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Jihadi War in Sinai

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Terrorist activity by Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis has increased in recent weeks. Presumably the organization's growing activity in Sinai, which is spilling over into Egyptian cities, is affected by the tightening of its relations with non-Egyptian terrorist organizations, headed by ISIS and Salafi jihadi affiliates from the Gaza Strip, and constitutes a strong challenge to the sense of security and stability of the el-Sisi regime. This is the background to the recently heightened activity by the Egyptian army against terrorism in Sinai. Relations between Egypt and the US have recently tightened, and the US is set to supply Apache helicopters to President al-Sisi's army as an expression of partnership between the two countries in the campaign against terrorism.

The intensive terrorism campaign by Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis is concentrated mainly in northern and central Sinai, and recently also on the border with Libya. It comprises primarily attacks on soldiers, ambushes, improvised explosive devices, and attacks against the natural gas pipeline. The organization's attacks are becoming more daring and more lethal, and some exhibit characteristics reminiscent of ISIS's brutal style, including the cold-blooded execution of groups of Egyptian soldiers and beheading of all those regarded as traitors.

In this context, the closer connections between Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis and ISIS over the past year are particularly noticeable. The Egyptian Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, whose founding declaration in late 2011 expressed public loyalty to al-Qaeda and its new leader, al-Zawahiri, apparently recently, at the demand of ISIS, transferred its loyalty to ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who appointed himself caliph, thereby challenging al-Zawahiri's leadership. The nature and depth of the connections between the organizations were recently clarified by the exposure of rare interrogation materials released by the Egyptian authorities, following the arrest of a senior operative in the Egyptian organization. The operative, Adel Habara, was formerly a senior commander in the Egyptian Islamic Jihad organization and one of al-Zawahiri's loyal followers. In August

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2013, he commanded the attack and murder of some 25 Egyptian soldiers, shot in cold blood by their attackers. In the transcripts of conversations between leaders of the two organizations, it was learned that a senior Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis member had reported to their his ISIS colleague on the massacre they had committed, and had asked for financing in return for logistics support, including Libyan documents and a pledge of allegiance.

ISIS has recently shown great interest in events in Libya, and seeks to exploit the anarchy in that divided country to obtain support from jihad organizations operating there. ISIS is using Libya as a springboard to countries on its borders, including Egypt. The Egyptians recently captured an ISIS squad attempting to penetrate Egypt from Libya. Note that Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis is also operating in this area; as part of these operations, in late July 2014 its attack on an Egyptian position on the Libyan border cost the lives of 22 Egyptian soldiers.

The Gaza Strip is also contributing its share to the cooperation between these jihadi organizations in Sinai. Although the connection between Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis operatives and Salafi jihadi organizations in Gaza is not new, it was recently given a boost by Operation Protective Edge. During the operation, Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis expressed public support for the Gazans' struggle, and even launched rockets against the communities of Bnei Netzarim, Ktziot, and Eilat. Another vehicle loaded with rockets belonging to the organization was seized by Egyptian security forces before the rockets could be launched against Israel. The organization also dispatched a suicide bomber to attack Kerem Shalom, but the attack was foiled when the terrorist was intercepted and killed by the Egyptian guards before he could carry out the attack. Notable in the context is the recent declaration in Gaza of the founding of a new Salafi jihadi organization called Supporters of the Islamic State in Gaza. Operatives of this organization documented themselves launching missiles against various targets in Israel during Operation Protective Edge, while quoting the words of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the founding father of ISIS, and expressing support for the Islamic State organization.

Gaza also provides places of hiding and passageways for ISIS personnel on their way to Sinai. For example, the Egyptians caught a network of 15 ISIS operatives that included Syrians, Iraqis, and Egyptians, who fought in its ranks, before they could manage to contact Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis operatives in Sinai for the purpose of carrying out joint terrorist operations against the Egyptian security forces.

Members of Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis are also operating in Egypt, together with smaller local organizations such as al-Furqan, Ajnad Misr, and Jaysh al-Islam. Their activities include shooting at police stations and roadblocks and assassinations of senior Egyptian administration officials and policemen belonging to the security forces. The organization

recently focused its activity in areas adjacent to the presidential palace in Cairo and government office buildings.

So far, ISIS has not operated in Egyptian territory, but following the declaration by President el-Sisi that his country would assist the international coalition in its war against ISIS, ISIS spokesman Adnani called on his organization's affiliates in Sinai to escalate their attacks against the Egyptian security forces, whom he called the Jewish guards and soldiers of the new Egyptian pharaoh, and told them to attack the Egyptian bases, seize the soldiers' houses, and behead the soldiers.

Following these statements, the Egyptian army recently began a major offensive against the terrorist organizations in Sinai. It arrested many operatives, bombed their positions and their underground launching sites, and conducted large scale battles with wanted persons and senior commanders in the organization.

The campaign against the smuggling tunnels from the Gaza Strip to Sinai also continues in full force. Even though the Egyptian army has already succeeded in destroying hundreds of tunnels, it appears that the tunnels still constitute a substantive threat to Egyptian security in Sinai. Therefore, the campaign by the Egyptian army and security forces against the growing terrorist forces in Sinai, which is also staging attack deep inside Egypt, will presumably escalate in the coming weeks. The fact that Egypt is being forced to deal now with an acute daily terrorist threat on several fronts – inside Egypt, in Sinai, on the Libyan border, and on the border with Gaza – is forcing it into a focused effort in cooperation with regional and international allies. Israel is unquestionably a loyal ally and partner in the campaign against Salafi jihadi terrorism, especially when Israel itself constitutes a target for these organizations.

Senior officers in Israel have stated that at this stage, ISIS is a remote enemy that does not regard Israel as its most important target, certainly not in the short term. At the same time, attention should be paid to the ever close alliance between ISIS and Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis and Salafi jihadi organizations in Gaza. This trend makes ISIS an immediate intelligence target for monitoring and counterattack in tight cooperation with both Arab and Western partners. Moreover, while it is preferable that Israel avoid being at the front of the campaign against ISIS, it is clear that it should lend its proven intelligence and operational capabilities to the international campaign to halt the expansion of Salafi jihadi terrorism parked on its borders to the south, the north, and probably in the future, also to the east.

