

MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

Briefing

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ISLAMISM IN NORTH AFRICA II: EGYPT'S OPPORTUNITY

This is the second of a series of ICG briefings addressing the range and diversity of Islamic activism in the North African states where this activism has been able to develop most fully -- Egypt, Algeria and Morocco. The first provides general background. Each subsequent paper examines with respect to one of the three states the outlook and strategies of the main Islamist¹ movements and organisations, their relations with the state and with each other, and especially the way in which they have evolved in recent years. The analysis focuses on the relationship between Islamic activism and violence, especially but not only terrorism, and the problem of political reform in general and democratisation in particular.

I. OVERVIEW

Important changes in the outlook of Egyptian Islamic activism in recent years have opened up possibilities for progressive political development, but these have gone unexploited because of the conservatism of the Egyptian government's policies. The absence of serious violence since late 1997 strongly suggests that the strategy of armed struggle (*jihad*) against the state has not only failed but has effectively been abandoned. At the same time, the ideology of non-violent Islamic activism has evolved and now emphatically embraces democratic principles and elements of a modernist outlook. However, unless the Egyptian government changes its approach, opens up the political field and undertakes serious political reform, the frustration

which many Egyptians feel could lead to a recrudescence of violent activism at some stage. The government risks realising too late that it has squandered a vital opportunity and wasted the fruits of its own earlier successes on the security front.

Between 1974 and 1997, Egypt witnessed intermittent violence conducted by radical Islamic groups animated principally by the desperate vision of Sayyid Qutb.² Between 1992 and 1997, the violence was particularly intense, with altogether over a thousand killed. Following the massacre of 58 tourists at Luxor in Upper Egypt in November 1997, however, the armed movements declared a cease-fire, which has held ever since. In the meantime, the Society of the Muslim Brothers has been allowed to pursue its activities and has recovered much of the position it held, before its banning in 1954, as a social movement combining religious, charitable, educational and publishing activities with a substantial political presence. However, while it is tolerated by the state, it formally remains illegal, enjoying neither the status of a legal political party nor that of a legal association. In recent years, a new grouping, consisting in part of former Brothers but also of personalities with no links to the Society, has sought to constitute a moderate reformist party (the *Wasat* or Centre party) on a new basis, but has also been refused legal status by the government. If armed *jihad* has led to a dead end, non-violent Islamic activism appears in an impasse.

Nonetheless, Islamic activism in Egypt has been undergoing an important process of change and has begun to emancipate itself from the main perspectives which had oriented it since 1970 if not earlier, that of Hassan Al-Banna on the one hand and Sayyid Qutb on the other. The ascendancy of these outlooks, expressing a conservative or even reactionary anti-Westernism, followed the eclipse of the earlier

¹ In the usage adopted by ICG, 'Islamism' is Islam in political rather than religious mode: 'Islamist movements' are those with Islamic ideological references pursuing primarily political objectives, and 'Islamist' and 'Islamic political' are essentially synonymous. 'Islamic' is a more general expression: usually referring to Islam in religious rather than political mode but capable, depending on the context, of embracing both (e.g. references in the text to 'Islamic activism').

² For a discussion of Qutb's thought, see ICG Middle East Briefing, *Islamism in North Africa I: The Legacies of History*, 20 April 2004.

positive, if selective and critical, orientation to Western thought which had characterised the original, "Islamic modernist", thrust of the Salafiyya movement under the leadership of Jamal al-Din Al-Afghani and Mohammed Abduh prior to World War I.³ In certain respects, the changes which have been occurring in recent years represent a recovery of the "Islamic modernist" outlook.

This evolution of Egyptian Islamism is not unequivocal and some scepticism is in order. In rejecting Qutb's outlook, the Muslim Brothers -- the largest movement in Egypt today -- initially reverted to Al-Banna's less radical perspective, and they have since followed a non-violent and gradualist strategy. In subsequently incorporating the idea of democracy into their discourse, the Brothers departed from Al-Banna's views, but this has not been fully acknowledged, still less accompanied by an explicit repudiation of the illiberal and anti-democratic strand of Al-Banna's thought. For this reason it is liable to be interpreted as a pragmatic and temporary adaptation to democracy rather than a wholehearted conversion to it. And in conserving its purpose as a missionary movement -- *da'wa* -- the Brothers have remained vulnerable to the government's charge that theirs is a religious organisation, which it would be inappropriate to legalise as a political party.

The same charge cannot seriously be levelled, however, at the *Wasat* Party launched in 1996 by a number of former Muslim Brothers in concert with activists from other political and ideological backgrounds. In defining its reference to Islam in terms of Islamic civilisation rather than the Islamic faith, its founders broke with a key aspect of the Muslim Brothers' tradition, renewed with the outlook of the earlier Islamic modernist thinkers, and established the doctrinal basis for a non-sectarian party of democratic reform. The refusal of the authorities to legalise the party has denied even the most liberal and forward-looking current in Egyptian Islamic activism a party-political outlet.

This refusal suggests that the government is intent on preserving the political dominance of the National Democratic Party in the formal political sphere, at the expense of any serious prospect of a real change in power. This scenario offers little or no scope for the effective and orderly representation of opposition

viewpoints, and will prevent the progressive -- modernist and democratic -- trends within Egyptian Islamism from bearing political fruit.

The current calm on the security front is unlikely to endure indefinitely. The distress many Egyptians feel inevitably will seek expression. Because Egypt both refuses to legalise Islamic parties and significantly circumscribes the operations of secular parties, there is still no effective constitutional and peaceful outlet for the country's Islamists or its alienated youth. The government's strategy of immobility is liable to generate frustration and could stimulate the revival of regressive, even violent, tendencies within the Islamist movement.

The government should embark on a new strategy as soon as possible. While the concern to preserve political stability is legitimate and mandates a prudent approach to political reform, the government should recognise that delay itself is imprudent. It should also recognise that the measures to reform or at least rejuvenate the ruling National Democratic Party,⁴ while valid and welcome, are insufficient. Without the stimulus of political competition from credible and legal rivals, its revitalisation is unlikely to go far and will be insufficient to provide effective representation for society's diverse interests and viewpoints. The reform priority should therefore be to revise the law on political parties to enable existing legal parties to recover an effective social presence and to permit the emergence of new parties capable of offering constitutional channels for the representation of Islamic currents of opinion on a non-sectarian basis.

The situation of the Muslim Brothers also should be clarified. The government's strongest argument for refusing them legal status as a political party is a pragmatic one. The Society's social presence dwarfs that of all potential political rivals, including the ruling NDP; if legalised, there is a real possibility of it overwhelming the political scene, a prospect that understandably also worries many ordinary Egyptians. In this respect, the disproportionate role of the Muslim Brothers in Egyptian society resembles that of the Algerian Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in the run-up to the fateful 1991 elections and the tragic events that ensued. But this situation is partly of the government's own making: by hampering legal opposition parties and refusing

³ For a discussion of Al-Afghani, Abduh and the Islamic modernism movement, see ICG Briefing, *Islamism in North Africa, I: The Legacies of History*, 20 April 2004.

⁴ For a discussion of these measures, see ICG Briefing, *The Challenge of Political Reform: Egypt after the Iraq war*, 30 September 2003.

to legalise new ones, it has facilitated the Society's virtual monopoly in this sphere. Were other parties allowed to develop their social presence in rivalry with the Brothers unhindered by government harassment, legalisation of the Brothers as a political party would carry far less risk. In the meantime, the government should accept that its longstanding refusal to accord them any legal status is inconsistent with and inimical to the rule of law, and it should act to bring the Society within the framework of law by recognising it as either an association or a confederation of individual associations.

Western policymakers need to tread carefully. They should certainly not endorse the regime's complacent inaction. But, equally, they should not presume to dictate the specific content or the pace of reform, let alone substitute themselves as the main actors of the reform process. In particular, they should recognise the counter-productive nature of applying heavy public pressure or attempting to by-pass the Egyptian government. Such approaches would risk aggravating the regime's legitimacy deficit and would thus subvert its ability to adopt bold reform measures, while allowing conservatives to engage in hollow nationalist posturing as a cloak for their resistance to change and simultaneously tarring genuine reformers as collaborators with foreign intervention. U.S. efforts have, undoubtedly, put the spotlight on the question of political reform, galvanising a debate that had languished too long. But, so long as the U.S. is viewed as either insufficiently engaged or excessively biased in the Arab-Israeli conflict, its credibility and efforts to promote reform will be undermined. Securing an equitable resolution of that conflict and acting to reduce tensions in the Middle East as a whole would be the most effective way for the West, and the U.S. in particular, to facilitate genuine and sustainable political reform in Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab world.

II. THE DERIVATIVES OF QUTB

All the main extremist and violent movements in Egypt have been Qutbist. The innovative elements of Qutb's thought represented a radical reaction to the doctrine and practice of President Nasser's regime. The central feature of this reaction was the practice of *takfir*, the act of denouncing someone or something as "infidel" or "impious".⁵ The state was condemned as

"impious" because it was perceived as the vector of irreligious (*jahili*) values. This perception was premised in part on a radical rejection of nationalism as un- or anti-Islamic. The popularisation of the idea of *takfir* also expressed the outflanking of the religious establishment by younger radical activists pretending to authority in matters of interpretation and judgement which were previously the preserve of the *'ulama*. It thus expressed the degree of anarchy that had developed within the religious field.

That Islamic extremists in Egypt have been oriented by Qutb's ideas does not explain why his ideas were taken up on a large scale instead of remaining the esoteric doctrine of a harmless fringe. The emergence of a *jihadi* current within Egyptian Islamism in the 1970s was connected at the outset with the Palestinian question.⁶ The subsequent popularisation of Qutb's thought occurred in conjunction with the radicalisation of the younger generation of Egyptian Islamists in reaction to Sadat's signing of the Camp David accords with Israel and his attempts to repress widespread opposition to this. The second wave of extremist violence from 1992 onwards came in the context of the fall-out from the war in Afghanistan and from the 1990-91 war against Iraq.

Qutb died before he could specify how true Muslims might licitly and effectively oppose the impious state, beyond vague references to the need for a vanguard "movement" (*haraka*). His Egyptian followers accordingly took off in different directions.

A. AL-TAKFIR WA'L-HIJRA

The idea that the new *jahiliyya* -- the era of barbarous ignorance -- was an accomplished fact and that Egyptian society as a whole had relapsed into unbelief underlay the activity of the group founded in 1971 by Shukri Mustafa (1942-1977), which he called *Jama'at al-Muslimin* (The Society of the Muslims), but which the government controlled media dubbed *Al-Takfir wa'l-Hijra*. Extremist in doctrine, the group was apolitical and initially non-

see ICG Middle East Briefing, *Islamism in North Africa I, The Legacies of History*, op. cit.

⁶ In the same way, the creation by the Muslim Brothers of their (now long since defunct) para-military "Special Apparatus" in 1940 was linked to their involvement in the Palestinian question at that time as well as to their anti-British campaign; see Brynjar Lia, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt* (Reading, 1998), pp. 177-181.

⁵ For a discussion of the place of *takfir* in Qutb's doctrine,

violent in behaviour. Far from going to war with the state, Shukri believed true Muslims should denounce the society as infidel (hence *Al-Takfir*) but then withdraw from it as the Prophet withdrew from Mecca (hence *al-Hijra*) and constitute a new community which would enlarge itself by energetic but peaceful proselytising (*da'wa*). This ambitious but non-violent project of an Islamic "alternative society" developing itself on the margins of, but spiritually in "complete separation" (*mufasala kamila*) from, the surrounding *jahili* society, came to grief when Shukri was drawn into conflict with a rival group and then with the Egyptian authorities. The fateful decision to take hostage a government minister, who was subsequently killed, precipitated a crackdown; hundreds of members were arrested and imprisoned and Shukri and four other leaders were hanged. Many former members remained active, however, often drifting into other groups.⁷

B. AL-JIHAD

The idea that the *jahiliyya* was a tendency rather than an all-enveloping reality, and that the state, rather than the society at large, was impious underlay the outlook of the *jihadi* groups, notably the "Jihad Organisation" -- *Tanzim al-Jihad* (often referred to simply as *al-Jihad*) -- and, subsequently, the "Islamic Group" -- *al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya*. The society and people (except the Christian minority) of Egypt being substantially Muslim, the problem was the impious state against which it was necessary, but also possible, to struggle.

The first contemporary armed *jihadi* group in Egypt was formed by a Palestinian of Jordanian nationality, Salah Sirriya, an ex-member of the Islamic

Liberation Party (*Hizb al-Tahrir al-Islami*) that had been founded in Jerusalem in 1953. Sirriya arrived in Egypt only in 1971 but in 1974 his followers attempted to mount a coup by taking over the Military Technical Academy in Heliopolis (a north-eastern suburb of Cairo) as a preliminary to assassinating President Sadat. The attempt failed, the group (called the "Military Academy Group") was rounded up, and Sirriya was executed in November 1976. Soon afterwards, a veteran of Sirriya's group, Salam Al-Rahhal (also a Jordanian, studying at Al-Azhar) organised in Alexandria the nucleus of what was to become *al-Jihad*. Discovered by the police and partially dismantled in 1977, it was thereafter led by Egyptians: Kamal Habib in Alexandria and, from 1979, Abd al-Salam Farag in Cairo. In 1980, a military intelligence officer, Abbud 'Abd al-Latif Al-Zumur, joined and later assumed overall military responsibility. At the same time, the group established a presence in Upper Egypt when Karam Mohammed Zuhdi, from Assiut, brought his followers (the Jihadi Islamic Group -- *al-Jama'a al-islamiyya al-jihadiyya*) into the organisation.

The doctrine of *al-Jihad* was elaborated by Farag in a pamphlet entitled *Al-Jihad: al-Farida al-Ghaiba* (Jihad: the obscured obligation). Clearly influenced by Qutb, it also invoked the thirteenth century Hanbali jurist, Taqi Al-Din Ahmed Ibn Taymiyya, who had prescribed the attitude Muslims should take to rulers whose Muslim credentials were suspect or bogus.⁸ For Farag, that Sadat had cultivated the image of *al-Ra'is al-mu'min* (the pious President) meant nothing against the crucial fact that Egypt was not governed by Islamic law. Consequently, Sadat's professions of faith were hypocritical and *jihad* was licit.⁹ Moreover,

⁷ A distinct *takfiri* movement roughly contemporary with Shukri's group was the Samawiyya, named after its founder, Sheikh Abdallah Al-Samawi, who developed the doctrine of *al-takfir* with Shukri while they were in prison from 1965 to 1971. Al-Samawi rejected Shukri's idea of retreating from society -- *al-hijra* -- in favour of a militant activist strategy and developed his own following, based mainly in the districts of al-Fayyoun and Minya as well as in Cairo. A characteristic feature of his group's behaviour was the resort to attacks on video shops and clubs; some churches were also attacked. The Sheikh and some of his followers were arrested and tried for these activities in 1986; see Gehad Auda, "The 'normalization' of the Islamic movement in Egypt from the 1970s to the early 1990s" in Martin E. Marty & R. Scott Appleby (eds.), *Accounting for Fundamentalisms: the dynamic character of movements*, American Academy of Arts and Sciences (Chicago, London, 1994), pp. 374-412, 399.

⁸ Ibn Taymiyya considered that the Mongols who had seized power on the ruins of the Abbassid empire after the sack of Baghdad in 1258 were not true Muslims, because they remained attached to the customary law (*yasa*) of the Mongol people, instead of upholding Islamic law (the *Shari'a*) exclusively. Since they were not true Muslims, the standard Sunni doctrine that bad Muslim rulers should be endured did not apply and rebellion, far from being illicit sedition (*fitna*), was the licit, indeed obligatory, defence of the Islamic community (*jihad*).

⁹ In May 1980 the Egyptian government amended article 2 of the constitution so as to proclaim the *Shari'a* "the main source" of legislation; see Steven Barraclough, "Al-Azhar: between the government and the Islamists", *Middle East Journal*, 52, 2, Spring 1998, pp. 236-249: 247. This was not taken seriously by Farag and his group; at this time Sadat had turned against those Islamist movements which he had previously encouraged, the Muslim Brothers and the campus-based Islamic groups (see below), and could thus be perceived

Farag argued, the obligation of *jihad* against “the nearer enemy” (the Egyptian regime) took precedence over that against “the more distant enemy” (Israel).¹⁰

This was the doctrinal rationale for the assassination of President Sadat on 6 October 1981. A full-scale insurrection was intended, but the attempt to organise one in Cairo was a fiasco and, outside Assiut, where rioting fomented by Zuhdi's followers lasted three days, few disturbances occurred. In the ensuing repression, Farag, Khaled Al-Islambuli (Sadat's assassin) and several other leaders were hanged, and many imprisoned, including Al-Zumur. The organisation survived, however, only to split over an internal dispute when the Upper Egyptian wing, Zuhdi's Jihadi Islamic Group, seceded in 1984.¹¹

Thereafter, *al-Jihad* proved unable to maintain an effective campaign and local jihadi groups developed outside its control. While its remaining members mounted occasional assassination attempts on regime figures in 1990¹² and 1993¹³ and on President Mubarak himself in 1995, they were increasingly drawn into international activities through their connection from 1989 onwards with Osama Bin Laden's al-Qaeda network, with which they formally merged in 1998. This re-orientation of *al-Jihad* to the external and international sphere has been largely associated with Ayman al-Zawahiri, who since 11 September 2001 has attained international notoriety

as oppressing the agents of the *da'wa* in the same way as Qutb had perceived Nasser's regime.

¹⁰ This thesis matched the perceptions of many Egyptian activists that, since Camp David, the state had comprehensively defaulted on its obligations in respect of Palestine and that a change of regime was accordingly the precondition of a resumed struggle against Israel.

¹¹ At issue was the succession to Farag as the *amir* (overall leader). The Upper Egyptian wing wanted the blind preacher Umar Abd al-Rahman (subsequently notorious for his role in the 1993 attack on the World Trade Center) as *amir*, whereas members of the founding nucleus of *al-Jihad* in Cairo considered his blindness made him unsuitable and proposed Al-Zumur (ICG interview with Islamist lawyer and former activist Montasser Al-Zayyat, Cairo, 5 October 2003). The members of the Jihadi Islamic Group rejected the leadership of a prisoner and seceded (Auda, op. cit., p. 400).

¹² The speaker of the People's Assembly, Rif'at Al-Mahgoub, was assassinated in October 1990, by *al-Jihad* according to some sources (e.g. Sullivan and Abed-Kotob, op.cit., p. 82) but not all; Auda (op. cit., p. 401) suggests that independent local *jihadi* groups were responsible.

¹³ In 1993, unsuccessful attempts were made to assassinate the information minister, Safwat Al-Sharif, in April, the interior minister, Atef Sidqi, in August and the prime minister in November.

as bin Laden's principal lieutenant. The prominent Islamist lawyer Montasser Al-Zayyat told ICG, “Al-Zawahiri took nearly everyone into al-Qaeda.”¹⁴

An important element of Al-Zawahiri's outlook is ascribed by some Egyptian Islamists to his experience in prison. Independent Islamist commentator Fahmi Howeidi told ICG: “Al-Zawahiri left Egypt because he had been tortured, humiliated; he hated the whole world after that. Al-Zawahiri was a product of a repressive system.”¹⁵

Al-Zawahiri visited Afghanistan in 1980 and Peshawar in 1981, was arrested in the clamp-down on *al-Jihad* after Sadat's assassination in October 1981 but released in 1984.¹⁶ Thereafter he took over the leadership of *al-Jihad* from the imprisoned Al-Zumur. He visited the USA in 1989 and again in 1993, when, disappointed by the failure of his fundraising efforts, he reportedly decided to throw in his lot with bin Laden completely. It was Al-Zawahiri who, while based, like bin Laden, in Khartoum, reportedly master-minded the unsuccessful attempt to assassinate President Mubarak in Ethiopia on 26 June 1995 and the bomb attack on the Egyptian embassy in Islamabad on 19 November 1995 which killed sixteen and wounded 60. Forced to leave the Sudan in May 1996, Al-Zawahiri scouted the possibility of establishing a base for *al-Jihad* in Chechnya but was arrested and briefly detained in neighbouring Dagestan in early 1997. In February 1998, he formally sealed his alliance with al-Qaeda, signing a document proclaiming the formation of the “World Islamic Front for Jihad against the Jews and Crusaders”.

Meanwhile, what was left of *al-Jihad* inside Egypt had been largely dismantled. Over 300 suspected members had been put on trial following the arrest of the organisation's membership director, Ismaïl

¹⁴ ICG interview with Montasser Al-Zayat, Cairo, 5 October 2003. Al-Zayyat was an Islamist activist in the early 1980s; arrested in October 1981, he was eventually acquitted and released in 1984. He has since become the best known lawyer defending Islamists in Egyptian trials. He is the author of *Ayman Al-Zawâhiri ka-mâ arafatuhu* [Ayman Al-Zawâhiri as I knew him], 2nd edition, Cairo, May 2002; English translation: *The Road to Al-Qaeda: the story of Bin Laden's right hand man*, London, Pluto Press, 2001.

¹⁵ ICG interview with Fahmi Howeidi, Cairo, 28 October 2003; Howeidi is a prominent Islamist columnist at *Al-Ahram*.

¹⁶ The account given in this paragraph follows that of Lawrence Wright, ‘The Man Behind Bin Laden: how an Egyptian doctor became a master of terror’. *The New Yorker*, September 16, 2002.

Nassir, in early 1993; a further 280 were arrested and six sentenced to death after the assassination attempt on the prime minister in Cairo the following November. Following the capture by American intelligence agents of senior *al-Jihad* figures in Baku and Tirana in 1998, over 100 members went on trial in Cairo and Al-Zawahiri and his brother Mohamed were sentenced to death *in absentia*. By then, *al-Jihad* had long since been eclipsed inside the country by *al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya*. When the latter decided to end its campaign in 1999, most *al-Jihad* members still in Egypt accepted its cease-fire and abandoned their *jihadi* activities. Montasser Al-Zayyat told ICG, "there is no *al-Jihad/al-Qaeda* network in Egypt today".¹⁷

C. AL-JAMA'A AL-ISLAMIYYA

From 1992 to late 1997, the main organisation engaged in violent insurgency in Egypt was the "Islamic Group", *al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya*.¹⁸ This was an evolution of the faction based primarily in Upper Egypt and led by Karam Zuhdi which seceded from *al-Jihad* in 1984. Although active on its own account from the mid-1980s onwards, it escalated its insurgency with the sensational assassination of a secularist intellectual, Farag Foda, in Cairo on 8 June 1992.¹⁹ Thereafter, it engaged in numerous armed clashes with Egyptian security forces, as well as violent sectarian clashes with the Coptic Christian communities that are especially important in the Assiut and Minya districts of Upper Egypt.²⁰ The *Jama'a's* insurgency climaxed in the massacre of 58 foreign tourists and four Egyptians at Luxor on 17 November 1997.

¹⁷ ICG interview, Cairo, 5 October 2003.

¹⁸ Conventionally referred to in Egypt (where the letter 'j' is pronounced as a hard 'g') as *al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya* or simply "the *Gama'a*".

¹⁹ It is important to note that Foda had already been denounced as an apostate - and thus liable to the death penalty under Islamic law - by a leading light of Al-Azhar, Sheikh Mohammed Al-Ghazali, two weeks before he was killed (Barraclough, op. cit., p. 241). Al-Ghazali was not formally speaking for the religious establishment, but as an Azhari he had important links to it and his declaration was evidence of the continuum of doctrine extending from 'official Islam' to the extremist movements. Another sensational attack by the *Jama'a* on a celebrated intellectual was the stabbing of Nobel-prize winning novelist Naguib Mahfouz in October 1994; Mahfouz survived, however.

²⁰ In those areas, they are 18-19 per cent of the population, compared to six per cent nationally.

The *Jama'a* had a different outlook from that of Al-Jihad. Al-Jihad's leaders had opted for a narrowly conspiratorial, elitist and militarist strategy, relying on targeted assassinations of senior regime figures and terrorist bombings and explicitly rejecting religious proselytising -- the *da'wa* - and political agitation in general as impossible given Egyptian conditions. In contrast, the *Jama'a* sought to combine the *da'wa*, which it interpreted as involving not only preaching but also the muscular policing of morals -- *amr bi 'l-mar'uf wa nahi ani 'l-munkar* (commanding that which is proper and repressing that which is reprehensible) -- with militant opposition to the state. Thus it was not purely conspiratorial but interested also in a kind of mass agitation and the project of re-Islamising society. This aspect of its outlook and behaviour expressed an important element of continuity with the Islamist agitation which had occurred in Egypt's universities in the 1970s.

The group which, under Karam Zuhdi, called itself *al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya al-Jihadiyya* and joined Al-Jihad in 1980 was an offshoot of the far broader movement of "Islamic groups" -- *al-jama'at al-islamiyya* -- which the Sadat regime had encouraged from 1972 onwards. Concerned above all to purge his regime of Nasserists and leftists, Sadat came to rely on Islamists to rout his critics in the student movement. This encouragement went a long way. The governor of Assiut appointed by Sadat in January 1973, Mohammed Uthman Ismail, developed such close relations with the local Islamists that he became known as "the Godfather of the *jama'at al-islamiyya*";²¹ the latter were allowed to organise Islamic summer camps on university campuses²² and in 1975 the government revised the regulations governing the National Student Union to facilitate its takeover by the Islamists the following year.²³

A valued auxiliary against Sadat's secular opponents, the Islamic groups also gave the regime support against the extremist current in Egyptian Islamism represented by Shukri Mustafa's *al-Takfir wa 'l-Hijra* group, complementing in this the efforts of the Muslim Brothers, with whom Sadat had effected a

²¹ Kepel, *Le Prophète et Pharaon*, pp. 144-145.

²² These camps were modelled on those run by the Muslim Brothers prior to 1954; the first camp was held at Cairo University in 1973; the following year, the Cairo camp was attended by the First Secretary of the ruling party and received favourable coverage in the government daily *Al-Ahram*; in 1975, *Al-Ahram* reported sympathetically on camps at Cairo and Beni Suef, and the camp at Mansourah was inaugurated by the Rector of Al-Azhar University (Ibid, p. 149).

²³ Ibid., pp. 150-152.

rapprochement. One of the *jama'ât*'s leading spokesmen, Issam al-Din Al-'Aryan, wrote an article denouncing the concept of *al-Takfir* as developed by Shukri Mustafa as a "sin" and arguing that Egypt was fundamentally a Muslim country, not part of *dar al-harb* ("the house of war", the traditional term for the non-Islamic world), and other members of the *jama'ât* claimed to have been "combating them [*Al-Takfir wa 'l-Hijra*] from the outset".²⁴

The regime's alliance with the *jama'ât* broke down in 1978. This was a consequence of Sadat's visit to Jerusalem in November 1977 and his moves towards peace with Israel, which culminated in the Camp David agreement of March 1979. In early 1978 the government organised a campaign to weaken the *jama'ât* in the universities and students' union; the following summer, the authorities prevented attendance at the *jama'ât*'s camps in Alexandria, Cairo and Zagazig; in April 1979, immediately after Camp David, Sadat vehemently attacked the Islamists in a speech at Assiut and in June the national students union was dissolved by decree. It was in this context, marked by the regime's inability to tolerate criticism of its foreign policy and its resort to repression of Islamist as well as other dissidents, that a section of the *jama'ât* was radicalised. Some of the movement's leaders aligned themselves with the Muslim Brothers, whose understanding with Sadat had also broken down over Camp David. Others, especially those based in Upper Egypt, revised their view of the regime along Qutbist lines, embraced the *jihadi* outlook and joined Farag's organisation.

Al-Gihad and the Gama'a were both involved in the assassination of Sadat. What brought them together was Islamic revolutionary thought against recognising the Muslim character of the regime, based on Ibn Taymiyya, Mohammed Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, Sayyid Qutb and Al-Mawdudi.²⁵

Following the break with Al-Jihad in 1984, however, the *Jama'a* developed a strategy that incorporated the mass agitation perspective of the 1970s campus radicals. It also reflected the group's roots in the society of Upper Egypt and the extent to which it was articulating popular resentments, which combined

regionalist as well as class and sectarian elements.²⁶ The project of re-Islamising society came to exhibit two particular features, which precipitated the eventual violent confrontation with the state:

In Cairo and some other large towns, the *Jama'a* invested in the poorer quarters neglected by the authorities and imposed its own conception of Islamic order, turning them into "Islamic liberated zones"; the classic instance was the Imbaba neighbourhood on the north-western edge of Cairo, where the *Jama'a*'s local leader, Sheikh Gaber, proclaimed an "Islamic state"; it was only in December 1992 that the regime reacted decisively, deploying 14,000 security personnel to reassert its authority there.

In establishing an "Islamic order", the *Jama'a* engaged in massive intimidation of the Coptic Christian population, notably in the Assiut and Minya districts of Upper Egypt, imposing on them the traditional status of *dhimmis* (non-Muslims tolerated and protected by Islamic rule) in return for payment of the *jiziyya*, a kind of poll tax which amounted to protection money, Copts who refused to pay being exposed to violent and sometimes lethal attacks.

III. LUXOR AND ITS AFTERMATH

In the course of its escalating confrontation with the authorities from 1992 onwards, the *Jama'a* repeatedly attacked tourists.²⁷ This continued over the next five years, badly damaging Egypt's tourist trade and affecting the economy as a whole. The climax came in late 1997 with the bombing of a tourist bus in Cairo's Al-Tahrir Square in September, in which nine Germans and the Egyptian bus driver died, and the previously cited November massacre at the Hatshepsut Temple in Luxor.

²⁶ For discussion of this aspect of the *Jama'a*, see Kepel, *Jihad*, pp. 281-293, and Mamoun Fandy, "Egypt's Islamic Group: regional revenge?", *Middle East Journal*, 48, 4 (1994), pp. 607-625.

²⁷ On 24 June 1992, *Jama'a* activists attacked a sound and light show at Luxor; in the succeeding weeks, they machine-gunned tourist boats on the Nile and in October an Englishman was killed in Cairo and three Russians were stabbed in Port Said. In February 1993, three foreigners were killed in an explosion in a Cairo café; in March the Cairo Museum was the target of a bomb attack; a few weeks later a bomb exploded at one of the Pyramids and in December eight Austrian tourists were wounded in an attack on their bus in Cairo. This pattern broadly continued until late 1997.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 158.

²⁵ ICG interview with al-Zayyat Cairo, 5 October 2003.

By this time, however, many *Jama'a* leaders recognised their campaign was strategically lost. The state's brutal repression had been effective and, in addition to the violence, the damage to the tourist trade had alienated public opinion. Already in 1996, the leading Islamist lawyer Montasser Al-Zayyat had publicly appealed to all armed Islamic groups in Egypt to cease violent activities.²⁸ In July 1997, Mohammed Amir Abd al-'Ali, the leading *Jama'a* defendant in a trial of militants involved in bomb attacks on banks, announced a cease-fire in a court statement, but the government refused to take this seriously and cast doubt on it.²⁹ No further attacks followed the Luxor incident, while intense discussions occurred within the *Jama'a* in both its internal and external wings. In March 1999, the group's leading instance, the *Majlis al-Shura* (Consultative Council), formally proclaimed a cease-fire, which has held ever since.

The *Jama'a* has recently engaged in a remarkable process of collective self-criticism that has included:

- ❑ publication in early 2002 of four volumes written by imprisoned *Jama'a* leaders in which they renounced their previous ideas;³⁰
- ❑ publication by the state-owned weekly *Al-Mussawar* in June 2002 of interviews with imprisoned *Jama'a* militants, including Karam Zuhdi, in which they criticised their former actions;³¹
- ❑ the *Jama'a*'s reaffirmation of its cease-fire in June 2003, following Islamist terrorist attacks in Riyadh and Casablanca, and its calling on "Muslim youth...to refrain from any participation in...operations carried out by al-Qaeda";³²

- ❑ an interview in *Al-Mussawar* on 15-16 July 2003 in which Karam Zuhdi went far beyond the original 1999 "initiative for the halt to violence" to disavow and apologise for the *Jama'a*'s past actions, describing its armed conflict with the state as *fitna* (illicit rebellion) and Sadat and all security forces killed since 1981 as "martyrs".

On 22 September 2003, Karam Zuhdi was released from jail, followed on 29 September by two other leaders, Fuad Al-Dawalibi and Assam Abd Al-Mageed and, on 30 September, by nearly 1,000 other *Jama'a* activists and another senior figure, Mamduh Al-Yussef.³³

The "ideological revision" has had four main elements: renouncing the use of violence; renouncing the resort to *jihad* against a ruler who does not apply the Shari'a; accepting that the practice of *amr bi 'l-mar'uf wa nahi ani 'l-munkar* (commanding what is proper and prohibiting what is reprehensible) should be left to the legal authorities; and abandoning the doctrinaire opposition to party politics, voting and so forth.

As comprehensive and radical as this "ideological revision" has been, it raises a number of questions. As several Islamists have noted, including some who supported the original cease-fire, it had the appearance of an unqualified, even humiliating, repentance,³⁴ and so gave the impression of a repudiation of the past made under duress. It has thus

Hayat on 26 May 2003; see 'Militants against terror', *Cairo Times*, 5-11 June 2003.

³³ 'Militants freed', *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 2-8 October 2003; 'Not yet a honeymoon', *Cairo Times*, 2-8 October 2003; 'A New Page?', *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 9-15 October 2003.

³⁴ One important figure, Osama Rushdi, expressed reservations about the trend of the imprisoned leaders' statements in June 2002. From Assiut, a founder-member of the *Jama'a* and a member of its *Majlis al-Shura*, Rushdi was arrested in 1981 but acquitted and then went underground; he left Egypt in 1989 and settled in 1993 in Holland, where he acted as the group's spokesman and editor of its journal *Al-Murabitun*. Associated with Montasser Al-Zayyat's appeal for an end to violence in 1996, he condemned the Luxor massacre, which he blamed on an extremist faction in the *Jama'a*, and was instrumental in securing the March 1999 cease-fire. He further criticised Zuhdi's declarations in his July 2003 interview, suggesting that, being made from prison and thus under duress, they would sow doubt and suspicion and were "oriented towards jeopardising the peace initiative" (*Cairo Times*, 27 June-3 July 2002). According to Montasser Al-Zayyat, Abbud Abd al-Latif Zumur, the military leader of *Al-Jihad* in 1981, who later joined the *Jama'a* in prison and supported the initial revision, also had subsequent reservations (ICG interview, 5 October 2003).

²⁸ ICG interview with Montasser Al-Zayyat, Cairo, 5 October 2003.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Collectively called *Tashih al-Mafahim* (The Correction of Concepts), their individual titles are eloquent, including *The Prohibition of Extremism in Religion*; *Shedding Light on the Mistakes of Holy War*; *Peace Initiative*, etc. (*Al-Ahram Weekly*, 2-8 October 2003).

³¹ These interviews, covering 19 pages, were conducted personally by the editor-in-chief, Makram Mohammad Ahmed, a fact which underlined the government's interest in the *Jama'a*'s 'self-criticism'; see Paul Schemm, "Egypt lets the world know that the Gamaa Islamiya is out of the terrorism business", *Cairo Times*, 27 June-3 July 2002.

³² In a statement published in the London-based daily *Al-*

left unanswered the critical question of whether Egyptian Islamic radicalism has genuinely and comprehensively come to terms with the bankruptcy of its *jihadi* strategy and settled its intellectual accounts with the thinking which inspired it.

What they believe now is the exact opposite of what they used to believe; this weakens the revision, because a politician may seek to reinterpret what he said in the past, but people are worried about a *total revolution* in their thought. This total volte-face is very dangerous. What guarantee is there they won't do another volte-face and revert to violence?³⁵

Thus, what began as an ideological revision has evolved into something else, considered by some of those involved to be a "collective repentance" and a "collapse"³⁶ which has deprived the *Jama'a* of the possibility of establishing a credible doctrinal basis for an alternative, non-violent, political strategy. While this evidently will frustrate *Jama'a* veterans seeking new political options, a far more important consideration is that it may fail to deter others from engaging in *jihadi* activism in the future. Evoking the outlook of the original founders of the *Jama'a* and *Al-Jihad*, Al-Zayyat told ICG that "my generation was a generation of adolescents; its thought was adolescent thought."³⁷ But Egyptian society is still producing angry adolescents in large numbers. Precisely because it is linked neither to an in-depth discussion of what went wrong nor to new, practical political approaches, the *Jama'a's mea culpa* may fail to have much impact on the outlook of the new younger generation.

Above all, the *mea culpa* does not seem to have dealt with the fundamental doctrinal premises of *jihadi* activism against the state, the ideas of Sayyid Qutb, which accordingly remain available for others to take up.

In general there is a shift away from Sayyid Qutb, but there is still loyalty towards him and Al-Gihad still adopts his thinking. A lot of people still read his work, seeing it as a gem of Islamic thought. *In the Shadow of the Qur'an* is still a best-selling

Islamic book, and *Ma'alim fi'l-Tariq* (Signposts on the Road) is also still sold and read.³⁸

The crucial point, however, is not that Qutb is still read, but that his thinking is not properly debated. There has been no thorough written critique of Qutb's thought within the Islamist movement.³⁹ Thus, despite the *Jama'a's* admission that their campaign of violence was illicit rebellion, not *jihad*, the intellectual underpinnings of the contrary view developed by Qutb have not been effectively challenged, let alone refuted. In other words, this re-orientation from Qutbism does not mean that it has been transcended, merely abandoned, and this abandonment could prove merely temporary as well as less than complete.

The *Jama'a's* recantation and repentance may thus prove to have been a missed opportunity. If the purpose of the Egyptian authorities who orchestrated the process was to induce the *Jama'a* to discredit itself, this aim may have been achieved. But the main ideas which oriented it have not been discredited, and the "ideological revision" has not produced a new orientation for the younger generation of impatient would-be activists that might enable them to be purposefully active in a constructive and non-violent way. This would not matter so much if government policy allowed an organised non-violent tendency to function as an effective channel for Islamic political activism. But it does not.

IV. THE SOCIETY OF THE MUSLIM BROTHERS TODAY

The Society of the Muslim Brothers -- *Jam'iyyat al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin* -- has recovered much of its pre-1954 strength since 1971, when President Sadat reversed Nasser's repressive policy and mended fences with the Society in the course of his move against his Nasserist critics. Classifying the Society is not easy, since it combines aspects of a religious movement practising the Islamic *da'wa*, a social movement, a network of charitable, educational and sport associations, and a (would-be) political party. This uncertainty is connected to its lack of legal definition.

The Egyptian state refuses to accord it the legal status either of a political party or of an association;

³⁵ ICG interview with Montasser Al-Zayyat, Cairo, 5 October 2003.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

formally, the Society exists outside the law. At the same time, the state tolerates it, and the Egyptian press reports its activities. At frequent intervals, however, the state cracks down, arresting Brothers at will, the standard charge being "attempting to reorganise a banned movement", and sometimes detaining them without trial for months on end. Thus the Society exists in a legal limbo, a sitting duck for repression, its wings regularly clipped, but never fully disabled. The ambiguity in its relationship to the state, the way the government connives at this and the Society's leadership endures it, constitute one of the main factors underlying and guaranteeing the immobility of the Egyptian political system.

A. DOCTRINE AND OUTLOOK: THE REJECTION OF QUTBISM

Since the late 1960s the Muslim Brothers have tried to live down the memory of Sayyid Qutb and to distance themselves from his vision. This process began even before Nasser's death in 1970 opened the way to a rapprochement with the regime. In 1969, the General Guide, Hassan Al-Hodeibi, published from prison a text, *Du'ah, Lâ Qudah* (Missionaries, Not Judges) in which he rejected Qutb's views, especially those concerning *al-Takfir*.⁴⁰ With the emergence of *takfiri* radicalism from the late 1970s onwards, the Brothers lent their support to the authorities, attacking the *takfir* doctrine in the early 1980s and even visiting radicals in prison to wean them off it.⁴¹ They also condemned the resort to violence, notably the murder of the minister of religious affairs by Shukri Mustafa's

group in July 1977 and al-Jihad's assassination attempt on the information minister in April 1993.⁴²

Defining the Society's attitude today, Abd al-Mon'im Abu 'l-Futuh told ICG:

Sayyid Qutb is an Islamic thinker whom we respect, but neither an ideological nor an operational reference for us. There is a huge gap between the thought of Hassan al-Banna and that of Qutb. Our ideological references are the writings of Al-Banna and all documents produced by the Society since then."⁴³

This attitude is based in part on changes since the early 1970s in the character of the Egyptian state, notably the official recognition of the *Shari'a* as the foundation of legislation.⁴⁴ More generally, the economic and political opening⁴⁵ -- *infatih* -- under

⁴² Sullivan and Abed-Kotob, op. cit., pp. 61-62; Ramadan, op. cit., p. 167.

⁴³ ICG interview, Cairo, 22 October 2003; Abu 'l-Futuh is a member of the Society's *Maktab al-Irshad* (the Guidance Bureau); in 1977, as president of the Cairo University Students' Union, he famously engaged in a heated exchange with President Sadat on live television; he was one of the leaders of *al-jama'at al-islamiyya* who rallied to the Muslim Brothers in the early 1980s instead of joining the *jihadis* with Karam Zuhdi and his associates.

⁴⁴ In the 1971 debate on the constitution, President Sadat recognised the *Shari'a* as "a source" of Egypt's laws (Voll, op. cit., p. 378); in May 1980, article 2 of the constitution was amended to make the *Shari'a* "the main source" of legislation (see fn. 8 above). These changes have had consequences: books and other artistic works which fall foul of religious authorities are banned by the courts, and family law is based on the *Shari'a*. In June 1995, in a sensational case brought by doctrinaire Islamists, a Cairo court imposed a divorce on an academic, Nasr Abu Zaid, and his wife on the grounds that Abu Zaid's writings showed him to be an apostate and his marriage to a Muslim woman was accordingly illegal; the couple fled the country (Kepel, *Jihad*, pp. 284-285, 289, 409, n.15); in 2000, a book accused (by a literary critic) of blasphemy, *A Banquet for Seaweed*, by Haydar Haydar, was initially cleared by a 'Committee of Experts' appointed by the minister of culture but then condemned along with its author by the rector of Al-Azhar, Sheikh Muhammed Tantawi, while the editors of the review which had originally published the book were charged with blasphemy by the state security department. Another writer, Salah al-Din Muhsin, was charged with blasphemy in 2000 and was sentenced in January 2001 to three years imprisonment. On this and similar affairs, see Samia Mehrez, "Take them out of the ball game: Egypt's cultural players in crisis", *Middle East Report* 219, Summer 2001.

⁴⁵ The Muslim Brothers publicly supported Sadat's economic *infatih* and some Brothers may have personally benefited from it (Sullivan and Abed-Kotob, op. cit., p. 51).

⁴⁰ Sullivan and Abed-Kotob, op. cit., p. 63; Al-Hodeibi's point was that the Brothers sought to lead straying Muslims back to the true faith, not condemn (still less wage *jihad* against) them for their lapses; Al-Hodeibi refrained from criticising Qutb by name, however; see John O. Voll, "Fundamentalism in the Sunni Arab World", in Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (eds.), *The Fundamentalism Project, vol. 1: Fundamentalisms Observed*, American Academy of Arts and Sciences (Chicago, London, 1991), pp. 345-402: 373.

⁴¹ See Abdel Azim Ramadan, "Fundamentalist Influence in Egypt: the Strategies of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Takfir Groups", in Martin E. Marty & R. Scott Appleby (eds.), *The Fundamentalism Project, vol. 3: Fundamentalisms and the State*, American Academy of Arts and Sciences (Chicago, London, 1993), p. 173; in August 1982, the Muslim Brothers' General Guide, Umar Al-Tilmisani, addressed imprisoned *takfiri* militants in Tura Prison (ibid.); see also Auda, op. cit., p. 396.

Sadat and his rapprochement with the Brothers meant that the state was no longer repressing the religious mission of the *da'wa* but even facilitating it, a fact which arguably eliminated another of Qutb's grounds for condemning it as impious. Following Sadat's amnesty for Islamists in 1971,⁴⁶ the Brothers enjoyed the freedom to operate, hold marches, and distribute leaflets.⁴⁷ In July 1976 they were allowed to publish their own journal, *Al-Da'wa*.⁴⁸ While Sadat's negotiations with Israel, culminating in the Camp David agreement in 1979, "changed the atmosphere",⁴⁹ and the Brothers' opposition to this policy led them to be targeted with other opposition movements in the repression of 1980-81,⁵⁰ Sadat's successor, Hosni Mubarak, released members from jail in November 1981 and has allowed the Society a (fluctuating) degree of space since then.

As a result, far from retaining Qutb's denunciation of "the impious state", the Brothers now take the opposite view, as Abu 'l-Futuh explained:

Egypt is a Muslim country. The society is Muslim and the state is Islamic, it is not impious [*kufir*]. The government is an Islamic government [*hukuma islamiyya*], but does not apply all its Islamic principles. The principles it does not apply are those of freedom [*hurriyya*] and justice [*'adala*].⁵¹

The Society's championing of freedom is articulated in a discourse on democracy which combines a critique of the government with a critique of the West.

The absence of democracy is one of the main reasons for the crisis here, in Egypt and the Middle East. The Muslim Brothers believe that

the Western governments are one of the main reasons for the lack of democracy in the region because they are supporting dictatorships in the Arab and Islamic region in general, despite the fact that it has been proved that the absence of democracy and freedom is the reason for terrorism and violence. The West has incorrectly attributed terrorism to Islam. The West was content for as long as violence was confined to the region. After 9-11 the West started to rethink and revise its support for dictatorship and authoritarianism, but the U.S. is still going down the wrong road and Europe is following it, with pre-emptive wars and supporting destruction in the region.⁵²

Similarly, the Society makes an issue of the absence of justice, both externally and internally:

Externally, it is seen in the U.S. attitude to the Palestinians, the unfair and inhumane treatment they suffer, and in the European Union's decision to consider Hamas and Islamic Jihad as terrorist organisations instead of national liberation movements like the French Resistance in the Second World War or the National Liberation Front in Algeria. Internally, it is epitomised by the absence of respect for people, the extension of authoritarianism, the absence of liberties, the way the legal system is deprived of independence, the lack of redress for citizens' grievances, the absence of social justice, the problem of corruption. The West supports all of this.⁵³

B. THE TRAVAILS OF ISLAMIC GRADUALISM

Ever since its rapprochement with the Sadat regime, the Society has pursued a non-violent strategy of expanding its social and political presence through an approach that recalls that of European social democracy.⁵⁴ According to Abu 'l-Futuh, the adoption of this strategy marked a return to the Society's original perspective of peaceful change as

⁴⁶ A leading Brother, Umar al-Tilmisani, went straight from prison to the Abdin palace to thank Sadat in person for his release. Ramadan, op. cit., p. 165.

⁴⁷ ICG interview with Abd al-Mon'im Abu 'l-Futuh, Cairo, 22 October 2003.

⁴⁸ Ramadan, op. cit., pp. 165-166.

⁴⁹ ICG interview with Abd al-Mon'im Abu 'l-Futuh, Cairo, 22 October 2003.

⁵⁰ The Muslim Brothers criticised Sadat's policy towards Israel in February 1978 and expressed full opposition to it the following October (Ramadan, op. cit., p. 168). Following Sadat's speech attacking his Islamist critics on 15 April 1979, *Al-Da'wa* was seized; the journal was banned altogether in 1981. In September 1981, many Brothers, including General Guide Tilmisani, were among 1,536 people arrested. Ramadan, op. cit., pp. 160, 172.

⁵¹ ICG interview with Abd al-Mon'im Abu 'l-Futuh, Cairo, 22 October 2003.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ That many Islamists have been abandoning revolutionary for "social-democratic" approaches, that is, strategies involving working within the institutions of the state instead of trying to overthrow them, has been a theme of Olivier Roy's analyses in particular; see *The Failure of Political Islam* (London, 1994), pp. ix, 77-79.

developed by Hassan Al-Banna. In fact, however, it has come to include an element of accommodation of Western political principles which Al-Banna originally rejected. As Abu 'l-Futuh told ICG:

Since the early 1970s, in the context of Sadat's liberalisation, opening and dialogue, the Society adopted a new strategy, which relies on democracy as a means of change and as an objective. Democracy is not incompatible with Islam; *shura* is like democracy, it forces respect for basic liberties and the rights of women. We don't disagree with the West on this, except that the West has left democracy behind.⁵⁵

The practical pursuit of this strategy has involved the Society in organising satellite institutions (such as Islamic charities and educational and sports associations) in the social and cultural sphere, where the authorities have tended to a *laissez-faire* attitude, and in seeking influence in other, pre-existing and more general institutions by playing the electoral game. Lack of legal status as a political party has handicapped it in the formal political sphere (the national Parliament, municipal councils), but not wholly disqualified it. In other institutions, notably the professional associations or "syndicates", which are major actors in Egyptian public life, it has had appreciable success. In pursuing its project of steady permeation of Egyptian society, the Society has been consciously following a cautious and piecemeal strategy. In 1987, the then General Guide, Mohammad Hamid Abu'l-Nasr, stressed its commitment not only to a non-violent but also to a *gradualist* approach in general and to the introduction of the *Shari'a* in particular,⁵⁶ and his successors have persisted with this approach.

In July 1976, Sadat declared that "the establishment of a political party based on religion will never be permitted",⁵⁷ and this has remained the government's position. In order to participate in parliamentary and municipal elections, the Brothers have had either to field candidates running as "independents" or ally with legal parties and secure places on their lists. In 1976, Sadat's own "Centre Party" obliged, enabling six Brothers to get elected to the People's Assembly.⁵⁸ In

1984, the Society allied with the newly re-legalised *Wafd* party and twelve Brothers were among that party's 58 successful candidates for Parliament.⁵⁹ In April 1987, the Society dropped its alliance with the *Wafd* and joined with the *Al-Ahrar* (Liberal) party and the *Al-'Amal* (Labour) party in an "Islamic Alliance"; this won 60 seats, of which the MB took 36, becoming the largest opposition grouping in Parliament.⁶⁰ During the 'de-liberalisation' of the early 1990s,⁶¹ the Society's political presence contracted. In 1990, following the introduction of a controversial electoral law allowing only individual, not party, candidacies, it boycotted the parliamentary elections, like most parties.⁶² In November 1995, despite a regime clampdown, it contested the elections for the People's Assembly, but with no success.⁶³ In the most recent Assembly elections, in 2000, Brothers ran as "independents" and, with judicial supervision ensuring a comparatively honest poll, seventeen were elected.

But it is in the associations and syndicates that the Society has probably made the most headway. In 1987, its members won 54 of the 61 contested seats in the Engineers' Association elections;⁶⁴ in 1988, they won all twelve seats in by-elections in the Medical Doctors' Association;⁶⁵ in 1989, an "Islamic list" won "a substantial segment of the votes" in by-elections in the Commercial Graduates Association;⁶⁶ the following year, similar lists won all seats on the governing body of the Cairo University Professors' Club and ten of the twelve seats on the governing body of the Pharmacists' Association.⁶⁷ In September 1992, the Brothers took control of the Lawyers' Association, securing eighteen of the 24 seats on its

⁵⁹ Auda, op. cit., p. 387.

⁶⁰ Ayubi, op. cit., 85; Sullivan and Abed-Kotob, op. cit., p. 52; Voll, op. cit., p. 387.

⁶¹ For a discussion of how Egypt's political liberalisation went into reverse, see Eberhard Kienle, *A Grand Delusion: Democracy and Economic Reform in Egypt* (London, New York, 2001).

⁶² Sullivan and Abed-Kotob, op. cit., p. 52.

⁶³ Geneive Abdo, *No God But God: Egypt and the Triumph of Islam* (Oxford, 2000), p. 197; conducted in a climate of repression, these elections were widely perceived as rigged in favour of the ruling National Democratic Party.

⁶⁴ Auda, op. cit., p. 387.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid. In April 1993, the Muslim Brothers took control of a faculty club in northern Egypt for the first time, winning ten of the fifteen seats at Zagazig University. Sullivan and Abed-Kotob, op. cit., p. 55.

⁵⁵ ICG interview, Cairo, 22 October 2003. *Shura*, which literally means "consultation", is a classic precept of Islamic government.

⁵⁶ In an interview with *October* magazine, 19 April 1987.

⁵⁷ Ramadan, op. cit., p. 166.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 167.

board and election of Hassan Al-Banna's son, Seif al-Islam Al-Banna, as secretary general.⁶⁸

At this point, the regime began to react. In 1993, it introduced new legislation, Syndicate Law 100, which decreed that 50 per cent of a syndicate's membership must vote for a syndicate election to be valid.⁶⁹ In February 1995 a further law gave the judiciary power to intervene in syndicate elections. The following month, five Brothers who were members of the Doctors' syndicate were arrested on charges of using medical relief operations outside Egypt as cover for military training, a move which heralded a wave of repression, with the Engineers' Association being sequestered and Brothers arrested over the summer and autumn, culminating in the arrest of over a 1,000 on the eve of the parliamentary elections. In 1996, the government moved again to curb the Society's influence in the syndicates, charging the Lawyers' Association with financial mismanagement and placing it under the supervision of court-appointed custodians. In the calmer climate following the end of the Islamic insurgency, and especially after the 2000 parliamentary elections, the Society was able to win some two thirds of the seats in the elections to the council of the Bar Association in February 2001 and made further gains in this Association in by-elections in March 2003.

Lack of legal recognition has made it difficult for the Society to capitalise on these advances or even consolidate them, since its status as "a banned organisation" provides a permanent pretext for official harassment,⁷⁰ including frequent recourse to prolonged detention without trial. Even elected members of the People's Assembly have not been

immune.⁷¹ At regular intervals, its leaders have made an issue of the state's attitude, to no effect,⁷² but they deny that this has affected the Society's basic outlook.

There has been no change in thinking since 1979 regarding the basic principle of seeking change by peaceful means, but we try to put pressure on the government to gain more freedoms. We need political reform in the whole region. Political reform would be the engine which pulls behind it the other reforms; economic reform does not come first, political reform does.⁷³

The specific measure the Society calls for are free and fair elections; the amendment of the laws on political parties and on professional syndicates; the right to demonstrate, hold meetings and publish newspapers; and, above all, lifting the Emergency Law in force since 1981.

The Society would itself be a major and immediate beneficiary of the above changes. They are, however, called for by all shades of opposition and independent opinion in Egypt today.⁷⁴ More controversially, the

⁶⁸ Abdo, op. cit., p. 95; Sullivan and Abed-Kotob, op. cit., p. 55.

⁶⁹ Turnout in the 1992 Lawyers' Association elections had been low, no more than 20 per cent according to Abdo (op. cit., pp. 95-96).

⁷⁰ For example, on 16 July 2001, 25 men accused of membership in the Muslim Brotherhood were arrested in a police raid in Giza; on 6 August 2002, fourteen Brothers were detained in Alexandria; on 4 September 2002, fifteen alleged Brothers were arrested in Sohag; on 13 October 2002, eight alleged Brothers were arrested in Zagazig, including the son of Mohammed Al-Morsi, the Brothers' parliamentary spokesman. After a lull in the run-up to the Iraq war, police crackdowns on the Society resumed in April 2003; see "Jilted Brothers", *Cairo Times*, 24-30 April 2003 and ICG Briefing: *Egypt After the Iraq War*, op. cit. On 3 November 2003, a Muslim Brother, Saad Sayyed Muhammed Qutb, who had been arrested on 31 October, died in hospital, apparently as a result of torture by the state security forces. *Cairo Times*, 13-19 November 2003.

⁷¹ On 15 December 2002, a leading Brother in the Egyptian People's Assembly, Gamal Heshmat, was stripped of his parliamentary membership following a finding by the Cassation Court that his victory in the 2000 parliamentary election in Damanhour in the Delta was invalid because the *Wafd* candidate had been mistakenly eliminated in the run-off; in the resulting by-election on 9 January 2003, the *Wafd* candidate routed Heshmat by 16,862 votes to 965, a result greeted with disbelief or open cynicism by many Egyptian commentators; following his eviction from parliament, Heshmat was arrested at his Damanhour home on 9 September 2003 together with six other Brothers on charges of holding an illegal meeting. They were all held in detention until 10 January 2004. As Diaa Rashwan commented, "it is usual to arrest some people from the Muslim Brotherhood before university starts". *Cairo Times*, 18-24 September 2003. Others noted that Heshmat, while a member of the Assembly, had prepared a report on torture, which may have been a factor in his abrupt downfall.

⁷² In December 1982, the General Guide Umar Al-Tilmisani wrote an open letter to the interior minister demanding full legal recognition for the Society (Ramadan, op. cit., p. 173); in 1991, Tilmisani's successor, Muhammad Hamid Abu 'l-Nasr, protested against the government's denial of legal party status; see Sullivan and Abed-Kotob, op. cit., p. 56. On taking office in January 2004, the new General Guide, Mohammed Mahdi Akef, reiterated the Society's demand for legal status and its protest at the state's continued denial of this. "Settling for small steps", *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 22-28 January 2004.

⁷³ ICG interview with Abd al-Mon'im Abu 'l-Futuh, 22 October 2003.

⁷⁴ See ICG Briefing: *Egypt After the Iraq War*, op. cit.

Society has recently added to this list a proposal for radical constitutional change to make the state a parliamentary republic.⁷⁵

C. ELEMENTS OF AN IMPASSE

Faced with the challenge of an Islamist organisation too powerful to legalise without destabilising the existing political system yet too important to repress without alienating too many people, the regime has adopted a twofold attitude: informally tolerating the Society's social and, to a degree, political role while formally denying it legal status and subjecting it to intermittent legal harassment. The position announced by President Sadat in 1976 -- religious movements may not be political parties -- still applies, as President Mubarak's political adviser, Osama Al-Baz, recently made clear.⁷⁶ The regime's attitude has been matched by the Society's own ambiguities, notably its claim to be a lay political party -- *hizb siyassi madani*⁷⁷ -- while acting as an all-encompassing social movement predicated on Islam. The peculiar nature of the relationship between the government and the Brothers has shaped the Egyptian political landscape in dysfunctional and, potentially, dangerous ways, channelling social discontent towards a movement that cannot translate it into effective political action or change.

The Society's responsibility for this state of affairs should not be minimised. Arguably, it has trapped itself in several ways at once:

- ❑ In acknowledging not only that Egypt is an Islamic state but also that its government is in principle Islamic, the Society gave itself a rationale for its non-violent strategy and its condemnation of the *jihadi* groups on its flanks, but it also tended to undercut its claims to a necessary political role.

- ❑ A staple of its political discourse has been that it is not seeking power, but rather wants to help to enhance the Islamic character of the government. The implication is that it does not aspire to form the government itself and is not in competition with the NDP; yet it already contests elections obliquely and seeks legal status so that it may do so openly and to greater effect.
- ❑ At the same time, its position that the government is insufficiently Islamic in practice provides ammunition for the authorities' charge that the Society is "based on religion" (Sadat) or has "a religious platform" (Al-Baz).
- ❑ In insisting that it is a lay political party, which is true in the sense that its leaders are not clerics (*'ulama*), the Society is endeavouring to rebut the "religious" label. But its claim that Egypt's Christians are welcome to join takes no account of the fact that its name and championing of *Shari'a* as the key to realising the principles of freedom and justice are liable to inhibit Christians from identifying with the Society.

The question of Egypt's Christian community is particularly sensitive, which may explain why it is not the subject of much public discussion in the debate over the Society's status. Senior spokesmen for the Brothers may well be sincere in saying that Copts are welcome to join the movement. This attitude can be traced back to the movement's founder, Hassan Al-Banna, who had two Copts as his assistants,⁷⁸ and whose attitude was public knowledge.⁷⁹ But the presence of broad-minded attitudes in the Society's leadership is not really the point, for two reasons. The first is that the gradual Islamisation of Egyptian public life which the Society has been promoting and in which the state has been acquiescing since the early 1970s constantly generates friction in Muslim-Christian intercourse.⁸⁰ Egypt's longstanding tradition

⁷⁵ At a press conference given by the General Guide, Mohammed Mahdi Akef, in Cairo, 3 March 2004. See Gamal Essam El-Din, "Brotherhood steps into the fray" and Amr Elchoubaki, "Brotherly gesture?", *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 11-17 March 2004, and Magid Fayez and Muhammad Mursi, "Islamist initiative", *Cairo Times*, 11-17 March 2004.

⁷⁶ In late January 2004, Al-Baz explained that "while the state would tolerate the existence of Islamic-oriented groups that are social or charitable in nature, it would not accommodate any political group with a religious platform." *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 22-28 January 2004.

⁷⁷ ICG interview with Abd al-Mon'im Abu 'I-Futuh, 22 October 2003.

⁷⁸ ICG interview with Gihane Al-Halafawi, Alexandria, 11 June 2003; Gihane Al-Halafawi is the first woman to stand for parliament as a candidate of the Muslim Brothers. In the first round of the 2000 elections, she won a majority in the Alexandria Raml district; the government cancelled the elections and, when by-elections were held in June 2002, a massive security presence prevented her supporters from entering polling stations, ensuring her defeat by the NDP candidate: see 'Democracy died today', *Cairo Times*, 4-10 July 2002.

⁷⁹ A middle-class professional, mid-70s, now retired, who belongs to the Coptic Church told ICG, "I remember Hassan Al-Banna well; he never spoke against the Copts". ICG interview, Cairo, 10 December 2003.

⁸⁰ A Coptic businessman told ICG that, while he tried to

of mutual tolerance between Muslims and Copts, while still alive, is more fragile than it used to be.⁸¹ The second is that the political representation of Egypt's Copts has begun to become an issue. In an interview in the government magazine *Al-Mussawar* on 8 October 2003, the head of the Coptic Church, Pope Shenouda III, called on the state to allow greater representation of Copts, complaining that only two out of the 444 elected members of Parliament are Copts and hardly any Copts are employed in the judiciary or universities.⁸²

In these circumstances, for the state to legalise a party with unmistakeably Islamic credentials would be to run the risk that members of the Coptic community would demand the right to organise a specifically Christian party, and that the religious difference would be explicitly and dangerously politicised. Although government spokesmen appear chary of citing this argument for not legalising the Society, it is unrealistic to suppose that it has been absent from government calculations and unreasonable to deny that it has some force. Ironically, the same Islamic credentials which are held to disqualify the Society in the party-political sphere were indispensable to its ability to combat *takfiri* tendencies within the radical Islamic movement and to provide a political home for the tendency in *al-jama'at al-islamiyya* which rejected *jihadi* violence.

In certain respects, this awkward co-existence of regime and Brothers has served the interests of both. Without a serious rival, the Society has been able to maintain a preponderant social influence. For the government, the Society's religious character has equipped it to be an ally against the *jihadi* opposition as well as a source of independent endorsement of the state's Islamic credentials. By tacitly conceding

the role of principal opponent to an Islamist movement, the regime enables itself to invoke the fear of an Islamist takeover when it resists pressure for political change. And by handicapping and regularly penalising the Society in the political sphere, the state reinforces the Society's image as victim of injustice and burnishes its credentials as an opposition force, thus tacitly underwriting its capacity to channel popular protest in ways that least threaten the regime.⁸³ Each side, therefore, has some reason to be relatively content with the status quo.

Thus the Society's posture is arguably that of a movement stuck in mid-stream, aspiring to a political role which it now conceives in democratic terms, but unable to gamble the influence it owes to its historic role for the hypothetical benefits of a legal political status which it has no guarantee the authorities will concede. The accusation of active complicity with the regime leveled at the Society's leaders by some of their critics is probably unfair and certainly one-sided. But there are grounds for thinking that the character of its leadership has contributed to its predicament. Although formally its decision-making structures resemble those of most political parties, in reality overall leadership is provided by the General Guide -- *al-Murshid al-'amm* -- and this post remains the preserve of the "historic" generation of the Society's founders, now extremely elderly: the current Guide, Mohammed Mahdi Akef, who succeeded Mamoun al-Hodeibi in January 2004, joined the Society in 1950 and is now 75.⁸⁴ Because closeness to the Society's charismatic founder has remained a tacit condition of election to the leadership, the Society has been inhibited from breaking clearly with the illiberal aspects of Al-Banna's thought.⁸⁵ Analyst Jean-Noël

accommodate the demands of some of his Muslim employees (e.g. for the provision of a prayer room, for the right to cease work at the hours of prayer, and so forth), he often found the tone in which these demands were made aggressive and sectarian. ICG interview, Cairo, 24 September 2003.

⁸¹ In a recent interview on Al-Jazeera television, the Egyptian Islamist Kamal Habib referred to Copts as '*kuffar*' (unbelievers). In classical Islamic doctrine, Christians are *Ahl al-Kitab* (People of the Book) rather than *kuffar*. Habib's remark provoked angry reactions from Egyptian Copts, one of whom, the prominent businessman Naguib Sawiris, rang the program to upbraid him on the air, because they violated an Egyptian convention of mutual respect between Muslims and Christians; Habib's remark was an offence against both politeness and the national tradition of tolerance, and threw into relief the connection between the two.

⁸² *Cairo Times*, 16-22 October 2003.

⁸³ Notably during the 2003 Iraq war, when the government authorised certain demonstrations under the Society's control. As one activist commented, "Whenever the government is threatened by the street, it goes to the Brotherhood"; cited in Paul Schemm, "Working together: The state and the Brotherhood cooperate and demonstrate", *Cairo Times*, 3-9 April 2003.

⁸⁴ The Society's General Guides have been: 1. Hassan Al-Banna (1928-1949); 2. Hassan Al-Hodeibi (1949-1973); 3. Umar Al-Tilmisani (1973-1986); 4. Mohammed Hamid Abu 'l-Nasr (1986-1996); 5. Mustafa Mashhur (1996-2002); 6. Mamoun Al-Hodeibi (2002-2003); 7. Mohammed Mahdi Akef (2004). Every General Guide has held office until his death.

⁸⁵ Whereas MB spokesmen today argue that democracy is compatible, if not synonymous, with the Islamic conception of *shura*, Al-Banna counterposed *shura* to Western liberal conceptions of democracy and opposed party-political pluralism; see Brynjar Lia, op. cit., pp. 10-11 and Sami

Ferrié told ICG, “the mode of decision-making -- charismatic centralism -- does not favour the liberal-democratic currents in the Muslim Brothers.”⁸⁶

This makes the Brothers vulnerable to criticism, and the regime has not hesitated to question the sincerity of their commitment to democratic principles and to argue that to legalise them as a political party would be to make the same “mistake” as the Algerian authorities made with the FIS in 1989. Together with the argument from the Society’s “religious platform”, the argument from the Algerian analogy is deployed by the authorities to justify the status quo.⁸⁷ It is possible that the younger generation of leaders, such as Abu ‘l-Futuh and Issam Al-‘Iryan, will be able to chart a way out of this impasse in due course, since it may be only a matter of time before this generation takes over the direction of the Society. These circumstances may also explain why there has not been a conspicuous debate over the Society’s strategy. Questioned on this, Abd al-Mon‘im Abu ‘l-Futuh told ICG:

We have not lost hope. Muslims do not lose hope. We have lost hope for this regime, but not for ourselves or our activities. The reason we do not resort to violence is that violence would harm our society.⁸⁸

But some Islamists independent of the Society take a different view. Fahmi Howeidi told ICG: “There is a problem, the problem of the new generation in the Muslim Brothers; they are frustrated with the lack of success of the peaceful policy and are now tempted by violence.”⁸⁹ Indeed, frustration with this impasse has already impelled others to despair of the Society as a political vehicle and to explore other options.

V. OTHER ISLAMISTS

Zubaida, *Islam, the People and the State: Political Ideas and Movements in the Middle East* (London, 1989), p. 49.

⁸⁶ ICG interview with Dr Jean-Noël Ferrié of the Centre d’Études et de Documentation Économiques, Juridiques et Sociales (CEDEJ), Cairo, 2 November 2003.

⁸⁷ For a characteristic example, see Ibrahim Nafie, ‘The gradual approach’, *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 29 January-4 February 2004; Nafie is the Chairman of the Board of *Al-Ahram Weekly* and widely perceived as a faithful exponent of President Mubarak’s views. The Egyptian intelligentsia’s lack of interest in the Algerian case has permitted the regime’s invocation of it to go unquestioned.

⁸⁸ ICG interview with Abd al-Mon‘im Abu ‘l-Futuh, Cairo, 24 June 2003.

⁸⁹ ICG interview with Fahmi Howeidi (see note 15), Cairo, 28 October 2003.

A. THE ‘CENTRISTS’

In January 1996, 74 Egyptians signed the application for legal status of a new political party, *Hizb al-Wasat* (the Centre Party). The project drew on a current that had developed in Egyptian intellectual circles since the mid-1980s, which some observers had dubbed *al-Wasatiyya* (Centrism). This was a diffuse movement of ideas, in which a number of Islamic intellectuals were prominent.⁹⁰ What they had in common was the project of re-thinking Islamic doctrine so as to take positive account of democracy, civil society, the national idea, the rule of law and human rights, etc.⁹¹

The project of a new political party also arose from the impatience of the ex-campus radicals of the 1970s with the Society of the Muslim Brothers. One of the prime movers in the project was Abu ‘l-‘Ala Madi,⁹² who told ICG why he left the Brothers:

There were two main reasons. The first concerns the ideas inside the Society. I felt that, on the political side, they were not suitable, and it did not develop itself. The second reason concerns the structure of the Society, and the way decisions were made. There was no freedom to express differences...We tried to make reform in both directions. So we decided to separate and form an independent party to express our opinions without restrictions and to present in it the evolutionary ideas we aspired to.⁹³

The fact that 62 of the application’s 74 signatories were ex-Brothers who had only recently left the Society was seized on by the authorities to justify their refusal to legalise the new party, on the grounds that it was really a manoeuvre by the Society itself, and most of the 62 did in fact return to the Society shortly thereafter. When the final appeal against the refusal of the state’s Political Parties Committee (PPC) to legalise the party failed in May 1998, Abu ‘l-‘Ala Madi quickly

⁹⁰ These include, notably, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Tariq al-Bishri and Muhammad Salim al-‘Awwa; Al-Qaradawi, a professor at Al-Azhar university and a former member of the Muslim Brothers, took part in the organisation’s journal *Al-Da‘wa* in the 1976-81 period and is the author of a number of works of Islamic theory; Al-Bishri is a leading Islamic jurist and historian; Al-‘Awwa, a leading Islamic thinker, is especially noted for arguing that there is no Islamic warrant for female circumcision.

⁹¹ Joshua Stacher, “Post-Islamist rumblings in Egypt: The emergence of the Wasat Party”, *Middle East Journal*, 56, 3 (2002), pp. 415-432.

⁹² Others included Assam Sultan and Salah Abd al-Karim.

⁹³ ICG interview with Abu ‘l-‘Ala Madi, Cairo, 8 January 2004.

submitted a new application for a party, to be called *Hizb al-Wasat al-Misri* (the Egyptian Centre Party), with 93 signatories, including three Christians (two Copts and a Protestant), nineteen women and only 24 ex-Brothers. This was rejected on 21 September 1998 on the grounds that "it failed to add anything new to the existing political parties". The appeal against this ruling was dismissed on 5 June 1999.

Madi remains committed to his project, however, and intends to try again to secure official recognition. He argued that the project definitely includes new elements:

We want to put forward a political, Islamic, peaceful, civil project. Each of these terms has a reference. It is *political* project, so we made it a party [*hizb*] not a "Society" [*jama'a*]. The party is constituted on the basis of citizenship: as it is a party, it accepts any citizens, Muslim and non-Muslim; this is a very important point. As a political project, we have discussed for the first time an *Islamic* project which directly expresses clear political ideas on problems such as democracy, pluralism, economy, education, health, etc. *Peaceful*: we are a pacific group working with democratic, peaceful and legal means. The fourth thing is that it is a *civil* and not a religious-theocratic concept. We do not put forward theocratic ideas, nor envisage theocratic government; we are talking about a civil project, we are lay citizens, presenting a civic discourse, believing in the civic quality of the order and of the state, etc. These are the four most important things that the Wasat Party is proposing.⁹⁴

This position marks an important break with the outlook of the Muslim Brothers. Madi explains that there is no conflict between the party's civil and Islamic aspects, because of the distinction which can be made between Islam as a religion and Islam as a civilisation.⁹⁵

We present Islam as a civilisational concept. Within Islamic civilisation there live both Muslims and Christians. But the Islamic religion, only Muslims join it. So we have presented Islam as a civilisational project. We have said that what unites us Egyptians is

Islamic civilisation, regardless of whether one is Muslim and Christian.⁹⁶

Thus, by detaching itself from the specifically religious preoccupations of the *da'wa* (the proselytising mission), *Wasat* has also sought to dissociate itself from the specifically Muslim identity politics pioneered by the Brothers in a way that can enable it to appeal to Egypt's Christians. The government's decision to deny it legal status as a political party appears both unjustifiable in principle and short-sighted in practice. The evolution of Egyptian Islamism may not yet be complete, but it is nonetheless a remarkable development that needs to be capitalised upon. Limiting the field of Islamic activism to the informally tolerated Muslim Brotherhood on the one hand and to violent *jihadi* groups on the other is a hazardous choice.

B. FREE-LANCE JIHAD

The fact that no *jihadi* violence has occurred since Luxor does not mean that a recrudescence can be ruled out. There is evidence that the impulse to engage in *jihadi* activism is still present in Egyptian society. As discussed, the authorities have blocked every avenue into legal political activity for Egyptian Islamists⁹⁷ and the doctrinal underpinnings of the Qutbist *jihadi* outlook have neither been demolished nor replaced by a more modernist Islamist outlook with a legitimate political role. In view of this, it is not surprising that Egyptians are being arrested on charges of forming new, autonomous, *jihadi* groups at frequent intervals.

- On 9 September 2002, 51 members of a group called *Al-Wa'd* (The Pledge) were sentenced (six *in absentia*) to prison terms of up to 15 years with hard labour on charges of "conspiring to stage a coup d'état in Egypt" and "plotting to assassinate President Mubarak and other prominent officials"; 43 other defendants were acquitted.⁹⁸
- On 20 October 2002, the trial of 23 Egyptians and three British nationals accused of reconstituting *Hizb al-Tahrir al-Islami* (The Islamic Liberation Party) began in the State

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ It should be noted that this distinction was a notable element of Jamal Al-Din Al-Afghani's thought; see the first in this series of ICG Briefings, *Islamism in North Africa I: The Legacies of History*.

⁹⁶ ICG interview, Cairo, 8 January 2004.

⁹⁷ In addition to refusing to legalise either the Muslim Brothers or *Wasat*, the authorities decided in 2000 to suspend the previously legal and recognised Labour Party, which was part of the Islamist ideological trend and had been an ally of the Brothers on occasion. The Labour Party remains "frozen" to this day.

⁹⁸ *Cairo Times*, 12-18 September 2002.

Security Court in Cairo.⁹⁹ On 25 March 2004, 12 defendants, including all three Britons, were sentenced to five years jail.¹⁰⁰

- Also in October 2002, 43 people were arrested on charges of belonging to *Al-Jihad*, charges denied by their lawyer, Montasser Al-Zayyat,¹⁰¹ but reaffirmed by the pro-government daily *Al-Ahram* when they eventually went on trial before a military court in November 2003.¹⁰²
- On 5 April 2003, 16 members of a group called *Al-Qutbiyyûn* (The Qutbists) were arrested in Cairo.¹⁰³
- In September 2003, 25 people, including six foreign students at Al-Azhar University, were arrested on charges of establishing a clandestine group allegedly named "The Jihad Group for Supporting Muslims at Home and Abroad".¹⁰⁴

If an element of the rationale of the regime's maintenance of the 1981 Emergency Law more than six years after Luxor is that it requires this framework in order to be able to nip *jihadi* impulses in the bud, the implication is that the Egyptian political order could remain frozen and immobilised for the foreseeable future.

VI. CONCLUSION

The defeat of *jihadi* groups oriented by Qutbist ideas and the repudiation by *al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya* of its own doctrines present an important opportunity to channel Egyptian Islamism in positive directions and to reform Egyptian politics as a whole. If it is not seized, and if the political impulses in Egyptian Islam are not provided with an alternative channel, some activists may be inclined to follow Ayman Al-Zawahiri into international *jihadi* activity while others may eventually revert to violent forms of domestic activism. Indeed, in view of the social and economic discontent in the country and the absence of constitutional channels for purposeful political activity, a revival of local *jihadi* activism cannot be ruled out.

There is little doubt that the regime's strategy has defeated the radical Islamic challenge. But it has done so only provisionally and at a high political cost. The denial of constitutional political outlets to all currents of Islamic activism has been part of a broader tendency to stifle political opposition in general. It has thus lent weight to opposition claims that the state has actually wanted to maintain the unconstitutional Islamic opposition in being as a permanent threat (while repressing its violent expressions) in order to pose as the lesser evil in the eyes of public opinion and its international partners.¹⁰⁵ It is doubtful that this strategy can be sustained indefinitely.

Advocates of democratic reform need, however, to recognise that -- whatever its precise motives -- the regime's strategy has created a situation in which rapid democratisation is probably impossible and potentially dangerous. By hampering the activity of the legal opposition parties and refusing to legalise new parties while tolerating the activities of the Muslim Brothers, the government has allowed the Brothers to consolidate a near monopoly of politically purposeful social activism. To legalise the Brothers immediately as a political party would create a dangerously unbalanced political situation. None of the already legal opposition parties could hope to compete, and there is reason to doubt that the NDP would hold its own. To this extent, the government's invocation of the lesson of Algeria is arguably valid, in that the legalisation of the FIS in 1989 and the way it was allowed to monopolise the representation both of the Islamist movement and of the urban poor in the 1990 elections helped to precipitate an ultimately uncontrollable degree of flux in Algerian politics and destabilised the state.

The key point is less the subjective outlook of the Islamists in either case than their position as quasi- or virtual monopolists of social activism. In other words, the problem is the absence of other credible parties, rather than the Society of the Muslim Brothers itself. The existing *tête-à-tête* between the government and an Islamist movement (the Brothers) that is both omnipresent and not authorised, that aspires to a political function but

⁹⁹ *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 31 October-6 November 2002.

¹⁰⁰ See Charles Levinson, "Hizb al-Tahrir verdict: Revenge or fighting terror?", *The Daily Star*, 29 March 2004.

¹⁰¹ *Cairo Times*, 9-15 January 2003.

¹⁰² *Cairo Times*, 13-19 November 2003.

¹⁰³ *Cairo Times*, 24-30 April 2003.

¹⁰⁴ *Cairo Times*, 26 February-3 March 2004.

¹⁰⁵ Fahmi Howeidi told ICG, "The problem is that people are not given any opportunity. The government would be happier with the fanatics and extremists. They celebrate these fanatics in order to frighten people with them and to send their message to the West: 'the others are worse than us'". ICG interview, Cairo, 28 October 2003.

lacks an accepted political role, is unhealthy both for the state and for Egyptian Islamism.

It follows that the priority should be to permit other political forces -- including Islamist ones -- to develop their social presence so that a number of credible political options is available to Egyptian society. Only in this way can Egyptian political life be liberalised without being destabilised. More generally, while the government should be encouraged to begin changing its strategy without delay, proposals for democratic reform need to be carefully thought out and consistent with preserving the stability of the Egyptian state if they are not to be self-defeating. This is the central lesson of the Algerian experience.

It also should be recognised that external initiatives that arrogate to Western governments or bodies the role of principal initiator and agent of the reform process, by-passing and implicitly subverting the Egyptian government while dealing directly with societal actors, are misconceived. They are bound to provoke vigorous reactions from the government and have in fact already done so.¹⁰⁶ No Western approach could be more certain to reinforce the conservative instincts of the government, to encourage it to abandon thoughts of reform, make common cause with conservative social forces and engage in nationalist posturing. And no approach could do the genuine reform currents within Egypt more harm, by associating them with external forces disrespectful of Egypt's sovereignty.

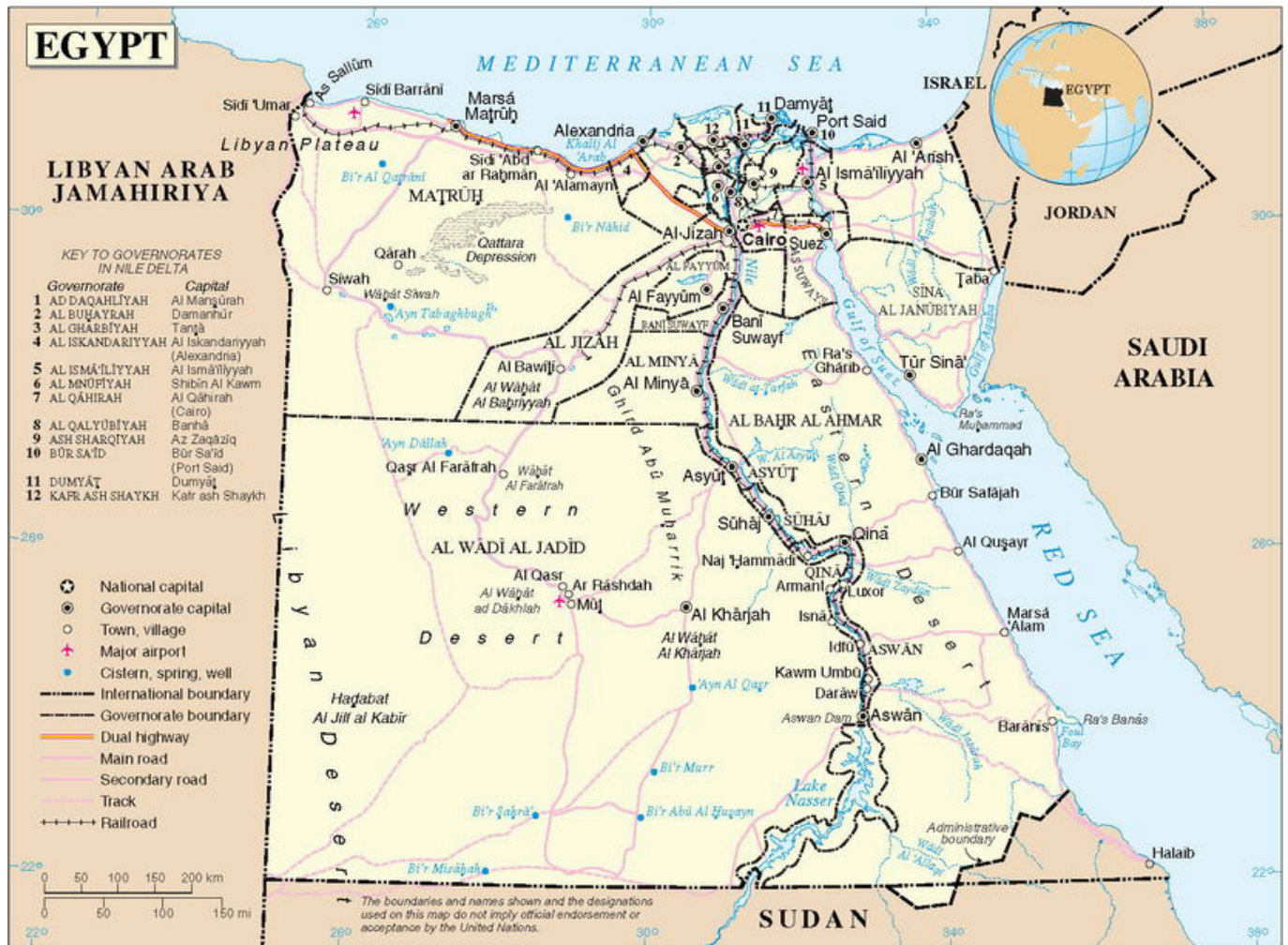
On the other hand, the Egyptian government should recognise that it has its own complacency and inaction to blame at least in part for the current impatient tenor of Western discourse on reform. The impatience of Western governments is nothing compared to the frustration and distress of the mass of the Egyptian people, and it should get down to the business of producing its own independent reform agenda and strategy without further ado.

Cairo/Brussels, 20 April 2004

¹⁰⁶ Notably the various declarations by President Hosni Mubarak; see "Mubarak warns against imposing ready-made formula on Mideast", *Egyptian Mail*, 6 March 2004; "Hosni Mubarak sonde l'Europe sur les réformes du monde arabe", *Le Monde*, 6 March 2004; Nevine Khalil, "Peace key to democracy", *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 11-17 March 2004; Nevine Khalil, "Slowly but surely", *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 18-24 March 2004; see also Gamal Essam El-Din, "Asserting home-grown reform", *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 4-10 March 2004.

APPENDIX A

MAP OF EGYPT



APPENDIX B

ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP

The International Crisis Group (ICG) is an independent, non-profit, multinational organisation, with over 100 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

ICG's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, ICG produces regular analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers. ICG also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a 12-page monthly bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in all the most significant situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

ICG's reports and briefing papers are distributed widely by email and printed copy to officials in foreign ministries and international organisations and made generally available at the same time via the organisation's Internet site, www.crisisweb.org. ICG works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The ICG Board – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring ICG reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policy-makers around the world. ICG is chaired by former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari; and its President and Chief Executive since January 2000 has been former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans.

ICG's international headquarters are in Brussels, with advocacy offices in Washington DC, New York, London and Moscow. The organisation currently operates thirteen field offices (in Amman, Belgrade, Bogotá, Cairo, Freetown, Islamabad, Jakarta, Kathmandu, Nairobi, Osh, Pristina, Sarajevo and Tbilisi) with analysts working in over 40 crisis-affected countries and territories across four continents. In Africa, those countries include Burundi, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sierra Leone,

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April 2004

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International Crisis Group

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