

## **Egyptian Islamists and Nonviolence Views from the Prison Cell**

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FOR THE FIRST TIME IN EGYPT'S HISTORY with violent extremism, the country's largest Islamist groups, Gamaa Islamiya and Islamic Jihad, which boast tens of thousands of members, have comprehensively performed introspective self-critiques of their jihadist ideology and their long history of radical, violent practices, reforming in order to join the ranks of increasingly popular peaceful movements within political Islam. In July of 1997, Gamaa Islamiya's leadership launched its Nonviolence Initiative and proceeded to evaluate its past actions and ideology, putting forth a self-critique in the more than 25 books it has published up to the present. Before its July 1997 initiative, Gamaa Islamiya was responsible for 95 percent of the terrorist attacks in Egypt, most notably the 1981 assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat.

Islamic Jihad, which has insisted it joined forces with Gamaa Islamiya to assassinate President Sadat, has also undertaken critical self-evaluations and renounced the use of violence. After the mid-1980s, internal conflict divided the Islamic Jihad movement into a distinctly Egyptian cohort and a foreign movement. The foreign component, including Ayman Al-Zawahiri, later evolved into a major component of al-Qaeda in the late 1990s, whereas a significant number of Islamic Jihad's historical leaders, many of whom are in Egyptian prisons or in exile in Europe, joined with Gamaa Islamiya's Nonviolent Initiative. Soon thereafter, many Islamic Jihad members undertook their own self-evaluations, making major advances with the November 2007 publishing of "Advice Regarding the Conduct of Jihadist Action in Egypt and the

World” by the movement’s ideologue and former emir, Sayed Imam Al-Sharif, known also as Abdel Qadir ibn Abdel-Aziz or simply Dr. Fadl. The renunciation of violence on the part of these two popular Egyptian jihadist movements, endorsed and led by Islamist intellectual heavyweights, may change the course of global jihad and influence its development in the Arab world.

### **The concept and content of the self-evaluations**

Speaking in accurate terms about Gamaa Islamiya and Islamic Jihad’s revisionist processes requires one to specify the organizations’ theoretical framework and practical content. It would be most accurate to say that Gamaa Islamiya’s self-evaluation, as well as the current self-critique being undertaken by Islamic Jihad, are twofold, in that they address the ideology adopted in the past and the actions this past ideology drove these groups to take as well as the formulation of a new group ideology. These two parallel, connected processes, which Gamaa Islamiya has finished and Islamic Jihad continues to undergo, have resulted in what have come to be called “the self-evaluations.” The first process is the fundamental, far-reaching criticism of past ideas and practices, while the second process is the formulation of a new ideological model that breaks with past jihadist thought. The complex, multifaceted nature of these self-reviews, undertaken by the two largest Islamist groups in the history of modern religious violence in Egypt, is what gives this process its significance, both for the future of these groups and for Egyptian society at large.

As for the product of this introspection, the leaders and members of both Gamaa Islamiya and Islamic Jihad developed their post-1997 positions, exemplified by the Nonviolence Initiative, into an ideology based on articulated theoretical foundations.

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This articulation of a new and more moderate ideological framework transformed Gamaa Islamiya’s unilateral 1997 ceasefire from an internal decision, based on practical public relations considerations, into the actualization of a new group ideology. As a result, both Gamaa Islamiya and Islamic Jihad have come to be seen in a new light. From their founding and until the renunciation of

violence, Gamaa Islamiya and Islamic Jihad were among the jihadist groups which believed that a genuine deviance was taking place among Muslims at the governmental, societal and individual levels and that correcting those beliefs was essential and warranted the use of violence. Furthermore, such groups felt that armed jihad opened

the door for the re-Islamization of society and the state, allowing them to be founded anew, based on the true Islam. With Gamaa Islamiya's renunciation of violence, followed by Islamic Jihad's own self-evaluative process, the two joined the ranks of the peaceful, moderate sociopolitical Islamist groups in the region that do not allow for any form of violence against fellow Muslims. At the forefront of their priorities is reorganizing their worldly situation, and the recognition that Shariah can only be applied by peaceful means. It is difficult to overstate the significance of the ideological leap that both of these groups have taken as they moved away from extremism and joined the broad field of moderate, centrist organizations, which represent the bulk of Islamic groups, past and present. The transformation and the revisions within Egypt's Islamist jihadist groups differ greatly from the experiences of Islamist groups in other Arab countries, such as Algeria and Saudi Arabia, where very few violent Islamist organizations have renounced violence. Most Arab countries have not reached this level of comprehensive transformation, nor have the changes resulted in the deep-reaching intellectual revisions that took place first for Gamaa Islamiya, and then for Islamic Jihad, in Egypt.

Gamaa Islamiya has made its substantive progress and its ideological transformation widely available to the public through its prolific publication of more than 25 books and other writings released since January 2002. These publications include not only the ideological bases and detailed visions of Gamaa Islamiya's new positions but also the organi-

zation's stances on a number of current international issues that touch upon Islam in some form. As for Islamic Jihad, after the publication of Sayed Imam Al-Sharif's "Advice Regarding the Conduct of Jihadist Action in Egypt and the World," the organization continued to review and revise its ideological vision, as it does still today. It is likely that Al-Sharif and other Islamic Jihad intellectuals will release further works on both their ideological stances and on contemporary international relations issues related to Islam, as Gamaa Islamiya did after the Nonviolence Initiative of July 1997.

Before 1981, Gamaa Islamiya had practically no famous documents or public intellectual figures justifying its ideology or the movement's actions, particularly its tendency to use violence, with the exception of two: the founder of Islamic Jihad Mohamed Abdel Salam Farag and his seminal manifesto "The Absent Duty" (*al-Farida Al-Gha'iba*), and professor of Quranic exegesis at Al-Azhar University, Omar Abdel

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Rahman, whom Gamaa Islamiya leaders took on as their mufti. It is important to note that while Gamaa Islamiya and Islamic Jihad did not share many common sources for the formulation of their previous world views, Farag's manifesto and Sayyid Qutb's "Milestones," his Quranic exegesis "In the Shadows of the Qur'an," and some of his later works were hugely influential to both groups.

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The first of the writings outlining Gamaa Islamiya's independent ideological framework emerged from Egyptian prisons after the assassination of President Anwar Sadat on Oct. 6, 1981, and the subsequent arrest of the group's leadership. Among these early statements was the "Charter of Islamic Action," which summarizes the group's ideological vision – its doctrine, goals and means of accomplishing its goals, as well as other principles of its philosophy and organization. In this stage, the writings of Gamaa Islamiya multiplied, all defining Gamaa Islamiya's path in terms of its violent tendencies: "jihad is fighting, i.e. confrontation and blood," and it was necessary for "Muslims to join the jihad however few their numbers."<sup>1</sup>

Islamic Jihad, in addition to Qutb's writings and Farag's manifesto, made use of philosophical writings penned by leaders of other jihadist groups that had formed since the late 1970s but had since disappeared. Most prominent was "The Message of Faith" (*Risalat Al-Iman*) manifesto authored by Dr. Salih Siriya, a Palestinian holding a Ph.D. in education, who led the failed Military Technical Academy in Cairo coup attempt in 1974. Both Gamaa Islamiya and Islamic Jihadist philosophies crystallized during the same period, and in the same prisons. Islamic Jihad put forth the seminal texts of its movement in two books by Aboud Al-Zomor, "Philosophy of the Confrontation" (*Falsafat Al-Muwajaha*) and "The Islamic Jihad Approach" (*Manhaj Jama'at Al-Jihad Al-Islami*). The goal of the group was clear in all of these documents, namely to "work to remove the dictators not ruling by God's law, establish Islamic rule, and restore the

philosophy and organization. In this stage, the writings of Gamaa Islamiya multiplied, all defining Gamaa Islamiya's path in terms of its violent tendencies: "jihad is fighting, i.e. confrontation and blood," and it was necessary for "Muslims to join the jihad however few their numbers."<sup>1</sup>

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1 The most important of Gamaa Islamiya's writings at that time were: Omar Abdel Rahman, *A Word of Truth and Categories of Rulers and their Rulings*; Najih Ibrahim, Assem Abdel Maged, and Assem Al-Din Darbala, *Charter of Islamic Action*; Aseem Al-Din Darbala, *Ruling of Fighting the Sect Abstaining from Any Part of Islamic Sharia*; Gamaa Islamiya's Research Council, *The Inevitability of Confrontation*; *The Excuse of Ignorance*; and *The Islamic Movement and Party Action*; Rifa'i Taha, *Harnessing the Energy to Reunite the Islamic Community*; and Abdel Akhir Hamad, *Replying to Doubts about Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice and Evidence in Sharia for the Permissibility of Changing Vice by Force to United the Flock*.

Islamic caliphate,” by force.<sup>2</sup>

In both cases, the leaders who outlined the philosophies of Gamaa Islamiya and Islamic Jihad were young men in their twenties, who possessed neither any religious training nor the experience to allow them to reach conclusions harmonious with the true essence of Islam. This dearth of training and experience may help explain their tendency for rigid, exaggerated interpretations of some Quranic verses and parts of the *Sunnah* (traditions of the prophet), and their use of these interpretations to justify the campaigns of terrorism that both groups waged in Egypt for roughly 20 years. In retrospect, and after the profound changes in both groups’ stance toward violence resulting in their complete renunciation of its use in Egypt and abroad, it does not seem implausible that a rudimentary understanding of Islam is what led the leaders of both Gamaa Islamiya and Islamic Jihad to tout an extremist interpretation of the Islamic faith. The early writings of Gamaa Islamiya, especially compared to some of its later revisionist literature, demonstrate that its leadership did not have a strong grasp of the different Islamic schools of philosophy and exegesis. The references cited in Gamaa Islamiya’s early writings were limited to the most hard-line schools, which they relied on entirely in passing their judgments, with little consideration of more nuanced schools of Islamic teaching. In their later revisionist books, the same leaders clearly had acquired, through time and experience, a deeper understanding of diverse Islamic philosophies, and consequently retreated from their hard-line stances, openly admitting their mistakes and criticizing all that they had perpetrated under a false understanding of Islam.

### **The impact of the Revisions on Egypt**

During the 10 years since the Nonviolence Initiative was announced in July 1997, the revisionist process has in fact led to a complete stop of religious violence perpetrated by Gamaa Islamiya in Egypt. The sole exception was the Luxor massacre on Nov. 17, 1997, which was committed by members of Gamaa Islamiya who were unaware of the leadership’s decision to stop using violence. As for Islamic Jihad, a number of factors led them to stop committing acts of violence in Egypt in 1994, such as its overall weakness at the time and the leadership’s desire to join Gamaa Islamiya’s Nonviolence

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2 The leading writings for Islamic Jihad during the same period were: Aboud Al-Zomor, *Philosophy of the Confrontation and The Islamic Jihad Approach and Ideological Agenda of the Islamic Jihad Group*; and Legal Council of the Jihad Organization, *Document of Jihad and Landmarks of Revolutionary Action*. Later on, in the 1990s, other prominent writings appeared, such as the following: Legal Council of the Jihad Organization, *The Necessity of Jihad and Honor of Martyrdom; Jihad against Tyrants Is a Divine, Irreplaceable Act*; and *The Secret Call*; and Abdel Qadir Bin Abdel Aziz, *Basic Principles in Making Preparations for Jihad and A Compendium for the Search of Noble Knowledge*.

Initiative. This largely practical stance on the part of Islamic Jihad has assumed an ideological dimension in the movement's current phase of self-evaluation.

### **The impact of nonviolence on post-Sept. 11 Egypt**

In part due to the shifts in ideology and the adoption of nonviolence by Gamaa Islamiya and Islamic Jihad, Egypt's experience in the post-Sept. 11, 2001 climate differed greatly from that of many other Arab countries. While intelligence agencies around the world, led by those from America and the West, devoted resources to chasing down suspected domestic jihadist Islamists, throwing hundreds into prisons and secret detention camps, the Egyptian state had begun the process of emptying its prisons of Gamaa Islamiya members by gradually freeing over 20,000, and even accelerating the release of Islamic Jihad members in late 2007. Egypt was in the unique position of being almost free of jihadist groups and terrorist activity, while many Arab and Islamic states were overwhelmed by the proliferation of jihadist organizations practicing unprecedented levels of violence. Egypt has experienced a few instances of terrorism since Sept. 11, such as the three bombings in Sinai in 2004, 2005, and 2006, far from the crowded Nile Valley, and for which responsibility is still unclear. However, by regional and global standards, Egypt currently is relatively untouched by international terrorism.

The total cessation of violence by Gamaa Islamiya and Islamic Jihad in the last decade, and its implications for the future of violent jihadist organizations in Egypt, is especially significant given that the overwhelming international developments on the terrorism and religious violence fronts have failed to return these two groups to their old extremist ways. This decade has seen the birth of dozens of new jihadist organizations boasting thousands of supporters and sympathizers. Nonetheless,

the explosive growth in global jihad has not pushed Gamaa Islamiya and Islamic Jihad to revert to their jihadist ideology and change their current status as peaceful sociopolitical Islamic organizations.

In addition to the renunciation of violence on the part of Egypt's most prominent Islamic movements, there are other factors that suggest that violent extremism will not reemerge in Egypt. For one, beginning with its exportation of liberalism and liberal values throughout the Arab world, Egypt his-

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torically has exported more ideology than it has imported. In this vein, there is cause to believe that Egypt will not be greatly influenced by the violent extremism occurring in other countries in the region. As for the individuals and small groups that could be influenced by the model of al-Qaeda and other Salafi jihadist groups that have spread around the world during the past five years, the probability that they will appear in Egypt will likely diminish as Gamaa Islamiya and Islamic Jihad complete their self-evaluation processes. This could result either from the direct influence of the revisions' content on religious youth or from the members of the two former jihadist organizations spreading their influence throughout Egyptian society, acting as a buffer to protect youth in particular from violent jihadist ideas coming from abroad. It is not without irony that the two groups which yesterday were the source of religious violence and terror have now become Egypt's most important defense against the spread of global radical religious violence.

#### **The Revisions' impact on international jihad**

Islamic Jihad's self-review process and the release of "Advice Regarding the Conduct of Jihadist Action in Egypt and the World" are tantamount to the largest challenge, and the first of its kind from an Islamist group, to the global jihadist movement headed by al-Qaeda. This development promises to have a significant impact on international jihad and al-Qaeda, for a number of reasons. Most importantly, the prestige and international influence of Sayyid Imam Al-Sherif, aka Dr. Fadl, the author of "Advice Regarding the Conduct of Jihadist Action in Egypt and the World" and head of the revision process, lends legitimacy to Islamic Jihad's challenge to al-Qaeda's jihadist tendencies. Before the publication of Dr. Fadl's treatise, no Islamic Jihad leader had declared a fundamental difference in practice from al-Qaeda, especially in respect to the use of violence. It is imperative to note that Dr. Fadl's first two books, "Basic Principles in Making Preparations for Jihad" and "A Compendium for the Search of Noble Knowledge," remain at the top of the reading lists recommended by al-Qaeda and other jihadist groups, while audio files on jihadist websites confirm that at least as of a few months ago, his first book was still being taught to members as a very useful book in the field of jihad. That an intellectual leader with the caliber of Dr. Fadl has renounced the content of his previous two books, which remain fundamental sources of jihadist thought, must leave a mark on the global jihadist movement. Evidence suggests that some uncertainty and confusion has actually taken root in jihadist groups, as seen by many comments made during online jihadist forums after "Advice Regarding the Conduct of Jihadist Action in Egypt and the World" was published in late November 2007. These comments registered the disbelief toward the revisionist process and

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incredulity that Dr. Fadl himself could have taken such a huge step. The impact from the news of Islamic Jihad's self-review process was not restricted to the many anonymous young men posting online, but also spread to some of the major names in Salafist jihadist thought, such as Ayman Al-Zawahiri, the deputy leader of al-Qaeda. In a speech broadcast on Dec. 14, 2007 on the occasion of the Annapolis conference,

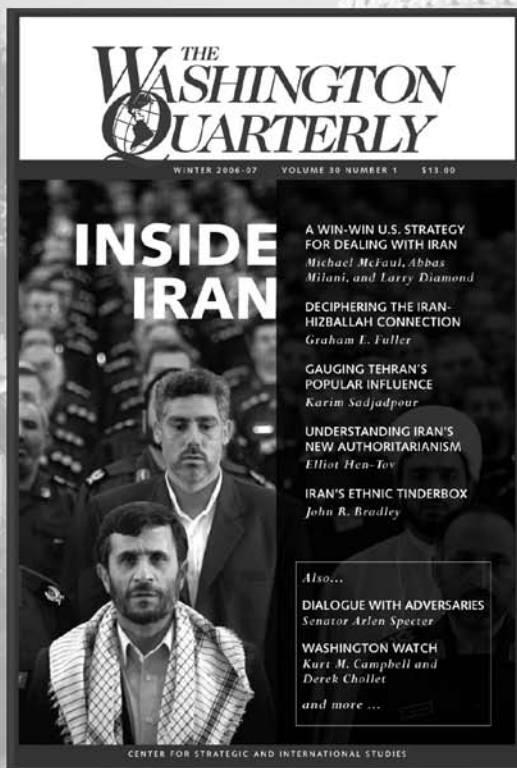
Al-Zawahiri devoted more than 40 percent of his time to sharply criticizing the document and the revisionist process in general, promising that al-Qaeda would soon issue a detailed response. In addition to Al-Zawahiri, other jihadist thinkers such as Abu Baseer Al-Tartousi, Abu Yahya Al-Libi, Hani Al-Sebai, and Abdullah Bin Hamid Al-Ali have all commented in various ways on Dr. Fadl's document.

The revisionist actions undertaken by Egypt's Islamist groups and the work of Dr. Fadl will likely effect global jihadist organizations differently, depending upon their history, ideology, and makeup. For instance, al-Qaeda depends essentially on a large number of deceased historical and modern writers, with a few old-guard contemporary authors, whereas newer organizations are more prone to follow current thinkers. Thus, it is likely that the effect of "Advice Regarding the Conduct of Jihadist Action in Egypt and the World" will be greater on the original al-Qaeda than it will be on the newer offshoots, considering the former's familiarity and respect for Dr. Fadl's writings, and the latter's adaptability and ability to draw from new, younger sources. Nonetheless, the self-review process is expected to have an impact on both al-Qaeda and the newer jihadist groups, given the widespread admiration among jihadists for Islamic Jihad's leadership.

Some argue that the self-evaluation processes and Dr. Fadl's writings will leave affect on international jihad and al-Qaeda because during the past six years Salafist jihadist models and ideas have spread around the world as a direct result of American and Western aggression in many areas, particularly in Islamic countries. Since this situation seems unlikely to abate in the near future, the spread of jihad will be unaffected by Islamic Jihad's self-evaluation process and "Advice Regarding the Conduct of Jihadist Action in Egypt and the World." However, this self-criticism by Gamaa Islamiya and Islamic Jihad, the oldest and largest jihadist groups in the world, is not simply intellectual exercise. Rather, they embody a new reality in international jihadist thought and could compel others to pursue the same non-violent course. Also not to be forgotten is the nature of Islamist movements, and jihadist ones in particular:

the philosophical, legitimizing process plays such a central role in their disposition toward the use of violence under the slogan of “jihad,” and they do not undertake practices without first providing religious justification satisfactory from their point of view. Hence, the trend of the evaluation process in general, and “Advice Regarding the Conduct of Jihadist Action in Egypt and the World” in particular, to criticize and correct jihadists will undoubtedly have an impact on the theoretical structure of believers within the international jihadist movement. ■

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