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MALAYSIA'S RELIGIOUS POLICE GO DIGITAL

The conservative government of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad in Kuala Lumpur is using 21st century technology to more rigorously police religion in the majority-Muslim Asian nation. As part of a new ordinance promulgated by the Mahathir government, the country's Islamic Development Department (IDD) will begin to cooperate with the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) in monitoring any negative posts or comments made about Islam or the Prophet Muhammad on social media. The initiative will rely on input from the public, with social media account holders "flagging" posts and comments deemed anti-Islamic and forwarding them to the IDD and the MCMC, which will review the posts and determine whether police action or prosecution is warranted. (*Malay Mail*, July 27, 2019)

ISIS REARS ITS HEAD IN SPAIN

The members of a four person Islamic State cell were arrested in the Spanish provinces of Gipuzkoa and Lugo in late July for attempting to recruit people and supporting acts of terrorism. Evidence suggests that one of those arrested sought to replicate the 2017 terrorist attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils - in which *jihadists* drove a van into vacationing pedestrians, killing 14 and injuring more than 100. According to researchers, three of the four apprehended radicals had a North African connection, hailing from the Kingdom of Morocco. In a by-now familiar pattern, all of the suspects had been radicalized online through their consumption of Salafist propaganda that urged them to take up arms and wage *jihad*. (Barcelona *La Vanguardia*, July 24, 2019)

A STEP FORWARD FOR EGYPTIAN COUNTERTERRORISM...

Egyptian security forces targeted and killed 17 militants on three separate occasions in early August, marking a surge in Cairo's counterterrorism efforts. The raids followed an attack at the beginning of the month outside Egypt's main cancer hospital that left 20 dead and 47 injured. The government of President Abdel Fatah el-Sisi has waged a widening counterterrorism campaign since taking office in June of 2014 - one that has entailed a crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates (with the parent group being designated formally as a terrorist organization in Egypt in 2015) as well as stepped up regional and global partnerships to combat Islamic militancy. The August raids were part of this initiative, and produced significant results. Assault rifles found in the homes of some of the militants killed by Egyptian security forces suggest that the group was planning future large scale attacks. (Associated Press, August 8, 2019)

..AMID NEW SIGNS OF LIFE FOR EGYPTIAN SALAFISM

Meanwhile, alarming signs indicate that religious discourse in Egypt is headed in a more radical and potentially violent direction. In early August, Egypt's Ministry of Islamic Endowments granted a month-long preaching permit to Sheikh Yasser Borhami, a radical cleric who serves as vice-president of the Salafist Call movement. The decision effectively reverses the Ministry's earlier, August 2014 decision, under which only clerics who received degrees from Cairo's Al-Azhar University (and were therefore more-or-less in line with official interpretations of the religion) were allowed to preach publicly.

Nevertheless, Borhami doesn't have a totally free hand to promote his extreme views - at least not yet. The Ministry's permit provides the cleric with a number of stipulations, including that he abide by official dogma, that his preaching be in line with Ash'ari doctrine, and that his sermons not be longer than 20 minutes. Nevertheless, the granting of the permit to Borhami is being seen by some of a potential broadening of Egypt's religious discourse - one that could soon come to incorporate significantly more radical views than prevail currently. (*Al-Monitor*, August 26, 2019)

ISLAMABAD SEEKS BEIJING'S SUPPORT ON THREAT FINANCE BLACKLIST

The government of Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan is seeking foreign assistance to help defer harsh consequences from a key watchdog body ahead of a crucial deadline. Islamabad is reportedly looking to Beijing for help in staving off potential penalties from the Paris-based Financial Action Task Force at its upcoming meeting in October. The FATF previously threatened Pakistan with blacklisting if it did not meet global anti-money laundering and counter-terrorism financing standards - a set of 27 regulations that Islamabad has been slow to adopt. Pakistani officials now worry that, given the current state of affairs, countries like rival India could press for Pakistan to be formally blacklisted following the FATF meeting in October, and are proactively looking for China - which is a major backer of Pakistan, and which now holds the chairmanship of the FATF - to commit to vetoing any such move. (*Bloomberg*, August 8, 2019)