enforcing norms of moral conduct that undermined local support. The second pattern could be observed when confrontations between al-Jamaa and the police escalated, and during the later development of the violent insurgency. Here, the militants reacted with violence to signs of weakening support and collaboration with the police, triggering a dynamic that resulted in the gradual isolation of the militants as well as in a loss of constraints on violent practices. In both patterns of development, interactions between the militants and their social environment were closely intertwined with confrontations with the police, with processes of violent escalation on all sides of this triangle re-inforcing each other.

a) Commanding right and forbidding evil: the radicalisation of the fight against moral corruption

Al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya's relationship with the Muslim population entailed a particular ambivalence. On the one hand, the group closely identified with the population and cultivated a self-image of being a "popular movement" with strong local support.¹³ On the other hand, following the Islamist thinker Sayyid Qutb, the group saw society as being in a state of "*jahiliyya*", that is, in a state of ignorance similar to the times before the Prophet Mohammad (Qutb 1981, 15, 152), and emphasised the need for true believers to separate from all infidels and from society's corrupting influences (Al-Berry 2002, pp. 88/89). This perspective entailed what Patrick Haenni called a "polemic" attitude towards these constituencies (Haenni 2005, pp. 145/146, 192-194): an attitude that not only entailed the belief in moral and spiritual superiority but also challenged traditions and social hierarchies. In addition to calling people to Islam (*al-dawa*), the group also saw itself from the very beginning on a mission of "commanding what is right and forbidding what is wrong" (*al-amr bi-l-ma'ruf wa-l-nahi 'an al-munkar*), a concept also known as *hisba*, which, in its traditional meaning, is bound to the authority of a legitimate ruler, but was transformed by al-Jamaa into an activist "programme of changing evil by force" (Meijer 2009, p. 1994). In relation to their social environment, this meant that on university campuses and in neighbourhoods, al-Jamaa attempted to enforce (their vision of) Islamic norms of moral conduct on the Muslim population, initially mainly by "advising" and reprimanding people (Gaffney 1997, p. 278; Al-Berry 2002, pp. 52-56; Meijer 2009, pp. 191-195). At the University of Assiut in the mid-1980s, for example, al-Jamaa sought to "Islamicise" campus life by establishing separate areas for male and female students in auditoriums and cafeterias, protesting against music recitals, film screening, or mixed holiday trips, as well as by approaching students having conversations with students from the opposite sex, or female students who were not dressed "properly". As one former al-Jamaa leader from Assiut admitted, these intervention could turn into harassment and intimidation when students refused to obey,¹⁴ and on a number of occasions al-Jamaa members violently attacked music groups or subjected alleged "transgressors" to punishment-beatings (Al-Berry 2002, pp. 113-117; Gaffney 1997, p. 278; Ramadan 1993, pp. 162/163). In some instances, these encounters became increasingly hostile, such as one incident in which al-Jamaa members reprimanded a student for talking to a girl (who turned out to be his fiancée), which, after the young

¹³ This self-image was apparently upheld even against contradicting evidence. In 1997, when the insurgency in Upper Egypt was clearly weakened, one of the group's leaders abroad still claimed: "The Gama'a Islamiyya is spread throughout the Egyptian principalities, [...] and receives great support from the people. [...] Many are continuing to join the Gama'a." Interview published in *Nida'ul Islam* (April/May 1997).

¹⁴ Interview with former al-Jamaa leader, England, June 2007.

man refused to accept their demands and got angry, escalated into a fight that, in the end, involved dozens of students.¹⁵

Expanding their activities beyond the university in the mid-1980s, al-Jamaa began “fighting corruption” in the city of Assiut, too, harassing couples holding hands or otherwise behaving “improperly”, severely beating alleged homosexuals, publicly flogging drunks, enforcing a ban on alcohol by stopping trucks carrying cases of beer and threatening merchants, and burning down video-shops.¹⁶ These acts seem to become increasingly violent and, in some instances, women were reportedly attacked with acid when not wearing the veil.¹⁷ As Osama Hafez, one of the original leaders of the group explained in his later/subsequent assessment of the group’s faults and mistakes, these “violations” severely undermined their support among the population of Assiut:

[These acts had] a negative effect on the population and produced aversion against the Islamic groups and the call to Islam. This is what happened in Assiut and it is the reason that people in Egypt regarded all men wearing beards with hostility and mistrust. It affected the stability of the city [of Assiut] and hurt the call to Islam.¹⁸

Equally prominent were al-Jamaa’s efforts to “prohibit the evil” in Imbaba, a Cairo suburb where, in the absence of government authorities, the group had gained a considerable degree of control over certain neighbourhoods in the late 1980s. There, al-Jamaa interrupted wedding celebrations playing music or having dancers, reprimanded women for “un-Islamic” attire, banned smoking the waterpipe (hookah or shisha) or playing cards in tea shops, or even burned down shops selling “improper” videos or alcohol (Haenni 2005, pp. 103-105). These incidents, however, increasingly provoked resentment among the population, as one resident explained:

Basically I agree with them [al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya], but I refuse some of their ways of behaviour. [...] The *shisha* [waterpipe], for example, they say that it is *haram* [forbidden], but I say that it is *makruh* [not recommended, but allowed]; they condemn wedding ceremonies with dance and music [...] and that is indispensable for us.¹⁹

Al-Jamaa, in turn, seemed to react to the growing resentment with an upsurge in coercive and violent acts against “corruption”, attacking video-stores and shops run by Christians, which led to a further withdrawal of support. As Haenni argues in his analysis of developments in Imbaba, this process also affected support among merchants at the local market, who had provided the militants with the financial means to run their welfare-services, and led to a decrease in donations. Lacking funds, the group then began to extort money not only from Christians, but also from Muslim shopowners, which, in turn, led to a further deterioration in relationship between al-Jamaa and the local population (Haenni 2005, pp. 33-38, 103-105, 115-118).

In sum, al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya’s efforts to “prohibit the evil” and impose norms of moral conduct on the population seemed to trigger sequences of interaction in which the people’s refusal to meet with the Islamists’ “advice” and the rejection of al-Jamaa’s agenda of cultural transformation resulted in increasingly aggressive and ultimately violent acts on the part of the militants, which, in turn, further undermined sympathies for the group. While rigid and forceful in their emphasis on Islamic law from the very beginning, the group became increasingly aggressive and violent in their dealing with the population as result of a process that was driven, if not caused, by a dynamic of interaction which re-inforced the radicalisation of al-Jamaa’s attitude and repertoires of action in relation to their social environment. Thereby, as discernible also from the account of Al-Berry, enforcing an Islamist moral order was closely intertwined with gaining control over a university or

¹⁵ Interview with former al-Jamaa member, England, June 2007.

¹⁶ Interview with Assiut resident, Assiut, April 2004; Al-Berry 2002: 55; Rubin 1990, p. 73; Ramadan 1993, pp. 162/163.

¹⁷ Interview with Assiut resident, April 2004.

¹⁸ Quoted by Mukrim M. Ahmad, in Al-Mussawar, no. 4055, June 28, 2002, pp. 8-10.

¹⁹ Quoted in Haenni 2005, p. 104, author’s translation.

neighbourhood. Thus, rejecting the militants' claim to moral authority meant challenging their power. So, their aggressive response to resistance seemed to originate from the urge to uphold sacred commands as well as from the need to assert the group's authority.

b) Violence, withdrawal of support, and the struggle for control during the violent insurgency

When confrontations between al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya and the police escalated into a violent insurgency, a second pattern of radicalisation became discernible. Relations between the militants and the local population became entwined in a dynamic of violence, which affected social ties, and was, at the same time, re-inforced by the gradual withdrawal of support, local resistance, and ultimately the isolation of the militant groups.

Developments differed between Upper Egypt and Cairo suburbs. In Ayn Shams, clashes with security forces began as early as 1988, after an attempt by the police to arrest alleged al-Jamaa members at the local mosque turned into a stand-off. During the ensuing riots, not only many young sympathizers but also many ordinary residents sided with the militants, including, according to one witness, elderly women throwing stones from balconies.²⁰ Yet, this support proved relatively short-lived. After first clashes, numerous alleged Islamist militants were arrested and Ayn Shams was put under a curfew which also closed down the open market. While people were furious about the arbitrary arrests and the disruption of people's livelihoods, they nevertheless seemed disinclined to bear the risk of being arrested or suffer other reprisals for their involvement with the Islamists, and many young followers changed their white *galabiyas* (long traditional garments which became a symbol for the Islamists) for a pair of trousers and shaved their beards to avoid persecution. After the curfew was imposed, the area calmed down and any open presence of the Islamists vanished, with al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya forced to operate underground; but even its clandestine presence in the neighbourhood seemed weak.²¹

A similar process took place in Imbaba, which, after the militants' bold announcement of the "Islamic Republic of Imbaba", became the site of a large police operation in December 1992, in which 14,000 policemen were deployed to cordon off the area and arrest the alleged militants. However, at this time, relations between al-Jamaa and the local population in Imbaba seemed to have already become tense after the militants' "fight against corruption" had turned into a campaign of coercion, and even if many people were reluctant to co-operate with the police, the security forces met very little resistance and there were no reports of residents siding openly with al-Jamaa. In the face of the escalating violence, people turned away from the group and Imbaba, too, became calm relatively quickly.²² In both cases, the militants growing social isolation at local level led to their withdrawal from these neighbourhoods and contributed to a shift in the repertoires of action towards a terrorist campaign at national level. As a direct reaction to the incidents in Ayn Shams, al-Jamaa carried out a series of bombings, targeting politicians, including an attack on the Minister of the Interior, Zaki Badri, in December 1989. The group from Imbaba apparently split after the events in 1992, with some members leaving the group, while other parts radicalised. A faction of al-Jamaa-members from Imbaba was allegedly responsible for a series of bomb attacks on cafés in the central squares of Cairo in 1993 (Haenni 2005, pp. 118-122, 125-128), while others militants left the neighbourhood for training camps in Afghanistan, and, after their return, took part in the terrorist campaign in other parts of the country. In other words, during the escalating confrontations, al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya's supportive milieu in these neighbourhoods fragmented as a result of police pressure, and residents as well as young sympathizers withdrew from involvement with the group. The gradual isolation, then, forced the militants underground or to leave the areas, and, at the same time, re-inforced a process or radicalisation which entailed a shift in their violent repertoires of action from local efforts to create

²⁰ Interview with resident of Ayn Shams, Cairo, December 2004.

²¹ Personal interviews with residents of Ayn Shams, December 2004, March 2005.

²² Personal interview with local journalist, Cairo, February 2004; Haenni 2005, pp. 125-128; see, also, Al-Ahram (weekly ed.), 10-16 December 1992, 17-23 December 1992.

Islamised spaces towards a terrorist campaign at “national level”, that is, against the government, as well as towards indiscriminate bombings against the civilian population.

In Upper Egypt, al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya’s position had been even stronger than in Cairo. The group had built a large following both among students and in many towns and villages, and it controlled numerous mosques and neighbourhoods (Hafez 2004a, p. 84). In some instances, sympathizers and followers withdrew quickly from involvement with al-Jamaa when problems with the police began, as, for example, al-Berry reports from his secondary school in Assiut, where: “We lost the terrain we had conquered even quicker than we had won it” (Al-Berry 2002, p. 64). But, by and large, support among the population and, in particular, its core following, seemed more resilient, and well into the violent insurgency, protest marches by al-Jamaa-sympathizers drew thousands of people.²³ In Upper Egypt, too, a process of isolation and radicalisation took place which began in a similar pattern of support eroding under the pressure of violent confrontations, but which was then exacerbated by a dynamic evolving from al-Jamaa’s increasingly violent struggle to re-gain control over the population.

In Upper Egypt, the strain of the violent insurgency (and counter-insurgency) on the civilian population was enormous. Villages were put under a curfew, thousands of young men were arrested, and the local economy was brought to a standstill (Roussillion 1994, pp. 237-239; HWR report 1993). At the beginning, however, repressive police-measures increased resentment among the population, and continuing support for the Islamists seemed to prevent any collaboration with the security forces.²⁴ This seemed to change around late 1993, after the police had begun to show some restraint in the area of Assiut, but also after relations between al-Jamaa and the population had become increasingly tense as a result of more and more coercive and violent acts of “prohibiting the evil”, involving, as mentioned above, not only severe beatings but also acid-attacks and other atrocities. In addition, in the second half of the year 1993, al-Jamaa not only escalated its attacks against policemen, but also planted a number of bombs at cafés and other public places in the city, targeting the civilian population.²⁵ Weakening support, then, seemed accompanied by a slowly growing willingness to collaborate with the police, to which the militants reacted with a campaign of threats and assassinations of alleged informers, thus further undermining support-relationships with the local communities. In Assiut, and particularly in Mallawi, which became the centre of violent attacks from 1994 onward, al-Jamaa targeted a growing number of Muslim villagers whom they accused of having betrayed militants to the police.²⁶ Over time, the categories of people targeted as “collaborators” broadened, and included not only individuals giving information to the police, but any form of involvement with the authorities: village guards, sheikhs at local mosques who accepted government-control, or tractor-drivers who helped clear sugar-cane fields (used by the militants as hideouts).²⁷ Moreover, these attacks became more and more brutal, and turned into a campaign of deliberate atrocities to frighten the population into refraining from collaborating with the police. In several incidents reported between 1995 and 1997, militants killed and beheaded alleged informers in front of village communities, which were forced to watch.²⁸ In some instances, attacks against village guards, farmers, or local policemen then triggered another pattern of interaction that drew violence into the relation between al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya and local communities: revenge cycles, in which family-

²³ See AFP, 31 May 1993; Toth 2002, pp. 559 & 561; Roussillion 1994, pp. 246/247.

²⁴ As indicated by a report of Interior Minister Abdel Halim Moussa on a violent attack: “As a result of the sway exercised by the extremists over the village, none of the villagers came forward to testify. Although the incident took place in broad daylight, police have yet to find a single witness.” Cited in Al-Ahram (weekly ed.), 7-13 May 1992.

²⁵ Report by the Egyptian Organization of Human Rights (EOHR), excerpts published in Al-Ahram (weekly ed.), 22 January-2 February 1994.

²⁶ Cases reported by newspapers and human-right organisations increased from 3 in 1993 to 38 in 1995. See, also, Khaled Dawoud’s account of the situation in Mallawi, AP, 18 October 1994.

²⁷ See reports in AFP, 27 February 1996; Al-Ahram, 14 April 1994.

²⁸ AFP, 14 September 1995; DPA, 3 August 1995, 25 October 1996. In this phase of the conflict, killing collaborators had become, as one human-rights activist from Mallawi put it, the militants’ main form of violence in the area (cited in DPA, 25 October 1996).

members attacked the families of Islamist militants, and *vice versa*. In November 1994, for example, al-Jamaa killed a guard at a mosque in a village near Mallawi. Family members of the victim then took revenge on the father of one of the attackers shortly later, to which the militants responded by killing two members of this family and, some weeks later, attacked the mosque, killing nine people, including another two members of the family.²⁹

In sum, in the case of al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya, the dynamics of interaction between the militants and parts of their social environment contributed to a process of radicalisation that entailed increasingly aggressive forms of action and ultimately the use of extreme forms of violence. In their efforts to “prohibit the evil”, the militants responded to signs of resistance by shifting from strategies of *al-dawa* (calling people to Islam), to imposing a moral order by force. During the violent insurgency, the militants reacted to signs of faltering support by assassinating alleged informers, which escalated into a campaign of terrorist violence against local communities. Both dynamics were, in a way, self-reinforcing. Increasing violence against the population further undermined support and increased the militants’ social isolation. As the account of al-Berry indicates, this process was accompanied by a shift in perspective towards this population, which, by the late 1980s, began to include notions of legitimising a violent struggle not only against the “infidel” ruler, but also against the Muslim community. He cites an internal document with the title “The fight against the community which refuses to accept God’s Law”, which stated that:

“This is about fighting and attacking the entire community which rejects the application of [even only] a single of God’s laws. This is an obligation. This fight is an even greater source of virtue than the fight against the unbelievers.”³⁰

4. Completing the triangle: the interrelation of violent repression, political violence, and the relationship between militant groups and their constituencies

In both the developments sketched above, relations between al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya and their constituencies were closely intertwined with the militants’ violent interactions with the police, forming a triangular relational dynamic in which the actors’ strategies and interactions were shaped by – and, in turn, influenced – relationships between the other sides. I will focus here on several characteristic patterns in which forms of state repression and relationships between insurgents and their constituencies were interlinked, and which shaped the process of escalation by inducing (or contributing to) important shifts in the form of violent interactions: the shift from toleration to police intervention in local settings; scale-shifts in the level and targeting of violence; and changes in the balance of military capabilities between the insurgents and the security forces.

Firstly, the start of police interventions at universities and in certain neighbourhoods seemed directly linked to the development of relationships between the militant groups and their (supportive) social environment at local level. Al-Jamaa came to be perceived as a threat by the authorities, in particular because of the fact that the group had managed to build a young and committed following at universities and mosques, was able to provide social services to local residents, and had established a degree of influence in these areas which challenged state control and legitimacy. As one leader of al-Jamaa explained, the fact that al-Jamaa offered basic medical services, organised the market, and mediated in conflicts in the neighbourhood of Ayn Shams, demonstrated, in a way which was visible to all, that the state was unable or unwilling to do so – a challenge that the state could not tolerate:

The government was angry. Why? [...] Because if you succeed, it means the government is bad. [...] This is the real reason for what happened in Ayn Shams. [...] Why they said they [al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya] are building a state inside the state.³¹

Police intervention then was triggered typically by events which brought the militants’ local influence to the government’s attention or demonstrated their increasing boldness as “rulers”, which, in several

²⁹ See AFP, 8 December 1994; AFP, 3 June 1995; AP, 5 June 1995.

³⁰ Cited in al-Berry (2002, pp. 43/44), translation by the author.

³¹ Interview with former al-Jamaa leader, England, March 2006.

cases, were linked to violent incidents involving acts of “prohibiting the evil” resulting in conflicts between al-Jamaa and local residents. In Ayn Shams, for example, the public flogging of a man by members of al-Jamaa as a punishment for alleged adultery made the headlines and forced authorities to react.³² Similarly, at the University of Assiut, complaints about harassment by al-Jamaa members or reports about alleged attacks on music recitals contributed to the increasing involvement of the police in conflicts on the campus. And the major police operation in Imbaba in December 1992 followed a press conference a few months before in which al-Jamaa leaders had announced the “The Islamic Republic of Imbaba”.³³ In other words, the (perceived and actual) challenge of al-Jamaa to the state-authorities was, to a considerable extent, based upon support-relations established in local settings, and, in some cases, interactions with local residents could trigger police intervention which then developed into larger confrontations with the militant group.

In the following process of escalating repression, the forms of violent police strategies seemed to change in reaction to what was perceived as support by parts of the local population for al-Jamaa, shifting from arresting individual militants, to police operations against local mosques, to measures that aimed at controlling entire communities or neighbourhoods. In Ayn Shams in 1987, for example, police first intervened in the neighbourhood to arrest suspected militant leaders. After reports that militants were hiding in the “Adam-Mosque”, a local stronghold of the group, and that the group had become the un-official rulers of the area, larger police forces were deployed to arrest young followers of al-Jamaa after Friday prayers, in a strategy directed against the group as a whole. After these operations had turned into street battles in which local residents sided with the militants, and people seemed unwilling to collaborate with the police, repressive strategies again shifted, now targeting the entire neighbourhood by imposing a curfew, shutting down the open market and thereby the area’s economic centre, and indiscriminately arresting large numbers of young people.³⁴ In Imbaba, where the police-intervention took place five years later, in 1992, the expectation of similar problems led the authorities to adopt a more indiscriminate strategy from the very beginning, which focused on controlling the local population as much as on arresting suspected militants, in an operation that involved around 14,000 troops and sealed off a considerable part of the city for months.

A third pattern in which interactions were connected was visible in the way in which escalating repression transformed relationships between the militant Islamists and their (supportive) social environment in local settings. In some cases, arbitrary arrests and police violence seemed to increase sympathy with the Islamists among young followers and local residents. But in a situation of the overwhelming superiority of the security forces in terms of their military capacity, the impositions of curfews, mass arrests, and other repressive measures necessarily resulted in a fundamental change in the conditions of support relationships. Where police imposed (coercive) control, al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya was no longer able to conduct open political work and gather their followers in meetings and study circles, nor to continue providing social services and other benefits to local residents. Ultimately, many people withdrew from open involvement with al-Jamaa, and the group was forced underground. In particular, at a later stage of the conflict, pressure from police-measures also seemed to become intertwined with aggressive interactions between the militant Islamist groups and their social environment. In Imbaba, for example, the militant groups became much more aggressive towards the population, after troubles with the security forces had begun, as one resident interviewed by a journalist explained: “The Islamists were a [mere] nuisance, until clashes with the police began. Then they hit anyone who got in the way.”³⁵ Also, in this case, solidarity among local residents seemed much weaker, because support had eroded even before the police intervention, as a result of conflicts around the militants’ radicalising the “fight against corruption”.

³² Interviews with residents of Ayn Shams, December 2004; see, also, the report by Nabil Omar, *Ruz al-Yussif*, Cairo, 19 December 1988.

³³ See AP, 19 July 1992; UPI, 19 December 1992.

³⁴ Interviews with residents of Ayn Shams, December 2004. On developments in Ayn Shams see also *Al-Wafd*, Cairo, 14 August 1988; *Ruz al-Yussif*, Cairo, 19 December 1988; *New York Times*, 11 December 1988.

³⁵ Resident of Imbaba, quoted in *Al-Ahram* (weekly ed.), 17-23 December 1992.

Similarly, the particular dynamic of local relations during the violent insurgent campaign in Upper Egypt was shaped by the patterns of state repression, as a result of the fact that the militant Islamist were forced underground and because of severe and indiscriminate forms of repression strategies deployed against local communities by the state authorities. The need for secrecy in clandestine operations rendered it necessary for the insurgents to control information held by the population, which triggered the escalating dynamic of coercively enforcing non-collaboration with the police by killing informants and terrorizing local communities, as described above. Thus, the violent insurgency against the police, the violent repression against both the militants and the population, and the transformation of local relationships coalesced into a process in which the militant group became increasingly isolated, and in which the causalities of either development can hardly be separated: escalating violence entailed growing tensions in the relationship between the militants and their constituencies, and created the need to switch to clandestine forms of operation in order to avoid persecution, thus contributing to the gradual erosion of the relationships with their constituencies.

Finally, the erosion of support among the local population affected the militants' capacity to withstand police pressure and avoid persecution, leading to a typical pattern of social isolation, the weakening of the insurgent campaign, but also a radicalisation of violent practices. In the areas of Assiut and Mallawi, the militants' violent campaign seemed to falter – and the police seemed able to push the militants out of the areas – also as a result of their loss of support in local communities, at a point in time when sentiments among those parts that had previously sympathised with al-Jamaa had turned against the group. Around mid-1994, the number of attacks in the area of Assiut decreased rapidly, but increased in the al-Minya region, only to decrease again after about two years.³⁶ From 1996 onward, reports of militants hiding in sugar-cane fields or dry irrigation tunnels became more frequent, indicating that they were unable to find shelter in village communities. Social isolation thus contributed to the gradual defeat of the militants in their conflict with the police. This was, however, also accompanied by a loss of constraints on violent practices. From 1996 onward, the number of “massacres” of Christian or Muslim civilians, and of foreign tourists increased, culminating in the attack at Luxor, in which 58 tourists and four Egyptian guards were killed.³⁷ From the relational perspective proposed here, this development can be interpreted as resulting (in part) from a loss of constraints on violent practices inherent in the militants' normative orientation towards their constituencies, and from the weakening of the mechanisms of social control inherent in this relationship. The fact that militant groups identify with a population as the community for which they fight, and that they depend on moral and practical support from this community, entails an influence which may lead the militants to adapt their actions in reaction to perceived criticism and resistance. The militants' social isolation not only undermines this influence, but also entails an exacerbation of hostility in relation to their enemy as well as in relation to these constituencies.

5. Conclusions and comparative remarks

This paper argues that a particular relationship exists between militant groups and those parts of the population addressed as their constituencies, and that, within this relationship, patterns of interaction can emerge which contribute to a process of radicalisation. This relationship is affected by (violent) interactions between the militants and their adversaries (the state security forces). But, at the same time, relations between militant groups and their social environment crucially influence the development of the insurgent campaign, thus forming a triangular relationship that shapes the processes of political violence. In the case of al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya, two basic mechanisms can be identified that re-inforced this process. Firstly, the militants' vision of creating a truly Islamic society entailed an agenda of transforming the Muslim community's social and cultural order (fighting corruption in society), which caused resentment and triggered a cycle of rejection and radicalisation, culminating in attempts to impose norms of moral conduct by force, which, in turn, contributed to a further loss of support. Secondly, the weakening of support during the violent escalation of

³⁶ See analysis of event-data on the conflict in Upper Egypt in Malthaner (2011b, pp. 170-172).

³⁷ On the Luxor massacre, see Police Federale Suisse: “Luxor: Synthèse de l'attentat du 17 novembre 1997”, (Swiss Federal Police, March 2000).

confrontations with the police triggered a dynamic of social isolation and radicalisation, either in a pattern of withdrawal and disengagement, with militants turning away from local arenas and engaging in national (or international) terrorist campaigns; or in a violent struggle over the control of the community, in which the militants reacted to what they perceived as betrayal by trying to coerce and terrorise the population both into compliance and into not collaborating with their enemy, thereby destroying all remnants of supportive relations with the local communities. The causal argument here pertains to the dynamic of the process, rather than to its origin: to some extent, al-Jamaa was more “radical” than other parts of the Islamist movement from the very beginning, particular in its emphasis on a rigid moral order. Yet, its radicalisation towards using extreme forms of violence against the population was the result of a pattern of resentment, violence, withdrawal, and social isolation.

What are the conditions of these mechanisms to emerge? And can they be found in other processes of political violence, too? This analysis relies on a single-case study and its results cannot be readily generalised. Yet, some comparative remarks can be made upon its basis. The first concerns the fact that al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya represents an Islamist movement and the degree to which this particular “character” shapes the relationship with its constituencies. Indeed, al-Jamaa’s agenda of fighting against moral corruption and “un-Islamic” behaviour is, to some extent, particular to Islamist groups, but not to all. Whereas this element seems prominent among groups such as the Algerian GIA, it appears more constrained in cases such as Hamas or Hezbollah, and the clandestine Egyptian al-Jihad, for example, did not engage in this type of activities at all. In the case of al-Jihad, interactions took place at a much more abstract level, via public statements and acts of “propaganda by the deed”, which facilitated a process of disengagement from the Egyptian arena, rather than the form of violent radicalisation in intimate interaction with the population observed in the case of al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya. In other words, Islamist groups are far from uniform concerning the relationship with their social environment, and the way in which this relationship develops. The relevant structural criteria for comparison, thereby, seem to be the form of the militants’ engagement with their constituencies and the degree to which the militants seek to transform – and thus turn against – the community’s social and cultural order; al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya represents a relatively large militant Islamist movement engaging directly and openly with the local population, and it put an extraordinary emphasis on the “Islamicisation” of local communities and the fight against “moral corruption”. When extending the comparison to include non-Islamist militant groups, one finds striking similarities concerning these criteria, for example, in some cases of social-revolutionary movements, such as the Shining Path of Peru. In these cases, a cultural transformation of society is sought in the name of the militants’ vision of a new society, which similarly goes along with imposing a transformation of traditions and aspects of daily life, and can trigger a similar dynamic of rejection and radicalisation.

A second remark concerns the dynamic of isolation and radicalisation regarding the control of information and collaboration. As Kalyvas demonstrates in his theory of violence in civil wars (Kalyvas 2006, pp. 146-208), this dynamic seems – to some degree - universal to violent insurgencies, in which all militant groups face similar challenges when facing a militarily superior enemy. Notwithstanding this, the evolving development-pattern is linked to the weakening of support relationships, and thus may differ in cases where support is based, for example, upon communal solidarity, which seems much more resilient under pressure. Relationships between ethnic-nationalist movements seem not only able to sustain persecution and the pressure from escalating violence, but also to exert a much greater degree of constraining influence on the militants’ violent campaign.

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