Political Violence in Context: Time, Space and Milieu

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Chapter Thirteen (pp. 215- 235)

The Emergence and Construction of the Radical Salafi Milieu in Egypt

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Contextualisation of political violence has recently gained prominence in the literature.[1] This development has followed decades of criticism – from both insiders and outsiders – as regards the ontological, epistemological, and methodological foundations of this field.[2] These reconsiderations have influenced the study of political violence and encouraged increasingly rich and intricate research projects that reject the understanding of violence as the outcome of isolated psycho-pathological factors, radical ideologies, or solely as the product of structural factors.[3] The emerging consensus on political violence advocates for an understanding of it as a dynamic, interactive, constructed, and emergent process (della Porta 2013) caused by a myriad of mutually constituted multi-level factors. This consensus generally favours the study of processes and causal mechanisms based on rich and

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2 Major criticisms of terrorism studies have recently been re-articulated by scholars of critical terrorism studies (*see* e.g., Jackson, Smyth and Gunning 2009). For a recent debate on the state of research on terrorism studies, *see Terrorism and Political Violence* 26(4).

3 Some of these criticisms were developed, for instance, in della Porta 2013; Hafez 2003; Pape 2006; Sageman 2004, 2008.

contextualised qualitative case studies.[4]

The contextualisation of political violence presented in this book pertains specifically to time, space, and milieu. The study of milieu combines many distinctive approaches. A prevailing angle focuses on milieu as the social environment in which violent movements emerge and develop. To use an analogy favoured by Mao Zedong, this social environment is the sea in which revolutionary guerrillas swim (Hilsman 1968: 271). The characteristics of the milieu can create an array of opportunities for militant and insurgent groups to mobilise and achieve significant levels of popular support for the completion of their tactical and strategic objectives. At the same time, their milieu can also hinder activities and limit available options.[5] A focus on social environment includes, for example, evolving mechanisms of popular support in civil war settings (Malthaner 2011; Wood 2003). Contextualised studies of political violence generally demonstrate that radical groups cannot be studied in isolation from the milieu in which they evolve.

The study of violence in Islamic settings has seen increasing coverage of the development of Salafi jihadism. This terminology describes Muslims who legitimise the use of violence against nominally Muslim heads of state, but there are secondary disagreements among scholars over what exactly Salafi jihadism entails in terms of political behaviour and religious creed (Hegghammer 2009; Wagemakers 2012; Wiktorowicz 2006). Rich studies of Salafi jihadi groups show how scholars regularly fail to contextualise these actors within their milieu. However, just as holds for other, non-Islamic settings, it can be assumed that Salafi jihadi actors cannot be isolated from the broader environment in which they

4 *See* e.g., della Porta 2013; Kalyvas 2006; Malthaner 2011; Weinstein 2007; Wood 2003.

5 One expanding branch of the literature focuses on the role of popular support in the use of certain repertoires, such as suicide bombings (e.g., Bloom 2004, 2007).

flourish, and which can both constrain and sustain their development.

This chapter investigates the emergence and evolution of the Salafi radical milieu in Egypt. This is defined as the social structures composed of supporters and sympathisers of the militant groups, providing them with both logistic and moral support. It is the setting from which these groups emerge and to which they remain connected (Malthaner 2014: 639; Waldmann 2010). This chapter argues that the internal characteristics of the radical milieu should be studied through the analysis of the diffusion of Salafi jihadi frames, at both micro and meso levels. It demonstrates that different types of frame diffusion – relational and non-relational – are related to fundamentally different networking structures. Relational diffusion of Salafi jihadi frames materialises through intermediaries at the micro and meso levels. This type of diffusion is mediated by different networking structures determining the level of internal control over its development. Conversely, non-relational diffusion occurs through global communication and creates a diversified radical milieu characterised by the absence of internal control.

This chapter establishes that the Egyptian Salafi radical milieu has been constructed in two successive phases. The first takes place between the 1970s and the 1990s. During this time, milieu-construction is better understood through meso-level study of its composite networks and organisations, since these had a virtual monopoly on the relational diffusion of frames and on micro-mobilisation. The second phase is set in the 2000s, with non-relational diffusion of radical frames through new means of communication fundamentally affecting the expansion of its milieu, and informing its development as internally more diverse and individualised. This came to subsequently shape the post-2011 developments.

This study is based on eighteen months of intensive field research, undertaken in Cairo between 2011

and 2014. The research includes a prolonged political ethnography with diverse groups of Salafi jihadi supporters in Egypt, as well as semi-structured interviews with leaders and members of two former militant groups in Egypt: the Islamic Group and the Jihad Group, and of their political parties.

An organisational study of Salafi jihadi networks

Modern Salafism is considered a contemporary revivalist religious movement defined by the specificity of its religious approach to Islam, which nevertheless contains acute internal political diversity. The Salafi approach to Islam (*al-manhaj al-salafi*) mostly diverges from non-Salafi Islam in the method of interpretation of Islamic sources. Salafi Muslims reject what they consider to be a blind following of the four canonical Islamic schools of law (Meijer 2009:4) and insist on the need to return to the two fundamentals sources in Islam – the Qur'an and the Sunna (the practice of the Prophet) (Haykel 2009: 38–9). Salafis promote a specific creed (*'aqida*), which is not shared by the majority of Muslims, and they insist on the necessity to purify Islam, ridding it of any innovation deemed un-Islamic (*bida'*), and from remnants of polytheist beliefs and practices (denounced as *shirk* in Arabic).[6] The political preferences of Salafis diverge substantially, however, with the trend including supporters of the status quo, proponents of political participation, and radicals, who legitimise the use of violence against Muslim leaders who do not rule exclusively with Islamic law (Hegghammer 2009; Wagemakers 2012; Wiktorowicz 2006).

The academic study of Salafi jihadism is relatively elitist and actor centred. Most research projects focus on specific case studies of Salafi jihadi groups and scholars to investigate their idiosyncratic

6 For general academic literature on Salafism, *see* Meijer 2009; Rougier 2008.

evolution.[7] Despite their valuable explorations of internal Salafi jihadi debates,[8] their limited elitist focus fails to account for the interactions between these groups and scholars, on the one hand, and the radical milieu in which they evolve, on the other. They generally understand the evolution of Salafi jihadism from the point of view of its prominent armed group leaders and religious scholars, and are virtually silent on the articulation of these debates on the micro and meso levels. Moreover, they generally overlook internal organisational dynamics and neglect to study the important networking structures of the groups.

The interactions between Salafi jihadi leaders and their followers have mostly been investigated from a social movement perspective.[9] The prevailing perspective resorts to framing studies to unpack the interactions between the Salafi jihadi elite and its followers (Meijer 2007; Wagemakers 2008, 2011, 2012; Wiktorowicz 2004). These studies explore the ideological articulation of Salafi jihadi thought and its adoption at a micro level with the tools commonly used for framing studies (including frame alignment and frame resonance).[10] Despite their multi-level objectives, however, these studies often reproduce the same elitist bias centered on ideological construction rather than on its micro reception, with a few exceptions (Wagemakers 2012; Wiktorowicz 2005).

More comprehensive multi-level research on the interactions between Salafi jihadi leaders and groups,

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7 A non-exhaustive representative list of studies of Salafi Jjihadi groups and scholars include Brachman 2008; Gerges 2011; Lia 2008; Tawil 2011; Wagemakers 2012.

8 *See* for instance Lahoud, 2012, 2013; Moghadam and Fishman 2011; Ryan 2013.

9 *See* e.g., Hegghammer 2010; Wiktorowicz 2000, 2001, 2005.

10 On framing, *see* Benford and Snow 2000; Johnston *et al.* 2013; Snow and Benford 1988; Snow, Rochford Jr, Worden and Benford 1986; Snow 2014.

and their followers, has adopted a meso-level focus. These studies question the organisational make-up of Salafi jihadi groups, from organised entities to loose networking structures, and the impact of these on micro-mobilisation and on the diffusion of ideas. They notably argue that group socialisation is crucial to the adoption of Salafi jihadism (Sageman 2004, 2008; Wiktorowicz 2005). In this regard, they stress the role of pre-existing ties between members of Salafi jihadi networks, and the importance of the meso-level processes leading to the adoption of violence. This corpus, therefore, follows the lead of established studies of political violence, emphasising the role of small-group dynamics.[11] More recently, they have been further supplemented by an emerging focus on the impact of the radical milieu (Malthaner 2014; Waldmann 2010).

Informed by the diverse scholarship on Salafi jihadism, this chapter focuses on the meso-level organisations and networks that structure the Salafi radical milieu. More specifically, this approach justifies the central assertion of this chapter that in Egypt, there are two main types of frame diffusion that have led to the socialisation of the radical milieu, and the subsequent adoption of Salafi jihadism. The first type of diffusion is relational and materialises through personal contacts and intermediaries, while the second type of diffusion is non-relational and occurs through new means of communication such as the Internet.

The central argument of this chapter is that different types of frame diffusion are aligned with different networking structures. The corollary of this argument is that specific networking structures have certain implications on the internal level of control over the ideological and organisational development of the radical milieu. In the case of non-relational diffusion, the argument is rather straightforward. The non-relational diffusion of Salafi jihadism creates a diversified radical milieu through new means of global

11 *See* Crenshaw 1987; della Porta 1995.

communication, characterised by the absence of central internal control over its ideological and organisational development. New followers of Salafi jihadism shape their own intellectual and religious understanding of this trend, which is not contingent on their inclusion into specific radical networks that could enjoy a monopoly on ideological articulation and organisational make-up.

In the case of the relational diffusion of Salafi jihadism, the argument is more sophisticated. The level of internal control over the development of the radical milieu, relationally diffused, is contingent on the structures of the meso organisations that compose it. Structured, cohesive, and integrated groups are more likely to expand their social networks while simultaneously maintaining a high level of internal control over their organisational and ideational developments. Conversely, divided groups with poor local anchorage are less likely to manage to expand their networks while maintaining a stronger internal control over their developments. Analytically, the study of the meso dynamics of militant groups should focus on the type of ties uniting their leaders; their leaders and followers, and these groups and their broader social networks.[12]

The emergence of Salafism in Egypt and the inception of its jihadi offshoot in the 1970s

Salafism emerged in Egypt at the beginning of the twentieth century. The first influential association promoting Salafi views – *al-jamʿia al-shariʿa lil al-ʿamilin bil al-kitab wal-sunna al-muḥammadiyya* (the lawful association for those who behave according to the Book [the Qur'an] and Muhammad's tradition) – was created by Sheikh Mahmud Khattab al-Sobki in 1912. The association has, since then,

12 This analytical perspective draws on Staniland's 2014 study of armed groups' embeddedness within their broader social networks.

been engaged in social work in the fields of preaching, education, and health (Faid 2014: 52).[13] Egypt's second main Salafi association emerged from a split in *al-jamʿia al-shariʿa*. In 1926, Sheikh Muhammad Hamed al-Fiqi created *jamʿia ansar al-sunna al-muḥammadiyya* (Association of the Partisans of Muhammad's Tradition), which has since followed the Salafi approach to Islam (Faid 2014: 54). These associations have since their inception developed an important network in Egypt, even if they had relatively limited political influence until the 1960s.

Since the 1970s, Salafism has spread considerably in Egypt due to a variety of factors. Regionally and internationally, this period marked a renewed influence of religion in the Middle East caused by the loss of Jerusalem in 1967, the relative demise of Arab nationalist ideologies after the 1967 Arab defeat, and the growing influence of the Gulf countries. In Egypt, the death of former president Jamal Abd al-Nasser in 1970 was followed by Anwar Sadat's accession to power. Sadat departed from the stance of his predecessor and changed Egypt's regional alliances (Thompson 2008: 317; Kandil 2013: 99). Domestically, he benefited from the religious revival, portraying himself as the 'believer president' against his nationalist and socialist political opponents (Esposito 1998; Zaman 2010: 146). He alleviated the pressure on the Islamist trend and released thousands of members of the Muslim Brotherhood from prison (Zollner 2008: 48). The liberalisation of the 1970s generally facilitated the expansion of religion in the public sphere.

The legitimisation of Islamist violence appeared gradually and distinctively, in three groups whose diverging patterns of mobilisation came to impact on the emerging networking topography of Egypt's radical milieu. Initially, the growing religiousisation of the public sphere, and the political and social

13 Many observers do not consider this association to be Salafi per se. It is included here due to the increasing importance of Salafism among its members.

consensus regarding the role of Islam in society, was not associated with theological justification of the use of violence. The relatively liberal political system was fairly inclusive, allowing for the development of religious groups. The legitimisation of violence among Islamist groups emerged as part of three different trends. Their respective influence and roles substantially diverged, however, and the following analysis will trace their origins and interactions with the broader radical milieu, as mediated by their organisational structures.

The first violent Islamist group was a sectarian epiphenomenon of the repression of the Muslim Brotherhood under Nasser. *Jamaʿa al-muslimun* (Society of Muslims)[14] was founded and led by Shukri Mustafa, following his release from prison in 1971. Mustafa adopted the ideas of Muslim Brotherhood intellectual Sayyid Qutb, who was radicalised in prison before his execution in 1966 (Calvert 2010; Musallam 2005; Toth 2013). Until the dissolution of his group, in 1978, Mustafa recruited young followers, and advocated for isolation from the allegedly un-Islamic influence of Egyptian society.[15] *Jamaʿa al-muslimun* was primarily a product of the harsh detention of Muslim Brotherhood members in prison, rather than of Sadat's political system.

This group was characterised by peculiar sectarian and authoritarian internal dynamics that isolated it from society and hindered the development of a supportive environment. This group was mostly based on prison ties, and its rejection of other Muslims on theological grounds later obstructed its local expansion. Frame diffusion at a local level was therefore extremely limited and this group had, during its short existence, the characteristics of a cult organised around an authoritarian leader.[16] Leaders and

14 This group has often been referred to as *takfīr wal-ḥijra* (Excommunication and Exile) even though it never used this appellation.

15 Studies of this group include Ansari 1984; Cozzens 2009; Ibrahim 1982, 1988; Kepel 1993.

16 *See* fn. 14.

other prominent members of the Islamic Group and the Jihad Group claim in interviews that they often tried to convince the followers of *jamaʿa al-muslimun* to revise their views, without significant success.[17] The group had no substantial role in the expansion and development of Egypt's radical milieu in the 1970s.

The second essential component of the Salafi radical milieu was the nebula commonly referred to as the Jihad Groups (*jamaʿat al-jihad*). This designates loosely related cells united by their eagerness to replace the regime with an Islamic state, although they frequently disagreed on tactical issues. Multiple interviews with former members and leaders of these cells indicate that their adoption of violence was not directly informed by Sadat's policies or by a process of radicalisation in prison, as in the case of Shukri Mustafa. These youths were from religious backgrounds and were recruited individually through social networks that had developed inside mainstream Salafi associations – most notably *ansar al-sunna* – and through family ties and acquaintances. Their adoption of a violent form of Salafism was a result of the local jihadi leaders successfully framing the creation of an Islamic state in Egypt as the sole remedy to multiple domestic and international grievances. These grievances were wide-ranging and stretched from the liberation of Jerusalem to the creation of an Islamic utopia.[18]

The networking mode of organisation of these cells and their early adoption of violence explains the types of framing used, their relational pattern of micro-mobilisation, and their circumscribed expansion. These cells centred around nodes of distinctive leaders who recruited through relational

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17 According to this researcher's interviews with members of the JG and of the IG in the 1970s, including Abd al-Rawf Amir al Jaysh, Kamal Habib, Osama Hafez, Najih Ibrahim and Rifai Taha.

18 Interviews with Abd al-Rawf Amir al Jaysh, Ali Faraj, Kamal Habib, Salih Jahin, Nabil Na'im and Osama Qassem.

framing within their close surroundings – in Salafi institutions and among their own friends and family members. Their early adoption of violence meant that being a member entailed personal pitfalls akin to high-risk activities. These networks could not recruit publicly, and trust and security issues limited their expansion. The coordination between their cells was therefore limited and they generally suffered from internal competition between individual leaders.[19] As a result, while these networks enjoyed some level of embeddedness in mainstream Salafi associations, they did not manage to expand in the wider society or create a substantial supportive milieu outside of their local ties.

The last essential component of the violent Salafi milieu in Egypt in the 1970s is *al-jamaʿa al-islamiyya*, or the Islamic Group (henceforth IG). This movement emerged in universities in Upper Egypt, and initially it merely strived to teach and spread Islam in society. In its conception as a student group, it did not follow a specific political agenda, and its religious framework was not clearly articulated. According to its leaders, the Salafi approach to Islam was adopted only later, towards the end of the 1970s. Eventually, it became a dominant force in Upper Egyptian universities, increasingly providing essential support to the students (Abdo 2002: 125; Kepel 1993). Its members gradually confronted their leftist and nationalist opponents and the group radicalised as a result. The closing of political opportunities in Egypt served to fuel the radicalisation process, as did Sadat's new international outlook and his rapprochement with the United States and Israel. From a comparative perspective, the radicalisation of this group was therefore more closely related to Sadat's political choices and to the contentious conflict with political opponents than were the jihad groups.[20]

The organisational development of the IG thus differed substantially from that of the jihad groups. The

19 *See* fn. 18.

20 Interviews with Osama Hafez, Abd al-Akhr Hamad, Najih Ibrahim and Rifai Taha.

emergence of the IG as a non-violent movement reinforced the strong ties between its leaders and facilitated the mobilisation of its followers and the constitution of a broad constituency before the beginning of the contentious conflict. Joining the IG was initially akin to joining a low-risk activity. IG leaders therefore had time to define the group's internal mode of organisation, and managed to make a consensual decision over the ideational and strategic developments of the group. Moreover, the IG was initially embedded in the social structures of the Egyptian South and engaged in public work, which eased the micro-mobilisation of a diversified membership. The adoption of violence in the aftermath of these organisational developments meant that the larger constituency of the IG shaped the foundations of an incorporated radical milieu controlled by IG leaders.

By the end of the 1970s, the closing of political opportunities in Egypt led to a rapprochement between some cells of the jihad groups and the Islamic Group in the South. Discussions were followed by agreement on a plan to topple the regime with a popular revolution combined with a military coup.[21] However, this new alliance did not take any further steps towards a violent removal of the regime, and the assassination of Anwar Sadat in October 1981 was first and foremost a hastened response to the large-scale arrests ordered by the latter during the month leading up to his death.

The reconstruction of the the Salafi radical milieu in the 1980s and the 1990s

Following Sadat's killing, further development of the Egyptian radical milieu was disturbed by the arrest of most members of radical groups and networks. During these massive waves of arrest, radical group members who escaped arrest left the country or became clandestine. The radical Salafi milieu was virtually decimated with the groups being relocated to prison, where they used their detention to

21 Interviews with Abd al-Rawf Amir al Jaysh, Kamal Habib, Najih Ibrahim and Rifai Taha.

re-evaluate their choices and determine their future. While they initially believed that they would be executed by the regime, the relative clemency of the judiciary prompted new discussions about the future. Negotiations regarding the consolidation of a united group failed to yield a positive outcome and personal conflicts between IG and jihadi group leaders caused a split, leading to the emergence of two distinct groups: the Islamic Group and the Jihad Group.[22]

The IG now materialised as a structured organisation with a well-defined leadership. In prison, a consensual direction constituted by its four main leaders was named to design the group's ideology and strategic vision for the future. This leadership – subsequently referred to as the historical leadership – was composed of the main founders of the group, whose pre-existing positions and organisational authority was formally acknowledged. In prison, they published several books that epitomised and summarised the ideology and tenets of the IG.[23] The already strong ties between its leaders facilitated the survival of the group and the reaffirmation of its consensual nature.

In 1984, IG leaders benefited from the liberation of many second-tier leaders and members, and the group's infrastructure in Upper Egypt could be revived. The strong legitimacy and unity of its imprisoned leadership helped to promote its views on the ground and to recreate pre-1981 social networks. The group took advantage of a phase of relative political liberalisation to recruit new members and to socialise them into the group's ideological tenets through a relational diffusion of the new frames developed in jail.[24] The IG reproduced pre-1981 micro-mobilisation patterns, assimilable to the joining of a low-risk activity – as argued above – and recreated a broad supportive environment and

22 Interviews with Osama Hafez, Nabil Na'im, Osama Qassem and Rifai Taha.

23 Interviews with Osama Hafez, Abd al-Akhr Hamad and Nahim Ibrahim.

24 Interview with Rifai Taha.

milieu in the south. This milieu was ideologically coherent and well structured around local IG leaders.

The Jihad Group (henceforth JG), on the other hand, did not come out of prison as a united entity. Its leadership was plagued by internal divisions and conflicts over which strategy to adopt.[25] These divisions did not occur in a vacuum but generally reflected the pre-1981 divisions between differentiated networks. Eventually – from 1984 onwards – the progressive liberation of second-tier leaders and members only worsened the internal divide. Many members and leaders of this group – including Ayman al-Zawahiri and Sayyid Imam – used this opportunity to go to Afghanistan to train fellow members. In prison, its leaders became increasingly isolated and, according to imprisoned leaders, the ties with the Afghan-based leadership were then severed.[26]

As a result, in the 1980s, the JG reproduced pre-1981 micro-mobilisation patterns, failing to overcome previous impediments to its expansion. In prison, JG leaders did not manage to clearly define the ideological and strategic views of the group, publishing only a few leaflets representing the individual position of some members. The JG failed to establish any sustainable coordinated networks on the ground, and its members merely managed to mobilise individuals located around them, in limited social networks. Despite the relatively open political environment, the JG's secret nature and internal divisions hindered the constitution of a strong supportive milieu.

From a comparative perspective, after 1984 the reconstruction of the radical milieu in Egypt followed two distinctive organisational patterns. In the South, the IG successfully reconstituted its former networks and structured them around a cluster of trusted leaders. Due to the relatively free political

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25 Interview with Nabil Na'im.

26 Interview with Salih Jahin and Osama Qassem.

environment this revived radical milieu expanded relatively rapidly and attracted many new followers that could be socialised into the group's ideological tenets and identity. This mode of organisation afforded the IG strong internal control over its radical milieu as well as a substantial level of local embeddedness in society. Conversely, JG-affiliated cells suffered from the divisions of the leadership in prison and abroad and reproduced pre-1981 patterns of socialisation. Its local networks were divided, secret, and lacked the coordination and control that the IG enjoyed. The JG's ideological tenets were only marginally spread at a local level, through family ties and acquaintances. This comparison between the IG and the JG demonstrates that relational diffusion of radical frames was differently negotiated by these groups' respective modes of micro-mobilisation.

Eventually, the cycle of contention between the security services and the followers of the violent Salafi milieu, triggered in Egypt in 1987, was not the outcome of deliberate strategic or tactical choices made by the leadership of these groups. It mostly resulted from changing state policies towards the Islamist radical milieu – represented chiefly by the IG and the JG – and from the wave of repression launched by the new Egyptian minister of the interior, Zaki Badr (Awwa 2006; Haenni 2005; Malthaner 2011). The IG and JG leaderships considered an armed confrontation as inevitable, but thought that the time had not arrived for a militarisation of their conflict with the state.[27]

These groups, and the radical milieu around them, managed state repression in different ways. The IG managed to preserve internal control over its followers and limited the use of violence at a local level during the first two years (i.e., before the disintegration of its leadership on the ground).[28] It benefited from growing sympathy from the population in some neighbourhoods of the Egyptian capital Cairo,

27 Interviews with Abd al-Akhr Hamad and Rifai Taha.

28 Interview with Maher Farghali.

and managed to further mobilise new followers. Initially, the group's support networks grew as a result of the contentious conflict with the state, which strengthened the local radical milieu forming around them. By contrast, the JG's organisational weakness and limited local anchorage prevented it from unifying and controlling new sympathisers. Interviews with some of the latter reveal that the group suffered from divisions among local JG leaders, and failed to unite their ranks. JG cells acted independently and resorted to selective violence against security forces, without regard of strategic objectives. These two cases thus demonstrate that the radical milieu formed around these groups reacted differently to state repression depending on the level of internal control and on their respective networking topographies. After a few years, they nonetheless suffered the same fate. The organisational structures of the IG and the JG were decimated on the ground level, with their leadership suffering imprisonment or exile. The remaining radical milieu became isolated from society, until it disappeared at the end of the 1990s.

In the meantime, the ideological construction of Egyptian militant groups was, paradoxically, consolidated thousands of kilometres away, in the Pakistani city of Peshawar. In the 1980s, the arrival of thousands of Arab volunteers for the Afghan Jihad (Anas 2002; Hegghammer 2010: 38; Salah 2001) created an environment in which Islamists from the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafi associations, and militant groups from diverse countries – notably Egypt and Syria – discussed and exchanged ideas. This relational diffusion of new ideas had a prominent role in the ideological shaping of the violent Salafi trend drawn from the Salafi creed and from the violent and militant approach to political action of Egyptians and Syrian militant groups. Egyptian leaders of the Jihad Group – including Sayyid Imam and Ayman al-Zawahiri – played a crucial role in this new ideological orientation. Other Salafi jihadi ideologues – such as Abu Muhammad al-Maqdissi and Abu Musab al-Suri – went on to become prominent representatives of this trend (Lia 2008; Wagemakers 2012).

The radical milieu around the IG and the JG was not immune to these ideological developments nor to this relational diffusion of new ideas. Many prominent members and leaders residing in Peshawar and in the Afghan training camps contributed to discussions and debates.[29] In order to understand the integration of the new ideas in these groups' ideologies it is nonetheless necessary to first understand the organisational mediation presented by specific group dynamics and by the general characteristics of the Egyptian Salafi radical milieu. In particular, it reveals that the latter could not have been acquainted with these ideological developments prior to the 2000s, when these groups had organisationally disappeared in Egypt.

On the one hand, in Peshawar, leaders of the IG recognised the primacy of their imprisoned leaders in shaping the group's ideology and for its strategic decision-making.[30] Hence, while some of the Peshawar leaders grew closer to the Salafi jihadi approach to political action, they still delegated the direction of the movement to the imprisoned leadership. Conversely, the rupture between the JG in Peshawar and its leaders in prison gave more leeway to its leaders abroad. Some of these leaders' adoption of the Salafi jihadi approach to Islam therefore had an incomparable impact on the ideological construction of this group, in this case leading to a wider adoption of these ideas by group members, facilitated by their isolation from the group's imprisoned leadership.

Neither the groups' followers in Egypt nor the Salafi radical milieu was influenced by these ideological developments, due to the impossibility to reach them either relationally or non-relationally. The

29 Interviews with Abd al-Akhr Hamad, Nabil Na'im, Muhammad Omar Abd al-Rahman and Rifai Taha.

30 *See* fn. 29.

expatriate leadership of the IG and the JG recognise that they did not then have the means to communicate easily with their followers in Egypt, nor to disseminate their new literature, published abroad.[31] Similarly, members in Egypt and in prison maintain that they only had sporadic access to this new written corpus and add that they only became acquainted with it after their liberation from prison in the 2000s.[32] The evolving complexity of the ideological construction of the IG and the JG abroad was thus, in the 1990s, only marginally distributed among supporters of the groups, and inside the violent Egyptian Salafi radical milieu.

The 1990s marked the end of the cycle of violence in Egypt. IG leaders – notably Karam Zuhdi and Najih Ibrahim – directed a unilateral initiative to end violence in Egypt.[33] In 1997, after intense internal discussions and a few unsuccessful attempts (Ashour 2009; Awwa 2006), they managed to declare a unilateral ceasefire for the group. They also succeeded in convincing their followers in prison to accept this new decision and to lay down their weapons. Eventually, the imprisoned leadership of the IG led a process of ideological revisions, amending several violent ideological tenets laid down in the literature of the group. Similar steps were also partially taken by followers of the JG, who pronounced a unilateral ceasefire in 1995, before revising some of their ideological tenets in 2007 (Ashour 2009).

The development of a diversified and individualised Salafi radical milieu in the 2000s

The construction of the Salafi radical milieu metamorphosed during the decade that preceded the 2011 Egyptian uprising. The two main factors influencing its constitution were the growing individualisation

31 Interview with Abd al-Akhr Hamad and Rifai Taha.

32 Interview with Salih Jahin and Majdi Salem.

33 Interview with Osama Hafez and Najih Ibrahim.

of religiosity in Egypt – reinforced by the development of new means of communication – and the framing of new international grievances. In combination with the organisational disappearance of the IG and the JG, this contributed to the expansion of Salafism in Egypt and to the end of these groups' relative monopoly on the development of the Salafi radical milieu. This milieu eventually became associated with the Salafi jihadi trend, which grew as a diverse and individualistic approach to radical Islamic activism.

The expansion of new media in the 2000s played a crucial role in the development of the religious field in Egypt. The proliferation of satellite TV channels, Egyptian households having increasing access to the Internet, combined with a marketisation of religion, promoted a new individualistic approach to Islam in Egyptian society (Haenni 2005; Roy 2012). This diversification of the religious field was reinforced by the growing disrepute of the religious establishment and by its inability to fulfill religious expectations at the level of the individual (Roy 2012). This individualisation of religion is reflected in the marginalisation of traditional and institutionalised forms of religiosity, which was progressively replaced by an individuality-driven selectivity among an array of religious sources (Roy 2012).

This setting provided fertile ground for the diffusion of new forms of Salafism. Salafi preachers increasingly relied on new religious TV channels and on the Internet, rather than on Salafi associations, for spreading the Salafi approach to Islam (Field and Hamam 2009). This new mode of socialisation shaped Salafism's new organisational and ideological make-up. While previously, Salafi Muslims in Egypt would primarily be socialised in Salafi institutions around specific religious scholars, this new socialisation, through the Internet and satellite TV, individualised the new generation's religious approach, allowing people to make an eclectic selection from diverse sources.

By the early 2000s, the former militant groups had formally disappeared in Egypt. The IG and the JG had no organisational presence and their members remained scattered abroad, primarily in Iran, Pakistan, and Europe.[34] In Egypt, the ideological revisions of the IG and factions of the JG gradually paved the way for the liberation of thousands of prisoners under the condition that they refrain from any public activity. Most of them were subsequently placed under the surveillance of the State Security Investigation Service (*mabahith amn al-dawla*), which maintained tight control of their interactions with other Egyptians. Leaders of both groups – notably Osama Qassem and Abd al Akhr Hamad[35] – recognise that this particular setting prevented them from reaching out to the new Salafi jihadi generation that, according to the IG religious mufti, Sheikh Abd al Akhr Hamad, was mostly socialised on the Internet, with Sheikh Google.

The propagation of Salafism and the absence of organised militant groups in Egypt are not, however, sufficient to explain the expansion of the violent Salafi milieu. The crucial element triggering its expansion in the 2000s is epitomised by the wars launched by the United States in Afghanistan in 2001, and in Iraq in 2003. While the post-9/11 invasion of Afghanistan and the subsequent replacement of the Taliban regime initially enjoyed a degree of international legitimacy also among prominent Muslim religious scholars, the Iraq War was a game changer. Many Middle Eastern countries were quick to perceive its lack of legitimacy and its framing as a remnant of old Christian crusades in the Middle East. The armed opposition to US-led forces was similarly legitimised among mainstream Muslims, easing the transition of young Salafi's adopting violent frames.

At a micro level, a political ethnography with several groups of Salafi jihadi youths revealed that a

34 Interview with Muhammad Omar Abd al-Rahman.

35 Interview with Abd al-Akhr Hamad and Osama Qassem.

majority had defined themselves as Salafi Muslims before accepting the religious justifications of violence framed by jihadi ideologues. They stress their genuine consternation at the Iraq War and argue that it nourished a personal, political, and religious quest. As individuals, they were looking for indigenous answers to these external threats against the Muslim world. They claim that the inability of mainstream Salafi preachers to adequately respond to the attacks against the Muslim world urged them to explore other alternatives. The main theological Islamic discourse of armed defence of the Muslim world was the growing jihadi corpus available on the Internet, particularly on the website of prominent Salafi jihadi ideologue Abu Muhammad al-Maqdissi.[36]

The new individual adoption of Salafi jihadi frames through non-relational diffusion online was of tremendous importance for the construction of the new radical milieu, which significantly contrasted with the past. In the 1980s and the 1990s, the construction of Egypt's violent milieu essentially occurred inside and around the IG and the JG. Conversely, the socialisation into violent frames in the 2000s was primarily non-relational, and taking place online. Members of the new Salafi jihadi milieu socialised individually and without intermediaries. They shaped a new individualised radical milieu that did not enjoy the topographical characteristics of former IG and JG-related networks. This individualistic approach, combined with access to a wide literature, facilitated new supporters personally interpreting the meaning of Salafi jihadism. This new pattern of socialisation eroded the control that militant groups had had over the ideological construction of the new violent milieu, inexorably broadening its ideological foundations.

This peculiar socialisation into the violent milieu has also meant that the distinction between different trends of Salafism, based on their political approaches – referred to as politico, scientific, and jihadi in

36 *Minbar tawheed wal jihad*, www.tahwed.ws. For more information, *see* Wagemakers 2011.

the literature – has become more blurred than expected. These distinctions do not adequately reflect the experiences of Salafi jihadi individuals and the internal diversity of this new radical milieu. Hence, even if new Salafi jihadi supporters mostly agree on the illegitimacy of current Muslim rulers, and on the necessity to oppose foreign occupation of Muslim lands, there is wide disagreement regarding subsidiary issues. For instance, they quarrel on the legitimacy of mainstream Egyptian preachers such as Muhammad Hassan and Muhammad Hussein Yaqub, and of scholars affiliated to Saudi Arabia, such as former mufti Ibn Baz. These extensive divisions – which reflect wider divisions between realists and purists (Moghadam and Fishman 2011) – were relatively inconspicuous prior to 2011.

The impact of the 2011 Arab Spring on the Egyptian Salafi radical milieu

In 2011, the Egyptian uprising inaugurated an unprecedented era for Egyptian Salafism and for the Salafi radical milieu. The opening of political opportunity after the resignation of former president Hosni Mubarak challenged the existing Salafi status quo and presented a new reality. The Egyptian military authorities liberalised participation in the political process and shortly after the uprising an array of new parties had appeared. Existing constraints on public activities were lifted, at least informally. Moreover, the new authorities gradually released thousands of Egyptians affiliated to the Salafi radical milieu, including members and leaders of the IG and the JG. This opening of political opportunities thus presented many challenges and opportunities to the Salafi radical milieu, which was reflected in their ideational and organisational implications.

The first notable ideational challenge to the Salafi radical milieu pertained to the legitimacy of political violence in Muslim countries. This issue was a dividing line that had formerly affected the development of mainstream Salafism and its radical fringe. Before 2011, Egyptian Salafis consistently

agreed that Islamic law should be comprehensively applied in Muslim countries, and their disagreement mainly consisted in the question of the legitimacy of using violence for reaching this outcome. The IG and the JG had historically legitimised the use of armed force to topple the regime, before renouncing this with the publication of their theological revisions in 2001 and 2007. The Salafi jihadi trend, on the other hand, was essentially defined by its support of armed violence against Muslim leaders who did not fully apply Islamic law. After 2011, however, its self-proclaimed representative in Egypt rebutted this claim and publicly announced that they would thenceforth only focus on public preaching. This new understanding of the legitimacy of political violence thus blurred this first division between mainstream and jihadi Salafism.

The delegitimisation of violence as a means to implement Islamic law in a Muslim country did not, however, comprehensively dissipate the use of violence in the Salafi discourse. The deterioration of the Syrian Civil War and the militarisation of a mostly non-violent uprising of the Syrian population gathered a significant sector of Egyptian Salafism behind the legitimisation of armed resistance to the regime of Bashar al-Asad. This support was reflected in the favourable public stance adopted by non-jihadi preachers and politicians, on television as well as in public demonstrations.[37] Paradoxically, while the renunciation of the use of violence in Egypt suggests that radical Salafis grew closer to mainstream Salafis, the Syrian War signaled that this rapprochement was not unidirectional, but led also to mainstream Salafis supporting the legitimisation of violence in other contexts.

The second main ideological challenge of the aftermath of the 2011 uprising concerned democracy and the legitimacy of political participation in the electoral process. In the past, the broadly defined Egyptian Salafi social movement family widely rejected democracy as a system of governance based

37 According to the author's field research.

on the sovereignty of the people.[38] This theological stance differentiated Salafis from many Islamist competitors, most prominently the Muslim Brotherhood. The Salafi position was further reinforced by the absence of free and fair elections in Egypt and by the official ban on religious political parties. After 2011, however, the political transition that followed the removal of Hosni Mubarak encouraged many sectors of the Salafi social movement to reconsider their position. Influenced by the Kuwaiti precedent and by the emergence of various Egyptian Islamist parties, many Salafi political parties mushroomed. Despite internal political divergences, most Salafis eventually legitimised participation in the political process.

These two ideational reconsiderations considerably affected the Salafi radical milieu after the 2011 uprising. The previous section demonstrated that the pre-2011 radical milieu was marked by its individualised and diffused networking topography and by the absence of internal structures that could regulate its ideational development. Being Salafi jihadi was primarily an ideational stance that did not necessarily entail a particular organisational belonging. This specificity signifies that the Salafi radical milieu was volatile and susceptible to external stimuli such as the Arab Spring. Discussions on political violence in Muslim countries and on the participation in the political process therefore transformed what it meant to be Salafi jihadi in Egypt. Field research has shown that, after 2011, Salafi jihadism broke up into three directions: the first group accepted the legitimacy of the political process as a means to implement Islamic law, and coalesced with mainstream Salafism. During the 2012 elections, many of its members supported the candidature of the Salafi preacher Hazem Abu Ismail. The second group maintained its theological rejection of the political process without excommunicating its proponents. The last group denounced political participation and excommunicated its advocates.

38 *See* al-Anani and Malik 2013; Al-Anani 2012; Lacroix 2012; McCants 2012; Utvik 2014.

The apparition of new ideational divergences, combined with a relatively permissive political environment after 2011, was conducive to the transformation of the organisational make-up of Salafi networks. The new political environment was favourable to public demonstrations, which proliferated in support of the Syrian jihad and of the application of Islamic law in Egypt. Thousands of Salafis of all ideological persuasions conglomerated and paved the way for flourishing interactions between previously isolated individuals and trends. This synergy produced new formal and informal networks and groupings, including *ansar al-shari'a* (Partisans of Sharia), *al-haraka al-islamiya li tatbiq shar' Allah* (the Islamic Movement for the Application of God's Law), and *al-tayyar al-salafi al-jihadi* (the Salafi Jihadi Trend), among others. These labels do not refer to clearly defined entities but designate, rather, informal groups of Salafis who gathered after the 2011 uprising. In addition, the unity of the Salafi social movement family regarding the legitimacy of the Syrian Civil War, and its popularity among Salafi youths, led to the emergence of covert social networks. The relatively easy access to Syria through Turkey, and the willingness of many youths to join the armed opposition to Bashar al-Asad, led to the emergence of numerous informal networks in Egypt. These networks essentially facilitated the procurement of visas, passports, funds, and contacts abroad.

The post-2011 developments consequently demonstrate the vulnerability of the individualised Salafi radical milieu, which expanded non-relationally in the 2000s through new means of communication. In contrast to former IG and JG-related networks – which had some level of internal control over their respective milieus – the new Salafi jihadi milieu is characterised by the absence of internal control over its ideational and organisational development. The opening up of political opportunity, therefore, effectively transformed its defining characteristics. Political developments in Egypt switched the dividing line between jihadi and mainstream Salafis and led to the inclusion of a substantial share of the former in the latter. In addition, this relatively free environment promoted internal discussions and

led to the development of new networks whose future cannot yet be ascertained.

Conclusion

The study of milieu is fundamental to the contextualisation of political violence. This object of study has nonetheless long been marginalised in the literature, despite its valuable contribution to the multi-level study of violent forms of contention. The radical milieu is defined as the social structures of supporters and sympathisers of insurgent and armed groups providing them with essential logistic and moral support. This chapter premised that the characteristics of the radical milieu could empower or obstruct militant groups' abilities to function and accomplish their tactical and strategic objectives.

This chapter explored the construction of the radical Salafi milieu in Egypt, with particular focus on the study of the evolution of its networking structures. It argued that the evolving topography of radical networks can be uncovered through the study of the diffusion of radical frames at the micro and meso levels. The main argument was that different types of frame diffusion are aligned with different networking structures, and that specific networking structures have specific repercussions on the level of internal control over the ideological and organisational development of the radical milieu.

The chapter demonstrated that the radical milieu in Egypt expanded through two types of frame diffusion: the first type, in the 2000s, was essentially non-relational. Salafi jihadi frames were diffused through new means of communication, such as the Internet, and were individually adopted by newcomers to the radical milieu. This type of frame diffusion facilitated a faster and broader expansion of the radical milieu, which was nevertheless not subjected to any organisational internal control due to of the facultative embeddeness of its members. After the 2011 uprising, this radical milieu appeared to

be strikingly susceptible to macro changes, such as an opening up of opportunity. In Egypt, it led to the redefinition of the essential characteristics of the radical milieu, both ideationally and organisationally.

The other type of frame diffusion in Egypt was essentially relational. In this case, relational diffusion designates the relational adoption of radical frames. This chapter has demonstrated that a study of relational diffusion necessitates the uncovering of the internal structures of radical networks, in order to assess the level of internal control over members of the radical milieu. The relevant factors pertain specifically to the type of ties present between the leaders of militant groups, between leaders and followers, and between the groups and their constituencies.

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