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Insecurity in Sinai and Beyond

Why the Egyptian Counterterrorism Strategy is Failing

Helena Burgrova

Since the ouster of President Mohamed Morsi in July 2013, Egypt has seen a dramatic increase in terrorist attacks. The country's military-led government has undertaken massive counterterrorism operations in the Sinai Peninsula, where professionalization of terrorism has risen sharply in recent years. These include shoot-to-kill policy at checkpoints, curfews, the destruction of tunnels, and the arrest of suspected terrorists. The government has evacuated entire residential areas and started building a buffer zone along the border with Gaza. Its harsh crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood and the repression of any form of public dissent has also been at the core of its fight against terrorism. However, terrorist attacks still plague Egypt almost on a daily basis, and terrorism in Sinai has taken on particularly dire proportions. Why is the Egyptian government failing?

In the past two years, the Sinai-Peninsula-based militant group Wilayat Sinai (Sinai Province of the Islamic State, previously known as Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, or ABM) has killed or injured hundreds of Egyptian security officials and civilians. These Islamic militants form by far the most active and dangerous armed group in Egypt. In 2015 alone, Wilayat Sinai (WS) has claimed responsibility for numerous attacks on security facilities and checkpoints in northern Sinai; the successful missile attack on an Egyptian navy patrol boat in July; the kidnapping and beheading of a Croatian worker; and, most recently, the bombing in October of a Russian charter airplane. Despite the government's ongoing counterterrorism campaign, ABM/WS has been able to maintain its stronghold in northern Sinai and further expand its operational capacities.

ABM/WS is a relatively new player to the Egyptian scene of politically motivated violence. The group emerged as Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (ABM) in the northern parts of Sinai shortly after the 2011 revolution and has integrated large numbers of residents of the peninsula's

Northern Governorate, appealing in particular to members of local Bedouin clans.¹ One reason for its success attracting local residents into its ranks was its ability to capitalize on widespread bitterness in the local population, which has experienced decades of economic neglect and state oppression.² In addition to attacks on military and police targets, which seemed to be driven primarily by vengeance, the group initially focused on Israeli targets. As its original name indicated, ABM's stated objective was the liberation of historical Palestine.³ To this end it launched several cross-border attacks and sabotaged the Egypt-Israeli gas pipeline several times. At the outset, ABM associated itself ideologically with Al Qaeda's jihadist ideology and hailed such Al Qaeda "icons" as Osama bin Laden and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

Morsi's Ouster Provided New Impetus to Terrorism in Sinai

The ouster of Mohamed Morsi and the subsequent bloody dispersal of pro-Morsi sit-ins in Cairo in the summer of 2013, which left “at least 817 and likely more than 1,000” protesters dead, gave new direction to ABM.⁴ Although the group claimed it despised the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) for participating in “the political game,” ABM sought to take advantage of the massive government crackdown on the MB and its supporters in order to present itself as the defender of Muslims, and it cited the crackdown as grounds for deliberately targeting the state. Subsequently, ABM increasingly and vehemently started to attack targets connected to the government.⁵ Whereas the bulk of attacks were concentrated in northern Sinai, ABM also undertook attacks in the Egyptian mainland. Among others, it targeted security headquarters in Mansoura. The geographical expansion of its attacks to the mainland was built on the clandestine network of ABM operatives in the Nile Delta who had been actively recruited in past years. It proved the emergence of an additional ABM stronghold outside Sinai.⁶

In November 2014, after months of heavy attacks against Egyptian security forces, ABM entered a new phase. It pledged allegiance (*bayat*) to the Islamic State (ISIS), changed its name to Wilayat Sinai (the Province of Sinai, WS), and adopted a media strategy that closely followed ISIS, including publishing videos of executions.⁷ The declaration of allegiance to ISIS created an internal ideological rift between Al Qaeda loyalists and supporters of ISIS, however, which weakened the group's internal structure and operational capacities in the early winter of 2014–15.⁸ Yet, as the developments of the past months have shown, ABM/WS has consolidated its position by taking on leadership of ISIS supporters. It has turned to more ruthless and ISIS-like tactics including attacks on civilians.⁹ Among others, civilian Sinai residents are increasingly being targeted for allegedly collaborating with the Egyptian military.¹⁰ Even though ABM/WS might initially not have identified with the global goals of ISIS, its claim of responsibility for the October 2015 bomb attack on the Russian charter plane that crashed over Sinai indicates that its aim of undermining the Egyptian government is compatible with ISIS's objectives; ABM/WS, too, is willing to attack nationals of those countries, like Russia, that are fighting in Syria and Iraq against ISIS.

The emergence of ABM and its further radicalization as WS, a stated affiliate of ISIS, have posed an enormous challenge to the Egyptian government's counterterrorism efforts. Certainly, these efforts have fallen

short of containing the militant uprising in northern Sinai. This essay examines the reasons behind the failure of the Egyptian counterterrorism campaign in the Sinai Peninsula.

The Egyptian War on Terror since 2013

The Egyptian state has been waging a massive “war on terror” since mid-2013. Although ABM/WS has established itself as the most active and dangerous armed group in Egypt, the Egyptian counterterrorism campaign has in fact been focusing on the Muslim Brotherhood, which it depicts as the mastermind organization behind all terrorist activities. In addition to extra-judicial security practices such as a shoot-to-kill policy and torture, the Egyptian government under President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has also introduced a set of repressive laws and policies. Borrowing from authoritarian rule of longtime Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak (1981–2011), the Protest Law of 2013 and the Anti-Terror Law of 2015 grant the executive branch exceptional powers to clamp down on any political opposition. For instance, the new Anti-Terror Law's vague definition of terrorism allows the government to label any activity deemed as “harmful to public safety” an act of terrorism. This includes acts such as the distribution of pro-Morsi flyers. The law also imposes severe fines on journalists who contradict official accounts of terrorist attacks.

Entangled in the long legacy of the conflict between the state and the MB, the government has framed an extensive “war” against the MB and its supporters as the only way to eradicate terrorism and ensure Egypt's security and stability. The powerful narrative of “Islamist/MB terrorism,” which has been an important device for legitimizing the 2013 military-led coup against Morsi and solidifying the new ruling elite's position, remains at the core of the security strategy. According to this line, the national counterterrorism campaign looks less like a carefully developed strategy based on credible evidence and more like collective punishment directed against those parts of Egyptian society who opposed Morsi's ouster and/or protested the subsequent political developments. This premise also informs the counterterrorism operations in Sinai. As such, it is the major policy- and strategy-based reason behind the Egyptian government's failure to contain Sinai-based militants.

Since Morsi's ouster, the government has launched several massive security operations to combat Sinai-based militants, which the Egyptian government has designated as vital aides to the MB despite the lack of credible evidence. For the past two years the lives of north Sinai resi-

dents have been dictated by government-imposed state of emergency, strict curfews, and a shoot-to-kill policy around security facilities. The Egyptian military has also destroyed dozens of tunnels under the Egyptian-Gaza border to further cut off logistical and operational cooperation between Sinai and Gaza-based militants. These counterterrorism efforts have, however, also borne strong implications of collective punishment of Sinai residents; security raids, demolition of homes, devastated farmlands, the forced eviction of thousands of Rafah residents from the buffer zone at the border with Gaza attest to this. Yet, despite these heavy-handed measures, ABM/WS does not appear to have been structurally diminished.

Flaws of Egypt's Counterterrorism Campaign

The Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty, which restricts deployment of Egyptian security personnel and equipment in Sinai, is often mentioned as one of the major impediments to a comprehensive counterterrorism operation in Sinai. Although it certainly plays a role, the success of the counterterrorism campaign does not hinge on it.¹¹ Indeed, Israel has shown readiness to ease up on the restrictions several times since 2011, indicating that the limitations on Egyptian military presence in Sinai may be negotiated. Certainly, militancy in nearby Sinai is a pertinent security concern for Israel as well, for since its inception, ABM/WS has been explicitly and consistently hostile toward Israel. Instead of limitations connected to the peace treaty, it is rather the design of the counterterrorism campaign itself that seems to pose the most considerable challenge to the fight against Sinai-based militants. At least three major, interconnected flaws have undermined the success of the Egyptian government's Sinai campaign.

First, the counterterrorism campaign in the Sinai Peninsula is not suited to the conditions of guerilla-style combat. The militants are highly flexible and scattered in a large area of the northern Sinai. They are able to retreat into inaccessible hilly desert terrain but also to urban areas, where they hide among civilians. The counterterrorism operations, which rely heavily on F-16 jets and tanks, seem inappropriate for asymmetrical warfare and are, regrettably, causing large numbers of civilian casualties.

Second, the counterterrorism operations in Sinai cannot rely on the local population's cooperation and intelligence. The practice of collective punishment, as a fundamental part of the government's "iron-fist" strategy, enrages Sinai residents, motivates them to do anything but support the ongoing security operations, and, in individual cases, actually drives them to join the militants. The distrust and animosity toward the central govern-

ment that prevails among residents of northern Sinai goes beyond the current counterterrorism campaign, however. Ever since the Sinai was returned from Israeli occupation to Egyptian sovereignty in 1982, the peninsula has been viewed as a security area, and its residents have been considered an untrustworthy "fifth column." This has been reflected in the government's longtime negligence of Sinai's economic development, with the exception of a few seaside resorts in the south. More than three decades of political marginalization, especially of the northern areas, has alienated Sinai residents from the central government. Their sense of resentment has been further fed by regular counterterrorism campaigns, to which the local population has increasingly fallen victim since the first decade of the 2000s.¹²

Third, the national framework of the Egyptian "war on terror" has in fact been undermining security operations in Sinai, as it further boosts militant activities rather than fostering social and economic stability in the region. In particular, the repression of a large number of Egyptian civilians whose complicity in terrorism activities is, if anything, highly disputable, is providing ABM/WS with an aura of legitimacy; for the group claims to be fighting an unjust political system. Moreover, the country's complex counterterrorism policies, which leave no space for the peaceful expression of political concerns and tolerate no contest to the ruling class, arguably produces more enemies than they are able to contain. This is especially true of large numbers of frustrated, disenfranchised, young Islamists – who have thus far survived the waves of mass repression and who form a vital recruitment base for militant groups such as ABM/WS.

Back to the Past? Does Deradicalization Offer a Way Out?

Armed conflicts between the state and Islamists are nothing new in Egypt. The country experienced a lengthy period of fierce violence in the 1990s led by the groups Al Gamaa al-Islamiyya (the Islamic Group, IG) and Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ). Like ABM/WS, both terrorist groups initially focused on security and government targets. Over time, however, they increasingly attacked the Egyptian Christian minority and foreign tourists in order to put greater pressure on Mubarak's government. The government's reply was a massive counterterrorism campaign and large-scale repression. Toward the end of 1990s, the bulk of militant Islamists from these groups was either in prison or exiled. As a result, IG's leadership unilaterally declared a cease-fire. This surprising decision started a process of collective deradicalization, which

eventually led the group to renounce violence. One of its major pillars was the publicly circulated revision of the group's ideological tenets, especially those concerning the use of violence. In return for a revised ideological framework, the government over time released thousands of IG's members and affiliates. A few years later, in the mid-2000s, the EIJ, with the exception of members who joined Al Qaeda, followed IG's lead and also abandoned violence in exchange for Egypt's promise to release its imprisoned members.

Even though ideological changes within IG and EIJ are cited as successful examples of collective deradicalization, there are legitimate doubts about its lasting effects. As the public accounts of revisionists released after the 2011 revolution show, abandonment of violence and revising their main ideological tenets might have been a matter of pragmatism in a time of a crisis rather than being motivated by real sense of repentance and change in worldview. For instance, during the short-lived Morsi government, Sayyid Imam al-Sharif, a prominent EIJ ideologue also known as Dr Fadl, reiterated the duty of Muslims to wage jihad and claimed that an armed struggle is useless as long as there is no capacity to conduct it properly. Both of these arguments are at odds with his previous "repentant" views.¹³ Thus, even though Mubarak's government might have been successful in inducing IG and EIJ to disengage from violence, the government's long-term success in changing militants' beliefs is questionable.

The current Egyptian leadership could learn a lot if it critically reflected on this past deradicalization experience. So far the government has only been repeating one key facet of the 1990s experience, namely the massive repression and mass imprisonment of militants. Although deradicalization experts usually agree on the necessity of a certain level of repression to bring about a strategic crisis of the targeted group, deradicalization is a complex process that cannot be achieved entirely through coercion. In this regard, the second key aspect of the Egyptian deradicalization experience, i.e., the ideological repentance of senior ideologues, can be particularly challenging. By declaring its affiliation with ISIS, the group ABM/WS became a part of ISIS's network and thus also became ideologically dependent on the transnational network of ISIS ideologues. Thus, even though the security forces might capture some of senior ABM/WS members and persuade them to revise the group views on the use of violence, ABM/WS's ideological anchoring within the wider regional ISIS framework might eventually marginalize the value of such repentant views for their fellow combatants.

What Can Be Done?

Egypt's counterterrorism campaign in Sinai is embedded in a larger socio-political context. As much as the restrictions set up by the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty might appear at first sight as an obstacle to the campaign's success, the flawed design of the counterterrorism operation itself is the major reason for the Egyptian failure to contain the rise of Sinai militants.

Egypt must revise its counterterrorism strategy to be more effective in its fight against ABM/WS. This, however, requires deep structural changes that go beyond the ambit of current security operations. Cooperation of the security forces with Sinai residents is crucial here, but such support cannot be secured as long as collective punishment remains the *modus operandi* of Egyptian counterterrorism forces and as long as Sinai residents remain marginalized at the national level. To gain the trust of the local population, however, the Egyptian leadership must come up with more than redesigned counterterrorism operations. It has to succeed in persuading Sinai residents of its commitment to truly develop the area economically and socially.

In the national context, the government must take decisive steps to contain further radicalization. This requires revising the current repressive legislation, which severely restricts possibilities to peacefully engage in political and public debate. It also requires releasing political prisoners and respecting judicial procedures. Such reforms, however, presuppose an essential modification of the government's approach to the political opposition, including the Muslim Brotherhood. The current Egyptian leadership must start to view peaceful political opposition as a partner, not an enemy. While the Islamic State's attacks on Paris of November 13, 2015 have certainly deepened the security concerns of Western states including Germany, fear of the spread of terrorism to Europe should not be a pretense for blindly accepting Egypt's woefully inadequate and ineffective counterterrorism strategy. Instead, international actors should pressure the Egyptian government to ease its restrictions on fundamental political freedoms in the country and support the release of political prisoners. Both are necessary prerequisites to prevent further alienation and radicalization of peaceful dissent.

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Notes

- 1 The exact numbers are not known. Yet, some estimate up to 300 tribal fighters to have joined the ABM/WS. See Ahmed Mohamed Hassan and Yara Bayoumy, "Bedouins Drawn into Egypt's Islamist Fight," Special Report by Reuters, July 7, 2015, p. 4 <<http://graphics.thomsonreuters.com/15/07/EGYPT-ISLAM:sinai.pdf>> (accessed January 5, 2016).
- 2 For an example, see the AMB statement "The Egyptian Army, Criminality and Betrayal" September 2013 <<http://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/jamc481at-ane1b9a3c481r-bayt-al-maqdis-22on-the-extended-military-campaign-against-the-people-of-the-sinai22-en.pdf>> (accessed January 5, 2016). For background information that captures the group's changed approach to Sinai residents, see Lina Attalah and Heba Afify, "Sinai: States of Fear," *Mada Masr*, February 28, 2015 <<http://www.madamasr.com/news/politics/sinai-states-fear>> (accessed January 5, 2016).
- 3 The Arabic term *Bayt al-maqdis*, or *bayt al-muqaddis*, refers specifically to Jerusalem and translates roughly to "Supporters of Jerusalem."
- 4 On the number of deaths in pro-Morsi protests, see Human Rights Watch, "All According to Plan: The Rab'a Massacre and Mass Killings of Protesters in Egypt," August 12, 2014 <<https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/08/12/all-according-plan/raba-massacre-and-mass-killings-protesters-egypt>> (accessed January 5, 2016).
- 5 For a visual record of the rise of militant attacks see the graph in Hassan and Bayoumy, "Bedouins Drawn into Egypt's Islamist Fight."
- 6 Mokhtar Awad and Samuel Tadros, "Ba'ya a Remorse? Wilayat Sinai and the Nile Valley," *CTS Sentinel* (August 2015) <<https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/baya-remorse-wilayat-sinai-and-the-nile-valley>> (accessed January 5, 2016).
- 7 Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, "Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis's Oath of Allegiance to the Islamic State," Wikistrat Commissioned Report (February 2015), p. 10. <<http://www.defenddemocracy.org/content/uploads/documents/Ansar-Bayt-Al-Maqdis-Oath-of-Allegiance-to-the-Islamic-State-Wikistrat-Report.pdf>> (accessed January 5, 2016).
- 8 *Ibid.*, pp. 10–11.
- 9 See Hassan and Bayoumy, "Bedouins Drawn into Egypt's Islamist Fight." See also Attalah and Afify "Sinai: States of Fear."
- 10 The militants allegedly distributed leaflets that threatened local army cooperatives with an execution. See Mokhtar Awad and Mostafa Abdou, "A New Sinai Battle? Bedouin Tribes and Egypt's ISIS affiliate," Atlantic Council blog, May 14, 2015 <<http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/en/blogs/egyptsource/a-new-sinai-battle-bedouin-tribes-and-egypt-s-isis-affiliate>> (accessed January 5, 2016).
- 11 Zack Gold, "Sinai Security: Opportunities for Unlikely Cooperation among Egypt, Israel, and Hamas," Saban Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings, Analysis Paper 30 (October 2013), p. 19 <<http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2013/10/22-sinai-egypt-israel-hamas-gold/22-sinai-hamas-egypt-israel-gold.pdf>> (accessed January 5, 2016).
- 12 For an extensive account of the topic see Human Rights Watch, "Look for Another Homeland: Forced Evictions in Egypt's Rafah," September 22, 2015 <<https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/09/22/look-another-homeland/forced-evictions-egypts-rafah>> (accessed January 5, 2016).
- 13 See Dina al-Raffie, "Straight From the Horse's Mouth: Exploring De-radicalization Claims of Former Egyptian Militant Leaders," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 1 (2015) <<http://www.terrorism analysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/400/html>> (accessed January 5, 2016).

