

## Egypt

By Jessie Kaplan

This is a summary of, and update to, the Egypt chapter of the American Foreign Policy Council's *World Almanac of Islamism 2021*. To read the full chapter, visit <https://almanac.afpc.org>.

*Egypt has played a central role in the history of Islamism over the past century. It was the birthplace, in 1928, of the Muslim Brotherhood, the world's first modern Islamist social and political movement. The Brotherhood became the main political opposition to successive Egyptian governments, from the time of President Gamal Abdel Nasser through the rule of Hosni Mubarak. In 2011, Mohammed Morsi became Egypt's first Islamist leader, and his brief tenure as President allowed Islamists and Salafists to gain stature and authority in the country. Mass protests led the military to oust Morsi in 2013, and the subsequent government of former general Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has made a crackdown on Islamists a centerpiece of its domestic policies.*

*The Sisi government has been forced to deal not only with the perceived internal threat posed by the Brotherhood, but with an external one as well. Since Morsi's overthrow, Egypt has had to contend with a significant upsurge in jihadist violence in the Sinai Peninsula, most notably, by the Wilayat Sinai (WS) – an offshoot of the Islamic State – which has more recently moved toward Cairo and has greatly impacted the country's internal security.*

### RECENT TRENDS

*A crackdown on Shi'a.* In March 2020, the country's Supreme Administrative Court ordered Egyptian authorities to [suspend the operations](#) of Shi'a TV channels, and authorized internet service providers to take down Shi'a websites. The decision was a reflection of growing governmental concerns about Iranian efforts to spread Shi'a Islam within the country. However, it has also had the effect of empowering and encouraging Salafist elements, which [pose a more immediate threat](#) to Egyptian society.

*A crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood.* This past Fall, the Egyptian Ministry of Interior formally [announced](#) that security forces had arrested Mahmoud Ezzat, the acting leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, in an August raid in Cairo. Ezzat, who has been a fugitive for years, is accused of overseeing multiple terrorist operations and assassinations in Egypt. Subsequently, in early April 2021, [a Cairo court](#) sentenced Ezzat to life in prison after it found the Brotherhood leader guilty of "terror acts" and the incitement of violence. Following Ezzat's arrest, [the group announced](#) the appointment of Ibrahim Munir as its new acting general guide. Since November, Munir has sought to hold [elections](#) for the group's governing body, likely from exile. However, these have been postponed due to significant differences within the organization – a reflection of the ongoing friction between the Brotherhood's "old guard" leaders and the group's "revolutionary" wing which has dominated the internal politics of the movement over the past decade.

*Salafists rebuffed at the ballot box.* The al-Nour party, Egypt's largest Salafi party, ran twelve candidates as independents in the August 2020 Senate elections, but [failed to secure any seats](#). Eight candidates

lost in the first round of elections, while four others secured a place in the subsequent runoff that took place in September, but ultimately lost as well. According to observers, the poor showing accurately reflected a growing popular disaffection with Islamism among Egyptians. “[O]rdinary people view the Salafists as representing the same political brand as the Muslim Brotherhood,” political scientist Akram Badreddine of Cairo university [has explained](#).

*Ongoing instability in the Sinai.* Over the past several years, the Egyptian government has sought to respond to the rise of extremist groups in the Sinai Peninsula with force, and that trend has continued. Egypt’s army claims it [foiled a terrorist attack](#) in the Sinai on July 2, 2020, after killing eighteen suspected militants who attacked a military post. Subsequently, in early September, after a week-long anti-terrorism operation, the Egyptian military [killed as many as seventy-seven terrorists](#) in the Northern Sinai where WS is active. This comes after a summer crackdown on Islamist extremists [targeted up to 317 dens, hideouts, and stores](#), as well as destroying vehicles filled with weapons and ammunition in the northern peninsula. However, local conditions remain dire; Egyptians living in the Sinai have suffered significantly from Islamist attacks, which has lately led to the evacuation of thousands, while scores of others have [fled their homes](#) in response to WS activity.

Meanwhile, the Wilayat Sinai branch of the Islamic State remains a formidable – and capable – opponent. As of 2018, the group was [estimated](#) to have 1,000-5,000 fighters under arms, and is responsible for [killing hundreds each year](#) and destroying vital infrastructure. In August 2020, it [executed four Egyptians](#) over their alleged cooperation with the Egyptian Army in Northern Sinai city of Bir al-Abd. Christians have also emerged as a particular target of the group, with at least one high-profile [kidnapping](#) and [execution](#) of a Coptic Christian taking place in the last year.

Nevertheless, ongoing counterterrorism operations in the Sinai Peninsula have had the effect of prompting terrorist elements to begin conducting their operations closer to the Egyptian capital. For instance, on September 28th, [two suspected militants were killed in a shootout in the greater Cairo area](#) after Egyptian security forces raided a hideout being used to plan terrorist attacks.

*Coronavirus and extremism.* As in other nations, recruitment by ISIS and other militants in Egypt has been affected by the coronavirus and resultant lockdowns, which have affected the ability of extremist groups to recruit, mobilize and organize. The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic presented the Egyptian government with the intertwined problems of combatting the virus while managing a slew of challenges, such as Egypt’s large, crowded population and fragile economy and health system. 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 have been spread by the group in an apparent attempt to erode trust in government, encourage public disobedience, and ultimately present itself as a viable alternative to the current regime. In April of 2021, the Sisi government once again [renewed](#) the country’s existing three-month state of emergency as part of what is likely to become an open-ended pattern.