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The War on Terrorism in Sinai: A Watershed?

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The November 24, 2017 attack on al-Rawda mosque in Bir al-Abed in the northern part of the Sinai Peninsula, apparently by Wilayat Sinai, a proxy of the Islamic State (ISIS) in Egypt, was the most deadly terrorist attack Egypt has ever known, killing more than 300 civilians and wounding over 100. Beyond the unusual scope of casualties, it was also unusual in its target: Salafi jihadist Sunnis massacring Sunni worshippers of the Sufi branch of Islam. Along with the profound shock felt in Egypt since the attack is the question whether Egypt's overall policy on terrorism will now change, or if the Egyptian regime, which tends to view Sinai as the state's backyard, will make do with a routine military response, i.e., aerial bombings, symbolic beefing up of forces, and a harsher stance toward the local population suspected of cooperation with Wilayat Sinai.

From the organization's perspective, the attack was designed to serve several operational and ideological goals: first, to project a show of the Islamic State's strength at a time it is being trounced in Iraq and Syria and challenged by competing terrorist groups (in addition to Wilayat Sinai, Egypt and Sinai are home to terrorist groups identified with al-Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood); second, to humiliate the Egyptian regime by portraying it to domestic and international publics as helpless and to deal another blow to its efforts to rebuild the nation's economy and tourist industry; third, to settle a score between Wilayat Sinai and locals cooperating with the regime's struggle against terrorism in northern Sinai and to deter other groups from cooperating with Cairo; fourth, to torpedo the understandings reached over the last year between the Egyptian regime and Hamas about increased supervision of the Gaza-Sinai border and opening the Rafah crossing; and, finally, to harm the believers in Sufism, seen by some Salafi jihadist groups as heretics who have deviated from the true path of Sunni Islam and are therefore subject to the death penalty.

Following the overthrow of President Husni Mubarak, and even more so after the overthrow of President Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood in 2013, the Sinai Peninsula became a locus for terrorist activity of Salafi jihadist groups, especially Ansar Beit al-Maqdis, which, after it was subsumed by the Islamic State, changed its name to Wilayat Sinai and worked hand-in-hand with the Islamic State and under its aegis. The increasing number of attacks in Sinai has forced the Egyptian regime to embark on a series

of military operations against Salafi jihadist terrorism, but despite the military efforts, attacks have continued unabated in the peninsula, taking a steep human toll, in particular of police and army personnel. Most attacks have been perpetrated in northern Sinai, and in turn the Egyptian army has expended most of its efforts in northern Sinai and the terrorist stronghold in Jabl al-Halal. While the expanding Egyptian campaign against terrorism in Sinai succeeded in 2017 in eliminating many terrorists and senior leaders and reducing the number of attacks overall, the attacks that were carried out have become more focused and deadly. Among the attacks that Egyptian authorities reported this past year were the January killing of nine policemen in el-Arish; the July killing of 26 soldiers and seven civilians near Rafah; and an attack in September west of el-Arish in which 18 people were killed, including senior officers. In the same period, many terrorist attacks were perpetrated in cities in Egypt proper: in April, the Islamic State carried out two suicide attacks against churches in Tanta and Alexandria, killing 49 Coptic Christians and wounding more than 100; in May, 29 Coptic Christians were killed and 20 were wounded in an Islamic State attack on a bus traveling to a church west of Minya; and in October, 16 policemen (according to the authorities; others put the number at around 50) were killed on the al-Wahat road to Giza, in an ambush attributed to Islamist terrorists who are apparently not affiliated with the Islamic State. Now that more than 300 additional deaths were added to the total number of terrorist victims, it seems that Egypt must make radical changes in how it fights terrorism in general and in Sinai in particular. The Egyptian security services are in urgent need of reorganization, closer coordination, and increased cooperation between military intelligence, which is in charge of the Sinai area, and other Egyptian security services. Furthermore, additional elite special forces must be allocated to the Sinai sector.

The campaign against terrorism requires coordination, maximal cooperation, and the removal of bureaucratic barriers among all the security services. This is a lesson that many nations – including the United States following the 9/11 attacks, France after the multiple victim attack in Paris in November 2015, and even Israel after suicide attacks during the second intifada in 2001-2005 – have learned the hard way. It is a vital prerequisite. The second essential component for improved effectiveness is high quality, accurate intelligence, which makes it possible to attack elements planning, assisting, and perpetrating the terrorism in a focused way, and distinguishing them from the population at large. This distinction is critical to reduce the civilian population's motivation to cooperate with the terrorists and encourage the locals to help the authorities actively fight terrorism. In Egypt, the inclusion of Sinai tribes in the campaign, which has already begun, must be expanded, because it may improve the scope and quality of the intelligence. The majority of victims in the most recent attack were members of the Sawarka tribe; this is an opportunity to invest greater efforts to enlist that tribe and others more intensely in the campaign against Wilayat Sinai.

Battling the terrorism jeopardizing the citizens of Egypt should be seen as a national mission of utmost importance. Yet as President el-Sisi declared in a speech on the attack, the campaign against terrorism is not solely Egypt's problem. Many of the terrorists, especially in northern Sinai, are affiliated with the Islamic State, which represents an international threat. Northern Sinai is currently one of the critical spots in the world struggle against the Islamic State, especially after its military defeat in Iraq and Syria. It is clear that the Islamic State and its supporters seek to continue the engagement in other locations around the world, including Egypt. It is therefore vital that Egypt receive increased aid from its partners in the global war on Salafi jihadist terrorism. Support from the United States in the form of Tweets from President Trump is insufficient. An organized US effort to provide essential assistance is needed, including specific equipment for counterterrorism (for example IED detectors), intelligence, and operational and intelligence consulting to take advantage of the United States' experience in fighting the Islamic State in other arenas. Pride aside, Egypt would do well to show openness to such assistance. Israel, a partner of many nations (in terms of intelligence and other consulting) in the war against terrorism may also be able to assist Egypt beyond what its existing help in fighting this common enemy. Defeating the Islamic State's arm in Sinai at this time is no less crucial than it was when the Islamic State was at the peak of its power, because the Islamic State's declared intention to reestablish itself in the Middle East relies on local partners, such as Wilayat Sinai.

Egypt and its friends in the international community must enhance the military and intelligence effort in the war on terrorism in Sinai with a long term and comprehensive strategic investment in Sinai's economy and civilian infrastructures. Such an investment may become an incentive for the local population, which has been neglected for decades, to take the side of the state and the regime. An economic campaign in northern Sinai must be accompanied by an intensive and courageous legal, educational, and ideological campaign to counter radical interpretations of Islam. The regime's success in enlisting cooperation on the part of the locals against the terrorist infrastructure in Sinai will determine Egypt's success in the campaign against the Islamic State and its affiliates. Such preparation must provide a similar response to alienation from the existing central government notable in other parts of Egypt. The wall-to-wall denunciation of the attack – from Jamaat Jund al-Islam, identified with al-Qaeda, through the Muslim Brotherhood and its ideological sister organizations such as Hasm and Hamas, to states favoring political Islam such as Qatar and Turkey – is evidence that the attack was seen as having crossed a red line. For the benefit of the Egyptian public and the international community, the enemies of the Egyptian regime have sought to distance themselves from any identification with an attack on innocent civilians, let alone Sunnis at prayer. This crisis, then, provides the Egyptian regime with the internal and external legitimacy of a kind it has never had before to undertake a fundamental realignment of the situation.

Egypt has a longstanding tradition of fighting terrorism and proven capabilities in the field. In the late 1990s, it succeeded in eradicating severe threats from radical Islamic organizations. Despite the complex nature of the current challenge here and elsewhere in the Middle East, Egypt is presumably quite capable of meeting it from the moment it decides the task is one of national urgency. It can then mobilize the necessary resources, undertake the required organizational changes, allocate the requisite manpower, take the vital socioeconomic steps, and open itself to the essential international aid. It is only fitting that this human and national tragedy serve as a wake-up call to Egypt and its friends in the region and the world before they experience further terrorist attacks that are sure to be perpetrated unless stopped before they start.