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Sinai Tribes: Between the Egyptian State and the Islamic State

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The jihadist insurgency in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula is taking an increasing toll on the local population and its tribal society. To confront this challenge, leaders of tribes from across the peninsula met on May 10, 2015 to discuss a plan of action. The resulting statement from the "Sinai Tribal Union" was not the declaration of war against the Islamic State (IS)-affiliated "State of Sinai" described in much of the Egyptian media. However, its recommendations for action have significant implications for the Egyptian military campaign in the North Sinai governorate and for Egyptian policymakers looking to separate the general population from the area's militants.

The Sinai Tribal Union's communique, as reported by Egyptian sources, concluded with eleven recommendations, which can be grouped into three categories: actions the tribes will take, calls to action (or inaction) among the North Sinai population, and requests for Egyptian government and military action.

With the Outsider against My Brother

Formerly known as Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis ("Supporters of Jerusalem"; ABM), the IS-linked State of Sinai operates primarily in the northeast corner of Sinai: between the North Sinai capital of el-Arish and the Gaza border, down into the mountainous areas of central Sinai. Tribal leaders have long denied supporting the organization, even though the militants operate in tribal territory and the majority of the State of Sinai's active fighters and supporters – and ABM's founders – are sons of Sinai's tribes.

One of the most meaningful outcomes of the Sinai Tribal Union meeting was the recommendation that tribes should deny protection to their members involved in militancy. In tribal law, great importance is placed on protecting kin against outsiders. Individuals that threaten that arrangement (militants that bring trouble on their clan by attacking members of other families) can be shunned, and the Union calls for them to be rejected. At the same time, the leaders hope tribal bonds still hold sway over jihadi fighters: those that leave the State of Sinai willingly are to be protected and supported.

The plan of action does not call for "war" against the State of Sinai, despite Egyptian media reports of a recent show of force by the Tarabin tribe. Indeed, there is no mention

of organizing tribal arms and fighters, proposals that have previously been rejected by Cairo. Instead, the tribal leaders pledged to cooperate with the Egyptian armed forces and plan to recruit youths from among the various Sinai clans to provide intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance to the army in advance of and during military operations.

Broader Cooperation Sought

The Sinai Tribal Union also provided guidance to the broader North Sinai population. The group asked for metal-shops and mechanics not to provide assistance to militants, who use stolen and unmarked cars for their attacks; and for youth that search for scraps in the desert not to sell explosives and landmines, remnants of the Egyptian-Israeli wars.

There was also a recommendation for tribes involved in smuggling to work with their kin across the Gaza border to ensure that State of Sinai militants are halted from escaping through border tunnels to seek safe haven in Gaza. The extent of such transit is unclear, given Egypt's imposition of a "buffer security zone" and other counter-tunnel measures. However, reports from the summer of 2014 suggest that despite these crackdowns, tunnel owners have continued allowing militants and weapons through the tunnels.

Perhaps the most controversial recommendation is for the civilian population to remain in its houses during military operations. Aerial assaults on suspected jihadist locations shake entire neighborhoods and regularly result in residents fleeing for safety. Indeed, one of the State of Sinai's regular propaganda campaigns highlights the supposed destructiveness of military operations, alleging wanton strikes against civilians, their homes, and their livelihoods. Asking residents to stay inside thus risks more collateral losses among the population, which militants can use to turn the population against tribal leaders. However, the tribal leaders conveyed the concern of the armed forces that when civilians run away, militants use them as "human shields" to escape the scene.

Requests of the State

The Sinai tribes were driven to these measures out of self-preservation, with the State of Sinai attempting to expand its reach. However, tribal cooperation is also necessary for the government's success against militancy. In return, the tribes are seeking their own benefits from the state.

It remains unclear what prompted the tribes to meet now, or if there was any state involvement in arranging the effort. However, the broader Bedouin community still bristles at the way in which security and intelligence offices have long co-opted the tribes. As such, it is interesting to note that the Union calls for the government to cooperate with the "natural leaders" of the tribes and to reconsider its past restructuring of the tribal order. The group also requests that the state treat any tribal youth recruited to cooperate with the armed forces as if they are no different from military recruits. Most

important, the Sinai Tribal Union requests that the Egyptian government address one of the Sinai population's largest grievances: the convictions *in absentia* of Bedouin for security crimes, many going back to the South Sinai resort bombings of 2004-2006. The statement again called for those uninvolved in terrorism to be provided amnesty.

Positive Effort, Possible Backlash

If implemented, the plan carries great risk to the tribes. Names of the leaders and the tribes and clans involved were not announced in order to "maintain the cohesion of tribal society," but this secrecy also provides a limited reprieve before jihadis target the participants. The State of Sinai will also likely target its own fighters if there is suspicion they are collaborating with security forces or that they intend to abandon the group.

A final and serious risk is that tribal and clan rivalries will play out with the unwitting assistance of the Egyptian armed forces, thus expanding grievances against the state. Dependent on tribal informants, the leadership of Egypt's Second Army and Unified Command must be aware of the independent interests of their collaborators. The military should mitigate the risk that identified targets will not be militant threats but, for example, a competitor smuggling ring.

However, if all of the Sinai Tribal Union's recommendations are carried out in full it would have a positive impact in quelling Sinai militancy. First, as the Egyptian government recognizes, cooperation from the Sinai population is necessary to defeat militants operating among it. Second, by addressing the grievances of the Sinai Bedouin, led by youth unemployment and *in absentia* trials, the Egyptian government can make strides in separating the regular population from the jihadis.

Implications for Israel

Any effort to help Egypt confront the State of Sinai and bring stability to the peninsula will have a positive impact on Israeli security. The Sinai-based jihadis fighting the Egyptian government are also a threat to Israel: they have targeted Israeli civilians and soldiers with cross-border raids and rockets, and given the opportunity will attempt to do so again. If Bedouin smugglers agree to forgo cooperation with jihadis, this could decrease militants' ability to carry out cross-border raids, as they rely on smugglers' expertise to beat Israeli defenses.

