

Wilayat Sinai: The Islamic State's Egyptian Affiliate

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For the Islamic State, bringing the Sinai-based Ansar Bait al-Maqdis (“Supporters of Jerusalem,” ABM) into its fold was a major coup on two fronts. First, since its inception in 2011, ABM had leaned toward al-Qaeda – the Islamic State’s rival for leadership of the global jihad movement. Second, ABM was already the most active and lethal jihadi group in Egypt, giving the Islamic State an immediate presence in the Arab world’s most populous country.

Ansar Bait al-Maqdis emerged from a number of indigenous Salafi jihadist groups in the Sinai Peninsula. Some of these groups had ties to Salafi jihadis in Gaza or leaders that had previously fought abroad, including with al-Qaeda. ABM rose from the chaos in Sinai that began with the uprising against long-time president Husni Mubarak in January 2011.¹ In the summer of 2013, ABM shifted its main target from Israel to the Egyptian security forces (especially soldiers and military patrols and outposts in North Sinai), with additional attacks against state economic engines, such as internal gas pipelines and on one occasion, tourists. From September 2013 to late January 2014, ABM claimed responsibility for a rapid succession of mass-scale attacks throughout Cairo and the Nile Delta, including the attempted assassination of the Egyptian interior minister Mohamed Ibrahim.

From early 2014 onward, the Egyptian military managed, for the most part, to confine the group to the northeastern corner of the Sinai Peninsula. The massive pressure on ABM, however, did not destroy it; indeed, Sinai’s militants continuously improved their capabilities. Yet while they continued to thrive in North Sinai, a combination of desperation over funds and leadership losses likely played a role in the group’s eventual affiliation with the Islamic

State.² There was already a level of affinity among Sinai's Salafi jihadis for the Islamic State: both for what the latter stood and also because a number likely fought alongside Islamic State militants in Syria and Iraq. However, Egyptian, Israeli, and international officials all conclude that ABM's main reasoning for affiliating with the Islamic State was financial.

Personal contacts between ABM and Islamic State leaders paved the way toward the alliance.³ According to the *New York Times*, in October 2014 two emissaries traveled from Sinai to Raqqa to negotiate how much money the Islamic State could provide to the Egyptian group.⁴ Yet even if the affiliation was purely a financial decision, a major ensuing concern has been that the Islamic State's financial commitment and logistical support would noticeably affect the operations and targets of ABM, now known as Wilayat Sinai, the Sinai Province of the Islamic State.

There were early signs of ABM's organizational shift toward the Islamic State while the Syrian-based group courted Egypt's jihadis in the summer of 2014. For example, in his Eid al-Fitr sermon in July 2014, ABM spiritual guide Abu Usama al-Masri called for victory for the Islamic State.⁵ The affiliation was not without controversy, however, and the struggle between pro- and anti-affiliation ABM cells poured out into the open with competing statements in early November 2014. Indeed, for Sinai's jihadis, affiliating publicly with a global organization, whether the Islamic State or al-Qaeda, created a number of risks, first among them the negative impact on local support. Despite its Salafi jihadi goal of forming an Islamic emirate in Sinai and its waging of jihad against Israel and the Egyptian army, ABM had always presented itself as a defender of the local Sinai population. In the first months as Wilayat Sinai, then, the group treaded carefully so as not to undermine its local support. Despite officially being directed by a foreign-based leadership, there was no operational difference from ABM: the group's targets remained the same.

The situation began to change slowly in January 2015, when over a dozen local civilians were killed by Wilayat Sinai.⁶ With rare exception, ABM had avoided targeting civilians and even operated in a manner to limit civilian casualties. In contrast, in 2015 Wilayat Sinai became ruthless in killing those it accused of cooperating with the Egyptian military and Israel's Mossad. It is unclear if the increased targeting of civilians is related to the group's Islamic State affiliation or is a measure of its paranoia regarding infiltration. However, the brutal manner in which these killings took place shows a clear

inspiration from the Islamic State, which is also responsible for the Sinai wing's messaging and propaganda.

Also unclear is whether Wilayat Sinai's major attacks in 2015 are results of Islamic State influence in arms and training or if they are arguably the natural progression of a militant group that has shown continuous advancement over the past two years. The Islamic State's provision of weapons, vehicles, and new uniforms to its Sinai-based affiliate may be beneficial, but such assistance may not actually make as strategic a difference as Islamic State-run propaganda suggests.

However, Wilayat Sinai has certainly attempted Islamic State-like operations in the Sinai Peninsula. Militarily, the group's July 1, 2015 siege of the town of Sheikh Zuweid in an apparent effort to control parts of the town, at least temporarily, resembled the manner in which Islamic State fighters have taken over cities in Iraq.⁷ In its propaganda, the group presents itself as carrying out state-like functions: from handing out food and financial aid to countering drug trafficking and cigarette smuggling.

Both Egyptian and Israeli officials have drawn links between Wilayat Sinai's most proficient attacks and the group's connection to the Gaza Strip and to Hamas weapons. Egyptian security officials also believe that Sinai's militants have received training from former Egyptian special operations officers such as Hisham al-Ashmawi, who split off from ABM following its Islamic State affiliation.⁸ In addition, Sinai fighters have seized weapons and explosives during operations in which they overran military checkpoints and police buildings.

While Wilayat Sinai increased its capabilities, the group for the most part limited its operations to the peninsula. One exception occurred on November 28, 2014 – a day of “Islamic rage” organized by a number of Egypt's Islamist political groups – when Wilayat Sinai claimed that a “detachment” of its fighters killed five soldiers, including two officers, in Cairo and Qalyubia governorates.

The Islamic State advanced on mainland Egypt in July 2015. That month, Wilayat Sinai took responsibility for a car bombing suicide attack at a military checkpoint on the Suez-Cairo road. Although Wilayat Sinai is the Egyptian-based arm of the Islamic State, the parent organization took responsibility for a July attack on the Italian consulate in Cairo. Given the historical and religious imagery of attacking the seat of Christendom, as Islamic State

propaganda has made clear, perhaps Wilayat Sinai operatives were behind the attack on behalf of the greater Islamic State collective.⁹

More worrisome would be if fighters from the Islamic State affiliate in eastern Libya were dispatched to attack the relatively vulnerable consulate in the Egyptian capital. Certainly, an apparent Islamic State strategy has been to provoke Egypt into a two-front war. This was quite clear in February 2015, when Islamic State fighters in Libya slaughtered 20 Egyptian Copts. This action prompted Egypt to launch airstrikes on its western neighbor; and the Egyptian military has been alert on its western border, which distracts it from the internal battle against Islamic State forces in Sinai.¹⁰ Another attack in Egypt's western desert, claimed by the Islamic State, raised the likelihood of a connection between Islamic State operations in Egypt and Libya. However, the fact that successive bombings in Cairo were also claimed by the Islamic State – and not Wilayat Sinai – suggests that at least one Islamic State cell is based in Egypt's capital.

The Islamic State crossed another line in Egypt in August 2015 with its “Message to the Egyptian Government.” Coinciding with celebrations of the opening of new sections of the Suez Canal, Wilayat Sinai released a video of a Croatian worker kidnapped on the desert road from Cairo in July. As a masked, knife-wielding militant stood over him, the captive read a statement in English that Wilayat Sinai would kill him if Egypt did not release “Muslim women” from its prisons. Despite the video's title, the message was more clearly directed toward Western interests in Egypt, particularly to international companies that invest there.

Egyptian Response

Egyptian officials note that their country is not Iraq or Libya: the military will not run away or fall apart. As such, while it struggles to stop the Sinai insurgency, the Egyptian military has managed to contain it.

In addition to its military response, Cairo has enacted a number of laws aimed at stemming the flow of Egyptians trying to join the jihad in Syria and Iraq. All Egyptians age 18-40 must register with state security before boarding planes to Iraq, Jordan, or Syria. While focused on potential Islamic State recruits, Egypt's registration program also has political connotations, given the late 2014 additions of Turkey, known as a hub of Muslim Brotherhood members in exile; and Qatar, another pro-Brotherhood state.¹¹

Consumed by its own counter-terrorism fight, Egypt's involvement in the anti-Islamic State coalition is non-military. At the same time, at every opportunity Egyptian diplomats call on the coalition to expand its mission to Islamic State affiliates in Libya and even to broaden further the scope of the alliance to counter the Brotherhood as well.¹²

In addition to intelligence sharing, the main contribution Egypt has put forward in the anti-Islamic State fight is the religious legitimacy of al-Azhar University, one of the oldest institutions of Islamic learning. However, there are two major flaws with this strategy. First, al-Azhar itself is a conservative institution that is slow to change. In July, six months after calling for a "revolution" in Islamic thinking, Sisi scolded al-Azhar for not following through.¹³ A more fundamental problem with al-Azhar's religious legitimacy is that the institution is considered closely tied to the Egyptian state. As H. A. Hellyer told the Associated Press after Sisi's call for reform, "no one who is remotely inclined to a violent interpretation will be impressed by" a counter-radicalization message from al-Azhar.¹⁴

Policy Recommendations

The international community must support Egypt's efforts to counter its internal Islamic State threat, as Wilayat Sinai has the desire and proven capabilities to attack Egyptian, Israeli, and international interests. Such assistance includes intelligence sharing, border security cooperation, and efforts to stem weapons smuggling and financial transfers from the Islamic State to its operatives in Sinai.

At the same time, Israel and Egypt's other allies in the fight against Wilayat Sinai must encourage Egypt to follow through on plans to address the long term economic and developmental grievances in Sinai that fuel support for anti-state violence. It is also important to counter the Islamic State narrative of an Egyptian government that represses Muslims. For the international community, a major concern is the effect Egyptian political repression has on Islamic State recruitment, both to Wilayat Sinai and externally.

Notes

- 1 For an in-depth background on ABM, see Zack Gold, "Security in the Sinai: Present and Future," International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague, March 2014, <http://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Gold-Security-In-The-Sinai-March-2014.pdf>.

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- 3 Ahmed Eleiba, "Not an Easy Scenario: How will Iraq Affect Sinai?" *Ahram Online*, July 13, 2014, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/106137.aspx>.
- 4 David Kirkpatrick, "Militant Group in Egypt Vows Loyalty to ISIS," *New York Times*, November 10, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/11/world/middleeast/egyptian-militant-group-pledges-loyalty-to-isis.html>.
- 5 "New Video Message from Jamā'at Anṣār Bayt al-Maqdis' Abū Usāmah al-Maṣrī: 'Sermon of 'Īd from the Sinai,'" *Jihadology*, July 31, 2014, <http://jihadology.net/2014/07/31/new-video-message-from-jamaat-an%E1%B9%A3ar-bayt-al-maqdis-abu-usamah-al-ma%E1%B9%A3ri-sermon-of-id-from-the-sinai/>.
- 6 "Egypt Security Watch – Monthly Briefing 4: January 2015," Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, February 13, 2015, <http://timep.org/esw/articles-analysis/egypt-security-watch-monthly-briefing-4-january-2015/>.
- 7 "Assault in Sheikh Zuweid: A Turning Point in Egypt's Fight against Terrorism," Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, July 2, 2015, <http://timep.org/commentary/assault-in-sheikh-zuwait-a-turning-point-in-egypts-fight-against-terrorism>.
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- 9 Damien McElroy, "Rome will be Conquered Next, Says Leader of 'Islamic State,'" *The Telegraph*, July 1, 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10939235/Rome-will-be-conquered-next-says-leader-of-Islamic-State.html>.
- 10 Mahmoud Mourad, "Egypt's Sisi Tours Border with Libya after Bombing IS Targets," *Reuters*, February 18, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/02/18/us-egypt-libya-idUSKBN0LM1JK20150218>.
- 11 "Country Reports on Terrorism 2014: Chapter 2. Country Reports: Middle East and North Africa Overview," U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2014/239407.htm>.
- 12 "Egyptian Rejection of Taking the Provisions of the International Coalition Strategy against ISIS," Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Facebook page, August 1, 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/MFAEgypt/posts/902452593160021>.
- 13 "El-Sisi says Al-Azhar has Failed to Renew Islamic Discourse," *Ahram Online*, July 14, 2015, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/135369.aspx>.
- 14 Sarah el Deeb and Lee Keath, "From Egypt's Leader, an Ambitious Call for Reform in Islam," *Associated Press*, January 8, 2015, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/d2f4ad0aefc742c0981575537818ffd5/egypts-leader-ambitious-call-reform-islam>.