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Strong Organization, Weak Ideology: Muslim Brotherhood Trajectories in Egyptian Prisons Since 2013

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Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood Supreme Guide Mohamed Badie flashes the four-finger sign from behind dock bars during a trial in Cairo, July 2014 © Khaled Elfiqi/EPA



The Muslim Brotherhood is a special organization. They are like a group of ants; if you try to block the way in front of a moving line of ants you will realize that they are rearranging their routes and always finding a way to pass. This is precisely what the Brotherhood does well

Asaad,¹ a detainee in Tora prison, Cairo

On 28 January 2011 – as hundreds of thousands of Egyptians demonstrated on the day dubbed the “Friday of Anger” – Muslim Brotherhood member, Sameh, was demonstrating with several thousand others in Mansoura in the Nile Delta (120 km north of Cairo). As demonstrators began to throw stones at the State Security Investigations building, Sameh stood in front of them shouting “peaceful”. He was hit in the chest by a stone meant to hit the building in one of the city's most prestigious neighbourhoods. Two years later, Sameh was arrested on an array of charges, including joining the Brotherhood and committing acts of violence against the state. A few months later, he told a friend waiting on death row that he considered the Muslim Brotherhood to be apostates and that he had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (Daesh) and its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

Sameh's case is not unique. According to several detainees – including current prisoners spoken to over the phone – there are ongoing changes among detainees who have spent most of their lives as Muslim Brotherhood members.

Egyptian prisons host tens of thousands of political detainees – perhaps more than 60,000 according to Human Rights Watch.² Arrests have mainly targeted members of the Muslim Brotherhood and its supporters. However, with increased armed attacks against the army and police, arrests have also targeted alleged supporters of Daesh, al-Qa’ida, and Islamists affiliated with smaller organizations. The Egyptian National Council for Human Rights documented prison overcrowding at a rate of at least 160%,³ forcing the authorities to build 20 new prisons since the military coup in the summer of 2013.⁴ Importantly, this has led to an increased exchange of influences and ideologies among detainees from diverse backgrounds.



Detainees – those held after referral to the judiciary or sentencing – are often relocated during their detention, including frequent transfers to temporary detention centres during court hearings, or when brought before the Public Prosecution or for medical treatment. This further facilitates communication with different prison populations and discussion and exchange of ideas between detainees.

This paper does not dwell upon traditional classifications imposed on Islamic movements in terms of moderate and extremist trends. Nor does it go into detail regarding the mechanisms of individual radicalization, though it does encourage further study. Instead, we focus on the developmental dynamics of Muslim Brotherhood youth and sympathizers in Egypt, especially those who were arrested during the breakup of sit-ins supporting former President Mohamed Morsi.

Developmental dynamics refer to the conditions and contexts which Brotherhood members and sympathizers experience in prison. These inform broader understandings of issues including state and society relations, and social mobility through *jihad* as opposed to social mobility through the Brotherhood.

This paper also discusses the ways in which the Muslim Brotherhood manages its members inside prison, and its attempts to maintain the Brotherhood's administrative and intellectual organization. It is based primarily on information collected during 10 rare phone interviews with current prisoners. It is also based on additional phone and face-to-face interviews with former prisoners inside and outside Egypt. The interviewees come from five different cities and have been in at least seven prisons, including Tora, Wadi al-Natroun, Mansoura and Gamasa; for security and technical reasons, it was not possible to expand the research cohort. The paper is also based on reviews of articles written by detainees, press reports, opinion pieces, and research papers dealing with the complex social phenomenon of the Muslim Brotherhood from different angles.

Organization and ideology: strengths and weaknesses

When establishing the foundations of the Brotherhood's identity, Hassan al-Banna



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may never have imagined that the idea enabling the large-scale gathering of people in a single organization would also produce the Brotherhood's weakest point. For al-Banna, the Muslim Brotherhood is a "Salafist call, a Sunni way, a mystical (*Sufi*) truth, a political body, a sports group, a scientific and cultural association, an economic society and a social idea." See the letter written for the fifth Brotherhood conference by Sheikh Hassan al-Banna. ikhwanwiki.com With this broad definition of the identity of the Brotherhood, Hassan al-Banna wanted his "Brotherhood" to unite everybody.

In order to ensure the survival of the Brotherhood, intellectual, jurisprudential (*Fiqhi*) or doctrinal differences were given less importance despite the prominent social and political roles played by the Brotherhood. While things have not always been smooth, the Brotherhood has demonstrated great ability to bridge internal contradictions for 90 years. These contradictions include intellectual, regional and generational differences. Internal balances of power and social and political contexts have always been influential in shaping the Brotherhood's intellectual orientations.

This cohesion comes from the Brotherhood's embrace and unification of opposing factions under its name and within its social functions and political ambitions. Those partners were not divided by their different ideas, whether they were religious (about jurisprudence and doctrine), intellectual (about concepts such as democracy), or even social (such as the relationship to the community and its different forces).

Hossam Tammam (1972-2011) observed how the organization, not the ideology, played the most important role, and how it was this that prevented the splitting of the Brotherhood.⁵ The organization has been subject to violent shocks throughout its history; indeed, the history of the Brotherhood is the history of the "trials" it has experienced. The members of the Brotherhood define its history via the trial of 1948, the assassination of al-Banna in 1949, the trials of 1954 and 1965, the limited confrontation with Sadat, and the long-term confrontation with the Mubarak regime. However, the Muslim Brotherhood has always been able to maintain its cohesion or to quickly restore it. Nonetheless, the Brotherhood's recent and intense confrontation with the state following the overthrow of Morsi led to a loss of control over its members, which brought to the surface many of its underlying



conflicts.

On 14 August 2013, the breakup of Rabaa al-Adawiya and Nahdha sit-ins marked the pinnacle of an overwhelming security crackdown that, according to conservative independent estimates, killed more than 1,000 Brotherhood supporters.⁶ The sit-ins were followed by a massive campaign of arrests of tens of thousands of Brotherhood members, including an overwhelming majority of the leaders from the first, second and third ranks – a blow many thought will end the organization.

The first wave of imprisoned Brotherhood members

Security forces launched a wave of arrests immediately after the announcement of the overthrow of Morsi on 3 July 2013. The first wave of arrests extended to a limited number of political and first-rank leaders of the Brotherhood, but soon included thousands of people who took part in the Rabaa al-Adawiya and Nahdha sit-ins. Most of the detainees were Brotherhood members or sympathizers or belonged to other Islamic groups, such as the *Gamaa Islamiya* (Islamic Group), or non-hierarchical Salafi groups, such as the *Hazimoun* Movement, formed primarily to support Sheikh Hazem Salah Abu Ismail in his presidential candidacy.⁷ The arrests continued intensively into early 2014.

Interaction between the different factions of Brotherhood supporters and sympathizers had begun before the arrests, especially during the sit-ins by Morsi supporters. For example, in the Rabaa al-Adawiya sit-in, it was clear that the Salafist and jihadist currents dominated the speech of the main podium of the sit-in, which contributed to many Egyptians entertaining negative images of the protesters.⁸ Control of the podium was a reflection of the weakness of the Brotherhood's ideology compared to that of the Salafist movements. During the sit-in, Brotherhood members shared the field with the Salafists, but the weakness of the Brotherhood's ideology had far-reaching consequences.

Tammam attributed this weakness to the gap between political practice and the founding ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood “practices a political



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act that belongs to the moment of the modern national state” in sharp contrast to its educational and intellectual frameworks that “circulate ideas and political theories belonging to the pre-national state.”⁹ This trial, which the Brotherhood failed by its full assimilation into the modern national state, did not apply to the Salafists and non-Muslim Brotherhood Islamists. Therefore, unlike the Brotherhood, whose opponents can, for good reasons, accuse the group of duplicity – contradiction, or the use of “*taqiya*” – Islamists with Salafist or jihadist tendencies were able to retain their puritanism. This combination led to a one-way transfer of ideas during the sit-in, from the Salafists towards the Muslim Brotherhood.¹⁰

During detention, the early stages of prison and trials, local¹¹ and international¹² organizations have documented various forms of torture by security forces against prisoners. This began immediately after security forces killed hundreds of protesters. The protesters circulated stories – most of which were later documented¹³ – about the security forces setting fire to the corpses of protesters on the spot, the killing of the wounded, and the blocking of safe passages for those wishing to leave the sit-in.

The failure of the Brotherhood to deal with state violence and reduce losses – and before that its failure to run the country and assume responsibility for the presidency – was a primary subject of discussion in prison. This was reflected by Asaad, a young man in his late twenties from the coastal province of Alexandria who was arrested in early 2014 and is still held in a Cairo prison. He said that Brotherhood youth often felt they were victims in the first months of detention. “Young people did not think that they were only deceived administratively but were vengeful towards the Brotherhood because of a sense of intellectual deception”. Asaad added that Brotherhood youth in prison believe that the organization’s leaders had hidden from them Islamic concepts such as “jihad” and did not explain it to them, as understood by the Salafist and the Jihadi movements.

Although the concept of “jihad” was central to the letters of the Brotherhood's founder, the use of force was not an option at all in the Brotherhood’s education curriculums. According to Asaad, during the early stages of imprisonment, discussions centred on resistance as a means of dealing with the regime in Egypt.



“For the youth of the Brotherhood, the organization was a backward entity closer to the oppressors than the oppressed”, says Asaad, noting that the moment was ripe for jihadist groups to attract new members, particularly since the Brotherhood was unable to justify its political position, which did not live up to the requirements of the post-revolutionary period.

The Brotherhood’s organization was at its weakest, and its ideology was no better when faced with reality. At the same time, jihadist groups, such as *Ansar Bayet al-Maqdis* (Supporters of Jerusalem) were making what angry youths considered “successes” on the ground, inflicting large casualties on the army and the police force. In a few months, the group, which later pledged its allegiance to the Islamic State (ISIS) and became the ISIS Group in Sinai, claimed responsibility for bombings and armed operations in various parts of Egypt, such as Cairo, Mansoura and Beni Suef, as well as in the Sinai Peninsula. For many members of the Brotherhood inside and outside prison, the “legitimacy of achievement”, i.e. reprisal against the regime, became stronger than the intellectual or organizational legitimacy that the Brotherhood had held for years.

Imprisoned non-Brotherhood supporters were the most easily influenced by jihadist ideas and the allure of ISIS. Inside prison, the Brotherhood was incapable of attracting them, particularly in the first months of detention. Prison overcrowding and subsequent mixing of prisoners played an important role in introducing moderate political detainees to the most extreme ones. Indeed, multiple testimonies confirmed a repeated pattern, starting with arrest and ending with the detainees pledging allegiance to ISIS. To explain this process, we outline below selected detainee testimonies in some detail.

The maximum-security ward: the dialectic of Jihad and *takfir*

Ramzi, a young man in his twenties, was sentenced to death following his arrest in 2015 and conviction on charges of using violence against the state. Ramzi's account of his detention and observations of other detainees reveal much of what the detainees go through during their intellectual transformation.



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Ramzi was a long-standing member of the Brotherhood but left after the coup for reasons he said were “practical, in relation to managing the crisis”. A top college graduate, Ramzi decided to join one of the committees known as the “Qualitative Work Committee”, which accepted the option of armed resistance by targeting regime facilities and officials. Ramzi refuses to call them jihadists saying, “those who carry out the ‘qualitative’ operations differ radically from organizations, such as the Islamic State in terms of their views of the regime, society, and the *takfir*¹⁴ of the army and the police”.

Ramzi was arrested nearly a year after leaving the Brotherhood. On the day of his arrest, he was transferred to the headquarters of a security agency where he was tortured. He said he was beaten, hung with his arms tied behind his back, given electric shocks all over his body, especially on the genitals, and sodomized with a wooden stick.

Ramzi was made to forcibly disappear for more than 20 days, during which he was forced to record a video where he read out loud a pre-written confession to various crimes. He was then transferred to the high-security ward at Tora prison in Cairo, a ward designed to punish prisoners and isolate those considered most dangerous. This suggests a desire to isolate prisoners who have engaged in violence from the rest of the political detainees but is far from the truth. According to another detainee interviewed by phone, many detainees in these wards did not engage in violence.

In the high-security ward, Ramzi became acquainted with Islamists of all currents: “ISIS, al-Qa’ida, the Muslim Brotherhood and sheikhs of the Salafist Front.”¹⁵ He said: “when I was in prison, I heard about *takfir* for the first time”. Ramzi did not meet ISIS members as “they accused us of being apostates... we were afraid that we might be wrong, so we started to engage with them”.

When engaging with ISIS members, Ramzi took a different approach to explain the rationale of the Brotherhood. The first wave of detainees saw jihadists as having the “legitimacy of achievement” and representing a practical alternative to the Brotherhood’s inability to handle the state. Ramzi and his friends believed it was their religious duty to get closer to the jihadists so as not to end up in “hell”.



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Ramzi spent nearly a year in the high-security ward. In addition to the hardships of detention in the ward, detainees “spent their time in intellectual conflicts”, said Ramzi. He detailed dealings with the prison administration and other prisoners. He was held with 11 others in a cell not large enough for more than seven people. He said:

“We were only allowed to go out to exercise for one hour before the other prisoners... when we went out in the morning, we would meet many frowning faces that did not smile or talk to us, and when they finally did, they accused us of being apostates because we were part of the Muslim Brotherhood that believed in democracy and participated in the elections”.

ISIS members believe Sharia should be supreme and that turning to popular decisions through elections or referendums – even accepting secular litigation procedures – are acts requiring the expulsion of participants from Islam. ISIS members rely on texts from the Quran and Sunna to confirm their views. Ramzi said: “when *al-Dawa’ish* [ISIS supporters] attacked us, we did not know how to respond because we did not have any knowledge of Sharia or Islamic jurisprudence... We asked the Brotherhood, but we did not find any answers”. Even when Ramzi and his companions asked more knowledgeable clerics outside prison, their response was that they must commit to worship and refrain from engaging in discussions with ISIS. Ramzi did not follow these instructions: “this is my religion, the dearest to me, so I was trying to understand from everyone, and so we started talking to the Salafists and members of al-Qa’ida”.

Ramzi and other detainees gradually established ties with al-Qa’ida members and Salafists such as Ashraf Abdel Moneim and Hisham Mashali. “Dr Hisham and Dr Ashraf were more than helpful in responding to al-Dawa’ish”. Abdel Moneim and Mashali later published two electronic books: Hisham Mashali, *Advice on Innocence from Muslim Takfir*. Ashraf Abdel Moneim, *Heated Discussions Behind Cold Bars* gabhasalafia.com that included discussions about *takfir* based on their experience conversing with ISIS members. “We spent a lot of time in these discussions, months even”, said Ramzi. He justified these discussions on the basis that it is very difficult to get books inside the prison, and almost impossible to smuggle phones or communicate with the outside world. There was no scientific material available for discussion. This situation led to increased pressure among detainees,



“discussions inside the cell were very intense, to the extent of fist fights”.

Ramzi said he did not see major shifts towards ISIS during his detention, believing that this was due to the efforts of the Salafist Front sheikhs. “We would hear something from al-Dawa’ish, then go the next day to the Salafist sheikhs, and then back to respond to al-Dawa’ish on the third day, and so on”. When asked about his current affiliation, Ramzi answered decisively: “I no longer belong to anything, I do not find a classification that suits me”.

According to Ramzi, what ISIS members failed to achieve in the high-security ward, was successfully completed on the death row ward in Wadi al-Natroun prison.

Death row: the making of a jihadist in prison

Beginning in 2016, Ahmed spent a year and a half on death row at Wadi al-Natroun prison before being transferred to another prison. He talked about a cruel life that could end at any moment.

“There are twenty cells in the Wadi al-Natroun prison, all of which were individual cells. But due to overcrowding, three people were put in one. The cells are not equipped with water or electricity. One lamp on the outside of the cell bars shines in the direction of the corridor. The cell is not exposed to sunlight either. It has two windows, each of 30 cm wide, overlooking two corridors. In the summer, we almost died from the heat in our cell.”

In each cell, two buckets are used as a toilet. The prisoners leave the cell to exercise in isolation from the rest of the prisoners. “Everyone has 20 minutes bathroom time a day, during which the individual has to shower, wash clothes and use the toilet”, said Ahmed. Visits were not easy and limited to one visit per month to see family for about half an hour, with detainees handcuffed the whole time. The authorities allow food and red clothes only, sometimes books are allowed, especially for students.

In the course of a year and a half, Ahmed said he attended 19 executions, six were of politicians. He explained the enormous pressure on prisoners. “People are



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dragged in front of you to their death”. When the death sentence is issued, the chief of investigations, inspectors from the Ministry of Health, and almost all the prison's interrogators raid the cell of the prisoner to be executed. “Most of the time, the prison guard would deceive the prisoners and tell them that they are doing an unannounced search; however, they would lead them to the gallows”.

In many cases, those sentenced to death are transferred to death row before the proceedings are fully completed. For example, in the case of some of those sentenced to death for conducting operations against the army in the Sinai, executions were carried out about a month after the court rejected their appeals.

Prisoners sentenced to death do not attend court appeal sessions. Ahmed said that the families of many prisoners do not tell the detainee about the outcome of the proceedings if their appeal is rejected. This means that the detainee may be taken to the gallows without knowing that he has exhausted all court proceedings. “We were afraid that our sentences could be upheld and that we might be executed at any moment”, Ahmed said.

Ahmed said that in these circumstances a person prepares to die and “meet God” – they are always thinking about religion. “The issues of *takfir* and excusing [religious] ignorance are on our mind all the time. This is the most discussed topic in prison”. Many ISIS members are on death row, and with enormous pressure on prisoners, they use prophetic traditions or Quranic verses to convince prisoners to pledge allegiance. “They tell me that there is a Caliph [leader of the organization] and that I have to pledge allegiance to him. I was terrified that I might die an infidel,”¹⁶ he said. Under these conditions, Ahmed met Sameh, along with four other Brotherhood members sentenced to death.

According to Ahmed, “no one on death row believes in the traditional ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood”. The former Brotherhood members whom Ahmed met on death row at Wadi al-Natroun were part of many discussions with ISIS members before talking with some Brotherhood leaders. Four of the five people Ahmed met engaged in extensive discussions with a Muslim Brotherhood leader they had met while being transferred between different prisons. These discussions centred on Islamic permission of democracy and participation in elections. According to Ahmed: “the Brotherhood leader could not respond to them... in the end, the four



announced their affiliation with ISIS and pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi”. However, the fifth man, who studied at al-Azhar, did not adopt ISIS ideas, which led his four former comrades to abandon and completely isolate him.

Ahmed, who has been in prison for more than three years, said: “extremism and discussions of this kind decline as prison conditions improve. The narrower the world is, the narrower your thoughts will be”. Abdullah, a 20-year-old who studied media, agrees with Ahmed. He believes that intellectual debates decreased as prisoners fill their time with books, smartphones, or tablets if they can get them.

Keeping up, not affiliation

Abdullah described a similar experience that reflects that of almost all interviewees. He said he was not significantly involved in politics before his arrest: “I was a supporter of Abdel Moneim Abul Fotouh’s¹⁷ nomination in the presidential elections, but I was not affiliated with any organization”.

Abdullah was arrested after a phone call with a friend who was wanted by the security forces. He was subjected to enforced disappearance for 40 days, during which time he was interrogated for 12 days. The interrogation was carried out every three hours and he was deprived of sleep. Abdullah said: “almost all of their questions were about my friend who telephoned me”. During the investigation, petrol was thrown on his body and ignited. He was electrocuted, stripped naked in winter and tied to an iron ring on the ground of the cell. When transferred to prison, Abdullah went to a high-security prison in Cairo, he said: “I spent 30 days seeing the sun only during an imprisonment renewal session at the State Security Prosecution”. For six months, Abdullah spent most of his time in a cell of 16 people, most of whom were ISIS members.

Abdullah learned about *takfir* for the first time in prison. When a fight broke out between members of ISIS and the Brotherhood, Abdullah called out to a prison guard to intervene; however, they all turned to him and called him an “apostate” for seeking the help of the “infidel government”.

Prior to his arrest, Abdullah had no interest in the issues discussed by the jihadists in prison and was often unequipped with the knowledge to discuss them. “I felt



that what they were saying was contrary to reason, but I cannot come up with evidence in Sharia that contradicts what they said”. Abdullah eventually told some ISIS members that he knew nothing about religion and asked them to teach him, which meant that they would get closer to him. “Within three months, fraternity developed between us”.

Abdullah explained the dedication of ISIS ward prisoners to intellectual discussions saying: “the cell is completely empty of books except for the Quran. There are no books, no telephones, no communication with the outside world. Even after reading a lot of the Quran and after a lot of prayers, we would still have a lot of free time to be filled with ideological and intellectual discussions”.

Abdullah helped ISIS members by giving them the medicines they needed, which he obtained from personal visits. He also shared food with them, helping him maintain their friendliness. Keeping up with ISIS was Abdullah's solution to surviving the time before moving to another ward containing liberal political prisoners and other Brotherhood members. “A Brotherhood member was in the cell with me, but he asked to be moved from the ward so that he would not be affected by ISIS”, said Abdullah. He continued: “his request was declined, and a few months later he became an active ISIS member in prison”. The situation is different in cells not packed with ISIS supporters.

Return of the organization: who controls the prisons today?

It was not long after Brotherhood members were imprisoned that its organizational structure emerged within the prisons it occupied. It adapted its structures to the prison context with surprising efficiency. This is likely due to technical and administrative reasons; the large numbers of Muslim Brotherhood members in prisons; the tremendous organizational capabilities of certain individuals and intermediate leaders of the Brotherhood; and the desire of the authorities, such as the Ministry of Interior, to impose order within the prisons at minimal cost and effort.

Musaab, a detainee in a Cairo prison, explained how the Brotherhood organized



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several elections to select departments and committees inside the prison to run its affairs, in addition to holding internal elections to select the Brotherhood's leaders inside the prison. “The Brotherhood held elections to choose their ‘coordinators’ for each prison, with each coordinator choosing his assistants”, Musab said.

The role of the coordinator includes communicating with the prison administration, arranging the movement of prisoners for visits and trials, and coordinating with the prison administration to schedule the times of exercise. In some prisons, this role extended to coordinating with the prison administration regarding further penalties imposed on prisoners. For example, if a prisoner committed an offence, e.g. causing trouble with other prisoners or spreading extremist ideology, the Brotherhood coordinators in some prisons referred these prisoners to the prison administration to be transferred to disciplinary cells, cells for common law criminals, or even ISIS cells. While political prisoners generally participate in the elections of the coordinators, the Brotherhood candidate usually wins as they constitute the majority of political detainees.

The ability of the Brotherhood coordinators to deal with prison officers varies from one prison to another. According to Musaab, who was held in several prisons, a coordinator at the Tora compound coordinated closely with the prison administration, which resulted in improvement in the treatment of prisoners. This contrasts with the Wadi al-Natroun prison, for example, which has very little coordination. Eyad, a former detainee who spent time in a prison in the Nile Delta, says that the coordinator communicated with the prison commander to transfer Eyad to the criminal ward after he had an argument with an imprisoned Brotherhood leader.

Musaab said that at the individual level, detainees now spend their time differently from what they did four years ago: “some days, I spend time watching TV series or movies from morning to evening on a phone or a tablet that I smuggled”. Prisoners can also obtain many prohibited items by bribing prison officers and guards. For example, detainees can smuggle a telephone in for about 4000 Egyptian pounds (approx. US\$223) paid to a guard. The price may double during times of increased security measures and varies from prison to prison. However, the prison authorities punish those found with prohibited items. For example, Musaab was subjected to solitary confinement and disciplinary measures more than once after



the prison authorities discovered he had a smartphone.

However, Brotherhood members run prison cells with a clear system. For example, in the Tora prison, the Brotherhood established a training academy called “Nuran” that is open to all prisoners and offered courses in English, German and Turkish, as well as courses in religion, economy, politics and international relations. “It was agreed that the prison courtyard would be given to ISIS prisoners two days per week and to the Muslim Brotherhood for the rest of the week”, Musaab said.

In some prisons, the Brotherhood runs the canteen and sells supplies to prisoners, which allows them to make financial gains that are used to finance detainees' expenses and other activities inside the prison. This stability enabled the Brotherhood to regain control over its imprisoned members. The Brotherhood provides an effective social incubator in prison, and ongoing relations between members inside and outside the prison give the Brotherhood many reasons to maintain cohesive influence over its members.

However, splits between the two factions of the Muslim Brotherhood¹⁸ eventually escalated. One faction was trying to maintain cohesion as a top priority, by avoiding escalation with the state, particularly armed escalation. This front retained control of most of the Brotherhood's resources, which were used to exert pressure on the geographic areas supporting the second faction that adopted armed action in the face of regime repression. The latter faction was led by the late Mohammed Kamal, a member of the Guidance Office, the Brotherhood's top executive body. When these splits reached the prisons: “the organization stopped financial allocations for the families of the detainees from the areas that supported Kamal's front”, Asaad said. This control of funds proved effective in cutting support for Kamal's front.¹⁹

The financial carrot was accompanied by a stick. Because of the mutual benefit between the organization's leaders inside prison and the prison administration, the organization made many reputational compromises to preserve its existence. Eyad believes that Brotherhood leaders in a Nile Delta prison handed over Brotherhood members who had disagreed with them to the prison administration who accused them of extremism resulting in new charges. Additionally, many detainees, including Sameh and Asaad, reported that some Brotherhood leaders in



their city informed the authorities on Brotherhood members, leading to their arrest and death sentence.

Such tools used by the Brotherhood to neutralize or bring into line internal dissidents have proved effective. Asaad said that younger Brotherhood members who became sympathetic to ISIS ideology are now distancing themselves from it. “I heard a young man talks about his psychological instability while he was with ISIS”, Asaad said. He added: “After years of isolation with ISIS, you find them [imprisoned young men] moving away from ISIS and getting closer to the Muslim Brotherhood, where they participate in prison activities, play sports, attend training courses, and have some fun!”

The Brotherhood also exerts influence via education. In addition to sports and training activities, detained Brotherhood members are divided into small groups, similar to structures outside the prison, known as “families”. Educational curriculums²⁰ focusing on religion are taught to members of these families. These curriculums are “traditional, and do not discuss any real change in ideas”, according to Asaad.

Time and imprisonment: two killers of ideology

All interviewees agreed that intellectual debates have now disappeared or began to gradually disappear soon after the first wave of arrests in the summer of 2013. “I came to Tora prison three years ago and moved between different prisons, and now I'm back here again”, said Ahmed. “At the time [of my arrest], discussions and conflicts were ongoing all the time, but now the situation is completely different. There are exercises from early morning to late evening; telephones, laptops and gaming devices are smuggled. I no longer hear anyone engaging in religious or ideological discussions”.

After five years in prison, Musaab said: “The detainees are no longer thinking about intellectual and ideological differences, or even about the political scene or the Brotherhood's place in it”. He continues, “They just want to go to their homes!”



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“All of them have been psychologically and socially abused. I’m talking about mass divorces and huge debts that weigh heavily on many of them”, Asaad said, adding that “prisons robbed them of their souls”. This situation extends all the way up to the Brotherhood leadership. Asaad said that some of the Brotherhood's leaders now intend to step down from any public work, “they say they have done everything they can, and cannot do more”.

Although the Brotherhood’s organizational skills have restored some of its dominance over the detainees, interviews indicate that the current sentiment among detainees can best be described as “indifference” or “a lack of belonging”. This is evident in the desire of many detainees, especially in Tora prison, to reach an agreement with the regime for their release, or at least to improve their prison conditions through the so-called “Initiative”.

Since late 2014, the regime has communicated with members of the Muslim Brotherhood through officers of the National Security Agency (NSA), urging the Brotherhood to petition President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, declaring that they disown the terrorist Muslim Brotherhood and recognize the legitimacy of the current regime. According to interviews with detainees, this effort did not gain much traction at the time and was not well handled by the NSA. Later, those who responded positively were isolated by other imprisoned Brotherhood members and other political detainees.

In 2018, another attempt by an NSA officer in Tora prison to persuade detainees to petition President al-Sisi was successful. In this case, the NSA officer offered incentives to those who agreed to sign the petition. For example, he transferred several powers that the Brotherhood held inside the prison to those who signed the “Initiative” petition. The canteen came under their responsibility instead of the Brotherhood’s and the prison administration showed great flexibility with their demands. “If a prisoner wants to avoid being deported to another prison, all he has to do is sign the ‘Initiative’”, said Asaad. He noted that the number of detainees signing the “Initiative” increases daily “to gain more visits, or medical treatments or a more humane treatment”.

While the Brotherhood has maintained good relations with at least one prison officer, four sources close to the Brotherhood in Tora Prison spoke about the



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removal of this officer under pressure from the NSA official responsible for the “Initiative”. This deprived the Brotherhood of a source of influence. While some Brotherhood members and many sympathizers have signed the “Initiative”, most of those who have signed the “Initiative” are not Brotherhood members.

The Brotherhood still maintains numerical strength and can, therefore, influence prison stability. For the first time, however, detainees are aware that it may be more effective to communicate via one of the signatories to mediate with the prison administration for demands instead of communicating via the Brotherhood's coordinators.

It is worth mentioning that the experience of the “Initiative” has not spread to other Egyptian prisons. So far, the petition appears to have come from a single National Security Agency officer rather than being led by detainees. Yet the restlessness of the detainees in different prisons indicates that its replication is desired, especially if the authorities begin to release or pardon signatories to the “Initiative”.

Conclusion

The campaign of mass arrests following the 3 July 2013 coup marked a decisive stage for the Muslim Brotherhood. It followed the largest massacre in Egypt’s recent history, in which the authorities targeted Brotherhood members and sympathizers. The repression that also targeted non-Brotherhood led to transformations that can be observed at different levels, both among organizations and individuals.

At the individual level, a clear pattern can be observed, one in which Brotherhood members are arrested by the security forces for political reasons or suspicion of engaging in political violence. They are then interrogated using brutal and degrading means of torture, with the detainee disappearing for up to three months. They are then transferred to a heavily guarded prison that also hosts members of *takfiri* armed groups, such as ISIS. In prison, Brotherhood members engage in interactions that begin with declaring the apostasy of police and army officers who tortured and imprisoned them and often end with detainees pledging allegiance to ISIS and its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.



These transformations are intensified in the high-security wards and death row to the extent that mainstream Brotherhood ideas largely disappear. This transformation can be explained by the isolation of detainees from any real exchange of ideas, as well as the tremendous psychological pressure suffered in prison. Their decisions thus come as emotional reactions to suffering during arrest and interrogation. This pattern highlights the responsibility of the authorities for the process that drives many political opponents toward violence and *takfir*.

Individual, social, cultural, class, and generational differences are also important. They may contribute to individual readiness to accept or reject *takfiri* ideology. It is necessary to consider the intellectual fragility and superficiality of Sharia or religious knowledge among most Brotherhood members and sympathizers. They are often unable to respond to the religious evidence that the *takfiri* or ISIS members use to support their arguments. In many cases, members of the Salafist movement, such as the Salafist Front, have great skill in debating with ISIS members to the extent that Brotherhood members turned to them for assistance. This means that belonging to *takfiri* movements in the cases we have observed in high-security wards and death row wards is not a political choice but an emotional and religious one. Converts to these movements, who may be subject to execution or lengthy imprisonment, become convinced that their non-affiliation with these movements means they have abandoned Islam.

At the organizational level, observations confirm conclusions by Hossam Tammam about the impact of the Brotherhood on the surrounding environment. The organization restricts its members in the periods of political obstruction and calls for hierarchical relations and the principle of listening and obedience. This is a matter of survival for the organization.²¹ Security raids successfully undermined the organization's capabilities in the immediate aftermath of the coup, but over time, the Brotherhood managed to regain control over its members by providing a social incubator for detainees inside the prison as well as for their families outside. The organization also used its financial capabilities and relations with the authorities inside the prison to neutralize dissent from within and “purify the Brotherhood”.

As for the Brotherhood, the current confrontation with the Egyptian regime proves that organizational structure, rather than the ideology, is what ensures the



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Brotherhood's survival in the face of the eradication campaign being waged against them. This factor also relates to the Brotherhood's political views, which have long been fully assimilated into the frameworks of the modern nation-state. These compromises meant the Brotherhood lost many supporters when elected to govern Egypt.

However, this does not mean that the organization does not face great challenges inside prisons. The criticism many Brotherhood supporters have made against the founding ideas of the Brotherhood does not yet constitute an immediate threat to the organization in the absence of organizational alternatives. The real challenge comes from outside the Brotherhood. In some prisons, the authorities have been able to provide incentives to Brotherhood members and others in return for signing the "Initiative" disowning the Brotherhood and asking for a presidential pardon. This is not yet widespread but if these incentives outweigh the those offered by the Brotherhood to its imprisoned supporters, a new scenario may emerge where the Brotherhood would suffer losses at the organizational level of the scale it has suffered on the ideological front.



Endnotes

1. The names of interviewees to were changed during the preparation of this paper.
2. hrw.org
3. nchregypt.org PDF
4. arij.net
5. Hossam Tamam, "The Muslim Brotherhood: Pre-Revolution Years", Dar Al Shorouk, 2012
6. hrw.org
7. For more information, see Ali al-Rijal, *Hazmoun Islamic Movement*, Arab Reform Initiative. archives.arab-reform.net
8. For more information, see Sherif Mohieddin, *Rabaa al-Adawiya Sit-Ins from the Inside: The Organization's Structure, Tactics and Interaction with Media Campaigns*, Arab Reform Initiative. archives.arab-reform.net
9. Hossam Tamam, *Transformations of the Muslim Brotherhood: Dissociation of Ideology and End of Organization*, Madbouli Library, 2010
10. Samuel Tadros, *The Brotherhood Divided*. hudson.org
11. alnadeem.org
12. hrw.org
13. hrw.org
14. *Takfir* or *Takfeer* is a controversial concept in Islamist discourse, denoting excommunication, as one Muslim declaring another Muslim as a non-believer (*kafir*).
15. The Salafi Front is a political association with a Salafi Islamic orientation. It emerged after the 25 January 2011 revolution and participated in the Rabaa al-Adawiya sit-in. It describes itself as a movement and a pressure group and "not a political party or an organizational group". Among its most prominent figures are Ahmed Maulana, Ashraf Abdel Moneim and Hisham Mashali, who all spent various periods in detention after the military coup.
16. Ahmad is referring to the hadeeth of the Prophet Mohammad (peace be upon him), "Whoever dies without the pledge of allegiance on his neck, dies a death of Jahiliya". This is a hadeeth quoted by the members of the ISIS on the obligation of allegiance to the leader of the organization and the *takfir* of those who did not do so.
17. Abdel Moneim Abul Fotouh is a former Muslim Brotherhood leader and an Egyptian opposition figure. He ran for president in 2012, which saw his dismissal from the Muslim Brotherhood. His presidential campaign included tens of thousands of volunteers from various political backgrounds.
18. For more information, see Muhammad Hamama, *How Does the Muslim Brotherhood Octopus Suffocate Itself?* 10 February 2016, [Mada Masr](http://MadaMasr).
19. Supporting detainees' families is one of the Brotherhood's main responsibilities towards its members. However, with the internal splits and the organization's factionalized control of funds, this support is limited to families in the geographic areas of those obeying the organization. This tactic may have contributed to the downsizing and weakening of the influence of Kamal's front inside the prison. Kamal's front – The Qualitative Work Committee – is based mainly on organizational ties and by losing the support of Brotherhood prisoners, the front lost one of the main sources of support on the ground and may lose its electoral legitimacy if the Brotherhood was to hold internal elections.



20. The Muslim Brotherhood “family” means that all members of the Brotherhood, at all organizational levels, are divided into small groups consisting of an average of five members. Each family has a “Captain” and is considered the first unit of education and organization.
21. Hossam Tammam, *The Muslim Brotherhood: Pre-Revolution Years*, 2010.



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