



Trends in Egyptian Terrorism in the Post-Mubarak Period¹

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Abstract:

Egypt has experienced a distinct wave of terrorism since the early 1980s. An analysis of trends shows that the intensity of political violence and armed clashes has increased significantly since the ousting of President Mohamed Morsi on 3 July 2013. Terrorist acts have since spread from the Sinai Peninsula to mainland Egypt, where the perpetrators have included religious fundamentalists and marginalised Bedouin groups in society, as well as increasing numbers of political opponents of the Sisi regime. However, the use of extremist means to gain religious, ideological, and political legitimacy has provoked an increasingly violent response from the Cairo leadership, which has launched several large-scale operations to dismantle terrorist bases in the country. Although the clashes have claimed the lives of thousands of soldiers, police and civilians, the fight is far from over.

In the present study, the authors outline the demographic background and social problems of Egypt's modern history of terrorism, in an attempt to give a sense of the trends. Their overall conclusion is that, despite the Egyptian government's propaganda announcements, the large-scale action of the security forces has not been able to completely eradicate the presence of fundamentalists in the country but has been able to significantly reduce their operational capabilities in the region.

Keywords:

Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, Egypt, Muslim Brotherhood, Mohamed Morsi, terrorism

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Introduction

Over the past decade and a half, the Egyptian government has been engaged in an intensive fight against terrorism on home soil, particularly in the Sinai. Although the fight against insurgents and extremists has intensified since President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi came to power, the expected overwhelming victory has not been achieved and the terrorist organisations operating in the Sinai have not been dismantled. Today, the government is practically fighting a covert war with terrorist groups and some local communities in Sinai, who are constantly suffering the consequences of air strikes, forced displacement or even deprivation of basic services. However, this approach has triggered new conflicts and terrorist attacks, which have already claimed the lives of thousands of officials and civilians since the 2011 revolution.

The aim of the study is to take stock of and analyse the demographic, social and political factors that have led to the emergence of terrorism in parts of Egypt over the past 30 years, culminating in violent acts against members of the majority society who are considered to be targeted for some reason. In this context, the authors aim to analyse the background and trends of violent manifestations of fundamentalism, characterise the actors involved and assess the response of the central authorities, with a particular focus on the factors that have influenced its effectiveness.

The Demographic and Economic Context of Terrorism in Sinai

The Sinai Peninsula covers an area of 60,088 square kilometres, which is less than 6% of Egypt's total land area. Its population of around 550,000 is also a fraction of the Arab state's estimated total population of 104 million (2022 estimates). The picture is further complicated by the fact that around 79% of the Sinai's population - around 434,000 people - are concentrated in the northern half of the region, in towns heavily affected by the fighting such as Al-Arish,⁴ Sheikh Zuweid,⁵ Rafah⁶ or Bir al-Abed⁷ (Al-Anani, 2020). Another important aspect is that about 70% of them are Bedouin, belonging to one of some 15–20 tribes and with significant kinship ties on both sides of the Egyptian-Israeli border.

The remainder are refugees of Palestinian origin from the city of Rafah on the border with the Gaza Strip, from families working in the Egyptian interior, mainly in the

⁴ The city is located in North-Eastern Egypt, directly on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. It is the capital of the North Sinai Governorate. The Rafah border crossing to the Gaza Strip is located 50–60 km from here.

⁵ A Bedouin town in Egypt's North Sinai Governorate, close to the border with the Gaza Strip. It is located between the cities of Al-Arish and Rafah, 334 kilometres northeast of Cairo.

⁶ A Bedouin and agricultural town. It is the capital of Rafah centre in North Sinai Governorate. Rafah is the site of the Rafah Border Crossing, the sole crossing point between Egypt and the Gaza Strip.

⁷ It is a well-known city in North Sinai, which has proved to be an important military base in the last ten years.



resort cities of Sharm al-Sheikh and Ras Muhammad in the southern Sinai, or from ethnic groups (such as Turks or Bosniaks) whose ancestors settled in the Ottoman period (Aziz, 2016. pp. 321–322; Sabry, 2015. p. 8).

In recent decades, this Bedouin population has been neglected by successive Egyptian central administrations. They have thus been disproportionately affected by social, political, and economic problems such as marginalisation, unemployment, poverty, repression, and displacement, despite the explosion of tourism in the southern coastal areas following the Israeli evacuation of the Sinai Peninsula in 1982 (Al-Monitor, 2014). Thus, the Cairo administration has converted hundreds of thousands of hectares of tribal land into agricultural land or tourist resorts, often with military protection (the so-called ‘Red Sea Riviera’), in exchange for land in the interior of the peninsula, most of which is of much lower quality, for the former owners.

The loss of land also meant the loss of the livelihoods that were fundamental to their Bedouin identity. The disadvantages were exacerbated by the fact that employers of large investments tended to bring in workers from the Nile Valley, while most of the Bedouin who had given up their semi-nomadic way of life could barely make a living from activities such as fishing, hunting, wholesale, and retail trade, transporting goods or guiding tourists (Gilbert, 2013). Finally, there were the consequences of misgovernance, which not only added to the already existing grievances, but also further alienated the local people from the central leadership (Graham and Harrison, 2015).⁸

Moreover, Egyptian governments have long viewed the indigenous Bedouin population of the Sinai Peninsula as a security threat and treated them as second-class citizens. For example, most of them have been denied access to public and private sector jobs in politics, diplomacy, and the judiciary, and have been refused recruitment into the police or the armed forces (Dentice, 2018a). The main reason for this political exclusion and socio-economic-educational neglect is the suspicion that arose from the Bedouin's alleged collaboration with the Israelis after the Israeli occupation of the peninsula in 1967 (Bar’el, 2012). This was later compounded by the aforementioned discrimination against Bedouins in the labour market, which led to an increasing number of Bedouins earning a living from trafficking in human beings, arms and drugs (Gold, 2014).

In addition to - or rather instead of - the publicly voiced accusations, the semi-nomadic way of life of the Bedouin tribes and their desire to preserve their independence from central power are considered more significant. As they have never been fully integrated into Egyptian society, many of them do not even have Egyptian identity documents and their political representation has only been established in recent years. The tense relationship has been exacerbated when Egyptian governments have reacted to the problems that have arisen with harsh and sometimes heavy-handed

⁸ Regarding the staged approach to the reform of territorial governance, see: Aboelnaga et al. 2019. pp. 193–194.

action, rather than identifying and tackling the root causes. The latter has led to a level of alienation among the local population that has greatly facilitated the growth in the size and expansion of militant groups in a geographically isolated region adjacent to regional conflicts.

The First two Waves of Egyptian Terrorism

Following the assassination of Egyptian President Sadat in October 1981, the Arab state experienced three distinct waves of terrorism. The first of these was clearly linked to the Mubarak regime, when armed actions by the Egyptian Islamic Jihad and especially al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya (The Islamic Group),⁹ mainly in Cairo and the Delta, claimed hundreds of civilian lives. Although the biggest international response was perhaps the massacre in Luxor in 1997, which claimed 62 lives (Jehl, 1997), the lowest point for the latter was 1993, when 1,106 people were killed or injured in terrorist attacks. It was also striking that, during the same period, security forces suffered heavier losses than terrorists, who often carried out successful attacks in broad daylight against senior police officers and their escorts (Murphy, 2002. pp. 82-83).

The second period began after the start of the Western invasion of Iraq and was characterised primarily by attacks by the Jama'at al-Tawhid wal-Jihad (The Monotheism and Jihad Group)¹⁰ in the Sinai Peninsula, which found a relatively easy following among young people from disaffected communities motivated by local grievances. The actions of Islamist militias have also claimed hundreds of lives in attacks such as those that took place in Taba and Ras Shaitan (Devil's Head) in 2004, in Sharm al-Sheikh in 2005, in Dahab in 2006 and in the South Sinai Governorate.

As the fundamentalist perpetrators of the first two waves included a significant proportion of Bedouins and Palestinians, the Egyptian security forces saw a more decisive action against the local population as the appropriate way to neutralise them. However, the arbitrary reprisals and unannounced raids carried out under the authority of Egypt's emergency law were an over-emotional, sometimes premature response rather than part of a strategy to prevent future attacks. As a result, the response strikes have had a counterproductive effect in further alienating civilians from central authority rather than intimidating and coercing cooperation. Thus, despite the arrest and often uncharged imprisonment of thousands, and the looting and destruction of their homes, which succeeded in ousting some extremist leaders, the more fanatical, the activists who remained free and the more radicalised civilians became as a result of the events, the

⁹ Sunni Islamist movement in Egypt, which has been declared a terrorist organisation by the UK and the European Union. It committed serious assassinations and terrorist attacks in Egypt, mainly between 1992 and 1996.

¹⁰ It was particularly active in Egypt and Iraq between 1999 and 2006. It was based in the Iraqi city of Fallujah.



more they confronted the regime's men in violation of tribal traditions and out of a desire for revenge (Awad and Hashem, 2015; Gold, 2014; Khalil, 2013).

However, the situation has become even more complex as a result of the *Arab Spring*,¹¹ with a re-dimensioning of the balance of power. After the Egyptian revolution in 2011, the social fault lines that had existed until then became even more polarised, while the Mubarak regime was accompanied by a breakdown of law and order in Sinai. The resulting security vacuum has led to the emergence of new terrorist organisations (such as Ansar al-Jihad and al-Qaeda in Sinai, the Muhammad Jamal Network, or Jund al-Islam) in the region, while the existing ones have become more radicalised in their ideology and methods. What all these groups had in common, however, was a closer or looser relationship with the international al-Qaeda network, a rejection of the authority of the Egyptian government, which they perceived as corrupt, and a jihad to create an Islamic state. Their circumstances were greatly facilitated by the fact that the resulting internal political instability further increased the susceptibility of citizens, already living below subsistence level and subject to discriminatory measures, to extremism, and they had little problem arming themselves from neighbouring, chaotic Libya or Sudan (Prantner, 2015).

As a result, *Operation Eagle*, launched on 14 August 2011, proved ineffective and was the most significant deployment of Egyptian armed forces in the Sinai since the 1973 Yom Kippur War (Katz, 2011). On 18 August 2011, just days after the launch of the military operation, Salafi jihadists carried out a series of strikes against Israeli targets along the Egyptian border on Highway 12. To make matters worse, in pursuit of the perpetrators, Israeli security forces, after entering Egyptian territory, also killed five Egyptian soldiers, leading to a diplomatic row between the two states¹² (Issacharoff, 2011). Attacks on gas pipelines in the Sinai Peninsula were also not prevented, with at least 15 bomb attacks between 2011 and July 2012 (Harb, 2012).

Even the electoral victory of the Islamist Morsi government failed to change the situation. Indeed, Morsi had already come to power with a small majority in a rather polarised political environment, with secular and liberal sections of society explicitly opposing the programme he had announced, while many revolutionary groups had rallied behind him simply because they considered him to be the "lesser evil" (Csicsmann, 2012, p. 118). Of particular importance was therefore the so-called Fairmont Accord signed on 22 June 2012 with key revolutionary actors, which gave the Muslim Brotherhood supporters and key opposition leaders a seat in the 'National Salvation Front' (Shukrallah, 2013).

¹¹ For more details on the Arab Spring in Egypt, see: N. Rózsa, 2015. pp. 122-127.

¹² The incident caused great outrage in Egypt. More than a thousand people demonstrated in front of the Israeli embassy in Cairo, where they demanded the expulsion of the Israeli ambassador. "Ahmed Al-Shahat", who was dubbed the "Egyptian Spider-Man" after his act, climbed to the top of the 15-story tower block that also houses the Israeli embassy, where he took down the Israeli flag and planted the Egyptian flag in its place.

However, an assessment of the events of the period suggests that the Muslim Brotherhood and the Morsi it supported entered into the agreement with other political movements for essentially tactical reasons, rather than out of sincere commitment. This was indicated by the Morsi cabinet's increasing disregard for the commitments made in the document after the victory, which, coupled with the expected lack of socio-economic development, turned the allied movements and activists into adversaries in a short period of time (Neszmélyi, 2018. pp. 114–115). This was compounded by a further deterioration in public security in the Sinai, where gunmen raided an Egyptian military base near Rafah on the border on 5 August 2012 and used the armoured vehicles, they had captured to enter Israeli territory (Zitun, 2012). In response, President Morsi replaced the defence minister with General al-Sisi. Operation Sinai was soon launched in close cooperation with the Israel Defense Forces to eliminate armed Islamist groups, protect the Suez Canal, and destroy the network of tunnels linking the Sinai Peninsula to the Gaza Strip, leading to a temporary calm in the area (Csicsmann, 2020. p. 73; Maher and Tarek, 2012).

However, the questionable enforcement of the November 2012 constitutional declaration,¹³ adopted and announced by Morsi, has already reached a breaking point that has led to the eruption of nationwide protests. The spectacular display of social discontent then provided the final impetus for the army, dissatisfied with the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood, to intervene and remove President Morsi from power in Egypt by staging a coup on 3 July 2013. Shortly after the ousting of the head of state, a wave of violence in the Sinai Peninsula erupted into unprecedented armed clashes, which were renewed in May 2013 following the kidnapping of an Egyptian officer (Eleiba, 2013).

The Current Wave of Terror

The third wave of terror, which is still ongoing today, was effectively triggered by the rise to power of General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Violence escalated shortly after the army's units bloodied peaceful demonstrations against a military coup (Human Rights Watch, 2014). Many members of the Muslim Brotherhood then became convinced that the only way to challenge the regime's policies was through the use of violence, and 'special operations committees' were set up in early 2014 to implement this (Awad, 2017). At the same time, the militias intensified their actions, arguing that the fall of Morsi had clearly demonstrated the legitimacy of their armed struggle against what they considered to be an oppressive state (Revkin, 2013). The Sisi regime adopted a much more aggressive strategy than before, officially declaring the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organisation at the end of 2013, and the security forces reverted to the methods used

¹³ The document transferred almost all judicial powers to the president, who at that time already held both the legislative and the executive powers.



by the Mubarak regime, mainly in Sinai, despite the fact that their effectiveness was already clearly in question. However, the disregard for local political, social and economic conditions and the use of excessive force by the authorities, mass imprisonment and torture of some suspected terrorists have, if anything, further increased instability. Thus, although the number of people arrested and detained in 2011 on or in connection with terrorism charges rose from 16 to 3,600 in 2015, the number of attacks nevertheless multiplied: from the beginning of the year to mid-November 2015, the number of armed attacks in Sinai increased to 357, a tenfold increase compared to 2012. At the same time, the number of victims “only” increased fivefold, with the death toll rising from less than 50 in 2012 to more than 250 in 2015. Even more striking was the discrepancy in the number of casualties in counter-terrorism operations, which rose from 12 recorded in 2012 to more than 3,000 in 2015 (Aftandilian, 2015). A significant proportion of these operations were carried out by Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis ('Supporters of the Holy House'), which has been active since 2011 in the northern Sinai Peninsula and pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in November 2014 under the name Wilayat Sinai (WS) (Kingsley, 2014).

The situation for the Egyptian security forces was made more difficult by the fact that the Islamic State was a role model not only for fundamentalists operating in the Sinai. The July 2015 bomb attack on the Italian consulate in downtown Cairo was the first time that the Islamic State made itself known in Egypt, and it has claimed responsibility for 19 other attacks in the Egyptian mainland as of May 2017, operating as a separate organisation from Wilayat Sinai (CBS News, 2015; Joscelyn, 2017).

In addition, the exclusion of Bedouin from the Egyptian armed and law enforcement forces in the Sinai Peninsula has also had the consequence of Bedouin being seen as outsiders to the security forces, depriving government forces of a wealth of valuable information (McGregor, 2016). This distrust was then made impossible by the aforementioned government strategy of viewing the Bedouin as essentially targets and not civilians to be protected. As a result, the brutal and spectacular executions of terrorists discouraged even the few Bedouins who would have been willing to cooperate in the face of any official protection. Conversely, the closure of border smuggling tunnels has made the livelihoods of many tribes impossible for lack of suitable economic alternatives, further increasing their anger towards the government and making some of them more receptive to terrorist recruitment (Graham and Harrison, 2015). Others, by contrast, have preferred to benefit from the militias, who have paid them to serve as guides and hide them from the security forces in the rugged terrain of Sinai (Awad and Hashem, 2015).

Another marked difference compared to the first two waves was the choice of targets. The attacks, which have become spectacularly more sophisticated, have now been predominantly directed against military and security facilities and state employees (e.g. police, soldiers, judges, politicians, etc.), mostly in cities in the northern Sinai (Medhat and King, 2017; BBC News, 2017a). Among the much more intense wave of

violence against individuals and institutions that embody the Egyptian state, the bomb attack by the Islamic State in Egypt on a building of the Egyptian internal security forces in the Shubra al-Kheima district of Qalyubia in 2015 stood out. August 20, 2015, which resulted in 29 people being injured (Ahram Online, 2015). attacks on fortified military checkpoints at Sheikh Zuweid and Al-Arish on 24 October 2015, or when a series of attacks, involving the active participation of some 300-500 militants, in an unprecedented manner and proportion, on more than 15 military and police posts simultaneously in July 2015, so violent and coordinated that the fundamentalists could only be forced to retreat by air power (Kirkpatrick, 2014; BBC News, 2015a).

The temporary capture of the town of Sheikh Zuweid, as well as the changes in tactics, methods and means used, and the high number of casualties, are the reasons why the post-2011 events in Sinai are increasingly described in the literature as a kind of insurgency (MEMO, 2020). At the same time, the undoubted manifestation of territorial ambitions was a reflection of the tactics used by the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. It is precisely the latter that has raised the terror threat to a higher level, as the armed struggle with the central power has now been spectacularly complemented by the terrorists' need for geographical visibility and identifiability.

For these reasons, the majority of Islamist armed groups have increasingly sought over time not to carry out indiscriminate attacks against local civilian targets, as they do not wish to collectively turn the civilian population against them. Indeed, Egyptian society is generally very tolerant, and the majority of Egyptians disapprove of attacks against their fellow citizens, regardless of religious affiliation (Grinberg and Sirgany, 2017). The clear decrease in terrorist attacks, however, did not mean that terrorists did not target civilians at all, but rather that they did. They regularly took victims in retaliation and/or as a deterrent, mainly among those suspected of collaborating with Egyptian army units. For example, Wilayat Sinai abducted 10 civilians in Amoriyah village on 17 March 2019, six of whom were later released. Weeks later, the terrorist group kidnapped another four civilians and massacred several others on the roadside, causing extreme terror. On 23 December 2020, three fishermen were taken to an unknown location. The extremist group has now claimed responsibility for the abduction and execution of 16-year-old Ahmed Faraj Suleiman Faraj al-Kiki, accused of collaborating with the security authorities (Sinai Foundation for Human Rights, 2021). Wilayat Sinai, notorious for its links with the security forces, kidnapped 14 members¹⁴ of the al-Dawaghra tribe in April 2021, two of whom were later executed (Naguib, 2021).

However, the background to the attacks on the Coptic Christian community already showed some variation in the motivation of the terrorists. Wilayat Sinai, for example, carried out attacks against the community largely because of their perceived or real links with the Egyptian authorities, resulting in virtually all Christian families being forced to flee their homes in Sinai (Human Rights Watch, 2019). In contrast, the Islamic

¹⁴ According to independent and opposition Arab media sources, it was 15 people.



State in Egypt, following Islamic State instructions, considered them a legal target simply because they were Christian and carried out several major suicide attacks or brutal raids against them, or their holy sites, despite the terror group's own "emir" acknowledging the backlash from the attacks and the resulting loss of popularity of jihadist ideology (also) within Egyptian society (Joscelyn, 2017).

The intensity of the terrorist attacks has been demonstrated by the fact that in less than a year, more than 100 Christians have been killed in attacks on Coptic churches, including the suicide bombing of St. Peter and St. Paul's Church in Cairo in December 2016, the simultaneous bombing in Alexandria and Tanta during Easter 2017, the massacre of 29 passengers on a bus to a monastery in central Egypt in May 2017, and the shooting at the St. Menas Coptic Church in Helwan in 2017. Finally, the gunmen did not shy away from the extreme use of violence against Muslims who they believed fell outside the rigid criteria set by the extremist religious views of the terrorist group.

The blatant terrorist attack that took place on 24 November 2017 at one of the largest Sufi affiliated al-Rawda mosques was a chilling testimony to this. In the bloodiest terrorist attack in Egypt's history, a group of around 40 assailants killed 311 people, including 27 children, and injured 128 others among Muslim worshippers gathered for Friday prayers (Egyptian Streets, 2017).

Egyptian fundamentalists have not completely abandoned their actions against foreign individuals and interests. If sporadic, terrorist attacks have continued against foreign ships crossing the Suez Canal, international observers, and foreign citizens and tourists. Among the latter, the incident of the Russian Metrojet Airbus A321-231, which crashed over the Sinai Peninsula on 31 October 2015 was a notable case (France 24, 2015). Two separate attacks in May 2022, which claimed at least 16 Egyptian soldiers as victims, were also a warning sign (Reuters, 2022). The militia raids took place on the eastern edge of the Suez Canal, raising questions about the Cairo government's ability to guarantee the safety and security of ships using the canal.

The Sisi Government's Counter-Terrorism Strategy

Already in 2014, after taking the presidential oath of office, President Sisi made a clear commitment to a military solution to the terrorist threat (Saleh and Fick, 2014). Accordingly, the Egyptian armed forces conducted operations in the Sinai Peninsula to dismantle militant groups and drive out fundamentalists in Rafah, Sheikh Zuweid, Al-Arish and other Sinai cities, which could be divided into several main phases.

The first phase started as early as October 2014, when President Sisi declared a state of emergency in the northern half of the peninsula in response to the attacks of Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis on 24 October, as mentioned above. Operations were then predominantly concentrated in the cities of Rafah and Sheikh Zuweid. The Egyptian

army sought to dismantle the activities of the militants there at the time by creating a 1,000-metre buffer zone along a 13.5-kilometre stretch of the Gaza-Rafah border by systematically cutting off basic services (such as water, electricity, internet, and mobile phone services), destroying some 1,500 homes and forcibly displacing more than 3,200 families (Kirkpatrick, 2015). However, despite the increased security measures, jihadist attacks continued, while support for the Egyptian army steadily declined due to the rising number of casualties from air and artillery strikes, and the deepening humanitarian crisis in some districts of Sheikh Zuweid and Rafah, which became more critical due to food and medicine shortages following the establishment of military checkpoints and the introduction of a curfew (Hashem, 2014; The New Arab, 2018; Wagoner, 2019. p. 7).

The second phase was launched on 3 September 2015, when Wilayat Sinai launched a missile attack against an Egyptian navy ship in the waters off the Gaza Strip city of Rafah (BBC News, 2015b). In retaliation, the Egyptian armed forces launched a comprehensive military operation dubbed 'Martyrs' Law' four days later to identify and neutralise the terrorists (Eleiba, 2015). However, the deployment of Egyptian soldiers only further escalated the belligerence of Wilayat Sinai, which became even more determined to attack members of the army and security forces. Thus, although Egyptian security forces have managed to eliminate hundreds of terrorists, including Abu Duaa al-Ansary himself, the commander of Wilayat Sinai, the terrorist organisation has proven capable of constant renewal with the emergence of new leaders and the replacement of lost members. Its ability to remain effective was demonstrated by the fact that in the autumn of 2017 alone, hundreds of people were killed in attacks such as the one that took place in September in the northern Sinai town of Al-Arish (18 policemen killed) (Sakr, 2017), in October in and around the town of Sheikh Zuweid (at least six soldiers killed) (Al-Jazeera, 2017), and in the bank robbery in Al-Aris (8 dead, 17 million Egyptian pounds¹⁵ in loot) (Al-Monitor, 2017), or the massacre at the Al-Rawda mosque mentioned above. The latter, in particular, highlighted the fact that, as a de facto result of the military operations, the gradual expansion of the terrorist organisation's radius of action had already begun at that time, as its operational area from the northern part of the peninsula gradually expanded to the western parts of the region. This trend was even more pronounced in the third wave, with one of the most recent attacks taking place in Ismailia against a police checkpoint in late December 2022 (Al-Jazeera, 2022).

The failure of the first two phases to produce the expected decisive breakthrough led the Egyptian leadership to change its tactics by launching the third phase, dubbed 'Operation Sinai 2018', in early February 2018 to retaliate against the attack on al-Rawda Mosque just a few months earlier. The scope of the new, comprehensive military campaign extended beyond Sinai to the Nile and Delta valleys and the Western Desert. In addition to ground forces, navy and air force, police and border guard units were

¹⁵ At the time of the bank robbery, the exchange rate of 1 US dollar was equal to 17.6 Egyptian pounds.



also involved in the combined operations. The scale of the counter-terrorism operations was further illustrated by the fact that the Egyptian government, with Israel's approval, more than doubled the number of its military forces in the Sinai Peninsula in just one year, with 88 battalions and 42,000 troops deployed in 2018 (Bassist, 2021).

However, in parallel to the military operations, the Sisi government has already sought cooperation with local tribal leaders, several of whom have been successfully involved in the fighting on its side under the auspices of the Sinai Tribal Alliance (Al-Monitor, 2020). However, the Sinai presence of fundamentalists has not been completely eradicated. The tribal groups in the alliance have sometimes fiercely competed with each other for greater influence, as well as for greater logistical support and the acquisition of modern equipment. The tribes, often with different interests and potential, therefore sought to establish and maintain their own lines of communication with the army, while exercising exclusive control over their territories and not allowing any armed men from other tribes to enter. All this made it extremely difficult for the allied tribes to coordinate their operations effectively (Al-Monitor, 2022).

This division and the decline of the Egyptian army's presence in Sinai was the main reason why, despite the heavy losses suffered, Wilayat Sinai's effectiveness continued to increase over time. This was demonstrated by, among other things, the expansion of the terrorist organisation's operational radius, the sophistication of the weapons it deployed and the increasing sophistication of the tactics it employed. In addition, successful attacks on high-priority, highly protected targets have also demonstrated their ability to infiltrate the Egyptian armed forces, where they have been able to obtain highly sensitive information and use it for their own purposes. This was the case, for example, with the most recent bomb attack in November 2022 that killed, along with three members of a pro-government Bedouin militia, Lieutenant Colonel Assem Mohamed Essameldin, leader of the 103rd Thunderbolt Battalion, one of the most famous units of the Egyptian Special Forces. It was particularly thought-provoking that Essameldin was the third commander of this counter-terrorism unit to be assassinated by fundamentalists in less than six years (Naguib, 2022).

All of these factors have combined to enable terrorists to move, in less than a decade and a half, from explosive and suicide attacks against urban soft targets with improvised explosive devices to a kind of structured low-medium level insurgency, in which the fight is now predominantly directed against hard targets with rockets and heavy weapons (Ashour, 2015). The guerrilla warfare with mobile units, based on 'hit and run' tactics, also highlighted the inability of the Egyptian military leadership to completely break away from traditional warfare. Strategic decision making remains largely based in Cairo, while there is a lack of a joint special operations command capable of dynamic response and autonomous mission execution in the areas most exposed to terrorist threats (McManus, 2020). The lack of a more flexible chain of command, the necessary experience, and the willingness/readiness to adapt may have led to an asymmetric fight against terrorists at a very high cost to the security forces,

despite their vast superiority. The latter was well illustrated by President Sisi's admission that in the nearly nine years since he came to power in 2013, more than 3,000 military and police personnel have lost their lives, more than 12,000 soldiers have suffered permanent injuries that have prevented them from returning to active duty, and the amount of money spent by the army to eradicate terrorism has exceeded 80 billion Egyptian pounds (Hendawi, 2022).

Impacts and Consequences of the Terrorist Threat

The instability, particularly in the Sinai Peninsula, has had negative social and economic consequences at national level. If we add to this the global events and processes (such as the Covid-19 epidemic or the Russian-Ukrainian war) that have recently hit Egypt, the urgency of finding a calming solution to the security and economic situation as soon as possible becomes clear.

In the short term, the first and most obvious consequences of the current terrorism are reflected in the destruction of property, the cost of repairing/rebuilding damaged buildings and infrastructure, the lack of investment in areas at risk of terrorist attacks, the loss of life in the labour market, etc, in the cost of treating the injured and providing long-term care for the permanently injured, in the outflow of labour and the increase in unemployment, or in the horrendous expenditure by the government on the operation and development of state agencies for the prevention of terrorist acts.

These aspects are almost universal to all regions affected by terrorism. In the case of Egypt, on the other hand, the impact on the tourism sector has a number of specific characteristics. As mentioned earlier, Moscow imposed a ban on direct charter flights to and from Egyptian tourist destinations after the Russian Metrojet Airbus A321-231 crashed over the Sinai Peninsula on 31 October 2015 with 224 people on board after take-off from Sharm al-Sheikh (France 24, 2015). Its example was followed by several European countries, causing the country's tourism revenues to fall by almost 50% to just under \$3.8 billion in 2016 (Trading Economics, n. d.).¹⁶ In the following years, there has been spectacular progress in this area thanks to security improvements at Egyptian airports and the voluntary devaluation of the Egyptian pound,¹⁷ which has made holidays in Egypt much cheaper for foreigners. However, the full recovery of the sector was set back first by the Cairo attacks in 2019 and then again by the pandemic and the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war. In the wake of these events, the need to avert

¹⁶ The decline is even more significant if we consider that in 2010, around 14 million foreign tourists visited the country, which at that time represented a revenue of USD 12.5 billion (13% of GDP) for the Egyptian economy (Neszmélyi, 2019, p. 4.).

¹⁷ The devaluation of the Egyptian pound is illustrated by the fact that while 1 US dollar was worth 7.83 Egyptian pounds at the beginning of 2016, a year later it was worth 18.9 Egyptian pounds. The Egyptian currency then fluctuated between 18.050 and 15.3 until the beginning of 2022, when it plummeted again. Currently, 1 US dollar is equivalent to 30.850 Egyptian pounds.



possible terrorist attacks has become a priority, given the sector's significant contribution to the country's GDP. A major attack on a single new tourist destination would almost certainly aggravate the already unfavourable situation of the sector, reducing the country's foreign exchange reserves, making it more difficult to recover and increasing unemployment.

In addition to tourism, particular attention should be paid to protecting shipping traffic through the Suez Canal. Any attack here would also have a negative impact on the country's economy. Indeed, the loss of foreign ships would significantly reduce revenues from canal tolls, which, for example, amounted to \$704 million in July 2022 alone, thanks to a significant boom in transit traffic for various types of vessels (Egypt Independent, 2022).

The fight against terrorism can also have several important political consequences. As we have pointed out before, President Sisi has made a strong commitment to eradicate terrorism by armed force, so failure to achieve decisive results could call into question both his personal charisma and his promises in the minds of many Egyptians. Discontent against his person may be fuelled by the fact that, instead of resounding successes, there has been a reduction in civil society and personal freedoms, and a narrowing of political space. Thus, counter-terrorism measures have effectively blurred the lines between fundamentalist militants and the broader political opposition, with thousands of perceived or real members of the Muslim Brotherhood imprisoned for invoking them, while journalists and bloggers have been detained for criticising government policies and civil rights activists for demanding freedoms and organising riots/demonstrations (Khalifa, 2017). This has given rise to theories that, for example, the Muslim Brotherhood's repression and the protracted fight against terrorism actually serve the political interests of the Cairo leadership by helping to increase support for the current political establishment among non-Islamist members of society who increasingly see President Sisi as a defender of the regime (Hassan-Mattingly-Nugent, 2022). They can also divert public attention from the atrocities and failures of structural reform and help build a sense of national unity among disaffected Egyptians by amplifying nationalist rhetoric (Dentice, 2018b). Other theories argue that President Sisi is using the fight against terrorism to reinforce his international legitimacy and maintain foreign aid by portraying himself as a key player in preserving regional stability (Al-Anani, 2023).

The Egyptian president's statement in January 2023 that he had succeeded in completely eliminating the terrorist presence in the North Sinai Governorate should also be treated with caution (El-Din, 2023). In fact, there have been no major incidents in the conflict-ridden northern zones, which are at risk of intense armed clashes since August 2022. However, this does not mean that there have not been more incidents in other parts of the peninsula. The armed raid on a military vehicle in St. Catherine, South Sinai, on 27 February 2023, clearly showed that the militia groups had at best only been

pushed out of their former stomping grounds, but that there was no sign of a definitive victory over them (Mada Masr, 2023).

The persistence of Wilayat Sinai may encourage other terrorist groups operating on the Egyptian mainland to continue their own activities. The latter include the other IS affiliates mentioned above, as well as groups such as the IS group, which was formed in 2014 and expanded in 2015. Ajnad Misr (“Soldiers of Egypt”), formed in 2015 and inactive since early August 2016, the Allied Popular Resistance Movement, formed in 2015 and active until August 2016, and Liwaa al-Thawra, formed in 2016 in the Menoufiya and Qalubiya governorates north of Cairo, or Hasm in Cairo, Fayoum governorate and Upper Egypt, which may be composed of younger ex-members of the Muslim Brotherhood who disagreed with the non-violence policies of their elders. These extremist groups primarily campaigned against the regime, thus predominantly targeting those who embodied/symbolized it - government officials and police officers - and did not select their victims because of their religious or ideological beliefs. The Hasm's determination in this area was illustrated, among others, by the assassination attempts in 2016 alone against former Grand Mufti Ali Gomaa, Deputy Attorney General Zakaria Abdel Aziz, and Judge Ahmed Aboul Fotouh, who was one of the judges who sentenced Islamist ex-president Morsi to 20 years in prison (El-Gundy, 2018; Ouf, 2017; Reuters, 2016). And his resilience was spectacularly demonstrated when his supporters killed at least 55 police officers in an oasis town some 80 miles southwest of Cairo when authorities raided their hideout on 20 October 2017 (Raghavan and Mahfouz, 2017).

Conclusion

The results of the fight against terrorism in Egypt can be assessed as effective, but not decisive, based on the experience of recent years. Although the number of terrorist attacks has clearly decreased in recent years, terrorist organisations have nevertheless managed not only to maintain but even to increase their operational capabilities. In fact, even this increased potential is not sufficient to overthrow the Cairo leadership, as the majority of society rejects fundamentalism, and the security services remain very strong. However, the terrorists' very ability to carry out sustained attacks can create adverse conditions that could make it extremely difficult, for example, to recover the country's critically strained economy. The reconstruction and development projects that the Egyptian state has announced and implemented since 2014, totalling some 610 billion Egyptian pounds, to connect the Sinai Peninsula with the hinterland of the Suez Canal, improve infrastructure and improve living conditions, are therefore exceptionally significant.

One of the biggest flaws in the Cairo government's security-oriented strategy since 2013 is that it is fundamentally short-term in its focus on "only" achieving quick and spectacular successes over terrorists. As a result, as a kind of symptomatic treatment,



it is essentially limited to preventing terrorist acts and containing insurgency, rather than seeking substantive solutions to the root causes. Thus, instead of unilateral, mainly reactive military responses - i.e., counter-terrorism raids and tracking down fundamentalists - it would be essential to see the state as a partner rather than an adversary by stopping abuses, ensuring decent living conditions and giving local populations greater political freedom, which would provide an excellent opportunity to deprive extremists of the possibility of recruiting new activists. This, however, makes it essential to implement a fundamental paradigm shift from a security-focused fight against terrorism to a development-focused strategy to address economic, social and economic problems.

Conflict of Interest

The authors hereby declare that no competing financial interest exists for this manuscript.

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