



## EGYPT'S ANSAR BAYT AL-MAQDIS AND THE ISLAMIC STATE

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### **ABSTRACT**

On January 29, 2015 a series of deadly attacks involving car bombs, mortar fire and ambushes targeted several military and police sites in North Sinai. At least 44 people, including military and police personnel and civilians, were killed and 105 others were injured in the attacks.

This was the first major terrorist attack carried out by Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, the Islamic State group's Egyptian affiliate, in the Sinai Province (Wilayat Sinai). The group claimed responsibility for the attacks via a Twitter account: "We executed extensive, simultaneous attacks in the cities of El-Arish, Sheikh Zuweid and Rafah". The group said it was retaliating against a government crackdown on supporters of former President Mohamed Morsi.

The deadly attacks in North Sinai suggested that Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis may be following the modus operandi of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

\* The views expressed in this publication are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (ICT).

## **Egypt's Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis and the Islamic State**

**Dr. Shaul Shay**

**(October 2014)**

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### **From Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis to Wilayat Sinai**

Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (ABM), Egypt's most dangerous Islamic terrorist group, swore allegiance to the Islamic State on November 3, 2014. The group published a nearly 10-minute long recording on its Twitter account, which stated that:

"After entrusting God we decided to swear allegiance to the emir of the faithful Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, caliph of the Muslims in Syria and Iraq and in other countries."<sup>2</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> Egyptian Islamic State group affiliate claims deadly Sinai attacks, Ahramonline, January 30, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Egypt's Ansar Bayt Al-Maqdis swears allegiance to Islamic State: Reuters, Al Ahram Online, November 4, 2014.

recording was later suspended from the account along with other jihadist Web sites and forums.<sup>3</sup>

The next day, ABM issued a short tweet denying the media reports that it had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. In the tweet, ABM asked the media “to check the accuracy of their sources” and warned that all information from the group would only be released via its official social media sites.<sup>4</sup>

Less than a week after denying the above reports, ABM released an audio clip in which it declared its support for the Islamic State, according to media reports. The nine-minute audio clip was posted on a Twitter account claiming to be ABM's official account. “In accordance with the teachings of the Prophet, we announce our pledge of allegiance to the caliph Ibrahim Ibn Awad ... to listen and obey him...and we call on all Muslims to pledge allegiance to him,” a man who reportedly identified himself as part of the group’s “information department” said in the recording, in which he referred to the Islamic State leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, by his adopted name.<sup>5</sup>

The speaker reportedly said that al-Baghdadi was “chosen by God” to establish a new caliphate after “Muslims suffered decades of humiliation.” A week later, the group used the same Twitter account to deny reports that it had aligned itself with the Islamic State.<sup>6</sup> According to media reports, the speaker also urged Egyptians to rise up against “the tyrant,” allegedly referring to President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi. “What are you waiting for, after your honor has been aggressed upon and your sons ' blood has been shed at the hands of this tyrant and his soldiers?”, the spokesperson reportedly said.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Zeinab El Gundy, Beyond the pledge: Ansar Beit Al-Maqdis joins IS, Al Ahram Online, November 11, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Ansar Beit Al-Maqdis denies pledging allegiance to ISIS, Daily News Egypt, November 4, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Avaneesh Pandey, Sinai-Based Ansar Bayt Al-Maqdis Swears Allegiance To ISIS A Week After Denying Links, International Business Times, November 10, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Shortly after ABM swore allegiance to the Islamic State, a jihadist Web site posted a statement that it attributed to Abu Mosa'ab al-Maqqdisi, a prominent Jordanian jihadist scholar who is seen by many as a source of inspiration for the Islamic State, in which he called on Egyptian jihadists to “take the battle” to Cairo and not stay in the Sinai Peninsula. He added that they should target the economy and the tourism industry by attacking major companies and communication organizations, specifically the Suez Canal and Egyptian businessman, Naguib Sawiris.<sup>8</sup> Al-Maqqdisi called on ABM to welcome "their immigrant foreign brother fighters" to Egypt while they can still access the country. He concluded with a warning that those who collude with police should be beheaded.<sup>9</sup>

As a jihadist group that has pledged allegiance to the caliphate, ABM should eventually join the war against the international coalition led by the United States to fight the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.<sup>10</sup>

Ansar Bayt Al-Maqqdis had previously sought inspiration and advice, and received financial aid from the Islamic State in return for the former's continued operations against the Egyptian army.

At the end of August 2013, Egyptian police forces in northern Sinai arrested an individual by the name of Adel Hebara, who they accused of belonging to the Sinai Peninsula and participating in the second Rafah massacre, in which 25 Central Security Forces officers were killed.<sup>11</sup> This is the term the Egyptian used

In the case against Hebara, the court listened to several telephone calls between Hebara and an IS member in Syria, in which the latter promised to transfer \$10,000 in return for the implementation of operations in the Sinai Peninsula and for an oath of allegiance to

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<sup>8</sup> Ansar Bayt al-Maqqdis denies Islamic State allegiance, Cairo Post, November 4, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Zeinab El Gundy, Beyond the pledge: Ansar Beit Al-Maqqdis joins IS, Al Ahram Online, November 11, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Egypt Pulse, Al Monitor, June 23, 2014.

al-Baghdadi. Hebara accepted the conditions. The IS, for its part, sent messages through its Web site to the “brave mujahedeen of Sinai” in which it called on Sinai militants to keep fighting the Egyptian army and establish an Islamic state in the peninsula. The IS also criticized Al-Qaeda for not fighting against the Egyptian army.

The message stated: “Keep your faith in the religion of God, may he be praised, and know that you are in the right. Do not slacken, no matter how much people betray you or work against you. Our hearts, men and available resources are at your service, for we all fight to establish the rule of God’s laws. God willing, we shall be one to cooperate in enforcing religion, and God will not divide us, neither through borders, nor nationalities, for we are with you in heart, substance, effort and money.”<sup>12</sup>

In September 2014, residents of border villages in Sinai near the cities of Sheikh Zuweid and Rafah reported seeing gunmen wave the black IS flag and carry banners emblazoned with “Islamic State,” though the words Iraq and Levant were absent.

### **Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis**

Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, a jihadist group based in Sinai, first emerged during the January 2011 uprising that toppled Hosni Mubarak. Based in the northern Sinai Peninsula near the Israeli border, the group’s operations expanded dramatically after the ouster of Islamist president, Mohamed Morsi in July 2013, and it has been targeting Egyptian police and military personnel since then in what it calls revenge for a government crackdown on Islamists. Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis has expanded its attacks beyond the Sinai Peninsula to other parts of the country, including the capital. Hundreds of people have been killed in the violence. The group has also been accused of firing rockets at targets across the border into Israel.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Patrick Kingsley, Sinai jihadist group says it has beheaded four men, *The Guardian*, August 28, 2014.

The group also claimed responsibility for several attacks against police and military targets:

In February 2013, it claimed responsibility for a suicide attack in Taba (near the Israeli border) that killed two Korean tourists and their Egyptian bus driver.

On August 31, 2013 authorities in the Suez Canal said that a “terrorist” had staged an unsuccessful attack on a container ship passing through the canal in an attempt to disrupt the flow of ships through the waterway. The attempt failed completely and there was no damage caused to the ship or the containers it was carrying. Had the attempt to block the canal succeeded, it would have had an immediate strategic effect on global energy prices and would have dealt a significant blow to the Egyptian economy and prestige.

On September 5, 2013 Egypt's Interior Minister, Mohamed Ibrahim, survived an assassination attempt when a bomb detonated near his convoy in northeast Cairo. Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis claimed responsibility for the attempted assassination.

On December 24, 2013 deadly bombings hit the Daqahliya security directorate in Mansoura, Nile Delta, killing 12 people and injuring 134 others in what seemed to be the worst terrorist attack since the ouster of Islamist president Mohamed Morsi.

The explosion ripped through the building's side façade, and damaged a number of police vehicles and parts of adjacent buildings, including the state's council, a theater and a bank. The head of Mansoura's security directorate was among those injured in the attack. Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, claimed responsibility for the attack. The bombings came one day after the group had called on police officers and members of the army to desert their posts in the secular government's military.

On August 30, 2014 Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis released a video in which its members decapitated four local men accused of supplying information to Israeli troops that helped them fire on the group's positions.<sup>14</sup>

On September 3, 2014 Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis posted a video on Twitter showing a bombing that had occurred just hours earlier. The video showed a security convoy driving on a road between the North Sinai provincial capital of El Arish and Rafah on the Gaza border, followed by a blast and the image of an armored personnel carrier (APC) flying into the air while a militant shouts: "Allahu Akbar (God is greater)". The video was also posted on YouTube along with the group's logo of a black flag, an AK-47 assault rifle and an open Quran.<sup>15</sup>

On October 17, 2014 militants killed three policemen and injured seven others in Egypt's North Sinai when they attacked a patrol car with RPG fire. The assailants targeted the police vehicle in El-Masaeed district on a main road near El-Arish. None of the militant groups currently active in the Sinai Peninsula have yet claimed responsibility for the attack.<sup>16</sup>

On October 24, 2014 a suicide car bombing killed 31 soldiers and left scores wounded at a checkpoint near El-Arish, Sinai. On the same day, gunmen shot and killed an officer and wounded two soldiers at another checkpoint near the town.

## **Egyptian Security Forces' Counter-terrorist Policy and Operations**

**Legal Steps** - On April 14, 2014 the Court for Urgent Matters officially labeled Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis a terrorist organization. In May 2014, Egypt's general prosecution

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/ansar-beit-al-maqdis-claim-responsibility-killing-policemen-794052130#sthash.94T7sxFD.dpuf>

<sup>16</sup> Three policemen die after Sinai RPG attack, Al Ahram Online, October 17, 2014.

referred 200 suspected Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis members to criminal court on charges of committing acts of terror.<sup>17</sup>

The Egyptian government has accused the Muslim Brotherhood of supporting militant attacks in Egypt but the Brotherhood has denied any such involvement.

**Foreign Policy** - Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Badr Abdel-Atty, said that Egypt had been in contact with many countries in an effort to explain the seriousness of the situation and the US State Department has designated Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis a "foreign terrorist organization."

Egypt joined the US-led international coalition, along with nine other Arab states, to combat the IS. So far, Egyptian officials have said that the country's military will not take part in any combat abroad against the IS and will confront the group using other means, including cutting funding sources or pushing an alternative religious discourse. It is unclear how ABM's declaration of allegiance to the Islamic State will affect Egypt's participation in the efforts against the IS.

**Military Operations** - The Egyptian military has targeted militant hideouts with helicopters and ground troops, killing scores of militants, according to army statements.

On May 23, 2014 the leader of Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, Shadi al-Menei, was killed along with three senior members in a security operation. Security forces opened fire on the four men as they were in a car in central Sinai, purportedly preparing to carry out an attack on a gas pipeline.<sup>18</sup>

In October 2014, Egyptian military forces arrested Walid Attalah, the leader of the military wing of Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis in North Sinai. Attalah is of Palestinian origin and

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<sup>17</sup> El-Sayed Gamal El-Din, 200 suspected Ansar Beit Al-Maqdis members charged with terror offences, Al Ahran Online, May 10, 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Head of Egypt's Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis killed, Al Arabiya, May 23, 2014.



received Egyptian citizenship during the era of ousted president, Mohamed Morsi. He Attalah is suspected of orchestrating an RPG attack in North Sinai, which killed three policemen and injured seven others.<sup>19</sup>

Following the attacks of October 24, 2014, Sinai was placed under a three-month state of emergency. President el-Sisi also ordered the creation of a 500-meter long buffer zone along the Egyptian border with Gaza in an attempt to quash the illegal tunnel trading between Sinai and the Gaza Strip. According to the Defense Ministry, the tunnels are an important method for “armed Takfiri groups to infiltrate Sinai to supply militants with arms, logistical assistance and shelter after staging their heinous attacks on the Egyptian army.”

In a controversial move, the Egyptian army gave over 1,100 families who lived within the buffer zone only 48 hours to evacuate their houses. North Sinai’s Governor Abdel Fattah Harhour stated that every family will receive EGP300 (US\$40) in housing allowance for three months and further compensation will be given for demolished buildings. However, tribal leaders from the region have expressed their dissatisfaction with the sums offered.<sup>20</sup>

ABM issued a statement on its alleged Twitter account condemning the Egyptian army's recent operations to form a buffer zone on the Rafah-Gaza border. Using strong language, as well as Quranic verses to justify its actions, the group said that the government's decision to evacuate hundreds of houses in the planned buffer zone was only helping the "Jews". The statement added that the buffer zone further tightened the ongoing Israeli blockade of the besieged Palestinian enclave. The group also called on local Sinai tribes to join the fight.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Egypt army arrests Ansar Beit Al-Maqdis leader: Sources, Al Ahram Online, October 18, 2014.

<sup>20</sup> U.S. to 'assess' Egyptian militant group's links to IS, Al Ahram Online, November 11, 2014.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

On January 31, 2015, Egypt's President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi established a unified command to combat terrorism east of the Suez Canal, following deadly militant attacks in Sinai. Egypt's Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) announced the presidential decree establishing the command. Sisi promoted Third Field Army Commander Osama Roshdy Askar to lieutenant general, who will be in charge of the command.

## Summary and Conclusions

Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis has fought a guerrilla and terror war against Egypt since the group's founding in 2011 following the Arab Spring uprisings that ousted Hosni Mubarak.

In the wake of the June 2013 coup against the Mohamed Morsi government, Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis expanded its operations and attacks against security personnel. ABM has faced significant losses as a result of the campaign led by the Egyptian armed forces and it needs both financial and logistical support. Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis pledged its allegiance to the Islamic State in a bid to boost recruitment and bolster its fight against the Egyptian army.

The group also swore allegiance to the Islamic State's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and subsequently adopted the name **Wilayat Sinai**, representing the annexation of the group and its transformation into a province within al-Baghdadi's unrecognized Caliphate.

The announcement is the most significant pledge of support for the Islamic State in the region outside of Iraq and Syria, suggesting that the group's influence over militant groups is overshadowing its once dominant Al-Qaeda rivals.

A key factor for the IS at this stage is how it can use the sympathy of other Islamist groups, and prove that it is not affected by the international coalition's war and that it is still capable of recruiting new members. ABM's infamous reputation in Egypt made them a key target for IS recruitment.

On January 30, 2015, following the deadly attacks in North Sinai, the Egyptian army said that militant attacks will not deter the armed forces from their "holy duty of uprooting terrorism", and the Egyptian armed forces have responded by waging a military campaign throughout North Sinai, targeting terrorist hideouts using Apache helicopters and ground forces.

The main challenge facing President el-Sisi and the Egyptian security forces is to restore security and stability to Egypt. The latest terrorist in North Sinai proves that Egypt will have to fight a long war of attrition against radical Islamic groups in order to achieve this goal.