

The Islamic Insurgency That Could Soon Hit Egypt

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By disorganizing Egypt's most cohesive Islamist group, the generals have turned hundreds of thousands of deeply ideological Muslim Brothers into free radicals who may no longer listen to their typically cautious leaders.

Shortly after the uprising-cum-coup that toppled Mohamed Morsi on July 3, I asked an Egyptian military official why the generals removed Morsi after only four days of protests when they had waited 18 days to remove Hosni Mubarak in 2011. "The previous military leadership was reactive," he replied, referring to the junta that ruled Egypt for the 16 months following Mubarak's ouster. "But this leadership wanted to be proactive."

To some extent, this contrast reflects the age difference between the septuagenarian generals who sacked Mubarak -- many of whom were subsequently sacked by Morsi -- and the younger brass that now effectively rules Egypt. But it also reflects the current regime's determination not to repeat what it views as its predecessor's mistakes. Whereas the previous military council was overwhelmed by post-revolutionary political trends, this military leadership intends to set the political agenda. The old generals responded to mass protests, dealt with the Muslim Brotherhood and saw it win elections. The new generals instead called protests against the "terrorist" Brotherhood and, after resisting international pressure for negotiations, attacked and defeated it.

Indeed, if the remarkably low attendance at yesterday's Brotherhood protests is any guide, the generals are succeeding in demoralizing and defeating the Brotherhood. Of course, given the many hundreds of Morsi supporters who have been killed and the deepening resentments among Egypt's Islamist masses, the military's victory may prove to be pyrrhic. But with public support firmly on their side, the generals have quelled the Brotherhood at least for the time being due to two key decisions: They struck first -- remember, these generals are "proactive" -- and focused on a strategy of decapitation, in which top Brotherhood leaders have been targeted for arrest.

The generals have thus demonstrated that they understand the Brotherhood's vulnerabilities, since the Brotherhood cannot function effectively once its top leaders have been apprehended. After all, the Brotherhood is at its core a hierarchical vanguard, in which legions of fully indoctrinated cadres are organized under a nationwide, pyramidal

chain-of-command. Specifically, decisions are voted on by a 120-member consultative (*shura*) council and executed by the 18-member Guidance Office, which passes directives to its deputies in each regional sector (*qita*), who call their deputies in each province (*muhafaza*), who call their deputies in each subsidiary area (*muntaqa*), who call their deputies in each narrower populace (*sho'aba*), who finally communicate the order to the chiefs of each family (*usra*), which is essentially a five-to-eight-member cell.

Far from being arcane bureaucratic trivia, the hierarchical process through which the Brotherhood makes decisions is an integral part of what it means to be a Muslim Brother. All Muslim Brothers take an Islamic oath (*baya*) to "listen and obey" decisions reached through *shura*, and they firmly believe that any decision taken through the organization's codified processes will advance its long-term Islamizing agenda. For this reason, Muslim Brothers even follow those commands with which they may individually disagree. For example, although many Muslim Brothers opposed the organization's decision to run a presidential candidate, they nonetheless followed the Brotherhood's command to campaign for Morsi in the 2012 presidential elections.

Disrupting this chain-of-command is thus vital to destroying the organization, which is why the military has pursued its decapitation strategy since the night it toppled Morsi, when security forces arrested top Brotherhood leaders and issued warrants for hundreds of others. The apparent goal was to capture Guidance Office and *shura* council leaders. But this strategy did not immediately work. Many of these leaders found safe haven at the Brotherhood's Rabaa al-Adawiya protest site in northern Cairo, where armed men reportedly protected them and allowed them to continue making decisions for the organization. Meanwhile, the Brotherhood authorized its provincial leaders to make decisions beyond Cairo, thereby insulating the organization in case its top leaders were apprehended.

Last Wednesday's deadly crackdown, however, in which hundreds of Morsi supporters were killed, forced top leaders into less secure hiding, and many have since been arrested. Then on Sunday, the military-backed government began targeting provincial Brotherhood leaders, raiding 34 leaders' homes in Alexandria, four in Sohag, and eight in Gharbiya. This campaign will likely extend to all governorates, forcing these leaders into hiding and thereby further disrupting the Brotherhood's organization. Even if decision-making powers now fall to leaders in each subsidiary Brotherhood "area" and thereby preserve the group's local organizing capabilities, it is now a substantially weaker entity. The Brotherhood's "area" leaders are far less experienced in making strategic decisions, and it will be extremely difficult for them to formulate a cohesive nationwide strategy given their wide distribution across Egypt.

Still, the military's decapitation of the Brotherhood is a double-edged sword. By removing the top layers of the organization, the military has made it impossible for the Brotherhood to execute a change in strategy. The military thus has no way of compelling the Brotherhood to abandon its disruptive protests and instead re-enter the political process, as the military says is its goal, because all of the top and provincial leaders who could command their cadres to change course are being removed from the scene.

Even worse, by disorganizing Egypt's most cohesive Islamist group, the generals have turned hundreds of thousands of deeply ideological Muslim Brothers into free radicals, who will no longer listen to their typically cautious leaders. Many younger Muslim Brothers, in particular, lean towards Salafism, and their upbringing in the Brotherhood -- whose motto concludes with the phrase "death for the sake of Allah is the highest of our aspirations" -- has made them willing to die for Islamism, and possibly willing to fight for it as well.

In other words, while the military has seemingly won its battle with the Muslim Brotherhood, its prize may be an undisciplined Islamist insurgency.

Eric Trager is the Wagner Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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