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Terror Strikes Again in Egypt

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The demonstrations in Tahrir Square three years ago that resulted in the ouster of President Husni Mubarak and the subsequent parliamentary and presidential elections led to the rise of the short-lived Muslim Brotherhood government. Today, Egypt is facing another election campaign, which will apparently result in General Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi's election as president. The mass street demonstrations accompanied by suppressed violence, which initially accompanied the changes of government in Egypt, have since given way to more intensive violence. Manifested first in Sinai, this violence has over the past several months spread to cities in Egypt proper.

The governmental instability that existed in Egypt after the Mubarak regime was toppled led to the release and escape from prison of many security prisoners, veterans of the terrorist organizations operating in Egypt beginning in the 1990s, some of whom were associated with elements identified with al-Qaeda and its affiliates. After they were freed, these activists joined terrorist organizations in Sinai and also reinforced the groups of local Bedouins that began to act against the Egyptian government and law enforcement officials in the peninsula. Some even joined global jihadi elements operating outside of Egypt, assisting them in their activities and disseminating al-Qaeda ideology in various countries in the Middle East. The tighter links between terrorist elements in Sinai and global jihadists have led to an upgrade of the terrorist methods in Sinai, incorporating suicide terror, for example, which is the trademark of al-Qaeda and its affiliates. The attacks in Sinai have focused on the gas pipeline to Israel and Jordan as well as on Egyptian police and military targets, and there have been a number of well-planned showcase attacks against Israel, including sporadic firing of rockets toward Eilat.

Following the significant escalation in attacks against the army in Sinai after Mohamed Morsi's ouster by the Egyptian military in July 2013, the military beefed up its forces

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considerably. Two additional battalions were sent to the Sinai, along with attack helicopters. This was coordinated with Israel, because it was necessary to make changes to the terms of the security agreement between Israel and Egypt, which is part of the peace treaty. As part of its operations, the Egyptian army also attacked the terror infrastructures in Jebel Hilal, where there was a high concentration of jihadists hiding among the local population. In addition, it raided bases belonging to terrorist organizations in northern Sinai and carried out a broad wave of arrests and pinpoint strikes against their senior commanders and operatives.

Egypt's military regime sees the Hamas government in Gaza as one of the entities enabling jihadi terrorist groups to operate in and from Sinai. It claims that the operations are directed from the Gaza Strip and aided by operatives and weapons flowing not on the familiar track of weapons smuggled from Sinai into the Gaza Strip, but in the opposite direction, from the Gaza Strip to Sinai. Consequently, the current Egyptian regime sees a need for action against Hamas in Gaza as part of its fight against terrorism in and from Sinai. The Egyptian military has worked intensively in recent months to destroy the tunnels between the Gaza Strip and Sinai, which operated under the supervision of Hamas in Gaza, in order to stop the transfer of weapons and operatives from the Gaza Strip and prevent terrorist elements from Sinai from using the Gaza Strip as a logistical hinterland and haven. Recently, statements from Cairo have indicated that Egypt seeks to take more decisive action against the Hamas government in Gaza in order to punish and perhaps even to overthrow it. It is still too early to say whether these statements will have additional operational meaning or whether they are only a propaganda campaign intended to justify what the regime is already doing.

Beyond the Egyptian government's concrete complaints against Hamas, it sees the organization as organically related to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. The military regime that toppled Morsi and his government sees the jihadi terrorist attacks as part of the Muslim Brotherhood's counter-campaign comprising violent demonstrations and terrorist attacks. Whether or not the leaders of the current regime truly believe that these terrorist attacks are directed by the Muslim Brotherhood, leveling accusations against Hamas and pointing to the connection with the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt serves the regime's purpose of discrediting the Muslim Brotherhood and weakening the public support it still enjoys among parts of Egyptian society.

The most prominent of the terrorist organizations in Sinai is Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, which was formally established in 2011 following a series of terrorist attacks carried out by its members against the Egyptian gas pipeline in Sinai. When it declared its loyalty and swore allegiance to al-Qaeda chief Ayman al-Zawahiri, the organization made clear its ideological identity and its world view. For his part, al-Zawahiri congratulated the organization on its operations and encouraged it to continue with its struggle against the

infidel regime in Egypt and its American and Israeli partners, whom the organization eyes as key enemies.

The upgraded terror activity in Sinai today is characterized by daily attacks on Egyptian police stations and soldiers, including execution of soldiers, bombings of buses and military vehicles, and suicide bombings against military and police targets. There are also attempts to assassinate senior military commanders such as General Ahmed Wasfi, commander of the Second Army, and kidnappings of government officials, who are released in exchange for large ransom payments, which in turn help to finance these activities. In addition, there have recently been renewed attacks on the gas pipeline in Sinai that leads to Jordan, which in 2014 has already been attacked three times.

In tandem, the struggle has spilled over to Egyptian cities, and a number of showcase attacks have been carried out in major metropolitan areas. These include suicide bombings against senior Egyptian officials, such as the failed attack against Interior Minister Mohamed Ibrahim, who is responsible for the operations of the internal security forces, the main fighters against terrorism, and the successful attack on his deputy. In addition, Mohamed Mabrouk, the Egyptian Interior Ministry official responsible for dealing with the Muslim Brotherhood, was assassinated, government offices in Cairo were attacked, and establishment and financial targets in Ismailiya and Suez were struck. The attackers justified the activities by saying that the current Egyptian government is illegal and illegitimate, and that the security forces sanctify the legitimacy of the infidel government. They believe the situation in Egypt confirms their claims that the democracy sought by the Egyptian citizens who carried out the revolution, which led to the election of the Muslim Brotherhood, was fundamentally flawed because it was a foreign element in a Muslim nation, which must conduct itself according to *sharia* laws. They charge that the al-Sisi government serves the interests of the United States and Israel and maintain that they will continue to use force until the government is deposed and a regime that operates according to Islamic law is established in Egypt.

For Israel, the increase in terror activity in Sinai and in Egypt proper sharpens the danger developing on its borders from global jihadi elements in the south and the north. However, Israel would do well not to intervene in the uncompromising fight Egypt has declared against the terrorist organizations. Any public intervention could help terrorist organizations that seek to portray the Egyptian struggle against them as connected to foreign interests. Therefore, intervention is ill advised while the Egyptians conduct the campaign as they see fit and according to their needs, subject to flexibility in the terms of the security annex of the peace treaty with Israel. It is essential that Israel avoid being dragged into provocations by Salafist jihadis in Gaza and Sinai, who are seeking to escalate the situation between Israel on the one hand, and Gaza and Egypt on the other. The recent rocket fire from Sinai at Eilat, and at least some of the rockets fired from Gaza, should also be seen in this context.