

De-Radicalization of Jihad? The Impact of Egyptian Islamist Revisionists on Al-Qaeda

By Omar Ashour

In July 1997, the largest armed Islamist movement in Egypt surprised many officials, observers and even its own activists by declaring a unilateral ceasefire. This declaration by the Islamic Group (IG) started a comprehensive “de-radicalization” process that led to its practical abandonment of violence. [1] The process also included an ideological component that used Islamic theological arguments to de-legitimize the use of violence against the state, the society and the “other.” By 2007, the IG’s de-radicalization process appeared successful: no armed operations since 1999, no significant splits within the movement and around 25 volumes authored by the IG leaders supporting their new ideology with both theological and rational arguments. Two of the volumes were critiques of al-Qaeda’s behavior [2] and a third was a critique of the “clash of civilization” hypothesis, arguing instead for cultural dialogue. [3] The drafting of these volumes by the same movement that co-assassinated President Anwar al-Sadat for signing the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty was a significant development. This process of de-radicalization removed more than 15,000 IG militants from the Salafi-Jihadi camp led currently by al-Qaeda. [4]

In 2007, the al-Jihad Organization, which is the second largest armed Islamist organization in Egypt and has strong ties with al-Qaeda, followed the IG’s lead. The de-radicalization process was led by the former Emir (commander) of al-Jihad (1987-1993) and al-Qaeda’s ideologue, Dr. Sayyid Imam al-Sharif (alias ‘Abd al-Qadir Ibn ‘Abd al-‘Aziz as well as Dr. Fadl). To recant his old views, al-Sharif authored a new book titled *Document for Guiding Jihad in Egypt and the World*. In addition, al-Sharif and other Jihad commanders had been touring Egyptian prisons to meet with their followers since February 2007. [5] The tours featured small initial meetings with the commanders of al-Jihad factions in an effort to organize a common stance. This was followed by lectures and questions periods between the al-Jihad leadership and the lower ranks. [6] This type of interaction was modeled after the IG leadership’s ten months of discussions and meetings with their followers in 2002. [7] Moreover, the IG leaders were included in al-Jihad’s meetings to share their experiences and demonstrate their relatively successful case of de-radicalization. Karam Zuhdi, the head of IG’s *Shura* (Consultative) Council, and Dr. Nagih Ibrahim, his deputy and the main ideologue of the IG, were present with al-Sharif in several internal al-Jihad meetings to encourage the process and answer questions. [8]

The phenomenon of “de-radicalization” is not only confined to Egyptian militants. It has also been undertaken by Algerian, Saudi, Yemeni, Jordanian, Tajik, Malaysian, and Indonesian armed Islamist movements, factions and individuals. It should be noted here that the “de-radicalization” process is primarily concerned with changing the attitudes of these movements toward violence – specifically violence against civilians (terrorism). It touches on other issues like stances on democracy and women, but there are no major changes regarding these issues. Almost all of these movements still uphold misogynist, homophobic, xenophobic, and anti-democratic views. However, the new development is abandoning and de-legitimizing the idea of using violence to impose such views. Given that, several important questions arise: What causes this de-radicalization process? What are the necessary conditions behind its success? Will it affect al-Qaeda’s behavior and/or ideology?

I have argued that a combination of charismatic leadership, state repression, interactions with the “other” and selective inducements from the state and other actors are common causes of de-radicalization. [9] There is a pattern of interaction between these factors leading to de-radicalization, and the case of al-Jihad is no exception. State repression and interaction with the “other” (here I refer to the dialogues between imprisoned liberals and human rights activists and al-Jihad’s and IG’s grassroots and leaders) [10] have affected the leadership of the radical organization. The latter initiates a de-radicalization process, which is bolstered by selective inducements from the state as well as internal interactions (lectures, discussions, meetings between the leadership, mid-ranking commanders and grassroots in an effort to convince them). De-radicalized groups often interact with other violent groups and, in some cases, they influence each other. The interactions between al-Jihad and the IG is one example of how a de-radicalized group can influence both the behavior and the ideology of a radical Salafi-Jihadi one. Given the strong ties of al-Jihad in general, and its main ideologue, al-Sharif, in particular to al-Qaeda, one question should be addressed here: what is the likelihood that the de-radicalization process of al-Jihad will affect al-Qaeda?

Although it is still too early to definitively answer this question, two facts should be highlighted. First, compared with other armed Islamist movements, including the IG and the Taliban, al-Jihad Organization has the strongest links with al-Qaeda. Al-Jihad figures were the co-founders and the main administrators behind the establishment of al-Qaeda. Those figures include Ayman al-Zawahri, Subhy Abu Sitta (alias Abu Hafs al-Masri), Ali Amin al-Rashidi (alias Abu 'Ubayyda al-Panjsheiri) and several others. Al-Sharif argued in one interview that these al-Jihad members are the "real" founders of al-Qaeda. In addition, a faction from al-Jihad merged with al-Qaeda in 1998 and signed the founding statement of the so-called "Global Islamist Front for Fighting Jews and Crusaders." Currently the commanders of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Iraq are Mustafa Abu al-Yazid (alias Sa'id) and Yusif al-Dardiri (alias Abu Ayub al-Masri and also Abu Hamza al-Muhajir) respectively. Both leaders were former mid-ranking commanders in al-Jihad. In addition, al-Qaeda's second-in-command, Dr. Ayman al-Zawahri, was the former leader of al-Jihad between 1993 and 2000 (following al-Sharif).

The second fact concerns al-Sharif himself, a highly regarded ideologue within the Salafi-Jihadi trend in general and al-Qaeda in particular. His two books, *The Collector in Pursuing The Noble Science* and *The Pillar of Preparation for al-Jihad in the Way of God* are considered "bibles" in jihadist circles and were taught in al-Qa'ida's camps in Afghanistan. Some Islamists regard al-Sharif to be the most influential ideologue in Jihadism after Sayyid Qutb.[12]

As opposed to the other ideologues of al-Qaeda, [11] al-Sharif's works are focused more on theological arguments. His *Document* dismantles the theological argument of Jihadism. For example, after long theological and ideological arguments, he concludes that the attacks on Sept. 11 were "treacherous acts" and that calling them a "*Ghazwa*" [13] is mocking and smearing the prophetic tradition of Muhammad. Indeed, al-Sharif challenges jihadists on their own ideological turf. Given that al-Qa'ida's leaders tend to legitimize their violent behavior to their followers and sympathizers based on Islamic theological grounds, the de-legitimization of that behavior by al-Sharif's *Document* and other de-radicalized Salafi-Jihadist works, such as the IG's, might affect some of al-Qa'ida's members, potential members and sympathizers. The question then becomes: which layers of al-Qaeda are most likely to be affected?

Arguably, al-Qaeda can be divided into three layers. The first layer is composed of a small core group that surrounds Bin Laden and al-Zawahiri and receives direct orders from them. This layer is the least likely to be affected. Al-Zawahiri has already criticized al-Sharif and mocked the idea of revisions, publications and "fax machines" in Egyptian prisons. In his latest audio statement, he promises to release a counterargument to al-Sharif's *Document* – a pledge that shows that al-Qaeda takes the new literature seriously enough to bother issuing a counterargument. In addition, Bin Laden criticized the behavior of al-Qa'ida in Iraq after the media announced that al-Sharif was in the process of writing the *Document*, but before the *Document's* release. Bin Laden may have attempted to minimize the effects of the *Document* and send a preemptive message to his sympathizers that there would be changes in al-Qaeda's violent behavior and terrorist tactics.

The second layer is al-Qa'ida's self-styled "branches" in Algeria, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and even Egypt. Of these, the Egyptian branch is most likely to be affected because of the weight of al-Sharif in Egypt, as well as the revisions of the IG. In the words of one of the IG's "de-radicalized" historical leaders, al-Sharif's *Document* is the final say in the "Islamic jurisprudence of violence" in Egypt. [14]

The third layer is that of the 'Internet militants'. This group is mostly teenagers and young men inspired by al-Qaeda's rhetoric, but have no organizational ties or contacts with its network. In other words, this is a layer of 'self-recruited members'. Probably aware that this layer has the weakest ties with the core of al-Qaeda, al-Sharif dedicated a large part of his *Document* to warning young Muslim men about the 'Internet Sheikhs.' This layer is likely the one that will be affected the most, and its members could be discouraged from following Salafi-Jihadism in general and al-Qa'ida in particular because of the influence of al-Sharif's *Document*.

In conclusion, this article has briefly highlighted the general causes behind the de-radicalization of al-Jihad Organization. It also referred to the IG's successful de-radicalization process that took place on the behavioral, organizational and ideological levels. Behaviorally, the IG shunned the path of political violence. Ideologically, it de-legitimized it and its leadership was able to unite the organization behind upholding the transformations. Although its current stance is far from electoral or liberal democracy, it does not represent the end of the transformations. For example, several sympathizers and former IG and al-Jihad members have participated in the 2005 Egyptian parliamentary elections.[15] Also, Karam Zuhdi explained in an interview that the current IG

position regarding democracy could change, based on “the interests of the IG.”[16] This seems to indicate that pragmatism has a final say in the behavior of the IG.

In case of al-Jihad, the smaller and more radical group, the organization was able to follow the lead of the IG and de-radicalize on both behavioral and ideological dimensions. Unlike the IG, however, the organizational dimension of the de-radicalization process is incomplete. This is because there are factions within al-Jihad that still refuse to uphold de-radicalization. These factions also refuse to leave the Organization and one of them is in alliance with al-Qaeda. The process, however, did not stop at this point. [17]

Another factor can be highlighted in the case of al-Jihad. The lead of the IG and the interaction with its leaders has facilitated and influenced the de-radicalization process of al-Jihad, which stalled on several occasions. Moreover, several Islamist leaders have argued that without the IG’s de-radicalization process, there would not have been an al-Jihad one. This suggests a “domino effect” hypothesis that can be a subject of future research; de-radicalization of one group can influence others operating in the same context under similar conditions. This hypothesis is supported by the cases of the small violent Takfiri and Salafi-Jihadi groups which joined al-Jihad’s revisions in 2007, mainly in reaction to al-Sharif’s *Document*. [18]

The discussion and analyses provided here can be valuable for policy purposes. External social interaction aiming to influence Islamist leaders coupled with selective inducements could be key factors in de-radicalizing militant groups. Eliminating the “spiritual”[19] leaders of a militant movement could be perceived as a media/psychological victory for a government but would make a comprehensive de-radicalization process less likely to succeed. Those leaders are necessary to legitimize de-radicalization and initiate a genuine dialogue with their followers (internal social interaction). Finally, aside from the moral element, while durable, intense and reactive state repression was correlated positively with the de-radicalization in both cases of the IG and al-Jihad as well as others, the consequences of that type of repression were not limited to de-radicalization. Those consequences included the initial radicalization of the IG as well as the fragmentation and further radicalization of other militant groups. The most notable cases are those of the Algerian Armed Islamic Group (GIA) and Salafi Group for Preach and Combat (GSPC) (which is now al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb).

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[1] For more details on that process and its comparison to the processes of Radicalization and Moderation see Omar Ashour, “Lions Tamed? An Inquiry into the Causes of De-Radicalization of the Egyptian Islamic Group,” *Middle East Journal* vol. 61, no. 4 (Autumn 2007), 596 - 597.

[2] Karam Zuhdi et. al, *Istratijiyat wa Tafjirat al-Qa’ida: al-Akhta’ wa al-Akhtar* (The Strategy and the Bombings of al-Qa’ida: The Mistakes and The Dangers), (Cairo: al-Turath al-Islami), 2002.

[3] See Nagih Ibrahim et al., *Hidayyat al-Khala’iq bayna al-Ghayyat wa al-Wasa’il* (Guidance of People between Means and Ends), (Cairo: al-Abikan), 2005, 225 – 247.

[4] See Ashour, *Lions Tamed*, 597.

[5] al-Masry al-Youm, 18 April 2007, 1.

[6] Jahin, Interview, 5; al-Sharif, Interview, part two, 8.

[7] Ashour, *Lions Tamed?*, 618. The IG was given much more extensive governmental media coverage, however.

[8] Magdi Abdul Rasul, “al-Jihad wa al-Jama’a Yatafiqan ‘ala Awlawiyat al-‘amal al-Siyasi (The Jihad and the Group Agree on the Priorities of Political Action,” *al-‘Arabi al-Nassiri*, 16 March 2006, 1.

[9] Ashour, *Lions Tamed*, 603-605.

[10] An example of that interaction was between al-Jihad members and some secular liberals, most notably renowned human rights activist and former political prisoner Dr. Saad Eddine Ibrahim. In 2002 and 2003, during his detention, Dr. Ibrahim held several discussions about Islam, democracy and human rights with detained Islamists, including al-Jihad members. He mentioned that following several months of talks with these members, many of them were ready to abandon violence and condemned the 9/11 attacks (Saad Eddine Ibrahim. Interview by author, 1 November 2007. Toronto, Ontario, Canada).

[11] Such as Abu Mus'ab al-Suri (Mustafa al-Sit Maryam), whose works are more strategy-oriented (not theology-oriented) and Ayman al-Zawahri, whose works are more history-oriented.

[12] Muntassir al-Zayyat. "Huwar ma' al-Zayyat (Interview with al-Zayyat)," Interviewed by Ahmad al-Khatib, *al-Masry al-Youm*, 17 November 2007, 5

[13] A *Ghazwa* is an Arabic word that is used to refer to the conquests of Muhammad in the Arabian Peninsula.

[14] Asim abd al-Majid, Interviewed by Ahmad Sa'ad. *Al-Jarida*, 4 December 2007, 12.

[15] Muntasir Al-Zayat, "Muhami Al-Usuliyin: Mawqifi Sa'b Fi Bulaq al-Dakrur (The Lawyer of the Fundamentalists: My Situation is Difficult in Bulaq al-Dakrur)," *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 9 November 2005, 5.

-[16] Interview with Karam Zuhdi, Liqa' Khas. *Al-Jazeera Satellite Channel*, Cairo. 23 August 2006.

[17] By 2007, most of al-Jihad factions have joined the de-radicalization process. The main exceptions are the faction led by Ayman al-Zawahri, which joined al-Qa'ida, and three small factions in Egyptian prisons who mainly refuse the ideological component of the process (see for example Salih Jahin, "al-Muttahham el-12 fi Qadiyyat Ightiyya al-Sadat (The Defendant Number 12 in the Case of al-Sadat Assassination)," Interview by Ahmad al-Khatib, *al-Jarida*, 2 December 2007, 12).

[18] Abdu Zinah. "Qiyadat al-Jihad Dakhil al-Sujun al-Masriyya Ta'kuf 'ala I'dad Bayan Mubadarit Waqf al-'unf (The Commanders of al-Jihad inside Egyptian Prisons are Engaging in Preparing a Communiqué for an Initiative for ceasing Violence." *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 19 April 2007a, 1.

[19] As opposed to the organizational leaders of a group.