Written evidence from Mokhtar Awad, Research Fellow at the George Washington University’s Program on Extremism (ISL0035)

I am submitting this testimony to highlight fundamental evolutions taking place in the ideology and structure of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. The testimony highlights how there remains a problematic relationship between the group, its ideas, and violence. The recent events in Egypt are the most direct involvement yet the group has had in modern times with violence. This testimony sheds light on key drivers for radicalization that are a direct result of Brotherhood leadership and ideology as the issue of autocratic repression and socioeconomic drivers generally overshadow it but are not to be discounted. The group’s UK branch is playing a key role in an ongoing struggle inside the Muslim Brotherhood over its trajectory and the consequences of the group’s evolution and developments in Egypt have an impact on UK interests and security.

I am an expert on Islamist groups in Egypt, Islamist ideology, and the politics and security of the Middle East. The Program on Extremism is a George Washington University think tank in Washington, DC. The think tank focuses on extremist groups, radical ideologies, and countering violent extremism research.

Executive Summary:

- The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is going through unprecedented fragmentation that has given rise to a new “revolutionary” wing that embraces violence.
- Radicalization in Brotherhood ranks and the embrace of violence underscores how core ideological principles and foundational texts of the Muslim Brotherhood are problematic and remain to be largely unrevised by the group.
- Pro-violence Brotherhood members and leaders, other radicals aligned with the group, and Salafists were easily able to influence a segment of the group’s members in Egypt to accept varying levels of violence as religiously justified. This contradicts claims by some that the group can be a “firewall” against such extremism especially when radical elements can produce a discourse of violence based on its texts.
- The turn to violence by some inside the Brotherhood has opened the door for new theorization that attempts to more directly reconcile a methodology of violence with the Brotherhood creed. This presents a tremendous risk as the group’s adherents and supporters who face adversity may have a lower threshold for employing violence as it no longer requires defecting to far more radical Salafi Jihadi groups.
- The group’s old guard, which is represented strongly in the UK, has attempted to rein in the pro-violence faction with varying degrees of success. The old guard, however, remains ideologically and politically rigid.

Recommendations:

- The UK may be able to influence these dynamics and should apply pressure, if possible, on Brotherhood elements in its territory to more swiftly rein in violent elements and address the group’s problematic ideology.
• The UK should anticipate increased Brotherhood related activity inside its territory. There could be some potential risk if radicals begin to heavily propagate a religious narrative on the conflict in Egypt that frames it as a destination for Jihad like Syria.
• The UK has a direct interest in monitoring these developments closely as the Muslim Brotherhood is the oldest and largest Islamist group and to inform its policy towards Egypt. Since if the situation in Egypt deteriorates, it’ll have direct consequences on regional stability and UK interests.

The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and Violent Extremism:

1) Nearly three years after the Muslim Brotherhood’s government was overthrown in Egypt, the organization, which is the oldest and largest Islamist group in the world, stands today as both weakened and fragmented as a result of a severe clampdown by the Egyptian government it seeks to overthrow. Yet the Brotherhood “mother” movement and its state of affairs still influences its thousands of followers and many branches, including those in the UK, as it undergoes an evolution in both tactics and ideology with factions springing up inside Egypt that embrace violence.

2) The adoption of violence by some Brotherhood members inside Egypt may have been triggered by a political crisis, but underscores how in the body of the Muslim Brotherhood there remains too many cadres who resort too easily to violence with religious justification and are susceptible to Jihadi recruitment. Although the Brotherhood is not fundamentally a “Jihadi” organization, like the Salafi Jihadists who prioritize violent Jihad as the methodology to bring about Islamist change, it is still a far-right politico-religious movement whose foundational texts call for the establishment of Islamic governance and the implementation of Sharia.

3) The movement may have in recent decades tactically adopted democratic tools like elections to pursue power in lieu of violence and rejected hardline doctrines like takfirism, or declaring other Muslim apostates. However, it has failed to undergo a serious ideological revision that challenge its core far-right principles and introduces texts that advance a more genuinely pluralistic, moderate version of Islam that is compatible with the modern world and liberal values. This is unlike the Tunisian branch, Ennahda, whose ideologue Rashid Ghanouchi had made some strides in this regard compared to the Egyptian mother organization and perhaps as a result helped avoid a political crisis in that country.

4) For this reason, the Egyptian Brotherhood was and continues to be ideologically rigid, and as a result, at the first sign of crisis and adversity, radical ideas like those found in the writings of early Brotherhood ideologue Sayyid Qutb or the use of violence by the Secret Apparatus under the command of the founder Imam Hassan al-Banna, easily seep back into the body of the membership. This is not to say that merely being a member of the organization, many of whom are educated and well-off, means that a cadre is predisposed to accepting these radical ideas or that the organization overall sanctions violence today.
But it is to say that though it is now obvious to policymakers that the organization is not immune to radicalization; it is indeed the Brotherhood’s leadership and its underlying ideology that are among the key drivers in facilitating radicalization which justifies responding to state repression with violence on religious grounds.

5) Understanding how the Brotherhood got to this point and how radicalization took hold in some factions is critical in informing any policy discussion on the movement’s relationship with violent extremism and how these dynamics impact regional security and UK interests.

Brief background:

6) From even before their overthrow in July 2013, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood began to ally with far-right Salafists, including former Jihadists such as the notorious Islamic Group, in an effort to build a political force. This intensified after the group lost all opportunities to build effective bridges with Egypt’s secular forces who opposed the Brotherhood President Mohamed Morsi’s constitutional declaration in November 2012 that gave him sweeping powers. Even the Salafist Nour Party, of the orthodox but non-violent Salafi Dawa of Alexandria, began to drift away from the Muslim Brotherhood for perceived failures in governance.

7) The impact of this Brotherhood-Salafi alliance was increased fear in society of a forceful Islamization agenda. There was also greater polarization as the Brotherhood’s Salafist allies deployed sectarian and hateful rhetoric against opponents that many times bordered on takfirism. It was clear that even though the Brotherhood had just taken power through democratic means, and was promising to govern inclusively, it had actually on the ground allied with the most conservative of Salafists. This was clear when in a June 2013 rally, Morsi was flanked by Salafist leaders and was silent as preacher Mohamed Abdel Maqsoud called Shiites “unclean” and prayed that planned protests against Morsi will be a day rued by “infidels and hypocrites,” meaning Morsi’s opponents. The same month, radical Saudi clerk Mohamed al-Oraifi was let into Egypt and delivered a Friday sermon in Cairo in which he called for an Islamic Caliphate. To name just two examples.

8) The 48-day long sit-ins at Rabaa Square in Cairo and Nahda Square in Giza were no different. In the group’s attempt to mobilize Islamists, it readily employed the most sectarian and polarizing rhetoric as it allowed hardline Salafists and Brotherhood preachers to deliver radical sermons. Those 48 days marking the end of Brotherhood rule in Egypt and dominance in society for years to come, were perhaps a fitting representation of what the movement had ideologically devolved into. And how in the face of adversity, the movement could only behave how a far-right politico-religious movement that mobilizes on the basis of identity and religion could. The Brotherhood’s deployment and tolerance of the most hateful and radical of Islamist discourse underscored how the movement had not fundamentally rejected such ideas found in its
foundational texts and how when it came to practice, the group’s pretentions of genuine political and religious moderation rang hollow.

9) Rabaa and Nahda were violently cleared by Egyptian authorities on August 13, 2013, killing about 1000, in what was the most brutal and bloody massacre in the country’s modern history. This lit the spark of more violent confrontation with the state, but as explained, subsequent Islamist violence did not happen in a vacuum as the Brotherhood leadership had turbocharged its base and supporters with radical and sectarian Islamist discourse. Dozens of churches were burned by Islamists and sporadic violence took place across the country. The Brotherhood’s leadership was also driven underground as thousands were either imprisoned or left the country. This set the stage for the group’s current state of affairs.

Brotherhood divisions and the rise of violent extremism:

10) In the view of many Brotherhood cadres, especially the youth, the senior, older leadership had miserably failed in both predicting and responding to their overthrow from power and the subsequent calamity. Disagreements and outright divisions are not new to the organization, with some defectors and dissidents leaving either because they are too moderate or too conservative for the movement. Calamities too are not new to the group as it suffered setbacks after its founder Imam Hassan al-Banna was assassinated and when President Gamal Abdel Nasser nearly wiped the Brotherhood out. However, the group has never faced a crisis on this scale before as it now had reached power and lost it, and also had brutally lost hundreds of members in a short span of time.

11) In reaction to the ongoing calamity and the decapitation of the leadership, the movement had to rely on a less decentralized approach to operating in Egypt. Newly exiled leaders in countries like Turkey, Sudan, Qatar, and the UK now had to plan for long term opposition in exile and leverage the group’s existing international network with cities like Istanbul and London being one of the most important nodes.

12) As the Guidance Bureau could no longer regularly meet, new bodies such as a Crisis Management Committee to oversee organizational affairs, as well as an office for leaders exiled abroad were elected in early 2014. These new bodies were meant to be temporary and included more junior cadres who viewed the senior leadership as ineffective, sowing the seed for internal tension. For the next year and a half, these new bodies would help influence the Brotherhood’s trajectory into more confrontation and embrace of varying degrees of violence.

13) Already from Fall 2013-Spring 2014 many Brotherhood cadres and Islamist allies began to engage in low-intensity violence that relied on the use of Molotov cocktails, arson attacks targeting infrastructure, as well as occasionally using birdshot shotguns to fire at security forces. Some of this was at first spontaneous and organic and didn’t heed calls
made by older leaders that “Peacefulness was stronger than bullets.” The violent operations began to be more organized and the violent actors were labeled by authorities as the Brotherhood’s “Special Committees.” But nevertheless, no drastic action was taken against the youth and many in the junior Brotherhood leadership, as well as some senior leaders, began to justify this low-intensity violence as merely “revolutionary action” and innovated terms such as “creative non-violence.” This colorful terminology also served to obfuscate when engaging European and American audiences.

14) One of their most powerful tools in exercising such influence over cadres inside Egypt was the use of newly created satellite TV channels, mostly based in Turkey and sometimes broadcast from studios allegedly in the UK. At least four channels were created by Islamists, with one specifically called Ahrar 25, later called Masr al-An, and now called Watan founded by the Brotherhood. In 2014-2015, these channels spewed hateful and sectarian messages. Masr al-An specifically incited outright violence in Egypt, something that is well documented.

15) As the Brotherhood-Salafi media machine was setting the tone for their “resistance,” and many times even providing a platform for radical clerics like Mohamed Abdul Maqsoud and Wagdy Ghoneim, who constantly declares President Sisi an apostate, the Islamist violence deployed by groups associated with the Brotherhood and its allies escalated. New groups calling themselves “Popular Resistance Movement” and “Revolutionary Punishment” that used IEDs and engaged in armed assaults sprang up. The Brotherhood channel Masr al-An and other Islamist channels embraced these groups. As the violence was escalating, Brotherhood cadres who wished to join even more effective groups, and have already gone down the path of justifying violence on religious grounds, began to join groups like Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis in Egypt, which later joined ISIS, or traveled to join ISIS or al-Qaeda overseas to gain fighting experience.

16) It became increasingly clear by mid to late 2014 that a distinct faction, a so called “revolutionary” faction, was the body leading things in this confrontational direction. They were largely represented by leaders elected in the new bodies such as Mohamed Kamal, Ahmad Abdul Rahman, and Hussein Ibrahim. They also appointed a new spokesman for the group who used the alias Mohamed Montassir and regularly used confrontational rhetoric in media and claimed that old guard leaders had no legitimacy. More worryingly, as reported by publications and writers close to the Brotherhood, specific leaders like Mohamed Kamal and Hussein Ibrahim were increasingly implicated in the escalating violence. It is reported that some of the so called “special committees,” which they reportedly helped found, had in fact evolved into Revolutionary Punishment, which claimed 150 attacks and to have killed a similar number of security forces in 2015. To finance such violent operations these leaders were also reportedly using funds entering Egypt meant for providing assistance to struggling Brotherhood families. Since these are funds collected from outside Egypt, there may have been a possibility that
money collected in the UK may have been used, but this is very difficult to investigate and prove.

17) More importantly, some in the so-called “revolutionary” faction had reportedly reached out to Islamic scholars to write a treatise on the issue of the use of violence and how it can be reconciled with the Brotherhood ideology. The result was a book published online in early 2015 which justified violence by the title of *The Jurisprudence of the Popular Resistance to the Coup*. Although the book is not technically an official Brotherhood document, as the group’s new radical faction wishes to keep its operations clandestine, it circulated widely in Brotherhood circles and its content makes clear that Brotherhood cadres are the primary audience. The book was easily able to tap into the group’s foundational texts and re-interpret problematic talk of “force” by the group’s founder and point to the most obvious of symbols: the two swords in the group’s logo. To name but a few examples. These have all been things that the group sought to explain away as simply “misunderstood.” But it became clear that without the group having to challenge head on its problematic history with violence and underlying ideology by thoroughly scrubbing its texts and symbols from problematic ideas taught in its acculturation process, then radicals from inside the group can repurpose them to fit their agenda. This new theorization, if it takes hold, risks lowering the threshold for employing violence by adherents of the Brotherhood creed who may be facing adversity since before it usually required a Brother to defect and join a far more radical Salafi Jihadi group.

18) In reaction to these developments, and the increasing authority of the newly created bodies, some in the old guard represented by Acting-Supreme Guide Mahmoud Ezzat, Secretary General Mahmoud Hussein, and UK based Deputy Supreme Guide Ibrahim Munir recoiled and attempted to retake power in 2015. They have denounced the escalated violence publicly and said that the new bodies do not have the legitimacy to run the organization. However, it has also been reported that the old guard leadership may just simply fundamentally disagree with the accelerated timeline followed by the “revolutionary” faction in implementing the final phase of confrontation with the regime that relies on violence. This is because they believe that the Brotherhood is not ready and the regime remains too strong.

19) Whatever the intentions, the old guard took steps to rein in the activity of the “revolutionary” faction and attempted to create a parallel media apparatus. They now operate a rival website, have used the UK-based al-Hewar TV channel as propaganda platform for their wing, and reportedly have taken control of the Turkey based Watan channel from the “revolutionary” faction.

20) The old guard control over finances has been a critical tool, as they have reportedly cut off some in Egypt who refused to recognize the old guard’s legitimacy and cease violence. The news of the UK investigating the Brotherhood’s ties to terrorism also appear to have strongly influenced the old guard’s decision to take action against violent
radicals. UK based Ibrahim Munir especially values the Brotherhood network he built in the UK for decades and does not wish to be implicated in increasingly clear acts of violence committed by his organization. This has resulted in a dramatic decrease of Brotherhood violence from mid to late 2015. Some of the violent cadres as a result are more likely to join other established Jihadi violent groups and some will try to reconstitute themselves and find alternative financing. It should be noted, however, that Mahmoud Hussein and others in the old guard were responsible for creating Masr al-An and had remained silent for over a year about the escalating violence (which was ineffective) before taking decisive action.

21) Despite many mediation attempts, the two factions remain at odds. In the process, no ideological revision has taken place within the organization, and in fact the contrary has taken place with attempts to found theological Sharia based justifications for violence. The old guard also remains ideologically and political rigid, unable to put forward a clear path for how it will reconcile with the regime and ensure that the rest of the Brotherhood will be on board. There is talk, however, of the old guard proposing a reconciliation initiative that does not condition the removal of Sisi, but it remains to be seen how authentic these calls are and if the old guard can reestablish control over the Brotherhood.

**Recommendations**

22) The UK may be able to influence these ongoing dynamics due to the heavy presence of Muslim Brothers in the UK\(^9\) and newly gained power by now Deputy Supreme Guide Ibrahim Munir. Policymakers and officials must make clear when engaging him and others that the old guard faction taking action now against radicalization in the organization is commendable, but not enough. That the Brotherhood must take steps to fundamentally address problematic texts and ideas that pro-violence Brotherhood leaders are able to cite for their agenda. And that his faction must also take concrete steps in putting forward a realistic proposal for settling the conflict with the Egyptian government. All of this, while remaining cognizant of the fact that the Brotherhood is a weakened force today and that the UK should not take any steps that may indirectly empower the organization or give its leadership the impression that it’ll have its backing in negotiations with the Egyptian government.

23) The UK should be aware that it is not only a key node in the Muslim Brotherhood’s international network, but that the UK Muslim Brothers are playing a nearly unprecedented role in influencing the fate of the organization today. This means that more money will pass through the UK and TV networks like al-Hewar and perhaps other future ones will be propaganda platforms. There may be risks if pro-violence Brotherhood leaders set-up camp in the UK to try and challenge their UK based rivals, as they will attempt to use the country as a base of operations for their agenda. The propagation of an Islamist and religious discourse on the conflict in Egypt may also impact UK nationals susceptible to radicalization who may begin to eye Egypt as a
destination for Jihad like they did with Syria.

24) The UK should urge the Egyptian government to capitalize on this fragmentation inside the Muslim Brotherhood and wider Egyptian Islamist landscape to seriously pursue an aggressive strategy of “divide and conquer,” to quickly reconcile with non-violent elements. The Egyptian government should also improve human rights conditions in its prisons and make a serious effort to combat violent extremism using a holistic approach. If insurgency in the Egyptian mainland escalates, it’ll have dire consequences for regional security and will directly impact European and UK interests and national security. For this reason, continued vigilance in monitoring the Islamist landscape is critical in informing UK policy towards Egypt and the Muslim Brotherhood.

April 2016


6 See: Ahmad El Telawy, “The Brotherhood’s Crisis: The Full Story,” Noon Post, February 7, 2016. http://www.noonpost.net/%D8%A3%D8%B2%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%AE%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%A3%D8%B2%D9%85%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%AE%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%82%D8%B5%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%84%D8%A9; AbdulRahman Youssef, “The Brotherhood’s Internal Disagreements and the Future of the Movement,” The Egyptian File: Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, Volume 16, March 2016. https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B9mwL5_FZOYJX2JBQk9GRG1KVHM/view
8 Book can be accessed here: https://cchs.gwu.edu/sites/cchs.gwu.edu/files/downloads/The%20Jurisprudence%20of%20Popular%20Resistance%20to%20the%20Coup.pdf