



The Islamic State's Sinai Attack: Commentary & Analysis

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On 1 July 2015 an unprecedented attack was launched by an Islamist organizations affiliated with the Islamic State (IS) against Egyptian military targets in the north of the Sinai Peninsula. This document is a collection of the commentary and analyses offered by experts of the [Mitvim Institute](#): Dr. Ronen Zeidel, Prof. Elie Podeh, Dr. Ehud Eiran, Dr. Ido Zelkovitz and Mr. Kamal Hassan. Our experts' analyses address the ties between IS in Iraq and Syria and its affiliate in the Sinai Peninsula; the significance of the attack for Egypt; the attack's possible ramifications for Egypt-Israel relations; the response of Hamas; and the impact of IS on Israel's Arab population.

A. The Great Unknown: The Relationship Between IS and its Sinai Affiliate

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Ansar Beit al-Maqdis, a local organization that operates primarily in the north of the Sinai Peninsula, pledged its allegiance to the Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. In return it received recognition from IS, which subsequently began referring to the Sinai Peninsula using the term *Wilayat al-Sina* (the province of Sinai), which is commonplace within IS jargon when referring to areas that are either under its control or within the sphere it aspires to occupy. As a result, there has been a significant increase in the volume and quality of the media activity of *Ansar* – or in its new name, *Wilayat al-Sina*. Alternatively, it is possible that there is a constant movement of fighters and activists between the core IS regions of Iraq and Syria and Sinai. From the Peninsula they continue on to Libya in which, contrary to reports, they have still not been able to successfully establish a presence.

Beyond this, the connection between the core areas of the IS Caliphate and the Sinai-based organization, which does not yet control vast territory is

unclear. The increase of recent weeks is indicative of a certain inspiration that shapes *Ansar's* actions. However, battling the Egyptian military was a staple of its past activity. Indeed, perhaps these actions contributed to IS's patronage of *Ansar* (IS has not accepted all pledges of allegiance and has in fact rejected those of certain organizations thus far). Other characteristics of IS's style of warfare, which include the extensive use of suicide bombers, fighting while in motion and overall notable military capabilities are still lacking in *Ansar's* arsenal.

IS's "Toyota Battalions," which are ubiquitous in IS-controlled Iraq and Syria are not as seen in the Sinai. The same is true of the *Muhajireen*, the global jihad's international volunteers, who cannot reach the Sinai. Moreover, *Wilayat Sina's* ability to control the peninsula's civilian population has yet to be put to the test since the organization has conquered but one small town to date.

That said, in the Sinai, particularly in its northern region, IS relies upon a support base that is primarily comprised of the Bedouin tribes. This differs significantly from the complex reality of Iraq and Syria where IS forced itself on the indigenous population and relied upon forces from outside to do its bidding. The situation in the Sinai can be seen as a point of strength as it gives the organization legitimacy, it is familiar with the terrain, the locals, and the ongoing disputes and cultural divisions between Cairo and the Peninsula's Bedouin population. However, from the point of view of the Global Jihadi movement it may not seem this way. An organization that is too local could adopt an agenda that is separate from that of IS and could be tempted to discard its allegiance if an opportunity presents itself.

The true test of the relationship between IS and its Sinai affiliate will be the extent to which IS's governing principles (institutions, judicial procedures, dress code and behavior in the public sphere) will be adhered to in areas under the control of *Wilayat al-Sina*.

B. Egypt Must Prepare for a War of Attrition Against the Jihadist Organizations

Prof. Elie Podeh, Mitvim Institute & The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

This is not how Egyptian President al-Sisi planned to celebrate the second anniversary of the counter-revolution against the Muslim Brotherhood, which occurred on 30 June 2013, or a year since he entered office on 8 June 2015. The downward spiral began with the assassination of Egypt's Prosecutor General, Hisham Barakat by an unknown organization that executed a well-planned attack; and continued with a coordinated assault by *Wilayat al-Sina* – the new name of *Ansar Beit al-Maqdis*, on Egyptian military and police outposts in northern Sinai, in the area between Rafah and El-Arish, and particularly in the town of Sheikh Zuweid.

It is hard to assess the level of coordination between these attacks. However, they have created the feeling that Egypt is under attack by extreme Islamist elements. Indeed, the Prime Minister declared that Egypt is under war. The Egyptian government is not differentiating between the homegrown Egyptian terrorists who have pledged allegiance to IS and the Muslim Brotherhood. All of these organizations, despite their ideological and political differences, have been outlawed, which allows Egypt to employ the same military and legal means to combat them.

Barakat's assassination did not come as a surprise as a previous failed attempt on both his life and that of the Egyptian Interior Minister took place three months ago. On the other hand, the latest attack in Sinai is surprising both in its brazenness and its scope. The size of the force used by the terrorists was of a reinforced company attacking some 15 different locations where security forces were positioned. The usage of anti-tank missiles – a relatively advanced armament – indicates that the militants are being supplied from outside the Sinai and that they are professionally trained. The Egyptian army's powerlessness here is also quite striking. Since the fall of President Morsi, the Egyptian army has been waging an all-out war against Jihadist organizations in its territory, without notable success. Over 300 security personnel have been killed in this period despite the fact that Israel allows the entrance of greater Egyptian forces into the Sinai that stipulated in the Camp David Accords.

The onslaught in Sinai and the assassination of the Prosecutor General suggest that Egypt should prepare for a war of attrition against the jihadist organizations. These include the Muslim Brotherhood who have also embraced violence as a legitimate tool and are calling for an open revolt against the regime. As opposed to Syria, Libya, Iraq and Yemen – where the regime's ability to fight the jihadists ranges from limited to non-existent – the Egyptian army has the military capabilities to confront these organizations if it allocates all the necessary resources. The main concern is that the "field of battle" is not in the Sinai Peninsula alone, but across all of Egypt. Moreover, the government is simultaneously confronting a series of economic challenges, which requires significant attention.

Israel is of course watching the unfolding events in Egypt with great interest and concern. It is giving Egypt a "long rope" for al-Sisi to fight this homegrown terror based on the understanding that Israel and Egypt share a common interest in confronting this threat. It is highly possible that this cooperation – particularly in the Sinai – will increase and will go beyond the sharing of intelligence. In the final analysis, it is both disheartening and disturbing to see how the Arab Spring not only failed to bring democracy to the Arab world, but also created large fissures that were filled by Jihadist organizations that seized the opportunity to realize their ideological aspirations.

C. The Events in the Sinai Point to the Challenges and the Opportunities of the Changing Middle East

Dr. Ehud Eiran, Mitvim Institute & the University of Haifa

The July 1st attacks by Islamists connected to ISIS on Egyptian military targets, and on Israel two days later, serve as yet another reminder of the kinds of challenges and opportunities Israel is facing in the constantly shifting sands of the Middle East.

First, despite statements from Israeli elected officials about the threat posed by ISIS to Israel, the main target of the multiple attacks launched by radicalized Islamists are the Arab governments, not the Jewish state. The attacks on Wednesday and the harsh Egyptian response left dozens dead. The three rockets fired into Israel fell in an empty field and caused no casualties. The attacks in Egypt are part of a direct challenge to the Egyptian government. In contrast, rockets were fired at Israel, according to the ISIS affiliate that shot them, in response to Israel's alleged support for Egypt. While ideologically Israel is surely on the target list, for now it is a rather low priority for the Islamists.

Second, new enemies create new alliances. The Israeli and Egyptian concern regarding the threat posed by Islamists in Sinai explains, at least in part, the close relations between Cairo and Jerusalem. The overlap in interests may also lead to even closer cooperation in the future.

Finally, prior to the attacks, and following them, there were conflicting reports about Hamas' approach to the ISIS' affiliates in the region. On the one hand, Hamas has been clashing with more radical Islamists in the Gaza Strip for months. On the other hand, there are reports (mostly from Israeli sources) that armed elements in Hamas assist ISIS affiliates in Sinai. This is another manifestation of this new, unstable, Middle East, and of the "frenemies" phenomenon. Hamas can fight ISIS in Gaza, but support it in Sinai, much like the US and Iran share the same interest in Iraq and cooperate there indirectly, while they have conflicting ideas about Syria, and offer military support there to opposing parties.

D. Hamas Should Keep a Low Profile to Prevent the Violence from Spilling Over from Sinai into the Gaza Strip

Dr. Ido Zelkovitz, Mitvim Institute & the University of Haifa

The ongoing war in the Sinai Peninsula has a direct effect on the Gaza Strip and has caused disagreements within Hamas to rise to the surface.

Hamas's military wing maintains a strategic relationship with Islamist organizations and Bedouin tribes in the Sinai, which remains an important geographical space for storage, as well as the supplying and smuggling of weapons. The ties between Hamas and the Bedouin tribes of northern Sinai have an economic dimension as well. Moreover, in times of hardship, the Gaza Strip can serve as a safe haven for Islamists who can access it by land via the system of tunnels or via the Mediterranean.

Conversely, Hamas's political wing is seeking to reach an understanding with al-Sisi that will improve the relationship between the two. There are those within the organization's political wing, chiefly among them Mousa Abu Marzook, who are consistently trying to improve the relationship with Egypt, which serves as Gaza's main gateway to the outside world as well as an important economic hinterland. The decision by the Egyptian court to remove Hamas from the list of recognized terrorist organizations created hope for an era of new and improved relations between the parties. The instability in the Sinai, however, creates a significant rift between the interests of Hamas's political wing and those of its military wing.

The Egyptian army's struggle against the Islamic State and other Islamist movements, which in the Sinai are comprised of a mixture of Bedouin tribesmen and foreign fighters creates the opportunity for al-Sisi's regime to weaken the Muslim Brotherhood. Beyond being the parent-organization of Hamas, the Brotherhood is also the Egyptian army's primary strategic rival and the only political player that, due to its capacity as an organization, has the potential to endanger the regime's survival. It is against this backdrop that we have seen raids conducted by elite Egyptian military units on Brotherhood safe houses and the killing of many senior officials within the movement.

The Egyptian regime views Hamas as an enemy. Hamas, on the other hand, which carries the burden of governing the Gaza Strip, must create stability in order to rule effectively. Therefore, being identified with the Islamic State will damage the fabric of the Hamas's overarching interests, leaving it between a rock and a hard place. Therefore, Hamas's best recourse is to maintain a low profile while doing its utmost to prevent the violence in the Sinai from spilling over into the Gaza Strip.

E. The Islamic State is Already Exerting Influence Over Israel's Arabs

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The attack in the Sinai Peninsula is indicative of the failure of Egypt's security forces and its partners in fighting the Islamic State (IS). IS has demonstrated military capabilities accompanied by the element of surprise, which has created difficulties to predict possible future attacks against Israel as well.

The expansion of IS's terror activities is already impacting upon the Arab citizens of Israel. To date, only a few of them have identified with IS or joined its ranks, while the vast majority have expressed utter disgust from the cruel methods of execution used by the criminal organization. However, in light of the difficult state of Israel's Arab population, there is a danger that this situation will change for the worse. Indeed, it is clear that IS has an impact upon Palestinians who are citizens of Israel on both the ideological and the behavioral levels.

On the ideological level: The horrific executions carried out by IS militants are a source of significant debate within the Israeli Arab populace. This debate, which manifests itself primarily on social networks, at times reflects the violent discourse employed by IS and includes terminology that is rife with oppression, violence and incitement against social and religious leaders, as well as individuals who express political or religious views that differ from those that are deemed acceptable

On the behavioral level: A number of horrific murders have taken place in Israel's Arab society in recent years. These may have been influenced by the methods of the Islamic State. Disagreements within Arab society in Israel at times manifest themselves through violence and are characterized by intolerance. This reality is most clearly seen on the municipal level, which has become the arena for bitter political and social struggles.

Israel should be concerned about a terrorist organization that is significantly endangering the Middle East's security and stability but is also gathering steam and influencing perceptions and behavior within Israeli society. Just as Israel is working to form regional partnerships to counter terror, so too should Israeli authorities engage with the country's Arab population, which suffers from many problems, in order to address its concerns. In this context, national figures should cease making racist statements that only exacerbate tensions, widen intra-societal divides, and entrench hatred.