

Empowering Egypt to Defeat Radical Islamism

DR. HEDIEH MIRAHMADI
DR. TAREK ELGAWHARY
MEHREEN FAROOQ



THE WORLD ORGANIZATION FOR
RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION



EMPOWERING EGYPT TO DEFEAT RADICAL ISLAMISM

Executive Summary

Despite billions of dollars in counter-terrorism measures to capture and kill terrorists, the threat from transnational terrorist organizations like ISIL, Al-Qaeda and the Taliban has metastasized into an even greater menace than ever before. Given the U.S.'s trepidation to engage the public sector on religious issues, our efforts to contain the threat have relied on purely kinetic counterterrorism approaches, rather than decreasing the proliferation of radical ideologies, which perpetuate the flow of new recruits. However, with a renewed focus in the U.S. on addressing radical Islamist extremism, there may be new opportunities to empower religious scholars who can authentically refute extremist narratives and possibly break the cycle of radicalization and recruitment.

The dynamics of Egypt's post-Islamist state provides a unique opportunity in this regard. From the Ministry of Religious Affairs to the renowned Islamic seminary, Al Azhar, Egyptian officials and religious scholars, have repeatedly stated their commitment to eradicate the use of Islam as a weapon for terrorists. If given the intellectual and social space necessary to engage in such efforts, Egypt's network of religious scholars and civil society institutions can play a particularly vital role in this regard. In short, considering their commitment to the issue and the scope of their religious networks -- with the al-Azhar schools alone having a student body of over 500,000 *each year* -- Egypt may be the key to curbing radicalization within its borders and beyond.

This in-depth study explores the current realities of religious networks in Egypt and their ability to counter extremist ideologies in a way that has global impact. We also explore whether U.S. policymakers can and should play a role in empowering or elevating their efforts. Having conducted extensive fieldwork in Egypt, and hosting high level discussions with policymakers in Washington, D.C., this report highlights several important recommendations.

- **Egypt can and should remain a key ally for U.S. national security interests:** Egypt should be at the center of a robust U.S. counter terrorism strategy that has the ultimate objective of stopping the proliferation of radical Islamism, which jeopardizes U.S. national security. Given its strategic importance and influence in political, cultural, and theological matters across the Arab world, Egypt is the natural choice to spearhead such an effort and the U.S. should capitalize on its willingness to do so.
- **Religious networks matter:** Graduates from the al-Azhar University number in the millions, many of whom have set up satellite teaching and educational facilities throughout the world. Given the size and scope of their networks, as well as the credibility they have with Muslim audiences, the U.S. should help amplify their efforts to reduce the appeal and proliferation of radical Islamist ideologies.
- **Refocus religious leader engagement:** Historically, the U.S. government and the international community have largely relied on engaging Islamists instead of traditional Islamic scholars, because the former were supposedly more "credible" to the extremists. This approach has not only failed to yield any positive outcomes, the problem of radicalization and recruitment to terrorism has increased. Considering the intellectual nexus between radical Islamist thought and support for terrorism, the U.S. government should instead pivot its focus to engage religious scholars who share our values on important issues like religious freedom, freedom of association, and nonviolent solutions to social change.
- **Provide language training and engagement opportunities to expand the reach of Egyptian religious scholars:** To counter extremist propaganda directed at Western audiences, young Egyptian religious scholars need opportunities to learn English and other European languages, which is a resource the U.S. can easily provide. The U.S. government should also continue its exchange programs like the State Department's International Visitors Leadership Program (IVLP) so these scholars can have access to other international Islamic scholars who do similar work and can share their best practices.
- **Help expand the reach of their counter messaging efforts:** Egypt's traditional scholars have an enormous amount of raw content from which they can develop authentic counter messaging campaigns; however they lack the communication training, marketing skills, and distribution channels to disseminate the content effectively. Although these scholars have created websites, YouTube videos, and social media content, it pales in comparison to the slick ISIL online machinery. U.S. government programs such as the Global Engagement Center, as well as private sector companies, could provide that sort of technical expertise and repackage the content in a way that maintains its intellectual integrity but is more appealing to the targeted population.

- **Support alternative messaging campaigns and curricula development:** While Egypt's traditional scholars are extremely well trained in theological discourses and teaching, they struggle with how to translate that into practical messaging campaigns for a lay audience. Again, communication and public speaking training is something the U.S. could easily provide without affecting the authenticity of the content the scholars have created.
- **Provide practical skills on community based interventions:** Upon graduation, many Azhar scholars travel to establish Islamic learning centers around the world. Their religious training equips them to recognize ideological radicalization; but, it is important for them to also be trained to recognize when an individual may be mobilizing towards violence, as well as key intervention strategies such as fostering help seeking behaviors, or in some cases, reporting a threat to law enforcement.