

Cairo Acts on its Fears of Radicalization after Afghanistan



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 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 and Muhammed Hassaan—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.

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 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.’

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 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.

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—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, 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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