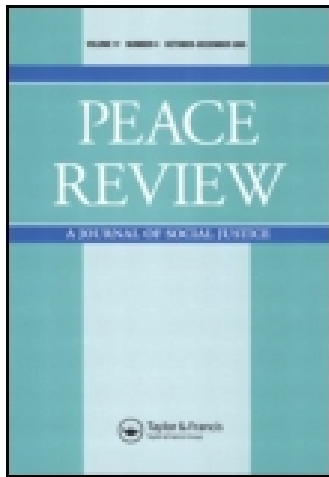


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Assessing Islamist Armed Groups’ De-Radicalization in Egypt

JÉRÔME DREVON

The de-legitimization of Islamist armed violence has been central to non-military approaches to Middle Eastern conflicts. This so-called “war of ideas” notably invokes the renunciation of violence of two former Egyptian Islamist militant groups as the most effective rebuttal to armed militancy and its religious legitimacy. These theological renunciations started in 2001, when the imprisoned leadership of the Islamic Group (*al-jama‘a al-islamiyya*, IG thereafter) authored four books to recant the theology of violence formerly endorsed by the group, and to nullify the resort to armed jihad in the Muslim world.

Six years later, these publications were followed by a comparable endeavor of a former prominent leader of the Jihad Group (*jama‘a al-jihad*, JG thereafter), Sayyid Imam al-Sharif, who similarly published a book to invalidate the recourse to violence in Western and Islamic countries. The unprecedented diffusion of armed forms of contention in the Muslim and non-Muslim world emphasizes the necessity to understand the origins, meanings, and ramifications of these ideological revisions.

The theological renunciations of the use of violence by Egyptian Islamist armed groups have sparked many controversies over their nature and political implications. Many observers have branded these revisions a deceiving tactical move to break out of prison, while others have additionally asserted that, in a few countries (including Saudi Arabia and Yemen), former participants to individual de-radicalization programs subsequently joined Al Qaeda in the Arabic Peninsula. On the other hand, a few academics have conversely endorsed a more optimistic outlook, and stressed that collective de-radicalization demonstrate that militant Islamist ideologies can be reinterpreted by former proponents of violence, and serve as a guideline for broader renunciations of violence by militant groups evolving in other contexts. This academic corpus is nonetheless still inadequate to fully comprehend the ramifications of these revisions, considering the absence of research based on rich primary sources and interviews with these groups’ members and leaders.

This essay is based on a comparative case study of the evolution of the Egyptian Islamic and Jihad groups from their emergence to the post-2011 uprising. This research relies on extensive field research and interviews with these groups' leaders and members undertaken in Egypt between 2011 and 2014, and on an exhaustive investigation of these groups' past and current publications. This essay presents two main lessons of group-centered de-radicalization in Egypt.

The first lesson of these ideological revisions is that violence ceased several years before the articulation of the theological renunciations of armed jihad. Its corollary is that the Islamic and Jihad groups recognized the necessity to end the cycle of contention in Egypt first and foremost as an admission that violence had not yielded any positive outcome, and had become counterproductive to the achievement of these groups' objectives. This case accordingly suggests that the state's policing of protest combined with these groups' embroilment in uncontrolled spirals of violence with their contenders preceded their leaders' religious retrospection, and overshadowed simultaneous state-driven attempts to "Islamically" de-legitimize the theological rationale of violence. Theological renunciations of violence therefore cannot be isolated from the broader context in which an armed conflict with the state takes place.

The second lesson suggested by field research and interviews with these groups' members and leaders pertains to the prominence of militant groups' organizational dynamics. A comparison of the Islamic and Jihad groups reveals that, in both cases, members and leaders were reflective over time of the necessity to reconsider their strategic choice to resort to armed violence against the state. This comparison nonetheless demonstrates that these individual reconsiderations were differently mediated by these groups' internal dynamics, and solely led to a consensual group-centered renunciation of violence in the IG, which successfully maintained its internal hierarchy and group discipline. Group-centered de-radicalization consequently differs substantially from individual renunciation of violence; its success is primarily contingent on organizational dynamics and on the preservation of a group's internal unity, rather than on the reintegration of former militants into their societies.

Historically, violence was adopted as a strategic choice to seize power in Egypt and replace the regime by an Islamic state in the 1970s. The IG and the JG did not initially develop a substantial ideological corpus, and merely pursued a shared endeavor to create an Islamic utopia in Egypt. They rejected the reformism of the Muslim Brotherhood, which consolidated under Sadat's presidency, and advocated the resort to violence against the Egyptian regime. By the end of the 1970s, they espoused an analogous political and religious understanding, even though their internal organizational structure

and approach to political action diverged substantially. The IG emerged as a group of friends who socialized collectively and gradually endorsed a mass-movement revolutionary approach to political change in reaction to changing macro-policies.

While the IG did not initially condone the use of violence against the state, the closing of political opportunities in Egypt combined with the proliferation of micro-level dynamics of violence with the group's contenders legitimized the resort to violence to change the status quo in the eyes of the group's leaders. On the other hand, JG-affiliated cells endorsed the use of violence from their inception in reaction to an array of domestic and international issues (including the loss of Jerusalem in 1967 and a feeling of solidarity with fellow Islamists who suffered from state repression) justifying the violent dismantlement of Sadat's regime. In contrast with the IG, the JG promoted the recruitment of a small, dedicated elite that would infiltrate the army and stage a military coup.

The repertoires of contention adopted by these two groups in the next two decades was primarily informed by these organizational and strategic differences; in both cases, they resulted in these groups' strategic defeat. Continuous IG efforts to galvanize substantial and popular support to pressure the state were fiercely opposed by the security services, and sparked a violent cycle of contentious that eventually shattered the group's leadership and led to its imprisonment and exile. Similarly, the limited use of violence by the JG and the decision to resort to selective political assassinations precipitated the arrest of most of its members, and resulted in the group's organizational elimination on the ground. In both cases, the policing of protest of the state decimated these groups' infrastructures.

The severe repression of the security services was accompanied, from the beginning of the 1980s, by frequent attempts to de-legitimize the theology of violence through prominent religious scholars. During the trial of Sadat's assassins, the state notably capitalized on the Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar, Sheikh Jad Al-Haq, to refute the theology of violence in Islam in the courts. Then, the state sent numerous religious books to these groups' imprisoned leaders with a similar objective. In the following years, several mediation attempts were additionally organized between independent religious scholars and these groups' leaderships.

These state-sponsored mediations nonetheless repeatedly failed to achieve substantial outcomes for multiple reasons, including the evolution of the security situation on the ground, the lack of trust between the parties, media leaks, and popular pressure on the Egyptian regime not to negotiate. Attempts to de-legitimize the use of violence during a contentious conflict are therefore hardly feasible, considering that such environments are more conducive to negotiating pressing demands rather than entrenched religious

interpretations, and that militant groups' leaders are less likely to credibly address the religious legitimacy of the rationale for violence with their followers when armed contentious culminates.

In reality, interviews with IG and JG leaders reveal that their initial eagerness to end the cycle of violence did not result from the state's attempts to convince them from a religious viewpoint, but were rather sparked by their own understanding of the evolution of the conflict. Leaders of both groups realized that, while they supported a limited use of violence against the state in the beginning of the 1990s, they gradually lost internal organizational control over their followers, and violence was becoming increasingly counterproductive to the achievement of their objectives. Indiscriminate violence against civilians, in addition to numerous family vendettas, were eroding remaining popular support and turning the population against them. As in other armed conflicts, internal discrepancies over the appropriate use of violence between these groups' leaders and followers exacerbated micro-level dynamics of violence when the former lost remaining organizational control.

The most lethal group, the IG, was therefore united in its endeavor to end the conflict with the state. Organizational divisions pertained to the nature and practicalities of a potential ceasefire, rather than to the intended objective. One faction was willing to present extensive and unilateral concessions to the state, while the other side wanted to be acknowledged as a political partner that could formulate political demands to the authorities. The most prominent role was played by the IG leader, Karam Zuhdi, later assisted by his second-in-command Najih Ibrahim. According to most testimonies, Zuhdi's efforts were crucial to convince the group's leadership to follow his lead and support a ceasefire initiative. Eventually, the IG managed to declare a unilateral ceasefire in 1997. Despite internal differences of views, the group managed to assure its organizational survival and preserve its internal cohesion.

This consensual end of violence failed to materialize in the JG, despite a ceasefire declared unilaterally in 1995. In contrast with the IG, the JG never managed to unite cohesively around a well-defined organizational structure; the group remained throughout its history a network of loosely connected cells. By 1995, the JG's organizational infrastructures virtually disappeared in Egypt. Most of the group's members were detained in prison while, in the diaspora, the JG was affected by a severe leadership crisis, and was struggling to overcome its strategic defeat in Egypt. As in the IG, the group's strategic defeat triggered individual reconsiderations of the validity of violence, according to field interviews with JG's members and leaders.

Organizational discord nonetheless frustrated internal attempts to channel these retrospections into a consensual solution, hence the JG further divided in absence of any meaningful alternative. Some of its prominent members joined the Al Qaeda organization, while others severed their ties

to the group. In prison, JG prisoners formed individual units that failed to communicate with one another. This isolation combined with the JG's organizational predicament hindered internal dialogue and thwarted the possibility to consensually articulate a shared position.

The ceasefires declared by the IG and the JG inaugurated a broader process of internal reflection and dialogue between their leaders and members. These discussions were designed to draw the ideological and theological ramifications of these groups' decisions to cease armed violence in Egypt and, on a more pragmatic level, to convince the state that these groups would not use violence again in the future if the regime agreed to free their members from detention.

In 2001, the collective leadership of IG, under the guidance of its two main leaders Karam Zuhdi and Najih Ibrahim, initiated a process of ideological revisions of the group's literature. Zuhdi was the historical leader of the group, while Ibrahim had historically played a critical role in the development of the group's early literature, even though he was not a religious scholar per se. The IG's ideological revisions generated four books written consensually, in addition to an array of subsidiary books and articles reflecting the non-consensual views of individual leaders. The four main IG publications cover prominent issues peculiar to *jihadi* groups, notably the practicalities and legitimacy of armed jihad in Islamic and non-Islamic countries, the excommunication of Muslims, and the application of *hisba* (which refers to an Islamic doctrine usually translated in the propagation of virtue and the prevention of vice). IG leaders adopted widely acknowledged Islamic tools and concepts to revise some of their positions and embed their arguments in classic Islamic jurisprudence.

The new literature does not reject the military component of jihad in Islam, but rather argues that jihad is conditioned by *maslaha* and *mafsada* (its positive and negative utility) and can only be considered a means (*wasila*) to achieve a higher objective. These new books additionally prohibit the resort to armed jihad against civilians, tourists, and non-fighters. IG leaders contextualize their use of Ibn Taymiyya's fatwas on the Mongol, previously used to legitimize violence against Muslim leaders who do not apply Islamic law, as a legitimization of violence against foreign occupiers rather than domestic leaders. These theological revisions therefore condition and practically impede, rather than de-legitimize, the resort to armed violence in Islam.

This collective endeavor did not materialize in the JG, whose theological revisions were not consensually adopted. Organizational dissensions impeded a consensual group-centered strategic reconsideration of the validity of violence in Muslim and Western countries. In the JG, the ideological revisions were most closely associated with the Egyptian security services, which arguably presided over this process. An opportunity to imitate the IG's

internal revisions materialized after the extradition to Egypt of a prominent former JG leader and one of the most renowned scholars of *salafi* jihadism, Sayyid Imam al-Sharif.

Sayyid Imam published a small opus on armed jihad, which was accepted by some JG-affiliated factions and rejected by many others. As in the IG's theological revisions, Sayyid Imam endorses new Islamic restrictions on jihad, *hisba* and *takfir* (excommunication of other Muslims). His book primarily addresses armed jihad and its practical regulation. In order to impede the resort to armed violence, Sayyid Imam insists that military jihad cannot be justified on account of the nationality of one's opponent, and adds that Islam forbid the killing of tourists and foreigners bearing a visa to visit Muslim countries, thereby converting their visa into a security covenant.

At a personal level, Sayyid Imam asserts that only Muslim fighters who are religiously trained and allowed by their parents can potentially participate in jihad. Yet, he additionally regulates their participation with the assertion that jihad is subordinated to military strength and to a favorable environment. Sayyid Imam insists that *mujahideen* (Muslim combatants) are constrained by *maslaha* and *mafsada* (positive and negative utility), and consequently rebuts the possibility to resort to violence in the contemporary era when the cost of armed violence exceeds its benefits. Sayyid Imam rather promotes societal isolation or immigration to other countries where preaching is permitted.

Despite clear rejection of the use of violence in Muslim countries, the IG and supportive JG factions did not comprehensively revise their former theological commitments. According to field research, the most contentious issue pertained to the excommunication of a nominally Muslim head of state who does not apply Islamic law comprehensively. Interviews with IG leaders and members revealed that the two main proponents of the theological revisions, Karam Zuhdi and Najih Ibrahim, revised their views but failed to reach a consensus with fellow IG leaders. Similarly, after the election of President Mohamed Morsi from the Muslim Brotherhood, Sayyid Imam asserted in a televised interview that he considered him a disbeliever for not applying Islamic law in Egypt.

Finally, field research with lower-ranking members of both groups suggests that their acceptance of the theological revisions was highly correlated to their leaders' ability to internally legitimize the practical renunciation of the use of violence. This process was specifically contingent on the successful ideational reinterpretation of a group's collective identity, and on the maintenance of its organizational structure and internal hierarchy. IG leaders notably reinterpreted violence as a reality that was imposed on them and that they did not want in the first place, arguing that their collective group identity and fundamental mission had always been nonviolent, religious proselytization (*da'wa*); this process was facilitated by the continuation of the group's

internal structure and by the widely accepted legitimacy of the leadership's prerogatives by lower-ranking members. This process was impeded in the JG, whose historical organizational inability to legitimize internal norms of decision-making and concomitant periodic factionalization over ideational and personal issues prevented a similar consensual reinterpretation of the group's collective identity.

These two theological renunciations of armed jihad offer valuable lessons for other contexts, despite the limited number of group-centered de-radicalization cases in the Muslim world. The main lesson from Egypt is that group-centered de-radicalization was mostly an internal retrospection and an acknowledgment by militant group leaders that their approach to political action had failed to yield any result. Multiple attempts of state authorities to achieve the same outcome through religious preachers and institutions were unsuccessful. These retrospections should therefore primarily be understood in the organizational context in which they take place.

A militant group, like any other organized political entity, includes an array of leaders and factions marked by evolving perceptions of their environments and of the most adequate pathway to the achievement of their objectives. The study of a group-centered strategic reconsideration therefore necessitates unfolding their organizational mediation. In Egypt, leaders in both groups reconsidered the merit of violence at different period of time; however, only the most structured and cohesive group managed to solve internal disagreement and reach a consensus. This case study accordingly suggests that similar outcomes are conditional on the preservation of militant groups' organizational cohesion as a necessary, yet insufficient, recipe for success.

This organizational importance also yields significant lessons for the assessment of the genuine nature of these groups' new political philosophies. These case studies suggest that the relative success of a militant group's theological revisions should be assessed at a meso, rather than individual, level. Group-centered de-radicalization indeed substantially differs from individual de-radicalization programs. The latter seek to sever the ties between former militants and their radical milieu in order to reintegrate them into their societies. De-radicalization programs, however, follow a different logic and do not necessarily entail an individual acceptance of the theological validity of the recantations. In many cases, internal group solidarity and the logic of group survival suffice to reach a broad internal consensus, as in the IG.

The theological revisions of the IG and of the JG finally demonstrate that militant groups' ideologies are not as flexible as sometimes suggested in the literature, and cannot be considered solely contingent on external stimuli. These case studies reveal that these groups' core commitments were not rejected, but merely regulated and conditioned. Furthermore, a few theological positions, such as the position on the Muslim leader who does not apply

Islamic law for instance, remained after the theological revisions. This position suggests that, rather than considering a group's core commitments flexible and subject to substantial change, one should rather focus on the flexibility of the political understanding derived from these ideas.

The post-2011 Egyptian uprising has indeed substantiated that the IG and JG factions that joined the political process can be accommodated and legitimize a new democratic political order. In 2011, the removal of former president Hosni Mubarak and the subsequent opening of the Egyptian political system sparked the creation of two political parties, the Building and Development Party created by the Islamic Group and the Islamic Party formed by individuals formerly affiliated with the Jihad Group. These parties' political platforms stress that their objectives still include a comprehensive implementation of Islamic law in Egypt. Their political practices and their political alliances before the 2013 military coup, however, have substantiated many assertions of the so-called inclusion-moderation thesis that states that radical groups moderate their policies when they join the political process. These political parties have eschewed street confrontations, favored consensual agreements with other political forces, and rejected post-July 2013 violence.

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