



EGYPT

Quick Facts

Population: 106,437,241 (July 2021 est.)

Area: 1,001,450 sq km

Ethnic Groups: Egyptian 99.7%, other 0.3% (2006 est.)

GDP (official exchange rate): \$323.763 billion (2019 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated February 2021)

INTRODUCTION

Egypt has played a central role in the history of Islamism. In 1928, an Egyptian teacher named Hassan al-Banna (1906-1949) founded the Muslim Brotherhood, the world's first modern Islamist social and political movement, and the most prominent Islamist force in Egypt. The Brotherhood soon created an ideological framework that would become the main political opposition to future Egyptian governments. From the time of President Gamal Abdel Nasser and through the era of his successor, Hosni Mubarak, the Brotherhood was outlawed but tolerated to varying extents.

Mubarak's ouster in 2011 marked a turning point for Islamists in the country, with several Islamic groups establishing legal political parties to participate in post-uprising politics. In the parliamentary elections held between November 2011 and January 2012, Islamists and Salafis won nearly three-quarters of all seats in the new Egyptian parliament. Mohammed Morsi (1951-2019), a Muslim Brotherhood leader, was elected Egypt's president on June 30, 2012 in the country's first democratic presidential election. However, in the wake of mass protests against Morsi's increasingly authoritarian and incompetent government in the summer of 2013, the Egyptian military ousted Morsi and replaced him with an interim government tasked with drafting and passing a new constitution. That government severely repressed the group and imprisoned tens of thousands of its leaders and members – a trend that has continued under the tenure of its current President, General Abdel Fatah el-Sisi, who has held power since 2013. But the Sisi government has been forced to deal not only with the perceived internal threat posed by the Brotherhood; since Morsi's overthrow, Egypt has had to contend with a significant upsurge in jihadist violence in the Sinai Peninsula, which has impacted the country's internal security situation as well as its relations with neighboring Israel.¹

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

The Muslim Brotherhood (Al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun, or MB)

The Muslim Brotherhood, founded in 1928 by Hassan al-Banna, is now the most prominent Egyptian Islamist movement. Its ideology states that a true “Islamic society” is one in which state institutions and the government follow the principles of the Quran, and in which laws follow *sharia* (Islamic law).² Al-Banna, a teacher from a modest background, was heavily influenced by Syrian-Egyptian thinker Mohammed Rashid Rida, who believed that a return to 7th and 8th century Islamic practices was the only way for Muslim societies to regain strength and to escape Western colonialism and cultural hegemony.³ Al-Banna viewed Islam as an “all-embracing concept,” meant to govern every aspect of life, and he constructed the MB to advance this totalitarian interpretation within Egypt from the grassroots up. Specifically, he sought to “reform” the individual through the Brotherhood’s multi-year indoctrination process, those individuals would then form families, and the families would then spread the message within Egyptian society. Once Egyptian society was “Islamized,” an Islamic state would emerge, and, once this happened throughout the Muslim world, the states would unify under a new *caliphate*.

Muslim Brotherhood cells spread rapidly throughout Egypt in the late 1920s and the 1930s. Amid episodic government crackdowns, the Brotherhood formed a violent “secret apparatus,” which was implicated in multiple assassinations and terrorist attacks. Al-Banna was assassinated in February 1949, and, while the Brotherhood initially cooperated with Egypt’s military following the July 1952 Free Officers’ revolution, the government cracked down on the group following an attempt on President Gamal Abdel Nasser’s life. During this period, the Brotherhood’s chief ideologue, Sayyid Qutb, authored the famous Islamist manifesto *Ma‘alim fi-l-Tariq (Milestones Along The Way)* while in prison in 1964. In *Milestones*, Qutb claims that all non-Muslim societies, and indeed those societies that are only Muslim in name but not in practice, are in a state of *jahiliyya* (ignorance). *Jahili* societies are those that do not strictly follow revelation, and Qutb called on Muslims to wage offensive *jihād* against *jahiliyya* until a global, united Islamic community was established. This was interpreted as a call to arms against the Egyptian state, and Qutb was executed in 1966.⁴

Following Nasser’s death in 1970, his successor, Anwar al-Sadat, lifted restrictions on Islamist activism, viewing Islamists as a useful counter to the leftists and the Nasserist old guard who challenged his authority. During this period, a wide variety of Islamist groups emerged on Egyptian campuses. As the Egyptian government liberated Brotherhood leaders throughout the 1970s, the organization integrated many of these young Islamists as it rebuilt itself.

The Brotherhood has adopted political tactics that favor activism and elections rather than revolution and/or violence. This process began following the execution of Sayyid Qutb in 1966. Members of the movement began questioning the relevance of *jihād* as a way to combat the government, and many chose to reject violence. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Brotherhood increasingly disavowed *jihād* in favor of political participation on campuses, in labor unions, and in the general elections. The process began with the release of a text entitled *Preachers, Not Judges* in 1969, which was likely written by multiple individuals but has been attributed to supreme guide Hassan al-Hudaybi. In this tract, al-Hudaybi developed a series of theological counterarguments to Qutb’s radical views.⁵ Under the leadership of al-Hudaybi and his successor, Umar al-Tilmisani, the Brotherhood officially and unequivocally distanced itself from armed action, gave an oath to Sadat not to use violence against his regime, and even named the President a “martyr” after he was killed in 1981. Under Mubarak, the Brotherhood participated in most parliamentary elections, either in partnership with legal parties, including non-Islamist ones, or as independent candidates. However, it remained a barely tolerated illegal organization, and the government could use its illegality as a pretext for cracking down on the the Brotherhood whenever it appeared to be gaining strength – such as during the run-up to the 1995 elections, and following its success in the 2005

elections (when it won 88 of 444 contested seats).

Notably, the group's renunciation of violence was limited to the domestic sphere. The Brotherhood otherwise continued to praise terrorist acts conducted by Hamas, its Palestinian off-shoot, as well as by the Iranian-backed Shi'ite militia Hezbollah.

In late April of 2011, the Brotherhood announced the creation of its "Freedom and Justice Party" (FJP). The FJP's policies would be grounded in Islamic principles but would be non-confessional and tolerant, including to both women and Christians in its ranks. In June 2011, the FJP received official recognition as a political party, enabling it to run candidates in the 2011-2012 parliamentary elections. This pragmatic positioning within the Egyptian political system, however, drew condemnation from other Islamist groups, most notably the al-Qaeda-affiliated Islamic Jihad and its commander Ayman al-Zawahiri, who criticized the Brotherhood's reorientation in a book entitled *The Bitter Harvest: The Muslim Brotherhood in Sixty Years (Al-Hisad al-Murr: Al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn fi Sittin 'Aman)*.⁶ Zawahiri wrote:

The Muslim Brotherhood, by recognizing the tyrants' legitimacy and sharing constitutional legitimacy with them, has become a tool in the tyrants' hands to strike *jihadi* groups in the name of [fighting] extremism and disobeying *sharia* [Islamic law]. There should be no doubt that we are proud to be outside of this "legitimacy of disbelief," which the Muslim Brotherhood has accepted and approved.⁷

In the wake of the coup, the organization gathered its members and allies in northern Cairo's Rabaa al-Adawiya Square and Giza's al-Nahda Square. Protesters denounced the interim government installed to replace Morsi as illegitimate. After negotiations between it and the new government broke down, security forces violently cleared these protests on August 14, 2013 and killed at least 800 civilians.⁸ The new government arrested tens of thousands of Brotherhood leaders and supporters and, following a terrorist incident in December 2013, the government labeled the organization a terrorist group.⁹ Ultimately, the government's crackdown on the group appears to have been decapitated, rendering it incapable of executing a nationwide strategy in Egypt.¹⁰

Meanwhile, the Muslim Brotherhood faces a significant internal crisis pitting younger members, who want to fight the current government with violence, against older leaders who fear that violence will legitimize the regime's crackdown. The organization's youth wing seemingly won internal elections that in 2014, which explains a January 2015 statement from the Brotherhood calling for *jihād* and martyrdom in fighting the regime. For a time, the group's "revolutionary" wing was led by a senior leader, Mohamed Kamal, who endorsed and encouraged violence against Egyptian security forces and state infrastructure. Kamal commissioned a *sharia* body within the organization to draft an Islamic legal defense of his faction's violence, deemed acts of "self-defense," entitled *The Jurisprudence of Popular Resistance to the Coup*.¹¹ This pitted him and his faction against the group's "old guard," nominally headed by deputy supreme guide Mahmoud Ezzat.¹² The rift deepened after several "old guard" leaders who had remained in hiding in Egypt in mid-2015 were arrested, as the "old guard" blamed the "revolutionary" wing's violence for endangering senior leaders. For a brief period, however, the "revolutionary" wing appeared to have the upper hand, and took control of the organization's main web portal. However, when Kamal was killed during a raid in October 2016, the "old guard" retook control. This did little to dampen the rift, however, and in early 2017, the "revolutionary" wing launched a series of online pamphlets criticizing the "old guard" leaders' conduct since the 2011 uprising and calling for new group power structures.¹³

When Morsi died while imprisoned in June 2019, the Brotherhood called for funerals paying tribute to the former president. However, people in Egypt didn't pay vigil, whether due to fear of a crackdown on protest, low media coverage of the event, a decline in the Brotherhood's popularity and of Morsi himself since his term, or the state's successes in its efforts to delegitimize the group.¹⁴

Today, due to these internal disagreements as well as effective government pressure, the group no

longer represents a significant threat to the current regime. The Egyptian government, in turn, has sought to press its advantage by shutting down the Brotherhood's social and educational services, freezing much of its finances and instituting strict restrictions on mosque preaching.

The Islamic Group (Al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya)

For years, the Islamic Group recruited on university campuses, in Egyptian prisons, and in the country's poor urban and rural areas. It was involved in a series of attacks during the 1980s and 1990s that were aimed at deposing Egypt's government and replacing it with an Islamic theocracy. These attacks included the 1997 killing of Western tourists in Luxor, the attempted assassination of President Hosni Mubarak in Ethiopia in 1995, the Cairo bombings of 1993, and several other armed operations against Egyptian intellectuals and Coptic Christians. The movement's spiritual leader, Umar Abd al-Rahman, was connected to Ramzi Yusuf, the perpetrator of the first World Trade Center bombing in 1993.¹⁵ Rahman and nine followers were subsequently arrested and convicted of plotting to blow up the United Nations headquarters in New York, the New York Federal Reserve Building, the George Washington Bridge, and the Holland and Lincoln Tunnels.

In July 1997, during a military tribunal, one of the group's activists, Muhammad al-Amin Abd al-Alim, read a statement signed by six other Islamist leaders that called on their affiliates to cease all armed operations in Egypt and abroad.¹⁶ While it elicited considerable controversy within the movement, the statement heralded the beginning of the group's renunciation of violence. In March 1999, the group's leadership launched an "Initiative for Ceasing Violence" and declared a unilateral ceasefire. Ideologues and leaders were mostly successful in convincing their base to renounce armed struggle and support a non-violent approach by authoring a series of texts to provide the ideological justification for their rejection of violence. Later that year, the Islamic Group declared a unilateral ceasefire in its longstanding struggle against the Egyptian government. This declaration marked a major ideological shift and, eventually, a complete end to violent behavior in 2002. Islamic Group leaders published four books in January 2002 under the title of *Correcting Conceptions (Silsilat Tashih al-Mafahim)*, addressing the reasons behind its ideological reorientation and explaining why *jihad* in Egypt had failed. Twelve other books followed, developing a critique of al-Qaeda's extreme ideology.¹⁷ Islamic Group members have not claimed responsibility for any armed attack since.¹⁸

Another notable example of this dynamic was the interaction between the Islamic Group and the smaller, more radical Islamic Jihad that began in the 1990s and culminated in 2007, when the latter embraced non-violence to some degree. These efforts were led by the movement's former leader, Sayyid Imam al-Sharif—also known as Abd al-Qadir Ibn Abd al-Aziz, or "Dr. Fadl." His *Document for the Right Guidance of Jihad in Egypt and the World (Tarshid al-'Amal al-Jihadi fi Misrwa-l-'Alam)* had an enormous impact within the country's prisons and led numerous inmates to reject violent *jihad*.¹⁹

These moves to diminish radicalism within the party drove a faction of the Islamic Group's more violent adherents to join al-Qaeda in 2006.²⁰ In the 2011-2012 parliamentary elections, the Islamic Group ran under the banner of *Hizb al-Bina' wa-l-Tanmiya* (the Building and Development Party) and won thirteen seats in the lower house.²¹ Members of the Islamic Group have protested the Egyptian military's decision to depose Morsi and dissolve his government, but in February 2014 the organization announced it was ready to engage with the interim government to end Egypt's political impasse.²²

Islamic Jihad (Al-Jihad)

Active since the 1970s, *Al-Jihad* was officially formed in 1980 from the merger of two Islamist cells led by Karam Zuhdi and Muhammad Abd al-Salam Faraj, respectively. Faraj's famous manifesto, *Al-Farida al-Ghayiba* (The Absent Duty), outlined the new movement's ideology.²³ Like those affiliated with the Islamic Group, members of *Al-Jihad* represent a relative minority within Egypt's Islamist spectrum and are mostly former members of the MB, some of whom allegedly fought alongside the Afghan *mujahideen*

in the 1980s. The organization's stated objective was to overthrow the Egyptian "infidel" regime and establish an Islamic government in its place. The Islamic Jihad also sought to attack U.S. and Israeli interests in Egypt and abroad. The group is infamous for assassinating President Anwar Sadat in 1981 and for additional attacks on Egyptian government officials in the early 1990s. It also allegedly attacked Egypt's embassy in Pakistan in 1995 and was involved in planning bombings against U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998. In June 2001, the group merged with al-Qaeda to form a new entity, called *Gama'a Qa'idat al-Jihad*, headed by Osama bin Laden's second-in-command, Ayman al-Zawahiri.²⁴

Salafists

Salafists have had a presence in Egypt since the early 20th century. The first Salafist association, the "*Sharia* Assembly," was created in 1912 (before the formation of the Muslim Brotherhood). Another group, named the "Supporters of the Sunna" (*Ansar al-Sunna*), was founded by Sheikh Mohammed Hamid al-Fiqi in 1926. Its members focused on protecting monotheism and fighting practices and beliefs they considered against Islam.

Salafism became more visible in Egypt during the 1970s and 1980s, for two reasons. First, as previously mentioned, President Sadat permitted Islamists greater freedom during this period to counter leftists and Nasserists domestically. Second, Egyptians working abroad in Saudi Arabia and other Persian Gulf states returned home carrying with them Salafi-influenced ideas, allowing these religious tenets to spread. Further, both the Saudi religious establishment and private donors propagated Salafi ideology in Egypt by way of financial investment.

Although few Egyptians openly identified as Salafists under the Mubarak regime, there were signs that their puritanical interpretation of Islam was nonetheless gaining ground. This was, for instance, evidenced by the growing number of women wearing the *niqab* (full veil) and men growing their beards. Beyond the traditional role of radical *imams* in mosques, satellite television channels also adopted explicitly Salafist rhetoric, widening their audience in the process.²⁵

Radical Islamists have, for years, openly targeted religious minorities in an attempt to provoke sectarian warfare in Egypt. Coptic Christians, a community that represents an estimated 10 percent of the population, has been a special target of Salafist bigotry. Militant Salafists commonly portray Christians as "infidels" who conspire against Islam, and have regularly called for violent attacks on them.²⁶ The rise of Islamists following Mubarak's ouster brought these attitudes to the fore, as radical preachers called minorities "heretics" and threatened to expel them if they did not pay the *jizya*, a tax levied on non-Muslims, in certain instances.²⁷

Since the 2011 uprising, Salafists have engaged in a massive anti-Coptic hate campaign. As a result, many Egyptian Christians fled the country, fearing for their future under Islamist rule.²⁸ In 2012, several Salafists accused Copts of being "traitors" for voting against Islamists in the presidential polls.²⁹ Following Morsi's ouster, dozens of churches were torched nationwide. Unfortunately, these types of attacks have continued under the rule of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, despite the president's close relationship with the Coptic Orthodox Church.

Salafists have also targeted other sects of Islam, such as the Shi'a, Baha'i, and Sufis, viewing them as inauthentic.³⁰ Before 2011, Salafists banned the *dhikr* (a devotional act of Sufi orders) and continued to call for the prohibition of all Sufi ceremonies. Salafists further accuse Sufi community members of encouraging sin and debauchery by mixing the sexes at shrines and during their rituals. They have, for example, regularly pointed to the mosque of Ahmad al-Badawi in Tanta – where the founder of the Sufi Ahmadiyya order is buried – which does not enforce segregation between men and women except during prayers. Salafists also view ancient Egyptian monuments as idolatrous; following Mubarak's overthrow, various Salafist groups threatened to cover the pyramids in wax.³¹

Salafists have increasingly targeted Egyptian women. Because Egyptian law requires that at least one candidate from each party be a woman, the Salafist *Al-Nour* party (see below) has run female candidates; however, it replaced their pictures with either a rose or a logo. On multiple occasions, Salafist leaders who have appeared on political talk shows insisted that female hosts either wear a veil or that they be separated from them by a screen.³²

The Salafist Call is the preeminent Salafi organization in Egypt, and in the past has focused primarily

on preaching and social service. However, the group has recently shifted to focus on politics, establishing *Hizb al-Nour* (Light Party), led by Imad Abd al-Ghaffour.

Insurgencies and Jihadist Groups

Several little-known violent groups, like the *jihadist* “Abdallah Azzam Brigades in Egypt” or the “Holy Warriors of Egypt,”³³ emerged in the 2000s, spreading radical and extremist ideologies, conducting anti-regime activity, and accusing society and state institutions of “apostasy.”³⁴ Another group calling itself *Tawhid wa-l-Jihad* (Monotheism and Holy War), which was connected to al-Qaeda, emerged during this period in the Sinai. It targeted the country’s tourism sector in a wave of bombings that first hit the town of Taba in 2004 and then the resort towns of Sharm al-Sheikh and Dahab in 2005 and 2006.

When Mubarak was ousted following Egypt’s 2011 “Arab Spring” uprising, Islamic extremist activities assumed a new intensity. On multiple occasions, armed fighters attacked Egyptian security forces, police stations, and the al Arish-Ashkelon pipeline exporting natural gas to Israel and Jordan. Other operations targeted Israeli patrols and soldiers.³⁵ New *jihadist* groups emerged, such as *Ansar al-Jihad* (Supporters of Holy War).³⁶ The most prominent of these was *Ansar Beit al-Maqdis* (Supporters of Jerusalem, or ABM), which swore allegiance to the Islamic State in November 2014 and renamed itself *Wilayat Sinai* (Sinai Province).³⁷ Since then, the Egyptian military has engaged in a broad, multi-year offensive campaign against these groups.³⁸ Egyptian authorities have recently declared victory in this campaign,³⁹ but the government’s tight control over news regarding its operations in the Sinai make it difficult to assess the military’s performance.

As mentioned, ABM is the most significant *jihadist* group in Egypt. ABM started its violent operations immediately following Mubarak’s ouster in 2011, targeting Israel and Israeli interests in Egypt, such as the al Arish-Ashkelon natural gas pipeline, which has been bombed repeatedly since 2011. Since the 2013 coup, however, the Egyptian military has been the organization’s primary target and, as previously mentioned, the Egyptian military has been actively fighting ABM since September 2013.⁴⁰ Another *jihadist* group is *Ajnad Misr* (“Soldiers of Egypt”), which emerged in late January 2014, saying that it was targeting “criminal” elements of the regime. As of early February 2014, the group has claimed responsibility for seven attacks in Cairo.⁴¹ *Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis* has referred to *Ajnad Misr* as “brothers” and suggested⁴² that the two organizations have cooperated on attacks in the past, although neither the extent nor the nature of the collaboration is currently known.

Some young people affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood have formed a variety of low-level insurgency groups, such as the Molotov Movement, Revolutionary Punishment, *Liwaa al-Thawra*, and *Hasm*. These groups focus their attacks on state infrastructure and security forces. At the same time, Sinai-based *jihadists* used the 2013 coup as a pretext for escalating their attacks on security forces. These groups also benefitted from regional instability: state breakdown in Libya, for instance, has made additional weapons available. These groups have also aligned to varying extents with groups in Gaza, such as Hamas, in trying to destabilize the Egyptian government.

The Sinai Peninsula has been a hotbed for Islamic extremism for years. During the 2000s, a mix of state neglect and insufficient local security enabled groups active in the territory to develop smuggling networks, plan attacks, and develop local support there. A number of militant groups have even expressed the goal of creating an independent Islamic Emirate on the Peninsula. It also provides hideouts for *jihadist* networks and has become increasingly unstable since the July 3, 2013 military coup that ousted President Morsi from power.⁴³

Islamic State (IS)

As mentioned, in November 2014, ABM pledged allegiance to the Islamic State and its former leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and rebranded into *Wilayat Sinai* (WS). Following the November 2019 death of al-Baghdadi, WS was the first province to swear allegiance to Abu Ibrahim al-Hashemi al-Quraishi, the

new leader of IS.⁴⁴ This close connection between WS and IS explains how the Islamic State expanded its Jihadist threat to Sinai and Egypt. WS sought full ideological identification with the Islamic State and began to shift from a mainly local dimension (Sinai and Egypt) to a more global/transnational Jihadist one. At the same time, WS adopted strict new measures towards local populations and created new mechanisms to control the territory, such as a morality police that monitors communities and punishes those it considers to be informants. This strict oversight antagonizes some Sinai tribes, in particular the Sawarka and Tarabin, and has encouraged them to cooperate with the regime in response. However, ABM's affiliation with the Islamic State has split the organization into two wings, with the Nile Valley leaders remaining loyal to al-Qaeda. While WS operations are limited almost entirely to the Sinai, al-Qaeda has remained inside Egypt, operating mainly in the territory between the Libyan border crossing and Egypt's Western Desert.⁴⁵

The increasing number of attacks in the Sinai has forced the Egyptian regime to embark upon a series of military operations against WS. Nevertheless, attacks have continued unabated in the peninsula, taking a steep human toll. Most attacks have been perpetrated in northern Sinai, including the infamous November 2017 attack on the al-Rawda mosque in Bir al-'Abd, in which over 300 people were killed in what was called "the worst bloodshed of its kind in Egypt's modern history."⁴⁶

El-Sisi's strategy in the Sinai has undergone changes over the past years. In February 2018, the Egyptian government launched "Operation Sinai 2018," a mission intended to kill Islamic State fighters and reinforce army units already there.⁴⁷ (A subsequent, similar operation was launched in the Fall of 2020, although few details are as yet publicly known) Despite this escalation of Egypt's military operations, however, WS still enjoys high tactical and operational capacity and continues to pose a serious daily threat in the Sinai peninsula. While the Egyptian campaign against terrorism in the Sinai succeeded in eliminating many terrorists and senior leaders and reducing the overall number of attacks, deadly attacks in the Northern Sinai are still reported weekly. With the collapse of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, the Sinai has become a frontline in the global war against *jihadist* extremism and a possible new hub for foreign fighters. The Sinai offers IS a position of strategic significance. The group is also relatively sheltered there, forced to contend at present mainly with the Egyptian state, rather than external intervention or coalition airstrikes. WS operations conducted from the Sinai, in turn, illustrate the ongoing strength of the group and the relative ineffectiveness of the Egyptian regime's counter-terrorism efforts.⁴⁸

^El-Sisi's government, however, appears to be formulating a new regional counterterror strategy. LE175 (\$10 million) has been allocated toward development projects in the Sinai, including in "the electricity sector, roads, improving the environment, strengthening local units, and strengthening security, traffic, and fire department services."⁴⁹ In June 2019, the President opened the tunnels under the Suez canal as part of the state's efforts to develop the Sinai and enhance regional investment opportunities.⁵⁰ The Egyptian Planning Ministry announced in August 2019 it would invest 5.23 billion Egyptian pounds (\$315 million) in the Sinai Peninsula in fiscal year 2019-2020.⁵¹ The el-Sisi government hopes that the regional buildup of infrastructure and local rule of law will strengthen the regime's grip on the notoriously challenging region and further consolidate el-Sisi's power.

Since the ABM's declaration of allegiance to the Islamic State in November 2014 and its subsequent transformation into Wilayat Sinai, there is also an intensifying ideological battle between the Egyptian regime and its Islamist rivals. The Grand Mufti of Egypt, Shawqi Allam, ruled that the *caliphate* was not a holy institution derived from religious texts, and that the Prophet Muhammad had not commanded it at all. According to his narrative, Islam is not a static religion that demands the restoration of a fixed form of government and a return to the Middle Ages; rather, flexibility is the soul of Islam, and there is no religious objection to the definition of Egypt as a modern nation state.⁵² Simultaneously, since 2014, the el-Sisi regime has embarked on an ongoing campaign regarding Egyptian identity and focusing on the contrast between Egyptian citizens who are loyal to their homeland and Islamists who seek to undermine the legitimacy of the nation state. As his government became more established, el-Sisi began formulating

a positive identity discourse to serve as an alternative to competing Islamist debates. The identity that the regime ascribes to its citizens is composed of a mosaic of historic (Pharaonic, Coptic, Islamic, and Greco-Roman) and geographic (Arab, Mediterranean, and African) layers, which together comprise the Egyptian personality. The Islamic layer is conceptualized by emphasizing the continuity of the nonviolent meetings between religions in Egypt that has taken place since the initial days of Islam and extending to the coexistence that prevails between them today. Similar continuity was attributed to the historic educational standing of the al-Azhar institution, due to its role in resuming religious discourse and in preaching moderate interpretations that are helpful to the global ideological battle against terrorism and Islamic radicalism.⁵³

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Since the 1950s, failures in governance, economic stagnation, and political exclusion have provided opportunities for reactionary Islamists to expand their influence in Egyptian society. Islamists have used their politicized interpretation of Islam as a source of legitimacy, and they have set up a number of informal institutions (charities, educational organizations, health services) to advance their ideology within various sectors.⁵⁴ While some extremist groups, including some in the official leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood, began to renounce violence in the 1970s, this rejection almost always catalyzed the emergence of violent groups that rejected the renunciations. As a result, radical discourse perpetuated within Islamist circles even when groups were technically non-violent. For example, a strong Qutbist faction formed and persisted within the Brotherhood, including among people who were jailed with him. The Brotherhood thus continued to read and teach Sayyid Qutb's works, even while claiming to have disavowed them. As a result, prominent contemporary leaders have been influenced by parts of the Qutbist ideology.⁵⁵

Meanwhile, political stagnation and poor economic conditions under Mubarak generated sympathy for the Brotherhood and Salafist groups, which offered social services and religious education.⁵⁶ Salafists inherit their name from the Arabic term "*al-salaf al-salih*," meaning the "righteous ancestors," a phrase referring to the first generations of Muslims after the Prophet Mohammed's death who sought to emulate his practices and maintained a literalist reading of the Qur'an and the *hadith* (the sayings of the Prophet). Salafists regard deviations from this literalist approach as *bid'a* (innovation), and therefore tantamount to *kufir* (apostasy). Under Mubarak, Salafists were strictly prohibited from political activities – in stark contrast to the Muslim Brotherhood, which was at times tolerated. Salafis, therefore, focused almost exclusively on social work and spiritual development and were permitted to launch television networks dedicated to preaching.

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

From the 1970s until the overthrow of Mubarak, the Egyptian state tolerated other Islamist groups at certain points while repressing or fighting them at others. The Muslim Brotherhood in particular used moments of tolerance to build its nationwide organization and win parliamentary seats while advocating for every day social causes. Similarly, it garnered public sympathy when the regime cracked down on it.

In 2005, the Brotherhood fielded approximately 150 candidates in the country's parliamentary elections and won 88 of 444 contested seats, making it the largest opposition bloc. The regime viewed these gains as threatening, and it responded with a series of constitutional amendments that limited the political participation of religious groups in 2007. The following year, more than 800 Brotherhood members were barred from standing as candidates for local council elections as a result of these restrictions. Subsequently, during the November 2010 parliamentary elections, the repression worsened: hundreds of Brotherhood

members were arrested, and none of the organization's parliamentary candidates were elected in one of the most fraudulent elections in Egypt's contemporary history.⁵⁷

While the fraudulence of the late 2010 parliamentary elections contributed to the January 2011 uprising, the Brotherhood and Salafi groups stayed largely on the sidelines during its earliest days. However, after massive protests on January 25, 2011, the Brotherhood endorsed the pivotal January 28th "Friday of Rage" protests, during which protesters overwhelmed the police and forced the military to take control of the streets. The group attempted to negotiate with the regime on at least two occasions during the uprising, but faced criticism from its youth members and revolutionary factions for doing so. It ultimately called for Mubarak's overthrow on February 7, 2011, four days before the Egyptian president was forced from power.⁵⁸

Egypt's Islamist groups were the only political forces capable of mobilizing their members nationwide after the overthrow of Mubarak and the collapse of the National Democratic Party. Non-Islamist groups, by contrast, were weakened after decades of mostly working within the regime's legal constraints. So, when the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) took control of the country on February 11, 2011 and opened Egypt's political arena, many of these Islamist groups quickly established legal political parties.

The new Salafist end of the political spectrum – including the Building and Development Party and the Light Party – included smaller movements such as the ultraconservative *Al-Asala Party* founded by Adil Abd al-Maqsoud Afifi. This marked a considerable departure for Salafist groups, which had previously always been apolitical. Members of the groups generally refused to work with secular state institutions, dismissing the concept of democracy as "alien."⁵⁹ But under the guidance of charismatic preachers, Salafist movements opted for participation because it was an opportunity to implement *sharia* and feared that their failure to participate would lead to secularization.⁶⁰ Salafists also sought to provide ideological justification for their entry into politics. One important concern for leaders was to intertwine entrance into the political arena and religious principles for its members. That hinged on pointing to the duty incumbent on Muslims to try and implement *sharia* law wherever possible. Given the contested political environment of post-Mubarak Egypt, the alternative (namely, a secular regime) would constitute negligence.

Islamist political parties did extremely well in the parliamentary elections of late 2011 and early 2012: the FJP-led Democratic Alliance for Egypt won 47 percent of the seats, while the Light Party dominated Islamic Bloc, which included the Islamic Group's Building and Development Party, won 24 percent. The *Wasat Party*, an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, gained an additional two percent of its seats in parliament.⁶¹ However, the Salafists' electoral gains were by far the most unanticipated development of the election.⁶²

Yet the Assembly was not the Brotherhood's last attempt to use its dominance in parliament. The group attempted to undermine the SCAF's political legitimacy, including trying to use the parliament to declare no confidence in the SCAF-backed government. In response, the SCAF issued a statement that tacitly threatened the group with a major crackdown.⁶³

In 2011, former Brotherhood leader Abdel Moneim Abou el-Fotouh emerged as a dominant candidate in the then-upcoming 2012 presidential elections. The organization had banished el-Fotouh from its ranks for declaring his intention to run for president, despite the group's orders not to do so.

Just before the collapse of Mubarak's regime, the Brotherhood had promised not to run a presidential candidate, but it still did so. The group's initial candidate was disqualified due to his incarceration during the Mubarak regime (as were several other leading candidates). The Brotherhood eventually nominated FJP chairman Mohammed Morsi.⁶⁴ The final list of candidates included thirteen people, including members of former governments. Morsi won with 24 percent of the vote,⁶⁵ and then won the run-off election against former Prime Minister Ahmed Shafiq with 51.7 percent of the vote.

In June of 2012, a court disbanded the FJP-controlled parliament on the grounds that its election was

unconstitutional, because the electoral format did not give political independents an equal opportunity to win. Also in June, on the eve of the declaration of Morsi's victory in the elections, the SCAF issued a constitutional declaration that protected the military from the elected president's oversight and granted itself legislative authority, to prevent Morsi from gaining power. In response, the Brotherhood and its allies occupied Cairo's Tahrir Square and threatened mass protests if Morsi did not become Egypt's president.

The constitutional declaration had a significant impact. When Morsi was sworn in on June 30, 2012, there was no parliament and no new constitution, and his exact powers were poorly defined.⁶⁶ On August 12, however, Morsi used a major attack in the Sinai that had taken place the previous week as a pretext for firing the SCAF's leaders, promoting director of military intelligence Abdel Fatah el-Sisi to defense minister, and granting himself legislative power until a new parliament was sworn in.⁶⁷

This made Morsi the undisputed power holder in Egypt, at least in legal terms. But in November 2012, it appeared as though a second Constituent Assembly (which parliament had appointed before it was disbanded) was going to be nullified by the courts. Morsi responded by issuing another constitutional declaration that protected the Constituent Assembly from the courts, but also placed his own edicts above judicial oversight. When mass protests broke out in response, Morsi rammed through the ratification of a theocratic constitution.⁶⁸

While the new constitution passed by 64 percent via referendum with a mere 30 percent turnout,⁶⁹ the political crisis persisted for months and protests against Morsi grew more violent and more regular. Meanwhile, the economy declined, lines for gas extended around city blocks, and power outages lasted for hours.⁷⁰ As a result, on June 30, 2013, millions of Egyptians took to the streets to demand early presidential elections. When Morsi refused to compromise, the military responded by ousting his government on July 3, 2013.

In March 2018, President el-Sisi won reelection with a reported 97% of the vote.⁷¹ El-Sisi has continued targeting the Brotherhood as well as other religious opponents of his rule. On July 5, 2018, 14 alleged members of the Brotherhood were sentenced to life in prison for their association with the now-outlawed organization.⁷² Three weeks later, on July 28, 2018, an Egyptian court sentenced 75 people to death for their role in the 2013 protests. Despite the continued crackdown, however, signs seemed to indicate the Brotherhood and el-Sisi's regime could reconcile; thus, in July 2018, amid the legal sentencing of Brotherhood members and demonstrators, an Egyptian appeals court overturned a verdict that placed 1,500 Brotherhood members on the national terror list.⁷³ However, as of this writing, a broader reconciliation has yet to materialize, despite repeated overtures.

To be sure, these efforts have not always resonated with Islamists. While Islamic Jihad leaders have publicly abandoned violence, some affiliated factions continue to advocate *jihad*, sometimes even leaving the movement to join other groups more closely aligned with their beliefs. One cell of Islamic Jihad, for example, joined al-Qaeda in the early 2000s and was likely involved in the wave of attacks that hit Egypt after 2003. The Islamic Group faced similar difficulties. In a 2010 interview, Nagih Ibrahim, one of its former ideologues, emphasized that although the group's formal rejection of violence had obviously helped limit the spread of violent Islamism in Egypt, such ideological revisions had had less impact on the younger generations, especially those sympathetic toward or active within hardline *jihadist* groups such as al-Qaeda.⁷⁴

In September 2019, el-Sisi faced a severe public crisis over videos circulated widely on Facebook, and aired by Brotherhood-backed satellite channels, that accused Egypt's top military and political echelons of corruption and encouraged the public to demonstrate against the President. The videos were described by the President and state media as baseless rumors aimed at diminishing the regime's achievements, driving a wedge between the military and the citizenry, and threatening the stability of the homeland. He also alleged that they were part of a plot by the MB and its regional allies, Turkey and Qatar. However, only a few thousand people answered the call to demonstrate throughout Egypt on September 20, 2019;

even fewer turned out on September 27th. Some television reports from the protests aired on Brotherhood-backed satellite channels were found to be fake.

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic presented the Egyptian government and military with the intertwined problems of combatting the virus while managing a persistently challenging relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood. Government leadership was presented in state media outlets as efficiently social and economic systems. Meanwhile, the Brotherhood was reportedly the source of rumors suggesting higher contagion rates in prisons, the army, and the upper echelons of the administration. These rumors proliferate in an attempt to erode trust in government, encourage public disobedience, and ultimately present themselves as a viable alternative to the current administration.⁷⁵

For the moment, at least, the Sisi government appears to be content with managing the current situation, using the pandemic as a justification for still greater state control. In October of 2020, it renewed the three-month state of emergency that had been in effect since April of 2017, and then did so again in late January 2021 in what is likely to be an open-ended pattern.⁷⁶ It has also used the cover of these restrictions to improve its position vis-à-vis the Brotherhood via moves such as the arrest of the organization's acting guide, Mahmoud Ezzat, who was arrested by Egyptian authorities in Cairo in August 2020.⁷⁷

The government's repression of the Muslim Brotherhood has deterred other Islamist organizations from escalating their activities, and many of the group's initial allies in the "Coalition for Legitimacy" have either been imprisoned or resigned from the coalition. For this reason, those Islamists who have not joined *jihadi* movements have deferred their political ambitions until the current regime falls. They seek power in the long run, but are currently prioritizing their personal survival. However, the November 2017 attack by the Islamic State is a stark reminder of the limits of the regime's ability to contain all Islamist groups operating in and around its borders, particularly in Northern Sinai.

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