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The Transformation of Violent Extremist Groups: New Threats and Challenges

Amr Elshobaki


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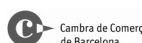


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Introduction

The new dynamics of violence in Egypt and the Arab region cannot be understood without examining the transformations of extremist groups since the 1970s. Since Sayed Qotb wrote his renowned book *Signposts on the Road*, in which he labelled Arab societies “apostate” and called for transforming them by force through a “faithful vanguard”, the region has witnessed the emergence of the first wave of Jihadist movements, particularly al-Jihad and al-Jamaa al-Islamiya, which appeared in Egypt and monopolised Jihadist violence until the last decade of the 20th century. Across the Arab region other extremist groups emerged, such as the Armed Islamic Group (Groupe islamique armé – GIA) in Algeria and the Moroccan Islamic Combatant Group, which adopted Salafist-Jihadist ideologies and whose main aim was to topple incumbent regimes.

Since that time, Jihadist violence in Egypt and several Arab countries has undergone various transformations, including broadening its targets and expanding the scope of its operations. This is particularly the case of al-Qaeda, which thrived in Iraq and then moved to Syria and the Gulf region, as well as of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which started in Iraq and Syria and then spread to the Sinai Peninsula and several regions in Yemen and carried out attacks in the Gulf region as well as in Tunisia and Morocco and in the West.

This paper will look into the key factors that have driven the transformations of extremist groups in the past five decades. This will be done by examining the discourse of the first wave of violent extremist organisations, exemplified by al-Jihad and al-Jamaa al-Islamiya in Egypt, and the second wave, with emphasis on al-Qaeda and ISIS. It will also examine discourses of other violent extremist groups, especially some that broke away from the Muslim Brotherhood and started new forms of violence, such as the Arms of Egypt Movement, also known as Hasm.

The analysis contributes to understanding new forms of terrorism, which in turn is useful to design new approaches to tackle violent extremism that would go beyond the security focus and the renewal of religious discourse.

The First Wave of Jihadist Organisations

The difference between old and new forms of terrorism can be attributed to two main issues: the organisational structure and the doctrinal foundation.

The first wave of Jihadist organisations were characterised by a coherent structure that was run centrally through a group of leaders, known as the “emirs”, responsible for directly recruiting operatives, and a number of mediating entities and leadership bases that spread across all Egyptian cities and governorates.

Al-Jihad and al-Jamaa al-Islamiya in Egypt as well as other early Jihadist groups operated within the framework of a doctrinal and political project inspired in its jurisprudence by a specific trend in interpreting religious texts that was originally founded by the 12th century theologian Ibn Taymiyyah. This trend was also adopted by a number of contemporary clerics who influenced those groups, such as Sayed Qotb, whose book constituted their main doctrinal reference. In addition, al-Jihad and al-Jamaa al-Islamiya also released their specific doctrines.

The *Absent Duty* (Alfaridat algha'iba), issued by al-Jihad, declared a holy war against secularism and vowed to eliminate all attempts to sideline religion on the social, political, cultural and judicial levels and to promote non-Islamic values in education and the media. It was a war against the regime, described as “jahili”, or tainted by the corrupt practices that prevailed in the pre-Islamic era. Al-Jihad also released a book entitled *The Neglected Obligation*, in which Jihad was presented as an obligation for all Muslims that had been neglected.

The *Islamic Action Charter* (Mithaq aleamal al'iislami) released by al-Jamaa al-Islamiya adopted the same approach and called for war to be waged against rulers who did not apply Islamic laws. The organisation also released a document entitled *The Islamist Movement's Stance on Partisan Life in Egypt*, in which it rejected democracy and the multi-party system. In addition to these documents, hundreds of books and thousands of pamphlets were published justifying violent action and the use of terrorism.¹

Al-Jihad and al-Jamaa al-Islamiya did not, however, accuse the entire society of apostasy as was the case with the Jamaat al-Muslimin (Society of Muslims) group, commonly known as al-Takfir wa al-Hijra (Excommunication and Migration). It is worth noting that al-Jamaa al-Islamiya was more flexible than al-Jihad on the organisational and doctrinal levels, which allowed it to attract more members and to spread widely across Upper Egypt.

Members of those Jihadist organisations subscribed to the ideological approach their respective groups adopted and would undergo a long process of indoctrination until

¹ These include works written by Sayed Imam al-Sharif, nicknamed Doctor Fadl, who was one of the most prominent ideologues of al-Jihad. He wrote a book entitled *The Essential Guide for Preparation*, deemed one of the most important references for Jihadist groups, as well as *The Compendium of the Pursuit of Divine Knowledge*, *Secrets of al-Qaeda*, *A Critique of Shiites*, *Terrorism is Sanctioned in Islam*, and *Guidelines for Divine Obedience*.

they were eventually capable of carrying out terrorist operations. Intensive ideological training enabled them to understand the religious reference of the actions they would engage in at a later stage. In fact, each of the attacks launched by these groups was preceded by a meticulous religious edict (fatwa) that justified the attack. This included the assassination of late President Anwar Sadat.

Terrorist attacks carried out by these groups targeted state officials and the economy, in particular the tourism sector. The Egyptian state eventually managed to disband both groups and stop their attacks. The 1997 Luxor massacre that resulted in the killing of dozens of tourists is considered the last terrorist attack carried out in Egypt by a Jihadist organisation belonging to the first wave.

With the outbreak of violence in Algeria following the exclusion from power of the Islamic Salvation Front (Front Islamique du Salut – FIS), the 1990s witnessed confrontations between the state and extremist groups that were bloodier than those that took place in Egypt. Like their Egyptian counterparts, Algerian Jihadist groups were local organisations focused on toppling a regime they accused of apostasy and on establishing what they claimed to be the Islamic alternative. Both the FIS and the GIA declared war against the state and civil strife ensued. After thousands of Algerians lost their lives, extremist groups eventually failed, as was the case in the Egypt.

Failure to achieve the local goals for which these groups were established was to a great extent responsible for the substantial transformation of Jihadist groups, including globalisation of their operations. Such transformation not only affected the Arab or Muslim world but also other parts of the world as was most flagrantly demonstrated in the 11 September attacks in 2001.

The Globalisation of Violence and Shifting Discourse from al-Qaeda to ISIS

The shift from the local to the global discourse can be traced back to 1998 when Ayman al-Zawahiri's wing of al-Jihad announced joining al-Qaeda and establishing the World Islamic Front for Jihad against Jews and Crusaders. Thus, the main objective of Jihadist groups shifted from toppling allegedly apostate regimes and replacing them with Islamic states to fighting foreign invaders, the United States in this case, then waging war against Shiites.

Al-Qaeda found fertile ground for its operations in Iraq following US invasion. In fact, the US war on terror was the main reason for the group's expansion. Al-Qaeda launched numerous attacks across the country mainly targeting Iraqi civilians and taking advantage of the security vacuum that ensued in the wake of toppling the Iraqi regime and disbanding state institutions.

Nevertheless, the period that followed the 11 September attacks was mainly characterised by a gradual decline in the doctrinal discourse. This was accompanied by the emergence of a new generation of operatives and ideologues rooted in their local political and sectarian contexts in Syria and Iraq, which presented a departure from the globalised discourse and leadership of figures such as Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri and Abu Mosaab al-Zarqawi, among others.

The eruption of civil strife in several Arab countries such as Iraq, Syria, Libya and Yemen together with political instability in others like Egypt, especially in the Sinai Peninsula, triggered the emergence of a new type of extremist group. In Iraq, the sectarian policies of Nouri al-Maliki's government coupled with violations committed by political parties and Shiite militias offered an ideal setting for the creation and empowerment of ISIS.

The new groups did not base their actions on doctrinal references, as was the case with their predecessors. The attacks carried out by the new groups were a result of social marginalisation and a desire for revenge on a sectarian or political basis. Some groups would at times use religious slogans only to justify actions they had already committed.

Another substantial difference between the first and second waves of Jihadist groups is demonstrated in the preparation of members for terrorist operations. In the 1970s, members of al-Jihad or al-Jamaa al-Islamiya were undertaking long doctrinal education to be ready for participating in militant operations. Members of ISIS do not receive any ideological preparation and do not need any since they join to satisfy an urge for

revenge whether against Shiites in Iraq, the sectarian regime in Syria or “infidels” in Europe.

It is important to take this transformation into consideration when examining the reasons behind militant extremism. In the last three decades of the 20th century, religious texts were the ultimate reference and extremist groups had a doctrinal reference that relied on a particular interpretation of those texts. Based on this interpretation, they concluded that incumbent regimes had to be toppled by force because they do not apply Islamic laws and are therefore deemed apostate. The militant leaders who wanted to renounce violence could do so only through doctrinal revisions of their views on the state and the use of terrorism. It was only through those revisions, supported by the Egyptian state, that many militants were able to renounce violence.

Since 2000, the doctrinal debate that defined the role of Jihadist groups and determined their fate receded remarkably to the background, then almost vanished with the emergence of new groups driven mainly by a desire for revenge whether for sectarian, social or political reasons. With no doctrinal reference, members of these groups presented themselves as criminals rather than Jihadists and gave precedence to the act of killing over the religious text that allegedly sanctions it.

ISIS: From Doctrinal to Popular Recruitment

The shift from doctrinal to vindictive violence and the withdrawal of the role of the religious text in favour of social, political and sectarian grudges do not mean the total absence of the religious factor in new forms of violence. It rather means that instead of the religious text being the point of departure based on which any action is initiated it becomes instead the tool through which the action is endowed with legitimacy.

With the emergence of ISIS and the expansion of its activities in Iraq, Syria and the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt, a new type of recruitment was introduced, one that is popular rather than doctrinal. New members are lured into joining ISIS through grievances they have and a desire to retaliate against the entity or group that is seen as the cause of their suffering. This was particularly demonstrated in Iraq when ISIS managed to expand its influence in different regions across the country, due to the popular support it received from a strand of the Sunni population that had been gradually marginalised by the government of former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki over successive years. This

desire for revenge was faintly coated with religious slogans that presented the enemy as apostate but such a discourse never featured prominently.

In Sinai, ISIS has been taking advantage of the social context in the peninsula. True, the group never managed to take control of entire cities or villages, as was the case in Iraq or Syria, but it still managed to take advantage of the violations committed by security entities against Sinai residents demonstrated by civilian deaths, the demolition of houses, forced evacuations and deteriorating economic conditions, as well as general lack of development in the peninsula and the continuation of the state of emergency. ISIS presented itself as the saviour that would defend the residents and help them retaliate against the regime. In this context, ISIS found the support it needed from the people who were subjected to different forms of injustice and many of whom were ready to take part in suicidal operations to seek vengeance (ElShobaki, 2017b).

ISIS State and the Caliphate

The documents released by early Jihadist groups gave a detailed account of the Islamic state to be established following the ousting of “apostate” regimes. This state, which applies Islamic laws, would be modelled after the state founded by the Prophet Muhammad in Mecca and Medina and the Four Guided Caliphs that succeeded him.

In the 1970s, the Muslims’ Group, one of the few fundamentalist groups that labelled both the regime and the society apostates, called upon its members to migrate to a place where they could establish a state similar to that founded by the prophet. Shukri Mustafa, the founder of the group, explained his view of the Islamic state:

Those who argue that the establishment of the modern city would not be at the expense of worshipping God or who think that Western scientists can be believers have abandoned their religion in favour of worldly pleasures. Was it possible for the Prophet Muhammad and his companions who dedicated their lives to worshipping God and fighting a holy war to be physicists, mathematicians, or astronauts at the same time? The prophet stayed in Mecca for thirteen years, during which he taught people about Islam... only about Islam, not about physics, philosophy, mathematics, or astronomy. How is it possible that many hypocrites still claim that Islam will only be powerful when Muslims learn the sciences of Europe?²

2 The statement of Shukri Mustafa at the Military Court in case no. 6 for the year 1977 on January 6, 1977

Such reference to the history of early Islam and the state established by the prophet and the four caliphs who succeeded him disappeared from the discourse used by ISIS and was replaced by the actual actions committed by the group, used as the main channel through which it attracted new recruits. This new discourse attracted different types of youths whose main objective was to engage in acts of vengeance against whichever entity or community they deem to have done them wrong.

The ISIS caliphate's ability to control and administer territory was a much more effective way to quickly recruit and indoctrinate youth to its ranks than the approach that had been used until its emergence, which revolved around appealing to the caliphate of history books. Despite the organisation's defeat on the ground in Syria and Iraq, ISIS continues to grow and retain this capability to expand through social networking websites.

Use of Technology and Social Media

Using technology and employing modern marketing strategies is undoubtedly one of the major differences that distinguish ISIS from earlier Jihadist groups in the 20th century. The earlier violent extremist groups depended on books and documents, explaining the doctrinal foundation that drove them into action. ISIS, on the other hand, employs the virtual world for recruitment, support and deterrence.

The use of technology has played a great role in consolidating ISIS power. Through the use of social media, the organisation has attracted large numbers of recruits from all over the world. It is also through the internet that ISIS receives funding and at times creates virtual training fields (Abdel Sabour, 2014).

Use of technology is not confined to recruitment and funding, but also as a means of deterring enemies and showing off power. This was most poignantly demonstrated in the videos ISIS published of the execution of its victims and whose graphic content was intended to inspire awe in any party attempting to fight them (al-Ghamrawi, 2015).

The Challenge of Incubating Environments

In the era of the first wave of Jihadist groups, which emerged in the 1970s, the main threat these groups posed was their doctrinal influence and role in recruiting

operatives. This meant that fighting those groups necessitated targeting their doctrinal base. That is why the Egyptian state focused its war against extremist groups on doctrinal revisions, initiatives by al-Azhar and dialogue with leading militants in and outside prisons in order to lead them to reconsider their stances on texts they used to justify terrorist attacks and to renounce violence.

As a result, in 1997, al-Jamaa al-Islamiya issued its doctrinal revisions in which it declared renouncing violence and stopping terrorist operations. This was followed by the release in 2002 of four books³ under a series entitled *The Revision Series*, which reviewed the doctrinal foundations based on which al-Jamaa al-Islamiya operated. In the following years, the group issued around 20 books, all tackling the same issue. The release of *Rationalizing Jihad* by Sayed Imam al-Sharif signalled the end of an era of militant extremism in Egypt.

The doctrinal challenge receded remarkably with the emergence of new groups that abandoned the religious discourse in favour of sectarian, political or social vengeance. In the case of al-Qaeda, or the Nusra Front, and later ISIS, the challenge is more related to the incubating environment, in which extremist groups enjoy popular support, such as the case of Sinai.

Many of the youths who join ISIS are not necessarily organised members of the group nor have they pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. They rather share a desire to retaliate against the regime for different reasons pertaining to the economic and political problems in Sinai. The grievances of those youths make them fall prey to those groups, which act as their savour and provide them with the money and ammunition needed to get back at the regime.

The same applies to major cities occupied by ISIS in Iraq and Syria where residents wanted to retaliate against the sectarian regime and found in extremist militants the opportunity to do so. Hence, ISIS was offered an incubating environment there too and was capable of spreading its influence and recruiting large numbers of civilians. That is also why it was only when ISIS lost this support provided by the incubating environment that state troops were able to liberate several cities from militants, which was the case in several Iraqi cities as well as in Raqqa in Syria.

Targeting incubating environments constitutes the major channel through which new extremist groups can be countered. This necessitates addressing political, social and sectarian issues that create those incubating environments and taking the required

³ The books were entitled *The Initiative to Stop Violence: A Realistic Vision and a Religious View*, *The Prohibition of Extremism in Religion and of Accusing Muslims of Being Infidels*, *Advice and Clarification in Correcting the Understanding of Those Ordering Good and Forbidding Evil*, and *Shedding Light on the Mistakes Committed in Jihad*.

steps towards granting citizens equal rights. Many of these factors are observable in the Egyptian context. Egypt shares similar experiences of the evolution of Islamic groups, from the nascent Jihadist organisations in the 1970s to the presence of ISIS, especially in Sinai, and all the significance that this has for the broader fight against extremism in the country.

Mapping the Extremist Groups in Egypt

Despite an extensive security clampdown and official statements on the elimination of terrorist cells in the Sinai Peninsula and across Egypt, terrorist attacks have increased in the past four years (2013-2016) (Hesham, 2016).

The first quarter of 2015 witnessed the largest number of terrorist attacks, with the number of attacks in March 2015 reaching 125. Compared to 2015, 2016 witnessed a remarkable drop in terrorist attacks in 2016 (200 attacks).

Since April 2017, the number of victims of terrorist operations has increased, with 70 Christians killed in April and May in attacks on two churches and on a bus transferring a group of worshippers to a monastery in Upper Egypt.

Terrorist operations particularly increased in the second half of 2017 to reach 20 attacks in July, including the attack in which 30 Egyptian army officers were killed in Sinai ("Terrorist Attacks in Egypt in 2017", 2017). In November 2017, an attack in the Bahariya Oasis killed 17 security officers, four from National Security. The BBC, however, reported a larger number of casualties and was faced with a wave of criticism and accusations of lack of professionalism by Egyptian media outlets and the State Information Service ("Clashes between Militants and Egyptian Security Forces", 2014). This was followed by the bloodiest terrorist attack in Egypt's modern history when 310 were killed at the Rawda Mosque in the Sinai Peninsula ("Victims of Rawda Mosque Attack Reach 310", 2017).

Attacks were not only confined to Sinai but also extended to other governorates. In 2015-2016, Sinai came first with around 450 attacks, followed by Cairo (102 attacks), Giza (93 attacks) and Fayoum (52 attacks) (The Regional Center for Strategic Studies, 2016a). The rise in terrorist attacks in Fayoum and Beni Suef is largely attributed to poverty and unemployment in these two governorates.

The Social Background of Extremist Operatives

The social background of militant operatives from the first wave of Jihadist organisation is well documented due to interviews conducted with a number of senior leaders by scholars from several Egyptian research centres such as al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, the National Center for Social Studies, and the Ibn Khaldoun Center for Developmental Studies. However, for the past five years, conducting interviews with members of the militant groups has not been allowed. Therefore, the

information regarding extremist operatives currently operating in Egypt is based on preliminary published data that gives a rough idea of their social background.

Most members of Jihadist groups that emerged in the 1970s were not from privileged social or economic backgrounds (with few exceptions such as Ayman al-Zawahiri) but belonged to the lower middle class and did not receive much education. However, members of current extremist groups, such as Hasm or Revolutionary Punishment, as well as several senior leaders in ISIS, belong to the upper middle class and come from well-off families.

In the era of the first wave of violent organisations, operatives mainly came from Upper Egypt, especially the governorates of Assuit and Minya. At present, terrorist activities are mostly centred in North Sinai, Cairo, Giza, Fayoum and Beni Suef, the last two being the poorest. The distribution of terrorist operatives is much higher in urban areas (69.7%) than in the countryside (30.3%) (The Regional Center for Strategic Studies, 2016b). In addition, terrorist operatives under the age of 35 (75%) far exceed those over the age of 35 (25%) (The Regional Center for Strategic Studies, 2016b).

Several research papers have demonstrated that the majority of ISIS members are youths who are attracted by the marketing strategies used by the group. One of the most prominent examples of youths who joined ISIS is Islam Yakan, the young man from the upper middle class, whose photos of him carrying severed heads went viral on social media (al-Qadi, 2014). There is also the case of football referee Mahmoud al-Ghandour, who comes from a well-off family, graduated from the School of Law and is the son of a football coach and the nephew of an international football referee. Al-Ghandour's transformation was quite striking. He was an athlete who liked acting and music and posted videos of himself singing. However, he denounced this phase of his life as anti-Islamic and announced he was travelling from Cairo to ISIS-controlled areas (Ramadan, 2015).

The information available on terrorist operatives who participated in the attacks on churches in Cairo is quite revealing. The Botroseya Church bombing, which took place on 11 December 2016, was carried out by Mahmoud Shafik Mohamed Mustafa, nicknamed Abu Dajana al-Kinani. Mustafa was born 1994 and was a university student who then joined Ansar Beit al-Maqdes and received his training in Sinai. Mahmoud Hassan Mubarak Abdullah, who carried out the suicide attack on Saint Mark's Cathedral in Alexandria on 9 April 2017, was born in 1986 and worked for an oil company. The perpetrator of the attack on Saint George's Church in the Nile Delta city of Tanta on the

same day as the Alexandria attack was Mamdouh Amin Mohamed Baghdadi, born in 1977 and graduate from the School of Humanities (al-Beheiri, 2017a).

The motives that drive youths to join ISIS and other violent extremist groups in Egypt have been a subject for debate. Some analysts believe that youths are mainly attracted by the ideology and religious approach promoted by ISIS. Others, however, argue that youths identify with the victimisation discourse and are mainly driven by their social and economic conditions and the subsequent urge to retaliate against whoever did them injustice, whether real or imagined. Poverty, unemployment, lack of awareness and deteriorating education all contribute to the increasing numbers of recruits (Fayez, 2016).

Victimisation and Political Vengeance

The discourse of Jihadist groups in the last three decades of the 20th century focused on proving that the regime is apostate because it does not follow God's laws and therefore had to be toppled by force. New terrorist groups abandoned the apostasy argument and focused instead on the regime being unjust.

In Egypt, many violent extremist groups emerged following the ousting of the Muslim Brotherhood and the subsequent intervention of the military in July 2013. These groups particularly decided to retaliate against the state following the dispersion of the Rabaa al-Adawiya and al-Nahda sit-ins, organised to protest the ousting of Islamist President Mohamed Morsi and which, according to independent sources, resulted in the death of 632 protesters and eight security officers (al-Hadari, 2014).

One of the senior leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood said that they had reconsidered the nature and the path of their struggle against the state in the light of their failure in the first confrontation with the regime between July 2013 and January 2014 (Atef, 2017). This statement signalled the beginning of a transformation in the Muslim Brotherhood's approach as they shifted from protests and marches to what they called "revolutionary action". However, the nature of this action was never clear and was at times subject to individual interpretations. Debates ensued inside the Brotherhood about what kind of action was to be taken, with some members advocating "advanced specialised operations" targeting particular figures in the police or the judiciary. The choice of these figures is based on the group's conviction that they committed violations for which they deserved to be killed, which was the case with late Prosecutor General Hesham Barakat, assassinated in Cairo in 2015.

According to Yehia Moussa, a senior leader in the Muslim Brotherhood who was the spokesperson of the Minister of Health during the Islamist rule and who currently resides in Turkey, all state institutions were stripped of their legitimacy following the “abduction of the democratically-elected president” Mohamed Morsi on 3 July 2013. Therefore, he argued, the people “acquired the right to restore their power and eliminate any obstacles that stand in the way.” This, for him, means that “violence of all forms becomes legitimate.” Moussa argues that the magnitude of this violence should be determined based on developments in the political scene. This kind of discourse is another illustration of the fact that the doctrinal foundation no longer exists and is replaced by a political discourse in which there is more focus on retaliating against the regime that they perceive has victimised the group.

There is no doubt that the Arms of Egypt Movement fully adopts a vindictive discourse. In fact, one of the assassins of the Egyptian Prosecutor General said: “We target people for their deeds not their doctrine.” When asked about their motives for killing the Prosecutor General, group members said that he had issued the order for the dispersal of the sit-in or at least this is what they heard on the megaphones right before the security forces attacked. According to Yehia Moussa, that was sufficient reason for them to assassinate Barakat (Atef, 2017).

However, revenge was not the only motive. According to the statements issued by assassins in the Barakat case, the main goal was “toppling the coup regime and the return of legitimacy or otherwise wreaking havoc.” Assassinating one of the main figures of the Egyptian state was considered an important step towards achieving this goal.

Targeting Christians

Sectarianism in Egypt can be classified into two different types.

The first type is the product of a sectarian culture that has been prevalent among a large segment of Muslims in Egypt, largely as a result of illiteracy and lack of awareness, especially in the countryside. It has taken the form of clashes over the construction of churches, disputes over social issues and discrimination in some official positions. Groups such as al-Jihad and al-Jamaa al-Islamiya targeted Christians by objecting to the construction of churches and even legitimised stealing from Christians. However, they did not sanction the killing of Christians and did not launch attacks against them.

The second type only emerged in the past four years. The video recorded by ISIS and aired on Sky News Arabia in September 2016 ("ISIS Record Collapse Statement", 2017), demonstrated a remarkable shift away from the doctrinal discourse adopted by the first wave of Jihadist groups vis-à-vis Christians. In this video the group stated that Christians were not religious enemies but political enemies because of their support for the current regime. Therefore, in the propaganda of ISIS, the Christians also become responsible for all injustices faced by Egyptian Muslims. Consecutive attacks against Copts in Egypt started after airing this video, and culminated with a number of terrorist attacks against Christians between December 2016 and June 2017.

Although the Coptic Orthodox Church supports the Egyptian regime, the assumption that Christians are responsible for the regime's action is inaccurate in several ways. Christians are not in power and do not have the upper hand in any of the state's security institutions. In addition, Christians in Egypt are always treated as one single entity that adopts the same stance, which is equally inaccurate, since the Christian community in Egypt is quite diverse and does include a substantial number who oppose the regime (ElShobaki, 2017a). Many Christians do support the regime because they fear being targeted by extremist groups.

Targeting Muslims

The terrorist attack on 25 November 2017 that targeted the Rawda mosque in Sinai and resulted in the killing of 310 is unprecedented in modern Egyptian history. All terrorist operations Egypt had witnessed since 1948 from the Muslim Brotherhood through al-Jihad and al-Jamaa al-Islamiya to new extremist groups have never targeted a mosque. This attack, therefore, marks a significant shift that raises a number of questions and requires thorough investigation. It is noteworthy that ISIS did not claim responsibility for the attack as it was expected to, which shows that the extremist ideological façade the group usually uses to justify its operations against army and police officers, Muslims cooperating with the state or Christians, no matter how superficial, could not apply to this case.

This also necessitates an inquiry into what distinguished this operation from its predecessors and in what way, if any, it can be linked to waves of new terrorism hitting Egypt and the Arab region.

One of the theories used to explain the motive behind that attack revolved around the fact that the administration of the mosque is affiliated to one of the Sufi orders in the

peninsula. Based on this theory, since ISIS regards Sufism as a novelty that has no precedent in the Quran or the prophet's teachings, ("beda'a") hence a heretic practice, they warned the Sufis who run the mosque and asked them to undergo a process of repentance, ("istitabah") and when they did not respond the mosque was attacked. Such a theory is not really valid since most worshippers targeted that day at the mosque were not Sufis but regular Muslims, including a considerable number of children. Also, ISIS circulated videos and photos of its leaders calling upon a local Sufi leader to repent and setting him free right after to prove that they were not involved in the attack.

ISIS also adopts the barricading ("tamattos") theory, which means that militants have the right to kill innocent Muslims only if "infidels" or enemies are barricaded behind them, which was not the case with the mosque.

The mosque attack, which seems to have been carried out by a separate group that superficially adopts an ISIS ideology, changed the equation. This attack also had a vindictive purpose but in a different direction since it aimed to ignite tribal conflict in Sinai. Most of the victims of the attack belong to the Sawarka tribe, whose members are divided into two camps: one that sympathises with ISIS and another that cooperates with the state. The statement issued by the Sinai Tribal Union in response to the attack called for retaliation "outside the court," which constitutes a serious and unprecedented transformation (Sweilam, 2014).

Therefore, the mosque attack can be considered as a purely criminal act with no ideological cover and that mainly aims at rechanneling the conflict from being between the state and extremist groups to one among Sinai residents.

Conclusion: How to Counter New Terrorism

The transformation extremist groups have gone through in the past few years demonstrates that the strategies employed by the Egyptian state to eliminate terrorism are not likely to yield the desired results and might, on the contrary, aggravate the situation. This is mainly because the state still adopts the security approach, which does not distinguish between actual members of terrorist groups and the incubating environment that allows such groups to thrive, and hence deals with both in the same manner.

Moreover, dialogue has been initiated about the reasons for terrorism and the social and economic factors that contribute to its growth. The way official and semi-official media outlets deal with terrorism is also quite problematic since they only condemn terrorist operations and focus on the conspiracy against Egypt while stressing that terrorism is an international phenomenon from which countries across the world suffer, hence ignoring the fact that the number of attacks in Egypt is unequalled in any democratic country. For example, terrorist attacks in Egypt amounted to 350 in 30 days of 2017, which was never the case in France, Britain or Germany over 30 months.

The growth of violence in Egypt in the past few years is basically attributed to the political situation in the country, especially following the intervention of the military on 3 July 2013. The violations committed by some security forces following the ousting of the Muslim Brotherhood were used by ISIS and other Islamist groups to generate a victimisation discourse that played a major role in recruiting members as well as to create an incubating environment that supported those groups as part of their grievances against the regime.

New violent groups still use an extremist religious discourse, yet on a more superficial level, to justify a terrorist attack rather than to found militant operations on a strong ideological base as was the case with earlier groups. Vengeance features most prominently in the strategies of new groups that take advantage of different hardships from which their potential members and sympathisers suffer, on top of which is marginalisation, whether political, social or economic.

That is why the popular recruitment strategy has been successful over the past few years as opposed to the indoctrination process through which recruits of Jihadist groups had to go in the last three decades of the 20th century. That is also why it became easier to target Christians who came to be considered a political enemy owing to their support for the regime, hence holding them accountable for its violations. This is also a remarkable departure from the approach adopted by earlier Jihadist groups whose leaders did not make killing Christians one of their objectives (ElShobaki, 2017b).

In the light of the above, it is not possible to deal with the new forms of terrorism without dealing with the actual grievances that incite militants to carry out terrorist attacks and which drive many youths to abandon peaceful protests for violent action. This necessitates a set of measures that directly address those grievances, including empowering civil society, an independent judiciary, a parliament that respects the law and equal rights for citizens.

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The objectives of the network are to foster influential quality analysis and reflection on Euro-Mediterranean politics and policies; to serve as a platform for dialogue between the members of the network and key stakeholders to discuss the key trends and challenges on the region's agenda; to increase the impact of think tanks and research institutes and to actively contribute to policy-making through dissemination of research outputs of the network to experts and national, European and international institutions linked to Euro-Mediterranean relations.

The EuroMeSCo work plan includes a research programme with five publication lines (Joint Policy Studies, Papers, Briefs, Spot-Ons and reports), as well as numerous activities, including annual conferences, seminars, workshops, presentations, formal and informal meetings with policy makers on the key political and security dynamics. It also includes communication and dissemination related activities (website, newsletter and targeted institutional dissemination) to raise awareness and promote the work of the network and to stimulate debate on Euro-Mediterranean affairs.

