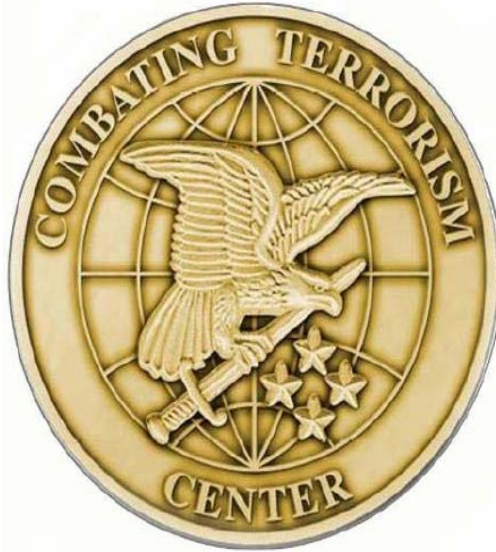


CTC REPORT



TRENDS IN EGYPTIAN SALAFI ACTIVISM

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Trends in Egyptian Salafi Activism

By Chris Heffelfinger, CTC Research Associate

Introduction

This report will explore the status of radical Islamic ideology and its popularity among Egyptians in Cairo today. It stems in part from an October 2007 research trip to gain insights into Salafi-jihadi activism and the political, social and religious climate that either supports or inhibits its growth. That climate in Cairo—gauged by recent public opinion polls, my interviews and observations, and trends among Salafis in Egypt today—does not seem to bode favorably for militant Islamist activism. The city is not a center for this ideology or its movement, partly due to recent economic success, belief in democratic principles and Egyptian Muslims' rejection of violent tactics.

Egypt served as the wellspring for modern Islamism and has had more than a century of evolving Salafi thought and activism. Certainly, foreign-born Muslims and Egyptians alike are well aware of this country's—and especially Cairo's—unique place in contemporary Muslim thought. It has produced some of the most influential Islamist thinkers and organizers of recent history—Muhammad 'Abduh, Rashid Rida, Hasan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb—who collectively dealt with issues of Islamic reform and revivalism, modeled on Salafi ideals. In recent decades, it has also produced or trained leading jihadi figures such as Ayman al-Zawahiri, 'Abdullah 'Azzam, and 'Umar 'Abd al-Rahman. Today, however, the Islamist movement, greatly weakened by crackdowns in the late 1990s, does not pose the same threat it once did to the Egyptian state.

The tension between the city's towering Islamist past and the newfound sense of progress and prosperity creates a duality in Egypt's capital that, for the time being, is a positive sign for U.S. efforts to combat terrorism. That is, there is for many a co-existence of Islam and Egyptian nationalism, which is open to the West and often associated with democratic values. The relationship between Egyptian nationalism and Islam also serves, in this sense, as a deterrent to the popularity of jihadists. The jihadi movement depends on the influence of ideologues who legitimize the movement to the Muslim public, and instill the belief that violent opposition to the existing government, or secular rule generally, is a priority for the Muslim community. These ideologues—and the jihadi movement more broadly—are weakened when Muslims view Islam and their own nationalism as being complementary rather than at odds.

On Egyptian television, images of the al-Azhar mosque complex and other picturesque Cairene domes and minarets are routinely juxtaposed against images of the Pharaohs, Pyramids of Giza, and other pre-Islamic symbols of Egyptian national identity. As many Cairenes told me, this is intentional; it aims to forge a national identity where Islam and the Arab Republic of Egypt are in harmony. Perhaps not surprisingly then, jihadi groups operating in Egypt have targeted these very images, attacking tourist destinations associated with pre-Islamic antiquity almost exclusively.

Based on recent patterns, Egyptian Muslims may well favor democracy and development over pan-Islamic resistance and the call to global or local jihad. That relationship will no doubt affect Western counter-terrorism efforts; if Egypt can be a model for Islam and modernity that moves toward gradual democratization, it could substantially weaken the credibility of al-Qa'ida, and Ayman al-Zawahiri in particular. At present, it appears that among most Egyptian Muslims, trends toward jihad are waning.

The Ideological Spectrum

There are a range of Islamic voices in Egypt today, but for the most part, those resonating do not do so based on violent opposition. Through a combination of government censures and Egyptians' rejection of extremism, the most popular Imams preach on individual faith and a platform of co-existence with the West.

Amr Khaled is Egypt's best-known Muslim preacher, described by *The New York Times Magazine* in 2006 as "the world's most famous and influential Muslim televangelist." Born in Alexandria, he graduated from Cairo University in 1988, where Ayman al-Zawahiri received his medical degree a decade earlier.¹ His lectures, broadcast on NILESAT, condemn bin Laden while promoting "faith-based development."²

While televised preachers like Khaled promote better relations with the West, the clerical establishment of Cairo—the muftis at al-Azhar University—have been called to correct pro-jihadist comments and fatwas following the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. In early 2003, the chairman of al-Azhar's fatwa committee ruled it was obligatory for Muslims to fight American and British forces in Iraq.³ The ruling was quickly addressed by the state, and Grand Mufti 'Ali Gum'a invalidated any such call for jihad from al-Azhar. Moreover, Shaykh Muhammad Tantawi, the Grand Imam of al-Azhar, has made a number of public comments condemning suicide bombing and broadly condemning extremist groups' understanding of jihad.⁴

Despite some talk of "Crusader" invasions by certain clerics, al-Azhar as an institution remains loyal to the regime. Its leadership positions are appointed by the state, and the clerics are salaried employees of the Egyptian government. These *hukumi*, or public (state-administered) religious institutions have a history over the recent decades of Islamist strife of cooperating with the state. As such, they are suspect in the eyes of militant Islamists and are sometimes viewed with contempt as the collaborators of tyrannical Arab regimes.

¹ Harmony Document 2RAD-2004-600457, February 14, 2006

² <http://www.amrkhaled.net>

³ Andrew McGregor, "Al-Azhar, Egyptian Islam and the War in Iraq," *Terrorism Monitor* 2:12 (2004).

⁴ "Cleric condemns suicide attacks," BBC News, July 11, 2003.

In organizational terms, Dr. Rafa'at Sayyid Ahmad's classification of Islamist groups aptly depicts the lines of demarcation among Egyptian Islamists⁵:

Divisions of Islamist Activism in Egypt		
	Type	Examples
1.	<i>Harakat Islamiyya siyasiyya-islahiyya</i> Reformist political Islamist movements	The Muslim Brotherhood, Hizb al-'Amal (Labor Party)
2.	<i>Harakat Islamiyya siyasiyya-radikaliyya</i> Radical political Islamist movements	Egyptian Islamic Jihad and Islamic Group
3.	<i>Harakat Islamiyya siyasiyya-in'aziliyya</i> Isolationist political Islamist movements	Takfir wa'l-Hijra (The Excommunication and Emigration group)
4.	<i>Harakat Islamiyya ghayr siyasiyya</i> Apolitical Islamist movements	Al-Azhar, preachers and Sufi brotherhoods
5.	<i>Al-juhud al-fikriyya wa'l-thaqafiyya al-mustaqila</i> Independent intellectual and cultural efforts	Islamic intellectuals; cultural, literary and artistic centers
6.	<i>Al-juhud al-ijtima'iyya wa'l-iqtisadiyya</i> Societal and economic efforts	Islamic banks and companies

Of the six divisions identified, only two are committed to violent change—radical political and isolationist Islamist movements. The other four types, made up of several different networks, organizations and individuals in Egypt, seek Islamic reform and revival through non-violent means. The Muslim Brotherhood is the oldest of these organizations and has been moving towards ever-increasing involvement in the political system in Egypt over recent decades. Yet the Brotherhood's fate hangs in the balance as the Mubarak regime, whose authoritarian rule has produced economic gains and stability in a region beset with conflicts, continues to crack down on dissidents and suspected members of the Brotherhood.

Earlier this year, Egyptian security services launched a crackdown on the Brotherhood that targeted businessmen, Islamic publishers and bookstores, and some senior leadership between Alexandria and Cairo.⁶ Such crackdowns have been ongoing; about 1,000 members were detained after the 2005 parliamentary elections (after the Brotherhood won 88 of the 454 seats). The Mubarak regime recently declared the organization a “threat to national security” for the first time. This comes at the same time

⁵ Rafa'at Sayyid Ahmad, *Qur'an wa sayf, min al-Afghan ila Bin Ladin*, (“Qur'an and the sword, from the Afghans to Bin Ladin”) (Cairo: Maktabat Madbuli, 2002), p. 90.

⁶ Andrew England and Heba Saleh, “Mubarak steps up fight on Muslim Brotherhood,” *Financial Times*, January 30, 2007.

as Mubarak's efforts to change several amendments to the constitution, including a ban on religious-based parties.⁷

The Brotherhood represents the political, non-violent range of Islamists opposing the Egyptian government, but it is unclear how such moves will affect the popularity of other Islamist groups, such as those who espouse violent tactics. At present, however, it appears that Egyptians are looking to economic and democratic political solutions over Islamism.

Economic and Political Counter Currents to Jihad

Egypt was rewarded by the World Bank in October when it was named "World's Top Reformer" among developing economies introducing market reforms.⁸ For many in Cairo, economic progress provides a new hope in the future, as Egyptians can now compete in some regard with the fast-paced growth of the Gulf States. Figures released by the Egyptian government in September show that the economy's growth hit 7.1 percent during the last year, ranking it among the fastest-growing economies worldwide. At the same time, foreign investment continues to increase, with nearly five billion dollars coming in over the past year. Although Egypt lags behind most of developed world's economies, the sense of growth and ability to compete help offset the appeal of Islamist opposition movements. Such movements are often based around resistance and the need for social and political change, and thus efforts to undermine the existing political structure are increasingly apt to be viewed as detrimental to the Egyptian national interest.

With Western hotels lining the Nile, and boasting twelve casinos, a portion of Cairo does offer the appearance of an advanced and affluent city. Yet, with the city's population at roughly 17 million and climbing, many Cairenes can only aspire to the luxury offered to the elite. This disparity in economic status does, in a sense, create two distinct Caicos—those with access to the proceeds of development and those without. Clearly, there is potential for the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist movements to compete among those disenfranchised from the current system.

In the affluent Zamalek district of Cairo, I spoke to a chemistry teacher at a local high school made up of both Egyptian and expatriate students. He found Egypt, and Cairo in particular, very much a class-divided society. There is not much of a middle class, and for the upper class there is a great deal of wealth and opportunity. Despite the disparity between social classes in Cairo, there seems to be widely held values embracing progress and development, and the hope of greater individual freedoms in an increasingly (economically) competitive society.

Abdelasiem El-Difraoui, an Egyptian documentary filmmaker, said that over the past two years he observed fewer *hijabs* (the headscarf worn by Muslim women) around the streets of Cairo. While there may indeed be fewer signs of outward religiosity to the

⁷ "Mubarak steps up fight on Muslim Brotherhood," *Financial Times*.

⁸ Liz Sly, "Economic boom in Egypt proves bust for the poor," *Baltimore Sun*, November 4, 2007.

casual observer, as well as greater signs of secularism, it is difficult to properly gauge the popularity of Islamism by counting hijabs. By and large, Muslims do not see their faith and Egyptian identity to be at odds.

Students from al-Azhar and Cairo University can be seen donning the “traditional” style of dress, the *galabiyya*—the long robe worn by Muslim men for centuries. During the month of Ramadan, Egyptian Muslims encourage each other to fast and there is a communal sense of Islam, which is publicly promoted. Among the majority of Egyptians I spoke to—ranging from taxi drivers to state employees to students at the American University of Cairo (AUC)—there was a reluctance to discuss Islamist opposition, and certainly guardedness in acknowledging that the Muslim Brotherhood had been gaining ground in recent years. At the same time, many young Egyptians were eager to talk about Islam as a religion of peace, and express their disdain for its association with “terrorism.”

A survey of public opinion in Islamic countries carried out by Monsoor Moaddel looked at the views of Egyptians towards Islam, religious institutions generally, and their views of democracy and the West before and after 9/11. Surprisingly, the survey found a pattern of “Egyptian worldviews in a direction less favorable toward religious institutions, less favorable toward the way the country is run, and more favorable toward democracy and gender equality” since September 11, 2001.⁹ However, there was a negative response on the part of Egyptians to the West following 9/11. In 2002-03, Egyptians responded with greater distrust, as reflected in the survey results, where 63% said that “Western cultural invasion was a very serious problem” in the pre-9/11 responses, rising to 71% after 9/11.

While the post-9/11 spike in hostility toward the West may be disturbing, it is not necessarily indicative of growing radicalization in Cairo. According to Dr. Jan Montassir of AUC, young Egyptians commonly hold the view that Islam should not be connected to terrorism. They are a generation of Egyptian Muslims striving to compete and bring about greater competition and equality in their society, all the while favorable to democratic principles. This was also expressed by the respondents in the survey conducted by Moaddel, who found that “respondents’ favorable attitudes toward democracy significantly increased on all indicators,” and that “those who strongly agreed with the notion that ‘while democracy may have problems, it is better than any other system’ increased from 56% before 9/11 to 69% after 9/11.” Such findings do suggest a growing support for democratic principles among Egyptians, a move away from religiously driven approaches to political issues.

In a Pew opinion poll released on June 22, 2006, the response data to two questions evaluating relations between Muslims and the West illustrate the lingering

⁹ Monsoor Moaddel, “Public Opinion in Islamic Countries: Survey Results,” available online at <http://www.asanet.org/footnotes/jan03/indexthree.html> (accessed on November 2, 2007). The surveys were carried out between 1999 and 2002 in Egypt, Jordan and Iran.

distrust of European influence and continued suspicion towards Jews and Israel.¹⁰ According to the poll, 58% of Egyptians say relations between Muslims and people in the West are bad, with 56% of those saying that Westerners are mostly to blame, 1% saying Muslims are to blame, and 22% saying Jews are to blame for the negative relations. Another question asking “What is responsible for Muslim nations’ lack of prosperity?” found that Egyptians do think they should be more prosperous, with 59% blaming U.S. and Western policies for their conditions. Yet, the second most popular cause among the respondents was government corruption, followed by lack of democracy.

More than a century earlier in Egyptian society, Western influence and lack of Muslims’ political and economic success were also key issues of discussion. However, these past Islamic leaders—the founding fathers of the modern Islamist movement—placed the blame for Muslims’ shortcomings on Muslims themselves for failing to adhere to the *shari`a*. In this light, the current trend toward democratic principles stands in sharp contrast to Egypt’s historical relationship with Salafi Islam.

Early Salafi Trends in Egypt

Islamist trends of the late nineteenth century, largely under the influence of Muhammad ‘Abduh (1849-1905), took a liberal view of modernity, seeking to demonstrate Islam’s compatibility with European rationalism using the model practiced by the first three generations of Muslims to succeed the Prophet Muhammad—the *salaf* (literally, “ancestors”). He thus named his movement, *Salafiyya*; in essence a response to Western Imperialism and an agenda for reforming Islamic society.

‘Abduh’s greatest influence was Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1839-1897). In the 1880s in Paris, the two published a journal entitled *The Indissoluble Bond*, and spread their message of Islamist awakening based on a return to the models of the *salaf*.¹¹ In doctrinal terms, he was more liberal than present-day Salafis, allowing *ijtihad*, or independent interpretation of the texts, to arrive at a legal decision.¹² The dominant Salafi ideologues today generally accept only the Qur’an, hadith and the consensus of the *salaf* as valid sources of law, thus enshrining a rigid conservatism and literal interpretation of the texts.

After four years in Paris, ‘Abduh returned to Cairo where he served as a judge for several years before becoming the highest ranking figure at one of Sunni Islam’s most prestigious institution—the al-Azhar University. Unlike future Salafist figures like Sayyid Qutb, ‘Abduh and his movement sought gradual reform, and as Grand Mufti of Egypt, his Salafi movement focused on education and *da’wa* (proselytizing).¹³

¹⁰ Pew Global Attitudes Project, “The Great Divide: How Westerners and Muslims View Each Other, Europe’s Muslims More Moderate,” available online at <http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=253> (accessed on November 4, 2007).

¹¹ “Militant Ideology Atlas,” available online at: <http://ctc.usma.edu>, pp. 335-336.

¹² Christopher Henzel, “The Origins of al Qaeda’s Ideology: Implications for US Strategy,” *Parameters* 35:1 (2005): 69-80, at p. 71.

¹³ Henzel, “The Origins of al Qaeda’s Ideology,” pp. 72-73.

The Salafi message was continued by ‘Abduh’s leading student, Rashid Rida (1865-1935), who published a pan-Islamist message through the magazine *al-Manar*, until his death. He blamed the Muslim world’s weakness vis-à-vis the West on excesses of the Middle Ages, influences of European philosophers, and other ‘deviations’ which led the Muslim nation to fall out of God’s favor. His work sought to purify Muslims in order to bring about an Islamic revival that would lead ultimately to political success. This concept of the exemplary purity of the early Islam of the *salaf* is a doctrinal pillar for a range of modern Salafi groups, from the Saudi Salafi establishment, to political Islamists at odds with their governments, to militant Salafi ideologues.

With ‘Abduh and Rida, the model for Islamic revival and reform was established and became widely regarded as “Salafi,” and its implementation by the succeeding generation of Egyptian Islamist activists brought it into direct conflict with the state. Hasan al-Banna (1906-1949), like Muhammad ‘Abduh, moved to Cairo at a young age to pursue higher Islamic education. Between 1923 and 1928, when he founded the *Ikhwan al-Muslimin* (the Muslim Brotherhood), al-Banna immersed himself in Rida’s teachings and the currents of the Salafi movement near Dar al-‘Ulum, where he studied.¹⁴

Al-Banna sought to confront Western influence by mobilizing Muslims towards a (re)awakening of Islamic values and a rejection of secularism. Al-Banna followed in Rida’s footsteps in this respect, seeing a societal drift away from Islam as the source of law and societal norms, with “the West,” or more accurately European colonialist powers, playing a central role in this process of Islamic decline.

Early in the Muslim Brotherhood’s history, political and social mobilization were of primary concern to al-Banna. The Society of Muslim Brothers was only one of a number of organizations al-Banna organized in the late 1920s, but by 1932 he focused his efforts on the Brotherhood. In 1932, al-Banna, who had founded the organization from the Suez Canal city of Isma’iliyya, decided to relocate to Cairo, where he incorporated an Islamic society led by one of his brothers.¹⁵ It soon began publishing its first weekly newsletter and by 1938 had grown to have three hundred branches and an estimated 50,000-150,000 members.¹⁶

From the 1930s to the 1950s, the organization continued to grow rapidly, initially as an apolitical movement dedicated to religious revival and reform. By the 1940s the organization gravitated toward political dissent, leveling criticism at the British administration in control of the country in newsletters and at rallies.¹⁷ In 1941 the Brotherhood fielded candidates for parliamentary elections on a platform centered largely

¹⁴ See Richard Mitchell, *The Society of Muslim Brothers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) and Brynjar Lia, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt: The Rise of an Islamic Mass Movement*. (Reading, UK: Ithaca Press, 1998).

¹⁵ Ziad Munsen, “Islamic Mobilization: Social Movement Theory and the Muslim Brotherhood,” *The Sociological Quarterly* 42:4 (2002): 487-510, at 489.

¹⁶ Munsen “Islamic Mobilization,” 490.

¹⁷ Munsen “Islamic Mobilization,” 490.

around a demand for British military withdrawal from Egypt. Their initiatives prompted an order for al-Banna's exile from Egypt by British authorities that same year, and he was imprisoned months later, along with other Brotherhood leaders. Distracted by World War II, the British administration lifted some of the earlier measures, and the organization grew to be the largest organized force in Egypt by 1949, when it counted between 300,000 and 600,000 members.¹⁸

The society grew despite being officially dissolved in 1948, followed by another wave of imprisonments. These crackdowns prompted a violent reaction from the Brotherhood, whose members were responsible for the assassination of Egyptian Prime Minister Mahmud Fahmi al-Nuqrashi Pasha, who had ordered the dissolution. Al-Banna was himself assassinated two months later.¹⁹ These assassinations foreshadowed greater acts of political violence to come for the Brotherhood and Egyptian Islamists. Two years after the Free Officers coup of 1952, led by Gamal Abdel Nasser, six leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood were hung, while thousands of others served prison sentences.²⁰ Following the tremendous blow of al-Banna's death to the organization, the Muslim Brothers reorganized and prepared for greater confrontation with the political authority in Egypt.

In 1949, Sayyid Qutb had published his first book, *Social Justice in Islam*, while he was living in Colorado. He returned to Egypt a year later, disillusioned by his travels in the United States.²¹ Like many of his fellow Islamists, Qutb expected the Free Officers to create, or make steps toward, Islamic rule in the country. Nasser refused to institute *shari`a* law, and his brief alliance with the Brotherhood came to an abrupt end. Qutb was among those caught up in the crackdown in 1954; imprisoned for ten years as an enemy of the regime. Freed in 1964, he was rearrested within a matter of months and tried, with much public attention, for sedition. He was hanged in 1966. During his time in prison, however, he wrote his most influential works, continuing his calls for an Islamic state rooted in a revival of true Islamic practices and beliefs.

The saga of Sayyid Qutb and his defiance of the Egyptian regime created a hero for Islamist activists, and his *Milestones (Ma'alim fi'l-tarikh)*, continues to be a primer for Muslims seeking to alter society and reorient it on an Islamist trajectory. In that book, he lays out the characteristics of the Islamic nation, and describes everything outside of it as *jahiliyya* (state of ignorance), “[f]or human life, there is only one true system, and that is Islam; all other systems are Jahiliyyah.”²² Qutb's call for a vanguard to lead the *umma*, or global Muslim community, toward the end of *jahiliyya* and the creation of an Islamic state were heard by many. Imprisoned and ultimately hanged in 1966. His words would continue to inspire however, and *Milestones'* literal and unyielding interpretations of the sacred texts of Islam still resonate in contemporary Islamist literature. The Combating

¹⁸ Munsen, “Islamic Mobilization,” 491.

¹⁹ Mitchell, *The Society of Muslim Brothers*.

²⁰ Gilles Kepel, *Muslim Extremism in Egypt: The Pharaoh and the Prophet* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), p. 37.

²¹ Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower* (New York: Knopf, 2006), pp. 22-28.

²² Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones*, available online at <http://www.youngmuslims.ca> (accessed on November 2, 2006).

Terrorism Center's *Militant Ideology Atlas* found that Qutb was among the most prominent authors in Salafi literature, and was frequently cited by leading contemporary Salafi-jihadi ideologues such as Abu Basir al-Tartusi and Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi.

Qutb's model for resistance and destruction of the existing state and its un-Islamic neighbors was clearly a call for greater confrontation. Following Qutb's death, further fragmentation among Islamist groups in Egypt ensued, with violent and non-violent activists forming separate camps, as well as splintering over differences in tactics and ideology.

From Islamist Activism to Terrorism

In the 1970s Muslim student movements grew on university campuses, enjoying tenuous relations with the Egyptian government. After Anwar Sadat came to power in 1970, he made efforts to use Islamist parties to counter his political opponents on the left. But Sadat did not keep his promises to implement Islamic law in Egypt, and relations with the Islamic groups turned to animosity by the end of the decade.²³

The campus-based groups grew across Egypt in the early 1970s. Their primary agenda was social reform from the ground up—attempting to enforce individual morality, with activism sometimes resembling vigilantism.²⁴ These Islamist groups were oriented around social change, but also regime change, increasingly turning towards armed resistance in their drive to implement Islamic law in the country. This period proved to be a formative one for Islamist militancy in Egypt.

Two militant Islamist organizations emerged in the late 1970s that would become Egypt's primary security concern for next two decades. Both coalesced around former radical members of the Muslim Brotherhood. Al-Jihad, or al-Jihad al-Islami (Egyptian Islamic Jihad, EIJ) and al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya (Islamic Group, IG) began as alliances of various groups and leaders that had been affiliated with the Brotherhood. Both sought to replace the secular Egyptian regime with Islamic rule.

Muhammad 'Abd al-Salam al-Faraj was inspired by the Salafi models of change put forth by Sayyid Qutb, although he viewed revolution as the necessary way forward for the Islamic nation. Faraj clashed with another rising militant Islamist group, Takfir wa'l-Hijra (Excommunication and Emigration) led by Shukri Mustafa, seeing them literally flee in the face of confrontation with the enemy. For Faraj—as he laid out in his best-known work, *al-Farida al-Ghayba*, or “The Neglected Duty”—armed jihad had been neglected by Muslims, and must be renewed and understood as an obligation for every believer, like fasting, prayer and almsgiving.²⁵

²³ Henzel, “The Origins of al Qaeda’s Ideology,” p. 71.

²⁴ Kepel, *Muslim Extremism in Egypt*, pp. 129-32.

²⁵ Lawrence Davidson, *Islamic Fundamentalism: An Introduction* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2003), p. 86.

These teachings were akin to another rising ideologue and jihadi leader of the day, ‘Abdullah ‘Azzam. ‘Azzam completed his PhD in Islamic jurisprudence at al-Azhar in 1973, and although he left Cairo to teach in ‘Amman and then Saudi Arabia, he got to know the future Egyptian theologians and ideologues of jihad ‘Umar ‘Abd al-Rahman and Ayman al-Zawahiri.²⁶ Zawahiri was arrested following the massive crackdown on Islamists after the assassination of Anwar Sadat in 1981. He served a three-year term for illegally possessing a firearm but was not charged in relation to the assassination.²⁷ After his release, he left Egypt for Pakistan and Afghanistan to aid the mujahidin’s anti-Soviet efforts there. He, along with another Egyptian leader of EIJ, Rifa’i Ahmad Taha (as well as other Egyptians), were signatories to Bin Ladin’s 1998 fatwa establishing the “International Front.”

Throughout the 1980s EIJ suffered from divisions in leadership and tremendous government pressure. Zawahiri’s followers broke away from the organization to form a faction called Vanguard of Conquest.²⁸ Zawahiri also had disagreements with IG’s leader, ‘Umar ‘Abd al-Rahman, in their approach to taking power and implementing Islamic law.²⁹ Another future al-Qaida figure who was at odds with the Egyptian government, Saif al-Adel, was arrested in 1987 in Cairo for attempting to revive the EIJ.³⁰ At his trial, the government accused him of plotting to set off simultaneous bombings at the Egyptian Parliament building in a bid to demolish it.

With various leaders and divisions over the late 1980s, IG and EIJ did share members and coordinate attacks. In 1995, during the height of the two groups’ militant campaign to unseat the Egyptian government, they coordinated efforts to attempt an assassination on Hosni Mubarak while on a visit to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. By the late 1990s, however, a number of IG leaders were forced to issue public renunciations of violence, and their leader, ‘Umar ‘Abd al-Rahman—despite terrorist attacks intended to free him—languished in a New York state prison for his role in the 1993 World Trade Center attack. In 2006 IG’s senior leader Nageh Ibrahim reiterated the group’s disavowal of violence on al-Arabiya television.

The two dominant Islamist movements of the 1970s and 80s in Egypt were hierarchical, structured organizations, made up of former Brotherhood members who resisted involvement in the political system and campus-based Salafi movements, and produced highly capable terrorist organizations in determined pursuit of an Islamic state in Egypt. They succeeded in carrying out a series of significant attacks in the country, the assassination of Anwar Sadat chief among them, as well as numerous operations against popular tourist sites that damaged Egypt’s economy. But ultimately the Egyptian government succeeded in dismantling them, exiling or silencing their leaders, while in turn marring the image of such militant Islamists among Egyptians.

²⁶ Peter Bergen, *Holy War, Inc: Inside the Secret World of Osama bin Laden*, (London: Orion Books, 2002).

²⁷ Harmony Document 2RAD-2004-600457, February 14, 2006.

²⁸ U.S. Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism*, 1997.

²⁹ Wright, *The Looming Tower*, p. 66.

³⁰ Harmony profile, Saif al-Adel, available online at http://www.ctc.usma.edu/harmony/profile_pdf/Saif.pdf.

The current challenge, however, is responding to those militant Egyptian Salafis such as Ayman al-Zawahiri who have fought the “far enemy” since the 1980s—the Soviet Union and the United States—and may now redirect their efforts toward the regime that ousted them. A series of attacks over the last few years in Egypt has shown that pan-Islamist groups are striking Egypt as part of a broader campaign, posing a set of problems distinct from those of the previous generation.

Egypt’s Recent History with Terrorism

Egypt was profoundly affected by the terror campaign waged by Islamist militants in the 1990s. From 1992 onward, militants from IG and EIJ carried out sustained attacks on foreign tourists and tourist attractions, as well as Coptic Christians, in order to damage Egypt’s foreign investment, the economy, and the presidency of Hosni Mubarak. However, after the 1997 attacks at Luxor, the spectacle of violence, harm to the Egyptian national interest and its international reputation caused such vociferous public outrage that the Islamist groups ceased the offensive. Mubarak’s regime declared victory on terrorism, but seven years later, new organizations again targeted tourist destinations.

The Luxor attack in November 1997 marked a turning point for Egyptian Islamist militants, when IG, headed by imprisoned cleric ‘Umar ‘Abd al-Rahman, carried out attacks at the temples, one of the country’s most popular tourist destinations. Armed gunmen opened fire on a tour bus, killing more than 60 tourists.³¹ The attackers hoped to win the release of ‘Abd al-Rahman from prison. This attack came after a five-year long campaign of terrorist attacks, primarily IG gunmen shooting down tourists in dozens of separate operations. The attack also coincided with the trial of 65 members of IG in Cairo. Adding to the significance of the event in Egypt’s history with terrorism, the Egyptian government maintained that Usama bin Ladin financed the attack.³²

This attack, however, marked the culmination of the Mubarak regime’s struggle with oppositionist Islamist militants, and swift measures quieted terrorism in the country for the following years. By not only clamping down on the militant groups, but also engaging in negotiations with selected ‘moderate’ leadership, IG was effectively sidelined as an organized force.³³ With ‘Abd al-Rahman still imprisoned, and its remaining leadership issuing denunciations of violence, the organization posed little further threat to Egypt’s security.³⁴

For the next seven years, Egypt saw virtually no militant activity; certainly nothing on the scale of the 1990s. However, two attacks in 2004 broke that silence. The denials of responsibility from the prominent Egyptian jihad groups—IG and EIJ—marked yet another transition in the ongoing conflict between Islamist groups and the Egyptian government, as the old guard had been replaced by new groups, fulfilling a

³¹ “Tourists massacred at temple,” BBC News, November 17, 1997.

³² Barbara Plett, “Bin Laden ‘behind Luxor massacre,’” BBC News, May 13, 1999.

³³ Sherifa Zuhur, “A New Phase for Jihad in Egypt?” *Terrorism Monitor* 3:10 (2005), p. 2.

³⁴ Khalil Gebara, “The End of Egyptian Islamic Jihad?” *Terrorism Monitor* 3:3 (2005), p. 1-2.

similar role. The *Kita'ib Shuhada 'Abdullah 'Azzam* (The Martyr 'Abdullah 'Azzam Brigades), also known as al-Qa'ida in Syria and Egypt, claimed responsibility for the October 2004 attacks (along with other groups) at the Sinai tourist resorts of Taba and Ras Shitan, which killed 34 people. This launched what can be seen as a new wave of Islamist terrorism in Egypt. Militants inspired more by the model of global jihadi activism than the Egyptian Salafi movements of the past century—smaller groups or cells with far less organization than IG or EIJ—became the new threat. In 2005, these included the Sharm al-Sheikh bombings in July and two attacks in Cairo in April.³⁵ The following year, another bombing targeting foreign tourists was carried out in Dahab, in April, killing 23 people.

Notably, the latest wave of mujahidin groups has used new tactics. Rather than ambushing tourists with machine guns, the groups that carried out the attacks from 2004-2006 relied for the most part on explosives, and in some cases suicide bombers. Among the groups to claim responsibility for the various attacks were the 'Abdullah 'Azzam Brigades, the Mujahidin of Egypt, and Tawhid and Jihad Group of Egypt—all previously obscure groups. The 2005 attacks in Cairo were also the first instance of Islamist militancy in Egypt's capital for the past seven years. In the April 30 attack, two veiled women opened fire on foreigners in al-Tahrir square in downtown Cairo, adjacent to the American University campus. One man strapped with explosives—the fiancé of one of the women, and brother of the other—was being pursued by police when he leapt over the October 6 bridge and detonated the device. Police say these attackers (who wounded nine, and were themselves killed by police) were tied to the somewhat crude bombs constructed out of nails and other shrapnel that detonated at Khan al-Khalili bazaar, frequented by tourists, three weeks earlier.³⁶ That attack killed three foreigners, one American and two French, as well as the suicide bomber. These attacks were also claimed by the 'Abdullah 'Azzam Brigades and the Mujahidin of Egypt.

The Egyptian government continued to crack down on suspected militant groups, although little evidence tied to the Sinai attacks was produced. One of the jihadi groups targeted and dismantled was al-Ta'ifa al-Mansura (the Victorious Sect), accused of planning attacks on tourist sites and assassinations of Muslim and Christian figures in the country.³⁷ Yet the dismantling of small groups like al-Ta'ifa do not address the ongoing threat global jihadi networks or cells pose to Egypt, as the 'Abdullah 'Azzam Brigades demonstrated. That group also claimed responsibility for the second significant attack on tourists, on July 23, 2005, at Sharm al-Sheikh.³⁸ In that operation, 88 people were killed and another 200 wounded when the Ghazala Gardens Hotel and a market were hit in coordinated bombings. The Brigades posted a claim of responsibility on an Islamist web

³⁵ Neil MacFarquhar, "Bomb kills 3 and wounds 17 at a Cairo tourist site," *International Herald Tribune*, April 9, 2005.

³⁶ "Two veiled women shoot Cairo tour bus," *International Herald Tribune*, May 1, 2005.

³⁷ Murad al-Shishani, "Egypt Breaks-up al-Ta'efa al-Mansoura Jihadist Group," *Terrorism Focus* 3:16 (2006), p. 2.

³⁸ Anthony Shadid, "Egypt Probe Seeks Ties to 2004 Blasts Similarities Found in Saturday Attack," *Washington Post*, July 25, 2005.

forum, stating that the attacks were in response to the “crimes of worldwide evil powers” in Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine and Chechnya.³⁹

Two points stand out about the Brigades and the series of bombing on tourist resorts over 2004-05. These bombings were better-planned—with two suicide car bombings and one timed explosive—and resulted in mass casualties, at the same time creating greater damage to the Egyptian tourism industry. Second, assuming that the relatively-unknown group was in fact responsible for the attacks, as appears to be the case, they cite international grievances against Muslims, invoking the pan-Islamist agenda of al-Qa’ida. This would put added pressure on the Egyptian government to defend against transnational threats in addition to countering internal resistance.

Contemporary Salafism in Egypt

The Salafi model for social change and Islamic renewal continues in a variety of forms in Egypt, and in the majority of cases it is moved forward by groups with non-confrontational agendas. Current strains in Egyptian Salafi thinking appear to be dominated by doctrinal issues and scholarly debate rather than political or social action.

An example of this is found on the SalafMisr website, which hosts several discussions of more militant Salafis, such as the campaign in Somalia against Ethiopia, but has no in-depth information on such power struggles within Egypt, if they exist at all. The sense is that for most of these groups, instilling a literal and strict adherence on issues of faith and doctrine—and expounding on them at length—takes precedence over organized or militant Islamist activity.

Hasan bin ‘Abd al-Wahhab Marzuq al-Banna, Abu Muhammad Khalid bin ‘Abd al-Rahman, Khalid ‘Uthman and others with local followings and distributed on Islamist web forums, discuss particular aspects of the Salafi doctrine and how it should be defined. This practice, known as *jarh wa’l-ta’dil* (Refutation and revision, e.g., internal Salafi challenges over various doctrinal issues), often frustrates Islamists who seek unity and action for the Islamic nation. For example, an essay from another Egyptian Salafi shaykh, Muhammad Sa’id Raslan, reads “Is this from the Salafiyya?! Our doctrine regarding Divine Judgment and Destiny,” and provides a lengthy discussion on the “proper” Salafi view toward such matters.⁴⁰ Yet these tracts generally avoid engaging in political issues or confronting Egypt's secular authority.

Daniel Maldonado, the American-born convert who traveled to Egypt to deepen knowledge of Islam and who eventually received training with mujahidin in Somalia, describes such groups in one of his online postings (comparing study in Cairo and Alexandria). Terming them “neo-salafis,” he describes how a local Alexandria Shaykh, Muhammad Isma’eel, expelled them from the mosque for bringing the bickering and discord of Cairo. Maldonado gives the impression that Cairene Salafis in particular are

³⁹ “The Brigades of the Martyr Abdullah Azzam Claims Responsibility for the Bombings in Sharm al-Sheikh, Egypt,” July 23, 2005. Available online at <http://siteinstitute.org> (accessed on Nov 7, 2007).

⁴⁰ <http://www.salafmisr.com/vb/showthread.php?t=2547>

prone to incessant debate.

These "neo-Salafis" have been the topic of discussion on Salafi web forums like Salafitalk.net, where extended refutations between imams lead to rancor and bitterness. The alternative Salafi movements that Maldonado describes prioritize education and *da'wa*, or proselytizing, but instill the standard Salafi precepts toward societal reform and Islamic revival.

Egypt, and Cairo in particular, have long been a center for Islamic and Islamist learning and activism. The country is unique in its history of evolving Salafi currents and Islamist activity, ranging from social mobilization, to political reform, to militant opposition. Egypt is clearly not a popular destination for those determined to gain experience or training in the jihad, like Pakistan, Yemen or Somalia, but Muslim trends in the country do impact the longer-term trends in militant Salafism.

Maldonado's Journey for the "True Islam"

Daniel Maldonado, who called himself Daniel al-Jughafi, pleaded guilty in April 2007 to joining al-Qa'ida and training in camps run by the Islamic Courts Union, seeking to establish an Islamic state in Somalia.⁴¹ Incarcerated at age 28, he was given a ten-year prison sentence for receiving training from a terrorist organization.

Maldonado initially chose to travel to Egypt in November 2005 to continue his Islamic studies among a community of believers after he had previously expressed grievances against Muslim persecution in the U.S. But upon coming to Cairo and then electing to take residence in Alexandria, where he enrolled at the Qortoba center, there is no evidence that he sought to join any particular militant group in the country. Rather, his online postings show that he was becoming more deeply immersed in the texts of Salafism, such as the writings of Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab.

In a post on his personal blog, danielaljughifi.wordpress.com, he writes about his obsession with works by Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, the eponymous founder of the Wahhabi movement, members of which typically label themselves as Salafi or *Muwahhidun* (monotheists) rather than Wahhabists. He wrote, on May 19, 2006, "Seeing that I have always been a lover of the books and writings of Sheikhu Islam Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahab(r) I would start with his books. After getting a few I some what became obsessed and went on a rampage trying to buy anything and everything he or his grandsons wrote [*sic*]."

Yet Daniel was not a Salafi of the Saudi establishment, calling them *tabdi'i*, meaning they frequently label other Muslims practices "innovations," which by their nature lead to sin, in their ideology.⁴² Commenting on 'Abdullah al-Faisal, who was

⁴¹ U.S. Department of Justice Press Release #07-531, "U.S. Citizen Sentenced to Prison for Receiving Military Training from a Terrorist Organization," July 20, 2007

⁴² Posting on Islamicnetworking.com, in reply to "Cleric who urged jihad to be freed," August 22, 2006 (accessed on November 12, 2007).

imprisoned for nine years for encouraging British Muslims to attend jihadi training camps, Daniel wrote, “He explains the groups and there deviancies and this is where he mentioned the ‘Saudi Salafis’ and made Takfeer of them. I do not care for the ‘Salafis’ niether, with their extra Tabde’e attitude and all But I think that Takfeer on them is a bit extreme [*sic*].” At this time, only a few months before he left for Somalia, he apparently believed that *takfir*, or labeling other Muslims as infidels, was an extreme belief.

Maldonado appears to have sat for the lectures of Muhammad Isma’il al-Muqaddam, a well-known Salafi *da’i* (missionary), who was born and continues his work in Alexandria. Daniel and other participants on the Islamicnetworking.com forum discussed Shaykh Muhammad Isma’il, and he was held in high esteem as one who refrained from the partisan bickering common to Salafi groups.⁴³

Muhammad Isma’il does routinely criticize the Shi’a (one speech he gave was entitled, “Shi’a: People of the ‘White House’”), but largely focuses on the teachings and interpretation of the early generations of Muslims following the Prophet. Clerics like Isma’il are primarily concerned with spreading their interpretation of Islam—their branch of Salafi Islam more specifically. While they may weigh in on political affairs and matters of authority, they are not necessarily a recruitment hub for radicalizing Muslims. Daniel Maldonado, in all likelihood, met individuals in the Islamic community in Alexandria that put him in contact with more militant elements attached to jihadi efforts in Somalia.

Arrested by Kenyan authorities after he fled from Kismaayo, he told his interviewers that he left Egypt to participate in the jihad in Somalia, describing it as “raising the word of Allah, uppermost, by speaking and fighting against all those who are against the Islamic State.”⁴⁴ After deciding to join the jihad, he believed he “would be fighting the Somali militia, and that turned into fighting the Ethiopians, and if Americans came, I would fight them too.” According to transcripts presented by the FBI in the criminal complaint, he also said he would “kill other Muslims, in an attack, if they were apostates and not faithful Muslims.” This statement contradicted his earlier postings criticizing *takfir*, as he was apparently now willing to kill fellow Muslims for religious deviations.

Maldonado’s route to jihad in fact began in the United States and online, and was continued in Alexandria. Both before and after his time in Egypt, Maldonado was primarily concerned with the affairs of the *umma* (in particular the Muslim community depicted by Salafi ideologues), and the future direction of Islam, as his postings illustrate. He continued to immerse himself as much as possible in Islam, and specifically in the doctrines of the Salafiyya, and he sought out such instruction in Alexandria. After a year there, Maldonado moved toward more militant Salafi activists, ultimately finding his way to an al-Qa’ida-linked training camp in Somalia after leaving Alexandria in November 2006.

⁴³ <http://talk.islamicnetwork.com/showthread.php?t=2978>

⁴⁴ Criminal Complaint against Daniel Maldonado in United States District Court, Southern District of Texas, February 13, 2007.

Conclusion

As one posting read on the Islamicnetworking.com site, “I’ll tell you the truth brother, you can learn a lot from the Islamic schools there in Egypt, but you can’t practise 2/3rds of your belief. It’s mostly a hush hush stay away from Jihad, politics...[sic]” The writer went on to advise study in northern Sudan, Yemen, or northern Pakistan. This sentiment—of pressure on suspected militant activist groups and their inability to operate in Egypt—was confirmed by the author’s field work as well as the recent history of Islamists’ relations with the Mubarak regime.

Generally speaking, in Egypt and in Cairo in particular, any form of militant or political Islam is suppressed. With widespread crackdowns on the Muslim Brotherhood and suspected jihadists, terrorist groups have been driven to the margins. While Islamist books could be found in Cairo bookstores and street vendors, militant Salafi literature was the exception rather than the rule. In Alexandria, one finds more committed Salafi groups, like that in which Daniel Maldonado participated, but they do not publicly condone militancy.

Since Egypt is a destination for Islamic learning and thought more than an active front for jihad, the trends in ideology and militancy can—and have been—influential on Islamist movements worldwide. One encounters committed Islamist groups in Egypt, but those endorsing violence have been forced underground. The current lack of popular support for or involvement in jihadi groups in Egypt could negatively affect mujahidin efforts in the Arab world more broadly, given Egypt’s place in Islamist history.

Critical to future counterterrorism efforts by Western governments is the degree to which these militant groups are outpaced by a nationalist Egyptian Islam endorsed by the state. If terrorist acts are popularly viewed by Egyptians as un-Islamic and anti-Egyptian, it will stifle the century-plus tradition of Salafi activism in Egypt—and could present a counterweight to Salafi-jihadi groups globally. With aims for democracy and economic progress, Egyptian Muslims appear to be increasingly less accepting or supportive of militant Islamic organizations.

The views expressed in this report are those of the author and not of the U.S. Military Academy, the Department of the Army, or any other agency of the U.S. Government.

