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**Islamic State Province in Sinai Changes its Strategy: Are Israel and the Suez Canal in the Crosshairs?**

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**In the past few months, Wilayat Sinai (the Sinai Province), which is the Islamic State (ISIS) affiliate in Egypt, carried out two unconventional attacks. On November 19, 2020 it blew up (yet once more) a pipeline that carries natural gas from Israel to Egypt and on July 21 it attacked an Egyptian military base in the area of Rabaa in Sinai. Following that attack, Wilayat Sinai militants held four nearby villages that were liberated by the Egyptian army only after three months of fighting. The attack on Rabaa was unusual and may indicate a strategic change in the organization, shifting from survival-based defensive action toward offensive actions that inflict considerable damage on the Egyptian regime and economy – inter alia by means of attacking the Suez Canal and tourism in the Sinai Peninsula. A call to Wilayat Sinai to attack Israel in a speech this past January by an Islamic State spokesman could spur a shift in priorities for the Islamic State affiliate, and add Israel as an additional target for attacks, while it continues to focus its primary efforts on the Egyptian army and civilians. Wilayat Sinai might attempt to fulfil this directive by attacking Israelis, who are likely to return to Sinai once Covid-19 restrictions are lifted.**

On July 21, 2020, militants from Wilayat Sinai (Sinai Province) – an affiliate of the Islamic State in Egypt – surprised Egyptian soldiers when they launched a joint attack on a military base near the town of Rabaa. Contrary to official military reports, which claimed a low number of casualties, the attack reportedly led to the deaths of some 40 people and left 65 injured. Subsequently, Wilayat Sinai militants seized temporary control over four villages near the base and attempted to impose a regime of *sharia* law upon them. Only after nearly three months of fighting was the Egyptian army able to cleanse the area of the militants, assume control over the villages, and liberate them. Wilayat Sinai's successful attack in Rabaa was the background for its public declaration of an "occupation" of the villages and a propaganda campaign, which focused initially – and for the first time – on demonstrating aspects of "governance" by the Sinai Province, with displays of flags, maintenance of public order, and provision of food supplies. This joined an emphasis on the harm caused by the Egyptian military on the village residents,

a message that was intended to help recruit new supporters from among the Bedouin population in Sinai.

Wilayat Sinai's attack on Rabaa was unusual both in its scope and in its mode of action when compared to other activities in the past year, which primarily included the planting of explosive devices, mines, sniping activity, hit and run operations, and the elimination of collaborators. Thus, this activity may signal a change in the organization's modus operandi, beyond the tactical level. Despite its ongoing weakness since the launch of the extensive Egyptian military operation to destroy it in February 2018, Wilayat Sinai is in a process of changing its strategy, shifting from defense and survival toward operational offensive and infliction of significant damage on the Egyptian regime and economy by attacking the Suez Canal, tourism in Sinai, and the natural gas pipeline. This change is not necessarily a reflection of the organization's growing strength, but rather its adaptation to the Egyptian army's counter-operations, and a "recalculation of its route" to optimize its influence and activities. The repeated attempts by the Egyptian army to contain terror groups in the unpopulated desert regions have not succeeded in recent years; similarly its efforts to establish deterrence against terror have failed. Accordingly, it is doubtful that the army will be able to curtail this new trend, though it appears to be preparing to do so. Wilayat Sinai also continues to launch weekly attacks on Egyptian soldiers in its primary operational arena in the northern Sinai in the Rafah el-Arish area.

In addition, in light of the call from an Islamic State spokesman this past January urging Wilayat Sinai to attack Israel, there is a possibility of a move toward attacking Israeli targets, which in recent years has been relegated to a lower priority as compared to the main struggle against Egypt's army and civilians, particularly in Sinai. In this sense, the organization's avoidance of attack along the border fence may signal a possible intention to harm Israeli tourists in the Sinai, when the Taba crossing re-opens (which would also serve to harm the Egyptian economy).

### **Wilayat Sinai on the Offensive**

In its early years, since November 2014 when it joined a number of organizations or provinces in an alliance under the leadership of the Islamic State, Wilayat Sinai was active in offensive operations against the Egyptian army, with its attacks growing stronger and broader both in terms of the number of combatants and in the duration of combat. One example of such an attack occurred in January 2016, which took place over the course of a day and ended with the seizure of an Egyptian tank. Since the Egyptian army began its "Sinai operation" against the growing terror attacks of Wilayat Sinai in February 2018, it adopted a more aggressive approach in its war against terror, and consequently it appeared that Wilayat Sinai was considerably weakened. Its ranks thinned sharply, dropping from an estimated 1,000 in 2017 to only 500-600 by 2019. In recent

years it seemed that Wilayat Sinai was forced to adopt a defensive strategy, which operated little against rural settlements, but remained established in the desolate dune areas southwest of el-Arish, where it could survive and avoid a decisive conflict with the Egyptian army. In turn, the average number of terrorist attacks per month declined, from approximately 55 in 2017, to an average of 35 a month in 2018 (a decline of 40 percent), to an average of 25 monthly attacks in 2019 – most of which were aimed at fending off the Egyptian army's counter-operations. Prior to the Rabaa attack, frequent operations included the laying of explosives and attacks on bulldozers and anti-explosive electronic warfare vehicles at the head of the maneuvering forces.

Thus the attack on the base at Rabaa suggests a possible change in strategy: the attack on this target, a military base deep in built-up territory, requires complex logistical preparation and a sophisticated network of collaborators. Furthermore, the attack was intended to be ongoing and not a hit and run operation, which characterized Wilayat Sinai attacks in recent years. In addition, the accompanying propaganda on Telegram channels affiliated with Wilayat Sinai included almost real-time updates from the field, a popular presentation of “the Egyptian army's harm to civilians,” and “signs of governance” photos. These testify to the special attempt to win over the local population, although there was no immediate official claim of responsibility for the attack, and most of the propaganda efforts were reported in local Sinai media and not on the Islamic State official propaganda channels. The success of the attack on Raaba, which lies only 40 kilometers from the Suez Canal, may encourage Wilayat Sinai to try to extend its reach to the rural regions closer to the Canal, particularly the settlement of Galbana, where evidence of armed activity has already been reported. This area, located about 15 kilometers from the Canal, would allow Wilayat Sinai to threaten the Canal and draw more civilians into the cycle of violence, and indeed in early November the group reported that its forces are deployed from Rafah up to el-Qantara. (between Jalabne and the Suez Canal)

It appears that the Egyptian army and security forces are aware of this trend, and in the past five months counterterrorism operations have intensified. The Egyptian Ministry of Interior increased the number of incursions and searches in the Bir al-Abed area, and since the attack new army checkpoints have been deployed even in areas where it maintained no permanent presence. It seems that the army will reinforce the area with another brigade, which was transferred from eastern Sinai to the northwestern area of the peninsula in order to stop the spillover of Wilayat Sinai westwards.

At the same time, Wilayat Sinai is clearly strengthening its force in central Sinai. Following the construction of the wall around southern el-Arish and the strengthening of the Egyptian security hold both there and along the gas pipeline in northern Sinai – a

coveted target for attack, as demonstrated on November 19 – Wilayat Sinai is expanding its presence in the mountainous areas of central Sinai, Jabel al-Maghara, and Jabal Yiallek, in an effort to create a bypass route against the army's hold there and enable new areas of attack. As a result, there has been an increase in the number of clashes between the army and Wilayat Sinai in the area, and in fighting against the tribes that serve as the army's proxy.

### **Israel as a Target**

Since 2012 Wilayat Sinai has refrained from attacking Israel (including in its previous incarnations as Ansar Bait-al-Maqdis, which was affiliated with al-Qaeda, before the group swore allegiance to the Islamic State), and made do with sporadic rocket fire towards it, mostly as a reaction to what it perceived as Israeli attacks against the organization. This is despite its ability to carry out an attack along the border fence, since the organization has a permanent presence on the Israeli border south of Rafah – a space in which it regularly confronts the Tarabin tribe. Following the call by the Islamic State spokesman to attack Israel, Wilayat Sinai may change priorities and include Israel as a target for its activities in addition to the principal focus on the Egyptian army and civilians.. The organization may strive to fulfill the directive through a significant achievement, such as an attack on Israelis in Sinai. The closure of the Taba crossing in early March due to the Covid-19 pandemic precluded this possibility, but the subject of re-opening the crossing to Israelis is now back on the agenda, and once the border opens and Israelis return to the Sinai shores, Wilayat Sinai's desire to harm them will also increase.

### **Conclusion**

In recent months, there have been discernible changes in Wilayat Sinai's grand strategy, principally a shift away from a defensive-survivalist strategy and toward proactive moves aimed at harming Egyptian strategic assets, particularly economic targets. These changes do not point to a strengthening of the organization but rather to a change in priorities – concentrating its capabilities and efforts toward scoring achievements that have a cognitive and economic impact in the direction of the Suez Canal, and southwards toward central Sinai, from where it will be easier to carry out attacks in southern Sinai, or in areas near the center of the Suez Canal, which are currently less protected. The Egyptian army, aware of the emerging threat, has worked in recent months to change its deployment, along with increasing its offensive initiative and operating a mobile defense. However, if the experience of the past year is any indication, this deployment will likely not manage to curb the expansionist trend of Wilayat Sinai, as demonstrated by the attacks on Rabaa and the gas pipeline.

The growing threat on Egyptian strategic assets, along with the trend of normalization between Israel and Arab states, creates a convergence of interests and invites a broad scope for improving security cooperation between the two countries. Harm to Israelis in southern Sinai once the Taba crossing opens is a scenario that will challenge Egypt and Israel, particularly if an abduction or execution of Israeli civilians occurs (in the notorious Islamic State style). Therefore, Israel should work with the Egyptians to coordinate a swift and effective response to such scenarios and assist in improving Egyptian security and formulating the required response.

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