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Country Report on Terrorism 2019 - Chapter 1 - Egypt

Overview: Nearly all terrorist attacks in Egypt took place in the Sinai Peninsula and largely targeted security forces, but terrorist attacks targeting civilians, tourists, and security personnel in mainland Egypt remained a concern. Though early 2019 witnessed a series of IED incidents in greater Cairo, those incidents became more infrequent as the year progressed. ISIS-Sinai Province (ISIS-SP) carried out the majority of the total attacks in 2019, though it claimed no attacks in mainland Egypt and no attacks against Western interests. ISIS-SP responded to ISIS’s call to increase attacks to avenge the terrorist group’s territorial defeat in Syria in March. ISIS-SP was the first affiliate to swear allegiance to the new self-proclaimed caliph in November. There were at least 151 IED-related attacks in Egypt in 2019, of which ISIS-SP conducted at least 137 in northern and central Sinai, along with near-weekly complex assaults on government-fortified positions, demonstrating the terrorist group’s freedom to maneuver during daytime hours and geographic expansion of attacks westward, toward the Suez Canal Zone, and southward. In addition, Harakat Sawa’d Misr (HASM) and al-Qa’ida allied groups such as Ansar al-Islam are believed to be behind the spate of anti-western attacks in mainland Egypt in 2019, and they also posed a continued threat.

While terrorist attacks primarily targeted Egyptian security personnel, civilians and foreigners were also targeted. Of note, terrorist groups carried out increased kidnappings and executions of individuals suspected of collaborating with the Egyptian government and military, particularly in April and June. Coptic Christians and other religious minorities continue to be targets for terrorist attacks.

As noted in the U.S. Department of State’s *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices and International Religious Freedom Report*, NGOs continued to claim that authorities used counterterrorism and state-of-emergency laws and courts unjustly to prosecute journalists, activists, lawyers, political party members, university professors, and critics for exercising freedom of expression.

Egypt is a member of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS.

2019 Terrorist Incidents: Overall terrorist attack methods throughout Egypt included small arms attacks, IEDs, VBIEDs, kidnappings, executions, complex assaults, ambushes, and targeted assassinations. Notable terrorist incidents in 2019 included:

- On January 23, HASM claimed responsibility for a VBIED attack targeting security forces in Giza, which killed or wounded 10 soldiers.
- On February 16, ISIS-SP attacked a government checkpoint near Al-Arish in North Sinai, killing 15 security personnel.
- On February 20, security forces detected and safely diffused an IED in Cairo planted by unidentified militants.
- On March 7, suspected terrorists opened fire on a security checkpoint on the Ring Road in Giza, resulting in one soldier wounded and three militants killed.
- On March 26, ISIS-SP claimed responsibility for an attack against aid workers in North Sinai that killed 12 civilians.
- On May 19, for the second year in a row, unidentified terrorists detonated an IED under a tour bus carrying foreigners near the Great Pyramids at Giza.
- On June 25, ISIS attacked a police assembly center and at least three checkpoints near Al-Arish in North Sinai, killing 10 people and wounding eight others.
- On July 16, ISIS-SP beheaded four individuals, whom the group claimed were informants for the Egyptian Armed Forces, near Bir al-Abd in North Sinai.
- On August 4, a VBIED detonated in front of the National Cancer Institute in Cairo. The Egyptian government blamed HASM, though the group denied responsibility.

Legislation, Law Enforcement, and Border Security: In March, the Egyptian Parliament’s legislative committee approved new amendments to the 2015 Anti-Terrorism Law, increasing the punishment to 10 years in prison for those who promote “extremist” ideology as defined by Egyptian law. The punishment was increased to a minimum

of 15 years if the promotion of “extremist” ideology was made at places of worship, public places, among members of the Armed Forces or the police, or in places allocated for these forces. Parliament is expected to pass these amendments, and President Sisi is then expected to ratify them in 2020.

In October, the Egyptian Parliament formed a new counterterrorism committee to revise national legislation and enable a more effective strategy against those who commit terrorist acts as defined by Egyptian law. This committee will propose amendments to existing legislation that gives law enforcement agencies additional powers to fight terrorism and accelerate trials of suspects charged with terrorist attacks. The committee will also make recommendations for religious and educational establishments, to include upgrading school curricula and removing content that might indirectly contribute to the “radicalization” of Egyptians.

Egypt’s most significant physical border security concerns remained Libya, Sudan, and Gaza. At border crossings and airports, Egyptian authorities continued to check for the presence of security features in travel documents. They also conducted checks of some individuals and shared derogatory information across the Egyptian Border Guard. Egypt maintains a terrorist watchlist for Egyptian immigration officials at the ports of entry, with detailed information maintained by the security services. The United States assisted Egypt’s CT efforts by providing training, equipment, and other assistance to its law enforcement security services, as well as to the Egyptian Ministry of Defense.

In July, British Airways and Lufthansa temporarily suspended flights to Egypt, citing unspecified security concerns, but resumed flights after one week and one day, respectively. In October, the United Kingdom lifted restrictions on flights to Sharm el-Sheikh for the first time since flights were banned in November 2015 following the downing of a Russian Metrojet airliner in an attack claimed by ISIS-SP.

Countering the Financing of Terrorism: Egypt is a member of MENAFATF. Its FIU, the Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing Combating Unit, is a member of the Egmont Group and the National Council of Payments. Egypt is also a member of the Defeat ISIS Coalition’s CIFG. There were no significant updates in 2019.

Countering Violent Extremism: The government continued its ongoing CVE efforts in 2019. In January, the Ministry of Islamic Endowments (Awqaf) inaugurated an academy to train imams and preachers and brought together 130 ministers of endowments and muftis from around the world for a conference to counter “extremist narratives” and promote pluralism. Al-Azhar continued to publish statements promoting tolerance and in January introduced several new academic textbooks focusing on the relationship between Muslims and Christians and promoting equal rights between the two religions. In February, Pope Francis and Grand Imam Ahmed El-Tayyeb signed a historic document pledging fraternity between the Vatican and Al-Azhar to work together to fight “extremism.” Al-Azhar additionally cooperated with the Arab League to continue organizing conferences focused on countering terrorist radicalization and recruitment.

The Ministry of Awqaf additionally focused on bridging the divide between Muslims and Christians, bringing together representatives from both faiths to debate issues of mutual concern in an effort to address sectarian issues, particularly in Upper Egypt.

Dar al-Iftaa, an official body associated with Al-Azhar that issues religious edicts, focused its efforts on rejecting “extremist” ideology. In an effort to counter ISIS, which in the past has demolished several shrines, Dar al-Iftaa published a fatwa saying that praying in a mosque with a shrine annexed to it was commendable in Islam, despite other fatwas contrary to this position.

The Cairo Center for Conflict Resolution and Peacekeeping in Africa (CCCPA) continued training through its Preventing Radicalization and Extremism Leading to Terrorism (PRELT) program, which aims to prevent the proliferation of “extremist ideology.” CCCPA trained 21 Arab women leaders in refuting “extremist interpretations” of religion and developing alternative religious narratives, and it hosted an advanced PRELT training for Sahel religious leaders.

The World Organization for Al-Azhar Graduates held a July workshop for Libyan imams and preachers with Azhari senior scholars on combating “extremism” and promoting moderate Islam. In October, a similar event was held on promoting tolerance.

Despite measures taken by the Egyptian government – such as establishing parameters to identify individuals vulnerable to recruitment and offering training and religious guidance to inmates – concerns persisted that Egyptian prisons continue to be a fertile environment for terrorist recruitment and radicalization.

International and Regional Cooperation: Egypt continued to support CT efforts through regional and multilateral organizations, including through the GCTF. Egypt currently co-chairs the GCTF East Africa Working Group with the EU. As Chair of the Peace and Security Council of the AU, Egypt regularly prioritized CT issues including during their ASWAN Forum.

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