



The Institute for National Security Studies
Strategic, Innovative, Policy-Oriented Research

INSS Insight No. 968, August 24, 2017

Egypt's Challenging Shift from Counterterrorism to Counterinsurgency in the Sinai

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Since June 2017, Egypt has faced a notable rise in terrorist attacks from Salafi-jihadist groups in the Sinai Peninsula that are affiliated with the Islamic State (IS) and from Islamist organizations inside the Nile Valley. Due to increasing violence, Egypt declared a country-wide state of emergency in April, and extended it in June for another three months. Security has been stepped up around public areas and religious sites. On July 7, Sinai Province, the Egyptian affiliate of IS, employed suicide car bombs and gunmen to attack an Egyptian military outpost near Rafah, killing at least twenty-three soldiers. In response, Egypt launched the fourth phase of the operation “Martyr's Right” against cells of the Sinai Province in North and Central Sinai, so far killing dozens of terrorists.

The precarious security situation in Egypt is likely to become an even greater threat as Sinai Province tries to remain relevant following IS losses in Iraq and Syria and recent agreements on border security between Egypt and Hamas, which seek to undermine the terrorist group's connections with counterparts in Gaza. On July 22, at the inauguration of Egypt's new Mohamed Naguib Military Base in Al-Hammam City, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi made it clear that Egypt will do whatever it takes to eliminate terrorism. However, in order to triumph over terror, Egypt will need to overcome challenges and transition from its current counterterrorism (CT) efforts to a full-fledged counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign.

CT and COIN in Egypt: From Theory to Practice

In many reports on the terror in Sinai, the terms counterterrorism and counterinsurgency are used interchangeably and their meanings are blurred. Although both are used to fight terrorism and insurgency, they require different resources and draw on distinct theories.

CT strategies are used to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat organizations that employ terrorism by military and security means. These strategies include drone strikes, special forces operations, and increased policing and intelligence operations.

Adopting COIN strategies is necessary when a state realizes that a military response alone will not constitute a workable solution to a violent conflict. COIN is an all-encompassing political, military, and civilian solution to challenge irregular insurgent warfare. CT strategies are not abandoned but are implemented within a COIN approach where the counterinsurgent (the government) also pursues support and legitimacy from the local population by promoting good governance and providing continued security after government forces have expelled the insurgent group. This population-centric strategy involves denying the insurgency its civilian-support networks, external support, and outside sanctuary, while simultaneously improving political participation and economic opportunities for civilians.

Egypt's current CT approach mostly resembles traditional CT doctrines. Egypt prepared for offensive military measures by declaring a state of emergency in specific areas of North Sinai back in October 2014. It has also breached components of the Military Annex of the 1979 peace agreement in coordination with Israel, transferring additional armed forces and heavy weaponry into Sinai. Egypt has installed roadblocks and military checkpoints across North Sinai to prevent attacks, increased cooperation with local Bedouin tribes to gather intelligence on the ground, and used F-16 fighter jets and Apache helicopters to strike militants from the air.

The CT measures used so far have been only semi-effective, and have fallen short of destroying the terrorist organizations or acquiring the Bedouin population's support for the government. Civilians have been caught in the crossfire during operations, straining state relations with the tribes, and offensive tactics alone have not deterred local youth from joining Salafi-jihadist groups that offer better economic opportunities. Militant interpretations of Islam sometimes won "the battle for hearts and minds" and tempted the young local population to join Salafi-jihadist groups. According to unofficial estimates, Egypt has lost over 2,000 security personnel during this stage of the conflict, with many civilian casualties that are under-reported. These losses are unsustainable and hasten the transition towards a COIN campaign.

Egypt has already set the groundwork to move towards a COIN campaign on military, economic, and political fronts. Since April 2017, Egypt has begun involving North Sinai Bedouin tribes in fighting terrorism, by gathering intelligence and other military activities. In the non-military fronts, first, El-Sisi hopes to promote a moderate form of Islam among the youth of North Sinai by using state religious apparatuses including al-

Azhar and its schooling networks. Moreover, in late July, El-Sisi took additional measures to stifle extremism by establishing the National Council to Confront Terrorism and Extremism. The council helps build a COIN policy through strategizing, mobilizing resources, amending existing legislation, and increasing economic opportunities in areas with high levels of extremism.

Already in 2016, Egypt detailed long-term plans for development in the Sinai with goals of increasing investments and focusing on population-centric projects. A first step would be to legalize land ownership for citizens and provide compensation for damages from military operations. The military also aims to win greater support and legitimacy by sending reconstruction missions to the conflict-ridden cities of El-Arish, Rafah, Sheikh Zuweid, and Bir al-Abd. Plans include building a new city of Rafah because much of the city has been destroyed by military airstrikes and the creation of a buffer zone on the Gaza border. The government declared its commitment to implementing development projects in North Sinai that will improve economic opportunities, but no time-frame has yet been given.

Lastly, Egypt's recent political and military actions support the goal of denying Sinai Province external support from its counterparts in Gaza, which has served as a training and recovery base and a source for underground smuggling of weapons and fighters. The recent Egypt-Hamas understandings reached in June-July when Hamas security delegations visited Cairo may aid Egypt's efforts in containing Sinai Province's activities by monitoring border security, extraditing militants hiding in Gaza, and denying the group a safe-haven/training ground. Cooperation with Hamas may expand also into economic spheres, and include a more stable power and oil supply from Egypt to Gaza, along with mutual trade relations that would provide residents of North Sinai and Gaza with legitimate job opportunities. Similarly, Egypt's decision, along with the rest of the Arab Quartet, to cut off diplomatic relations with Qatar for funding terrorist organizations is another strategic step towards denying funds and resources to militant groups.

Conclusions

Egypt is already heading in the right direction towards a COIN campaign, but overcoming various challenges is still necessary to solidify its strategies. Cairo must better formulate a COIN doctrine that will enable a transition from CT to a full-fledged, integrated, and effective COIN operation. That has implications also on the military level. Egypt should lead a determined and powerful fight against terrorist strongholds, while at the same time avoid harming uninvolved civilians. If the latter is not prioritized, the military may alienate the local population and damage Egypt's image in the international arena. To this end, the adoption of appropriate methods of combat that minimize collateral damages—including the use of accurate weapons that will target only the

terrorists—is required. In addition, while integrating local tribes in fighting terrorists, Egypt must pay close attention not to hurt its sovereignty and governance.

On the economic level, Egypt should carefully plan its investments to ensure that improving the welfare of the Bedouin population in North Sinai will not come at the expense of other local populations that are loyal to the state. Additionally, given its limited financial resources, Egypt must balance its efforts between addressing short-term economic distress and the promotion of long-term economic goals.

On the political level, Egypt should adopt a "carrots and sticks" policy towards the civilian population of North Sinai. The use of authoritarian practices, such as emergency laws, must be well measured in order to avoid alienating local tribes from the regime. On the external political level, Cairo must be mindful that its cooperation with Hamas will not boost the standing of the Islamist alternative that Hamas represents in the Palestinian arena over more moderate and pragmatic Palestinian political forces, such as Fatah.

Finally, the international community has a vital interest in supporting the Egyptian regime in shifting from CT to COIN, by providing military assistance and targeted economic aid, while encouraging good governance and political participation. The eradication of the insurgency in Sinai will be a desirable achievement not only for the 93 million inhabitants of Egypt but also for the global war on terror.

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