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Egypt's Coming Chaos

The assassination of a top official and a brazen attack by an Islamic State affiliate this week herald a prolonged period of bloodshed.

By Steven A. Cook

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When Egyptian Prosecutor-General Hisham Barakat's car was blown up in Cairo this week by as of yet unknown terrorists, there was a profound sense of foreboding that Egypt was in some new, unprecedented phase of violence. These concerns were only reinforced when the Islamic State-affiliated Wilayat Sinai, or "Province of Sinai," killed dozens of soldiers and policemen in a spectacular raid on the town of Sheikh Zuweid the following day. Egypt is indeed entering unchartered territory, fighting an undeclared war in the Sinai Peninsula that is spreading to population centers in the Nile Valley. It is hard to imagine how Egyptians will avoid a prolonged period of bloodshed.

Barakat's assassination was just the most recent in a long list of Egyptian officials killed at the hands of their opponents. Everyone knows about President Anwar Sadat's murder in October 1981, but far fewer know that in the 1940s alone, two prime ministers, a minister of finance, a well-respected judge, and the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hassan al-Banna, were assassinated. With the obvious exception of the greater influence of the British, who occupied Egypt at the time, there are echoes of that era in Egypt's current political dynamics — notably hypernationalism, political instability, widening violence, and a pervasive sense of chaos. How did it all end then? With a coup.

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While a coup today seems unlikely, if not entirely implausible, the Egyptian military's decisions are once again at the center of the current moment. Its goal has been to rebuild, renovate, and reengineer a system in which it can play a role similar to the one it perfected during the Mubarak years. In the 38 years starting after the October 1973 war, the military enjoyed the prestige and influence of being the guarantor of Egypt's political order without actually having to be responsible for anything — with the exception of national defense — or accountable to anyone. The violence that is bedeviling Egypt and drawing the military deeper and deeper into a full-blown civil conflict reveals this effort to be a failure.

The insurgency tilts the balance of civil-military relations further in favor of the high command. As civilians or civilianized officers are diminished, the commanders will necessarily (though not always happily) assume greater responsibility for issues beyond those strictly related to national security.

There are parallels here to the dynamic that bolstered the Turkish General Staff's outsized role in politics after an insurgency by Kurdish guerrillas broke out in 1984. By the mid-1990s, Turkey's civilian leaders, unable to manage the conflict and fearful of the officers, basically abdicated their responsibility for the southeastern part of the country to the General Staff, which made for an even more autonomous and politically active military establishment. Despite the widely held perceptions of the Egyptian officer corps, this is precisely the kind of outcome they want to avoid. The officers enjoy their prestige and jealously guard their power — but as the armed forces' own history demonstrates, politics and conflict undermine their preeminent place in the system.

Yet the officers do not seem to have a choice. The Province of Sinai — imbued with an uncompromising extremist worldview — has made war on Egypt, promising to keep the military out in the open and politically exposed.

So what next? History is not much of a guide. In the late 1940s, in response to violence, the government dissolved the Muslim Brotherhood — but more violence ensued. The instability and uncertainty of that era only ended when Gamal Abdel Nasser and the Free Officers deposed King Farouk in July 1952, but even then it took them almost two more years to establish political control.

In the 1990s, terrorists of the Islamic Group and Egyptian Islamic Jihad attacked tourists, intellectuals, police generals, and senior officials like then Interior Minister Abdel Halim Moussa, who was the target of four unsuccessful assassination attempts. The military played a largely secondary role for most of that conflict until 1997, when terrorists murdered 58 tourists and four Egyptians near Luxor. Under the command of Sami Enan, who would later become the armed forces chief of staff and the number two figure in the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, the military hunted down the perpetrators of that attack. The violence came to an end shortly afterwards, when the accumulation of arrests and killings took a toll on the extremist groups. These examples provide few, if any clues, as to how the Egyptian government will manage the current conflict.

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For the military, the current struggle is made all the more difficult because the officers have spent the last 42 years equipping themselves to fight a large land war that will never happen. Add to this the significant ideological challenge that the terrorists of the Province of Sinai, which declared its allegiance to the so-called Islamic State in November 2014, represent.

As a result, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and the military seem to be at a loss. The special forces operation that killed nine members of the Muslim Brotherhood the same day of the Sheikh Zuweid attack seemed to have little rationale other than vengeance. The Brotherhood's statement in response, calling on Egyptians to rise up against Sisi to avenge these deaths, was chilling. If government crackdowns, restrictive laws, violence, and nationalist propaganda have done nothing to arrest Egypt's slide, adding vengeance to this dynamic will almost certainly produce a spiral of violence from which it will be hard to break out.

When Sisi deposed former President Mohamed Morsi and brought Egypt's brief experience with Muslim Brotherhood rule to a merciful end, the officers' promise to the Egyptian people was that of prosperity borne out of stability. It has not come to pass. In the broad sweep of Egyptian history, Hisham Barakat's assassination is no more important than that of Minister of Finance Amin Othman's in 1944 — but there is something about the present struggle that seems different and with greater stakes.

Unlike in previous conflicts, Egypt's officers find themselves in the worst of all possible worlds: Fighting a long war for which they are not prepared, thus risking the officers' vaunted position in the Egyptian political system. In the abstract, a change in the military's place would be a good

thing. But in the present conflict, it would mean breaking the military — and when you do that, you break Egypt.