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Resilience against violent radicalisation: Why haven't more Islamists taken up arms in Egypt since 2013?

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**Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies**

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## **Abstract**

While most research on violent radicalisation often focuses on answering the question why people take up arms, this paper seeks to answer the opposite question: why have more Islamists not taken up arms in Egypt since 2013? In Egypt, after the military intervention against the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood in July 2013 and the new regime's decision to classify the movement as a terrorist organisation, many voices warned that non-violent Islamists would shift their tactics to include the use of violence. However, only a minority among the Muslim Brotherhood and its supporters have decided to do so. In answering the "why not" question, this study seeks to contribute to the larger debate on the sources of resilience against violent radicalisation and how to understand the roles of legitimacy, social trust, organisational rules and external actors in increasing the resilience of Islamist youths against violent radicalisation.

## **Keywords**

Violence- Radicalisation- Resilience- Muslim Brotherhood- Islamism- Egypt



## Introduction\*

While most research on violent radicalisation often focuses on answering the question why people take up arms, this paper seeks to answer the opposite question: why have more Islamists not taken up arms in Egypt since 2013? In Egypt, after the military intervention against the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood in July 2013 and the new regime's decision to classify the movement as a terrorist organisation, many voices warned that non-violent Islamists would shift their tactics to include the use of violence (Byman & Wittes, 2014; Ayoob, 2013). However, only a minority among the Muslim Brotherhood and its supporters have decided to do so.

While most policy attention focuses on the causes of radicalisation, the case of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt after 2013 raises an equally important question: why, despite the repression the movement suffered after July 2013, has only a small minority turned to violence? What makes understanding violent radicalisation complicated is that violent activism is very rare while the often-cited drivers of it are broad. Hence, answering the question of what factors lead to violent radicalisation seems difficult since we do not know why others who have been through the same experiences choose not to take up arms. Only by seeking to understand the factors that prevent, discourage or deter people from joining violent groups can we have a better understanding of this complicated phenomenon.

In answering the above question, this study seeks to contribute to the larger debate on the sources of resilience against violent radicalisation and how to understand the roles of legitimacy, social trust, organisational rules and external actors in increasing the resilience of Islamist youths against violent radicalisation.

## Why men don't rebel: a literature review

Although little has been written on the factors limiting violent radicalisation, a few studies have raised the 'Why not' question and highlighted a number of possible factors that are worth testing to answer our research question. In his book *The Missing Martyrs* (2018), Charles Kurzman raises the same question as this research paper: why are there so few Islamists taking up arms? Kurzman argues that

the three main waves of global Islamist terrorism – al-Qaida and other groups in Afghanistan from the 1980s through 2001; the insurgency in Iraq from 2003 through 2008; and the Islamic State and other groups in Syria and Iraq from 2013 through 2017 – never managed to recruit more than 1 in 40 million Muslims from outside of these civil war zones (Kurzman, 2018: 10).

Both al-Qaida and the self-proclaimed Islamic State have called it a duty for Muslims to engage in armed jihad – against their own rulers, against the Soviets, and later against the Americans and their allies. Tens of thousands have obeyed. However, more than a billion Muslims – over 99.99 percent – have ignored the call to action (Kurzman, 2018: 10).

Taking the same question, but focusing on specific case studies, Kim Cragin, Melissa A. Bradley, Eric Robinson and Paul S. Steinberg look at the case of non-radicalisation in the Palestinian West Bank (2015). They argue that the West Bank is an area well-suited to a proof-of-concept study about why people remain non-radicalised. In their words,

populations are accessible, and residents have ample opportunity to become involved in violence. Most of the factors attributed to radicalisation – both structural factors and individual experiences – exist there, leading naturally to the question 'why aren't more people involved in political violence?' (Cragin et al., 2015: 2).

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In their report *What Factors Lead Individuals To Reject Violent Extremism in Yemen*, Eric Robinson, P. Kathleen Frier, Kim Cragin, Melissa A. Bradley, Daniel Egel, Bryce Loidolt and Paul S. Steinberg (2017) used a survey and focus group research to continue their previous work by examining why individuals reject violence in Yemen.

The above three studies share one initial observation: **sympathy for Islamist terrorism rarely translates into Islamist terrorist activities** (Kurzman, 2019: 31). Kurzman refers to this phenomenon with the term ‘radical sheikh,’ echoing Tom Wolfe’s ‘radical chic,’ describing non-revolutionaries who claim to support revolutionary causes. According to Kurzman, radical sheikhism involves expressions of sympathy for Bin Ladin or the self-proclaimed Islamic State as anti-imperialist heroes of Islamic authenticity. However, this sort of symbolic endorsement does not translate into potential participation in terrorism. By the same token, research on Yemen and the West Bank finds that choosing not to engage in violence is attitudinally distinct from opposing violence (Cragin et al., 2017: 36; Cragin et al., 2015: 16).

Kurzman’s work highlights **the importance of the diversity of the religious sphere**, in terms of both actors and ideas, in preventing more people from joining violent groups. He argues that Al Qaeda has had to compete with other Islamic groups and ideologies. Within this religious sphere, jihadist groups are to a large extent isolated among political Islamists – that is, movements seeking to establish an Islamic state. For a combination of pragmatic and ideological reasons, most of these movements have decided to seek power through peaceful means. Liberal Islamic movements, both as organisations and as an ideological frame, represent a significant challenge to violent Islamic groups. By liberal Islam, Kurzman refers to movements that embrace key ideals of the Western liberal tradition such as democracy, human rights, social equality and tolerance. These liberal ideals are more popular among Muslims than theocracy and terrorism, he argues (Kurzman, 2019:96).

Another question that the above three studies tackle regards the role of **social ties** in preventing violent radicalisation. Kurzman argues that family is a barrier against violent radicalisation. Those who think of engaging in violent activities know that their relatives will lose both a source of income and a loved one and are frequently placed under surveillance, and recruits may feel guilty in advance that this will happen. The study on the West Bank confirms the same point. Respondents who reported being subject to strong peer influence did not express different views on violence to those reporting weak peer influence. Parental influence, however, emerged as significant. Those who claimed that their parents had only a minimal impact on their important decisions were also statistically more likely to engage in violent protest. This finding confirms that family plays a greater role than friends in dampening influence to radicalise (Cragin et al., 2015: 13). The work on Yemen, however, suggests that social ties – as measured by the degree of influence exerted by family, friends and religious leaders – have no clear effect on the choice to engage or not engage in violence. The study explains this paradox by arguing that the ongoing conflict in Yemen has led to a general **distrust of social authority** figures. This general distrust, in turn, may have diminished the significance of social ties in Yemen when it comes to individual motivations and behaviour related to political violence.

The study on the West Bank also suggests that it is logical to assume that risks to **personal safety** would dissuade some individuals from becoming involved in violent activities (Cragin et al., 2015: 15-16). Palestinian residents of the West Bank encounter Israeli security forces regularly. It is therefore logical that fear would affect individual attitudes to non-violence. The data collected by the researchers reveal that individuals who were concerned about being arrested by Israeli security forces in the future were significantly less likely to support suicide bombings (Cragin et al., 2015: 11).

The same study also reveals that **apathy** might contribute to a perception of violence being ineffective. Some individuals might believe that nothing will work and that no pathway exists to an independent Palestinian state. According to the survey, those who expressed dissatisfaction with their current quality of life were also significantly less likely to support suicide bombings against Israeli

civilians. The results revealed that apathy – a view that nothing will work – had a greater positive role in non-violence than political activism, for example.

Contrary to the often-cited fact that non-violent forms of political activism offer an alternative to violent radicalisation, the studies on both Yemen and the West Bank show that alternative forms of political activism do not diminish a propensity to violence. In the West Bank, individuals who self-identified as not politically active were also less radicalised, while non-violent political activism did not contribute to non-radicalisation. Yemenis too viewed political violence as a form of activism, so participation in non-violent activism did not diminish a propensity for violence. Rather, Yemenis viewed political violence along a spectrum of political activism (Cragin et al. 2017).

To sum up, previous research has highlighted four main factors that contribute to preventing violent radicalisation: the competitive religious sphere (in terms of both ideas and actors); the role of social ties (including family, friends and other credible local voices like imams); the cost of violence; and apathy. Previous research has also highlighted two other findings: there is a distinction between supporting the use of violence and engaging in violent activities; and that non-violent forms of political activism do not necessarily offer an alternative to violent radicalisation. The present study aims to consider these different potential answers to its research question on the decision by the majority of Muslim Brotherhood members to not take up arms after 2013.

## **2. The rise and fall of the Muslim Brotherhood**

Ever since Hassan Al-Banna founded the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928, the group has maintained an influential position in Egypt's political scene. The group has a dual structure as both a religious evangelising movement and a socio-political organisation. After the 1952 military coup, the Muslim Brotherhood thought it would play a role in shaping the new regime. However, it clashed with Nasser twice in 1954 after an attempt on his life, and in 1965 Nasser accused the Brotherhood of planning a series of terrorist attacks to destabilise his regime. Nasser eradicated the movement by imprisoning many of its leaders and making others leave the country. These repressive measures led to a radicalisation of a faction within the Brotherhood. It was during these years that the Muslim Brotherhood figure Sayyed Qutb wrote his book *Milestones*. This was considered the ideological foundation of the radical Islamic movement in Egypt. The Nasser regime executed Qutb in 1966 but his ideas inspired a violent Islamist insurgency that started in the 1970s. According to Qutb, a society is only Muslim if it lives in accordance with God's law, *hakimiyyat Allah*, as revealed in the Qur'an. He argued that any supposedly Muslim society governed by man-made law is not Muslim, even it claims to be. Qutb's ideas were rejected by another faction of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Supreme Guide of the movement, Hassan al-Hudaybi, responded to Qutb's ideas in his book *Preachers, Not Judges (Du'at la Qudat)*, arguing against Qutb's concept of excommunication. In its treatment of the basic question 'Who is a Muslim?' al-Hudaybi insisted that anyone who pronounces a declaration of faith in earnest must be considered a Muslim (Zollner, 2009).

After Sadat rose to power in 1970, he decided to release the Muslim Brotherhood leaders and encouraged them to rebuild their movement in order to counter the influence of Nasserist and leftist groups, in particular inside the universities. This is known as the second foundation of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Since the second foundation of the movement in the 1970s, the political component of the Brotherhood has had much greater prominence. This came as a direct consequence of the Egyptian regime strategy of allowing it to compete in parliamentary elections as independents, and in professional syndicate and student union elections (Abdelrahman, 2015:77). Since the 1980s, the Brotherhood has taken part in almost all parliamentary elections (except in 1990), seeming more like "an informal party" than a religious evangelising movement (Bianchi, 1989: 198). The Brotherhood succeeded also in using democratic processes to achieve electoral victories in almost all professional syndicates. In 2000, it won

17 of the 444 seats in parliament and the number jumped to 88 in the 2005 parliamentary election. During the 2010 parliamentary election, together with other opposition parties the Brotherhood withdrew after the first round as it became clear that the regime would not allow members of the opposition to gain any seats. Only two months later, Egyptians took to the streets against the Mubarak regime.

The 25 January 2011 revolution that toppled Mubarak's regime opened up new opportunities for the Muslim Brotherhood, whose activities had until then been relatively restrained by the regime. In April 2011, it established the Freedom and Justice Party. The party participated in the 2011 legislative election and managed to win 46% of the seats in Egypt's first free and fair election. In May 2012, the Muslim Brotherhood competed in the presidential election and its candidate, Mohamed Morsi, who ran against Mubarak's former prime minister Ahmed Shafiq, won the second round in June 2012 with almost 51.7% of the votes.

During the Muslim Brotherhood's rule, relations between the Islamic movement and non-Islamic political groups were sharply polarised. In his first few months in power, Morsi tried to reach out to the opposition and he even appointed some opposition figures into his administration. However, it soon became clear to these people that they were only there for show and that political decisions were not taken by Morsi at the presidential palace but instead by the guidance office at the Brotherhood's headquarters.

The turning point in relations between the regime and the opposition came during the process of writing a constitution. The opposition withdrew from the constituent assembly in order to put pressure on the president to change his policies. However, Morsi decided to face the crisis, accepted the draft constitution and called for a referendum. Although the constitution was adopted with 63.8% of the votes, three governorates rejected it, including Cairo with 56.8%.

On a parallel track, tensions also rose between the Brotherhood and Egyptian state institutions, particularly al-Azhar (Egypt's oldest religious institution), the judiciary and the security agencies, over which the group attempted to tighten its control. Although it was in power, the Brotherhood lacked control of the state apparatus. The more it attempted to control these institutions, the more resistance it faced (Al-Anani, 2015: 539). Some of the institutions rejected what some have called the 'Brotherhood-isation of the state' (*akhwanat al-dawla*), referring to the appointment of Muslim Brotherhood members to key positions in the state administration.

The crisis reached a peak on 30 June 2013, when the opposition forces took part in massive demonstrations to demand early presidential elections. Morsi rejected this call and insisted that he was the legitimate president until the end of his mandate. His supporters also took to the streets to support him. In this highly polarised environment, supported by the judiciary, the political opposition, the Coptic Pope and the Sheikh of al-Azhar, the military intervened on 3 July 2013 to remove Morsi from power. The Muslim Brotherhood and its supporters refused to accept this and staged sit-ins at Rabaa al-Adawiya and al-Nahda Squares to demand Morsi's return to the presidency.

As all political attempts to reach a compromise between the Brotherhood and the new regime reached a dead end, the security forces intervened on 14 August 2013 and dispersed the demonstrators, resulting in the Brotherhood having to operate under even harsher conditions than during the Mubarak era. In addition to thousands of deaths and arrests, the new regime also dissolved the Freedom and Justice party, confiscated and froze the financial assets of the movement's leadership in October 2013 and classified the Brotherhood as a terrorist organisation in December 2013. Unlike the repressive means used by the Mubarak regime, which the movement could accommodate and survive, the crackdown led by the post-2013 regime significantly affected the movement and undermined its organisational coherence.

Members of the Muslim Brotherhood continued to protest against the new political rule. This strategy was mainly inspired by a decision it made during a sit-in to use a non-violent creative approach to face the new regime. In a famous speech on 5 July 2013 at the Rabaa al-Adawiya sit-in protesting against

the military intervention, the Brotherhood's Supreme Guide, Mohammed Badie, stressed "our revolution is peaceful and will remain peaceful. And our peacefulness is stronger than bullets."<sup>1</sup> The approach was to insist on resisting the regime non-violently. However, by the end of 2014 as the regime was consolidating its power, some Muslim Brotherhood youths began to question the utility of this approach to facing the regime, particularly as jihadist groups in Sinai and mainland Egypt that had chosen a violent path were seeking to attract Brotherhood members. Within the Brotherhood a tense debate ensued on whether to use self-defence tactics to protect protesters from police attacks. The movement's leadership rejected any use of violence and told its members to stay home if they could not protest peacefully (Al-Anani, 2019: 6).

### **3. The risk of large-scale violence: 2015, the turning point**

Although Egypt had witnessed various waves of Islamist insurgency in the past, the violent wave that followed the ousting of Morsi is considered "the deadliest and most complex insurgency in its [Egypt's] modern history" (Awad & Hashem, 2015: 1) as the level of violence and the diversity of the groups taking part were unprecedented. In terms of the level of violence, while during the wave of violence from 1986 to 1999 approximately 391 members of the security forces lost their lives, in this recent wave in just the period from 2013 to 2015 approximately 700 members of the police and armed forces were killed (Awad & Hashem, 2015: 5). Regarding the participants in this new wave, they ranged from groups affiliated to Islamic State (IS) operating in northern Sinai known as Wilayat Sinai (Sinai Province) and groups operating in mainland Egypt under the name of The Islamic State in Egypt to other groups affiliated to al-Qaeda, including groups like Jund al-Islam (Soldiers of Islam) operating in the Western Desert and Ansar al-Islam (Supporters of Islam) operating in northern Sinai.

Although the Muslim Brotherhood remained largely non-violent during this period, some voices from within the movement called for it to join other Islamist groups in their military struggle against the Egyptian regime. On their side, jihadist groups criticised the Muslim Brotherhood's non-violent political approach and called on their youths to join them. For these jihadi groups, as the largest Islamist movement in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood represented an enormous reservoir of potential recruits.

The escalation of the security confrontation and the arrest of the Brotherhood's leaders after July 2013 dealt a strong blow to the organisation, which remained unstable for almost 6 months. The majority of the Brotherhood's leaders were either arrested or had to flee the country, creating a leadership vacuum. Some of them who remained in Egypt worked clandestinely to fill this vacuum, as was the case of Mohammed Kamal, a member of the Guidance Bureau who took a de-facto leading position during this period. In February 2014, the movement's *Shura* council approved an administrative committee tasked with running the Brotherhood under the leadership of Kamal. Kamal found himself in a difficult position, being faced with angry Muslim Brotherhood youths who were fed up with non-violence and the increasing attraction of Salafi jihadism, in particular after the establishment of the self-proclaimed Islamic State over large parts of Iraq and Syria in summer 2014.

The second half of 2014 represented a turning point in the Muslim Brotherhood strategy to resist the new political regime. It became clear that peaceful protest was unable to harm the regime, which had been able to consolidate its power by adopting a new constitution in January 2014 and electing a new president in May 2014.

Some Muslim Brotherhood youths expressed disappointment with the movement's strategy and explicitly told its leadership that they were not willing to protest and risk their lives or be arrested for nothing (Personal communication, 26 March 2019). The Brotherhood's old strategy was rejected by many of its younger members. Hence, the new leadership felt pressure to consider a new approach.

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<sup>1</sup> The full speech by 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=mAuHkmXDlxg> [Accessed 5 February 2018].

After consultation with other active members of the Brotherhood in Egypt, at the end of 2014 Mohammed Kamal proposed a “disorient, attrite and fail [the regime]” strategy. The strategy was based on escalating violent attacks against the security forces, infrastructure and the economic interests of the regime, and started in January 2015 with the aim of reaching its peak by January 2016. The plan intended to pave the way for what Kamal thought might be an opportunity to bring down the regime in January 2016. Kamal had in mind what had happened on 28 January 2011 when the security forces lost control over the country and hence opened an opportunity to change the regime. The strategy was discussed and approved by the administrative committee.

Ideologically, Mohammed Kamal framed this strategy on the basis of a document called *The Jurisprudence of Popular Resistance to the Coup*, which was issued by a religious committee within the Brotherhood. The document offered 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 it stated is equivalent to the modern concept of the right to self-defence.

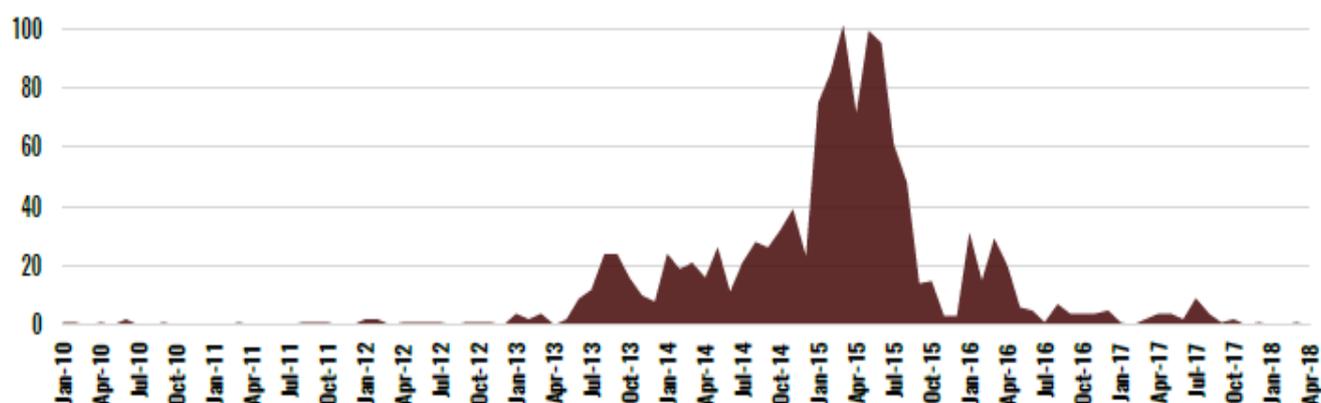
This ideological framework insisted on a wide range of degrees and choices between non-violence and fully armed confrontation. According to its religious approach, the assailant should be resisted in a gradual manner, starting with the least costly measures (threatening/beating up). The authors of the document were very careful to insist that the strategy did not constitute a shift in the Muslim Brotherhood's approach but only a shift in its attitude, which might change according to circumstances as long as it remained within the religious limits. The document also placed a number of limits on the use of violence, for example a ban on attacking security officers that are not involved in attacking protesters, such as border control forces and road checkpoint personnel, together with the families of police officers involved in violence against protesters. This new ideological framework was distinct from Salafi jihadist ideology, which relies on the principle of excommunication as the basis for the military struggle against state institutions to achieve Islamic governance. The new approach did not excommunicate members of the security forces and insists that they should be resisted not because of their faith but their actions.

#### **4. The ‘disorient, attrite and fail [the regime]’ strategy**

In the first half of 2015, the new strategy seemed successful. While during 2014 attacks were reported at a rate of around 30 a month, this number jumped to an average of over 100 a month from January to August 2015, as **Figure 1** below shows. In order to achieve its aim of destabilising regime control, the wave of violence targeted government buildings, infrastructure and economic objectives: transport, electricity towers and telecommunication services, in addition to multinational corporations and other foreign institutions. The attacks mainly took place in five governorates: Cairo, Giza, Sharkiya, Fayoum and Beni Seuif.

By mid-2015, Egypt had seen more attacks reported than in the previous two years combined. However, as **Figure 1** shows, in July 2015 the numbers of attacks decreased enormously. Although the administrative committee adopted a new strategy to escalate violent attacks against the political regime, the wave of violence only lasted 6 months before decreasing significantly in the second half of 2015.

**Figure 1: Attacks in mainland Egypt 2010-2018**



(Source: Five Years of Egypt's War on Terror, Tahrir institute for Middle East policy, 24 July 2018, p.9)

In the second half of 2016, two violent groups with links to the Muslim Brotherhood appeared: *Hassm* (Arabic for 'determination', and abbreviation for 'Movement of Egypt's Forearms'), established in July 2016, and *Lewaa al-Thawra* ('The Banner of the Revolution'), formed in August 2016. These two groups tried to continue the path of violently resisting the regime. They followed the same ideological approach of *dafa' al-sa'el*, repelling the assailant, but they took it one step further by holding that if killing a person would stop an assault the person can be killed. They also kept the same target audience as the 2015 wave: all the revolutionary forces that opposed the current political regime regardless of their position on the political spectrum. *Hassm* even addressed foreigners in Egypt after the US embassy in Cairo warned of a possible attack by the group. The statement came in English and read "We are the resistance and we are not terrorists. There is no need to worry; we are Muslims, not killers."

Unlike some Salafi jihadi groups such as Islamic State, the two groups continued to refuse to target civilians or religious minorities. Both *Hassm* and *Lewaa al-Thawra* condemned Islamic State attacks on Coptic churches. In its statement after a suicide attack on a chapel adjoining St Mark's cathedral in Cairo in December 2016, *Lewaa al-Thawra* stated that its resistance strategy did not include attacking civilians, regardless of their personal political attitudes or religious affiliations.

*Hassm* claimed responsibility for around 15 attacks and *Lewaa al-Thawra* only two. These operations included the assassination in October 2016 by *Lewaa al-Thawra* of Brigadier General Adel Ragaie, a senior officer in the armed forces, and an attempt in August 2016 by *Hassm* to assassinate the former Mufti of Egypt, Ali Gomaa. The operations took place mainly in Cairo, Damietta, Mounoufia and Fayoum. However, as was the case of the wave of violence in 2015, the two groups failed to attract a large number of Brotherhood members, and their activities almost came to a halt in 2018.

## 5. Understanding resilience against violent radicalisation

Following the EU's approach to resilience as the "capacity of societies, communities and individuals to manage opportunities and risks in a peaceful and stable manner, and to build, maintain or restore livelihoods in the face of major pressures" (European Commission & High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, 2017, 3), resilience is understood here as the capacity of the Muslim Brotherhood to manage the opportunities and risks after 2013 in a peaceful and stable manner.

The main question that this paper seeks to answer is how the limited involvement of individuals and the limited geographical presence of violent activities can be explained. Answering this question requires an understanding of four main factors: legitimacy, social trust, institutional rules governing the Brotherhood and external pressure.

### **5.1 The lack of a unified legitimate leadership supporting the use of violence**

Although Mohammed Kamal acted as head of the administrative committee, and all the Brotherhood members first perceived his decisions as legitimate, a rise of opposing voices from within the Brotherhood's historical leadership contested Kamal's legitimacy.

The historical leadership both in Egypt and abroad rejected the violent approach adopted by the new leadership in Egypt and accused Kamal of seeking to militarise the Muslim Brotherhood. These opposing voices included Mahmoud Ezzat, the deputy Supreme Guide, and Mahmoud Hussein, the Secretary-general of the movement. They challenged the legitimacy of the new leadership and tried to reassert their control over the movement. The crisis between the two leaderships was exposed to the public in May 2015 in an article penned by a leader from the old guard and member of the Guidance Bureau, Mahmoud Ghozlan. In the article, Ghozlan outlined the Muslim Brotherhood's fundamental principles and called for commitment to these constants:

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 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 resort to the *takfir* [excommunication] of Muslims (Ghouzlan, 2015).

The article was followed by a statement from Mahmoud Hussein, the Secretary-general of the Brotherhood, which said:

The Brotherhood operates with its apparatuses and institutions in accordance with the regulations and with the members of the Guidance Bureau. It has supported its work with a number of assistants in accordance with these regulations and the decisions of its institutions; its deputy leader accordingly acts as a general 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 work of the organisation.

Ghozlan's article and Hussein's statement provoked angry reactions from the youths leading the struggle on the ground. They saw in the article a departure from the revolutionary approach adopted by the new leadership, and they saw in Ghozlan's and Hussein's words an attempt by the old leadership – which they held largely responsible for the situation during the transitional period – to impose its vision on them.

Some have said that the old leadership's response boiled down to a disagreement over the use of violence. However, the conflict was broader than a dichotomy between a commitment to peaceful means and the use of violence against the regime. While the main concern of the new leadership was to bring down the political regime, the old leadership perceived the period as a crisis over protecting the organisational structure. It believed that being dragged into military confrontation with the regime would only mark an end to the organisation. They had seen the same strategy against Nasser's regime in the 1960s. The result was devastating for the movement. It also often highlighted the experiences 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. *Jama'a Islamiya* revised its entire religious approach and renounced the use of violence in its famous ideological revisions, which started with a call to stop violence in 1997. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood's approach was also framed by the experiences of other Islamist movements outside Egypt, such as the confrontation between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Syrian regime in the 1980s in which the Syrian regime violently defeated the movement. Even if some young men were eager to go for a violent confrontation with the regime, the old leadership preferred to lose some of the movement's popular base to losing the organisation they knew and had built up over the previous four decades.

The division among the leadership led many members to lose faith in it altogether and to conclude that the problem was not only about bringing down the political regime but that there was a need to first

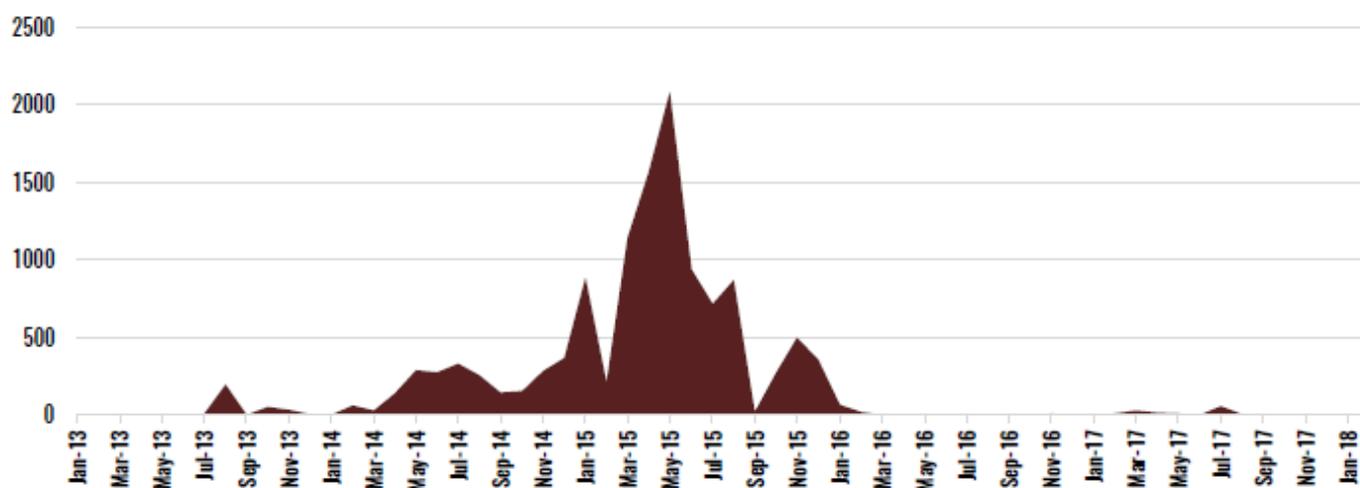
restructure the Brotherhood itself. They perceived the leadership to be lacking the vision to lead. Many of them held it responsible for their political defeat. The lack of a political project and a united organisation to implement it to many of them meant that using violence would be more of a suicide than a political option. As one member of the Brotherhood put it,

The question was not to use violence or not, but the real question was for which goal? Violence is not an aim in itself; it should be one tool among many that will help to achieve a larger political project. If the political project is not there, why should we take this risk? We needed to start by first reforming our organisation and deciding on our political project. Taking up arms was not the issue. No other Islamic group had more arms than ISIS did. What did they do with it? Nothing (personal communication, 25 March 2019).

Other members of the Brotherhood went as far as to accuse the leadership of corruption and treason (personal communication, 25 March 2019).

The lack of support from the leadership also led the rank-and-file members to doubt the idea that using violence against Egyptian state institutions would destabilise the political regime. With a divided leadership, many members of the movement thought that they had no chance of winning such a battle, in particular as the regime responded so firmly to the Muslim Brotherhood's violent escalation starting in January 2015. The state answered this increase in violent activities with a wide campaign of more than 2000 arrests in some months during the first half of 2015, as **Figure 2** shows. Of all the state-reported arrests of "terrorists" from January to October 2015, around 65% of these were for alleged involvement with the Muslim Brotherhood, and many were for non-violent crimes like possession of pro-Morsi paraphernalia, holding political meetings or having Facebook pages (Egypt's rising security threat, 2016:17).

**Figure 2: Arrests reported for suspected Muslim Brotherhood affiliation**



(Source: Five Years of Egypt's War on Terror, Tahrir institute for Middle East policy, 24 July 2018, p.13)

Given this firm reaction by the state institutions, members of the Muslim Brotherhood believed that their leadership's lack of support made the cost of using violence much higher than the benefits. The lack of support from the leadership not only meant a lack of financial support to obtain the arms and materials required to commit violent attacks but also a lack of support for the families of victims or imprisoned members who decided to use violence. The old leadership threatened to cut funds for the families of prisoners who engaged in violent activities. As most of the movement's assets in Egypt had been frozen, it mainly depended on its economic activities outside Egypt. These projects were only known of and administered by a few members of the Guidance Bureau that were aligned with the old leadership. For example, the old leadership refused to pay money allocated to the families of imprisoned members of

the administrative office in Alexandria as they considered it part of the Mohammed Kamal camp (personal communication, 26 March 2019).

Hence, those who thought about joining violent groups had to think about the costs of the decision to their families. With no organisational support, the cost seemed very high while the benefits were inexistent (Personal communication, 27 March 2019).

## 5.2 *The lack of a supportive environment*

While some members of the Muslim Brotherhood framed the political environment as a struggle between “the people and the military coup,” the popular anger with the Brotherhood and its supporters took many of them by surprise. This was the case even within the same family. One member of the Brotherhood was rejected by a part of his family after he was released from prison (Personal communication, 26 March 2019). Other members were shocked to find that they were attacked by the residents of their neighbourhoods, who refused to let the Muslim Brotherhood protests pass through their areas (Personal communication, 25 March 2019). This high level of popular anger put some limits on implementing the decision to take up arms starting from 2015.

One former member of the Brotherhood summarised this argument by stating that “the dilemma of the Muslim Brotherhood was that it was organisationally strong in hostile local environments, while in supportive local societies it was organisationally weak” (personal communication, 12 January 2019).

The Muslim Brotherhood lacked the combination of strong organisation and a supportive local environment needed to maintain a military struggle against the Egyptian state, as did Jamm’a Islamiya, for example, in the 1980s and 1990s.

The organisational strength of the Brotherhood in the delta governorates could be seen in the relative weight of these governorates in the *Shura* council, while the political polarisation could be seen in the voting behaviour in the first and second rounds of the presidential election in 2012. In 2008, the growing Muslim Brotherhood membership in the Delta governorates over the previous decades had led the leadership of the movement to reconsider their relative weights inside the *Shura* council and allow Dakahlia, Sharqia, Gharbia and Monoufia 28 of the 75 seats on the *Shura* council. However, during the second round of the 2012 presidential election, the Brotherhood failed to win any of these governorates, as **Table 1** below shows. The table also shows the degree of polarisation in these governorates by comparing the percentages of votes for Morsi in the first round (meaning votes in favour of the Brotherhood regardless of who was running against it) and votes for Shafiq in the run-off (meaning votes against the Muslim Brotherhood regardless of the alternative).

**Table 1: numbers of seats allocated to the different governorates in the *Shura* council and percentages of votes in the first and second rounds of the 2012 presidential election**

Governorate	Number of seats on the <i>Shura</i> council	% votes for Morsi in the first round of the presidential election	% votes for Shafiq in the second round of the presidential election
Cairo	5	16.9%	53.7%
Alexandria	6	16.6%	42.5%
Port Said	1	15%	54.2%
Suez	1	23.9%	37.3%
Damietta	4	23.6%	44%
Dakahlyia	10	23.1%	53.6%
Sharqia	8	31.1%	54.3%
Qalubiya	2	22.8%	58.3%
Kafr al-Sheikh	2	17.1%	44.6%
Gharbiya	5	17.4%	63%
Monoufia	5	18.4%	71.5%
Beheira	6	28.7%	41.4%
Ismalyia	1	26.4%	55.7%
Giza	5	27.8%	40.3%
Beni Sueif	2	41.8%	33.5%
Fayoum	2	47%	22.2%
Menya	2	42.2%	35.6%
Assiut	2	31%	38.5%
Souhag	2	28.7%	41.8%
Qena	1	25.1%	44.4%
Aswan	1	23.1%	48.1%
Wadi el-gadid	1	28.7%	36.6%
North Sinai	1	37.1%	38.5%

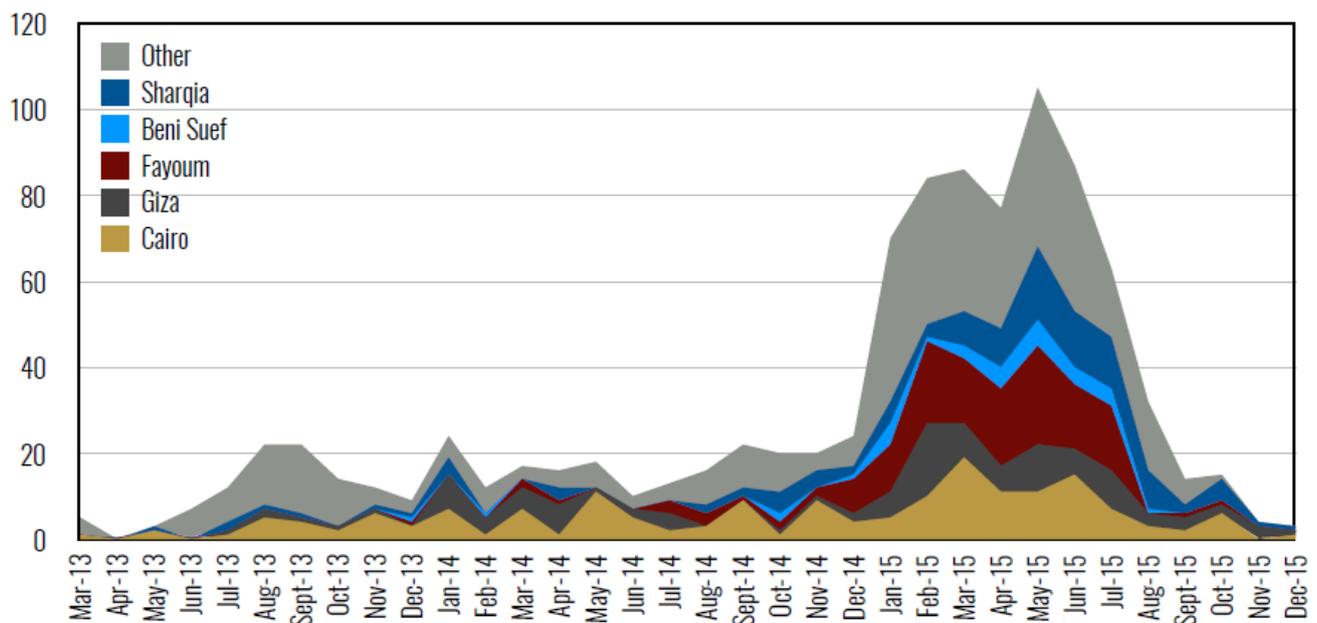
This situation of strong organisation and a polarised society put more constraints on the ability of the Brotherhood to take up arms as it lacked a supportive local environment. As one member put it, “in Dakahlia [...], the Muslim Brotherhood members were afraid to walk in the streets, not because of the security forces but because of the people. How could they expect to operate in such a hostile environment, not to mention taking up arms. They couldn't even go out to buy food” (personal

communication, 12 January 2019). Another member of the Brotherhood stated that “in Mansoura [...], a family was thrown out of their apartment because they were from the Muslim Brotherhood” (personal communication, 25 March 2019).

Although the Brotherhood had more public support in Upper Egypt, it lacked strong organisation. In addition, these areas had little presence of state and economic interests, which were the main targets of the wave of violence. As **Figure 3** below shows, the wave of violence focused on the northern part of Egypt, where the state institutions are concentrated.

The violence during the first half of 2015 took place in five main governorates: Sharqia, Greater Cairo (the provinces of Giza and Cairo), Fayoum and Beni Suef. Many of the attacks were on infrastructure and the police. The attacks were designed to challenge the state’s efforts to govern effectively and its ability to maintain security. However, as **Table 1** shows, **all** these governorates suffered from the strong organisation-polarised society/weak organisation-supportive environment dilemma, with the only exception of Giza, where the movement had a relatively strong presence with 5 seats on the *Shura* council and enjoyed 59.7% support in the second round of the presidential election in June 2012.

**Figure 3: Attacks reported by governorate (outside North Sinai)**



(Source: Egypt’s security watch, Quarterly report January-March 2016, Tahrir institute for Middle East policy, 18 May 2016, p.9)

In addition to the popular feeling against the Brotherhood, in order not to lose them the movement also had to take into consideration those who were neutral but would not agree to it using violence. Even the new leadership was careful to avoid alienating the segments of society that had been against the violent crackdown on the Brotherhood but might also be against the organisation resorting to violent means to resist the authorities. It ordered that operations should be conducted in line with the popular feeling in a given area. In other words, in areas where there was clear anger with the political regime it allowed a greater number of operations to be carried out, and where there was a feeling against the use of violence it asked the members to avoid violent activities (Personal communication, 28 May 2015).

**The lack of a strong organisation and a supportive local environment** made a decision to take up arms more costly, as members of the Muslim Brotherhood would not only have to face the security forces but also the local population, which would either stand against them or at least would not offer them any support in their battle against the security forces. Unlike the case of Jama’a Islamiya, which

led a military rebellion against the Mubarak regime in Upper Egypt during the 1980s and the 1990s, the Muslim Brotherhood did not enjoy the same level of popular support in the northern part of Egypt where it was most strongly present.

### **5.3 Organisational rules**

Institutions are often defined as having “persistent and connected sets of rules (formal and informal) that prescribe behavioural roles, constrain (as well as enable) activity, and shape expectations” (Keohane, 1989, 161). Following this approach, by organisational rules I refer here to the internal institutional rules governing adherence to the movement and the relationship between the leadership and the rank-and-file members inside the movement itself. In particular, I refer to two main institutional characteristics of the organisation: its ideological frame rejecting the Salafi jihadi doctrine of excommunication and the increasing presence of rural values within the Brotherhood, what Hussam Tammam called the “ruralisation of the Muslim Brotherhood” (Tammam, 2012).

#### **5.3.1 Recruitment rules: rejecting excommunication**

A rejection of violence and excommunication mark the ideational frame of the Muslim Brotherhood as it has been institutionalised over the past four decades. Since the 1970s, the Brotherhood had preached against the jihadist groups’ approach of excommunicating state officials and using violence to achieve their political goals. Even though the Muslim Brotherhood shared the same goal as radical groups – to establish an Islamic state ruled by Shari’a law – it explicitly renounced the use of violence employed by radical groups and instead sought to share power by participating in elections.

Moreover, it institutionalised these ideas into its membership rules. Positions on excommunication and the use of violence were the main factors determining whether one could become a regular member of the Brotherhood. There were clear orders not to promote any sympathiser to the level of full member if there were any doubts over his views on these two issues.

One example of these strict rules was mentioned by a former member of the Brotherhood: “when we were visiting a supporter of the Brotherhood, the head of our group saw a photo of Osama Bin Laden in his room. He refused to promote him to full membership” (personal communication, 28 March 2019). Another example is from a former member of the promotions committee: “I was in one of these promotion meetings, and the individual being interviewed had doubts about the idea of excommunication. The head of the meeting refused to promote him. I tried to explain to him that the person was only sharing his doubts, but he replied ‘This is a red line’” (personal communication, 12 January 2019).

Even the new leadership, which promoted the use of violence, was careful to frame it as ‘self-defence’ and it rejected the Salafi jihadi approach of excommunicating by stating that regime members should be resisted for their actions not their beliefs.

Here it is important to distinguish between the original texts of the of the movement’s main theorists, such as Hassan al-Banna and Sayyed Qutb, and how these texts were translated into curricula inside the Brotherhood. The curricula offered their own reading of the texts and relied mainly on summaries, not on the original texts (Personal communication, 12 January 2019)

While the text itself might offer justification for the use of violence, the way these ideas were framed in the discourse within the Muslim Brotherhood for the past four 5 decades, at least since the second foundation of the Brotherhood in the 1970s, has made non-violence and rejecting excommunication a main cornerstone of the group’s ideology, and has hence shaped the values of its members (Personal communication, 12 January 2019). Although the concept of jihad was central in the writings of the Brotherhood's founder, the use of force was not an option at all in the Brotherhood’s education curricula (Ayyash, 2019:6).

### 5.3.2 Rules governing the relationship between the leadership and the rank and file

A large proportion of the members of the Brotherhood still respect the old leadership, and even if they do not agree with its decisions they would obey it. This attitude can be traced to what Hussam Tammam called the process of “ruralisation” of the Muslim Brotherhood. According to Tammam, in recent decades the Muslim Brotherhood has undergone a process of ruralisation in which the movement, which was first established by members of the urban middle class, has been including more members with a rural background. This shift has been clear from the increasing weight of rural governorates within the *Shura* council, as was shown earlier. This process of ruralisation has brought a different set of values and rules to the movement, among which are respect for and obedience to the older generation. It has favoured an organisational trend within the Brotherhood to put values such as obedience and trust in the leadership above any other issue (Tammam 2012).

The institutional design of the Muslim Brotherhood has made decisions to leave the movement for other violent groups less likely. On the one hand, the set of values advanced through the ruralisation of the Brotherhood has led many of the rank-and-file members who disagree with their leadership to take a step back rather than joining other organisations. In addition, as the ideological frame of the Brotherhood excludes the principle of excommunication, these members find it difficult to overcome this ideational barrier against joining Salafi jihadist groups.

However, it is worth noting that these two factors have a weaker influence when it comes to young people, particularly those who were jailed after 2013 (Khayal, 2016). Among this particular group, the leadership does not have the same level of influence on their decisions as they have only spent a few years in the Brotherhood and have not developed the same pattern of respect for and obedience to their superiors. In addition, many of them have shared the same prisons with jihadi prisoners and they have been exposed to their jihadist ideology, which offers a strong ideational frame for the practice of violence. One member of the Brotherhood described his friend’s process of ideational shifting in prison: “He went from being a harsh critic of ISIS to distancing himself from the Brotherhood, until he reached the level of excommunicating members of the Muslim Brotherhood. The whole process of ideational shifting happened in less than a year” (Personal communication, 30 March 2019). Even when they meet their families, the length of the visits has recently become very short so they will not be able to notice these ideological changes (Personal communication, 30 March 2019).

### 5.4 *The role of external actors*

One of the main battlefields between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Egyptian regime since 2013 has been Western capitals, where each side has been trying to mobilise support for its cause among Western policy-makers. While the Egyptian regime has relied on its diplomatic service, members of the Muslim Brotherhood have relied on their network of organisations in Europe and the United States to defend their cause. Since at least the 1950s, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood has developed an international network within and beyond the Islamic world in Europe and the United States. This global network performs a number of functions, ranging from promoting the Brotherhood’s ideology to raising and investing funds. This network has provided the means for the Muslim Brotherhood to regroup and recover from setbacks in Egypt after 2013.

The Egyptian regime, supported by its regional allies, namely the UAE, has been pushing Western governments to follow its line and consider the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organisation. This lobbying battle over links between the Muslim Brotherhood and violence has played a decisive role in shaping the old leadership’s position against any attempt by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt to take up arms, even for self-defence. They see Kamal’s strategy as giving an opportunity for the Egyptian regime to prove its argument and win its diplomatic battle in Europe and the US. That was in particular the position of Ibrahim Mounir, the Brotherhood’s representative in London, who was appointed Deputy supreme Guide after 2013.

In the US, already under the Obama administration in 2015 several members of Congress introduced legislation seeking to designate the Muslim Brotherhood as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation (FTO). After Trump's presidential victory, he directed the State Department to look into designating the Brotherhood in 2017, but it decided that the group did not meet the legal requirements to be an FTO since it is not a unitary organisation and does not have an established pattern of violence. Again in April 2019, Trump announced that he would seek to have the State Department designate the Muslim Brotherhood a Foreign Terrorist Organisation (Hamid & Mandaville & Mccants, 2017).

In the UK too, in April 2014 the government commissioned an internal review of the Muslim Brotherhood, including of its origins, ideology, record in and out of government and its organisation and activities in the UK and abroad. The British government's aim has been to develop a better understanding of groups which have been or are alleged to have been associated with extremism and terrorism. The review was conducted by two of the UK's most senior and expert civil servants: Sir John Jenkins, until recently HM Ambassador to Riyadh, assessed the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates overseas; Charles Farr, at the time of writing Director General of the Office for Security and Counter Terrorism in the Home Office, considered the history, activities, ideology and influence of the Muslim Brotherhood's network and affiliates in the UK. The review resulted in a classified report to the Prime Minister. However, the main findings of the review were made public.

Both Jenkins and Farr drew the following overarching conclusion from their work:

The Muslim Brotherhood historically focused on remodelling individuals and communities through grassroots activism. They have engaged politically where possible. But they have also selectively used violence and sometimes terror in pursuit of their institutional goals. Their public narrative – notably in the West – emphasises engagement not violence. But there have been significant differences between Muslim Brotherhood communications in English and Arabic.<sup>2</sup>

Aware of the repercussions of such conclusions if adopted by the British government and translated into decisions, senior members of the Brotherhood in the UK put pressure on the leadership Egypt to stop any violent activities. They insisted that strategies adopted by the movement in Egypt would impact the whole movement worldwide. The old guard realised that the choices by the base on the ground not only relate to the Egyptian situation but have significant effects on the Muslim Brotherhood movement in other countries. This dimension seems to have been absent from the priorities of the new leadership, whose moves were primarily dictated by the internal situation in Egypt. The group was under pressure from the Muslim Brotherhood outside Egypt to renounce any level of violence in order to protect its international image as a non-violent movement.

## 6. Conclusion

The main question that this paper has sought to answer is why only a minority within the Brotherhood took up arms after 2013 and only for a short period despite the increase in the activities of transnational jihadist groups inside Egypt, such as IS and al-Qaeda.

I have argued that four factors have played important roles in increasing the resilience of the Muslim Brotherhood against violent radicalisation.

**(1) A lack of unified and legitimate leadership supporting this option.** Although Mohammed Kamal acted as head of the administrative committee and all the Brotherhood members first perceived his decisions as legitimate, a rise of opposing voices from within the historical leadership has rendered Kamal's legitimacy contested. The division among the leadership led many members to lose faith in it altogether and conclude that the problem is not only bringing down the political regime but that there is

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<sup>2</sup> To read the report on the main findings of the review, see [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/486948/53163\\_Muslim\\_Brotherhood\\_Review\\_-\\_PRINT.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/486948/53163_Muslim_Brotherhood_Review_-_PRINT.pdf)

a need first to restructure the Brotherhood itself. The lack of support by the leadership has also led rank-and-file members to doubt that using violence against Egyptian state institutions would destabilise the political regime. With a divided leadership, many members of the movement think that they have no chance of winning such a battle. They 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 not only means a lack of financial support to obtain the arms and materials required to commit violent attacks but also includes a lack of support for the families of victims or imprisoned members who decide to use violence.

**(2) The lack of a supportive local environment.** While some members of the Muslim Brotherhood framed the post 2013 political environment as a struggle between “the people and the military coup,” popular anger with the Brotherhood and its supporters took many of them by surprise. Members of the Brotherhood were shocked to see that they were attacked by residents in their neighbourhoods, who refused to let Muslim Brotherhood protests pass through their areas. The lack of a supportive local environment made the decision to take up arms more costly, as members of the Muslim Brotherhood would not only have to face the security forces but also the local population, which would either stand against them or at least would not offer them any support in their battle against the security forces.

However, one question seems plausible: given all these constraints on the ability of the Muslim Brotherhood as an organisation to practise violence, why have angry young men not joined other violent groups, such as ISIS or al-Qaeda? Here, the role of the **internal organisational rules (3)** of the Brotherhood is crucial. The rural value of respect for the leadership together with the ideological frame of the Brotherhood that rejects the principle of excommunication have made it less likely that members of the Brotherhood will leave the movement for other jihadist groups.

Finally, **external actors** played an indirect role in shaping the attitudes of the Muslim Brotherhood's historical leadership to the choice to take up arms (4). The debate in the UK and US in recent years over links between the Muslim Brotherhood and violence has framed the priorities of the historical leadership in resisting the desire of the new leadership in Egypt to allow a strategy that includes any level of violence. As some of them already live in Western countries, they understand being classified as a terrorist organisation would have drastic consequences for the Brotherhood's political and economic activities.

These four factors have rendered the cost to the Brotherhood of using violence very high. However, this non-engagement in violent activities should not be mistaken for non-radicalisation. As has already been highlighted in previous studies, choosing not to engage in violence is attitudinally distinct from opposing violence. The younger members of the Brotherhood have undergone a profound but quiet wave of radicalisation over the past few years. The same individuals who in January 2011 believed in non-violent action as a means to introduce political change now openly call this naïve and are questioning the efficacy of non-violence as one of the ideological pillars of the Muslim Brotherhood. Although they still reject the idea of excommunicating members of state institutions, they believe that violence should be considered a political option and should not be dismissed ideologically. Although they see that with the current balance of power between the movement and the Egyptian state they would have no chance of winning an armed conflict against the security forces, if this balance of power shifts they might reconsider their choice. As one of the Muslim Brotherhood student leaders explained, “Why they are not using it is because it is not worth it now. Nevertheless, in a different moment they might use it” (Personal communication, 29 March 2019).

The resilience factors presented above have an important influence on the choices of the majority of the Muslim Brothers and have led most of them to refrain from using political violence. However, it is also important to note that the impact of these factors is on the action of taking up arms, not on the ideational shift within the members of the Brotherhood. Violence is often rejected rationally but not ideationally.

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