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# INTO THE THOUGHTS OF JIHADIST LEADERS

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The current global conflict against terrorism has compelled a new way of thinking about the curriculum and study of the military sciences. Books unknown among American military planners must be brought to light for they address the innermost thoughts of the adversary and his tactics, aspirations, and measures of success. Books, pamphlets and articles found from the alleyways of Arab cities to booksellers in major Arab cities become precious finds for those wanting to become a connoisseur of jihadist movements and countering violent Islamist extremists.

One book that was printed in 2002 and 2003 and is read by many Egyptian counterterrorism and law enforcement experts is Makram Muhammad Ahmed's *Muamara Amm Murajaah: Hiwaar maa Qaada Al-Tataruf fee Sijn Al-Akrab (Conspirators or Reformers: A Dialogue with the Leaders of Extremism in the Maximum Security Prison known as the Scorpion)*. This work was published by Dar-Al-Shrook Printers in Cairo, Egypt. Ahmed is a well-known journalist who has taken on controversial topics for decades and was among those targeted for assassination by Islamists in the '90s. The failed attempt on his life led to his exploration and interviews of Egypt's most notorious jihadists to find out, in their own words, what aspects of the Egyptian and Islamist experience led them to choose violence as a means of imposing their vision of an Islamist state. He argues that the jihadist movement of the 1980s-1990s caused fractious civil divisions among Egyptians and retarded economic growth, which in turn increased hardship among Egyptians; it has also stifled Egypt's writers and intellectual life. Ahmed observes that: "jihadists are half ignorant and half educated, lost between affairs of religion and the real world."

This essay will review Ahmed's book and highlight those passages that are of use to American military leaders to help better understand the inner thoughts of a generation of jihadist leaders. Ahmed's questions are probing, such as how can Islamist groups establish an Islamist government when they excommunicate whole swaths of (Egyptian) society? After all, it was the label of secularist that led to Ahmed's attempted assassination at the hands of a youth, who had not read a word of Ahmed's writings. The youth attempted to shoot Ahmed because a cleric labeled him as wanting to separate religion from the state, and every secularist is thereby an infidel deserving of death.

## Ahmed's Critical Observations on the Jihadist Movement in Egypt

Ahmed sees many opportunities within Egypt's modern history for Egyptians to exercise the right to ask where the wrong lies between the government and the Islamists. What is the correct way ahead in addressing Egypt's social and political problems? Finally, the key question is: why does a religious organization (The Muslim Brotherhood) that was established initially as a social

organization resort to violence and murder? To understand these questions one must examine Egypt's modern history and the opening salvos between Islamists and the government beginning in 1948. Discontent over the conduct of the first Arab-Israeli War led members of the Muslim Brotherhood and their military wing *Al-Jihaaz Al-Sirri* (The Secret Apparatus) to conduct bombings in Cairo and attempt to murder government figures. Prime Minister Mahmoud Nokrashi ordered the disbanding of the Muslim Brotherhood and 20 days after the order, on Dec. 28, 1948, he was gunned down. This led to a round of arrests and retaliation ending in February 1949 when Muslim Brotherhood founder Hassan Al-Banna was killed by Egyptian secret police. Ahmed opines that the really potent and violent elements and splinter groups of the Muslim Brotherhood did not emerge during the monarchy that ended in 1952, but when the group attempted to kill Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel-Nasser in 1954. The severe crackdown of Nasser led to the radicalization of Egypt's Islamist movement that burst forth in the assassination of Egyptian leader Anwar Sadat in 1981 and the violence that ensued through the '80s and '90s.

Ahmed is critical of President Sadat. He argues that the late Egyptian leader handed increasing power to Islamists by:

- Releasing imprisoned Muslim Brotherhood members from prison to counter Nasserists, leftists, and Arab socialists determined to topple Sadat.

- Allowing the Muslim Brotherhood to openly conduct their activities, publish pamphlets, and radicalize the population to counter secular Arabs that were seen as a threat to Sadat.

- Amending the Egyptian constitution twice. Once in 1971 that made Islamic Law a primary source of legislation in the country. The second amendment occurred in 1981 and made Islamic Law the primary source of legislation in the country. Substituting "a" with "the," in Ahmed's view, was the most destructive aspect of Sadat's presidency. Sadat compromised on this amendment to gain support for legislation reforming family law in Egypt, a program forwarded by Sadat's wife, Jihan.

- Turning a blind eye to Islamist groups, which were dominating college campuses and enforcing Islamist dress codes on students, as well as imposing religious morality in towns in southern Egypt.

Sadat attempted in 1981 to regain control of Islamist groups, starting with the closure of the Islamist paper *Al-Dawa* (The Calling). He also reimposed the standing rule banning religious parties from Egypt's political system. In an attempt to appear balanced, Sadat exiled the Coptic Patriarch Pope Shenoda III in Wadi Natrun in the Sinai. There is argument whether Sadat's decision was to protect the Coptic Pope or whether it was designed to affirm the separation of religion from Egypt's political life. What is clear is that Sadat attempted to crack down on Islamist groups that had been unleashed for a decade in Egypt. Sadat's

peace initiative towards Israel, violence against Copts and government officials led to the perfect storm that broke out on the military reviewing stand in Oct. 6, 1981 — the date of Sadat's assassination. It is in this climate the book introduces the biographies of the violent Islamist leaders incarcerated in Cairo's maximum security prison, the Scorpion, known officially as cell block 992 of Tura Prison. There were members of the *Gamaa Islamiyah* (Islamic Group) Shura (Consultative) Council. Several prisoners interviewed were on death row, and most of those represented the military wing of the Islamic Group. It is important to note that the *Gamaa Islamiyah* was severely undermined in the mid-90s both by an outraged Egyptian public and virile security and intelligence services.

Incarcerated members of the Shura Council consisted of: Karam Zohdy, leader; Najih Ibrahim, strategist and ideologue; Safwat Abdel-Ghani, chief planner of the assassination of Prime Minister Rifaat Mahjoub; Ali Sherief, operational planner; Usama Hafiz; Badri Makhoulf; Mamdouh Yusuf; and Hesham Abdel-Zaher.

Incarcerated members of the military wing who were condemned: Hassan Al-Khalifa, Ahmed Bakri, Ghraib Hashaash, and Shaaban Huraidy.

An assessment of the 12 shows that five have bachelor's degrees, one in engineering and another in medicine. The rest have the equivalent of a technical college education in business or trade school. All were born between 1953 and 1969, with the younger members being involved in perpetrating physical violence.

### Ahmed's Questions

**Jihad as a means or an end?:** The discussion begins with questions on the concept of *qital* (murder) and *jihad* (holy war). Zohdy, the lead jihadist, argues that many within the jihadist movement understand jihad and specifically martyrdom to be the only objective in Islam. Therefore, they sacrifice themselves without consideration to the benefits and/or damage this is doing to Islam. It is important to impart a public campaign that emphasizes jihad as a means and not an end. Safwat Abdel-Ghani, then takes up the question, saying that jihadist thinking

has harmed the Egyptian society and economy and only caused rifts among Egyptians. In the end, it did not call people to Islam but damaged the faith even further. Other Islamic terms abused by the jihadist include *hisbah* (holding an individual accountable for acts of immorality and infidelity) and *nahy ann Al-munkar* (prohibiting vice); both are means of exerting societal control at the community level. Jihadists use these Islamic concepts not for the purpose of awakening a moral conscious but for exerting control over neighborhoods and towns. Prisoner Usama Hafiz led a discussion on *hisbah* (enforcing moral accountability), the concept of intruding upon one's privacy with the objective of catching a fellow Muslim in an act that is considered to be morally objectionable to the individual doing the surveillance. Jihadists seek out immoral behavior and thus violate the Quranic words *wa-la tajassasu* (do not spy upon one another). Ali Sherief indicated that since jihadist groups establish secret cells then their message is illegitimate. He also criticized Islamist militant groups for making jihad the all-consuming singular issue in the practice of Islam, and expressed his guilt by saying that Islam is not propagated through evil. During the period of conquest, the incarcerated jihadist leaders discussed how the conflict was between armies in the field of battle and not communities and that Islamists have suppressed the Quranic injunction of not transgressing the bounds of warfare.

**On Shariah Law:** *Shariah* (Islamic) Law cannot be divorced from the realities of daily life; as apart of his revisionist thinking, Karam Zohdy advocated a reading of the Quran and Prophetic sayings both literally and then examining the realities in which these verses and revelations were imparted to Prophet Muhammad. It is vital to then look upon the issue of Islamic literalism, interpretations and then the realism of applying these laws in society whether in Prophet Muhammad's time or now.

**On Takfir (excommunication):** Zohdy discusses how jihadists blur the lines of actual clear hostilities between nation-states like Israel and Egypt during the Arab-Israeli Wars, in which Jews were demonized with the encouragement of the

government; the jihadist took this a step further applying this labeling of infidelity on Egypt's Coptic Christians. Zohdy remarks that this was combined with taking the Quran selectively and applying the literal verses in an unrealistic way. One quarter of Egypt's population is Coptic Christian, which makes their discrimination a social-ill for Egypt and a cause of sectarian strife. Usama Hafiz argues that the *Fatwas* (religious rulings) of Sheikh Bin Taymiyyah (1258-1327 AD) that demonize Christians, Jews, and Mongols were issued in dealing with certain historical pressures of the period and that Bin Taymiyyah cannot be applied in today's situation. Bin Taymiyyah lived at the times of the Crusades and the wars between Mameluke Egypt and the Mongols over control of the Levant.

The author continued his discussions in a maximum security retreat in the Sinai known as Liman Prison in Wadi Natrun. There Najih Ibrahim summarized his views that *ghilu* (expressions of superiority) in Islam goes against the Quranic principle of fair dealings. Expressed in the 7th century in the metaphor of the merchant's scale, one cannot uphold fair dealings when jihadists are quick to declare a fellow Muslim an infidel. Islam is a moderate faith. Islamist militants have taken the faith into a perverted extreme, and arguments by these ideologically rehabilitated Muslim jihadists from the older generation (that of Zawahiri and Bin Laden) offer a unique opportunity to develop counter-ideological campaigns against jihadist works, speech, and pamphlets.

Najih Ibrahim calls the doctrine of *takfir* a catastrophe in Islamic tolerance. One could also add that *takfir* is a cancer on Islamic thought and evolution. *Takfir* is also what caused the loss of public support for Islamists and radicalists in Algeria, initially elected to government in 1992; they lost a sense of moral high ground when the Islamic Salvation Front and the current Salafist Group for Propagation and Combat excommunicated swaths of Algerian society and murdered women and children. When looking at Muhammad's society in Medina, the rightly-guided caliphs, the apex of Islamic civilization in the 9th century, one sees that the Islamic

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state is constructive and not destructive.

**On Sheikh Omar Abdel-Rahman:** In discussions over the blind cleric, his imprisonment deprived the *Gamaa* (The Islamic Group) of its spiritual leader, a man who could issue religious edicts and sanctions assassinations, mass murders and terrorist acts. Should he ever be released from federal custody, Najih Ibrahim, one of those Islamist leaders interviewed, said he was sure Sheikh Omar Abdel-Rahman would resume his leadership and activities in the jihadist movement.

**On September 11th:** Karam Zohdy reiterated to the author that the imprisoned jihadist issued a formal communiqué denouncing the attack, and further declared that the killing of merchants, children, women and, according to Zohdy, 600 Muslims in the World Trade Center is an Islamically illegal act. The leaders of *Gamaa* level the following charges on Usama Bin Laden for conducting the 9-11 attacks:

- The common good of the Islamic community as a whole supersedes that of a single group. The 9-11 attacks have damaged the Islamic *Ummah* (community) as a whole.

- It destroyed the Taliban regime and through this act undermined both the Al-Qaeda group and the state that hosted it.

- Bin Laden has undertaken an impossible goal by grasping at too many global Islamist causes in Chechnya, Afghanistan, Algeria, Kashmir, Tunisia, Libya and in France. The jihadist prisoners reminded the author that Prophet Muhammad did not undertake war on two fronts.

- Bin Laden undertakes jihad for its own sake and not to accomplish any realistic objective.

**Operations of the *Gamaa*:** Aside from the Luxor attack of 1997, there were plans to conduct an assault on the Opera *Aida* performance in the pyramids, but it was considered a hard target. *Gamaa* was behind the assassination of not only Sadat, but Speaker of the Parliament Rifaat Mahjoub, the unsuccessful attempt on Information Minister Safwat Sherief, and the failed yet sophisticated attack on the current leader, Hosni Mubarak, in the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa. *Gamaa* in the '80s and '90s also undertook a deliberate targeting for specific and diverse objectives that included:

- Egyptian tourist sites to destabilize the economy and bring media attention to the group.

- Coptic Christian businesses and churches to create a split among segments of the Egyptian population and domestic instability; in addition, stolen funds from Coptic businesses are used to finance *Gamaa*'s operations.

- Deliberate attacks on police, security, and intelligence officers as a means of causing the state to increase its oppression and harshness against the people.

- Assaults on Egyptian intellectuals like the murder of Faraj Foda, and attempted murder of Nobel Literature Laureate Najib Mahfouz to suppress criticism of the need to establish an Islamic State in Egypt.

*Gamaa* was also among the principle groups that facilitated the transfer of young Egyptians to Afghanistan both during the end of the Soviet invasion and during the fight between the Afghan warlords.

## Discussions Continue at Liman Prison in the Sinai

On a broader historical level groups like *Gamaa*, *Takfir wal Hijrah* (Condemn and Immigrate) and Zawahiri's Egyptian Islamic Jihad were a product of Nasser's crackdown and violent repression of the Muslim Brotherhood from 1954 to 1970. When President Sadat released many prisoners to counter leftists and Nasserists threatening his rule, many found the Muslim Brotherhood's methods too liberal and founded their own smaller yet violent and radical groups.

Najih Ibrahim turned to discussing the problem of Muslim society and the obsession over small issues of Islamic practice that go beyond the basic pillars and the earning of extra blessings from God. This obsession has diverted attention to the larger issues of establishing a just and prosperous society, and solving the massive socio-economic problems that Egypt faces.

**A new concept from the Islamist prisoners:** Hamdy Abdel-Rahman, a *Tanzeem Al-Jihad* member and member of the Consultative Council for the *Gamaa*, discussed the term *fiqh waqaeah* (realistic Islamic jurisprudence). This means interpreting Islamic laws in ways that take into consideration the realistic challenges of 21st century society, and not the other way around. He uses examples such as performing the *Hajj* (Pilgrimage to Mecca). Although it is a once-in-a-lifetime obligation, it is not to be conducted at the expense of financially burdening a family.

Getting into the ideological minds of the adversary is crucial in fighting the phenomenon of Islamist Radicalism. Author Makram Muhammad Ahmed, a Muslim intellectual, understood that this is a battle for who will and in what way Islam will be interpreted in the 21st century. It is vital that American policymakers and military planners review Arabic works such as Makram Ahmed's and begin to seriously engage, find ways and enable Muslim moderates to defeat *takfiri* (declaring one outside the faith) ideology. Perhaps it is time to label this fight a war against takfirism, a concept used to sanction the murder of innocent Muslims and non-Muslims alike and which is prevalent in most jihadist groups. These series of interviews also bring forth in the words of major Islamist militant leaders the damage caused to Egypt's society, economy, and people as a result of their actions. This message must be incorporated in any counter-ideological campaign against such organizations as Al-Qaeda and militant Islamist terrorists from Algeria to Indonesia. The future of American war studies lies in part in the many Arabic books written by or on Islamist militants; it is time to begin highlighting these works, discussing them, and entering into the vocabulary of the adversary.

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