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North Sinai Population Continues to Sacrifice for Egypt



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On April 25, 2015, Egypt celebrated Sinai Liberation Day: the thirty-third anniversary of the return of most of the peninsula back to Egyptian sovereignty, following the signing of the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty in 1979. In a [speech marking the occasion](#), Egyptian president Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi noted, “Sinai residents have also been playing a vital role in our battle with terrorist groups, and we have been making all efforts to provide them with security.”

Sinai residents indeed play a vital role—but they also are paying an enormous price. The average citizen of North Sinai is caught between a murderous jihadi group that pledged allegiance to the brutal Islamic State and the heavy-handed Egyptian army. For this population, the sacrifice for Sinai continues to this day. North Sinai [commemorated](#) its “liberation” under a state of emergency and [nighttime curfew](#), which was extended for a second time.

This curfew was imposed following the October 24, 2014, attack on a military checkpoint between the North Sinai capital of Arish and the city of Sheikh Zuweid, an attack which was the deadliest in the province up to that time, leaving at least 30 dead. In the six months since that attack, the Egyptian military has had some successes, such as protecting the South Sinai tourist city of Sharm el-Sheikh during the Egypt Economic Development Conference and the Arab League Summit in March and in more broadly keeping Sinai-based militants from infiltrating other parts of Egypt. At the same time, however, militants have shown a continued ability to strike military and police targets—both with small, opportunistic attacks and with well-coordinated larger attacks—in and around the North Sinai cities of Arish, Sheikh Zuweid, and Rafah on the Gaza border.

Throughout the period of the curfew, life for the population of North Sinai has gotten much worse. On November 10, 2014, Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis—the largest and most lethal jihadi group in Sinai—[pledged allegiance](#) to the Syria-based Islamic State, formally changing its name to Wilayat Sinai (“State of Sinai,” a province of the rhetorical Caliphate of the Islamic State). For the most part, Wilayat Sinai has continued to operate as it had under the ABM brand, focusing its attention on the state

security apparatus. The one difference in its methods has been a more pronounced targeting of civilians in the name of Wilayat Sinai.

Prior to 2015, Sinai-based militants took care to avoid civilian casualties and they occurred rarely—for example, a civilian would be walking near a security checkpoint when it was attacked, or a mortar misfire would hit a market next to an army base. The rare exception was in August 2014, when in a style that could be considered a copycat of IS propaganda, [ABM released a video](#) of four men being beheaded for allegedly collaborating with Israeli intelligence.

Data collected by the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy indicates that there were 36 attacks on civilians in North Sinai in January 2015—more than all attacks on civilians in the governorate in the entire year prior. Militants allege that they murdered these civilians for suspected collaboration with the Egyptian army or Israeli intelligence. More likely, however, militants advertise these alleged “crimes” to intimidate the local population into submission. As Wilayat Sinai increasingly challenges local power structures, the group risks [drawing the wrath](#) of area tribes, which have recently signaled greater support for the military.

At the same time, in an effort to block illicit tunnels, the Egyptian military is [clearing a buffer zone](#) along the Gaza border. As buildings and farms are demolished—first 500 meters from the border, now a kilometer, with more planned—residents have been forced to seek shelter elsewhere, sometimes more than once. In conjunction with the armed forces’ increased reliance on airpower, whole swaths of North Sinai civilization no longer exist. Additionally, errant rocket and missile fire between the military and militants has destroyed homes and killed or injured civilians.

Fully appreciating the sacrifice of the local population is made difficult by the imposition of a media blackout from North Sinai. Western journalists are usually unable to get past military checkpoints on the road to Arish. Even when Egyptian journalists get that far, without local connections their [reporting is confined](#) to the North Sinai capital. Journalists with significant ties to and knowledge of North Sinai have been [harassed](#) and [intimidated](#). Therefore, most local reports are based not on actual reporting but on a reporter’s personal connections to anonymous, so-called security sources, which—along with [anonymous reporting](#)—are only as credible as their authors or publications.

In addition to a blackout on independent reporting, in February a policy of complete silence by the Egyptian armed forces spokesman further limited information about Sinai. On January 29 another [wide-scale Wilayat Sinai attack](#) targeted Egyptian forces in Arish and across the governorate. Throughout February, Egyptian and foreign media reported massive military operations, in which [hundreds of militants and suspected jihadis were killed and captured](#). These reports all cited anonymous sources; the military spokesman did not release a single statement on Sinai operations between January 27 and March 1.

When the military released a [full recap of February operations](#), the information gap in Sinai became painfully clear. As the Tahrir Institute noted in its [Egypt Security Watch briefing](#), the military’s statement “bore no resemblance to the reports published throughout the month.”

The ministry of defense reversed its policy of silence in March, recognizing that the information gap allowed others to push their own narrative. The handing over of its media and propaganda to the Islamic State was a major change for ABM, which had not even used social media until last summer. Through the Islamic State propaganda machine and its online supporters, Sinai militants have presented a much larger and organized operation than they likely actually maintain. Also, official and supportive social media accounts have published blatantly false information. For example, one Twitter account published a photo of what it called a “Jewish drone” over Sinai; the photo was lifted from the [U.S. Air Force website](#).

The importance of Wilayat Sinai’s propaganda is not whether it is accurate but whether it is effective. At a moment when Sinai militants are more brutal, Egyptian policy in Sinai should aim to separate the grievances of the civilian population from those of the jihadis. Instead, photosets of houses destroyed by Apache fire raise questions as to why one would cooperate with the military—and [jihadi intimidation campaigns](#) against any cooperation work if locals believe that the military and police cannot keep them safe.

The government in Cairo has promised to address the needs of the North Sinai population, but it must act on these promises more rapidly. Construction of New Rafah is intended to provide significant [employment opportunities](#) for the residents of Sinai, thereby addressing one local economic grievance, though Egypt is still dealing with fallout from its policy of leveling old Rafah. The first steps of creating the Gaza buffer zone took place [with little notice, over mere days](#). To Cairo’s credit, phase two has been carried out [much more deliberately](#).

The few reporters in North Sinai have a responsibility to get the story right. Instead of publishing the testimony of locals as fact, reporters should ask tough questions and attempt to reconcile witness accounts that run [counter to known facts](#). Foreign editors and news services that work with locals also have a responsibility in this regard.

The government of the United States, which supports Egyptian counterterrorism operations in Sinai, should help Egypt by continuing to [speak privately](#), and also warning publicly, about [concerns of Sinai operations](#) doing more harm than good. Curbing potentially excessive operations can arrest the influence of militant propaganda. U.S. supporters of Egypt’s efforts in Sinai should also encourage a free and honest press, which could reflect the voices of local North Sinai residents.

Given the vital role—as Sisi put it—of North Sinai’s population in Egypt’s counterterrorism campaign, Egyptian policymakers and their international partners must do more to ensure locals are provided with more security than sacrifice.

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<http://timep.org/commentary/north-sinai-population-continues-to-sacrifice-for-egypt/>