

The Luxor Shootout and Egypt's Armed Islamist Opposition

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Brief Analysis

The explosion of violence this morning in Luxor, which left 64 civilians dead and 25 wounded, gives renewed indication that the battle between the government of Egypt and militants who seek its overthrow is far from over. It remains to be seen whether a broader crackdown by Egyptian security forces against armed opposition groups will calm the situation or merely lead to wider confrontations and more violence.

Context: As recently as September 1997, many observers agreed that Egypt's government had triumphed against armed groups using slogans and symbolism from Islam to argue for the overthrow of the present government. Two months earlier, on July 5, imprisoned leaders of the "Jihad" and "Islamic Group" organizations issued a statement calling for an end to acts of violence. Two armed men attacked a tourist bus in Cairo on September 18, but the Egyptian government quickly dismissed the act as an isolated crime perpetrated by a mental patient and lacking any political motive. The accused men, Mahmoud and Saber Abu al-Ulla, were convicted and sentenced to death on October 30.

The renewed outbreak of violence is a sign of continuing deep discontent among Egypt's lower classes. While Egypt's major cities have witnessed the rise of a highly visible class of millionaires who drive Mercedes sedans and watch satellite television, economic vitalization has thus far bypassed many of Egypt's poor. This is especially true in Egypt's largely impoverished south, where today's attack occurred. Since 1991 the government has been implementing an IMF-sponsored economic reform program which slashes or eliminates subsidies on many staples. On October 1 of this year, a new law came into effect which eliminated rent controls on much of the rented agricultural land in the country. Such ceilings, in place since the days of Gamal Abdel Nasser, had protected poor farmers but limited landlords' profits from land ownership. The country witnessed sporadic outbreaks of violence between renters and owners in the last month, but opposition was not directed at the government. The current upsurge in violence may be connected to changes in the law.

Background: The previous cycle of violence in Egypt began in 1991, with clashes between Muslims and Christians in an area approximately 120 miles south of Cairo. The target of attacks shifted toward government forces over the next year. On February 26, 1993-the same day that a bomb shook the World Trade Center in New York City-a bomb exploded in a crowded cafe in Cairo's main square, killing 3 and injuring 18. The cafe is in sight both of the Egyptian Museum and the country's largest government building, and was widely interpreted as a challenge to the central government.

The government's response to the Cairo attack was swift and fierce. The Minister of the Interior, who is responsible

for internal security, was replaced by the current incumbent, then thought of as a hard-liner. Government troops waged gun battles with militants in the countryside and in the cities. Thousands were imprisoned, and the government used the provisions of a long-standing state of emergency to prosecute its fight against militants in military courts. Under such a counterattack, the opposition movements appeared to lose steam. Although isolated acts of violence continued, the only attack in Cairo in the last three years occurred in April 1996, when terrorists opened fire on tourists outside the Hotel Europa near the Pyramids.

Another part of the government's response to the terrorist attacks has been to coopt those favoring a more Islamic government. Television has featured more Islamic programming, and the government has gone out of its way to highlight the legitimacy of its actions under Islamic law. Indeed, the government was careful to gain the public support of clergy in the months before the new rent control legislation went into effect. While the government's moves may have won it support among more moderate Islamist elements in Egypt, it clearly failed to neutralize opposition radicals.

Prospects: If the past is any guide, the government will respond to the current attack by rounding up those thought to be sympathetic to the armed opposition. President Mubarak will also likely dismiss Minister of the Interior Hassan al-Alfi, of whom the government allowed unprecedented criticism in a series of articles in an opposition newspaper last September. Al-Alfi has been in his post for more than four years, an unusually long time for an incumbent in that position.

Today's attack was clearly intended to hit Egypt's tourist trade just before its busiest season. Tourism is one of the primary sources of foreign currency for the government of Egypt, accounting for more than \$3 billion last year. Egypt's tourism trade had been booming in the year leading up to September's attack, with tourist nights in February 1997 up 39.9% compared with a year earlier. In addition, millions of investment dollars had been pouring in to resort developments on Egypt's extensive Red Sea coast. Although the new resorts are well isolated from the site of today's attack, the events today will likely put a chill on this winter's sun-seekers.

The expected drop in tourist dollars comes at a particularly inopportune time for the Egyptian government. Most international observers agreed that the Egyptian economy was starting to show real signs of vitality, and Egyptian government bonds won investment-grade ratings for the first time in January 1997. Foreign and domestic investment has been increasing in the last several years as major financial players began to look seriously at Egypt as a major growth market, not only in tourism but also in agriculture, light industry, and energy. Still, Egypt relies on a steady flow of expatriate worker earnings, Suez Canal tolls, and tourism to keep the economy afloat, and the diminution of one of those elements is likely to slow progress in the near term.

More generally, today's attack is evidence of the continuing balancing act that the government of Egypt must play as it seeks to form alliances within the country, in the region, and with the outside world. While domestic forces argue against economic change, international ones prescribe it. While on the international stage Egypt seeks to be portrayed as a staunch ally of the West, it also seeks to maintain its regional position as a defender of the Arabs against outside interests. The balancing act is likely to continue.

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