

Egypt's Counterinsurgency Success in Sinai

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Brief Analysis

The military's shift to tribal engagement has helped reduce jihadist attacks, but Cairo's lagging efforts on development and human rights could leave the peninsula open to a future resurgence.

On December 5, the Sinai Tribal Union (STU) announced that it had killed two members of the Islamic State's so-called Sinai Province (Wilayat Sinai) in a joint operation with the Egyptian military. "The rest will have to wait...We are coming for you in your burrows," the group warned in Arabic. The incident followed other recent successes in stanching local militancy, culminating in the September surrender of leading IS figure Abu Hamza al-Qadi. Indeed, Cairo's expanded military cooperation with Bedouin tribes and other residents has played a decisive role in weakening Wilayat Sinai. Yet this success may not last unless Egypt does more to correct its longstanding neglect of the peninsula.

The Rise of Wilayat Sinai

Wilayat Sinai emerged in November 2014, when the jihadist group Ansar Beit al-Maqdis pledged allegiance to IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Over the next year, attacks in Sinai increased by about 130 percent and fatalities rose 250 percent, according to statistics from the Global Terrorism Database.

The group's largest operation occurred on July 1, 2015, when at least 300 fighters assaulted the town of Sheikh Zuwaid and briefly held it before Egyptian reinforcements and airpower repulsed them. The army sustained around sixty-four casualties in the fight. Smaller-scale assaults were still occurring as late as July 2020, when the group occupied four villages. Displaced residents were unable to return until the military dislodged the jihadists that October. The group has also executed notorious terrorist attacks, most notably the 2015 bombing of Russian Metrojet Flight 9268, which killed 224 people.

During its peak, Wilayat Sinai drew on several sources for its strength, none more important than its tribal connections. Many of its leaders hailed from the large Sawarka and Ramailat tribes and leveraged these ties to gain support and recruits. Years of neglect and discrimination by the central government had fueled profound grievances among the Bedouin. Employment in the police force or lucrative tourist industry was often closed to them, and Cairo's heavy-handed counterterrorism responses in 2004-2006 only heightened the animosity; for example, security forces detained members of certain clans en masse to bargain for the surrender of suspected terrorists. Jihadists took advantage of these grievances to turn locals toward militancy. (Though some clans, notably the Tarabin, continued working with the government on various matters, such as securing seventy-five polling stations for the 2012 election.)

Wilayat Sinai also benefited from smuggling activities that originated with Palestinian militant groups in Gaza (chiefly Hamas (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-iran-fuels-hamas-terrorism>)). Jihadists used these networks to acquire weapons (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hamas-and-islamic-state-growing-cooperation-sinai>), funds, and recruits. Similarly, access to seasoned IS members from Iraq and Syria brought important experience and technical know-how that helped the group boost its fighting capabilities, while the IS branch in Libya and its facilitators helped smuggle captured materiel from there to Sinai.

Egypt's Response and the Tribal Factor

After Abdul Fattah al-Sisi ascended to power in 2014, Egypt adopted a brutal approach to stemming Sinai militancy. Intensified military operations began that October with a scorched-earth strategy aimed at dismantling Gaza-Sinai smuggling networks. While creating a 1,000-meter buffer zone along the Gaza border, Egyptian forces destroyed up to 2,000 houses, razed hundreds of hectares of farmland, and evicted 3,200 families from their homes. The government promised compensation for these losses, but many residents have yet to receive it.

Despite the harsh crackdown, Wilayat Sinai intensified its activity, spurring Cairo to deploy more forces to the peninsula in September 2015. Israel even assented to Egypt exceeding 26,000 personnel in Sinai, the maximum established in their 1979 peace treaty. By early 2018, eighty-eight Egyptian battalions with 42,000 soldiers were operating there, effectively remilitarizing the peninsula. Meanwhile, Israel has conducted airstrikes in Sinai at various points and shared intelligence with Cairo.

Yet even these drastic military efforts failed to improve the situation, mainly because Egyptian forces were unable to win local support. Sisi's initial crackdown had left many residents homeless, unemployed, and prospectless—an environment that Wilayat Sinai readily exploited.

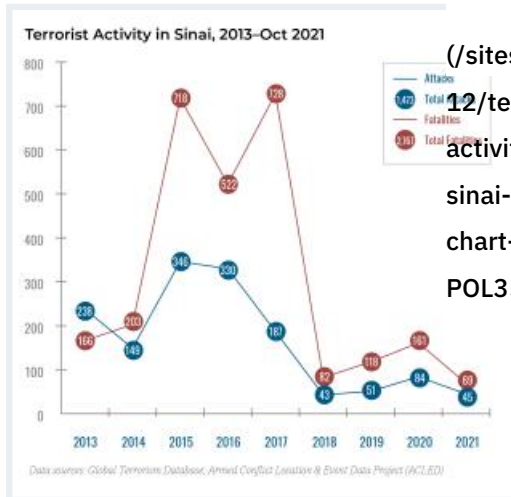
The opportunity to turn the tide came as the group adopted a more hostile approach to the tribes, carrying out dozens of kidnappings, beheadings, and hit-and-run attacks in order to break their authority over local communities and prevent them from cooperating with the army. In May 2017, Sinai's largest clans—the Tarabin, Sawarka, and Ramailat, among others—jointly declared war on the jihadists.

Egypt soon seized on this opportunity, launching “Operation Sinai 2018” in February of that year. In addition to renewing the military campaign, this operation focused on working closely with locals—a course of action that U.S. officials had been urging for years, echoing the tribal approach used in the 2007 Iraq “surge.”

Today, STU forces and “armed civilian groups”—local residents provided with funding and weapons by the military—routinely help army personnel in securing checkpoints, sharing intelligence, and raiding jihadist targets. One instructive example is the army-backed “Battalion 103” in Sheikh Zuwaid, composed of residents who receive a monthly wage from the army and carry out arrests, interrogations, patrols, and identification of terrorist suspects. Further, the army has been more willing to address complaints of abuse; for example, soldiers responded to one

such instance by arresting five members of an army-backed local group and issuing leaflets at checkpoints apologizing for the incident.

This shift—coupled with the decimation of IS “provinces” in other countries and the decrease in smuggling after Hamas cracked down on IS supporters in Gaza—contributed to a sharp decline in Wilayat Sinai’s terrorist activities. Attacks fell from 330 in 2016 to 187 in 2017, and then to a low of 43 in 2018. After increasing slightly in 2019-2020, they fell back to 45 as of October 2021. The expanded presence of local patrols has generally precluded large-scale attacks; most incidents now consist of kidnappings or sniper shootings. Fatalities have plummeted as a result—as of October, 69 people had been killed in 2021, or just 9 percent of the 728 killed in 2017.



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Despite its success in decreasing attacks, Egypt’s strategy has serious shortcomings. The military regularly shuts down internet and electricity services to disrupt insurgent communications, a practice that disproportionately affects innocent residents and perpetuates media blackouts. In addition, economic development and reconstruction efforts in devastated areas continue to lag despite years of lofty promises from Cairo. Some promising steps have been taken—such as completing eleven residential agricultural development projects and rebuilding Rafah, which the army razed in 2015—but much more needs to be done. Meanwhile, human rights NGOs have accused the Egyptian military of extrajudicial killings against unarmed people, as well as indiscriminate fire and bombings that it covers up as “shootouts” with insurgents.

Policy Implications

Egypt has achieved considerable but precarious success in its Sinai counterinsurgency campaign. To maintain momentum against the jihadists, Cairo needs to sustain and even deepen its cooperation with locals while investing more in development projects. Longstanding Bedouin grievances against the government remain mostly unresolved—indeed, it was largely Wilayat Sinai’s hostility toward the tribes that pushed them to the army’s side, not Egyptian overtures. If Sisi’s government continues neglecting the Sinai, it may find itself with less cooperative tribal partners and more militancy.

For their part, U.S. officials should continue **raising concerns (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/top-agenda-items-us-egypt-strategic-dialogue>)** with Cairo over its human rights record in the peninsula. As American forces have learned in other countries, the Sinai insurgency reaffirms that heavy-handed military efforts alone tend to exacerbate conflict, while focusing on the population’s well-being can yield important gains. Egypt has previously taken steps toward a better approach in response to U.S. pressure—see for instance the Obama administration’s 2013-2015 freeze on arms sales and subsequent prioritization of counterterrorism equipment in Foreign Military Financing purchases. Washington should make clear that its support is contingent on Cairo

continuing down this path.

More broadly, as U.S. adversaries attempt to [court \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hanging-idlib-hayat-tahrir-al-shams-expanding-tribal-engagement\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hanging-idlib-hayat-tahrir-al-shams-expanding-tribal-engagement) and [coopt \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/islamic-state-threat-syria-two-years-after-caliphate\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/islamic-state-threat-syria-two-years-after-caliphate) tribal groups throughout the Middle East, Egypt's campaign against Wilayat Sinai is further vindication of American counterinsurgency efforts in Iraq and Syria. After a hard learning process, the shift to properly incorporating civil affairs and tribal engagement into military campaigns has produced tangible gains. Yet maintaining long-term relations with newly empowered local populations is crucial—otherwise, losing touch with local partners can lead to disasters such as the IS sweep through Iraqi tribal areas in 2014.

Ido Levy is an associate fellow with The Washington Institute's Military and Security Studies Program. ❖

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