

Sharm al-Shaykh Bombings:

The Egyptian Context

Aug 12, 2005



Brief Analysis

The July 23 bombings at Sharm al-Shaykh offered a harsh reminder that Egypt remains vulnerable to Islamists who see terrorism as their only viable means of affecting political change. The attacks, which left at least sixty-four dead and more than two hundred injured, were the deadliest to be carried out by Islamist extremists in the last two decades. And the participation of Sinai Bedouin youths in the attacks points to a dangerous development in terrorist activities in the region.

Major Egyptian Islamist Political Groups

Three major Islamist political groups are active in Egypt:

* The Muslim Brotherhood (MB). The longest established of the three, the MB dissociates itself from any terrorist activity and is more or less tolerated by the regime.

* The Jamaa Islamiyya, or Islamic Group (IG). Starting in 1992, the IG backed a terror campaign in the Nile River Valley against Egyptian officials and tourists. The campaign was aimed at weakening the regime of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak and responding to security forces' brutal treatment of Islamist militants. Local terrorists carried out the attacks in the Nile region, sparing Sinai from any serious incidents. In 1997, a desire to follow the MB's path to mainstream political legitimacy led the IG to halt the terror campaign with an unconditional ceasefire. Since then, IG leaders have published books preaching a nonviolent discourse, and Egypt saw a lull in terrorist attacks.

* Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ). In the late 1990s, EIJ leadership split over the issue of renouncing violence. The group's leaders inside Egypt preferred to follow the MB and IG on a nonviolent path, but the group's current leader and al-Qaeda's second in command, Ayman al-Zawahiri, refused to give up violence.

The October 2004 bombings in Taba heralded the start of a new terror campaign in Egypt. The campaign has continued with apparently related attacks on tourists in Cairo in April and the bombings at Sharm al-Shaykh. The MB firmly condemned the attacks, while the IG and the EIJ did not claim responsibility for these acts. Instead, three previously unknown groups claimed responsibility for the Taba and Sharm al-Shaykh attacks: the Abdalla Azzam Brigades of al-Qaeda in the Levant and Egypt, the Holy Warriors of Egypt, and the Egyptian Tawheed Wal Jihad Movement. Little is known about these new groups, which may not even exist. Established groups often claim responsibility for attacks under different names to evade government crackdowns.

Timing of the Bombings

The timing of the recent bombings have symbolic significance in Egyptian politics.

July 23 is the Egyptian national holiday, the anniversary of Gamal Abdel Nasser's 1952 coup that overthrew the monarchy; the current regime draws its legitimacy from the political order Nasser established. The Sharm al-Shaykh bombings were also timed to intrude on Mubarak's campaign for a fifth term as president in elections scheduled for

September 7. Just two days before the attacks, Mubarak delivered an address to the Military Academy touting the stability, security, democracy, and economic progress he provided Egyptians in the last two decades. And the attacks came two days before Mubarak officially declared his candidacy.

The Taba bombings took place on October 7, one day after the anniversary of the 1973 war between Egypt and Israel. Mubarak portrays himself as a hero of that war, and the Taba bombings struck a border town that is popular with Israeli tourists and a frequent site for Israeli-Arab peace talks.

Specificity of Sinai

The recent attacks were the first Islamist violence in the Sinai Peninsula and the first terrorist attacks in Sharm al-Shaykh, a city known as the most secure in Egypt. Indeed, Mubarak spends much of the year there, and the resort regularly hosts international conferences on the peace process and counterterrorism. Sharm al-Shaykh is also a tourist center, with about \$6 billion in revenues last year, and one of Egypt's leading sources of foreign currency.

The sophistication of the attacks in Taba and Sharm al-Shaykh could point to foreign involvement. Further, the groups that claimed responsibility for the bombings linked the attacks to the larger global jihadist movement against the West and its allies.

The logistics of the attack suggest the involvement of Sinai Bedouins. This marks the first Bedouin involvement in violence against the Egyptian state. Though Sinai Bedouins are part of the Egyptian social fabric, they see themselves as a distinct ethnic group -- Arabs with nomadic roots in Arabia, Jordan, and Palestine different from Nile Valley Egyptians, whose ancestors were farmers and who mainly claim descent from ancient Egyptians. The development of tourism in southern Sinai since the 1980s brought prosperity to the southern Bedouin tribes while the northern tribes were left without any significant source of legal income. Poor economic conditions and political frustration created ideal circumstances for extremist organizations to recruit militants among northern Sinai Bedouin youths. Young men from northern Sinai took part as terrorists in both the Taba and Sharm al-Shaykh bombings.

After the Taba bombings, human rights organizations reported that Egyptian security forces arrested up to 2,400 Bedouins, including women and children, out of a population of around 100,000. The crackdown radicalized some Bedouins, who became willing to collaborate in a vengeance against the state. Similar security measures used in the Nile Valley during the 1980s and 1990s led to a spiral of violence between security forces and supporters and families of suspected terrorists. The same seems to be happening now in Sinai.

The Sinai Peninsula is at the crossroads of Gaza, Israel, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. The collaboration of Sinai Bedouins with terrorist organizations could have dangerous consequences for the region.

The Bombings and Egyptian Politics

Assuming Mubarak starts a fifth term in office in September, he will have two options for addressing the new wave of terror.

First, Mubarak could use security imperatives and the war on terror to justify a continuing denial of genuine political reform. That was his pretext for the absence of democratic reform in the 1980s and 1990s -- indeed, Mubarak justified regressive steps, such as the Emergency Law, press restrictions, and barriers to political organization and public protest, as necessary measures to protect Egypt from religious extremism. These policies radicalized the Islamists and curtailed the democratic opposition's efforts to become a viable political alternative. Notably, the official Egyptian press has not used the latest attacks to justify the lack of democratic reform. Instead, it has focused on promoting the limited reforms Mubarak has allowed and countering opposition claims that these reforms are merely symbolic.

A much more viable solution to the problem of Egyptian political violence would be to offer genuine reform. Real political opening would provide an opportunity for the discontented to express their grievances within a democratic framework. Substantive reform would reduce the temptation to use violence to achieve political change. To be sure, tough security measures are necessary, but they are insufficient. If President Mubarak adopts them without real reform, Egypt risks the perpetual resurgence of violence.

Khairi Abaza is a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

Policy #1023

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

[\(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)

TOPICS

Terrorism (/policy-analysis/terrorism)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Egypt (/policy-analysis/egypt)