

## Institutionalizing Thuggery: Egypt's Parallel Violence Since 2013



Since July 2013, Egypt has witnessed a sharp rise in the influence of “thug” groups in public life, particularly in the streets and on university campuses. These networks, initially loosely organized and operating under the patronage of various power centers—including state security agencies and affiliated businessmen—have gradually evolved into more structured entities with functional titles.

How did the regime weaponize these groups to suppress dissent, especially in universities and public squares? How were they deployed during parliamentary and presidential elections? And how did their increasing organization impact efforts to subdue Egyptian society?

### Universities and Public Squares During Elections

In Cairo and across the country, the years following 2013 were marked by organized assaults on student-led demonstrations opposing the new regime. Security forces at several universities reportedly unleashed “civilians,” acting under the supervision of Interior Ministry officers, to attack protestors.

Eventually, security forces themselves began storming campuses, violently

dispersing protests and leading to hundreds of arrests and multiple injuries and deaths. In one tragic incident in October 2014, a student was shot dead by police at the Faculty of Engineering at Alexandria University.

In public squares, these groups emerged as parallel forces directed by official security agencies to suppress protests against the new regime. Dozens of masked young men known as “thugs” infiltrated peaceful protests to sow chaos and derail demonstrations using violence.

This became especially evident during and after the dispersals of the Rabaa and Nahda sit-ins, when these groups spread across Egypt, attacking and torching businesses affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood and assaulting anyone suspected of opposing the dispersals or the emerging authoritarian order.

A Human Rights Watch report noted that Egyptian security forces transported these armed groups in private buses to break up peaceful demonstrations, later rewarding them with free meat and immunity from prosecution.

These thug networks were also deployed during presidential and parliamentary elections. In the 2023 presidential race, opposition candidate Ahmed Tantawy announced his withdrawal, citing targeted harassment by the regime and its thugs. His supporters were reportedly blocked from issuing the power-of-attorney documents required for his nomination.

Several media and human rights organizations documented campaigns led by the National Security Agency, with the backing of pro-regime political parties, using large groups of outlaws to coerce citizens into surrendering their national ID cards for use in falsified nominations. These events marked the beginning of an organized, state-sanctioned system of violence—particularly visible during key political junctures such as elections.

### Networks and Their Relationship with Security Agencies

It is nearly impossible to separate these groups from the broader state security apparatus, particularly the National Security Agency, the Criminal Investigations Department, and General Intelligence. They are often viewed as an unofficial extension of state security.

In fact, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi himself once publicly boasted about the state's ability to unleash thugs to destroy Egypt, underscoring his—and his security agencies'—deep involvement in managing and exploiting these networks for authoritarian control.

Despite an August 2013 Interior Ministry announcement banning the so-called “popular committees,” the move proved largely symbolic. The state continued to rely on similar actors under new names and institutional covers.

Major private security companies—such as Falcon were formed under the supervision of state agencies. In 2014, Falcon even released a promotional video showcasing a “rapid support and intervention unit” operating in tandem with police to secure universities and public spaces.

Falcon later formally assumed responsibility for security at dozens of universities and major public events, effectively integrating a parallel security force into the official apparatus.

Over time, these networks evolved from informal gangs led by former convicts into structured entities backed by influential businessmen. One of the most prominent figures is Sabri Nakhnoux, infamously dubbed the “President of the Republic of Thuggery” in Egypt. Nakhnoux took over the Falcon security group, appearing in photos on social media chairing its board meetings.

Falcon has since become one of Egypt's largest security firms, commanding nearly 62% of the market even before Nakhnoux's takeover.

Its funding reportedly stems from business elites close to the regime, who provide both economic and political cover. Notably, Nakhnoux had previously been convicted in several thuggery-related cases before receiving a presidential pardon directly from Sisi in mid-2018.

Following his release, observers questioned whether he had been tapped by the state to head a new empire of organized violence an empire with deep historical roots predating the 2011 revolution.

### The Impact of Thuggery on the Public Sphere

This strategic maneuvering by the regime has led to the gradual erosion of Egypt's public sphere. These tactics succeeded in silencing dissent without the need for overt state violence eschewing uniformed forces in favor of plausibly deniable actors. But the cost has been high.

The state has forfeited its claim to a monopoly on security by outsourcing enforcement to lawless groups, whose actions cannot be fully controlled. This has endangered ordinary citizens, making journalistic activity or protest inherently risky.

High-profile attacks on individuals like human rights lawyer Gamal Eid and political activist Ahmed Douma are emblematic of this threat.

These networks have played a critical role in enabling the regime to crush grassroots opposition—particularly Islamist movements—after 2013. The division of labor between the regime and the thugs appears increasingly sophisticated: while police have withdrawn somewhat from direct violence, especially on campuses, these semi-armed groups now perform the state's “dirty work.”

Yet the long-term dependence on such networks may pose a grave risk. Their loyalty is conditional, not institutional. The security they offer is not grounded in law, but in allegiance. And while this policy may yield short-term stability, it creates the specter of uncontrolled violence. As thugs gain power, the state's ability to rein them in diminishes.

This dynamic threatens to unravel Egypt's social fabric, stifling civic activism and prompting urgent questions about how to achieve real stability and public trust without perpetuating a cycle of lawless violence.

In the end, by organizing, funding, and jointly administering thug networks with business elites and security officials, the regime has made them a core instrument in suppressing public opposition—especially during elections and referendums. Egypt's security apparatus, and the political authoritarianism it underpins, understands that these networks are essential to its dominance over society.

Given the scale of Egypt's population, no security agency alone can maintain control—especially in the event of mass unrest, as seen during the January 28, 2011 “Friday of Rage,” when police forces collapsed under the weight of public fury.

The regime's response has been to construct a civilian “security” apparatus rooted in thug networks—an indispensable part of its strategy for repression, domination, and control in a country simmering with poverty and rage.