

Islamist Discontent in the Sadat Years: Considering the Structures of Anti-Sadat Islamist Thought

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This paper will consider the growing Islamist opposition to Anwar Sadat's presidency in Egypt in the 1970s. It will explore the tenets for what became an extreme dimension of Islamism in the form of groups like Takfir wal-Hijrah and Egyptian Jihad, the latter being the organization of Sadat's assassin Khalid Islambouli. This is done by tracing the ideological and social trajectories of Islamism in the country, and this paper engages with the thought of figures like Abd-as-Salam Faraj and Sayyid Qutb along with commentaries on their social and theological influence. Sadat's own public comportment, policies like his Infitah (open door), and the accompanying sociological changes and economic malaise prompted a turn to Islamism and its potent ideological aspects by a disillusioned youth. In considering the interplay between ideology, structural realities, and Sadat's government's policies, this paper will demonstrate how the pervasive anti-Sadat sentiment from a crucial part of Egyptian society was realized.

Anwar Al-Sadat's presidency marked a continuation of the Free Officers' hegemony over Egyptian politics established by Gamal Abdel Nasser. Sadat's presidency was marked by efforts to confirm his legitimacy as leader in the wake of Nasser's death, the latter being a colossal figure in Egyptian, Arab, and world politics. Sadat endeavoured to reintegrate Egypt into the world economy through his open-door *Infitah* policy and to secure Egypt's foreign policy interests by pursuing a rapprochement with Israel. The Islamist movement that grew during the Sadat era, however, would prove substantial in fomenting dissent against Sadat's policies, regime, and system of government. Lieutenant Khalid Islambouli, a member of the militant Egyptian Jihad Islamist group, assassinated Sadat on October 6, 1981. Many suggested his assassination was due to the unpopular Camp David Accords signed in 1979, which was seen as a betrayal of Arab solidarity. This foreign policy decision was undoubtedly a factor that exacerbated anti-Sadat sentiments, but the reasons for the fervent anti-Sadat currents go beyond his foreign policy decisions.

This paper will focus on the domestic conditions in Egypt that made Sadat and his regime increasingly unpopular with Islamist sections of Egyptian society. It will explore the growth of Islamist influence vis a vis domestic political, economic, and

social conditions and the ideological and theological stances of key Islamist figures like Sayyid Qutb and Abd-al-Salam Faraj. In considering these points, this paper will demonstrate how Islamist dissidents gained substantial influence and posed a credible threat to Sadat's regime. This paper argues that domestic structures and conditions in Egypt were significant enough to induce anti-Sadat Islamist activity and that foreign policy was not the sole feature around which Sadat's Islamist detractors mobilized.

Mohamed Heikal, long-time editor-in-chief of the government-owned newspaper Al-Ahram, recalls Sadat's personal conduct, as exhibited to the wider Egyptian populace, as the reason for his inadvertent emboldening of Islamic fundamentalism. According to Heikal, Sadat grew increasingly self-important when assuming a public religious guise. Both abroad and in Egypt, Sadat would borrow from Islamic language used to describe God, projecting the image of 'the pious President' whose directives were tempered by mercy, to the chagrin of "those who recognize mercy as God's prerogative."¹ Heikal mentions that Sadat would paraphrase verses from the Quran to bolster his religious public persona.² Reflecting on Sadat's legacy in the early years after his death, Heikal states that Sadat, probably seeking to dismantle Nasser's legacy, which had the potential to undermine his presidency, "divided Egypt against itself."³ He outlines how Sadat compromised Egypt's long-standing nationalism, which had existed since the early 19th century during Muhammad Ali's reign, by utilizing religiosity in a bid to undermine his political opponents and detractors. Sadat adopted a devout persona to reach these ends while attempting to foster interreligious harmony between Muslims, Copts, and Jews.

As such, his effort to propagandize religion to bolster his public image and political legitimacy incensed fundamentalist and militant Islamists, as his efforts at intercommunal harmony would have been irreconcilable with Islamist dogma. It is with this knowledge that we can understand Heikal's remark that "It is not surprising that the freedom with which he used the term 'atheist' to abuse his political opponents should have encouraged others to apply the same term to himself."⁴ Sadat normalized the use of religion to bolster political legitimacy, exposing the wider populace to a culture that in turn allowed Islamist trends to undermine his legitimacy as they called into question Sadat's religiosity. Such ill-informed religious embellishment of his persona would have alienated Sadat from the broader religious populace of a majority Sunni country like Egypt.

Nazih Ayubi writes of how Sadat's economic policy of *Infitah* brought about social conditions that exacerbated Islamist frustration. The Egyptian government under Sadat had sponsored and supported religious groups on university campuses in the hopes that they would neutralize leftist and Nasserite detractors. As Ayubi points out, however, Sadat's use of the "religious weapon"—referring to Sadat's instrumentaliza-

1 Mohamed Heikal, *Autumn of Fury: The Assassination of Sadat*, (London: Andre Deutsch, 1983), 181.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., 275.

4 Ibid., 276.

tion of religion to bolster political legitimacy—had emboldened Islamist student groups to the point where they harassed other groups on university campuses.⁵ This happened while Sadat remained ignorant of the growing disconnect between his religiously embellished public persona and the growing Islamist trends on university campuses. Ayubi describes how young militant Islamists were enraged by the proliferation of nightclubs, bars, and other sites frequented by wealthy foreigners where activities counter to traditional Islamic norms of propriety occurred.⁶ Sadat's conspicuous religiosity was not enough to satiate the religious youth as it "could not camouflage the economic crisis and the lack of jobs, the self-indulgent consumerism and unabashed corruption, and the [supposedly] uncritical subservience to the Israelis and the Americans."⁷

Moshe Albo and Yoram Meital write about the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Abd al-Halim Mahmud's criticisms of *Infitah*. Mahmud articulated his concern over the growing influence of Western morals and values that threatened to replace traditional Egyptian Islamic morals in society. Mahmud wrote of Sadat's complicity in the spread of a culture that, in his view, saw the rise of immodesty through cinema and was antithetical to traditional Egyptian society:

I have repeatedly argued that the president was the one who publicly declared his commitment to the general principle - the principle of faith, but he doesn't keep close tabs on the implementation of these principles. Today, there is no social leader that can promulgate what these principles are and then spend his time meticulously tracking and inculcating them among the citizens and the institutions that are bound to the Islamic faith.⁸

Albo and Meital note that Mahmud expressed concern over how *Infitah* required Egypt to cooperate economically with North America and Europe, consistent with Ayubi's observation that Sadat's policies required Egyptian deference to foreign interests. While Al-Azhar was fundamentally separate from the Islamist movement theologically and politically, Mahmud's concerns over the apparent erosion of Islamic Egyptian society brought about by *Infitah* reinforces the notion that Sadat's regime and policies alienated the religiously inclined. If the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Egypt's foremost religious authority, and someone Sadat relied on for religious legitimacy, was critical of *Infitah*'s cultural impact, then we can understand how these societal changes could be extremely incendiary to militant Islamists. Mahmud "asserted that the adoption of materialistic and capitalist values by modern Egyptian society

⁵ Nazih Ayubi, *Political Islam: Religion and Politics in the Arab World*, (London: Routledge, 1991), 74.

⁶ Ibid., 75.

⁷ Ibid., 76.

⁸ Moshe Albo and Yoram Meital, "The Independent Path of Shaykh al-Azhar 'Abd al-Halim Mahmud," *Die Welt des Islams* 54, no. 2 (2014): 173.

was responsible for the decline in the religious education system's public standing."⁹ These observations speak to the growing influence that Islamist groups potentially secured over religious youth due to Sadat's regime alienating them economically whilst undermining traditional Islamic norms and, therefore, the conventional Islamic establishment. Young militant Islamists would not find Azhari modes of education appealing and would instead turn to more radical forms of religious organization.

While Abd al-Halim Mahmud was critical of policies like *Infitah* for their supposed undermining of Islamic values, he was also part of an established religious authority that served to reinforce Sadat's political ends. The Grand Imam denounced the anti-government demonstrations in the 1977 riots, which were a response to government-cut subsidies to staple items like rice and oil.¹⁰ The complementary relationship between the formal religious establishment and Sadat's regime furthered the disconnect between the masses and establishment figures like Mahmud, as evidenced by his unwillingness to criticize a widely unpopular move by Sadat. Gabriel Warburg writes of Sadat's religiously motivated opportunism, stating:

Once religion became a legitimate political force in service of the regime it was not long before these same groups exploited religion in order to criticize and even attack Sadat's own policies. This was especially true in the universities where the Islamic student groups, Sadat's erstwhile allies, became his most vocal opponents.¹¹

Mahmud and his implicit criticism of policies like *Infitah*—done through denouncing the emerging, supposedly un-Islamic Egyptian zeitgeist that emerged during the Sadat years—provided a position for Islamist and extremist opposition groups to incorporate into their criticism of Sadat's regime. While simultaneously adopting a pro-government stance, figures like Mahmud ensured that the orthodox religious establishment did not invite institutional and religious currents which were critical of the government. These currents would then turn to the more radical, Islamist sphere in a political culture that questioned the religiosity of a group to undermine their political legitimacy, something Sadat himself partook in.

The March 21, 1980 plebiscite that introduced changes to the constitution determining sharia to be "the basis for legislation" was another significant move that contributed to an increasing atmosphere of religious extremism.¹² The plebiscite saw some judges favour *sharia* over the application of civil law, with Speaker of Parliament Sufi Abu Talib recommending that *sharia*-influenced legislation be applied to Muslims and non-Muslims alike.¹³ Religious forces, having gained in-

⁹ Albo and Meital, "The Independent Path of Shaykh al-Azhar 'Abd al-Halim Mahmud," 173.

¹⁰ Gabriel R. Warburg, "Islam and Politics in Egypt: 1952-80," *Middle Eastern Studies* 18, no. 2 (Apr. 1982): 139.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Heikal, *Autumn of Fury*, 214.

¹³ Ibid., 216.

fluence in various levels of the bureaucracy and military, wanted to affirm Islam's codified place in Egyptian politics.¹⁴ This led to increasing resentment within the Coptic community. Militant youths from the Jama'at al-Islamiya (collective Islamist society), according to Heikal, saw in their perception of "religion as the basis of the state"¹⁵ license to call for the second-class status of Jews and Copts and adhere to *fatawa* from militant *shuyukh* that sanctioned crimes against these communities.¹⁶ Such a trend of affixing religion to politics would culminate in events like the communal riot of June 10, 1981 in Zawaya el-Hamra, which left ten dead. Heikal states that "This incident was symptomatic of a dangerous polarization which was taking place."¹⁷ Religious extremism had entered the arena of Egyptian politics due to Sadat's attempts to bolster his and his government's legitimacy by using religion.

Abdullah Al-Arian notes that Sadat failed to manipulate Muslim Brotherhood members whom he had released from prison to serve his agenda, with leader Umar Tilmisani rejecting his offer to register the Brotherhood with the Ministry of Social Affairs.¹⁸ The Brotherhood periodical *Al-Da'wa* resumed publication in 1976 and by 1980 had become a great source of anxiety for Sadat. *Da'wa* had consistently opposed many of Sadat's policies throughout the 1970s, and Arian argues that the 1980 Law of Shame was meant to address student and Islamist forms of dissent, both of which had Brotherhood presences.¹⁹ Sadat, in his last address to parliament, refuted *Da'wa's* criticisms against him before ordering the infamous September 3, 1981 raid that saw thousands of political opponents, critics, Islamists, and religious leaders jailed. Sadat's anxiety regarding the Brotherhood's growing influence via *Al-Da'wa* was an indicator of how much the Islamist movement had grown during his presidency, with radicals like Omar Abd-al-Rahman emboldened to the point of issuing a *fatwa* for Sadat's assassination, and Faraj and Islambouli organizing it.

Jeffrey Kenney identifies the radical militant Islamists responsible for Sadat's assassination as approximating Kharijites, adopting Islamic nomenclature referring to rebels who assassinated the fourth Caliph Ali bin Abu Talib during the first *Fitnah* (civil strife) in the medieval Islamic period. Kenney likens groups like Egyptian Jihad, the group directly responsible for Sadat's assassination by Khaled Islambouli, and Takfir wal-Hijra to these early Muslim rebels who sought to dethrone a legitimate ruler. Even though the Muslim Brotherhood in large part denounced violent action against Sadat, it is useful to situate the politico-religious prerogatives of groups like Jihad and Takfir in the broader context of growing Islamism under Sadat, of which the Brotherhood is a part. Groups like Jihad and Takfir represented the extreme end

14 Heikal, *Autumn of Fury*, 217.

15 Ibid., 221.

16 Ibid., 222.

17 Ibid.

18 Abdullah Al-Arian, *Answering the Call: Popular Islamic Activism in Sadat's Egypt*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 173.

19 Ibid., 174.

of Islamist sentiment, markedly violent in their outlook when compared to groups like the Brotherhood. This growing current of Islamism had its roots in Nasser's era. Prior to his execution in 1966, Muslim Brotherhood leader Sayyid Qutb was also the organization's chief ideologue. Qutb was wary of bringing into his Quranic exegesis the idea of the Kharijites, excluding them from the interpretation of a verse that would typically implicate them as recalcitrant unbelievers in the normative Sunni tradition.²⁰ The verse in question is as follows: "Whoso judges not according to what God has sent down—they are the unbelievers."²¹ Kenney suggests that Qutb instead chose to interpret this in a manner that criticized contemporary Egyptian leadership on the basis of their supposed *jahiliyya* (ignorance or un-Islamic conduct), eschewing any ideological connection with Kharijites.²² Qutb's refusal to acknowledge the seditious history of Kharijites while using the verse to criticize the legitimate rulers who Kharijites would typically target marked a development in Islamist theology that framed the ruling political establishment as an antagonistic object. Qutb's theological outlook shines a light on emerging Islamist modes of thought that considered Egypt's political establishment to be illegitimate and in need of removal.

Kenney writes of the ideological schism within the Brotherhood caused by the 'prison debates' following the 1965 suppression of Brotherhood individuals including Qutb. While imprisoned, Brotherhood member Hasan Ismail al-Hudaybi argued for moderation within the Brotherhood, as their extremism led to the government crackdown in 1965.²³ Hudaybi opposed the militant branch's tactic of pronouncing *takfir* (status of unbeliever) on the government figures they were critical of. His 1969 *Propagandists...Not Judges* refuted Qutb's treatise *Milestones Along the Way* in which Qutb outlined his critique of the government. Hudaybi had reformist intentions in acknowledging Kharijite trends in the Brotherhood, and his critiques of key Brotherhood figures like Qutb and admission of the organization's extremism point to the very real militant Islamist trends developing in the Brotherhood. Hamied Ansari mentions "There is documentary evidence that some of the Tanzim (umbrella term referring to openly avowed militant Islamists like Takfir and Jihad) members at one time had close connections with the Muslim Brotherhood."²⁴ Ansari states that Ahmed Shukri Mustafa, the leader of Takfir, belonged to the young militant offshoot of the Brotherhood in which Qutb's ideas of opposing a government based on *jahiliyya* took root.²⁵ We see a direct genealogy from Qutb's ideological contributions to the Brotherhood and the emergence of smaller but significant militant groups like

20 Jeffrey T. Kenney, *Muslim Rebels: Kharijites and the Politics of Extremism in Egypt*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 120.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., 121.

23 Ibid., 121, 123.

24 Hamied N. Ansari, "The Islamic Militants in Egyptian Politics," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 16, no. 1 (Mar. 1984): 135.

25 Ansari, "The Islamic Militants in Egyptian Politics," 135.

Takfir. In 1977, Takfir kidnapped and murdered Sheikh Hussein al-Dhahabi. Al-Dhahabi refuted their tactic of pronouncing *takfir* and *jahiliyya* against political leadership in his 1976 publication *Deviant Trends in the Interpretation of the Quran*²⁶ and the Azhari booklet *Firebrands from the Divine Guidance of Islam*.²⁷ Takfir exhibited the growing modus of Kharijite (to use Kenney's terminology) militant Islamism during Sadat's era. This current posed a real threat as evidenced by the assassination of minister al-Dhahabi. Egyptian Jihad's chief ideologue Abd-al-Salam Faraj represented another iteration of this tangible and acute extremism that was becoming a feature of certain Islamist groups. Faraj authored *The Neglected Duty*, a call for Muslims to wage *jihād* against contemporary Muslim leaders whom he considered apostates.²⁸ This was despite the fact that he belonged to the Brotherhood offshoot that sought "to demonstrate their moderation to President Sadat and strike a *modus vivendi* with the regime."²⁹ Nonetheless, Faraj's extremist ideology found expression when he successfully coordinated Sadat's assassination by directing Islambouli's operation.

Examining Islamist groups in terms of their demography helps to understand how they grew in influence. Uri M. Kupferschmidt mentions that along with the culture shock and socio-economic hardship that rural migrants experienced in urban centers like Cairo, they made concerted efforts to learn more about religion.³⁰ As such, Islamic societies by the 1970s opened centers of instruction in religion to cater to these rural migrants.³¹ Kupferschmidt suggests that fundamentalist organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood, the majority of whose members were educated, literate, and urban, could influence this incoming demographic and, in doing so, open them up to "the influence of representatives of underground militant cells."³² We can consider this, along with Warburg's observations in which he identifies the strong centralizing tendencies of Nasser's and Sadat's regimes, as preventing any economic or social basis of mobilization from emerging in rural Egypt. Warburg notes that religion remained "the only meaningful unit in Egyptian villages."³³ Like the urban lower classes, rural denizens did not respond to "the religious establishment [which] had lost the remnants of its economic independence while its credibility ha[d] been further undermined [making it] a servile part of the feared, but remote, center."³⁴ The Muslim Brotherhood was a viable alter-

26 Kenney, *Muslim Rebels*, 130.

27 Ibid., 127.

28 Ibid., 135.

29 Ansari, "The Islamic Militants," 135.

30 Uri M. Kupferschmidt, "Reformist and Militant Islam in Urban and Rural Egypt," *Middle Eastern Studies* 23, no. 4 (Oct. 1987): 408.

31 Ibid., 409.

32 Ibid.

33 Warburg, "Islam and Politics in Egypt," 134. 'Unit' here is employed in a socio-political sense, referring to an identity marker with a commonality amongst rural denizens around which they could mobilize.

34 Warburg, "Islam and Politics in Egypt," 134.

native for lower-class and rural Egyptians to receive religious instruction, providing a fundamentalist and potentially Islamist theology that was accessible to the masses.

Hamied Ansari points out Colonel Abbud al-Zomor's and lieutenant Khalid Islambouli's rural origins and draws the link between rural elites and militant Islamists. The Zomor family were part of the rural elite that Sadat's regime tried to appease in order to cement their legitimacy in the countryside. This was also a way to roll back Nasser's influence as the Zomors had been targeted in 1966 by the Higher Committee for the Liquidation of Feudalism for land sequestration. The state-funded Zomor's mother's *hajj* contributed five thousand pounds to Abbud's cousin Tariq's mosque.³⁵ This is one example of Sadat's repeated appeasement of Islamist groups to offset opposition from leftists and Nasserites who were deemed a greater threat to the regime. While not the foremost feature of their activism, militant Islamist links with Egypt's rural population were significant enough to influence people like Islambouli and Zomor, the two most instrumental figures in Sadat's assassination and proof that Islamist influence could enter even the military institution. Kupferschmidt mentions "rising educational standards" accompanying the increased reception of fundamentalist ideology in villages.³⁶ He also points out how improved communications and educational infrastructure in small towns like Tanta, Abu Tig, and Luxor contributed to the dissemination of Islamist ideas to an increasingly literate rural populace.³⁷ Education as a driving factor towards Islamism can be observed by looking at Tanzim demographics, with students and professionals comprising 56.4% of the membership while 87.5% were aged thirty or younger.³⁸

From the analyses considered, we see the cultural impact that Sadat's national policy of *Infitah* had on Egyptian society. Only those with connections to Sadat's establishment had reasonable opportunity to achieve economic prosperity. A young segment of the population alienated from economic prosperity saw a concomitant rise in social conditions antithetical (in their view) to Islamic morals and norms. Sadat's openly professed religiosity was irreconcilable to militant Islamists, who saw his regime's tolerance of Western immorality and collusion with Western powers as responsible for Egypt's economic and social malaise. Sadat's attempts to co-opt the religious establishment's authority in order to legitimize his rule was ineffective and only undermined the traditional institutional credibility of religious schools like Al-Azhar. Even Grand Imam Mahmud could not co-sign everything Sadat's regime enacted, and this incomplete alliance of views is an indicator of the cynicism and resentment young militants could feel. Qutb's and Faraj's ideological and theological stances give us an understanding of the express goals of militant Islamist movements. They constructed their ontological view of what Egypt should look like based on Islamist theology. The significance of such ideological trends can be found

35 Ansari, "The Islamic Militants in Egyptian Politics," 134.

36 Kupferschmidt, "Reformist and Militant Islam," 404.

37 Ibid., 409.

38 Ansari, "The Islamic Militants in Egyptian Politics," 133.

in that those who subscribed to them were moved to violent action against political figures like Dhahabi and Sadat. Conditions of modernity gave educated Islamists such as the Muslim Brotherhood exposure to increasingly literate Egyptians. Sadat's enabling of religious fundamentalism to assert his legitimacy in the face of Leftist and Nasserite detractors would push young militants towards the radicalizing trends that ultimately denounced him. Therefore, the reasons for militant anti-Sadat Islamist movements go beyond foreign policy and can be considered in a separate domestic context. All of the factors observed give credence to the notion that Egypt was rife with internal and domestic conditions that begot such a fervent, radical anti-Sadat Islamist opposition. It was the ideological potency of Islamist groups, Sadat's policies as they related to the nation, and changing social conditions that indicate that Islamist extremist activity was deeply rooted in conditions endemic to Egypt.

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