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“Struggle Is Our Way”: Assessing the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood’s Relationship with Violence Post-2013

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Abstract: This article focuses on the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood’s relationship with violence after the 2013 military *coup*. Following the Brotherhood’s sudden ouster from government, scholars predicted that renewed repression would lead to the radicalization of wings of the movement, particularly speculating that the youth would resort to violence as a way to respond to the regime. Indeed, calls in favor of the use of violence were recorded and associated with the activities of the New Office in Egypt during 2015, and with radicalization within the country’s prisons. Yet, this phenomenon has remained limited with reference to both time and context. Relying on interviews with members in Egypt, Turkey and the UK (2013–2021), this article critically unpacks the Brotherhood’s relationship with violence in the aftermath of the *coup*, investigating how the majority of Brotherhood members who subscribed to the movement’s peaceful resistance navigated nonviolent and violent strategies advocated by competing movements’ factions, as they became exposed to state-led violence. It looks at how members, male and female, endured repression, what role violence had in their resistance, if any, and how they justified it. The conclusion reflects on the role that violence plays in the Brotherhood’s strategies to reunite and rebuild after 2013.

Keywords: Egypt; Muslim Brotherhood; Muslim Sisterhood; post-2013; mobilization; repression; violence; resistance; revolutionary strategy; *jihād*



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1. Introduction

On 3 July 2013, the Egyptian President Mohammad Morsi was overthrown by a military *coup d’état* led by former army general and current president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who posed a violent end to the Muslim Brotherhood’s (henceforth: Brotherhood) rule in government, instigating one of the worst crackdowns in the movement’s history (Ardovini and Biagini 2021b; Brown and Dunne 2015). While some key leaders and members managed to escape Egypt to resettle abroad in countries such as Malaysia, Qatar, Sudan and Turkey, but also the UK and North America (Dunne and Hamzawy 2019), a significant number also remained in Egypt, where they continued to endure repression. Soon, the new dimension of exile contributed to the fragmentation of the Brotherhood organization which, coupled with the leadership’s inability to provide a unifying strategy to respond to the brutality of the al-Sisi regime, created the conditions for competing approaches to repression being advanced by both its membership and leadership bodies (Willi 2021). A prominent debate that emerged back then pertained to the use of violence as a means to counter the regime, with the Brotherhood official leadership professing its longstanding commitment to peaceful means from abroad, and a small cohort of members and mid-rank cadres associated with the New Brotherhood Office established in Egypt in 2015 (henceforth: New Office) advancing calls in favor of the use of violence (Ardovini and Biagini 2021a).

These divisions have been addressed in the literature and often portray two separate Brotherhood factions advancing competing peaceful and violent strategies to respond

to repression (see also [Fahmi 2015](#)). As we discuss in more detail below, this binary approach is longstanding in the literature and rests on the influence that scholars believe the violent tactic of the movement's Secret Apparatus and some of Sayyid Qutb's ideas that justified violence as a legitimate means to achieve political ends continues to have on the Brotherhood's ideology and its members to this day. Indeed, the research on the Brotherhood that emerged in the aftermath of the 2013 *coup* often drew on the militant actions carried out by a minority of individuals to portray the whole movement as radical (among others, see [Awad 2017](#); [Awad and Hashem 2015](#); [Ayoob 2013](#); [Byman and Wittes 2014](#)), downplaying the Brotherhood's efforts to distance itself from violence since the 1960s, so as to embrace a moderate approach to participation through formal political channels ([Zollner 2009](#)). In contrast, those who continued to emphasize its peaceful and moderate nature also seemed to shun away from properly examining the role that violence played in the movement post-2013, so as not to risk contributing to the literature that uncritically designates the Brotherhood as radical (among others, see [Ardevini and Biagini 2021a, 2021b](#)).

[Al-Anani \(2019\)](#) represents an exception to this scholarship, and in his work, the scholar challenged this binary by exploring individual members' responses to repression as opposed to the collective response of the movement, thus highlighting variance in the former, based on the role of emotions and personal experiences. Yet, he also somehow reproduces the peaceful vs. violent binary by failing to distinguish between the Brotherhood's violent and revolutionary strategies. For a number of weeks after 2013, the membership engaged in countrywide revolutionary action with the goal of defeating the *coup* ([Grimm 2021](#); [Grimm and Harders 2018](#); [Ketchley 2017](#); [Biagini 2017](#)). Yet, after the New Office appropriated violence as part of its revolutionary strategy, the Brotherhood worked to demobilize its members not to risk radicalization. At that point, several members, particularly among the youth, refused calls for demobilization and continued to mobilize in revolutionary resistance ([Biagini 2019](#)). They remained critical of both the senior leadership's call to abandon the streets and the New Office's hands-on approach, finding themselves having to navigate these two emerging violent vs. peaceful strategies. Therefore, what remains unproblematized in the post-2013 Brotherhood literature pertaining to violence is what role violence played in the resistance strategies of those members who did not fall neatly into the violent/peaceful categories.

For the purpose of this article, therefore, we focus our attention on the role that violence played among Brotherhood members who remained critical of both the senior leadership's and the New Office's approaches, but who continued to be involved in revolutionary resistance post-2013, defying the senior leadership's calls for demobilization. Specifically, we ask "what role did violence play among revolutionary male and female Brotherhood members after the 2013 repression of the movement, if any?" and, if so, "what circumstances led to violence as a means of resistance being considered, supported or justified?" This allows us to pay attention to how members who found themselves in between these two leaderships have endured repression, and to assess whether exposure to state-led violence caused them to consider, adopt or condone violent means of actions against the state. Such an investigation warrants scholarly attention because, since 2013, a majority of members have grown increasingly critical of the senior leadership's inability to provide an exit strategy to the *coup* but have also remained skeptical that the New Office's violent approach represented an effective solution to achieve political change. Consequently, any assessment of the Brotherhood's relationship with violence in the post-2013 context cannot rely exclusively on the position of the official leadership or of a radicalized minority that affiliated itself to the New Office, but must include a larger membership body to provide a more realistic and de-sensationalized picture of the Brotherhood's relationship with violence post-2013.

In exploring the role that violence played among the Brotherhood membership, we acknowledge that some members have endorsed violent action against the regime post-2013 (see [Ranko and Yaghi 2019](#); [Yaghi 2021](#)), but we do not assume that a direct causal link

exists between violent ideas and violent action, thus distancing ourselves from a large part of the radicalization literature. In doing so, we build on a long-established literature in social movements that challenges understandings of Islamist groups as “sui-generis”, and therefore as inherently radical or irrational because of their religious character (among others, see Wiktorowicz 2001, 2004; Hafez 2003; Biagini 2017; Rivetti 2020; Kraetzschmar and Rivetti 2018; Ketchley 2017; for similar approaches in non-MENA contexts, see, among others, McAdam et al. 2001; Tarrow 2011). Rather, we are of the view that violence played an important role in the post-2013 Egyptian context as a form of contentious politics that emerged in response to state-led repression and violence in a situation of asymmetric conflict. We also avoid making normative arguments about the use of violence, as its use in a context of asymmetric power relations, longstanding colonial struggles, repression and conflict can be defined as legitimate (see also Stefanini 2021; Yaghi 2021, p. 156). Furthermore, we do not use the term radicalization as synonymous for terrorism. Historically, the term was coined to designate Western leftist ideologies and contentious politics, but after 9/11, it was appropriated by terrorism studies to designate individuals who espoused violence as a means for political ends (Yaghi 2021, p. 155; see also Schmid 2013). It also assumed an increasingly orientalist posture that racialized Arab Muslim communities as inherently radical and as terrorists (see also Stefanini 2021, p. 665). Furthermore, while we acknowledge that the Brotherhood has produced ideologues whose ideas have been appropriated by diverse *jihadi* groups to justify violence against states and populations for political ends (e.g., ISIS), we do not assume a causal link between the existence of violent ideas and militant action. Rather, we understand ideology as a body of ideas Brotherhood individuals can use to rationalize their experience with violence, but that does not create a necessarily causal link with violent action.

We explore the Brotherhood’s relationship with violence relying on 107 interviews with Brotherhood and Sisterhood members who endorsed revolutionary resistance after the 2013 repression, conducted through multiple rounds of fieldwork in Egypt, Turkey and the UK, between 2013 and 2019. In doing so, the study rests on the views of a broad range of members that have often been silenced in investigations pertaining to the Brotherhood’s relationship with violence post-2013, which focused largely on a minority of mid-rank and rank and file youth members often associated with the New Office. In doing so, we focus on the Brotherhood’s relationship with violence as a means of resistance against state repression, and we do not analyze instances of sectarian or intra-communal violence that took place in Egypt after 2013.

The findings confirm that, while instances of Brotherhood-led violence took place following the *coup* in Egypt, these were largely carried out by a small cohort of individuals, often associated with the New Office, with no endorsement from the official organization, which always remained committed to peaceful resistance. The findings also show that gender dynamics are particularly significant to explain revolutionary members’ support and/or justification for violent resistance, which was exercised to stop or prevent further sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) being perpetrated by state personnel against male and female members in particular. As such, our data show that members who embraced revolutionary resistance limited their support and justification for violence to violence that was exercised in self-defense and as a deterrence measure, in a context characterized by extreme repression, power asymmetry and lack of state accountability and justice. Indeed, these same members challenged the use of violence against the state as a deliberate strategy to obtain political change, as the New Office conceptualize it, and they did so on both strategic and ideological terms, confirming that violence continued to play no significant role among the Brotherhood’s mainstream revolutionary membership after the 2013 *coup*.

This article proceeds as follows: First, it provides a background on the Brotherhood’s relationship with violence, to contextualize the events that followed the *coup* within the broader historical trend that has seen the movement face internal tensions surrounding violence as a means to political participation and resistance to the state. Second, we present the methodology and dataset at the core of this article. Third, we move onto a discussion

of our data, clarifying the distinction between revolutionary and violent strategies in the Brotherhood post-2013. We then present first-hand accounts of members who were personally affected by state repression consequently to their involvement in revolutionary resistance post-2013, illustrating how their experiences shaped debates pertaining to the use of violence. We briefly reflect on the role that violence might have in the movement moving forward, before recapping on the main findings in the conclusion.

2. The Brotherhood's Relationship with Violence in a Historical Context

The Brotherhood was founded by schoolteacher Hassan al-Banna in 1928 and was centered on al-Banna's view of Islam as a comprehensive way of life, and rooted in the fight against social injustice, British colonialism and Western influences in Muslim societies (Mitchell 1993). Al-Banna originally conceived the Brotherhood as a grassroots, pan-Islamic, anti-colonial and religious movement, but over the years, the organization quickly grew into one of the largest voices of opposition both within Egypt and across the Arab world, serving as a model for other Islamist movements globally. Represented by the slogan "Islam is the solution", the Brotherhood benefitted from a comprehensive ideology and understanding of Islamic values as core pillars of society, which awarded it with an unprecedented level of domestic and regional support (Wickham 2002, 2013).

Many of the controversies and debates surrounding the movement's relationship with violence are centered on its motto "Allah is our objective. The prophet is our leader. Qur'an is our law. Jihad is our way. Dying in the way of Allah is our greatest hope" (Simmons 2018, p. 203). Therefore, before proceeding with the rest of the article, a clarification on the exact meaning of *jihad* is necessary. Since 9/11, *jihad* has mostly been associated with violence and terrorism, but as a theological concept, the word has two very distinct meanings: "Greater *jihad*" refers to believers' life-long personal spiritual struggle to oppose evil and become pious or, such as in this context, to better society in the long term, starting with reforming the individual. "Lesser *jihad*", instead, refers to armed warfare against unbelievers and those who actively oppose Islam (Cook 2015). In his teachings, al-Banna referred specifically to greater *jihad* with the overarching goal of establishing an Islamic society, to be pursued through *da'wa* and *tarbiyya* (preaching and education, respectively), focusing, first and foremost, on reforming the outlook and spiritual values of individuals and families and, ideally, society as a whole (Labuschagne and Sonnenschmidt 2009). Therefore, the Brotherhood's official commitment to bring about change through peaceful means makes it a moderate Islamist group.

However, even before the 2013 *coup*, there have been instances of Brotherhood offshoots being linked to political violence and lesser *jihad*. Historically, these instances have been linked to members' competing approaches to respond to British colonialism and state repression, envisaging different tools of resistance, both of which evolved alongside the movement's troubled relationship with successive Egyptian regimes. The Brotherhood's renowned survival skills have evolved over time to adapt to the socio-political circumstances within which it operated, and consequently, members have not unanimously supported these strategies. Like the dynamics we observe playing out in the movement after 2013, there are old internal disagreements over which path to pursue to survive repeated crackdowns and illegality. These internal disagreements have their roots in the foundation and activities of the Secret Apparatus (*al-Nizam al-Khass*, 1938–1954) and subsequently manifested in two competing ideological currents: a more confrontational one epitomized by Sayyid Qutb, and a more accommodationist one articulated by former general guide Hassan al-Hudaiby (Zollner 2019), and later by Umar al-Tilmisani (Soage 2009; Willi 2021). As we show below, the struggle between the New Office's hands-on approach against the regime and the historical Brotherhood leadership's call for patience that we observe today can be understood as an echo of these old tensions. However, it needs to be noted that these are not binary categories; rather, our data show that members may move from one camp to the other depending on their changing circumstances after the *coup*. Therefore,

individuals' relationship with violence under state-led repression cannot be categorized as falling neatly into either of the two peaceful or violent approaches.

The research on the Brotherhood that emerged in the immediate aftermath of the 2013 *coup*, however, often drew on the militant actions carried out by members associated with the New Office to portray the Brotherhood, as a whole, as radical (among others, see [Awad 2017](#); [Awad and Hashem 2015](#); [Ayoob 2013](#); [Byman and Wittes 2014](#)). The Brotherhood's association with violence is often reproduced as an echo of radical tendencies espoused and promoted by the Secret Apparatus and then later conceptualized by Sayyid Qutb, the group's second most influential ideologue after al-Banna, who in the 1950s and 1960s justified violence as a means of resistance against secular regimes, and against the repression of Gamal Abdul Nasser in particular ([Soage 2009](#)). Yet, this scholarship tends to overlook the organization's efforts to disassociate itself from radical elements since the 1960s so as to embrace an approach to political participation grounded in principles of liberal democracy ([Zollner 2009](#)), which contributed to the evolution of the Brotherhood into a moderate socio-political movement in the following decades ([Wickham 2013](#)). Still, the Brotherhood continued to be a fluid and internally diverse movement, grouping members with different ideological and religious inclinations. For instance, some individuals of the Brotherhood leadership and membership base are known to be more conservative and Salafi leaning ([Tammam 2011](#)). Yet, this does not mean that they endorse or condone violent means of resistance; rather, they remain committed to a peaceful approach while holding on to values such as secrecy and nepotism that are historically at the core of the Brotherhood's organizational culture ([Willi 2021](#), p. 130). Therefore, while, since the 1960s, those who appealed to *jihadi* doctrines ended up being marginalized in the movement and exited to join more ideologically aligned movements ([Ashour 2009](#)), the Brotherhood's ability to accommodate a diverse membership means that versions of lesser *jihadi* might have continued to fascinate members during the years, as some research shows (see [Ranko and Rezda 2016](#)). Yet, research that emphasizes the prominence of ideology for individuals' actions assumes an inevitable causal link between the presence of ideas and how individuals respond to external circumstances; it also obliterates the role of context and of individuals' agency and, in the case of the Brotherhood in particular, reinforces views of the movement as a unitary and inherently radical actor.

The reliance on violent resistance that some Brotherhood factions showcased in the past can largely be explained as a defensive rather than an offensive measure, and thus as a direct response to British colonialism and state repression. The first instance of recourse to violence is rooted in the foundation of the Secret Apparatus as a secret cell within the Brotherhood in 1938. The Apparatus was founded in response to increasing demands from the Brotherhood membership to confront British colonialism, a sentiment that was shared by a high number of political forces in Egypt at the time ([Gershoni and Jankowski 1995](#)). Throughout the 1940s, the movement developed an understanding of *jihadi* as a key component of the nationalist struggle, linking it to violent, anti-colonial and anti-establishment actions, which should be understood as part of rising anti-British sentiments that date back to the early 20th century ([El-Zalaf 2022](#)). As a highly secretive cell, the existence and activities of the Apparatus were kept hidden from the "mainstream" membership of the Brotherhood. Kamil al-Sharif (cited in [El-Zalaf 2022](#), p. 10) clearly articulates that the Apparatus's activities reached their peak in the post-war years when, together with other political groups, its members became immersed in assassinations of British soldiers, bombing of military bases and targeting of police stations. Yet, these instances were short-lived, as following the assassination of judge Ahmad al-Khazindar in 1948 by two Apparatus members and the repeated arrest of Brotherhood-linked militants, the Brotherhood was dissolved by Prime Minister Mahmoud Fahmy al-Nuqrashi ([Munson 2011](#)). In this historical context, the high secrecy of the Apparatus and its existence as a cell of the Brotherhood organization rather than as an acknowledged part of the movement shows that, while a portion of the Brotherhood membership was directly involved in tangible acts of anti-colonial violence, this was never a distinctive feature of the movement

as a whole but rather represented the peak of an era characterized by a strong anti-colonial struggle that enveloped a variety of different movements within Egypt (El-Zalaf 2022; Gershoni and Jankowski 1995). Indeed, the embracement of direct forms of lesser *jihad* pre-dates the influence of Qutb's thought on the Brotherhood, as the Apparatus was finally dissolved in 1954 when it became evident that its existence significantly worsened the levels of repression that the movement and its members were subjected to.

Following its dissolution in 1948, the new illegal status generated internal chaos for the Brotherhood, which also struggled to control internal disagreements over the appointment of Hassan al-Hudaiby as a general guide after al-Banna's assassination in 1949 (Zollner 2009). Al-Hudaiby's appointment had been a highly strategic move, as the High Judge's commitment to moderate means, aversion to violence and respected public image were deemed necessary for the movement to regain the legitimacy it had lost since it was outlawed (Johnston 2007). However, rather than reuniting the movement, al-Hudaiby's appointment became a prime cause for internal instability, as his forceful opposition to the Apparatus and condemnation of violence as a means to a political end effectively resulted in the Brotherhood dividing into two distinct factions (Ardovini 2020a). The Brotherhood's support for Gamal Abdul Nasser's Free Officers coup in 1952 represented an opportunity for the Brotherhood to regain its lost legitimacy. Yet, the initial cooperation between the Brotherhood and the Egyptian army soon turned sour as the decreasing popularity of the Free Officers' regime made the movement a potential rival rather than a political ally (Zahid 2010). When Nasser dissolved the Brotherhood once again in 1954, he also unleashed one of the worst crackdowns in the movement's history, which saw the indiscriminate arrest of its leaders and supporters, public executions and their detention in concentration-like camps (Rubin 1990), forcing the Brotherhood to once again rethink its approach to state repression.

It was in such a context that the ideological schism between al-Hudaiby's moderate means and Qutb's support for violent resistance and militant action as strategies against oppression first took root, building on the legacy of the Apparatus's activities. As one of the Brotherhood's main ideologues, in his most influential work *Milestones*, Qutb identified *jahiliyya* ("state of ignorance" as opposed to "sovereignty of God"; see Willi 2021, p. 399) as the core characteristic of secular regimes, Western values and Nasser's government, which were therefore all obstacles to the achievement of an Islamic society (Qutb 1990). He consequently argued that the practice of *jihad* was the only solution to the removal of these obstacles and understood it in both its greater sense as a "personal/internal battle" and in its lesser sense as an "armed struggle". Subsequently, Qutb developed a very precise set of notions that justified the use of violent *jihad* as opposed to peaceful means to express opposition against the regime, which—echoing the Apparatus—at the time appealed to several Brothers living under Nasser's repressive rule. Consequently, this led to a deep ideological division within the organization, as this radicalized narrative kept on fascinating numerous Brothers even after Qutb's death in 1966. Yet, while there is a rich body of literature that links Qutb's thought to the Brotherhood's political violence (see, among others, Kepel 2007; Gerges 2018; Toth 2013), the existence and activities of the Apparatus long before Qutb joined the movement show that Qutb is far from being the main ideologue of Islamist violence within the movement. Indeed, the Apparatus's very existence and the recourse to violent means post-1954 have been condemned multiple times by the "mother" organization. While the movement's reliance on such practices in the past is undeniable, one must always keep in mind the Brotherhood's internal diversity.

Nevertheless, certain factions within the Brotherhood continued to resort to violent *jihad* and political violence at various times throughout its history. The peak of such activities can be identified in the assassination of Anwar Sadat in 1981 by the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, which featured some former Brotherhood members among its ranks (Kandil 2014, p. 172–73). This happened under a specific set of historical circumstances, which saw younger Muslim Brothers growing increasingly dissatisfied with what they identified as the organization's passivity towards the government oppression and persecution (Soage and Franganillo 2010). Building on the legacy of the Apparatus and Qutb's thought, such

frustration and dissatisfaction with the organization's strategies led to further schisms and internal division, with members leaving the organization to form more militant groups in the subsequent decades (Ashour 2009). Yet, this is not a suggestion that there is a mechanical link between frustration and radicalization, as the movement as a whole, together with the majority of its membership, remained committed to peaceful means of resistance despite ongoing debates over the use of violence.

Since the 1970s, these debates saw different cohorts splitting between different approaches. While *jihadism* took place outside of the movement, the Brotherhood still witnessed internal splits. This saw a portion of the movement siding with al-Hudaiby's commitment to peaceful means, as articulated in his book *Du'a la Quda (Preachers, not Judges)*, which disassociated the Brotherhood from violence (Zollner 2009). Another side condoned armed resistance under extreme circumstances, such as in the aftermath of the 2013 *coup*. Yet, they still argued that such a strategy would not be an isolated one but rather had to be integrated with social and political efforts (Soage and Franganillo 2010). Hence, the landscape and the appeal of the New Office to violent resistance after 2013 reflect these historical tensions. Nevertheless, it needs to be noted that the original components and majority of the Brotherhood's members remained moderate and committed to peaceful means, increasingly focusing on social provision and political activism as a way to engage with the Egyptian population and government. Therefore, while it is clear that the Brotherhood has indeed been subjected to radicalization trends, the mother organization also historically distanced itself from its more radical elements.

A similar pattern is visible in the post-2013 context, when revolutionary and violent approaches became somewhat conflated because of the unprecedented scale of repression faced by the movement. As we explain in Section 4, while the distinction between revolutionary and violent approaches is still up for debate, our data suggest that members understand revolutionary approaches as the pursuit of thorough political change and the refusal to compromise with the military regime and the deep state. At a practical level, revolutionary approaches refer to mobilization and protest strategies. Hence, while, after 2013, some mid-rank cadres and rank and file members temporarily embraced the idea of violent resistance, the Brotherhood organization quickly rejected this position to profess its commitment to peaceful resistance against the al-Sisi regime. This is also why the New Office established itself in separation from the Brotherhood organization, marking the first serious Brotherhood internal division since the Nasser era (Willi 2021). Therefore, the revolutionary strategy supported and adopted by the Brotherhood and the youth in particular after 2013 should not be conflated with the call to violence advanced by the New Office, despite this last understood violence as part of a revolutionary strategy. We return to these competing approaches over the use of violence below, when we move on to examine how modern manifestations of these debates played out in the post-2013 context and how members who endorsed a revolutionary strategy responded to them.

3. Data and Methods

This article asks "what role did violence play among revolutionary male and female Brotherhood members after the 2013 repression of the movement, if any?" and, if so, "what circumstances led to violence as a means of resistance being considered, supported or justified?" To answer these questions, we rely on 107 semi-structured interviews conducted with 92 current and former Brotherhood and Sisterhood members carried out through multiple rounds of field research between 2013 and 2019 in: Egypt, Cairo, in 2013–2014 and 2017–2018, with 40 respondents, 35F and 5M; in Turkey, Istanbul, in 2016–2019, with 30 respondents, 2F and 28M; and in the UK, London, in 2013–2019, with 22 respondents, 3F and 19M. We interviewed some of the participants multiple times, and, since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 and the subsequent halt to international travel, we maintained contact and engaged in multiple conversations with our participants via internet communication tools. To complement interviews, we rely on field notes, informal conversations with participants and observations we noted while in the field.

Interviews were conducted for two separate research projects that did not put violence at the center of the investigation. Rather, both projects focused on the Brotherhood's evolution since Egypt's uprising and the subsequent 2013 repression, with research in Egypt carrying a specific gender dimension. Our in-depth semi-structured interviews with members addressed themes such as mobilization and political participation strategies, and issues of leadership, legitimacy and organizational and identity change, prompted by members' experiences. For this research, we combined our dataset and analyzed the interviews using grounded theory tools such as coding, memoing, sampling for theory development and the constant comparative method (Charmaz 2014, p. 12), to assess the significance of the above themes to the Brotherhood's strategies aimed at reuniting after 2013, along with issues of identity and value change, which we addressed in other works (Ardovini and Biagini 2021a, 2021b; Ardovini 2020a, 2020b; Biagini 2017, 2019, 2021a, 2021b). However, discussions on violence emerged during interviews. After the Brotherhood's electoral successes, the movement's past relationship with violence, along with its religious-conservative nature, became a prominent concern among Egypt's oppositional forces and the international community alike, which often used it to delegitimize the group and increase fears with regard to its anti-democratic character. After 2013, the al-Sisi regime capitalized on these narratives to declare the Brotherhood a terrorist organization in December 2015 and to fully repress the movement (Pratt and Rezk 2019). Violence, therefore, was often discussed by members despite not being the main focus of our research. In this study, we focus our attention on the issue of violence, reflecting on the role that violence played among Brotherhood and Sisterhood members who, after 2013, were involved in revolutionary resistance while remaining critical of the Brotherhood leadership's inability to provide an efficient strategy to defeat the *coup*, and also of the New Office's belief in the use of violence as means to a political end. In doing so, we address an important gap in the literature by looking at how members navigated competing peaceful vs. violent approaches, with the goal to de-sensationalize narratives of violence, militantism and *jihadism* that took hold of some Brotherhood scholarship after the *coup*.

A peculiarity of our dataset is that it comprises interviews with members who cut across the entire Brotherhood organizational spectrum, to include senior Brotherhood leaders, Freedom and Justice Party former ministers and members, mid-rank cadres involved in the movement's *da'wa* circles, members active at the grassroots level, youth members, dissenters and former members. While Brotherhood senior leaders are included in this study (3M; 1F), the largest majority of our interviewees are mid-rank and rank and file members who, after 2013, were left bearing the brunt of repression despite having played a very marginal role in the Brotherhood decision making while in office, if any at all. After 2013, all of the respondents endorsed widespread Anti-Coup mobilization, but three (two mid-rank male cadres and one young Sister), since the beginning, had maintained that protesting would only cause damage to the movement and little tangible gains. All of our respondents, except the above three and an additional senior Sister who could not partake in protests because of health reasons, had been involved in mobilization to diverse degrees and played a variety of roles (e.g., as organizers, supporters and activists, providing material support).

Chiefly, none of our respondents fully escaped repression, as violence affected them directly or indirectly, due to them being friends, relatives and family members of individuals who had been subjected to violence, be this in the form of arrest, beating, torture, killing or SGBV, but also structural forms of violence such as being subjected to travel restrictions, seizing of funds and broad violations such as intimidation. That is, our respondents' sense of security had been shuttered to significant degrees due to the brutality of the repression that was exercised against the movement after 2013 by the al-Sisi regime. While none of our respondents testified to having actively engaged in violence, they all acknowledged that protests had failed to end the *coup*, but, while recognizing the need for alternative and more effective strategies to exit the crisis, they maintained that violence against the state was not to be used as a deliberate strategy to achieve political change. As such, they belonged to

a majority of members that, after the Brotherhood's ousting, were exposed to competing peaceful and violent approaches but who, failing to fully support either of the two, were left largely on their own, having to assess how to respond to repression and violence.

A second peculiarity of our dataset is that, differently from much of the existing Brotherhood scholarship, it is balanced when it comes to gender, as nearly half of our interviewees are Muslim Sisters. The gender dimension of our study is significant in terms of representation. While research on the movement's female members is growing, women's voices remain largely overlooked in studies of the Brotherhood, and their views on violence are virtually unexplored, despite the central role that women played in the post-2013 Brotherhood's resistance. The gender dimension of our dataset also affected our analysis and findings in important ways because, as the discussion shows, those instances in which mainstream members considered, supported or justified violence were to stop or prevent further SGBV from being perpetrated against women (and men) by state personnel. This finding testifies to the importance of gender-sensitive research, because it is only by including both male and female respondents that the centrality of SGBV to the Brotherhood's relationship with violence could be emphasized. Because this was a main finding of the study, one that is novel in the literature and that adds an important dimension to the Brotherhood's relationship with violence, women's views figure prominently in the discussion.

In terms of age, our respondents were aged between 19 and 65 years old at the time of the first interview, but slightly over half of them fell into the so-called Brotherhood youth category, being aged 39 or less (Al-Anani 2009). Importantly, over half of the youth members were women. This makes our sample inclusive of the diverse Brotherhood generational cohorts, including the young Sisters who were involved in the Brotherhood revolutionary resistance after 2013, and who were particularly subjected to state repression and SGBV. To protect our participants' anonymity, we do not report their names and we limit ourselves to indicate only the year in which the interview took place, not the day or the month, but we provide general and anonymized biographical information when quoting interviews and when relevant to the background context.

4. Peaceful, Revolutionary and Violent Approaches Post-2013

The historical tensions between peaceful and violent approaches discussed above re-emerged after Morsi's ouster in 2013 due to the brutality of regime repression. The forceful removal of the Brotherhood from government marked the beginning of a new phase of state confrontation against the movement and one of the harshest crackdowns in its history, as since then, the regime demonstrated its willingness to go to any length necessary to eradicate the group from Egypt's socio-political sphere. While, after the *coup*, Islamist mobilization remained largely peaceful in nature, clashes between Islamists and pro-regime supporters and episodes of sectarian violence were recorded both before and in its immediate aftermath (Awad 2017), with the Raba'a dispersal marking a key turning point in Islamist mobilization. During the forceful evacuation of the largest Islamist sit-in ever organized on 14 August 2013, state forces targeted and killed over 1000 Brotherhood members, supporters and demonstrators in a single day (Human Rights Watch 2014). The brutality of the Raba'a massacre, today recognized as the largest mass unlawful killing of demonstrators in a single day in Egypt's history, prompted calls for countrywide resistance among the membership, and the youth in particular (ElMasry and Ketchley 2020; Biagini 2017), but also led to radicalization tendencies among some members (Yaghi 2021).

The use of violence as a strategy to "break the coup" by some members was also favored by the fragmentation of the Brotherhood organization and the leadership's inability to effectively contain the damages of repression. Following the ousting, key Brotherhood senior leaders were arrested or killed, and those who avoided persecution fled abroad, from where they attempted to maintain their control over the membership in Egypt (Ardovini and Biagini 2021a). They continued to circulate slogans such as "our peacefulness is stronger than your bullets," to reinforce the Brotherhood's commitment to peaceful means.

However, amid the escalation of state-led violence, mass incarcerations and killings in the weeks that followed, members in Egypt began to question the viability of the Brotherhood's peaceful approach, calling for a change of strategy. In particular, some members began to question when, how and by what means the use of violence against the regime was to be considered permissible (see also Ibrahim 2015). A Brotherhood member in his thirties who now resides in Istanbul points precisely to these factors as a main cause leading to the emergence of competing approaches to resist regime repression among the membership:

Especially after the military coup the rank and file in the Brotherhood started to question the leadership and they had no answer, which obviously led to some friction. From the early days soon after the coup, the leadership declared that their aim is to appeal to constitutional legitimacy to fight against the coup, but they did not adopt the appropriate tools to do that effectively. This led to some parts of the organization believing that we need different tools, a different strategy, to achieve these goals.¹

Another factor that led to violence being considered was the increasing sense of legitimacy over the movement that members in Egypt came to acquire because of their involvement in resistance (Ardevini 2021; Biagini 2017; Brown and Dunne 2015). Initially, the Brotherhood endorsed members' greater independence in Egypt because operating along loose and informal networks increased the movement's resilience against regime repression (Ketchley 2017; Grimm and Harders 2018). In the long term, however, independence gave members legitimacy to claim leadership over the movement and its strategies (Fahmi 2015). In the absence of an effective solution to contain repression, some became increasingly receptive to Salafist groups, who justified violence against the regime as a self-defense measure, and began to argue that the only way to respond to the crisis was through a "zero-sum" game (Yaghi 2021). It was then that a group of mid-rank cadres capitalized on the movement's status of disarray to advance a more proactive and violent response against the regime. The High Administrative Committee, also known as the "Crisis Management Committee" or the "New MB Office" (Hashem 2016), was created by members in Egypt in 2014 to guide the Brotherhood through its domestic crisis. Soon, the New Office brought together a more revolutionary membership grouped around the leadership of Mohammed Kamal, a Guidance Office member and agriculturalist in the late fifties (Willi 2021; Fahmi 2019).

What came to constitute a revolutionary approach in the Brotherhood after 2013 is still debated (Brown and Dunne 2015). As noted above, since backing the Free Officers Revolution in 1952, the Brotherhood abandoned its support for a rebellious approach against authoritarian regimes as a means to achieve political change, opting instead for "reform over revolution, gradual improvements over radical change, and compromise over confrontation" (Al-Anani 2015, p. 534). After Egypt's uprising, the youth in particular referred to a revolutionary approach to indicate their support for thorough political change and their refusal to enter any compromise with the military or the forces of the old regime, who should have played no role in post-uprising Egypt in their view (Brown and Dunne 2015; Biagini 2021a). At a practical level, "revolutionary" also came to designate rebellious mobilization and protest strategies that the Brotherhood youth borrowed from Egypt's revolutionary movement, with whom they shared the struggle (Biagini 2019). These strategies did not necessarily entail the use of violence as a means to achieve control of the state and its institutions, as it is often implied in the literature to designate groups as radical/jihadist (see Yaghi 2021, p. 152). Rather, they were used to maintain control of the streets and therefore of a space to voice opposition. In this regard, the revolutionary strategy that youth members adopted after 2013, and that the Brotherhood temporarily supported through the Anti-Coup movement (see also Grimm 2021), did not envisage the use of violence as a means to achieve state control, despite violence—in the form of stone throwing and vandalism, among others—featuring in street demonstrations between protesters and security forces (Ketchley 2017; Biagini 2019). It was with the establishment of the New Office and under Kamal's leadership that the notion of revolutionary resistance

was appropriated to include the use of violence as a means to regain control against the state and as a legitimate and deliberate strategy to counteract state repression. Therefore, the revolutionary strategy supported and adopted by the Brotherhood and the majority of the youth after 2013, and that of our respondents in particular, should not be conflated with the call to violence advanced by the New Office, despite this last understood violence as part of its revolutionary strategy.

Indeed, while the mother organization endorsed revolutionary resistance between 2013 and 2015, it categorically objected to violence as a strategy to defeat the *coup* when the New Office began to promote violent operations in 2015. Furthermore, to distance itself from the New Office, the Brotherhood also retracted its support for street protests and required members to demobilize (Biagini 2019). Nevertheless, the New Office's support for violence directly challenged the Brotherhood's image as a moderate Islamist movement, putting the Brotherhood in the spotlight when it came to debates about whether or not the movement is a radical or moderate one. It also raised concerns within the senior leadership because it revealed deep internal fractures and members' desires to challenge the movement's old-standing, strict hierarchies, along with the lack of a clear ideological narrative behind the use of violence that began to take hold of some individuals. A senior leader who always championed the Brotherhood's commitment to peaceful means remembers these times with great worry, referring to the repercussions that violence would have on the image of the movement as a whole:

In Egypt in the beginning it was very difficult, especially when we announced that violence was not our strategy. A lot of the young leaders were not satisfied with this. They said that just being peaceful would not solve the coup. They thought that the coup had to be resisted force to force. But where is their expertise? Their army? Their training? So there was this division, this problem.²

Back then, therefore, some members in Egypt followed the New Office and subscribed to its "revolutionary option" and, from the early days after the *coup*, engaged in acts of vandalism such as setting fire to electricity generators, launching arson attacks on police vehicles and targeting police officers and military personnel known to be persecuting Brotherhood members and their families (Willi 2021).

It is important to reiterate that these acts of violence were limited in scope and number, and those who carried them out encountered severe opposition from the mother organization abroad as well as from the majority of members who continued to abide by peaceful resistance in Egypt. One mid-rank Muslim Sister in Egypt, who by 2014 had emerged as a key leader among the youth due to her role in the resistance but also among the senior Brotherhood leadership precisely due to the influence she had amongst the youth, recounted that it was the same Brotherhood that was working to counter radicalization among its rank and files, and the youth in particular. As she stated, "The youth wants justice. They have seen their friends and families being violated and killed in front of them, and they want justice, but it is the Brotherhood that is working to keep them together"³: that is, not letting the youth be influenced by violent approaches and radical ideologies and to abide, instead, by the Brotherhood's peaceful struggle. Women, who by their very nature as nurturers and reproducers of the Brotherhood movement enjoyed a position of close proximity to the youth, were therefore among those upon whom the Brotherhood relied to promote patience among the membership, and to counter calls for retribution and violent resistance advocated by the New Office. Women did so by promoting a dialogue between the youth and the senior leadership, by continuing to promote a moderate ideology so as to persuade the youth away from violence and by identifying and marginalizing radical members from the group (Biagini 2017). Therefore, while violent tendencies took place among some members after 2013 and were exploited by the New Office, the Brotherhood actively worked to contain radical ideas from taking root in the movement, and the largest majority of the membership remained faithful to its peaceful approach.

What is also important to highlight is that, to this day, it remains difficult to assess the extent to which the New Office was either responsible or supportive of violent acts that

have been carried out in Egypt after 2013, or to gain an estimate of the numbers who left the movement behind in favor of violent resistance. Indeed, Brotherhood radicalization post-2013 took place mainly in the form of members leaving the movement or being expelled from it to join the ranks of paramilitary groups such as the Popular Resistance Movement (*Harakat al-Muqawama al-Sha'biyya*) and the Revolutionary Punishment (*al-'Aqab al-Thawri*), which employed a variety of tactics ranging from explosive devices, car bombs, armed ambushes and the targeting of military installations and checkpoints (Awad and Hashem 2015). While membership overlaps between the Brotherhood, the New Office and these paramilitary groups likely existed for a period, there is little to no evidence of any formal links between the New Office and these violent groups (see Willi 2021). This makes it even more important to assess the role that violence, as a means of resistance, played out among members who did not associate themselves with the New Office or with the violent/paramilitary groups, but who had nonetheless remained involved in revolutionary resistance, something we turn to in the next section.

5. Brotherhood's Violence in Response to SGBV

The interviews with members confirm the existing literature (e.g., Willi 2021; Fahmi 2015; Brown and Dunne 2015), highlighting cases in which violence, as a means of resistance in the Brotherhood, took place, even if only temporarily. The acts of violence our respondents knew happened and narrated were limited and circumscribed to instances where local communities or individuals dealt autonomously from the Brotherhood to respond to state-led violence, perpetrated by police officers and military personnel against Brotherhood and Sisterhood members and their families. In these cases, violence was used to protect the communities from further abuses and violence by state personnel in the absence of state accountability and justice. Mainly, it was employed to intimidate police officers and military personnel from carrying out further acts of brutality, and thus as a deterrent and defensive strategy. Another finding that emerges from the interviews is that SGBV perpetrated by the state against female members of the movement was significant in creating support and justification among our interviewees for violence to be used as a self-defense and deterrent measure against the state.

The Brotherhood had, since the Nasser era, avoided including women in political activities to prevent them from falling victims to regime retaliation (Abdel-Latif 2008), but the scale of regime brutality to which the movement was subjected since 2013 made it difficult for the Brotherhood to marginalize the Sisterhood's participation. After the Brotherhood's removal, the Muslim Sisters also played a prominent role in the Islamist resistance. The first all-female Sisterhood-led movement, Women Against the Coup (*Nisaa' did al-Inqilab*—WAC), was established in July 2013 in Raba'a al-Adaweya Square out of the initiative of both senior and junior Sisters and enjoyed the Brotherhood's support. The WAC, like other Anti-Coup movements established at the time, appealed to the Brotherhood's discourse of legitimacy and advocated for the return of Morsi to the presidency of the state, but its gender dimension indicated women's efforts to secure a role for themselves in the Islamist struggle to bring Egypt's 2011 revolution forward. Since the very start, the WAC embraced peaceful means of resistance such as street protests and human chains and soon turned into an umbrella movement grouping women-led Anti-Coup groups across Egypt, thus playing a pivotal role in sustaining Islamist anti-regime mobilization in the months that followed (Biagini 2017).

Nevertheless, after the New Office's establishment in 2014, the Brotherhood feared that radicalization tendencies could take hold of the movement and worked to demobilize its membership, detracting its support for protest activities. One way the Brotherhood attempted to take back control over the membership was by establishing further coalitions with the goal of uniting the several Brotherhood and Sisterhood protest groups that had emerged since 2013. The Brotherhood made similar efforts to contain the WAC, by establishing the Revolutionary Coalition of Egyptian Women (RCEW). Back then, the Brotherhood promoted the RCEW as an umbrella movement to coordinate joint protest activities, but to

the young Sisters, it became immediately apparent that the RCEW's goal was to demobilize women and to control and contain those members who risked falling under the spell of "revolutionary" resistance. When the RCEW officially barred street protests for women, some young Sisters split from the WAC to establish their own revolutionary movements (Biagini 2019).

Ultras Girls (*Ultras Banat*) and Daughter of the Revolution (*Bint al-Thawra*) were two Sisterhood-led youth movements that defied the Brotherhood orders and continued their activism, including protest activities. Their members adopted more radical forms of protest to counter the regime and resist repression. These included *farasha* protests and stone throwing, but also direct engagement with police violence so as to defend themselves from arrest (Biagini 2019). Ultras Banat and Bint al-Thawra activists also secured medical supplies and learnt about first aid to provide medical care to those injured in protests. Efforts were made to give women self-defense skills to prepare them to defend themselves from police violence and free themselves from arrests if needed (Biagini 2017). They coordinated with male-led Brotherhood youth movements for protest activities, therefore often exposing themselves to state-led violence and arrest. As one Sister member of the Bint al-Thawra movement indicated, while the Brotherhood denied them support for contravening its orders, for a brief period, leaders affiliated to the New Office provided material backing for their initiatives, such as financing the printing of revolutionary and self-defense manuals.⁴

Ultras Banat and Bint al-Thawra, therefore, constituted the female revolutionary wing of the Brotherhood that, together with male youth members, sustained the lion's share of regime violence after 2013. A 2014 WAC report, for instance, indicated that at least 1558 women, the overwhelming majority of which were Sisters, were arrested and that at least 85 were killed by September of that year alone at the hands of the new military regime.⁵ Their revolutionary nature, however, remained limited to mobilization tactics and self-defense strategies. To date, there is no evidence that members of these movements directly engaged in acts of violence, if not for self-defense during street protests (Biagini 2017, 2019)—despite accepting material support by members associated with the New Office, as for the printing of manuals noted above, when the Brotherhood stopped endorsing protest activities.

That very same year, the regime began to use SGBV against women as a strategy to demobilize Islamists. It is difficult to assess whether the use of SGBV was intentionally adopted by the state as a countrywide strategy or whether it depended on the predispositions of local police officers. Feminist research on Egypt would suggest the former (see Agosti 2018; Zaki and AbdElhamid 2014), but it is also true that Egypt's security forces worked in a decentralized manner to counter Islamist mobilization. A young Sister, who after 2013 worked as part of the women's network tasked to record human rights violations against protesters and to provide assistance to survivors of violence, explained that the brutality of regime repression differed across governorates according to the history that marked the relationship between the protest group in a particular governorate and the officer in charge of it. As she explained:

Each province has its own *mudir* [governor] and state security officials, which are responsible for that area and know who are the Brotherhood members and the revolutionaries and how to deal with them; he [*mudir*] knows who to arrest to get to those he cannot reach. For example if he cannot reach someone he gets his mother and he is not going to let his mother out until he gets that person . . . The Kom el-Dikka case is a clear example.⁶ Each [local] area also has its own history [with the revolution prompting different responses] and what we can do now is just rescue who we can rescue and hopefully one day we will be able to have a clear picture of all the violence that happened.⁷

Therefore, while human rights abuses by the state remained widespread, SGBV in particular was reported being used against Islamist communities from Alexandria to Greater Cairo (Helwan) until the delta region (Mansoura).⁸ In 2014, therefore, SGBV became a strategy

the regime used to demobilize Islamists, and women donning the Islamic dress became primary targets.⁹ SGBV, as well as the threat of it, was also used in police stations and in prisons to terrorize and humiliate Islamist members of both genders, as one young Sister who was arrested for four months in 2014 explained.¹⁰ It was around the same period that so-called punitive operations were recorded as taking place by Brotherhood members in the literature and then embraced by the New Office (Willi 2021; Fahmi 2015). While none of the Ultras Banat and Bint al-Thawra activists interviewed reported taking part in acts of violence, their experience of state-led violence, including SGBV, contributed to them starting to question the viability of the Brotherhood's peaceful approach to resistance. As one Bint al-Thawra member indicated, what women urgently needed were tools to contain and defend themselves against state-led violence, both of which the Brotherhood lacked.¹¹

In 2014, one senior Sister who enjoyed a high-ranking position in the RCEW categorically refused to acknowledge any involvement of the youth in episodes of violence or any radicalization tendency taking place among the membership.¹² Her position could be explained as her attempt to counter any image of the Brotherhood as a violent movement amid the growing regime's rhetoric designating the group as a terrorist organization, to justify its crackdown. It could also be explained by the rejection of violent means by the Brotherhood, and the movement's efforts to distance itself from individual members who adopted violence. The overwhelming majority of the mid-rank and junior Sisters interviewed also maintained that the Brotherhood should have continued on a peaceful path of resistance. One young Sister's words embody one main reason as to why violent resistance should not have been adopted, when she claimed that "Islam is a peaceful religion and violence has no place in it".¹³ The second most frequent reason the Sisters provided was that violence was counterproductive to the Brotherhood because of the asymmetry of power between the movement and the regime, which would have certainly caused the Brotherhood to suffer greater damage and defeat.¹⁴ Another viewpoint almost all Sisters interviewed shared was that the use of violence was going to be damaging to the Brotherhood because it would have legitimated the regime crackdown against the movement and also its rhetoric of the Brotherhood as a terrorist organization.¹⁵ Therefore, what the interviews revealed was that the Sisters interviewed overwhelmingly objected to violence against the state as a deliberate political strategy being used, out of the belief that it contradicted their religion and that it was counterproductive for the Brotherhood. Yet, what they also revealed was that debates pertaining to the use of violence had become prominent among members due to the abuses they were being subjected to, and due to the radicalization tendencies that were taking hold among some members of the movement.

In later years, a small minority of Sisters admitted to having endorsed violence against the regime as a deterrence strategy at some point. One Sister in her mid-thirties who had been involved in street demonstrations, for instance, admitted having endorsed the use of violence employed by some individuals against state security personnel and *baltageya* (state paid thugs or informal police), as a way to contain and eventually stop state-led violence against Brotherhood and Sisterhood members. In her words:

The Muslim Brotherhood objects to violence, and those members who are in support of violent operations face the objection of the Brotherhood before they face the oppression of the state. Although, in my personal view, violence that is performed for the purpose of gaining our rights back is not violence but justice. I also believe that if the Brotherhood decided to support violent operations against the state, this could at least create a state of fear that would make officers refrain from using violence against people and dealing unjustly with them, even if violence failed to damage the state. If you, as an officer, know that you will face violence if you performed torture, rape and abuses against the people, you will think twice before doing this again next time.¹⁶

As she continued, she indicated that this was not only her sentiment but also that of a number of Sisters she knew and who had also supported, and at times even encouraged,

men to exercise violence against police officers known to have abused women, with the goal to stop them.¹⁷ Among members of the Ultras Banat and Bint al-Thawra activists, there were also women who expressed similar endorsements, justifying those who killed security officers known to have killed or raped girls in police stations. As one Ultras Banat activist in her early thirties admitted, “After the Rabaa massacre there was a time in which I approved of violence. I was pro-*jihadist* [in the lesser sense]. I believed that it was justified to kill a police officer that attacked and raped a girl”.¹⁸ She later reconsidered her support when the scale of repression made it difficult to be certain of the identity of the officers who had committed violations, or of the abuses committed against protestors.

One Sister in her mid-twenties, who was in Raba’a the day of the dispersal working as a journalist for human rights organizations and international news agents, also expressed concern when noting that the scale of state-led brutality had led to members, and particularly the youth, questioning the extent to which the use of violence against state personnel could be considered legitimate. In particular, the debate in her community pertained to how to obtain justice in the absence of fair laws and state accountability, without transgressing the principles of Islamic religion (which prohibits the killing of other Muslims), and whether forms of violence that inflicted punishment but were short of killing could be justified. As she explained:

[By asking me about violence] You reminded me of the case of a very famous *baltagy* who used to operate in Mansoura and carry out violence against women in there. He killed a little girl of only 15 years old, called Alaa. People attacked him and hurt him to the point that they paralyzed him. He later died because of his injuries. When he died, one side of me felt happy, because it was stopped and could no longer hurt or violate women. However, I knew that this would instigate a circle of violence that would never end. Someone told me that there is a difference between killing and hurting someone so that he could no longer do whatever bad thing he was doing. This is what people call “the grey zone” ... I am not sure if this “grey zone” exists in Islam or not, but I know for sure that Islam is against people killing each other outside the framework of law. [As a Muslim] You should not take revenge, outside of limited cases. Also, in Islam the punishment of killing was not killing, but *Diya*¹⁹ [blood money or ransom]. This is to control the phenomenon of violence that spurs from people taking revenge on each other in society. This “grey zone” is a social invention of people who have no other means to defend themselves in the absence of a just state. I cannot say if this is right or wrong. What I know is that the legal process to obtain justice in Islam is very long, and until the very end the person who committed injustice can still repent of his or her sins, and must be forgiven; it is called *istitabah* [act of repentance and asking forgiveness to God].²⁰

When asked about her view on whether killing President al-Sisi could be considered legitimate considering all of the violence that was perpetrated against Islamist communities under his rule, the same Sister responded that the only permissible way to kill al-Sisi would be through the Islamic law, but that even al-Sisi should be forgiven if it performed *istitabah*. This option remained available to him because it is close to impossible to demonstrate that someone is *kafir* (not a Muslim, which would make the killing permissible). As she explained:

There is a debate going on now with regard to whether Sisi is a *kafir* or is only a sinful Muslim. If he is *kafir*, for him *istitabah* is not applicable because he is already an infidel. But if he is a Muslim, he can ask forgiveness to Allah, return the rights to the people, whether in this life or the hereafter, and he could be forgiven. If this is true, I could never accept that I will have to share the paradise with him after what he has done to the people. But applying this possibility is fully Islamic and no one can declare him a *kafir*. In Islam, as far as someone defines himself a Muslim, nobody can accuse him of the contrary. Only a group of high religious

scholars can determine when there are the conditions for someone to be *kafir*. Also, no one can accuse another person of being *kafir*, because when this happens, one of the two is *kafir*, and if you cannot prove that the one you accuse is *kafir*, you are the *kafir*. He can commit sins but he is still a Muslim. Islam has these strict tools to prevent people from playing God with each other.²¹

Therefore, interviews with our respondents indicate that while the Sisters did not directly participate in acts of violence, in limited cases, some of them supported or justified the use of violence that was taking place against the regime. Their support was limited to inciting male members to carry out violence against security personnel and police officers known to have sexually abused, tortured or killed members, but they also soon reconsidered this position as entailing greater risks than benefits, and as unrighteous in Islam. In all cases, the use of violence that women supported or justified was limited to violence employed as self-defense or as a deterrence strategy and thus aimed at containing further violations to which members were being subjected, in the absence of a fair and impartial justice system and state accountability in Egypt since 2013. Indeed, in no instance did the Sisters believe violence against the state was an efficient strategy to obtain political change. As a matter of fact, even in those cases in which the Sisters were exposed to debates taking place among Islamist communities, which addressed the legitimacy of methods that were short of killing (such as the “grey zone”), they showed uneasiness with these violent actions, continuing to underscore their illegitimate status under Islamic law. Furthermore, when the Sisters were directly asked whether more radical positions on the use of violence could be justified, such as killing al-Sisi, the answer to which strongly relies on the interpretation of theological notions used to justify lesser *jihad*, such as *takfirism* (see Haddad 1983; Willi 2021), they dismissed these notions by articulating moderate interpretations of Islamic religion which the Brotherhood had used to challenge *jihadist* doctrines in the movement since the 1960s, in favor of a peaceful approach to resistance and political participation.

6. What Role Is Violence Likely to Have for the Brotherhood Moving Forward?

Indeed, while instances of violence did take place alongside more revolutionary methods, the Brotherhood never officially strayed from its peaceful rhetoric, and the leaders based abroad never ceased reiterating the movement’s commitment to peaceful means as their official position. Moreover, violence as a strategy progressively lost its appeal because it did not yield tangible results but rather worsened the Brotherhood’s position both domestically and internationally. Consequently, many of those who initially supported more proactive methods have since reconsidered the value and sustainability of this strategy moving forward, returning to the mother organization’s approach of patience, peaceful resistance and endurance in the face of repression. This shift officially began in August 2015 when Ibrahim Munir, Secretary General of the International Muslim Brotherhood and Official Spokesman for the Muslim Brotherhood in the West, published a letter in which he compared those who had violated the Brotherhood’s official policy of “peacefulness” to defectors and *de facto* suspended their membership (Willi 2021). He also reminded the movement as a whole that the Brotherhood had faced similar crises in the past, and that strategic choices should be left to those officially in charge of the movement. It is important to acknowledge herein that Munir has historically represented the international Brotherhood organization from his positioning in exile, and that the internal fragmentation of the Brotherhood organization since 2013 casts some doubts on whether his words can be said to represent the whole Brotherhood membership, but given the renewed circumstances the movement finds itself in, his are taken as the official positioning of the Brotherhood. In fact, this was also the viewpoint and main message that the Brotherhood leadership promoted in Egypt despite the violence perpetrated by the state against women, as a senior leader highlighted:

Our strategy is to be peaceful, “struggle is our way”, even after what happened to some of our sisters, of our women, we need to be patient and we need to solve our problems with wisdom. Because Sisi and all his companions are just waiting

for the Brotherhood to turn to violence, they are trying to push us in this direction, so that they have another excuse to kill us even more. So we were saying “don’t give him this excuse!”²²

Yet, bringing it back to the internal challenges that the Brotherhood faces in the present day, it is hard even for the leadership to ignore the fact that these divisions over violence as a strategy, and the conflation between revolutionary and violent approaches, are symptomatic of larger issues within the Brotherhood, concerning ideology, questions of legitimacy and the future of the movement itself, now that it is forced to exist abroad. A senior leader now residing in the UK expressed great concern about those who left the organization to pursue violent resistance, and he recognizes the need for the movement to be more united than ever in the face of the repression that followed the 2013 *coup*:

I believe that 2013 is the biggest crisis we have ever had facing the Brotherhood, not only in Egypt, but also in other countries. After some young people intervened with violence in Egypt, I myself made some justification for them, some excuses. Because it is not easy for anyone to be tortured, it is not easy for young people to see their sisters and mothers being raped and stay silent, do nothing. Just to hear about what happened to someone else’s mother, or sister, or to your classmate. So they wanted revenge. But these young people don’t have enough experts. Especially since the Special Apparatus was over in 1948, they don’t have any experts who give them guidance on how to do this, or to do that. So they don’t have any experience and they commit a lot of mistakes. [. . .] We need to regain the young people who we lost because of the violence. If they want to come back, to unfreeze their membership, the door is open.²³

Indeed, internal divisions over strategy and ideology, as well as organizational structures, remain at the core of the movement in the post-2013 context, and the Brotherhood today is arguably more divided than ever (Ardovini 2021). While the New Office lost most of its legitimacy and influence following Kamal’s assassination in 2016 (Middle East Eye 2016), larger debates remain concerning the ways in which the Brotherhood should restructure itself both internally and in relation to the outside world. It is, however, worth noting once again that many of those who deserted its ranks following the *coup* are now slowly circling back to the mother organization, refocusing their efforts on internal renewal rather than direct confrontation with the regime. According to a young member who temporarily left the Brotherhood in 2014 to join the ranks of the Popular Resistance Movement, this is because

The New Office made promises that they could not keep, such as “we will have another revolution” and after some time people saw that they did not achieve anything and were also adopting an increasingly confrontational discourse against the state. The spokesman had a very strong language, he used to say that “we will respond to the regime harshly” but he did not achieve anything, so the discourse did not match the reality and people’s alliances shifted towards the old leadership again. People are turning back to the old leadership not because it is good, but because they don’t want to leave the Brotherhood so let’s stick to what we know [“the devil that we know”], they don’t admire the leadership but they know what to expect from them.²⁴

Another member who has since left the movement altogether stated that, while disputes over leadership are not as prominent now as they used to be, the question of strategy remains a central one that will define the Brotherhood moving forward:

It’s complicated, we can say it’s a power game, and also how to face the coup. This is the main question at this stage, how to face this coup. It is strategy. The historical leadership said “this is not the first time for us, we can face it again by being away from this, and by using patience and you know all of these ideological theories, and we will have a victory at the end and so on”. But the Kamal side

said no, “we have to face them, we have to make another revolution”. They tried to make another revolution, they dream about something like that. But they also said “we need to use some violence” [laughs] there is no problem with some violence. But after that they separated and separated more, and now we see all of these small groups and we don’t know who they are.²⁵

Overall, therefore, the data show that more violent means embraced by a small cohort of individual members have largely failed, and that the Brotherhood’s historical commitment to peaceful resistance remains the organization’s official strategy. Yet, this also highlights that, in the context of exile, one of the Brotherhood’s most urgent tasks remains that of developing a coherent strategy on how to move forward that reunites the movement ideologically as well as bridging the gap between the leadership and the rank and file.

7. Conclusions

In this article, we analyzed the Brotherhood’s relationship with violence in the aftermath of the 2013 *coup*, with the goal to overcome the binary between peaceful and violent responses to repression over which much of the existing Brotherhood literature pertaining to violence post-2013 rests. We argued that these binary approaches are longstanding in the literature and are symptomatic of a conflation that is often made pertaining to what are revolutionary and violent approaches in the Brotherhood. We showed that episodes of violence within the membership did take place but were mostly driven by the establishment of the New Office in Egypt following the *coup* and its appeal for revolutionary resistance to counter state brutality in a domestic context, which also included violence against the state as a means to end repression. The New Office’s revolutionary approach differed from the revolutionary resistance that the largest majority of Brotherhood members embraced post-2013, which did not necessarily entail violence against the state as a deliberate strategy to achieve political change and end the *coup*.

We also argued that the New Office’s appeal was favored by the decentralization of conflict in Egypt, the level of state brutality and the Brotherhood leadership’s inability to advance an effective strategy to end repression and to protect its members from violence. Yet, save those individuals who left the Brotherhood to follow the New Office, who joined separate groups or who were expelled, a majority of members who remained critical of the leadership’s peaceful approach due to its lack of effectiveness against state repression also never abided to the New Office’s violent strategy or believed that violence against the state was an effective means to achieve political change. We also argued that state-led SGBV against female members was a main reason leading to violence being considered, supported or justified among these members. In no instance, however, do our data show that notions of lesser *jihad* took hold among our respondents, who instead challenged notions of lesser *jihad* using moderate religious interpretations that the Brotherhood had used to challenge *jihadist* doctrines within the movement since the 1960s. In this respect, we have demonstrated that the Brotherhood’s responses to repression sit uneasily in binary categories of peaceful vs. violent, and that there is a value in distinguishing between revolutionary and violent approaches in the Brotherhood post-2013.

Furthermore, we argued that the lack of a cohesive Brotherhood leadership following exile and of a united strategy to resist repression post-2013 indicates that the Brotherhood faces bigger questions about ideology and trajectory than binary discourses between violent and peaceful means can capture. Overall, the failure of violent resistance and the return to the mother organization of those who temporarily embraced it confirm that the Brotherhood organization as a whole maintained its historical commitment to peaceful means of resistance, legitimacy and participatory democracy, rather than condoning lesser *jihad*. However, while questions around violence as a resistance strategy have now faded, those on how to rebuild the internal unity that has been shattered by the repression that followed the 2013 *coup* remain central to the movement moving forward.

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Notes

¹ Author Interview, Istanbul, 2019.

² Author Interview, London, 2019.

³ Author Interview, Cairo, 2014.

⁴ Author Interview, Cairo, 2017.

⁵ Soon, recording human rights abuses and cases of violence against women became a main activity of the WAC movement. See Women Against the Coup. 2014. *Violations Against Women: 100 Days Under the Rule of al-Sisi* [*'Intihakat did al-mar'a: yum 100 taht hukm al-Sisi'*] Cairo: Women Against the Coup [unpublished].

⁶ Kom el-Dikka is a district in Alexandria. During the winter of 2013–2014, security forces abducted over 100 Brotherhood children with the goal to extort from their families information on the whereabouts of wanted Brotherhood leaders (see also Biagini 2017, p. 49).

⁷ Author Interview, Cairo, 2014.

⁸ Ibid; see also (Amnesty International 2016, p. 16).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Author Interview, Cairo, 2014.

¹¹ Author Interview, Cairo, 2017.

¹² Author Interview, Cairo, 2014.

¹³ Author Interview, Cairo, 2014.

¹⁴ Author Interview with young Sister, Cairo, 2014.

¹⁵ This point came up in several interviews with Sisterhood members interviewed by the author in Cairo between 2014 and 2017.

¹⁶ Author Interview, Cairo, 2017.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Author Interview, Cairo, 2017.

¹⁹ In Islamic law, *deya* refers to the financial compensation that perpetrators pay to the victim or heirs of a victim in cases of killing, bodily harm or property damage. It is commonly referred to as blood money and it consists of an alternative punishment to *qisas*, which instead refers to equal in-kind retaliation; see also (Hascall 2011).

²⁰ Author Interview, Cairo, 2017.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Author Interview, Istanbul, 2019.

²³ Author Interview, London, 2019.

²⁴ Author Interview, Istanbul, 2018.

²⁵ Author Interview, Istanbul, 2020.

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