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**Egypt's War on Terrorism in the Sinai Peninsula:  
Alliance with Tribes, Partnership with Israel?**

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In its January 2017 annual report, the Global Terrorism Index named Egypt as one of the ten most terrorism-struck countries in the world, placing it ahead of Libya, Ukraine, and Turkey. Since 2014, Salafist jihadi terrorism in the Sinai Peninsula has, according to unofficial and unverified estimates, taken the lives of about 2,000 soldiers and police personnel, and the phenomenon is increasingly spreading into the country's heartland. Since the beginning of 2017, the Salafi-jihadi group Sinai Province has carried out a series of attacks aimed mostly against Egypt's Coptic Christian community. In February, hundreds of Copts living in el-Arish (northern Sinai) fled for their lives and sought shelter in the Nile Valley. But the attacks on the churches in Tanta and Alexandria in April and the shooting attack of the bus filled with Copts travelling in the al-Minya Province in May are evidence that Egypt finds it difficult to keep its citizens safe.

The horrific terror attacks in the heart of Egypt, killing dozens of innocent people, aimed to mock the promise of the el-Sisi regime to provide its populace with basic safety, security, and stability and overshadowed its tremendous efforts to bring tourism and investment to the country. The ongoing failure to root out terrorism has led the Egyptian authorities to examine new and more efficient counterterrorist steps, while realizing that cooperation with the Bedouin tribes in Sinai is a central condition for defeating Sinai Province. In light of this, the regime has decided on two major steps: in the short term, encouraging the establishment of a coalition of Bedouin tribes to help fight against Salafist jihadi organizations operating in Sinai, and, in the mid- and long-term, advancing projects to improve the physical welfare of the Bedouins in the peninsula, a step designed to buy their loyalty.

These steps come on the heels of initial understandings that Egypt attained with Hamas in early 2017 on stopping the smuggling of weapons and combatants between Sinai and the

Gaza Strip. At the same time, the Egyptian military continues to operate in Sinai; to that end, Egypt and Israel maintain low-key, tactical cooperation.

### **Enlisting the Sinai Tribes to Combat Terrorism**

In recent months, a new player has emerged in the campaign in Sinai: a local armed force of tribesmen that operates in coordination with the Egyptian army and enjoys the logistical support of the military. At the end of a conference held on March 31, 2017, with the participation of Sinai's tribal leaders, the latter announced their united support for the Egyptian military in its war on terrorism in the peninsula. In response, on April 16, Sinai Province attacked the stronghold of the Tarabin tribe in Rafah using rocket launches and torched two vehicles carrying smuggled cigarettes to the tribe. The attack led to armed clashes between tribesmen and operatives of the Sinai Province during which the former managed to capture several jihadists. In reprisal, a Bedouin businessman and a leader of one of the tribes was abducted. The clashes reached heights of mutual barbarism, including car bombings, burning prisoners alive, and beheadings.

Given the rising violence between the Tarabin and Sinai Province, four Bedouin tribes—the Tarabin, Sawarka, Tiyaha, and Rumaylat—announced on April 29 that they were establishing an alliance against Sinai Province. Sheikh Ibrahim al-Arjani, a Tarabin leader, declared that the tribes had decided to cleanse the Sinai Peninsula of Sinai Province operatives “in coordination with Egyptian army personnel,” and noted that the alliance leader would be Sheikh Abdul Majid al-Muna'i. The alliance's objective, he added, was the elimination of terrorism, including of the Sinai Province group.

If the tribal alliance proves to be sustainable and effective against the Sinai Province, it may well herald a reversal in the battle and help reduce the affiliate's power to a significant extent and perhaps even deal it a mortal blow. A useful example of enlisting the tribes, which represent an integral part of the local social fabric, in the war on terrorism was in Iraq in 2007–2008. In those years, in tandem with a massive addition of US ground troops, American forces, in cooperation with the Iraqi government, started to recruit Sunni tribes in the al-Anbar province to the war against Salafist jihad. Cooperation with the Awakening (al-Sahwa) movement, made up of Sunni tribesmen weary of al-Qaeda activity in their region, became a decisive factor in succeeding to reduce the number of people killed in terrorist attacks and armed clashes in Iraq.

The Sinai tribes can make a similar contribution, manifested in providing intelligence (key to the effectiveness of the war on terror), refusing shelter to Sinai Province operatives, closing smuggling routes, handing over wanted personnel, and, of course, fighting. At the same time, there is a risk that weapons now given to the tribes by the state could in the future be turned against the regime or serve to settle inter-tribal

conflicts, and the precedent of a military force operating outside the state's sovereignty might encourage further anarchy and lack of governance.

To reduce these risks and construct mutual trust with the tribes, Egypt must complement this move with unwavering steps of economic development in the Sinai Peninsula, while providing for the needs of the Bedouin population that has suffered from many years of neglect and exclusion. The Egyptian regime has already undertaken concrete steps in this direction: the Egyptian army's engineering authority— sometimes in conjunction with relevant government ministries and with Saudi financial backing—is promoting a series of projects currently in various states of implementation. These include the development of infrastructures for transportation, water, electricity, housing, education, and healthcare, the creation of new employment opportunities in industry and agriculture, and the repurposing of a military airfield into a civilian airport.

### **Pragmatic but Temporary Cooperation with Israel**

While the alliance the Egyptian regime has made with the Sinai tribes is public, albeit a loose one, cooperation with Israel – according to media sources – is covert but flourishing. Israel should have an immediate interest in improving political and security governability in the Sinai Peninsula and in increasing the effectiveness of the Egyptian anti-terrorism campaign, because Sinai Province is committing acts of terrorism aimed at Israel—such as rocket launches and threatens to increase them —and because it is liable to join a military coalition with Hamas in case of a future flare-up in the Gaza Strip. Given this joint Israeli-Egyptian interest, Israel has allowed the Egyptian army to station forces in Sinai's demilitarized zone beyond the limits established in the Military Appendix to the peace treaty. According to reports in Bloomberg and other media outlets—unconfirmed by either Israel or Egypt but also not denied—the level of trust between the nations has reached the point where Israel is providing various military technologies and operational intelligence to Egypt and is operating attack UAVs in Sinai with Cairo's approval.

Although Israel and Egypt have become informal partners in the war on terrorism, the precise nature of the relations remains within the realm of just a few military personnel, without generating a qualitative change in the cold peace between the two. This is evidenced in part by the fact that Israel does not receive any formal appreciation in the Egyptian public opinion for its part in fighting Sinai Province. Absurdly, the official newspapers from time to time actually accuse Israel of being behind the terrorist organizations active in the Sinai Peninsula. For example, an article published in the daily al-Ahram on April 13, 2017, wondered if the closing of the border at Taba was an Israeli “signal” to terrorist groups to carry out attacks in the peninsula. Another essay published

next to it claimed that continuing attacks in Egypt is for Israel's benefit, while the intelligence warnings it provides its neighbors is nothing but "sand cast in their eyes."

It is evident that the Egyptian public and many officials are uncomfortable with the military cooperation with Israel in Sinai and view it as an unwelcome necessity forced upon Egypt because of temporary interests at a given point in time, one that will probably end as soon as security circumstances permit it. In practice, Egypt's leadership is careful not to endow security relations with Israel with any long-term strategic dimension. Moreover, Cairo still places restrictions on leveraging the trust between the Egyptian and Israeli military echelons in Sinai into improving other arenas where the two nations have mutual interests, certainly not when it comes to civilian cooperation in the economy, science, or culture. This situation requires constant vigilance in Jerusalem concerning the erosion of the Military Appendix of the peace treaty in recent years, which is concurrent with a massive build-up of the Egyptian army.