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Egypt, Hamas and Islamic State's Sinai Province

Centre for the New Middle East
Policy Paper No. 12 (2016)

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The Henry Jackson Society
October 2016

Executive Summary

- There has been a long history of Jihadist groups operating in the undergoverned and lawless parts of the Sinai Peninsula. Groups operating there have been particularly bolstered by Palestinian militants moving across from Gaza, a phenomenon that increased significantly following the Israeli withdrawal from that territory. With the weakening of the Egyptian state – particularly after the 2011 uprisings – it is not surprising that terrorist non-state actors have been able to capitalise on the power vacuum that has been created.
- Formed in 2011, the al-Qaeda-aligned Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (ABM) grew to become one of the most significant militant forces in that territory. Initially ABM focused much of its attention on attempting to attack Israeli targets, with the group's ideology specifying the importance of prioritising the war against the Jewish state. Over time, however, ABM increasingly became embroiled in battling the Egyptian security forces.
- In November 2014 ABM broke off its ties with al-Qaeda, instead swearing allegiance to Islamic State and recognising al-Baghdadi as caliph. The transition to becoming Islamic State's Sinai Province initially risked splitting the group, with a number of ABM's senior figures remaining loyal to al-Qaeda and breaking away from what subsequently became known as Wilayat Sinai. The move to joining with IS significantly advanced the group's status, and also assisted the group strategically.
- Following the group's realignment with Islamic State, Wilayat Sinai considerably expanded the scale and ambitions of its operations. Despite determined counterinsurgency efforts on the part of the Egyptian military, president Sisi's government struggled to degrade the group's capabilities and continued to suffer serious losses at the hands of militants throughout 2015. Wilayat Sinai continued to successfully execute a series of high-profile attacks in Egypt's major cities, and in October 2015 the group secured international attention with the bombing of the Sharm el-Sheikh Russian passenger jet.
- There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that Islamic State's Sinai Province is collaborating with the military wing of Hamas in Gaza. Hamas figures are known to have crossed into the Sinai and are believed to be with Wilayat Sinai for training purposes. Senior figures associated with Wilayat Sinai have also travelled to Gaza, and a number of the group's fighters are understood to have been brought into Gaza for medical assistance. However, the full extent of cooperation between the two Islamist groups remains a matter of dispute.
- Over the course of the summer of 2016 the Egyptian military succeeded in degrading some of Wilayat Sinai's operational capabilities. Nevertheless, the risk of groups linked to Islamic State becoming resurgent in the Sinai remains a distinct possibility. Islamic State has more recently placed an increased emphasis on the Sinai in its propaganda campaign. If IS continues to lose ground in Iraq and Syria, we may see that organisation redoubling efforts to advance in other territories, certainly in Libya, but potentially also in the Sinai as well.

The Roots of Islamic State's Sinai Branch

For decades the Sinai Peninsula has been undergoverned space, neglected by the Egyptian state, with areas of that territory suffering from lawlessness. During the 1990s Islamist terrorists took advantage of this state of affairs, and Egypt witnessed a spate of attacks directed at foreign tourists, including at several tourist resorts in the southern Sinai during the following decade. At the time of the Palestinian Second Intifada in the early 2000s, Islamist factions in the Sinai were already acting in cooperation with Palestinian groups in Gaza, and increasingly these militant groups were also stepping up their own activities against the Egyptian security forces. Ten years later, these same groups were becoming better organised and were promoting a more clearly articulated ideology. In 2009 the Sinai based al-Tahwid wa al-Jihad – Bayt al-Maqdis published a document setting out the group's ethos, one that closely mirrored the views of contemporary militant groups such as Islamic state in Iraq.¹ The following year, another Sinai Jihadist group, Ansar al-Sunnah fi Aknaf Bayt al-Maqdis, released a series of videos glorifying attacks against Israeli civilians and military targets.²

It was out of this milieu, and the collapse of the Mubarak regime during the Arab uprisings, that the Salafist-Jihadist Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (ABM) formed in the northern Sinai during late 2011.³ The group's name, which translates roughly as “Supporters of the Holy Places” or “Supporters of Jerusalem”, denotes the group's early ideological orientation, which focused as much on hostility toward Israel as it did on attacking the Egyptian state. In the early stages of the group's operations ABM was believed to be primarily based in the village of Al Mahdeyya in southern Rafah and drew both its leadership and membership from local Bedouin, with particular links to the Menai clan of the Sawarka tribe.⁴ Within a short time of its formation ABM aligned with al-Qaeda, although the exact nature of the Sinai based faction's connections with the international terror organisation remained unclear. However, the affiliation was certainly recognised within al-Qaeda itself, and as recently as January 2014 Ayman al-Zawahiri was still referring to ABM as “our men in the Sinai”.⁵

In terms of terror operations, in its early stages ABM concentrated much of its terror efforts toward attempting to reach Israeli targets. In August 2011 the group carried out an attack on a bus near Eilat, killing eight Israeli civilians and three Egyptian security personnel.⁶ The following year, in September 2012, ABM carried out an attack in Israel, killing one Israeli soldier,⁷ and also attempted a bombing of an armoured personnel carrier at the Kerem Shalom crossing into Israel,⁸ while in 2014 the group fired two Grad Rockets at Eilat.⁹ ABM also repeatedly targeted infrastructure in the Sinai, carrying out a series of attacks on the natural gas pipeline connecting Egypt, Israel and Jordan.¹⁰ Indeed, since 2012 the Egyptian-Israeli-Jordanian pipeline in Sinai has been attacked some ten times by Islamist militants.¹¹

¹ Ashour, O., 'ISIS and Wilayat Sinai: complex networks of insurgency under authoritarian rule', *DGAPkompakt*, August 2016.

² *Ibid.*

³ Schweitzer, Y., 'The Weakening of Wilayat Sinai', *INSS Insight*, August 2016.

⁴ Dyer, E. and O. Kessler, 'Terror in the Sinai', The Henry Jackson Society, May 2014.

⁵ Ashour, O., 'ISIS and Wilayat Sinai: complex networks of insurgency under authoritarian rule', *DGAPkompakt*, August 2016.

⁶ Dyer, E. and O. Kessler, 'Terror in the Sinai', The Henry Jackson Society, May 2014.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Schweitzer, Y., 'The Weakening of Wilayat Sinai', *INSS Insight*, August 2016.

⁹ Dyer, E. and O. Kessler, 'Terror in the Sinai', The Henry Jackson Society, May 2014.

¹⁰ Schweitzer, Y., 'The Weakening of Wilayat Sinai', *INSS Insight*, August 2016.

¹¹ 'Islamic State – Sinai Province, Mapping Militant Organizations', Stanford University, available at: <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/557>, last visited: 3 October 2016.

A shift in the focus of ABM operations became more apparent in 2013, however, following the ousting of the Muslim Brotherhood regime and the crackdown against Islamist militants enacted by the Sisi government. It was at this time that ABM adopted a shift in rhetoric that advocated the defence of Egypt's Muslims against the "Army of Apostates"¹² - the Egyptian security forces. Accordingly, by 2013 the group had significantly expanded its operations, having reached targets in mainland Egypt and carried out a series of multiple bombing attacks in both Cairo and Mansour.¹³ ABM's militant activities intensified in the winter of 2013-2014, with the high-profile assassination of Colonel Mohamed Mabrouk in Cairo in November 2013, the assassination of the head of the interior ministry's technical office in January 2014, and a strike on a military helicopter in Sinai with the use of a surface-to-air missile that same month.¹⁴ While the group continued intermittent attempts to carry out attacks on Israeli targets, by this point ABM was mounting an intensive terrorist insurgency against the Egyptian state, and the beginning of a guerrilla ground offensive in the northern Sinai was escalating.

¹² Ashour, O., 'ISIS and Wilayat Sinai: complex networks of insurgency under authoritarian rule', *DGAPkompakt*, August 2016.

¹³ Dyer, E. and O. Kessler, 'Terror in the Sinai', The Henry Jackson Society, May 2014.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Swearing Allegiance to Islamic State

The transition that ABM underwent to realign itself from its allegiance to al-Qaeda to identifying as the Sinai Province of Islamic State (Wilayat Sinai) does not appear to have been a straightforward process, nor a particularly immediate one. Reports have circulated that from as early as 2013 some senior Sinai Jihadists, such as Kamal Allam of Tahwid Wal Jihad and Abu Osama al-Masri of ABM, had been traveling to Syria for training with ISIS, while others have claimed that individuals from the Sinai had met with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi years earlier while fighting in Iraq.¹⁵ ISIS had declared its caliphate in the summer of 2014, but it would not be until November of that year that ABM's Shura council made the decision to swear allegiance to al-Baghdadi as the recognised caliph. Notably, it was most likely during a clampdown by the Egyptian military of October 2014 that al-Masri and others temporarily fled to Syria. It may well have been these encounters with Islamic State that ultimately triggered the realignment of ABM the following month in November. It was a move, however, that caused a number of significant rifts within the organisation, with several of ABM's most prominent figures ultimately splitting from the group.

A particularly significant loss for the organisation would have been that of Hesham al-Ashmawy, formerly Lt. Colonel al-Ashmawy. Al-Ashmawy served in in Egypt's Special Forces from the mid-1990s, but by the time of the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak in 2011 al-Ashmawy had radicalised and in 2012 joined ABM militants in the Sinai.¹⁶ It is believed that within ABM al-Ashmawy played a crucial role in training the insurgents and masterminding the string of attacks and assassinations in Cairo. However, when ABM pledged allegiance to Islamic State in November 2014, al-Ashmawy and a small faction around him defected on ideological grounds, instead remaining loyal to al-Qaeda. Al-Ashmawy was understood to have travelled to Derna in Libya, where he was joined by a number of other former members of the Egyptian security forces.¹⁷ More recent reports suggest that al-Ashmawy is now leading the al-Qaeda linked North African Islamist group, Al Murabitoon.¹⁸ The lasting hostility that arose from al-Ashmawy's split remained evident some months later when his former comrades released a "wanted dead" poster for him.¹⁹

A further indication of how fraught and contested the process of realignment with Islamic State may have been was indicated by a series of conflicting statements put out by ABM's twitter account. At the beginning of November 2014, ABM's account had been used to tweet a message that the group was now aligned with Islamic State, only for another tweet to emerge from the same account the following day that disavowed the claim. Nevertheless, by 10 November ABM's account had once again tweeted an audio video expressing the group's support for ISIS, vowing to "listen to and obey" al-Baghdadi as the legitimate caliph, while also declaring that Islamic State would bring "a new dawn raising the banner of monotheism".²⁰ There were no further retractions, but evidently this decision

¹⁵ Ashour, O., 'ISIS and Wilayat Sinai: complex networks of insurgency under authoritarian rule', *DGAPkompakt*, August 2016.

¹⁶ Hassan, A., 'One of us: the militant Egypt's army fears most', *Reuters*, 16 October 2015, available at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-army-militant-insight-idUSKCN0SA0XT20151016>, last visited: 3 October 2016.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Joscelyn, T. and C. Weiss, 'Former Egyptian Special Forces Officer Leads Al Murabitoon', *The Long War Journal*, 23 July 2015, available at: <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/07/former-egyptian-special-forces-officer-leads-al-murabitoon.php>, last visited: 3 October 2016.

¹⁹ Joscelyn, T., 'Former Egyptian Special Forces Officer Calls on Scholars to Support al-Qaeda's Jihad', *The Long War Journal*, 11 March 2016, available at: <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/03/former-egyptian-special-forces-officer-calls-on-scholars-to-support-al-qaedas-jihad.php>, last visited: 3 October 2016.

²⁰ 'Islamic State: Egyptian Militants Pledge Loyalty', *BBC News*, 10 November 2014, available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-29993183>, last visited: 3 October 2016.

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to realign with ISIS fractured ABM as a movement, with another faction of former ABM fighters who remained loyal to al-Qaeda now operating in the Nile Valley.²¹

²¹ Joscelyn, T., 'Islamic State Sinai "province" commander killed in Cairo, Egyptian government Says', 9 November 2015, available at: <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/11/islamic-state-sinai-province-commander-killed-in-cairo-egyptian-government-says.php>, last visited: 3 October 2016.

Collaboration with Hamas

Islamist extremists in the Sinai have long maintained links with their counterparts in Gaza. The 2007 conflict in Gaza that led to Hamas seizing power not only saw some members of the non-Islamist Fatah driven into the Sinai, but also, initially, some of the smaller Salafist groups that rivalled Hamas, such as Jund Ansar Allah, fled into the Rafah area of the northern Sinai.²² Inevitably, such individuals maintained connections with their contacts in Gaza and were able to make use of an expanding network of cross-border tunnels to move between the Sinai and the Gaza enclave. More recently, Egypt's military has alleged that, having been provided with a haven and even medical assistance in Gaza, a number of key figures in Sinai Province have been able to evade capture. What has remained a contested matter is the extent to which in recent years Hamas has permitted, encouraged or even assisted Sinai militants seeking to use Gaza as a base of operations.

Hamas has consistently denied being in collusion with militant Sinai groups and has claimed to fundamentally oppose Islamic State, which has in turn ruled that Hamas is an infidel organisation.²³ Nevertheless, the Egyptian government clearly believes the security threat from cross-border cooperation between the militant groups to be serious enough to warrant the creation of a Sinai-Gaza buffer zone, involving the demolition of more than 2,000 homes in Rafah and the construction of a water-filled trench to prevent further tunnel construction.²⁴ Despite these measures, both the Israeli and the Egyptian governments maintain that their intelligence demonstrates that Hamas and the Sinai militants have been able to find ways to continue their cooperation. Indeed, the Egyptian government is understood to have acquired information showing that Islamic State militants injured while participating in a recent attack on Egyptian soldiers at al-Arish were subsequently provided with medical assistance in Gaza.²⁵

Egypt has continued to put pressure on Hamas to terminate any assistance it may be providing to Wilayat Sinai, and given that the Hamas authorities in Gaza are eager that Egypt should open its Rafah border crossing into Gaza, the Islamist group has made moves to at least create the impression that they are acting to prevent militants crossing in and out of Gaza. In April, Hamas spokesperson Eyad al-Bozom claimed that Hamas would be deploying a further 300 members of its forces along the Rafah border, stating "the national security forces redeployed along the borders with Egypt, and it is part of the security plan to fully control the borders and the stability of it, as well as the security of our Egyptian brothers".²⁶

Nevertheless, the Egyptian authorities have said that their intelligence demonstrates that Hamas has been assisting Wilayat Sinai with both weapons smuggling and training. Israeli intelligence has further indicated that Hamas actively permitted Salafist militants from smaller groups based in the

²² Ashour, O., 'ISIS and Wilayat Sinai: complex networks of insurgency under authoritarian rule', *DGAPkompakt*, August 2016.

²³ Booth, W. and S. Raghavan, 'Israel, Hamas and Egypt form an unlikely alliance against Islamic State affiliate', *The Washington Post*, 30 April 2016, available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/israel-hamas-and-egypt-form-unlikely-alliance-against-islamic-state-affiliate/2016/04/30/cacb99dc-fb79-11e5-813a-90ab563f0dde_story.html, last visited: 3 October 2016.

²⁴ Khoury, J., 'Egypt to Raze 2000 More Homes for Gaza Buffer Zone', *Haaretz*, 12 January 2015, available at: <http://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/.premium-1.636538>, last visited: 3 October 2016.

²⁵ Issacharoff, A., 'Egypt rankled by Hamas's burgeoning ties to Islamic State', *The Times of Israel*, 1 August 2016, available at: <http://www.timesofisrael.com/egypt-rankled-by-hamass-burgeoning-ties-to-islamic-state/>, last visited: 3 October 2016.

²⁶ Booth, W. and S. Raghavan, 'Israel, Hamas and Egypt form an unlikely alliance against Islamic State affiliate', *The Washington Post*, 30 April 2016.

Gaza Strip to travel into the Sinai for the expressed purpose of assisting Islamic State there.²⁷ Additionally, it is known that a number of key figures from the military wing of Hamas itself recently crossed over from Gaza into the Sinai and are now with Wilayat Sinai. There are conflicting claims about whether these individuals are actually working with Sinai Province on behalf of Hamas. Allegedly, Wilayat Sinai has been trained by Hamas members in the use of anti-tank missiles and the planting of IEDs.²⁸ Yet while it had been suggested that these individuals may only be temporarily working with Islamic State's Sinai Province for the purpose of training the militants in how to most effectively carry out attacks against the Egyptian army, reports that a number of Hamas members have relocated their family members to the Sinai has led to suspicions that they may in fact have defected from Hamas to join Islamic State.

In the cases of Hamas members such as Muhammad Abu Shawish and Abed Al Wahad, it is certainly believed that these were a matter of outright defection.²⁹ Similarly, Nasser Judah, a prominent Hamas activist from Gaza, is believed to have been killed while fighting alongside Islamic State in the Sinai earlier this year.³⁰ However, a number of other members from Hamas's military wing are understood to still be fighting with Wilayat Sinai, including Mohammed Sami Gint and Mahmoud Nimr Abdel Latif Zagrah.³¹

Another significant individual from Gaza who crossed into the Sinai earlier this year was Mahmoud Zinet, a Salafist militant who previously operated in the southern Gaza Strip, acting as a go-between for coordinating activities between Hamas and Wilayat Sinai.³² Ibrahim Abu al-Kariya has played a similar role in the Sinai among Bedouin there. At the beginning of March al-Kariya was reportedly in Gaza for meetings with officials from Hamas's military wing as part of alleged arrangements whereby al-Kariya and his men facilitate the smuggling of weapons to Hamas and in return Hamas provide Wilayat Sinai with funds, the manufacturing of weapons in Gaza and medical treatment for injured ISIS fighters.³³ Indeed, reports from Gaza have alleged that Hamas military officials such as Muhammed Deif and Yahya Sinwar have personally overseen the bringing of injured ISIS fighters into the Strip for medical care.³⁴ Further reports have claimed that Hamas's military wing commanders in Rafah have been hosting the Sinai militant Suleiman al-Sawarka.³⁵ According to these, al-Sawarka has been in Gaza holding talks with senior Hamas figures, including Muhammad Shabbaneh, Hamas's commander in southern Gaza.³⁶

In the past, there have been clear disagreements over policy between Hamas's political and military wings. One possible explanation for Hamas's seemingly contradictory attitude toward Wilayat Sinai is that it is another example of the Hamas leadership being split. Clearly the two groups are ideologically opposed, and it appears that Hamas's political leadership has judged that for the sake of not further provoking Egypt, ISIS must be disavowed. Yet, at the same time, the key figures in Hamas's military wing, particularly those tasked with smuggling weapons into Gaza via Rafah, may

²⁷ Tower.org staff, 'IDF: Hamas Militants Fighting Alongside ISIS in Sinai', *The Tower*, 14 March 2016, available at: <http://www.thetower.org/2089-idf-hamas-militants-fighting-with-isis-in-sinai/>, last visited: 3 October 2016.

²⁸ Issacharoff, A., 'Egypt rankled by Hamas's burgeoning ties to Islamic State', *The Times of Israel*, 1 August 2016.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Tower.org staff, 'IDF: Hamas Militants Fighting Alongside ISIS in Sinai', *The Tower*, 14 March 2016.

³² Ibid.

³³ Issacharoff, A., 'Under Egypt's nose, Hamas boosts cooperation with IS in Sinai', *The Times of Israel*, 6 March 2016, available at: <http://www.timesofisrael.com/under-egypts-nose-hamas-boosts-cooperation-with-is-in-sinai/>, last visited: 3 October 2016.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Issacharoff, A., 'Egypt rankled by Hamas's burgeoning ties to Islamic State', *The Times of Israel*, 1 August 2016.

³⁶ Ibid.

well have determined that it makes more strategic sense to maintain cooperation with Wilayat Sinai. Hamas in Gaza has long been dependent upon groups in the Sinai as a channel for smuggling weapons. Given that ABM – and now Wilayat Sinai – have been the most powerful Islamist group in the Peninsula for some years now, Hamas has much to gain in practical terms from keeping open opportunities for collaboration.

Naturally, both the Egyptian and Israeli governments view the cooperation between Sinai and Gazan Islamist militants as a shared threat. The result of this has been an increasing degree of security cooperation between the two countries. Israel has permitted Egypt to increase its military presence in the Sinai in excess of what is permitted under the terms of the 1979 peace agreement. Clearly the Israelis now view the Islamists as the greater threat in the Sinai and view an Egyptian military build-up in the Peninsula as a welcome move, rather than the kind of threat it would have been interpreted as in past decades. In July there were further reports of Israel conducting numerous drone strikes targeting militants operating close to the Israeli border. It is understood that these operations were undertaken with the full knowledge and consent of the Egyptian authorities:³⁷ a further indication not only of how far relations between the two countries have come, but also of just how seriously the sides take the Islamic State threat.

³⁷ 'Report: Israel Launched Numerous Drone Strikes in Sinai', *Haaretz*, 11 July 2016, available at: <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/1.730167>, last visited: 3 October 2016.

Wilayat Sinai's Strategies and Capabilities

Despite several years of the Egyptian state mounting a determined counterinsurgency against the Salafist militants of the Sinai, until very recently ABM/Wilayat Sinai was continuing to grow and strengthen on the Peninsula. Through its use of guerrilla tactics, we have yet again witnessed how an Islamist non-state actor can successfully wage a war of attrition against an apparently superior military force. In particular, the use of extreme brutality, ambush tactics and highly pinpointed large-scale attacks have been employed by Sinai Province to promote its profile and undermine the morale of the regular military. Since its establishment in November 2014, it is believed that Wilayat Sinai has been responsible for killing more than 800 people, almost half of them civilians.³⁸ Of those civilians, 224 were killed in the October 2015 attack on the Russian Sharm el-Sheikh flight, the group's most high-profile and devastating attack.

Advancing its profile and promoting its Jihadist credentials has assisted Wilayat Sinai when competing with other militant groups for recruits. It is deeply intertwined with the local population, recruiting from the Peninsula's Bedouin tribes, as well as among Palestinians in Rafah. In addition to recruiting support from locals, Wilayat Sinai has been able to bring in experienced and skilled combatants from a number of other sources. Certainly this has included Islamist and Salafist militants from Gaza, who bring with them experience of fighting the Israeli army. But ever since the days of ABM, the group has been bolstered by defections from the Egyptian military, including members of the Special Forces. In all, Sinai Province is believed to possess a relatively small hard core of highly committed and experienced fighters, probably with fewer than a thousand combatants even at the time of the group's height in 2015.³⁹

On the Peninsula itself, Wilayat Sinai is strongest and carries out most of its attacks in three of the Sinai's provinces: Rafah, el-Arish and Sheikh Zuweid. However, unlike Islamic State in Iraq, Syria and Libya, Wilayat Sinai is not in control of consolidated areas of territory. The group has, however, managed to secure a stronghold in the caves of the Jabal Hillal area, and the militants made an unsuccessful attempt to capture full control of the town of Sheikh Zuweid in the summer of 2015 when Sinai Province was in a clear period of ascendancy.

While there have been some reports of Wilayat Sinai manufacturing weapons in Gaza and smuggling them back into the Sinai, one of the primary routes for smuggling weapons to the group has its source in lawless Libya.⁴⁰ Additionally, much of the weaponry used by Wilayat Sinai has in fact been captured from the Egyptians during raids and attacks. This tactic has been used by the group since early in its development. Following attacks in October and November 2014 on Egyptian military outposts in el-Arish and Sheikh Zuweid, the militants managed to seize a large stockpile of weapons, including heavy machine guns and mortars, while also killing a considerable number of Egyptian soldiers.⁴¹ And Sinai Province have continued to use this method with considerable success until quite recently. Even during the course of the summer of 2016, Wilayat Sinai raids on Egyptian military posts saw the group capture a number of armoured vehicles, including a tank.⁴²

³⁸ Schweitzer, Y., 'The Weakening of Wilayat Sinai', *INSS Insight*, August 2016.

³⁹ 'Islamic State - Sinai Province, Mapping Militant Organizations', Stanford University, available at: <http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/557>, last visited: 3 October 2016.

⁴⁰ Booth, W. and S. Raghavan, 'Israel, Hamas and Egypt form an unlikely alliance against Islamic State affiliate', *The Washington Post*, 30 April 2016.

⁴¹ Ashour, O., 'ISIS and Wilayat Sinai: complex networks of insurgency under authoritarian rule', *DGAPkompakt*, August 2016.

⁴² *Ibid.*

Sinai Province has had the advantage of inheriting much of the technical experience and strategic expertise possessed by ABM. Much of this knowledge, along with the certain ideological commitments, was retained by the organisation through holding on to many of ABM's most senior and charismatic leaders. Additionally, individuals such as Abu Osama al-Masri had learnt how to adopt Islamic State fighting strategies during their time training with the caliphate in Syria in 2014. Arguably, one of ABM's greatest assets with regard to expertise had been the Egyptian former Special Forces officer turned Jihadist, Hisham al-Ashmawy. Although Wilayat Sinai was to lose al-Ashmawy when he defected from the group following its break from al-Qaeda and realignment with Islamic State, the group retained much of al-Ashmawy's expertise in the form of his right-hand man, Ashraf Ali Hassanein al-Gharabli, who remained with the Sinai group.⁴³ Al-Gharabli is believed to have been responsible for masterminding a series of high-profile Wilayat Sinai attacks, including the murder of American citizen William Henderson in 2014, the beheading of a Croatian man in August 2015, and a car bombing at Cairo's Italian consulate the month before.⁴⁴ However, in November 2015 the Egyptian authorities announced that al-Gharabli had been killed in Cairo during a gun battle with the police.

Wilayat Sinai employs many of the tactics commonly associated with urban guerrilla warfare, but notably it also replicates strategies commonly associated with Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. In particular, its use of sniper fire to cover the advance of groups of militants in irregular formations of tens is reminiscent of the strategies employed by other branches of Islamic State.⁴⁵ Islamic State in Iraq and Syria had formulated a strategy manual - "Managing Brutality" - instructing its operatives on how to best manage and capitalise on situations of instability and lawlessness; something that Wilayat Sinai mastered just as ABM had been learning to do previously.⁴⁶

An obvious target for Sinai Province would be the international peacekeeping force that has been based in the Sinai since the Israeli withdrawal from the Peninsula following the 1979 peace agreement. These forces would be a particularly prized target for Islamic State given that several hundred American servicemen are included in their number. These concerns that Sinai Province might attempt to target international peacekeepers appeared to have been validated in April of 2016 when the group claimed responsibility for an attack on the Egyptian military supply route to the Gora airport base used by the peacekeeping mission.⁴⁷ Previously, in 2015, several American members of the international force were injured by a roadside bomb believed to have been planted by Wilayat Sinai.⁴⁸

Another target that Sinai Province may seek to shift its attention to is Israel. In a 35-minute long video released by Sinai Province at the beginning of August 2016, the group directly threatens Israel, stating that Israelis would "pay a high price".⁴⁹ In line with the ABM ideology, IS propaganda has also repeated the line that the Sinai is the "gateway to Palestine" and to liberating the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. Also in line with the ideology the group promoted as ABM, Wilayat Sinai

⁴³ Joscelyn, T., 'Islamic State Sinai "province" commander killed in Cairo, Egyptian government says', *The Long War Journal*, 9 November 2015.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ashour, O., 'ISIS and Wilayat Sinai: complex networks of insurgency under authoritarian rule', *DGAPkompakt*, August 2016.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Booth, W. and S. Raghavan, 'Israel, Hamas and Egypt form an unlikely alliance against Islamic State affiliate', *The Washington Post*, 30 April 2016.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ 'Egypt's Islamic State affiliate threatens Israel in new video', *The Times of Israel*, 3 August 2016, available at: <http://www.timesofisrael.com/egypts-islamic-state-affiliate-threatens-israel-in-new-video/>, last visited: 3 October 2016.

continues to pledge to attack Israel and specifically to conquer the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem. Islamic State in Iraq and Syria has also made repeated references to Israel. The group released a video at the beginning of August 2016 in which al-Baghdadi assured that his organisation had not forgotten Jerusalem, with the speaker threatening Israelis “we have a long-standing account with you, and you will soon pay the price” and “your land will not be yours for long, it will be your graveyard”.⁵⁰

In May of 2016, as Islamic State was losing ground in Iraq and Syria, the group initiated a video propaganda campaign in support of its Sinai Province; an area IS had not yet been put on the back foot. This triggered speculation that Islamic State might be looking to shift focus toward North Africa. Indeed, the fact that Amaq, which acts as Islamic State's central news agency, has raised the profile of attacks in the Sinai to a comparable level of importance given to its operations in Libya for example is clearly significant.

Equally others have raised the possibility that elevating Sinai Province could even be an attempt to rally support by targeting Israel.⁵¹ The videos released by IS criticised the former Muslim Brotherhood government of Egypt for ruling with “man-made law”, while also urging Egyptians to reject democracy. The propaganda campaign stressed the notion that the cooperation between Egypt and Israel was one of an alliance between apostates and Jews, with the promise to slay Israelis just as Wilayat Sinai has been killing Egyptian soldiers. The video attempted to give added religious significance to IS activities in the Sinai by referring to it as “the land of Moses” and, in an inverted rewriting of the biblical narrative, casts president Sisi as the new pharaoh, cursed for protecting the Jews.⁵²

Despite this eagerness on the part of Islamic State to promote its affiliate's victories in the Sinai, in recent months Wilayat Sinai's fortunes appear to have been reflecting those of the IS in other localities. With journalists having been banned from entering the northern Sinai by the Egyptian government in recent years, it has been difficult to assess the extent to which the military is genuinely gaining the upper hand over Islamic State. However, over the course of the summer of 2016 the Egyptian military does appear to have gained some advantage over Wilayat Sinai. Owing to improved intelligence, Egypt's air force carried out a series of strikes on the group's strongholds between May and August. In particular, the Egyptian military hit the Islamists in the cave systems of the Jabal Hillal area of the Sinai, which the group had been using as a base of operations.

Reports from the first weeks of the campaign suggested that the Egyptian offensive had succeeded in destroying a significant proportion of the group's stored weaponry while also killing almost a hundred of the militants.⁵³ In August the Egyptians announced they had struck another major blow to Wilayat Sinai, carrying out an incursion on another of the group's strongholds, this time just south of el-Arish. According to Egypt's military, the operation succeeded in destroying several

⁵⁰ Schweitzer, Y., ‘The Weakening of Wilayat Sinai’, *INSS Insight*, August 2016.

⁵¹ Kessler, O. and M Peck, ‘ISIS Targets Egypt: Why the Group Set its Sights on the Sinai’, *Foreign Affairs*, 17 May 2016, available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/egypt/2016-05-17/isis-targets-egypt>, last visited: 3 October 2016.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Issacharoff, A., ‘Sinai attacks decline as Egypt's fight against IS yields results’, *The Times of Israel*, 29 August 2016, available at: <http://www.timesofisrael.com/sinai-attacks-decline-as-egypts-fight-against-is-yields-results/>, last visited: 3 October 2016.

weapons storehouses and killing 45 Islamic State combatants, including Abu Duaa al-Ansari, one of the group's most senior commanders.⁵⁴

Observers have noted that 2016 has seen a decline in the scale and ambition of the group's attacks, compared to when the group was at the height of its strength in 2015. Some of Sinai Province's earlier and more ambitious attacks against Egyptian military outposts combined suicide attacks with heavy missile fire, including the use of advanced anti-tank missiles.⁵⁵ These may now have become a thing of the group's past. Nevertheless, Wilayat Sinai has managed to keep up a regular series of smaller-scale attacks in the areas where they are at the greatest strategic advantage, particularly el-Arish and Rafah. These smaller attacks on Egyptian police and soldiers have consisted of less sophisticated ambushes and the use of IEDs, as opposed to the types of highly organised attacks involving heavy weaponry and numerous militants.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Schweitzer, Y., 'The Weakening of Wilayat Sinai', *INSS Insight*, August 2016.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Conclusion

While the Egyptian army finally seems to be advancing in the fight against Sinai Province, the group still poses a very serious threat for the time being, and may yet rally. For the moment, Wilayat Sinai is primarily a direct threat to Egyptian and Israeli security. Furthermore, as was witnessed with the downing of the Russian passenger flight in 2015, the group may continue to represent a substantial threat to foreign nationals for the time being. More generally, as a component of the wider Islamic State network, Wilayat Sinai also serves as a destabilising force within the region, one that will repeatedly challenge the rule of state authorities for as long as it is allowed to proliferate.

International leaders and policymakers certainly cannot afford to be complacent about the possibility of an Islamic State resurgence in the Sinai. With IS losing so much ground in Iraq and Syria it has been suggested by a number of commentators that the group might attempt to shift its focus of operations to North Africa. Primarily this would be to the group's stronghold in Libya, where Islamic State might attempt to reallocate its resources and assets. However, the Sinai would represent another alternative focus of activity for IS, in addition to Libya. Even if the group doesn't undertake such a dramatic pivot, if the group is allowed to maintain even a low-level presence in the Sinai then the Peninsula will continue to be used as a lawless passage through which weapons can be smuggled to Hamas and other militants in Gaza.

The threat from an ongoing Islamic State presence in the Sinai should lead the international community to place a renewed emphasis on the importance of defeating the group there. This may require a bolstering of support for the operations of the Egyptian and Israeli security forces in that vicinity. The rise of ABM and Sinai Province in Egypt serves a reminder of how non-state actors can take advantage of unstable and undergoverned spaces for the purpose of gaining a foothold from which to launch further attacks. Having morphed into ABM before then transitioning into the Islamic State's Sinai Province, this may not yet be the final stage in the evolution of Jihadist Salafism in the Sinai.

Finally, it should be taken into account that even if the Egyptian state does succeed in reasserting its authority over the Sinai Peninsula, it is conceivable that many of the militants there might attempt to seek refuge in Gaza. From there it would be possible for the factions to continue to launch attacks against both Israel and Egypt, and eventually to return to operating in the Sinai. A comprehensive counterinsurgency strategy for that part of the world would ultimately have to factor in securing both the Gaza strip and the Sinai Peninsula.

About the Author

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