

Terrorism Monitor

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SYRIA: AL-QAEDA LOOKS TO REVIVE ITS FORTUNES

Brian Perkins

An attack on Syrian government forces in the country's Hama governorate appears to have been intended to raise the profile of a rejuvenated al-Qaeda-linked alliance in the midst of Syria's conflict.

Syrian forces have been ramping up their assaults on jihadist groups in Hama in recent weeks ([ABNA](#), August 7). Amid that campaign, fighters with Hurras al-Din claimed to have carried out an attack on government positions in Jurin, in northern Hama, saying in a statement on August 3 that "many" government troops had been killed in the assault ([Jihadology](#), August 3). The group later also published photographs, supposedly showing the attack, in which militants could be seen firing mortars and using a heavy machine gun ([SITE](#), August 6).

One month earlier the group claimed to have killed seven government soldiers in an operation in Tell Bizam, in northern Hama, although pro-regime media termed the incident a "failed attack" ([FNA](#), July 9).

Formed in February, Hurras al-Din (also called the Guardians of Religion Organization) brings together a number of jihadist groups, including Jaysh al-Malahem, Jaysh al-Badia, and Jaish al-Sahel, and appears to constitute an alliance of al-Qaeda loyalists united in their fealty to Ayman al-Zawahiri ([Step News](#), February 27).

The group's leader, Abu Hamam al-Shami, is a former member of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) who fell out with the HTS leadership over its clampdown on al-Qaeda elements ([New Arab](#), May 1; [Enab Baladi](#), May 10). That purge was in November last year, when HTS arrested a number of high-profile al-Qaeda-affiliated clerics and leaders, including former Jabhat al-Nusra ideologue Sami al-Aridi and former Jabhat Fateh al-Sham leader Iyad al-Tubaisi ([Syria Call](#), November 27, 2017). The move prompted an immediate rebuke from al-Zawahiri and appeared to confirm that al-Qaeda had lost control of its major Syrian affiliate ([Asharq al-Awsat](#), November 30, 2017).

Also contributing to the formation of Hurras al-Din seems to have been HTS' acquiescence to Turkish intervention in Idlib and the establishment of a "de-escalation" zone ([MEMRI](#), June 8; [Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs](#), September 15, 2017). That decision was largely

pragmatic on the part of HTS, but has potentially laid it open to an ideological backlash from other hardliners.

However, while critical of HTS, Hurras al-Din appears keen to avoid conflict with the group. In any case, it is in no position to threaten it, with its fighters spread thinly and under-resourced. Nonetheless, the images the group published supposedly depicting its attack on government troops in Jurin showcased an improved arsenal and could be seen as an attempt to bolster its position as it seeks to pick up the support of local groups unhappy with its rival's new direction. The emergence of Hurras al-Din offers al-Qaeda its best chance yet to reinvigorate its support in Syria.

TUNISIA: TROUBLED POLITICS ALLOWS MILITANTS TO MAXIMIZE IMPACT

Brian Perkins

An attack on a police patrol last month by al-Qaeda-linked fighters has raised fears of greater militant activity in Tunisia as a political crisis in the capital Tunis gathers pace. The situation, however, remains relatively controlled.

Six members of the Tunisian National Guard were killed and three others wounded in July when militants attacked a patrol in Ghardimaou in the northwestern region of Jendouba, in an area known to be a communications black spot ([al-Jazeera](#), July 8; [Asharq al-Awsat](#), July 9). The group's patrol vehicles were reportedly hit by an improvised explosive device before waiting militants opened fire on the survivors ([TAP](#), July 9). On July 8, a statement from al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) said its Tunisian branch, the Katiba Uqba ibn Nafi (KUIN), had carried out the attack, a claim made through a newly created Telegram channel for the group.

The incident, which sparked national outrage in Tunisia, is significant as the first major KUIN attack this year. Although still relatively small, it successfully dealt a blow to the Tunisian tourism sector, which is slowly rebuilding after two major attacks in 2015. The attack on holiday-makers took place at a resort in Sousse, with authorities cancelling cultural events, including an international music festival ([TAP](#), July 8).

KUIN has long had a presence in the Chaambi mountain range along the border with Algeria, but has suffered a series of setbacks at the hands of the security forces, including losing its leader, Mourad Chaieb, in August last year and a number of other leaders ([MosaïqueFM](#), August 9, 2017; [MME](#), January 21). The Ghardimaou attack could indicate the group is reconfiguring.

European governments will be watching the situation closely, especially following the arrest of a Tunisian national in Germany accused of planning an attack using the poison ricin (see Christian Jokinen's article in this issue of *Terrorism Monitor*). Furthermore, an announcement this month by Tunisian officials reported that they have uncovered an international network funneling suspected terrorists from Iraq and Turkey into Europe ([Asharq al-Awsat](#), August 4).

All this comes at a difficult time for Tunisia politically, with Prime Minister Youssef Chahed facing calls to resign following a shift in the balance of power within the governing coalition. The ongoing dispute between the Nida Tunis and Ennahda parties, which lead the coalition, threatens to paralyze government decision-making. Jihadist attacks make the situation more difficult as critics like to push the blame toward the government and Ennahda, the main Islamic party ([Realites](#), July 8).

Nonetheless, Tunisia's political deadlock is not unresolvable—a well-timed cabinet reshuffle could ease tensions. Meanwhile, KUIN, which has been relatively quiet for months, still appears to be on the back foot, confined to the Chaambi Mountains where it is in competition with the Islamic State-linked Jund al-Khilafah-Tunisia.

The Taliban Takes on Islamic State: Insurgents Vie for Control of Northern Afghanistan

Waliullah Rahmani

Fierce fighting between the Taliban and Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K), the Afghan chapter of IS, have seen hundreds of militants killed in Jowzjan and Faryab provinces, two provinces in northern Afghanistan considered to be IS-K strongholds. About 300 militants were killed in two weeks of clashes between IS-K and the Taliban, which began on July 25 in the Darzab district of Jowzjan. It was the Taliban's third major offensive against their rivals, and saw about 200 IS-K fighters hand themselves over to government forces rather than face the Taliban. Video footage from August 1, released by the government, showed IS-K fighters demanding protection in return for their surrender ([Khabarnama](#), August 2).

The Taliban reportedly attacked IS-K forces, inflicting heavy losses on the group. Senior commanders on both sides were killed in the fighting. A spokesperson for the Jowzjan governor told local outlets that Haji Qumandan, the deputy leader of IS-K in northern Afghanistan, had been killed. The governor also reported the deaths of many senior Taliban members, including Haji Shakir, the district chief for Sangcharak district of Sar-e Pol ([Khabarnama](#), July 25). An earlier report on July 18 claimed that two IS-K fighters targeted a Taliban gathering in Sayyad district of Sar-e Pol, killing 15 Taliban militants and wounding five others ([Khabarnama](#), July 18).

Sar-e Pol, Jowzjan and Faryab are not the only provinces where the Taliban and IS-K have engaged in heavy clashes. The fighting appears to be a growing trend that has hit record levels of violence in the last three years following emergence of IS-K in Afghanistan. While a truce of sorts appears to be in place between the two groups in Afghanistan's southwestern and southern provinces, in the north it appears to be the Taliban's intention to eliminate IS-K forces entirely ([Khabarnama](#), July 2018).

Darzab: IS-K's Northern Stronghold

IS-K has come to dominate Darzab district in the southwest of Jowzjan province in northern Afghanistan—to the west lies Sar-e Pol province, while Faryab province is to the east. As of 2012, the district had a population of 52,800 people ([IFPS](#), August, 2012). IS-K's presence in northern Afghanistan began to emerge in 2015, when Qari Hekmat, a former Taliban commander in the north, shifted allegiance to IS-K and started recruiting local insurgents and building alliances ([AAN](#), March 4). The group's fighters are dominant in Darzab, having sidelined the Taliban and other armed actors there. The district faces many reports of IS-K carrying out killings, attacking international aid workers, beating teenagers, preventing female education and exploiting mineral resources ([Tolonews](#), December 9, 2017; [Tolonews](#), July, 5, 2017; [khabarnama](#), February 8, 2017; [1tvnews](#), April 17).

It is unclear why IS-K has focused its energies on Darzab, Qush Tepa and the rest of Jowzjan province. Bashir Ahmad Tahyanj, a member of parliament from Faryab province, however, told The Jamestown Foundation that Darzab's strategic geography, coupled with the local population's highly conservative views, have paved the way for IS-K's emergence. [1]

IS-K first began to seriously establish its presence in Darzab district in early 2017. In June that year, two groups of Taliban fighters who had switched allegiance to IS-K staged a series of attacks on government outposts in Darzab. In those battles, IS-K fighters killed at least 10 government fighters and many civilians ([AVA](#), April 10, 2017).

Since then, three major battles have taken place between Taliban and IS-K fighters. The first major attack took place in the second half of October 2017. The Taliban had mobilized hundreds of fighters from several provinces to oust Qari Hekmat and his forces from Darzab ([AAN](#), November 11, 2017). The second military offensive of Taliban insurgents against IS-K fighters took place within four months, but again failed to recapture the territorial control of Darzab district. Qari Hekmat and his forces survived the attack, which lasted for around 10 days starting from January 19, 2018, and involved hundreds of Taliban fighters. In early April, Qari Hekmat was reportedly killed in a U.S.-Afghan joint raid in the north, but even without their leader IS-K survived a third Taliban attack on the district.

Composition of IS-K in Darzab

The presence of foreign fighters among IS-K in Darzab and other northern provinces is an additional concern. In August 2017, the Jowzjan police chief confirmed the presence of foreign fighters including Chechens and Uzbeks—like the prominent Aziz Yuldashev, son of Tahir Yuldashev—along with Pakistani and even Uyghur fighters on the battlefields of Darzab, fighting against Afghan government forces ([Khabarnama](#), August 25, 2017).

Abdul Ahad Elbek, the Faryab deputy provincial council chief, had reported that Russian and Tajikistani citizens were present alongside other IS-K fighters in the battlefields of Jowzjan and Faryab. It would be weeks before Afghan senior security officials confirmed the presence of these foreign fighters in Jowzjan. ([Khabarnama](#), August 10, 2017).

Soon after the claims of foreign fighters' involvement in Darzab district by local officials in northern Afghanistan, another report emerged in December 2017 stating that Algerian and French fighters had joined IS-K in Darzab. The report bolstered fears of a growing presence of foreign fighters among IS-K militants in that area ([Tolonews](#), December 10, 2017).

IS-K's ranks in northern Afghanistan—particularly in Darzab, Qush Tepa and other Jowzjan and Faryab districts—are an unusual combination of foreign and Afghan fighters. This has attracted the attention of the Afghan government and international forces, which have been concerned about northern Afghanistan becoming a destination for IS fighters fleeing the battlefields of Iraq and Syria. Moreover, the trend has also concerned Russians and citizens of Central Asia who are part of the broader picture of the IS-K formation in northern Afghanistan.

Roots of Resentment

The Taliban made clear its unwillingness to tolerate IS-K from the day the group first emerged in 2015. In early October that year, Taliban officials announced the formation of an elite force—one that insurgents claimed was better trained and equipped than regular Taliban fighters—and deployed it to provinces where IS-K had emerged ([BBC Persian](#), December 23, 2015).

The Taliban then began a broad offensive against IS-K affiliated groups. In late November, insurgents brutally killed IS-K members in Zabol province ([Pazhwok](#), November 9, 2015). Ahead of Zabol in June 2015, they crushed IS-K fighters in western Farah province. Later, the Afghan national army would say IS-K had been stamped out from the province entirely ([al-Arabia](#), June 1, 2015). Since then, there have been no reports of IS-K activities in Farah and other western provinces bordering Iran. Some believe the Taliban had been subcontracted by Iran to ensure the provinces remains free of the group.

Fighting between the Taliban and IS-K continued into the following years in other areas of Afghanistan. In 2016, Nangarhar emerged as a major IS-K stronghold and became the focus of the Taliban. Fighting between the two insurgent groups resulted in a large number of casualties, although interestingly the Taliban found it was unable to eliminate the IS-K Nangahar strongholds. Instead, in many areas, IS-K emerged as a dominant player, controlling wider areas of land and winning territory from the Taliban ([BBC Persian](#), January 6, 2016). Clashes between the Taliban and IS-K continued, even as the Afghan government and U.S.-led international forces targeted IS-K with the "mother of all bombs" and killed IS-K leaders ([BBC Persian](#), May 7, 2017).

In contrast to the Taliban's success against IS-K in south and western Afghanistan, the group has failed to suppress IS-K fighters and eliminate their strongholds in eastern and northern parts of the country.

The Role of Russia

Concurrent with IS-K emergence in Afghanistan, Russia has continuously developed its relations with the Taliban. In April 2016, a senior Russian official confirmed his country's relations with the group but denied any cooperation with them ([Azadi Radio](#), April 11, 2016). Russia's Special Envoy to Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, told the press that his country's concern about IS-K is the main reason for Moscow's contacts with the Taliban ([BBC Persian](#), December 26, 2016). In fact, Russia's concerns go further. Moscow is continuously engaged in discussions with regional players, including Pakistan and China, to address regional security and the risk of IS-K infiltration into the Central Asian region ([8am](#), April 1, 2016).

Afghan experts believe Russia first started talks with the Taliban in 2006, urging the group to fight the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and counter drugs trafficking to Central Asia ([VOA Dari](#), November 13, 2016). No official sources confirm Moscow's relations with the Taliban as early as 2006, although Russians in more recent years have been vocal about their country's channels of communication with the Taliban. This has led to assumptions that the Taliban's aggressive stance against IS-K in northern Afghanistan, particularly in the Darzab district of Jowzjan, might be due to Moscow's involvement. If true, utilizing the Taliban as a proxy against IS-K in Afghanistan seems to be a double-edged sword for the Russians who are putting at risk their relations with Kabul. Moreover, such a tactical stance only strengthens the Taliban, which still brutally kills Afghan and international forces and is responsible for thousands of civilian casualties every year.

Russia has been uncompromising in its stance toward Islamic State, and Moscow is doubtless concerned about the emergence of IS-K in Afghanistan. The heavy Russian military presence in Tajikistan and its involvement with the Taliban clearly illustrates that Moscow sees IS-K as a strategic threat both to Russia and Moscow's wider "security belt" throughout Central Asia.

NOTES

[1] Author interview (July 2018)

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Foiled Ricin Plot Raises Specter of 'More Sophisticated' IS-inspired Attacks

Christian Jokinien

The arrest by German police of a 29-year-old Tunisian immigrant in Cologne may have foiled what Herbert Reul, the interior minister for the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia, claimed had the potential to be "the biggest terrorist-attack Europe has witnessed" ([Kölnische Rundschau](#), June 20; [Frankfurter Allgemeine](#), June 29). Prosecutors accuse Sief Allah Hammami of planning an attack using the poison ricin, which he had manufactured at his home.

While such an attack would constitute a new escalation in terms of the terrorism threat in Germany, there are echoes of similar plots elsewhere in Europe. With international operations becoming increasingly important for Islamic State (IS) as it contemplates its own decline, some fear that the group is planning a major headline-grabbing attack in the West, possibly one involving a biological or chemical agent.

Arrest in Cologne

Hammami was arrested at his home, a nondescript high-rise building on Osloer Street in Köln-Chorweiler, on June 13 ([Bild](#), June 26). The subsequent search of the premises was conducted by police dressed in full protective gear and assisted by a specialist unit from the fire services and toxicological experts from the Robert Koch Institute, a German federal government agency responsible for disease control and prevention. Hammami had, it appeared, turned his home into a laboratory where he had manufactured ricin from around 1,000 castor oil beans. During the subsequent search of the flat, authorities found 84.3 milligrams of the highly poisonous substance, as well as 2,000 unused castor oil beans. Altogether, Hammami had successfully acquired 3,150 castor oil beans ([Generalbundesanwalt](#), June 20; [Tagesschau](#), June 20; [Welt](#), June 20).

The authorities also secured 250 metallic balls, fishing hooks, two bottles of acetone nail polish remover and 950 grams of what was described as a mix of aluminum powder and pyrotechnic material ([Welt](#), June 20, [Gen-](#)

[eralbundesanwalt](#), July 24). According to the German state prosecutor's office, Hammami—who arrived as an immigrant in Germany in 2016—had been planning to combine the deadly toxin with a bomb, although the timing of the attack and its intended target appear to be unknown ([Generalbundesanwalt](#), August 3).

Hammami's wife, a German convert to Islam identified in the German media only as Jasmin H, was arrested along with her husband ([Bild](#), June 18). She was released shortly after but was then rearrested in July, being suspected of supporting Hammami's alleged plot ([Generalbundesanwalt](#), July 24; [Generalbundesanwalt](#), August 3).

Intelligence Sharing

Preventing this planned attack came down to a successful combination of international collaboration and local police work. In May, Germany's Internal Security Service (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz, BfV) received information from a U.S. intelligence service—presumed by German media to be the CIA—that a Tunisian national who was residing in Cologne had made an online order for ricin castor beans and an electric coffee grinder ([Welt](#), June 19). At the same time, the German security service had received a tip-off through an established public anti-terror hotline. As a result, the BfV had already identified Hammami as a threat before receiving the information supplied by U.S. officials.

The information BfV had received led the service to believe that Hammami was planning to travel abroad, either to Syria or Egypt, to join a jihadist group. Indeed, he had failed on two occasions in 2017 to travel to Syria with the alleged intention of joining IS. He attempted to get to the border via Turkey, but was picked up by Turkish authorities and sent back to Germany, where the authorities were informed of his attempts ([Express](#), June 15; [SWR](#), June 20). Despite this, German authorities did not regard Hammami as a potential attacker (Gefährder) or suspected IS member, only changing their assessment after they received the information about Hammami's online purchases. Consequently, the BfV intelligence operation was handed over to the federal police (BKA) at the beginning of June who moved to arrest him ([Welt](#), June 19; [Welt](#), June 26).

According to German State Prosecutor Peter Frank, Hammami had been "deeply connected to the Islamist

spectrum", although no accomplices—except his wife—have been arrested in Germany. Instead, it has been reported that Hammami's connections to the jihadist milieu date back to his time in Tunisia ([SWR](#), June 20; [NTV](#), June 20). After his failed attempts to travel to join IS, Hammami linked up successfully with members of the group through social media. There, he pledged allegiance to the IS leader, according to the German state prosecutors office (Generalbundesanwalt, August 3).

Poison Plots

While a ricin attack would constitute a new escalation in terms of the terrorism threat in Germany, similar plots have been detected in Europe. In mid-May, French authorities arrested an Egyptian-born student in Paris after intercepting messages on the secure messaging platform Telegram. According to French authorities, the student possessed "instructions on how to build ricin-based poisons" ([France24](#), May 18).

In January 2003, British authorities disrupted an alleged ricin plot led by the suspected al-Qaeda operative Kamel Bourgass. His plan, prosecutors said, was to produce a ricin-based paste that the plotters would smear in small quantities on surfaces in public places in the British capital—such as the doors of taxis, handrails on the London Underground system, and in buses. Bourgass was convicted of conspiracy to cause a public nuisance at a trial in 2005, and two others were convicted of possessing false passports, while the others accused in the plot were acquitted ([BBC](#), April 13, 2005). In comparison to the suspected Cologne plot, the authorities confiscated "only" 22 castor oil beans, and while equipment and recipes needed to produce ricin were found, the alleged plotters had yet to weaponize the poison.

Compared to these, the suspected plot in Cologne appears to have reached a dangerously advanced stage. German State Prosecutor Frank warned that jihadists have for some time contemplated the use of biological weapons and have "in the last years distributed time and again different manuals for the manufacturing of these, including for the production of ricin from castor oil beans" ([Tagesschau](#), June 20).

The arrests in France and Germany show the continued interest jihadists have to acquire and use biological and chemical weapons, but the BfV believes that IS has al-

ready manufactured ricin with traces of it secured in Iraq and the Iraqi-Syrian border. In Iraq, IS had access to laboratories at Mosul University and some of Saddam's chemical weapons engineers among its membership. There the group reportedly conducted deadly tests using thallium sulphate and a nicotine agent on human subjects ([The Times](#), May 20, 2017).

Al-Qaeda has already experimented with producing poison from nicotine, largely because of its easy availability. The Egyptian-born bomb-maker and chemist Abu Khabab al-Masri developed a procedure for extracting nicotine poison from cigarettes in the late 1990s, as witnessed by former al-Qaeda member and later MI6 spy Aimen Dean. [1] In 2004, a jihadist cell in the UK contemplated applying nicotine poison to the door handles of expensive cars. [2] In addition, IS appears to have experimented with chlorine and sulphur mustard attacks in Syria and Iraq, becoming the first non-state actor to have developed a banned chemical warfare agent and combining it with a projectile delivery system, according to the London-based IHS Conflict Monitor.

IS has encouraged the use of these unconventional weapons abroad. In a plot uncovered in 2017 in Australia, two Lebanese Australian brothers, Khaled and Mahmoud Khayat, were allegedly planning to build an "improvised chemical dispersion device" that would release highly toxic hydrogen sulphide. The plotters had allegedly received instruction from an IS controller in Syria, who had been put in touch with them by a third brother, Tarek, who was with the group ([The Australian](#), August 5, 2017).

The Cologne plot shows some similarities with the one prevented in Australia. The German authorities allege that Hammami received instructions on how to prepare the ricin and construct the explosive device from two different individuals via social media (Generalbundesanwalt, August 3).

Europe on Edge

Although happily prevented, the alleged Cologne ricin plot appears to alter and expand the spectrum of IS tactics in Europe. IS-directed attacks, such as those in Paris in 2015 and Brussels in 2016, have been conducted using firearms and explosives, while the spate of low-tech, IS-inspired attacks seen in Europe have involved knives and vehicles used as weapons. Often these have been

carried out by lone actors, have required limited preparation and often resulted in only a small number of casualties. The suspected Cologne plotter seems to fall into a category of being initially IS-inspired, but then becoming a remotely guided attacker.

Hammami's plot demonstrates a new level of ambition and complexity. It highlights the creativity of IS jihadists, their willingness to test a wide range of asymmetric possibilities, and the desire to achieve a much higher number of casualties with such attacks. Describing the alleged Cologne plot, BfV director Hans-Georg Maaßen warned Hammami could have "wounded, if not even killed, hundreds of people" ([Welt](#), June 26). At the same time, the Sydney, Cologne and Paris cases also underline the risk of biological and chemical weapons knowhow spreading in the jihadist milieu.

Islamic militancy is set to remain the primary terrorism threat in Europe in the coming years. As IS comes under pressure after losing the territory it held in the Middle East, the group or one of its supporters could try to launch a spectacular attack to reinforce its image as an important actor on the international jihadist scene. Such an attack could involve using biological or chemical weapons in order to make that point.

NOTES

[1] Aimen Dean, Paul Cruickshank and Tim Lister "Nine Lives. My time as MI6's top spy inside al-Qaeda (2018), p.103.

[2] *Ibid*, pp.304-307

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The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt: Current Crisis and Future Directions

Alison Pargeter

In July 2018, the Congressional Subcommittee on National Security held a hearing to examine the threat of the Muslim Brotherhood to the United States and its interests. This hearing—expected to pave the way for Congress to follow through on efforts to designate the Brotherhood as a terrorist group—has re-ignited the debate about the Muslim Brotherhood and its relationship to violence and terrorism.

The hearing comes at a time when the Muslim Brotherhood is undergoing a crisis of extreme proportions. This is especially true for the mother branch in Egypt, which serves as the spiritual leader of the transnational Brotherhood movement, and which is suffering what is arguably the deepest calamity in its long history. Since the military toppled President Mohamed Morsi in July 2013 and designated the Brotherhood a terrorist organization five months later, the Egyptian Brotherhood has been hunted down and its members imprisoned, or forced to flee abroad. Its networks have also been dismantled, with its vast web of businesses, charities and social welfare organizations broken up. What once served almost as a state within a state has been brought to its knees.

This state repression has been accompanied by a narrative that links the Brotherhood directly to involvement in violence, with its members accused of committing or being behind terrorist acts inside Egypt ([France24](#), December 13, 2016). [1] This narrative also holds that, at the very minimum, the movement serves as the start of a conveyor belt of radicalism that finishes with the likes of Islamic State (IS). The regime has also routinely linked the movement to several violent groups, including Hasm, which was designated a terrorist group by the United States in January 2018, despite there being no concrete evidence of links between these groups and the Brotherhood ([Egypt Today](#), June 26). To add to the pressure, the regime has also been promoting stories of Brotherhood prisoners "repenting," having signed up to a set of revisions, referred to as the "repentance acknowledgements," in which they have denounced the movement ([Egypt Today](#), November 11, 2017).

The regime's relentless onslaught against the Brotherhood has not only fueled some of the shrill arguments being put against the group in Washington. This campaign has also fed into ongoing assumptions that the increased repression, coupled with the Brotherhood's failed performance as a political actor during its brief spell in power, has the potential to radicalize the base and push it toward violence.

Yet however logical such arguments may appear, so far these assumptions are not being borne out in reality. While some hot-headed elements who were either part of the Brotherhood or on its margins may have sought to fight fire with fire, there is still no concrete evidence of there being any real shift either among the base or the leadership toward adopting a violent strategy. By contrast, the Brotherhood has remained remarkably steadfast in its refusal to be drawn down such a path, and Egypt has avoided suffering the same fate as Algeria, which, in the 1990s, descended into a long and bloody civil war after the military stepped in and cancelled the elections that the Islamic party had won.

Gray Areas

This does not mean that there are no gray areas. In the immediate aftermath of the Raba al-Adawiya events, in which security forces killed at least 800 Morsi supporters in a single day, some inside the movement felt that such repression should be met with resistance. This was coupled with a belief that the masses would mobilize in support of the Brotherhood and restore "legitimacy" by bringing Morsi back in a kind of rerun of the events of January 2011. Hence, the Brotherhood encouraged protests and demonstrations in a bid to break the coup.

It soon became clear, however, that the movement had overestimated its own power and that it was no match for the security services. This kind of peaceful resistance had achieved nothing other than deaths and more arrests, and through such actions, the movement was heading down a self-destructive path.

Within this context, a group of Brotherhood activists sought a new way to resist the coup. This group was led first by Mohamed Taha Wahdan, a former Guidance Office member, once in charge of the movement's education section. After Wahdan's arrest in 2015, Mohamed Kamal, a doctor and another seasoned Brotherhood

member, took charge. He was killed by security services in October 2016 ([MEMO](#), October 4, 2016).

Frustrated by what they perceived as the lack of action by what was left of the traditional leadership, most of whom were now based abroad and paralyzed by the shock of what had happened, this activist group established its own rival leadership bodies and media outlets through which it sought to wrestle control of the movement. More importantly, this group advocated for a more robust response to Morsi's overthrow. Although notably vague in its language, it sought to raise the stakes by rekindling the revolutionary spirit of January 2011 and advocating a more vigorous form of popular resistance to the regime. This included adopting what some members described as "creative pacifism," namely attacking police cars and electricity pylons, stopping trains, and setting fire to public buildings ([al-Araby Jadeed](#) December 28, 2015). In other words, engaging in a form of civil disobedience in which violent actions other than killing were considered legitimate.

When this form of resistance also failed to bear fruit, some elements—they may or may not have been linked to the Brotherhood—went further and advocated for the targeting of the security forces, or the killing of judges who passed death sentences ([al-Araby Jadeed](#) December 28, 2015). Around this time, a handful of hot-headed youths advocated for the carrying of weapons to confront the repression and to protect the protests that were still ongoing at this time.

This was a chaotic and reductive response by certain elements that were either part of the Brotherhood or on its margins, who felt the need for action in the face of both severe repression and the inertia of the traditional leadership. Kamal himself was explicit in his statements that he did not want to militarize the revolution, but rather wanted to have the necessary tools to "break the coup" and protect those who were protesting. In other words, his mission was to "exhaust the regime, throw it into confusion and then defeat it" ([Mekameleen TV](#) [YouTube], October 6, 2016).

However, the group's efforts fizzled out fairly early on. This was partly because it could not sustain itself in such extreme and repressive circumstances. It was also because the veteran leadership, whose priority was to preserve the movement at all costs, refused to bend and insisted on upholding its stance of peaceful resistance.

The traditional leadership was well aware that such an approach would be suicidal, and would strip the movement of the moral authority it could still lay claim to through upholding its pacific stance and appealing to democratic legitimacy. It was also conscious of the fact that the Egyptian Brotherhood carries a particular weight as the mother branch of a transnational movement and any wrong move that could leave the movement open to accusations of violence would have major repercussions, including in the West.

The old guard worked hard, therefore, to convince and contain these rival elements. When that failed, it kicked them out of the movement. Moreover, there was no real appetite for such a self-destructive approach within what was left of the Brotherhood, including the leadership in prison. In addition, those who are bearing the brunt of the regime's crackdown, including Morsi and other iconic Brotherhood leaders, are clearly backing the old leadership abroad.

Thus the wider movement was able to absorb this challenge to its leadership and with Kamal's death the project lost its momentum.

A Revolutionary Approach?

However, splits within the Brotherhood remain. Perhaps the most pronounced division is between the traditional leadership and those Brothers, some of whom are based in Turkey operating under a body named the General Office of the Muslim Brotherhood, who are still employing a discourse that demands a more revolutionary approach.

Advocates of this approach, who include Amr Darrag, Ashraf Abdel Gaffar and Gemal Heshmet, have openly criticized the traditional leadership. They accuse it of having failed during its time in power, and of being unwilling to undertake any proper review or to amend its methods in line with present-day realities. This group argues that the events of the Arab Spring ushered in a new era of revolutionary activism, making the Brotherhood's old gradualist approach of reforming society from the bottom-up redundant, requiring the movement to adopt new methods that are more in line with the spirit of the times ([al-Thawra Channel](#) [YouTube], November 3, 2015). As Heshmet explains, the group wants to continue along al-Banna's path, but to "bring up a new generation fed on the concept of 'we are revolu-

tionaries'." [2] He makes clear that this does not mean being aggressors, but explains, "Revolutions are the best way forward and the best way to gain freedom." [3] Indeed, this group seems to believe that Egypt, and the Arab world more widely, is still in a revolutionary mode, and that there is a need to capitalize on such revolutionary fervor.

While it is not clear exactly what this group means by being more revolutionary, it is evidently advocating a break from the movement's old way of doing things. In 2017, the new group issued an evaluation of the movement since its inception and concluded that Brotherhood had failed because it had not been revolutionary enough and because it had not focused sufficiently on politics. [4] It argued that organizational elements had taken priority over revolutionary or political action and that there had been a failure to separate the Brotherhood as an organization that did *dawa* (preaching Islam) from its political work. As such, this group looks to be trying to push the movement toward a more political route, in a watered down version of what an-Nahda has done in Tunisia, and effectively secularizing the Brotherhood in the process.

Such arguments are likely to fall on deaf ears as far as the traditional leadership is concerned. This leadership is not going to embark upon any serious review of its ideology or its political approach. It knows full well that any genuine review of this type is likely to prompt more recrimination, something the movement can ill afford at this time. More importantly, it knows that any serious review of its ideology could mark the start of the movement's unravelling, and would only work in the regime's favor. In addition, the Brotherhood by its very nature has never been a movement open to genuine self-review or reflection.

As such, this clash over what is essentially more tactics than ideology is likely to persist. However, the group that advocates this revolutionary stance is unlikely to have any major impact in the long term. It increasingly looks like a talking shop and intellectual exercise that is far removed from the reality on the ground in Egypt.

As such, the bigger movement is likely to absorb this challenge, just as it has absorbed the many challenges that have come before, both prior to and since the revolution. Rather, the core of the Brotherhood will persist and continue to sit it out. This leadership knows that the

best means of self-preservation is to sit tight and wait for circumstances to change.

What Future?

All this leaves many unanswered questions about the Brotherhood's future in Egypt. While the traditional leadership has indicated a willingness to reach some sort of compromise with the regime, the regime has shown less inclination to do so. According to the Brotherhood, the regime has made overtures to the movement, but these have been somewhat half-hearted and appear to have been more about neutralizing the movement rather than engaging with it politically. [5]

Swiss-based Yousef Nada, who has long served as a kind of foreign commissioner for the movement, claims that he was asked to go to Egypt by the regime for talks. When he refused, he was told to meet with the Egyptian Ambassador to Switzerland. This was clearly not the kind of engagement the Brotherhood had in mind and was reminiscent of the overtures made to al-Nahda elements in Paris and London during the last years of the Ben Ali regime. Ibrahim Mounir, the Deputy Supreme Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood, complained, "We don't want this level of talks. The purpose of their talks is to prolong the life of the regime." Mounir also explained in April 2018 that while contacts had continued from 2014 to 2016, the Brotherhood had come to the conclusion that the regime "wanted us to legitimize the coup."

Despite this, the Brotherhood has continued to talk about reconciliation, this seemingly being a way for it to maintain relevance. In April 2018, Mounir listed three conditions that would need to be met for reconciliation to take place. The first was that talks should be at a more senior level than ambassadorial; the second that the dialogue must include all groups that reject the current regime rather than just the Brotherhood; and the third that all political prisoners, including Morsi, should be released before the commencement of any dialogue. [6]

Such conditions are clearly wishful thinking on the Brotherhood's part. In the 1970s, former President Anwar Sadat enabled the movement to rebuild itself following another long period of repression as a means of countering his nationalist and leftist challengers. Today, President Abdel Fattah al-Sissi is not engaged in any such ideological conflict and can clearly do without the

Brotherhood. While Egypt's prisons may be groaning under the weight of political prisoners, including from the movement, there is no ideological or political reason for him to compromise and permit the movement to re-establish itself at this time. Any move by the United States to designate the Brotherhood as a terrorist group will only strengthen his hand in this respect.

As such, the Brotherhood and the regime are locked in the same old stalemate, with neither ready at this current point to give any real ground in order to achieve national reconciliation. The Brotherhood is still too bruised and battered from its disastrous experience following the revolution to be able to make any real compromises. Added to this, it has a long way to go to rebuild trust with the population. While the movement still has a core constituency—many of whom support it because they equate it with Islam itself—the shambolic way in which it approached power has left the impression in the minds of many, including the rest of the opposition, that it is not fit for purpose. As such, the Brotherhood is facing a stark choice. It either bows down to the regime's conditions in order to get a toe-hold back in the country—something it is in no mood to do at this stage—or it faces a very long wait indeed.

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NOTES

[1] For example, Egypt's interior ministry accused fugitive Muslim Brotherhood leaders who have fled to Qatar of training and financing the perpetrators of the bomb attack on a Cairo church that killed 25 people in December 2016.

[2] Readings from Inside. Gamal Heshmet. Dirasat Mostaqbaliya. Issue 2. October 2017
Available at: <http://gamalheshmat.com/storage/app/media/uploaded-files/aan-mstkb1-gmaa-lkhon-lm-slmyn.pdf>

[3] Ibid.

[4] Evaluation Before the Vision. General Office of the Muslim Brotherhood. March 2017. Available at <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B0QvhG2VgvyNelplN0t6Sm-Q5TkE/view>

[5] Ibrahim Mounir to Al-Jazeera Direct, April 2018.

[6] Ibid.