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The Islamic State’s Egypt offshoot (Wilayat Sinai or Sinai Province) targeted an Egyptian Navy vessel with a missile on July 16.

ALGERIAN ATTACK UNDERLINES THREATS ARISING FROM INTER-JIHADIST COMPETITION

James Brandon

At least nine Algerian soldiers were killed in an attack on July 17 when their patrol was ambushed by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Magreb (AQIM) militants in Souq al-Attaf in northwestern Ain Defla province (Algeria Press Service, July 19). The attack was one of the most lethal in the country since a mass hostage-taking at the In Amenas natural gas plant in eastern Algeria killed 40 in January 2013. Although the latest attack was more deadly than usual militant operations in northern Algeria, which typically take the form of low-level bomb or gun attacks on passing convoys, it is not entirely clear whether this is due to the attackers “getting lucky” on this occasion, or if the operation signifies a substantial increase in militant ambitions and capabilities. It may, however, also reflect growing competition among the country’s various jihadist groups, including AQIM, the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA), al-Murabitun and Jund al-Khilafah fi Ard al-Jezayer (Soldiers of the Caliphate in Algeria), which has declared allegiance to the Syria and Iraq-based Islamic State group.

Following the attack, AQIM swiftly took credit for the operation via Twitter in a statement that claimed that the group’s “knights of Islam” had killed 12 “apostate army soldiers” in an ambush (SITE, July 19). The group added that the attack was in response to a recent statement by Ahmed Gaid Saleh, the Algerian Army’s chief of staff, who claimed that the domestic Islamist militancy had been crushed following a series of recent successful military operations. Indeed, two weeks earlier, the defense ministry said that over 100 militants had been killed, captured or had repented in the first half of the year (al-Arabiya, July 7). AQIM also posted photos that purported to show army soldiers patrolling on foot before the attack and also military equipment, including AK-47s, which the militants had allegedly seized during the operation. AQIM’s statement

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that the attack was intended to rebut the army's recent claims underlines that many militant operations in Algeria are aimed less at seizing ground or inflicting casualties than scoring political points against their enemies, in this case via damaging the credibility of the government and military.

Underlining the centrality of public relations to recent militant operations, one Algerian newspaper, citing a government security source, argued that the latest attack was additionally "a message from AQIM to its rivals" (*El-Khabar*, July 21). This reflects that Algeria is now home to various competing, and sometimes overlapping, jihadist groups that are not only locked in a battle with the Algerian government, which they regard as an apostate or tyrant entity, but also to different degrees with each other, in an internecine competition for media attention, funding and recruits. Indicative of this competition is a video produced by the Islamic State entitled "A Message to the Algerian People" (North Africa Post, July 16). Purportedly filmed in Raqqa, the group's Syrian capital, and distributed via the group's Isdarat.tv website, the five-minute video showed two apparently Algerian fighters threatening that Algeria "would pay a heavy price" for its crackdown on Islamists, additionally promising that the group "would not be satisfied until we reach Andalucia," a reference to areas of southern Spain formerly occupied by Muslim powers (Isdarat.tv, July 14). Such lofty rhetoric and large ambitions potentially represent an attempt by the Islamic State to compete for the mindshare of their target audience in lieu of actual recent attacks in Algeria.

This intense competition between rival jihadist groups, however, means that AQIM's latest operation may put pressure on Islamic State-aligned groups in Algeria to carry out a significant attack in the near future in order to defend their own credibility. The last high-profile attack in the country by Islamic State-affiliated militants was Jund al-Khilafah's videotaped execution of a civilian French hostage in September 2014 (France24, September 25, 2014). This group, which mainly operates in mountainous areas east of the capital Algiers, is led by Abdelmalek Gouri (a.k.a. Khaled Abu Suleiman), a former AQIM leader who broke with al-Qaeda after accusing it of deviating from the correct path. No doubt bitter at having the limelight stolen from him by AQIM's latest successful attack, Gouri and Jund al-Khalifah group will likely now be tempted to back up the Islamic State's recent video message with action on the ground in Algeria in order to both damage the government and to chalk up a victory over his former colleagues from AQIM.

GROWING TEMPO OF SAUDI ANTI-TERRORISM ARRESTS HIGHLIGHT ISLAMIC STATE THREAT

James Brandon

The Saudi government, on July 18, announced the arrest of hundreds of individuals allegedly linked to the Syria and Iraq-based Islamic State militant group. The government's statement, issued by the Ministry of Interior, said that 431 people had been arrested to date (Saudi Press Agency, July 18). It also said that the majority of these individuals were Saudi citizens, although there were also nationals from Yemen, Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Algeria, Nigeria, Chad and elsewhere, with arrests taking place across the country. The announcement, which follows a series of Islamic State-linked attacks in the capital Riyadh and against Shi'a Muslims in the eastern part of the country, underlines the fact that the group poses an increasingly complex security challenge to Saudi Arabia.

The government also revealed a number of thwarted plots, including one to attack a mosque used by special response forces during Friday prayers and another to conduct a series of attacks on consecutive Fridays against (presumably Shi'a) mosques in the country's Eastern Province, where there is a large Shi'a population. Additional plots allegedly thwarted by the authorities included plans to attack an unspecified diplomatic mission in Riyadh and to conduct attacks on security installations in Sharurah, an area of the country's southern Najran Province, close to the Yemen border. This latter plan was allegedly considered to be advanced, with the plotters having established a training camp in the desert nearby in order to undertake "various military exercises there," and to enable "communication and coordination" with "wanted elements in Yemen." The government, however, did not make clear to what extent the arrested individuals were directly linked to the Islamic State, and how far they were merely inspired by it.

The statement is also remarkable for focusing exclusively on the Islamic State rather than on any groups associated with al-Qaeda. While this partly reflects the extent to which the Islamic State has eclipsed al-Qaeda among hardline pro-jihadist audiences in the region, it may also reflect that al-Qaeda's relationship with Saudi Arabia is now complicated. In particular, Saudi Arabia is backing al-Qaeda affiliated forces in Syria via the "Jaysh al-Fateh" Islamist militant umbrella group, and given that its key allies in southern Yemen are also closely connected with al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, the organization's Yemeni branch. Moreover, it is also possible that due to the death of Osama bin Laden, its Saudi founder, al-Qaeda is now less interested in attacking

the Kingdom.

In meeting the challenge from the Islamic State, Saudi Arabia is considerably more prepared—militarily, ideologically and psychologically—than it was when domestic jihadism previously peaked in the 1990s or the mid-2000s. However, as the sheer volume of recent arrests, their geographical spread within the country and the wide variety of militant targets—from diplomatic facilities to Shi'a mosques to the security services themselves—shows, the challenges ahead are nonetheless considerable.

Tajikistan's Counter-Productive Campaign Against Terrorism

Edward Lemon

In May 2015, missing Tajikistan police commander Colonel Gulmurod Halimov appeared in an Islamic State video to announce his defection to the group. While his defection caused embarrassment in Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe, given the regime's repressive religious policy, this development was also perhaps unsurprising. A trained sniper, Halimov was handpicked by President Emomali Rahmon to lead the country's paramilitary police following a counter-insurgency operation in 2012. He had also received counter-terrorism training in the United States on at least five occasions. In the video, Halimov was clear on why he had left Tajikistan, saying that the regime in the predominantly Muslim, formerly Soviet, Central Asian country of eight million people "does not permit people to pray and wear Islamic hijabs" (YouTube, May 28). He also accused the security services of paying prostitutes \$10 each to appear in hijabs in a video that state media had used to discredit Islam. "You passed a law prohibiting prayer on the streets. But God says you can pray anywhere," Halimov said, underlining what he regarded as the religious basis for his decision.

Halimov's defection is the most prominent—but not the only—case of blowback against the regime's repressive counter-terrorism policy. Leading regime critic Izzat Amon, who advocates for Islam being given a more prominent place in public affairs, retorted after the defection: "Dear officials, continue your fight against the hijab, the beard, *azan* [call to prayer] and other Islamic attributes. But it will certainly come back to you like a boomerang" (Facebook, May 28). Considerable debate exists as to how many Tajik citizens are currently fighting with in Syria and Iraq. Whereas one militant has boasted that 2,000 Tajiks are currently based in Iraq and Syria, the interior ministry has given a more circumspect figure of 412 (Asia Plus [Dushanbe], January 29; Asia Plus [Dushanbe], June 7). Taking the government statistic at face value, this means only one in every 20,000 Tajik is fighting with the group. While significant, this is a smaller proportion of the country's Muslim population than in many European and Middle Eastern countries. The majority of Tajik fighters in Iraq and Syria are aligned with the Islamic State.

While the process by which an individual comes to be recruited into a militant group varies from case to case, the existing biographical data for Tajik fighters indicates that a few common characteristics do exist. Most Tajikistanis

known to be fighting (or to have fought) with the Islamic State are young males aged 18 to 40; few have received formal religious education, and the majority spent time in Russia before going to Syria or Iraq. Although the authorities have said that most recruitment takes place in Russia's mosques, evidence from Moscow suggests that gyms and building sites are also key sites for recruitment (IslamNews [Moscow], November 22, 2014).

One prominent recruit who fit this profile was the spokesman for Tajik members of the Islamic State, Abu Muhammad al-Tajiki, who died in a U.S. airstrike in Kirkuk, Iraq, on February 11, 2015. Born Alan Chekranov in 1993, al-Tajiki grew up in the Sharituz district, located on the border with Afghanistan (Asia Plus [Dushanbe], December 8, 2011). In 2010, he graduated from high school and enrolled at the prestigious Tajik-Slavonic University in Dushanbe. Two years later, the university expelled him for missing too many classes. Like over a million young Tajiks, he moved to Russia in search of work. One year later, he returned to Tajikistan a changed man, according to his friends. He wore a beard, only spoke of the need for jihad and said he had been socializing with other Caucasians in Russia. In 2013, he travelled to Syria via Turkey. He became the most active Tajik fighter on social media, appearing in at least fifteen videos that sympathizers posted on YouTube and Odnoklassniki (EXCAS [Exeter], January 5; Odnoklassniki, December 12, 2014; Odnoklassniki, December 17, 2014; YouTube, December 25, 2014; Odnoklassniki, January 6).

As Abu Muhammad al-Tajiki's case indicates, many Tajik militants are active on Russian social networks like Odnoklassniki and VKontakti, posting homemade videos and memes in both Tajik and Russian. Although videos featuring Tajik militants are often taken on mobile phones, some have been featured in videos produced by the Islamic State's Russian language media outlet "Furat." These have included footage showing Central Asian militants being trained by prominent Chechen militant Abu Jihad and a Tajikistani militant leading a suicide mission near Raqqa, Syria, in June 2015 (Twitter, June 26).

Despite the limited number of Tajikistani citizens who have joined the Islamic State, the regime has hyped up the threat that they pose to the country. By painting the jihadist group as an existential threat, the Tajikistani regime has created the conditions to justify a heavy-handed counter-terrorism policy. In particular, a worldview that perceives assertive secularism as modern, rational and secure, as opposed to backwards, irrational and violent religion, prevails among policymakers in Tajikistan. According to this interpretation, the Islamization of society is a sign of political radicalization.

By presenting Islam itself as a dangerous force that needs monitoring, Tajikistan has created the conditions for a campaign against religion. It has accordingly passed laws to make it difficult to register religious organizations, banned those under 18-years-old from attending mosques and has restricted students studying Islam abroad. While a state-sponsored official Islamic infrastructure exists, the regime labels those falling outside of the system as potential "terrorists" and "extremists." The security services have also taken to eliminating alleged outward signs of "radicalism," for instance, forcing men with beards to shave them and women to remove their hijabs (Ozodagon [Dushanbe], May 7).

Groups with questionable links to religious violence, such as Hizb ut-Tahrir, Tablighi Jamaat and groups associated with the Salafist movement, have also been outlawed. The most prominent victim of this anti-religious campaign is the regime's civil war era opponent, the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), a moderate party which pushes for a strengthening of Islam's position in the country. Although the IRPT remains the region's only legal religious party, it is the government's main political rival, and the authorities have in recent years led a coordinated campaign to associate its name with extremism and instability in the popular mindset, using the rise of the Islamic State to further defame it. Numerous former members of the party have also been accused of recruiting and fighting in Syria and Iraq (TajInfo [Moscow], April 17). On the eve of the March 2015 parliamentary elections, for example, imams in Tajikistan read a sermon text prepared by the government, in which they called on voters to shun the IRPT:

Today, there are some people who blacken the name of the [president's ruling PDP] party, who blacken the name of Islam. These words are spoken by those who have usurped Islam for their own selfish purposes and scare people with religion [i.e. the IRPT]... In neighboring countries, parties and groups who act in the name of Islam exist, but today on their territory blood has been spilt. These parties are foreign to us, they blow up mosques, destroy people's tranquility and make children orphans (EurasiaNet, February 27).

The IRPT lost its two seats in parliament in elections in March after it failed to reach the 5 percent vote threshold. Subsequently, the government has accused its leader Muhiddin Kabiri of corrupt property deals in the 1990s; he remains exiled, fearing arrest if he returns (Ozodagon [Dushanbe], June 19). Additionally, on July 9, the country's prosecutor general called on the government to ban the party, arguing that its mandate was no longer supported by

the population (Khovar [Dushanbe], July 9).

Despite this range of hardline tactics against a variety of Islamic opposition groups, the state has also engaged in some “soft” tactics against the terrorist threat. For instance, the government has also engaged in an “information” campaign against the Islamic State, which includes talks by former jihadists about conditions inside Syria and Iraq (Radio Ozodi [Dushanbe], June 13). It has also enlisted the support of the state-sponsored Islamic clergy to counter the Islamic State’s messaging. For instance, in September 2014, the country’s top council of religious leaders, the Council of Ulemo, issued a *fatwa* against the Islamic State, calling it a “great sin” to serve in its ranks (Radio Ozodi [Dushanbe], September 25, 2014). State imams have also discussed the atrocities in Syria and Iraq in official sermons. On May 22, 2014, the Tajik parliament approved an amendment to the criminal code stipulating punishment for Tajik nationals taking part in foreign armed conflicts, although those who repent will be spared punishment (Radio Ozodi [Dushanbe], May 22, 2014). A year after this, in May 2015, the Ministry of Interior offered amnesty to those who return from the battlefield; so far, six people have reportedly taken up this offer (MVD [Dushanbe], May 11).

By marginalizing the political opposition and country’s pious Muslims, however, the regime is taking a potentially dangerous path. Not only does such heavy-handed counter-terrorism lend the Islamic State’s messaging a semblance of legitimacy and credibility, it also alienates everyday people, who have seen their personal lives encroached upon. Although the prospects for widespread instability in a country that experienced a bloody five-year civil war within living memory remains remote, some blowback is inevitable, as evidenced by the recent defection of a regime insider to the Islamic State.

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The French Jihadist ‘Foreign Legion’ in Syria and Iraq

Timothy Holman

It is probable that before the end of 2015, more than 1,000 French residents or nationals will have travelled to Syria and Iraq to join one of the various armed groups active in the two countries. This mobilization dwarfs all prior French jihadist travel to other conflict theaters, which is estimated at approximately 500 individuals (Europe 1, June 28). In response to this unprecedented mobilization, in June 2015, a French parliamentary commission produced its final report on jihadist networks in France. [1] The 500-page report provides an overview of the French foreign fighter mobilization for Syria and Iraq, observations on the resulting terrorist threat to France, recommendations on how the government can mitigate the threat and also provides the following figures:

- The French foreign fighter contingent is the largest from Western Europe, with an estimated 843 French jihadist fighters or supporters having been in either Syria or Iraq since 2012;
- The contingent increased rapidly from 20 persons in Syria in February 2013 to 843 by May 2015;
- The French volunteers are predominantly male (75 percent), although among minors, females are the majority;
- Approximately 20 percent are converts to Islam;
- More than half of the travelers were unknown to the French intelligence services prior to their departures;
- Six regions in France have provided the majority of the foreign fighters: Ile-de-France, Rhone-Alpes, Provence-Alpes-Cote d’Azur, Languedoc-Roussillon, Nord Pas De Calais and the Midi-Pyrenees;
- French jihadists are believed to be mainly joining the Islamic State and to a lesser extent, Jabhat al-Nusra.

The French authorities have separately said that by June 2015, an estimated 119 French residents or nationals were believed to have died in either Syria or Iraq (Europe 1, June 28). This means that over the course of the conflict, the total casualty rate has climbed from five percent to 12 percent of the in-country contingent. In other words, a French foreign fighter currently dies on average approximately every three days, compared to every 10 days between September 2013 and September 2014. The coalition airstrikes on the Islamic State since mid-2014 may also have led to an increase in jihadist returnees from Iraq and Syria—from 150 by August 2014 to 278 by May 2015, of whom 217 have returned to France.

However, the number of persons reported to be in transit to Iraq and Syria now stands at some 300 with another 600 individuals interested in leaving France (Europe 1, June 28).

The National Assembly report also found that there was no general profile for a French foreign fighter, and that they came from a mix of religious and cultural origins, including recent converts. This finding is similar to French journalist David Thomson's in-depth account of his interaction with a number of French foreign fighters, arguably the most comprehensive study so far. [2] For instance, some have had educational difficulties, while others had attended university. Many appear to have come from difficult social circumstances, experiencing unemployment and financial problems. Others, however, appear to have held good jobs and been financially stable. In a number of cases, there are prior histories of criminal activity, although these are predominately minor offenses. Some have additionally come from complex family environments with separated parents or absent parents. An example of this diversity is Raphael Amer, a Jewish convert to Islam and reportedly a brilliant student; Amer was a member of the Lunel jihadist cluster and, within the same cluster, had friends with notably lower levels of educational achievement from single parent families (*Libération*, November 18, 2014; *Libération*, February 26).

The motivations of the fighters also appear to depend on the personal circumstances of the fighter, and, to some extent, the point at which they travelled to Syria or Iraq. Motivations and reasons for travel include a mix of political engagement, humanitarian concerns, religious obligations, peer group solidarity, a desire for adventure and finally, some who simply want to fight. A French investigative magistrate has also gone so far as to claim that 90 percent of the foreign fighters are going for reasons linked to wanting to fight, or for adventure, and only a small number are travelling due to adherence to coherent religious beliefs (*Le Telegramme*, June 27).

In terms of reaching the battlefield, French fighters seem to have organized their entry into the conflict zones of Syria and Iraq in a number of ways. An early channel of entry for the French foreign fighters at the beginning of the conflict was through Tunisia, where they were connected to Tunisian militant networks providing fighters to Iraq. [3] Meanwhile, Iraq war-era networks dating to the mid-2000s were also active; an example of French nationals who traveled via this path are the al-Harzi brothers, both of whom were killed in Iraq and Syria in June 2015 by U.S. military operations (Mediapart, June 27). Tariq al-Harzi (a.k.a. Abu Umar al-Tunisi) may have been the Abu Umar named in Sinjar documents as previously facilitating Egyptian, Libyan and Tunisian foreign fighters through Damascus in 2006 and

2007. [4]

Once the first French volunteers had established themselves in-country, likely by sometime in early 2013, they then organized themselves on social media to facilitate the travel of other interested individuals still in France. An example of an individual involved in this activity is Mourad Fares, a French national who first joined the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (the previous incarnation of the Islamic State) and then moved to Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria. He was later linked to many of the late 2013 and early 2014 departures which including the two minors from Toulouse, a female minor from Avignon, a cluster from Strasbourg and a group from Lyon and Switzerland (*Le Monde*, September 12, 2014; FranceInfo, September 12, 2014; VICE News, February 12, 2014). Fares eventually handed himself over to Turkish authorities and was deported to France (*Le Monde*, September 15, 2014). Despite the efforts of the French authorities to disrupt such loose clusters and micro-networks that are facilitating travel, their decentralized nature and use of social media platforms has meant that the ability for would-be fighters, recruits and volunteers to exchange information and create opportunities for travel remains largely intact (*Le Monde*, April 23, 2014).

Representative of the localized and personalized nature of French jihadist mobilization and travel is the case of Lunel, a small town in southern France with approximately 25,000 inhabitants. From here, a cluster of approximately 20-30 persons, mostly male, but including wives, single females and children, have travelled to Syria and Iraq during the last two years (*Libération*, December 10, 2014). They originally joined Jaysh Muhammad, a small hardline jihadist group based around Aleppo in Syria, before moving across to the Islamic State (*Libération*, July 2). The earliest travelers from Lunel left in late 2013 and were joined by others in the summer of 2014. The last traveler may have left as late as mid-2015 (*Midi Libre*, June 5). The first travelers used Facebook contacts with an individual in contact with Mourad Fares to enter Syria (*Libération*, July 2). The cluster is comprised of a core group of friends who met in high school, as well as family members, including brothers and wives (*Libération*, February 1). The group financed their own trips through taking out loans and leasing a BMW, which was sold in Syria (*Paris Match*, October 29, 2014). Accounts of the group suggest no prior engagement in political violence or militant activity, although a number of the cluster participated in an informal religious study group run by an individual who was later arrested in January 2015 (*Libération*, July 2). The group's members range in age from 18- to 44-years-old and include a mix of converts; some had jobs, businesses or were in tertiary education, while others were unemployed (*Le Parisien*, October 25, 2014). The Lunel micro-network has

so far seen seven or eight of its volunteers killed, one while conducting a suicide attack, and at least two return to France, where they were arrested (*Midi Libre*, May 21). In January 2015, the French police arrested five persons alleged to have been involved in aiding the group; two of those arrested were recently returned from Syria, and a third was the brother of two others, who had travelled to Syria and are believed dead (*Libération*, February 1, *Libération*, July 2).

The Lunel cluster remains the subject of debate as to how the individuals came to travel to Syria and Iraq, the role of the local mosque and religion, the impact of unemployment and debates about integration (France24, March 3). This debate reflects broader national discussions about the causes of the large-scale French mobilization, and what, if any, of the solutions recommended in the parliamentary report will actually aid in stemming the growth of would-be travelers to Syria and Iraq.

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Notes

1. “La commission d’enquête sur la surveillance des filières et des individus djihadistes, Rapport fait au nom de la commission d’enquête sur la surveillance des filières et des individus djihadistes,” (Paris: Assemblée Nationale, June 2, 2015).
2. David Thomson, *Les Français Jihadistes*, (Paris: Les Arenes, 2014).
3. *Ibid*, pg. 167-168.
4. See: https://www.rewardsforjustice.net/english/tariq_al_harzi.html and Felter, Joseph, and Brian Fishman. 2007, “Al-Qa’ida’s Foreign Fighters in Iraq: a First Look at the Sinjar Records,” Harmony Project, Combating Terrorism Center (US), pg. 23.

Egypt’s Growing Militant Threat

Muhammad Mansour

During the past two months, Egypt has witnessed an unprecedented wave of attacks by Islamist militants, mostly launched by the Islamic State’s Egyptian branch—which calls itself “Sinai Province,” and which was formerly known as Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis—against tourists in Luxor, the chief prosecutor, a naval vessel, the Italian Consulate in Cairo and various army targets in Sinai. These attacks not only aimed to weaken the Egyptian state and the government and credibility of the country’s president General Abd al-Fatah al-Sisi, but also to gain territory in Sinai and to damage the Egyptian economy.

Sinai Attacks

At the start of July, the Sinai Province organization launched some of the most deadly attacks against the army since the Arab Spring erupted in 2011, with a series of coordinated attacks on July 1 in Sinai’s al-Arish city killing around 17 Egyptian soldiers and injuring tens more (*al-Watan*, July 1). Unlike previous attacks since the military takeover two years ago, the simultaneous raids were reminiscent of Islamic State tactics elsewhere, involving attacks on around 15 army checkpoints, mining a street leading to al-Arish’s police station, raising the Islamic State’s black flag on the rooftops of some buildings and deploying hundreds of militants, leading to an 11-hour long battle. This assault, therefore, marked a striking escalation from previous hit-and-run attacks, and the goal this time was not only to inflict losses on the Egyptian Army ranks, but also to apparently gain control of Shaykh Zuweid, a Bedouin-populated town near al-Arish that is the main stronghold of the group on the border with the Gaza Strip. Despite the scale of the militant attack, however, Egyptian F-16 aircraft and Apache attack helicopters gained the upper hand in the battle, and the militants were forced to withdraw after sustaining major losses, according to statement by the group (*al-Bedaiha*, July 3). The army’s spokesperson, Muhammad Samir Abd al-Aziz Ghoneim, later claimed that the Egyptian army had killed at least 100 militants (Facebook, July 1).

Despite the Egyptian Army’s victory, however, the attacks raises important questions, particularly around how the militants had obtained large quantities of sophisticated weaponry, including Russian-made Kornet anti-tank missiles, rocket-propelled grenades, mortars, anti-aircraft guns and other guided missiles, despite the military’s continuous raids in Sinai, the closing down the tunnels with Rafah and the

government forming a new joint military command to fight terrorism east of the Suez Canal (*al-Watan*, July 1). Three days after the Sinai attacks, al-Sisi made a visit to troops in Sinai, appearing in a military battle dress for the first time since assuming office last year, and delivered a televised speech—his first public comments on the attack—saying that Egypt had foiled an attempt by the Islamic State to seize territory and set up an extremist state. At the same time, however, he also sought to downplay the recent violence, saying: “Rafah and Shaykh Zuwaid is only five percent of the total size of 6,000-kilometers Sinai, the troops stationed in Sinai are only one percent of the whole Egyptian Army, the air force working there is only one percent of the total Egyptian Air Force; the Egyptian Army is able to show 1,000 times more than what it showed” (*al-Hayat*, July 4). “We will never leave Sinai,” al-Sisi added, “Sinai is ours. Sinai will not separate from Egypt unless all of us are killed.”

Soon afterwards, however, Sinai Province carried out another when it fired a rocket at an Egyptian naval vessel in the Mediterranean Sea, near the coast of Israel and the Gaza Strip. The group, on July 16, posted footage on its Twitter account showing a rocket being fired towards the vessel and claiming to have destroying it and killed all soldiers onboard (*al-Arabiya*, July 16). However, Egypt’s military spokesperson, writing on his Facebook page, denied the Islamic State narrative, saying instead that “a coast guard launch suspected some terrorist movements on the coast, and while chasing them, the coast guard exchanged fire with terrorist elements, causing the vessel to catch fire, and there were no casualties” (Facebook, July 16).

Prosecutor General Assassination

In separate indication of the militants’ growing ambition, on June 29, two days before the second anniversary of the Egyptian uprising against Islamist former president Muhammad Mursi, Egypt’s Chief Prosecutor Hisham Barakat was killed in a car bombing targeting his heavily secured convoy (*al-Youm al-Sabea*, June 29). Barakat had been the architect of the state’s judicial crackdown on Muslim Brotherhood members and associated dissent. His killing is the first successful assassination of a high-profile figure in decades, as well as being the first assassination in Egypt’s modern history to use a car bomb. Following his death, al-Sisi called in a televised speech for an increased legal battle against Islamists and to take revenge for killing who he dubbed as “the voice of Egypt that they wanted to silence.” The government also cancelled all prepared anniversary celebrations (*al-Ahram*, June 29).

Sinai Province had called earlier for attacks on the judiciary, after the hanging of six militants. In an audio statement posted on a prominent jihadist website, the leader of Sinai Province, Abu Osama al-Masry, said “It is wrong for the tyrants to jail our brothers,” he said, referring to judges: “Poison their food... survey them at home and in the street... destroy their homes with explosives if you can” (*al-Jazeera*, April 21). However, the group did not take credit for the assassination itself, and it is so far unclear which group carried out the attack. Barakat had previously sent thousands of Islamists to trial as part of a two-year crackdown on supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood, which the Egyptian government designates as a terrorist group, although there is also no evidence linking the organization to the assassination.

Two days after Egypt’s public prosecutor was assassinated, however, Egypt’s special security forces raided an apartment in the 6th of October Province and killed nine Muslim Brotherhood members, including a lawyer and a former member of parliament. An interior ministry statement said those killed were fugitives who had been meeting to plan terrorist plots. It added that the group included two people who had previously been sentenced to death, and they were killed in an exchange of fire with policemen (*al-Watan*, July 1). However, the Muslim Brotherhood denied these claims and called for a rebellion against al-Sisi, claiming that the nine were “murdered in cold blood,” while also not specifying the precise meaning of “rebellion” (*Ikhwan Online*, July 1).

Thwarted Attack in Karnak Temple

In addition to these attacks, earlier on June 10, two terrorists were killed and another wounded in a foiled attack at the Karnak Temple, one of Luxor’s tourist landmarks (*al-Ahram*, June 10). According to eyewitnesses, a taxi driver reported to a policeman that three suspicious individuals were waiting at the nearby parking lot for tourists to arrive to the temple, prompting the policeman to attempt to check their identities. As a result of his intervention, before the tourists could arrive, one of the assailants blew himself up, and the other two gunmen began shooting at the policeman and at other security officials in the area, leading to the killing of one assailant and the wounding and arrest of the other (*al-Masry al-Youm*, June 10). The intervening policeman and his colleagues received minor injuries, and no tourists were killed or injured (*al-Ahram*, June 10).

The authorities later identified the Karnak attackers as Ali Gamal Ahmad Ali, from Beni Suef Province, Mohamed Farag Hamed from Gharbia Governorate and Saeed Abdul Salam Sayyed Mohamed from Minya Province. The investigation also suggested that the first was a member

of Sinai Province (*al-Masry al-Youm*, June 12). Egyptian media reported that the three militants were heavily armed, possessing nine hand-grenades, three machine guns with 300 rounds of ammunition, two explosive belts and further small bombs. The attackers' plan was apparently to begin randomly shooting tourists when their buses arrived, and then potentially to blow themselves up after they were arrested to inflict further casualties (*al-Masry al-Youm*, June 14).

The attempted Karnak Temple attack is the first of its kind in Egypt's southern provinces since 1997, when six al-Gama'a al-Islamiya members killed 62 people, most of them tourists, at Hatshepsut's Temple also in Luxor; this was the most fatal terrorist attack in Egypt's modern history. The recently thwarted attack was likely planned to be as catastrophic as the 1997 one and was almost certainly intended to hit the Egyptian economy by directly harming foreign investments and tourism; tourism alone accounts for 11 percent of Egypt's gross domestic product and 19 percent of its foreign currency revenues. Significantly damaging this sector would undermine the government's financial stability and hopes of any economic recovery, one of al-Sisi's stated main goals. Although the attack was unsuccessful, it is nonetheless reported to have impacted tourist numbers and bookings (*al-Watan*, June 10). The operation also signals the Sinai Province group's ambitions to play a role in the south of Egypt, and it is the group's first attack in the area, the organization having previously only carried out operations in the Sinai, Cairo and the Nile Delta areas in the north. Notably, the attackers themselves were from southern Egyptian provinces. However, the attack's failure potentially suggests that the militants lack well-trained figures in this part of Egypt, with its members there potentially only having been trained partly or even entirely online.

The attack is also significant because while Islamist militants have been regularly targeting security personnel and installations, until now they have avoided direct attacks on tourist sites or against civilians, largely because they do not want to damage relations with Egyptian civilians or create dissent among embattled Islamists. This reflects the belief that widespread popular revulsion against the 1997 Luxor attack led al-Gama'a al-Islamiya at that time to revise their ideology and renounce violence after years of insurgency, as well as empowering the security services to crackdown on the group, effectively destroying the group's militant capability. However, further underlining contemporary militants' growing willingness to attack foreign targets, on July 11, a car bomb hit the Italian Consulate in downtown Cairo, killing one civilian. The strong blast occurred at 6:30 am, when the area was less busy with pedestrians. The

"Islamic State in Egypt" later claimed responsibility for the explosion on Twitter, saying that "Islamic State soldiers exploded a booby-trapped car carrying 450 [kilograms] of explosive charges targeting the HQ of the Italian Consulate in Cairo" (*al-Arabiya*, July 11). The precise relationship between the "Islamic State in Egypt" and the group's "Sinai Province" wing is presently unclear.

Conclusion

The recent increase in militant attacks in Egypt, including by affiliates of the Islamic State group, does not necessarily mean that the militants will be able to repeat the success of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. Reasons for this include the fact that the Egyptian Army is one of the three strongest armies in the Middle East and the lack of inter-Muslim sectarian rivalries, even though there is a risk that al-Sisi's policies against Islamists do risk triggering more militant violence and potentially strengthening terrorist organizations in some respects. It is also significant that despite the intensity of attacks in Sinai, Egyptian soldiers did not retreat like other armies, notably the Iraqi Army in Mosul and other parts of northern Iraq in mid-2014, and also that the attempted major terrorist attack in Luxor was successfully foiled by the quick reaction of the local police. At the same time, however, it is worth noting that if the attack had succeeded, tens of tourists would have potentially been killed, and Egypt's tourism sector would have been damaged for years, with important knock-on effects for the Egyptian economy and al-Sisi's credibility. In addition to the growing ambitions of Egyptian militants, a further important factor in the coming months will be the Muslim Brotherhood's attitude to violence; at times, the group has seemed to encourage their followers to use violence on the grounds that they are not able to peacefully express their opposition to the government. For instance, in a recent post on the group's official website, the Muslim Brotherhood urged its supporters to "resist this coup by all means until the fall of the regime" and referred to the "legitimate right to self-defense," although these terms were not practically defined (*Ikhwan Online*, July 15). That said, while the government has been quick to highlight the Muslim Brotherhood's potential threat, that group's actions—for now, at least—are highly limited, especially compared to the recent attacks by the Sinai Province organization.

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