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One Year of the Islamic State in the Sinai Peninsula

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Sinai militancy changed over 2015, following the decision of the peninsula's main violent jihadi group to pledge allegiance to the Islamic State organization. The developments have created challenges for Egypt – and for Israel, though a less immediate target – but they also provide an opening to weaken the group's entrenchment in North Sinai.

From Local Militancy to Islamic State Province

One year ago, on October 24, 2014, Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (“Supporters of Jerusalem,” ABM), a militant jihadi consortium that formed in Sinai following the 2011 uprising, perpetrated a massive, multi-pronged operation against an Egyptian military checkpoint in the peninsula. A vehicle-borne improvised explosive device was used to destroy the outpost, followed by a small-arms raid. Over thirty soldiers were killed in the attack.

That attack was followed two weeks later by ABM's November 10 public affiliation with the Islamic State group based in Syria and Iraq. ABM changed its name to Wilayat Sinai, the “Sinai Province” of the Islamic State. Prior to its rebranding, ABM was already a violent and proficient organization, and its members had received training and assistance from figures linked to al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and other violent anti-state groups in Syria, as well as from Gaza-based militants, including Hamas. ABM's ability to command media attention in the most populous Arab country made it a major asset for the Islamic State.

Over the past year, Wilayat Sinai developed into a paramilitary force, with the organization's operations larger, more frequent, and more complex. To be sure, given ABM's advances since 2011, this development might have taken place without IS affiliation. The exception, so far, to ABM/Wilayat Sinai's operational trend was the July 1, 2015 siege of Sheikh Zuwaid, the third largest city in North Sinai. That attack, clearly an attempt by hundreds of militants to take control of a city, mirrored the way in which the Islamic State stormed through northwestern Iraq.

Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis vs. Wilayat Sinai

The Sheikh Zuwaid operation, uncharacteristic though it was, signaled three ways in which militancy in Sinai has changed. First, Wilayat Sinai poses a much larger threat to the local population. The group has killed dozens as alleged spies and has publicly threatened opposing tribal leaders. Wilayat Sinai's larger attacks have put civilians directly in harm's way, while the group has interdicted the smuggling of cigarettes and marijuana for being "Islamic vices." Finally, Wilayat Sinai has attacked and harassed the international troops of the Multinational Force and Observers – a prime target of transnational jihadis, but also the largest employer of Sinai's Bedouin.

The changed approach toward the local population largely results from the second major difference from ABM: an influx of foreign fighters into Sinai, as well as Egyptians returning from the Syrian conflict. One diplomat referred to this as a "game-changer" in ABM's relations with Sinai tribes. If accurate, the rise in foreign militants creates an opportunity that the Egyptian government can exploit. ABM always had international support, but the group maintained a local agenda despite its foreign links. The perceived external interests of these new outsiders, be they foreigners or mainland Egyptians, could perhaps bring the local population to the government's side under the right circumstances.

The final change in ABM since its IS affiliation is that Wilayat Sinai controls territory. The area is relatively small, and northeast Sinai has long lacked the full authority of the Egyptian state. However, in practice the group is in control and is strengthening its authority over the border area. Like its parent organization, Wilayat Sinai's propaganda reflects its intention to govern.

Opportunities for a Successful Egyptian Response

These developments in Sinai represent a failure to date for Egypt. Since October 2014 Egyptian security policies have placed increased hardship on Sinai's residents; nonetheless, the local population is less safe today than a year ago. Despite unprecedented levels of Egyptian troops and weaponry in Sinai, and the reported killing of approximately one thousand "terrorists" this year, military operations have resulted in no enduring impact on Wilayat Sinai strongholds or operations. Finally, despite a clampdown on Sinai's entryways from Gaza, the mainland, and the sea, advanced weaponry and fighters are still able to reach the peninsula.

These setbacks, however, are reversible. The changes in the nature and structure of ABM/Wilayat Sinai have provided an opening for Egypt. For the first time, the local population needs the Egyptian state to protect it from militancy. To exploit this opportunity, Egypt should do more than continue with its military campaigns. Sustained, effective military operations are necessary, but Egypt can also counter the Islamic State

narrative in both word and action. This counter-narrative can emphasize that Wilayat Sinai is acting against the interests of locals. To prove that it is a better alternative, Egypt should treat its citizens with respect, deliver services, and address longstanding political and developmental grievances. Most important, Egyptian security forces must provide security for the Sinai population.

There appear to be positive developments coming out of Cairo recently. In one of its first acts after it was sworn-in last month, the new Egyptian government published a statement on its “Comprehensive Plan to Combat Terrorism in Sinai.” The strategy calls for humanitarian assistance and medical attention to the Sinai population and a “precise” compensation plan for residents harmed or displaced in the course of security operations. The government calls on security forces to protect the population by acting on accurate intelligence, revising operations that put civilians in harm’s way, and refraining from firing on “potential threats” without identifying those being targeted.

In addition to this government plan, the military itself has signaled a change in operations. “Phase Two” of its latest operation, “The Martyr’s Right,” calls for extending total Egyptian control over North Sinai’s cities. Achieving this objective will require Egyptian military and police not just to clear militants in successive airstrikes, but also to hold the territory with ground troops based among the local population. Whether the Egyptian government and military carry out these measures may be the difference between success and failure.

Impact on Israel

Israel has given Egypt significant leeway in efforts to counter the mutual threat both face from Sinai militancy. Egypt’s military deployments in the peninsula, which exceed the quota stipulated in the peace treaty, are in full coordination between the parties. Israel also watches its western border closely, and provides Egypt with intelligence. At the same time, questions remain if Egypt can destroy or even contain Wilayat Sinai. The IDF is preparing for the likelihood that the group will strike across the border: targeting Israeli civilian towns or military positions the same way it has attacked Egyptian security posts. The prospect of improved Egyptian military operations and governance in North Sinai would thus greatly benefit Israel. However, Israel and Egypt will face continued security risks for the foreseeable future if the Egyptian policies that attempt to bring immediate stability exacerbate local tensions.

