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The Demise of Islamism in Egypt? - The Dissolution of al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya's "Building and Development" Party

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On October 27, Egypt's high court ordered the dissolution of the "Building and Development" (*Al Bina' wa al-Tanmiyya*) Party, the political wing of *al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya*. It claimed that the party was undermining the social order, trying to destabilize the incumbent regime, and was involved in the wave of terror plaguing Egypt. The decision to dissolve the party was, without a doubt, a major shock for *al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya*, but that's not all. It threatens other Islamist parties and thus the future of Islamism in Egypt.

Al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya was founded in the 1970s at the University of Asyut, in order to strengthen Islamic identity on campuses and beyond. At first, the group won the support of the Egyptian government under President Anwar al-Sadat, who hoped to weaken the power base of the Nasserist Left, which at the time was a source of considerable opposition to Sadat. Dissatisfied with the regime's attitude to religion and its political status, the *Gama'a* soon turned to terror and was behind the assassination of Sadat in 1981, the murder of Coptic Christians during the 1990s, and the Luxor tourist massacre in 1997. At the end of 2001, many of its members agreed to change their ways and renounce the path of violence, following the de-radicalization process initiated by the Egyptian government. This process led to splits and desertion by members of the group who opposed change, but in essence the *Gama'a* moved away from the path of violence. In June 2011, with the fall of the Mubarak regime, the *Gama'a* established a political wing for the first time, the "Building and Development" Party, which won 13 seats in the 2012 parliamentary elections. When 'Abd al Fattah al-Sisi came to power in July 2013, he was determined to crush the Muslim Brotherhood and jihadi groups, and this led to tension and suspicion with *Gama'a*, due to its good relations with the Brotherhood.

For the past year, Egypt's government-controlled media has advanced an extensive campaign targeting Islamist parties, including *Gama'a*, claiming that they are a source of Egypt's ills. Mohammed Abu Hamed, an Egyptian MP and member of the social solidarity committee in parliament, said that the presence of religious parties in Egypt contradicts the current constitution because of the ban on setting up political organizations based on religion or ethnicity. Yahya Kedwany, another MP and senior member of the parliamentary national security committee, agreed with this approach and demanded prosecution for all those involved in inciting violence. However, Kedwany also noted that the dissolution of the religious parties must be conducted prudently and with legal backing to avoid provoking the public at large.¹ The "Committee of Political Parties," which is responsible for monitoring political parties in the country, even drew up a list of Islamic parties, many of whom have formal ties with the Muslim Brotherhood, advising that they should be dissolved. The list included the "Building and Development" Party, "Al-Watan (The Nation Party)," "Al Wasat (The Middle Party), and "Al-Istiqlal (The Freedom Party)." It should be noted that the Salafi "Al-Nour" (The Light Party) was not included on the list, probably due to its explicit support for President Sisi and its traditional rivalry with the Muslim Brotherhood.

Against this background, we can understand the various initiatives of the *Gama'a*, which wants to establish an image of itself as an organization striving to preserve the unity of Egypt's national interests. For example, in April 2017, the group announced its intention to open a dialogue with the jihadi insurgents in the Sinai Peninsula in order to stop the violence against the army and police, as well as the Egyptian army activity in the area.² The initiative was not taken seriously by the government, but the media were quick to cast doubt on the organization's ability to achieve this goal. Moreover, in the eyes of many Egyptian analysts this initiative proved that there is a covert relationship between the *Gama'a* and the Islamic State in the Sinai Peninsula.³ Nevertheless, the organization has made an effort to demonstrate its support for the Egyptian government. Osama Hafez, head of the *Gama'a*'s Shura Council, publicly praised the achievements of Sadat, particularly the October 1973 War.⁴

¹ Mohammed Nassar, "[The report on the dissolution of al-Bina' wa al-Tanmiyya .. Is this the end for the religious parties in Egypt?](#)" [in Arabic], *Masr al-Arabiyya*, October 27, 2017.

² For full program details see: "[Saving initiative marking the day of the liberation of Sinai](#)" [in Arabic], Hizb Al-Banna' al-Tanmiyya – official site, April 22, 2017.

³ Ahmad Arfah, "[Experts: The initiative of al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya's party revealed its relations with the \[Muslim\] Brotherhood and their allies Da'esh](#)" [in Arabic], *al-Youm al-Sab'i*, April 25, 2017.

⁴ Kaml Kaml, "[After 44 years, the head of al-Gama'a, Sadat's assassin, recognizes the accomplishments of the October War](#)" [in Arabic], *al-Youm al-Sab'i*, October 6, 2017.

From time to time, the *Gama'a*'s attempts to prove that it shares the country's interests also attract criticism from former members. London-based Sheikh Hani Al-Siba'i, for example, who is currently affiliated with *al-Qa'ida*, expressed his disappointment with the change in direction and the group's abandonment of its principles. He urged the leadership to take note of the twenty principles that he claims haven't been honored, such as ignoring the will of "The Blind Sheikh," Sheikh Omar 'Abd al-Rahman (one the original leaders of the organization who died this year in an American prison), and avenging his death. Sultan al-Mahdi, a senior member of *Gama'a*, dismissed al-Siba'i accusations and stressed that *Gama'a* respects the Egyptian state and its institutions.⁵

Yet *Gama'a*'s efforts were to no avail; on October 23, the "commission of the Egyptian parliament delegates" (*Hayat al-Mufawidin*) issued a report calling for the Supreme Court to dissolve the "Building and Development" Party and seize its assets. The Egyptian government also repeatedly accused party members of making subversive statements against the regime; conducting demonstrations supporting deposed President Mohamed Morsi in an attempt to ignite a civil war; and, establishing an armed faction and recruiting fighters for *al-Qa'ida* and the Islamic State.⁶ The timing of the report has been linked to the upcoming Egyptian presidential election in April 2018 and to the inclusion of Tariq al-Zumar, former leader of the "Building and Development" Party,⁷ who was included on the list of terrorists linked to Qatar, which was published in June by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain.⁸

Sheikh Abbud al-Zumar, a senior member of the organization, rejected the accusations that it was involved in terrorism and argued that such claims are distorted by politics. According to him, the party is "national", not religious, and even some Christians have joined. Al-Zumar stressed that his party is committed to the national interest and that it has worked to bring calm to the Sinai Peninsula.⁹ *Gama'a*'s former leaders, who fled to Qatar or Turkey, have been more defiant in their comments in response to the Egyptian regime. For example, Tariq al-Zumar published a series of manifestos on social media that denounced the regime for its intention to dissolve the "Building and Development" Party.

⁵ Al-Saghir Omar 'Abd al-Rahman, "[29 Stations of terrorism in the history of al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya](#)" [in Arabic], *al-Bawaba*, March 14, 2017.

⁶ "[Egypt: Legal recommendation to dismantle the al-Bina' wal-Tanmiyya arm of al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya](#)" [in Arabic], *al-'Araby al-Jadid*, October 23, 2017; "[Egypt accuses the al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya of resuming armed activities](#)" [in Arabic], *al-Hayat*, November 3, 2017.

⁷ In March 2011, he was released from prison after serving a prison sentence for helping Sadat's assassins, and served as leader of the "Building and Development" Party from early 2017 until June 2017. His inclusion in the list of terrorists led to his resignation and his flight to Qatar, where he began a virulent propaganda against the Egyptian regime.

⁸ [al-Youm al-Sab'i](#) [in Arabic], August 15, 2017.

⁹ 'Abd al-Rahman Jamaa, "[al-Zumar responds to Wahwa Jibril's 'Ambush' of al-Bina' wal-Tanmiyya](#)" [in Arabic], *al-Masriyun*, October 26, 2017.

"There is no doubt," he wrote, "that the current regime in Egypt is the most failed regime the country has known in modern times." He added that "The cycle of poverty is increasing, prices keep rising, "20 million people live in darkness, 5 million live in cemeteries, and 2 million children roam the streets as beggars."¹⁰

More broadly, the decision to dissolve the political wing of *al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya* indicates that Islamists in Egypt now face a serious crisis for. Hisham al-Najjar, a political analyst, argues that *al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya* is not able to take responsibility for the negative developments afflicting it, such as a return to violence and terror. Instead of real introspection, it seeks to shift responsibility to others, "a shameful and obvious attempt to avoid accountability so no one can speak, criticize or blame it for the historic destruction of Islamism, to a degree not seen before."¹¹ Assam 'Abd al-Magid, a former member of *al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya*, also laments that that Islamists today have lost their way and are preoccupied with rivalries, such as the split between the Salafi Al-Nour Party and the Muslim Brotherhood. Therefore, today, members of *al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya* "are the weakest of the weak."¹²

The growing public discourse in Egypt denouncing Islamist parties and the apparent negative public opinion are a result of the wave of terrorism engulfing the country. This mood, in fact, puts pressure on the Islamist movements to re-examine their direction and ideology and to come out more resolutely against the use of violence. However, this pressure could also lead to the opposite effect, pushing members of *al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya* to abandon politics and focus on incitement and armed struggle against the regime. This is what happened two years ago to the Muslim Brotherhood, when it was outlawed and prevented from taking part in Egyptian politics. This led some members to abandon the group and create the *Hasm* terrorist organization, which focuses on assassinating public figures and army personnel in Egypt.

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¹⁰ Tariq al-Zumar, "[Volcanos of social rage are erupting in Egypt](#)" [in Arabic], Facebook post, October 1, 2017.

¹¹ Kamel Kamel, "[Islamist battles in search of the flame of errors ... Assam 'Abd al-Magid attacks Islamist movements: They revere their leadership even though it is hypocritical \[...\]](#)" [in Arabic], *al-Youm al-Sab'i*, August 24, 2017.

¹² Rahmat Mahmud and others, "[A new study... Cheating al-Gama'a](#)" [in Arabic], *al-Bawaba*, September 17, 2017.

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