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The Geopolitics of Violent Extremism: The Case of Sinai

Giuseppe Dentice

EuroMeSCo

This series of Papers brings together the result of research projects presented at the EuroMeSCo Annual Conference 2017. On the occasion of the EuroMeSCo Annual Conference "Confronting Violent Extremism in the Euro-Mediterranean Region", held in Barcelona on 1-2 June 2017, distinguished analysts presented indeed their research proposals related to the phenomenon of violent extremism. The papers were articulated around the three main tracks that were discussed: the link between violent extremism and geopolitics, the complex nexus between violent extremism and populist, nationalist and islamophobic trends in EU countries on the one hand and authoritarian trends on the other, as well as policies and initiatives in the fields of preventing and countering radicalisation.

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The Geopolitics of Violent Extremism:
The Case of Sinai

*Giuseppe Dentice**

*Associate Research Fellow, Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), PhD Candidate in "Institutions and Politics" at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, Milan

Introduction

The emergence of the civil and proxy wars in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen and the "war on terror" against Islamic State in the Arab world has provoked both an implosion of some Middle East states and a breakdown of the old state system, exacerbating other chronic problems in the MENA region (political polarisation, authoritarianism, corruption, a lack of accountability and democracy, poverty high unemployment rates). Protests, dissent and violence erupted all over the region, but in some cases the "revolutions" have not had a positive epilogue. In Egypt, for instance, the uprisings against a dictatorial regime favoured a political change without a clear political horizon. In other cases, the power vacuum created the conditions for a long and uncertain civil war (such as in Libya, Yemen and Syria) or a deeper sectarian conflict (such as in Bahrain and Iraq) (Gause, 2014). The appearance of these issues in Arab societies has consequently exacerbated other typical problems within some countries of the region, creating ungoverned spaces, with inevitable consequences also for the security dimension. One of the most pressing challenges is the situation that affected the Sinai Peninsula, and particularly the northern part, which is the most problematic area in terms of terrorism, radicalism and economy (Sabry, 2015). After the fall of Mubarak in 2011, the region has experienced a deep political and securitarian crisis, gradually evolved "from a local struggle for autonomy to the latest frontline of jihadi extremism in the Middle East" (Burt, 2017).

Against this background, the Jihadist recruiters exploited these structural issues in convincing local populations that radical Islam/violent extremism "is the solution," the only way to solve social and political problems. In this context, Sinai's volatility represents a particular case study because it encompasses more than one of these factors of crisis and instability. In fact, since 2011, after the first Egyptian revolution, thousands of civilians, soldiers and militants have been killed by waves of state and non-state violence that have transformed the peninsula into a permanent conflict zone. This situation intensified social grievances and strong resentment against national authorities, fostering the growth of an extremist cultural brew that is leading local populations to adopt an ethnic radicalism (a Bedouin insurgency) or religious fanaticism closer to Salafist-Jihadism and, at the same time, transforming the hinterland of the state into an ungoverned space and a hotbed of violent extremism (Ahmed & Akins, 2012).

In regard to the escalation of terrorism, and viewing Sinai as a marginalised borderland, emerging research questions are: Why has terrorism escalated so dramatically in Sinai post-2013? Does the ungovernability of this particular area explain this new scenario as well as the difference in scale and scope of terrorism? Is Sinai a significant challenge to

the central government? What is the Egyptian government's response to the violence? Have armed/terrorist groups transformed a local insurgency? What are the implications for local populations and Near Eastern dynamics?

Through a historical and diachronic approach, this article aims to explore the roots of Sinai's instability and the evolution of violence from local insurgency to (trans-) national terrorism, as well as to define the new aspects of the "Sinai Question" and its regional spillover threats.

The study begins with a brief theoretical premise on the term "terrorism", defining its meanings in order to put terrorist events in an appropriate context of Sinai's security problems and local grievances. The article then looks briefly at the historical and geographical background to introduce the complex ongoing dynamics in Sinai. It then attempts to underline and explain the causal grounds for Sinai's instability. On this basis, the analysis focuses on the most significant actors in the area and especially on Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis [ABM] (Supporters for Jerusalem), its terror operations and evolution up to its pledge of alliance to Islamic State (IS). The final part describes the risks for Egypt and its immediate neighbours, laying out some critical issues to define an alternative level of governability in the Sinai Peninsula.

The research and analysis of the context are largely based on existing academic literature and media reports on Sinai. Moreover, the study explores the causes of this deep crisis that could produce terrorism, investigating the relationship between independent (the "Sinai Question") and dependent (terrorism) variables. The sources of the data collected are based on freely available databases/datasets that all reported Sinai-linked militant attacks.

The Meaning of "Terrorism"? A Brief Introduction

Before addressing any of the problems this case study deals with, we need to define a minimal standard for the term "terrorism" and to put terrorist events in an appropriate context in order to understand the Sinai context and to explore the nature of this type of political violence. Firstly, it is important to note that there is no consensus on the concept and that there are different definitions for "terrorism". Moreover, some definitions are very ambiguous and others are defined according to particular cases of terrorism.

According to the Encyclopædia Britannica, terrorism is "the systematic use of violence to create a general climate of fear in a population and thereby to bring about a particular political objective" (Jenkins, 2016). In its popular understanding, the term "terrorism" refers to an act that is wrong, evil, illegitimate, illegal and a crime. In the 1990s the United Nations attempted to define the term, its acts, methods and practices stating: "Criminal acts intended or calculated to provoke a state of terror in the general public, a group of persons or particular persons for political purposes are in any circumstance unjustifiable, whatever the considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or any other nature that may be invoked to justify them" (United Nations General Assembly, 1994).

At the same time, it is more difficult to make a distinction between "terrorism" and "insurgency" because insurgents are one type of violent non-state actors (NSA) who may choose to use terrorism. According to the US Department of Defense, "insurgency" is used to define "the organized use of subversion and violence to seize, nullify, or challenge political control of a region. […] [Insurgents] do so through the use of force (including guerrilla warfare, terrorism and coercion/intimidation), propaganda, subversion and political mobilisation. Insurgents fight government forces only to the extent needed to achieve their political aims" (US Department of Defense, 2009, p. 6). Basically, "not all insurgents use terrorism, and not all terrorists are part of an insurgency. Further, while the use of violence by insurgents to target governments is driven by a particular ideology, terrorists use violence against a range of targets (including governments) to advance their ideology" (Forest, 2007, p. X).

Any attempt to examine this distinction in the case of Sinai could depend on the nature of the NSA operating in the area and the threat environment in that region. These groups have in many cases formed anti-government movements or ethnicity groups that have used several instruments of terrorism (employ hit-and-run attacks, ambushes, roadside bombings and indirect-fire attacks with rockets and mortars) to challenge the authority of the central state perceived as an "occupying power" or a "foreigner".

The militant threat in Sinai, especially in the northern part, is a persistent menace that goes hand in hand with extremism, which poses a long-term threat (Stewart, 2016). Indeed, after Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (ABM) swore allegiance to Islamic State and rebranded in Wilayat Sinai (WS), the group became the pole star in local Jihadism and "prefers to gain trans-national extremist support, in which the other local groups have either ceased to exist or have merged with the biggest organisation" (Awad & Hashem, 2015, p. 18). In this sense, ABM/WS is an insurgent group that uses terrorism as a method to accomplish a political goal.

Regardless of the diatribe on the use of "terrorist attack", this paper uses the definition of the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), which defines this term as "the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by a non-state actor to attain a political, economic, religious or social goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation" (Global Terrorism Database, p. 9). In this way, the best definition applicable to the situation in Sinai is that it is used in the methodology of the security report of the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP), which describes the nature of "terrorism" in Egypt as a phenomenon strictly connected to "the creation of a climate of fear [that] has the explicit intent to fundamentally alter existing power structures" (The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, 2015, p. 23).

According to the Global Terrorism Index 2016, Egypt is ranked number nine out of 130 with a score of 7.3/10 (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2016, p. 10), which reflects the brutality of terrorism as a phenomenon rooted in Egypt. While terrorist attacks that took place in Greater Cairo, Alexandria, the Western Desert, Fayoum, Beni Suef and Sharqiya have significantly declined since 2015, terrorism in Sinai has decreased only in the number of reported events. However, terrorist activities in Sinai have been viewed as a substantial problem on a large scale, although the perception of what is going on there is likely distorted due to the selective news filtered by the Egyptian government (Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, 2017).

A Historical and Geographical Overview

Sinai is a strategic territory and an important geopolitical space for Egypt. In fact, the peninsula is a bridgehead between Africa and Asia that also connects the Mediterranean Sea and Red Sea through the Suez Canal, one of the most important chokepoints through which revenue transits around 8-10 percent of global trade (including 3 percent of global oil supplies) and 15,000 ships a year (Middle East Petroleum & Economic Publications, 2017). After the Second World War, Sinai was involved in many political tensions: the aftermath of the 1948 war, the Suez Crisis in 1956, the Six-Day War in 1967 when Sinai was placed under Israeli control, the Yom Kippur War of 1973, during which Egypt sought to restore its sovereignty over the area and, finally, the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty (1979), which gave Sinai definitively to Egypt. Basically, following Israel's final withdrawal in 1982, Sinai has represented a buffer zone utilised to build trust and ensure peace between Egypt and Israel (Hart, 2016).

The Sinai Peninsula is sparsely populated (587,000 inhabitants), which amounts to less than 1 percent of the total Egyptian population, and most of them live in coastal areas. The Sinai Peninsula represents 6 percent of Egypt's total space with a land area of about 61,000 square kilometres. Administratively, Sinai is divided into two governorates of approximately equivalent space; 422,000 inhabit the northern part, which is the most populated area, while the southern part is inhabited by 165,000. Regardless of national official statistics on northern Sinai, poverty afflicts 16.2 percent (while the value for the entire region is 25.6 percent – latest survey in 1999) of Sinai inhabitants and 12.7 percent of them are unemployed (13.8 percent in the whole territory – latest survey in 2004). Moreover, according to the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics of Egypt (CAPMAS), 28.5 percent of the labour force is over 15 years old, 67.3 percent are employees in public sector/governmental structures, and 30 percent are employees in the informal sector (latest survey in 2004) (Knoema).

Bedouins are natives of the peninsula and concretely represent an Egyptian minority, with their culture and history different from the rest of the Egyptian population living on the mainland. Sinai Bedouins account for approximately 70 percent (some 360,000) of local inhabitants and possess a strong identity ethnically closer to Bedouin tribes in the Israeli Negev and in the Gaza Strip (International Crisis Group, 2007). They are semi-nomadic tribes, with ancient origins in the Arabian Peninsula. Many of them live in other countries of the MENA region, observing their intricate tribal code (*urf*) aimed at regulating order and justice in their ancestral lands independently from any political institutions. In defending their strong identity and independence from external interference, Bedouins view relations with the Egyptian government as based on mutual distrust and suspicion (Ahmed & Akins, 2012).

Nevertheless, the statistics do not represent the real conditions in northern Sinai because they do not show the global situation, i.e. that concerning the weakness of the state penetration into local society as well as the greater northern Sinai socioeconomic marginalisation compared to the southern more developed part.

Despite the political commitments planned by the Egyptian governments (including construction of an industrial zone and the development of new agricultural lands), Sinai remained in large part underdeveloped, particularly in the north of the peninsula. In fact, since the Israeli withdrawal in 1982 local communities have remained deeply excluded from these projects. The state penetration into northern Sinai society has been very limited economically, socially and politically. The only area of Sinai that has been developed is in the southern part of the peninsula, where Egypt built resort cities like Taba, Dahab, Ras al-Shaitan, Nuweiba and Sharm al-Sheikh. In this case, too, local populations have not benefited from revenues, which have instead enriched close partners of the Cairo government. In parallel, the Mubarak regime neglected northern Sinai, favouring a militarisation of the area bordering on the Gaza Strip and Israel in order to monitor threats coming from Egypt's eastern flank. This situation gave rise to great tensions, especially in the 1990s, when the Egyptian government increased its presence in Sinai (International Crisis Group, 2007).

Causes of Violence in Sinai

The structural dimension of the Sinai crisis has its roots in the aftermath of the Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula in 1982, as foreseen under the Camp David Accords (Ashour, 2016). For over 30 years, in fact, unfair Egyptian security and social policies, worsening living conditions and complex relations between the Cairo government and local populations have made the peninsula a borderland rather than an integrated part of Egypt. This situation has created an ungoverned space, also with inevitable consequences for the security dimension (Sabry, 2015). Since the 1980s the Egyptian government has promoted informal discriminatory and repressive policies that in general treated local populations like second-class citizens, politically, economically and culturally (Pelham, 2012). In particular, this approach was often directed at Sinai Bedouin tribes, particularly in northern Sinai, who accused the central authorities of pursuing unfair policies against them.

Many Bedouins are not permitted to work at the public-private political level, either in the judiciary or in diplomacy, as well as being forbidden to perform military service or study in police or military colleges (Atef, 2017). They also do not have political representation at all levels. Moreover, some Bedouin tribes (i.e. the Azazma) were denied citizenship and not allowed to vote until 2007 (Walton, 2012). Like the Negev tribes in Israel, the Egyptian government refused to recognise their ownership of lands and expropriated them in order to develop Egyptian tourism and energy projects – the two main industries developed during the Mubarak regime (International Crisis Group, 2007). Moreover, Bedouins are always largely viewed as "traitors" or, as Nicolas Pelham noted, a "potential fifth column"[1] by the Egyptian authorities. This misconception is based on the better socioeconomic conditions that some Bedouins enjoyed under the Israeli occupation of Sinai (1967-1982) (Pelham, 2012).

This condition of alienation was further exacerbated by government policies during the 1990s and 2000s. In this period, the Egyptian cabinet planned a strategy of resettling Egyptians from the overpopulated areas of the Nile and Delta Valleys to the coasts of Sinai, in order to alter the demographic balance in the peninsula. Additionally, unlike its treatment of Bedouins, the state offered economic support and work to internal migrants, fuelling local tribes' resentment of the government (Pelham, 2012). At the same time, thanks to US financial aid to Egypt ($US1.3 billion granted under the terms of the Camp David Accords), the government built tourist infrastructure (the so-called "Red Sea Riviera") and, in general, created a strategic industry that provided an important inflow of foreign capital and development in the southern part of the Peninsula. These tourist facilities were given military protection, forcing southern Bedouin tribes into the interior (Swale, 2015). Local Bedouins have also been denied access to Sinai's oil and gas

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1 In both the 1967 and 1973 wars, the Egyptian and Israeli sides managed to recruit some tribe members for intelligence purposes and, less frequently, covert operations behind the frontlines. For more information, see Ashour, O. (2015, November 8). Sinai's stubborn insurgency: Why Egypt can't win. *Foreign Affairs.* Retrieved from https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/egypt/2015-11-08/sinaisstubborn-insurgency

infrastructure, such as the Arab Gas Pipeline (AGP), on the northern coast that transported liquefied natural gas (LNG) to Israel (until 2012) and Jordan (Hart, 2016). In addition, the mega project of piping Nile River water to the Gaza border in order to support local agriculture was halted, with precedence given to other projects considered more urgent on the Egypt mainland (Swale, 2015). Basically, these discriminatory policies engendered both local resentment towards state authorities and demands to preserve local identity.

In the early 2000s, with locals alienated from the economic and socio-political dimensions, and with a weak alternative represented by the Multi-National Force and Observers (MFOs),[2] the peninsula became a wider ungoverned space, in which criminal activities (such as weapons smuggling, human trafficking, kidnapping for ransom, contraband and also drugs crops) emerged, led by local inhabitants. At the same time, Sinai saw the first appearance of terrorist networks, especially in the centre-southern part of the peninsula, near the Israeli border (Aziz, 2017). Sinai was converted into a "safe haven" for the proliferation of illicit businesses. The persistent exclusion of local Bedouins from the key formal economic sectors created new opportunities for the emergence of an informal economy (in particular arms and drug smuggling, as well as contraband in basic necessities) (Yossef, 2017).

Some Bedouin tribes (such as the Sawarka, Tarabin, Masaid or Rumaylat) conducted smuggling operations into Gaza or Israeli Negev through tunnels[3] or by controlling border territories. Moreover, Hamas' seizure of power in Gaza (in 2005) and the following Israeli-Egyptian economic blockade on Gaza (2007) created more opportunities for Sinai's illicit economy (Siboni & Ben Barak, 2014). According to Ehud Yaari, Hamas saw the region "as a sphere of influence, reaching out to the local population and manifesting an ever-growing confidence in its ability to obtain substantial freedom of manoeuvre for its activities there" (Yaari, 2012, p. 2). A risky situation that soon led to confrontation between the Egyptian authorities, Palestinian factions present in loco and Sinai Bedouins. By 2009 illicit trade with Gaza was reported to have become the Bedouins' principal source of income, with trade routes extending as far as Libya and Sudan (Attalah, 2013). With the growth of illegal smuggling, many Bedouins – in complicity with Hamas and other Palestinian organisations in Gaza – contributed to an upsurge both in Salafist preachers coming from abroad (in particular from the Gaza Strip) and in Islamist militants, many of them linked to or inspired by al-Qaeda's ideology (McGregor, 2016). Long-standing grievances and alienation from the state made it possible to shift Bedouins' perceptions of the Egyptian government, increasingly seen as an interloper and a military occupant. As a result, the local Bedouins began to view Egyptian state powers as an

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2 The MFO based in northern Sinai are the region's largest unofficial employers of Bedouins. For more information, see Idris, I. (2017, February 3). Sinai conflict analysis. *K4D research helpdesk*. Retrieved from http://www.gsdrc.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/049-Sinai-Conflict-Analysis.pdf

3 According to an UNCTAD report (2014), more than 1,500 underground tunnels run under the 12 km border between Gaza and Egypt. See United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. (2014, September 14-25). Report on UNCTAD assistance to the Palestinian people: Developments in the economy of the Occupied Palestinian Territory. Retrieved from http://unctad.org/en/PublicationsLibrary/tdb62d3_en.pdf

enemy to fight and they consequently supported extremism and armed insurgency for reasons of political opportunism. In some cases Salafist-Jihadist groups fomented Bedouin resentment of Cairo, fostering a process of radicalisation of local Sinai tribes (Ashour, 2015). In other cases, the nexus between Bedouins and militants has been defined as a "marriage of convenience" based on their common opposition to Cairo (Gleis, 2007). According to Rawya Rageh, Bedouin tribes are fighting with Jihadist groups "not so much out of genuine conviction and belief in the militant/Islamist ideology but rather out of anger and frustration towards Cairo" (Rageh, 2013).

Unequal development and the government's neglect and disdain also created a situation of economic disparity between northern and southern Sinai. All of these factors compounded a deep polarisation, sowing the seeds for a spiral of violence and instability in the northern area in the years to come. In short, Sinai's integration into Egypt led to an authoritarian government response, filling the vacuum with policing and a centralisation of local policies that inevitably strengthened Sinai's self-identity claims.

The Growth of Militancy (Mid-2000s)

The lack of alternatives increased the Bedouins' resentment of Egyptian political authority. At the same time, their grievances rendered local tribes vulnerable to radical Islam (Watanabe, 2015). Indeed, during the mid-2000s, the region evolved into a "security hotspot" due to the deep penetration of Jihadist militancy, which also permitted an increasing inflow of Salafist-Jihadist groups that promoted an upsurge of rebellion against Cairo's central authorities (Yaari, 2012). In fact, while local authorities and the central government have reduced their political presence in these territories, Salafist-Jihadist groups and other non-state actors are filling the security vacuum, legitimising themselves as alternatives to state powers. As a result, grievances and resentment have been transformed into a specious political accountability that armed groups exploit to declare an intra-state conflict. A perfect example of this trend is the so-called "Sinai bombings" experience. Between 2004 and 2006 southern Sinai's Red Sea resort towns were involved in a large wave of attacks. This prolonged terror campaign killed 145 people (11 of them Israelis), becoming the worst terror attacks in the history of Egypt since the Luxor massacre[4] (Awad & Tadros, 2015). The author of these assaults was identified as Tawhid wa al-Jihad [TwJ] (Monotheism and Jihad),[5] an Egyptian-Palestinian Jihadist group backed by several local radicalised Bedouins, primarily originating from three northern tribes, the Sawarka, Masaid and Tarabin (Tuitel, 2014).

TwJ was founded in 1997 by Khaled Masaad and Nasr Khamis al-Malakhi in the district of al-Arish, in northern Sinai. The group focused on attacking southern tourist resorts in Sinai. Although its roots are in Sinai, TwJ has also been active in the Gaza Strip, and its close ties with Hamas, and in particular with its militant branch, the Izzedin al-Qassam Brigades, have been verified. The group was heavily influenced by the ideology and modus operandi of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi – the founder of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) – and it has close links to al-Qaeda leadership in Afghanistan, although it has never been formally an Egyptian branch of the al-Qaeda network ("Profile: Tawhid and Jihad group", 2004; Ashour 2012). Beyond the number of victims and the repression following these dramatic events, the attacks in southern Sinai had a strong impact on and great significance in the history of the country. Indeed, the "Sinai bombings" represented a substantial divide in the history of Egyptian terrorism because they were the first acts of terrorism involving local Bedouins on Egyptian soil (Gleis, 2007), marking the beginning of a new wave of Islamist violence in Egypt and widening differences between Egyptians of the mainland and the inhabitants of the Sinai Peninsula (Breen, 2013a).

The success of the TwJ attacks was rooted in the same bases as the socioeconomic and political grievances that affected local Bedouins, transforming the peninsula into a crisis scenario due to competition between new local and transnational forces. The group

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4 In November 1997, some militants of al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya killed 72 people – 58 were foreign tourists – in the archaeological site of Deir al-Baharit, near Luxor. In the period from the Luxor attack (1997) until the Taba attack (2004), there were no violent Islamist attacks in Egypt.
5 For further information on the group, see Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (n.d.). Tawhid wa-al Jihad. Retrieved from https://timep.org/esw/terror-groups/tawhid-wal-jihad/

exploited the permeability of the region's borders, filling the political vacuum existing in many areas of the peninsula and manipulating local resentment against central authorities. All these factors created a strong appeal and wide sympathies within the local population, thereby increasing the co-opting of the radicalised Bedouin groups in exchange. Since TwJ presented itself as the defender of local interests against alleged abuses by the state, this has reinforced the local communities' confidence in them (Siboni & Ben Barak, 2014).

After the "Sinai bombings", the Mubarak regime's response to terrorism in Sinai was a military crackdown, basically in the security sphere. Egyptian security forces used the same form of repression and political alienation towards both Jihadists and Bedouins. According to international human rights organisations, nearly 10,000 people remained in prolonged detention without charge under the terms of the law; moreover, 3,000 people were arrested, held without charge and subjected to torture (Human Rights Watch, 2007). At the same time, the government increased its exclusionist socioeconomic policies in the region. These measures aimed to halt illicit traffic to and from the Gaza Strip – in particular, the smuggling of goods through the tunnels from and to the Gaza Strip gave local Bedouins revenue worth $US700 million a year (Pelham, 2016) – and to stop the proliferation of militants in both directions. But yet again, the regime's security response was unfair because it did not consider the needs of the Bedouin community, instead creating the conditions for a future radical step (Siboni & Ben Barak, 2014). Despite sporadic incidents along the Israeli border, until 2011 the Peninsula did not experience other episodes of violence, but these groups paved the way for an increase in Islamist attacks and for close cooperation between local Bedouins and Islamist organisations on both sides of the shared border (Siboni & Ben Barak, 2014).

The Rise of a New Terrorist Threat in the Peninsula (January 2011-June 2013)

After the ousting of Mubarak in 2011, violence increased significantly on the peninsula. The instability in Sinai has been growing especially in the north, near the cities of Rafah, Sheikh Zuweid and al-Arish, next to the Israeli border, where there is the highest concentration of radical Bedouins and small clusters of Salafist-Jihadists. Compared to the protests and violence occurring in that period on the Egypt mainland, demonstrations in Sinai were given marginal attention by the central government (Kessler & Dyer, 2014). The Egyptian uprisings in fact have emphasised the persistent instability of the Sinai Peninsula and other structural problems rooted in years of political abandonment. A weakness that has also fostered the growth of extremism and militancy in the area (Kova & Guertin, 2013), exacerbating the Egyptian security situation and increasing the flow of illicit smuggling from Libya and the Gaza Strip (Attalah, 2013). Police stations were abandoned or attacked by militants, prisoners were freed and, in general, the Cairo authorities gradually slackened their control on the ground (Riedel, 2012). After the revolution in 2011, "the Sinai Peninsula became a lawless region, creating a security vacuum in the area" (Tuitel, 2014, p. 85).

Within this context, a number of radical groups were operating in northern Sinai. Although the number of armed groups operating in this area and their real capabilities are uncertain, there are almost 22 extremist militant groups, many of them are allegedly affiliated with Gaza-based Jihadist groups, local insurgent organisations or connected to al-Qaeda. The total number of militants operating in Sinai is approximately 2,000 fighters, despite the Egyptian security source believed to have around 12,000 units (Gaub, 2015, p. 3; Eleiba, 2013). Many of them are radicalised Bedouins (especially from Tarabeen and Sawarka tribes), Palestinian militants, foreign fighters (largely from Libya, the Maghreb and Europe), some criminal smugglers who turned into terrorist groups and, finally, other Egyptian Salafist-Jihadist members (Burt, 2017). According to Heidi Breen, the instability in the region "has contributed to making Sinai a more conducive environment for armed militants" (Breen, 2013a, p. 25), who use the territory as a safe haven for confronting Israel and Egypt (Siboni & Ben Barak, 2014).

In this new wave of local insurgency and Salafist-Jihadist attacks, ABM capitalised on the deep resentment of Sinai populations, presenting itself as a defender of local interests and thus gaining the sympathies of many Bedouin tribes (Gold, 2016b). As a result, the group quickly emerged as the most prominent Egyptian armed group and a few months later as the most important terrorist organisation in Sinai. ABM appeared for the first time in January 2011, but it became certain that it was operating in the peninsula by August 2011, after an attack inside southern Israel, near the city of Eilat, where the group killed eight Israeli border guards (Kessler & Dyer, 2014).

ABM is an al-Qaeda-inspired group but it was never an official al-Qaeda offshoot. The group recruits its members in Egypt and in the Gaza Strip among former Jihadists (i.e. Egyptian Islamic Jihad and al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya), other Salafist-Jihadist groups operating in Sinai (such as Tawhid wa al-Jihad), as well as some foreign fighters (largely from Libya, the Arabian Peninsula and East Africa) and militants with important experience in Jihadism in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iraq and Syria (Siboni & Ben Barak, 2014). In ABM, too, radicalised Bedouin tribe members remain important key players, especially the largest and best-organised tribes, such as the Sawarka, Masaid and Tarabin. These tribes have considerable influence in northern Sinai, controlling key smuggling routes along the Israel-Gaza border and having intimate knowledge of the territory. ABM in fact considers Bedouins a primary source in confronting Egyptian authorities and launching attacks along the Gaza-Israeli border (Gold, 2016b).

ABM's operations were focused mainly near the cities of Rafah, Sheikh Zuweid and al-Arish and their activities range from economic warfare (especially bombing economic infrastructures like the Arab Gas Pipeline) to assaults on military or police checkpoints and kidnapping Egyptian army officers. The most lethal attack led by ABM occurred in August 2012, when the group assaulted a military base in a raid on the Kerem Abu Salem checkpoint (known as Kerem Shalom in Israel), killing 16 Egyptian soldiers (Friedman, 2012).

During the presidency of Mohammed Morsi (August 2012-July 2013), there was little violence in Sinai and the government attempted to change some policy drivers in the "Sinai Question", ranging from a de-militarised approach to one that engaged in dialogue with tribal leaders. The Muslim Brotherhood government therefore used soft tactics towards terrorism and the radical Bedouin threat in Sinai, allocating additional resources ($US 270 million) to promote development and infrastructure projects, as well as promising economic reforms, including landownership (Breen, 2013b; Sabry, 2015). Although this period was characterised by an apparent calm, in 2012 Israel's Shin Bet (the internal security service) released in its annual report on terrorism a statement that emphasised an increase of Salafist-Jihadists present in the Sinai Peninsula (Barnett, 2013). In this new trend, ABM also tested new operational developments. In fact, the group engaged in attacks with other Salafist-Jihadist organisations operating in different areas. In some cases, ABM operated with other local groups beyond Egyptian territory, such as the Muhammad Jamal Network (MJN) (for example, in the assault on the US Consulate in Benghazi, in September 2012) or the Mujahideen Shoura Council in the Environs of Jerusalem (MSC) (i.e., in the ambush on the Kerem Abu Salem checkpoint, in August 2012). As a result, the group's sophistication and capabilities increased greatly (Gold, 2016a).

**The Morsi Ousting and Sinai as Sanctuary
(July 2013-October 2014)**

After the crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) in July 2013 and the re-seizure of power by an interim, military-led government, Egypt's political landscape was radically changed on the mainland. In parallel, the Sinai Peninsula experienced one of the most massive waves of violence in its recent history, favouring a growing penetration of armed groups and foreign fighters (Kessler & Dyer, 2014). Indeed, in mid-2013 the Sinai Peninsula became a sanctuary for many radical Bedouins and Jihadists (Garnett, 2015), who used Morsi's ousting both to legitimise their ideological and political battles in Egypt and to enlarge their strategic range from the Sinai Peninsula to the immediate neighbourhood of the Egyptian mainland. Indeed, during these years, attacks and violence increased exponentially in Sinai and in Egypt (El-Dabh, 2013). Moreover, ABM became a magnet and an attractive actor for some disillusioned MB members (Barnett, 2014), although Egyptian security forces[6] and the national media[7] consider the Muslim Brotherhood to be entirely responsible for the growing instability in the country. Although the Muslim Brotherhood leadership denounced the violence of the "new military regime as illegitimate and unjust, […] and while [their members] were careful to avoid declaring whether or not they intend to resort to violence" (Shavit, 2015, p. 601), some affiliates or disillusioned MB members embraced violence. Indeed, according to Scott Stewart (2014) "some Egyptians have left the Brotherhood for Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis. Some Brotherhood members have become radicalised since their party was ousted from power. Others have grown disillusioned and frustrated with the Muslim Brotherhood's policy of nonviolence. Thinking that violence is the only viable solution, they have turned to Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis". Anyway, these alleged connections between ABM and MB have never been completely proven, even though in this context there appears to be complicity (Lynch, 2016). In fact, it is interesting to note that after the ousting of Morsi several small groups emerged in the Egyptian context, such as Revolutionary Punishment (RP), Helwan Brigades and the most recently founded entity Hasm movement, more or less directly connected to some radicalised Muslim Brotherhood factions. These groups are non-Salafist-Jihadist organisations responsible for a long series of attacks in the most important city in the Nile and Delta Valley (Awad, 2016a).

While "the brutal crackdown against the Muslim Brotherhood and some liberal opponents of the military-backed government have closed off Egypt's political space in ways reminiscent of the worst periods of repression in the past" (Kurtzer, 2014), ABM filled this new legal and security vacuum, intensifying and radicalising its terrorist activities, also targeting civil and military symbols of Cairo's central powers on the Egyptian mainland (Elmenshawy, 2014). At the same time, the group quickly expanded its actions from Sinai to the Egyptian interior, especially in the densely populated areas of the Nile Delta and the Cairo district, in order to create new terrorist networks and to manage an

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6 After the attacks on the police station in Mansoura and Beni Suef on 24 December 2013, the Egyptian government considered the Muslim Brotherhood to be responsible for the operations, although these assaults were claimed by ABM. For this reason, state authorities declared MB a terrorist organisation and in August 2014 the Supreme Administrative Court in Cairo ordered the dissolution of the Freedom and Justice Party, the political wing of the MB.

7 A former militant and founder of the Islamic Jihad in Egypt, Nabil Naeem accused some MB political leaders of having direct links to ABM.

umbrella organisation that merged its satellite groups with other Jihadist-Salafist organisations active in the country (Lindsey & Stewart, 2014). In fact, ABM proposed combined attacks with the Muhammad Jamal Network (MJN), Ajnad Misr and Ansar al-Sharia Egypt along the Suez Canal, in the Nile Delta region, the Cairo district and at the Libyan border crossing.[8]

This new split in ABM strategy permitted it to step up the frequency of its raids and to increase in sophistication and capabilities. The most significant attacks were the bombing of the South Sinai Security Directorate headquarters in at-Tur on 7 October 2013 (3 soldiers dead and 62 injured) ("Militants Involved in South Sinai Attack Arrested", 2013a); the shooting down of an Egyptian army helicopter with MANPADS (man portable air defence systems) in al-Shollaq, a small town just south of Sheikh Zuweid, on 25 January 2014 (Kirkpatrick, 2014a); the ABM's attack in Taba on an Egyptian bus in which four South Korean tourists were killed on 16 February 2014 ("4 Killed As Bomb Hits Egypt", 2014). Moreover, ABM claimed responsibility for several high-profile attacks in Cairo against military-security personnel.[9] Other significant attacks were the bombing of the Daqahlia Security Directorate in Mansoura on 24 December 2013 (16 dead) ("15 Dead, 134 Injured in Egypt", 2013b) or numerous assaults on police infrastructures – including the car bombing outside the Cairo Security Directorate and a police station in Beni Suef – on 23-24 January 2014 (13 killed and some 80 wounded) (Hauslohner & Cunningham, 2014). In the last two attacks, the activities of the group were inspired by an attempt to create a state of political chaos before and after the vote on the new Constitution (January 2014).

In response to this vacuum and to the large wave of terror attacks, at the end of July 2013, state authorities evolved their strategies by – unsuccessfully – adopting a more repressive approach (detaining several Salafist figures and preachers, introducing new draconian measures and defining strictly counter-terrorist strategies[10]) towards Sinai populations, which only strengthened local support for the extremist group, worsening the local security situation. Additionally, the military-led government launched its largest military operation (Desert Storm) in Sinai since the Yom Kippur War in 1973. Despite the severe setbacks caused by counterterrorism operations and, to a certain extent, by the onset of Salafist-Jihadist competition, ABM continued to strengthen its power in Sinai, consolidating itself on the Egypt mainland (Dunne & Williamson, 2014).

Furthermore, this period represented a significant shift for ABM because it saw a substantial change in the insurgency's rhetoric, behaviour, intensity and scale of

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8 Significant examples of these are the assault in the western desert area of al-Wahat in June 2014 (6 soldiers were killed); the murder of 22 border guards at the al-Farafra checkpoint in the New Valley in July 2014; the militants' attack on the police checkpoint in the Dhabaa area, in the province of Marsa Matrouh (5 killed).

9 Such as the failed assassination attempt on Interior Minister Mohammed Ibrahim, on 5 September 2013; the murder of Lt. Col. Mohammed Mabrouk, a senior counterterrorism official, on 17 November 2013; the assassination of Gen. Mohammed Said, an aide to the Interior Minister, on 28 January 2014.

10 The Egyptian government also created a cordon sanitaire along its border with Gaza. The creation of the cordon necessitated the destruction of over 2,000 homes and displaced hundreds of families. Most received no compensation for their losses.

operations, as well as in its overall narrative and goals. Since its origin, the group had built a solid narrative based on three pillars: attacking Israeli civilian and military targets, its interests on Egyptian soil and the Egyptian-Israeli relationship. From 2011 until mid-2013, the group concentrated its terror campaign on cross-border attacks and sabotage against the Arab Gas Pipeline. After the ousting of Morsi in July 2013, apart from its usual rhetoric against Israel, ABM altered its narrative from protector of local populations and their interests, to embrace a new rhetoric involving no consideration for Sinai insurgencies and Bedouin grievances. Basically, ABM radicalised its terror activities. In fact, in this period, the group implemented its attack against local Bedouins, accused of being Mossad spies, and carried out a number of high-profile attacks outside northern Sinai, including the failed assassination of Interior Minister Mohammed Ibrahim in Cairo (September 2013) (Gold, 2015).

In the meantime, while ABM entrenched its relations with al-Qaeda (Cook, 2014), in the same period the group tried to keep in touch with some military leaders of Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) (Ashour, 2016). A confirmation of this new alignment with IS was evident in late January 2014, when Abu Usama al-Masry, a heretofore unknown ABM official, issued an audio message in which he threatened the Egyptian government and its security forces and expressed his support for "our brother fighters in Syria, especially those of Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant" (Daragahi, 2014). Other confirmation of the growing ties between ABM and ISIS came when an anonymous clan elder from the village of al-Mahdiya, in central Sinai near the Israeli border, released an interview to Al Monitor in June 2014 in which he affirmed "ISIS supported Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis in its […] campaign of attacks against the Egyptian army and security forces in the Sinai Peninsula" ("Will ISIS Find Fertile Ground in Egypt's Sinai", 2014), relying on information that he received from young men who fought with Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis. Then, in July 2014, once again al-Masry recorded another audio message during the Muslim festival of Eid al-Fitr (the holiday celebrating the end of the holy month of Ramadan), which called upon God to "grant victory to our brothers in Islamic State and open Baghdad and all the country to them as well as the hearts of the people" (Zelin, 2014). Subsequently, in August 2014, ABM released a video showing the beheading of four Egyptians accused of being Mossad spies who had allegedly provided Israel with intelligence for an airstrike in northern Sinai that killed three of its fighters on 23 July 2014 (Georgy, 2014). Three days later, the group claimed responsibility for beheading another two Egyptian men in al-Mahdiyya, a village south of Rafah. Again near Sheikh Zuweid, an Islamist attack killed 11 Egyptian army soldiers on 2 September 2014. Finally, in September 2014, the last proof of this mounting rapprochement arose when IS's official spokesman, Abu

Muhammed al-Adnani, released a new speech in which he called Sinai militants "brothers", incumbents to fight Egypt's army "in any possible way and to turn their lives into hell and horror" (Van Ostaeyen, 2014). All these events confirm ABM's ideological shift from al-Qaeda to IS.

From Local to Global: Islamic State in Sinai and a New Terror Threat (2014-2017)

In November 2014, ABM pledged allegiance (*bayah*) to Islamic State (IS) and its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi[11] (Kingsley, Chulov & Salman, 2014). When ABM rebranded into WS, the group changed its nature, adopting a more radical ideology founded on ultra-fundamentalist interpretations of Islam and on military control of the territory (Al-Tamimi, 2014). Since the *bayah*, Wilayat Sinai has been gradually and increasingly serving Islamic State's cause, maintaining a massive anti-Jewish and anti-Western propaganda and, at the same time, adopting and implementing an IS agenda in Sinai based on a strong trans-nationalisation of military operations against the "near enemy", the Egyptian regime (defined as "apostate") and its interests in the region (Azoulay, 2015). In this sense, the Sheikh Zuweid assault (July 2015) is the most iconic action of this transformation because it defined a new level of change in Sinai militancy and showed a considerable improvement in capabilities and revealed techniques acquired in Iraq. Moreover, this close connection between WS and IS denotes how Islamic State is expanding its Jihadist threat to Sinai and Egypt. On the other hand, after the *bayah* to IS, WS sought full ideological identification with the Iraqi-based group and began to shift from a mainly local dimension (Sinai & Egypt) to a global/transnational Jihadist scenario (Gaza Strip, Israel, Libya and Western countries) (Gold, 2015b; Awad, 2016b).

Since pledging allegiance to IS, the group's enhanced combat tactics, procurement of advanced weaponry and growing strength threatens the stability of the Egyptian state, while sustaining a deadly insurgency in Sinai since early 2014 (Garnett, 2016). Like ABM, but with a harder approach, WS has aimed to reinforce loyalty from influential tribal communities, using the same methods already applied in al-Anbar (Iraq), such as marriages and kinship affiliations or co-opting the younger generation within Islamist militia tribes, gaining trust and influence on local dynamics (Hassan, 2014). Moreover, WS adopted strict new measures towards local populations and created new mechanisms to control the territory, such as an intelligence arm – more like a religious police or morality police force (Hassan & Noueihed, 2017) – that monitors communities and punishes those it considers to be informants (Horton, 2017). This strict oversight quickly antagonised some tribes (in particular the Sawarka and Tarabin). When WS started to kill Bedouin members alleged to be Mossad spies, Sawarka and Tarabin clan elders announced their full commitment to restoring security in Egypt's restive northern Sinai region by cooperating with the Egyptian military forces to fight Wilayat Sinai (The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Center, 2015). Despite these tensions with WS, the majority of the Sinai Bedouin tribes have continued to support their alliance with WS because they have a multiplicity of mutual interests (Awad, 2016b). In any case, the rebellious clan statements reflected isolated decisions arising from a wrong inflicted. Most probably, the Tarabin and Sawarka pushback was based on the growing threat

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11 It subsequently also reaffirmed its allegiance in a video released on May 2015.

represented by WS' illicit activities along the Gaza-Israeli borders, one of the core businesses of most Sinai tribes. From the perspective of WS, the extreme severity and brutality of the organisation is aimed at deterring other groups from cooperating with the Egyptian government. Whatever the reasons, the lack of alternatives in Egypt's Sinai policies has created some disillusion among tribes, reinforcing the threatening rhetoric of Wilayat Sinai in the peninsula (Gartenstein-Ross, Barr, & Moreng, 2016).

However, ABM's affiliation with Islamic State has split the organisation into two wings, with the Nile Valley leaders remaining loyal to al-Qaeda (Kirkpatrick, 2014b). In order to weaken the former ABM, al-Qaeda loyalists split off to found new movements. The most important of them is al-Murabitoon, a brigade led by Hisham al-Ashmawy (also known as Abu Omar al Muhajir al-Masry), a former Egyptian special forces member expelled from the army in 2009 for his radical ideology (Maguid, 2017). Ashmawy was responsible in the summer of 2014 for several high-profile attacks in al-Wahat, al-Farafra and Marsa Matrouh that killed more than 40 Egyptian soldiers. This new group, officially an al-Qaeda branch, operates in the territory between the Libyan border crossing and Egypt's Western Desert, recruiting its soldiers among former ABM members or from some Salafist-Jihadist groups active in this large area. Additionally, former ABM members have sought to engage both young people radicalised by the brutal crackdown against the Muslim Brotherhood and non-aligned terror groups responsible for attacks against policemen in Cairo and the Nile Valley (Saleh & Solomon, 2015). ABM's split is based on different perceptions of ideology, affinity and strategy between al-Qaeda and IS, with the latter more interested in expanding its terrorist network and using the Sinai Peninsula as a new square on its global Jihadist chessboard (Wikistrat, 2015).

This paradigm shift marks an important change in the goals and modus operandi of the Jihadist cells, identifying WS' new focus as part of Islamic State's global strategy in which North Africa and the Levant are crucial to re-orientation of the IS approach. While the middle-term goals of WS are the overthrow of the al-Sisi regime and the establishment of an Islamic state in Egypt, in the long term the main target remains the destruction of the State of Israel (Kessler & Peck, 2016). This mission is possible through an expansion of its action from Sinai to the Gaza Strip and Israeli Negev, on the one hand, and to the Egyptian mainland and eastern Libya, on the other, meanwhile escalating its terrorist activities. WS has, in fact, shown increased capacity for conducting sophisticated attacks (such as the downing of the Russian Metrojet flight 9268, the so-called "battle for Sheikh Zuweid", the sinking of an Egyptian naval vessel, all in 2015, or the "Palm Sunday church bombings" in Tanta and Alexandria and the

mass-killing attack at a Sufi Mosque of al-Rawda, all in 2017[12]), targeting local civil and military powers.[13] Moreover, the group has launched a new terrorist campaign against its regional and international "corrupted allies". Confirming this new trend are several attacks: the December 2014 murder of US citizen William Henderson, an employee of an oil company active in Egypt; the beheading of the Croatian Tomislav Salopek (August 2015); the multiple attacks against the Multinational Forces Operation – which includes about 700 US troops – at al-Jura (June 2015); the murders of the Egyptian Coptic Christians (November 2016-April 2017, including the assault on St. Catherine's Monastery in Sinai). The change consists of a diversification of final targets, an internationalisation of local Islamist terrorism and re-launch of an economic Jihad against the most significant structures of the Egyptian economy (in particular, tourism) (Okail, 2016).

Basically, what we are witnessing is a deep transformation of WS into a new organisation closely directed by or connected to Islamic State's core in Syria and Iraq. Probably when ABM swore allegiance to IS, the group saw it as a way to get power and resources (economic, military and logistic assistance). In this sense, the role of financial support has had a strong impact in this attempt of transformation, but it remains unclear what tangible benefits the group has gained. As noted by J. M. Berger in an interview to Frontline, Islamic State has "the millions [that] it has made through oil production and kidnapping ransoms, ISIS has more money than it can spend" (Boghani, 2014). In this regard, the big escalation of violence carried out by WS might also be a way of earning the trust of IS leadership, in the sense of providing them with more rewards (money, weapons, emissaries, vehicles, etc…) in order to strengthen ties with the group. In fact, such as in Iraq and Syria, tribal elites involved in smuggling networks in northern Sinai partnered or even joined WS (Gold, 2016a).

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12 Although Wilayat Sinai has denied any involvement in this attack and has not claimed its actions, the Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Center believes that the modus operandi and the sophisticated tactics adopted in this assault are more similar to other WS attacks in the past. See The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Center. (2017, 29 November). Spotlight on global jihad. (23-29 November 2017). Retrieved from http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/app/uploads/2017/11/E_232_17-1.pdf

13 According to TIMEP, since 2013, WS has killed more than 2,000 Egyptian military officers and police officers in the Sinai. For further information, see The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy. (2017, 17 August). Egypt's security watch. Quarterly Report: January-March 2017. Retrieved from https://timep.org/esw/reports-briefs/quarterly-report-2017-q1/

Sinai at a Crossroads

Although recent developments in the region have stripped Islamic State (IS) of a significant part of its presence in the Middle East, its geographical presence in Sinai through WS has not been shrinking and its territorial control and resources, while limited, were not significantly reduced (The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Center, 2017). The Sinai Peninsula, as noted by Mark Singleton, will remain "a magnet for terrorists and the stage for a bloody, intense and protracted guerrilla-style insurgency, with perhaps even more spillover to the Egyptian mainland and into southern Israel" (Singleton, 2015).The growing instability of Sinai and WS' deep roots in some Middle Eastern territories (Egypt, Gaza Strip and Libya) are making the peninsula a new "hotspot" for global Jihad, posing a serious threat to the security and stability of North Africa and the Near East (Gomaa, 2018).

Therefore, regional destabilisation – including a break in the balance of power between Egypt and Israel – could be another goal of WS. According to Daniel Kurtzer, Egypt "has as great an interest today as it had in 1979 in maintaining the peace treaty with Israel […] and the strengthening of Egyptian-Israeli ties are still important to the United States as well, especially as the Administration actively pursues a breakthrough in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process" (Kurtzer, 2014). Should this balance be upset it could again lead to an exacerbation of violence and an escalation of lethal attacks, with Sinai-based organisations using the peninsula as an operational area to direct attacks against the Jewish state and the North African country (Schweitzer, 2013).

Furthermore, Wilayat Sinai has set up a central hub for IS, also after the creation of local links and the return of foreign fighters (although not only Egyptian) to that vulnerable community, permitting survival of the Caliphate. Accordingly, WS will also intensify its own campaign, targeting security services, civilian populations (the "traitors" in its narrative), strategic infrastructure as well as the tourism industry (Dentice, 2017; Schweitzer & Winter, 2017). However, as Seth Jones noted, "Egypt, with the support of the international community, has the capability to degrade Islamic State and improve security in Egypt and the region" (Jones et al., 2017, p. 137).

Establishing a Priority.
How to Counter Sinai Insurgency?

To face these threats, the Egyptian government has adopted a long series of civil-military measures in order to contain violence in Sinai and to eradicate extremism in the region. In other words, Egypt has adopted both counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency approaches. On a military level, since 2011 the Egyptian armed forces (EAF) have launched five counter-terrorism operations in the northern and central part of the Sinai Peninsula (Operation Eagle I-2011; Operation Eagle II-2012; Operation Desert Storm-2013; Operation Sinai-2014; Operation Martyr's Right-2015) ("The Peninsular War", 2015) aimed at confronting terrorist groups. Since July 2013, the EAF has increased its presence in the region, deploying nearly 30,000 troops, including 41 infantry battalions, operating in the north-eastern corner of the Sinai border, between al-Arish, Sheikh Zuweid and Rafah, and launching airstrikes with helicopters and drones. In particular, the battalions 101 and 102 were dedicated to fighting Salafist-Jihadist groups, while battalion 103 was committed to protecting civilians ("The Armed Forces Men in Sinai", 2016). Other measures are: the creation of a 5-kilometre buffer zone along the border with Egypt and the Gaza Strip in the Egyptian territory in an effort to cut off the flow of weapons and militants; the evacuation of some 10,000 houses in the Safa, Imam Ali and al-Ahrash neighbourhoods in Rafah city in the northern Sinai Peninsula (at the end of 2016, the Egyptian government estimated that 12,861 residents from 5,324 families and from 68 communities in those areas had been internally displaced). Last but not least, the destruction of Gaza underground tunnels by filling the area with water (The Tahir Institute for Middle East Policy, 2017b; Human Rights Watch, 2015).

Despite the implementation of the army's harsh methods in Sinai and several losses in security personnel (over 2,000 deaths) and civilians (nearly 2,500), this strategy has failed to a large extent. The large number of terrorist deaths (over 2,600 according to the Ministry of the Interior) because of the escalated political violence and collective punishment (in many cases was used against the local populations by the EAF) have transformed Sinai into a conflict zone, in which local Bedouins have not cut their ties with militants (The Tahir Institute for Middle East Policy, 2017b).

Against this background, since the end of 2015, the Egyptian government has rethought its approach to the Sinai crisis, shifting towards a more comprehensive counter-insurgency strategy on the military, economic and political fronts. On the civil-political level, the Cairo government has enacted a number of laws to prevent menace, to eradicate violence and extremism and to staunch the flow of Egyptians trying to join the Jihad in Syria and Iraq. First, the passing of a new anti-terrorism law (2014-2015) and the institutions of the National Council to Confront Terrorism and Extremism (NCCTE) (late July 2017). Another relevant measure is the attempt to reform Islamic thinking

through a revolution (or renewing as mentioned by the president al-Sisi) of religious discourse of al-Azhar University, one of the Sunni Islam's most prestigious institutions ("Reforming Islam in Egypt", 2017). No less relevant is the establishment of a registration programme of all Egyptians age 18-40 with state security before boarding planes to Iraq, Jordan, Syria and Turkey. As noted by Zack Gold, "while focused on potential Islamic State recruits, Egypt's registration programme also has political connotations, given the late 2014 additions of Turkey, known as a hub of Muslim Brotherhood members in exile; and Qatar, another pro-Brotherhood state" (Gold, 2015b). On the political front, the Egyptian government has taken several actions aimed at cutting external operational support to WS, such as the Egyptian efforts to contribute to the international coalition against Islamic State, led by the United States as a non-military actor or the recent deal between Hamas and Fatah mediated by Egyptian intelligence forces (July-September 2017), which includes an agreement between Egypt and Hamas aimed at stabilising and securitising the Sinai-Gaza border (Winter & Malter, 2017). At the same time, Egypt detailed long-term plans for development in Sinai with goals of increasing investments and focusing on population-centric projects in order to gain local support and legitimacy. In this sense, these "carrots" are an important attempt at conditional engagement between the EAF and local Bedouins that should evolve into sustained cooperation in fighting terrorism (Jones et al., 2017).

Despite those measures, the case of Sinai shows that things are still not really under the control of the Egyptian authorities and they need to rethink their policies to safeguard state interests, especially in terms of human security strategy, policies inclusive of local communities, economic growth, poverty alleviation and protection of basic civil and political rights. Without a holistic and comprehensive approach, the "Sinai problem" cannot be resolved and the situation will not change (International Crisis Group, 2007). Toward this end, the policies of the Egyptian government should focus on a few points:

- Firstly, the Egyptian government needs to get as much support as possible from local inhabitants in Sinai in fighting terrorism, separating the Bedouins and civilians from the insurgents and the extremist militants.

- In order to contain Salafist-Jihadist and local Bedouin radicalisation, the Egyptian government should define a new counter-narrative campaign based on a strong and innovative political, religious and cultural response to the so-called "Sinai Question".

- The Cairo authorities should calibrate their policies to safeguard their interests in Sinai, favouring policies of greater inclusiveness towards local Bedouins, detailing

an economic plan of development and protecting the basic civil and political rights of all individuals.

- A political approach by the Egyptian government could favour a rapprochement with and stabilisation of the peninsula. At the same time, it is necessary to better promote a culture of legality and the legitimate power of Egypt's government.

- No less important is the role of Sinai Bedouins. They are involved in a number of illegal practices in the region and in light of this they are both victims of and responsible for the current situation. Sinai Bedouins need to engage in a new dialogue with state powers in order to break the cycle of abuse, repression and violence.

- Finally, the Cairo authorities could also rethink security policies in this area (especially in the de-radicalisation of Jihadists, closer coordination and increased cooperation between military intelligence) and this could entail de-militarisation, which might be the best way for the Egyptian government to maintain control over the territory.

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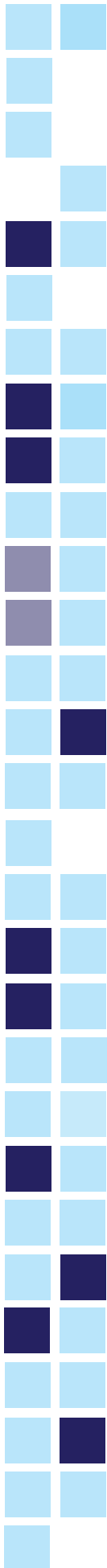
EuroMeSCo

Founded in 1996 and comprising 106 institutes from 32 European and South Mediterranean countries, EuroMeSCo (the Euro-Mediterranean Study Commission) is the main network of research centres on politics and security in the Mediterranean, striving at building a community of research institutes and think tanks committed to strengthening Euro-Mediterranean relations.

The objectives of the network are to foster influential quality analysis and reflection on Euro-Mediterranean politics and policies; to serve as a platform for dialogue between the members of the network and key stakeholders to discuss the key trends and challenges on the region´s agenda; to increase the impact of think tanks and research institutes and to actively contribute to policy-making through dissemination of research outputs of the network to experts and national, European and international institutions linked to Euro-Mediterranean relations.

The EuroMeSCo work plan includes a research programme with five publication lines (Joint Policy Studies, Papers, Briefs, Spot-Ons and reports), as well as numerous activities, including annual conferences, seminars, workshops, presentations, formal and informal meetings with policy makers on the key political and security dynamics. It also includes communication and dissemination related activities (website, newsletter and targeted institutional dissemination) to raise awareness and promote the work of the network and to stimulate debate on Euro-Mediterranean affairs.

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