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Egypt's Sinai emerges as new theater for jihad



An Egyptian doctor once close to Osama bin Laden is bringing together multiple al-Qaeda-inspired militant groups in Egypt's Sinai to fight the country's military, as the lawless peninsula emerges as a new theater for jihad, according to Egyptian intelligence and security officials. There have been other signs of a dangerous shift in the longtime turmoil in the peninsula bordering Israel and the Gaza Strip since the military's July 3 ouster of Islamist President Mohammed Mursi, the officials say.

With the shifts, Sinai's instability is becoming more regionalized and threatens to turn into an outright insurgency. Sinai has seen an influx of foreign fighters over the past two months, including several hundred Yemenis.

Several militant groups that long operated in the area to establish an Islamic Caliphate and attack their traditional enemy Israel have joined others in declaring formally that their objective now is to battle Egypt's military. Also, Sinai has become the focus of attention among major regional jihadi groups.

A leader of al-Qaeda's Iraqi branch, Abu Mohammed al-Adnani, last weekend called on Egyptians to fight the military, as did al-Qaeda's top leader, Ayman al-Zawahri.

The militant considered the most dangerous man in the Sahara - one-eyed terror leader Moktar Belmoktar, a former member of al-Qaeda's North Africa branch - joined forces with a Mali-based jihadi group last month and vowed attacks in Egypt. Topping the most wanted list in Sinai is Ramzi Mawafi, a doctor who joined al-Qaeda in Afghanistan in the 1990s.

Mawafi, 61, escaped from an Egyptian prison in 2011 in a massive jailbreak that also sprung free Mursi and more than a dozen Muslim Brotherhood members during the chaos of the uprising against autocrat Hosni Mubarak. Mawafi is now believed to be in Sinai coordinating among militant groups and helping arrange money and weapons, security officials told The Associated Press.

The four officials were from military intelligence, the military and the security forces and spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak to the press. Sinai's disparate militant groups are now "on the same page, in full cooperation in the face of the same threat," Gen. Sherif Ismail, a recently retired security adviser to the governor of Northern Sinai, told the AP.

He said the groups are inspired by al-Qaeda, but not necessarily linked to the mother group. Mursi's fall opened the way for an escalation by Sinai's jihadis.

Most militants had seen Mursi as too willing to compromise in bringing rule by Islamic Shariah law in Egypt.

But his removal by the military, backed by liberals, was seen as an attack on Islam.

More importantly, it ended the policy Mursi pursued during his year in office of negotiating with Sinai armed groups, restraining security operations against them in return for a halt in attacks on the military. Now, the military has stepped up operations.

On Tuesday, helicopter gunships struck suspected militant hideouts in several villages near the borders with Israel and Gaza, killing at least eight and wounding 15, the state news agency MENA announced. Since Mursi's ouster, more than 70 police and soldiers have been killed by militants in a cycle of attack and counterattack that has seen jihadis turn to more brutal tactics.

In the worst single attack, gunmen pulled police recruits from buses, lay them on the ground and shot 25 of them to death on Aug. 19.

Days later, a group of militants was killed before carrying out a suicide car bombing in a significant escalation. Over the same period, security forces have killed 87 militants, including 32 foreigners, and arrested 250 others, including 80 foreigners, according to the army spokesman's office. Hit-and-run attacks take place nearly daily in northern Sinai, targeting security forces in the provincial capital of el-Arish and towns dotting the coast and the borders with Gaza and Israel. Two militants - a Yemeni and a Palestinian - who were recently arrested in Sinai provided information about Mawafi's role while under questioning, the security officials said.

Recently, Nabeel Naeem, a founder of the Islamic Jihad militant group who has known Mawafi since Afghanistan - said on an Egyptian TV station that Mawafi "is leading the militants in Sinai." Mawafi specialized in bomb-making during his years in Afghanistan, the officials said. He also supervised clinics that treated wounded Islamic fighters, earning him the nickname "bin Laden's doctor" - though Naeem said he never treated the late al-Qaida leader himself. An Egyptian court in June last year accused Mawafi, along with Mursi and other Muslim Brotherhood members of conspiring with Hamas and Hezbollah to orchestrate the 2011 break from Wadi Natroun prison.

The court described Mawafi as “the secretary general of al-Qaeda in Sinai.” The number of jihadi groups operating in Sinai’s rugged, mountainous deserts has mushroomed over recent years, believed to have thousands of fighters. Some are mainly Egyptian, such as Ansar Jerusalem - thought to include Egyptians from outside Sinai - and the Shura Council of Mujahedeen of Environs of Jerusalem - which is mostly Sinai locals - and the Salafi Jihadi group.

Among Sinai’s population, there has been a growing movement of “Takfiris,” who reject as heretical anyone who does not adhere to their strict interpretation of Islam.

While not all Takfiris are involved in armed action, their ideology makes them an easy pool for armed groups to draw from. Other groups are based in the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip, such as the Islam Army and Jaljalat, which are believed to send fighters into Sinai. Some groups were oriented toward fighting Israel, occasionally firing rockets across the border.

Others attacked Egyptian security forces, usually in retaliation for arrests or out of the deep-seeded resentment of the police among Sinai’s population.

In the aftermath of Mubarak’s fall in 2011, a group attacked police stations and drove security forces out of the border towns, declaring the area an Islamic Caliphate.

Many of them were later tried and sentenced to death. Now multiple groups are overtly calling for “jihad” against Egypt’s military. Several hundred Yemeni fighters came in after Mursi’s ouster in response to religious edicts by clerics back home urging them to fight jihad in Egypt, according to a Yemeni security official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to talk to the press.

Al-Qaeda in Yemen, known as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, is considered the most active branch of the terror network. The Egyptian officials say fighters have also come from Saudi Arabia, Libya and Syria. The military intelligence official said commanders of jihadi groups are joining ranks with prominent Sinai-based militants who belong to major tribes to ensure protection and facilitate weapons smuggling.

One of the most influential tribes, the Swarkas, has split between anti- and pro-government families. An Egyptian military official in el-Arish said jihadis run at least nine main training camps in Sinai, hidden in villages controlled by allied tribes or in mountainous regions. Ismail el-Iskandarani, a researcher at the Egyptian Center for Social and Economic rights who writes extensively about Sinai, says it’s hard to pin down the number of militants or camps because local jihadis hide in homes among their own families after carrying out hit-and-run attacks. “Even their relatives might not know they are involved in Islamic militancy,” he said. He said there is also no single leader, with small cells of differing ideologies.

The situation is further complicated by the overlap of militants and criminal networks involved in smuggling, sometimes with the involvement of corrupt police officials.

“Different security agencies are meddling in making it hard to tell who is doing what,” he said. Now international terror groups are adding their calls for jihad in the wake of the coup. In an Aug. 3 statement, al-Zawahri mocked Morsi’s participation in the democratic process, calling democracy “an idol made of date paste” created by secularists.

The al-Qaeda leader called upon “the soldiers of the Quran to wage the war for the Quran.” From North Africa, the militant leader Belmoktar and a Mali jihadi group announced last month that they aim to form a jihadi front from the River Nile to North Africa’s Atlantic coast. So far, Egypt’s military has not launched a major offensive against armed groups in Sinai.

El-Iskandarani believes the generals are wary of a sparking a wider confrontation with disgruntled Bedouin tribes.

Also, Sinai jihadis have powerful new arsenals of heavy anti-aircraft guns, rockets and other weapons smuggled from Libya. “The price will be very heavy,” el-Iskandarani said.