

## Radicalisation and Resilience Case Study

# Egypt

Associated Researchers

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This case study is part of a series of in-depth reports on religiously motivated violent radicalisation - and resilience to it - in 12 countries. The series examines periods in which religious radicalisation and violence has escalated and analyses relevant policy and political discourses surrounding them. While seeking to identify factors that drove radicalisation and violence in each country, the case studies also critically assess programmes of prevention and resilience-building, identifying good practices. This series was produced by GREASE, an EU-funded research project investigating religious diversity, secularism and religiously inspired radicalisation.

### **Countries covered in this series:**

Australia, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Egypt, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Morocco, Russia, Tunisia and the United Kingdom.

<http://grease.eui.eu>



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**The EU-Funded GREASE project looks to Africa for insights on governing religious diversity and preventing radicalisation.**

Involving researchers from Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Oceania, GREASE is investigating how religious diversity is governed in over 20 countries. Our work focuses on comparing norms, laws and practices that may (or may not) prove useful in preventing religious radicalisation. Our research also sheds light on how different societies cope with the challenge of integrating religious minorities and migrants. The aim is to deepen our understanding of how religious diversity can be governed successfully, with an emphasis on countering radicalisation trends.

While exploring religious governance models in other parts of the world, GREASE also attempts to unravel the European paradox of religious radicalisation despite growing secularisation. We consider the claim that migrant integration in Europe has failed because second generation youth have become marginalised and radicalised, with some turning to jihadist terrorism networks. The researchers aim to deliver innovative academic thinking on secularisation and radicalisation while offering insights for governance of religious diversity.

The project is being coordinated by Professor Anna Triandafyllidou from The European University Institute (EUI) in Italy. Other consortium members include Professor Tariq Modood from The University of Bristol (UK); Dr. H. A. Hellyer from the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) (UK); Dr. Mila Mancheva from The Centre for the Study of Democracy (Bulgaria); Dr. Egdunas Raciunas from Vytautas Magnus University (Lithuania); Mr. Terry Martin from the research communications agency SPIA (Germany); Professor Mehdi Lahlou from Mohammed V University of Rabat (Morocco); Professor Haldun Gulalp of The Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (Turkey); Professor Pradana Boy of Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang (Indonesia); Professor Zawawi Ibrahim of The Strategic Information and Research Development Centre (Malaysia); Professor Gurpreet Mahajan of Jawaharlal Nehru University (India); and Professor Michele Grossman of Deakin University (Melbourne, Australia). GREASE is scheduled for completion in 2022.

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GREASE - Radicalisation, Secularism and the Governance of Religion: Bringing Together European and Asian Perspectives

**Table of Contents**

*ACKNOWLEDGEMENT*..... 4

**INTRODUCTION** ..... 4

*METHODOLOGY* ..... 4

*CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF RADICALISATION*..... 5

**WITHIN STATE INSTITUTIONS** ..... 5

**WITHIN CIVIL SOCIETY** ..... 7

*COUNTRY BACKGROUND*..... 8

*DRIVERS OF RELIGIOUSLY-INSPIRED RADICALISATION AND ASSESSMENT*..... 9

*THE STATE’S APPROACH; AND NON-STATE, SOCIETAL LED APPROACHES*..... 10

**PROSECUTIONS, TRIALS AND SECURITY OPERATIONS**..... 11

**LAWS AND DECREES**..... 12

**COORDINATION WITH REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL ALLIES** ..... 15

**DEVELOPMENT, SOCIAL OUTREACH AND RELIGIOUS RE-EDUCATION PROGRAMMES** ..... 15

**REHABILITATION PROGRAMMES IN PRISONS** ..... 17

*CRISIS CASE STUDY*..... 18

**ATTACK ON THE SUFI AL-RAWDA MOSQUE IN BIR AL-ABED TOWN, NORTH SINAI, ON 24 NOVEMBER 2017** ..... 18

*BEST PRACTICES*..... 21

**BEIT AL-ALIH (THE FAMILY HOUSE) INITIATIVE** ..... 22

**THE "SCHOOL OF KNOWLEDGE" INITIATIVE** ..... 23

**DAR AL-IFTA’S MONITORING OBSERVATORY** ..... 23

**AL-AZHAR’S COMMUNAL MEETINGS**..... 23

*CONCLUSION*..... 24

*REFERENCES*..... 26

## Acknowledgement

This chapter relied substantially on external researchers whose work was trusted by RUSI, but who opted to remain anonymous.

## Introduction

The main purpose and objective of this case study is to study, in depth, different periods in which religiously inspired radicalisation has escalated – specifically, in the Arab Republic of Egypt. Such religiously-inspired radicalisation might be religiously-attributed – i.e., radical individuals or groups whose targets are chosen because of the religion of those targets – or inspired, in which case the radical actor claims to be motivated by their own religion. Furthermore, the paper seeks to analyse relevant policy, political discourses, and measures taken in response to such radicalisation.

The cause of religiously inspired radicalisation in Egypt is a deeply complex and varied issue. Arguably, it's an issue that has a pedigree of several decades, and no less today. Indeed, Egypt has been the target of different types of religiously-inspired radicalisations in the post-colonial era a number of times, and from different quarters. In the context of national security and public peace, both the state and civil society agree that only one kind of religiously inspired radicalisation poses a serious threat to Egypt. That kind of radicalisation, according to this reading, is extremist Islamism, as it is the most prevalent, and the only one that is often translated into acts of both organised and spontaneous violence<sup>1</sup>. At the same time, there are significant differences of opinion as to *what* such radicalisation is in reality.

As is in many developing countries struggling with religiously inspired radicalisation often begins by attempting to convince would-be recruits<sup>2</sup> that Islam is under a concerted attack by Western powers, aided by non-Muslim minorities in their countries. As such, these Muslims, preyed upon by recruiters, will suffer eternally if they do not do everything in their power to save it by eliminating, or otherwise neutralizing, their enemies through any means necessary, including force. In recent years, such religiously inspired radicalisation in Egypt has created more violence than silent or passive hostility. That is linked to the overthrow of Morsi and the ending of the 2011-2013 democratic experiment, following widespread protests<sup>3</sup>. Nevertheless, it is important not to reduce the development of radicalisation simply to the military's overthrow of the elected president, as radicalisation existed prior to it – the dynamic of how radicalisation took place and developed is more complex than a single variable. These developments have, nevertheless, thrust the state's views and attitudes towards the issue into the international spotlight.

## Methodology

Data for this report come from interviews with relevant stakeholders in Egypt and desk research. The research relied substantially on external researchers whose work was trusted by RUSI, but who opted to remain anonymous. We respect their choice, and as

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<sup>1</sup> Phone interviews with Azhari clerics, Christian priests and security officials who declined to be named.

<sup>2</sup> Interviews with Azhari clerics and activists who declined to be named.

<sup>3</sup> "Egypt's Mohammed Morsi: A turbulent presidency cut short," BBC. June 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-18371427>

such, this report is not given a single authorship. We conducted interviews with policymakers, practitioners, faith leaders, members of CSOs, security sector specialists, and researchers. For the purposes of confidentiality, we have been very careful about assigning identities to interviews.

## Conceptualisations of radicalisation

For the purposes of this section, ‘conceptualisations of radicalisation’ refers to how one intellectually theorises what radicalisation means and how it comes about. In this regard, no normative conceptualisation is provided – rather, the point of this section is to identify how the state and non-state actors in Egypt *do* conceptualise radicalisation. For more on a normative approach to conceptualisation religiously inspired radicalisation, particularly in relation to a Muslim context, GREASE has published a conceptual framework for exploring the relationship between radicalisation, religion and violence elsewhere<sup>4</sup>.

### Within state institutions

Egypt’s current president, Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi, often describes radicalism as the biggest challenge facing the country today. Prominent members of Egypt’s religious minorities agree, calling it an existential threat to the sliver of diversity left in the country.<sup>5</sup> The state’s understanding of religiously inspired radicalisation in the country was formulated by its security agencies and el-Sisi, who used to head the country’s military intelligence apparatus prior to the 2011 uprising<sup>6</sup>.

In different fora, privately<sup>7</sup> and publicly, Egyptian security officials have stated they view religiously inspired radicalisation in the country as at least partially the product of a Western conspiracy against them and that it can only be eradicated with force<sup>8</sup>. In police and military academies across the country, officers are told that extremist Egyptian Islamists are impoverished and morally bankrupt individuals paid or manipulated by foreign governments to bring down their government. They are firmly and vocally opposed to viewing radicalisation as a multidimensional socio-economic and political issue, and believe that all resources should be dedicated to “practical solutions” such as surveillance equipment, interrogations, arrests and prosecutions rather than academic research. State and pro-government media have been broadcasting messages to this effect for years.

The state is thus, effectively, laser-focused on terrorism and violent forms of religiously inspired radicalisation. Nonviolent forms of it, however, particularly the ones that are

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<sup>4</sup> Hellyer, H.A. & Grossman, Michele, “A Framework for Understanding the Relationship between Radicalisation, Religion and Violence” *GREASE Working Paper*, May 2019 [http://grease.eui.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2019/05/GREASE\\_D1.2\\_Hellyer-Grossman\\_Final1-1.pdf](http://grease.eui.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2019/05/GREASE_D1.2_Hellyer-Grossman_Final1-1.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Sayed, Ashraf, “Countering terrorism is the most dangerous issue for 2018: Sisi follows the Comprehensive Military Operation in Sinai”, *Veto*, 9 February 2018, <https://www.vetogate.com/3062805>

<sup>6</sup> “Egypt: Abdul Fattah al-Sisi profile” BBC. May 2014. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-19256730>

<sup>7</sup> Private interviews with security official, Cairo, December 2019 – February 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Interviews with security officials who declined to be named.

not directed at the state itself such as hate speech towards Coptic Christians, receive little to no attention<sup>9</sup>.

Even though the view of the security agencies is what dominates state policy to religiously inspired radicalisation, it is not shared by all state institutions. There are many voices of dissent in the official religious establishments of Al-Azhar and Dar Al-Ifta' (House of Edicts), for example, but they are largely silent for fear of reprisals from the security agencies<sup>10</sup>.

The voices of dissent can be divided into two types of perspectives. The first group does not view religiously inspired radicalisation as a major problem in Egypt. They think that the security crackdown on dissent in Egypt is to blame for the religiously inspired Egypt witnessed in recent years; and they view the military-dominated government's outward commitment to renewing religious rhetoric and combating extremist ideology to be an exercise in folly at best and an attempt to appease to Islamophobic world powers at worst<sup>11</sup>.

In January 2020, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmed el-Tayeb, made the presence of this perspective publicly known for the first time in an impromptu public speech he gave at a conference titled, 'Al-Azhar International Conference on Renovation of Islamic Thought,'<sup>12</sup> which was aimed at fighting extremist ideology, calling the fixation on changing the rhetoric a 'headache' that is the product of 'political strife' and is 'something that is manufactured to hold us back.' He argued that Islam in all its form plays no role in modern Egyptian society outside of regulating marriage, divorce and inheritance. 'Our character as Arabs and Muslims is gone,' he said. He went on to express frustration over the need for Al-Azhar to publicly denounce radical Islamist group and violence, saying that it was unnecessary since it is obvious that they do not endorse it. 'This was a trap that we fell for,' he said, suggesting that there is a concerted effort to put the broader Islamic religious establishment on the defensive.

There is a sub-group inside Al-Azhar that goes a step further and considers radicalisation to be a more complex social problem caused by increasing poverty rates, a lack of education, and festering resentment towards public institutions and the country's political elite over endemic corruption that impacts basic services. There are elements in the security agencies and the justice ministry that agree but they present a small minority in government and are unable to meaningfully inject their ideas into mainstream discourse or into the state's counter-radicalisation strategy<sup>13</sup>.

The second group of dissidents within the religious establishment are even more critical of the government, and as such, hinders state efforts to address the social aspect of religiously inspired radicalisation by refusing to fully comply with orders from the central government to conduct outreach programs that aim to inoculate youth against extremist ideologies. Al-Azhar did, however, manage to make some amendments to the learning curricula after 2013. The objective was to revise and eliminate excerpts of the curricula which were seen to be outdated and clash with modern times, but state officials

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<sup>9</sup> Interviews with Coptic priests and activists who declined to be named.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Azhari officials who spoke on condition of anonymity.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Azhari officials who spoke on condition of anonymity.

<sup>12</sup> "Dispute at al-Azhar conference reflects deep divisions over Islamic renewal," The Arab Weekly, February 2020. <https://theArabweekly.com/dispute-al-azhar-conference-reflects-deep-divisions-over-islamic-renewal>

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Azhari officials who spoke on condition of anonymity.

believed that the amendments were not extensive enough. These updated curricula are subject to assessment every three years.

### **Within civil society**

Egyptian and international rights groups are at odds with the Egyptian government over its views on religiously inspired radicalisation.<sup>14</sup> While they both agree that it is one of the greatest threats to the stability and future of Egypt that requires urgent action, they both often trade blame over the issue.

The rights groups view the government's crackdown on political opponents, particularly Islamists, which include a documented and internationally recognised reliance on torture, extrajudicial killings, arbitrary arrests and long-term solitary confinement, as the main driving force behind religiously inspired radicalisation.

'President el-Sisi justifies his government's campaign of repression as necessary to fight terrorism and ensure stability. In fact, Egypt has grown less stable since then-General el-Sisi seized power. The number of terrorist attacks has soared from a monthly average of less than 2 in 2011 to more than 26 in 2014 and over 75 this year. The surge in violence is driven in part by militants in the Sinai and fuelled by the Egyptian military's indiscriminate operations and the lack of economic opportunities for local inhabitants,' Freedom House noted in a written statement in 2015.<sup>15</sup>

Civil society and independent local and international media often point to how the so-called ISIS group, Al-Qaeda and other known militant groups use these state practices as proof that Islam is under attack for recruitment purposes.

Many also argued that is pushing those already in custody into the arms of radical groups.

'The State Department's [latest human rights report](#) cited numerous human rights issues in Egypt including unlawful or arbitrary killings by the government, forced disappearances, life-threatening prison conditions, arbitrary arrest and detention, political imprisonment, and torture. These conditions have been acknowledged by numerous human rights organizations and, according to former detainees, are pushing prisoners toward the Islamic State' an article published in Foreign Policy<sup>16</sup> noted in April 2019.

Large sectors of the administration, on the other hand, blame terrorism on civil society groups, accusing them of being terrorist sympathizers and agents of an aforementioned Western conspiracy against Egypt.<sup>17</sup> The state has all but outlawed most rights groups with a 2017 law and the security agencies have arrested hundreds of activists and lawyers since 2013. (The law which is currently being re-written after it provoked an

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<sup>14</sup> Interview with Egyptian political activists who spoke on condition of anonymity.

<sup>15</sup> "Repression and Instability: Egypt's Downward Spiral," Freedom House. 4 November 2015. <https://freedomhouse.org/article/repression-and-instability-egypt-s-downward-spiral>

<sup>16</sup> "Egypt's Prisons are becoming recruiting groups for the 'Islamic State' (Amy Woodyatt Foreign Policy, April 8<sup>th</sup>, 2019) <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/04/08/egypts-prisons-are-becoming-recruiting-grounds-for-the-islamic-state/>

<sup>17</sup> "Mada Masr: Egypt independent news outlet's office 'raided'," BBC. November 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-50537578>

international uproar, prompting President Sisi to say that it lacked 'balance' in November 2018.<sup>18)</sup>

## Country Background

### *Socio-demographic Context*

To understand how religiously inspired radicalisation in Egypt came to be, it is important to first understand the country's socio-demographic reality. Egypt is the Arab world's most populous centre, with a population of 108 million.<sup>19</sup> Sunni Muslims make up about 90 percent of this population, while the remaining 10 percent are Christian.<sup>20</sup> The Coptic Orthodox Church accounts for 90 percent of Egypt's Christians, while the rest include Anglican or Episcopalian and Protestant denominations; Jehovah's Witnesses; Mormons; Greek and Syrian Orthodox; and Armenian Apostolic. The country, which has Bahai<sup>21</sup>, Shi'i Muslim, and Jewish communities, also has atheist and agnostic populations. However, there are no reliable estimates or figures for these groups.

According to government figures, close to 28 percent of Egypt's population earn \$28.6 a month, falling below half of the international poverty line of \$1.9 a day.<sup>22</sup> The average Egyptian family, consisting of four people, earns about \$2600 a year. Furthermore, only 56 percent of homes are linked up to the country's sanitation system.<sup>23</sup>

The average Egyptian family's economic woes are, unsurprisingly, closely correlated to the authoritarian rule under which the country fell throughout its history. Pre-1952, the population consisted largely of peasants who grew grain, the country's main source of food and export.<sup>24</sup>

With the rise of the Free Officers movement in 1952, led by the Arab nationalist Gamal Abdal Nasser, a welfare system was introduced, and the government promised free education for all, and public sector employment. These policies resonated widely with the masses, whose social contract with the state mandated political acquiescence in exchange for upward social mobility for millions of Egyptians. However, corruption and mismanagement of state funds eroded these benefits. For instance, the quality of education deteriorated massively that a report described Abdal Nasser's promise as a

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<sup>18</sup> "Egypt's Sisi says law curbing NGOs needs to be more "balanced"," Reuters. 5 November 2018.<https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-egypt-rights/egypts-sisi-says-law-curbing-ngos-needs-to-be-more-balanced-idUKKCN1NA1MJ>

<sup>19</sup> Egypt Survey 2017. Egyptian government. [https://www.capmas.gov.eg/Pages/Publications.aspx?page\\_id=7195&Year=23448](https://www.capmas.gov.eg/Pages/Publications.aspx?page_id=7195&Year=23448)

<sup>20</sup> El Gergawi, Sherry, "Egypt military restoring churches destroyed following Morsi's ouster", *Ahram Online*, 7 February 2016, [english.ahram.org.eg/News/185985.aspx](http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/185985.aspx)

<sup>21</sup> The Bahai's are an offshoot of Shi'i Islam – the religion dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is not recognised as a part of Shi'ism by Shi'i Muslims, nor do Baha'is consider themselves as such.

<sup>22</sup> Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics' graph showing percentage of those unable to afford the cost of obtaining food only (cost of survival) [https://www.capmas.gov.eg/Pages/IndicatorsPage.aspx?Ind\\_id=1121](https://www.capmas.gov.eg/Pages/IndicatorsPage.aspx?Ind_id=1121)

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Egyptian officials who spoke on condition of anonymity.

<sup>24</sup> "An Economic History of the Middle East and North Africa," Issawi, Charles. July 1982.



“false entitlement, especially for the poor,” saying “the education available to them has been of such poor quality as to make it of little real economic benefit”.<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, the rapidly growing population, which more than quintupled since 1952, meant that the government became unable to create jobs at the required pace.<sup>26</sup>

### **Drivers of religiously-inspired radicalisation and assessment**

Radicalisation as a problem grew in importance across the Arab world following the eruption of the Arab Spring revolts in 2011, which were led by young people frustrated by decades of official corruption, repression and class inequality. The movement, which began by the self-immolation of a Tunisian street vendor, was spontaneous and it, along with the growing spread of the internet and technology, led to an explosion of public interest in politics as well as religion, economics and social change, which led to increased interest in radical Islamist and non-Islamic ideas and beliefs in Egypt and elsewhere. (There has also been a noted increase in atheism and agnosticism across the region.)<sup>27</sup>

Between 2012-2013, the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafis and other Islamist groups struck deals to expedite national elections with the military, which they were certain to win as the only organised force with an existing power structure and finances.<sup>28</sup> They opened dozens of news outlets and channels, many of which openly incited violence against Muslims who were not supportive of the Brotherhood, Copts and other opponents, resulting in an uptick in sectarian tensions and violence.<sup>29</sup>

After the military suspended the democratic experiment in 2013 and arrested then president Mohammed Morsi, it launched a widescale crackdown on a number of different types of Islamists and political opponents, including opponents of the Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>30</sup>

As the authorities in Egypt engaged in a forceful crackdown with a rising death toll, the notion of non-violent resistance grew weaker among young supporters of various Islamist groups by the day.<sup>31</sup> With an avalanche of arms from post-civil Libya, these radicals are suspected to have formed groups and armed themselves quickly.

These events set off a chain reaction of terror attacks across mainland Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula, which included bringing down a commercial flight in Sharm el-Sheikh, killing 224 in October 2015, assassinating the country's chief prosecutor in June 2015

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<sup>25</sup> Birdsall, Nancy, "Putting education to work in Egypt", *Carnegie Endowment Center for International Peace*, 25 August 1999 <https://carnegieendowment.org/1999/08/25/putting-education-to-work-in-egypt-pub-685%20Car>

<sup>26</sup> "As Egypt's Population Hits 100 Million, Celebration Is Muted," *NYTimes*. February 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/11/world/middleeast/egypt-population-100-million.html>

<sup>27</sup> "How Egypt's Activists Became 'Generation Jail'," *NYTimes*. March 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/14/magazine/how-egypts-activists-became-generation-jail.html>

<sup>28</sup> "Into the Hands of the Soldiers: Freedom and Chaos in Egypt and the Middle East," Kirkpatrick, D. David. August 2018.

<sup>29</sup> Interviews with Islamist activists who declined to be named.

<sup>30</sup> "Egypt: Bitter legacy of Rabaa massacre continues to haunt Egyptians," *Amnesty*. August 2019. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/08/egypt-bitter-legacy-of-rabaa-massacre-continues-to-haunt-egyptians/>

<sup>31</sup> Interview with political activists and Azhari clerics who declined to be named.

and numerous deadly attacks on churches and government facilities that killed hundreds of civilians, churchgoers and officials. The attacks put the country's entire tourism sector out of business from 2013-2017.

There has been no credible evidence to show that foreign Islamic State fighters or other radicals carried out major attacks in Egypt. In fact, many of the major attacks were undertaken by young Egyptian men who were swept up in the crackdown following 2013 and released, such as Mahmoud Shafik Mohamed Mostafa.<sup>32</sup> Mostafa was a 22-year-old man who detonated a suicide vest inside a chapel on the grounds of the seat of the Egyptian Orthodox Church, St. Mark's Coptic Orthodox Cathedral, in the heart of Cairo in December 2016, killing 25 people.<sup>33</sup> Mostafa was arrested for allegedly taking part in a pro-Muslim Brotherhood protest in 2014 and subsequently reportedly tortured in custody. He joined the so-called ISIS group upon his release.

### **The state's approach; and non-state, societal led approaches**

The state dominates the response to religiously inspired radicalisation and does not allow independent civil society groups to work on this file.

To the state, success has long been measured in terms of security, particularly in reducing the frequency, scale and magnitude of militant attacks. As a result, officials believe that the policy of arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearance, torture, extrajudicial killings and mass and other forms of 'expedited' trials, deployed in the 1990s against Islamist radicals, to have been successful.<sup>34</sup> (In an interview, a high-ranking executive official said that the state regards other forms of radicalisation such as hate speech and hate crimes, which survived the 1990s campaign, were considered somewhat 'trivial' and difficult to police because they are small and require a level of public interest and awareness of the issue that is currently unavailable.)

They believe that the 1990s policy, which has been redeployed and intensified by all accounts since 2013, is effective in rooting out terrorist elements and that the violence and high collateral damage that come with it prevent further radicalisation by inspiring fear in would-be recruits.<sup>35</sup> 'It may be costly for the image of Egypt internationally but it worked internally and continues to.'<sup>36</sup>

Among Egypt's top brass, the language used to discuss the subject of radicals suggests that class also plays an important role in the state's understanding and philosophy towards the issue.<sup>37</sup> Officials commonly refer to themselves as 'the masters' of the public and to those prone to radicalisation, who tend to come from disenfranchised and impoverished communities, as 'insects' and 'peasants' that are 'motivated by envy' of the upper classes.

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<sup>32</sup> Interviews with Egyptian and US security officials.

<sup>33</sup> "Egypt says church bomber linked to Muslim Brotherhood," Reuters. December 2016. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-security-church/egypt-says-church-bomber-linked-to-muslim-brotherhood-idUSKBN142100>

<sup>34</sup> Interviews with Egyptian officials who declined to be named.

<sup>35</sup> Interviews with Egyptian officials who declined to be named.

<sup>36</sup> He spoke on condition of anonymity because he is not allowed to speak publicly about the matter.

<sup>37</sup> Interviews with Egyptian officials who declined to be named.

Against the background of the 'war on terror', Egypt's official philosophical approach attaches limited significance to social programmes and initiatives that aim to study the causes of radicalisation and address them through non-violent means. Several sources<sup>38</sup> declare that state programmes are viewed internally as perfunctory measures taken solely to appease critics in the international community who accuse them of being only interested in force or fuelling radicalisation with it. The lack of state resources and local media attention to such initiatives, in comparison to the military campaign, appears to substantiate this assessment.

The state campaign to counter radicalisation and terrorism as a whole can be divided into five main lines of activities:

### **Prosecutions, trials and security operations**

The overwhelming majority of resources and attention has gone to police and military operations across the country, with a focus on North Sinai, where an affiliate of the so-called ISIS group maintains a strong presence and has conducted attacks on security installations, churches and civilians that killed and injured thousands since 2013. The campaign also includes operations in mainland Egypt, primarily in rural areas around Cairo and Giza, the Nile Delta Valley and the Western Desert. The state campaign, launched in the summer of 2013, killed over 7,097 people up until 2018, according to a tally by The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy. There is a lack of concrete, first-hand information about the nature or impact of these operations because state officials declared a no-press zone in North Sinai. The state also passed laws that made publishing information about the campaign that contradict official statements a crime punishable by a fine of up to GBP £ 26,000. Official statements normally only report the number of casualties and a rough location of the incident.<sup>39</sup>

Over time, however, some details about the campaign's impact began to emerge in 2017, including official footage that suggested that the security in North Sinai used internationally banned cluster bombs and unofficial footage and local accounts that suggested that security forces also regularly opened deadly fire on unarmed men. Local reports indicated that many of the men were in fact in custody and the footage showed soldiers staging the deaths to make it look like they occurred in a fire exchange.<sup>40</sup><sup>41</sup> Egyptian officials denied all accusations of wrongdoing and have made some steps to open up its operations to the public following backlash. In July 2018, the military organised a media tour of North Sinai and in November 2019 the interior ministry organised a similar tour of Scorpion Prison, but journalists who attended the tours later said they were not allowed to speak to residents or inmates without official supervision.<sup>42</sup><sup>43</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Interviews with Egyptian officials who declined to be named.

<sup>39</sup> Interviews with Egyptian officials who declined to be named.

<sup>40</sup> "Egypt: Use of banned cluster bombs in North Sinai confirmed by Amnesty International," Amnesty International. 1 March 2018. <https://tinyurl.com/ydc2453g>

<sup>41</sup> "Clip appears to show Egyptian soldiers executing unarmed men in Sinai," Times of Israel. 22 April 2017. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/clip-appears-to-show-egyptian-soldiers-executing-unarmed-men-in-sinai/>

<sup>42</sup> "Handicrafts, ostriches and football: Journalists, public figures taken on stage-managed tour of Tora Prison Complex," Mada Masr. 11 November 2019. <https://tinyurl.com/rdv6wr6>

<sup>43</sup> <https://tinyurl.com/ultx2o4>

US officials and Senate staffers, who are legally obliged to inspect the operations in North Sinai given that they provide Egypt with over a billion USD in military aid yearly, have also said in interviews that they have been denied access to the area for years. This was one of the reasons why the Donald Trump administration withheld a portion of the aid to Egypt in 2017. (It was later restored in 2018.)

### **Laws and decrees**

Overall, Egypt witnessed an unprecedented legislative expansion after June 2013 to consolidate the current regime's priorities, and to also contain all threats to that order caused by the January 2011 uprising, both socially and politically.<sup>44</sup> Chief among those was the existence of MB-Islamism and violence, which were criminalised in a manner that ultimately produced a very complex and comprehensive legislative network.

The Egyptian Constitution of 2014, which was later amended in April 2019, addresses counter-terrorism efforts in article 237.

“The state commits to fighting all types and forms of terrorism and tracking its sources of funding within a specific time frame in light of the threat it represents to the nation and citizens, with guarantees for public rights and freedoms. The law organizes the provisions and procedures of fighting terrorism, and fair compensation for the damages resulting from it and because of it.”

As such, the post-2013 Egyptian state's legal and legislative tacking of violence and terrorism is twofold: firstly, the issuance of a slew of laws and decrees regulating the war on terrorism, accompanied with several legal amendments to accommodate situations created by confrontations on the ground and terrorist operations; and secondly, the judicial aspect, which has been instrumental in confronting terrorist organizations as defined by the state.

The first legal-legislative track includes the presidential decree on the Terrorist Entities and Lists Law no. 8 of 2015. This legislation regulates lists of those accused of terrorism-related charges, based on a request submitted to the Attorney General, pending their trial before courts. Security services' investigations alone are enough to get a name added to the terrorist list, without the need to interrogate the suspect. Yet, the decision to list suspects is final and is not appealable, and based on these requests, the assets of those listed are frozen and suspects are banned from traveling. This law was followed by the Terrorist Funds Law no. 22 of 2018, which tasks a newly established judicial committee with creating lists of terrorist individuals and entities. The committee confiscates all the private property of those in the aforementioned lists, adding them to state coffers. The committee's decisions in this regard are also final.

Later, the Countering Terrorism Law (no. 94/2015) was issued, dealing with all aspects that involve such crimes. This includes a definition of terrorism and members perpetrating such acts, an outline of the procedural aspects related to trials, and the punishments for individuals involved in such practices based on their levels of

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<sup>44</sup> Interviews with Egyptian officials who declined to be named.

involvement. Given its importance within the war on terror's legal framework, certain aspects of the law proved gravely problematic.

To begin with, the bill's broad definition of what constitutes a terrorist act makes the expression of political protest susceptible to prosecution. Furthermore, the law includes unprecedented indicators of the state's retaliatory approach. The first of such indicators is that it shields all troops enforcing the law - primarily the police and the armed forces - from any criminal responsibility when exhibiting force in confrontations. Moreover, while the law allows for sentences in these cases to be reduced by only one level, it expands crimes punishable by death and life imprisonment to include the joining of, or belonging to, entities designated as terrorist organizations, or engaging in any of the multiple levels of terrorist acts. The law also includes a clause which stipulates that assaults on family members of law enforcement officers be punished as acts of terror, and not considered normal acts of violence. Although this should provide security reassurances for the state's security apparatus and their family members, it nevertheless encourages the abuse of force.

The law also penalises the concealment of terrorism-related information; the provision of logistical support for terrorist operations; and the facilitation of perpetrators' escape whether before or after the execution of terrorist attacks. Only first-degree relatives of the accused are exempted. Aimed to eliminate all breeding grounds for terrorism, this provision, however, undermines the guarantees of justice and impartiality, especially in cases of malicious reporting, which are common in Egypt under the current conditions of the institutions of justice.

Amendments to existing laws have also been ratified with a focus on terrorism. This includes Article 102a of the Penal Code, which penalizes first degree relatives if they withheld information about the existence and use of explosives. The law intensifies penalties for armed forces and police officers getting involved in terrorism, as previous periods revealed the presence of many of them within the ranks of some groups that emerged in the aftermath of 2011, especially after 2013. Both provisions indicate the reactivity of the Egyptian state towards developments on the ground as it combats terrorism, and its attempt to address these developments legislatively. Moreover, amendments to the Code of Criminal Procedure no. 11 of 2017 imposed a ban on entities listed on terrorism lists from exercising any civil and advocacy activities under any designation.

Despite this spree of terrorism-focused legislations, President Sisi criticized the traditional course of justice as insufficient and futile when handling terrorism, and that it requires wider amendments to ensure swiftness in adjudicating such cases. This swiftness was revealed in the speed with which individuals are added to lists of terrorist entities: this can now take no more than seven days. Also, new amendments to the Code of Criminal Procedure have ensured that swiftness of adjudication in trials and sentencing are codified. This was achieved by ensuring that rulings can be issued in absentia, as though the accused are present. Swiftness has also been tangible in authorities' conduct of death penalties, eliminating any chance of backtracking or appeals in cases where new evidence emerges.

In terms of the judiciary's role in combatting terrorism, certain criminal court circuits have been assigned to exclusively handle cases of terrorism and related issues, and judges, aware of the pressure of time, seek to meet expectations. This is reflected in the

mass death sentences handed by these courts, as with the case of the general attorney's assassination, and other horrifying verdicts where suspects included children and juveniles, like the Case of Amtay in the Minya governorate.

Along the same lines, the Cairo Summary Court appears to be a channel in tracking down entities designated as terrorists. The court's decision no. 3343 of 2013 banned all Muslim Brotherhood (MB) activities and confiscated its assets, and those of any subsidiary association or foundation. These confiscated assets will be managed by a committee under the Cabinet, as per the law. Subsequently, the same court banned other local entities on the same pretext of terrorism, including *Ansar Bait al-Maqdis*, *Ajnad Misr*, the 'Alliance of *Da'm al-Shar'iyya*', the 'Alliance of Supporting the MB (and its political arm)', and *Hizb al-Istiqlal*, as well as transnational entities like ISIS, in addition to a 'temporary' ban on the activities of Hamas. This ban implies that there is an intention to track any member belonging to these entities, to prosecute them, and dry up their financial resources and property.

Between 2013 and 2015, the committee responsible for seizing and managing the MB's properties has seized the assets of the group's leaders down to the third level of its hierarchy. This was followed in 2016 by the seizure of the assets of the fourth level of the group's leaders and members. This also included the closure of currency exchange offices associated with members of the Brotherhood and annulling their registration at the Central Bank.

Beyond the civilian judiciary system, military courts have also been pivotal in prosecuting suspects of terrorism charged with targeting army establishments or members of the armed forces, including army conscripts. The most prominent case in this regard is the one publicly known as the Arab Sharkas Cell.

Imposing a state of emergency, and the enactment of the emergency law, particularly in north Sinai and following the bombing of Saint Mark's Coptic Orthodox Cathedral in Alexandria in April 2017, has helped the regime reproduce the Courts of State Security, characterized by their hasty trials and unappealable sentences. These courts, whose judges are appointed directly by the president, handle any case referred to them by him. With limited oversight by the judiciary system over their procedures, and their quick trials and final sentences, these courts serve as the state's "correction" to what it sees as flaws in the terrorism law.

Furthermore, Law 25 of 2018 ushered the creation of the Supreme Council of Combating Extremism, whose task is to develop counterterrorism strategies at the national and regional levels, including the drafting of developmental schemes for marginalized regions, and the putting together of educational curricula that serve these goals. Bringing together representatives from governmental and religious institutions, the council lacks any noteworthy communal participation. In fact, security apparatuses dominate the council, and secrecy engulfs its deliberations and decisions, allowing for little to be known of its composition, role, and real impact. The General Intelligence Directorate, the Military Intelligence, the National Security Agency (formerly State Security) and the Administrative Control Authority – which is directly controlled by the president – are all represented in the council. The Secretariat coordinates between all parties and institutions of the state involved in combating extremism.

## Coordination with regional and international allies

Egyptian officials have also been relying on their political allies in the region to combat radicalisation and terrorism. In the north, they have been receiving intelligence from with Hamas, an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood that governs Gaza and with whom they have reconciled following a brief standoff over the ouster of President Morsi in 2013. Hamas supplies them with information on the illegal tunnels and terrorist activities in North Sinai. They are also working closely with Israel, which has been providing military support and conducting air strikes in Sinai with their permission. To the west, Egypt joined forces with General Khalifa Haftar in eastern Libya, who is attempting to take over the country and defeat Islamists there. General Haftar has been providing Egypt with intelligence about terrorist operations in the Western Desert and handing over radical Islamist fighters wanted in Egypt. These militias, most deadly of which is *Al-Murabitun*, have staged attacks against the Egyptian army and police in the country's Western Sahara and seek to infiltrate the Egyptian territories through the largely permeable Egyptian-Libyan border. The recent arrest, trial and execution of *Al-Murabitun's* member Hisham Ashmawi, the former Egyptian special forces officer, marks the peak of this alliance between the Egyptian state, Haftar's forces and the government in Tobruk. Also, the Egyptian side carried out raids inside Libya, like Derna, as a response to the slaying of Egyptian Christians by the so-called ISIS group there. There are also joint operations by the Libyan army and the Egyptian elite forces, along with intelligence cooperation with the French forces in Libya. This interstate coordination coincided with improved relationships between Egypt's armed forces and tribes in Western Sahara in Egypt.

To the south, similar dynamics are at play in Sudan. The two neighbours have established a joint force to combat terrorism and cross-border crimes, as well as agreed to hold bi-annual meetings between the chiefs of staff.<sup>45</sup>

Within this context, the Egyptian state has used its membership in the pan-Arab Anti-Terrorism Convention to push forth its classification of the MB as a terrorist group, which was passed in 2013.

Egypt also called to form a joint Arab force to combat terrorism and confront threats to Arab national security, especially terrorist organizations.<sup>46</sup> In its capacity as a member of the Security Council, Egypt sought to pass resolutions on combating terrorism, particularly in the case of foreign fighters.

Egypt has also been successfully lobbying both Western and Arabian Gulf allies for funds and political backing to support its campaign on terror, raising billions of USD in military and economic aid.

## Development, social outreach and religious re-education programmes

Egypt has a number of social outreach and re-education programmes.

The Ministry of Endowments, Al-Azhar and Dar al-Ifta (House of Edicts) jointly lead most non-security-related efforts to push back against the tide of radicalisation. Their main

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<sup>45</sup> Interviews with Egyptian officials who declined to be named.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Egyptian officials.

order of business was to reclaim the country's vast network of unregistered mosques, known locally as *zawaya*, which allowed radical groups to spread their ideologies, particularly outside of Cairo, with great ease pre-2013. Nearly 20,000 *zawaya* mosques were closed since then and thousands more were forced to register.

As part of the new campaign, the only imams allowed to deliver sermons during Friday prayers must, as of 2014, have authorization from Al-Azhar. Security officials monitor all mosques closely to ensure adherence to the new rules. But critics say the state over-corrected by standardising the sermons, which considerably reduced their appeal to the public, according to activists. The state's religious institutions similarly lost considerable public credibility due to their closeness to President's Sisi and vocal support of his policies, thus undermining their ability to influence those on the cusp of radicalisation, who tend to be anti-government.

"Now you are unlikely to hear something inciting against Christians in Friday sermons in rural areas but you will also notice that young people are not attending or listening to the sermons," an Azhari imam who is based in Upper Egypt said in an interview. "They joke about us being Sisi's puppets and do not take us seriously."

The three religious institutions are carrying out other projects, but they are less well-known. These include creating observatory groups online to attempt to track, tally and refute materials (in 12 languages) published by the media arms of the so-called ISIS group, and other radical organizations.

They also include initiatives to deploy imams to schools nationwide as part of an initiative called "School of Knowledge" to inoculate youth against radicalisation. However, these efforts have been undermined, according to critics and many imams on the ground, by the aforementioned public image crisis that these institutions have, which has so far not been addressed by the state.

These efforts are also limited due to the lack of financial support from the state. For example, the average Azhar-licensed government imam earns GBP £ 78; some earn as little as GBP £ 17 a month. The highest salaries rarely exceed GBP £ 465 and that is including travel allowance, which limits the ability of imams to travel and focus on the campaign given that many are forced to take on other jobs to supplement their income.

Another obstacle that stands in the way of these programmes is that many among the top brass in all the religious institutions of Egypt are, in private, resistant to change, considering the non-religious establishment unqualified to make these changes. This is why, for example, they continue to refuse to extensively revise the curriculum of Al-Azhar schools and colleges.<sup>47 48</sup>

"The religious leadership is not politically powerful enough to stand up to the presidency; they say yes to the orders they get but then do not carry them out, or do so poorly," the Azhari imam from Upper Egypt said. "Imam Ahmed el-Tayeb's remarks about the subject were so shocking because such things are so rare."

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<sup>47</sup> "Al-Azhar's education moves a blow to extremism," The Arab Weekly. 30 September 2018. <https://thearabweekly.com/al-azhars-education-move-blow-extremism>

<sup>48</sup> "رئيس قطاع المعاهد الأزهرية يتحدث لـ«البوابة نيوز»: منتقدو مناهجنا لا يحسنون قراءتها أو فهمها" - Al-Bawaba. 21 December 2019. <https://www.albawabhnews.com/3840737>



In North Sinai and more remote areas away from the Nile Valley, the state has also rolled out small-scale socio-economic development programmes including vocational training initiatives and offering loans as an attempt to provide disenfranchised youths, vulnerable to radicalisation, alternatives to life enhancement and hope, using funds from allies including pro-state billionaires like Naguib Sawiris, Kuwait and the US.<sup>4950</sup>

Activists and journalists on the ground in North Sinai say these efforts yielded effectively no results because they were small and lacked genuine political will.

### **Rehabilitation programmes in prisons**

Egyptian state institutions have had success rehabilitating convicted terrorists and radicals in the past.

In 1999, after having dealt several crushing blows to the structure of groups such as the Gama'at al-Islamiyya, the state brought mediators into its prisons to offer the convicted rewards in exchange for genuine renunciations of violence. In 1999, the Gama'at al-Islamiyya, which had attempted to assassinate President Hosni Mubarak in June 1995 and carried out multiple deadly attacks targeting tourists, security forces and civilians, did exactly that.

That being said, the state cannot claim complete credit for the *jihadi* revisionism that took place at the time, as these groups were also suffering from a loss in public support and ability to attract young recruits because of their actions as well as various leadership problems. Egyptian officials did, however, carefully select respected imams to serve as mediators to approach the convicts and create an environment within prisons at the time that incentivised self-reflection and revisionism through offering practical rewards to those who appeared serious in the form of family visits, longer gym breaks, better food, reduced sentences and pardons, according to a former mediator who led these efforts at the time.<sup>51 52</sup>

To some extent, parts of this policy remain alive -- inmates are still promised (and sometimes given) similar rewards for renouncing violence or membership in groups. But the selection of mediators is no longer as careful, most of those selected are state clerics that lack credibility or are completely unknown, unlike their selections in the past who included Montasser el-Zayat, a widely respected Islamist lawyer.<sup>53</sup> Security officials say the lack of political will is the reason why the policy is not fully reinstated.

In fact, credible media reports and accounts from Islamist activists with connections to inmates indicate that the some prison officials have been placing many political activists who were arrested for supporting the Muslim Brotherhood and other nonviolent Islamists in cells with so-called ISIS group members and al-Qaeda members, creating a

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<sup>49</sup> "1st forum to provide job opportunities for Sinai youth to start Wednesday," Egypt Today. 16 October 2019. <https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/1/75846/1st-forum-to-provide-job-opportunities-for-Sinai-youth-to>

<sup>50</sup> <https://sawirisfoundation.org/work/bedouin-youth-skills/>

<sup>51</sup> "From Violence to Moderation Al-Jama'a al-Islamiya and al-Jihad," Carnegie. April 2010 <https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Hamzawy-Grebowski-EN.pdf>

<sup>52</sup> "Country Reports on Terrorism 2017 - Foreign Terrorist Organizations: Gama'a al-Islamiyya," Refworld. 19 September 2018. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5bcf1f4ba.html>

<sup>53</sup> Interview with Egyptian security officials and Islamist activists who declined to be named.

pool of potential recruits for both groups. The so-called ISIS group has successfully capitalised on the arrangement, according to activists. Security officials also confirmed that this trend remains ongoing, leading some activists to suggest that the top leadership is interested in keeping terrorism and radicalisation alive for political purposes.

### **Crisis case study**

#### **Attack on the Sufi al-Rawda mosque in Bir al-Abed town, North Sinai, on 24 November 2017**

On the 24<sup>th</sup> of the November 2017, a mosque in North Sinai was attacked by some 40 militants during weekly congregational Friday prayers. The attack resulted in 311 deaths among the worshippers, and injured at least 122, making it one of the deadliest attacks by a non-state actor in Egyptian history<sup>54</sup>.

#### *Causes and responses:*

Press reports, along with interviews with victims, community leaders, lawmakers and officials from North Sinai clearly identified four main factors that contributed to the preparation and execution of the attack, beyond the overthrow of late President Morsi in 2013 and the violent state crackdown that followed it.<sup>55</sup>

Firstly: like the rest of North Sinai, Bir al-Abed is a deeply neglected town with limited and poor services, which only deteriorated after the security agencies began actively conducting air strikes and raids in it in 2013. This radicalised many of its youths, providing a point of entry for the ISIS-group recruiters. The reported mistreatment and targeting of Muslims in other countries including Syria, Myanmar, China and in Western countries were also issues that were reported to have fuelled the anger of recruits, and as such were exploited by radicals.

Secondly; while the Egyptian affiliate of the ISIS-group's focus was and continues to be the Egyptian state itself, it has also incited against Copts, Sufis and other Sunni Muslims by arguing that their religious differences with radical Islamists incentivises them to be pro-government or at least anti-ISIS-group. In the year leading up to the attack, the group threatened Sufi clerics at the Rawda mosque and in other parts of the town with violence, demanding they stop practicing Islam in the manner in which they did. The clerics reported the harassment repeatedly, particularly after the group beheaded a beloved Sufi cleric in the area in 2016 and destroyed multiple shrines.

Thirdly; as the harassment and violence increased, local residents, who are mostly Bedouins who practice Sufism, began supplying the security agencies with information,

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<sup>54</sup> "Death Toll Rises to More than 305 in Mosque Attack in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula" by Dahlia Kholaf, Wall Street Street, November 25<sup>th</sup> 2017. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/death-toll-rises-to-more-than-305-in-mosque-attack-in-egypts-sinai-peninsula-1511620240>; "Al-Azhar Grand Sheikh performs Friday prayers at Rawda Mosque"; al-Masry al-Youm, December 1<sup>st</sup> 2017 (<https://www.egyptindependent.com/al-azhar-grand-sheikh-performs-friday-prayers-rawda-mosque/>)

<sup>55</sup> "Motives in Egypt's Deadliest Terrorist Attack: Religion and Revenge," Youssef, Nour. NYT. December 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/01/world/middleeast/egypt-sinai-mosque-attack.html>

which attracted further ire from the ISIS-group. The threats and warnings continue to increase.

Fourthly; the state announced in October 2017 that it was cooperating with the Tarabin tribe, one of the biggest in the region, to hunt down militants, confirming long-held suspicions about the political positions of the Sufi order's adherents in the town and leading to a spike in attacks on informants and suspected informants there and elsewhere in North Sinai.

The local government was, according to all accounts, unresponsive to complaints of harassment in the lead-up to the attack — a fact that also played a role in violent attacks on churches in Upper Egypt in 2013, where Coptic priests and residents also reported threats and harassment but received little or no support from the local government until large-scale attacks took place. Over 220 churches and Christian homes and businesses were torched during that period. The logic of officials at the time was that harassment, even from known militants, was not important enough to warrant a police or military investigation.

Even though establishing ties with the local community was, indeed, productive and yielded positive results in the form of arrests of radicals, significantly downsizing their operations in the area, officials failed to provide enough protections for their local informants and ignored their verbalised concern for their safety. This led to further bloodshed and was exploited by radicals who presented this to recruits as proof that the state must be fought and cannot be trusted.

The state response to the attack on the Rawda mosque as it happened was similarly slow. Despite their being three security installations within 19 kilometres of the mosque, ambulances arrived some 20 minutes before the security forces. (Even though the ISIS-group did not claim the attack, they were blamed for it based on credible evidence.)

The state's response following the bloodshed was initially positive. The central government ordered the renovation of the mosque and made assurances to the local community. In private, officials acknowledged fault to community leaders and promised change.

The state's wider response to the Rawda mosque also included an expansion of its security operations in North Sinai, launching in February 2018 a new military campaign called "Comprehensive Military Operation Sinai 2018." The campaign was and continues to be marred with the same practices that undermined previous campaigns, including reports of extrajudicial killings, indiscriminate aerial bombardment, torture and arbitrary arrests.<sup>56</sup>

The refusal to engage with criticism among state officials, which goes beyond the campaign in North Sinai, only deepened local anger and resentment towards the state in Bir al-Abed and across Egypt, inadvertently helping maintain the cycle of radicalisation.

Attacks on both residents and security forces continue to this day in Bir al-Abed, but are largely unreported in the media due to the ongoing government-sanctioned media blackout in effect across North Sinai. These attacks have, however, decreased in size

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<sup>56</sup> Mohamed, Amer. "Superficial Gains, but No Lasting Success in Sinai 2018," TIMEP. 2 July 2019. <https://timep.org/commentary/analysis/superficial-gains-but-no-lasting-success-in-sinai-2018/>

since the ISIS-group suffered immense losses in the security campaign that followed its attack on the mosque.

Local Sufi leaders and North Sinai lawmakers say that the religiously inspired radicalisation they are witnessing in Bir al-Abed is the most dangerous kind in comparison to other forms prevalent in urban areas, which are not as violent and organised.

“There is not a house in Egypt that is not suffering from the effects of radicalisation,” a Sufi community leader from the town, who lost relatives in the attack, said. He spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals. “The only difference is severity. In Cairo, you have Christians who complain about people not smiling in their face or the police not giving them permits to build churches. But over here, people are afraid for their lives.

“They are not unrelated. Daesh (the ISIS-group) did not come out of a vacuum. The same thing that makes someone frown in the face of a Christian is what makes that person call me a *kafir* (disbeliever) and pick up a gun,” he added. “The problem is that over here we cannot protect ourselves and the state can’t protect us.”

Many in Bir al-Abed echo this sentiment and express much bitterness towards the state over its handling of the crisis.

“I don’t know what to tell my people when I see them,” a North Sinai lawmaker said, who spoke on condition of anonymity. “They told us that the attack was coming and we did nothing. They are telling us now they are under threat and we are still not doing anything...The state does not protect its informants. It does not compensate their families when they die. People cooperate with them at the expense of their lives because they have no choice,” he said.

The lawmaker said that almost no one in Bir al-Abed has ever heard of government efforts to address radicalisation socially, for example.

“If people don’t even know you have a social programme, then your programme is a failure,” he said. “Security is important but it is not the only solution. It is what we have always done and it led to this.”

The lawmaker, like others, said that they hoped that the attack on al-Rawda mosque would serve as a wake up call to the country’s leadership.

“If (the ISIS-group) can now convince people that fellow Muslims as well are deserving of death, that you should walk into a mosque during Friday prayers and open fire indiscriminately, even on children, then we have completely failed to address their ideas socially,” the lawmaker said. “This is unheard of in Egypt. We were worried about the Christians, now we have to worry for everyone.”

The local anger is not strictly limited to the state. It is also directed at Egyptian society itself.

“We have not seen much support from the Egyptian people. Very few talk about us and very few donate to the affected families who lost their breadwinners,” the lawmaker added. “People here feel unseen by the rest of Egypt.”

Other victims of religiously inspired violence elsewhere in the country also criticised the lack of societal response to radicalisation.

"I understand that the economic situation and lack of political freedom prevents people from making initiatives," a survivor of an attack on a Coptic church in Tanta said. He spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals. "People can at least stand up to people who are discriminating against Christians at work or confront people spreading hate speech online -- anything. That is not too much to ask for."

The locals of Bir al-Abed did have some positive feedback for both the state and society at large.

The state spent roughly GBP £ 3.5 million in compensations to the families of those affected by the attack.<sup>57</sup> Those who lost family members received approximately GBP £ 10,500 while those who were injured received GBP £ 2,50, which is high for state compensations of the sort. High-ranking officials also visited the families to pay their condolences and President Sisi gave a speech condemning the bloodshed.

In the immediate aftermath of the event, social media was awash with posts about the attack.

"I was thankful for what we received," a Bir al-Abed resident who lost her husband in the attack said. "At that moment, I felt like we were not alone. But people quickly forgot about us." She too spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals.

Others were also thankful to the avalanche of public criticism that was directed at Al-Azhar senior official Abbas Shouman for his remarks, when he suggested that ISIS-group members could not be declared apostates.<sup>58</sup> In this regard, Shouman was following the normative Sunni practice of being reluctant to describe Muslims as leaving the faith on account of sinful actions – indeed, that reluctance distinguishes normative Muslim religious authorities from radicals who tend to be fairly liberal in anathemising Muslims. However, this reluctance is often misinterpreted by publics outside of the religious establishment.

"Small things like that gave me a sense of solidarity, that we were not the only ones hurt and outraged by what happened," the woman added.

## Best practices

The following practices are the ones that most activists and lawmakers believe to have the most potential in the state's campaign on radicalisation because they focus on societal aspects and do not involve violence, which they worry is only fuelling the problem.

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<sup>57</sup> "انتهاء صرف تعويضات 298 أسرة شهيد و116 مصابًا بحادث الروضة" AMAY. June 2018. <https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/1301953>

<sup>58</sup> "عمرو أديب يهاجم وكيل الأزهر عقب رفضه تكفير منفذي حادث الروضة (فيديو)" AMAY. November 2017. <https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/1223585>

### **Beit Al-Alih (The Family House) initiative**

In 2011, Al-Azhar established the Beit Al-Alih initiative, which included establishing a large body staffed by Al-Azhar-trained cleric as well as Coptic Orthodox priests, with offices across the country to reduce that Muslim-Coptic tensions that so often fuel violence.

The body is most active in Upper Egypt, where Christians present a much sizable portion of society and tensions run higher than in Cairo. The aim of the body is to intervene when tensions flare up before or immediately after an act of violence takes place to resolve matters amicably, encourage disengagement in violence and build resilience greater understanding between the Muslim and Coptic communities.

Interviews with local Coptic priests and clerics showed that the organisation has had some success in preventing a limited number of attacks on church and Christian businesses and helped resolve disputes that could have otherwise easily ended in bloodshed across Upper Egypt.

The organisation does have clear objectives, which include: 1) Reduce communal violence. 2) Reduce tensions between Muslims and Christians and work to build mutual understanding and respect. 3) Facilitate the resolution of complaints and cases with the prosecution with the logic that decreasing the number of lawsuits and criminal charges being filed by Christians against Muslims would pave the way towards greater societal peace.

But upon closer look, it becomes apparent that the same friction the organisation aims to decrease outside exists inside.

Mahmoud Goma, the undersecretary of the organisation's Minya branch, has deeply underplayed the problem of sectarianism. In an interview with the New York Times in 2016, he told reporters that sectarianism and radicalisation do not exist as problems in Egypt altogether, saying it is "just the media makes it look like we have a problem."<sup>59</sup> It was also described in interviews that different officials regularly pressure Coptic Christians to withdraw police complaints.

The state also does not provide special training for anyone working in the organisation, nor does not make certain qualifications, beyond being a religious functionary with a degree from Al-Azhar or working with the Coptic church, a requirement for the job. Virtually everyone employed by the organisation lacks experience with conflict resolution, education and social outreach. There is little to no supervision on affairs by management on the Muslim side. It exists on the Christian side, which is less active due to its frustrations over the status quo.

Evidence also suggests that there is no process for performance evaluations.

"What happens is the Muslim clerics say everything is fine and we say everything is not fine, and then nothing happens," a Christian priest who was once part of the organisation in Minya said. He spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals.

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<sup>59</sup> "Egypt's Christians Say They Are at a 'Breaking Point'," Nordland, Rod. NYT. September 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/05/world/middleeast/egypt-middleeast-copts-christians.html>

### **The "School of Knowledge" initiative**

It was launched in 2017 by the Ministry of Religious Endowments and it involves imams teaching religious curriculum to the public in schools operating in major mosques. Excelling students are presented with a certified degree from the MoE and can join the 'Contemporary Imam' or 'Reformist Imam' programs and become fellows. The ministry has also appointed many female preachers to track women who account for the majority of donations made to support extremist groups as well as political religious groups that oppose the state. (The government also issued a ban on such financial activity by non-government entities in mosques.)

Unlike Beit Al-Alih, this program lacks clear objectives and the public is effectively entirely unaware of its existence because, as is the case with many of the state's social initiatives, it is severely affected by the government lack of credibility with the public and there are multi-layered gaps that separate them from average citizens and their daily hardships and concern.

As a result, very little is known about its structure and it is unclear if there is sufficient training, supervision or performance evaluation.

### **Dar al-Ifta's Monitoring Observatory**

Dar al-Ifta', like Al-Azhar, also launched a media-focused Monitoring Observatory to examine 'electronic fatwas' (meaning religious edicts issued online) and radical views. It detects and responds to fatwas on social media that excommunicate others ('takfiri fatwas'). The Observatory also issues periodical reports on terrorist operations, although far less frequent than that of Al-Azhar's Observatory. These reports are shared with policymakers and can often contain politicized content. Like the Ministry of Religious Endowments, Dar al-Ifta' reports tend to denounce the Muslims Brotherhood and attack countries supporting the group, namely Qatar and Turkey.

It is similarly difficult to assess the impact as well as the structure of the observatory due to the lack of media coverage of its activities and the fact that it also suffers from the same problems that hinder the aforementioned state counter-radicalisation projects.

### **Al-Azhar's communal meetings**

Al-Azhar has been organising communal meetings across the country since 2013 to address radicalisation and other societal issues, which in large part targets university students. Senior leaderships and clerics from Al-Azhar often hold public seminars in peripheral governorates to which high-ranking security officials and Coptic Christian religious come. The Islamic Research Academy of Al-Azhar also sends preachers to engage with youth on the ground in public places like local coffeeshops to correct misconceptions of Islam and contain radicalisation.

Public turnout to such events tends to be poor and they receive little media attention. Clerics who participate in such meetings complain that there is very little public engagement with their efforts and that their seminars are undermined by the fact that they, as well as other participants, cannot speak freely due to fear of reprisals from the security agencies.

“We are just given generic talking points about the importance of peace in Islam and we have to sit there and talk to the 20 people the police rounded up to sit in front of us and make it look like we have an audience,” one Muslim cleric said, speaking on condition of anonymity. “It is staged and completely ineffective.”

These meetings tend to have extremely vague objectives and no performance or impact evaluation.

“We are just ticking boxes here,” the cleric said.

The overriding recommendation from all the sources interviewed was for the state to allocate more funds to all four programs, adopt a vetting system that ensures that the clerics and civil servants overseeing them are fit for the job and rein in its security agencies — not only to prevent their campaign from fueling radicalisation but also to allow journalists, civil society groups and researchers to better the collective understanding of the issue and help both the government and society address the problem.

## **Conclusion**

Although the state may have made progress in its fight against terrorism, the war on terror is not over, and future rounds are likely to be fiercer. Anti-terrorism policies need to be less political, strategies must be cleared from its current retaliatory approach, and a bigger societal involvement must be allowed, for more efficient results.

Egypt’s counter-radicalisation politics have so far been fully state-dominated, which can be easily understood within the context of the current regime’s rise. According to the state’s narrative, Sisi’s regime saved the state and society from the post-2011 chaos and terrorism, for which it blames significant factions of the society for. Within that context, societal efforts, initiatives or recommendations are excluded and stifled, and the state doesn’t seek any partnership with the society in its pursuit to dominate it. Efforts to combat terrorism are completely politicized and populist, aimed at consolidating power dynamics that favour security agencies. Proving this point is the creation of the Supreme Council for Combating Extremism, whose representatives from the various security agencies are tasked by law to exclusively carry out this mission, on the local, regional and international levels.

Capitalizing on international community’s fear of terrorism, the current regime uses the pretext of terrorism to extend and expand the limits of exception, making it the norm for everyday politics.

In its war on terror, the state uses all weapons for the sake of any abstract success. Among the fronts lost in this war is the judiciary system, which has become entangled in the politicized war on terror as it sided with the state, undermining its own credibility and independence. Legal and judicial integrity was demolished over the last 4 to 5 years by the codification of new legislations that seek revenge, not justice, and approve collective punishment policy.

Religious institutions’ role in this war was also skewed by its patron-client relations with the regime. This decreased their legitimacy and credibility as trusted bodies capable of



delivering independent and unbiased views on religion to Muslims. State-approved efforts on their part are unlikely to resonate with the masses. While the Ministry of Islamic Endowments and Dar El-Ifta have become total subordinates, Al-Azhar continues to vie for independence, which is only met by more state limitations. It is impossible to gauge these institutions' impact on the ground.

Ironically, actors who engaged in violence in the 1980s and 1990s, like al-Gama'at al-Islamiyya and Al-Jihad, are more likely to have a counter-radicalisation impact. Their previous experience and their revisions vis-a-vis jihad as a concept and a political tool, works in their favour as a counter-terrorism front. This history of jihadism enables factions like the Salafi Call and al-Gama'at al-Islamiyya to engage in intellectual debates with Salafi jihadists on Jihad and the relation with state and the society. However, the credibility of these groups among hardline mainstream Islamists was impacted by their political positions post-2013 coup, and their alliance with the state.

On the military front, the state's security surveillance in the mainland claims spectacular successes against militants, announcing countless raids and deaths in insurgents' ranks, and the foiling of terrorist attacks and plots. Coordination with neighbouring countries over borders proved effective in controlling the infiltration of fighters and weapons. Non-state circumstances have also worked in the favour of combatting terrorism. This included divisions within the MB, in which the traditional part is rumoured to cooperate with the authorities to contain radicalized MB youths and restrict the flow of money into the defected armed group which was led by senior MB leader Mohamed Kamal, who was killed by security forces.

The extent to which a decline in radicalism among Islamist youths, mainly the MB, inside prisons remains unclear. There are contradictory observations in this regard, with some voicing the opinion that there is a fall in the ISIS-group's appeal among these youth, and others assuming that many youths were radicalized within prisons. With many of those imprisoned being of a young age, they could complete their jail terms of 10 to 15 years and be released into society with the risk of taking on a new round of violence.<sup>60</sup>

Successes claimed by security apparatus in north Sinai are difficult to independently verify. The army's frequent statements of victories, albeit welcomed by supporters, are doubted by critics who cite continued attacks on soldiers and civilians who collaborate with the military in its war on terror. Some conclude that militants' replication of attack strategy on checkpoints and soldiers' inefficient weaponry are reflective of flawed military policies. Meanwhile, the situation in north Sinai for civilians continues to worsen, as they bear the massive brunt of war. Therefore, although terrorist networks face losses at the hands of the military, the root causes for radicalisation still exist, and do not seem to be abating soon.

In general, the security situation in Egypt is not an easy one. There are clearly several drivers in existence as a result of recent historical events, and narratives that predate them. The state clearly takes the issue of security extremely seriously, but has as yet been unable thoroughly remove the threat. It is difficult to separate the issue of security from others that currently face Egypt in terms of good governance, transparency and inequality. For the good of the region and its peoples, one hopes that these problems will be overcome.

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<sup>60</sup> "Made in Prison", *Arij*, [https://arij.net/made\\_in\\_prison/](https://arij.net/made_in_prison/)

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