

Syrian Conflict Amplifies Egypt's Sectarian Tensions

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Egyptian Salafists are using Iran's support for Syria to advance their own deeply held anti-Shiite agenda.

On June 15, Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi announced he was cutting diplomatic ties with Syria and backed the creation of a no-fly zone over the country. In an email interview, Eric Trager, a Next Generation fellow at The Washington Institute, explained how Syria's war has affected Egypt and Morsi's influence on the broader region.

WPR: How are the effects of the Syrian war being felt in Egypt?

Trager: In three ways. First, in the past few weeks, President Morsi has attempted to use his support for the Syrian uprising to bolster his domestic political standing as he faces mass protests. He thus addressed a 20,000-person audience in Cairo a few weeks ago, using a speech that was largely about Syria to also denounce his domestic opponents.

Second, the increasingly sectarian nature of the Syrian conflict is amplifying sectarian tensions within Egypt. In this vein, Salafists are using Iran's support for Syria to advance their own deeply held anti-Shiite agenda. The recent attack on a Shiite mosque in Giza, in which four people were murdered, including the imam, is partially a consequence of this.

Third, Egyptians have been among the foreign fighters entering Syria to combat against the Assad regime. While we do not know how many Egyptians have joined the fighting, Egyptian casualties are regularly reported on jihadi websites, and Egypt's Salafist Nour party and Gamaa Islamiya, which is a U.S.-designated terrorist organization, have reportedly encouraged their constituents to go to Syria. It should be emphasized, however, that the number of Egyptians fighting in Syria will likely remain small relative to the broader population of combatants.

WPR: What drove the Egyptian government's decision to cut ties with Damascus?

Trager: Two factors drove Morsi's decision to cut ties. The first was his desire to consolidate his Islamist base, which is deeply hostile toward Shiites and thus rejects Iran's support for the Assad regime, as he faces a wave of mass

protests against his presidency.

The second reason was a recent fatwa from Sheikh Youssef al-Qaradawi, an influential Sunni cleric, calling on Muslims to join the "jihad" in Syria. While Morsi does not technically answer to Qaradawi -- contrary to conventional wisdom, Qaradawi is not atop the global Muslim Brotherhood's chain of command -- the sheikh exerts tremendous influence over the population of non-jihadi Islamists that the Brotherhood likes to claim as its constituents.

WPR: What does Egypt's withdrawal from Syria indicate about the Morsi government's ability to influence events in the region?

Trager: Shortly after coming to office, Morsi announced a plan to negotiate Syria's future and an end to the conflict with Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia at the table. Egypt's withdrawal from Syria, however, indicates that this plan has failed, as many analysts anticipated it would. But Egypt was never expected to be a major player in Syria, given its significant domestic problems, so in that sense Morsi's action leaves perceptions about Egypt's regional role unchanged. The bottom line: Egypt will likely remain a player in issues along its own borders -- for instance, Gaza -- but not much more for the time being. ❖

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