Youth Radicalisation in Egypt and the Complicated Relationship to Violence

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Radicalism in Egypt has both escalated and deescalated over the five years since the revolution broke out on 25 January 2011. Among Egyptians who have turned to violence – whether temporarily or for good – the areas of North Sinai have been a primary stage for conflict within the country while abroad, Syria is the closest foreign theatre. Indeed, since the Syrian revolution turned into a civil war, it has become a key destination for those who have turned to violence. However, the decision to join a radicalised group is neither obviously ideological, nor does it necessarily lead to individuals to themselves take up arms. On the contrary, exploring the narratives of young Egyptians who have become radicalised demonstrates differences between those who have chosen violence and those who have been only ideologically encouraged, and explains why this is expressed differently at home and abroad.

Theatres of Radicalism in the Immediate Wake of the Revolution

Attacks by radicalised groups or individuals were relatively scarce in 2011 (with the exception of the pipeline through which Egypt exports natural gas to Israel, which was bombed around twenty times). This is notable given the absence of security forces in the streets throughout 2011. In theory, this provided radicalised groups with a prime opportunity to launch powerful attacks when the state was at its weakest, yet they chose not to do so. In an interview with a jihadist who was released from prison during the 18-day uprising, the first thing he did upon liberation was go to Tahrir Square, which for him meant “standing up to injustice.” Although many people who participated in the revolution had ideas and visions for the post-Mubarak
order that differed from his, he was “accommodating” and did not resort to extremism to impose his own ideas. Many other jihadists shared this characteristic, as did certain well-known Egyptian sheikhs.

This “accommodating” stance was largely due to the transformed political order the revolution provoked. Most jihadists considered the police state to be an infidel state, and believed that using violence and force was the only way to change it. But as the state’s authority crumbled just a few days after millions of people took to the streets, the jihadists’ primary goal – to overthrow the regime – was easily achieved, contrary to expectation. Furthermore, it was achieved by a diverse spectrum of people, and was planned by activists outside the extremist camp.

Likewise, their second goal – to impose sharia’ law on the state and society – posed a philosophical problem. Although they viewed democracy as a Western creation incompatible with Islam, they benefitted from it greatly, obtaining freedoms of assembly and association. As a result of these unexpected gains, it became more difficult for them to resort to violence or turn against those who had been the The power pushing for the enjoyment of these freedoms. According to interviews conducted in 2012, when Sheikh Hazem Salah Abu Ismail, a Salafist politician, ran in the presidential elections, many of them throughout Egypt became engaged in the democratic process and indeed supported it.

The major exception, however, was in the Sinai Peninsula. Since the early days of the Egyptian revolution, North Sinai has proven a particularly violent area within Egypt. On 27 January 2011, a young man named Mohammed Atef was killed by a sniper while protesting in a demonstration in the city of Sheikh Zuweid, becoming the first victim of the Egyptian revolution whose death was photographed. That day, a university student from Sheikh Zuweid was interviewed over the phone about the expected response. Speaking over gunfire and missiles, he replied, “This is the response.” The loud bang heard during the interview was from an RPG that someone next to him used to shoot at a Central Security Forces (riot police) camp. The student then claimed that by the following day, the police – who have had an ambiguous but largely repressive presence in Sinai since an earlier tribal agreement – would no longer be visible in the peninsula. The student’s statement came to pass. And though the police absence during the 2011 uprising was not uniquely confined to North Sinai, what set this region apart was the people’s recourse to firearms and rockets in order to achieve their aims.

Likewise, the expression of Egyptian radicalism found a stage abroad. There was an increase in radical attacks against Israel in 2011 and 2012, with the jihadist group Ansar Bait al-Maqdis (Supporters of Jerusalem), based in North Sinai at the time, claiming responsibility. Beginning in the early days of the revolution in February 2011, the group conducted at least four armed
attacks against Israel and bombed the natural gas pipeline. In one of their video statements from 2012, the group declared that this was part of the jihad to stop the agreement to “steal our gas,” which amounted to “giving gas to our enemies for free.” The revolution did not stop the export of natural gas; it was the jihadist armed attacks that did. And around this time, dozens of young Egyptians also joined armed groups in the Syrian conflict and the revolution against Bashar al-Assad’s regime. This trend was bolstered by the position of the Muslim Brotherhood regime. Then-President Mohammed Morsi participated in the Conference on Egyptian Support for the Syrian Revolution, which was held in the Cairo Stadium on 15 June 2013, just 18 days before he was ousted by the army. The majority of speakers at the conference were Muslim religious figures, and Morsi repeated his rallying cry of “Syria, we’re here for you.” Although Egypt’s stance on its citizens traveling to Syria to join the conflict was unclear, the scene carried great symbolic weight.

**July 2013: Unleashing the Radicals**

The ouster of President Morsi by the army on 3 July 2013 saw an important shift in the degree of radicalism expressed on Egyptian soil. The Islamist group Ansar Bait al-Maqdis began to directly disavow the army and police as non-believers, and gradually began to target them. In November 2014, they subsequently declared their allegiance to the so-called Islamic State and renamed themselves Wilayat Sinai (Sinai Province).

When the army launched a series of military campaigns in North Sinai – the largest it had conducted since the 1973 Arab-Israeli War – the group released more than five films documenting the violations of the army and security services, showing how they had bombed citizens’ homes and mosques, and killed women and children. It also declared in the media that it would respond militarily to these violations, in the spirit of resistance and jihad. And though Wilayat Sinai was by no means the only group to launch an attack on the regime that had deposed Morsi, it was the first to announce this change in direction. And as many young Egyptians across the political spectrum abandoned their erstwhile hopes for change born during the heady days of the 2011 uprising, recruitment to Wilayat Sinai increased.

Since 2013, the group has engaged in attacks that have resulted in a large number of victims extending beyond the Egyptian security services to also include foreign entities. This became particularly evident in 2015: the group bombed the Italian consulate building in the heart of the capital, announced they had kidnapped Tomislav Salopek, a Croatian engineer, and launched a rocket attack against the Multinational Force and Observers Headquarters in the Jura region of North Sinai. Finally, on 31 October 2015 – on the one-year anniversary of their declaration of allegiance to ISIS – they brought down a Russian passenger plane.
**Convinced by Radicalism but Reluctant to Take up Arms**

In a March 2016 interview with Abdelrahman, a man from a village south of Sheikh Zuweid, he described what he had seen among young people who joined Wilayat Sinai. From his point of view, they can be divided into three categories: those who have been impacted by army operations, whose houses were bombed and families killed; those who have low socioeconomic status within the tribal order in North Sinai and for whom joining an armed radical group is a way to gain social status; and those who benefit financially, such as cross-border arms smugglers. Assuming this accurately describes the kinds of individuals who join Wilayat Sinai, further questions must be posed. These explanations focus less on ideological factors, and instead place at the fore social and local retaliatory ones. Does this mean that ideological factors have less influence? This question can only be answered by examining more cases of individuals who have been ideologically convinced that radicalism is inevitable, but who are reluctant to resort to it.

Ahmed Adel, a young preacher, represents an example. A Salafi, he had been trying to combine different forms of human development in his preaching, and gave lessons to young men at social clubs and charities in Cairo and Alexandria and on YouTube on how to live according to religious teachings in the modern world. After Morsi’s overthrow was announced, Adel expressed his support for what he described as “legitimacy, and the right to peaceful protest against military rule.” After the security forces killed hundreds of protesters who were supporters of the ousted president, though, he became convinced that resorting to violence was the only hope for change in Egypt. Yet although he believed this, he did not dare take up arms against his fellow Egyptians in the army. Instead, he decided to take up arms in what he considered a clearer, less complicated battle. He travelled to Syria and joined an armed faction engaged in the war against Bashar al-Assad’s regime. Adel began to post videos on YouTube urging young people to respond to the call of jihad in the Levant. His personal Facebook account was deactivated several times, and YouTube deleted many of his videos, but each time he created another account, and continued to upload videos in which he vowed to defeat Shiites and Russians.

Walid, a 21-year-old student at al-Azhar University, represents another example. A conservative Salafi, he had always avoided politics, and did not take to the streets when the Egyptian revolution began. Yet as the Salafist Call, a group based in Alexandria, became more involved in political life and the democratic process, Walid became more interested in politics. This, however, was short-lived: as the public sphere was repressed, protests were suppressed in increasingly violent ways, and the regime became more militaristic after Morsi’s overthrow, Walid’s steadfast support of the Salafist Call – who accepted the post-Morsi political order – waned. He slowly began to disengage from the Salafist Call and its political arm, the Nour Party.
Walid had previously supported al-Nusra Front in Syria and opposed what ISIS was doing. Yet in another interview, when a researcher asked him what he thought about the terrorist attacks that ISIS carried out in Paris on 13 November 2015, and the announcement claiming responsibility for downing the Russian plane in Sinai, Walid purported to approve these actions, and said, “as long as these nations bomb civilians in Syria, those civilians should do to them what they do to us.” Yet although he is convinced by radicalism, and has considered travelling to Syria several times, he has thus far hesitated. He also denies having any inclination to take up arms against the Egyptian army, even if he sympathises with what happened to people in Sinai as a result of military operations there.

**Conclusion**

These observations go beyond widely held stereotypes that young people join ISIS and other armed groups because of a predisposition for violence, or prior experience with such groups. Neither of the individuals in the examples presented above had prior experience with armed jihad, nor had previously participated in terrorist attacks or shown a predisposition for violence. By investigating their motives without preconceived notions, we find that they make a difference between resorting to armed violence within Egypt, and travelling abroad to fight.

The decision to use violence against the Egyptian state appears complex and on which many of those who espouse jihadist ideology have still not taken a stance. It is a difficult decision to make, both rationally and emotionally, given that recruits (on both sides) are ordinary people, who have no say in the battle between radicalised and leaders in the regime. The decision to travel abroad to fight, conversely, is an easier option put into practice.

The phenomenon of people travelling to Syria to fight has decreased dramatically, for a variety of reasons. First and foremost, it is unclear how useful it is to fight in Syria. The situation has become more complicated, and it has become incredibly difficult to travel both out of Egypt and through Turkey. Egyptian authorities have imposed increasing restrictions on those who want to go through Turkey to fight in Syria, and on those traveling to Turkey for peaceful purposes. Turkey itself has made its travel procedures stricter, and it has become more difficult to cross into Syria through Turkey.

Yet to ultimately fight radicalism in Egypt, authorities must take advantage of the current decrease in extremism and change their ways, as opposed to continuing with rights violations. In so doing, they would undermine the jihadists’ calls denouncing of the state as infidel and the appeal for armed action, thereby undercutting at least a portion of the ideological roots of radicalisation recruitment.
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