

Jihadists on the Nile: The Return of Old Players

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Brief Analysis

Washington should work with -- and pressure -- Cairo to counter the country's growing jihadist threat.

Jihadist groups are emerging as a major threat in Egypt because of three developments: the permissive atmosphere for Islamist mobilization in general since Hosni Mubarak's February 2011 ouster, the ruling Muslim Brotherhood's tolerance toward its fellow Islamists, and the weakness of the Egyptian state. To help inhibit violence by such groups, Washington should approach Cairo with a mix of economic inducements, diplomatic pressure, and intelligence sharing.

KEY JIHADIST GROUPS AND FIGURES

Following the 2011 revolution, the military junta that replaced Mubarak granted amnesty to many Islamists, including individuals with blood on their hands. Many of these figures renounced violence, and some established political parties, but others remain completely unreformed. These latter jihadists are radicalizing Egypt's domestic political scene and threatening U.S. interests.

Two Egyptian "Ansar al-Sharia" groups, whose names echo those of other regional jihadist organizations, are particularly worth noting. Gamaat Ansar al-Sharia in Egypt (ASE), which was founded in mid-October 2012, focuses on internal "reform," including application of sharia, compensation for the martyrs of the revolution, purging the judiciary and media, allowing bearded officers, and not relying on *riba* (usury) in financial transactions. Similar to the Ansar outfits in Tunisia and Benghazi, Libya, ASE runs local community services such as distributing sheep for ritual slaughter during the Eid al-Adha holiday and providing food for the needy.

By contrast, al-Taliah al-Salafiyah al-Mujahediyah Ansar al-Sharia (TSM), which was formed this month but officially declared in mid-November, is more internationally focused. Run by former members of Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) who post their press releases to al-Qaeda-affiliated online forums, it emphasizes liberating foreign-occupied Muslim lands, supporting foreign mujahedin, resisting the foreign ideologies of liberalism and communism, repelling the

implementation of secular laws from Europe, and stopping the "Christianization" of Egyptian education. Unlike ASE, TSM does not publicize any social services that it provides; much of its public profile since Mubarak's ouster has been in the form of articles, books, and fatwas regarding the Egyptian transition.

Meanwhile, the emergence of former EIJ figure Muhammad al-Zawahiri, brother of al-Qaeda leader Ayman, has given these groups a public face. Zawahiri was released from prison in March 2012 and has since promoted the global jihadist worldview through local and international press interviews. While he denies being an al-Qaeda member, he agrees with its ideological outlook and, through Twitter, instigated last year's September 11 protests outside the U.S. embassy in Cairo that culminated with the breaching of the compound's walls and desecration of the U.S. flag. He also cooperated with TSM's Ahmed Ashoush to plan Salafi jihadist participation in an early November demonstration in support of sharia. And in December, he catalyzed a boycott of the constitutional referendum, criticizing the Muslim Brotherhood's "sharia sins" and arguing that the new charter was insufficiently Islamist.

While these groups and figures have only small followings -- as evidenced by the unimpressive turnout at their occasional Tahrir Square sharia protests -- there is substantial risk that they will gain followers in the coming months. The relative openness of post-Mubarak Egypt has afforded them unprecedented opportunities for proselytizing. Moreover, they will likely draw followers away from Salafist political parties, whose members may become disillusioned with a political process that they already view as a "necessary evil."

Egypt's declining internal security will give jihadists ample recruitment opportunities as well. Instability in the Sinai could also provide them with new training grounds, allowing them to return to their Nile Valley communities with newly developed skills for attacking civilians or the state. In addition, instability in northern Sinai and attacks against Israel could jeopardize the bilateral peace treaty.

CAIRO'S RESPONSE

The Egyptian government has done little thus far to curtail the jihadist emergence. While neither the military nor the Muslim Brotherhood wants to see jihadist groups rise, both fear the domestic political repercussions of taking them on too directly; in particular, the Brotherhood is worried that confronting fellow Islamists would benefit its Salafist competitors. The military further views the problem as a policing issue for which the Interior Ministry is primarily responsible.

To date, very few arrests have been made with regard to jihadist weapons smuggling through Egypt to Sinai. Government operations in the peninsula proper have not made an appreciable difference, with some claiming that many of the individuals killed or arrested have actually been Bedouin tribesmen, not jihadists. Further, if reports are true that Egypt's Jamal Network has connections to last year's attack on the U.S. diplomatic compound in Benghazi, nothing has been done to verify the claim or help Washington prosecute these individuals. Cairo has also failed to investigate the nature of the relationship between Muhammad al-Zawahiri and his brother. Such inquiries could go a long way toward better understanding the intentions and transnational connections of Egypt's jihadists.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

To address the emerging jihadist problem in Egypt, Washington should use different tools for different actors -- namely, demobilization, intelligence sharing, and economic opportunity. First, working through the Muslim Brotherhood, the United States must encourage a demobilization program to co-opt jihadists and bring them into the political process. To be sure, Egypt does not have sufficient funds to fully copy the Saudis, who have been able to "reprogram" extremists through provision of money, housing, and wives, among other things. Yet it could adopt one aspect of the Saudi program: using mainstream clerics from al-Azhar to convince jihadists that their interpretations of certain Islamic sources are faulty. High-ranking members of al-Gamaa al-Islamiyah (GI) who demobilized in the late 1990s should also be part of such discussions, as should former EIJ members who accepted GI's revisions.

This policy would not necessarily show results immediately, but it could stem further growth in jihadism as well as peel away individuals whose ideological commitment is soft. Demobilized jihadists could then be given a legitimate means of airing their grievances. The goal would be to replicate the case of GI and ex-EIJ actors who have established or joined political parties. Jihadists who accept this path would be given a clean slate, while those who reject it would be made to understand the consequences: that they would be tracked by intelligence and arrested if they gave any sign of planning violence in or outside Egypt.

Second, Washington should coordinate with Israel on providing intelligence to Egyptian authorities in order to help them identify and monitor jihadists. Although many jihadists have not engaged in violence since being freed from prison, the ability to quickly shut down their networks is imperative given the likelihood that they will return to such activities down the road. Mapping their networks would also help determine the extent to which Nile Valley-based jihadists are contributing to Sinai's instability. If Cairo does arrest such suspects, it must try them based on the rule of law. Egypt currently co-chairs the Global Counterterrorism Forum's Committee on the Rule of Law, so its partners in that body should provide guidance, led by the United States.

Third, as a long-term approach, Washington should work with Cairo to provide economic opportunities for underdeveloped areas. This would sap the narrative that any non-jihadist regime is "unjust," as well as co-opt individuals whose support for Salafi jihadism is soft. This is especially important in Sinai, since it could drain potential recruitment of individuals involved in smuggling networks. Specific measures could include building roads to neglected areas, constructing mobile and telecommunications networks, establishing new industrial zones, opening new educational and healthcare facilities, and giving locals an opportunity to participate in the tourism industry instead of providing land and contracts to mainland Egyptians with government connections.

For this three-part approach to work, Washington must persuade Cairo that it is in Egypt's best interests. The United States should also provide economic and diplomatic inducements and disincentives. For example, if Cairo does not cooperate, President Muhammad Morsi should not be allowed to visit the White House; if, however, the government takes consistent actions over time, President Obama should consider a state visit to Egypt. Additionally, if the Muslim Brotherhood or military is unwilling to work with Washington on these issues, or if Morsi continues to call for the release of convicted terrorist Omar Abdul Rahman, the United States should hold, withdraw, or change the amount of aid it provides. Given how important the jihadist problem is to both Egyptian and U.S. interests, it should be a central component of bilateral relations.

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