**It’s war in Sinai**

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After Friday prayers last week an as yet unidentified person drove a car carrying two tons of explosives into the Karam Al-Qawadis checkpoint. The checkpoint is at the intersection of several roads between the areas of Rafah, Al-Awja and Al-Arish and the closest inhabited area is Al-Kharuba, three kilometres away. On the sides of the roads leading to the intersection explosive charges had been planted to target any military convoys heading towards the checkpoint.

When support forces moved in from several directions these were detonated, increasing the number of casualties which were driven even higher by smaller separate incidents such as the attack against a policeman in front of the Al-Arish hospital where ambulances were carrying the victims. In two separate attacks at least 31 officers and soldierswere killed. The wounded were transferred to three hospitals, two in Al-Arish (Al-Arish Central Hospital and Al-Arish Military Hospital) and one in Cairo (the Maadi Military Hospital).

Initial investigations suggest dozens were involved in the attack. The perpetrators were probably divided into teams, each assigned with specific tasks, part of a meticulously designed and tightly coordinated plan. According to sources close to the investigations the perpetrators are likely to be unknown to security forces, their names absent from any suspect lists.

This fact lends weight to speculations that those who masterminded the terrorist operation were foreigners who had linked up with local members of the Ansar Beit Al-Maqdis organisation. Following the operation the perpetrators fled nearby mountain areas - Al-Kharuba, Abul-Eraj, Abu Lufaita and Al-Jami, the most rugged, located 15 km away.

Some might have headed to Al-Mahdiya and Al-Maqatia. The former is a relatively populated area known to be hospitable to salafi jihadist elements and home to a number of Ansar Beit Al-Maqdis leaders, most notably the Shadi Al-Mani family. All these areas are east of Al-Arish and south of Al-Sheikh Zuwaid and Rafah.

The most striking feature of the 24 October massacre is the level of planning. In addition to the unprecedented numbers involved, it is presumed that the perpetrators also possessed means to monitor patrols and predict the convergence of a large number of soldiers in a specific location. It is known that the army has been carrying out special military operations in the area for about a month.

Military and security experts contacted by Al-Ahram Weekly refute any suggestion there is a breach in the ranks of the intelligence and security services in Sinai. That former police and security officers have been involved in recent terrorist operations had fed speculation to this effect.

Both General Sameh Seif Al-Yazal and General Alaa Ezzeddin find it difficult to imagine any such breach. The two military experts agree that Egypt's security system is better than any of its regional counterparts when it comes to responding to terrorist threats, although Ezzeddin concedes there may have been “some mistakes made on the ground”.

URGENT MEASURES:

The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), headed by the president, met on Saturday to review the latest developments in Sinai, scene of one of the deadliest terrorist attacks against the Egyptian army since the overthrow of the regime of Mohamed Morsi and the surge in salafi jihadist activity in Sinai that followed.

The SCAF meeting took place a few hours after a meeting of the National Defence Council (NDC) which is headed by the president and includes high level military and intelligence officials alongside key civilian government officials.

A three-day mourning period was declared to commemorate the martyrs.

The NDC meeting resulted in a three-month state of emergency being declared in North Sinai. Article 1 of presidential decree 366 of 2014 declared a state of emergency across almost the whole of the governorate of North Sinai, the only exceptions being the districts of Bir Al-Abd, Nakhl and parts of the district of Al-Hassana in central Sinai. A curfew has been imposed from 5pm to 7am and the Rafah crossing closed until further notice.

Mohamed Hammad, a resident from Beir Al-Abd, says the curfew is being applied outside the designated area, including in Beir Al-Abd which is 80 km away. Hammad told theWeekly that the army had started to close all roads in the vicinity from 7pm to 6am.

Other Sinai residents say that a curfew has effectively been in place in Sheikh Zuwaid for more than a year now and that most of the decisions that the government has now announced have been applied for some time. One of these decisions, they say, is the evacuation of families from Rafah.

Another measure triggered by last week's attack was the decree issued by the president, in his capacity as commander in chief of the Armed Forces, to place legal cases in the named areas under the jurisdiction of military courts. The president also issued a decree ordering the Armed Forces to work with the police to protect public buildings.

SCAF assigned a committee of senior Armed Forces commanders the task of studying the circumstances surrounding recent terrorist attacks in Sinai and to draw up a strategy to enhance the fight against terrorism in all its forms throughout the country. The committee began its work on the day it was created. A joint meeting with police commanders has already been scheduled to coordinate their efforts and tasks.

In a related development the cabinet, meeting at the beginning of this week, proposed legislative amendments to broaden the remit of military courts to cover all cases that threaten the national security. This includes attacks against the police and Armed Forces and against all public property and utilities, including blocking and destroying roads.

General Abdel-Moneim Said, head of Armed Forces operations during the 1973 war, told the Weekly these measures are “beyond discussion”given the gravity of the situation.

“They are necessary to correct the mistakes the government has made for decades. Foremost among these is the neglect of Sinai, which is implicated in most of what we are seeing today.” Western policy in the Middle East also had a hand in generating this situation, most notably the US policy of “constructive chaos and its attempt to fragment the countries of the region”.

Said points out that an estimated 1,000 jihadists had returned to Egypt from Afghanistan and Pakistan. These, he said, were responsible for the attacks on Taba and Sharm El-Sheikh. “They have infiltrated Bedouin tribes and, due to the [government’s] neglect they have attracted large numbers of Bedouin youth. As a result, instead of a thousand they are now twenty thousand.”

Said addressed specific issues related to measures being taken in Sinai, including the compulsory evacuation of inhabitants from areas of Rafah with compensation, the creation of a buffer zone and the destruction of tunnels between Gaza and Sinai. “Israel does not pose a security problem for Sinai. Nor can it keep Egypt from defending itself there,” he said.

He stressed the need for the government to work to bring its relationship with Sinai tribes back on track. This entails implementing “an urgent development plan beginning in the west and extending eastwards”. The Suez Canal development project is clearly intended to serve this end, he said, adding, “all these actions will reduce the threat of terrorism in Sinai but won't stop it 100 per cent”.

On the question of the army and police sharing responsibility for protecting vital facilities Said said: “If Sinai makes up about six per cent of Egypt's surface area and is home to around 600,000 citizens, this will not create a crisis for the government in its handling of the problem there as long as a detailed plan is drawn up for the purpose.

"However, the rest of the domestic front also needs to be secured. Courts have been targeted, universities have been targeted, roads have been targeted by groups dedicated to violence and destruction. This has to end. It will take around two years. That is how long the military establishment estimates he threat will last.”

ISIS INVOLVEMENT:

Some local sources in Sinai believe that the qualitatively new operation in which Ansar Beit Al-Maqdis is presumed to have been involved is a prelude to an announcement that ISIS has set up a base in Egypt. They point to the recent message conveyed by ISIS to its “brothers” in Sinai telling them not to come to the “land of the jihad” in Iraq and Syria but rather to support Ansar Beit Al-Maqdis.

“We have been warning of this for months,” Sinai resident Gazi Al-Tarabini told the Weekly. “Daesh (the Arabic acronym for ISIS) is at the gates. It is not important whether they keep or drop the Ansar Beit Al-Maqdis label.” One indication of this, he said, could be found in the interview on a local news website with the chief defendant in the second Rafah massacre case, Adel Habara, who was quoted as saying that “IS is coming”.

What Habara's message signals is that some local leaders of Ansar Beit Al-Maqdis have pledged allegiance to ISIS without publicising the fact yet. Some sources say this may be due to the many hits Ansar Beit Al-Maqdis has taken from security forces in recent months.

According to sources militant jihadists on the Gaza side of the border from organisations such as Jaljala, Jund Allah and Jund Al-Islam have united beneath the banner of ISIS. They add that these organisations are increasingly interwoven with their Egyptian counterparts and are helping to bring the latter into the ISIS fold. The Gaza-based organisations may have played a part in smuggling into Egypt the unfamiliar faces that Egyptian security agencies say were behind the most recent attacks.

It is noteworthy, in this regard, that Al-Battar, an ISIS affiliated website, broadcast a video clip of the Karam Al-Qawadis attack, though it was removed almost immediately. Ansar Beit Al-Maqdis must have sent footage to the ISIS website, a significant precedent given the group has in the past used other websites to publicise its operations.

Nor should we ignore Egyptians active in ISIS, in its fatwa branch in particular, since it was founded by Abu Omar Al-Baghdadi in 2008. One of the most dangerous figures in the organisation is Abu Hamaz Al-Muhajer. Its first “minister of defence”, he laid the groundwork for the military structure of the organisation. Before he was killed in a military operation along with Abu Omar Al-Baghdadi, Al-Muhajer drafted the document, The Prophetic State, that can be regarded as the ISIS charter. Al-Muhajer is likely to have recruited a number of Egyptians into ISIS, particularly former army officers.

It is also believed that he founded an intelligence agency for the organisation that contains many Egyptians. When Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi took over ISIS the organisation continued to rely on these elements.

There is some evidence that ISIS has been recruiting networks from Egypt and that a number of youths had enlisted with it during the period of Muslim Brotherhood rule and afterwards. The overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood may have propelled some of its younger members into the ISIS embrace, particularly in the wake of the breakup of the Rabaa sit-in. There are messages on various social networking pages indicating that ISIS had targetted Muslim Brotherhood members, in addition to salafi jihadists, for recruitment.

A Sinai source, speaking to the Weekly on condition of anonymity, said moving money in order to recruit youth was “easy”. The source suggested that funding for these groups came indirectly through networks in Israel and others in Gaza. “Ansar Beit Al-Maqdis is playing the same role as Daesh in collecting money from local sources, whether through the smuggling trade across the borders with Israel and Gaza, arms trafficking or other unofficial economic means... Even channels for the movement of money, itself, in foreign currencies seem available and unrestricted.”

It appears that conventional bank transfers via Turkey to Beirut banks and then to Gaza are still the easiest way to funnel money to fund these groups and their operations.

HAMAS INVOLVEMENT:

Hamas is suspected of involvement in Sinai attacks because of its organic connection with the Muslim Brotherhood. Many commentators have pointed fingers in the direction of Hamas, discounting the statement Hamas issued in the immediate aftermath of the attack claiming it had no connection whatsoever with the incident. Hamas official Moussa Abu Marzouk felt compelled to issue another statement in which he stressed that it was only the Egyptian media, and not Egyptian officials, that blamed Hamas. He added that the subject was not even raised in talks between Hamas and Egyptian General Intelligence Agency officials.

Egyptian security sources stress that investigations are still ongoing and that no possibility has been ruled out yet. At the same time, it appears certain that Gaza was where the Sinai attack, or at least a phase of it, was prepared.

EVACUATION PLAN:

General Sameh Seif Al-Yazal, Director of the National Centre for Strategic and Security Studies, believes that an approximately eight kilometre wide stretch of territory to the west of the eastern border zone should be cleared of all civilians and declared a military zone. The idea has gained momentum among politicians, journalists, and even among military officials in Cairo.

As Major General Mohamed Al-Shahawi, who serves as an advisor at the Commanders and Staff College observed: “There are several advantages to this idea. One is that the area declared a military operations zone would be brought under the jurisdiction of the military judiciary. The second is that it would be cleared of civilians and be regarded as an open theatre.”

Ashraf Suweilam, a journalist from Sinai, initially brought the idea to General Seif Al-Yazal's attention. The idea originated with tribal leaders who recalled Egypt's evacuation of the area during the 1967 war and who, according to Suweilam, were fed up with jihadist activities in their area.

“It is not that easy,” General Alaa Ezzeddin, former director of the Military Studies Centre, told the Weekly. “In carrying out the plan we would forfeit one of our most important sources of information in the field.”

Gazi Al-Tarabini, a Sinai resident responds: “Yes, Bedouin tribes are a source of information. But there is another problem, namely the response of Ansar Beit Al-Maqdis leaders who have called for the death of any Bedouins who cooperate with the army and security forces.” Al-Tarabini said that though initially suspects were summarily executed “now people who are accused of cooperating with the army are given an ultimatum to leave their homes and clear out of the area within a week or else they will have their heads cut off... Already about 30 families have fled to governorates in the Delta, to Beheira governorate in particular.”

Al-Tarabini does not approve of the evacuation plan. “Memories of the evacuation are bitter for the people of Sinai. We do not want it to be repeated, even if there are arrangements from beginning to end and financial compensation. We should not forget that Sinai tribesmen are attached to the land and that it is hard to get them to move even with the promise of better housing.”

Most Bedouin sources say the idea is likely to be greeted negatively. In 2012, moves to create a buffer zone along the border with Gaza are thought to have triggered a number of terrorist attacks. At the time Ibrahim Al-Mani, leader of the “independent tribes” and an uncle of Ansar Beit Al-Maqdiscommander Shadi Al-Mani, told the Weekly, “We will not permit it”.

“We need to admit, without generalising, that evacuation is likely to cause problems with the tribes. We also need to end any supportive environment for extremist organisations in these areas,” says Nabil Abdel-Fattah, an advisor at the Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies and a specialist in Islamist movements.

Abdel-Fattah draws a distinction between “temporary evacuation”, which would be required in some areas in order to prevent civilian casualties during military operations, and “compulsory evacuation”, required in the buffer zone in order to build a barrier wall along the border with Gaza, something that is “a national security matter beyond discussion”. He adds that in both cases there should be compensation.

An official source told the Weekly that the census committee, charged when Al-Sisi was Minister of Defence to address issues connected with the proposed buffer zone, had found just 638 people would be affected by the project. “It’s not a large number and they could be compensated” to permit for the creation of a 13 kilometre longbuffer zone.

According to military sources the Engineering Corps is currently in Sinai to study the construction of the steel wall and buffer zone as well as ways to better protect military barracks.

On the question of communications between the jihadists, Al-Tarabini said: “It is difficult to imagine that the cells operating in Sinai are communicating via the three local mobile networks. Most likely some are using the Thuraya satellite network with a direct satellite linkup, while others are using Palestinian or even Israeli networks.”

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