



Egypt: Terrorist Attack in the Sinai Peninsula

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Background

Terrorists based in the Sinai Peninsula have been waging an insurgency against the Egyptian government for more than six years. While the terrorist landscape in Egypt is evolving and encompasses several groups, Sinai Province (SP) is known as the most lethal. Since its affiliation with the Islamic State in 2014, SP has attacked the Egyptian military continually, targeted Coptic Christian individuals and places of worship, and occasionally fired rockets into Israel. In October 2015, SP targeted Russian tourists departing the Sinai by allegedly planting a bomb aboard Metrojet Flight 9268, which exploded mid-air, killing all 224 passengers and crew aboard.

For U.S. policymakers, including Congress, continued terrorist attacks in the Sinai Peninsula raise concerns over Egypt's stability, the security of neighboring Israel, the safety of U.S. military personnel serving as peacekeepers in the Multinational Force and Observers, and the growing capabilities of terrorist groups based in Egypt.

The November 24, 2017, Attack

On November 24, approximately 25-30 gunmen launched a coordinated attack against the Al Rawdah mosque in the town of Bir al Abed in northern Sinai, killing at least 305 people in the deadliest terrorist attack in Egypt's modern history. According to Egyptian authorities, the terrorists drove up to the mosque in five vehicles carrying flags of the Islamic State before they detonated bombs inside the mosque and shot worshippers both inside and outside. According to the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, the November 24 attack "brings the total attacks in 2017 to over 338, with at least 322 and 401 security forces and civilians killed in attacks."

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With the Islamic State having lost nearly all of its territory in Syria and Iraq, many analysts have anticipated that regional affiliates such as SP would increase their terrorist activities. The Islamic State has declared Sufi Muslim worship (featuring many variants that draw from a rich history of Islamic mysticism) to be heretical. While SP has yet to claim responsibility for the attack, it may have chosen the Al Rawdah mosque as a target since it is home to the Gaririya Sufi order, one of the largest Sufi orders in North Sinai; the mosque is also frequented by members of a local Bedouin tribe opposed to SP. According to one report, SP may have even warned Bir al Abed residents ahead of time to stop collaborating with security forces and to suspend Sufi rituals at the mosque. Moreover, the Islamic State may have sought to carry out a high casualty attack in order to demonstrate their continued lethality. According to a U.S.-based scholar of the Islamic State, “As you get more desperate, you also get internal feuding over who is more puritanical....Everyone is trying to compete to show they are truer to the cause. They want to cast themselves as the hardest of the hard-liners.”

The Persistence of Terrorism in the Sinai Peninsula

Immediately following the November 24 attack, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al Sisi vowed to respond forcefully, and the Egyptian Air Force carried out air strikes against SP vehicle convoys. Many observers have questioned the overall Sinai counterterrorism strategy of the Sisi administration. The Egyptian military typically claims that its tactics are effective, and that it is gaining ground by increasing the army’s troop presence in Sinai towns, closing smuggling tunnels to Gaza, and engaging the local population. However, critics charge that authorities generally revert to similar responses against Sinai-based militancy, with questionable effectiveness: The military launches a major operation in response to an attack, killing some militants but also causing collateral damage and thus angering the local population. The operation concludes with the withdrawal of the regular armed forces, leaving more lightly armed military police to secure the peninsula’s vast, rugged terrain.

Figure 1. Location of the November 24 Mosque Attack



Source: The Times (UK)

The Sinai Challenge

The Sinai Peninsula is a large, sparsely populated land mass, where the Egyptian government has historically exercised limited control, complicating its efforts to combat terrorism there. The 1979 Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty limits the number of soldiers that Egypt can deploy in the Sinai, subject to the parties' mutual agreement on changes as circumstances necessitate.

In the Sinai, there is deep resentment against the government amongst segments of the population, which has complicated government efforts to secure local cooperation in countering terrorism. During the final years of the regime of Hosni Mubarak, who resigned under pressure in 2011, Bedouins in the Sinai resented corrupt business dealings (involving government officials and businessmen with personal ties to Mubarak who sought to develop beach tourism in southern Sinai and natural gas pipelines across northern Sinai). Bedouin tribes asserted that no infrastructure investment was channeled toward their areas and that the legal system precluded many Bedouin from attaining land rights. Many residents from local tribes have described being treated as second-class citizens, while government officials often claim that Sinai Bedouin cherish their local autonomy.

Additionally, since the start of the Sinai insurgency in 2011, many observers have accused the Egyptian government of human rights abuses against the civilian population. According to one observer, such abuses (unlawful detention, torture, and extra-judicial killings) have "facilitated the spread of radical and terrorist recruitment propaganda and has turned many inhabitants of the Sinai against the state."

For decades, some U.S. policymakers have been calling on the Egyptian military to consider using more flexible approaches toward the insurgents' unconventional tactics. According to a former National Security Council official, "They [Egyptian military] understand they have got a problem in Sinai, but they have been unprepared to invest in the capabilities to deal with it."

U.S. Policy Response

On November 24, President Trump offered his condolences to President Sisi by phone and "reiterated that the United States will continue to stand with Egypt in the face of terrorism." One question stemming from the November 24 attack is whether the United States will attempt to increase U.S. military and economic assistance to Egypt to assist with its Sinai counter-insurgency efforts. The previous Administration had indicated that beginning in FY2018, U.S. military assistance would only be available for four categories of aid—counterterrorism, border security, Sinai Peninsula security, and maritime security. It is unclear if President Trump will continue this policy. Congress has passed successive foreign operations appropriations for Egypt specifying that economic assistance to Egypt may be used for economic development projects in the Sinai. However, active hostilities in the northern Sinai could possibly limit the operation of U.S.-sponsored projects there.

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