The Many Faces of Islamic Fundamentalism: A Profile of Egypt

Fundamentalist movements in Egypt are best known in the West for their violence and extremism. Yet, these movements represent only a visible minority of Egyptian fundamentalism as a whole. Other groups and organizations espouse very different, often more peaceful, methods to realize the goal of an Islamic state and society. Today, the intertwining of colonization, foreign influence, economic traumas, and the failure of secular governmental institutions to meet the needs of a changing population have combined to turn many moderate Egyptians towards fundamentalism.

By Nicholas Breyfogle

The very words "Islamic fundamentalism" strike fear into the heart of the Western world. They elicit images of deranged terrorists; of suicide bombers who explode themselves at thirty thousand feet along with any number of fellow travelers; of chanting and ranting street crowds; of world leaders such as the Ayatollah Khomeni who issued the celebrated death threat to writer Salman Rushdie; of tourists attacked and killed as they survey the pyramids; and of female university students forever scarred by acid thrown in their faces because they were not wearing a veil.

The bombing of New York's World Trade Center in February of this year, combined with the more recently thwarted plot to explode the Lincoln and Holland tunnels along with the United Nations building, did little to change (and much to entrench) these impressions. With every denial of his involvement, Sheik Omar Abdel-Rahman—blind from birth, his eyes disfigured with a whitish coating—looked every bit the part of the unbalanced muslim militant.

Currently a New Jersey resident in the hands of U.S. immigration, Sheik Omar was exiled from Egypt for his anti-government rhetoric and actions. He has been linked—although never conclusively—to a series of murders and killings that stretch back to the 1981 assassination of, then Egyptian President, Anwar Sadat. He is suspected to have issued the *fatwa,* or religious opinion, that spiritually sanctioned the killings not only of Sadat, but also of Egyptian Mustafa Shalabi in Brooklyn last year and of Farag Foda, an anti-fundamentalist Egyptian writer killed in his homeland in June of 1992. Moreover, it is believed that Sheik Omar has provided much of the religious justification for the recent rash of attacks on tourists in southern Egypt that have so damaged the country's $4 billion tourist industry.

Back in Egypt, the confrontation between fundamentalists and the state powers is on the rise—a conflict that has claimed more than 140 people in 1993 alone. In one week at the end of May, a bomb detonated outside a police station killing seven and wounding another twenty, another explosion sent five people into hospital, and two assaults on military installations were also reported. An immediate suspect for the latest violence was the Islamic Group (*Gamaa al-Ilamiya*). They are infamously credited with a long list of atrocities that includes a variety of attacks on tourist buses and boats, forays against the police, and a series of attempts on the lives of public officials, of which the failed assassination of information minister Safwat Sharif in April, 1993 is among the most recent.

The Egyptian government has fought back in recent months. During the spring, security forces led raids on suspected extremist strongholds in which hundreds of purported activists were killed, many more arrested, and others still sentenced to death by military tribunals. Yet efforts on the part of the government to hold the extremists at bay appear to have only temporary affect.

The Faces of Fundamentalism

While the violent element of Muslim fundamentalism has currently taken center stage (and deservedly so, one cannot deny their existence nor their significance), many analysts are quick

Alexandria

Cairo

Suez Canal

Isr

Jor

SA

Libya

Nile

Luxor

Aswan

EGYPT

Sudan

[Electromap, Inc.]

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to assert that the Islamic fundamentalist movement is not solely composed of extremists and terrorists. They point to a wide variety of other faces of Egyptian fundamentalism which, as a whole, provide a less extreme Islamic answer—faces whose numbers dwarf the relatively small and numerically marginal violent militants.

As professor Robert Bianchi recently argued in the journal *Current History*, there exists a "wide assortment of mainstream religious organizations that are pursuing various visions of an Islamic state through peaceful and legitimate means." Mumtaz Ahmad, a political science professor at Virginia's Hampton University, continues in this vein: "The most important thing to remember is that not all Islamic revivalist movements are fundamentalist, that not all fundamentalists are political activists, and that not all political activists are radicals....There are very respectable Islamic fundamentalist movements in major Muslim societies that are part of the mainstream and part of the democratic electoral process, and that want to operate within a constitutional framework."

These analysts affirm that aspects of fundamentalism hold an appeal for many secular muslims. The fundamentalist movement in Egypt has its intellectual roots in a society whose cultural reference points and worldview originate from within an muslim environment. While a state and society based upon Islamic law, custom and political practices may appear far-fetched to the Western mind, it is far from a foreign idea to even the most irreligious Egyptian citizen. Thus, there are many who are sympathetic to the fundamentalist cause while opposed to the extreme methods used by certain sects. That many citizens do support the application of at least some Islamic tenets in state practices is clear from recent inclusions of *Shari'a* law into Egyptian legal books. [The *Shari'a* is the name given to the compilation of Islamic law. It includes the teachings of the Qu'ran (the Muslim holy text), the *Hadith* (those traditions associated with Muhammed), and the *Sunna* (customs, practices and practical inscriptions of how to live one's life)].

Egypt and the Appeal of an Islamic Society

On the whole, Islamic fundamentalists in Egypt, as in other countries, assert that existing social and political structures are corrupt and unsound. Problems and deficiencies derive from a deviation from Islamic tenets and ways of life. Thus, as anthropologist Michael Gilsenan relays, for a lasting solution, fundamentalists desire that "the entire social order should be overthrown by the righteous and an Islamic state should be established."

Specifically, the fundamentalists call for the recognition of God as the single source of power and legitimacy; the implementation of Islamic *Shari'a* law; a return to traditionally sanctioned forms of dress and social interaction; an end to interest charges; the stamping out of corruption; and, more recently, the cutting of ties to Israel with whom Egypt had begun a rapprochement in the late 1970s, as well as the end to the Western presence with its debt charges, hotels, bars, discos, and alcohol.

Many secular leaning Egyptians have turned increasingly to versions of the fundamentalist answer. They do so not solely out of faith, nor simply because Muslim leaders have been able to successfully paint an untested and untried Islamic state as a panacea. But, rather, they look to Islam out of frustration with the failures of the existing western style regime to provide basic necessities to the nation. As Mamoun Hodaibi, the 77 year old leader of the fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood, has asserted: "Every time there is a crackdown, there is a period of calm. But until the social, political and economic problems of this country are addressed, the struggle and the violence will continue."

Egypt faces ever worsening economic problems. Foreign debt stands at somewhere more than $45 billion for a population of only 57 million. The country now imports approximately 70% of its food requirements. Remittances from Egyptians working abroad in oil producing countries have declined with the drop in oil prices. Millions are unemployed. A housing crisis grips the urban centers. It is a paradoxical crisis in which one in three people lacks adequate accommodation while there are some 100,000 to 150,000 unoccupied units in Cairo's fancier sections—units that were quickly erected during the construction boom of the latter part of Anwar Sadat's reign in the 1970s. On top of the economic crisis lies widespread government corruption. In a celebrated incident in the 1970s, a government minister used his position to establish a lucrative trade in illegal hashish to the tune of millions of dollars.

Muslim groups have often taken clearly defined actions to mitigate widespread hardships and bring services and aid to sections of the populace that the ineffectual and cumbersome bureaucracy cannot reach. Through the philanthropic infrastructure of the mosques, they have set up relief organizations,

The many faces of fundamentalism
[BC Pictures]

educational facilities, health clinics, and job training centers. "They are strong in my village," states a woman from the delta region. "Unlike the other parties, [the Muslim Brothers] work among people in the fields and take up real problems." In response to the October, 1992 earthquake in Cairo, another man cried: "The mosque is the only place we can turn to for help. Everyone else is corrupt."

The Inherent Unity of Church and State

While specific historical circumstances have often determined the course of Muslim fundamentalism in Egypt, an important component of its motive force comes directly from the general precepts and history of Islam itself. Jesus Christ is quoted as saying "render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's and unto God the things which are God's." With that sentence the basis for the Christian world's separation of Church and State was established. In Islam, however, no such distinction exists. From the birth of Islam, the church and the state were one and the same. Dictionaries of classical Arabic have no words for such common Western opposites as lay and ecclesiastical, sacred and profane, and spiritual and temporal.

Christianity grew up as an independent movement within the Roman Empire—a community within a state. However, as Bernard Lewis points out in his introduction to Gilles Kepel's *Muslim Extremism in Egypt*: "the Prophet Muhammed founded not only a community but also a policy, a society and a state, of which he was the sovereign. As sovereign, he commanded armies, made war and peace, collected taxes, dispensed justice and did all those things which a ruler normally does."

Islam ordered not only the spiritual life of the community but also its social and political lives. The raison d'être of the state structure was to "defend and promulgate God's faith and to uphold and enforce God's law." Muslim norms are applicable to all peoples and in all times. Each fundamentalist movement of today—and in fact each movement of the past approximately 1350 years—has looked back to the purity of the

Listening to the Friday sermon
[BC Pictures]

model society, to the short-lived "golden age" founded by Muhammed himself.

British Colonization and the Rise of the Muslim Brothers

When the British bombed of the Egyptian port of Alexandria in 1882, Egypt became a full fledged British colony. The new possession served Britain—through the Suez Canal—primarily as an important link to British interests in India and the Far East. Nonetheless, the imperialists were quick to fully integrate Egypt into the flow of the British international economy.

British economic penetration of Egypt had significant impact on the colony's economic structure. On one hand, it served to enrich certain classes of Egyptians—notably the large landowners. On the other hand, it disrupted and displaced the traditional patterns of subsistence agriculture as well as the established trade systems. For example, cheaper textiles could be imported from European industry and, as a result, local textile manufacturers found themselves out of job. Farmers turned to cash crops from the traditional fare that had sustained the populace for centuries. Despite the benefits that accrued to portions of the Egyptian population, most suffered widespread social and economic dislocations while the majority found life to be increasingly unstable.

In the midst of the uncertain economic environment in the 1920s, and in the wake of the failures of the national independence movement (which had become tainted by collaboration with the imperial powers), grew the most long-standing and the most prominent of the modern Islamic fundamentalist groups in Egypt: the Muslim Brotherhood (*Ikhwan al-Musilman*).

Hassan al-Banna, founder of the Muslim Brothers in 1928 had a simple message: "The Qu'ran is our constitution, and the Prophet is our leader.... Our programme is the Qu'ran, our programme is Islamic government.... When asked what it is you propagate, reply that it is Islam, the message of Muhammed, the religion that contains within it government. If you are told that you are political, answer that Islam admits no such distinction."

While the message of the Muslim Brothers was not new, their success was. Hassan al-Banna was a passionate speaker and an inspired organizer. He acted as the "General Guide" to a national network of cells, battalions, youth groups, philanthropic organizations for health and social welfare, labour camps, religious centers, schools, political activists, journals, and a secret organization (the paramilitary "Special Wing") for covert activities.

This bureaucracy, though tangled, was nevertheless remarkably effective in reaching the populace both with propaganda and with aid to those who the government had overlooked. But, the efficient organizational structure hid divisions within the movement as a whole. The official approach of the Muslim Brotherhood to creating an Islamic society was gradual and reformist. However, many were attracted to their message of Islamic renewal who had very different notions of the tactics required to succeed. An increasingly vocal fringe even called for violence.

The Muslim Brothers reached the apex of their power following World War II. The increased economic and social pressures that the war placed on an already hurting society sent many adherents their way. During the late 1940s, the Brotherhood itself became increasingly frustrated both by the denial of

the state powers to allow them to participate in the parliamentary system and by the ostentatious rule of King Farouk. Discontent reached its peak. Outbursts against foreign, un-Islamic symbols—bars, nightclubs, movie theaters, and department stores—became increasingly common. A prominent judge was assassinated. Strikes broke out in opposition to the British presence.

This rise in action by the combined forces of the nationalist and fundamentalist opposition movements was met with repercussions, arrests, and crackdowns from the Egyptian government. Undaunted, the Special Order killed the Prime Minister Mahmud Nuqrashi in 1948. In return, Hassan al-Banna himself was assassinated by the government's secret police. Unrest came to a climax in early 1952. British bulldozers and tanks had crushed a community of Egyptian mud houses to make way for a British water supply. When Egyptian police responded to what they considered an outrage, British troops shattered the police barracks, killing 50 and wounding over a hundred. The public reaction was "Black Saturday" in which 750 establishments were destroyed.

The Free Officer Revolution: The Fundamentalists Suppressed

When the military coalition of the Free Officers, including Gamal Abdel Nasser, came to power in 1952 (ousting the king, parliament and much of the British presence), the Muslim Brothers initially enjoyed a relative amount of freedom and toleration. The role that they had played in pre-revolutionary opposition movements was not forgotten by the Free Officers. However, relations between them quickly began to sour as the differences in their respective programs and goals became more and more apparent.

Nasser, recognizing the potential strength (and threat) of the fundamentalist movement, used a two-prong assault in order to assure that they did not disrupt the power of the Free Officers nor his plans to modernize and strengthen Egypt. On one hand, he ruthlessly quashed any signs of movement on the part of the Muslim Brothers. The Brotherhood had already been officially dissolved by the government on two separate occasions by the time one of its members (from the Special Wing) attempted to assassinate Nasser in 1954. A severe crackdown and arrests followed. Leaders were imprisoned, tortured, sent to concentration camps, and some executed. Their headquarters were razed to the ground and a propaganda barrage railed against their organization. The back of the Muslim Brothers, the last independent association in Egypt, was broken—permanently, so the Free Officers hoped.

On the other hand, in all government actions and speeches, Nasser was very conscious to accent Islamic practices and principles in order to buttress the legitimacy of his regime in the eyes of popular Islam. Some Free Officers even preached

Nasser reaches out to his people
[BC Pictures]

Friday sermons in the mosques. In 1954, at the zenith of the conflict with the Muslim Brothers, Nasser made a pilgrimage to Mecca to show that despite his oppressive tactics against an Islamic organization, he was no less a Muslim than they. Later in 1954, the government founded the Islamic Congress to administer the relations (sometimes coercively) between the state and religious leaders. The *ulema* [Islamic religious clerics] were encouraged to point to the similarities between Islam and Nasser's brand of national socialism. Islamic scholars often provided the spiritual sanction for the policies of socialist nationalization.

Despite government efforts, neither the Muslim Brothers nor Muslim fundamentalism as a whole were definitively defeated. In the late 1960s, Nasser once again ran into problems with the resurgence of Islamicist movements. Muslim Brothers who had been released from their imprisonment were quick to return to their old patterns of preaching and grassroots organizing. Many were rapidly re-imprisoned.

The Muslim fundamentalist movement was profoundly altered by their experiences under Nasser. Never before had they experienced such oppression, and from Muslim Egyptians no less. The years in the concentration camps, facing the threat of torture and the gallows, hardened the fundamentalists deeply. It also provided them with the time and a segregated environment in which to develop new strategies for the successful implementation of an Islamic nation. When those surviving fundamentalists emerged from the camps in the 1970s, the movement was intrinsically split and many had moved towards the extreme.

Exit Nasser, Enter Sadat

The death of Nasser in 1970 ushered in deep-seated changes in government policy. Over the course of the 1970s, Nasser's successor, Anwar Sadat, moved Egypt from a quasi-socialist economic structure that relied on the Soviet Union and stressed unity with other Arab nations to a free market system that looked to foreign investment and which integrated Egypt into the economy of the United States. With the Camp David Accords of 1978-79, Sadat brought about the beginnings of the normalization of relations with Israel after the 1973 war—a highly unpopular move in Egypt, but one designed to demonstrate commitment to the U.S.

Sadat's new economic orientation was known as the *infitah*. In retrospect, his policies brought inflation, high prices, American influence, quickly rising foreign debts, a culture of vulgar profiteering, a society that consumed more than it produced, and excluded the poorer classes. Western investors—given privileged status and incentives by the Egyptian government in the hope of attracting large amounts of foreign capital for development—in fact did little to develop the industrial or agricultural infrastructure. Instead, they focussed their

attentions on the service and construction sectors where they could make a quick profit. Luxury hotels and apartments began to dot the Cairo skyline to service a clientele who were almost exclusively foreign. The rapidly enriched privileged Egyptian classes began a frenzy of consumerism and luxury that set in motion an ever spiralling foreign debt.

Sadat required justification for his drastic change of course and, like Nasser before him, he looked for it in the religious community—a tactic that both succeeded and failed. While a portion of the clerics were more than willing to provide spiritual blessing for his actions, another component—and one that became increasingly large as the 1970s progressed—vehemently opposed him. Unlike Nasser who pandered to popular Islam while keeping a tight lid on the fundamentalist organizations, Sadat began by pandering to all Islamic groups irrespective of their potential threat.

Sadat legalized religious parties and organizations. He expanded the Qu'ran radio station which played excerpts from the Qu'ran and theological commentary. All radio and television programming was briefly stopped for the five-times-daily call to prayer. The amount of religious instruction in schools was increased. Sadat was called the "pious president" and was widely publicized going to a different mosque every Friday. As a sign of goodwill, he released many activist fundamentalists from Nasser's concentration camps.

Fundamentalism Split, Extremism on the Rise

At the changeover of leadership, the Muslim Brothers—scarred by their experiences with oppression—looked, acted, and believed very differently. The older fundamentalist oppositionists quickly came to welcome Sadat's initially more moderate regime. They worked for accommodation with the government and embraced the hope of changing the regime from within. The Muslim Brothers, led by Hasan al-Hudaybi, and their monthly magazine *al-Da'wa*, took the accommodationist, constitutional point of view. They did not alter their beliefs or deny their goal of instituting an Islamic society. But, they strove to attain their goals through non-violent, reformist, and parliamentary means. They argued that they should be "preachers, not judges."

For others, the more moderate path had yielded little fruit and, instead, much pain. The tendency to look to the extreme was enhanced. The belief that there could be no compromise between the Islamic world and the Egyptian government as it then stood was becoming increasingly more entrenched. These

Mohammed Hosni Mubarak: twelve years of emergency rule
[Egyptian Embassy, Ottawa]

were two mutually exclusive societies and sets of beliefs. Sadat aide Mohamed Heikal explains in his book on the assassination of the President that "as the *infitah* developed, bringing in its wake foreign influences, vulgar ostentation and materialist values, [fundamentalists] felt more than ever convinced of the justice of their cause."

The structure of the Muslim Brothers' formerly cogent and efficient organization was fractured into multiple parts. New organizations and sects grew up, each with their own modus operandi. As Gilles Kepel eloquently relates: one group, led by Shukri Mustafa, "preached 'uzla, or withdrawal from society, as a means of avoiding the horror of the camps and gallows [and of demonstrating their opposition to the regime]. Others took the road of political commitment in a multitude of ways, either collaborating with the regime in an attempt to Islamicize it or entering the world of politics as a sort of opposition, in the hope of avoiding, partly through ties to the regime itself, the spectre of torture and extermination. Still others organized for the forcible seizure of power, hoping that next time they would be able to act before the state could strike back." A final group of fundamentalists took to preaching—using the pulpit as a means to verbally critique the failings of the existing government and spreading their words to increasingly larger audiences through cassette and now video recordings.

Fundamentalism in the Universities

Under Sadat, the universities became hotbeds of Islamic thought and action. Students were encouraged by the regime to organize Islamic student associations (*jama'at islamiyya*) as a counter balance to leftist/Nasserite groups (who opposed Sadat's western leaning policies). Almost overnight, however, the Islamic student groups turned to bite the hand that fed them. The associations espoused the need to return to the "golden-age of Islam" where society was ruled by "rightly guided" leaders. Specifically, they forcefully challenged the government's rapprochement with Israel and its ties to the United States. The regime responded with harassment and repression as Sadat found that his lenient policies vis-à-vis Islam were not producing the desired results.

It should not be surprising that the universities became loci of Islamic opposition to the regime. The university system at this time (and today as well) left much to be desired. Universities were under-staffed and over-studented. The infras-

tructure was highly lacking—it was not uncommon that two if not three students would share the same chair in a lecture. While education was ostensibly provided gratis by the government, students often found themselves having to pay huge sums out of pocket to attend special tutorials held by the professors before the decisive end of year exams. For the professors, such tutorials were their only means to stay alive on the government salary. For the students, it was the sole way to obtain the information that they would need for the final exam. Students of anatomy found themselves required (if they wanted to pass) to pay exorbitant fees in order to acquire (illegally) a freshly buried corpse for dissection. Perhaps the most devastating aspect of the university system was the lack of jobs awaiting students if they could, in fact, extricate themselves successfully from the confusion.

Jama'at confronted issues that affected all students whether they were sympathizers of the fundamentalist cause or not—a fact that brought the *jama'at* wide support.

Women had increasingly become a part of public life in a society that did not have the infrastructure to accommodate such changes. Sharing seats, as well as the crowded buses that students took to school, were sites where a female student was compromised and often harassed. *Jama'at* set up a minibus service that would transport women to and from the campus in the hopes of avoiding assaults on their dignity and modesty. The shuttle system was an instant success and demand quickly outstripped supply. It soon became common that a woman would have to dress in "Islamic fashion" (veil, gloves, long dress or robe) in order to use the buses. Many women, whether Islamic sympathizers or not, did take up the dress to avoid public transportation. The same was also true in university buildings. *Jama'at* found a great deal of support from female students tired of having to fight to preserve their dignity for their demands to segregate genders in the classroom by row.

In response to the tutorial sessions that emptied the pockets of students and their families, *jama'at* began revision sessions at local mosques. There, students could, in peace and quiet, pour over lecture manuals that the *jama'at* had reproduced at the Student Union for free.

Sadat Assassinated, Mubarak in the 1990s

One of the extreme fundamentalist groups that grew up during the Sadat years from the legacy of the Muslim Brothers was *al-jihad*, or Sacred Combat. It was one of this group's adherents who was the celebrated assassin of Sadat in October, 1981. His words, "I am Khalid al-Islambuli, I have killed Pharaoh, and I do not fear death," were recorded and broadcast throughout the Islamic world. For many, this sentence represented a relief to finally be rid of Sadat. For others, it was a call to battle, the echo of which has yet to fade.

One of the fundamentalists' hated Western hotels, in Cairo [BC Pictures]

Hosni Mubarak, Sadat's vice-President and successor, has taken an approach to the fundamentalist problem that stands closer to Nasser than Sadat. He has kept Egypt in a state of emergency for his entire rule and used the special powers that it gives him to crack down quickly and forcefully on all forms of opposition. He has channeled almost unprecedented support in the direction of the military in order to ensure their support. Like Nasser, he has struck at the heart of fundamentalist organizations while playing up to popular Islam. A huge new, neon green billboard displaying "Allah" sits atop the headquarters of the ruling National Democratic Party. Official statements now refer to Mubarak by his full, religious name: Mohammed Hosni Mubarak. Stated Judge Ashmawy: [The government] are trying to outbid [the fundmentalists] for Islamic support, just like some kind of auction."

Mubarak has been successful up to now in keeping a lid on an increasingly boiling pot. But his policies are making him enemies from even the most moderate of Islamic groups. They criticize his reliance on undemocratic, coercive measures to keep his government in power. The recent hanging of an Islamic extremist, the first of 22 such death sentences, has left many dismayed with the brutality. They are further frustrated by an ever worsening economy (this despite U.S. aid of $30 billion over the last 12 years) and what they consider to be the corruption and ineptitude of Mubarak's regime. In comparison, the Islamic answer appears promising.

Moreover, events in other Islamic countries have led Egyptian fundamentalists further down the extremist path. In recent Algerian elections, the fundamentalist party won the majority of votes for the parliament. Despite this, however, the military stepped in, instituting emergency powers, and denied the elected members the places that they had won. Such actions have made it clear to many fundamentalists in Egypt that the parliamentary road yields no fruit even if electoral victory is achieved. In Bosnia, Egyptians see Muslims killed by Christians as Europe and the United States looks on; in India, they see Hindus murdering Muslims; and they see U.S. bombings of Iraq and Somalia with little international reaction. In their eyes, the Western world seems bent on stamping out Islamic societies. Fundamentalists increasingly believe they must react in kind.

Suggestions for Further Reading

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