

Islamic Terrorism in Egypt: Challenge and Response

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On November 17, 1997, Islamic fundamentalists, armed with assault rifles, attacked tourist groups in the courtyard of the famous Temple of Hatshepsut in Luxor. Sixty-eight people were killed in the massacre, fifty-eight of them foreign tourists. The terrorist attack, which was carried out by the largest Muslim terrorist organization in Egypt—Islamic Group (al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya)—inflicted a severe blow to Egyptian tourism, caused significant damage to the national economy, scarred the image of the regime and halted the declining trend of terrorism in recent years.

Ironically, about one month before the massacre, President Hosni Mubarak spoke to a group of tourists in Luxor who attended a gala performance of Verdi's "Aida" and expressed his confidence in the continued prosperity of tourism in the region, and in Egypt in particular. The massacre that then took place changed the situation in a day. This is the nature of terrorism: sudden and cruel, it attacks a country's weakest point.

Islamic terrorism in the Middle East in the past two decades has not only been Israel's bitter lot. It also exists in Egypt, the largest and most important of the Arab countries. Israel and President Mubarak's regime are in the same boat, since both organizations—al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya, which is fighting to bring down Mubarak's regime ("the infidel regime"), and Hamas, which is fighting to destroy Israel in order to replace it with an Islamic State "from the sea to the river," spring from the same source: the Islamic revival movement.

The massacre in Luxor was the most deadly terrorist act in the history of Egypt.

Over the course of the twentieth century, terrorism has occurred in waves, each wave being more brutal and more severe than its predecessor. In each wave, a national leader has been killed: in 1910, Prime Minister Butrous Ghali; in the second wave, two prime ministers—Ahmed Maher in 1944 and Mahmoud al-Nuqrashi in 1949; and during the third wave, which began in the 1970s and continues intermittently until the present day, President Anwar al-Sadat, in 1981. This last wave has been harsher than any before. There were more than 3000 victims of terrorism in the years between 1992 and 1997, of which 1,500 were killed. (See Table 1).

neglected and unemployment-stricken south of the country, whose residents, "the Saidis," are estranged from the central leadership in Cairo. They were joined by hundreds of volunteers who returned from the war in Afghanistan, well-trained and instilled with faith and motivation after the defeat of the Soviet Army.

In the information age, it is impossible to hide the failures of leaders and ideologies from today's fundamentalists. This, in addition to Khomeini's revolution in Iran, has increased Islamic enthusiasm in Egypt, and may explain the growth and the harsh brutality of terrorism in the last six years.

Terrorist organizations in Egypt have

Table 1. Victims of terrorism in the years between 1992 and 1997

Year	Civilians*	Terrorists	Security Forces	Total
1992	32	39	23	94
1993	101	111	120	332
1994	60	140	110	310
1995	90	217	108	415
1996	67	77	43	187
1997	114	29	29	162
Total	464	603	433	1500

*Including foreign tourists.

Like their predecessors, Islamic fundamentalists of the 1990s are determined to overthrow an "infidel regime" in order to establish an Islamic Shari'a state in its place. In all other aspects, however, they are different. The fundamentalists of the nineties are younger, less educated and more often come from agricultural areas, small field towns and slums, especially from the

four main targets: public and administration figures and heads of the security establishment; foreign tourists; the Coptic minority; and Egyptian and other targets abroad.

Striking against administration officials and heads of the security establishment has become a very important goal for Islamic terrorist organizations since the assassination of

President Sadat by the Islamic Jihad in October 1981. In the past decade, there have been many attempts on the lives of government ministers in Egypt. Ministers of interior are marked as priority targets because they are in charge of the war on terrorism. As part of this campaign, fundamentalists murdered the speaker of parliament, Rifat Mahgoub, police officers and other senior security officials. Intellectuals accused of deviating from Islam were also targeted. For example, the author and journalist Farag Foda was murdered in 1992, and Nobel Prize Laureate Naguib Mahfouz was wounded in an attempt on his life in 1994. Furthermore, President Mubarak barely escaped an assassination attempt in Addis Ababa in June 1995.

Beginning in mid-1992, the fundamentalists have also targeted tourism, in an effort to deal a blow to the nation's economy (tourism is Egypt's second largest source of foreign currency, behind fees from the Suez Canal) and to harm the image of the regime in the region and around the world. Sheikh Omar Abd al-Rahman, the spiritual leader of al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya, sent a fatwa (religious ruling) from the United States to his followers, permitting the murder of foreign tourists in Egypt. Two seasons of tourism were lost (1992 and 1993) due to terrorist activity, costing the state direct damage of \$3-5 billion. After the regime regained the initiative, tourism managed to revive and thrive between 1995-1996, until the massacre in Luxor, which again froze this important source of income. Ninety-seven foreign tourists were killed in Egypt in six years of terrorism, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Tourists Killed by Terrorists

1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	Total
1	6	4	0	*19	**67	97

* Of them eighteen Greek tourists who were killed in Giza on April 18, 1996.

** Of them, nine German tourists who were killed in Liberation Square in Cairo on September 18, 1997, and fifty-eight tourists who were killed in the Luxor massacre on November 17, 1997.

The third target of the terrorist organizations is the Coptic minority. Muslim fundamentalists view the Copts as outsiders, both religiously and ethnically, and are jealous of their economic success. For them, the Copts symbolize the hated regime in Cairo. Therefore, the fundamentalists attack their property and rob their money. It is very easy to strike at the Copts—especially in the southern region, where fundamentalist control is stronger. More than 100 Copts were killed in the last five years of terrorism, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Copts Killed by Terrorists

1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	Total
19	8	29	30	228	114

The Muslim terrorist groups also carry out attacks abroad, both because of pressures within Egypt and in reaction to security forces' operations against them. A clear example is the attempted assassination of President Mubarak in Addis Ababa in June 1995. In November of that year, a suicide bomber detonated a pick-up truck loaded with explosives in the courtyard of the Egyptian Embassy in Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan, and caused many fatal casualties. One month later, a car bomb exploded in the Pakistani

city of Peshawar, killing at least thirty people. The Jihad organization, which claimed responsibility for the attack, asserted that the operation was carried out in reaction to the Pakistani government's decision to extradite wanted Islamists to Egypt.

The wave of terrorism that broke out in Egypt in mid-1992 surprised the regime both in its scope and in its force. The Egyptian leadership did not have a suitable response. It lacked sufficient intelligence and a comprehensive strategy to fight back. Under these circumstances, the regime reacted to the terrorist attacks by applying force, using fire arms, carrying out mass arrests and imposing collective punishments in the communities near the sites of the attacks or where arms were uncovered. Security forces placed curfews on urban neighborhoods and in towns in order to capture wanted fundamentalists and to discover weapons caches. A typical example of the security forces' methods was their campaign in the poverty-stricken quarter of Imbaba in northern Cairo. On December 8, 1992, some 15,000 security personnel surrounded the quarter that houses more than a million residents, imposed a curfew for one week, and conducted house-to-house searches. About 700 suspects were arrested, among them leaders of terrorist organizations, and large amounts of weapons were uncovered.

Following the mass arrests, Egypt's prisons were quickly filled beyond capacity and it was no longer possible to separate the fundamentalist prisoners from common criminals. In many prisons, the fundamentalists ruled over the

inmates, forcing them to follow the rules of Islam and recruiting them to their organizations. Thus, the prisons became schools of terrorism. Many who were arrested—despite their innocence—were released from prison straight into the arms of fundamentalist organizations.

Finding itself cornered, the regime tried to reach an agreement with the fundamentalists through dialogue and negotiation. This experiment was conducted by Minister of Interior Abdel Halim Moussa in early 1993. The leadership of al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya set conditions for an agreement, according to which most of the fundamentalist prisoners would be released in exchange for a cease-fire. In the absence of trust between the parties, the negotiations ultimately failed. The interior minister paid for the failure with his job. The regime understood that it had erred and never returned to the negotiating table with the fundamentalists.

In the second half of 1993, the Egyptian government adopted a different strategy for combating terrorism. The program focused on the following means: recruiting agents from within the fundamentalist organizations; establishing a computerized information database on the fundamentalists and their activities; raising the personal and professional standards of the internal security forces; direct strikes against commanders and leaders of terrorist organizations; and concluding intelligence and operational cooperation agreements with Arab and Western countries.

The internal security forces implemented this strategy successfully.

Many agents were recruited from among the terrorist groups and supplied important information to the security forces. The information enabled more focused strikes on terrorist commanders and terrorist cells. Enlisted soldiers with suitable qualifications were drafted to internal security units and special anti-terrorist units were established. The computerized database supplied the security forces with a constant flow of up-to-date information. A "shoot to kill" policy was authorized and, in 1995, 217 Islamic terrorists, including many commanders, were killed and only fifteen were injured.

In addition, Egypt reached agreements on combating terrorism with Jordan, Yemen, the Gulf States, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Morocco and Pakistan. The agreements provided for an exchange of intelligence information, and wanted terrorists were extradited to Egypt. An understanding was reached with Western countries on intelligence exchange but due to legal and moral considerations they refused to extradite to Egypt wanted fundamentalists. Instead, special Egyptian units operated in Europe against terrorist leaders.

The comprehensive efforts of the internal security forces produced some successes. The fundamentalists have been pushed out of the Cairo area and from the north, toward southern Egypt.

Since the end of 1994, there has been a decline in the fear of violence and terrorism among the public, especially in Cairo and the north. The number of terrorist incidents has dropped, and the presence of security forces in the large cities has diminished. The smuggling of

arms from Sudan to terrorist cells in Egypt has also been successfully prevented. In addition, the fundamentalists' financing channels have been partially blocked.

During 1997, leaders of al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya approached the government at least three times, with offers of a cease-fire agreement (*hudna*). Their hope was to gain a time-out to rest and reorganize for the resumption of their jihad against the infidel regime, and they had the blessing of their spiritual leader, the blind Sheikh Omar Abd el-Rahman, who is imprisoned in the United States. But in light of its previous experience in trying to reach an agreement with the fundamentalists in the beginning of 1993, and aware of the historic Islamic significance of a *hudna*, the regime rejected the proposals outright.

The activities of terrorist organizations, have clearly declined and indications exist that they are growing weaker. In upper Egypt, however, their infrastructure is still strong. The fundamentalists who fled from the north, enjoy support and popularity in the south.

The "Saidi" population in the south does not cooperate with the Egyptian government. Hence, it is difficult for it to infiltrate the terrorist cells there. This enables the terrorist organizations to reappear occasionally for a display attack, especially against defenseless Copts and tourists—such as in the massacre in Luxor—to signal their continued existence.

The terrorist organizations do not pose an existential threat to the regime in Egypt. They can depose a leader, but they cannot establish a leadership. They do not enjoy

significant public support, except in the south of the country. The government enjoys the support of the military and is capable of protecting the country's vital resources. Nevertheless, it is incapable of offering complete protection to the tourism industry. It is also important to note that in contrast to the cases of Jordan, Syria and Iraq, so far the Egyptian government has refrained from unleashing the army against terrorist organizations. This is because the internal security forces have managed to take care of the problem with relative success.

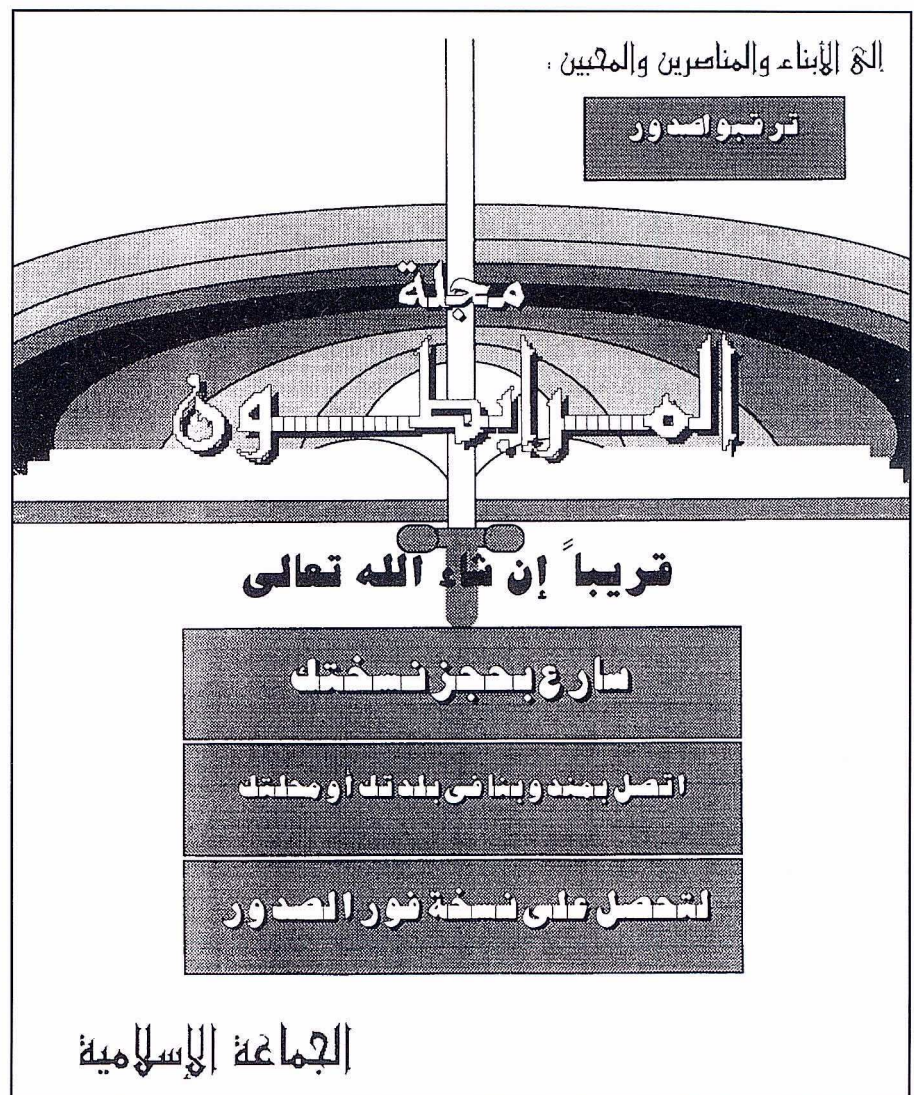
It is not yet clear when the Egyptian Government will overcome the current wave of terrorism. What is clear is that the specter of terrorism will not disappear in the foreseeable future. Because terrorism in Egypt is not only a phenomenon of political violence but also derives from despair and a deep socioeconomic crisis, it is extremely difficult to cope with. Terrorist groups will continue to enlist new members as long as people are driven—by personal motivations, such as poverty, unemployment and hatred for the leadership—to join the jihad against the regime. The confrontations with the security forces and the resulting large number of deaths among terrorists deter many youngsters, but that is not sufficient to weaken the motivation of many others to join, especially when these groups appeal to their strong religious sentiments.

In summary, in a dramatic improvement over what has been the case in 1993, the Egyptian Government has succeeded in preventing terrorism from disrupting daily life. It has taken the initiative and has pushed the fundamentalists southward. The

Government now plans to concentrate efforts on striking at the infrastructure of terrorism in the south, thereby providing tourists with maximum safety.

Because of Egypt's ties with the West, President Mubarak cannot eliminate the infrastructure of terrorism in the southern city of Minya in the same brutal fashion

that President Assad fought Islamic terrorism in the Syrian city of Hama. Instead, he will have to continue his protracted struggle. Terrorism does not pose an existential threat to the Egyptian regime, but it certainly poses an ongoing strategic challenge.



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