

Analysis Sinai Attack: Astonishing Egyptian Failure Has Israel Worried

The ineffectiveness cries out to the heavens, especially considering reports that Israel helped Egypt with intelligence and the use of drones against ISIS strongholds.

The massacre of worshippers at a mosque in Sinai on Friday – the deadliest jihadi terror attack ever in Egypt – is the Egyptian security forces' second failure in just over a month. In the previous incident, in the Giza district west of Cairo, more than 50 Egyptian policemen were killed in a raid gone wrong at a hideout of Muslim Brotherhood militants. After the first incident, Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah al-Sissi fired his army chief of staff, now simply a presidential adviser.

From the Israeli point of view, the two Egyptian failures are astonishing. Especially in Sinai, it's hard to understand how after constantly fighting the Islamic State's Wilayat Sinai affiliate in recent years, the Egyptians have let fewer than 1,000 operatives carry out such murderous attacks. The ineffectiveness of the Egyptian security forces cries out to the heavens, especially when we remember the foreign media's reports that Israel has been extensively helping Egypt in intelligence and the use of drones against Islamic State strongholds.

The United States shares the frustration and surprise; in a number of cases Washington noted to Sissi and his people that the Egyptian security forces' preparedness was clumsy and predictable. In the fight against terror and guerrilla groups, quicker action is needed, combining precise intelligence and commando forces. The Egyptians are still very far from employing this method that resembles the way Israel combats terror groups.

From the Egyptian point of view, things aren't so bad, despite the terrible massacre in Sinai. If more than 300 had been killed in Cairo, for example, this would have presented a much greater challenge to the regime.

Senior Egyptian officials have said more than once that the fight against terror, especially in Sinai, will take a great deal of time, and that they have patience. To

them, they've chalked up plenty of achievements, above all getting some of the Sinai Bedouin tribes to fight the Islamic State. The backdrop for the recent attack might have been the refusal of the tribe in whose territory the attack took place to cooperate with ISIS.

Cairo, in any case, perceives the war against fundamentalist groups as a battle on three fronts: on the Libyan border, in core Egypt and in Sinai. The fighting on the Libyan front is more severe than in Sinai, and the Egyptians have seen some success there. The main concern, shared by Egypt and Israel, involves the possibility that Wilayat Sinai will now strengthen in light of events in the entire region.

The defeat of the Islamic State and the fall of the caliphate the group established in Syria and northern Iraq paves the way to a new era that Israeli intelligence calls ISIS 2.0. This is no longer control of a clearly defined territory, but rather a "virtual caliphate" in which the group recruits young radicals for attacks via the Internet, in Western countries as well, while taking advantage of Sinai's great desert.

In a speech to the nation, Sissi promised that operations against the Islamic State would become more brutal. It may be assumed that the Egyptians will opt for a major show of force in Sinai while trying to reach understandings with more Bedouin tribes.

The Islamic State has already taken in to its ranks veterans of its battles in Syria and Iraq, a phenomenon that could increase in the coming months. Friday's attack showed a high degree of planning and implementation; the terrorists stormed the mosque where hundreds of worshippers were trapped and then set ambushes for rescue personnel. Such sophistication also worries the Israel Defense Forces, in case ISIS fighters (who are also operating against Al-Qaida's awakening local branch) try an ambitious attack in the direction of Israel.

Shaky Hamas-PA reconciliation

The Sinai attack will delay the opening of the Rafah crossing, which Gazans have been waiting for impatiently following the reconciliation agreement between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority. But the status of the reconciliation talks is worse than the parties are willing to admit. For the moment, it seems high hopes will be dashed: completing the process by December 1, launching the joint

government's operations and putting the Rafah crossing into continual operation.

The last round of talks in Cairo ended in utter failure. In this context, a kind of unsigned manifesto has been published detailing the ostensible understandings reached by the parties. This might have been a false report by Egyptian intelligence, which is mediating the process and now wants to calm things down.

Among other things, it claimed that Hamas had agreed to accept the Palestine Liberation Organization as the only legal representative of the Palestinian people. It's hard to believe that Hamas would agree to this without promises of representation in PLO bodies - one of the main stumbling blocks in the negotiations.

And so there's a double danger. One is the Palestinian people's loss of hope in light of the talks' failure, which could help reheat the border between Israel and Gaza. The second is the possibility that Islamic Jihad will request a chance to settle accounts after Israel blew up a tunnel on the Gaza border last month, killing 12 Islamic Jihad militants and one Hamas man.

Source: <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/1.824959>

[Disclaimer]