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EGYPT'S ESCALATING ISLAMIST INSURGENCY

Mokhtar Awad and Mostafa Hashem

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Summary

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.

A Fragmented and Violent Landscape

Following mass demonstrations against his rule on June 30, the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi, Egypt's first democratically elected president, was ousted in a popularly backed military coup in July 2013 by then defense minister General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who would later become president. In retaliation for planned protests against Morsi, the Brotherhood and its supporters had established camps in two squares in Egypt's capital that grew considerably following the coup, believing that a show of force would somehow reverse Morsi's ouster or at least provide them with a better bargaining position. By August 2013, negotiations had collapsed, and the security forces moved in to violently clear the two Islamist camps, resulting in nearly 1,000 deaths in one day. In the ensuing months, tens of thousands of Islamists and Brotherhood members and their supporters were arrested, and the Brotherhood's organizational capacity in Egypt nearly collapsed as a result, setting the stage for an unpredictable conflict.

The Brotherhood and the Egyptian government have both adopted a zero-sum approach, offering no realistic political way to end the impasse. Instead, the government's harsh crackdown on the Brotherhood and Islamist incitement have helped breed a cycle of violence with no end in sight.

The core Brotherhood leadership is scattered across Egyptian prisons and world capitals, with factions competing over the best strategic course. The leadership is losing control over younger members, many of whom are itching for outright confrontation. These youth, with other radical Islamist opponents of the government, are shaping events on the ground with or without the blessing of the senior leadership. There are advocates of true nonviolence in the Brotherhood leadership, yet they remain committed to their zero-sum strategy, while many other leaders are on a slippery slope leading to the justification of an increased use of violence.

Other Islamists have stepped into the void created by the near-absence of pragmatic Brotherhood leadership. Antigovernment Salafists have framed the current struggle as a war against Islam, and some Brothers who wish to rally Salafi support have opportunistically used the same rhetoric, pushing angry and violent youth closer to Salafi jihadism. The potential result is the creation of a haven of popular support for violence and jihadism in the Arab world's most populous country. Indeed, since July 2013, a number of new violent actors who do not subscribe

The potential result of current trends is the creation of a haven of popular support for violence and jihadism in the Arab world's most populous country.

to Salafi jihadism—including members of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists that target the security forces and infrastructure—have emerged.

These groups are all part of Egypt's changing insurgent landscape. It is made up of three broad categories: Sinai-based jihadists affiliated with the self-proclaimed Islamic State and with a limited operational presence in the mainland (the populous heartland of Egypt along the Nile valley), mainland-based Salafi jihadists who tend to be supporters of al-Qaeda or affiliated with al-Qaeda, and a new category of non-Salafi-jihadi groups made up of Islamist supporters and some members of the Muslim Brotherhood.

What distinguishes this last category is that its members fashion themselves as “revolutionaries” or “resistance fighters,” thus justifying the often-anarchic violence they deploy. Their objectives are also narrower than those of the jihadists, encompassing only retribution against security forces and toppling President Sisi's government in order to reinstate Islamist rule in Egypt.

These nonjihadi violent groups are often overlooked because they are made up of amateurs with no combat experience and have inflicted fewer losses than established jihadi groups. But their continued growth and resilience represents a significant challenge to Egypt's security; they are embedded in their local populations along the Nile valley, a proximity that will compound the damage they can inflict if their numbers continue to increase. Furthermore, as such groups become more sophisticated, the likelihood of cooperation with established jihadi factions that can provide both training and weapons increases.

Jihadi groups, in turn, are actively seeking to connect with this deep reservoir of potential recruits and link up with their violent efforts in order to gain a foothold in the Egyptian mainland. If the jihadi groups succeed in establishing such a foothold by recruiting as-yet nonjihadi Islamists, the scenario of armed insurgency spreading to pockets of Islamist grievance in the mainland becomes increasingly likely.

The conclusions made here about the new insurgent dynamics in Egypt are drawn from dozens of interviews conducted with Brotherhood members and leaders, other Islamists, and Egyptian government officials from 2013 to 2015. To study the newly formed violent groups, the authors relied on tracking their social media activity and tabulating violent incidents and reported deaths to quantitatively analyze patterns that help shed light on the opaque current landscape.

The Precedent of Islamist Insurgency in Egypt

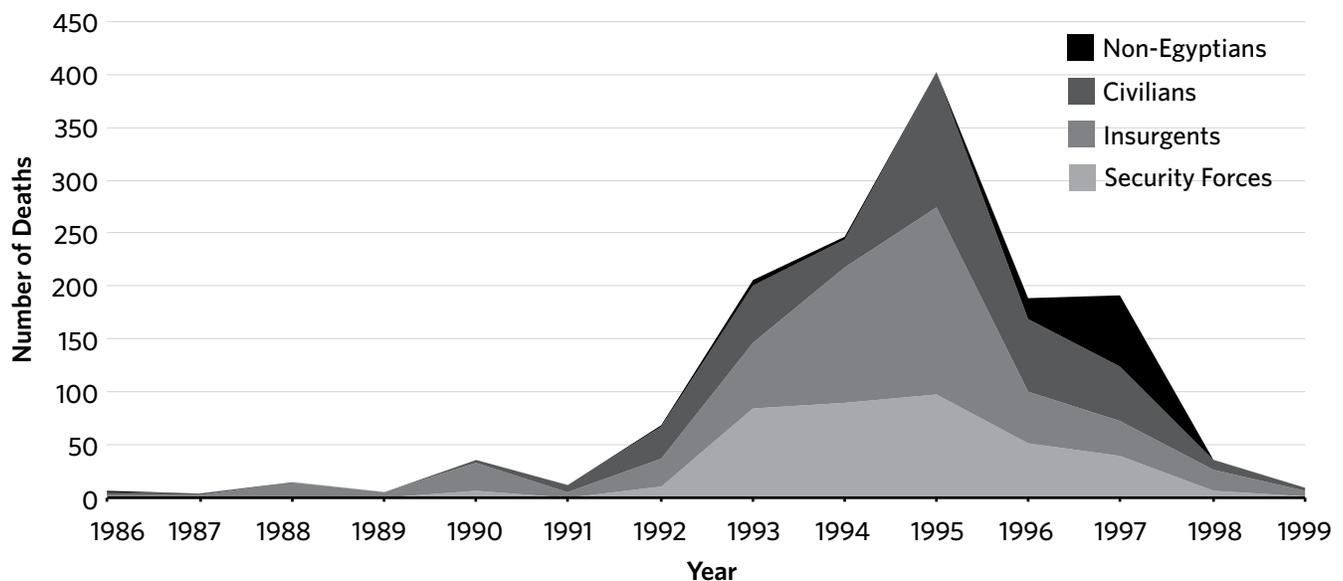
Islamist insurgency in Egypt is not unprecedented. A low-level jihadi insurgency against then president Hosni Mubarak played out in the 1980s and 1990s in the mainland along the Nile valley. Then, the government's counterinsurgency efforts were complicated by the proximity of the violence to the major population centers and the fact that one of the major insurgent groups

at the time had deep roots in Upper Egypt. It took the government more than a decade to put down the insurgency completely.

There is no guarantee that the government will achieve even that slow success this time, particularly in view of young Islamists' strong grievances and the rapid spread of jihadi groups in the Middle East. Many Islamists have vowed revenge against the government for the harsh crackdown and the toppling of their rule.

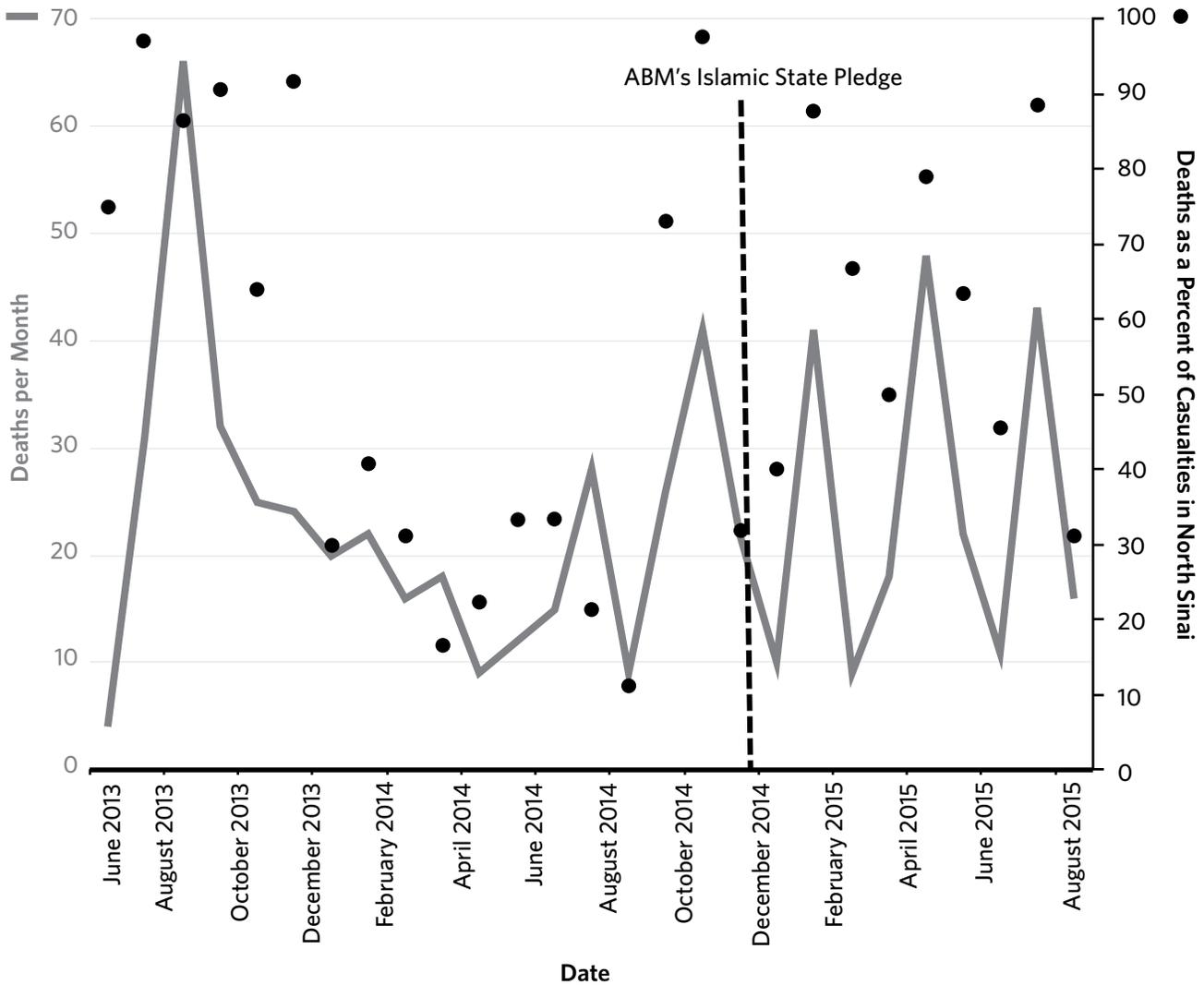
Further complicating efforts to quell the insurgents, the levels of violence since 2013 and the diverse composition of the groups taking part are unprecedented in Egypt's modern history. Over the course of the thirteen most active years of the previous insurgency—from 1986 to 1999—an estimated minimum of 1,300 Egyptians lost their lives as a result of terrorist activity. Of those, approximately 391 were members of the security forces, 385 were civilians, and the rest were insurgents (see figure 1).¹ Although far fewer civilians have been killed at the hands of the jihadists in the current insurgency, the state killed nearly as many Islamist protesters during the camp dispersals of August 2013 as all Egyptians killed during the decade-long previous insurgency. And as of August 2015, jihadists and other violent actors had killed approximately 700 members of the police and armed forces in just two years,² nearly double the number of security personnel killed in the previous insurgency (see figure 2).

Figure 1. Total Deaths, 1986–1999 Insurgency



Source: Chuck Fahrer, "The Geography of Egypt's Islamist Insurgency," *Arab World Geographer* 4, no. 3 (2001): 160–84.

Figure 2. Security Forces' Deaths From June 2013 to August 2015 (per month and percentage of casualties in North Sinai)



Note: ABM is Ansar Beit al-Maqdis.

Sources: Original data set relied on open-source reporting collected by Egyptian researcher Mohamed el-Sawy and the Global Political Trends Center and amended by the authors, who also consulted data collected by the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy. Soldier/officer names and the nature of the attacks were reviewed to determine if an attack was caused by an armed group.

Data analysis shows that in the spring and early summer of 2014, the proportion of casualties in North Sinai dropped as other groups in the mainland rose to prominence. However, after the Sinai-based Ansar Beit al-Maqdis (ABM) jihadi group pledged allegiance to the Islamic State—and Islamic State training and funds were shared with the affiliate—North Sinai once again experienced the lion's share of casualties.

Origin: The Muslim Brotherhood's Loss of Control

The turn to violence by some members of the Muslim Brotherhood and the proliferation of nonjihadi violent groups can be explained in part by the Brotherhood's loss of control over members and deep internal rifts over strategy in the wake of an unprecedented government crackdown. Today, various antigovernment Islamist actors form a fragmented Islamist opposition with no one leader or overarching strategy.

The Muslim Brotherhood remains the dominant antigovernment Islamist actor, and while its senior leaders have publicly decried the steady march toward armed rebellion, some of them have openly endorsed “creative nonviolence.”³ This innovation attempts to justify any violent actions that do not involve killing, but it represents a slippery slope at best and has understandably resulted in serious, damaging organizational rifts and strategic dissonance. The effect is that the Muslim Brotherhood, which previously stood as the model of—and drew its strength from—unquestioning loyalty and strict hierarchical discipline, finds itself increasingly marginalized as its established leadership loses control of a violent, rowdy new generation of so-called revolutionary Brothers cooperating with like-minded Islamist actors.

Internal rifts in the Brotherhood both caused and continue to foster a chaotic state of affairs. The group had to restructure to adapt to the government's crackdown.⁴ It had to decentralize to allow for greater dynamism and to replace the crop of detained or exiled senior leaders. Over the last two years, a series of internal elections gradually granted new powers to junior leaders and members who were already in a position of strength due to their protests on the ground and occasional use of violence, many of whom also resented the old leadership's ineffective strategies.

The internal conflict following this shift was foreshadowed in an interview with a senior leader in exile in mid-2014: “Those inside have complete freedom in decisionmaking without following orders from the outside . . . some of our base are now looking to what is more effective beyond protesting, especially to non-Brothers.” In the summer of 2015, the cumulative impact of these changes exploded into the open when a number of senior leaders tried to check the rising influence of a largely youthful faction armed with “revolutionary strategies.” This attempt ultimately translated into more internal rifts, and the division in the group has helped the revolutionary wing further assert its position and decry its adversaries in the senior leadership as out of touch and irrelevant.

Some of the leaders in the revolutionary camp argue not only that retribution against the police and the army is justified as a tactic but also that the possibility of an armed insurgency is unavoidable if the current regime stays in power. To them this justifies a strategy of “managing and containing” radical elements as opposed to ostracizing them. But in reality this has meant not

seriously challenging radicals' positions head-on. As the strategy stands, it is more a policy of reckless appeasement than of smart containment.

The senior leadership may be seen by outsiders as more pragmatic, but only slightly. The real sin in the eyes of the revolutionary faction is that senior leaders continue to focus on street protests with little change in tactics, while hoping for some kind of *deus ex machina* (like a counter coup) to rid them of Sisi. They refuse to accept the political reality and exonerate themselves from any blame for the turn to violence—seeing no link between their zero-sum politics and the continued escalation.

What has further exposed the Brotherhood to rifts is the leadership's early decision to operate under the guise of the National Coalition to Support Legitimacy (NCSL), an ambitious but weak coalition of smaller Islamist fac-

tions that later broke down. This coalition building started before the July 2013 coup as hardline Salafists were on the front lines defending Morsi's regime. The sit-in at Rabaa al-Adawiya Square, set up on June 28, was in fact a preemptive protest camp to demonstrate the Islamists' strength before mass protests on June 30 and Morsi's ouster on July 3. The Salafists helped rile up the crowds at the protest camps with incendi-

ary, sectarian, and uncompromising rhetoric. The decision to align with these factions had the unintended consequence of granting outsiders the power to lead and speak for the Brotherhood's base at a very critical moment.⁵ Many of these Salafists have long held more radical views than the more mainstream Brotherhood, and they have helped strengthen the hand of the Brotherhood's revolutionary faction as they both seek confrontation.

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The Radicalization of Islamist Youth

At least initially, most Islamist youth who embraced violence did so as a means of exacting revenge against the state for the deaths of Islamist protesters in Rabaa Square and other areas in the months following Morsi's ouster rather than as a result of an overnight conversion to Salafi jihadism or bitterness over the loss of Morsi. While Human Rights Watch reported the number of deaths in Rabaa to have been around 1,000,⁶ some Islamists have inflated the figure to between 2,500 and 5,000 or even more.⁷ Islamists recount the details of that day with a focus on the most gruesome aspects, such as charred bodies and gaping bullet wounds. These perceptions, as well as the fact that tens of thousands of Islamists were detained in the months after the coup and held in terrible prison conditions, have left thousands of families angry at the government.

Some of those wishing for what they perceived as justified revenge against security forces began to organize on social media sites, hoping their nonideological approach would reach a broader audience. Groups like the Molotov

and Wala (Arabic for “set fire”) movements launched their mission of chaos and revenge with activities like setting police cars on fire.⁸ They encouraged others to do the same, with the clarification that any target without a “soul” was permissible: police cars and stations, and officers’ private property, were considered fair game. But predictably, this rang hollow. Some of these groups took credit for killing people they claimed were thugs hired by the regime early in 2014 and attacked businesses they alleged were helping these thugs.

Egyptian university campuses were the incubators for this type of revenge violence. As other avenues of protest were closed off following the regime’s 2013 crackdown, Islamist students and their supporters started antigovernment protests on campuses. The authorities responded with greater violence,⁹ and soon university protests were a near-daily occurrence. Out of political expediency, the Brotherhood instigated and supported this campus action. The youth were encouraged to hold their ground and were lionized for their steadfast resistance to the authorities.

Young Islamist women also joined the protests, instigating sit-ins and sometimes starting riots. Many were arrested, and inflammatory images of young girls in hijabs and niqabs being manhandled soon spread online. Subsequent accusations of sexual abuse helped fuel the violence as male students were further motivated to fight for what they believed to be the honor of their female classmates.

According to a rights group tracking student casualties, police across Egypt killed 191 students and arrested 1,671 from July 3, 2013, to April 25, 2014.¹⁰ Nearly 84 percent of deaths were of students enrolled in campuses in greater Cairo, 39 percent of which were students in the religious al-Azhar University, the university with the most active protests during the 2013–2014 school year. The 2014–2015 school year started with a rash of violence, with students rioting against a private security firm hired by the government to police campuses.¹¹ However, campus activism soon died down as the proliferation of new groups once more made the streets the epicenter of protests.

Nonjihadi Violent Groups and Brotherhood Violence

As violence on university campuses escalated in the fall of 2013 and spring of 2014 following the mass killing at Rabaa, groups of Brotherhood members and their supporters were ramping up the operations of new anarchic groups. The new violent activists learned from experiences elsewhere and employed tactics garnered from online literature on violent resistance. The Molotov Movement, for instance, was clearly influenced by the tactics of militant Shia youth groups in Bahrain. The young Bahrainis’ impressive videos of mobbing security forces with barrages of Molotov cocktails were widely shared and studied.¹² In January 2014, the online activity of Egyptian pro-violence activists

increased; they began sharing documents such as an instructional paper titled “Organizing Resistance,” which gave clear instructions on how to form clandestine networks and how to use Molotov cocktails and other homemade devices as weapons.¹³

Soon there were “martyr brigades” with the aim of escalating the violence to armed operations against officers. A group calling itself the Execution Movement vowed to target police officers and thugs suspected of killing protesters or sexually assaulting female prisoners. According to one young Islamist interviewed, groups such as the Execution Movement began killing thugs as previously indicated and burning government property. Another young Islamist, who is a former Muslim Brother and an advocate of violent insurgency, explained that the groups justified the targeting of officers as a way to deter the police from the most abusive forms of torture against Islamist detainees. They believed that the most hardline of jihadists received relatively better treatment in prison due to the fear of retribution.

These violent groups were at first largely unorganized and believed to be a transient phenomenon. The reality is that they have not only persisted but

Violent groups were at first largely unorganized and believed to be a transient phenomenon. The reality is that they have not only persisted but also grown more sophisticated.

also grown more sophisticated. As the prevalence of these groups increased, so did the involvement of some Brotherhood leaders and members in violence. Interviews with Brotherhood members and even midlevel leaders indicated that youth members began resorting to violence in late 2013 to early 2014. At first, they carried firearms to protect their demonstrations against police dispersal and thugs allegedly hired by the regime,¹⁴ but this appears to have escalated into active violence on the one-year anniversaries of Morsi’s ouster and the massacre in Rabaa, when several small bombs went off around the country. There is currently little doubt among those familiar with the conflict that some Brotherhood members played a part in these attacks and other attacks on infrastructure, though whether they were acting on their own or with instructions from the senior leadership is unclear.

As the leadership of the organization does not officially sanction armed resistance, it is difficult to assess the extent of the Brotherhood’s involvement in violent acts. The Ministry of Interior alleges that Brotherhood members have been responsible for destroying electric lines and similar attacks, but the affiliations of the perpetrators of numerous other attacks that the ministry alleges were carried out by Brotherhood members cannot be definitively identified. The ministry alleges, however, that all nonjihadi violent groups are simply cells created by the Brotherhood. Although there is no hard evidence of this, and it is unlikely that there will ever be proof of a clandestine directive, the reality on the ground indicates that the leadership is either unwilling or unable to stop members from engaging in acts of violence, like using small explosives against

infrastructure or collaborating with violent groups that were not necessarily formed with the Brotherhood's blessing or approval.

The attacks allegedly committed by Brotherhood members have also included targeting less-guarded police installations and courts with so-called sound bombs, which are nonlethal and cheap to make but have the effect of keeping police on edge and locals feeling unsafe.¹⁵ Another method of attack has been arson targeting infrastructure. While the attacks themselves do not bring the government closer to collapse, they send a message of resistance and disrupt daily life. The perpetrators believe that the government and police officers are collectively guilty of murder or other abuses and that their attacks are therefore justified.

Though the ministry's allegations are difficult to prove, one incident that more clearly pointed to Brotherhood involvement occurred in July 2014, when at least four Brotherhood-affiliated men died when small explosives accidentally detonated at a farm in Fayyoun Governorate where they were being stored by a local Brotherhood leader, Ahmad Arafa Abdel Qader.¹⁶ That same month, a small explosive device targeting a train car killed a child in Alexandria. The suspects, shocked by the unexpected result, gave a specific confession noting that at least one of them was a member of a Brotherhood *usra* (family), the basic local unit of the organization.¹⁷

Much of the violence perpetrated by these Brotherhood-aligned groups falls within the definition of so-called creative or defensive nonviolence. Brotherhood leader Ashraf Abdel Ghafar said in a television interview that there are "levels of nonviolence," and targeting infrastructure can be considered part of one of those levels.¹⁸ Another Brotherhood leader admitted that Islamist youth do indeed target officers, but only "the major criminals," and clarified that he counsels patience instead.¹⁹ Even if the Brotherhood does decide to embrace violent action, it will never declare so publicly, and the history of the group shows its preference for clandestine operations and violence by proxy.²⁰

An ironfisted campaign by authorities initially helped curb violence by these new nonjihadi actors. When Islamist activists protested on January 25, 2014, the third anniversary of the revolution, by burning dozens of police cars and engaging in other acts of sabotage, many of them were killed. As participants had released a great deal of identifying information on social media websites, police were able to track and arrest activists who had escaped initial arrest. Many of them were sent to secret prisons in which suspects were held and tortured.²¹ An Islamist activist who had been involved in these nonjihadi violent groups and was arrested confirmed that the arrests and systemic torture did temporarily curtail antigovernment violence. He said, "The torture inside prisons is horrific; some tell on their colleagues as a result of the torture." Though this

Much of the violence perpetrated by these Brotherhood-aligned groups falls within the definition of so-called creative or defensive nonviolence.

deterred activists for a short time, new groups have emerged that more openly encourage violent action and armed resistance. The data support that this violence has happened and will likely continue to come in waves, with periods of intense activity and others of dormancy as security forces gain the upper hand.

The Evolution of Non-Salafi-Jihadi Violent Groups

In August 2014, coinciding with the first anniversary of the Rabaa dispersal, a new crop of more brazenly violent groups emerged in the mainland. The anarchists throwing Molotov cocktails had evolved into distinct groups urging armed resistance, the first of which was the Popular Resistance Movement. The group's slick website showed videos of improvised-explosive-device (IED) attacks targeting police stations and claimed credit for police assassinations.²² Some of the core members were arrested, but the group persisted, and existing lone-wolf-type groups across the mainland adopted the name and found a new sense of purpose in the message of armed resistance.

Some Brotherhood and Islamist youth have indicated their desire to form local Popular Resistance groups to put pressure on the Muslim Brotherhood to "reform itself to become a resistance movement," as one interviewee put it. A Brotherhood youth leader explained the "difficulties facing anti-coup forces in executing this plan of Popular Resistance groups. The most important of which is protecting these groups from state infiltration as well as ensuring their administrative and ideological cohesion. . . . [Such steps are necessary to increase] the ability of the groups to put forward a serious plan to subjugate the state apparatuses and possibly collaborate with leftist groups [to achieve this]. The other challenge is financing these groups, and finally the extent to which the Brotherhood . . . will support this revolutionary body."

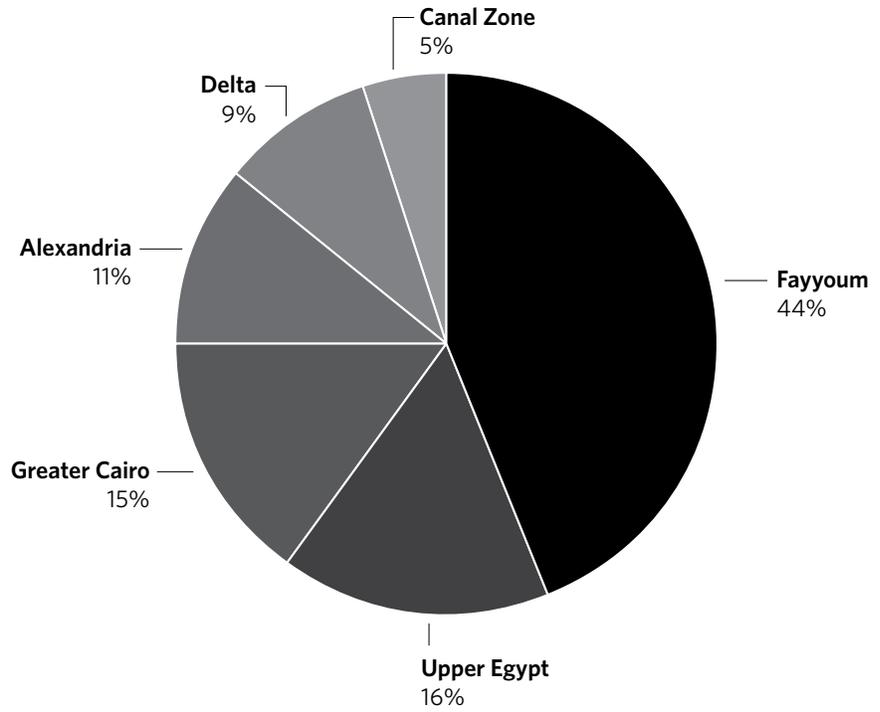
Around the same time, the Helwan Brigades, another armed group, briefly popped up. The group itself may have failed to deliver much of a blow if any to the government, but it provided the first clear example of the possession of sophisticated weapons when it posted a short video online of ordinary young men from the Helwan neighborhood, who spoke simple Arabic and did not appear to be hardened criminals or jihadists, dressed in all-black and ski masks brandishing assault rifles. Many observers dismissed the video due to its amateur nature, but it was precisely the fact that amateurs were starting to carry rifles that should have been worrying. Islamist activists from Helwan said that it was not surprising that such weapons would show up in the area, a mainly working-class region that has seen an increasingly tense relationship develop between police and local antigovernment Islamists.

The newest of the groups is also the deadliest thus far: the Revolutionary Punishment group, which announced its existence in January 2015 to coincide

with the fourth anniversary of the January 2011 revolution. This is a common theme among these groups as they attempt to present themselves as extensions of the popular 2011 revolution to further legitimize their actions. The first operation by the group was a drive-by shooting that signaled its embrace of machine guns. As of September 2015, the group had carried out about 150 attacks across sixteen governorates. It claims to have killed at least 157 security forces, although this could not be independently verified.²³ The attacks have ranged from planting IEDs targeting infrastructure and police convoys, to conducting armed ambushes of police checkpoints, to assassinating top police officers. The group has also claimed credit for the execution of at least two alleged informants and the bombing of the home of former mufti and prominent pro-government preacher Ali Gomaa in Fayyoun Governorate. Although the group continues to refrain from adopting overt Islamist discourse, one of its videos showcasing the execution of one of the alleged informants had jihadi *nasbeeds* (hymns) in the background and an editing style obviously inspired by Islamic State execution videos. Revolutionary Punishment is also the most highly organized among the new mainland-based groups and has meticulously recorded every attack it has carried out, signaling the possibility of a central command and, more importantly, access to a logistical network and financing.

An analysis of the group's attacks based on data compiled by the authors reveals that 44 percent of the attacks as of August 2015 had occurred in Fayyoun Governorate (see figure 3). The area is a well-known Islamist stronghold and has consistently produced some of the highest election results favoring Islamists. Fayyoun was also home to the Shawkies, one of the violent groups that emerged during the previous insurgency, and, because of its unique brand of *takfirism* deeming all who did not join the group unbelievers, it is remembered as one of the most radical groups that has ever existed in Egypt.²⁴ The Shawkies' sectarianism and uncompromising *takfirism* was responsible for one of the worst bouts of severe sectarian attacks targeted against Christians during that insurgency.²⁵ Although there is no evidence that the remaining Salafi jihadists in Fayyoun inspired by the Shawkies' ideas helped form Revolutionary Punishment, the risk of them potentially influencing the group and Brotherhood members is a worrying prospect.

Figure 3. Revolutionary Punishment's Violent Operations per Region



Sources: Revolutionary Punishment's website, "Revolutionary Punishment," last accessed September 28, 2015, <https://el3qab.wordpress.com/author/3eqab/>, and the group's social media activity.

This kind of influence can be observed in the northern Cairo district of Al Matariyyah, which has been especially active with Islamist protests and confrontations with the police. The area was the home base of the late radical Salafi preacher and theorizer Rifai Surour, the "Philosopher of al-Jihad," or the Egyptian Islamic Jihad group which was active during the previous insurgency and al-Qaeda's current leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, was a leader of.²⁶ Some of Surour's disciples, called Revolutionary Salafists, are among the most active cheerleaders of violent groups today and have engaged in violence, thus helping inflame the situation in Al Matariyyah.²⁷ Revolutionary Salafism infuses various radical Islamist ideas with a revolutionary focus on mobilizing the Muslim masses to found an Islamic state. Adherents shun the organizational structures of groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood yet are still supportive of that group's ultimate aims and commitment to fight the Sisi regime. This explains why Revolutionary Salafists sided with the Brothers following Morsi's ouster.

Fueling the Fire: Salafi Sheikhs and Brotherhood Propaganda

The post-coup political environment provides fertile ground for certain Salafi preachers and pro-Brotherhood media to inflame Islamist anger and provide religious justification for antigovernment violence. One means of fueling the fire has been the hodgepodge of a media operation that pro-Brotherhood Islamists and some Brotherhood members have set up by launching satellite channels in Turkey. The channels are *Misr al-An* (linked to the Muslim Brotherhood),²⁸ *El Sharq* (funded by Egyptian Islamists, non-Brothers), *Mekameleen* (allegedly funded by a Gulf businessman), and *Al Thawra* (formerly called *Rabaa*, with unclear sources of funding). Though these channels regularly suffer from shortages in funding, and some have shut down and relaunched under different names due to internal organizational disputes or pressures from the host government, those detailed here had a largely uninterrupted period of activity from the spring of 2014 to the summer of 2015. The operation of these channels indicates that the Brotherhood and other Islamist activists are adjusting to a long campaign of opposition to the government to keep the fire of resistance burning.

These channels are frequently used by radical Salafists. Though they are not part of the Brotherhood chain of command and do not abide by that group's stated principles of nonviolence, they do have a strong relationship with the Brotherhood and are therefore given a platform on these channels. But because these radical Salafists wish to create an environment conducive to insurgency, they overshadow those with legitimate political grievances to voice; the end result is an Islamist echo chamber with increasingly religious justifications for violence.

Some of the Salafi figures who appear on these channels encourage violent resistance and help create a general environment of hatred, which in turn opens the door for exploitation by jihadi ideologues. Salafi Sheikh Mohamed Abdel Maqsood used the *Al Thawra* (*Rabaa*) channel to declare that it was permissible to burn police cars. In an interview he explained, "We try to terrorize them [security forces]. Either by burning their cars, or threatening them, or burning their homes, and this is strictly for deterrence without having to go into an explicit armed confrontation."²⁹

Another Salafist who appears on these channels, Wagdy Ghoneim, declared Sisi an apostate even before the *Rabaa* dispersal. Muslim Brotherhood member Sheikh Essam Telemeh justified the killing of the mufti and judges on religious grounds, pointing to a fatwa that states any Muslim in society can exact retribution on a thug and equating unjust officials to thugs.³⁰ (The distinction is important because per Islamic law it is the family or guardians of the victim who seek retribution, not the entire society.) A former official in Morsi's government, Sheikh Salamah Abdel Qawi, issued a fatwa specifically condoning the killing of Sisi and encouraging conscripts to not turn up to their posts in Sinai.³¹ Perhaps the most radical voice, though, is that of Revolutionary Salafi

Mahmoud Fathy, the president of the Salafi al-Fadila Party. Fathy, based in Istanbul, tirelessly advocates for “popular resistance” and talks of Sisi’s “war on Islam.”³²

These channels also help promote new violent groups like Revolutionary Punishment. A guest on Misr al-An, for instance, called upon these groups to turn their guns on pro-regime media figures.³³ The channels have also hosted radicals like Shahid Bolsen, who in early 2015 helped inspire violent groups to target businesses ahead of a major economic conference.³⁴

The Brotherhood has also published and endorsed radical statements online that come close to inciting violence. The youth spokesperson appointed by the group in 2015, who uses the pseudonym of Mohamed Montasir and who

insiders say is in reality a number of individuals, has repeatedly used inflammatory language, in one statement calling for “revolution that chops off heads from rotten bodies” in reference to regime officials.

The most dangerous and significant statement yet, entitled “Nidaa al Kinana” (Egypt’s Call), was signed by 159 religious scholars, many with close ties to the Brotherhood.³⁵ It stated that it is Muslims’ religious

duty to resist the current regime, which it called an enemy of Islam, and to work to “eliminate it by all legitimate means.” It added, “Any leaders, judges, officers, soldiers, media figures or politicians, and anyone [else] who is definitely proved to be involved (even if only through incitement) in violating the honor of women, shedding the blood of innocents and unlawful killing – [all these] are murderers according to the shari’a, and must be punished according to the shari’a.”³⁶ The punishment for murderers per sharia is death. The Brotherhood endorsed the statement.³⁷

Furthermore, a book entitled *The Jurisprudence of Popular Resistance to the Coup*,³⁸ published by a Brotherhood-aligned Sharia Committee in early 2015 that is endorsed only by the revolutionary faction, further expanded on the permissibility of the use of force against security forces, outlining some limitations, such as discouraging intentionally indiscriminate attacks on security forces, which are meaningless in practice.

The “war on Islam” theme is present across the media and the wider Islamist discourse as of 2015. The presence of such a discourse is very dangerous as it justifies targeting the government in order to “defend Islam,” which feeds into the jihadists’ message. This type of discourse undercuts any serious claims made by antigovernment Islamists that they are fighting for democracy rather than for the return of Islamist rule.

The Brotherhood has published and endorsed radical statements online that come close to inciting violence.

The Steady March Toward Jihadism

In this evolving landscape of repression and incitement, some radical Islamists seek to add an ideological compass to these new violent groups aimed at toppling the secular state and replacing it with an Islamic one. On the one hand, there are the traditional Salafi-jihadi groups that attempt to directly recruit ordinary Islamist youth into becoming hardened Salafi jihadists. On the other hand, there is also a new breed of Revolutionary Salafists that seeks to combine a populist and jihadi message to create a more appealing path for Egyptian Islamists who may have reservations about joining groups like al-Qaeda or the Islamic State.

As the Revolutionary Salafi message is largely indigenous to Egypt, it is more relatable to the native activists. The most notable group currently proselytizing this message is the Ahrar (Freemen) Movement, a radical Islamist youth group.³⁹ Ahrar, formed in 2012, has attracted a curious mix of Salafists inspired by former presidential candidate Sheikh Hazem Salah Abu Ismail and violent soccer hooligans called ultras, who played a critical role in the street violence that plagued Egypt following the 2011 revolution. Ahrar's significance lies in its ideological theorizing, found in the group's manifesto, "Freemen's Struggle," and on its website, urging activism and violence in seeing through the implementation of Revolutionary Salafi ideas.⁴⁰

For Ahrar, the current battle is not about Morsi or the Muslim Brotherhood. Though the group detests both of them for buying into the democratic process and working with the military during Morsi's rule, it considers the true enemy to be the Egyptian state itself and its military. The group rejects national borders and highlights the United States and its world order as the enemy that colonizes the Muslim world through client regimes like Egypt's. Under different circumstances, such views could be dismissed as the musings of disillusioned Islamist youth, but because of Egypt's current climate, theorizing movements like Ahrar could inspire already violent antigovernment groups to become more violent. To dismantle the state, the group promises a two-phase campaign: first "raising awareness," as the group puts it, and then mobilizing the masses toward armed resistance. In other words, its message is a reinvention of the core jihadi message of groups like al-Qaeda, though Ahrar packages its message in a polished, modern, quasi-intellectual way and delivers it through well-spoken activists.

Radical ideas in Egypt are flourishing in new ways—radicalization should not just be associated with recruitment of youth into al-Qaeda or the marauding Islamic State. Revolutionary Salafism currently holds the potential to inspire a new strand of Islamist jihadism.⁴¹ The power of these ideas transcends the influence of the groups that try to spread them. Ahrar, for instance, barely

Some radical Islamists seek to add an ideological compass to the new violent groups aimed at toppling the secular state and replacing it with an Islamic one.

exists as a group on the ground due to its members being detained by authorities soon after its formation, yet the ideas it helped spread persist and will continue to evolve if the thus-far nonjihadist violent groups adopt them as an alternative to joining al-Qaeda or the Islamic State.

Jihadists' Recruitment and Homegrown Jihadists

Several jihadist groups have emerged at the forefront of the insurgency. Though it has been active since 2011 and responsible for major attacks in the Egyptian mainland since July 2013, Ansar Beit al-Maqdis's pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State in November 2014 cemented that group's place at the center of Egypt's ongoing jihadist insurgency. Since its rebranding as the Islamic State's Sinai Province, it has undoubtedly been one of the Islamic State's most active global affiliates and has become much deadlier. Al-Murabitun, another group (affiliated with al-Qaeda), is led by former special forces officer Hesham Ashmawy, who is believed to have been responsible for improving the combat effectiveness of ABM before he split from that group.⁴²

Though potential al-Qaeda–Islamic State competition in Egypt over financing and recruits will undoubtedly create more violence, these groups as they are, whether the Sinai-based ABM or the still-small al-Murabitun, are unlikely to represent an existential threat to the Egyptian government unless they can successfully tap into the wider Islamist anger in the Egyptian mainland and thus establish a foothold in the major population centers. The true prize is the potential thousands of recruits from the current amalgam of thus-far nonjihadist violent youth and the ranks of the Muslim Brotherhood and other antigovernment Islamists.

ABM has succeeded in continuously recruiting Egyptian men, young and old, from the Egyptian mainland. An armed confrontation with Egyptian security in March 2014 occurred only a fifteen-minute drive away from Cairo's borders, in the village of Arab Sharkas, Qalubiyah. There, fourteen militants—some of them armed with suicide belts—battled security forces for seven hours. The operation cost two officers their lives, and six of the terrorists died. A picture released by ABM showed the young faces of some of the terrorists, and a statement revealed that a father and son were members of the cell. The picture was then widely shared online by jihadists to show those who may have been on the fence that anyone can wage jihad.

ABM has continued strategizing to actively appeal to Egypt's youth and to channel youth anger toward fighting through jihad. Only hours before the January 24, 2014, bombing of the Cairo Security Directorate, ABM released an audio recording of one of its leaders, Abu Osama al-Masri. In the statement,

al-Masri appealed to the disillusioned nonjihadi youth, whom he cleverly referred to as “revolutionaries”:

[Our message] is for our brothers the revolutionaries against tyranny: O revolutionaries rebel for the sharia of Allah, O heroes defend Islam. O heroic revolutionaries . . . may Allah accept who were killed from you. . . . My brothers the revolutionaries: know that your brothers the mujahideen suffer for your suffering . . . so listen to us.⁴³

Refraining from castigating these nihilist youth for not raising the banner of sharia in their protests, al-Masri instead appealed to them, saying: “The battle today isn’t against an individual, or figure, or group, the battle today is against Islam.” ABM’s recruitment efforts following the group’s pledge to the Islamic State have continued to focus on reaching out to disgruntled Islamists, and recent videos increasingly show fighters with distinctively mainland accents or noms de guerre indicating that they hailed from the mainland.

One factor plays a particularly significant role in helping recruit youth: alleged police sexual assault of female detainees, which to Islamists is a redline. “I have personally documented twelve cases of girls getting pregnant [while in prison],” a pro-violence Islamist activist claimed. He explained that “most of those carrying weapons are doing so to confront a tyrant [Sisi] who has killed [thousands] of people in one day, destroyed entire villages . . . and now sexually assaults those detained.”

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Jihadists exploit the specific issues of sexual assault and torture to tap into the rage of furious youth. They recognize that the issue of sexual assault may push activists sitting on the fence over the edge and have therefore tied attacks directly to these abuses. In March 2014, a jihadi group called Ansar al-Sharia in the Land of the Quiver (Egypt) took credit for the assassination of more than two dozen security forces. The Ministry of Interior later confirmed the deaths and said it had proof the group was created by ABM. Ansar al-Sharia specifically justified its killings by claiming they were done to “avenge the honor of our free women.” An Islamist activist interviewed said, “Ansar Beit al-Maqdis’s targeting of the security directorate in Mansura was in response to girls who were killed and others who were assaulted by the regime’s thugs.”

New recruits may initially set aside differences over ultimate ideological objectives and forge ahead with violence in order to participate in this type of revenge. These dynamics set the stage for radicalization and the rise of home-grown jihadi groups in Egypt proper.

One of the most significant of these homegrown groups is Ajnad Misr (Soldiers of Egypt), which has claimed credit for numerous attacks targeting the police. The late founder had previously fought in Iraq and Sinai and used what he learned in these theaters to establish Ajnad Misr. Although the group

has not officially pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda, it is closer to that group than to the Islamic State.⁴⁴ ABM at one point referred to the group's members as "brothers," but there was an ideological split after ABM pledged allegiance to the Islamic State.

Ajnad Misr's attacks steadily grew in lethality and sophistication in 2014. An analysis of the location of the attacks suggests that it is a Giza-based group.⁴⁵ In early April 2014, it planted three improvised explosive devices outside Cairo University, killing a brigadier general of the police who served as the head of Giza's investigation department. An attack in September 2014 killed two officers and a conscript near the foreign ministry.

Ajnad Misr's statements of responsibility for these attacks specifically focused on retribution for those killed in Rabaa and other sit-ins and avenging the honor

The eventual return of Egypt's many itinerant jihadists—probably several thousand—is another factor that will likely increase jihadists' recruitment of Islamist youth.

of sexually assaulted Islamist women. In fact, the group has named its campaign "In Retribution There Is Life," which is part of a Quranic verse. The ideology of this group is a toxic mix of Revolutionary Salafism and Salafi jihadism, a worrying sign of the emerging trend of homegrown Egyptian jihadists who may have subscribed to Revolutionary Salafi ideas but from there have easily gone down the path of Salafi jihadism.

The group has also focused on spreading its ideas and the principle of jihad. It invested resources in launching an online media operation called Al Kennana that publishes articles encouraging jihad and lays out the religious rationale for why jihad in Egypt in 2015 is justified. The wind was taken out of the group after security forces killed its founder and arrested many of its operatives, most of them very young. Despite these setbacks, the group killed an officer with an IED in a Cairo neighborhood in August 2015.⁴⁶ The fate of this specific group may be unknown, and it may indeed never truly rebound, but it will continue to represent the first successful mainland-based jihadi group to have emerged after Morsi's ouster and to have acted largely independently. It will likely serve as an inspiration for future groups.

The Return of Egypt's Itinerant Jihadists

The eventual return of Egypt's many itinerant jihadists—probably several thousand—is another factor that will likely increase jihadists' recruitment of Islamist youth and the possibility that nonjihadi violent groups embedded in the Egyptian mainland will turn into active cells of the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. There is a precedent for this. When Egyptian fighters returned from jihad in Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s, their actions precipitated the bloodiest years of the previous insurgency.

The brutal and successful Islamic State has inspired many young Islamists to wage jihad, particularly after its conquests in Iraq and Syria and its infliction

of significant casualties on the ranks of the Egyptian military. An increasing number of Islamists have joined its ranks, and others have fought under the banner of jihadi groups in Libya. Al-Qaeda also remains a popular touchstone among those who reject the Islamic State's claim to the caliphate and its gross barbarity. Its branch in Syria, the Nusra Front, is another successful model in the view of young Islamists, and some Egyptians have traveled to join its ranks.

Many Egyptian jihadists who left in the 1980s stayed overseas to fight in regions like the Arab Maghreb—one estimate by a pro-government center run by a retired senior officer puts the number at anywhere between 8,000 and 10,000 Egyptians, though these numbers could not be independently verified.⁴⁷ Egyptian authorities claim that at least 3,000 Egyptians have traveled to join the Syrian jihad since 2012, a number that peaked during Morsi's presidency.⁴⁸ This number is also impossible to verify, but an Egyptian Islamic State fighter based in Syria interviewed for this paper confirmed that the number is likely close to several thousand.

As the war in Syria escalated during Morsi's tenure, government-sanctioned religious preachers actually encouraged Egyptians to travel to Syria.⁴⁹ A senior Morsi-government official said in June 2013 that Egypt would not punish fighters returning from Syria and dismissed the notion that they could pose a threat.⁵⁰ This dismissal is proving to be specious, as Egyptian jihadists returning from overseas have already been involved in attacks. The most significant example was when a former Egyptian army major who had waged global jihad carried out a suicide attack in Egypt—the September 2013 attempted assassination of the interior minister. The leader of the Ajnad Misr group also fought overseas, as previously stated, and other members of the group had allegedly traveled to places like Yemen.

Some other jihadists are returning to Egypt allegedly with orders from Egyptians who have risen to positions of leadership in either al-Qaeda or the Islamic State and wishing to contribute to what they see as a promising Egyptian jihad. Even before ABM made the Islamic State pledge, the connections between jihadists abroad and operatives inside the group were so strong that one Islamist youth interviewed, who had attempted to join ABM, was told that he needed to find an Egyptian jihadist in Syria to vouch for him. According to an interview with a midlevel Brotherhood leader in Giza, some Brotherhood members traveled to Syria in 2012 and in early 2013, and those who did join militant groups returned to Egypt after the coup with an itch to practice what they learned.

The Islamic State's ability to wrest territory away from Syria and Iraq, two previously strong Arab republics, has inspired some Islamists to believe that the same could be achieved in Egypt. Some activists interviewed suggested that the next step in escalating the fight against the Egyptian state will be attempting to establish control over certain neighborhoods, especially in working-class areas like Helwan. Attempts to do just that have failed in the past, but the Islamic

State's declaration of its own caliphate and the success of al-Qaeda affiliates in seizing territory could inspire some to try again.⁵¹

Can the Insurgency Be Deescalated?

As of this writing, neither the government nor the Muslim Brotherhood is taking actions that could deescalate the insurgency and move Egypt onto a more constructive path. For its part, the Egyptian government has offered no convincing strategy to stem the tide of extremism. Instead, the government has continued to crack down severely on all Islamists, effectively betting on the utility of brute force to nip the insurgency in the bud. The Brotherhood may share the blame for this turn toward violence, as evidence shows. But if the government dismantles the Brotherhood's network and continues to accuse it of sophisticated violence perpetrated by jihadists, it cannot expect the group's leadership to have the ability or willingness to rein in its members when needed.

Although they are bitter enemies locked in a zero-sum struggle, the government and pragmatic senior Brotherhood leaders share an interest in neutralizing this budding jihadi insurgency, as unlikely as this may seem. Sisi's regime naturally wants stability in order to proceed with critical economic reforms and regime security. For the Muslim Brotherhood, jihadism in its ranks poses a threat to the survival of the group as a unified organization. Salafi jihadists reject the Brotherhood's basic ideology of political participation and gradual change and deem it apostate, while many of the violent Brotherhood members increasingly view the group's leadership as unrepresentative and incapable and, as recent events show, are willing to rebel against it.

As there are no signs of either side abandoning its zero-sum approach to the ongoing conflict, talk of political reconciliation is at best premature. Yet there are certain steps that each side can take to deescalate the ongoing conflict and contain the violence.

The government needs to address the role it has played in the ongoing radicalization by fixing the deplorable prison conditions, releasing those in detention who have not committed criminal acts, and stopping practices such as forced disappearance, alleged extrajudicial killing, and sexual abuse that provide jihadists a prime recruitment tool.

It must also address the shortcoming in the threat analysis that lumps young Brothers together with hardened Salafi jihadists: this one-size-fits-all approach is destined to fail in combating extremism primarily because it does not exploit possible differences that may allow the government to divide and conquer this complex amalgam of violent actors. The government must use the fragmented landscape of Islamist militancy to its advantage and provide an alternative political path for nonviolent Islamists who disapprove of the current trajectory and wish to jump ship.

The government should be confident in its position of power when taking these measures. Offering a path toward political participation and deescalating the harshest and most indiscriminate security tactics would not be a sign of weakness but rather a smart strategy that would invite greater international support.

The Brotherhood should come to terms with the realities of the post-Morsi political order and recognize the recklessness of blaming the government entirely for the turn to violence and the Brotherhood's current predicament. It must rein in internal agitators and shut down the radicals.

Instead of waiting for a countercoup or a bloody showdown to settle its score, it must strive to reach a settlement with the regime. This reality must be reinforced by Western interlocutors who still engage with Brotherhood leadership. The senior leadership can use its weight, knowledge of the organization, and sources of funding to counter the rise of the revolutionary strand. As unlikely as a political settlement seems today, it could be an impossibility for decades if the more confrontational Brotherhood faction wins out.

Recognizing the potentially devastating consequences of the growing radicalization of Islamist youth is critical, and government efforts to stem the tide of such a steady move toward armed rebellion are at least as important as defeating ABM in the Sinai. Otherwise, crises will continue to rock Egypt, inhibiting any hope for political progress and economic recovery. Due to its population, geography, and significance to Islamists worldwide, an inflamed Egypt could experience levels of devastation surpassing those already inflicted on the region by the conflicts in Iraq, Libya, and Syria.

The government must address a shortcoming in its threat analysis that lumps young Brothers together with hardened Salafi jihadists.

Notes

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