

Egypt's Extremist Groups and the Shrinking Political Space

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August 29, 2017



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المركز العربي واشنطن دي سي

Egypt faces a threat from several extremist groups, the most active among which is Wilayat Sinai (Sinai Province) that is affiliated with the so-called Islamic State (IS) and has killed hundreds of security personnel and wreaked havoc on its important tourism industry over the past several years. Although the extremists are not strong enough to overthrow the government of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi--in large part because most Egyptians abhor terrorism and the security services remain strong--their continuing ability to stage attacks has the potential to stymie Egypt's ambitious economic reform program that is designed to turn the country's moribund economy around.

Moreover, the Egyptian government's repressive policies have contributed to the problem of extremism by constricting political space and severely cracking down on the Muslim Brotherhood, leading some of its members to conclude that violence is their only option. Although the government needs to confront and root out terrorism, force alone will not solve the problem. The United States and the international community need to press upon the Egyptian authorities to adhere to human rights norms, ease restrictions on civil society organizations, and, in the case of the Bedouins of northern Sinai, end the practice of collective punishment of villages and provide meaningful economic alternatives for the disaffected Bedouin youth.

An Array of Terrorist Groups

Wilayat Sinai remains very active, especially in the northeastern part of the Sinai Peninsula close to the Gaza Strip. It became active as Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis in 2011 in the security vacuum left by the Egyptian revolution against the Hosni Mubarak regime. Its leadership is believed to include extremists from the Egyptian mainland, though most fighters are from Bedouin tribes of northern Sinai. The group initially focused on sabotaging gas pipelines leading to Israel but evolved to targeting Egyptian security forces. In early July 2015, it even launched an offensive against the town of Sheikh Zuweid in North Sinai, before retreating after a long battle with security forces. It currently uses hit-and-run tactics, direct attacks on security checkpoints, and roadside bombs to kill as many Egyptian security personnel as possible. Although Egyptian government officials claim that they have killed hundreds of its members, the fact that this group is still able to mount attacks after such losses suggests that it remains able to attract many recruits. Membership is estimated to be around 1,000.

In November 2014, Wilayat Sinai pledged allegiance to IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. In October 2015, it succeeded in placing a bomb aboard a Russian Metrojet flying out of Sharm El-Sheikh airport in southern Sinai, killing all 224 people on board and dealing a devastating blow to tourism.

There is another IS-affiliate, the Islamic State of Egypt that operates in the Egyptian mainland. It surfaced in 2015 and claimed credit for the

bombing of the Italian consulate in Cairo and an Egyptian Homeland Security building. Since then, it has also targeted regime officials and police. In addition, since late 2016 it has targeted Coptic Christians and their churches in several large-scale bombing attacks. Although there is some connection to Wilayat Sinai, the Islamic State of Egypt considers itself a separate but similar organization.

As for other groups, the regime's severe crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood in the summer of 2013 not only allegedly spurred some former, younger members of the Brotherhood to start their own organizations but has led to a split within the Brotherhood itself. The Sisi regime's official designation in late 2013 of the Brotherhood as a terrorist organization thus became a partial self-fulfilling prophecy.

Two terrorist groups that some analysts believe are made up of former Brotherhood members are Liwa al-Thawra and Hassm, both formed in 2016. The former has targeted police and is active in the Menoufiya and Qalubiya governorates north of Cairo; the latter has been active in Cairo, the Fayoum governorate, and in Upper Egypt. It has killed a number of policemen and targeted regime officials, including the former Grand Mufti of Egypt whom it tried to assassinate for supposedly colluding with the regime.

Some younger members who are still active in the the Muslim Brotherhood itself, frustrated by the elders' insistence that the Brotherhood

remain non-violent, came to believe that force must be met with force and undertook low-level attacks against the regime. They later coalesced under a charismatic member of the Brotherhood's Guidance Bureau, Mohamed Kamal, who had managed to escape the regime's dragnet. Kamal provided a theoretical justification for the use of violence against the regime in 2014 and created "Special Operations Committees" to carry this out. Kamal was killed in a police shootout in 2016 but some of these committees continue to operate.

Purpose and Impact

The aim of the terrorist groups is to punish the Sisi regime, cause havoc in the country, and show, by their violent acts, that the regime is vulnerable. They reason that targeting foreign tourists will hurt the economy and provoke an uprising. Additionally, they design their attacks on Coptic Christians to drive home their warped point that Egypt should only be a country for Muslims and to provoke sectarian violence.

The major impact has been the precipitous decline in tourism revenues. Because of the downing of the Russian Metrojet in late 2015, which led to the suspension of Russian tourist flights to Egypt and a sharp decline in British and other Western European tourists to Egypt, tourism revenues dropped by 42 percent from 2015 to 2016 according to Egypt's official statistics agency, CAPMAS. Even the 2015 figure is well below that of 2010 when tourist revenues reached \$12.5 billion.

Although tourism is currently improving—largely because of the voluntary devaluation of the Egyptian currency as part of Egypt’s November 2016 IMF economic reform program, which makes a holiday in Egypt inexpensive for foreign visitors—as well as security upgrades at Egyptian airports, another major terrorist attack against a tourist target could set back this upward trend. Such an attack would not only hurt improvements in Egypt’s foreign exchange reserves but would hinder economic growth and the employment picture.

While Sisi’s popularity has slipped in Egypt from its peak in 2013, largely because of austerity measures and the rise in food prices, this does not mean that Egyptians look favorably upon terrorist groups and their acts. Egyptian society is generally very tolerant and most Egyptians disapprove of attacks against fellow citizens, regardless of religious identity. They also disapprove of the targeting of foreign tourists, not only because it tarnishes Egypt’s image abroad but also because it keeps many Egyptians unemployed; in good years, about one in ten Egyptians owe their livelihood to the tourism industry.

Moreover, Egyptians have previously faced terrorism, such as in the 1990s when two groups, al-Jama’ah al-Islamiyah (The Islamic Group) and Egyptian Islamic Jihad, targeted the Egyptian police and officials, Coptic Christians, and foreign tourists. Although these groups caused great harm and hundreds of casualties between 1992 and 1997, they were never able to

attract significant public support to their cause. Indeed, what often angers Egyptians is their belief that their government is not doing enough to counter and defeat the extremists.

Repression and Poor Economics

In addition to the utopian understanding of a just society that draws young people to extremist groups and youth unemployment (around 31 percent in the first quarter of 2016), many young people in Egypt today feel pressure from the government’s pervasive security apparatus.

Political space in Egypt is even more restricted under Sisi than it was under former president Hosni Mubarak. Dissenters are often labeled as "traitors" and journalists, bloggers, and many human rights activists who are critical of the government are often imprisoned. As former Secretary of State John Kerry stated in Cairo in August 2015 at the resumption of the US–Egyptian strategic dialogue, “...the larger imperative is to persuade and prevent young people from turning to terror in the first place. Otherwise, no matter how many terrorists we bring to justice, those groups will replenish their ranks...The success will depend on building trust between the authorities and the public, and enabling those who are critical of official policies to find a means of voicing their dissent peacefully, through participation in a political process.” Kerry’s thoughtful advice has not been heeded.

In the North Sinai, the situation is even more complicated because of the poor socio-economic conditions faced by the Bedouins who have been neglected and distrusted by the security forces in large part because they were under Israeli occupation from 1967 to the early 1980s. For example, the Bedouins are generally prohibited from joining the police or military. They eke out a meager living by herding or subsistence farming, and many believe that smuggling is legitimate. When the government closed down many tunnels from the Sinai into Gaza—done at the behest of the United States, Israel and the international community—not enough thought was given to providing the Bedouins with a sufficient alternative.

The Bedouins' second-class citizen status may have let the government feel free to use even more draconian measures against them than would otherwise be the case. Some courageous journalists have reported that whole Bedouin villages have been punished if a few youth in the village were suspected of aiding Wilayat Sinai. This, however, has been met by Bedouin resistance because of social notions of justice and revenge, a situation that only helps Wilayat Sinai's staying power.

The Trump Administration's Conflicting Policies

The warm embrace by President Donald Trump of President Sisi last April seemed to suggest that there would be very little American pressure on the Egyptian government to improve human rights and expand political

space in the country. President Trump did intercede with Sisi to release a dual Egyptian-American citizen, Aya Hijazi, from jail (she was imprisoned on dubious charges) but he remained silent on the thousands of other political prisoners languishing in Egyptian jails.

US military officials, even before Trump took office, had been trying for several years to move the Egyptian armed forces away from using their \$1.3 billion in US military aid to purchase prestige items to equipment more suitable for combating the immediate threats such as those from Wilayat Sinai and the porous borders with Libya and Sudan. US Defense Department officials also came to believe that Egyptian security policies in the North Sinai were not working and were often counter-productive.

In mid-August 2017, the US military's persistence seemed to have paid off as the Pentagon announced that *Bright Star* military exercises, which were usually held every two years from 1980 until 2009, would be resumed in September 2017. Unlike previous military exercises that involved thousands of troops from many countries and were designed to fight a traditional land war, this time the exercises would only involve a few hundred troops from Egypt and the US and would be geared toward counter-terrorism operations. In addition, as part of the exercises, there would be a "senior leader seminar," presumably to allow US military officials to brief their Egyptian counterparts on best practices that the US military has painfully learned fighting terrorist insurgencies over the past decade and a half,

including how *not* to alienate the civilian population.

But shortly after the Pentagon made this important announcement, the State Department announced on August 22 that the US was suspending \$195 million in military aid to Egypt and reprogramming about \$65.7 million in US economic aid from Egypt's account to other countries because of Egyptian bureaucratic obstacles. This partly was due to pressure from Congress, which has been upset over Egypt's poor human rights record and its restrictive new NGO law, but also partly due to the Trump administration's anger over Egypt's "cozy relationship" with North Korea at a time when Trump wants maximum pressure applied on Pyongyang.

Recommendations for US Policy

Although there are good reasons to pressure Egypt on human rights and NGO restrictions—and that would help to reduce the grievances of many of Egypt's young people as mentioned earlier--the timing of the announcement to suspend some military aid could not have been worse, with *Bright Star* coming September 2017. This could cloud the Egyptian military's receptivity to US advice on best counter-terrorism practices, including adherence to human rights. After the exercises are held and if there are some improvements in the way the Egyptian military and police conduct themselves in the Sinai, the suspended military aid should be restored, as that would underscore that the United States wants Egypt

to succeed in its fight against the terrorists. Merely continuing with the same policies, which Egypt could do now out of pique, serves no one's interests except extremists'.

The US would do well to also work with Egypt to help it develop social and economic programs in the North Sinai that would give the disaffected Bedouin youth an alternative to joining Wilayat Sinai. Using the stick and not the carrot will not end the terrorist insurgency there. In 2016, Saudi King Salman pledged \$1.5 billion to Egypt to fund development projects in the Sinai, presumably to hinder Wilayat Sinai's recruitment efforts, but this aid has not yet been delivered or spent. Given the close American-Saudi relationship and Egypt's currently good ties to Saudi Arabia, American policymakers should work with both the Saudis and the Egyptians to help them devise ways to create and fund worthwhile (and labor-intensive) projects in the North Sinai for maximum effect.