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The Egyptian Response to Coronavirus: Denial and Conspiracy

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Brief Analysis

The coronavirus pandemic currently sweeping the world and is a new contagious disease caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), which scientists believe originated from a mutated virus carried by bats and originated in Wuhan, China December of last year. **As of March 27**, more than 549,105 cases of COVID-19 and internal cases have been reported in many countries, resulting in over 24,861 deaths worldwide. These numbers provide a window into the pandemic's massive spread: hard-hit countries now include Iran, much of Europe, and the United States. Moreover, the unprecedented measures taken to counteract the virus have begun a global economic restriction, predicted to lead to a global recession.

While no country in the Middle East has been hit as hard as [Iran](#), governments throughout the [MENA region have had to quickly decide](#) how to respond to the swift spread of the virus. Whereas some governments have shut down parts or all of the country in response, Egypt's officials and its media have not properly dealt with the coming crisis. Egypt has not addressed the likely social, medical, and economic implications of the virus; instead, its response has been to deny, simplify, and seek shelter from the threat in conspiracy theories shifting blame to outside enemies.

Even after numerous countries—including Canada, Taiwan, Lebanon, Canada, Algeria, Greece, the United States, France, and Kuwait—reported that tourists who had traveled to Egypt subsequently tested positive for coronavirus, Egyptian media and officials have continued to deny that Egypt has had any confirmed cases. Adding to the confusion, the Ministry of Health has confirmed that the [number of infected people has reached 456](#), though the actual total infected, as in many countries, is likely much higher. Yet Egyptian media and officials have continued to deny even this low estimate, relying on conspiracy theories to back false claims of a country without coronavirus.

The Egyptian government has taken some late measures to slow the spread of the virus, including a partial curfew. Schools, universities, mosques, museums, and archeological sites were closed, and flights to and from infected countries like China and, more recently, Italy were suspended. Moreover, the Egyptian army, in coordination with other agencies, worked to sanitize key streets and squares in the country.

With these measures, the Ministry of Health has declared that it had undertaken all the necessary preparations to confront the virus. Yet the issue lies at the heart of the country's healthcare system itself; the Egyptian health system suffers from decay due to neglect. Doctors are not trained to deal with coronavirus cases and hospitals lack the necessary equipment required for basic surgeries and operations. Consequently, in a country whose population is over 100 million and where 95 percent of the population lives on about 4 percent of the land, the outbreak of coronavirus could be disastrous and the death toll could be significant. This is especially likely in Egyptian prisons, which are overcrowded and are likely to become a death trap for those inside. The outbreak of the virus will also have a devastating impact on the Egyptian economy as international travel effectively grinds to a halt. Egypt's tourism industry is facing a potentially insurmountable obstacle, and even trade revenue from the Suez Canal is likely to drop severely. Even foreign remittances from the Gulf are facing unavoidable decline as the Gulf enacts strict social distancing measures.

For example, pro-regime media continues to deny the credible reports of tourists testing positive for coronavirus after visiting Egypt. In this same vein, Egyptian Health Minister [Hala Zayed](#) shocked the public in mid-February by claiming that the virus will not strike Egypt because "it lives in China, not in Egypt." Zayed also claimed that the virus is not contagious and that she did not intend to bar Chinese visitors from entering the country, "because the WHO hasn't recommended doing so."

Moreover, pro-regime talk show host [Nasha'at Aldayhaa](#) swore on air that there were no coronavirus cases in Egypt. Aldayhaa also accused some individual and state organizations of disseminating these rumors about Egypt because they did not want to see Egypt free of the coronavirus.

Egyptian media affiliated with the regime has also attacked foreign media, labeling its news as false and misguided when their reports contradicted official denials. In this context, the British newspaper *The Guardian* came under fire for [reporting on the release of a Canadian medical study that analyzed the likely spread of coronavirus in Egypt.](#)

The study, which was conducted by infectious disease specialists from the University of Toronto, claimed that the real number of infections in Egypt could potentially be over 19,000. Similarly, the [popular Egyptian website Youm Sabea reported on a NYT reporter deleting a 'fake tweet' discussing the study.](#) Meanwhile, an [official source](#) from the Egyptian Ministry of Health issued a statement in March 16 that categorically rejected the results of the study, while also emphasizing that Egypt had nothing to hide. The Egyptian Ministry of Health also stated that its decision to announce cases is made transparently, in coordination with the WHO, and that the number of confirmed cases released by the Ministry are credible. Simultaneously, the Ministry waged a ferocious media campaign against *The Guardian* on March 17, with the Health Ministry later revoking the newspaper's accreditation and closed its office in Egypt.

Officials have also sought to tamper down any information they deemed by officials to be 'fake' domestically. Egyptian Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouly announced in mid-March that the government intended to launch a [campaign](#) against the dissemination of false news about the coronavirus. According to Madbouly, the spread of false news "gave a negative image abroad about the government's approach to dealing with the virus and a false impression that the disease has spread in Egypt, resulting in some countries taking measures against the country." The Egyptian government has also set up a hotline for people to report individuals who spread such rumors.

Subsequently, the Minister of Interior declared in a [statement](#) on March 13 that the Egyptian police arrested three people for allegedly spreading false news on Facebook regarding the number of infected people in Egypt. Moreover, the Egyptian security services have recently arrested the family of jailed Egyptian activist [Alaa Abdel Fattah](#) for organizing a sit-in in front of the Egyptian Cabinet, which was held to ask the government to take more serious measures to confront the outbreak of coronavirus in prisons and to demand the release of prisoners. Among the four women arrested were Abdel Fattah's mother Lila Soueif, his aunt Ahdaf Soueif, a prominent writer, his sister Mona

Seif, and Raban Al Mahdy, a professor at the American University in Cairo.

To bolster their own claims regarding the virus, both Egyptian media and officials have espoused a conspiratorial discourse, which includes accusing several states, organizations, and individuals of being responsible for its spread. Naturally, Egypt's most constant feature in conspiracies—the Muslim Brotherhood—features heavily in these narratives. Some official religious figures and media outlets have accused the Muslim Brotherhood of being a part of a conspiracy to spread coronavirus among the public. In particular, the Egyptian Minister of Endowment's [Muhammad Mukhtar Jumaa](#) sparked widespread controversy after claiming that the Muslim Brotherhood planned to spread the coronavirus among members of the army, the police, the judiciary, and the media.

The United States has also featured in these claims. In a recent live-streamed video on Facebook, Egyptian-American Psychologist and Youtuber [May Elkharsity](#) claimed that the panic Egyptians feel about the “global pandemic” is unsubstantiated because the coronavirus is just a conspiracy promoted by the United States to get people to “over-shop” and stay at home. Elkharsity previously worked as a [program presenter at Al-Qahera W al-Nas TV channel—a pro-regime channel—and currently works as program creator in several other programs on the same channel.](#)

Moreover, pro-regime TV presenter [Basma Wahaba](#) has claimed that the [virus is a new form of biological warfare produced in a laboratory](#), noting that war is no longer a matter of fighter planes and machine guns. However, Wahaba has never accused any specific country or organization of producing and spreading the pandemic.

Yet the number of cases in Egypt are likely to grow, and in response, Egyptian media and officials have relied on approaching the threat by mocking it and simplifying the complications of the challenge. In this context, [TV presenter Gaber al-Karmouty](#) appeared on Al Hayat network television and conducted an interview with a person dressed up as the coronavirus to mock the threat. During the interview, al-Karmouty thanked the ‘virus’ for appearing, stating “we have the honor to have you in our show,” while the ‘virus’ complained, “I’m blamed for all the troubles.” The ‘virus’ also responded to the claim that it is scaring the whole world, stating, “somebody sneezes and somebody coughs, they blame it on corona.” It went on to say, “How about if you just keep clean. How about instead of cloth handkerchiefs you use paper tissues?”

Moreover, Egyptian Minister of Endowments [Muhammad Mukhtar Jumaa](#) showed no sense of responsibility in dealing with the crisis. He commented on the ongoing debate on the need to cancel Friday prayer to minimize infection, a move that several other countries have adopted, stating, “Our mosques are open for all prayers, and no soul will die until it has received all its provision.”

Other TV presenters have made quack medical claims to justify the lack of action, claiming the coronavirus will not affect Egyptians because most Egyptians eat onions, lentils, and fava beans, or claiming that Egyptians are “immune” to any virus. In addition, Pro-regime TV presenter Tamer Amin hosted senior journalist [Mofieed Fawzy](#) on his show, where Fawzy claimed that India was the only country in the world that has not been affected by the coronavirus because they add minerals called “chromium” to their food.

The Egyptian media and officials should learn from Italy's experience, a country with a sophisticated medical system and, even so, now has the most deaths from coronavirus in the world. Italy initially engaged in an official campaign of denial eerily similar to Egypt's current attitude; Italian officials also claimed that everything was under control until their hospitals were overwhelmed. Italian officials had justified their sense of security by claiming that the protection system put in place by Italy was the most stringent in all of Europe. Also like Egypt, the Italian [media](#) and its [officials](#) misjudged the severity of the outbreak and consequently, mishandled the crisis.

If Egyptian officials truly hope to limit the the virus's impact in Egypt, Egyptian media and its officials need to change their discourse and handle the crisis in a responsible and transparent way. Only with transparency can the government restore people's trust in its procedures, and the trust of those potential future tourists who make up

such a large portion of the [Egyptian economy](#).

The media can play a vital protective role, raising public awareness about protective measures people can pursue to stop the spread of the virus and avoiding the dissemination of false news that seeks to save the face of the regime at the expense of real protective measures for the Egyptian people.

As the outbreak worsened in Italy, the government began to advise against social gatherings, which rapidly spiraled into a nationwide lock-down. But people outside of Italy's "red zone" continued to go to bars and discos, eat meals at crowded restaurants, and hug and kiss each other as they underestimated the lethality of the virus. Italians have now recorded messages to themselves admonishing their cavalier attitudes. Egyptians have the chance to learn from Italy's mistakes and develop a public commitment to social distancing and other necessary measures—before it is too late. ❖



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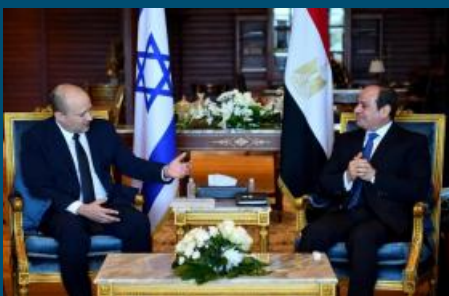


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