The second anniversary of the January 25 revolution in Egypt was overshadowed by the widespread perception that the political situation there was locked in polarisation. Progress towards building a functioning democratic system appeared blocked by insurmountable distrust between two fields: ‘Islamists’ and ‘secularists’ or ‘liberals’. Following the election victories of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in 2012, their uncompromising attitude in pushing through a constitution helped to harden the fronts, and polarisation soon erupted in violence (key events: clashes at the Presidential Palace in Dec. 2012, and at the MB headquarters in March 2013). By March 2013, many in the opposition concluded that violent overthrow of president Mursi was the only way out. An alliance of youth activists, big business, old regime figures, and army and police officers went on to oust Mursi in July 2013. In the subsequent crackdown, thousands of real or supposed MB supporters were denounced as terrorists, killed, or jailed. And it did not last long before also secular opponents of military rule were subject to repression.

Physical repression and elimination of opponents of the military regime was preceded their discursive demonisation and elimination from the community of legitimate members of the body politic. This polarising discourse can be traced back on the internet to at least the early 2000s. While at first, Islamists often eclipsed their secularist opponents, the social web that spread since 2005 has been more critical of political Islam. So when in February 2012, the MB asked on Twitter: “Why do you hate us?”, this reflected both the growing political polarisation and the perception that the Egyptian Twittersphere was dominated by anti-Islamist voices. Answers came under the hashtag #WhyIHateIkhwan. Starting from there, this paper analyses the image the Brotherhood had among its foes on Twitter in early 2012, and charts changes in this image in the period leading up to and following the military crackdown in 2013.

Analysis of #WhyIHateIkhwan shows that the most prominent reason for hating the Brothers in early 2012 was the feeling that they had betrayed the revolution; they had broken their promises to join a broad coalition and instead made deals with the military to monopolise power; they are liars who cannot be trusted. Whether they were an integral part of the revolution from the start or only came in later (“riding the revolution”) was less important than the perception that their power-games were responsible for derailing it.

Other elements played a much smaller role in this picture: their exploitation of religion for political purposes; their internally undemocratic structure; and their use of violence for political ends (NB: the word ‘terrorism’ was not used at all at this point).
Yet, while Twitter reveals many ‘rational’ explanations for disliking the Brothers, almost 20% of responses expressed a predominantly emotional rejection of the Brotherhood: ‘They are the scum of society – I just hate them!’ Likened to both the Nazis and the Jews, the solution proposed was their extermination: “Hitler should be back to life to deal with these Mother Fuckers!”1 This violently emotional rejection must not be underestimated if we want to understand subsequent public acquiescence in what Human Rights Watch called the “worst mass unlawful killings in the country’s modern history”. Where the Brotherhood’s opponents after their election defeat had tried to denounce the Ikhwān’s “Renaissance Project” as a project to “exterminate a [whole] people”,2 in 2013 calls for the “extermination of the Brothers – the Jews of Egypt” appeared in Egypt’s streets and on Facebook.3

Such extreme statements may not represent the majority even of those 20% who professed an openly emotional dislike of the Brotherhood. They did, however, grow on the fertile ground of much more widespread anti-Brotherhood sentiments. The catchiest of these was the idea that the “Brothers are traitors”: al-Ikhwān khawana – a play on words in Arabic that insinuates that it is their root nature to betray. كَانُون – ِيَخْنُم –ِ ِمَيْسَرُونُ – يَخْنُمُونَ (“Betrayed – Betray – Brothers”), a slogan popularised by Bāsim Yūsuf (the ‘Egyptian Jon Stewart’), spread like wild fire through the web. Similarly, Google’s predictive search was used satirically to ‘expose’ the truth about the Brothers. Screenshots showing Google’s search suggestions for “al-Ikhwān kh[...]” made the rounds on social media in 2013, demonstrating that “even Google knows” that the Brothers are traitors (khawana), have destroyed Egypt (kharrābu Miṣr), are deviants from Islam (khawāriği), sheep (khirfān), a danger to Egypt (khaṭar ʿalā Miṣr), etc. While the letter kh lends itself particularly well to such completions, we must remember that Google’s algorithm reflects actual search activity and thereby a certain zeitgeist.

#WhyEgyptiansLikeIkhwan

Two days after the hashtag #WhyIHateIkhwan went wild, Ikhwanweb tried to counter it with #WhyEgyptiansLikeIkhwan: “Faculty members, engineers, doctors, lawyers, scientists, teachers, peasants, workers, middle class, why do they not hate us? Because we are from among them and they are from among us.”4 The new hashtag, however, was immediately hijacked by the opposition. The first reply came in English: “Egyptians don’t like ikhwan, Egyptians -or at least the educated ones- are not retarded =)”.5

These two tweets present one of the prominent points of contention: The Brotherhood regarded its opponents as an elitist urban minority isolated from the ‘real Egypt’ of the working people with whom the Brothers were in daily contact and whose concerns they know first hand. For its detractors, on the other hand, the MB’s success was mainly due to its cunning exploitation of the backwardness of the Egyptian masses whom they bought with oil and sugar and promises of heaven. This idea crystallised into the image that the followers of the MB are a flock of dumb ‘sheep’ (khirfān) blindly obeying every command and willingly walking to their destruction.

The derogatory depiction of the Islamists as ‘sheep’ is older than the Egyptian revolution, but it was not yet very prominent in our Twitter debate; it only took off as a meme after the Brotherhood’s election victories. The meme served as a means to explain away the Brotherhood’s success at the ballots while maintaining an attitude of superiority. Our two hashtags may thus be summed up thus: We hate the Brothers...
because they are traitors (al-Ikhwān khawana), while those who follow them do so because they are dumb sheep (al-Ikhwān khirfān).

**Brothers aim to present themselves as constructive force**

Portraying Brotherhood supporters as ‘sheep’ implicitly excludes them from the community of ‘reasonable’ members of the political community that are able to participate in shaping the way the polity is run. How about the opposite side? The anti-Brotherhood camp often claims that the Brothers are guilty of a worse exclusionary discourse: that of casting their opponents as infidels (takfir), thereby implicitly calling for their extermination since apostasy is punishable by death according to Islamic Law. This has led many to describe the polarisation in Egypt as a balance of exclusionary discourses where both sides attempt to deny legitimate agency to their opponents. Looking at the web, however, the scales of this balance tip: one finds many more sheep than infidels. My data contain many examples of secularists alleging that Islamists ‘regard us as infidels’ – but no links to actual instances of takfir by the Brotherhood. Instead, the MB attempted to present itself as a legitimate player in the democratic process, enjoying much wider popular support and being closer to the true pulse of Egypt than their ‘élitist’ opponents.

**Islamist polarising hate discourse exists — on the fringes**

While exclusionary polemics against the Brotherhood was easier to find on social media than comparable material by the Brotherhood against the secular/liberal camp, Islamist polarising discourse did exist – but it remained on the fringes of the MB. Most of it came from salafis and jihādis who for many years have been rivals of the Brotherhood. There were, however, examples of extremely polarising discourse also emanating from Brotherhood figures, although they did not represent mainstream Brotherhood positions but were in fact at odds with them. A case in point is maverick preacher Waǧdī Ghunaym who in June 2013 declared on YouTube: “those who will demonstrate [against Mursi] on 30/6 are infidels and must be killed”.6

Ghunaym had his home in the Brotherhood, but was unhappy about its course. Outrageous as his statements were, they were directed first and foremost at the home front, at the “heretic” leadership of the Brotherhood who were, in his view, on a dangerous path embracing values of democracy and equal citizen rights that were leading them away from the only true principles of Islam. Using voices like his to denounce the Brotherhood therefor is akin to the “Selective Memri” of the Israeli-founded Middle East Media Research Institute whose translations from Middle Eastern media serve to spread a very lop-sided image of Middle Eastern public opinion by consistently highlighting the most extreme positions.7

**Seculars confound all ‘Islamists’ – to blame Brothers for extremism**

Until spring 2013, the careful observer cannot but conclude that the mainstream Brotherhood presented itself on social media as a popular, democratic, non-violent movement with an Islamic value agenda, while their opponents deliberately tended to blur the line between the Brothers and more extreme Islamists (even though these in practice often were opponents of the Brotherhood). This clearly served to demonise the Brotherhood. By downplaying ideological and political differences between the Brotherhood, salafi movements, and other, more extreme Islamists, by portraying them as one “Islamic trend”, one could indiscriminately attribute all kinds of misdeeds to them: for example, to blame the Brotherhood for the armed attacks after Mursi’s ouster, even though jihādist movements claimed responsibility for them. The ‘secularist’ camp thus proved guilty of the same sin that they accused the Islamist side of: to construct an image of a political opponent that was more one-dimensional and extremist than the multifaceted reality, in order better to batter this caricature.

I ideological polarisation masked real differences of class and power & helped to justify violent crackdown

Such polarising discourse has had two important functions. It served to mask real differences of socio-economic and socio-cultural background, of class, and of power, taking away attention from the political economy of the conflict. Obsession with ideology was so powerful that even outside observers largely failed to comment on the material differences of interest between the Brotherhood’s electorate and the social classes that have dominated Egyptian political and economic life for decades.

Second, the increasingly harsh polarisation was exploited to legitimise violent resistance against the Brotherhood and to justify military intervention and the subsequent bloody crackdown. It is towards this end that the label “terrorist”, which had not played a role on social
media before, was attached to the Brotherhood during the anti-Mursī demonstrations in 2013. After the army takeover in July, demonisation was unleashed in force. Campaigns to outlaw the Brotherhood first appeared on Facebook in July; in December, it was officially declared a terrorist organisation.

Other elements of this campaign were: The Brothers work not for the nation but for their own interests, for an international, secretive organisation; they are freemasons conspiring with America, Hamās, the Zionists, and other terrorists to betray Egypt. The Brotherhood has been a terrorist organisation since the beginning; it is not surprising that it continues in this path, financing Sinai terrorists and smuggling weapons into what they call “peaceful” demonstrations. What they call for is not real Islam, not the moderate Islam that has been practiced by Egyptians throughout history, but a foreign and primitive Islam, an Islam of the seventh century, an Islam not of the civilised world but of the Arabian bedouins. In short, they are pseudo-Muslims, not real Muslims.

While most of these stereotypes can be traced back to before 2011, they were massively pushed in public after the Brotherhood gained power in 2012, and turned up a few notches during the campaign to “rebel” against Mursī in spring 2013. After the coup, the tone was further escalated, to the point where the supporters of the Brotherhood were declared un-Egyptian, not a part of ‘our’ people. In a music video published right after the coup, the slogan “Get out!” (irḥal), which in 2011 had been raised against Mubārak, was turned against this ‘foreign’ other.

With the Brothers discursively stripped of their Muslimness and their Egyptianness, and collectively branded as terrorists, the path was opened for their physical elimination as well: the bloody but necessary ‘operation’ of mid-August 2013, when police and army, answering to the call of the nation, moved in to clean the streets and put an end to chaos in a historic and “heroic battle” in which they proved their readiness to “sacrifice and efface themselves to defend the will of the nation”.

A Third Square?

In this heavily polarised climate, intermediate voices had little chance to succeed in the short term. Attempts to establish a “Third Square” to claim space for those who stood for the ideals of the January 25 Revolution against both the supporters of the army and the old régime (Taḥrīr Square) and the supporters of Mursī (Rābiʿa Square) had only limited success. After the crack-down on supporters of Mursī’s presidency, the military-backed régime began arresting those who raised the slogan “Down with all traitors – military, old régime, Brothers!” Even the few prominent liberal, secularist intellectuals who dared to speak up against the coup were subjected to harassment, judicial charges, or jail. On the third anniversary of the revolution, most representatives of this “Third Trend” decided to stay at home instead of risking their lives in meaningless confrontation with the security forces. Where on previous occasions, they had had chanted “The revolution is still [alive] on the Square”, they now tried to assure themselves that “The revolution [lives on] in ourselves”. Those wielding a polarising and dehumanising discourse had won back the Egyptian street, and were openly celebrating 25 January as “Police Day” again – “don’t you ever forget that, you sheep!”
“The New Middle East: Emerging Political and Ideological Trends” is a five-year research project funded by the Section for Peace and Reconciliation at the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It is based at the Centre for Islamic and Middle East Studies at the University of Oslo and involves researchers from the Institute for Labour and Social Research, Fafo, The Peace Research Institute Oslo, PRIO, and the University of Oslo. The project is headed by Professor Bjørn Olav Utvik.

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