

## Country Report

# Egypt

H.A. Hellyer

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This Country Report offers a detailed assessment of religious diversity and violent religious radicalisation in the above-named state. Published by the GREASE project, this report is part a series covering 23 countries on four continents. Each report in the series has a corresponding Country Profile (issued separately) offering more basic information about religious affiliation and state-religion relations in the given country. Both the reports and profiles are available on the GREASE project website.

**Countries covered in this series:**

Albania, Australia, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Egypt, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Lebanon, Lithuania, Malaysia, Morocco, Russia, Slovakia, Spain, Tunisia, Turkey and the United Kingdom.

This report was produced by the partners of GREASE, an EU-funded research consortium investigating religious diversity, secularism and religiously inspired radicalisation.

<http://grease.eui.eu>



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## **What is the GREASE project?**

Involving researchers from Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Oceania, GREASE is investigating how religious diversity is governed in 23 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.

For further information about the GREASE project please contact: Professor Anna Triandafyllidou, [anna.triandafyllidou@eui.eu](mailto:anna.triandafyllidou@eui.eu)

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

## Table of Contents

<b><i>Religious diversity in Egypt: socio-demographic context, institutional framework and radicalisation challenges</i></b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Introduction: An Overview of Egypt</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b><i>Egypt's Social Makeup and Challenges:</i></b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>Social composition:</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>The birth and challenge of radicalisation</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b><i>History and Current Structure of State-Organized Religion Relations:</i></b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>Egypt's regulatory framework as a republic under Abdel-Nasser:</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b><i>Egypt's regulatory current framework:</i></b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b><i>Religious Extremism Challenges:</i></b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b><i>State's Counter-Radicalisation Efforts: Cases and Responses</i></b> .....	<b>13</b>
<b>Law and the judiciary: First lines of attack</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<b>Religious institutions in Egypt's War on Terror</b> .....	<b>15</b>
<b>Non-state alliances</b> .....	<b>16</b>
<b>Regional cooperation</b> .....	<b>17</b>
<b>Military campaigns</b> .....	<b>17</b>
<b><i>Conclusion</i></b> .....	<b>18</b>
<b><i>Timeline of main events that affected religious dynamics in recent Egyptian history:</i></b> .....	<b>19</b>
<b><i>References</i></b> .....	<b>21</b>

# Religious diversity in Egypt: socio-demographic context, institutional framework and radicalisation challenges

## Introduction: An Overview of Egypt

As a country with a population of 108 million and a history stretching back to 7000 BC, Egypt naturally has a long multi-layered and rich history of religious diversity.<sup>1</sup> But the religious landscape of modern Egypt is far less layered in comparison to its past.

About 90 percent of Egyptians follow Sunni Islam and the remaining 10 percent follow Coptic Orthodox Christianity. Other confessions of Christianity and Shi'i Muslims have a more difficult time finding space within the existing regulatory framework. Any and all members of other religious faiths are not recognized by the state. Judaism remains recognized but only a handful of its Egyptians followers are in the country.<sup>23</sup>

The most serious threat to religious diversity in Egypt at the moment stems from the polarisation in the country following the 2011-2013 period, which ended with the military overthrow of the country's first democratically elected president, Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), in July 2013 amid mass protests against his short, divisive rule.<sup>4</sup> This was followed by an intense security crackdown, potentially contributing to the vulnerability of the country to narratives vis-à-vis extremism.

A flurry of extremist Islamist organizations emerged stronger in the aftermath of the coup, including Jund al-Islam, al-Murabitun and, most importantly, Wilayat Sinai: the so-called "Islamic State" resilient affiliate in North Sinai. The latter targeted Christians and Sunni Muslims who practice Sufism, whom they view as heretics, on top of security personnel and state officials with devastating efficiency in recent years.<sup>5 6 7</sup>

The overthrow of Morsi contributed to a dangerous schism in Egyptian society, where his supporters began to deeply resent those sectors of society opposed to Morsi, particularly Christians, who participated in mass against Morsi's rule in the leadup to the overthrow and blamed them for the state violence that ensued. Hundreds of Morsi supporters responded by attacking over 220 churches and Christian properties across the country in response to the massacres of the pro-Morsi protest camps of Raba' al-'Adawiya and al-Nahda in August 2013. Egyptians on both sides of the conflict, with help

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<sup>1</sup> Pérez-Accino, José, "Ancient Egypt gave rise to one of the world's oldest Christian faiths", *National Geographic*, 19 April 2019, <https://on.natgeo.com/2ZNgaRF>

<sup>2</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>3</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>4</sup> Speri, Alice, "Egypt's Rabaa Massacre of 1,000 Morsi Supporters Went 'According to Plan'", *VICE News*, 12 August 2014, [https://news.vice.com/en\\_us/article/yw4k87/egypts-rabaa-massacre-of-1000-morsi-supporters-went-according-to-plan](https://news.vice.com/en_us/article/yw4k87/egypts-rabaa-massacre-of-1000-morsi-supporters-went-according-to-plan)

<sup>5</sup> "Liwa Al-Thawra", *Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP)*, 29 March 2017 <https://is.gd/TSrihB>

<sup>6</sup> "Hasam", *TIMEP*, 29 March 2017, <https://is.gd/iLangP>

<sup>7</sup> Awad, Mokhtar; Hashem, Mostafa, "Egypt's Escalating Islamist insurgency", *Carnegie Middle East Centre*, 21 October 2015 <https://is.gd/qVZM6I>

from relentless propaganda from state-controlled and pro-MB media outlets, came to see each other as terrorists who were existentially intent on destroying the other.<sup>8</sup>

The military-dominated regime has repeatedly dismissed the idea of reconciliation. What is left of Egypt's different political groups remain in shock while mutual feelings of animosity and distrust continues to grow unabated between Egypt's religious communities. Incidents of communal violence against Christians have been on the rise in Upper Egypt; members of Sufi orders remain harassed by Islamist extremists in North Sinai; and citizens who have non-conformist views are reluctant to air their views publicly.

## Egypt's Social Makeup and Challenges:

### Social composition:

Total population:	99,363,807
Muslims	90.00%
Christians	10%
Bahais	N/A
Non-believers	N/A

Sources: Egypt Survey 2017, Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics, 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) and El Gergawi, Sherry. "Egypt military restoring churches destroyed following Morsi's ouster", *Ahram Online*. (2016.)

Egypt is the Arab world's most populous centre, with a population of 108 million.<sup>9</sup> Sunni Muslims make up about 90 percent of this population, while the remaining 10 percent are Christian.<sup>10</sup> The Coptic Orthodox Church account 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>11</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>12</sup> The average

<sup>8</sup> Coleman, Jasmine. "Egypt election results show firm win for Islamists," *The Guardian*. 21 Jan. 2012. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jan/21/egypt-election-clear-islamist-victory>

<sup>9</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>10</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>11</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 Bahai's consider themselves as such.

<sup>12</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)

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>13</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.

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 "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>14</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.

### **The birth and challenge of radicalisation**

Egypt's President Sisi often describes extremism as the biggest challenge facing the country today. Members of Egypt's religious minorities tend to agree, calling it an existential threat to the diversity left in the country.<sup>15</sup>

Under the guise of combatting extremism, Sisi, as the defence minister in 2013, led the military overthrow of the Islamist-led government and the following crackdown. Over the course of the following weeks and months, there was a spike in attacks on churches and Christian property – particularly the day of and following the forceful dispersal of the pro-Morsi sit-ins – leaving over 220 churches torched, and provided a narrative that led to a militant group in Sinai called Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis gaining more prominence than hitherto. Opponents to the military and its crackdown against Morsi's supporters falsely considered Christians to be disproportionately responsible for the military's move, which likewise fed into discourse that problematised them further via hate speech and incitement to violence.

These events tapped into an existing crisis of radicalisation within the country, which is partially connected to the spread of purist Salafism in Egypt from the 1970s. Large numbers of mostly blue-collar workers migrating to the nascent, oil-rich economies of the Arabian Gulf, led to the intensification of the presence of Saudi-style purist Salafism,

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<sup>13</sup> *ibid*

<sup>14</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>15</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>

in various forms, some of which were more extreme than others.<sup>16</sup> This combined with other factors, including the global post-9/11 surge, further provided the environment for more receptive recruits to radicalism in countries like Egypt.<sup>17</sup>

The “Arab Spring” period included, alongside movements against authoritarian regimes, the meteoric rise of ISIS. With its flashy and shocking propaganda videos, it captured the imagination of some of Egypt’s extremist Islamist-leaning youths. These youth were encouraged by many factors, both on the macro or individual level, to take up arms and join militants.

One such factor, that has proved significant in narratives of extremists, is the state’s restrictive policies. Since 2013, human rights organisations report that the state oversaw violations to basic rights in its quest to crackdown on dissent, with mass arrests and abuses.<sup>18</sup> With state laws criminalizing most forms of peaceful opposition, many youths became receptive to the narrative that violence is their only option. In many cases, youths claimed they were motivated by the desire to retaliate against state repression, even if they were originally apolitical.

Geopolitical factors also facilitate the existence and adaption of violent actors within Egyptian borders, as with the cases of northern Sinai and the Western Desert. In Sinai, geopolitics intertwines with structural grievances, including political and economic factors.

Falling on the border, where the central government’s security grip is fragile, the North of the peninsula became a hotbed for militants to take up root and to recruit a minority of the disgruntled population. Also, the region was ideal for criminal and illegal practices, which provided resources for militants and secures their survival in the peninsula.

Lack of proper religious education aids in the recruitment process of youth by radicals. Media reports on jails and detention centres show that those without sufficient religious knowledge are vulnerable to radical brainwashing.

According to a noted researcher on the MB’s trajectories<sup>19</sup>, policies of detention centres themselves work in favour of radicalisation. With many non-violent prisoners facing terrorism-related charges, scores end up jailed with radicals in the same cell, where debates and discussions between inmates can result in the successful recruitment of youth, either by pressure or persuasion.

One of the factors attracting many youths to militant groups is their need to fulfil a sense of achievement and accomplishment. Armed groups’ propaganda successfully markets their victories against official troops on the ground. With an outreach and quality that

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<sup>16</sup> Rock-Singer, Aaron, "Islamic media and religious change in 1970s Egypt", *MPC Journal*, 23 January 2017, <https://mpc-journal.org/blog/2017/01/23/islamic-media-and-religious-change-in-1970s-egypt/>

<sup>17</sup> Byers D., Bryan; Jones A., James, "The impact of the terrorist attacks of 9/11 on anti-Islamic hate crime," *Journal of Ethnicity in Criminal Justice*, 5:1, 2007, p43-56

<sup>18</sup> Roth, Kenneth, "Egypt: Events of 2017", Human Rights Watch, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/egypt>

<sup>19</sup> Ayyash, Abdelrahman, "Strong organization, weak ideology", Arab Reform Initiative, 29<sup>th</sup> April 2019, <https://is.gd/34SxEH>

are unprecedented, this propaganda is unmatched by players of mainstream political Islamism, who can neither afford, nor are technically equipped to counter it.

Regional developments and foreign policy are also very important determinants in radicalisation.<sup>20</sup> After all, it is the common element between the post-2011 wave of violence and the ones that followed the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan and American occupation of Iraq. Amidst the 2011 uprisings, Iranian and Russian interventions supporting the Syrian regime against the mostly-Sunni insurgents have spurred many Egyptian youth to take sides in the conflict to support civilians and the vulnerable.<sup>21</sup>

## **History and Current Structure of State-Organized Religion Relations:**

### **Egypt's regulatory framework as a republic under Abdel-Nasser:**

With Egypt becoming a republic in 1952, its three-star flag resembling its diverse population was replaced, and an Arab nationalist identity overpowered any other. Even though the state claimed it was a neutral protector of Egypt's three main religious communities -- the Muslims, Christians and Jews -- its security agencies and political elite pursued Jews and, to a lesser extent, Christians for alleged ties to Israel.

As the Egyptian state was preoccupied with the struggle to take back the Sinai Peninsula from the Israelis and transition from a monarchy into a republic, little attention was paid to relations between religious communities.

This changed slightly after Abdel-Nasser, Egypt's new ruler, survived an assassination attempt and blamed it on Islamist movements like the MB and oversaw a crackdown against them in 1956. The episode ended with the execution of their founder, Hassan al-Banna, and the arrest and abuse of many of its followers.

### **Egypt's regulatory current framework:**

Since the late President Anwar El Sadat's 1971 constitutional adjustments, Islam has been a main source of legislation, presumably to win over conservative support. The current constitution, passed in 2014 and amended in 2019, is in line with this. Like its predecessors, it acknowledges the three Abrahamic religion, and its third article says that Judaism and Christianity are the sources of legislation for personal status law for their adherents.

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<sup>20</sup> Drevon, Jerome, "Embracing Salafi Jihadism in Egypt and Mobilizing in the Syrian Jihad", *Middle East Critique*, 25:4, 18 July 2016, pp321-339, p9-10

<sup>21</sup> Ahmed, Nouran S., "Toward understanding violence and revising counter-violence policies in southern Mediterranean", Euromesco, April 2019 <https://is.gd/wJCITU>



With time, relations between religious communities became a more sensitive issue domestically and an issue of international concern as the extremist Islamist crisis began to develop from the 1970s.

New rounds of repression in the 80s and 90s followed the 1981 assassination by extremists of Abdel-Nasser's successor, Anwar El Sadat, for making peace with Israel in 1973. Stories of torture and killings in Egypt's detention centres helped both the Brotherhood and Salafi groups, like Ansar al-Sunna and al-Gama'a al-Islamiyaa, gain some sympathy in Egyptian society. This paved the way to the current charged atmosphere of mistrust that Egypt suffers from. Asef Bayat argues:

"The major difference lay in the fact that Egypt began to develop a fairly powerful Islamist movement since the presidency of Anwar Sadat who paid lip service to the rising "Islamic Associations" in the universities as a way to undermine the Nasserist nationalists and communists as he was drawing close to the West. These Islamic Associations grew and, in the process, got radicalised by the 1980s during (President Hosni) Mubarak's rule, turning into the insurgent al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya and al-Jihad. Together with the powerful Muslim Brotherhood, who had maintained their non-violent strategy, and other emerging groups, Egypt experienced a strong "Islamic mode" during the 1990s and early 2000s. Egypt's Islamism developed basically outside and even in opposition to al-Azhar or the institution of the ulema."<sup>22</sup>

The Egypt state's approach to religious diversity, since 1952, was and continues to be reactionary and largely dormant, meaning the state only acts in order to contain an outburst of violence or issue perfunctory reassurances that all Egyptians were seen as equal periodically.

Egyptians falling outside of the three Abrahamic religions - like atheists, Bahais, agnostics - have and continue to be unacknowledged by the state and its laws.

The regime, however, maintains that article 64 of the constitution, which states that "freedom of religion is absolute," has and still does provide sufficient guarantees for Egyptians to practice and hold other non-Abrahamic beliefs.

But this specification has not removed bureaucratic limitations, some of which date back to the Ottoman-era, which restrain Copts' ability to build places of worship, for example.<sup>23</sup> Up until 2016, Egypt had a law, issued in 1934 by the interior ministry, that forbade the building of churches near schools or railway stations.<sup>24</sup> In 2016, Coptic leaders praised the partial lifting of some of its limitations, like omitting the previous requirement of obtaining permission from security agencies before building churches. The 2016 law does maintain the authorities' right to choose the size of the church based on the number of Christians in its area — a calculation that is difficult to assess since the

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<sup>22</sup> Gokmen, Ozgur, "Five years after the Arab uprisings: An interview with Asef Bayat" *Jadaliyya*, 30 April 2016 <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/33222>

<sup>23</sup> Abouelenein, Ahmed; Abdallah, Mohamed, "Egyptian parliament approves long-awaited church building law," *Reuters*, 30 August 2016 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-politics-religion/egyptian-parliament-approves-long-awaited-church-building-law-idUSKCN1152KK>

<sup>24</sup> Mazel, Zvi, "A new law aims to make building churches in Egypt easier - But will it work?", *The Jerusalem Post*, 6 September 2016, <https://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/A-new-law-aims-to-make-building-churches-in-Egypt-easier-but-will-it-work-466890>

government does not accept independent tallies of Christians by church leaders, nor does it count them itself.<sup>25</sup>

Other constitutional articles that do provide more protections, like article 65, which guarantees freedom of expression, is constrained by the vaguely worded penal code articles of 98 (f), 160 and 161.<sup>26</sup> Even though the constitution's legal authority overrides that of the penal code, the aforementioned vaguely-worded articles are routinely employed by authorities to prosecute people for their expressed views.<sup>27</sup> Since 2011, there have been at least 63 such cases, and in 2017 the US Commission on International Religious Freedom ranked Egypt sixth in the world for harsh blasphemy laws.<sup>28</sup>

Even when there are no penal or civil codes obstructing the application of liberal constitutional articles, like article 53 that criminalises religion-based discrimination, the state has failed to apply them. For example, it is extremely difficult for Muslims to change their religion status on their national ID, but it is possible for Christians to change theirs to Islam. The Bahais were, according to press reports, the only non-Abrahamic religious minority to ever come close to getting recognition in their national ID. After suing the government, all that they managed to achieve in 2009 was replace their religious identification with a dash (-).<sup>29</sup>

Outside civil rights matters, article 2, which states that the principles of the Sharia are the principle source of legislation, has had little impact on Egyptian laws, whose French origins (in terms of civil law) are a relic of the 19<sup>th</sup> century French occupation of Egypt. Article 2 acts as a restraining mechanism in terms of legal precedent, rather than an active positive law-making mechanism.

There are, however, signs that the state's approach to governing the relations between religious communities may change or become more proactive in the near- or medium-term. President Sisi has been attending Christmas mass celebrations since 2016, which sent an objectively small but rare and significant message of inclusion to the public as he is the first Egyptian president to do so.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, the increase in prosecutions of perceived insults to religion signalled to many a change of state's policy of indifference towards non-conformists that was present prior to the rise of Islamist radicalisation.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Abouelenein & Abdellah

<sup>26</sup> Barsoum, Marina. "Egypt's anti-blasphemy law: Defence of religion or tool for persecution?" *Ahram Online*, 15 May 2016, [english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/151/216896/Egypt/Features/Egypt-antiblasphemy-law-Defence-of-religion-or-to.aspx](http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/151/216896/Egypt/Features/Egypt-antiblasphemy-law-Defence-of-religion-or-to.aspx)

<sup>27</sup> Ibid

<sup>28</sup> "Ranking countries by their blasphemy laws", *The Economist*, 13 August 2017, <https://www.economist.com/erasmus/2017/08/13/ranking-countries-by-their-blasphemy-laws?fsrc=rss>

<sup>29</sup> "Egypt: Decree Ends ID Bias Against Baha'is", *Human Rights Watch*, 15 April 2009, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2009/04/15/egypt-decree-ends-id-bias-against-bahais>

<sup>30</sup> "Egypt's Sisi attends Coptic Christmas celebration amid tight security," *Xinhua*. 7 January 2018. [www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-01/07/c\\_136877006.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-01/07/c_136877006.htm)

<sup>31</sup> Darwish, Passant. "Egypt's 'war on atheism'," *Ahram Online*. 15 January 2015.

[english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/151/120204/Egypt/Features/Egypt-war-on-atheism.aspx](http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/151/120204/Egypt/Features/Egypt-war-on-atheism.aspx)

## Religious Extremism Challenges:

### i) Violent non-jihadi<sup>32</sup> current:

Segments of the wider MB-inspired universe which took up arms after 2013, are the principal representative of this category. Those armed groups are known as the “Qualitative Committees” (QC), and came to life officially and organizationally in 2014, with the support of Mohamed Kamal. A member of the MB’s Guidance Bureau, Kamel led a current within the wider MB-universe that endorsed a more ‘confrontational’ attitude, which appears to have included certain types of violence. As the MB fragmented, Kamal emerged as the godfather and engineer of QC, and his political wing was reportedly able to consolidate control over some provincial bureaus along the Nile Delta, including Fayoum, Alexandria, Bani Soueif, Minya, Giza, Cairo, Qalyoubia and Munifiya, with fluctuating influence on some bureaus.<sup>33</sup> The first such group reportedly founded under Kamal’s supervision to deploy such violence was the Popular Resistance and Revolutionary Punishment group (PRRP) in 2015. Kamel was killed by security forces in 2016.

Other groups include Liwa’ al-Thawra, which claimed the assassination of General Regai, commander of the ninth armoured division in Dahshur in 2016.<sup>34</sup> Hasm (Sawa’id Misr) is another group that was established in 2016 and has conducted both explosive attacks and targeted policemen. It also attempted the assassination of the former grand mufti, Ali Gomaa, and the deputy prosecutor, General Zakaria Abdel Aziz.<sup>35</sup>

Other smaller, short-lived groups were possibly experiments leading to the emergence of QC. These include Maghouloun (Anonymous), Wala’a (Set on Fire) and Molotov, which provided instructions on how to use Molotov cocktails against police forces. Another entity, called ‘Edam (Execution), aimed at assassinating policemen and thugs hired by security forces to chase and beat demonstrators. Finally, there were the Helwan Brigades, who were mostly arrested shortly after several operations.<sup>36</sup>

These currents, made up mostly of MB supporters, used minimal religious interpretation to justify their use of violence, emphasizing on the right to use violence to defend their lives and against those who kill the protesters. Generally speaking, this category’s discourse focuses on concepts of “resistance”, “revenge on state apparatus due to its

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<sup>32</sup> We use ‘jihadi’ here as a term that is used generally in the literature, while noting that ‘jihad’ is used widely in Islamic literature in the same way that ‘just war’ is used in Catholic doctrines. In other words, while the word has been instrumentalised by extremists, it has a very normative basis within Islamic thought, and does not automatically mean extremism. Indeed, Muslims of all normative types view the word in a positive fashion. As one Islamic scholar mentioned, ‘terrorism is to jihad what adultery is to marriage’.

<sup>33</sup> Hamama, Mohamed, “Interior ministry policy inks the end of the Qualitative Committees’ Engineer”, *Mada Masr*, 4 October 2016, <https://is.gd/zORpss>

<sup>34</sup> “Liwa’ Al-Thawra”, *Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP)*, 29 March 2017 <https://is.gd/TSrihB>

<sup>35</sup> “Hasam”, *TIMEP*, 29 March 2017, <https://is.gd/iLangP>

<sup>36</sup> Video published by Al-Masry Al-Yowm allegedly showing *Helwan Brigades* fighters in their first appearance <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-OQMPEjk60U>

violations” and “restoring the Islamic rule of Mohamed Morsi”.<sup>37</sup> However, recent public statements issued by the PRRP reveal a shift in the discourse and the technical aspects of the videos, which could imply the influence of extremist actors or a possible collaboration.<sup>38</sup>

These violent, non-jihadi groups mainly operate in the mainland and, apart from the aforementioned human targets, they also attacked properties, infrastructure, and economic interests.

ii) Violent Salafi-Jihadi current:

This category comprises of Salafi-Jihadi actors affiliated either with ISIS or Al-Qaeda, or some relatively local jihadi actors. While it is known that both ISIS and Al-Qaeda mainly operate in remote and border areas, either in the Sinai Peninsula or the Western Desert, they are also active in the mainland to some extent. Both groups are known for their highly advanced training, strategies and equipment as militias, and are together responsible for some of the deadliest operations against security forces.

With regards to ISIS-affiliated actors, this consists of Ansar Bait al-Maqdis (ABM) which declared allegiance to ISIS in 2014 and renamed itself as Wilayat Sinai (the Sinai Province). Mainly operating in Sinai, the group’s scope of targets has significantly broadened following the 2013 overthrow of Morsi, from primarily targeting the gas pipelines between Egypt and Israel and Israelis near Sinai, to then attacking security forces, civilians accused of aiding security forces, and more recently tourists, like downing the Russian passenger jet in 2015; Christians, through killing them or forcing them to flee their homes in Sinai; and Sufi groups, through the 2017 attack on a mosque that left over 305 worshippers dead. They have taken hostages, mainly foreigners.<sup>39</sup>

There is also the so-called “Islamic State in Egypt” (ISE) (i.e., ISIS in Egypt), which likely maintains connections with the Sinai Province. ISE is mainly active in the mainland, and some analysts think it is mostly centred in Cairo and Giza, with less presence in other governorates.<sup>40</sup> It has claimed major operations like bombing an Italian governmental office in Cairo, and attacks on Coptic churches in Cairo and Alexandria.<sup>41</sup> Their version of Salafi-Jihadism is derived from that of Al-Qa’eda, which regards the state and its apparatus as apostates.

As for Al-Qaeda-affiliate actors, these are active in both Sinai and the western desert. One of their major arms is Jund Al-Islam, which conducted several attacks on state facilities in Sinai.<sup>42</sup> However, Al-Murabitun, which was founded by former special forces officer Hisham Ashmawy who was previously a member in ABM, is the most prominent

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<sup>37</sup> Awad, Mokhtar; Hashem, Mostafa, “Egypt’s Escalating Islamist insurgency”, *Carnegie Middle East Centre*, 21 October 2015 <https://is.gd/qVZM6I>

<sup>38</sup> Mcmanus, Allison; Green, Jake, “Egypt’s mainland terrorism landscape”, *TIMEP*, 7 June 2016 <https://is.gd/kCS9mj>

<sup>39</sup> “Wilayat Sinai”, *TIMEP*, 23 July 2014 <https://timep.org/esw/non-state-actors/wilayat-sinai/>

<sup>40</sup> Mcmanus & Green, *ibid*.

<sup>41</sup> “Islamic State In Egypt”, *TIMEP*, 8 May 2017 <https://is.gd/hEnWWX>

<sup>42</sup> “Jund Al-Islam”, *TIMEP*, 22 July 2014 <https://is.gd/KY67z3>

armed group believed to be affiliated with Al-Qaeda. It is active in the western desert and Libya and is reported to include some former military officers.<sup>43</sup>

Other lower-profile violent groups with ties to Al-Qaeda and Ashmawy are Ansar al-Islam and Jabhat al-Tahrir.<sup>44</sup> The former is recognised for its 2017 attack in the western oasis which left 58 officers and soldiers killed.<sup>45</sup> It came back to the scene by declaring new attacks on economic properties of American corporation for petroleum “Apache”, by using IEDs, whilst threatening British Petroleum, Italian corporation (ENI) and Apache to leave the country and to withhold all their operations on Egypt land.<sup>46</sup> Another affiliate of al-Qaeda is Ansar al-Sharia, which has been active in Egypt since 2011. Some of its leaders have ties with Muhammed al-Zawahiri, long before the 2011 uprising.<sup>47</sup> Regional links were present obviously, whether with Salafi-Jihadi groups in Gaza or with Salafi-Jihadi ones in Mali via Libya.<sup>48</sup>

A homegrown jihadi group that has set itself apart from both regional and global actors like IS and Al-Qaeda, is Afnan Misr (Egypt’s Soldiers).<sup>49</sup> The short-lived group disappeared after its leader Hamam Attiya, who operated in Iraq in the early 2000s, was killed by security forces. The group was flexible in opening its doors to members who hold no strong connections to other jihadi factions, and shared the same principle targets of policemen, military forces and judges.<sup>50</sup>

## State’s Counter-Radicalisation Efforts: Cases and Responses

### Law and the judiciary: First lines of attack

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 January 2011 uprising.

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 are 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

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<sup>43</sup> Zahran, Mostafa, “Regional Jihad: Contemporary Jihadist movements in Egypt” in book: “What is political in Islam?” (Ma al-seyasey fe al-Islam?), Dar Maraya, 2018, p136

<sup>44</sup> Ibid

<sup>45</sup> Walsh, Declan; Youssef, Nour, “Militants Kill Egyptian Security Forces in Devastating Ambush”, *New York Times*, 21 October 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/21/world/middleeast/egypt-ambush-hasm.html>

<sup>46</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/ahmed.mawlana.16/posts/656155831520140?\\_tn=%K-R](https://www.facebook.com/ahmed.mawlana.16/posts/656155831520140?_tn=%K-R)

<sup>47</sup> Ibid

<sup>48</sup> Verdict in case publicly known as “Madinat Nasr Cell”, *Manshurat*, 22 October 2014 <https://manshurat.org/node/1289>

<sup>49</sup> “Afnan Misr”, *TIMEP*, 22 July 2014 <https://timep.org/esw/non-state-actors/ajnad-misr/>

<sup>50</sup> Zahran, p138-140

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, providing a broad definition of what constitutes a terrorist act, which made the expression of political protest susceptible to prosecution.

Furthermore, the law includes unprecedented indicators of the state's retaliatory approach. It shields all troops enforcing the law from any criminal responsibility when exhibiting force in confrontations.

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, can be used to easily undermine the guarantees of justice and impartiality.

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.

Despite this spree of terrorism-focused legislations, 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. Swiftness has also been tangible in authorities' conduct of death penalties, eliminating any chance of backtracking or appeals in cases where new evidence emerges.

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.

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.

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. 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.

### **Religious institutions in Egypt's War on Terror**

#### **i) Ministry of Endowments (MoE)**

MoE's plays a particularly active role in combatting terrorism by virtue of its authority over mosques. The ministry's main focus is to dismantle potential channels of communication between organizations of extremist Islamism and less radical groups, and the public, which can take place through mosques and their faculties.

As such, law no. 51 of 2014 stipulates that religious sermons must be authorized by imams of Al-Azhar, and delivered only by those appointed by the MoE. Temporary permits issued for imams to deliver sermons allow for the continuous monitoring of their compliance to distributed instructions.

Informal prayer halls, or smaller mosques known as *zawaya*, were brought under the MoE's supervision by decree no. 64 of 2014. Since 2013, the ministry has reportedly shut down nearly 20,000 *zawaya*.

The MoE also undertook initiatives to safeguard youth from being recruited by fundamentalists, which include the "Schools of Knowledge" initiative that was launched in 2017 and involves imams teaching religious curriculum to the public in schools operating in major mosques.

Similarly, many female preachers have been appointed to track women who account for the majority of donation made to support extremist groups as well as political religious groups that oppose the state. A ban on such financial activity by non-government entities in mosques has also been imposed by a MoE decree.

#### **ii) Al-Azhar**

Al-Azhar, the world's pre-eminent seat of religious learning for Sunni Muslims, is also active in combating extremism, albeit at a predominantly global level. One of its vital instruments is al-Azhar's Observatory to Combat Extremism with its social media platforms, which uses 12 languages to spread its interpretation of Islam and tracks terrorist operations in various countries and studies them.

As for its role at home, al-Azhar's efforts include representatives holding communal sessions within local communities, which in large part targets university students nationwide.

That being said, al-Azhar's biggest contribution to the war on extremism is the amendments it made to the institution's learning curricula after 2013. The objective was to revise and eliminate excerpts of the curricula which are seen to incite violence and hatred, especially against Christians, or deemed too outdated and clash with modern times. These updated curricula are subject to assessment every three years.

### iii) Dar al-Ifta' (House of Edicts)

Dar al-Ifta' is another government institution that launched its own media-focused Monitoring Observatory to examine radical views and refute them on social media.

The extent to which these three institutions impact the fight against extremism remains unclear. Similarly, their outreach among youth and other social groups cannot be accurately assessed. However, it's likely that their efforts on the ground are limited in impact because of the multi-layered gaps that separate them from average citizens and their daily hardships and concerns.

## **Non-state alliances**

Although the Egyptian counterterrorism strategy is a 'statist' one, there are other factors which must not be overlooked. This is, for instance, how the state and its bodies co-opted numbers of community forces in the border provinces. This is evident in the western parts of Egypt, where Salafism has significant influence and where the state reached an understanding with the tribes there to facilitate the arrest of wanted terrorists who rely on logistical support from locals of these regions. Thus, the state achieved a tighter control over the western borders with Libya, and also succeeded in releasing security officers who were kidnapped by outlawed terrorist groups in these regions. Such co-optation of tribes involved pledges of dropping legal charges against their leaders and paying compensation to victims who fell during clashes between government troops and armed militants. In exchange for that, tribesmen must assist authorities in enforcing law and order in their regions, and in controlling the flow of weapons across borders.

A similar pact was achieved with the population of North Sinai, although on a much larger and more complex scale. The state bodies and the local tribes in Sinai have reached certain understandings, manifested in the 'Union of the Tribes of Sinai,' an entity bringing together pro-state tribesmen.

The state-tribes cooperation in North Sinai plays a role more similar to that of the Awakening movement in Iraq. This can be witnessed through the partaking of tribesmen in combat, and their involvement in inspecting and interrogating terrorists captured by the security forces. This cooperation has led the ABM terrorist group to target leaders and members of pro-army tribes.

In recent years, such alliances with Sinai locals have been on the decline because the army's security strategy shifted to relying primarily on evacuating entire cities, demolishing many residential areas and agricultural land. Unsurprisingly, this has severely impacted the lives and livelihoods of locals. There have also been reports on abuses and violations carried out by security forces against local communities.

Elsewhere in Egypt, particularly in the New Valley (or al-Wadi al-Gedid) Governorate, such forms of communal alliance completely vanished as the state uses pure authoritarianism to control both security and administrative aspects of the region. Aside from the aforementioned rare incidents of communal collaboration, Egypt's war on terror has been predominantly state-controlled, and two specific examples of the state's rejection of communal collaboration stand out the most. The first took place in 2014 by



the Salafi al-Nour Party and Da'wa movement, under the banner of 'Egypt Without Violence', which was rejected and stopped by the state under the pretext of it lacking coordination with the authorities.

Similarly, a set of initiatives put forth by the Construction and Development Party of Al-Gama'a Al-Islamiyya, calling for nonviolence from both state and anti-state groups, failed to gain any traction in Egypt's political sphere, and was shunned by the state.

### **Regional cooperation**

On a regional level, the Egyptian state coordinates with several neighbouring countries in the war on terrorism. The Hamas movement, an offshoot of the MB which governs the Gaza strip, has come to aid the Egyptian government through committing to closing joint borders during the course of the most recent military operation. Hamas also provided intelligence to the Egyptian military relevant to the fight against armed groups. Furthermore, the government of the Gaza Strip established a 100m deep buffer zone, extending along the 13km borders it shares with Egypt.

To the south and west, Egypt coordinated with Sudan, and with the Libyan National Army (LNA) under Khalifa Haftar in their offence, which also targets militants associated with IS. The recent arrest of Al-Murabitun's leading figure 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.

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.

### **Military campaigns**

In relation to security and military confrontations, Egypt's armed forces have conducted a series of military confrontations, mostly focusing in North Sinai as the hotbed of military groups, but which also included parts of the Delta and deserts west of the Nile valley.

Throughout these operations, official military statements frequently announce the success of advances made against extremists, as well as losses inflicted in the ranks of security forces. However, it is difficult to verify or challenge the accuracy of such data, since the anti-terrorism law penalises the publication of false news or statements on terrorist acts or counterterror operations contrary to official Ministry of Defence statements.

In a similar vein, the state pledges development projects in North Sinai on administrative and economic levels, but these promises have not yet borne any fruit, and there is no talk about programs to rehabilitate radicalised individuals.

## 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 are unlikely to be less political, while strategies would benefit from involving more substantial societal involvement.

Egypt's counter-radicalisation politics have been fully state-dominated, which can be 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; the state doesn't seek any partnership with societal groups. Efforts to combat terrorism are politicized and populist, aimed at consolidating power dynamics that favour the current war on terror dynamic.

Capitalizing on international community's fear of terrorism, the authorities focus on the war on terror narrative to extend and expand the limits of exception, making it the norm for everyday politics. In its war on terror, the state uses all tools. The judiciary system has become entangled in the politicized war on terror, leading to accusation of undermining its own perceived credibility and independence with new legislation.

As previously discussed, approximately 90 percent of Egyptians are Sunni Muslims and the vast majority of the remainder are followers of Coptic Orthodox Christianity. Egypt has a handful of Jews, Bahais, atheists and Muslims from other sects, that number in the low thousands. This, combined with the fact that Egypt has been run by a strongly military-influenced Nasserite republican model since 1952, limits public discussion on such a sensitive issue as religious diversity, except in the modes that the state supports. (Between the 2011 uprising and 2013, Egyptian activists interested in the matter experienced an opening in such discussions). Society cannot address bigotry and sectarianism effectively when doing so may be perceived as challenging public order.

The credibility of the roles of religious institutions role was also skewed by relations with the state. This decreased their legitimacy as trusted bodies capable of delivering independent and unbiased views on religion to Muslims. State-approved efforts on their part have often been perceived as unlikely to resonate with the masses. While the Ministry of Islamic Endowments and Dar al-Ifta' have become subordinate to state narratives, Al-Azhar continues to vie for independence, which is only met by more state limitations. It is difficult to gauge these institutions' impact on the ground.

Ironically, actors who engaged in violence in 1980s and 1990s, like al-Gamaa al-Islamiya and Al-Jihad, are more likely to have a counter-radicalisation impact. Their previous experience and their revisions vis-a-vis modern jihadi narratives as a concept possibly works in their favour. This history of jihadism enables factions like the Salafi Call and Al-Gamaa Al-Islamiyya to engage in intellectual debates with Salafi jihadists on modern discussions on jihad and relations with state and the society. However, the credibility of these groups among hard-line mainstream Islamists was impacted by their political positions post-2013.

On the military front, the state's security surveillance in the mainland claim successes against militants, announcing countless raids and deaths in insurgents' ranks, and the foiling of terrorist attacks and plots. These claims are difficult to independently verify. 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 has been rumoured to cooperate with the authorities to contain radicalised MB youths, and restrict the flow of money into the rogue 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 ISIS's appeal among these youth, and others assuming that many youths were radicalised 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 the society with the risk of taking on a new round of violence.<sup>51</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 brunt of war. Therefore, although terrorist networks face losses at the hands of the military, the root causes for radicalisation still exist, and don't seem to be abating soon.

## **Timeline of main events that affected religious dynamics in recent Egyptian history:**

- 1) 1948: Following the establishment of Israel in mandated Palestine, various sentiments abound in Egypt, among both officials and the public, particularly about perceived support Israel received from Egyptian Copts and Jews, resulting tensions among Muslim and non-Muslim Egyptians. Nationalistic sentiment and resulting measures leads to many in historically non-Arab communities (such as Jewish-Egyptians, Greek-Egyptians and Latin Egyptians) to depart.
- 2) 1952: Military ends monarchy and takes over, and begins campaign to co-opt Muslim, Christians and non-religious public figures, movements and institutions.
- 3) 1954: President Gamal Abdel-Nasser survives an assassination attempt and blames it on the Muslim Brotherhood group. He bans them and cracks down on the movement, which is used as a recruitment tool later on.

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<sup>51</sup> "Made in Prison", *Arij*, [https://arij.net/made\\_in\\_prison/](https://arij.net/made_in_prison/)

- 4) 1971: President Anwar El Sadat makes Islam the official religion of the State in an apparent bid to gain conservative support.
- 5) 1981: President Sadat is assassinated by extremist Islamists; his successor, President Hosni Mubarak, tightens state control over religious institutions, which leads to the undermining of their credibility and influence in Egypt. Crackdown on Islamists is heightened, and radicalisation narratives are strengthened.
- 6) 2001: US-led war on terror begins, which in turn is followed by a surge in appeal of extremist ideology in Egypt, aided by growing economic hardships.
- 7) 2011: Overthrow of Hosni Mubarak leads to an environment of political freedom and openness, which on the one hand allows for extensive media freedom, and on the other means that populist sectarian rhetoric becomes more visible in certain parts of the pro-Islamist public sphere.
- 8) 2013: Morsi supporters fixate on role of the church in support of the military overthrow, particularly after the crackdown; violent backlash that sees the destruction of over 200 churches and Christian businesses.
- 9) 2014-to date: Military tightens grip over mosques, closing unlicensed ones and outlawing non-state-sanctioned Friday sermons. ISIS group rises to more prominence, targeting Christians in different parts of the country, facing a massive counter-terrorism effort by the state.

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Contact: [anna.triandafyllidou@eui.eu](mailto:anna.triandafyllidou@eui.eu)

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