

E-PAPER

Policy Brief Egypt 2 – Radicalization

Regime Repression and Youth Radicalization in Egypt

ANONYMOUSLY

In order to protect the identity of the author, the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung has chosen to publish the paper without naming the author.

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by Anonymous

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Preface to the Series

Policy Brief Egypt

Brutal regime repression, including rape and torture in detention, has initiated and fueled radicalization among youth activists who had originally adopted non-violent strategies. Similar to the Assad regime in Syria, Egypt's current rulers appear to be content that the most radical Jihadi groups emerge at the forefront of its opponents and make compromise appear impossible. The destruction of the Muslim Brotherhood, but also the leadership failures of the movement's top echelon, have left a whole generation adrift and receptive to radical ideologies and practices. Germany and the EU should return to a policy of strict conditionality determined by the priority of human rights. Initiatives that aim to re-insert youth into the political process need to be supported to prevent a massive increase in support for radical movements.

«They forced him to undress until he was completely naked and made him sit blindfolded, with his back and buttocks turned towards the officer, who told him: <today is Thursday and my wife has raised the red flag (a colloquial expression for refusing sexual intercourse), so this night is on you [...] > The boy was 15 years old, and would not tell us whether the officer actually raped him or not [...] but he said: <I will kill this officer, and everyone else who works in this prison!>»

(Reported by Y.M., an activist of the April 6 movement, imprisoned in late 2015).

The period that followed the military coup in July 2013 and the takeover of power by general Abdelfattah El-Sisi was marked by an unprecedented expansion in the power of the security forces. Real and suspected dissidents and opponents to the regime face detention, forced disappearance and extra-legal killings at the hands of the security services, who operate with full political cover from the top levels of the regime. The ban on any local or international human rights organizations and institutions to inspect prisons and detention centers has further encouraged abuses and human rights violations. Organizations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch or the Egyptian Coordination Group for Human Rights ^[1] have published chilling reports on the deteriorating situation of human rights in Egypt and the treatment of political prisoners. Sixty thousand political detainees are believed to be languishing in Egyptian jails, which are notorious for abuses against prisoners, and for physical and sexual torture, including rape. Since July 2013, 7,650 detainees were hauled before military courts, including 35 female detainees, which is a first in the history

1 The website of the organization is available at <http://ecrfeg.org/ar> (Arabic only).

of the military court system. 1,700 death sentences have been handed down, of which 688 have been confirmed, and seven actually executed. The number of enforced disappearances between July 2013 and June 2016 stands at 2811 people, including 1001 cases of enforced disappearance during the first half of 2016, an average of five cases a day. According to a report by the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention more than 3,200 children under the age of 18 have been detained since July 2013, and more than 800 of them are still being held. Torture is rampant in detention centers, and the number of those who perished as the result of torture and medical neglect has reached 268 detainees.^[2]

However, rather than with the human rights situation as such, this chapter is concerned with the impact that the policies of repression exert on the political orientation and intellectual trends among young people. Particularly, it looks into how the experience of violent repression has prompted youths to transform their political outlook and adopt radical positions, and to accept or advocate violence as a legitimate or even the only form of political action. It therefore focuses on youths who, prior to becoming victims of repression, had worked for peaceful political change in Egypt. To this end, 17 in-depth interviews were conducted, either face-to-face or via electronic communication, with former prisoners, as well as prisoners still in detention.^[3] They were affiliated with political currents that occupy different places in the secular-religious spectrum of the Egyptian political opposition (Revolutionary Socialists, April 6 Movement, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Gamaa Islamiyya [Islamic group], independents), and the duration of their incarceration lasted between one month and two years.

Most of these individuals had originally taken part in the demonstrations that initiated the 2011 revolution, and did not have a history of engaging in violence as part of their political activism. Despite the outbreak of the civil war in Syria in the summer of 2011, the emergence of the Jihadi movement *Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis* (ABM) in early 2012 (which declared allegiance to the Islamic State in November 2014, and changed its name to *Wilayat Sinai* [Arabic for «Sinai Province», WS]) and the Raba' massacre in August 2013 in the aftermath of the ouster of president Muhammad Mursi, they stuck to their conviction that peaceful political action was the right approach to achieve change in the political landscape in Egypt. Yet, as the security forces continue to use violence to suppress demonstrations, and resort to hired thugs and extra-legal killings without any accountability to the judiciary or the institutions of the Egyptian state, some have gravitated towards more radical approaches. Thus, the wave of repression that has swept over Egypt after July 2013 has created an environment that is generally conducive to direct young people in Egypt towards

- 2 Al-Jazeera: Egypt's prisons: the slow death, 5 September 2015, available at www.aljazeera.net/knowledgegate/newscoverage/2015/9/5/%D8%B3%D8%AC%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%88%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%B7%D9%8A%D8%A1 (Arabic, accessed 8 February 2017).
- 3 Communication was arranged through contact persons, and conducted over online phone applications at late hours of the night. Many of the political prisoners appear to have access to internet-enabled mobile phones.

embracing extremist ideas. Yet, radicalization occurs through different mechanisms and in different places.

Recruitment in detention

«I asked an officer of National Security: don't you see that these policies (systematic torture, ongoing arrests, closure of the public sphere) are a sure recipe to produce followers for the Islamic State? He smiled and told me: this is exactly our job.»

(N.A., an activist with the Revolutionary Socialists, arrested in 2016 in the run-up to the demonstrations opposed to the ceding of two Egyptian islands to Saudi-Arabia, detained for some months in a prison near Cairo).

Many similar testimonies from inmates of the Kanatir, Tora, Aqrab (in or near Cairo) and Burj Al-Arab (near Alexandria) prisons, but also reports by media who are generally supportive of the regime,^[4] confirm that Egyptian prisons and detention centers have turned into recruitment centers for the Islamic State and other Jihadi movements. Two sets of factors appear to be especially conducive for the intellectual reorientation of non-Jihadi youths. First, detainees are put under severe psychological pressure due to extremely poor conditions (overcrowded cells, as well as solitary confinement over weeks) and repetitive sessions of excruciating, often sexualized torture. Prison authorities then often deliberately dispatch young, non-Jihadi detainees to cells and barracks that are dominated by radicals. Already shaken by their harrowing experiences, these youths are thus subsequently exposed to cellmates who exploit their condition to systematically undermine their commitment to non-violence, democracy, or intellectual and religious pluralism.

«I don't really understand much of what is going on, but this is definitely a criminal regime, and it has to be taught a lesson», resumes R.S., a 19-year old member of the «Za-malek Ultras», a group of politicized football fans. R.S. participated actively in the 2011 revolution, and voted for the leftist presidential candidate Hamdeen Sabahi in the 2012 presidential race. After his imprisonment, R.S. was exposed to brutal physical and sexual torture and then placed in a cell dominated by affiliates of the Islamic State. Within days, they convinced him that violence is the only way to resist the regime, and he declared his adherence to the organization under the nom de guerre «Abu Obeida Al-Daqma». Prison

4 See for instance Al-Shourouq, «Here is Tora [i.e., the Tora prison at the southern edge of Cairo], a government center for IS recruitment», 21 April 2016, available at <http://cms.shorouknews.com/news/view.aspx?cdate=21042016&id=2b8f13ca-e5d8-4b0f-8868-d24288fa4161> (Arabic, accessed 8 February 2017).

authorities also appear to be using assignment to such cells as disciplinary measures, as reported by «Kasper», a journalist who was arrested and accused of «defaming Egypt». After rebelling against mistreatment in detention, he was transferred to a cell under the control of the Islamic State, and likewise changed his attitude into supporting violence to dispose of the regime.

In general, young detainees who have not yet acquired a solid intellectual, political and religious worldview, appear to be the most vulnerable to this kind of influence that often quickly leads to the adopting of outward Jihadi appearances and behavior, to taking a *nom de guerre* and finally, declaring allegiance to the Islamic State. On the other hand, prison authorities effectively allow, whether intentionally or out of negligence, that a steady flow of written and audiovisual propaganda material from the Islamic State reaches the inmates. Affiliates of the group propagate their views about how to change the regime in this way, and despite their ideological and doctrinal paucity, these materials often become important references for inmates who are otherwise largely deprived of access to information and media, and do not have a solid ideological foundation themselves.

Radicalization and Resistance

«They could not go on resisting the regime unarmed when the police was attacking them with life fire, and sending thugs to attack and kill demonstrators».

(S.A., medical student aged 27, arrested and sentenced to two and a half year despite the acknowledged fact that he had left the Muslim Brotherhood movement by November 2011).

With the continuous killing of protestors during the demonstrations that the Muslim Brotherhood organized in the wake of the toppling of Mohammed Mursi, a significant part of the young members of the Brotherhood began to exert pressure on the leadership to adopt a tactics of so-called «effective action». Such actions first occurred in the city of Al-Mansoura in July 2013, after three female students participating in a protest were killed by gunshots, allegedly fired by plain cloth thugs operating under orders of the security forces. Initially, these operations were aimed at self-defense and at protecting the demonstrators. They can be classified into two types: Disruptive actions, on the one hand, were aimed at spreading confusion and sabotage the tactics that the police adopted during this period to repress protests, for instance with the use of fireworks and sound guns. Destructive operations, on the other hand, targeted specific police stations, security vehicles and thugs involved in the killings of protesters and the physical liquidation of the activists. Eventually, however, essentially anything and anybody related to the security apparatus became a legitimate target for attacks. The question whether this should involve direct assassinations of police forces and plain cloth thugs led to a deep rift in the Brotherhood. Yet, with the progressive destruction of the movement's organizational structures, it became increasingly difficult to formulate coherent positions, and individual groups started to operate without any guidance or consideration for a doctrinal and legal basis. What began as a purely tactical response to the violence of the security forces has now gained its own dynamics of retaliation and escalation. Thus, similar to the case of the protest movement in Syria, violent regime repression pushed youth supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood – an organization which had made non-violence and institutional change its strategic choice – and secular opponents of the 2013 coup quickly into a cycle of escalating violence. Unlike the Syrian case, however, these protesters lacked access to weapons, external backing and perhaps also the mass support that may have turned the contestation into a full-blown civil war. Instead, many of those activists who were not killed or imprisoned went underground or joined jihadi groups.

It appears then that, in detention and resistance alike, «extremism is born out of physical and emotional suffering, and pushes individuals into a quest for revenge, without any intellectual framework to guide them, such as Fabion who was exposed to electric torture to his genital that developed erectile dysfunction: his ultimate hope has become to revenge from the officer who has done so» (X.B., a sociologist arrested at random and held in a prison for some months). Whether in prison or outside, these young people operate without any sound

religious or doctrinal rooting and guidance, and instead succumb to narratives of «confrontation» and «retribution», which lead directly to the imperative of taking up arms to confront the security forces. They turn away from non-violent action because it failed to bring real change and overthrow the despotic regime, which in their mind can only be changed by its own methods, namely violence. And they turn against democracy as a normative principle, also because international actors who proclaim support for democratic values have extended their support to the current Egyptian regime, despite it having usurped the reins of power by illegal means. In fact, the conviction has further gained ground that Western democracies will not accept the results of democratic elections when the winners turn out to be Islamists, as occurred with the tacit support for the military takeover in Algeria in 1992, the isolation and rejection of Hamas in Palestine despite its clear success in the 2006 elections, and the muted criticism, followed by gradual return to business as usual, after the coup against the Brotherhood's rule in Egypt.

«The commitment of the Western regimes to democracy is pure hypocrisy. Instead of repudiating the regime in Egypt, they are normalizing political relations, and providing economic assistance under the pretext of fighting terrorism and preventing migration.»

(«Michael», graduate of commerce at Cairo University, arrested in 2014. Initially held incommunicado and exposed to torture, he is still an inmate in the Tora prison).

Dimensions of Radicalization

Repression and resistance against it do not, however, necessarily generate identical trajectories and outcomes, and do not always lead to radicalization and extremism. Roughly speaking, it is possible to distinguish between three different currents among those who resist against the current order: the most radical considers the regime as such as «infidel», making it impossible to reform it from the inside and through the institutions, as the movements of political Islam and in particular the Muslim Brotherhood had proposed. Accordingly, «armed confrontation is the solution.» Indeed, according to these positions, one of the key preconditions to get rid of the regime will be to first eliminate the movements of political Islam, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and the Gamaa Islamiyah, after they established formal political parties. In fact, affiliates of the Islamic States consider the Muslim Brotherhood and the Gamaa Islamiyah as heretics for their involvement in formal politics. That is why one of the key slogans of imprisoned supporters of IS goes «we prevail and expand despite the heretic group [the Brotherhood]». For this current, the movements of political Islam are «the close enemy» that has to be defeated to achieve the unity of true believers, before starting to confront the «distant enemy»: the regime, other political movements, and the Christian minorities. Following an intellectual tradition first conceived in the 1960s by Egyptian Islamists such as Shokry Mustafa (imprisoned and tortured during

the reign of Abdel Nasser), they believe that anybody involved with the «infidel» regime must in turn be considered an infidel.

A second, less radical current among those who chose to pick up arms does not share the fundamental rejection of participation in politics, and hence refuses to label groups who made that choice as heretics. Instead, they focus on the current regime, and adopt a line of «an eye for an eye» meaning that only those directly involved in the torture or killing of dissidents should be targeted. Rather than considering society as made up of infidels, they see it as a victim of oppression that has to be redeemed by instruction and education. Finally, and against all odds, a third current of imprisoned youth remains committed that democracy is the solution, despite the difficulties it currently faces. They believe that the movements of political Islam should undergo a process of internal revision and self-criticism, and elect new leadership figures in place of those «who failed to deal with the political crises since July 2013» (A.Z., graduate of commerce at Alexandria University, arrested and imprisoned since 2015 for demonstrating against the regime, victim of enforced disappearance and tortured with electric shocks). This moderate current, however, finds its position undermined by the continued support of «democratic» countries for the oppressive Egyptian regime, «which gives traction to a discourse that argues to expand the circle of revenge even beyond the Egyptian regime, that this, to the Western countries who enable it.» (Michael, quoted above).

To sum up, we can say that there are two dimensions to the radicalization of youth in Egypt: on the one hand, extremism that emerges as the result of the systematic and excessive violence, ranging from physical and sexual torture to murder, which the security forces mete out with full political cover. There is a clear and straightforward relationship between this violent approach of the regime and the emerging of an environment that provides a fertile ground for the repudiation of peaceful resistance and the shift to extremist ideas, which appear to offer a much faster route to exert revenge upon a regime that continues to persecute dissidents regardless of their political orientation. Exposing young prisoners to a massive presence of supporters of the Islamic State after suffering sessions of brutal torture further accelerates the process, and turns prisons into incubators of extremism and violence. It appears as if the regime, which builds its legitimacy on a narrative of «fighting terrorism», sees the spread of extremism throughout society and the resulting persistence of instability as a convenient justification for its own hold on power that should be nurtured rather than eradicated. This narrative also serves to further discourage democratic countries to stop pushing for a democratic process in Egypt, and instead normalize political, economic and military ties with the regime, which in turn contributes to the decision of youths to embrace the ideology of violent extremist groups as a last resort.

On the other hand, there is a generational dimension to consider: youth (that is, the age group between 13 and 25) now account for more than half of Egyptian society. As a result of their prominent involvement in the 2011 revolution, tyranny and despotism in any form has become unacceptable for this part of society. At the same time, Oliver Roy's observation whereby the current Islamist youth movements in Europe have emerged independently from the ideological origins of the parent generation, equally applies in Egypt. The uprising

of the youth that erupted in 2011 occurred in a context full of bitterness and shaped by economic and political defeat, and in isolation from the ideological and educational environment of political movements in general, and those of political Islam in particular. These organizations did not only fail to develop a clear and viable political project, but have also has been unable to provide forms of internal participation and communication that could engage youth socialized into the fast pace and direct, non-hierarchical exchange typical of social media. Already in 2011, a sizeable part of the Muslim Brotherhood youth broke away, and the repression that occurred in 2013 only deepened the leadership crisis.

Thus, we find that the real beginning of the radicalization process lies in the decision to pick up of arms as a means to change the regime, which occurs in a close and repressive environment that in turn generates the urge for revenge. The intellectual transformation towards extremism then occurs as a rationalization of that decision, as justifications are assembled for the decision to use force and for the rejection of any «appeasement» with the regime, or «politics» in general. The logical endpoint of this development is the involvement in violent acts against the regime and its security apparatus: terrorism that is the product of and the response to the violence handed out by the regime.

This, however, does not appear to be a trajectory that is necessarily preordained: radicalization processes can be stopped and reversed when the conditions that generated them are changed. R.S., for instance, the member of the «Ultras» soccer fan group who then declared allegiance to the Islamic State, reversed this decision after long discussions with N.A. (the revolutionary socialist) who he encountered in prison. Instruction from imprisoned members of the Muslim Brotherhood about the doctrinal implications of declaring believers (even those working for the regime) infidels and the shaky foundations of the Jihadi ideology further helped this decision along. After his release, R.S. no longer supports any political organization, and has taken a distance from any kind of political activity. Kasper, the journalist, also started to doubt the soundness of the Jihadi approach as soon as his «disciplinary rooming» with the followers of the Islamic State was over and he was returned to a cell populated by his original friends. Micheal, despite or perhaps because of his sharp criticism against Western governments, intends to seek contact with Western young activists once he is released, «so that they exert pressure on their own governments to be consistent with their democratic values when it comes to us.» Despite not being related to any Islamist movement, he plans to «support a move to a transparent system that allow for people of competence to be elected for office in Islamic movements.»

Stopping the Slide

Contrary to the claims of regime propaganda, one of the most important deterrents against radicalization, and hence the slide into terrorism, are indeed the remains of the Islamist movements and their imprisoned cadres, in particular the Gamaa Islamiyya. Prisoners report that many of the group's intellectual members preach against the dangers inherent in the slide towards violence and Jihadist tendencies. Their discourse is characterized by a high level of coherence and doctrinal erudition, and virtually unassailable by the militants, who often lack even basic religious training. It enjoys special credibility due to the fact that the group itself underwent the practical experience of violence struggle against the Egyptian security state during the 1980s, and subsequently undertook a complete revision and self-criticism of its strategies. Thus, they developed a solid doctrinal and ideological foundation for the disavowal of violence in political action. In particular the lectures of Sheikh Safwat Abdel-Ghani, an inmate in the Aqrab prison, are said to have contributed significantly to stem the spread of extremism there. Along the same lines, the debates conducted in prison by Sheikh Ashraf Abdel Moneim, published under the title «Heated Debates behind Cold Bars» provide an important reference to challenge the idea of violence as a political means.

The Muslim Brotherhood, on the other hand, has become the target of sharp criticism by groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, for providing «tyrannical» and «secular» regimes in Egypt as well as Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia with a cover of religious legitimacy. The organization itself suffers from a severe internal crisis, not only due to its inability to formulate a religious discourse that is acceptable to its members, but also on the organizational level, as a result of disagreement over the means to counter the repression. This has prevented it from formulating a coherent religious and ideological narrative that could compete with the tenets of the Jihadi ideology, and has restricted it to a hostile political posture towards groups who adopt it. Youth with Islamist tendencies, in particular those gravitating towards the use of violence, are not convinced. The same and more applies to the representatives of official religion, in particular the Sheikhs of Al-Azhar: due to their complete cooptation by the regime, their credibility among the youth, and hence their capacity to influence their intellectual orientation, is simply nonexistent.

Recommendations

- It appears as if the optimism that characterized the first phase of the Arab spring has mostly evaporated and been replaced by extremism. Yet the reasons behind the surge of terrorism that has hit Egypt remain poorly understood, with public discourse – inside as well as outside Egypt – dominated by the self-serving narrative of a repressive regime. More research is needed to understand the dynamics of extremism and identify suitable approaches to work against it.

- One such approach would be to promote activism that works through non-violent means, and to encourage young people to return to politics. This, however, requires additional efforts by European governments to end the repressive approach of the Egyptian regime. In particular, military cooperation and the proliferation of equipment for the purpose of repression (truncheons, tear gas) must be halted and political conditionality for economic support restored.
- Crucial conditions would be a halt to death sentences, to suspend law number 8 of 2015, which adopted an excessively vague definition of «terrorism»,^[5] the permission for independent commissions to visit Egyptian prisons and inspect the situation of prisoners, pressure to release minors and young people, and to open the public sphere to all opposition movements in Egypt regardless of their intellectual orientation.
- Open channels of dialogue with Islamist movements who are capable of confronting extremist thoughts and tendencies, such as the Party for Building and Development (the political arm of the Gamaa Islamiyya), to acquire direct knowledge about their orientation, rather than relying on media reports.
- Develop digital/remote access educational programs that offer Egyptian activists and dissidents training in political science and other relevant disciplines; this was a repeated request from current prisoners, who feel the need to develop a conceptual framework for their future activism.

5 George Sadek, FALQS: Egypt's New Antiterrorism Law, Law Librarians of Congress, 8 September 2015, available at <https://blogs.loc.gov/law/2015/09/falqs-egypts-new-antiterrorism-law> (accessed 8 February 2017).

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