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THE MARKET OF VIOLENCE IN EGYPT

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While Egypt approaches the upcoming presidential elections with an almost uncompetitive political sphere, the spectrum of violence in Egypt has become more diverse over the last few years. It has developed to the extent that we could speak of a “market of violence” among different groups who seek to maximize their respective market shares. These competing groups can be divided into three main categories: groups affiliated with the Islamic State (IS), that include those operating in northern Sinai known as Wilayat Sinai (Sinai Province or Islamic State in the Sinai) and groups operating in mainland Egypt under the name of The Islamic State in Egypt. Another category is those affiliated with al-Qaeda and includes groups like Jund al-Islam (Soldiers of Islam) operating in the Western Desert and Ansar al-Islam (Supporters of Islam) operating in northern Sinai. Lastly, there are the groups emerging from the Muslim Brotherhood such as Hassm (The Arms of Egypt Movement) and Liwa al-Thawra (The Banner of the Revolution) that operate in mainland Egypt.

These different groups differ in ideology and strategy. On the ideological level the groups affiliated to both the Islamic State and al-Qaeda adhere to Salafi-jihadism, which relies on the principle of takfir – the process of excommunication as the basis for the military struggle against state institutions to establish Islamic governance based on sharia. Groups like Hassm and Liwa al-Thawra, however, reject the concept of excommunication and insist that state officials should be resisted not because of their faith but for their actions. The groups of the latter category also do not adhere to the concept of Islamic governance. According to Liwa al-Thawra, it is up to a nation to decide how to govern itself. While the movement questions the Western roots of democracy, it also rejects the establishment of a despotic religious rule.

While all of these groups seek to topple the current regime, they apply different strategies to achieve this goal. IS in general targets both state officials and civilians and attacks mosques and churches alike. Over the last couple of years, The Islamic State in Egypt has carried out three major terrorist attacks

against Coptic Orthodox churches in Cairo, Alexandria, and Tanta that left more than 80 dead, while the Islamic State in Sinai stands accused of being behind the November 2017 attack on al-Rawdah mosque in northern Sinai that left more than 300 dead. On their part, Hassm and Liwa al-Thawra target both security and religious figures connected to the regime. However, and unlike IS, they refuse to target civilians or religious minorities. Both groups condemned the IS attacks against Coptic churches and the mosque in northern Sinai. As for Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups, they avoid attacking civilians and mainly target security officers. They also condemned the attack on al-Rawdah mosque: Jund al-Islam described it as “a great sin”, although they did not condemn the attacks against the Coptic churches.

Despite sharing the same goal, there is fierce competition between these groups for influence and resources. A crisis of leadership within the Muslim Brotherhood has led the other groups to solicit Muslim Brotherhood youths to join their ranks instead.

While some members of Hassm and Liwa al-Thawra were previously associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, the movement failed to attract large numbers of Brotherhood youth to their ranks. This is mainly due to the rejection of both the ideological frame and the strategies that were promoted by the historical leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood. Those who still believe in the Muslim Brotherhood are not likely to join these new groups, while the youths who gave up on the Muslim Brotherhood ideology altogether will not join them either, as these people are looking for a more radical approach and would hence be more likely join Salafi jihadi groups instead.

Last month the Islamic State in Sinai and the leader of al-Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahiri, each posted a video message criticizing the Muslim Brotherhood's non-violent political approach. The Province of Sinai revealed in its video that Omar al-Deeb, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood who was killed in September 2017 in Cairo, had both left the Brotherhood and had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. This statement was included so as to implicitly encourage other Muslim Brotherhood youths to follow in his path. Ayman al-Zawahiri's message in turn was critical of a statement that Mohammad Badie had made on the occasion of the 2013 Rabaa sit-in. Badie, the supreme guide of the Muslim Brotherhood since 2010, had proclaimed that, “Our peaceful approach is stronger than bullets,” and al-Zawahiri insisted that the result of this approach was the killing of thousands without any resistance.

Over the last few years, IS has been more active in attracting Muslim Brotherhood youths to their ranks, particularly from inside prisons. Testimonies from inside prisons show that the percentage of Muslim Brotherhood members who became more willing to join Salafi jihadi groups amounts to more than 20 percent among detainees. An Egyptian newspaper even referred to one of the prisons as “a governmental centre to recruit members for IS”¹. Its military setback in Syria and Iraq over the past year, in addition to its new strategy of attacking places of worship in Egypt, including mosques, are likely however to drive most of the Muslim Brotherhood youths away from IS. The return of al-Qaeda-affiliated groups to the market, on the other hand, and their strategy of mainly targeting security officials

¹ Mohamed Khayal, [Hona Toura: Markaz Hikoumi li-tajnid al-dawa'sh](#) (“Here is Torah: a governmental centre to recruit members for IS”), *Sborouk newspaper*, 21 April 2016.

might offer an alternative to the disappointed Muslim Brotherhood youths.

The threat of violent extremism is likely to remain a key challenge for President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi in his second mandate. Although, until now, only a minority within the Muslim Brotherhood has taken up arms, the main risk remains that large numbers of

Brotherhood youths will abandon their organization and join Salafi jihadi groups. While IS has attracted many youths, particularly from inside prisons, al-Qaeda-affiliated groups with a more radical discourse than that of Hassm and Liwa al-Thawra and a more nuanced strategy than that of IS seem to be the more long-term competitors in this market of violence in Egypt.