

EGYPT'S ESCALATING ISLAMIST INSURGENCY

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Egypt is facing what is shaping up to be the deadliest and most complex insurgency in its modern history. The military-backed ouster of Mohamed Morsi from the presidency in July 2013 fragmented Egypt's Islamist landscape and set the stage for an unpredictable struggle between Islamists and the Egyptian state. In this environment, some Islamists, specifically the youth, have turned to violence, and the trend could continue. The pro-Brotherhood nonjihadi violent groups these youth have founded could evolve into an armed jihadi rebellion. There are steps, however, that the government and the Muslim Brotherhood can take to head off this long-term insurgency in the making.

Fragmentation and Violence on the Rise

- The state crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt's largest Islamist group, in addition to divisions within the organization have weakened the Brotherhood leadership and have paved the way for its loss of control over a growing number of members.
- Various Salafists, ultraconservative Islamists, have rallied around the Brotherhood, framing the struggle with the regime as one between a secular state and Islam.
- Two increasingly distinct Brotherhood factions have emerged. One embraces confrontational tactics and violence while the other emphasizes nonviolence. In reality, however, many leaders tolerate escalating levels of violence, stopping short of endorsing murder.
- Brotherhood and Salafi radicals justify political violence as a legitimate tool of protest and encourage youth to adopt violence under the guise of self-defense, religiously justified retribution, and defending Islam.
- Nonjihadi violent groups mainly composed of Islamist youth began to rely on anarchic violence starting in late 2013. Two years later, these groups have not only persisted but have also grown more sophisticated, conducting armed ambushes and improvised-explosive-device attacks against security forces.
- Jihadi groups tirelessly attempt to tap into brewing anger and to recruit Islamist youth for their budding insurgency.

Lessons for Egypt and the Brotherhood

- Disavowing torture, investigating allegations of sexual abuse, ending forced disappearances, and generally improving prison conditions are critical steps the government should take to ensure that radicals cannot exploit such conditions for recruitment.
- Understanding the new, fragmented landscape of violent Islamists is necessary to adequately formulate strategies to combat these actors and better "divide and conquer" disparate cells and groups.
- Pragmatic senior Brotherhood leaders must rein in radicals who incite violence to ready their base for the eventual need for a settlement with the state. The current trajectory is eroding the group from the inside and may spell the end of the organization as it has long been known.

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