



Egypt's war against terror -  
Comprehensive Operation Sinai  
2018

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## Abstract

*In February 2018, Egypt's security forces launched a major anti-militant operation aimed at rooting out terrorism in Sinai and other areas across the country. A year later, the battle against Islamic insurgency is far from over.*

In February 2018, security forces launched a major anti-militant operation, Comprehensive Operation Sinai (COS) 2018, aimed at wiping out terrorism. The operation came two and a half months after President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi appointed Lt. Gen. Mohamed Farid Hegazi as Army Chief-of-Staff and issued instructions to eliminate terrorist organizations in Sinai within three months. Hegazi's appointment was made three days after an attack on Al-Rawda Mosque in the Bir al-Abd district, west of Arish, which claimed the lives of more than 300 civilians. The operation also coincides with Libyan National Army's strikes against terrorist strongholds around Derna, which have driven the terrorists based there closer to Egypt's western border. Egypt has for years been battling an Islamist insurgency, which expanded following the ousting of Islamist President Muhammad Morsi in 2013. The attacks have been mainly concentrated in the restive northern Sinai Peninsula but have also spread to the mainland, including the capital Cairo.

President El-Sisi held a meeting with military and security top ranks after performing Friday prayers, on March 9, 2019, at Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi Mosque in New Cairo. He discussed with the army and police leaders, notably the ministers of defense and interior, the latest developments at the domestic, regional and international levels. Also, they reviewed army and police efforts within the framework of the ongoing military Operation Sinai 2018, in addition to tightening border security. The president lauded tasks undertaken by police and army forces to preserve the country, as well as their efforts to support the pillars of stability and development across the nation.<sup>1</sup>

On March 11, 2019, in the 32nd statement on the latest developments related to Operation Sinai 2018, the Egyptian armed forces announced that 46 terrorists were killed following shootouts in northern and central Sinai. Three army soldiers were martyred in those operations, the statement said.<sup>2</sup>

The statement added that around 15 hideouts and four vehicles used by the terrorists in the north-east were destroyed by the air forces. The timeframe of events was not specified.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Egypt's Sisi meets top military, security ranks on Friday," *Ahram Online*, March 9, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> "46 militants killed in Egypt's anti-Daesh campaign in Sinai," *Arab News*, March 11, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> "46 'dangerous terrorists' and 3 soldiers killed in Sinai operations - Egypt's military," *Ahram Online*, March 11, 2019.

Egypt experienced two deadly terrorist attacks in February 2019, one in El Arish and the other in the Darb Al-Ahmar district near Al-Azhar. The attacks could have been timed to coincide with the first anniversary of the launch of COS 2018, and with el-Sisi's visit to Germany to take part in the Munich Security Conference.

### **The Attack in El Arish**

The attack on an Egyptian army checkpoint in El Arish occurred on February 16, 2019. It left 15 soldiers dead or wounded and seven of the suspected jihadist assailants killed. A combing operation was immediately launched to apprehend and eliminate terrorist operatives in the vicinity. ISIS has claimed responsibility for the attack, the group's AMAQ news agency said.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Suicide Attack near Al Azhar**

On February 19, 2019, in Darb Al-Ahmar, Al-Hassan Abdallah, 37, blew himself up when security forces tried to arrest him after a four-day manhunt following an attempt to plant an IED near a police unit stationed by al-Istiqama Mosque in Giza Square. Explosive experts succeeded in defusing the device. When confronted by

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<sup>4</sup> "ISIS claims North Sinai attack, says 20 Egyptian troops killed," *Al Arabiya*, February 17, 2019.

police, he detonated an explosive belt, killing three policemen and himself. The explosion took place in a crowded quarter and wounded several passers-by.<sup>5</sup>

The terrorist was a supporter of ousted president Mohamed Morsi who had taken part in the Rabaa Al-Adawiya sit-in. He later joined a jihadist cell and was responsible for lookout and surveillance operations for the Revolution Brigade and the Hasm terrorist organization.

He made several attempts to infiltrate Sinai in order to join the Islamic state (IS) affiliated groups there but failed. He was, however, able to establish contact with some IS affiliated groups who instructed him to carry out an attack in the vicinity of the Al-Istiqama Mosque.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Islamic resistance groups**

Since President Morsi's ouster in July 2013, the government of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has been carrying an extensive clampdown on Islamists. As a result, a debate on the use of violence greatly divided the Muslim Brotherhood and many Muslim Brotherhood operatives have shifted to more violent groups like Hasm and the Revolution Brigade groups. The "language" of these groups demonstrates their close

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<sup>5</sup> "Two police officers killed after terror suspect blows himself up near Al-Azhar Mosque in Cairo," *Arab News*, February 19, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

connection to the Brotherhood and their relative distance from other purely jihadist groups like the Islamic state and Al Qaeda.

**Hasm** - an acronym in Arabic for the Forearms of Egypt Movement which doubles as the word for decisiveness is the predominant group. It announced its existence in June 2016 via a website and staged its first attack on July 16, 2016, targeting the intelligence chief of Fayoum governorate.

**The Li'wa al-Thawra**, or the **Revolution Brigade**, was formed same year. On August 21, 2016, a policeman and a soldier were killed. The Li'wa el Thawra movement claimed the attacks in a public letter.

### **The War against the Tunnels between Sinai and Gaza**

On February 11, 2019, two Palestinians died inside a cross-border tunnel in Rafah, after they were allegedly exposed to toxic gases and suffocated. Palestinian news outlets claimed that Egyptian soldiers pumped toxic gas into the tunnel. The Egyptian army has not commented on the report. Palestinian civil defense teams managed to rescue two more people from the tunnel, the purpose of which was said to be “commercial” by Gaza’s interior ministry.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> “Two Palestinians die after 'Egypt pumps toxic gas' into Gaza tunnel,” *The New Arab*, February 12, 2019.

A Hamas official statement quoted by i24news has confirmed the death of police officer Maj. Abed al-Hamid al-Aker, 39, and Subhi Saqer Abu Qirshein, 28, saying they suffocated from toxic gases. According to Iyad al-Buzm, Gaza's interior ministry spokesperson, al-Aker was on a security mission to inspect a border tunnel in the south of the Gaza Strip.<sup>8</sup>

The destruction of smuggling tunnels connecting the Gaza Strip with the Sinai Peninsula is one of several counter-terrorism initiatives taken by the Egyptian government in recent years. Egypt sees the tunnels as a passageway for arms and militants it has been fighting in North Sinai, posing a risk to the country's security.

The network of smuggling tunnels that connects Sinai with the Palestinian Gaza Strip is controlled by the Islamist Hamas movement. Hamas and other terror groups operate secret tunnels to facilitate the flow of weapons and militants into and out of Gaza. Palestinian smugglers in Gaza have built thousands of underground tunnels to bring a wide range of goods into the Strip, from food and medicine to cement and iron. Hamas, which controls Gaza, effectively licenses the tunnels, providing electricity, taking a tax on smuggled goods and banning the import of drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> "20 Sinai smuggling tunnels destroyed by Egypt's military in November: Spokesperson," *Ahram Online*, December 7, 2015.

The excavation of smuggling tunnels in the Rafah area began in 1982, subsequent to the division of the Rafah city between Egypt and the Gaza Strip. The average smuggling tunnel is approximately 500 meters in length, and 20 to 25 meters deep. The tunnels may be equipped with wood-paneling, electrical infrastructure, communications gear, and rudimentary elevators in vertical shafts, to transport people or the freight of goods. The openings of the tunnels are often located within private Egyptian homes or other buildings, near or next to the border with Egypt.<sup>10</sup>

Israel and Egypt imposed restrictions on Gaza after Hamas seized control of the territory in 2007. Egypt has put even more pressure on Gaza through prolonged closings of the Rafah crossing.

## **Conclusion**

Egypt witnessed a significant rise in militancy, particularly in Sinai, since the military-backed ouster of Islamist President Mohamed Morsi in July 2013 following mass protests against his rule.

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<sup>10</sup> Rory McCarthy, "Egypt building underground metal wall to curb smuggling into Gaza," *The Guardian*, December 10, 2009.

Egypt's army and police forces have been waging a war over the past six years against an Islamist militant insurgency mainly in North Sinai. Hundreds of security personnel and militants have been killed in the violence.

Operation Sinai 2018 is a major component of Egypt's counter-terror strategy and it will have a significant long-term impact on the terror threat in the country.

Israel and Egypt have a common strategic interest in fighting terrorism. In recent years, Israel has allowed Egypt to send extra forces into the Sinai Peninsula to fight Islamist terrorists. Under the terms of the 1979 Israel-Egypt peace treaty, Egypt must ask Israel for authorization before sending troops into the Sinai, which is supposed to remain demilitarized.

Egypt says the closing down of the tunnels along the Gaza border is part of a crackdown against Islamist militants in the Sinai Peninsula and their supporters in the Palestinian territory. According to Egyptian reports, some 1900 tunnels have been destroyed in the years 2013-2017. The Egyptian army has said it destroyed 37 cross-border tunnels in 2018, but the war against the tunnels is far from being over.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ahmed Eleiba, "The fight continues," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, Issue 1431, (21 - 27 February 2019).

Despite the significant achievements of the operation, after a year, Wilayat Sinai (ISIS Sinai province) is weaker but still very much a force to be reckoned with, and the Egyptian security forces will have to prolong the operation for a lengthy period.

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