

Cairo Acts on Its Fears of Radicalization After Afghanistan

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Brief Analysis

The recent saga surrounding the implications of American withdrawal from Afghanistan has not gone unnoticed in Cairo. Egyptian policy circles believe it has opened the door for Islamist and extremist groups to gain momentum across the region, and regime messaging is framing the situation accordingly.

Since last May, Cairo seemed to be readying itself for the consequences related to the controversial American decision to pull out of Afghanistan. Sheikh Al-Azhar Ahmed al-Tayab [changed \(https://m.facebook.com/watch/?v=2240533746081542&_rdr\)](https://m.facebook.com/watch/?v=2240533746081542&_rdr) his rhetoric from his usual emphasis on sticking to traditional interpretations of religious texts and instead called for reform, stating that “it is a source of vitality and dynamism in Islam.” The Egyptian parliament approved legal amendments that expanded the power of government to fire state employees if they were found to have links with organizations that Egypt has designated as terrorist groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood. In the same vein, judges interrogated in a humiliating way two of Egypt’s most prominent Salafists clerics—[Muhammed Hussein Yaqoub \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aMhKOWLe_g4\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aMhKOWLe_g4) and [Muhammed Hassaan \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-YbmmC9VNWE\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-YbmmC9VNWE)—during a televised court session.

While Egyptian rhetoric and legal actions against Islamists ramped up in the months preceding the U.S. withdrawal, Egyptian rhetoric since the Taliban took over Afghanistan is characterized by three themes: a heightened concern over radicalization and the view that Western states are not addressing this threat seriously, and a sense that the U.S. withdrawal indicates either American weakness or lack of trustworthiness.

Considering concerns over increased radicalization, President Abdel Fatah el-Sisi has imposed a national duty on Egyptian intellectuals to combat radicalization. The president [appeared on TV \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q58eJbGyrMo\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q58eJbGyrMo) to call on “talented” Egyptian authors to produce ideas that reform the religious discourse. He likewise gave the green light for broadcasting TV shows this upcoming Ramadan to discuss issues related to terrorism and Jihad. Moreover, Sisi announced a new strategy to tackle the file of human rights in the country, which the government characterizes as seeking to improve conditions of ordinary Egyptians and mobilizing the public around the state. This effort is designed as a means to avoid radicalization among Islamist-leaning youth along with its efforts to address concerns raised by Washington over Egypt’s human rights record.

Intellectuals’ discussions within the elite circles of Cairo have focused on nation-state building to enhance Egypt’s regional soft power while maintaining its culture domestically. They have made numerous [references \(https://www.skynewsarabia.com/varieties/1458063-%25D9%2585%25D8%25B5%25D8%25B1%25D9%258A%25D8%25A9-](https://www.skynewsarabia.com/varieties/1458063-%25D9%2585%25D8%25B5%25D8%25B1%25D9%258A%25D8%25A9-)

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[%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25AC%25D9%2585%25D9%258A%25D9%2584](#)) to Afghanistan’s past in the mid-20th century, when it had a functioning state system and had good relations with Egypt. One of the most frequently mentioned books in Egyptian media lately has been *An Egyptian woman in Afghanistan*, which depicts the personal story of the first Egyptian academic to obtain a doctorate degree from Kabul in 1968 during its ‘flourishing times.’

These efforts reflect the view that the Taliban’s return to power is a boost to Islamists in the diaspora and terrorist recruitment. Over the past seven years, the Sisi regime has been consistent with its message to Islamists that his era differs from that of the Sadat period, when Islamists were allowed to return to the political arena. Cairo now seems to be **puzzled**

[by what it sees as soft Western rhetoric toward the Taliban. Domestic newspapers have frequently raised concerns over German Chancellor Angela Merkel calling for talks with the fundamentalist group, which Taliban spokesperson Zabiullah Mujahid reportedly welcomed in an interview](https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/2411213)

[with the German newspaper Bild. This exchange enhanced the belief in Egypt that there is a wide Western interest in bringing Islamists back to the region writ large. Often, any open exchange between western powers and Islamist or radical groups is interpreted as a sign that this is the case.](https://www.bild.de/politik/international/bild-international/taliban-spokesperson-we-would-really-welcome-angela-merkel-77593550.bild.html)

There is also a clear consensus in Cairo is that the American withdrawal from Afghanistan occurred via a deal with the Taliban, and that the Taliban government serves U.S. interests in some capacity. Veteran Egyptian diplomat **Mustafa el-Fiky**

[sarcastically described the group’s easy ascendance to power as “arriving on a white horse.” Many Egyptian intellectuals are interpreting the move as a tactical U.S. decision to pressure Russia and China by unleashing the fundamentalist group, a facet of the broader American **power competition**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uPRyTi_QxUA)

[with the Russians and Chinese. This conspiratorial perspective argues that the United States will also benefit financially, as wealthy Gulf states will be incentivized to purchase more American weaponry to defend themselves from this new threat.](https://idsc.gov.gov/DocumentLibrary/View/5879)

For those who do not buy into this conspiratorial belief, completion of U.S. withdrawal efforts from Afghanistan has cemented the view that an alliance with Washington is not fully guaranteed and American power is in decline. In this line of thinking, more efforts should be directed toward Beijing and Moscow to diversify weapons and diplomatic options. Leftist and nationalist voices are the biggest champions of this strategy, and there appears to be a joyful atmosphere among them because of an American loss. They are hopeful that what happened in Afghanistan will repeat itself when it comes to the Israel-Palestine conflict.

Meanwhile, the internal Egyptian security apparatus is increasingly on the alert in anticipation of Islamists resorting back to violence domestically and potential recruitments among young Egyptians to travel to Afghanistan for the purposes of Jihad. Indeed, the historical term **Afghani Arabs** ([\[international/2021/08/16/%25D9%2585%25D9%2584%25D8%25A7%25D8%25B0-%25D8%25A2%25D9%2585%25D9%2586-%25D8%25B9%25D9%2588%25D8%25AF%25D8%25A9-\]\(#\)](https://www.alhurra.com/arabic-and-international/2021/08/16/%25D9%2585%25D9%2584%25D8%25A7%25D8%25B0-%25D8%25A2%25D9%2585%25D9%2586-%25D8%25B9%25D9%2588%25D8%25AF%25D8%25A9-</p></div><div data-bbox=)

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[%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25B9%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A8](#))—referring to the Arab nationals who fought against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s and return to carry out attacks against their own governments—has reemerged among security experts. According to general Egyptian **assessments** ([\[%25D8%25AA%25D8%25B9%25D9%2584%25D9%258A%25D9%2582%25D8%25A7%25D8%25AA-\]\(#\)](https://arabic.rt.com/middle_east/1262151-</p></div><div data-bbox=)

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, they are potentially going to take Sinai mountains, Libya, and Syria as a haven due to the fertile environment to carry out their operations.

Generally, the reduction of U.S. power does not worry Cairo in the same manner as the Gulf states in the region, which have a tight security architecture with Washington. What does concern Egypt is that the vacuum left by America will likely increase the peak of terrorism throughout the region. Hence, further crackdowns on Islamists and further efforts to regional alliances with likeminded states is likely to be the Egyptian strategy in the years to come when navigating these new regional realities. ❖

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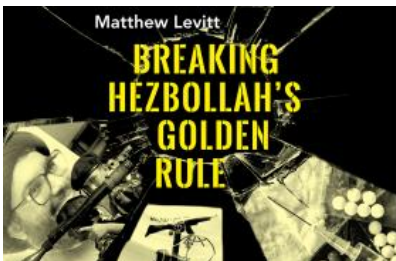
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