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ISIS in Egypt's Sinai: The next regional hotspot in the making

The Egyptian army is involved in a battle against terrorism in Sinai without appropriate training or suitable readiness for such a mission in a Guerilla war setting. The army primarily depends on traditional troop tactics with heavy vehicles, vulnerable column movements of exposed ground forces, and blanket artillery. Random collective punishments applied by the military have led to serious violations that are feeding vindictive feelings among marginalized young men in the underdeveloped border area of Sinai and pushing them to fight beside the Jihadists. Next to Syria and Libya the Sinai might well become the next regional hotspot. This paper offers an explanation of what is going on in the Sinai and related violence in Egypt's mainland, based on field investigations. This will shed light on the recommended policy that the EU should adopt.

On Tuesday November, 11th, 2014, Sinai-based armed group *Ansar Beit El-Maqdis* (ABM) officially announced loyalty to ISIS and subsequently changed its name to "ISIS' Sinai Province". The next day, an unprecedented maritime operation took place off the Damietta coast in the Mediterranean, where a rebel navy commando officer kidnapped a fighting boat, killed its crew, and attempted to attack some targets in both Egyptian and Israeli waters. Four months earlier, ABM attacked an Egyptian military camp close to Farafra Oasis in the Western Desert, near the Libyan border, killing and wounding more than 30 soldiers. By the end of January 2015, ABM massively attacked ten military and security targets including some civilian facilities over North Sinai, killing dozens of officers and soldiers and wounding hundreds. This has been the biggest attack on the Egyptian army since the 1973 war.

The Egyptian army has declared a state of emergency in the north-eastern border region of Sinai since October 25th, 2014, one day after the largest attack on its forces committed by ABM taking place at the Karm El-Qawadis check-point east of Al-Arish, the capital of North Sinai Governorate. A few days later, the Egyptian authorities began establishing a buffer zone between the two bisects of Egyptian and Palestinian Rafah, isolating Gaza from the Sinai, utilizing the 51 soldiers who were killed and injured in Karm El-Qawadis to justify these measures. President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi claimed responsibility of Gaza Strip for the inflamed security scene in Sinai referring to weapons smuggling through the tunnels. He associated this accusation with his sanctions against Gaza.

Classic centralized mentality

Egypt inherited administrative techniques of the Sinai from the Ottoman and British occupations, which considered it a 'land of operations' – where security permission was required for civilians to visit the peninsula. This procedure was cancelled shortly before the Sinai fell under Israeli occupation in 1967. From 1979 to 1982, Egypt recaptured the vast majority of Sinai lands (Taba was not returned to Egypt until international arbitration in 1989) and began taking over executive administration. New 'comers' (Wafideen) from the western bank of the Suez Canal took the local lead instead of the eastern 'comers' / previous conquerors.

Indigenous people were frequently marginalized from decision-making in development projects in the Sinai during the Mubarak regime, leading to corruption and the unsuccessful replication of centralized methods honed in the much more

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populated Nile regions. Part of this process questioned the loyalty of Bedouins, excluding them from the security apparatuses and trusting only officers and soldiers from the Nile Valley. This led to favoritism and positive discrimination towards officers and Wafideen from the Nile Valley and Delta. Moreover, local veterans' prowess has been excluded from the official narration and replaced with accusations of disloyalty.

Unlike Mubarak, El-Sisi recognizes locals' patriotism and support in the war on terrorism. However, his rhetoric is received as individual showmanship, thus unable to shift the skeptical discourse that has been systemically produced since Mubarak's era till now. This may explain the context of rejecting young locals' proposals to establish 'voluntary community peace-

keepers'. Young Bedouins in the border area of North Sinai have proposed such ideas several times since 2012, asking only for recognition and protection from being declared "wanted persons". The army has refused all of these initiatives. Naysayers argue that the state should monopolize the legitimacy of carrying arms and any breach of this law may open the gate to have criminal gangs and armed militias. While this is a valid argument in principle, it does not fit the local circumstances and realities. According to the security appendix of the Peace Treaty between Egypt and Israel (signed in Washington, D.C. in 1979) and its later amendments, deployment of armed forces in Sinai's Zone C is restricted. Hence, the Egyptian authorities have always depended on cooperative local Bedouins in both intelligence and operational missions, in spite of the discourse of treason against locals.

Extensive violations reinforce dynamic of revenge

The absence of humanitarian concerns in military and security

planning has paved the way for making people's daily life unbearable. The local population struggles to find potable water and have regular electricity; curfew has been applied even before legalizing it under the state of emergency; ambulance service is prohibited after 5pm; markets and stores are closed; main roads are blocked; last but not least, all communication networks are frequently shut down by the army. Ironically, all of these procedures have neither been effective nor efficient in confronting terrorist threats.

On the strategic level, military leaders focus on regional goals regardless of local effects. Legal and political justifications for proactive military operations against armed groups fail to vindicate random collective punishments on local civilians. Starting with unaccountable mistakes, then repetitive violations, and, finally, some official statements and press releases of military spokesmen could be considered as confession of criminal or even war crimes (e.g. praising attacking a 'field hospital'). Local testimonies assure dozens cases of forced disappearance, torture to death and fabricated military trials. An example is the forcible displacement that is being applied in Rafah's border districts. In addition to violating the 2014 constitution (article 63), the current implementation of forced displacement is extremely abusive. There is neither an evacuation plan; no help to transporting families (officially: more than 2250 extended families) and furniture; no price control on service providers nor rental of alternative apartments. According to in-person inter-

views, the forcibly displaced victims are asked to move out before destroying the houses on their heads, to move from Rafah to Al-Arish (40 kilometers) on their own without any exception to the curfew or road closure, and to sign a plethora of waiver documents denying any sort of legal rights to receive promised financial compensation. In the local memory and perception, expelling civilians, emptying whole districts, striking homes with Apaches and drones, bombing houses, using mortars in inhabited villages, irresponsibly and the unintentional killing of dozens of women and children in several villages, are all reminiscent of 'Nakba' - the Arabic word of 'huge disaster' that refers to the Israeli expulsion of Palestinian in 1948 as well as Israeli policies towards the Palestinians. Locals are now reproducing a narrative of Sinai's / Rafah's Nakba committed by the Egyptian regime which prioritizes

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security cooperation with Israel over citizens' rights. In parallel to locals' hostile attitude towards Israel, they blame US military support to the Egyptian army that uses American equip-

ment in killing civilians, they narrate.

In addition to the alienation of the local population, the military campaign also fails to reach its objectives vis-à-vis ISIS and its local affiliates. On the tactical level, the Egyptian army is still dependent on heavy vehicles, conscripts and blanket artillery. Videos of ISIS' Sinai Province, formerly ABM, show how small bands of fighters succeed in defeating the military forces and plundering major caches of arms. This assures that Gaza is a destination of weapon smuggling, not a source. Accusing Gaza of responsibility for the inflamed security scene in Sinai does not make sense regarding the attacks in Nile Valley including Cairo, the Western Desert, and the Mediterranean, in addition to the illogical description of Gaza as a source of arms instead of the destination of smuggled weapons.

Unless rapid intervention corrects the strategies and tactics which beget only chaos, a worsening scenario is likely to happen. ISIS' Sinai Province, formerly ABM, has taken control over a limited number of areas south to Sheik Zuwayyid town where its fighters regularly hold check points, seeking for wanted persons who are cooperating with the army. The army transports its soldiers to and from Sinai in military boats instead of mined roads which are mostly beyond state control. Some irritated villages have been free of any deployment of forces, meaning partial defeat of the army and qualitative progress for ISIS. Repeating the same procedures which have previously lead to failure, will continue to do so.

How to decrease the danger of ISIS extension in Egypt?

The ISIS affiliate in Egypt aims at mobilizing the population by referring to the army's violations and blockage of political horizons for Islamists. They claim that they protect Muslims against an army of 'apostasy' (disbelieving) and argue for a unified Salafi Jihadist post-revolutionary state, boycotting political participation in the current system, and a rejection of democracy. To decrease the future risks of ISIS further impacting Egypt, this paper recommends the following policies:

Special recommendations to German and European policy makers:

The EU should offer strategic and tactical training for the Egyptian army on efficient operations that follow international humanitarian laws and human rights standards. In addition, the EU should address the local community and victims with humanitarian aid and relief work through NGOs. Moreover, it should mention Sinai in official talks, statements, and press releases – stopping the marginalization and exclusion felt by the local community. A local grand narrative of injustice is being formulated now, and it is important to decrease its severity before further bolstering ISIS Sinai.

Recommendations addressed to the Egyptian government that should be stressed for by the international community:

The Egyptian government should immediately start 'humanitarian relief' works. In practice, this means allowing ambulances, revitalizing communication networks, opening the main asphalt roads after curfew time, as well as empowering NGOs and their local and international partners to help affected victims with heating, food and medicine as well as psychological support. In parallel, the authorities should immediately review the status of hundreds of random

detainees in Sinai and quickly release all persons who are held without charge. In addition, criminals should be treated according to the rules of criminal justice and human rights. It is important to rebuild trust in the justice system. War crimes and criminal behavior by the army in Sinai must be stopped, offences have to be investigated, and suitable action against the involved officers and soldiers need to be taken.

Concerning the whole political scene, a serious action towards reconciliation with moderate forces of political Islam must be taken. On the operational level, classical tactics, conscripts and artillery bombing should be replaced with special operations, well trained commandos and targeted strikes. Random collective punishments must be immediately stopped. Moreover, relations between the security apparatuses and local

participants should be evaluated as well as the excessively vertical structure of communication in army ranks.

In addition to a long-term development plan, steps towards 'developmental rapid deployment' are needed.

At least a minimum level of local participatory decision-making would be effective and fruitful. This should be implemented simultaneously with challenging the terrorist narrative with fact-based media, to stop untrue propaganda and to let journalists work safely in the field in terms of right to know and information accessibility.

The Egyptian authorities should invest in studying the combined factors that may motivate local individual fighters to join the ISIS branch in Sinai. Such studies, which must benefit from domestic experts and stake-holders, might propose innovative solutions that may contain the incoming risks (i.e. conditional amnesty for those who willingly surrendered).

Last but not least, Egypt should adopt the concept of comprehensive security widening national security considerations to include educational, health, and basic rights concerns as well as corruption, and paying attention to importance of developmental prevention and treatment.

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