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**From radicalisation to violence: The
factors shaping Egyptian radical youths'
decisions whether to take up arms**

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Abstract

On 14 August 2013, the Egyptian security forces ended Muslim Brotherhood sit-ins in Cairo and Giza. After hours of clashes between the security forces and supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood, the latter left the square through safe corridors created by the security forces. Angry, humiliated and defeated, some of these youths would leave the square to establish/join violent groups, while others would not. How can these different attitudes be explained? Why did some youths decide to take up arms while others, who went through the same experience, decided not to? What factors shaped these decisions? To answer this question, this paper analyses the paths of Islamist youths who took part in the Islamist popular mobilisation from 2013 to 2015. The paper argues that political and socio-economic grievances might have led youths to radicalise but they were not enough to lead them to violence. To make the transition from radicalisation to violence three elements are essential: an ideational frame that justifies the use of violence; a cost/benefit calculation that the benefits from using violence outweigh the cost; and legitimate voices that support this path. The presence or a lack of these three elements can either facilitate or block paths to violence.

Keywords

Radicalisation, Islamism, Egypt, Violence, Youths

On 3 July 2013, supported by a large part of the Egyptian population and the judiciary, the political opposition and prominent religious representatives, both Christian and Muslim, the Egyptian military ended the Muslim Brotherhood's rule after only one year in power. Supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood rejected this political move and insisted they would remain on the streets until the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated president Mohammed Morsi was back in power. On 14 August 2013, the Egyptian security forces ended Muslim Brotherhood sit-ins in Cairo and Giza. After hours of clashes between the security forces and supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood, the latter left the square through safe corridors created by the security forces. Angry, humiliated and defeated, some of these youths would leave the square to establish/join violent groups, while others would not. How can these different attitudes be explained? Why did some youths decide to take up arms while others, who went through the same experience, decided not to? What factors shaped these decisions?

What makes understanding a decision to take up arms complicated is that violent activism is very rare while the often-cited drivers – political, social and economic – of violent radicalisation are common. These often-cited factors leading to violent radicalisation should have led to a much larger proportion of the population joining violent groups. However, in all Muslim societies only a very tiny minority took up arms. According to Charles Kurzman, the three main waves of global Islamist terrorism – al-Qaida and other groups in Afghanistan from the 1980s to 2001; the insurgency in Iraq from 2003 to 2008; and Islamic State and other groups in Syria and Iraq from 2013 to 2017 – never managed to recruit more than one in 40 million Muslims from outside these civil war zones (Kurzman 2019: 10).

This paper seeks to address this gap in the literature by answering two questions. Why did some Egyptians decide to take up arms? And why did others, who went through the same political experience, decide not to? The two questions are complementary. The answer to the question of what factors led to violent radicalisation would remain incomplete if we do not know why others who went through the same political and socio-economic experiences chose not to take up arms. Only by seeking to understand the factors that prevent people from joining violent groups can we gain a better understanding of why others decided to do so. While after summer 2013 most Islamist youths adopted a radical approach to political change in Egypt, including accepting the possibility of using violent means to achieve political aims, most of them could not make the decision to take up arms. As one former member of the Brotherhood sarcastically put it, "it's not that they don't want to, but they cannot." It is exactly this shift from radical attitudes to violent behaviour that this paper seeks to analyse.

To answer the question about the factors that shaped already radicalised youths' decisions whether to take up arms, this paper focuses on the case of Islamist youths who took part in the Muslim Brotherhood sit-ins (June-August 2013) and their paths after they left the square. We traced more than 50 cases and relied on personal interviews, written materials and field notes. The paper seeks to offer in-depth knowledge from below on the factors shaping violent radicalisation in Egypt after 2013.

1. The quiet wave of Islamist radicalisation

Despite widespread use of the term, there is no scholarly consensus on how to understand radicalisation. For some, radicalisation is a purely cognitive process leading to endorsing radical ideas; for others, it implies a behavioural transformation leading to a person having either accepted the use of violence or being willing to perpetrate it (Crone 2016: 590). Instead of imposing a definition of radicalisation in our case study, we decided to let our case 'speak for itself.' We focused on one main question. How did Islamist youths' ideas change from the (non-violent) beginning of the Arab Spring in 2011 to the situation after the Muslim Brotherhood's rule being ousted in summer 2013?

The experience of Mohammed Morsi being ousted in July 2013 left many Islamist youths feeling frustrated, angry and defeated. Most of them underwent a process of radicalisation during and after leaving their sit-ins. This process had two main characteristics. First, it was a process of political, not religious, radicalisation. Second, it was largely quiet/passive radicalisation, not involving using violent means.

The first characteristic of this wave of radicalisation is that it was political, not religious. Most of the Islamist youths adopted more radical attitudes regarding political change in Egypt and how to achieve it after their clash with state institutions in summer 2013. Unlike the case in the 1960s of Sayyid Qutb, who in a similar moment of a clash between the Brotherhood and the Egyptian regime framed his struggle against the Nasser regime in the 1950s and 1960s as “not a political or economic struggle, but a struggle over religious doctrine” (Qutb 1964), the Islamist youths were not occupied by the question of whether the new regime and its leaders were Muslims, but focused instead on the political aspect of the struggle. The language of Islamist youths was mostly political with little reference to religious doctrine. While Qutb framed the Muslim Brotherhood’s struggle against the Nasser regime in the 1960s as one between believers and non-believers, Islamist youths framed their struggle against the post-2013 regime as one between revolution and counter-revolution, and while Qutb labelled his enemies ‘infidels’ the Brotherhood youths referred to them as ‘occupiers’ (Awad 2016).

It is worth noting that few voices among these Islamist youths were calling for a doctrinal approach to the struggle. Following the immediate spark of violence after 2013, there was an endeavour to give the struggle a religious frame, raising inquiries into the religious orthodoxy of prominent regime figures and accusing them of launching a ‘war on Islam.’ However, this claim failed to reach the majority of Islamist youths as it was not compatible with the complex intertwining of religion in the new regime’s politics after 2013, including the support it received from Islamic figures such as Al-Azhar scholars and prominent Salafi preachers.

Most of the Islamist youths we interviewed took part in the non-violent uprising in January-February 2011, and in all the electoral processes during the transition period. Back then many of them even accused radical political groups such as the Revolutionary Socialists and the 6 April youth movement of either being politically immature or of even seeking to disturb the transition period with their radical acts to not allow Islamists in power. The same individuals who in January 2011 believed in nonviolent action to introduce political change now openly call their positions ‘naïve.’ Most of these youths now reject the Muslim Brotherhood’s reformist approach after 2011 and argue that the Brotherhood should have taken more radical steps to eliminate the old regime’s networks and bring revolutionary changes to the country. This is the case, for example, of a former member of the Muslim Brotherhood who used to be an active member but left the organisation after 2013. He accused the Muslim Brotherhood leadership’s approach of seeking compromises with state institutions after 2011 of being both naïve and opportunistic (personal communication, 25 March 2019).

These Islamist youths gave up most of their ideas on gradual political change. They are convinced that the ‘reformist’ approach adopted after Mubarak stepped down was a mistake. They argue that Egypt needed radical political changes. After 2013 many of them even found themselves close to radical leftist groups such as the Revolutionary Socialists. According to one Islamist leader, the struggle was not about Islamists versus the state but revolutionary forces against the counter-revolution, and – although he is an Islamist – he considered the Revolutionary Socialists and the 6 April Movement to be allies in this struggle.¹ Furthermore, the office of a Muslim Brotherhood branch adhering to the radical line of MB leader Muhammad Kamal in Istanbul even featured photos of Islamist figures such as Abdallah Azzam and Sayyid Qutb alongside photos of Che Guevara, Martin Luther King Jr. and Gandhi (Afan 2019).

1 Hazim al-Wakil, “Qiyādi jihādī: qaṭa`nā shawṭan kabīran fī al-taqārūb ma` “6 abrīl” wa-“l-ishṭirākīyyīn al-thawriyyīn”,” *al-Watan*, 2 June 2014, <https://www.elwatannews.com/news/details/495949>.

The political nature of this wave of radicalisation can partly be explained by ideas that were introduced by the 25 January 2011 uprising, which was indifferent to inquiries concerning its religion and categorisation during the 18 days (Agrama 2012: 29). This position of little reference to religion proved to be a key element in the success and source of momentum during the 2011 uprising and it seemed to more accurately interpret the context in Egypt. Hence, this radical political frame was an endeavour to restore this condition to fight the post-2013 regime. The Islamist youths wanted to recreate the 2011 environment. Many of them spoke explicitly of another 2011 moment in their struggle against the post-2013 regime.

The attitudes of these Islamist youths to the Coptic minority are another example of the nature of the radicalisation process being political, not religious. While many of them used critical discourse on the Coptic minority, their main argument was political, not religious. They criticise the Coptic Church for its political support for ending the Muslim Brotherhood's rule in July 2013, but this is about political attitudes, not religious beliefs. According to one Islamist, the Coptic Church's political attitude put all Christians in the counter-revolutionary camp (personal communication, 28 March 2019). This approach becomes clearer when looking at the very aggressive discourse of the Islamist youths against the Salafi Nour party. They accuse the party and its members of being merely security 'informants.' Hence, these youths did not view the struggle as being one of Muslims against non-Muslims. They equally accused both the Salafists and the Copts of supporting the military decision to overthrow the Muslim Brotherhood.

However, while most of these youths went through the same process of political radicalisation, their answers to it differed. Most of the Islamist youths who left the square in August 2013 continued to protest against the new political regime. Islamist youths went on mass demonstrations every Friday to declare their rejection of the new political system and to demand the return of the ousted president. This popular movement continued on a weekly basis in many governorates throughout the second half of 2013 and 2014, before it began to decline in the first half of 2015. As the new regime moved forward in consolidating its political power with a new constitution in January 2014, a presidential election in May 2014 and parliamentary elections from October to December 2015, these youths felt that the 'old' approach based on protests that brought down the Mubarak regime in 2011 was not working this time.

Others decided to withdraw from the public sphere altogether (Al-Anani 2019: 1337). Many of these active Islamists left the country to look for study or work opportunities abroad. Many of them argue that the time was not now in favour of radical political change. One of them, who left to continue his studies abroad, argued, "I thought it was wise in this phase to take a break, and work on myself in terms of career and education, instead of losing time seeking political change in this current phase (personal communication, 25 March 2019). Others decided to focus on their families and to avoid any talk about political issues. One person who used to write regularly on his blog stopped writing, arguing it was not worth it any more, at least now (personal communication, 12 January 2019).

Another aspect of this wave of political radicalisation is attitudes to violence. Islamist youths' attitudes to the use of violence were flexible. According to many of them, violence should not be rejected in principle but should be approached rationally. They often quoted cases of revolutionary violence, as in the case of leftist and nationalist radical movements such as IETA in Spain, to argue that violence should be an option on the table. However, despite their initial approval of the use of violence to achieve political goals, very few of them indeed took up arms. This is the second main characteristic of this wave of radicalisation: it was largely passive.

While adopting radical political views, this wave was mostly quiet/passive. Although many of the Islamist youths took part in the Raba'a sit-in and the protests that followed the security decision to end it, a very tiny minority resorted to violence to apply their radical views. In the next section, we look at the factors that shaped these radical youths' decisions whether to take up arms.

2. Factors shaping Egyptian youths' decisions whether to take up arms

Although many Islamist youths experienced the wave of political radicalisation after 2013, not all of them took up arms. Three main factors shaped their decisions whether to take up arms: ideas, cost/benefit calculations and the presence of legitimate voices supporting or rejection this decision.

2.1. The role of Ideas

Youths who went through this wave of political radicalisation looked for an ideational frame to explain the political struggle they were facing, to show the final aim they should struggle for and the means allowed to be used in the struggle. Although, as many have already argued (Roy 2017), religious ideas only play a secondary role in the radicalisation process, they nonetheless play an essential role in the transition from radicalisation to violence. The fact that ideas come later in the radicalisation process does not mean that ideas were not important in shaping the paths of these radical youths. These ideas frame the struggle and identify the final aim and the path towards achieving it. Without these ideas, a decision to take up arms was less likely to take place.

A Salafi-Jihadi frame offered some youths an answer to their questions. The root of the Jihadi doctrine goes back to a similar period of clashes between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Egyptian regime during the 1950s and 1960s. The writings of Islamist thinker Sayyed Qutb in the 1960s offered an inspiring frame for many youths to make sense of the post-2013 political environment. Qutb's famous book *Milestones* offered an answer to why the post-colonial regime in Egypt failed to build rule based on Islamic norms and moreover persecuted Islamists. The Muslim Brotherhood, including Qutb himself, was a strong supporter of the 1952 military coup in Egypt, thinking it would build a regime based on Islam. However, both the secular and socialist political paths of coup leader Gamal Abdel Nasser left Islamists disappointed. The regime's persecution of the Muslim Brotherhood during the 1950s and 1960s led Qutb to reconsider the frame of the political struggle in Egypt. He concluded that the struggle was neither economic or political. It was a religious battle. In Qutb's words, this was a struggle over religious doctrine, nothing else, and the two sides were believers against non-believers. This was not a political, an economic or a racial struggle. Had it been any of these, settling it would have been easy and the solution to its difficulties would have been simple. However, essentially it was a struggle between beliefs: either unbelief or faith, either *Jahiliyyah* or Islam (Qutb 1964: 176-177). According to Qutb, the enemies of believers may wish to change the nature of the struggle into an economic, political or racial struggle so that believers become confused concerning the true nature of the struggle and the flame of belief in their hearts becomes extinguished. Believers must not be deceived and must understand that this is a trick. Qutb argued that by changing the nature of the struggle, the enemy intends to deprive them of their weapon of true victory, victory which can take any form, be it the victory of the freedom of spirit as was the case of believers in the story of the Makers of the Pit, or dominance in the world because of freedom of spirit, as happened in the case of the first generation of Muslims.

Although it claimed to be Muslim, the Egyptian regime did not apply the rules of Islam and hence was not Muslim according to Qutb. He framed the choices as either a struggle to live according to the rules of Islam or to accept to live in the pre-Islamic era of ignorance, *Jahiliyyah*. Within this frame, the final aim is to build an Islamic society, and the tool to achieve this aim is *Jihad*. Qutb's 200-page book has inspired a wide range of literature on the idea of Jihad as an obligation on all Muslims to live according to the rules of Islam, not those made by men.

It was only after the process of political radicalisation described in the first section that youths started to look for ideas that fitted their radical political approach to make sense of the political crisis they were facing. In most of the cases followed here, the decision to embrace Jihadi ideas only came after radical political convictions were deeply rooted. In other words, angry youths looked for ideas to justify their decision to practise violence. They looked for ideas; it was not ideas that were looking for them.

However, these ideas were not merely tools to justify their political radicalisation. Once adopted, these ideas had their own impact. For many of these individuals, Salafi-Jihadi ideas changed their worldviews entirely, including on the initial trigger of radicalisation, ousting the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood in our case study. In the case of one of the Muslim Brotherhood supporters, although he protested against ousting Mohammed Morsi after July 2013, adopting Jihadi ideas led him to change his position on Morsi, arguing that he entirely deserved what happened to him because he did not rule by what God revealed and he resorted to democracy (Arij and Mada Masr).

Here, the Jihadi literature makes out that political violence is not only a normatively accepted choice but even an Islamic duty. Ideas play a primary role in leading an individual to make or not make the move from political radicalisation to violence. All the cases of Egyptian youths who decided to take up arms looked for literature that justified the use of violence. Many of them found what they were looking for in the writings of Sayyid Qutb and Abdullah Azzam. There is a nuance that should not be overlooked: in some cases individuals thought that the Jihadi ideas articulated by thinkers like Qutb did not answer all their concerns and doubts but there was no escape from abiding by them to carry out their aims even if they did not agree with all of them.

On the other side, religious ideas represented a barrier to violence among those who were raised rejecting ideas of excommunication. This was the case of many of the Brotherhood youths. Since the 1970s, the Brotherhood had preached against the jihadist groups' doctrine of excommunicating state officials and using violence to achieve their political goals. Moreover, the group institutionalised these ideas in 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 (Al-Mouhandess 2015). Others who had had religious education at an al-Azhar religious institute faced this same ideational barrier. In these cases, their religious ideas played a decisive role in their decisions not to take up arms against other Muslims.

Youths reacted to this ideational barrier differently. Some indeed accepted the fact that violence was not a viable option. However, others who took up arms tried to overcome this ideational barrier with two main responses. First, some individuals overcame this barrier by leaving Egypt for Syria, arguing that the battle was clear there between Muslims and non-Muslims, and hence they did not need to think about ideas on excommunicating Muslims. Similarly, many of those who left Egypt to join armed groups felt that they could not kill an Egyptian. Others said that in Syria the line between good and evil was clear, unlike the case in Egypt after 2013. This was the case of an Egyptian photographer who studied at al-Azhar university. Although he went through a phase of political radicalisation and started reading Salafi-Jihadi literature, he refused to practise violence inside Egypt, arguing that he could not kill innocent Egyptians. He decided instead to travel to Syria to join Jabhat Al-Nusra. He argued that the fight in Syria and its boundaries was clear. He refused to join IS, telling his friend he did not want to kill Muslims. The battle against the Syrian regime seemed legitimate to him. He travelled to Syria and was killed months later (personal communication, January 2016). Another case was a young preacher who used to give lessons to young men at social clubs, in charities and on YouTube on how to live according to religious teachings in the modern world. After the ousting of Morsi, he accepted the use of violence as a legitimate tool to achieve political change. Nevertheless, violence was not permissible within Egypt, and he therefore decided to travel to Syria instead to what he described as "a clearer, less complicated battle" (Mohy El Deen 2016).

Others tried to offer a new ideational frame for the practice of violence. This is the case of one branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. A part of the leadership sought to offer an ideational frame that would allow Muslim Brothers to practise a limited level of violence in its strategy to resist the political regime. They asked a number of religious scholars within the Brotherhood to offer an ideational frame that set the conditions for the practice of violence. This committee issued a document called *The Jurisprudence of Popular Resistance to the Coup*. It provided religious justification of the use of violence against security forces by underlining the religious concept of *Dafa' al- Sa'el*, or Repelling

the Assailant, which, according to the document, is equivalent to the modern concept of the right to self-defence. This ideological framework contained 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 (threats/beatings). The authors of the document were very careful to underline 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 but should remain within the religious limits. The document also put several 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, even if the police officers themselves are involved in violence against protesters.² 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 approach in the document did not excommunicate members of the security forces and underlines that they should be resisted not because of their faith but because of their actions.

2.2. Cost/benefit calculation

Based on the ideational frame adopted to make sense of the political crisis they are facing, youths are likely to weigh the costs and the benefits of taking up arms against state institutions. The decision to take up arms is not an easy one. It comes with a wide range of sacrifices, including personal sacrifices related to the individual practising violence himself, and also to his family members and to the political group he belongs to. Individuals therefore carefully weigh these sacrifices against the possible benefits of following such a path.

The Muslim Brotherhood youths who considered this path in the new ideological frame supported by a part of their leadership had two main concerns that led them to renounce such an option based on their cost/benefit calculations. The first factor was the power imbalance between them and the security forces they faced, which made it impossible to win a military battle against them. The second factor was the lack of support from Egyptian society. 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. Other members were shocked to find that they were attacked by the residents in their neighbourhoods, who refused to let their protests pass through their areas.³ This high level of popular anger, together with the power imbalance between violent groups and the Egyptian state security forces rendered the decision to take up arms very costly, while any benefits were less likely to be achieved.

Some youths who abstained from practising violence saw violence in this case as a premature option since it did not reflect a strategy. While they could accept the use of violence in principle, they argued that violence needed to be part of a wider strategy, and this was not the case. By the lack of a strategy, they meant that the approach did not consider the day after the collapse of the regime. It principally appeared to be a mere hopeless option with a lack of other reciprocal political tools such as negotiation channels and building alliances to translate gains. As a consequence, it would end up turning its perpetrators into criminals lacking public sympathy. Therefore, many of these Islamist youths thought that violence would lead nowhere.

However, those who followed the Jihadi doctrine were not deterred by the sacrifices they had to make and not even by their likely defeat by the Egyptian security forces. The Jihadi doctrine frames

2 Mekameleen TV, "Ḥadīth tārikhī ma' D. Majdī Shalash 'uḍw al-lajna al-idāriyya al-'ulyā li-l-ikhwān wa ṣadīq D. Muhammad Kamāl," *YouTube*, October 6, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ffxvHduo064>.

3 Salih Ramadan, "al-Ahālī yu'linūn al-nafīr al-'ām dīd 'al-mahzūra'.. wa qarār sha'bī bi-tahjīr al-ikhwān min 'al-manšūra'," *al-Watan*, December 26, 2013, <https://www.elwatannews.com/news/details/380065>.

the struggle against the political regime as one of believers against non-believers in which Jihad is a religious duty regardless of the outcome of the struggle.

Moreover, the Jihadi doctrine frames the meaning of costs and benefits differently. In Sayyed Qutb's own words, life with all its gains and losses is not the main criterion when weighing the cost and benefits and it does not determine who wins and who loses. In his famous book *Milestones*, Qutb quotes the story of the 'Makers of the Pit' as is told in the *surah al-Buruj* (The Constellations). This is the story of a group of people who believed in Allah and openly proclaimed their belief. They encountered tyrannical and oppressive enemies. In Qutb's words, the faith in the hearts of the believers raised them above all persecution. Belief triumphed over life. The threat of torture did not shake them, they never recanted, and they burned in the fire until death. They freed themselves from this earth and all its attractions, triumphing over life through a sublime faith. Qutb makes this meaning clear by arguing that life's pleasures and pains, achievements and frustrations, do not have any great weight in the scale, and do not determine winning or losing. Triumph is not limited to immediate victory, which is but one of the many forms of triumph. In Allah's scale, the true weight is the weight of faith. In Allah's market, the only commodity in demand is the commodity of faith. The highest form of triumph is the victory of the soul over the material, the victory of belief over pain, and the victory of faith over persecution. In the incident described above, the souls of the believers were victorious over fear and pain, over the allurements of the earth and of life (Qutb 1964).

Therefore, the ideational frame adopted by the youths had a direct impact on the cost/benefit analysis they made. Ideas shaped the weight of both costs and benefits and would therefore determine the rationality of the political decision whether to take up arms. The Muslim Brotherhood's post-2013 ideational frame based on armed political resistance led many Muslim Brotherhood youths to doubt that using violence against Egyptian state institutions would destabilise the political regime given the imbalance of power between the two sides, and when weighing an unlikely victory against all the sacrifices they had to make, many of them gave up on the armed struggle. The youths who adopted a Jihadi approach did not face this dilemma.

The Jihadi frame also played a role in the cost/benefit calculation in the cases of Islamist youths who were never members of organisations but they chose to participate in violence. In their case, they were not interested in a cost/benefit calculation as they did not see violence as a political tool to make gains but instead as an act of purification to display devotion to God by standing up against tyranny. Only through violence/Jihad and the sacrifices that came with it could they fulfil their responsibility before God and their fellow Muslims, and the earthly outcome, winning or losing, was merely God's will according to their understanding. This was true in the case of an Islamist engineer with no organisational affiliation. He fiercely refused any call to consider the rationality behind sacrificing his privileges and his established social stance in favour of going for the non-realistic choice of Jihad/ fighting. According to accounts of his experience, he thought it was a matter of being ethical and a good Muslim to care for supporting the weak and to fight injustice. This account and similar ones contribute to understanding of why the Jihadi approach was more attractive to individuals who did not have any political project as it seemed to be more authentic, pious and clear in comparison to other trends that sought material gains from this mighty cause.

2.3. Legitimate voices

Legitimate political and religious voices played a decisive role in this moment of transition from radicalisation to violence, by either facilitating or hindering it. The decision to take up arms could not be made if one was in doubt. It needed a 100% conviction that this was the right path. One important factor in reaching or not reaching this conviction was the presence of legitimate voices arguing either for or against the option.

In the case of youths affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood, the legitimate voices from within the movement that rejected the use of violence had a strong impact on their decisions to reject this

option or at least to remain in doubt about it. Although the violent path was advocated by a senior leader, Mohammed Kamal, who back then acted as head of the administrative committee, and the Brotherhood members at first perceived his decisions to be legitimate, 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.⁴ This disagreement put many Muslim Brothers in doubt about this path. Mahmoud Ezzat in particular has often been classified as one of the hardliners within the Muslim Brotherhood, or even as a Qutibist, with reference to Sayyid Qutb. When Ezzat objected to Kamal's strategy, many youths started to doubt this choice.

Some of the cases of radical youths also show the decisive role of trusted local imams in persuading them not to follow this path. This was the case of two brothers who wanted to travel to Syria to join armed Islamic groups there. When talking to a Salafi Imam who they trusted about their plans, he rejected them and convinced them that it was not the right decision. Interestingly, the imam used a 'legal' condition for going for Jihad outside one's homeland: getting the approval of one's parents. He asked the two brothers to either obtain the approval of their parents or give up on the idea. They ended up not following this path.

The case of the *Salafi Front*, an Egyptian Salafi group that emerged after the 25 January 2011 uprising, offers another interesting example. While the movement supported Morsi and many of its members ended up in prison after 2013, they opposed ISIS and its ideas. They engaged in debates with ISIS members inside the prison to answer their ideological claims. These legitimate voices from the Salafi Front could stand up against the ISIS propaganda inside the prisons in the post 2013 era. They enjoyed the necessary legitimacy to talk to radical youths and persuade them not to follow the path of ISIS, while religious scholars invited by the security forces to talk to the prisoners were often perceived as the regime's mouthpiece with no legitimacy. One Islamist in the prison did not see major shifts towards ISIS during his detention, believing that this was due to the efforts of the Salafist Front sheikhs (Ayyash 2019: 10).

On the other hand, the passive attitudes of the Muslim Brotherhood leaders to the prison authorities led some Brotherhood youths to lose their faith in these leaders. As one Muslim Brotherhood member who spent time in prison described, Muslim Brotherhood leaders often cooperated with the prison authorities to control their cells and make sure their members followed the prison rules. These attitudes left some of the youths disappointed, which made them an easy target for the Salafi Jihadi prisoners (personal communication, 17 March 2019). On the other hand, ISIS members in prison often acted with defiance against these officers. They would often insult them and call them 'kafir,' and threaten that they would go after them and their families for revenge. This defiant attitude increased their legitimacy in the eyes of many other Islamists, while the submissive attitude of the Muslim Brotherhood leaders diminished their legitimacy even among their own followers.

Those who choose the violent path looked for legitimate voices to follow. Interestingly, for many of those who made this decision, it was inspired by the personal experiences of those who advocated Jihadi ideas. This was the case of Sayyid Qutb, Abdullah Azzam and Osama Bin Laden, for example. Youths were often fascinated by their experience of changing their societies, and their decisions to leave everything behind them to follow the ideas they believed in. The personal experience of these voices carried equal weight to their ideas. These personal experiences constituted an attractive frame for youths.

4 Mahmoud Hussein, "Rudūd 'alā ba' d ta' assulāt," *Alamat Online*, 9 February 2016, <http://alamatonline.com/archives/7083>.

3. Policy implications: Preventing violence or preventing radicalisation?

Preventing violent radicalisation often fails to answer one main question: what is it exactly that we are trying to prevent? Is it radicalisation or violence? The distinction between the two sides of this phenomenon is often missed. Studies of violent radicalisation in post-2013 Egypt have shown a clear distinction between two phases: radicalisation and violence. While many Islamists youths experienced a deep wave of political radicalisation, not all of them took up arms. More importantly, the factors leading to the two phases are different. As many researchers have argued, while political and socio-economic grievances might lead youths to political radicalisation, the decision to take up arms requires an ideational frame that justifies it, a cost/benefit calculation in favour of violence and legitimate voices that support such ideas.

The problem we are facing is not – we argue – radical views but violent acts. In a liberal society, where freedom of speech and opinions – within specific limits defined by the law – is a fundamental right, ideological radicalisation is not in itself a problem but on the contrary a right (Crone 2016: 590). Therefore, policymakers need to focus on addressing the factors shaping the decisions of radical youths to take up arms. Although ensuring a political regime that respects both the political and socio-economic rights of all its citizens is a good thing and could indeed reduce the level of political radicalisation and hence indirectly limit the process of violent radicalisation, it does not have a direct impact on the decision to take up arms.

More importantly, while changing political and socio-economic conditions is likely to reduce the level of political radicalisation, it is unlikely to impact youths who have already adopted the Jihadi doctrine. This is the case of those who had already adopted Jihadi ideas before the 2011 uprising. Although the political environment changed, it did not lead them to give up their ideas. Once Salafi-Jihadi ideas are adopted, they offer new understanding of a struggle that is no longer connected to the political and socio-economic conditions. As was previously mentioned, for youths who were radicalised after the ousting of Morsi in Egypt, once they adopted Salafi-Jihadism they became not interested in the debate over democracy and authoritarianism or over revolution and counter-revolution. Some of them even claimed that Morsi deserved what happened to him because he did not apply the rule of Islam. While the ousting of Morsi was the trigger for these youths' radicalisation, following Salafi-Jihadism led them to change their views on the event itself. The path from radicalisation to violence is not accumulative.

This study has underlined three main factors that shaped youths' decisions whether to take up arms. A successful preventing violent extremism strategy needs to focus on these three factors to prevent already radicalised youths taking up arms. While radicalisation is a social phenomenon that is shaped by structural factors such as political and socio-economic ones, taking up arms is an individual decision and it is often shaped by personal factors such as individual religious convictions and understanding of the costs of this decision on one and one's close ones, and the extent to which legitimate voices that radicalised youths trust support or object to the decision.

Work towards preventing violence needs to include two elements: first, an ideational answer to Jihadi ideas; and second, strengthening legitimate voices that can carry these ideas to radical youths. While socio-economic and political grievances might lead youths to political radicalisation, it is the Jihadi framework that translates radicalisation into violent action. Therefore, limiting the influence of these ideas should be an integral part of any counter-violent-radicalisation strategy. Although since the 1960s many religious scholars have tried to answer Jihadi ideas on excommunication and jihad with lengthy refutations, religious scholars in the MENA region often lack the legitimacy that Jihadi figures such as Qutb and Abdullah Azzam enjoy in the eyes of these radical young people. Most of these religious scholars are perceived as mere regime mouthpieces. Limiting the influence of Jihadi ideas requires not only a religious answer but legitimate voices that are able to speak to radical youths and are independent of the state institutions that these young people are politically contesting. The legitimacy of religious actors depends mainly on their independence from state institutions. While

many regimes have been calling for a reform of Islam to combat violent radicalisation, we do not need to reform Islam but instead to reform Islam-state relations in order for Islamic religious institutions to ensure their independence from state institutions. Only by ensuring their political independence can they strengthen their religious legitimacy.

Conclusion

This paper has analysed the paths of Islamist youths who were part of the popular Islamist mobilisation after the ousting of Mohammed Morsi in July 2013. We have traced over 50 cases of Egyptian youths who were part of the popular Islamist mobilisation from 2013 to 2015. The main question that the paper answers is why some of these youths took up arms while others did not. In other words, what are the factors that shape the transition from radicalisation to violence? In answering these questions, this paper has distinguished between two main concepts: the radicalisation path; and the violent radicalisation moment. While many of these youths were radicalised, few made the decision to take up arms.

The paper has argued that although radicalisation and violence are interrelated the two phenomena are distinct in their causes and therefore in how to address them. While there are many drivers of violent radicalisation, the numbers of those who engaged in violent activities are very little.

Political and socio-economic grievances might lead youths to radicalisation but they are not enough to lead them to violence. To make this transition from radicalisation to violence three elements are essential: an ideational frame that justifies the use of violence; a cost/benefit calculation that the benefits of using violence outweigh the cost; and legitimate voices that support this path. The presence or a lack of these three elements can either facilitate or block paths to violence.

Although religious ideas have been perceived as playing little role in the radicalisation process, it seems that religious convictions played a decisive role in shaping individual decisions whether to take up arms. Jihadi ideas could offer a frame to make sense of the political struggle by reducing it to a struggle over religious doctrine. They also shaped the weight of both costs and benefits leading youths to follow this path despite the imbalance of power between armed groups and the Egyptian security forces. Finally, the legitimate life paths of Jihadi figures such as Qutb and Abdullah Azzam led youths to read their work with admiration and respect.

On the other hand, individuals with a religious background that rejected the concept of excommunication of Muslims, as is the case of those who had followed an al-Azhar religious education and members of the Muslim Brotherhood, were less likely to accept the Jihadi frame. When members of the Muslim Brotherhood offered a new ideational frame to justify the use of violence based on ideas such as political resistance and self-defence, the power imbalance between them and the state security forces led them to give up on this violent approach. Finally, legitimate voices played an important role in convincing radicalised youths to either follow the violent path or to give up on the idea. The resistance of one part of the Muslim Brotherhood leadership to the violent strategy suggested by Mohammad Kamal put many Muslim Brotherhood youths in doubt about this option. Similarly, members of the Salafi Front prevented many youths from following the path of ISIS inside Egyptian prisons.

To sum up, policies designed to prevent violent radicalisation should distinguish between two concepts: radicalisation and violence. The factors shaping each of these phenomena are different, and therefore the policies designed to prevent each of them should be different too. While political and socio-economic grievances lead to political radicalisation, individuals' religious ideas, a cost/benefit analysis of this violent path and the role of legitimate voices shaped radical youths' decisions to take arms. Therefore, policies aiming to prevent violence should seek to address these three elements by formulating a religious answer to jihadi ideas and collaborating with legitimate religious voices that are credible in the eyes of radical youths.

Following the case of Islamist youths after 2013 has shown that although it is a challenge radicalisation is not in itself a threat. Many Egyptian youths went through this phase of radicalisation. However, only a minority took up arms. The question is what are the factors that shape the path from radicalisation to violence. Preventing violence should focus on preventing the path from radicalisation to violence.

Focusing solely on radicalisation does not seem fruitful as it seeks to address more structural causes such political and economic regimes. Although addressing these structural factors is likely to reduce levels of radicalisation and therefore would reduce the pool of those who turn from radicalisation to violence, these measures are by their nature long-term ones. Moreover, their impact on levels of violence is not necessarily linear. And finally, these values should be supported for their own sake and not necessarily because of their impact on violence. Democratic regimes that respect human rights and equal socio-economic rights should be supported for their own sake and not necessarily for the impact they might have on levels of violence. If the aim is to reduce levels of violence, policymakers should focus on these factors shaping the transition from radicalisation to violence.

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