

Egyptian Assassinations and Islamist Escalation

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Following the latest high-profile assassination, tensions between Islamists and the state will likely continue to escalate, with the judiciary looming large in both the government's response and further Islamist plots.

On June 29, Prosecutor-General Hisham Barakat died in an orchestrated blast that targeted his convoy in the Cairo suburb of Heliopolis. The attack was forceful; the leader of Barakat's security team also perished while eight others were injured. This incident raises many questions as to how President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi will deal with the loss of a main pillar in his regime and a major representative of the constitutional state. It is also unclear how the assassination will impact the political struggle and escalation of violence that began between the state and Islamists after the overthrow of former president Mohamed Morsi.

Barakat's murder is one of the most successful Islamist political assassinations in the last several decades, which included the assassinations of former president Anwar Sadat and former speaker of the People's Assembly, Rifaat al-Mahgoub. In the aftermath of each attack, Hosni Mubarak's regime tightened its grip against Islamist groups by cracking down on member activities and speeding through trials against major Islamist leadership. The escalation continued until Islamist groups declared a truce in 1997, sixteen years after President Sadat's assassination.

However, Islamist violence is once again escalating. The Barakat assassination must be viewed as the most recent incident in a string of judge assassinations and as part of the Islamists' retribution against the regime's new crackdown on them. Last month, Ansar Beit al-Maqdis -- an ISIS affiliate -- assassinated three judges in al-Arish, the provincial capital of Northern Sinai. This attack targeted a vehicle carrying a number of civilian judges and prosecutors, also killing the driver and causing several injuries. Ansar Beit al-Maqdis intended for the attack to serve as reprisal against the Egyptian judiciary's decrees that Morsi and 104 Muslim Brotherhood members receive the death sentence in mid-May.

The Islamist community's response to the rulings demonstrates their impact -- 150 Muslim scholars and 10 Islamic

bodies with close monetary ties to the Brotherhood issued a joint statement on May 30 titled "Call of Egypt: Muslim Scholars' Statement on Crimes of the Coup in Egypt and the Stance Towards It." The statement called for revenge against the judges for their endorsement of the execution of innocent souls: "Rulers, judges, officers, soldiers, muftis, media persons, politicians, and any other party proven beyond any doubt to be involved in the crimes of violating honor, bloodshed, and illegal killing, even if through inciting such acts, are considered, from Islamic perspective, murderers to whom all rulings related to the crime of murder are applicable. They must receive *qisas* [retribution] within the Islamic Law limits. Allah Almighty says that 'whoever kills a soul unless for a soul or for corruption [done] in the land -- it is as if he had slain mankind entirely' (al-Maidah 5:32)."

While Ansar Beit al-Maqdis had already attempted at least one major assassination targeting former interior minister Muhammad Ibrahim before Morsi's sentence, the successful assassination of Barakat marks a major shift in Islamist tactics. The targeting of major state figures, ministers, judges, and politicians appears to be a key new Islamist strategy. The Muslim scholars' statement serves as a political, religious, and intellectual cover for these assassinations and supports the idea that political killings are now within the repertoire of accepted Islamist actions. Unfortunately, this trend is not likely to end with this most recent assassination.

And it is clear from Sisi's recent statements that the great concern about the continuation of political assassinations will tighten state policies against Islamists. Directly after the prosecutor-general's funeral, Sisi gave a speech stressing the importance of the judicial process and vowing to enact new laws to help Egyptian judges obtain quick execution of their decrees. The president addressed judges directly in his speech, saying, "The way tribunals have been working over the last two years is 'inefficient'; if a death sentence is issued, it should be carried out, the same goes for life in prison." Then Sisi indirectly referenced Morsi by claiming that "some people issue commands to kill from behind bars," alluding to Morsi's hand gesture during his trial, which is now perceived to have been a signal to kill Barakat.

There are many indications that tensions between Islamists and the state will continue to escalate both publicly and behind closed doors. Based on the recent judicial assassinations, the Muslim scholars' statement of condemnation, and Sisi's suggestion of free rein for the judiciary, it seems that Egypt's judges will be key in this new escalation.

Mohamed Soliman is an engineer and a member of the Dostour Party's political bureau. This article originally appeared on the [Fikra Forum website \(http://fikraforum.org/?p=7110\)](http://fikraforum.org/?p=7110). ❖

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