

The Radical Risk of Media Censorship:  
How Censorship to Fight ISIS Actually Empowers It

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### **Abstract**

In post-Arab Spring Egypt, the primary focus of the new military government has been fighting terrorism to restore stability and economic prosperity to the nation. As a result of this effort, it has employed more stringent media controls to turn the public against the Islamists the military overthrew and the radical Islamic extremism that fuels the terrorism that plagues the country. Many private media organizations have also been pressured into publishing the government's narrative or have joined in on this cause as a result of nationalism, leading to a more singular-voiced media that fails to provide trusted news to the populace. I argue that the increasing convergence of public and private media coverage of ISIS in Egypt as a result of government and self-censorship turns disillusioned citizens to social media where ISIS's voice and recruitment strategy is strongest. Coupled with domestic problems that further disillusion Egypt's youth population in particular, media may actually be aiding ISIS recruitment by priming citizens to consume their news from social media, where Islamist and ISIS ideology still exist and where ISIS recruitment is most strongly focused.

**Keywords:** Egyptian media, media censorship, ISIS recruitment, ISIS media strategy

### The Radical Risk of Media Censorship:

#### How Censorship to Fight ISIS Actually Empowers It

In modern times, the fight against terrorism has consumed the focus and imagination of nations around the world set on restoring stability and tranquility to their lands. Unlike thousands of other wars in the past, the war against terror intimately involves civilian populations who are often even more at risk than their governments. As a result, many other parts of society have involved themselves in the fight against terrorism, including private organizations and the media. In the west, much controversy has surrounded media coverage of terrorism, especially when that reporting involves extreme violence, spreading the terror their actions rise, and can be used to bring attention to groups societies are attempting to destroy. In Egypt, however, the media has not wholly operated alone in deciding how to cover terrorist organizations. Instead, the government plays an increasingly active role in making sure both public and private media organizations limit the exposure of terrorist ideology while also demonstrating a consensus of support for government deeds. The increasing convergence of public and private media coverage of ISIS in Egypt as a result of government and self-censorship turns disillusioned citizens to social media where ISIS's voice and recruitment strategy is strongest. When media starts to sound to like government propaganda, politically interested citizens with other options will seek out those options to find out the truth, these are the residents most dissatisfied with their surroundings, these are the citizens most willing to actively oppose the government, and when all of the opposition is silenced, these are revolutionaries who will join their cause.

Even as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria declines without any territory, its reach as a political movement persists in other parts of the Muslim world. One of the ways terrorist organizations build power and reach is through absorption of smaller extremist groups. Primarily

to attract these smaller constituent groups, ISIS and Al Qaeda publicly seek to differentiate themselves from each other. They use whatever platform they're provided to resist the notions of similarity their similar approaches and ideology encourage. Often this resistance is merely untrue posturing to appeal to different value systems. For instance, with the emergence of ISIS in the early 2010s, Al Qaeda attempted to present themselves as a more civilized and developed alternative, lending the organization greater perceived legitimacy as a more "professional" force. They issued statements painting ISIS's media strategy as not just barbaric, but also as a bad way to beat the west (Masi, 2014). Al Qaeda specifically highlighted ISIS's strategy of filming and distributing videos of the violent acts they commit, claiming that such depictions are counterintuitive to Quranic principles about what is appropriate for women and children to see. In the terrorist group's "first international press conference", answering journalists' questions on social media, the group even cited Osama bin Laden's supposed distaste for brutality as evidence of their relative civility when compared to ISIS: "Sheik Osama bin Laden used to say anyone with sound instincts cannot stand watching scenes of killings,"(Masi, 2014). Al Qaeda specifically called out ISIS for its beheading videos, calling them a "big mistake" (Masi, 2014).

Though using harsh words to call for an end to barbaric beheadings, Al Qaeda was actually the group whose harsh actions brought them onto the screen in the first place, filming and distributing the gruesome beheading of journalist Daniel Pearl in 2002. The similarities between ISIS and Al Qaeda media strategies abound. They both produce videos of their battle triumphs, release (similarly worded) statements from their leaders calling Muslims to jihad, and create magazines tracking their progress and encouraging individuals to carry out terrorist attacks with their instructions. This "open source" jihad was first introduced in an Al-Qaeda magazine published from Yemen in English called "Inspire" as a how-to guide for jihad. ISIS's Dabiq

online magazine often features similar articles and has successfully encouraged numerous lone wolf attacks (Husick, 2014). Perhaps the biggest difference between Al Qaeda and ISIS media is the far more professional production quality of ISIS material, featuring HD shots, careful scripts, and multilingual messaging. While ISIS media is released on the surface web that most people use and social media specifically, strategically placed to go viral and produced well enough to draw attention, Al-Qaeda media is typically casually produced and uploaded in internet cafes. As a result, even Al Qaeda affiliated fundamentalist groups are progressively choosing to affiliate with ISIS, attracted especially by the substantially superior resources and media infrastructure available to ISIS groups (Husick, 2014).

### **ISIS in Egypt**

What began as a Bedouin resistance movement called Ansar Beit al-Maqdis (ABM), which means Supporters of the Holy House in the Northern Sinai in 2011 gained strength and notoriety when it declared allegiance to the Islamic State and Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi in November of 2014 (Mapping Militant Organizations, 2018). In joining ISIS, ABM renamed itself Wilayat Sinai, forming the Sinai Province of the Islamic State. Joining forces with ISIS provided fighters, recruitment, resources, and greater organization to fuel their struggle against the Egyptian military and police forces. The benefits of joining ISIS were valuable enough for Wilayat Sinai to shift their ideology from opposing and terrorizing Egyptian police and security forces as recompense for el-Sisi's extreme crackdown on Islamists after his military overthrew the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood government to ISIS ideology—opposing westernization and improper Islam, terrorizing civilian targets in addition to security personnel (Mapping Militant Organizations, 2018). For ISIS and Al Qaeda specifically, smaller terrorist partners like Wilayat

Sinai also benefit tremendously from the media strategies these organizations extend, helping them to impact public perception about their movement and attract more support from foreign countries and domestic citizens.

Researching the actual efficacy of terrorist recruitment is extremely difficult. When governments detect any sign of successful recruitment, they're often more interested in snuffing out the embers they find before they flare up than they are in identifying the fuel source. Once they join up, terrorists aren't the most likely citizens to self-report in polls. Without much research into the efficacy of terrorism recruitment, especially in the more controlled authoritarian countries of the Middle East, it's difficult to assert which of ISIS's strategies are most effective at actually swaying young people. We know, however, that these young people have historically been successfully tantalized by radical groups inside and outside of Egyptian borders. ISIS's staying power in many of the regions in which it remains, like the Egyptian Sinai, is significantly fueled by a steady flow of recruits enraptured by its carefully calculated social media operation.

The Egyptian government has responded to ISIS attacks in the Sinai with three major offensives resulting in the deaths of thousands of militants including group leaders, and yet the group is still operational and planning attacks. With the much stronger Egyptian military against it, the number of attacks has drastically fallen, but the number of fatalities from attacks has risen, perhaps showing more strategic attack planning to maximize deaths (Mapping Militant Organizations, 2018). More recently, in February 2019, President el-Sisi demanded that terrorism be defeated in 3 months, significantly ramping up air strikes and ground attacks, but even after the death of the Emir of Wilayat Sinai, Abu Fares al-Ansari in 2020, the group was able to regroup and continue planning attacks (Megahid, 2020). The Egyptian media marketed this offensive, which lasted more than 3 months and failed to completely crush Wilayat Sinai, as

“all-out war and final odyssey to crush Wilayat Sinai (the Islamic State’s- “Sinai Province”) and clean Egypt’s territory of terrorism” (Mohamad, 2019). Media propaganda regularly exaggerates military achievements and highlights the weakness of terrorist enemies in an effort to turn a nation that voted an Islamist government into power in 2011 against Islamism, painting the ideology as a component of the terrorism the country fights. In this effort, the government seeks to kill as many “terrorist enemies” as it can, even murdering prisoners to exaggerate the numbers they report. In news reports, these reports are exaggerated even further, even reporting the military killing or arresting more people than are a part of the Wilayat Sinai organization (Mohamad, 2019).

Despite the national focus on terrorism, the Egyptian military has been unable to effectively destroy Wilayat Sinai. It has been successful at restricting ISIS movement, destroying some bases and hideouts, and eliminating soldiers and leadership, but the organization is fueled by some advantages that make complete destruction difficult to achieve. ISIS is fueled by a steady flow of domestic fighters as well as foreign fighters from Libya, Maghreb, and Europe, fruits of ISIS’s social media recruitment (Wright, 2017). The group also receives jihadist Salafist fighters from Gaza (Megahid, 2020). Wilayat Sinai also benefits from its mission to avenge the Egyptian government’s violent treatment of the Muslim brotherhood, a message understood at least in part by poorer Egyptians who elected the Muslim brotherhood into power in 2011. Another advantage ISIS has in the Sinai is that many of its fighters and leaders are Bedouins who know the remote terrain better than the Egyptian government and can easily blend in among civilians. This severely disadvantages Egyptian air force pilots and drones who don’t know where to strike or have to consider the effect on civilians before executing an attack (Megahid, 2020).

ISIS has also been relatively successful against the Egyptian military, far from playing defense during el-Sisi's offensives. "Throughout the operation, Wilayat Sinai persistently engaged in complex attacks, assassinations, ambushes, kidnapping, sniper attacks, and explosions. Excluding kidnapping, all these types of attacks were frequently documented in every month during the operation. Wilayat Sinai also carried out complex coordinated attacks using multiple tactics and several types of weapons, usually resulting in severe army casualties" (Mohamad, 2019). The group is especially capable at harming their targets and assassinating police, military, and spy affiliates. Where they have control, they've established checkpoints to search every passing car for victims, even executing 3 soldiers in a civilian car during el-Sisi's 2018 offensive. Looking to capitalize on the event and draw more potential recruits, the group filmed and broadcast the execution using the ISIS propaganda machine (Mohamad, 2019).

Additionally, the fighting in the Sinai has created a significant humanitarian crisis since the institution of the Egyptian State of Emergency in the region in 2014 (Wright, 2017). Many tribes in the region have been put under curfews and military surveillance to prevent increased insurgency, but this has prevented half a million people from moving freely, leading to a depletion of food supplies. In the towns near Gaza and Arish International Airport where the Sinai connects to the outside world, the Egyptian army has been demolishing houses and clearing out whole towns, leaving displaced families in their wake in a brutal environment (Mohamad, 2019). Egypt's heavy-handed militaristic approach has only driven more local civilians towards the militants, allowing ISIS to better conceal their fighters and even their leadership among Egyptian citizens the government can't harm.

### **ISIS Social Media Strategy**

ISIS social media strategy is far more advanced and far more capable at attracting recruits than any of Al-Qaeda's past efforts. In 2014, the group founded the Jihadi al-Hayat Media Center to specialize in media publishing, including ISIS's infamous videos and the Islamic State Report and Dabiq online magazines, and social media recruitment (Husick, 2014). The organization is primarily focused on spreading its ideas to attract recruits to fight or to live in the Islamic State under a caliph it hopes to create. This ideology is based in extreme interpretations of Islam and Islamist thought, specifically highlighting the idea that a state should have no religious choice, that violence is a mandate from God to defend Muslims, and that fearlessness and sacrifice are essential Muslim virtues that bring glory to Allah (Greene, 2015). They are also interested in establishing political legitimacy for themselves as a state, not just a movement, a desire that fuels their footage of food distribution, medical care, giving money, and devout mass prayers in formats reminiscent of aid videos, asking for help to build a caliphate (Husick, 2014). "The first issue of *Dabiq* features such a section which focuses on Halab, and claims that ISIS is 'returning rights and property to their rightful owners, pumping millions of dollars into services that are important to the Muslims... ensuring the availability of food products and commodities in the market, particularly bread, reducing crime rate, [and] flourishing relationship between the Islamic State and its citizens'" (Greene, 2015). This appeal for legitimacy also explains the orange jumpsuits they use on their prisoners and the uniforms they wear in videos.

ISIS also focuses on demonstrating religious legitimacy through instruction from Islam's holy books, claiming that they are enforcing Zakat, one the five pillars of Islam, as well as daily prayer (Greene, 2015). They also extensively quote the Islamic holy books and use them to explain the reasoning behind their violence and jihad against secularism. "Stories and analogies

using traditional figures from the Abrahamic religions are used as religious examples in Al Hayat articles, with both Abraham and Noah being used in the earliest issues of *Dabiq* (Greene, 2015).” They also attempt to explain their violence against other Muslims through the concept of Takfir, arguing that Muslims that resist them or are indifferent are not real Muslims and can be killed. These particular arguments also successfully draw in a violent type of people who are willing to engage in the type of Islam they preach, a type of person that makes a great soldier (Greene, 2015).

ISIS makes an effort to promote these ideas in public, on social media in ways that are difficult for even the most sophisticated countries to censor. They circulate their videos widely and quickly, posting them from many different sources to attempt to prolong the length of time they can be seen. They use a complex network of servers to prevent tracing and make it harder to censor live feeds or posted content—“... jihadi videos continue to circulate widely in cellphone format, as well as higher resolution computer formats, and is often stored on multiple servers in the West, including the Internet Archive, making it impossible to censor the feed or to trace the ultimate source” (Husick, 2014). They even use hashtags, campaigns and bots to attempt try to get their posts to go viral. When using hashtags, ISIS will not only write them in the descriptions of their content, they’ll also make their prisoners say their hashtags on camera in different languages (Irshaid, 2014). Their campaigns highlight fundraising or community building on social media, focused on helping people who feel alone in their pro-ISIS sentiments to feel supported by a community while also attracting more attention. For example, their #theFridayofSupportingISIS campaign intended to help their supporters display their Islamic State nationalism by calling on them to wave the ISIS flag in public and post about it. Their “One billion campaign” similarly called on Muslims (the one billion) to post content in support

of the terrorist organization (Irshaid, 2014). This encourages people who aren't yet blocked to help ISIS spread their message. In a way, this is a way of participating in the Islamic State and spreading terror without leaving the comfort of your own home and life while also solidifying one's ties to the organization.

### **Egyptian Media Environment**

Although Egypt is only the third largest media market by revenue in the Middle East, after Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, Egypt is the Middle East's historical media capital (Allam, 2020). Arabic dialects throughout the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) vary so widely that many Arabs from different places can barely communicate, but Egyptian Arabic is nearly ubiquitously understood throughout the region because of the dominance of its media. With a fast-rising population of 100 million, Egypt is the largest country in the Middle East with plenty of domestic consumers to sustain its own media outlets. Egyptian media has the resources and strength to greatly impact the worldview and politics of the country, and the Egyptian government has often leveraged the power of their media to promote their political goals among its citizenry.

As a result of its tremendous capacity to influence public opinion, foreign and domestic, Egyptian media has been strategically utilized by the Egyptian government as a tool in furthering its political goals, especially following the 2011 overthrow of dictator Hosni Mubarak during the Arab Spring. The European Journalism Centre describes this revolution as pivotal in understanding the current media landscape in the country: "Classified as a transitional democracy, Egypt features a media landscape which has witnessed many changes and challenges since the January 25 revolution in 2011" (Allam, 2020). As an ally in the fight against terrorism,

the Egyptian government cares deeply about how terrorist organizations appear in the media and do their best to diminish their impact on the country. Egypt, once crippled by numerous terrorist attacks specifically targeting its lucrative tourism industry, has honed its focus on reestablishing stability and security both in fact and in perception. The media plays one of the most prominent roles in promoting the perception of stability the country needs to continue to develop and to thrive.

The Egyptian government also has a vested interest in public opinion about terrorist groups, especially given the thousands of Egyptians that have helped to fuel terrorist organizations throughout the Middle East. Many of the same types of people who made up the terrorist groups that once threatened the population and tourism centers of the country are now especially vulnerable to recruitment by ISIS, and in the Sinai peninsula, many of the locals have joined the militants in declaring allegiance to the Islamic State. Therefore, the Egyptian government regularly employs their media to spread nationalist sentiment and propaganda that they hope will fuel devotion to the state and its ideology over the personal hardships and extremist ideologies that make citizens vulnerable to recruitment.

Egypt's media market is largely impacted by its demographic makeup. Because over a quarter of Egyptians—25 million people—are illiterate, and just under half have access to the internet, spoken media dominates Egyptian markets and written and online media tend to reach more elite audiences (Allam, 2020). Accordingly, the biggest player in the Egyptian media market by far is television, easily consumed by rich and poor alike. Even in poorer parts of Egypt, neighborhood cafes often feature televisions to entertain patrons enjoying the company of friends and the warm comfort of shisha smoke. Most Egyptians get their news from the most entertaining television source: talk shows. These well-produced shows combine heartfelt

monologues with the day's headlines, often featuring the incredibly personal take of the host buttressed by props and passionate displays of emotion. The importance of opinion and the strength of emotional connection formed by this medium make it a great way to influence public opinion, and the Egyptian government works to employ it to their benefit. "The national television has not seen actual change in terms of conversion from being the mouthpiece of the government to an actual public service broadcaster" (Allam, 2020). Many of these TV shows are better described by their affiliation with the government than by their star presenter.

While print and online media play a lesser role in Egyptian news reporting than TV talk shows, they still hold considerable sway over the literate three-quarters of the Egyptian population and also constitute a major investment of Egyptian government resources. Print and online media make up a particularly intriguing media sector because they demonstrate the competition between government owned and operated media outlets and private, citizen-run media outlets—especially important as the government transcends precedence and legal limitations to exact control over media narratives.

### **Media Anocracy**

Much of the Egyptian media market is a mixture of government-controlled media outlets and independent media outlets. While some sectors of Egyptian media, like terrestrial radio and television broadcasting—absolutely monopolized by the government who occasionally chooses to grant rare permits to use its infrastructure—are more fully government-controlled and other sectors, like newer and much less regulated social media are more fully free, many sectors of Egyptian media exhibit private media outlets in direct competition with the government.

Washington University in St. Louis political science and economics professor Norman Schofield

calls this system that exhibits “mixed characteristics of both democratic and autocratic regimes” anocracy (Schofield, 2011). Not quite authoritarian and not quite democratic, anocracy often leaves institutions operating within murky, ill-defined frameworks and can be the ideal culture for the growth of self-censorship. The Egyptian government paradoxically offers freedom of the press alongside its threats of censorship, leaving even fully private media organizations to make their best guess about what they should choose to publish (Allam, 2020).

Even since its new Constitution was ratified in 2014, the Egyptian government has been far from consistent in its implementation of its constitutionally assured freedom of the press and freedom of expression. While the government allows even some critical opposition press to thrive and even call out government corruption with little censorship, specifically from its opposition press, which even receives government subsidies (Allam, 2020), it has also become one of the world’s most notorious at unjustly imprisoning its journalists (Egypt Steps Up Crackdown on Journalists, 2020). Many journalists have responded to these threats by choosing to publish under pseudonyms or change their narrative completely to ingratiate the government. In response, May 2020 saw the Egyptian Supreme Council for Media Regulation which controls all government-owned media outlets, ban its journalists and contributors from using pseudonyms without written consent from the government (Mahmoud, 2020). In order to receive the written consent, a journalist or contributor has to disclose the purpose for using the pseudonym as well as their personal data (Mahmoud, 2020).

Private organizations operate with a lot more autonomy, but they can also be punished for speaking out of line. Al Masry Al Youm, the nation’s largest and most read private newspaper, was fined 250,000 Egyptian pounds (approximately \$16,000 US Dollars) in April 2020 for publishing articles under a pseudonym that the government claimed undermined the constitution

and laws of Egypt (Taha, 2020). The articles were written about the situation in the Sinai Peninsula, a topic that the Egyptian government treads carefully around as it seeks to extirpate ISIS presence in the region and quell local Bedouin dissatisfaction and revolt. Any upheaval in the country threaten the fragile message of stability the Egyptian government wants communicated clearly to its citizens and foreigners. Bedouins in the Sinai Peninsula are so disgruntled that they fuel an ISIS cell in the region and have even commented nostalgia for days when the Sinai was controlled by Egypt's former archenemy, Israel (Wright, 2017). This nostalgia is especially remarkable given that Wilayat Sinai was originally founded to rid Egypt of Israeli presence (Mapping Militant Organizations, 2018). Viewing this movement as disloyal and treasonous, the government portrays any reporting that mentions the perspectives of Sinai locals or undermines the Egyptian military narrative of complete dominance as unpatriotic, claiming that Al Masry Al Youm's coverage of the crisis "provided a negative model for freedom of expression and opinion that does not target construction of the country but harms and demolishes it, not advancing its interests or enhancing its cohesion and solidity but spreading division...destroying the values and constraints of society" (Taha, 2020).

Criticism is important in the discussion of media anocracy because it serves as a major differentiator between public and private media outlets. One of the primary ways private media outlets compete for an audience is to provide a different perspective from the government media that operates as a mouthpiece for the unified message the government wants to shape the national political dialogue. Private media outlets are also more adaptable, currently benefiting from a quicker transition to the internet without the overstaffing and bureaucratic dilemmas endured by public media outlets (Allam, 2020). The government attempts to compete with private media outlets by controlling information and by the use of censorship, preventing private companies

from wielding their critical perspective with direct evidence that condemns the government narrative.

In general, the Egyptian government is not very transparent. There are no Access to Information laws on the books (Allam, 2020). With no regular press conferences and official data that is rarely released to the public and frequently cryptically formatted (“Egyptian Media is on Life Support”, 2019), reporting on government matters from the outside is already designed to be difficult. This is likely the reason that opposition party press has for decades been legally and financially empowered by the government, receiving handsome subsidies and enjoying censorship restrictions even during times when Egypt was ruled by dictators with full control over every other source of media. While these opposition papers were tolerated, they suffered from low credibility because of the extreme control over information regimes maintained (Allam, 2020). Today, these parties are declining, replaced by more capable private media companies that are able to compete with the government in both perspective and as businesses, unable to depend on the government and relying on audiences and business decisions for funding.

Despite the effectiveness of information control at giving the government advantage over private media outlets, its side effects stymie the government itself. Information control still provides undisputable power to the government. “For particularly ‘sensitive’ and ‘politicised’ stories, local media doesn’t dare publish a single report until the Egyptian government has spoken” (“Egyptian Media is on Life Support”, 2019). As private media outlets await government responses to political concerns or events, sometimes days or weeks late, they can’t publish, and the government is left in the dark about both public opinion and unpublished media narratives. Both private and public media lose credibility as citizens turn to social media and

foreign press for updates they aren't receiving from domestic media sources, empowering outsider narratives and extremist and alternative perspectives perpetrated by smaller groups of people with strong social media presence.

### **Government Censorship**

Egypt has been a hub for tourism for centuries. Home to the last remaining wonder of the ancient world as well as thousands of temples and ruins of one of the world's oldest and grandest societies, tourism supports the Egyptian economy all the way up and down the Nile river.

Terrorism and revolutionary government overthrow in the past few decades, however, have dissuaded many of the deep-pocketed tourists from braving the Egyptian desert sun to visit some of the most impressive landmarks civilizations have ever built. Threatened by the same pressures that overthrew past governments, the Egyptian government must also consider stability and the façade of peace that will attract tourists and revive the economy as it plots how to use its media to compete with private media outlets while making progress towards its policy goals and preserving its power.

The Egyptian government's media mission is largely focused on positivization of the media to convince foreigners of internal security and stability and to convince citizens not to destabilize the government. The government advocates positivization of media as a display of nationalism for the public good, benefiting the economy, though positive coverage also works to shield the government from criticism and helps to consolidate its power. The power of this perspective also lies in its contagion. Positivization easily lends itself to self-censorship, since it appeals both to nationalistic feeling as well as to the fatigue many citizens feel from years of political difficulty. Alternatives to positive narratives can be easily targeted and painted as

disloyal or inaccurate, especially as they become rarer. This is far from unlikely in today's Egypt where positivization has spread nearly ubiquitously in the mainstream Egyptian media. Take, for example, the case of reporting about an Egyptian prison so notorious for the mistreatment and torture of prisoners that it regularly reaches international news during Egyptian protests as a symbol of authoritarian abuses. "Recently, a number of Egyptian newspapers reported on prison conditions at the infamous Tora Prison in Cairo following a visit by officials. The coverage by Egyptian newspapers was unanimously and overwhelmingly positive, lacking any critical (or simply unbiased) reporting: '*Prisoners have barbecues, great access to facilities and have no complaints at all!*'" ("Egyptian Media is on Life Support", 2019). Censorship in Egypt has been overwhelmingly successful.

Government censorship in Egypt often takes the form of financial pressure, legal pressure, or harassment of journalists. Reporters Without Borders highlights Egyptian press freedom as a very serious situation with a Press Freedom Rating of 161 (the lowest possible score is 180 for the worst press freedom situation) (Allam, 2020). While the government claims the power to fine non-governmental media outlets as it did Al Masry Al Youm, it also seeks leverage to employ over private media organizations to further its narratives. Much of the government's leverage over media relies on remnants of the nationalized media system introduced by Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser in the 1960s. Al Ahram, the oldest and most widely read newspaper in Egypt was founded as a private newspaper in 1875 and nationalized in 1960 along with every other newspaper in the country (Al-Ahram, 2018). This Nasserite act of nationalization was never undone. The oldest private newspaper today is Al Masry Al Youm founded in 2004, 44 years after the Egyptian populace lost its last independent political voice (Allam, 2020). Today, Al Ahram, Al Akhbar, and Al Gomhuriya make up the

government trifecta of newspapers, each run by editors appointed by the head of the National Council for Print Media (NCPM) and under the direct jurisdiction of the Egyptian Supreme Council for Media Regulation, and the government still views their control as essential to the public good. “The regime still counts on the government print media as a tool for public mobilisation of popular support for its political programs and for delivering the official line for creating a favorable public opinion” (Allam, 2020).

Another remnant of the ossified nationalized media structure the government frequently exploits is the unequal distribution of resources in the country. Because the government exclusively controlled the media for nearly half a century, newly developed private media organizations must often depend on printing and distribution infrastructure that is government owned. While larger media outlets have found ways to avoid this complete dependency on the government in order to operate, 80% of private newspapers still pay the government to use their printing and distribution services (Allam, 2020). The revenue from this venture helps to fuel and sustain national newspapers even as they suffer from government subsidy cuts and the steep decline of advertising revenue all newspapers are enduring as their readers transition to the web. Especially as advertising revenue plummets across the country, down by as much as 60% in 2017 (Allam, 2020), this system not only benefits government-owned media outlets over private ones, it also gives the government significant leverage over private firms, controlling their mode of communication with their readers.

Despite the advantages government media enjoys, private media has proven appealing to the Egyptian people, and Al Masry Al Youm is now challenging Al Ahram’s status as the most widely read Egyptian newspaper getting “almost similar circulation rates due to its news agenda that is different from the protocol news format of the national newspapers” (Allam, 2020).

Especially since nationalized Egyptian media outlets are the most censored and closest to the views of the Egyptian government, Egyptians are eager to find alternatives. “Newspaper organisations use the same and often only source to gather information: the government. This resulted in a status quo position in organisations and put the national media in real crisis” (Allam, 2020). Other major private newspapers founded during or before the Arab Spring have also been hugely successful at capitalizing on the crisis of national media, creating their own independent operations and raising enough revenue to effectively minimize the government’s financial leverage over them. More specifically, Al Youm7, founded in 2008 and Al Watan, founded in 2012 have risen in status enough to round out a trifecta of private media powerhouses (Allam, 2020).

After the 2011 revolution and the 2013 coup, however, economic hardship hampered the growth of many smaller private media outlets, and when the government raised its printing costs by 80% in 2016 when the Egyptian Pound was freely floated, many more private media outlets dropped out of the market. This occurred at the same time the Egyptian government founded three new regulatory bodies and set a broadcast code of ethics for journalists. The 102 print media organizations that were thriving in 2011 were whittled down to 75 in 2015 by the economic upheaval, but by 2017, only 41 persisted (Allam, 2020).

When private media outlets struggle, the Egyptian government takes advantage of the opportunity to augment the strength of its voice by purchasing and acquiring them. This practice began with the el-Sisi regime and is a remarkably different policy from the more socialist policies of past regimes. Instead of merely nationalizing media, the regime chose to become a player in the private media market, starting the Eagle Capital front company to buy TV channels and other news media outlets (Gizbert, 2019). Once they own a media company, the government

reworks the company, streamlining it to fit the el-Sisi regime's view of the national interest. Some TV stations, for instance, once bought by the government, are reworked so that talk shows begin towing the government line. Others, however, are completely transformed from news channels into entertainment and sports channels (Gizbert, 2019). This effectively neutralizes problem TV stations in a way that does little to disrupt public opinion, since entertainment and social programs are the most popular shows on Egyptian TV by far (Allam, 2020). While some of these outlets are directly managed by the Eagle Capital front company as if they were independent from the government, others are simply acquired by the government and controlled similarly to other government-owned media sources, run by leadership appointed by the Egyptian Supreme Council for Media Regulation.

While the government often attempts to legally censure and pressure media organizations, their legal claims are often constitutionally dubious. Especially with the freedom of the press and freedom expression assured to the Egyptian people in the 2014 constitution, many legal censorship motions publicly issued by the government are rhetorical calls for outlets to capitulate to the national interest or attacks on their loyalty to Egyptian society. The government often accompanies these motions with fines, requests for retractions, and condemnations of journalists (Taha, 2020). Since the establishment of Egyptian media regulatory bodies and the broadcasting code of ethics in 2016, the government has also expanded its legal right to harass and prosecute journalists who violate vague controls and standards veiled under the guise of journalistic principles (Egypt Steps Up Crackdown on Journalists, 2020).

Foreign journalists are even harder to keep on message. Legally, these non-citizens are often protected by their home countries, but the Egyptian government has complete control over who they allow to transcend their borders. As the Middle East's historical media capital, Egypt,

even during periods of intense government control and policies of nationalization, has allowed foreign journalists access to the country, even creating a foreign press association in the 1970s, only a decade after President Nasser nationalized Egyptian domestic media, pushing out all independent voices. As time progressed and private media outlets reemerged and developed, the Egyptian government increased controls on foreign journalists and decreased their exposure. The foreign press association that once hosted hundreds of foreign journalists is now at an all-time low, and it's becoming increasingly difficult for foreign correspondents to obtain permission to report from Cairo.

Where the government lacks the financial or legal leverage to censor journalists, it has harassed and even illegally imprisoned them. This is far from an unusual and occasional practice; it is a systematic strategy with its roots in the changes initiated by the 2011 revolution. Under the deposed dictator Mubarak, in power before 2011, media outlets were permitted to act as a check on the corruption of members of the cabinet and elected officials as long as they didn't cross certain lines (Youssef, 2015). As the Arab Spring came and went and the untouchable authority was deposed, media's criticism accrued and grew more powerful. When the military seized power in 2013, they lost their status as an apolitical force with broad public support and became susceptible to the criticism due to public officials. President el-Sisi, before the coup, had spent his life hidden from the media, but had grown to dislike the media. A leaked video from 2011 shows el-Sisi in a meeting with military advisors plotting ways to control the media criticism that was aimed at the military for the first time. In the meeting, he posits, "I know how to incentivize, but can you tell me how to terrorize them? You need to take your time and think about how you can really affect the media" (Gizbert, 2019). Media domination has been a goal of the el-Sisi

regime since the beginning, and the censorship acts they commit, whether legal or illegal, are all part of a larger plan.

While lack of transparency conceals some of the actions the government takes against journalists—a number of them have disappeared from the air, including prominent TV talk show hosts when they chose not to legitimize el-Sisi’s presidency and vilify his critics (Gizbert, 2019)—details of other stories of harassment have made it out into the open. Though the government often can’t indict journalists legally, they can harass journalists by arresting and imprisoning them in preparation for trials that can be easily postponed or cancelled. Though journalists are legally innocent, they can be held pre-trial for months awaiting trial (Gizbert, 2019). This problem has become so pervasive that one of Egypt’s closest allies, the United States, has publicly called on the el-Sisi regime to respect the freedom of the press. In November of 2019, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo spoke in defense of Egyptian journalists after the Egyptian military raided a private media outlet, confiscated computers, and briefly imprisoned members of its staff (Pamuk, 2019). Even a smaller brush with the authorities can be enough to intimidate journalists or media outlets into giving the government what it wants, even before it asks for anything.

### **Self-Censorship**

Perhaps even more than legal pressure, illegal harassment of journalists helps to cement internalized fear into Egyptian journalists who might stray from the government’s perspective. The legal dubiousness of many of the government’s actions keeps them veiled in mystery, leaving journalists to play it safe when they report, but even when they are careful, their actions might still prove worthless. “At Al Masry Al Youm, reporters also say they know which topics to avoid. ‘No one can question how [well] trained the soldiers we have thrown to face the

insurgency in Sinai,' says website editor Ahmed Ragab. Even when the newspaper published a report on police abuse partly showing the authorities in positive light and showcasing their "heroism in the war on terrorism", its journalists were still referred to the public prosecutor after the Ministry of Interior issued a statement promising to sue the paper for what it claimed was an unprofessional report" (Youssef, 2015). Emphasizing the betrayal of media outlets that step outside of the government's will, often media organizations and individual journalists are accused of committing crimes against the state rather than of breaking specific laws. Even now that the Egyptian government has published and legally legitimized a code of ethics for journalists, many of the punitive measures it takes are merely tangentially related to its laws.

The internalized fear the government brews in its media even extends to the powerful owners of media organizations who have a lot of say over what is reported in private media organizations. Ahmed Amir, a young journalist who works for a news talk show, describes the absolute authority of the owners of private media organizations to decide reported narratives by reducing journalists in stature to merely serving as their tools. "We are tools, not journalists. The media owners use us to attack the regime when they want and support it when they want,' he [Ahmed Amir] says. 'This is the profession of those with no conscience'" (Youssef, 2015). Even with all the power to use journalists as they see fit, however, owners "without conscience" still limit themselves, most likely to protect themselves. "El-Watan reporter Ahmed Ghoniem says owning media outlets "comes in handy if you get into any kind of trouble and have to pressure the government". But no owner completely "unleashes his journalists" on the government, he says" (Youssef, 2015). Even the most powerful non-governmental media actors fear the government enough to self-censor, even when they may need to use their outlets to pressure the government.

While fear of government censorship or harassment may be a primary impetus the government hopes will lead to self-censorship, the government still combines efforts that incite fear with efforts to persuade the media to support the public good. “The last standing state-owned and privately-controlled news media organisations have largely resorted to self-censorship, banning all material which “may incite” or otherwise undermine state institutions directly or indirectly – it is a “nationalistic duty” to toe the line” (“Egyptian Media is on Life Support”, 2019). Nationalism is a powerful positive motivator for those who choose to self-censor. Egyptians are extremely nationalistic people, claiming their lineage from one of the world’s oldest and most dominant civilizations and known throughout the Arab world for bragging about their ancestry. Egyptians bombastically refer to their motherland as *Um al-Dunya*, Arabic for mother of the world and regularly celebrate the accomplishments of their people even in the face of political turmoil and economic strife. The government uses the media to appeal to this hypernationalism, spreading propaganda films featuring national anthems and films of Egyptian triumphs on the battlefield interspersed with famous ruins and natural beauty. The military also hosts pro-military government celebrations with turnouts higher than revolutionary protests, and when it called for people to take to the streets to demonstrate a national mandate to fight terrorism, millions showed up and marched (Kotb, 2014). Needless to say, nationalism is a strong motivator for the Egyptian public.

This intense hypernationalism has also inspired the media to self-censor in support of their military government. For many media organizations, self-censorship is a form of serving one’s country, helping the government to persuade the world and Egyptian citizens of the stability necessary to foster peace and economic growth. Media outlets in Egypt have always operated with a tacit understanding of certain limitations on coverage of political issues, and so it

makes sense that they are more open to accepting the tightening of these limitations, especially if the reasoning behind the changes remains consistent. Before the 2011 revolution, when President Mubarak was still in power, private media was especially critical of the government, but only touched members of the government whose downfall wouldn't destabilize the government. "Before 2011, there was an unspoken rule among broadcasters and newspapers: criticise everyone except the president and his immediate family. To some, this silence extended to the defence and interior ministers" (Youssef, 2015). The military was also mostly protected from negative scrutiny [Quote]. These unspoken rules were in place to preserve the power of the people most associated with ensuring domestic tranquility and stability, the president who led the country, the defense minister who fought terrorism and foreign adversaries, and the interior minister who controlled Egyptian law enforcement. The el-Sisi regime employs these same reasons to justify strengthening media restrictions. With the media already on the same page with the government, tighter regulations seemed natural when the Muslim Brotherhood, painted by the el-Sisi regime as terrorists, took over the government in 2011 and needed to be overthrown in a coup to preserve the country's stability. According to this narrative, the current military government acted heroically on behalf of the people.

Today's military government has capitalized on this collective, nationalistic pursuit of stability to build relationships with media outlets. "Today, many of Egypt's top TV presenters and journalists are remarkably candid about their willingness to act as government mouthpieces. 'I would say anything the military tells me to say out of duty and respect for the institution,' says Ahmed Moussa, one of the most popular TV presenters in Egypt" (Youssef, 2015). Starkly different than the journalistic traditions in countries where freedom of the press is guaranteed and enforced, many journalists see themselves first as loyal citizens and second as objective

journalists, and they make no effort to hide their priorities. Self-censorship for the “good of the nation” is such a strong and overwhelming force that some journalists are willing to undermine and disparage other journalists before criticizing the government. “‘Claims of oppression are just a trend,’ Capital Broadcasting Center (CBC)’s Khairy Ramadan says. ‘Anyone who says they are under pressure is a liar.’” (Youssef, 2015). Ahmad Moussa, the third most watched TV talk show host, the most consumed form of Egyptian media, is famous for using his theatrical personality to paint President el-Sisi as a “savior against terrorism” with loud, hyperbolic, nationalistic monologues celebrating the government’s response to the “national emergency” of terrorism necessary, even when prisoners’ rights are violated (Gizbert, 2019). Like many other TV talk show hosts, he ties every national problem to terrorism, the government’s biggest enemy, and the Muslim Brotherhood, the past regime this military government overthrew.

These colorful displays of highly subjective national fervor are still consumed as news by millions of Egyptians each day spreading the calculated and dynamic opinions of the presenters from the professional environment of a newsroom. Their opinions, though based in the events of the day, often seem more like dramatized social media newsfeeds than objective reporting. Whether from government pressure or because of self-censorship, Egyptian media has blended into more and more of a single voice. “Egyptian newspapers and talk show hosts are constantly ridiculed for their emotionally-charged, un-critical and redundant approaches to news and information” (“Egyptian Media is on Life Support”, 2019). The more obvious it is that media messaging is converging, the less politically active citizens trust the media and the more they are willing to put their trust in alternative sources.

### **ISIS Targets the Weaknesses of Egyptian Media**

Although, ISIS as whole is not singling Egypt out as it develops its social media strategy, instead specifically targeting broader swathes of potential recruits from around the world, the organization's social media strategy perfectly exploits the vulnerabilities of the Egyptian media machine. Egypt's population is extremely young—49% of its citizens are under the age of 25 (Allam, 2020)—and younger Egyptians respond to media uniformity in fundamentally different ways. While older generations are more likely to take a more favorable response to both government and private media, younger generations are more willing to categorically reject the Egyptian media altogether.

Many older Egyptians hold views similar to TV talk show host Mahmoud Saad, who confesses he no longer has that “fighting spirit”. “I am an old man”, he says. ‘I just want to spend my time here in quiet’ – of which there is plenty in his brightly lit villa in a gated community in Giza. ‘I don’t want to ruin anyone’s day’, he says. ‘The viewer is tired. He doesn’t want to hear about corruption and theft.’ This desire to please is clear on Saad’s show, where all he had to say on the day a court dropped charges of killing protestors against Mubarak was: “Is it really important that we get into details? I think not (Youssef, 2015).” Older generations, having seen more turmoil and different regimes in Egyptian society are often more politically pessimistic and share the government’s desire to strengthen and stabilize the nation, even at a cost. In fact, since President el-Sisi rose to power and initiated promised economic reforms, Egypt’s GDP has seen steady growth placating many citizens yearning for societal improvement, stability, and peace (Allam, 2020). The el-Sisi regime has also undertaken significant infrastructure projects to widen highways and even create a new capital to ease the negative effects of rapid population growth, very visible signs of prosperity many citizens highlight as evidence of the competence of the government.

Younger generations respond to media positivization and displays of overt nationalism somewhat hesitantly. While previous generations have lived most of their lives under the thumb of dictator Hosni Mubarak, this generation has been raised during an unprecedented time of revolution in Egyptian society, marked by two massive protests leading to government overthrows in 2011 and 2013. Egyptian Streets, a media organization that describes itself as “an independent, young, and grass roots news media organization aimed at providing readers with an alternate depiction of events that occur on Egyptian and Middle Eastern streets, and to establish an engaging social platform for readers to discover and discuss the various issues that impact the region” (Egyptian Streets, 2015) describes the positivization and self-censorship of mainstream Egyptian media as a path resulting in the death of journalism – one that sees media organisations placing rose-coloured glasses on the eyes of its readers and audience” (“Egyptian Media is on Life Support”, 2019). People disenchanted with the media tend to search these alternatives for truth, perusing social media feeds, “official statements” (which are rarely released), and foreign coverage to conduct citizen journalism. “Facebook, Twitter and even Instagram are the new community noticeboards: readers flock to them first for information about what’s happening in their communities” (“Egyptian Media is on Life Support”, 2019).

Egyptian media is losing more than the trust of the nation’s youth, it’s also losing their attention to foreign and social media who shape the dilemmas in Egyptian in vastly different ways. Given that millions of Egyptian young people are looking for alternatives to mainstream Egyptian media, public and private, neither of their choices benefit the Egyptian government’s interests. While foreign press can be easily controlled by internet blocks and lack of access to government information, the Egyptian government holds no significant power over outlets who choose to publish critical articles. A critical foreign press can undermine both of the Egyptian

government's main goals, making Egypt seem unstable and dangerous to foreign tourists and businesses while also making the government appear weak and corrupt to its own citizens. While the Egyptian government censors to inspire more nationalism and reassure the public of the country's success and improvement, its actions teach dissatisfied audiences to trust foreign press instead, reducing nationalism and eroding the influence of the voice of the government even more.

Foreign press, however, also doesn't have the greatest reputation in the eyes of many Egyptians. Regional disputes as well as Al Jazeera's decision to give airtime to Islamist leaders and the Muslim Brotherhood have led many Egyptians to detest the Middle East's largest news network (Carlstrom, 2014). Many others view certain cultural forms of westernized Arab media as "a regression from the authentic heritage of the region" (Mellor, 2013). This struggle against globalization can also lead to distrust of other western news outlets, especially when critical of their country. Egyptians unimpressed by domestic and foreign press are most likely to turn to social media and citizen journalism as their primary source of news.

The problem of youth reliance on social media as their primary source for information appears even more grave for the Egyptian government when you consider that 30% of youth in Egypt are unemployed and a completely captive audience for the citizen journalism that thrives on these sites. Social media consumed in conjunction with other news sources can be a healthy outlet for dialogue and a great place to hear alternative perspectives, but when isolated, this news source—without much of the censorship the media endures—presents a full variety of perspectives, including those of Islamists and radical groups. Egyptian youth, more interested in an alternative to the government and understanding the politics of their youth might also be

drawn to understanding the Islamist beliefs of the past government and the current enemies of the nation.

Social media is a newer and less regulated mode of communication in Egypt. As of 2017, 30 million Egyptians use Facebook, 1.7 million use Twitter, and 800,000 use Instagram (w, 2017). While there is a cybersecurity law restricting online news media and encouraging websites to share user data, these laws only tangentially apply to social media. The government has also used a “dissemination of false information charge under the terrorism law” to prosecute individuals forwarding news to multiple people online that the government decided was a threat to national security (Gizbert, 2019). The government also has a system of blocks that blocks certain users and sites, especially from terrorist sources. The government also keeps an active social media presence to spread its own perspective online and to correct fake news and rumors (Allam, 2020). This highlights one of the core weaknesses of social media as a news source: the spread of many unverified narratives and rumors. “Stories are sometimes even hijacked by those with ulterior motives maliciously seeking to cause divisions or incite violence and instability” (“Egyptian Media is on Life Support”, 2019).

Young Muslim men looking for alternatives to the government narrative are the exact audience ISIS targets with its media efforts. Alongside young men who have migrated to the west from Muslim countries, ISIS has found a lot of success in recruiting them to support their fight for jihad (Husick, 2014). This risk is even higher considering that terrorist recruits in general have more than average education, and very few Western terrorists are uneducated or illiterate (Hudson, 1999). A report by the Federal Research Division of the Library of Congress on the sociology and physiology of terrorism provides a general description of “young foreigners claiming to be ‘students’” that may pose a higher risk: “physically fit males in their early

twenties of Egyptian, Jordanian, Yemeni, Iraqi, Algerian, Syrian, or Sudanese nationalist, or Arabs bearing valid British passports, in that order” (Hudson, 1999). Egypt tops the list. High youth unemployment (over 30%) primes these young men for recruitment (Wright, 2017). This is the ideal demographic to fuel a terrorist movement—young, disgruntled men who are willing and able to fight for lofty goals without significant ties to keep them yearning for home. Since ISIS also has territorial aspirations, they’re also trying to encourage these young men to emigrate to Islamic State territory, trying to sell the offer of an alternate life to those who are frustrated with their own and need somewhere else to turn. They support this offer by appealing to both the earthly and heavenly desires of their target audience, displaying scenes of ISIS food distribution and medical care alongside scenes of devout mass prayers and spiritual promises of rewards to those who wage jihad (Husick, 2014).

### **Research Design**

One of the greatest ways to test the pervasiveness of self-censorship is to attempt to verify the inklings of the many Egyptians who are growing cynical of their media. If it’s true that there is no difference between government-controlled media outlets and the independent outlets that are choosing to self-censor, then there should be statistical similarities in the ways they discuss an issue as pertinent to the Egyptian government’s mission as ISIS. As the Egyptian government wages its war against terror in the Sinai and against the fear of terror that has overtaken the minds of so many citizens and foreigners that participate in the Egyptian economy, government sources seek to portray stability, nationalism, and dominance of the Egyptian military whenever ISIS is mentioned. An analysis of government-controlled media should reaffirm these themes as well as others that work to diminish public perception of ISIS and its ideology while augmenting national pride, emphasizing peace and stability, and encouraging

economic growth. Any independent outlet that self-censors to reiterate a government narrative should similarly emphasize these same themes.

Using Latent Dirichlet Allocation Topic Modeling, these themes can be uncovered, analyzed, and compared. Topic Modeling uncovers these themes by analyzing a corpus of texts to find ways to sort them. It processes the language of each text to group it with other texts that are like it, giving lists of texts that can be labeled with themes that best fit their similarities. To gain a better understanding of how exactly Egyptian media depicts ISIS, I would design a topic model that analyzes government media outlets, like Al Ahram, and private media outlets, like Al Masry Al Youm to see how each covers ISIS. I would create this corpus by pulling articles mentioning ISIS more than once to ensure that the article is focused on ISIS and not merely mentioning the group for use as metaphor or anecdote. With a set of topics that best sum up each media type's approach to ISIS coverage, I'd be able to clearly see how similar coverage is between the two. High impact of censorship or self-censorship would show very similar topics, since the media type would not matter as media messaging converges on the government message; low impact of censorship or self-censorship would show very different topics, highlighting different perspectives on the issue. I hypothesize that the topic models should be very similar, highlighting high levels of censorship, since ISIS coverage in Egypt is inextricably tied to the themes of security, stability, and government strength that the Egyptian government most wants to project.

Strengths of this design lie in its ability to accentuate and describe broad patterns and their saliency within the corpus. Each topic model will describe what topics media outlets discuss when reporting on ISIS, which will uncover the most common narratives that appear in news coverage. On their own, they would also show which topics are most popular when

discussing the terrorist organization. Once compared, it would be clear how similarly government and private media outlets discuss ISIS, which would highlight a degree of censorship or self-censorship, though it would be impossible to understand how much of that effect is due to direct censorship or self-censorship. Topic models could also be used with corpuses created from articles taken from different time to better understand the degree to which media narratives have converged at different periods in history. This approach could also be used to analyze more than just print media. Transcripts accurately portray topics, and the vague, theme-finding of this approach maps well onto textual representations of visual and audio media, since the subtleties of performance, while impacting meaning, do not alter topics and themes.

The design's weaknesses lie in how vague topics can be. Censorship may not be fully evident just by topics alone—it may be necessary to also understand the positions articles take around a certain topic. This means that while topic modeling can still uncover broader trends of censorship by showing if the same types of points are raised about ISIS, it is unable to detect more specifically how closely related government and public media coverage of the terrorist group is. Therefore, my findings couldn't conclusively prove censorship resulting in the same perspectives but could point out censorship resulting in the same broad narratives or topics discussed. This knowledge is also fruitful to understanding censorship since it would demonstrate government dominance in framing political issues—a key aspect of the convergence of media that disillusion people and leads them to seek other news sources. Another weakness lies in the case where one of the news outlets is an extreme outlier. While selecting a few different outlets of each type adjusts for outliers, one outlet that doesn't self-censor as much as others would impact the overall topic model. I would try to avoid this affect by selecting the

most popular private media outlets, those the government might be most interested in “encouraging” to spread the government narrative.

## **Conclusion**

There is a symbiotic relationship between terrorism and the media, no matter the perspective we take. The media is drawn to violence and dramatic depictions of events, since they bring in more viewers and amplify media voices. Terrorist groups need attention to attract support and resources and to have the full effect of “terror” on civilian populations (Greene, 2015). The two models widely used to describe this relationship merely shift the blame for the relationship on one of the two actors. The culpable-media model shifts the blame on the media: media coverage encourages more terrorist attacks by giving them more impact. The vulnerable-media model shifts the blame on the terrorists: media is placed in a difficult position when an attack occurs—if media doesn’t cover terrorism, viewers are lost and their voice is diminished (Khawaja, 2016). These models describe the relationship between ratings-obsessed western private media and terrorist groups very well.

Despite many differences from western media and a lack of real ratings-based decisions, the Egyptian case still fits cleanly into this paradigm. The Egyptian government and the media that follows its lead has greatly benefited from the national consensus the terror threat has built, and terrorism has given it a fascinating topic to report on that still captures the attention of many Egyptians who feel threatened. At the same time, terrorist groups also benefit from constant conversation about them, increasing the terror they cause and occupying the attention of a large nation. They also benefit as those dissatisfied with their lives or with the government join forces with them, especially from those who might still support the Muslim Brotherhood. Terrorist

groups, however, also gain an additional advantage from all of the censored media coverage: Egyptian citizens, disenchanted with Egyptian media place more trust in the social media where ISIS and similar groups are most active and less restricted. No media outlet in Egypt will allow a radical Islamist perspective any airtime, but on social media, these ideas can spread for a time before they're stamped out by the authorities.

Again, the fault for the symbiotic relationship relies on your perspective. According to the culpable-media model, the media and the government is to blame for empowering terrorist groups and choosing to make them the constant topic of national conversation. According to the vulnerable-media model, terrorist groups are to blame for forcing the government and the media to form a strategic response to their activities. Because of the former popularity of the Muslim Brotherhood and pervasive radical Islamic beliefs held by some Egyptian citizens, the media was put in the difficult situation where they needed to collectively persuade Egyptians against siding with the former government or with terrorist organizations. In either case, the government, the media, and terror groups made decisions that had positive benefits for all involved, and whether or not you agree with the actions the Egyptian government and media have taken, the benefits to ISIS must be addressed.

In Egypt, media censorship that's meant to fight terror ends up diminishing its voice and turning citizens towards sources where they're more likely to encounter radical views unhelpful in the fight against ISIS. Perhaps the next big step in fighting extremism in Egypt should be to provide private media the freedom to cover it more freely. As the public sees many different sources independently converging on the same prognosis of radical vices, it'll be far more likely to trust private media and the government itself over unchecked voices on social media. Even if the government preserves its control over its own media outlets, private outlets can provide the

diversity of thought to restore public faith in their government as well as in their country's media. If terrorists are speaking loudest on social media, a trusted mainstream media at full voice can drown them out.

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