



Institute for Islamic Strategic Affairs

## The policies of Abdel Fatah El Sisi: Shielding Egypt from neo-Jihadism or creating a breeding ground for terrorism?



By Lisa Marie Joyce

### Abstract

*President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi has proclaimed that “Egypt is fighting a war of existence” against extremist forces in the Sinai region<sup>1</sup>. Sisi has built his campaign and presidency around this war of existence, and hails himself to be the leader that will stop this plot to “break up Egypt and the Egyptians”. The Army general has cleverly employed a mix of nationalism and fear to suppress Islamists and wreak havoc on the Sinai Peninsula. However, his tactics are backfiring, and the unintended consequence of the policies used in the Sinai is the rise in Islamic neo-Jihadism. The security of the Middle East region, already at the height of instability, is at risk as a result.*

## **The importance of the Sinai region: A secure Sinai equals a safer Middle East.**

Since the downing of a Russian passenger plane in the Sinai the group claiming responsibility, Sinai Province, has come under the spotlight, after existing on the margins for nearly two years. The extremist, militant group claimed it carried out this deadly attack on a Russian airliner flying 224 tourists home from the popular coastal destination of Sharm el Sheikh, killing all on-board. The Sinai Peninsula, a region with a deadly combination - being both a tourist hot spot and home to a growing insurgency loyal to IS - is a ticking time bomb in need of further analysis. The Sinai, once a paradise for Egyptians and foreigners, now looms in a dark shadow, of an uncertain future of armed resistance and militant warfare. No stranger to unrest, this region is more important now than ever as it has the ability to becoming a hub for regional neo-jihadist groups.

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The strategic importance of the Sinai Peninsula, a point of reference connecting two continents, cannot be overlooked. In addition to the tactically crucial Suez Canal, adjacency to the Gaza strip and the defensive importance of the region, especially regarding the security of Israel and the Persian Gulf. This region's stability is of the utmost importance for a stable Middle East and the future of the Sinai itself is inextricably linked with the future of the Middle East as a whole.

The group, formally known as Ansar Beyt al Maqdis (Supporters of Jerusalem/The holy house), is now commonly referred to as "Sinai Province" or "Islamic State Sinai Province" after pledging allegiance to Islamic State in November 2015. Ansar Beyt al Maqdis was formed after the removal of President Hosni Mubarak from power, in 2011. According to the BBC, the group currently has between 1,000 to 1,500 fighters<sup>1</sup>. Other estimates suggest that they have up to 2,000 fighters<sup>2</sup>.

Since 2011, there has been unprecedented unrest in the North of the Sinai Peninsula. After the ousting of the President Morsi by the military in 2013 the security of the region has deteriorated, with increased attacks on army and police personnel.

Those following the rise of IS would not be surprised that this largely ungoverned region has become a target of their expansion. Egypt links the way to Libya, where IS has been even more prevalent. Furthermore, Egypt's proximity to Israel is a worrying factor for security analysts and a major factor as to why the US is keen to support Sisi and his fight against extremism in that region.

The terrain of the Sinai is well suited to the enemy facing Sisi's government. They have superior knowledge of the mountainous terrain and the mobile group can use their familiarity and the nature of the terrain to their advantage. These guerrilla warfare tactics are notoriously difficult to defeat, such as the fight against the IRA in the Irish countryside. The terrain and location of the Sinai makes it the

perfect haven for militant jihadist groups. The security vacuum in the region post-revolution was tactically used by Ansar Bayt al Maqdis. The ability to smuggle weapons from Libya, matched with their later astute alignment with the region's most notorious jihadist group, and the repercussions of the harsh crackdown on Islamists by the Egyptian regime, have all played into the favour of this group.

### **A tense relationship**

The relationship between the Bedouin and the Egyptian government has never been a trusting, nor amicable one. After the 1978 Camp David Accords the Sinai tribes feared that the return of the land to Egypt would not be in their interest<sup>3</sup>. Rightly so, as the tourism windfall did not benefited the remote parts of the region and the disparities in the economic and political status of the locals has created an atmosphere conducive to the workings of jihadi groups. Lack of investment in the region and the strategy of Sisi, lumping all Islamists into the same terrorist category has permitted radicalism to thrive. This negative focus on the Sinai by Sisi, alongside the favourable topography, allowed the Sinai to

become home to the most lethal group within Egypt today. The incentives created by the likes of “Sinai Province” become more appealing with the recent demolition strategy of the officials in Cairo.

The army devised a strategy to combat the rise in militancy that was based on the creation of a buffer zone, between the Egyptian Northern Sinai territory and the Palestinian, Hamas-controlled, Gaza strip. Home demolitions and forced evictions affected more than 3,200 families according to Human Rights Watch (HRW)<sup>4</sup>. In addition, this mass demolition agenda violates international law. A report from September of this year by HRW, entitled “Look for another homeland”, highlights the flawed strategy of the army, wiping entire neighbourhoods off the map to destroy smuggling tunnels when other avenues were available to them<sup>5</sup>. Families have not only been forcibly evicted, destroying heritage and legacies crafted through generations, but cultivated farmland

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was destroyed robbing these families of their livelihoods. The authorities in Egypt claim these smuggling tunnels allow ammunition and fighters into the Sinai from Gaza thus vindicating their buffer-zone creation. This strategy began in July 2013, and has accelerated after the attack on an army checkpoint in Sheikh Zuweid. Lack of dialogue and consultation with local tribes mean the Egyptian government is losing

control of the key allies in the fight against extremism in the region.

### **2015: An escalation of the Sinai insurgency**

The Russian air crash was not the first sign of the grander motives of the group. July 2015 was a deadly month in the Sinai. On the first of July numerous coordinated attacks on Egyptian security forces, in which more than fifty people died and five checkpoints were attacked<sup>6</sup>. Per usual, there were vague and conflicting reports of breakdown of deaths<sup>7</sup>. This was an attack on a truly

superior scale, after authorities and the media dismissed previous attacks of a smaller nature in the preceding years.

The strategic town of Sheikh Zuweid was the focus of the attack, and the sources from the Egyptian side claims they had planned to lay siege to the town<sup>8</sup>. This assault signalled a progression of the group's abilities and intents. It was also the largest attack of an IS affiliate group outside of Iraq and Syria. There was a foreboding message in the run up to this attack. Two months previous, the commander of SP, mocked President Sisi in a video released online, telling him to send his entire army to fight them and that they would all die in the desert of the Sinai<sup>9</sup>. Exporting a ground offensive to this region signals a worrying trend and lends credence to the concern that the Sinai region is a target of large scale IS expansion.

In late June 2015, the Egyptian prosecutor-general was killed in Cairo in a car bombing<sup>10</sup>. In May 2015, hours after Mohammed Morsi was sentenced to death, three judges were assassinated in the Sinai town of al-Arish<sup>11</sup>. Similarly, judges operating during the recent

November 2015 elections in Al-Arish were targeted, with seven people confirmed killed<sup>12</sup>. These attacks show that the officials of the Egyptian regime are the primary targets, not only the army and police personnel, but also politicians and judges. The security of the Egyptian navy and shipping vessels in the Mediterranean Sea are in peril also. In July of this year, Sinai Province claimed to have carried out a missile attack on an Egyptian naval vessel off the northern coast of the Sinai, in the waters north of Rafah<sup>13</sup>. Claims on casualties differ from militant sources to army sources. Militants claim to have destroyed the vessel completely while officials claim there were no casualties and that a firefight caused a coastguard boat to catch on fire.

In the previous year, November 2014, days after Ansar Bayt al Maqdis pledged allegiance to IS, there was a similar attack on an Egyptian navy<sup>14</sup>. There is extreme difficulty in assessing the seriousness of these incidents, as media in Egypt are unwilling to contradict official sources, which would open them up to the possibility of large fines.

Whilst the northern Sinai has seen attacks, curfews, and unrest since 2011, the south remained a

popular tourist destination with the Sisi propaganda machine ensuring the coverage of Northern unrest was contained. However, it was only a matter of time before the unrest of the North spread to its southern region. This was seen in October of this year, in the most dramatic fashion. Hitting the heart of Egypt's tourism industry, the group found itself propelled onto the international media frenzy surrounding its counterpart in Iraq and Syria, when it hit the Russian airline, killing all the tourists on board. The economic repercussions on the southern Sinai and Egypt as a whole will be catastrophic. With a failing tourism industry and high unemployment, this economic catastrophe will only help recruitment of the very group that caused the upheaval.

Sisi's counterinsurgency campaign is never going to be successful as long as this flawed governmental campaign continues. The increased marginalisation and collective punishment of the local population will only lead to the increased attractiveness of militant jihadist groups. Likewise, the increased stigma attached to Islamism and the handing of death sentences to hundreds of Muslim Brotherhood members will discredit

a government, with a large amount of scepticism already seen in this region. There is visible proof that the situation is not recovering, as the pattern of attacks has grown in scale with every incident. It began with on a smaller scale, such as an assassination attempt on the Minister for the Interior, and the targeting of army and police officers. Then it escalated, targeting army helicopters, killing five and coordinating attacks on the security services in the Sinai. The latest attack has been the downing of an international airline. The pattern is frightening and prediction of what will come next is not one anyone wishes to take a guess at.

### **Capabilities of Sinai Province**

The Salafi Jihadist group, sees the current regime as an "apostate regime". Since declaring itself a province of the self-entitled Islamic State their targets have gone from local to global. The attack on the Russian passenger plane shows the need to examine their military acumen and analyse exactly how they managed this horrendous attack. The audio recording registered an explosive sound and a heat flash detected, what Russian and US authorities declare to have

been, amid air explosion. The picture posted online of the home-made bomb, in a soft drink can, is as far as the group have gone in explaining their method. Al-Masri declared, “we are not compelled to announce the method that brought it down”<sup>15</sup>.

Experts are seeing similarities with the Lockerbie tragedy of 27 years earlier, where a simple tape recorder device caused that explosion. As a security source said sometimes “the more simple the device, the less metal to be detected by security forces at the airport”<sup>16</sup>. Moreover, military analyst Paul Beaver assured he was “pretty convinced IS doesn’t have a surface-to-air missile that can go up as far as 31,000ft. That’s a very serious piece of equipment”<sup>17</sup>. Thus, it seems that a simple homemade device combined with the unfortunate lax security at Sharm el Sheikh airport allowed this tragedy to unfold. Egypt must remain vigilant, especially as the return of trained fighters from Syria is a worrying trend. A statement from the Interior Ministry in November

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2014 announced an Al-Nusra Front militant fighter, sent to Egypt to train an Egyptian terrorist group in bomb making, was arrested when he returned from his conflict in Syria<sup>18</sup>.

In a report by the BBC it traced the weapons used by Sinai Province in its attacks on military targets as including “aircraft surface-to-air guided missiles to shoot down an army helicopter; 60mm and 120mm mortars; 12.7mm heavy machine-guns; Grad rockets to attack el-Arish's airport; anti-tank guided missiles; and various improvised explosive devices (IEDs).”<sup>19</sup> These sophisticated weapons match their attack list; a helicopter, attack on the military HQ in Al-Arish and the brief capture of the town of Shikh Zuweid by 300 of their fighters. Their communications system is a key cog in their machine and their ability to respond quickly online, by posting videos and pictures, doesn’t fit the narrative of the regime, which dictates a restriction on communication in the Sinai. The government has cut off

communications, and issues with phone and Internet networks in the region have been reported since the beginning of the crackdown in 2013<sup>20</sup>. However, this has not stopped the terrorists' attacks or their communication and there are unconfirmed reports, "chatter" picked up by spies that Britons with electronic backgrounds were trained in Syria and possibly helped with the making of the bomb that brought down the airliner<sup>21</sup>. This chatter has shown that Sinai Province and the leadership of IS in Syria and Iraq have been in communication and provided operational support, a vital element in the military progression of this group. The fact that al-Baghdadi accepted the allegiance and commitment of Ansar Beyt al Maqdis highlights that the group must have had the resources and abilities to join this coalition. It seems that this allegiance with IS has only made them better connected, for arms and training. The terrain and the ability to get arms by sea and by land, through the porous border with Libya, all point to a group whose military capabilities are bound to grow as the neo-Jihadist groups extend out of Syria and Iraq.

### **The consequences of repressing the Muslim Brotherhood: A history repeated.**

Sayyid Qutb, a prominent fundamentalist thinker, and Ayman al Zawahiri, the current leader of Al-Qaeda, was radicalised whilst languishing in Egyptian prisons. In 2015 there have been more political prisoners than ever before in Egyptian prisons; herein lies fertile ground for further IS recruitment. Human Rights Watch estimates that as of May 2014 there were 41,000 arrested or facing charges<sup>22</sup>. In July 2014, the Interior Ministry gave figures estimating half that figure, by suggesting that 22,000, had been arrested within that years time frame. Moreover, a report from the National Council on Human Rights in 2015 said the violence in prisons in Egypt led to 2,600 deaths<sup>23</sup>. Sisi's roundup of the Brotherhood echoes past mass imprisonments that produced martyrs and radical leaders.

Sayyid Qutb, the father of modern Islamic fundamentalism and protagonist of Bin Laden, languished in an Egyptian prison and wrote there a book, "Milestones", that inspired radical Islamists worldwide<sup>24</sup>. Imprisoned with many

other members of the Brotherhood by Gamal Nasser after an assassination attempt on him, he was hanged for treason, becoming a martyr for the cause and inspiring radical Islamists since.

Likewise, Ayman al Zawahiri was jailed following the assassination of President Anwar Sadat, in a roundup of colossal scale of suspected Islamic militants. According to his lawyer the torture he suffered in the notorious Egyptian prisons during his 3-year sentence, instigated the exacerbation of his jihadi inclinations<sup>25</sup>. This experience undoubtedly radicalised him, and in 1998 he united the Egyptian Islamic Jihad with Al-Qaeda. Thus the merging of Egyptian Islamic militant groups with larger organisations, such as Al-Qaeda or IS, is not a new phenomenon and one that has proven causality with the brutality and repression of Egyptian regimes. Crackdown on Brotherhood members by Sisi has seen hundreds sentenced to death, including Morsi himself. The martyrdom and suppression of the Brotherhood in Egyptian history have shown that it is solely the more radical groups that will benefit.

## The Future

President Sisi, whilst popular within Egypt, is not immune. Protests in Luxor in the past week mirror the protest in Alexandria that sparked the Egyptian revolution of 2011 that ousted Hosni Mubarak. The death of a young man in police custody in Luxor is a frightening parallel to the death of Khaled Said in Alexandria that sparked the protest and movement, “Kullena Khaled Said” (We are all Khaled Said), credited with starting the revolution of 2011. President Sisi and those in power must tread carefully if they don’t want to repeat history in Egypt. The damage to an economy highly reliant on tourism and to the premise of President Sisi’s rule is not all that is at stake. This peninsula has the ability to become the Middle East’s newest haven for an ever-alluring neo-jihadist movement. Unless the injustices, economic and political, are mended between the locals and the government the territory could propel the most populous Arab nation into the fight against IS on a grander scale.

With continued political and economic disillusionment comes a rise in the appeal of these militant groups. The dilemma in Egypt

mirrors the dilemma of the international community vis-à-vis intervention in Syria. Brute force by the Egyptian army is likely to create more extremists than it will eradicate extremism and arguments are rife that the same can be reasoned for increased bombing of Syria. The root causes; the economic hardship, the political alienation, the suppression of Islamism and the flattening of houses, villages and livelihoods must be addressed before the appeal of extremist ideology and militancy will ever begin to diminish.

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The worrisome trend in the Sinai of the grassroots dissent against the government echo to the beginning of the downfall of Mubarak or Assad. However, Sisi's support at home and abroad, both regionally and internationally, put him in a stronger position than any of the military leaders whose demise began in 2011. For one, Sisi has complete control of the military, unlike Assad who suffered defectors that created the Free Syrian Army. Secondly, Sisi has cleverly garnered the support of the important regional actors, such

as Saudi Arabia, and built strong relationships with them since his inauguration. Likewise, although tension has crept into Egyptian-Russian relations after the airliner incident, the future appears secure, with joint projects such as the creation of Egypt's first nuclear station announced since the incident. Thus, Sisi has cleverly safeguarded himself diplomatically and used the insurgency in the Sinai to portray his rule as Egypt's only option against radical extremist factions.

Thus, the main concern is that "it is likely that Egypt will become a new hub for jihadi groups, be they rivals or allies"<sup>26</sup> and the ability of the Egyptian army to counter them. The support of the local population is vital and the government must work to win them over. The reports around the death of the founder of Ansar Beyt al Maqdis, Shadi el Menai, speculate that locals were responsible for his death in a purported revenge attack for the group's killings of tribesmen<sup>27</sup>. This highlights, given the nature of the terrain and

population of the Sinai, that the role of the tribes is equal, if not more important, than that of the army. The lack of accountability of the government's Sinai policies to the locals is detrimental to the fight against counterinsurgency and a revision of security and military policies in the region is urgently needed. Whilst this insurgency remains localised, the ability to hit

targets in Cairo is worrying, and containing it will be a difficult task for the government. The counterinsurgency policies of Sisi need to involve long-term political, social and humanitarian solutions for the resident tribes if that task is to be achieved.

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## **ABOUT THE NEO-JIHADISM PROGRAMME:**

### *Scope & Rationale:*

Within in the last decade, the Islamic world has gone through monumental shifts that have had severe implications on its landscape. The fallout of the 'Global War on Terror' the Arab revolutions and post-Arab revolution crises have transformed not only the states themselves, but also the non-state actors within and across the region. This programme aims at analysing the impact of these critical factors on the region. On the one hand, we aim to capture how the concept of Jihadism has – and continues to – evolve in order to identify its implications on the broader social, political, and religious spheres. And on the other, we aim to address how states deal with emerging transitional challenges. While these focuses were previously separated, combining these two research programmes offers a holistic, interconnected approach.

Jihadists represent a fraction of the larger mainstream Islamist movement, which dominates the social space in most Muslim societies. Jihadism does not possess a viable broad social base like the Muslim Brotherhood. From the late 1960s until the mid-1990s, militant Islamists or jihadists were preoccupied with the fight against Al-Adou al-Qareeb (the “near enemy”) Muslim rulers. The primary goal of modern Jihadism is and always has been the destruction of the atheist political and social order at home and its replacement with authentic Islamic states. One silver lining for Al Qaeda, however, is its affiliate organizations. In Iraq, Syria, the Maghreb, Somalia, Yemen, and Egypt, Al Qaeda has won over formidable local allies to its cause, expanding its reach, power, and numbers in the process. This string of mergers is not over. In places as diverse as the Sinai Peninsula and Nigeria, Al Qaeda-linked organizations are emerging. Jihadism today is neither transnational such as Al-Qaeda central, nor national, such as Hezbollah, but regional. It is also increasingly more sectarian. As the Jihadists'

landscape changes, the study and understanding of Jihadism must also adapt to address the developing movement of ‘Neo-Jihadism’:

*Neo-Jihadism is a diverse, syncretic form of global organisation and interaction that emerged from within Islamic Jihadism, is unique to early-twenty-first-centuries, is increasingly sectarian and through its advocacy of violent form of war and selectively literal interpretations of sacred texts, radically differentiates itself from the traditional Jihadist forces, the faith’s mainstream and constitutes a new body of thought and actions. – Neo-Jihadism: A new form of Jihadism, leading and emerging actors [[FULL REPORT](#)]*

Furthermore, in analysing the effects of the Arab Spring on the nascent groups that have emerged in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya or situation in Afghanistan, it is important to distinguish between violence ensuing from the types of unrest that are typical of states undergoing regime change and that resulting from new groups projecting a jihadi agenda. Thus, it is necessary to also analyse the challenges that these transitional states face in order to understand the broader implications that these issues may have on regional stability. This feature expands on our previous programme ‘[US Afghan withdrawal analyses; regional and global security implications](#)’ (2012-2015). Conversely, in dealing with transitional challenges, the topics of security sector reform (SSR) and disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) (which also builds on our previous [I-SSR/DDR programme](#)), becomes essential and must be integrated into a framework that deals with both radicalisation and deradicalisation.

## **ABOUT THE INSTITUTE FOR ISLAMIC STRATEGIC AFFAIRS (IISA)**

**IISA** is a think-tank and an intellectual forum for addressing the current and future dynamics of the Islamic-world and its interaction with Western civilisation. Based in London, IISA will create trans-Islamic and global reach. IISA seeks to establish a platform where Islamic-world's dynamics, trends, issue, problems or crises are analysed within the Islamic-world and by working on local models and realities and not against any external standards or perceptions. We will be one of the leading think-tank on the Islamic-world and its role in the contemporary global system. In a short span of time we have attracted great academic support and a reputation for both open and track-II dialogues. IISA is the only think tank initiative that goes beyond national and regional inclinations and addresses strategic and socio-political issues/crises of the Islamic world in its totality. For more information i.e. our mission statement, current programmes and our academic and regional expertise please visit the following links:

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