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Egypt's War in the Sinai Peninsula: A Struggle that Goes beyond Egypt

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Egypt is in the midst of a war that can be categorized as a low-intensity conflict. This category represents a common pattern of military campaigns in the early twenty-first century: sub-conventional wars fought by armies and security services belonging to states against armies of terrorilla - fully armed and hierarchical organizations that operate among civilian populations, combining guerilla and terror warfare tactics with the logic of terrorism. The civilians provide shelter and aid, whether under duress or in solidarity, and they always suffer the bitter consequences of the conflict.

Egypt's war against Salafist jihadi elements, primarily in the Sinai Peninsula, has also spilled over to its streets. The war in the Sinai is thus merely part of a broad campaign, shared by Egypt's Middle Eastern neighbors. The governments of these countries are fighting to prevent the spread of militant Salafist jihad, seeking to impose Islamic religious law based on the Taliban model, which governed Afghanistan from 1996-2001.

The January 29, 2015 attack in the area of el-Arish and Sheikh Zweid in northern Sinai by armed groups numbering some sixty perpetrators s focused primarily on military and police targets, though civilian targets were not spared. Thirty-two people were killed in this attack, which included rockets and mortar fire and at least three suicide bombings. There were also concurrent attacks in Port Said and Alexandria.

The offensive was carried out by Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, which has been calling itself "Wilayat Sinai" since November 2014, when it pledged allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, leader of the Islamic State (IS), and subordinated itself to the group. Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis began operating in Sinai in late 2011, following the uprising that broke out in Egypt against the Husni Mubarak regime. Its members include residents of the Gaza Strip, Hamas veterans, as well as local Bedouins, who adopted the Salafist jihadi ideology and joined veteran operatives from Egyptian terrorist organizations who supported al-Qaeda or joined its ranks. These operatives escaped from Egyptian prisons or were released after the Mubarak regime was toppled. They were also joined by foreign fighters who infiltrated Egypt from various areas in which jihadi organizations were

active, including Libya, Yemen, and Mali, and some of them joined Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis under orders from IS.

The attack in northern Sinai was another link in the chain of murderous attacks causing numerous casualties carried out by Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis in recent years, along with the daily attacks against military and police forces stationed in the Sinai. Among the most notable were the attack in Rafah during the Ramadan fast in August 2012, which caused the deaths of sixteen soldiers; the killing of twenty-one soldiers near the border with Libya in July 2014; the execution of twenty-five soldiers in August 2013; and the attack in October 2014 that killed thirty-one soldiers.

The issue of targeting the army in Egypt is sensitive, as the Egyptian Armed Forces are considered a symbol of national honor. The series of attacks has thus forced Egypt to wage all-out war against the perpetrators. However, it is likely that any country would have responded harshly to systematic harm on the level caused by the jihadi operatives' attacks in the Sinai.

Another target for counter-terror operations by Egyptian security forces is Hamas, which rules the Gaza Strip. Cairo sees Hamas as a major player involved in the establishment of Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis and as such, the party responsible for the area that constitutes the rear headquarters essential to its continued operations. Therefore, Egypt has recently designated the military branch of Hamas, the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, as a terrorist organization. The connection between Hamas in Gaza and the armed terrorilla campaign in the Sinai is the reason that Egypt established a security zone about one kilometer wide along its border with Gaza. It is also working to destroy the extensive infrastructure of tunnels built by Hamas, used for smuggling weapons and operatives from Gaza to Sinai and back to seek refuge in Gaza.

The fact that IS has granted its patronage to Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis is another cause for concern in Egypt. IS support for the group through funding and provision of weapons and personnel gives Egypt's campaign in the Sinai great importance, which goes beyond maintaining the stability of the regime and protecting Egypt's national security. The success of the Abdul Fattah el-Sisi government in providing an effective response to the offensive by Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis and its partners will also affect the ability of other countries in the region—Libya, Yemen, Jordan and others—to contend with Salafist jihadi elements. Such success will also serve to hinder the impression of an unstoppable, threatening force created by IS conquests.

The connection between jihadi elements targeting Egypt and IS is not restricted to Sinai. IS supporters, who have taken over Darna and other cities in Libya, were also involved in terror attacks in Egypt in the area of the border with Libya. Furthermore, IS spokesmen have urged Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis to overthrow the el-Sisi regime. This is tangible

evidence of their intentions to turn the Libyan-Egyptian border into an active combat zone and Libya into an infrastructural and logistical rear for their activities.

Another source of concern for Egypt is the building tension in Jordan. Internal unrest in Jordan is growing against the backdrop of the negotiations between Jordan and IS for the release of the Jordanian pilot who was captured after his plane was shot down in Syria. The unrest is evident primarily among Islamic elements, including IS supporters, who are protesting Jordan's participation in the international, U.S.-led anti-IS coalition. The execution of a Japanese journalist taken captive by the organization, in addition to the Jordanian pilot's captors' refusal to provide proof of life, does not bode well. However, one can assume that even an escalation in protests by Islamic circles in Jordan will not change the kingdom's approach to the need for a steadfast struggle against IS and that Jordan will not withdraw from active participation in the coalition waging war against the group.

Egypt's campaign in the Sinai has tremendous significance for Israel. Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis has carried out attacks against Israel in the past, including the attack on Highway 12, which leads to Eilat; firing of rockets at Eilat before and during Operation Protective Edge; and sending a suicide bomber to the Kerem Shalom border crossing, who was killed by the Egyptians before he could carry out his plan. These events, along with the group's close ties with organizations active in the Gaza Strip— Hamas, Mujahidin Shura Council in the Environs of Jerusalem, the Army of Islam, the Popular Resistance Committees, and more—strengthen the common Israeli-Egyptian interest on this issue. The two countries have an even greater common interest, given the explicit declarations by Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis that it will continue to operate directly against Israel.

Escalation in the Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis struggle against Israel could be a complex challenge for IDF soldiers and Israeli citizens. The group has great—and proven—military capability, and its attacks are carried out by squads with many participants, sometimes between ten and several dozen heavily armed attackers equipped with rockets, mortars, rocket launchers, and missiles. It has also made use of suicide tactics.

The assessment that Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis will again operate against Israel relies on past experience, the group's current operations in the Sinai Peninsula, and its close ties with the terrorist organizations active in Gaza. It is even possible that it will do so under the guidance of IS, which, according to a speech by al-Baghdadi in January 2015, depicts Israel as a partner and assistant of the international coalition fighting against it in Syria and Iraq.

Therefore, any intelligence, operational, or political assistance that Israel can provide to the el-Sisi regime, including support for improving its ties with the United States and a willingness to favorably consider requests by Egypt to expand its military presence in the

Sinai, will serve Israel's security interests, the overall relationship between Israel and Egypt, and the necessary international campaign to block the spread of IS and its partners.

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