

Failed Negotiations and the Dark Side of Ripeness: Insights from Egypt¹

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Abstract

This article revisits ripeness theory and examines whether conflicts with armed Islamist groups can also be ripe for negotiations. The article argues that armed Islamist organizations can be willing to negotiate and demobilize, but talks are particularly vulnerable to spoilers and public backlash. To examine these dynamics, the article investigates the case of al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya in Egypt. Relying on a variety of primary and secondary sources, including organizational documents and testimonies by the leaders, the analysis shows that the absence of ripeness can indeed explain some of the failures of negotiations. However, when the conflict was finally ripe, talks broke down because of elite divisions and public backlash. The case reveals that there is a dark side to ripeness: the conditions that lead to a mutually hurting stalemate can also lead to public outrage, elite divisions and opposition to negotiations.

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Commenting on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and tensions in the Middle East, former President George W. Bush declared that “no nation can negotiate with terrorists, for there is no way to make peace with those whose only goal is death” (ABC News 2006). Indeed, the mantra that “we do not negotiate with terrorists” has been the official policy of the American government since Ronald Reagan (Keating 2015). Yet unofficially, many governments, including the American one, have at times negotiated with terrorist groups.

Whether such negotiations serve to empower and legitimize violent actors or are an essential way to get concessions from radical groups remains up for debate. Some scholars suggest that negotiations with terrorist groups can provide an essential tool for conflict transformation and for the legitimization of nonviolent tactics (Toros 2008, 2012). With the dramatic rise over the past two decades in intrastate conflicts that involve at least one actor that makes explicit Islamist demands (Svensson and Nilsson 2018; Nilsson and Svensson 2017), the debate over negotiations takes on a new dimension. Is it possible to negotiate with armed Islamist groups? If so, when should negotiations with such actors be pursued? Is there a right time and context in order to guarantee success?

A prevalent argument in conflict theory is that a conflict has to be “ripe” for negotiations to succeed (Zartman and Berman 1982; Zartman 1985). What has received less attention is whether the concept of ripeness can also be applied to conflicts involving armed Islamist groups. Some of the main proponents of ripeness theory have suggested that the logic of the argument might not apply to “true believers,” because such actors might only resort to more resistance in response to pain, and they are unlikely to compromise (Zartman 2000, 239). In much of terrorism studies, however, armed Islamist groups are considered to be rational and strategic actors who use violence for instrumental purposes (Kydd and Walter 2006; Bloom

2005; Pape 2003; Crenshaw 2011). This calls for a closer investigation of whether conflicts with Islamist actors can also be ripe for negotiations.

Because ripeness theory has been criticized for being non-falsifiable and too easily blaming negotiation failures on the absence of ripeness (Kleiboer 1994; Walch 2016; O'kane 2006), a careful examination of conflicts with Islamist groups would require explicitly interrogating whether failed negotiations are due to the absence of ripeness or due to ideological intransigence. This article tackles this issue and proposes a revised model of ripeness that can better account for failure by taking into account potential spoiling dynamics, and bringing into consideration elite support, public opinion, and organizational cohesion. This framework is tested in the case of al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya (GI) in Egypt. The analysis reveals that the Islamist group was willing to engage in negotiations, and the absence of ripeness can indeed explain some of the failures of negotiations. But when the conflict was finally "ripe" for negotiations, the talks failed primarily because the audience cost of the violence was so high that the public rejected any form of negotiation with and concessions towards the GI.

The Egyptian case study suggests that there is a dark side to ripeness: the conditions that lead to a mutually hurting stalemate can also lead to public outrage, elite division, and opposition to negotiations. Ripeness, therefore is not enough for negotiations to be successful. Success requires support from the elites, from the general public, and from the organization. This being said, the Egyptian case also reveals that disengagement from violence can occur in the absence of successful negotiations.

The next sections outline some of the central debates around negotiating with terrorist groups, and present the theoretical argument. The empirical analysis first provides an overview of engagement between the government and the GI, before examining whether the absence of

ripeness can explain negotiation failures. The last part of the case study discusses why the GI ultimately embarked on a unilateral process of disarmament even when negotiations failed. The conclusion reflects on how the findings may relate to the larger issue of negotiating with armed Islamist groups.

Is there a Right Time to Negotiate with Terrorists?

When it comes to negotiating with terrorist groups, two questions arise: Is it possible to successfully negotiate with terrorist groups, and if so is there a right time and context to do so? This section briefly outlines the main lines of contention on these two concerns.

Negotiating with terrorists

Some consider that whereas negotiation may be possible with pragmatic terrorists, whose goals are limited and who employ violence for instrumental purposes, negotiating with absolutist groups is counterproductive (Zartman 2003). In particular, “Islamic fundamentalist” groups are often perceived to be beyond negotiation, because there is “nothing to negotiate with, and nothing to negotiate for” (Zartman 2006, 256). If armed Islamist groups have revolutionary absolute goals, their unlimited ends implicitly lead to the adoption of unlimited means (Zartman 2003; Hayes, Kaminski, and Beres 2003). Since some organizations regard violence as a redemptive act rather than a means to an end (McCormick 2003, 477), for some armed Islamist groups violence may serve a cleansing rather than a strategic purpose.

Negotiating with an organization like al-Qaeda can also be difficult because the group frames the confrontation as a sacred struggle, which implies that compromise is impossible (Juergensmeyer 1997, 2004). Furthermore, negotiating with a leader like Osama bin Laden, who was in no position to negotiate a settlement of the issues he discussed in his justifications for violence, could also magnify his importance and reward his tactics with political legitimacy

(Juergensmeyer 2007). For scholars like Juergensmeyer, then, a nonviolent response to religious terrorism includes capturing perpetrators, addressing root grievances, and opening the space for religion in such a way that rejects violence, but not religion itself (Juergensmeyer 2007, 2000).

Some critical terrorism scholars, however, challenge the notion that negotiations can confer legitimacy to a terrorist group, on the grounds that legitimacy is socially constructed and intersubjective, and a community would find a terrorist group legitimate only if the group's behavior is congruent with the community's shared beliefs (Toros 2008, 413). Thus, a state's decision to enter into talks with a terrorist group can strengthen the latter's legitimacy claims vis-à-vis the broader national and international community, but it can also reinforce the norm of nonviolence and empower the moderate factions within a group (Toros 2008, 413).

Pruitt suggests that instead of assuming that some terrorists are lost causes for negotiation, it is more appropriate to assume that both terrorists and governments start with extreme demands, but then can become more flexible in response to the context (Pruitt 2006, 384). Flexibility can come from a sense that the conflict is counterproductive, from contact with moderates, or from pressure from third parties. This being said, Pruitt also acknowledges that negotiations with a group like al-Qaeda is unlikely because of their ideology, even though policy makers should remain open to the possibility of backchannel talks with the group. Similarly, Cronin considers negotiation with the central core of al-Qaeda unrealistic because they have non-negotiable terms, are increasingly defined by indiscriminate violence, and are unresponsive to their constituents. Yet, talks with al-Qaeda affiliates could hold out promise (Cronin 2010).

Jones considers that some elements within al-Qaeda might be willing to engage in talks about localized and specific concerns (Jones 2015, 188). Such talks could help detach some elements from the hard core, and distinguish hardliners from moderates within the group.

However, it may be more difficult to engage terrorists on their political vision, and instead it may be more feasible to discuss security concerns and negotiate practical issues, such as a truce or a hostage release (Koopmans 2018, 73).

To the extent that talks with radical religious groups are possible, the success of negotiations depends on group characteristics, context, and the nature of negotiations. The terrorist groups that have engaged in track two diplomacy were highly hierarchical organizations with strong leaders, and a constituency that has grown tired of violence (Jones 2015; Cronin 2010). Some argue that in dealing with terrorist groups, states should seek to get terrorists to abide by some rules, negotiate with complete deniability, use third parties and mediators, and employ coercive diplomacy to practice tough bargaining (Spector 2003). The context, however, is also key. In that sense, successful negotiations depend on a thorough understanding of the political context, on the level of popular support for the terrorist groups, and on the expectations of the population (Cronin 2010). As the context and the conflict keep changing and evolving, finding the right time to engage becomes critical if negotiations are to succeed.

Timing and ripeness

Ripeness theory holds that the success of negotiations is not only about the substance of the talks, but perhaps even more importantly about the timing of such engagement. Parties in a conflict are not ready to truly resolve the issues, until they perceive themselves in a mutually hurting stalemate, where they can no longer pursue any unilateral actions, and they cannot escalate to victory. The best timing to open negotiation is therefore when the deadlock is too costly for everyone, and both sides are ready to look for a way out (Zartman 2001).

This being said, Pruitt's notion of readiness, suggests that de-escalatory sequences can encourage gestures of conciliation, build trust, and set the stage for negotiations even in the absence of ripeness (Pruitt 2007). Third parties can foster working trust through a circular process of reassurances, and a chain of communication that eventually connects parties on opposite ends of the spectrum, increasing optimism about the outcome of conciliation and negotiations (Pruitt 2005). In addition to such confidence building measures, "talks about talks" are also important in order to agree on the ground rules and the parameters of future negotiations (Koopmans 2018, 103).

When the "ripe" moment for negotiations does arrive, the mutually hurting stalemate (MHS) is what pushes parties towards negotiation, and the willingness to look for a way out is what pulls them towards a mutually enticing opportunity. The challenge, however, is that in order to maintain the momentum and the pressure that drives actors towards negotiation, parties might have to keep alive the danger (Zartman 2015). Increased pain, however, can also lead to an increase in resistance, and in particular for "true believers," pain can justify the renewal of violence (Zartman 2001).

If one considers Islamist actors to be true believers, this implies that ripeness might not apply to conflicts involving jihadist groups. However, in terrorism studies many scholars treat armed Islamist groups as rational actors who use violence for strategic purposes (Pape 2003; Kydd and Walter 2006; Bloom 2005). This perspective implies that we can expect armed Islamist groups to respond to external pressures similarly to other rebel groups. Nonetheless, the most recent scholarship investigating conflicts that involve religious claims shows that there might be indeed something distinctive about intrastate conflicts involving Islamist actors: such

conflicts are more intractable, and less likely to be solved through peace settlements (Baumann, Finnbogason, and Svensson 2018; Svensson and Harding 2011; Svensson and Nilsson 2018).

These findings underline the importance of investigating empirically whether ripeness theory can apply to conflicts involving jihadist groups. Undertaking such an investigation requires paying close attention to some of the criticism of ripeness theory. In this regard, one of the most significant charges raised against it is that it is tautological and non-falsifiable. Empirically, it is difficult to evaluate ripeness *ex ante*, and to distinguish ripeness from the outcomes of mediation (Kleiboer 1994, 115). When talks fail one can simply argue that the moment was not ripe, so that all inaction or failed action can be blamed on the absence of ripeness (Walch 2016; O'kane 2006).

In order to address these critiques, it is important to pay closer attention to conditions under which ripe moments can still result in failure. Rather than discarding the theory as a whole, one can develop it, by moving towards greater specificity on how the two main variables (mutually hurting stalemate and willingness to engage) might interact to produce different outcomes. The next section proposes a framework that brings in spoiling dynamics and public attitudes in order to better account for the conditions under which ripe moments can come to fruition.

Ripeness and Context: Bringing Spoilers and Publics into the Analysis

Ripeness theory is centered around the primary parties to a conflict, which usually boils down to the government and a rebel group. Yet, governments and rebels do not operate in a vacuum, and they are rarely unitary actors. Combatants can consist of a variety of coalitions and factions (Stedman 1991), and political leaders don't always agree about the desirability of an accord (Haass 1990). Haass has argued that the ability of political leaders to agree, and the shared perception of the desirability of an accord are necessary prerequisites for ripeness (Haass 1990).

Building on these insights, I bring elites, publics and organizations into the analysis, and argue that in order for ripe moments to lead to successful negotiations, the possibility of spoilers and public backlash has to be eliminated.

This builds on the insights of the rich literature on spoiling, which has long argued that spoilers pose a significant risk to negotiations, and that intra-party divisions and dynamics are key for understanding commitment to the peace process (Stedman 1997; Pearlman 2009). Within this literature, however, there are significant debates around who constitutes a spoiler. One line of disagreement is whether the term should only include non-state actors, or whether it can also include official spoilers on the government side (Nilsson and Söderberg Kovacs 2011). Another debate centers around the question whether spoilers have to be actors that resort to violence to undermine negotiations, or whether the refusal to engage or the reneging on promises can also constitute spoiling (Stedman 1997; Zahar 2003; Pearlman 2009).

This article starts from the assumption that both government and rebels can be spoilers, and that spoiling can take both violent and nonviolent forms. Because considering any actor opposed to a peaceful settlement as a spoiler lends itself to conceptual stretching (Nilsson and Söderberg Kovacs 2011), I differentiate between spoiling dynamics and public backlash.

On the government side, if political elites or key decision-makers are divided over negotiations or the terms of a settlement, they can derail or stall negotiations. Which political elites should be considered depends on the regime type and institutional framework within which the parties to the conflict operate. In a democratic setting, disagreements over negotiations are natural, but the important question is whether there is strong enough opposition among politicians to block the implementation of any settlement. In non-democratic regimes, the focus would be either on divisions within the top echelons of the ruling party, or divisions

among some of the key political officials, such as the President, Prime Minister, Minister of Interior and/or Minister of Defense and top generals.

On the rebel side, if the leadership of the organization is fragmented or divided over the question of negotiations, the possibility of spoiling also emerges. This is in line with existing studies that show that fragmented rebel groups are less likely to make concessions and stay at the negotiation table, whereas cohesive groups are more likely to follow leaders in reaching negotiations (Walch 2016; Stedman 1997; Pearlman 2009).

Successful negotiations, however, also require a minimal level of public acceptance, so that there is no public backlash. Whereas the notion of willingness to engage has been mainly applied to the government and the rebel side, it is important to also consider the willingness of the public to accept either the terms of an agreement, or the very idea of negotiations. In this sense, it is not just the parties to a conflict who have to be ready for talks; the public has to be prepared as well, especially if the combatants are designated as terrorists and perceived as illegitimate. Thus, the notion of ripeness has to go beyond the political elites and the rebel leaders doing the bargaining; it also has to include an element of preparing all necessary constituencies for the negotiations.²

Public support might seem particularly important in democracies, where publics have access to information and can punish political elites at the voting booth. However, I argue that public opinion also matters in non-democratic regimes. In countries with limited political contestation and participation voters do not have as much power to express their discontent during elections, but authoritarian regimes still seek legitimacy in order to reduce the cost of repression. The higher the legitimacy of the regime, the lower the need for coercive measures

² I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for underlining this point, and helping me clarify this part of my argument.

to maintain power and stability. From this perspective, then, public opinion matters, and public backlash against negotiations can threaten the legitimacy of the regime.

In light of these considerations, I propose that the ripe moment for negotiations depends not only on the willingness of the parties to engage and on the presence of a mutually hurting stalemate, but also on the cohesion of the elites and of the organization, and the public acceptance of concessions. This argument, which combines a structure-oriented and an actor-oriented focus, is captured in Figure 1. The remainder of the article tests this argument in the context of a case study.

- INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE -

Re-evaluating Ripeness Theory through the Case of al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya

Al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya presents one of the most drastic transformations of an armed Islamist group. After being one of the most active armed groups in Egypt, the organization eventually shifted to nonviolent tactics, dismantling its armed wing, halting all armed operations, and perhaps most astonishingly, publishing volumes of ideological revisions that explained why their past actions were misguided. Whereas most work on this group has sought to understand what has driven this process of de-radicalization (Ashour 2009, 2010; Matesan 2018), the group also provides an excellent case for testing and developing ripeness theory.

First, the group allows us to investigate an instance of successful demobilization that has not received a lot of attention from the literature on negotiations, and see if the causal mechanisms proposed by ripeness theory hold. We can examine whether the timing of the group's ultimate decision to disengage from violence was marked by "ripeness," and whether this is a case of long-term success of negotiations, or demilitarization in spite of failed engagements.

Second, GI offers a lot of within case variation that offers a unique opportunity for developing ripeness theory. Government officials and religious figures have attempted to talk and negotiate a ceasefire with the group for over a decade, yet with no success. If we investigate each attempt at engagement and negotiation, we can examine to what extent the conditions of ripeness were present or absent, and what best explains the failure of the negotiations. This can be a particularly useful exercise for addressing the charge that ripeness theory is non-falsifiable, blaming all failures on the absence of ripeness.

In order to identify the presence or absence of ripeness, the empirical analysis focuses on the two main factors proposed by the theory, examining the extent to which the two sides ever reached a mutually hurting stalemate, and whether the government and the GI saw a way out and were willing to engage. Operationalizing these two dimensions is no easy task, and it is invariably bound to sacrifice some of the nuance and complexity of the original theory, which places a lot of emphasis on perceptions. As Zartman argues, “the ripe moment is necessarily a perceptual event, not one that stands alone in objective reality” (Zartman 2000, 239). However, assessing such perceptions post hoc is nearly impossible, so Zartman recognizes that even though nothing in the definition of a mutually hurting stalemate requires it to be at the height of a conflict, “the greater the objective evidence, the greater the subjective perception of a stalemate and its pain is likely to be” (Zartman 2000, 230).

With these caveats in mind, in order to test the theory and examine the extent to which it can apply to conflicts involving an Islamist actor, the analysis operationalizes a mutually hurting stalemate by looking at the levels of violence against the government, and the external pressure placed on a group through arrests, repression and counter-terrorism tactics. Data on violent attacks is obtained from the Global Terrorism Database and the UCDP Database,

whereas data on arrests and detention is collected from Human Rights Watch reports, State Department cables and secondary sources. This information is complemented by an interview conducted by the author with the spokesperson of the Building and Development Party (the GI party) in 2012.

In order to assess whether the government or the GI saw a way out, I examine the extent to which the two sides presented any options to end the stalemate, and were willing to engage in talks. The vast majority of the information on the nature and extent of talks is obtained from autobiographical accounts of GI members (such as Mahir Farghali and Khaled al-Berry), accounts of the lawyer who represented the GI members and who participated in the negotiations (Muntasar al-Zayyat), statements made by group leaders, such as Muhi al-Din and Rushdi, and Makram Mohammad Ahmed's interview with the imprisoned historical leaders of GI. On the government side, the main primary source is the autobiographical account of Kamal Janzuri, who was Deputy Prime Minister between November 1986 and January 1996.

Since the question is not only whether we can estimate the presence of ripeness, but also whether negotiations failed due to the absence of ripeness, due to spoiling dynamics, public backlash or the ideological intransigence of the Islamist actor, the analysis relies on process-tracing. This method is particularly useful for uncovering causal mechanisms and discussing sequences of events (George and Bennett 2005; Beach and Pedersen 2013). In addition to the primary sources mentioned above, the inquiry also draws on a variety of newspaper articles, State Department cables and secondary sources.

Willingness to Engage and the Transformation of al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya

The GI traces its origins to the Islamic societies that emerged in the mid to late 1970s on university campuses across Egypt (Abdo 2002). The student movement was largely nonviolent,

but by the late 1970s it became increasingly antagonistic towards the state, organizing demonstrations and sit-ins, which often led to clashes with the authorities (Meijer 2009). After the Iranian Revolution, the GI formed as a distinct organization, whose goal was to bring about an Islamic revolution in Egypt, create an Islamic society, and establish an Islamic state.

In 1981, GI assassinated President Sadat. Immediately after, most leaders and many members were arrested, and for several years the organization was largely incapacitated. Some of the GI figures not directly implicated in violence were only sentenced to three years in prison. Once these members started being released in 1984, the group started rebuilding itself.

In 1987 the GI formed an armed wing, and over the subsequent years the group continued clashing with the police (Al-Sayyid 2003, 14). In 1989, GI tried to assassinate Interior Minister Zaki Badr, and in 1990 it tried to assassinate his replacement, Abdel-Halim Moussa, but it killed the Parliamentary speaker Rifaat Maghoub instead. By the early 1990s, the group shifted from targeting government officials to targeting civilians deemed as “apostates” (such as writer Farag Foda and Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz), and it eventually turned to large-scale attacks on tourists.

During this entire period, religious figures and government officials tried to hold several rounds of talks with the group. Initially, this was an attempt to put theological pressure on the GI and convince members that they were misguided in their religious justification for violence. Over time, however, the government also attempted to negotiate a ceasefire with group leaders. At times the group completely refused to engage, and at other times leaders were willing to entertain conditions for a ceasefire. In turn, the Ministry of Interior oscillated between being willing to make isolated concessions, and using a heavy hand to destroy the capacity of the organization. None of the attempts at talks resulted in a successful settlement. Instead, the

conflict escalated and started taking an increasing toll on the population. When the group eventually embarked on a nonviolent initiative in 1997, it was a unilateral decision that was not the immediate result of negotiations.

Before examining why early attempts at negotiations failed to deliver results and why the group nonetheless demobilized in the late 1990s, this section provides an overview of all attempts to engage with the GI. By paying close attention to the timing of these episodes, identifying who initiated and participated in the talks and what solutions were proposed, the section seeks to address one of the conditions of ripeness: willingness to engage and to look for a way out.

Let Us Tell You Why You're Wrong: Government Attempts at Engagement 1981-1986

After Sadat's assassination, religious militancy became an issue of great concern to the Egyptian public. The prevailing view was that the perpetrators of violence had misguided religious interpretations, so the Egyptian regime embarked on a campaign of "reorienting straying youth" and promoting moderate religious interpretations (Middle East Contemporary Survey 1982, 450). The budget of the Ministry of Religious Endowments was increased, and prominent religious figures from al-Azhar were designated to spearhead this widespread campaign, which included lectures, symposia, religious competitions, and an expansion of religious education and television programs (Middle East Contemporary Survey 1982, 450).

As part of this initiative, the government also started targeting Islamist activists in prison. There are reports that as early as 1982 members of Islamic groups who attended religious seminars in prisons and were willing to reform their "extremist concepts" were released (Middle

East Contemporary Survey 1982, 450). However, the first explicit account of an attempt to engage with GI prisoners is in 1984, before the first round of GI prisoner releases were due.

According to an autobiographical account of a GI member, this initiative involved al-Azhar sheikhs and the Minister of Religious Endowments, who were supervised by a representative of the national security intelligence (Farghali 2012, 94–95). The aim of these talks was not to build mutual trust or discuss strategies for transforming the conflict, but rather to convince the GI that its religious interpretations were misguided. The ultimate goal was to reach a ceasefire, but through theological persuasion rather than negotiations.

During this campaign, prisoners were driven to mosques in some of the GI strongholds, where they were met by the Minister of Religious Endowment and by Sheikh Muhammad Said Tantawi, a prominent Islamic scholar from al-Azhar, who would become the Grand Mufti of Egypt in October 1986. At first, GI members refused to engage, arguing that any negotiation should happen with the group's sheikhs (Farghali 2012, 96). When al-Azhar sheikhs attempted to meet with the GI spokesman, 'Ala Muhi al-Din, he refused and ordered members not to participate in such initiatives. However, some GI members explicitly disobeyed this order, and in an attempt to send a strong signal that cooperation would be rewarded, the government released them and proposed a third round of talks (Farghali 2012, 96–97).³

These talks, held in Minya, included several leaders of the GI, and were primarily centered on theological issues related to promoting virtue and forbidding vice (Farghali 2012, 99).⁴ These initial rounds of talks were neither confidence-building measures, nor “talks about

³ Two other important leaders of the organization were released in 1984, though it is unclear whether there was any connection between these releases and the attempt at negotiations: Safwat Abdelghani and the spiritual guide of the group, Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman.

⁴ GI had used the principle of *hisba* (*al-amr bi-l-ma'ruf wa-l-nahy 'an al-munkar*, commanding right and forbidding wrong) to justify both vigilante activities against “vice” and

talks,” and they did not set the stage for any actual negotiations or bargaining. Instead, there were primarily attempts by the Ministry of Interior to use state-sanctioned religious authorities to offer a counter-narrative.

Whereas these “talks” were the first time that GI leaders met with government officials, they did not result in any concessions. In fact, from 1984 to 1987 the GI started rebuilding itself, and some of the most prominent thinkers of the movement published and refined their ideological tenets, which stood in stark opposition to the views that the religious talks were attempting to impart to the GI constituency. For example, the group’s manifesto *The Charter of Islamic Action* started circulating in the beginning of 1984 (Stein 2011, 867). GI’s spiritual leader Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman also published *A Word of Truth* in 1985, in which he argued that it was the duty of all Muslims to rise up against the rulers who have abandoned Islamic law (Euben and Zaman 2009, 346, 348).

This initial attempt at “engagement” with the GI was not only unsuccessful, it might have even been counterproductive. From the perspective of negotiation theory, one can argue that they were counter-productive precisely because they were not aimed at increasing the readiness of actors to engage in negotiations; rather these early engagements were direct attacks on the GI worldview, in an attempt to delegitimize the group and counter its narrative. By 1987, however, there were indications that the government moved beyond religious conversations, and started considering limited negotiations with the GI in order to achieve a ceasefire.

attacks on Christians (Blaydes and Rubin 2008). Classical doctrine holds that political authorities have the prerogative to make things right with the hand, whereas scholars can do so with the tongue, and common people with the heart (Meijer 2009, 191). During the talks, religious scholars tried to convince GI leaders that political authorities were the only ones with the right to promote the good and forbid the wrong “by hand.”

An Attempt at Limited Negotiations: 1987-1993

Zaki Badr became Interior Minister in 1986, after a mutiny by security forces led to the resignation of Interior Minister Ahmad Rushdi. Badr had been previously the governor of Asyut, and he came into the new post with a strong conviction that the state should take a harsh and uncompromising approach towards Islamist militants. Over the years, his perspective on Islamist militancy became even more uncompromising. In a February 1989 interview he declared:

“It is a grave error to deal with these people through dialogue [...] I see them as mad dogs, with all due respect to dogs.[...] I say in a crystal-clear way that killing, mutilation, and the use of live ammunition is the method against those who use terrorism as their means. There is no other way.” (cited in Middle East Contemporary Survey 1989, 299)

In spite of this harsh stance, however, behind closed doors Badr was at times willing to engage with the leaders of the GI in an attempt to reach a ceasefire. There are reports that in April 1987, GI spiritual leader Sheikh Abdel Rahman met with the Interior Minister before the elections and agreed not to disturb the peace (American Embassy in Cairo 1989). When attacks against Christians escalated later that year, another attempt at mediation was initiated on September 16th in Asyut, involving both religious figures and security officers.

This time, several prominent GI leaders were present, including Talaat Yassine, who would become the leader of the armed wing. When the discussions turned to theology and centered around the rightful authority to use physical force to command the good and forbid the wrong, GI dismissed its interlocutors, on the grounds that security forces attacked GI members in front of a mosque (Farghali 2012, 100; Muhi al-Din 1987). Nonetheless, when the Minister

of Religious Endowments and the Mufti agreed to stop the violence by the security forces (Muhi al-Din 1987), GI leaders were willing to consider de-escalation. They made three demands: (1) the GI prisoners would be released, (2) the government would lift the ban on propaganda and rescind the order to close down GI mosques, and (3) the state would end torture and hostage taking (Blaydes and Rubin 2008, 466). Unlike previous discussions, which were focused on theological issues, this marked a significant episode of substantive bargaining. However, with the government refusing to meet any of the conditions, this round of talks ultimately did not result in any changes on the ground.

In January 1989, several prominent religious figures signed a statement that the Egyptian officials were not rejecting Islam or the judgment of Allah (Farghali 2012, 100). According to a GI leader, two months later, some of these sheikhs and the Minister of Religious Endowments attempted another round of discussions with GI, under the supervision of security officers and of the Interior Minister (Rushdi 2001). The lawyer representing the GI recalls that all the state-owned newspapers and TV stations were present, but they did not report on these meetings. Since the talks did not change the stance of GI leaders, the Interior Minister ordered that such dialogue should not be held again, unless it would convince the prisoners that they were wrong (al-Zayyāt 2004, 87).

In March 1990, however, Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman met with the Interior Minister again, and this was perhaps the most explicit set of negotiations between the group and the government up to that point, resulting in short-term concessions by both parties. In January 1990, Zaki Badr was replaced by Abdul Halim Moussa, who had been governor of Asyut. Unlike Badr, who in public never wavered on the question of confronting violent Islamists with

an iron fist, Moussa sent more mixed signals about the willingness to engage in talks or negotiations (Khafājī 1993, 72–74).

In a June 1990 interview, Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman revealed that the talks at the Ministry of Interior revolved around the ability to undertake *da'wa*, the status of mosques, the treatment of prisoners and the use of torture (*Al-Murabitun* 1990). When the emir asked that political prisoners be treated under criminal law, the Minister of Interior claimed that he had brought up this issue with President Mubarak. When Abdel Rahman brought up the prevalence of arbitrary arrests without warrants, however, the Minister denied the existence of such practices. On the question of being able to use the mosques for *da'wa* and preaching, the Minister argued that the group was free to do so as long as it did not mention an Islamic Caliphate or Islamic state (*Al-Murabitun* 1990).

The March 1990 negotiations had some immediate results. GI regained control over a mosque, and the right to lead Friday prayers and some Monday seminars. In exchange, the group accepted to reduce its public activities (al-Berry 2001, 134). Yet this truce was short-lived. By April security forces started clashing with the group in Upper Egypt, and in May the Interior Minister once again declared that “we do not hold dialogues, and security is security” (cited in Middle East Contemporary Survey 1990, 320). Yet later Moussa also unsuccessfully tried to negotiate with GI leader Abbud Zomor, who was still in prison (Fawzī 1995, 66–67).

The most significant attempt at negotiations came in 1993. The government formed a committee for mediation, embarking on the most in-depth attempt at reaching a settlement with the GI. The committee was led by Skeikh al-Sha'rawi, and also included other prominent religious figures, moderate Islamists, and members of the Muslim Brotherhood (Ashour 2015, 177). Kamal Janzuri, who at the time was Deputy Prime Minister, writes in his autobiography

that the Minister of Interior believed that some reconciliation could reduce the violence, and that he had the support of the Prime Minister to engage in these negotiations (Janzūrī 2014). On the GI side, this was the most significant engagement to date of its most prominent leaders and thinkers (al-Zayyāt 2005).⁵

The government called on the GI to stop its violence. In return, the GI demanded that the government stop the mass arrests of GI members and the torture of prisoners, release fifty percent of those arrested under emergency law, transfer cases from military courts to civilian courts, and allow the group to continue pursuing *da'wa* without government interference, and without the supervision of the Ministry of Religious Endowments (Ḥammūdah 2016, Fawzī 1995).

This time the media publicized GI's demands (Khafājī 1993, 154). Not only did the public become aware that the government had been negotiating with the GI, but this publicity came in the midst of an outbursts of conspiracy theories in the media about the link between the GI and the United States. This led to a harsh public outcry, especially from the secular and communist circles, who accused the government for even considering negotiating with terrorists. The prospects of settlement vanished, and the Interior Minister was dismissed. This was the last attempt at negotiation that was initiated by the government.

This chronological overview of attempts to engage the GI reveals that group leaders have indeed displayed ideological rigidity, but they have also shown a willingness to negotiate ceasefires in 1987, 1989, 1990 and 1993. In order to assess whether these were ripe moments

⁵ In addition to the GI leaders, this initiative also included leaders from the Egyptian Islamic Jihad and from the Vanguard of Conquest.

for negotiations, the next section seeks to evaluate whether there was ever a mutually hurting stalemate.

Violence, Repression and Mutually Hurting Stalemates

In order to estimate whether the conflict between the GI and the government ever reached a point of mutually hurting stalemate, this section discusses the level of violence against the regime, and the pressure placed on the GI by arrests, police repression and counterterrorism tactics. In doing so, there are of course some challenges.

First, many attacks go unclaimed or even unreported, so in reality the level of violence and the involvement of GI members in armed clashes is most likely higher than is reflected in the databases I rely on. Additionally, governments can reach a hurting stalemate due to other challenges to their legitimacy, and not just the costs imposed by the party with which it might consider negotiating. For instance, in 1986 there was a large-scale mutiny of about 17,000 members of the security forces, which shook the country and led to the resignation of the Interior Minister (Middle East Contemporary Survey 1986, 266-267). Such an incident is not captured by either conflict databases, and does not entail large-scale armed attacks, yet it posed a significant challenge to the legitimacy of the government.

Second, when it comes to government repression of the GI it is difficult to obtain reliable numbers for the entire period under consideration. Amnesty reports that might contain details on arrests and conditions in prison are embargoed for another fifty years, and existing information about arrests rarely discerns between the GI and other “Islamic extremists.” In order to obtain as accurate of an estimate of arrests as possible, I draw on a variety of sources, including State Department cables, Human Rights Watch reports, secondary literature, and reports included in various volumes of the Middle East Contemporary Survey. I separate reports

of arrests aimed at workers or other specific but non-Islamist audiences, and include the numbers that most accurately capture the estimated number of Islamists arrested, with the caveat that non-GI activists were also branded as extremists at times. Whereas this gives us an estimate of pressure placed on GI, I recognize that it is still an incomplete account.

Last but not least, aside from acknowledging the inherently limited nature of the data, it is also very difficult to accurately assess when pressure becomes a “hurting stalemate,” especially since the perception of the pressure is so important. Here, interviews with the leaders of the movement can offer important insights, even though post-hoc evaluations have their limitations too.

With these caveats in mind, Figure 2 presents the number of violent incidents in Egypt between 1981 and 1997, which is the period when GI was actively involved in a conflict with the state. The graph differentiates between incidents undertaken by GI and by other groups.

- INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE -

Figure 2 shows that GI violence only really took off in the 1990s, at the tail end of an escalating wave of violence undertaken by other groups. Yet, this does not fully capture all violence associated with GI members, or fully capture the symbolic value of the GI violence. For instance, former members report that when the group started reorganizing in 1984, clashes between members and police officers started spreading (al-Berry 2001, 172). In 1985, GI also started launching attacks on Copts in Upper Egypt, especially in Minya and Asyut (al-Berry 2001, 172). In 1988, clashes with the police spread to Cairo, leading to clashes at Ayn Shams mosques (American Embassy in Cairo 1988b), and driving the group to declare several areas in Cairo free zones (al-Berry 2001, 172). Similarly, whereas the group had few attacks in 1989

and 1990, they were perhaps the highest profile attacks since the assassination of President Sadat, as they included assassination attempts on two consecutive Interior Ministers.

In terms of the pressure on the regime, these violent episodes in the 1980s were important, but none of them posed a strong enough crisis to constitute a hurting stalemate for the regime. To the extent that the Ministry of Interior resorted to religious figures to engage the GI in talks, this was not out of a perception that the status quo was unsustainable, but rather out of a desire to combine the heavy handed approach aimed at incapacitating the organization with a propaganda campaign aimed at undermining the group's ideological tenets.

1992 was the first year when violence drastically increased, even though most of it was not undertaken by the GI. This is also the first year that GI started targeting civilians (aside from the attacks on Copts), assassinating secularist writer Farag Foda, and explicitly started targeting the tourism industry. In September, the GI started issuing statements cautioning foreign tourists not to visit Egypt. The group warned that it would attack tourists until the government would release detained and imprisoned members, end the torture of detainees and stop detaining the relatives of members (Amnesty International 1998, 4). Soon after these threats, the GI delivered on its message, attacking a Nile cruise boat on October 1st, and attacking a minibus of tourists near Daryut on October 21st (Amnesty International 1998, 4).

One could make the case that the exponential expansion in the amount and scope of violence in 1992 posed enough pressure on the regime to constitute a hurting stalemate, especially as the conflict started taking a toll on the crucial tourism industry. Janzuri suggests that the Minister of Interior sought some reconciliation by 1993 in order to restore political and economic stability and attract investments and tourists again (Janzūrī 2014, 76–77). By the beginning of 1993, the Egyptian government also initiated a series of meetings and talks with

American diplomats and F.B.I. agents in order to improve cooperation in the fight against terrorism. Whereas these meetings reportedly warned the U.S. about possible terrorist attacks on American soil,⁶ the main topic of discussion was the threat posed by Islamic militants within Egypt (Jehl 1993). This suggests that the Egyptian government certainly perceived a significant enough pressure from terrorist attacks to seek a change in the status quo. However, for Mubarak this perceived need to address the growing levels of violence did not preclude increased military pressure on the group.

Since Sadat's assassination, the government employed a heavy hand towards the GI and all other radical elements within the country, though with varying levels of intensity. Between 1981 and 1984, the GI was largely incapacitated, with most of its members in prison. In 1984, some of its members started being released, and pressure on the group did not start rising again until 1986, after the GI began launching attacks on Copts in Upper Egypt. In response, the government increased arrests, closed down mosques affiliated with the group, forbade lectures, and interfered in student union elections to undermine the Islamists (Al-Awadi 2004).

It is nearly impossible to have definitive numbers of GI arrests for the entire period, but piecing together details from Human Rights Watch reports, State Department cables, Middle East Contemporary Survey reports and the secondary literature, Figure 3 presents the estimates for the number of Islamists and "religious extremists" arrests and detained between 1986 and 1994, which is the period during which the government showed some willingness to engage in talks.

- INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE -

⁶New York Times reports that the Egyptian authorities issued repeated warnings to American authorities in the months preceding the February 1993 attacks on the World Trade Center.

A group leader remembers the period between 1986 and 1989 as a time of “very aggressive repression” and a “turning point” for GI (Anonymous 2012). In the summer of 1987 some three thousand Islamists (both GI and Muslim Brotherhood) were arrested (Blaydes and Rubin 2008, 466). Yet, this was not perceived as a stalemate, but rather as an aggression that only served to inspire a desire for revenge. In August 1988, the group explicitly warned the Interior Minister against using repressive measures, threatening to escalate tensions nationwide otherwise (American Embassy in Cairo 1988a).

The turning point in the relationship between the regime and the group came in 1990, when the government assassinated GI spokesperson, ‘Ala Muhi al-Din. Whereas Figure 3 shows that the most devastating wave of arrests came in 1991, which some considered the beginning of an open war between the GI and the government (al-Berry 2001, 173), the assassination of Muhi al-Din was a critical juncture for the group. Al-Berry argues that the assassination was a clear message sent by the regime that it intended to eradicate the GI in all its forms (al-Berry 2001, 132). Leaders of the group argue that at this point they saw the pressure reaching a climax, and the leadership faced with two options: respond in order to try to deter the government from violence, or do nothing, and let the government undertake even more killings (Anonymous 2012). The group chose the former, attempting to assassinate the Interior Minister, and in the subsequent year embarking on an extensive campaign of violence.

This marked a point of no return in terms of the conflict between the GI and the government, after which the pressure on the group steadily increased, eventually completely incapacitating the organization. This pressure came in multiple forms. In 1991, the government allegedly arrested 25,000 GI members (al-Berry 2001, 173), and in 1993 it is reported to have arrested over 17,000 extremists (Zahi 1995). In 1992 the government also undertook a brutal

five week raid on the Imbaba district in Cairo, that amounted to a small urban counter-insurgency campaign that resulted in indiscriminate violence (Abdo 2002, 20–23). In October 1992, President Mubarak started issuing special decrees referring Islamists to be tried by military courts (Amnesty International 1998, 3). In February 1993 the Supreme Court upheld the government’s authority to try extremists in military courts, and a State Department cable suggests that the government “was seeking not only more expeditious trials, but also a clear warning to the Islamic opposition of the harshness of military sentences” (American Embassy in Cairo 1993a). In a 2004 interview, GI leader Karam Zohdy stated that the early 1990s represented a “deeply dark and dispirited period” in which the group “almost did not see the faintest bit of hope” in the confrontation with the government, until the point was reached in 1993 where they “hurried to immediately send for wise men, scholars and thinkers” (Blaydes 2004b, 5). By 1997, when the group announced the nonviolent initiative, the group was completely crushed, incapable of conducting any activities, and with 20,000 members in prisons (Anonymous 2012).

Based on these episodes of violence and repression, Table 1 presents how the cost of the conflict and the willingness to engage lined up between 1981 and 1997.

- INSERT TABLE 1 HERE -

Talks were initiated after the stakes were raised for both sides, yet until the early 1990s it is difficult to argue that there was a mutually hurting stalemate. Furthermore, during these early stages, the GI was only solidifying its identity and ideology, therefore only becoming more rigid and uncompromising from the confrontation with the state. The initial exposure to the moderate views of the religious scholars did not soften their stance, but rather the uncompromising stance of the state and the increasing levels of repression that accompanied these talks only empowered the GI.

To the extent that the two sides ever perceived a mutually hurting stalemate, this would have been between 1992 and 1993. From the perspective of ripeness, 1993 was perhaps the best time to engage in negotiations and seek to settle the conflict, because for both sides the stakes of the conflict were raised exponentially, yet both sides signaled the willingness to engage and seek a solution. Compared to previous attempts at negotiations, the 1993 talks were indeed the most serious attempt to come to an agreement from both sides: the willingness to engage came from the high echelons of the government, and the GI had some of its most important leaders and thinkers present. The pressure was high enough on both sides that one could argue this was the closest that the two parties have come to a mutually hurting stalemate up to that point. Yet the negotiations ultimately failed. To understand why this happened, the next section examines this moment more closely.

1993: Ripe Moment but Failed Negotiations

Looking back at the talks of 1993, both sides blame the media and the public for the failure of negotiations. Janzuri suggests that when the information about the negotiations got out, Mubarak rejected the initiative and dismissed the Interior Minister in order not to give the impression that the state was weak (Janzūrī 2014, 76–77). On the GI side, Karam Zohdy argues that “some individuals with personal interests entered into things and blew up the issue in the media and the intervention was lost as a result of the inappropriate media frenzy” (Blaydes 2004a, 24). Other scholars point out that in addition to the lack of consensus around negotiations in society, the media and the regime, the GI leadership was also not united in the call for the cessation of violence, and al-Azhar figures were not seen as legitimate by the Gama’a (Harrigan and El-Said 2013, 85–86).

These points reinforce the argument put forth in this article, which suggests that ripeness concerns more than just the parties willing to come to the bargaining table. For negotiations to succeed, it is also necessary to have elites, organizational leaders and the public coalesce around support for negotiations. Whereas the classic ripeness argument would suggest that the conditions of 1993 were perhaps best suited for negotiations, these talks ultimately failed because the public was not properly prepared, and some of the prominent decision-makers in Egypt were divided on the issue. Whereas the Interior Minister might have been indeed committed to negotiations, the talks came in the midst of a series of reports that GI members secretly met with American diplomats, leading to an outpour of conspiracy theories that blamed the U.S. and Israel for harboring and supporting terrorists in order to undermine the country. In response, GI argued that this was a propaganda campaign promoted by the U.S. to justify Egyptian military trials, and Skeikh Omar Abdel Rahman wrote an extensive letter from exile in the U.S. calling on Egyptians to oppose Mubarak's "despotic regime," and all those who fight in the cause of the United States (American Embassy in Cairo 1993d, 1993b). For Mubarak and the Prime Minister, such conspiracy theories could have significantly damaged their reputation, so perhaps it is no coincidence that the Interior Minister was dismissed the day after the American Embassy in Cairo issued an official statement that denounced the press reports and reaffirmed the opposition to terrorism (American Embassy in Cairo 1993c).

The fate of the previous two Interior Ministers shows that the fear of public backlash was a powerful motivation for the government. Mubarak was deeply concerned about how the public perceived the regime, and worried that disillusionment on security issues could spill over into a larger challenge to the legitimacy of the government. In 1986, for instance, in response to a mutiny from the security forces, Mubarak and the Defense Minister responded with

overwhelming use of force, but also forced the Interior Minister to resign, and Mubarak ultimately gained the support of all party leaders (Middle East Contemporary Survey 1986, 267). In 1990, when Interior Minister Zaki Badr expressed vulgar criticism of government officials and public figures, there was a public outcry, with lawyers and university staff threatening to strike, and three days later Mubarak dismissed him, and replaced him with Abdul Halim Moussa (Middle East Contemporary Survey 1990, 320). What these examples underline is that even in non-democratic regimes public opinion can be a powerful force, as ruling elites seek to maintain a semblance of legitimacy and responsiveness to the citizens.

The failure of the 1993 negotiations also reveal a potentially dark side of “ripeness,” especially in conflicts where a radical Islamist group does not represent large segments of the population: by the time the government and the group have reached a mutually hurting stalemate, the public has been dragged into a war with such high audience costs, that it is no longer acceptant of a settlement. The in-group/out-group dynamics are hardened, and the Islamic group can be seen as an enemy of the public, a terrorist “other” that needs to be eliminated, rather than accommodated. In the Egyptian case, this dynamic was exacerbated by the state-led propaganda campaign against militants, which included a daily broadcast called “No to terrorism” (Hedges 1993).

From the very beginning, neither GI nor the government embarked on only one strategy. Instead, attempts at engagement were accompanied by violent campaigns on both sides. From the perspective of ripeness theory, one could understand repressive measures by the regime as an attempt to push the group towards a hurting stalemate, in order to force it to offer more meaningful concessions. Yet such measures reinforced a sense of mistrust and betrayal within the GI, only strengthening the desire for revenge, and driving the group to resort to violence as

an attempt at deterrence. In 1988, the GI explicitly threatened to escalate violence if the regime did not reduce repression. In 1990, the group perceived a violent campaign as the only way to try to deter the government from resorting to extrajudicial killings and to abuses against their family members. In 1992, the GI embarked on attacks against tourists after the regime refused to release detainees and end torture in prisons.

Whereas the growing cycle of violence led to a mutually hurting stalemate that eventually drove both sides to a last attempt at engagement in 1993, the violence also took a heavy toll on the population, which found itself caught between a rock and a hard place, and grew increasingly antagonistic towards *both* the regime and the GI. Thus, when talks of negotiations and of GI demands were made public, there was a public outcry, especially from leftist and secularist circles. For the regime, there were enough other social, economic and political grievances within the population that it could not risk fully alienating these constituencies.

Once it became clear that negotiations were no longer an option, the government continued its war against the GI. Weakened and alienated from the public, both leaders and cadres within the GI started becoming disillusioned with their cause. It is in this context of public isolation and disillusionment that the leaders were finally willing to reconsider their mission, and they embarked on a unilateral and unconditional path towards ideological revisions in 1997.

Demobilizaion in the Absence of Negotiations: The 1997 Nonviolence Initiative

During one of the trials in the summer of 1997, a leader of the GI announced a nonviolent initiative, calling for the unconditional cessation of violence inside and outside the country. This announcement was supported by six of the historic leaders of the organization. The declaration

did not lead to an immediate end to violence, and it caused some divisions within the leadership. Rifa'i Taha, was one of the most outspoken opponents of the Nonviolence Initiative, and many consider that the Luxor attack of November 1997 was coordinated by him as a response to the ceasefire initiative (Dawoud 2001). Over the subsequent years, however, the most radical elements left the group, and by 1999 all elements of the GI leadership inside and outside the country came to support disengagement from violence.

The driving force behind this initiative was the sense of disillusionment with the cause that was pervasive within the organization (Matesan 2018). The public turned decisively against the GI, and the organization as a whole was largely incapacitated. In this sink or swim scenario, leaders had to rethink their approach. In this context, they finally became open to learning and to new theological interpretations, as this became one of the most feasible and coherent exit options from the losing battle against the state.

The history of discussions with religious figures did pave the way for the subsequent collaboration between GI leaders and religious figures, which led to the publication of multiple volumes of ideological revisions. From the perspective of negotiations, however, these early talks failed to bring about any significant changes, primarily because they were not envisioned as setting the groundwork for real bargaining.

One of the reasons why the nonviolent initiative came to be accepted by the movement as a whole and why the leaders were able to successfully implement this transformation of the organization was the ability of the leaders to hold discussions and debates with members inside the prisons. After 2001, the historic leaders started publishing ideological revisions in collaboration with al-Azhar sheikhs, and in 2002 they embarked on a ten month tour of all known detention centers, discussing these revisions with their members (Ashour 2015, 172).

Both scholars and the leaders of the organizations themselves recognize that these tours, and the strong hierarchical structure and obedience to the leaders were critical in transforming the organization, and effectively implementing the nonviolent initiative.

Re-evaluating Ripeness: Concluding Remarks

Armed Islamist groups are often perceived as difficult partners for negotiations because of their ideological tenets. The evolution of al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya in Egypt, however, suggests that even the most intransigent groups may be willing to come to the negotiation table when they perceive a hurting stalemate. To be sure, the extent to which the GI experience is generalizable to other Islamist groups remains to be tested, and not all armed Islamist groups may respond to a hurting stalemate in the same way as the Egyptian group did. But in this particular case, several significant attempts at negotiation failed mainly due to the government's refusal to meet basic, non-ideological demands, such as ending the use of military tribunals and stopping the torture of prisoners. When both sides were finally ready to make concessions in 1993, the negotiations broke down because of elite divisions and public outcry at the thought of negotiating with terrorists.

The failed attempts at negotiation with the GI raise a warning flag about the conditions that lead to a ripe moment, and in particular about the public cost of the mutually hurting stalemate. Whereas pressure on non-state actors might drive them towards a hurting stalemate, repressive measures and indiscriminate responses can escalate the amount and scope of violence, and lead to a growing toll on the population at large. Such high audience cost can drive the disillusioned public to reject any negotiations or concessions, making it much more difficult to reach a settlement. This can be a particularly acute problem if the government

engages in a propaganda war against the terrorist group that further demonizes the organization, rather than preparing the general public for conciliatory gestures and negotiations.

This suggests that ripe moments can lead to successful negotiations if all relevant constituencies have been prepared for the negotiation process, and there is broad-based support for talks not only among elites and organizational leaders, but also within the population at large. However, negotiations can fail even when there is a mutually hurting stalemate and a willingness to engage from all parties in the conflict, if the elites are not unified around reconciliation, the rebel groups are not cohesive, or the public is opposed to any reconciliatory gestures towards the rebel group.

This being said, the history of the GI also shows that disengagement from violence can occur in the absence of negotiations. One might ask then, why we should focus on negotiations in the first place, if violence can ultimately also subside in their absence. On this question, the evolution of the GI is also telling, as it reveals that successful negotiations could have potentially prevented some of the most brutal acts of violence. In a 2004 interview, GI ideologue Nageh Ibrahim argued that “If the intervention of 1993 had succeeded, then there would not have been this bloodshed” (Blaydes 2004a, 24). As the empirical analysis has shown, regardless of how ideologically inflexible the group was, its demands during talks were rather modest and pragmatic, and the failure of the state to budge on these demands directly led to an increase in both the scale and the scope of violence. Once it became clear that negotiations were no longer an option, the group used large scale terrorist attacks to punish the state, and it embarked on its most intensive violent campaign since its founding. The fact that the state eventually incapacitated the group and prompted the leaders to rethink their strategy does not take away

from the fact that much of the bloodshed could have been prevented if the talks had been successful.

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