THE ISLAMIST CHALLENGE IN EGYPT

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ABSTRACT

This article provides an analytical discussion on the Islamist challenge in Egypt, with an aim to explore conditions and conflict-prone effects of the movement. The study, utilizing a historic analysis, suggests that the Islamic opposition in Egypt is to some extent value-driven, but it is mostly a reaction to undesirable conditions, namely, economic distress, widespread poverty, unjust distribution of national wealth, state suppression, as well as spreading sense of alienation of Islamic views from the political sphere. Hence, the study reaches the conclusion that positive actions should be taken to deal with these issues if the religious opposition is to be successfully managed in Egypt.

Keywords: *Islamist Challenge. Islamist Opposition, Political Islam, Egyptian Politics, Egypt.*

ÖZET

Bu makale, Mısır'daki rejime yönelik İslamcı-dinsel muhalefet üzerine analitik bir tartışma sunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Tarihsel analiz yöntemine dayanan çalışma, Mısır'daki dinsel muhalefetin kısmen sübjektif dinsel yorumdan kaynaklandığını, ancak daha ziyade, ekonomik baskı, yaygın yoksulluk, ulusal gelirin adaletsiz dağılımı, devlet baskısı ve İslamcı görüşün politik alanda marjinalleştirilmesi gibi bir takım olumsuz koşullara bir reaksiyon olarak ortaya çıktığı sonucuna ulaşmaktadır. Bu sonuca dayanarak, dinsel muhalefetin kontrol altına alınması bağlamında, söz konusu olumsuz koşullar üzerine yapıcı adımlar atılması gereğine dikkat çekilmektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: *İslamcı Karşıtlık, Dinsel Muhalefet, Siyasal İslam, Mısır Politikası, Mısır.*

Introduction

As we entered the new millennium, the world, in general, and the Middle East, in particular, have begun to witness a fresh resurgence in religious faith, often manifesting itself in a wide variety of cognitive, social, and political conflicts. The common assumption concerning the role of religion in the modern

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world throughout the nineteenth century and most parts of the twentieth century was that as a result of great advances in science and technology, religion would become less and less important, that modernization and positivist thought would gradually replace mystic, religious beliefs.

The shocking Islamic religious revolution in Iran in 1979, however, took the world by surprise and forced the general public, as well as experts and scholars, to reevaluate their common assumption. At the time of the formation of the Islamic Republic in Iran, the new interest in religion was largely limited to Islam. Today, however, the careful observer of current events and trends can find ample evidence to suspect a fresh resurgence of religion in other faiths as well. In the West, for example, an enormous variety of sects and cults have emerged, such as the Children of God, Jesus People, Divine Light Mission, International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Scientology, Rastafarians, and so on. Likewise, Asian countries are now less inclined than they once were to acquiesce to Western norms. There, too, religious / nationalist movements and cults are increasing in number. In such an atmosphere, some analysts (e.g., Huntington, 1993) contend that it is now culture rather than ideology that divides the world and that religion fuels the conflict in a special way by inspiring intolerant and irreconcilable images of identity and commitment among competing civilizations.

In the face of increasingly evident religiously driven conflicts around the globe, a necessity arises to understand the nature of such conflicts. This necessity emerges not only from pure scientific curiosity but also from practical concerns regarding the crucial question of how to manage and resolve these conflicts. This study is an attempt to explore such issues by focusing on religious revivalism in Egypt. Egypt offers a good example, since the government has long been challenged, sometimes quite seriously, by Islamic oppositions. Also, on many occasions, Radical Islamic groups have waged battles in which other Muslims, non-Muslims, as well as foreigners have been victims, killed in streets and public places. Although it should be admitted that through one-case study it is not likely to reach generable results, it may, nevertheless, help us to understand some aspects of religious opposition and its conflict-prone aspects.

The study will start with a brief background information regarding the roots of the Islamist challenge in Egypt. Then, by utilizing the method of historic analyses, it will particularly focus on the twentieth century Islamic revivalism and the Society of the Muslim Brotherhood, discussing factors and conditions giving

rise to the Islamist challenge as well. Based on the evaluations, the concluding section will also address the implications of the findings for conflict management.

Historical Background of the Islamist Challenge

A glance at the Egyptian history suggests that Islamic tradition runs deep in Egypt's culture. Founded by the Fatimid dynasty (A.D. 909-1171), the mosque and madrasa of al-Ahzar in Cairo, for instance, is considered the oldest existing Muslim university, which played a central role in shaping the country's religious, educational, and cultural life, preserving its essentially Islamic mold. The system was the sole disseminator of education and culture to uncounted successive generations and remained dominant in Egyptian life till the introduction of modern European ways by Muhammad Ali Pasha (1805-1848), the founder of modern Egypt. But the new educational system did not supplant the traditional religious one; rather, it existed alongside it, inculcating Western science and ideas. Eventually, the two educational tracks, with their different orientations, created a dichotomized culture, religious versus secular, which has persisted up until the present time (Kerr, 1968: 169-194).

The roots of Islamic revivalism in Egypt can be said to be rooted in this cultural clash in that the onset of nineteenth-century modernism did not eclipse Islam, but precipitated an Islamic revivalist movement in the latter half of the century. Early Muslim reformers, like Jamal Al-Din Al-Afghani and Muhammad Abdu, who were well versed in Islamic learning, called for a revitalization of Islamic thought, while rejecting the dominance of European education and culture. These scholars, however, did not completely reject the Western-oriented modern science and education. In fact, they had come to appreciate some aspects of them, technological advances in particular, and sought ways of incorporating these into the Islamic thought. Inspired by Prophet Muhammad's saying that "seek knowledge even if you have to go to China," their argument stressed that the Muslims had to be aware of progress elsewhere in the world and adapt to the new circumstances it imposed. Although special priority was given to religion, a synthesis of Islam and modernity could be the medium whereby their society could advance within the Islamic context (Faksh, 1997: 41-42).

Therefore, the assumption of the early Islamist reformers was that genuine Islam does not conflict with modern science. They called for the restoration of *ijtihad*, the application of personal reasoning in the interpretation of Islamic doctrine, so that Islam could assimilate Western ideas. Hence, the reformers

sought an awakening derived from religion. In fact, they all defended the essence of Islam and its relevance to renaissance. Once Islam was purified of the accretions that had corrupted its essence and led to stagnation, it would adopt to modernity. What is more, it seemed easier to initiate reforms based on religion than on European secular rationalism.

However, these early attempts to develop an Islam-modernity synthesis turned out to be rather fragile. Neither the conservative *ulema* (clerics / religious scholars) nor traditional masses were ready or willing to accept a liberalized Islam. They rejected the idea of a compromise between Islam and modernity, which, for them, meant the abandonment of culture and identity (Zuhur, 2007). Thus, the Islamic reformation failed to take root. Yet the fact remains that the initial voices for an Islamic renaissance clearly show that the notion of Islamic revival is deeply entrenched in Egypt and has continued to express itself in one form or another under different Islamic movements till the present.

On the other hand, the course of modernization and an opening up to Europe, initiated by modern Egyptian state under Muhammad Ali in the early nineteenth century, proceeded steadily. The spread of Western cultural and educational influences promoted a semblance of modern liberal culture championed by a small, but growing Western-educated elite who wanted to incorporate Western ideas, values, and techniques into the predominantly traditional Islamic milieu in Egypt. Modernizers, such as Rifa'a al-Tahtawi, Qasim Amin, and Ahmed Lutfi al-Sayyid, looked to European thought, politics, and economics for renewal. These sought an awakening not derived from religion, but they never denounced Islam or dismissed its essential role in the society. They were simply more receptive to Western intellectual tradition than to earlier Islamic epistemology (Hatina, 2007).

By the turn of the century, a growing infatuation with the European model made the modernist message all the more susceptible to European secular nationalist thought. The emergent liberal-nationalist group, imbued with Western liberal principles, led to the struggle for independence from the UK (1918-1922) and dominated the political and cultural landscape. Hence, Egypt's early encounter with modernity influenced its institutional and political development in accordance with the European example. Indeed, the modernization of Egypt and its opening and exposure to the West made it the cultural and educational lighthouse of the Arab world, transmitting liberalism and modernism (Hatina, 2007).

Islamic revivalism in Egypt, then, was counterbalanced and tempered from its inception by the ascendant forces of liberalism and nationalism, which steered the country on a modern path, starting with Muhammad Ali and continuing during British rule (1882-1922), as well as after independence, under monarchy. The monarchic period (1922-1952), ushered in liberal constitutionalism and nationalism, was led by a Western-oriented liberal elite. The stress was on building an integrated modern national community. Revolutionary nationalism and socialism were followed in the post-1952 revolution under Gamal Abdul Nasser, with its emphasis on populism and Arab radicalism. Anwar Sadat (1970-1981) shifted toward a more open and liberalized economic and political direction, leading to free entrepreneurial activity and limited democratization, which has continued, albeit slowly, under Hosni Mubarak. Throughout, all attempts by various Islamic groups to change the course of the Egyptian state proved to be unavailing (Shehata, 2010).

The Twentieth Century Islamic Revivalism and the Society of the Muslim Brotherhood

Despite the ascendancy of the modernist-nationalists, the tradition of Islamic revivalism continued in the twentieth century with the establishment of the Society of the Muslim Brotherhood (*Jama'at al-Ikhwan al-Muslimoun*) in 1928 by the supreme guide Hasan al-Banna. It became the major mainstream Islamic fundamentalist movement and has remained so, with its adherents and branches in other Arab countries, making it close to being a transnational pan-Islamic movement. For al-Banna (1979), the movement was particularly protesting, and struggling against, three things: government corruption, social and economic injustice, and foreign influence. In the words of al-Banna (1979, 28), all these debilitating conditions were plunging Egypt into a "pit of degradation and defeat."

Starting as a reform movement concerned basically with religious activities and individual and social morality, the Brotherhood turned into a populist Islamic movement in the 1940s, with an activist political bent, advocating an Islamic polity based on Islamic norms and law. The movement is said to have found its strongest support among the middle and lower classes that viewed Islam as Egypt's salvation (Ibrahim, 1996: 25). In fact, the Brotherhood spoke to the masses in their own language, the simple language of Islam, affirming the belief that "Islam provides thorough and sound solutions to all problems (al-Banna,

1979: 27). This is in marked contradistinction to the elitist intellectual discourse of the nineteenth century Muslim reformers, which failed to penetrate the masses' sentiments and therefore never managed to move them.

Furthermore, the Brotherhood movement's popular appeal was greatly enhanced by the large-scale network of social, educational, religious, and charitable organizations it successfully established in cities and towns across Egypt. Local volunteers and financial support from domestic and foreign (mainly from Gulf area) pious wealthy Muslim philanthropists provided the backbone for these structures. They served as centers for dissemination of the Islamic message and recruitment of members (Mitchell, 1969). Also, this network of service structures helped to institutionalize the movement in Egyptian life, giving it strength and durability to become practically an autonomous society- a society within the larger society (Esposito, 1995: 131-133).

Another important feature of the Brotherhood that became a trademark of modern Islamic fundamentalism is that the founders of the movement, both al-Banna and his supporters, as well as successor leaders, were intellectual laymen, products of modern Egyptian institutions and universities. For instance, al-Banna neither attended the traditional al-Ahzar university nor belonged to the religious class, the *ulema*. He was a graduate of the College of Sciences and a schoolteacher of Arabic. In fact, with the rise of the Brotherhood, the Islamic movement came increasingly under the control of educated lay leaders, marking a shift away from the religious scholars' leadership of early Muslim revivalism. The shift reflects, too, the anticlerical attitude prevalent among modern fundamentalists. They accuse the official *ulema* of antiquated religious formalism and irrelevance and of political subservience as "the mouthpiece of the government" (Ibrahim, 1996: 35-36).

But the most significant legacy of the Brotherhood is that it has politicized Islam and injected it with a new dynamism and activism that thrust it to the forefront of public affairs, a status which paved the way for the rise of Islamic militancy in Egypt. As a matter of fact, today's militant fundamentalist groups are rooted in the Brotherhood (Rubin, 2010). At the center stage during the 1940s, a period of increasing social and political turmoil and violence in Egypt, the Brotherhood saw and declared the Egyptian state as a colony under British tutelage, in spite of the formal independence in the early 1920s, and ruled in conjunction with a privileged Westernized group. It sought both to rid the country of foreign forces and to establish an Islamic state ruled by the Sharia. The

Brotherhood's growing power and popularity were viewed with considerable alarm by the Egyptian state, giving rise to the first government crackdown in 1948. This led to the assassination of Prime Minister Mahmoud Fahmi al-Nuqrashi by a member of the Brotherhood later in the same year and the counter-assassination of the leader of the movement, Hasan al-Banna, shortly thereafter (Hussain, 1983: 7-8).

In the absence of its supreme leader, the Brotherhood survived and continued to function, albeit outside the law. Indeed, during much of its history, the Brotherhood was tolerated -but not legalized- as long as it did not challenge the authority of the state. Historically, the centrality of the state in maintaining social and political order has always been pivotal in Egyptian life, and the state has always jealously guarded its prerogatives. Although the Brotherhood did not publicly espouse violence against the state, its secret paramilitary wing, *al-jihaz al-khas*, intermittently committed violent acts. Hence, on the few occasions, the Brotherhood threatened the state, the latter moved forcefully to suppress it. Such was the case in the 1948 repression, in the 1954 banishment of the movement after the failed attempt on Nasser's life, and in the 1965 arrest and repression of the younger leaders who unremittingly castigated Nasser's "Godless" nationalist socialist state (Esposito, 1995: 135-136).

After a brief period of co-existence with the post-1952 revolutionary regime, the Brotherhood soon found itself in collision with the emergent nationalist state of Nasser, which it accused of deviating from Islamic principles and deteriorating into military dictatorship. The military-state dictatorship was held responsible for the decline of Islam and perceived corruption (Faksh, 1997: 45). Over the next two decades, Nasser's severe repressive measures incapacitated the Brotherhood politically, with fateful consequences for the future of the movement in Egypt. Thousands of members were jailed and tortured, and several top ideologists were executed, including Abdul Qader Odeh in 1955 and Seyyid Qutb in 1966. The intensity of the crackdown, the harsh prison experience, and the prolonged underground existence radicalized the movement and led to militant splinter groups that split from the brotherhood. Accordingly, a new breed of extremist Islamic groups was created, incubated in Nasser's prison cells and hatched under Sadat's policies of *infitah* (openness) in the 1970s (Winter, 1995: 48-50).

About two dozen radical Islamic groups emerged in the span of a decade. The major ones included the Islamic Liberation Party, Apostasy and Flight Group,

Jihad Organization, and Islamic Society (Altman, 1979). These charted a path of open confrontation and violence against the state, while the revived main body of the Brotherhood eschewed violence in favor of a strategy of change by peaceful means. The difference widened the division with the young zealots, who objected to the Brotherhood's moderation in seeking a *modus vivendi* with Sadat. Yet in spite of the divergent strategies, they all remained deeply committed to the ultimate goal of bringing about an Islamic state (Kepel, 1985).

In an effort to stem the imminent threat to his regime posed by the leftist-Nasserist power centers, Anwar Sadat, shortly after coming to power in 1970, unleashed the Islamic movement and even encouraged the establishment of Islamic groups. Additionally, he allowed the Brotherhood to operate publicly and to expand its educational, social, religious, and philanthropic service networks at a time of government retrenchment and retreat from state welfarism under the new economic policy of *infitah*. These moves paved the way for the Islamist forces to assume a substantial role in Egypt's public life (Finklestone, 1996).

Sadat, indeed, went beyond his accommodation of and cooperation with the Brotherhood movement to embrace religious Islamic rhetoric and symbols so as to gain respectability and strengthen his position. To this end, his initiatives ranged from assuming the title *ra'is al-mou'min* (the believer president) to using his first name Muhammad, invoking the name of God at the start of his public speeches, and wearing traditional dresses (Winter, 1995: 50-51).

Sadat, then, helped to promote further the atmosphere of religiosity. But the use of Islam by a national leader for political purposes had its price. It could set in motion inimical forces that would come back to haunt him. Indeed, the more Sadat stressed the religious theme and the more he associated his state with religion, calling it "the state of the faith," the more he became vulnerable to the Islamic opposition. His initial policies, aimed at containing the leftist-Nasserist threat, eventually gave rise to a far greater Islamic challenge with the blossoming of the radical fundamentalist organizations as they expanded recruitment and training in a climate of political tolerance (Finklestone, 1996).

By the late 1970s, Islamic organizations were securely established. They became more independent and critical of Sadat's policies, namely, his support of the Shah of Iran and condemnation of the Iranian revolution, the Camp David Accords, pro-Western economic and political ties, and more important, the failure of his government to implement Islamic law (Esposito, 1995: 94-95). In response,

Sadat took a series of repressive actions by using the state power. In 1979, most Islamic student organizations were banned, many members of religious organizations were arrested, and mosques and religious institutions became under government control. Furthermore, in the same year, he called for the separation of religion from politics, a position seen as un-Islamic by Muslim organizations. Sadat's growing authoritarianism and suppression reached its peak in 1981 when he imprisoned more than fifteen hundred radical Islamists almost overnight. In turn, on October 6, 1981, he was assassinated by members of the Organization for Holy War.

Hosni Mubarak, *who* succeeded Sadat, pursued a path of greater tolerance, while at the same time responding firmly to those who resorted to violence to challenge the authority of the government. Under Mubarak, the Brotherhood was further drawn into the system, taking an active part in the open social, economic, and social welfare organization. It particularly gained a central role in public welfare eclipsing that of the dilapidated government agencies. This was clearly evident during the October 1992 earthquake, when the Islamist-controlled organizations were the first to appear on scene to provide shelter and medical care for the victims, in contrast to the delayed government response. The Brotherhood operated its own publishing houses and newspapers, propagating freely its Islamic message. Above all, it participated in free elections within unions and professional associations. It managed to gain control of much such major associations as those of lawyers, physicians, pharmacists, and engineers. Besides, it ran candidates in parliamentary races in alliance with secular parties, such as the New Wafd Party in 1984 and the Socialist Labor Party in 1987. In the 1984 elections, the Brotherhood won 8 seats, and in the 1987 ones 36 seats in the 444-seat national assembly. Encouraged from its strength and political tolerance, the Brotherhood even sought repeatedly recognition, but was denied legitimacy because of the prohibition on religiously-oriented parties. The argument and justification of the government were that Islam does not represent a particular constituency to the exclusion of others; rather, it is a common heritage shared by all members of the community, and thus, no single group can claim guardianship (*wisaya*) over it (al-Awadi, 2004; Rutherford, 2008).

The Violent Feature of the Movement

In contrast to the mainstream Brotherhood movement, the relatively new and younger fundamentalist groups, such as Mohammed's Youth, the Army of God, the Islamic Society, the Jihad Organization, the Technical Military Academy

Group, and the Apostasy and Flight Group, all of which are connected to the larger movement, pursued an open violent confrontation with the Egyptian state that has been the center of attention internally and externally since the mid-1970s. Such groups represent the radical *jihadi* (invoking holy war) tendency in the Islamic movement. They all have forsworn the larger Brotherhood due to its compromises and accommodation with the system; accused the state, or state and society, of being un-Islamic, living in a condition of *jahiliyya* (the pre-Islamic lifestyle and apostasy); and declared *jihad* as the means to bring about an Islamic transformation in accord with their rigid religious interpretation (Ibrahim, 1996: 8-14; Karawan *et al.,* 2008).

The intellectual fountainhead of the radical Islamic movement was Sayyid Qutb, the younger chief ideologue of the Brotherhood in the 1960s. He elaborated an ideology of resistance (*jihad*) against authority, based on his doctrinal interpretation of the existing conditions of Muslim societies as vitiated by *jahiliyya* and their rulers as *kuffar* (apostates). In his view, all those in the society who partake in this state of affairs are in the category of apostates (Qutb, 2000). Qutb's conception of *takfir* (to apostatize, or to declare someone non-Muslim) and *jihad*, which sanctions the overthrow of corrupt rulers by force, established a dangerous precedent for the future of radical fundamentalists to follow.

In the same way, the *Jama'at al-Takfir wa al-Hijra* (the Apostasy and Flight Group), led by a veteran Brotherhood member, Shukri Mustafa, declared that the Egyptian state and society were infested by *jahiliyya*, which requires a complete moral overhauling to bring about a true Muslim society. To achieve that end, the group called for a retreat (*hijra*) by a nucleus of true believers to the desert and mountains to build a "model Islamic community" which could grow and ultimately lead in a victorious struggle against the *jahiliyya* society (Ibrahim, 1996: 2). This strategy is analogous to the Prophet's flight in 622 from Mecca to Medina, where he founded the first Muslim community, and his recapture of Mecca eight years later.

The group had a violent showdown with the Egyptian authorities in July 1977, subsequent to the kidnapping and killing of a former minister of religious endowments (*al-awkaf*), Sheikh Muhammad Hussein Al-Dhahabi, one of the most influential members of the *ulema*. In response, many of the militants were either killed or imprisoned, and the top leaders, including Shukri Mustafa, were executed in 1978.

Likewise, the Technical Military Academy Group, the successor group of the Jihad Organization and its ideological associate the Islamic Society, viewed the prevalent corruption and decadence in the society as rooted in its ruling elite. To redeem the society, the elite would have to be transformed into an Islamic leadership that applied Sharia. This transformation, it is believed, should be carried out not by the peaceful means of religious education and moral uplifting but by direct action and open confrontation, an all-out jihad. The stridency and aggressive stance of these groups brought them into an open conflict with the Egyptian government, starting with the bloody attempted takeover of the Technical Military Academy in April 1974 by the Technical Military Academy Group as part of a coup. During that event alone, more than 60 people were killed or wounded, and the top leaders of the movement, including its head, Salih Siriyya, were executed. This was followed by the assassination of Sadat in October 1981 by members of the Jihad Organization. The conflict has continued throughout much of the 1980s and in the following years (Karawan *et al.,* 2008).

The assassination of Sadat and the subsequent fundamentalist revolt that took place in the city of Asyut in upper Egypt shook deeply the Egyptian state. After a brief period of lull following Mubarak's accession and an initial attempt at a dialogue, the acts of violence were ongoing in the second half of the 1980s and escalated in the post Gulf War period in the early 1990s (Esposito, 1995: 96-99). Assassinations and threats of assassinations targeted particularly government officials, security forces, members of the Coptic Christian minority, secular writers and journalists, artists, as well as foreign tourists.

Violence against the Christian Copts in particular reached unprecedented proportions. Anti-Coptic riots and assaults were instigated between 1979 and 1981 by extremists and popular religious preachers, such as Sheikh Abdul Hamid Kishk, whose radical sermons on cassettes were widely circulated inside Egypt and out. To Muslim extremists, the Coptic Christian minorities are alien subjects serving as agents of the West in the midst of Islam (Scott, 2010). In a country that had traditionally prided itself on religious tolerance and social harmony, the actions of the extremists posed a tremendous threat to social order and stability, as well as an affront to the government authority.

Another target of high visibility and immense importance was tourism. Attacks on tourists meant to damage the tourism industry, Egypt's main hard currency source of more than $3 billions annually; its loss or even diminution could aggravate the economic crisis in the country. The attacks, then, are not only

a show of rejection of the West, Westerners, and their culture, in general, but also a means to undercut a resource helpful to the regime and to stifle foreign investment- both are vital for the regime's economic development plans. The assumption of the radical militants is that the greater the economic hardships the greater the prospects for popular revolt advantageous to their cause.

Also, the power of the Islamist militants flourished with the creation of "Islamized spaces," chipping away at the dominion of the state. The militants grew so strong that they were able to control poor neighborhoods in Cairo and small towns and villages in upper Egypt. They have become virtually the principal domestic power in such areas, imposing their own social and moral code, running their own mosques, providing social welfare services, as well as settling disputes according to the Quranic principles outside the authority of the government. These Islamic strongholds, providing competing networks of social and economic support services that rivaled, even supplanted, the inefficient government system, have witnessed violent clashes with the security forces since 1987 (Zuhur, 2007).

The Recent Government Response

As the fundamentalist challenge grew stronger with its "frightening alternative," as Mubarak calls it, the government has taken a series of measures. Its initial response was a combination of repression and accommodation. While seeking to quell the militant opposition, it courted the moderate members of the Brotherhood. Beginning in the summer of 1992, great security force and mass arrests were utilized to break up the power of radical Islamists in their strongholds in the slums of Cairo. Additionally, a systematic campaign was instituted to "decapitate" the Islamic Society and Jihad leaderships and deplete their ranks. In the ensuring clashes, over 600 people were killed, not to mention hundreds of wounded (Esposito, 1995: 99).

With the escalation of the government's campaign, military courts and the death penalty, introduced under emergency laws in effect since the early 1980s, were also utilized to deal severely with "terrorist crimes". The unprecedented harshness and extent of the government blows gave rise to some domestic criticisms and international protestations from human rights organizations (*Christian Science Monitor*, July 9, 1993). Yet the government, impelled to greater authoritarianism to meet the fundamentalist challenge, refused any talks with militant Islamists and international human rights organizations. On many

occasions, Mubarak mentioned that "I refuse to allow human rights to become a slogan to protect terrorists".

The government's effort to contain the fundamentalist threat extended to the foreign front as well. On one level, the Mubarak regime launched an international campaign to discredit and isolate the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Sudan, as it perceived them as the primary exporters of revolutionary Islam, supporting Islamist terrorists in Egypt (Faksh, 1997: 51). While it is true that both countries gave some general support to the Islamists, the fact, supported by the vast majority of previous research, is that Egyptian fundamentalism is mainly a home-grown movement embedded in Egyptian circumstances. What is more, the Sunni fundamentalists in Egypt tend not to see the Shi'a-based religious state in Iran as a model.

On another level, Mubarak moved to seek place the issue of terrorism under the international spotlight right after the bombing of the World Trade Center in New York City in early 1993. Sheikh Omar Abdulrahman, the spiritual leader of the *Islamic Jama'a* in Egypt, and some of his followers were charged and convicted as the perpetrators of that event. Mubarak called on the US to play a "tough role," arguing that terrorism is a source of problems not only for the Middle East but also for other regions and countries (Sciolino, 1993). In addition, at the International Conference on the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders, which was held in Cairo in early May of 1995, Egypt pushed hard for adoption of a resolution equating terrorism with international organized crime and calling for a concerted international effort to combat it (Cordahi, 1995).

Equally adept in the strategy of containment, the Mubarak government at the outset cloaked itself in the mantle of Islam to appease the general public's religious sentiments and to enlist the *ulema* support. In fact, since the grip of Islam remains popular in the Egyptian society, the governments have frequently used it against their opponents. As recalled, Nasser invoked Islam to equate socialism and nationalism with Muslim egalitarianism and strength. His twin policies had to be given Islamic garb to gain popularity and status among the masses. Sadat consistently promoted the image of the pious Muslim and used Islam to battle secular leftists, as well as to validate his peace policies with Israel. At present, under Mubarak, the aim is to brandish state-supported Islam to combat the militant fundamentalists (Shehata, 2010).

In this respect, some radical Islamists left their arms. For example, as early as July 1997, one of the most violent groups, the Islamic Society, formally renounced violence upon an agreement with the Egyptian government, mediated by Islamist lawyer Montassir al-Zayyat. Since then, the Islamic Society even openly condemned religiously-inspired violence with its publications and fatwas.

The Mubarak government also questions the authenticity of the extremists "foreign supported" doctrine of violence as something un-Egyptian and against the true spirit of Islam. Likewise, the *ulema*, siding with the government, rejects the fundamentalists' use of their own dogmatic views, and unorthodox interpretations of the Quran and prophetic traditions (*sunna*) for the purpose of justifying violence against the state. The religious leaders frequently accuse the militant groups of being ignorant, resulting either from an absence of systematic training in Islamic studies or a wrong understanding of Islamic theology. They label such groups as *ghulat* (excessive)- outside the mainstream Egyptian Islam; the groups were committing heterodoxy in the tradition of the *Kharijites* (the seceders) of the seventeenth century, who stood outside the consensus of the Muslim community under the fourth Caliph Ali, rebelling against him and killing him (Ursula, 2009).

To add to its appearance of Islamicity, the government took a series of steps as well, such as allowing the circulation of a plethora of mainstream Islamic publications, promoting Islamic programs on radio and TV channels, and beaming long hours of religious messages. But on the other hand, the state-sponsored Islamization to check radical Islamists caused deep concerns among intellectuals about the future of secular liberalism in Egypt. Their long-term fear is that state policies might turn average minds toward Islam. The more immediate concern is that the dominant Islamic discourse began to tilt the cultural balance against the tradition of liberty that has been in place since the early nineteenth century. It might lead as well the further marginalization and intimidation of the liberal secularists, threatening the dynamic cultural and intellectual life of modern Egypt (Shehata, 2010).

Accordingly, in manipulating Islam to defuse religious fundamentalism, the government is running the risk of incubating a zealotry that might lead to further extremism and ultimately undermine its authority. In order to prevent such a dangerous outcome, the government has expanded its authoritarian reach to the mainstream Islamist movement, the larger Brotherhood. For instance, the Mubarak regime moved to clamp down on the Brotherhood's various organized

activities so as to contain its growing influences in the public life. New legislation changing councilor election procedures in the unions and professional associations has brought the councils under the strict supervision of the judiciary. The objective is to break the hold of the Islamists on these organizations and the control of the ruling National Democratic Party instead.

Moreover, the government acted to stem the proliferation of private mosques and associated charity foundations to end their extra governmental authority. In fact, recognizing that private organizations could serve to enhance the potential for Islamic opposition, the Mubarak regime brought all civic organizations under closer scrutiny and control. In addition, the government attempted to get rid the educational system of the Islamist influences that had crept into it over the past twenty years. It transferred hundreds of teachers to administrative posts, removed Islamist tracts from library shelves, and tried to ban the imposition of the *hijab* (veil) on young schoolgirls (Rutherford, 2008).

Equally, the Mubarak regime continued to deny the Brotherhood's legal party status, referring to the constitutional prohibition on religious-based parties. In effect, it barred the Brotherhood from participating in Egypt's limited multiparty politics that remains circumscribed by lack of a party institutional development and popular roots, as well as by government control of political climate in general. Indeed, Mubarak has no qualms about outlawing the Brotherhood. Successive governments have always suspected its motives and therefore have kept the group in a semi-political diaspora subject to the limits of government tolerance (Shehata, 2010).

The Present Situation

As of the present time, the Mubarak regime does not seem to be in imminent danger of collapse as the fundamentalists have thought or wanted the world to believe. The regime remains strong and is supported by large segments of the elite, particularly the armed forces. Further, the leadership of the Brotherhood has sustained grievous blows and its ranks have been depleted. Mubarak, despite his lack of charisma, will likely to continue to hold onto power by carrying of the business of managing public affairs in the usual Egyptian manner: by employing the power of the state. There is also some research to suggest that radical Islam has run its course. It is no longer a strong political movement supported by the majority of Muslim communities (Roy, 1994, 2007).

But nonetheless, it seems that the Islamist challenge is far from disappearing as well. The Brotherhood offers a reaffirmation of traditional beliefs and an outlet for the frustrations of anomic social conditions, poverty, and social injustice, to mention a few major issues concerning the majority of the Egyptians. Moreover, the message and activities of the Brotherhood are intertwined with religious beliefs in such a way that each is strengthened and made more resilient to state repression and more attractive to potential recruits (Spencer, 2010). Although the mainstream Brotherhood movement advocates democratic, nonviolent struggle today, many militant Islamic groups will also likely to continue to engage in intermittent acts of violence against the state. Ultimately, the durability of the Egyptian regime will particularly depend on the loyalty of the military, the mainstay of the Egyptian state since 1952 and the traditional beneficiary of its favors.

Implications for Conflict Management and Conclusion

As the exploration of the Egyptian case suggests, some aspects of Islamic extremism are tied to literal interpretations of Quran and other sources of Islam, in that many Muslims believe that they are rightfully entitled to have an Islamic state because Islam does not separate politics from everyday life. To these, a small minority, to be sure, an Islamic order cannot be brought about through piecemeal reforms only; thus, state power must be seized, forcibly if needed, to implement the "true" vision of Islam. Accordingly, they resort to violence either defensively or offensively. Then there are radical Islamists who interpret the concept of jihad in a way that struggle against perceived non-Muslims is obligatory by all means. The target population includes in-group members failing to comply with the requirements of Islamic law, as well as unbelieving outsiders.

Dealing with this "blind" side of Islamic extremism will be extremely difficult. Better intelligence and effective use of security forces may reduce the likelihood of immediate threat.

But the study also reveals that militant Islamists of this kind do not constitute a large number in the whole movement of political Islam. Indeed, the vast majority of Islamists condemns and has been against violence as a way to remove the secular state in favor of an Islamic one. The appeal of mainstream political Islam has more to do with undesirable domestic conditions and resulting social distress. Hence, this is the area towards which positive actions should be directed if the movement is to be managed and integrated into the system.

So far, the regime in Egypt has been primarily concerned with economic reforms. In its view, it was primarily economic distress that has given rise to revolutionary Islam, and thus the threat could be dealt best by economic healing. To this end, the Egyptian government both made many internal reforms and sought financial support from international institutions and foreign nations. No doubt, the economic dimension is important, for a society characterized by prolonged economic difficulties and uneven distribution of national wealth is a place where any kind of political extremism is likely to grow. Economic well being may contribute to a sense of security and give people a stake in the system. Nonetheless, such one-sided approaches may not be sufficient to manage the challenge of political Islam. The movement also seems to be a reaction to other real or perceived domestic crises, namely, political and cultural crises, which need to be addressed as well.

Political crisis is associated with the spreading sense of exclusion of Islamic views from the political system. Thus, instead of pure suppression, ways of accommodation with moderate Islamic ideology should be sought so that those believing in the superiority of Islam do not feel alienated and their worldview is recognized to some extent. By accommodation, I do not mean the use of religion for political purposes, as was clearly evident under Sadat's administration. I mean, rather, initiating and keeping some kind of intimate dialogue for co-existence and cooperation. This, at least, requires the will to listen, the will to acknowledge the other side's causes and grievances, without necessarily agreeing on them, and more important, the will to create a range of different alternatives for resolving the problem, without an over reliance on law or state power.

The dilemma or fear of the ruling elite is that exploring alternatives with the Islamists may actually encourage Islamic extremism and things could get totally out of control. This fear is not always baseless. Some research reveals that there is, indeed, a positive correlation between political tolerance towards religion and violent religious intolerance (Yılmaz, 2002). But on the other hand, it is simply not possible to ignore those segments of the public who believe in Islam as a political ideology. Peace through complete suppression is not peace at all and is certainly fragile. Hence, the crucial point, albeit not easy, is that the ruling elite has to draw a line between moderate and radical Islam, and has to deal with the former and respond firmly to the latter. The Algerian example reveals that when lines of communication remain open, the Islamic challenge gets more moderate and defuses its hard liners by itself (Duran, 2010). Similar effects can be attained

in Egypt as well if the Mubarak regime displays a little more flexibility, in this regard.

In responding to the cultural crisis, which has to do with contending worldviews, on the other hand, it would be unrealistic to expect that people can change their worldviews, since such views, rooted in early socialization, are deeply embedded in individuals' personal and social identities. But actions can be taken to reduce mutual stereotypes and build a certain degree of trust between the parties. Conflict resolution literature provides a wide variety of approaches for trust building, ranging from unilateral initiatives to bilateral and third party efforts. For instance, the possibilities for easing intergroup antagonism would greatly be enhanced when conflicting groups are brought together to work for some common goals. The creation of supranational bodies that have the responsibility for fulfilling key economic and social needs could gradually bring about a transfer of loyalty from the narrow cultural group to the supranational bodies. Eventually, particularistic antagonisms would be dissolved as the participants become caught up in a web of mutual dependence (Sherif, 1988; Pruitt *et al*., 2004).

Research shows that especially proponents of political Islam have a strong tendency towards in-group centrality (Yılmaz, 2002). They run their own businesses; publish their own materials; set up their own TV channels and associations; operate their own schools; and make far more frequent exchanges with one another than with outsiders. To some extent, the same exclusivity is also the case for those who share secular worldviews. They, too, are reluctant to employ, and make exchanges with, religious people. This vicious circle needs to be broken by an outside power that possesses the capacity to move the parties towards the pursuit of common goals and make them dependent on each other for future favors. One of such effective outside powers would be the state authority itself, as regulations by it would be more readily acceptable by the society.

Education is another area where "religious ethnocentrism" would be reduced. An education fostering intellectual and moral qualities, such as critical thinking, openness, skepticism, objectivity, and respect for differences would be a powerful weapon in the hands of any peace builder, since the whole process of child raising may have a critical impact on attitudes and beliefs in later life. In addition, if one-sided information and negative perceptions are not passed on to younger generations, then the younger generations might be able to deal with contending worldviews in a more constructive atmosphere.

Negative stereotypes in the Islamist-secularist conflict would also be reduced through intensive problem-solving workshops, arranged and facilitated by psychologically-sensitive third parties. Problem-solving workshops, in a generic sense, refer to unofficial, informal interactions between members of adversary groups that come together, or are brought together, to discuss their differences for the purpose of coming to a mutual understanding of their needs and values (Montville, 1990). As a grass-root approach, the expectation from problem-solving workshops is that such workshops may help the parties arrest the dehumanization process, overcome psychological barriers, and focus on relation building so that reason, rather than simple inner feelings, would become the dynamic factor of future interactions (Yılmaz, 2005).

Additionally, there are a number of other ways to respond to the cultural crisis side of political Islam, including -but not limited to- contact and acquaintance programmes (i.e., neighborhood festivals, community conferences, etc.); group retraining methods; positive action by the mass media; exhortation by community leaders, such as local religious leaders, politicians, etc.; as well as individual therapy (Gopin, 2000: 115-138).

The conclusion emerging in light of this discussion is that the Islamist challenge in Egypt is many-sided and there can be no single formula to respond to it. The approaches that fail to consider the complexity of the issue and emphasize the supposedly crucial role of a single factor are not likely to produce effective outcomes. The wisest thing to do, therefore, is to attack on all fronts simultaneously. If no one single attack has large effect, yet many small attacks from many directions can have large cumulative results.

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