

The Egyptian Islamist Experience in Asia

Report >
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The IIAS seminar 'Religion, Transnationalism and Radicalism' is built upon three basic assumptions: (1) Due to international migration and the accumulation of money and power, new diasporic religious communities have arisen. Increasingly creative, these communities are freer to express their ideas than in their places of origin. (2) This process has enhanced a tendency towards radicalization. The alien cultural and religious environment the diasporic communities live in has produced greater self-awareness and self-consciousness, which in turn has led to the simplification and radicalization of doctrine and religious practice. (3) As a result of modern means of transportation and new technologies of communication and mass media diasporic communities and their communities of origin have developed continuous relations with each other. The radicalization of diasporic communities has therefore also spilled over into the communities of origin.

By Roel Meijer

The transnationalization of the Egyptian Islamist movement confirms some of the above points. Al-Qa'ida and the foundation of the International Front for the Jihad against Jews and Crusaders in 1998 seems to form another, more extreme stage in the radicalization of the Egyptian Islamist movement and fits the idea that radical diasporic communities are more radical than radical groups in the home countries.

To be sure, radicalization within the Egyptian Islamist movements had already taken place before transnationalization of the more radical group in the 1960s. Even at this stage, however, the notion of migration – Prophet Muhammad's migration being a central theme for all Muslims – has always been a trope within the imagination of the radical Islamist movement.

Radical Egyptian Islamists came to demand mental or physical migration from a society that they do not consider Muslim, such as Egyptian society,

because it does not apply the sharia. In the 1970s the notion of migration was applied by some groups by retreating partially from an impure and infidel society by forming religious communities in hired (expensive) furnished apartments in Cairo, or by 'migrating' to the desert in Upper Egypt to establish an ideal society of Muslims. Peaceful 'migration', however, proved difficult and the leaders of the movement were caught and imprisoned. The other option of direct violent confrontation with the state, without migration, was even less successful. Groups that advocated an overthrow of the state were rounded up after the assassination of president Sadat in 1981, and its leadership was hanged.

By the time most members of the radical groups were released from prison in the second half of the 1980s, the opportunities for internal migration were blocked, and many looked for means to escape from Egypt in order to build an ideal Muslim society elsewhere. The accelerated process of glob-

alization allowed them to find a new external abode and build a new ideal society. Not only did the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the ensuing chaos in the Central Asian republics and Chechnya following the Soviet collapse in 1989 provide ideal circumstances to establish a new society, new means of communication allowed them to mobilize the human, financial, and ideological resources throughout the Islamic world. For a while Peshawar became the hub of the Islamist movement, where in true transnational fashion 'flows of people, money, images, ideas and objects circulate with growing speed, intensity and volume'. Informal transnational networks extended from the centres of struggle to the smallest towns in the outreaches of the Islamic world to support this migration.

Typical of this new, more extremist stage of the Islamist movement is the close connection between migration and the application of violence. Under cover of the jihad against the Soviets thousands of Egyptians, other Arabs,

Pakistanis, Philippines, and Indonesians were flown in to take part in the construction of a new pure Muslim society that was created and purified by force of arms. When the local war against the Soviets in Afghanistan ended in 1989, the mujahidin, internationalized their struggle by gradually turning against the United States. In addition, they promoted jihad in their countries of origin. As in the outlines of the seminar, the diasporic community had become the leading force in the radicalization of the Muslim world.

Ayman al-Zawahiri's memoirs 'Knights under the Prophet's Banner', smuggled out of the Afghan caves before the American invasion in 2002, provides a unique insight into the transnational, almost postmodern, ideology of the Egyptian radical Islamist movement in this transnational phase. Calling himself 'an emigrant fugitive, who gives his backing to other emigrants and *mujahidin*', he regards Afghanistan at this 'stage of global battle' the ideal place to 'fight the new crusade', because as he says, 'it is a pure battle between Muslims on the one hand and infidels on the other'. Conscious of the role media play in this war and the postmodern era, he expresses his fear of penetration by 'the Arab and Western media [who] are responsible for distorting the image of the Arab Afghans'. 'The external enemy' aside, al-Zawahiri played a major role in promoting violent confrontation with the 'internal enemy', the Egyptian authorities.

In other respects, however, the Egypt-

ian movement does not fit the outlines of the seminar. Although al-Zawahiri and other members of the radical Egyptian Islamist movement were able to promote jihad from a safe transnational haven, were free to develop their ideas and communicate them to the rest of the world as well as plan the assault on the World Trade Center in New York, they did not succeed in further radicalizing the movement in Egypt itself. Indeed, the majority of the movement condemned violence and rejected the Front of Osama Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri, even before 11 September. Since January 2002 the leaders of the Gama'at al-Islamiyya publicly rescinded many of their previous ideas regarding jihad, *takfir* (the condemnation of society as infidel), and *hisba*. In that sense the influence of the diasporic radical community of Egyptians is waning. What has changed, however, is that the debate on violence and the means of establishing an ideal Muslim Society have become transnational. Since 11 September the Egyptian debate on establishing an ideal Muslim society and the role of migration and violence has become a worldwide Muslim debate. The Asian experience of the Egyptian movement has played a key role in this process. <

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