

Terrorism Monitor

In-depth analysis of the War on Terror

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MOROCCO: SECURITY SERVICES MAKE GAINS AS TERROR THREAT GROWS

Alexander Sehmer

Moroccan investigators arrested an alleged jihadist with links to al-Qaeda in the city of Azrou in November. The man, a computer engineer, had disseminated jihadi propaganda and was suspected of involvement in online banking fraud that had allowed him to seize large sums of money, according to the authorities. Reports quoting the interior ministry linked the man to al-Qaeda and Jabat Fateh al-Sham in Syria ([Morocco World News](#), November 20).

The arrest follows the successful dismantling in June of a supposed Islamic State (IS) terrorist cell, composed of six people with links to IS in Libya. The group was operational in the cities of Agadir, Amzmiz, Chichaoua and Laqliaâ and was planning suicide attacks, according to Moroccan authorities ([Tel Quel](#), July 2016). In May, the security services arrested a 33-year-old Chadian man accused of leading an IS cell in Tangiers. He was suspected of planning an attack equivalent to the devastating Casablanca bombings in 2003, in which 33 people were killed; in November, a court jailed him for 20 years

on terrorism charges ([Morocco World News](#), November 11).

Morocco has seen a number of attacks since the 2003 Casablanca bombing, including one blamed on al-Qaeda that killed 17 people in Marrakesh in 2011. But for a country that is a key exporter of Islamist recruits to jihadist causes abroad – by some estimates at least 1,500 Moroccans are fighting for IS in Syria and Iraq, and that number may even be higher – its security services have proved relatively successful at countering terrorist threats at home ([Daily Sabah](#), November 8, 2015). Its foreign intelligence service also maintains good relations with its European counterparts. Following the attacks in Paris in 2015, the Moroccan authorities tipped off French police leading to the raid on the flat where the attacks' alleged mastermind, Abdelhamid Abaaoud, a Belgium national of Moroccan origin, was hiding out.

The success is partly a matter of experience – the authorities have been tracking Moroccan fighters at least since the 1979–1989 Soviet-Afghan war, in which hundreds of Moroccans took part. But Morocco also benefits from having one of the region's more open political landscapes, which has allowed it counter negative socio-economic factors such as high youth unemployment.

Morocco's successful weathering of the "Arab Spring," and its measured response to the recent protests over the killing of a fisherman – he was crushed to death in a garbage truck after refusing to pay a bribe to police – are a testament to this ([New Arab](#), October 30).

Nonetheless, the Moroccan authorities must remain vigilant. In an audio recording obtained by al-Jazeera in May, the head of the so-called Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahrawi, threatened attacks on Morocco ([al-Jazeera](#), May 4). While it is highly doubtful al-Sahrawi's group has that kind of capacity, the recent arrests indicate Morocco remains at risk from attacks by domestic terrorist cells.

IRAQ: SECTARIAN TENSIONS WILL OUTLAST MOSUL OFFENSIVE

Alexander Sehmer

As efforts to recapture the Iraqi city of Mosul from Islamic State (IS) militants move into their third month, Iraqi security forces in the capital are struggling to prevent attacks in and around Baghdad, a reminder of the sectarian tensions that will persist even after the Mosul offensive is concluded.

In what is now a fairly routine announcement, the Iraqi defense ministry said on December 1 that security forces had arrested four men linked to IS's so-called Wilayat Baghdad. Reportedly the group was planning attacks on security forces and civilian targets. Such attacks are a near daily occurrence. Indeed, in the days following the arrests, the capital was hit by another series of blasts, including attacks using "sticky" bombs attached to the underside of civilian busses, which left at least 2 people dead and 13 more wounded ([Iraqi News](#), December 7).

Wilayat Baghdad, which operates as a kind of provincial arm of IS, has been behind scores of bombings over the last few years. In March 2015, Iraqi intelligence rounded up more than 30 alleged members of the group reportedly responsible for 52 attacks in areas around the capital ([al-Arabiya](#), March 15, 2015). Two months later, Iraqi military intelligence claimed to have killed the group's leader, a man they named Abu Walid ([Iraqi News](#), May 12, 2015; [Tasnim](#), May 13, 2015). Those successes, however, brought only the most temporary of reprieves. Wilayat Baghdad has remained active, continuing to release propaganda videos online and staging attacks around the capital. It is unlikely the eventual capture of Mosul, whenever that happens, will put an end to this.

Part of the problem is that the Sunni areas surrounding Baghdad, the so-called "Baghdad belt," are still a fertile area for recruitment by insurgents. The situation there was made worse in the build-up to the Mosul offensive because Shia militias were turned loose on areas north and east of the capital nominally to maintain security, but indiscriminate violence and looting exacerbated sectarian tensions.

In February, a plan to build a concrete security barrier around Baghdad, which had been first mooted several years earlier, was resurrected in the hope of preventing

infiltration from insurgents ([al-Arabiya](#), February 3). Such a plan is fraught with problems. It alienates communities outside the capital and does little to prevent sleeper cells already present in Baghdad. Further, for many the move is simply a plot for a Shia land grab ([al-Jazeera](#), February 10).

IS likes to use the persistent attacks on Baghdad to demonstrate that, even as it loses ground, it retains the ability to strike across the country. But the attacks are also indicative of Iraq's sectarian tensions, an issue that will not be brought under control with the eventual recapture of Mosul.

Islamic State in Yemen

Yasir Yosef Kuoti

Since October 2016, Islamic State (IS) has increasingly been on the defensive. The terrorist group is losing territory in northern Syria – including the historic town of Dabiq lost to Syrian rebels – and is likely to lose the northern Iraqi city of Mosul to Iraqi forces in the coming months. Meanwhile, the group's Libyan affiliate is close to losing the entirety of its stronghold in Sirte.

While defeating IS in Iraq and Syria is one of the most pressing international security challenges facing the world, equal attention should be paid to the terrorist group's regional affiliate in Yemen (IS-Y). IS Yemeni affiliate is steadily growing in strength, so much so that when the offensives on Mosul and Raqqa are finally over, IS leadership, as well as the rank-and-file, could potentially relocate their operations to Yemen.

It is essential then for the United States and its counter-IS coalition partners develop a military strategy to eliminate IS-Y before it can fully mature.

The Origins of Islamic State in Yemen

The presence of IS in Yemen was first openly acknowledged two years ago when, on November 9, 2014, an Arabic-language audio recording titled *The Yemeni Bay'a to the Islamic State* surfaced online. In the recording, a group of jihadist fighters in Yemen vowed to follow in the footsteps of Muslim Prophet Muhammad "to exhibit obedience to God and the Prophet who taught us to be united, we announce our allegiance and obedience to Caliph Ibrahim bin Awad bin Ibrahim al-Qurashi al-Husseini [a.k.a. Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi]" ([Archive.org](#), November 11).

Four days later, on November 13, 2014, al-Baghdadi acknowledged this affiliate ([Bawabit al-Harakat al-Islamiya](#), April 29). Since then, IS-Y has been building a strong presence in a number of Sunni-dominated locales in the Aden, Hadramawt, Sanaa, Taizz, Lahij, Shabwah and al-Bayda governorates.

Three reasons are likely to have motivated the timing of al-Baghdadi's announcement. The first is related to IS as an aspiring global terrorist organization – its weekly Arabic-language publication, *al-Naba*, calls for fighting

the “unbelievers wherever they are on Earth until they become believers” ([al-Naba, Issue 14](#), January 18). The second is related to the idiosyncrasies of the Yemeni conflict, particularly the collapse of governance and lack of security that followed the Houthis’ capture of the capital Sanaa in September 2014. This situation had presented IS-Y with the opportunity to brand itself as the savior of Sunnis who felt targeted and humiliated by the Zaidi/Shia Houthis.

The third is related to reported internal divisions inside the Yemen-based leadership of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) ([Al-Jazeera Arabic](#), February 19). Potential AQAP recruits are less likely to be attracted to a disunited jihadist program, and subsequently are more willing to join the more visibly successful IS.

Leadership and Strategy

The most well-known IS-Y leader is Nashwan al-Adeni (a.k.a. Abu Salman), the *wali* (governor) of IS-Y’s *wilyat* in Aden. His name suggests origins in the Aden governorate, but little is known about IS-Y’s leadership or chain of command. Information is also scarce on IS-Y’s rank and file, but it is probable that its top leadership is made up of former AQAP members, who are mainly Yemeni and Saudi nationals with an intimate knowledge of Yemen.

Nurturing IS-Y is part of the strategy of the group’s parent organization for building a global caliphate. This strategy rests on attempting to mobilize Muslims to engage in *jihād* against unbelievers in the West and alleged apostate states in the Muslim world, and it relies on brutal violence and a use of social media far more sophisticated than that employed by other terrorist organizations ([al-Naba, Issue 16](#), February 1).

Yemen has great significance to IS’s apocalyptic worldview ([al-Wafid](#), December 21). [1] According to some readings of Islamic theology common to both Shia and many Sunni schools of thought, a leading figure by the name of al-Yamani will appear at the end of time to aid the movement of al-Mahdi al-Muntazar in ridding the earth of evil. Al-Muntazar will appear in the last days, along with the Messiah, to create a universal government compatible with the moral values of Islam. His movement will intellectually and militarily takes on unjust movements and systems around the world. Al-Yamani is to lead the movement in Saudi Arabia.

More prosaically, Yemen is strategically important for IS. Its shared border with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia would mean IS could potentially use Yemen as a base for spreading disorder across the border to the Kingdom. It is also central to IS’ strategy of exhausting its enemies by creating multiple frontlines and meshes with the aspirations of imposing a global caliphate ([al-Naba, Issue 16](#), February 1).

Tactical Operations

IS-Y is intent on undermining efforts by the internationally recognized Republic of Yemen Government (ROYG) to build a stable Yemeni state. It employs a narrow set of tactics to this end, including targeted assassinations of government officials and security personnel, suicide attacks, and improvised explosive device (IED) attacks ([al-Naba, Issue 36](#), June 21; [al-Naba, Issue 24](#), March 28; [al-Naba, Issue 18](#), February 16).

IS-Y’s attacks principally target the ROYG security forces and, to a lesser extent, Houthi forces and allied military units loyal to former president Ali Abdullah Saleh. The violence is not indiscriminate. An analysis of attacks claimed by IS-Y shows they calculated and coordinated as part of a strategic campaign to bleed the fledgling ROYG in order to carve out territory.

Since December 2015, al-Naba has published details on at least 21 IS-Y attacks in Yemen. Of these, 18 targeted the ROYG security forces. In some of its attacks, IS-Y was able to carry out sophisticated operations with suicide bombers. This was evident in an attack on a military recruitment center in Aden City carried out on August 28, which left 60 people dead and dozens more wounded. In what was one of the most deadly and sophisticated attacks by IS-Y to date in Yemen, an IS-Y fighter bearing the *nom de guerre* Abu Sufyan al-Adeni drove a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) through a number of security checkpoints to the recruitment center before detonating his explosives ([al-Naba, Issue 45](#), August 29).

Such attacks indicate IS-Y’s capabilities to conduct large-scale, mass causality operations, but the group has also conducted targeted killings against security officials, particularly in Aden City, the ROYG’s temporary capital. Assassinations claimed by IS-Y include that of police colonel Marwan Abu Shawqi in Aden City’s al-Mindarah

neighborhood; the killing of National Army commander, Colonel Badr al-Yafe'i in Aden City; the killings of officers Hafez al-Baiti and Wisam al-San'ani of the Sheikh Othman Police Department Investigative Unit in Aden City's al-Mansourah's District; and the killing of officer Salim al-Hasani, also of the Sheikh Othman Police Department Investigative Unit ([al-Naba, Issue 29](#), May 02; [al-Naba, Issue 30](#), May 10; [al-Naba, Issue 36](#), June 21; [al-Naba, Issue 41](#), August 02).

Differences With AQAP

While displaying many of its parent body's violent traits, IS-Y appears to have also made a number of organizational adjustments that distinguish it from IS and its rival AQAP in Yemen.

Unlike IS and AQAP, IS-Y appears to largely exempt civilians from its attacks. Though this is perhaps due to the group's limited interactions with locals, it reduces the chances of friction and conflict with the local population.

In fact, IS-Y appears to have little interest at all in the local population. Unlike AQAP (or IS in Iraq and Syria), IS-Y does not concern itself with providing day-to-day services as a matter of policy. On a number of occasions IS-Y has criticized, in writing, such soft-power strategies on the part of AQAP. When AQAP paved some local roads and distributed insecticides, IS-Y condemned the work, likening the group to a commercial company. For IS-Y, social services and interactions with locals are a distraction from its jihadist program. IS-Y has even attributed the AQAP's decline to its strategy of "[governing] by worldly rules, trying to please people [and] forgetting to please God" ([al-Naba, Issue 30](#), May 10).

IS-Y sees engagement with the needs and desires of the local population as loaded with potential confrontation when those needs and desires are not met. Locals might also influence the targets of the groups' attacks. IS-Y has criticized AQAP for "fighting the enemies of the locals, not those of its own, leaving untouched the tyrants of infidelity, that are the new [Yemeni] government and its soldier," which may explain why IS-Y is particularly focused on targeting ROYG security forces.

Security Breakdown

IS-Y has been able to expand in the midst of a deteriorating security situation caused by the ongoing conflict

between the Houthis and their allies, and the ROYG. Sectarian strife and security disarray, prompted by the Houthis' capture of the capital Sanaa in 2014, has afforded IS-Y the opportunity to thrive.

The group is likely to expand farther as the conflict, exacerbated by Saudi Arabia's intervention, drags on. Peace talks have seen little progress, but even if a relative peace can be brokered it is likely that IS' presence in Yemen would be unaffected. The group appears able to coexist with local Sunnis, who are adamant the Houthis have no political future in Yemen.

IS-Y will pose a growing threat to efforts to build reliable state institutions in Yemen. The current government seems unable to deliver on its security promises, including in its own capital. It also appears unable to carry out serious reforms to institutions wrecked by decades of bad governance under the regime of former President Saleh and years of civil strife.

With international attention focused on Iraq and Syria, there has so far been only limited interest in IS-Y. However, that will need to change going forward, and a preemptive political-military strategy must be developed to contain the group before it is too late.

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NOTES

[1] For a useful and comprehensive study of IS' apocalyptic views, see *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State*, by William McCants, St Martin's Press (2015).

Foreign Fighters and Sectarian Strikes: Islamic State Makes Gains in 'Af-Pak' Region

Animesh Roul

Since its formation nearly two years ago, Islamic State (IS) in Afghanistan, known as IS Khorasan, has struggled to maintain a foothold in an ever-competitive jihadist landscape. Its disregard for local sensitivities and a number of setbacks on the battlefield had relegated it to a violent distraction in Afghanistan. In the last few months, however, IS Khorasan has claimed several deadly sectarian strikes that have inflicted mass casualties and signaled a possible resurgence of the group in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the epicenter of its imaginary Khorasan region.

IS Khorasan gained its new strength through forging alliances with local sectarian pro-al-Qaeda or Taliban militant groups like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi al Alami (LeJ-A), Lashkar-e Islam (LeI), or disgruntled Taliban factions like Jundallah and Jamaat ul Ahrar (JuA), which have been active in the region for many years. It has also reportedly recruited operatives from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).

The success of this strategy is manifest in the geographical distribution of the recent attacks, which suggests a logistical penetration and influence that extends from Kabul and Jalalabad in Afghanistan to Quetta and Peshawar in neighboring Pakistan.

Cross-Border Activities

Since its emergence as a province of the Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's so-called caliphate, most of IS-Khorasan's activities in the region have been controlled and managed from Nangarhar province in Afghanistan. Its influence has extended since early 2016, with the group demonstrating its violent intent and capability on either side of the border. Although IS' central authority in Syria has, via its Amaq news agency, claimed responsibility for most of these attacks, on the ground the operations are carried out by militants from IS-Khorasan.

In Pakistan, IS Khorasan-led violence reached new heights with the August 8 suicide bombing at the Quetta civil hospital that killed over 70 people and injured more than a hundred others. Those killed were mostly members of the Shia community and lawyers from the Balochistan Bar Association ([Dawn](#), August 9). IS' Amaq news agency claimed – in a report purportedly released from Cairo, Egypt – that the attack had been carried out by "a martyr from the Islamic State" who blew himself up near "a gathering of justice ministry employees and Pakistani policemen in Quetta." ([Dawn](#), August 9).

Likewise, IS Khorasan-linked militants carried out a similarly violent attack against security services on October 25, in which a three-man suicide operation targeted a police training college located on the Sariab road in Quetta, killing and injuring more than 200 people ([Express Tribune](#), October 24).

Most recently, on November 12, a suicide bombing at the Sufi shrine of Shah Noorani in Balochistan killed more than 60 people and injured more than 100 worshippers. The explosion, which was triggered by a teenage suicide bomber, was claimed by the IS via the Amaq news agency ([Samaa TV News](#), November 13).

Concurrently, across the border in Afghanistan, IS-Khorasan-led violence reached a new height with the July 23 Dehmazang Square suicide attack in Kabul in which more than 80 people, mostly ethnic Hazara Shia, were killed ([Khaama Press](#), July 23).

Abu Omar Khorasani, a spokesperson for the group, said the Dehmazang attack was in response to support offered by some Afghan Shia members to the Assad regime in Syria, with the help of Shia Iran. Speaking to the media, Khorasani threatened further attacks against Hazara Shias saying that, "unless they [Hazaras Shias] stop going to Syria and stop being slaves of Iran, we will definitely continue such attacks" ([Reuters](#), July 26).

On November 21, nearly 30 people were killed following a suicide bombing inside the Shia mosque of Baqir al-Olum, in Kabul, during a religious ceremony commemorating the 40th day of Ashura. IS released a photograph of Hamza Al-Khorasani, the suicide bomber involved in the bombing. This was not an isolated attack by IS Khorasan on an annual Shia religious ceremony. There had been similar attacks in previous months targeting Shia minorities during their holy month of Muhar-

ram. On October 12, IS Khorasan militants targeted the Karte Sakhi Shia shrine in Kabul, killing 18 people, and another attack in Mazar-e-Sharif against Shia worshippers left 14 people dead ([Khaama Press](#), October 12; [Al Jazeera](#) October 12).

Anti-Shia Ideology

A recent issue of the IS propaganda magazine Rumiya attempted, indirectly, to justify violence against Shia Muslims and others who do not subscribe to IS' ideals by invoking the 9th century Afghan Sultan Mahmud Ibn Subuktikin, better known as Sultan Mamud of Ghazni, who massacred "heretical sects" during his reign, in particular Ismaili Shias and Hindus. [1]

In a recent audio statement, the newly appointed IS spokesperson, Abu al Hassan al-Muhajir, made clear the group's intention to target Shia Muslims and others around the strongholds of IS, and claimed that the group was fighting on behalf of Sunnis everywhere "from Baghdad to Beirut, from Aleppo to Damascus, and from Khorasan to Sanaa." [2]

Despite IS-Khorasan's surge and apparent consolidations in the region, Pakistan continues to deny the group's existence on its soil. Instead, Pakistani officials blame local militant formations such as LeJ-al Alami and dismiss IS claims of responsibility as attempts by the group to "isolate Pakistan in the international community" ([Reuters](#), November 13; [Express Tribune](#), October 26). Many in Afghanistan, however, believe that IS Khorasan has the blessing of Pakistan's powerful Inter-Services Intelligence and the army ([Khaama Press](#), July 18; [Afghanistan Times](#), August 21).

The usual regional bickering notwithstanding, in early August this year, General John W Nicholson, the commander of the U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, made it clear that almost 70 percent of IS Khorasan militants present in Afghanistan are former members of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and came from Orakzai Agency of Pakistan, bordering Nangrahar ([Express Tribune](#), August 1; [The News](#), September 4).

He has also said there are up to 1,300 IS militants in the country receiving money, guidance and communications support from IS leaders in Syria and Iraq ([Afghanistan Times](#), September 24).

Recruitment of Foreign Fighters

Akin to IS' successful recruitment of foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq over the last couple of years, IS Khorasan has invited sympathizers and fighters from across the region to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In an interview in Dabiq, carried out before his supposed death in August, the IS Khorasan leader Hafiz Saeed Khan urged Muslims to "unite and gather against the world of *kufr* (disbeliever), apostasy and atheism" and to "come forth to fight the *kufr*, *mushrikīn* (polytheist), and *murtaddīn* (those who reject Islam)" [3]

If the Afghan leader General Abdul Rashid Dostum is to be believed, that call has been successful, there are nearly 7,500 foreign IS fighters, including Chechen, Uzbek, Tajik, Iraqi, Syrian, Lebanese and Libyan fighters who are waiting to enter into northern Afghanistan ([Heart of Asia](#), October 16). This June, reports emerged that about 20 people from India's Kerala state, including women and children, had travelled to Afghanistan to join the ranks of IS Khorasan ([Economic Times](#), September 23).

Despite a number of setbacks since its formation in January 2015 as IS' eastern wilayat – including the deaths of founding members such as Abdul Rauf Khadim in February 2015 and Hafiz Saeed Khan in August this year – IS Khorasan has consolidated its position in recent months. Its successful mass-casualty attacks have attracted fringe militants, sidelined Taliban leaders and those unwilling to countenance a negotiated settlement with the government.

By co-opting dissatisfied local militants in Afghanistan and Pakistan and exploiting their material and manpower resources, IS Khorasan is leaving al-Qaeda, and to some extent even the Taliban, to play second fiddle for the time being.

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NOTES

[1] "Sultan Mahmud al Ghaznawi; Breaker of Idols, Subduer of Heresies" Rumiya, No. 3, (November 2016), p, 39

[2] Audio for the speech by Abul-Hasan al-Muhajir, (December 5) can be found here: <http://tinyurl.com/hngnfzn>

[3] Interview with "Wali of Khorasan", Dabiq, No 13, (January 2016), pp. 49-54

Why Are Egypt's Counter-Terrorism Efforts Failing in the Sinai Peninsula?

Andrew McGregor

In October 2011, Field Marshal Muhammad Hussein Tantawi declared, "the military situation in Sinai is 100 percent secure" ([Daily News Egypt](#), October 6, 2011). Four years later, army spokesman Brigadier General Muhammad Samir assured Egyptians that the North Sinai was "100 percent under control" ([al-Jazeera](#), July 2, 2015). Even Dr. Najih Ibrahim, a former jihadist and principal theorist of Egypt's al-Gamaa al-Islamiya (GI, Islamic Group) declared as recently as last August: "This is the beginning of the end for this organization ... It cannot undertake big operations, such as the bombing of government buildings, like the bombing of the military intelligence building previously... or massacre, or conduct operations outside Sinai. Instead, it has resorted to car bombs or suicide bombings, which are mostly handled well [by Egyptian security forces]." (Ahram Online, [August 11](#); [August 15](#)).

Since then, Islamic State-linked militants have carried out highly organized large-scale attacks on checkpoints in al-Arish, killing 12 conscripts on October 12 and another 12 soldiers on November 24. Together with a steady stream of almost daily IED attacks, mortar attacks and assassinations, it is clear that militancy in North Sinai is far from finished.

Since 2004, there have been a series of jihadist groups operating in the Sinai. The latest face of militancy in the region is the Wilayet Sayna (WS, Sinai Province), a name adopted by the Sinai's Ansar Beit al-Maqdis (ABM, Supporters of Jerusalem) following its declaration of allegiance to the IS militant group in November 2014. The secretive WS is estimated to include anywhere from several hundred to 2,000 fighters. It operates for the most part in a small territory under 400 square miles that has a population of roughly 430,000. Despite this, a series of offensives since 2013 by the Arab world's most powerful army in North Sinai have produced not victory, but rather a war of attrition. The question therefore is what exceptional circumstances exist in the North Sinai that has prevented Egypt's security forces from ending a

small but troubling insurgency that receives little outside support?

Bedouins and Militants

As in northern Mali in 2012, the conflict in Sinai has merged a localized ethnic insurgency with externally inspired Salafi-Jihadism. The conflict persists despite the wide latitude granted by Israel in terms of violating the 1979 Camp David Accords' restrictions on arms and troops deployed by Egypt in the Sinai. Unsettled by the cross-border activities of Gazan and Sinai militants, Israel has basically granted Cairo a free hand in military deployments there since July 2015.

At the core of the insurgency is Sinai's Bedouin population, culturally and geographically separate from the Egyptian "mainland." Traditionally, the Bedouin of the Sinai had closer relations with Gaza and Palestine to the northeast than the Egyptian nation to their west, though Egypt's interest in the Sinai and its resources dates to the earliest dynasties of Ancient Egypt. The Israeli occupation of the region in 1967-1979 left many Egyptians suspicious of pro-Israeli sympathies amongst the Bedouin (generally without cause) and led to a ban on their recruitment by Egypt's military or security services. According to Egyptian MP Tamer al-Shahawy, a former major-general and military intelligence chief, social changes began in the Sinai after the 1973 war with Israel: "After the war a major rift in tribal culture occurred — on one hand was the pull of the Sufi trend, on the other the pull of money from illegal activities such as smuggling, drug trafficking and arms dealing ... For a number of reasons the government was forced to prioritize security over a socio-economic political response." ([Ahram Online](#), August 15).

Lack of development, land ownership issues and Cairo's general disinterest in the region for anything other than strategic purposes erupted in the terrorist bombings of Red Sea tourist resorts from 2004 to 2006. The deaths of at least 145 people led to a wave of mass arrests, torture and lengthy detentions that embittered the Bedouin and further defined the differences between "Egyptians" and the inhabitants of the Sinai Peninsula. With the local economy struggling due to neglect and insecurity, many young men turned to smuggling, a traditional occupation in the region. Like northern Mali, however, smuggling has proven a gateway to militancy.

Military Operations in Sinai

In recent decades, Islamist ideology has been brought to the Sinai by "mainland" teachers and by students returning from studies in the Nile Valley. Inattention from government-approved religious bodies like al-Azhar and the Ministry of Religious Endowments left North Sinai's mosques open to radical preachers denouncing the region's traditional Sufi orders. Their calls for an aggressive and "Islamic" response to what they viewed as Cairo's oppression, along with the support available from Islamist militants in neighboring Gaza, led to a gradual convergence of "Bedouin issues" and Salafi-Jihadism.

Support for groups like ABM and WS is far from universal amongst the tribes and armed clashes are frequent, but the widespread distaste for Egypt's security forces and a campaign of brutal intimidation against those inclined to work with them have prevented Cairo from exploiting local differences in its favor. The army claims it could "instantaneously purge" Sinai of militants, but it has not done so out of concern for the safety of residents ([Ahram Online](#), March 21).

Instead, beginning with Operation Eagle's deployment of two brigades of Saiqa (Thunderbolt) Special Forces personnel in August 2011, Cairo has initiated a series of military operations designed to secure North Sinai, eradicate the insurgents in the Rafah, al-Arish and Shaykh al-Zuwayad districts of North Sinai, eliminate cross-border smuggling with Gaza and protect the Suez Canal. While meeting success in the latter two objectives, the use of fighter jets, artillery, armor, attack helicopters and elite troop formations have failed to terminate an insurgency that has intensified rather than diminished.

The ongoing Operation Martyr's Right, launched in September 2015, is the largest military operation yet, involving Special Forces units, elements of the second and third field armies and police units with the aim of targeting terrorists and outlaws in central and northern Sinai to "pave the road for creating suitable conditions to start development projects in Sinai." ([Ahram Online](#), November 5, 2016). Each phase of Martyr's Right and earlier operations in the region have resulted in government claims of hundreds of dead militants and scores of "hideouts," houses, cars and motorcycles destroyed, all apparently with little more than temporary effect.

Military-Tribal Relations

Security forces have failed to connect with an alienated local population in North Sinai. Arbitrary mass arrests and imprisonments have degraded the relationship between tribal groups and state security services. Home demolitions, public utility cuts, travel restrictions, indiscriminate shelling, the destruction of farms and forced evacuations for security reasons have only reinforced the perception of the Egyptian Army as an occupying power. Security services are unable to recruit from local Bedouin, while ABM and WS freely recruit military specialists from the Egyptian “mainland.” It was a Saaqa veteran expelled from the army in 2007, Hisham al-Ashmawy, who provided highly useful training in weapons and tactics to ABM after he joined the movement in 2012 ([Reuters](#), October 18, 2015). Others have followed.

The role of local sheikhs as interlocutors with tribal groups has been steeply devalued by the central role now played by state security services in appointing tribal leaders. In 2012, a sheikh of the powerful Sawarka tribe was shot and killed when it became widely believed he was identifying jihadists to state security services ([Egypt Independent](#), June 11, 2012).

The use of collective punishment encourages retaliation, dissuades the local population from cooperation with security forces and diminishes the reputation of moderate tribal leaders who are seen as unable to wield influence with the government. Egypt's prime minister, Sherif Ismail, has blamed terrorism in North Sinai on the familiar “external and internal forces,” but also noted that under Egypt's new constitution, the president could not use counter-terrorism measures as “an excuse for violating public freedoms” ([Ahrām Online](#), May 10).

Operational Weaknesses

The government's media blackout of the Sinai makes it difficult to verify information or properly evaluate operations. Restrictions on coverage effectively prevent public discussion of the issues behind the insurgency, reducing opportunities for reconciliation. Nonetheless, a number of weaknesses in Cairo's military approach are apparent:

- Operations are generally reactive rather than proactive.

- A military culture exists that discourages initiative in junior officers. This is coupled with an unwillingness in senior staff to admit failure and change tactics compared to the tactical flexibility of insurgents, who are ready to revise their procedures whenever necessary.
- An over-reliance on airpower to provide high fatality rates readily reported in the state-owned media to give the impression of battlefield success. The suppression of media reporting on military operations in Sinai turns Egyptians to the militants' social media to obtain news and information.
- The widespread use of poorly trained conscripts. Most of the active fighting is done by Special Forces units who reportedly inflict serious losses in their actions against WS. As a result, WS focuses on what might be termed “softer” military targets for their own attacks; checkpoints manned by conscripts and conscript transports on local roads. There are reports of poorly paid conscripts leaking information to Sinai-based terrorists for money ([Ahrām Online](#), October 21).
- A failure to prevent radicalization by separating detained Sinai smugglers or militants with local motivations from radical jihadists in Egyptian prisons.
- An inability to stop arms flows to the region. Though effective naval patrols and the new 5 km buffer zone with Gaza have discouraged arms trafficking from the north, arms continue to reach the insurgents from the Sharqiya, Ismailiya and Beni Suef governorates.

Islamist Tactics in Sinai

The Islamist insurgents have several advantages, including intimate knowledge of the local terrain and a demonstrated ability to rejuvenate their numbers and leadership. Possession of small arms is extremely common in Sinai despite disarmament efforts by the state and the militants have captured many weapons from Egyptian forces operating in the Sinai. The WS armory includes Kornet anti-tank guided missiles, RPGs and mortars.

According to WS' own “Harvest of Military Operations” reports, IEDs are used in about 60 percent of WS attacks, guerrilla-style attacks account for some 20 percent, while the remainder is roughly split between sniper attacks and close-quarter assassinations. Since 2013, over 90 percent of the targets have been military or police personnel, as well as suspected informants ([al-Jazeera](#), May 1). In 2016, IED attacks have numbered

roughly one per day. The bombs are commonly disguised as rocks or bags of garbage.

Well-organized assaults on security checkpoints display a sophistication that has worried military leaders. Checkpoint attacks since October 2014 often involve the preliminary use of suicide bomb trucks to smash the way through fixed defenses, followed by assaults by gunmen. The militants are often in 4x4 vehicles, which have been banned in military operational zones since July 2015. Car bombs and mortars have been used to launch as many as 15 simultaneous attacks, demonstrating advanced skills in operational planning. Snipers are frequently used to keep security forces on edge and the ambush or hijacking of vehicles on the road complicates the movement of security personnel.

The militants intimidate residents unsympathetic to WS and its aims, even warning ambulance drivers not to transport wounded security personnel to hospitals ([Shorouk News](#), December 21, 2015). Suspected informants are shot, though WS tries to remain on good terms with locals by providing financial aid and social assistance. Sympathetic residents are able to provide a steady flow of intelligence on Egyptian troop movements and patterns.

WS focuses on state institutions as targets and rarely carries out the type of mass-casualty terrorist attacks on civilians common to other theaters of jihad. However, public, security and religious figures are all subject to assassination. In November, WS beheaded a respected 100-year-old Sufi sheikh of the Sawarka tribe for "practicing witchcraft" ([Ahram Online](#), November 21). Even senior officers are targeted. In November, Brigadier General Hesham Mahmoud was killed in al-Arish, and a month earlier Brigadier Adel Rajaei, a veteran of North Sinai, was killed in Cairo. Both men were shot in front of their own homes ([Ahram Online](#), November 4). In July, a Coptic priest in al-Arish was murdered by Islamic State militants for "fighting Islam" ([Ahram Online](#), July 1). Religious sites inconsistent with Salafist beliefs and values are also targeted for destruction. The shrine of Sheikh Zuwayad, who came to Egypt with the conquering Muslim army of Amr ibn al-As in 640 CE, has been attacked multiple times in the city that bears his name.

When Egyptian military pressure becomes too intense, the insurgents are able to take refuge in Jabal Halal, a mountainous cave-riddled region south of al-Arish that

acts as a main insurgent stronghold and hideout for fugitives. The area is home to many old Israeli minefields that discourage ground operations, though Egypt's Air Force claims to have killed scores of militants there in airstrikes ([Egypt Independent](#), August 20, 2012).

A Greater Role for Russia?

Egypt's large-scale counter-insurgency operations have been disappointing for Cairo. Such operations do not have the general support of the local population and are regarded by many as suppression by outsiders. The army and police are not regarded as guarantors of security, but as the violent extension of state policies that discriminate against communities in the North Sinai. So long as these conditions remain unchanged, Egypt's security forces will remain unable to deny safe havens or financial support to militant groups. Airstrikes on settled areas, with the inevitable indiscriminate and collateral damage, are especially unsuited for winning the support of the local population.

Excluding the Bedouin from interior ministry forces foregoes immediate benefits in intelligence terms, leaving security forces without detailed knowledge of the terrain, groups, tribes and individuals necessary to successful counter-terrorism and counter-smuggling operations. However, simply opening up recruitment is not enough to guarantee interest from young Bedouin men; in the current environment they would risk being ostracized at best or assassination at worst. With few economic options, smuggling – and the consequent association with arms dealers and drug traffickers – remains the preferred alternative for many.

Seeking perhaps to tap into the Russian experience in Syria, Egypt conducted a joint counter-insurgency exercise near al-Alamein on the Mediterranean coast in October. The exercise focused on the use of paratroopers against insurgents in a desert setting ([Ahram Online](#), October 12). Russia is currently pursuing an agreement that would permit Russian use of military bases across Egypt ([Middle East Eye](#), October 10; [PressTV](#) [Tehran], October 10). If Cairo is determined to pursue a military solution to the Islamist insurgency in Sinai, more material military assistance and guidance from Russia may be part of the price.

A greater commitment to development is commonly cited as a long-term solution to Bedouin unrest, though

its impact would be smaller on ideologically and religiously motivated groups such as WS. Development efforts are under way. Last year, President Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi committed the equivalent of \$560 million to new industrial, agricultural, transport and housing projects ([al-Masry al-Youm](#), March 8). Unfortunately, many of these projects are in the Canal Zone region and will have little impact on the economy of North Sinai. More will be needed, but with Egypt currently experiencing currency devaluation, inflation, food shortages and shrinking foreign currency reserves, the central government will have difficulty in implementing a development-based solution in Sinai.

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