GLOBAL JIHAD IN SINAI: AN EXTENSION OF THE GAZA STRIP?

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ABSTRACT

The ongoing Islamist insurgency that has taken root in the Sinai since the January 25 revolution has gone from bad to worse. Deteriorating following the Muslim Brotherhood’s ouster, the conflict is extraordinarily complex as it conflates the continued political turmoil in Egypt, the longstanding marginalization of Sinai Bedouins, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Libya’s lawlessness, internal friction in Gaza, transnational criminal networks, and the growing presence of global jihad-inspired fighters. Due to the security vacuum, Sinai has quickly become yet another fertile breeding ground for militant Islamists, and moreover, a base from which they can target both Israel and Egypt rather unchallenged. Through the lens of the concept of terrorist organizations’ “glocalization,” this paper seeks to analyze this relationship by examining the various interwoven local, regional and global features facilitating Gazan actors’ incentives to export subversion and terrorism to Sinai, the extent to which these networks have shaped the insurgency, and the security challenges they pose. It concludes that, even though some other non-local battle-hardened jihadists have likely influenced the rise of (sophisticated) attacks too, Gazan Salafi-jihadists have played a major role in the terrorist activity across the Philadelphi Corridor by means of exploitation of Sinai’s breakdown of security.

* 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).
## ACRONYMS

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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tr>
<td>ABM</td>
<td>Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (Supporters of Jerusalem)</td>
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<td>AQAP</td>
<td>al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula</td>
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<td>AQI</td>
<td>al-Qaeda in Iraq</td>
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<td>AQIM</td>
<td>al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb</td>
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<td>IAF</td>
<td>Israeli Air Force</td>
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<td>IDF</td>
<td>Israeli Defense Forces</td>
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<td>IED</td>
<td>Improvised explosive device</td>
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<td>ISIS</td>
<td>The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant)</td>
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<td>JAA</td>
<td>Jund Ansar Allah (Soldiers of God’s Supporters)</td>
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<td>JAI</td>
<td>Jaish al-Islam (the Army of Islam)</td>
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<td>MAITIC</td>
<td>The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center</td>
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<td>MJN</td>
<td>The Muhammad Jamal Network</td>
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<td>MSC</td>
<td>The Mujahideen Shura Council in the Environs of Jerusalem</td>
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<td>OPD</td>
<td>Operation Pillar of Defense</td>
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<td>PIJ</td>
<td>The Palestinian Islamic Jihad</td>
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<td>PRC</td>
<td>The Popular Resistance Committees</td>
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<tr>
<td>RPG</td>
<td>Rocket-propelled grenade</td>
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<tr>
<td>SAM</td>
<td>Surface-to-air missile</td>
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<tr>
<td>TWH</td>
<td>Takfir wal-Hijra (Excommunication and Exodus)</td>
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<td>TWJ</td>
<td>Tawhid wal-Jihad (Monotheism and Jihad)</td>
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INTRODUCTION

In spite of a considerable decline in the 2000s, al-Qaeda’s narrative has paradoxically been revived throughout the Middle East and North Africa due to the security vacuums left by the developments of the so-called Arab Spring. Apart from, for example, Syria, Iraq, Libya and Lebanon, another area this trend has manifested itself in is Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula.¹

Though Sinai has always been a historically neglected area, insecurity and lawlessness have risen significantly since the January 25 revolution. Hence, the peninsula has quickly become another hotbed for jihadists, and moreover, a platform from which they can target Israel as well as Egypt’s mainland with relative impunity. Since the Egyptian army’s takeover of power on July 3, 2013, however, the army has conducted an extensive counter-terrorism campaign in accordance with Israel’s approval of increased military deployment in the Sinai. Nevertheless, violence deteriorated rapidly, transforming the area with nearly daily shootings and bombings.² To date, at least 315 attacks have been reported in Sinai since 2013.³

Consequently, Shin Bet, the Israel Security Agency, established a new unit in 2013 that exclusively focuses on thwarting attacks from Sinai.⁴ In the same year, an Israeli senior intelligence official stated that “[w]e thought that Sinai was the source of all evil for Gaza, but it turned out things were exactly the opposite.”⁵ Numerous other accounts have linked the deterioration of violence in Sinai to Salafi-jihadist elements stemming from the

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Gaza Strip. Whereas cooperation between militants from Gaza and Sinai is not a new phenomenon, these relationships have increased in recent years. As it is critical for counter-terrorism purposes, this paper attempts to analyze these networks by setting a theoretical framework with respect to the notion of the "glocalization" of terrorist organizations, and subsequently examining the various interrelated local, regional and global features facilitating Gazan Salafi-jihadists’ motives to export rebellion and terrorism to Sinai, the extent to which these networks have shaped the insurgency, and the security challenges they pose. It concludes that, whereas some other non-local battle-hardened jihadists have likely influenced the upsurge of (sophisticated) attacks as well, Gazan Salafi-jihadists have directly as well as indirectly played a major role in the terrorist activity in Sinai through exploitation of the area’s risen lawlessness.

Notwithstanding contradicting sources and the media blackout imposed by the Egyptian military-led government, the analysis of such a fluid and covert topic is limited because credible evidence concerning the organizations’ structures, funding and operations is hard to come by, reinforced by the rapidly changing nature of the situation on the ground. Groups operating in Sinai have been mapped on several occasions, albeit limited in depth, which can entirely be contributed to their elusive character. Heavily reliant on secrecy, they consciously employ sophisticated strategies as a means to obscure their connections, coordination and activities.

The first chapter will provide a historical background on Sinai’s demographic, political and security environment. Subsequently, the jihadist maps of both Sinai and Gaza will be discussed, including their organizational structures, followed by an overview of the key Salafi-jihadist groups. After a theoretical framework regarding the concept of "glocalization" is laid out, the next three sections will examine the applicability of this notion, respectively outlining the (overlapping) local, regional and global features of the main Salafi-jihadist militias in Sinai. The chapter on regional issues will almost
exclusively analyze the Sinai-Gaza terror nexus, including strategies, supporting evidence and tactics, whereas the global aspects predominantly focus on the revival of Salafi-jihadism and al-Qaeda affiliation. Next, a case-study of Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, Sinai’s dominant and most lethal group will be provided. Before drawing conclusions, Hamas’s controversial yet problematic role will be discussed.

BACKGROUND

Adjoining Israel and the Gaza Strip, the Sinai Peninsula has historically been Egypt’s least developed area. Estimates of the number of Bedouins range between 80,000 and 300,000 out of a total Sinai population of about half a million, the bulk inhabiting the north. Ever since Egypt regained full control of the peninsula in 1982, the Bedouins have been subject to systemic socioeconomic marginalization. The Mubarak regime’s efforts to develop the area almost exclusively focused on enhancing the lucrative tourism industry along the coast of the Red Sea, in which the locals were mostly ignored. Due to the non-existence of the rule of law and social and economic services provided by the government, the Bedouins’ resentment towards the regime rapidly grew. A critical factor was Cairo’s response to the terrorist attacks on tourist sites in Sinai in the mid-2000s.

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Bedouin tribes in the north, who, according to the regime, had cooperated with operatives from Gaza, were blamed. Subsequently, a brutal crackdown was unleashed by the army in which thousands of Bedouins were arrested and received cruel treatment, including torture, long-term detention and the arrests of family members. The key causes of Bedouins’ increasing frustrations were left unaddressed by the regime.  

Without any opportunities offered by the state, the Bedouins began seeking other sources of income. In the 1990s, this initiated the creation of a vast smuggling network close to the borders with Gaza and Israel. This network, which became a key economic source for the locals, was increasingly used for transferring illicit arms. Israel’s disengagement of the Gaza Strip in 2005, Hamas’s takeover of power in 2007, and Israel’s economic blockade of the enclave in 2007, rapidly augmented demand for goods and weapons in Gaza, reinforcing the criminal networks and resulting in a substantial increase of tunnels under the Egyptian-Gaza border. It was estimated in 2011 this parallel economy surpassed $300 million per year.

These events also led to the expansion of Hamas and other Gazan operatives into Sinai. Heavily reliant on the tunnel economy, Hamas has established close relations with Sinai Bedouins more and more since 2007. Moreover, because Gaza’s leadership perceived, and still perceives, Sinai as a critical operational backyard, illicit weapon trade and transferring increased in both directions. It is believed Hamas’s al-Qassam Brigades (its military wing) started smuggling heavy arms, such as missiles, to storage depots in Sinai.

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in 2010. After the Egyptian army’s takeover of power, the tunnel infrastructure has largely been destroyed. Recently, the military said it had demolished 1,370 tunnels. According to Amos Gilad, Director of Political-Military Affairs for the Defense Ministry, approximately 90 to 95 percent of the tunnels have been destroyed by the Egyptian forces.

While many Sinai Bedouins had a positive perception of Israel in the early phases after its withdrawal from Sinai due to good relations during the Israeli occupation, a considerable part of the Bedouin community has radicalized over time, particularly since 2007. Whereas there is little hard data on the radicalization processes, many factors point to these developments. Most likely, the authorities’ previous and current counter-terrorism operations, and historical neglect and discrimination have played, and still play, a crucial role. In addition, many Bedouins arrested during the crackdowns following the Sinai tourist sites’ bombings spent years in prison with Salafists, and escaped during the turmoil of the January 25 revolution. Furthermore, the locals have also come under increasing influence of Hamas, other Gazan Islamists, and Salafi-jihadists from

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elsewhere. Other possible causes of expanded radicalization are the accumulated amount of Islamist websites, the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood and the subsequent clamping down on Islamists by the army.

The political turmoil in Egypt since early 2011 has transformed Sinai into an even more ungoverned space than it was before, which accelerated after the ouster of President Mohamed Morsi in July 2013. Sinai’s breakdown of security was instigated during the January 25 revolution when security forces pulled out, resulting in an enormous demand for weapons. Nowadays, there is a huge amount and variety of arms in the area, including many advanced missiles and explosives' originating from former Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi’s regime’s plundered weapons stockpiles. Two other main sources of arms in Sinai are believed to be Yemen and Sudan. Aviv Oreg, former head of the global jihad desk in Israel’s Military Intelligence and currently owner of CeifiT, a risk consultancy company on terrorism, said in February 2014, "[n]ame whatever weapons you need, and you can find it in the Sinai Peninsula." Additionally, a significant rise of both local and foreign jihadists, including Palestinians, has been notified in recent years. These developments in combination with the increased lawlessness, continued Bedouins’ grievances, and opportunity to operate with relative freedom have accelerated the radicalization process.


impunity in the proximity of Israel, have created a safe haven and fertile soil for the rise of the global jihad movement.\textsuperscript{21}

THE SALAFI-JIHADIST MAPS OF SINAI AND GAZA

While Sinai is an area rife with organized crime and home to a vast array of armed groups and cells, this paper’s scope is mainly bound to the Salafi-jihadist factions. Therefore, it is useful to define this term beforehand. As Yoram Cohen, chief of Shin Bet, states on movements adhering to this ideology in Gaza, "[l]ike other extreme Sunni Islamist groups, the ideological objective of these Salafi-jihadist groups is to revive the golden days of ancient Islam (Salafi) and establish a global Islamic caliphate that implements Sharia (Islamic law). These Salafi-jihadist organizations sanctify the use of violence (jihad) as the main way of realizing this vision. As such, it is legitimate to use force against non-Muslims (infidels), regimes considered insufficiently Islamic, and other perceived enemies of Islam… The Salafi-jihadist groups espouse an ideology of ‘pure resistance,’ within which there is no room for ceasefires or temporary halts in attacks against the enemy."\textsuperscript{22}

An important note is that Israel differentiates among the militant groups in Gaza. It regards the Salafi-jihadists as members of the global jihad movement, in contrast to members of Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), the Popular Resistance Committees (PRC) and al-Ahrar, which deem themselves national liberation movements


concentrating on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through armed struggle. Salafi-jihadists, on the other hand, do not recognize states’ borders and consequently perceive themselves as affiliates of a transnational front. In addition, they consider all apostates of true Islam justified targets, including Iran and Shi’a Muslims.\textsuperscript{23} Matti Steinberg, former chief advisor to the director of Shin Bet elaborated on this distinction by saying that “Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood strike a balance between universalism (Islam) and localism (nationalism/Palestine). Their focus is \textit{Daawa} [calling people to Islam]. They spring from the centre of society, which they wish to occupy. In order to achieve this, they must necessarily be moderate. Al-Qaeda is the opposite. It wishes to distance itself from society – to create a counter-society – in order to attack it.”\textsuperscript{24} The following paragraphs will provide an overview of the Salafi-jihadist maps in Sinai and Gaza, and their fluid organizational structures. The next chapter will briefly introduce the prominent groups.

\textbf{Overview}

Little is known about the Salafi-jihadist map in Sinai. The exact number of global jihad organizations as well as fighters in the area is not clear. This is highlighted by, for instance, the different estimations of Shin Bet and Israel’s Military Intelligence, which put the amount of militants at respectively several hundred and a few thousand. According to the former, at least 15 groups are active in the peninsula.\textsuperscript{25} Israeli


intelligence further approximated that over 200 small cells are operating in the area.\footnote{26} The prominent factions that have attacked Israeli targets are considered to be Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (ABM), Jaish al-Islam (JAI), the Mujahideen Shura Council in the Environs of Jerusalem (MSC) and Takfir wal-Hijra (TWH).\footnote{27} In order to achieve their ultimate ideological goal, Sinai-based terror networks almost exclusively target the Egyptian security forces and Israel, through which they also seek to derail Egyptian-Israeli relations. Some groups tend to focus more on attacking the Egyptian military-led government; others seemingly put more emphasis on aggression against 'the Zionist enemy'.

Not only do most of the groups share the same global jihadist ideology, they are also linked to Gaza in some way or another. This is most clear in the cases of JAI and the MSC, which are both Palestinian organizations, headquartered in the Strip, but have branches in Sinai as well.\footnote{28} In the last few years, various reports have mounted regarding the involvement of Gazan Salafi-jihadist groups in Sinai.\footnote{29} Despite the ambiguity of such elusive matters, sources have not only accumulated in frequency over the course of the past three years, but have also provided more and more evidence on the influence of these factions. Nevertheless, cooperation between Sinai and Gaza-based groups is anything but new. For example, apart from the smuggling networks, it is believed particularly JAI has used Sinai as an operational base even before President Hosni Mubarak was toppled. It was accused of coordinating terrorist activities in Egypt for al-Qaeda and was allegedly


involved in several attacks carried out in Egypt, such as the February 2009 attack in Cairo’s El Khalili bazaar, resulting in the death of a tourist, and the suicide bombing of a Coptic church in Alexandria on New Year’s Eve 2010/2011, which killed 25 citizens.\textsuperscript{30} Another Gazan organization that is thought to have expanded its operations in Sinai well before 2011 is the PRC.\textsuperscript{31} The Sinai-Gaza terror link will be addressed in more detail later on.

The Salafi-jihadist movements in Gaza, which have increasingly emerged since 2007, mainly consist of Palestinians.\textsuperscript{32} A senior intelligence officer of Shin Bet stated that these factions’ members are all defected operatives of Hamas and the PIJ.\textsuperscript{33} In 2009, it was estimated between 30 and 50 foreign fighters were present in the enclave, notably Egyptians and Yemenis. It is believed some of them have gained significant training and/or combat experience in other jihadist strongholds, such as Afghanistan or Iraq.\textsuperscript{34} While estimates of the total amount of Salafi-jihadists in Gaza vary widely, Shin Bet

approximated the number at 500 in 2010.\textsuperscript{35} Due to the recent events in Egypt and the expertise of the al-Qassam Brigades and Salafi-jihadist groups, presumably many more foreigners, including Sinai Bedouins, have infiltrated Gaza for military training courses in recent years. Aviv Oreg approximated in 2014 that there are now up to 1,000 Salafi-jihadists in the enclave.\textsuperscript{36} A leader of the MSC who spoke on condition of anonymity to Associated Press, disclosed in March 2014 that their numbers are rising, adding that there are perhaps 4,000 of global jihad-inspired militants.\textsuperscript{37} The Salafi-jihadist militias in Gaza include, but are not limited to, JAI, the MSC and Tawhid wal-Jihad (TWJ). The tense relations Hamas has with the Salafi-jihadists, which are important for understanding the Sinai-Gaza terror link, will be analyzed in a following chapter.

The composition of Sinai-based factions’ operatives, however, appears to be more complex. Basically, they derive from five, sometimes overlapping, sources. Firstly, local Bedouins constitute the core element of the insurgency, predominantly young radicalized members of the Sawarka, Tarabin, Tiyaha\textsuperscript{38} and Breikat tribes.\textsuperscript{39} The first two have heavily been involved in the Gaza tunnel trade and smuggling, especially through

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establishing good relationships with clans in Rafah and local Palestinians. In combination with the radicalization processes that have taken place, many Bedouins perceive the anarchy as an opportunity to force their traditional demands, such as political and economic reform, and the release of prisoners. However, not all local criminals or militants are necessarily adherents of radical Islam. Though it is difficult to estimate the tribal members’ sympathy towards the insurgents, it is believed many support them – some because of the destruction of their livelihoods (i.e. the tunnel economy), others because the army’s counter-terrorism operations have caused the loss of lives and massive (collateral) damage. The second group comprises Palestinian Salafi-jihadists from Gaza, many of them former members of Hamas and PIJ. Most likely the majority of them are members of Gazan factions’ branches in Sinai and move forth and back between Sinai and Gaza. As this paper will highlight later on, operating in Sinai clearly offers them an abundance of advantages over operating in the Gaza, irrespective of whether they have fled from Hamas’s crackdowns, been expelled by Gaza’s rulers, or

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left for Sinai for other reasons. Thirdly, numerous Egyptian prisoners, including Bedouins, escaped during and after the 2011 revolution, some of which were jailed for involvement in terrorism. Many of them have reportedly sought refuge in remote Sinai. Fourthly, except for Palestinians, various sources report on the increased presence of other foreign fighters. These include, but are not limited to, Yemenis, Libyans, Saudis, Tunisians and Algerians. Until recently, this was likely the least widespread of five main sources of Sinai-based Salafi-jihadists. However, their numbers have progressively increased. According to a joint report by The Saban Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings and the Institute for National Security Studies, hundreds of foreign jihadists have now infiltrated Sinai. They pose a serious threat since many of them are seasoned fighters that have undergone sophisticated military training and acquired extensive combat experience abroad.

The opportunity to attack Israel and Egypt’s military-led government relatively unchallenged from Sinai may soon draw more foreign global jihad adherents. A fifth group that has only recently received increasing


Worth mentioning is al-Mahdiya, a troublesome village harboring jihadists next to the border, where the Egyptian army has carried out several raids.\footnote{Issacharoff, A., 2014. Taba bombing shows Sinai terrorists won’t go quietly. \textit{The Times of Israel}. February 17, 2014. \url{http://www.timesofisrael.com/taba-bombing-shows-terror-group-not-giving-up-on-sinai/} [Accessed February 18, 2014]; Voice of Russia, 2014. Jihadist leader killed by Egyptian army in Sinai. January 19, 2014. \url{http://voiceofrussia.com/news/2014_01_19/Jihadist-leader-killed-by-Egyptian-army-in-Sinai-0294/} [Accessed February 18, 2014].} It is almost exclusively controlled by the Breikat tribe that, unlike the majority of tribes in Sinai, has previously cooperated with militant Islamists too.\footnote{Siboni, G. and Ben-Barak, R., 2014. The Sinai Peninsula threat development and respond concept. \textit{The Saban Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings}. January 2014, p. 2. \url{http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2014/01/28-sinai-israel-siboni} [Accessed February 13, 2014].} According to residents in Northern Sinai, the militias have taken control of approximately one third of the villages. By hiding among the local populace, the insurgents not only try to decrease the likeliness of being targeted but also hope collateral damage through the military’s operations will increment...
resentment towards the government,\textsuperscript{53} which they then can exploit to recruit, spread their ideology and legitimize their actions. One region of particular concern is Jabal al-Halal, a territory of approximately 2400 km\textsuperscript{2} located 60 kilometers south of al-Arish, which serves as a safe haven.\textsuperscript{54} Only accessible by foot, mountainous and remote, the terrain is often called the 'Tora Bora of Sinai'.\textsuperscript{55} Historically, it has always been a hideout for criminals and hardliners. Even under Israeli occupation, Israeli troops were never able to control it.\textsuperscript{56} It was thought around 1,000 militants were hiding in the Jabal al-Halal mountains in January 2014.\textsuperscript{57} Due to the parallel economy’s significance and the locals’ vast knowledge of Sinai’s rugged hinterland, which includes smuggling routes, hiding places, caves and short cuts, cooperation between non-locals and local Bedouin militants is highly likely.\textsuperscript{58} Another base is the area of Jabal al-Amru, close to the Israeli border.\textsuperscript{59} The fact that attacks have increasingly been carried out in Egypt’s heartland may indicate the networks have set up cells or divisions in areas outside of Sinai as well.\textsuperscript{60}

to locals in Northern Sinai, a considerable amount of belligerents have recently moved towards Egypt’s Nile Valley region.\textsuperscript{61}

**Organization**

The Salafi-jihadist factions’ clandestine nature makes untangling these networks extraordinarily hard, if not impossible. Posing many challenges to intelligence services, they are structured very loosely and heavily rely on secrecy in order to consciously obscure their inner and outer workings.\textsuperscript{62} An anonymous source close to the Egyptian intelligence services said, for instance, that ABM resembles a cluster organization comprising many different cells consisting of 10 militants at the very most. The sources further argued that cells communicate through coded messages but not all operatives have connections to other cells.\textsuperscript{63} A flexible organization including numerous and diverse informal cells precludes the movements from having an obvious operational signature, increasing their elusive character. Consequently, it is very likely 'memberships' overlap due to shared interests\textsuperscript{64} and individuals possessing unique expertise. An example


demonstrating this was Hisham al-Mashal, a militant highly-skilled in making rockets who worked for various Gazan extremist groups and, before his death in April 2013, had supplied rockets to Sinai. In August 2013, a northern Sinai tribal leader said that while there are different Salafi-jihadist militias in the area, they "…coordinate and sometimes run shared operations." Alex Fishman, veteran Ynet News military analyst, argues that sophisticated high-profile attacks are generally conducted by a set of militants collected from several bases in Sinai. According to WND reporter Aaron Klein, Middle Eastern security officials have stated that "there is information the militant groups are forming a de facto chain of command, with alarming coordination between the various jihadist factions embedded in the country." In addition, as the terrorist organizations deliberately do not have any (apparent) tangible sign or proof of membership, defining groups’ members constitutes a major problem, becoming even more difficult in case they successfully blend in with the local populace. Perhaps some combatants do not even belong to any faction, but are involved because of political, economic and/or ideological interests. Gen. Sherif Ismail, former security advisor to the governor of Northern Sinai, asserted in September 2013 that the distinct militias in Sinai are now "on the same page, in full cooperation in the face of the same threat." Due to close ties among some of the (members of the) groups, some of them presumably utilize a common infrastructure, including sources of income and arms supplies, and at the same time, operate under
different names. The abovementioned is illustrated by an interview of International Crisis Group with a Salafi-jihadist in Rafah who commented on the existence of Jaljalat, a name that has caused confusion because some consider it a distinct faction, while others, including Hamas, regard it as the entire Salafi-jihadist community in Gaza. The interviewee said "[t]here is no entity called Jaljalat. It is not an organisation. What you have to understand is that even the other names that you use – Tawhid wa al-Jihad, Ansar al-Sunna, and the like – are not really separate organisations. All the Salafis will use these different organisational names at different times and for different operations. But we are all the same, with the same goals and the same teachings. One day you and several others launch some mortars and declare that is was Ansar al-Sunna. Another day you and a few different people fire a rocket and say it was Jaysh al-Umma. These different names are adopted only because of the pressure we face from the government." Given the substantial influence of Salafi-jihadist Gazans in Sinai, on which will be elaborated later on, and the extensive counter-terrorism campaigns of the Egyptian army, it is plausible Sinai-based groups employ the exact same method for the exact same reason. The loose structures make it difficult to view the groups as separate entities and consequently, who to blame, which explains why some attacks have been attributed to different organizations. As The Jerusalem Post journalist and military analyst Yaakov Lappin argues, "[w]ith hundreds of Salafi jihadists based in Gaza, and...

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many of them moving to and from Sinai, smuggling weapons and plotting attacks, it is no longer possible to view Gaza and Sinai as fully separate sectors.”

Interestingly, however, ABM is the only faction that has taken credit for more than one attack in Sinai since Morsi has been deposed.

**KEY SALAFI-JIHADIST GROUPS**

Whereas it is estimated there are at least 15 Salafi-jihadist groups active in Sinai, this chapter provides a brief overview of the most prominent ones. The following chapters will explore some of these in more detail.

**Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis**

Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, ABM (Supporters of Jerusalem), also known as Ansar Jerusalem, is the dominant and most lethal movement in Sinai. It is believed it was established in early 2011, and has become the premier terrorist threat to Egypt. In early February 2014, geopolitical intelligence firm Stratfor concluded that it "has rapidly become one of the most active jihadist groups in the world.” Israeli intelligence considered ABM responsible for the majority of attacks launched from Sinai territory in 2012, many of

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them aimed at the al-Arish-Ashkelon gas pipeline.\textsuperscript{78} Headquartered in the insurgency’s heartland, it mainly comprises Sinai Bedouins,\textsuperscript{79} complemented with a number of non-local jihadists (including other Egyptians and Palestinians), some of which have extensive combat experience.\textsuperscript{80} Some reports estimate ABM totals approximately 700 to 1,000 members,\textsuperscript{81} many of them well-trained, evidenced by the movement’s substantial amount of sophisticated attacks.\textsuperscript{82} ABM has reportedly been established to target Israel, but clearly shifted its prime focus to the Egyptian security forces after the Muslim Brotherhood’s overthrow.\textsuperscript{83}


\textsuperscript{79} Hauslohner, A. and Cunningham, E., 2013. In Egypt, jihadist group Bayt al-Maqdis claims responsibility for bombing. The Washington Post. October 21, 2013. http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/in-egypt-jihadist-group-bayt-al-maqdis-claims-responsibility-for-bombing/2013/10/21/7ddbd77c-3a6a-11e3-b0e7-716179a2c2c7_story.html [Accessed December 7, 2013]; Kovač, N. and Guertin, T., 2013. ArmABM has reportedly been established to target Israel, but clearly shifted its prime focus to the Egyptian security forces after the Muslim Brotherhood’s overthrow.\textsuperscript{83}


Some of the attacks it claimed responsibility for include the suicide bombing of the South Sinai Security Directorate in el Tor on October 7, 2013 (leading to three deaths and more than 45 wounded), the assassination of Lieutenant Colonel Mabrouk of Egypt’s National Security Agency on November 17, 2013, and a suicide car bombing of the Daqahliya Security Directorate in Mansoura on December 24, 2013 (resulting in 16 fatalities and 132 wounded). The group unsuccessfully attempted to murder Minister of Interior Mohammed Ibrahim by means of a suicide bombing. Additionally, in the run-up of the third anniversary of the 2011 revolt, ABM took credit for some of the five explosions, among others one at the police headquarters, in Cairo in two days in late January 2014, killing six and wounding approximately 100. In late January, an ABM operative shot down an army helicopter with a sophisticated surface-to-air missile (SAM). Five soldiers died in the incident. Most recently, a member of the group blew himself up inside a tourist bus at the Taba border crossing on February 16, 2014, leading to 4 deaths and 14 wounded. It was the first time ABM attacked tourists, indicating an


expansion of its potential strategic targets. In response, it said, among others, that "[w]e will target [the Egyptian regime’s] economic interests everywhere to paralyze its hands from what they do to the Muslims." Following the attack, the group declared foreign tourists had four days to vacate Egypt, "or you don’t have no one else but yourselves to blame."

ABM employs a variety of tactics which include suicide bombings, car bombs, drive-by shootings, assassinations, rockets, mines, mortars and SAMs. The impact of its attacks since July 2013, and the wide array of weaponry used, show the organization’s evolvement and ability to adapt to the fluid situation on the ground. The group has clearly developed and adjusted its tactics since its attacks have become less exposed and more high-profile. The assassination of Mabrouk and the Mansoura and Cairo bombings highlight its growing capabilities and efficiency to unleash terror and hit key targets, including inside Egypt’s mainland.

**Jaish al-Islam**

Jaish al-Islam, JAI (the Army of Islam), is one of the strongest Salafi-jihadist factions in Gaza and was founded in 2006 after its leader Mumtaz Dughmush and his followers split

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off from the PRC (though close relations continued to exist). Dughmush is a member of the Dughmush clan, whose stronghold used to be the Sabra neighborhood in Gaza City until 2008, when Hamas took over control by force. The al-Qaeda-inspired group’s operational base is now located in southern Gaza, where it is heavily involved in arms trafficking, among others to Sinai-based operatives. One of the movement’s most well-known operations is the kidnapping of IDF (Israeli Defense Forces) soldier Gilad Shalit in 2006, in cooperation with Hamas and the PRC. Furthermore, it has attacked targets that they deem Western, such as tourists in Sinai and internet cafes, journalists and Christians. In 2007, it kidnapped BBC reporter Alan Johnston. JAI, designated a terrorist organization by the United States in 2011, has also collaborated with the MSC in the past by jointly firing rockets at Israel. The militia comprises a few hundred operatives, predominantly based in Gaza. According to Shin Bet, Dughmush is directing the majority of military training camps in Gaza for jihadists from all over the

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Arab world, who subsequently go abroad, including Sinai. In addition, a JAI member was killed in Syria in mid-2012, suggesting some more have possibly gone there.

The Mujahideen Shura Council in the Environs of Jerusalem

The Mujahideen Shura Council in the Environs of Jerusalem, MSC, or Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen fi Aknaf Bayt al-Maqdis, emerged in June 2012 and is an umbrella organization consisting of several Palestinian Salafi-jihadist groups, among others TWJ and Ansar al-Sunna. The MSC was founded by the two emirs of these factions, which were both killed by Israeli airstrikes in October 2012. Particularly TWJ’s former leader, Hisham Ali Saidani, killed by an Israeli airstrike in October 2012, was an experienced jihadist who had fought in Iraq and allegedly had strong connections to al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). According to Egyptian officials, Ansar al-Sunna is active in Sinai


106 The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 2012. The Gazan-based Salafist jihadi network Tawhid wal-Jihad carried out the terrorist attack on the Israeli-Egyptian border on June 18, 2012, in which an Israeli
as well. Sheik Anas Abdul Rahman, a leader of the MSC, has argued his organization aspires to “fight the Jews for the return of Islam’s rule, not only in Palestine, but throughout the world.” Though based in Gaza, the MSC is active in Sinai too, where it maintains ties with indigenous fighters. According to analyst Murad Batal al-Shishani, the MSC serves predominantly as a unifying ideological banner as the Gazan jihadist movements lack the financial means to support their Egyptian-based counterparts. Hence, other factions may very well fight under the MSC’s framework and/or have benefited from training courses, and yet operate independently. Perhaps it constitutes a somewhat more cohesive body in Gaza in order to form a united front against Hamas. Due to its expertise, it is likely it has provided training and operational coordination for jihadists in Sinai. In April 2013, the Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center (MAITIC) asserted the organization was responsible for the majority of rockets and mortars launched from the Gaza Strip since the conclusion of Operation Pillar of Defense (OPD) in November 2012. It has also fired rockets into Israel from Sinai and claimed credit for an Egyptian-Israeli cross-border assault in June 2012, carried out by

members of TWJ, which killed an Israeli civilian. The perpetrating cell included an Egyptian and a Saudi, of which the latter had acquired training in Gaza. Possibly the MSC also has a presence in the West Bank as three of its members were killed by IDF forces close to Hebron in November 2013.

Takfir wal-Hijra

Takfir wal-Hijra, TWH (Excommunication and Exodus), is an extremist movement created in the 1960s by Egyptians as an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood. After the group abducted and murdered former Minister of Religious Endowments, Husayn al-Dhahabi, in 1977, the authorities launched a nationwide crackdown, resulting in the execution of leading figures and imprisonment of hundreds of sympathizers. While the organization ceased to exist, and many of its members resurfaced in other groups, it "…left an enduring legacy which was taken up by Islamist radicals in subsequent years and decades", according to Katerina Dalacoura, author of Islamist Terrorism and Democracy in the Middle East. Following from this, TWH should not necessarily be addressed as a single (umbrella) organization, but rather as a decentralized network of

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committed Muslim fighters around the world affiliated only through their beliefs.\textsuperscript{119} The same applies on a smaller scale to Sinai, where apparently various militias operate under the name TWH.\textsuperscript{120} Their strict Salafist ideology, which includes the rejection of tribal law and local customs,\textsuperscript{121} requires, according to analyst Joshua L. Gleis, "…that its followers purify the world of infidels. The group is known for perpetrating violence against those it considers *kufar* (heretics), including those Arabs and Muslims whom Takfiris do not consider to be living in accordance with true Islam."\textsuperscript{122} Its presence in Sinai resurrected through a considerable influx of detainees who escaped during the 2011 revolt.\textsuperscript{123} An article in The Daily Star Lebanon stated that the number of Takfiris in Sinai had risen from a few hundred before 2011 to about 4,500 in August 2012.\textsuperscript{124} Most of them live in Sheikh Zuwaid and Rafah.\textsuperscript{125} Although not all Takfiris fight jihad, and their ideology does not completely tally with that of Salafi-jihadists', they are likely easily persuaded by armed groups to conduct or collaborate in terrorist attacks due to their puritanical

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\textsuperscript{121} Hauslohner, A., 2011. What scares the Sinai Bedouin: The rise of the radical Islamists. *Time*. August 10, 2011. [http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2087797,00.html#iXxZ3caz5gD](http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2087797,00.html#iXxZ3caz5gD) [Accessed March 10, 2014].


beliefs. Additionally, as they live very isolated in Sinai, their military capabilities are obscured to a large extent. According to Shin Bet, the ultra conservative movement was responsible for a complex cross-border attack in August 2012, which killed 16 Egyptian security forces. Some sources were certain experienced Palestinian militants were involved in this assault in some way or another.

Tawhid wal-Jihad

Established in 2008, Tawhid wal-Jihad, TWJ (Monotheism and Jihad), is another al-Qaeda-inspired faction in Gaza. It merged into the MSC in 2012, but it is not clear to what extent the MSC constitutes a coordinating entity. It is very possible these affiliates continue to operate independently, to a certain extent. Its founder, and also one of the creators of the MSC, was Hisham Ali Saidani, already mentioned above. TWJ is reportedly stationed in the refugee camps in central Gaza, particularly Nuseirat, but, like other groups discussed previously, uses Sinai as an operational backyard as well. It conducted an attack on June 18, 2012 claimed by the MSC, in which three militants dressed in uniforms very similar to that of the Egyptian army infiltrated Israel from Sinai.

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and killed an Israeli civilian. Other attacks it carried out are, for example, the IED (improvised explosive device) that killed an IDF soldier in 2009 and the murder of the kidnapped Italian activist and journalist Vittorio Arrigoni in 2011.\textsuperscript{132} TWJ in Gaza should not be confused with the similarly named group that was created by Sinai Bedouins in 2000 and is thought to have carried out the devastating Sinai tourist sites’ bombings in the mid-2000s, which resulted in the deaths of 145 and nearly 300 wounded.\textsuperscript{133} Regardless of the ensuing crackdown by the authorities, in which more than 3,000 tribesmen were arrested, many of the detainees have joined the new Salafi-jihadist groups in Sinai after escaping from prison in early 2011,\textsuperscript{134} and thus, possibly the Gazan TWJ. Considering the ‘older’ Sinai TWJ originated from al-Arish, it is very likely many of them have returned there and subsequently joined other jihadist factions or regrouped with remnants of the Sinai TWJ. This was demonstrated, for example, when a statement of ABM in response to the death of one of its founders, Tawfiq Mohammed Freij, said he had previously ‘accompanied’ leading figures of the Sinai TWJ.\textsuperscript{135} This is only one of the many examples that underscore these groups’ shadowy character and the challenges intelligence and security services are facing.


“GLOCALIZATION” – THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A relatively new theory regarding militant Islamism is that of 'glocalization'.136 Before analyzing the applicability of this concept to the Salafi-jihadist groups in Sinai, it is important to layout this notion’s theoretical aspects.

According to Virginie Andre, researcher at the Global Terrorism Research Center at Monash University, glocalization can be defined as "the intertwining of the global and the local, a process through which universal ideas are locally interpreted and absorbed according to local cultural and historical particularities. It is a process of cultural mixing across locations and identities, which gives rise to a global mélange."137 With regard to some terrorist organizations, this is manifested by a dual nature that mixes local and transnational/global variables. While strongly being shaped by, and often exploiting, local political, historical, demographic and socioeconomic factors (such as tribal values and grievances), 'glocal' militant groups’ objectives and methodologies are influenced by international conditions and opportunities as well. For instance, some radical Islamist movements, such as Hamas, exclusively wage jihad locally as a religious obligation on behalf of the transnational idea of the Ummah (nation). Other examples of regional/global factors are ideological/organizational affiliation with other transnational jihadist or criminal networks, global jihadist aspirations, sources of funding abroad, the employment of foreign fighters, the use of high-tech technologies, etc. It should be said this connection usually remains vague to a large extent due to the clandestine organizational structures, the abstract idea of 'membership' and a lack of evidence. Additionally, often the boundaries between the local and international conditions are blurred and/or interrelated. In certain cases, such as the US presence in Afghanistan, (attacks carried out

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on) US forces could be interpreted as a 'near' (local) as well as an 'far' (global) target. Moreover, the employment of local, regional and global features is mostly unique to every organization and heavily dependent on the local environment it is based in. Examples of glocal terrorist organizations are al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). Whereas both are highly designed by the unique local conditions in respectively Northern Africa and Yemen, they are also clearly influenced by international factors in terms of objectives, tactics, ideological propaganda, technological know-how, funding and transnational (jihadist) connections, including to al-Qaeda’s senior leadership.

Critical for glocal terrorist organizations is balancing their local and global objectives, their short-term and long-term goals, and hence, their strategies towards the 'near' and 'far' enemy. In recent years, these have increasingly blurred as jihadist groups’ rhetoric and actions have become more heterogeneous. The Islamist insurgency in Sinai, including its connection to Gaza, constitutes a complex environment where the near and far enemy, respectively the Egyptian army and (predominantly) Israel, are intertwined to a great extent, and moreover, can both be targeted from the same operational area. Other than that, defining local and transnational/global here is problematic as, for instance, Palestinians coordinating attacks on Israel from Sinai carried out by Egyptians or foreign fighters can be considered both.

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For a glocal organization, remaining devoted to the local cause(s) is key, through which it can obtain, and maintain, legitimacy and relevance. Longstanding local discontent due to political and economic marginalization, for instance, could make locals susceptible to radicalization and join armed groups, and therefore, ideal recruits. However, locals may also take up arms because of frustrations rather than ideological association to Salafi-jihadist groups. Addressing local grievances and at the same time responding to, or making use of, the local social, ethnic and tribal structures, can mobilize support. This support can manifest itself in various ways, such as volunteers, sanctuary, expert knowledge of safe havens and harsh terrains, trafficking routes, access to arms, etc.  

Interweaving transnational/global facets brings several advantages. Articulating global jihadist aspirations, for example by means of using the al-Qaeda 'brand' or proclaiming to attack Israeli or Western targets, could increase media exposure, earn legitimacy on another level, exaggerate their power, make them more resilient, and open doors to other transnational jihadist groups, and therefore, perhaps material, logistical or financial support. Moreover, it could also widen the potential recruitment base because it provides incentives for (highly trained) radical Islamists to join the armed struggle. By joining and manipulating local insurgents fighting an oppressive and/or impious government, and portraying the conflict as a religious battle, Salafi-jihadists can strengthen the global

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jihadist movement and possibly become a dominant local force aspiring regional/global goals.¹⁴⁴

On a tactical level, the use of both local and global aims could decrease the predictability of attacks as well as enable the group to employ a more flexible rhetoric. Needless to say, transnational channels in terms of operational and technological know-how offer ample opportunities to enhance methodologies and communication. Nevertheless, focusing too much on the international and long-term agendas has possible disadvantages. Should the local cause(s) be overlooked, terrorist groups may not only risk limiting mass mobilization, they may also become more prone to internal divisions and perhaps infiltration. Furthermore, internationalization may increase vulnerability to containment and counter-terrorism policies by both local and foreign security services.¹⁴⁵ The following chapters will examine the main local, regional and global aspects of the Islamist insurgency in Sinai, with a particular focus on the role of Salafi-jihadists from Gaza.

THE LOCAL AGENDA

So how does this notion of glocalization relate to the violence in Sinai? While the interconnection and implementation varies per group, the main factions are clearly glocal ones, among others because they engage in a local conflict under the banner of the global jihadist narrative. Starting with the local agenda, ABM evidently espouses a global jihadist ideology but at the same time appears to be the one most committed to the local


cause, which it has seemingly co-opted to garner support, legitimize its actions and reinforce its ideology. Headquartered among Sinai tribes and mainly consisting of local Bedouin tribesmen, it has primarily targeted the Egyptian security apparatus. This devotion has possibly contributed largely to the movement’s rapid growth. As a result, the bulk of its statements refer to the Egyptian army and police. For example, in October 2013, it argued that, for more than six decades, Egyptians Muslims have suffered under "agencies of oppression" which have aimed "to push aside the Islamic Shariah, fight the religion, spread disbelief and atheism, and crush these Muslim people without mercy and make them beg for their freedom, dignity and livelihood… [T]he head of these agencies that enslaved these people and fought their religion and creed is the criminal police." In a statement on jihadist forums concerning claiming credit for a car bombing in the city of Ismailia on October 19, 2013, the group asserted that it seeks to "cleanse Egypt of all dens of criminality and agency" and that the attack was a consequence of the ongoing "repressive practices carried out by the Egyptian army against our people." Additionally, while being aware targeting civilians will decline its number of supporters and sympathizers, ABM has stressed it does not aim to harm the population. Several times, it has warned Egyptians to stay away from governmental, police and military sites, as they are "legitimate targets for the mujahideen." It is likely the group draws

substantial support among Sinai Bedouins as well as Egyptian Islamists through its commitment to, and manipulation of, local grievances.

Many other groups active in Sinai have called for attacks on the Egyptian army as well, but appear to be focusing less on local issues than ABM. This seems to be the case for organizations that originate from Gaza, especially the MSC and JAI, which predominantly set their sights on waging violent jihad against Israel. The MSC has not taken credit for any attack on Egyptian targets yet, in spite of calling for attacks on them. However, even though there are little signs with respect to their commitment to, for instance, the Bedouins’ alienation, they presumably attempt to gain support among the locals, and enhance their ranks and networks through exploitation of the situation on the ground. Having said that, ABM is by no means less committed to the destruction of Israel than the MSC or JAI. ABM’s transnational character will be addressed in a following chapter.


THE SINAI-GAZA CONNECTION

The amount and variety of weapons used, the presence of experienced, well-trained (foreign) jihadists, and the sophisticated tactics employed in Sinai explicitly point at the linkage with transnational jihadist and criminal networks. It is very likely some Sinai-based Egyptian and foreign operatives that previously waged jihad in Afghanistan, Iraq or Syria and have connections to other global jihadist groups, have been influential in the increase of militancy. Nonetheless, according to numerous accounts, a key source of training and operational coordination stems from Gazan Salafi-jihadists. Since Mubarak’s fall these relationships have been reinforced and have contributed largely to the rise of terrorist activity in Egypt. This chapter will examine these ties by outlining these groups’ strategies, common interests and modus operandi, supported by various sources referring to these links.

Strategy

In order to examine the cooperation between Salafi-jihadist groups from Gaza and Sinai, an analysis of the various interrelated motives to use Sinai as an operational base is critical. As in other battle zones, the key reason is because of the area’s increased lawlessness, which has resulted in a security vacuum. In contrast to the Gaza Strip, where Hamas has clamped down on the Salafi-jihadists, the ungoverned Sinai simply provides

significantly more operational freedom.\textsuperscript{156} Not only is Sinai nearly three times the size of Israel,\textsuperscript{157} the Egyptian-Israeli border is also substantially longer than Gaza’s border with Israel, respectively 266 km\textsuperscript{158} and 51 km.\textsuperscript{159} Moreover, since Egypt has destroyed most of the Rafah tunnels, vital channels in terms of financial means, arms and equipment are easier accessible in the peninsula. Due to the ongoing political turmoil in Egypt, security in Cairo and other major cities has taken precedence, making the government even less capable of establishing law and order in Sinai. Besides, the Egyptian army lacks the capabilities to efficiently combat terrorism and guerilla warfare, among others because of a doctrinal void.\textsuperscript{160} Other than that, Israel is officially restricted by the 1979 peace treaty and thus, cannot violate Egypt’s sovereignty. Through, for instance, airstrikes in the peninsula, Israel would not only breech the longstanding treaty, but would also risk inflaming the Egyptian population.\textsuperscript{161} Therefore, by moving operations from Gaza to


Sinai, the Salafi-jihadists can escape from both Hamas’s crackdowns and Israeli retaliation, and decrease the likeliness that the Palestinian population will be affected by reprisal operations. At the same time, Sinai operatives can move to Gaza in order to flee from the Egyptian army’s counter-terrorism campaigns. Operating in Sinai exploits both the security vacuum and the terms of the peace treaty, and is very likely utilized by the Gazan Salafi-jihadists too as a means to rebutting involvement or responsibility. Consequently, the peninsula offers opportunities to serve as a nearby base for all radical Islamists – and not only for Palestinians or Sinai Bedouins – to stage attacks against Israel, the 'infidel' Egyptian army, tourists and the Multinational Force & Observers (MFO), an international peacekeeping force based in Sinai assigned to monitor the implementation of the peace treaty. All of these local and transnational conditions, in combination with a strategy of hijacking the struggles of the local people, provide a fertile soil for strengthening the global jihadist movement.

Supporting evidence

Apart from the MSC, JAI and TWJ’s role in and towards Sinai, which have been addressed briefly in their respective profiles above, there are plentiful other sources that link Sinai-based groups with elements from Gaza in varying degrees. In the early stages after Mubarak’s resignation, the MAITIC published a report addressing the fear that Gazan Salafi-jihadists would increase their efforts to export terrorism to Egypt. In contrast to what Israel’s Military Intelligence and Shin Bet initially assumed, Israel’s

http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2013/10/22%20sinai%20egypt%20israel%20hamas%20gold
withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in 2005 and Hamas’s subsequent rise to power resulted in the export of terrorism and subversion from Gaza to Sinai rather than the other way around. A senior intelligence official of Shin Bet argued that "[w]e thought experienced global jihad operatives from Afghanistan and Syria would come to Sinai, and from there to Gaza, but in practice, the operatives from Gaza are the ones who taught the operatives in Sinai everything they know… The Salafi operatives from Gaza are all breakaways from Hamas and [the Palestinian] Islamic Jihad who know the IDF well and have accumulated much more combat experience than the operatives from Sinai… The Gaza operatives are an operational asset, because they know how to plan and supervise attacks." Considering the date of this statement, the increased presence of other non-local fighters in Sinai (including Egyptians), and the destruction of most of the tunnels, it is likely experienced jihadists other than Gazans now do constitute another significant source of coordination, training and logistics.

The official further contended that experienced Gazan militants have travelled to Sinai to establish relations with local Bedouins and that, over the course of the past two years, Gaza has become a military training ground for jihadists from all over the region. After completion of the courses, these belligerents allegedly leave for other jihadist arenas, including Sinai. JAI’s leader Mumtaz Dughmush is believed to be running the majority of training camps. This could mean, perhaps, that JAI operatives are not carrying out assaults in Sinai themselves, but 'subcontracted' operatives trained and supervised by it, who might have joined other cells or factions, are. The same could explain the attacks in Egypt that the JAI is accused of having played a key role in. This was discovered for the first time when three suspected Egyptian members of the "al-Zeitoun cell" were arrested due to their failed plan to kill the Israeli ambassador in Cairo in 2009. Reportedly, the

militants said they had been trained by JAI in Gaza. Sinai combatants have not only gone to Gaza for training, however, since some of them also purportedly joined the fight in Gaza against Israel during OPD.

Other sources support the claim that Sinai-based terror is strongly influenced by Gazans. Analyst Murad Batal al-Shishani cited a Sinai militant who said in September 2012 that "[t]he interdependence [between jihadists from Gaza and Sinai] certainly exists organizationally and ideologically. Salafi-jihadist groups in the Sinai and Gaza do not recognize borders; they are dealing with the Palestinian issue in terms of religious understanding. Even before the fall of the Mubarak regime, jihadists in the Sinai supported Gaza by weapons, supplies and military missions through the tunnels. [We have] also sheltered some of them who are wanted in Israel… On the other hand, Sinai jihadists have benefited from the expertise available in the [Gaza] Strip, some were sent there to receive training or to hide."

The Sinai-Gaza terror link and the danger it poses became horribly apparent on August 18, 2011, when a string of sophisticated, cross-border attacks killed eight Israelis and wounded over 30, the worst terrorist attack Israel had endured since 2008. While


Israeli intelligence was immediately aware it was orchestrated by the PRC (the Israeli Air Force retaliated at PRC senior officials in Rafah on the same day),\(^{171}\) investigation found out later that members of ABM had carried out the PRC’s plans. According to Brig. Gen. Nadav Padan, former commander of the IDF territorial division responsible for the Egyptian-Israeli border and the southern part of the Jordanian border, the PRC had provided financial, logistical and material support, among others through transferring suicide vests via the tunnels.\(^{172}\) On February 9, 2014, the Israeli Air Force (IAF) targeted and seriously injured Abdallah Kharti, a leading PRC operative, who, according to Israeli intelligence sources, had played a fundamental role in erecting the terrorist infrastructure in Sinai and provided assistance to ABM.\(^{173}\)

In contrast to what Israeli intelligence initially believed, ABM played a much greater role in the operation in August 2011. In September 2013, Padan argued that the Sinai-based militias are gaining more independence from their counterparts in Gaza.\(^{174}\) Though it is difficult to judge to what extent this could be the case, several factors could point to this development. Firstly, even though tunnels still exist, or are rebuilt,\(^{175}\) the destruction of the bulk of them, and the Egyptian army’s recent strategy to establish a buffer zone in

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Rafah up to 500 meters,\textsuperscript{176} have considerably limited the freedom of movement between Gaza and Sinai. Secondly, the increased number of foreign jihadists could indicate that Sinai-based militants have also benefited from other experienced actors’ expertise. Various sources state numerous training camps have been set up in Sinai.\textsuperscript{177} And thirdly, Sinai-Gaza collaboration already existed before last year’s deterioration of violence. Presumably most of the Sinai insurgents that have acquired military training in the coastal enclave have done so prior to the tunnel infrastructure’s demolition. Due to the training, connections and increased number of (high-profile) attacks carried out, some Sinai-based factions have grown themselves and increasingly developed their tactics over time, and perhaps started to act more on their own. According to an Israeli television station Channel 10 report in October 2012, this applies to ABM as its relationship with the PRC has waned because the former began operating more independently.\textsuperscript{178} According to Padan, some jihadist networks in Sinai have also started producing their own arms.\textsuperscript{179}

However, providing coordination, advice or assistance does not necessarily require travel across the border. Whereas access to Gaza is restrained to a certain extent, Palestinian Salafi-jihadists still reside in Sinai and could direct training camps and/or operations from there. In spite of possible increased independence by some organizations or influence of


seasoned foreign fighters, it is very likely Sinai-based elements still profit from their Gazan counterparts’ expertise and that these ties continue to develop one way or another, given these groups’ ideological similarities, innovativeness and shown ability to adjust to changing circumstances.

**Tactics**

The tactics used by Salafi-jihadists in Sinai vary widely – from more common terrorist attacks (such as mines, mortars, kidnappings, hit-and-run attacks and IEDs) to assassinations to sophisticated, near-simultaneous multi-strikes, including suicide bombings. These groups, and ABM in particular, have clearly learned on a strategic as well as a tactical level, suggesting the influence of experienced jihadists from Gaza or elsewhere. Though little is known about the planning of operations, it is obvious that some of the high-profile attacks must have taken weeks, or even months, to prepare and required advanced intelligence gathering skills. For instance, the car bomb claimed by ABM that struck the police headquarters in Cairo in January 2014, was detonated at exactly the same time police officers changed shifts.180 The threat that the varied and complex nature of these groups’ modus operandi constitutes will be emphasized by three of the many attacks that stood out.

With regard to the cross-border attack on August 18, 2011 mentioned above, it is believed about 15 to 20 militants had exited Gaza and entered Israel near Eilat via Sinai,181 wearing Egyptian military uniforms182 and equipped with bombs, assault rifles,

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grenades, a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) launcher, and anti-tank missiles. The perpetrators appeared to be working in multiple units. Initially, three militants set up an ambush, positioning themselves at intervals of approximately 200 meters along route 12, a desert border road. Two buses and some cars were attacked by heavy gunfire,\(^\text{183}\) including an anti-tank missile hitting a car.\(^\text{184}\) A suicide bomber blew himself up near the second bus. Not much later, mortars were fired into Israel from Sinai. Explosive devices had also been planted along the road,\(^\text{185}\) hitting a military vehicle.\(^\text{186}\) After Israeli soldiers arrived, a gun battle erupted, followed by another one later that day. While the majority of assailants managed to escape, seven were killed, respectively five by Israeli troops and two by the Egyptian army in Sinai.\(^\text{187}\) Additionally, three Egyptian security officers lost their lives.\(^\text{188}\)

On August 5, 2012, another well-coordinated, complex attack was carried out at the Kerem Shalom border crossing, close to where Gaza, Egypt and Israel’s borders meet. While Egyptian soldiers were having their meal after sunset during Ramadan, their base


was overrun by militants armed with RPGs and assault rifles.\textsuperscript{189} Sixteen Egyptian soldiers were killed and seven injured.\textsuperscript{190} Subsequently, they seized an armored personnel carrier and drove to the border crossing where they sought to break through the security fence and head to the Kerem Shalom IDF base. At the same time, the alleged commanders of the operation and one other cell firing mortars for cover, totaling at least ten militants, stayed on the Egyptian side. It is thought the idea was to kill as many as forces possible, and probably abduct an Israeli soldier, through entering the base with a pick-up truck loaded with half a ton of explosives, followed by the armored personnel carrier, including some suicide bombers. Luckily, the Israeli border forces were prepared and succeeded in stopping the attack. While the pick-up truck already exploded at the border crossing, the armored personnel carrier did infiltrate Israel before being destroyed via, among others, airstrikes. Some assailants got out of the vehicle and engaged in clashes with the Israeli forces. Six terrorists were killed.\textsuperscript{191} Some sources say 35 fighters were involved in the operation.\textsuperscript{192} Sources vary about who carried out the attack, demonstrating the fluid nature of these groups’ structures yet again. While Shin Bet thought TWH was responsible,\textsuperscript{193} others blamed JAI,\textsuperscript{194} ABM\textsuperscript{195} or TWJ.\textsuperscript{196} Nevertheless, both Israel and


Egypt were certain that Gazan actors had played a major role in orchestrating the attack.\footnote{Ben David, A., 2013. Rocket attack could shake Israel-Egypt security ties. \textit{Al-Monitor}. April 19, 2013. \url{http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/04/securing-israels-souther-border.html} [Accessed March 5, 2014].} According to Alex Fishman, the complex assault had taken at least two months of preparation, including intelligence gathering along the border, training, logistics, and funding.\footnote{Fishman, A., 2012. Tracking sources of Sinai terror, all roads lead to Gaza. \textit{Al-Monitor}. August 13, 2012. \url{http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/iw/contents/articles/security/01/08/the-sinai-war.html} [Accessed December 25, 2013].}

GLOBAL JIHAD AND AL-QAEDA AFFILIATION

Despite a substantial decline in the 2000s, the developments of the so-called Arab Spring have paradoxically facilitated the resurgence of al-Qaeda’s narrative throughout the Middle East and North Africa, including Sinai. Due to the chaos and various regimes’ failure to (re-)establish law and order, security vacuums arose which have been exploited by adherents of global jihad (but also by other sub-state actors, such as gangs and criminal networks). Other countries in which this pattern has particularly been witnessed are, for instance, Syria, Iraq, Libya and Lebanon. As a result, even though Salafi-jihadist groups have seemingly become more decentralized and do not necessarily constitute a coherent front in terms of objectives and targets, their amount, individuals inspired by it, and attacks carried out by them have increased in recent years. Additionally, another possible factor for explaining the revival of the global jihad movement is the transnational migration of militant Islamists. Through collective training, praying and eating, training camps provide excellent opportunities for the participants to create close relationships and strengthen ideology among various nationalities. Hence, these social processes, which also take place when fighting together, generally result in increased transnational networks, which may culminate in diverse means of support later on.

Salafi-jihadists nowadays derive from four different strata, namely al-Qaeda’s core in Afghanistan-Pakistan, its formal territorial affiliates (AQAP, AQIM, Jabhat al-Nusra and al-Shabaab), groups associating with al-Qaeda that are not officially recognized by it but may collaborate with it and/or its branches for certain purposes, and independent networks and actors.\textsuperscript{201} Sinai’s strategic location and the opportunities its lawlessness

offers to operate against both Egypt and 'the Zionist enemy' with relative impunity, may soon draw more Salafi-jihadists from all over the Islamic world.

In line with the possible factors contributing to the rise of radical Islam, there is a significant amount of sources that link the violence in Sinai to al-Qaeda. This association, irrespective of whether it is ideological or organizational, is a key indication of the terrorist organizations’ transnational character. Many militant groups in Sinai adhere to al-Qaeda ideals, evidenced by a plethora of statements, black al-Qaeda flags, tributes to al-Qaeda leaders, and identical tactics.\(^{202}\) The ideological similarities are evident. First of all, democracy and secularism are strongly rejected, and implementing Sharia is the solution to the region’s problems. Secondly, violence, and not democracy, is perceived the only path to establish Islamic rule. And thirdly, external actors’ interference in the Middle East is considered a major cause of the region’s problems and instability, including the Muslim Brotherhood’s overthrow.\(^{203}\) ABM, for instance, blamed "America and the Crusader West" of interfering in the Arab Spring "to change the natural directions of these blessed revolutions, and prevent[ing] the Muslim peoples from achieving their


true freedom and implementing their Islamic Shariah.” Accordingly, a common trait of the Salafi-jihadist movements active in the peninsula is that they all seek to destroy Israel. As for Egypt’s military-led government, senior fellow of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies Thomas Joscelyn argues, ”[a]-Qaeda has consistently portrayed the Egyptian military as a servant of an imaginary Zionist-Crusader conspiracy, making the government a legitimate target for jihad.” Given the increased presence of al-Qaeda-inspired fighters and sympathizers, operating from Sinai is a strategic move to establish a new safe haven for the global jihad movement. At the same time, several al-Qaeda leaders and affiliates have commented on the developments in Egypt. Al-Qaeda’s Egyptian emir Ayman al-Zawahiri has praised attacks on Egyptian and Israeli targets, and expressed his support for “our people in Sinai”. Similar statements have been released by, among others, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS; though recently disowned by al-Qaeda’s senior leadership), AQIM and AQAP.

Consequently, it comes as no surprise many sources affiliate the Salafi-jihadist groups with al-Qaeda. In spite of the ideological association, however, there is no concrete evidence with regard to factional ties to al-Qaeda (branches). Aviv Oreg argues, for example, that ABM possibly has internet contact with al-Qaeda elements and utilizes similar tactics, but is not subjected to external leadership by al-Qaeda. In an interview with Egyptian newspaper al-Masry al-Youm in 2011, a Gazan militant said that the Salafi-jihadist networks in Gaza are only inspirationally connected to al-Qaeda. Other sources express a similar point of view that there is no official presence of Zawahiri’s organization in Sinai or Gaza.

No proof, however, does not mean such ties do not exist. Many signs suggest possible involvement of al-Qaeda (branches). A key rule of Osama bin Laden was the "centralization of decision and the decentralization of execution", which has been applied to such a degree that even senior leaders were unaware of who planned and executed

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operations until the attacks were completed. It should not be excluded a possible a similar or slightly configured strategy has been employed towards Sinai. Additionally, the return of Egyptians from, or presence of foreign jihadists who have been to Syria, for example, could indicate connections with Jabhat al-Nusra or former affiliate ISIS. Militants associated with ISIS and its even more extremist practices, could exacerbate violence even more through expansion of targets, such as churches, Christians, women, elders and children. According to a leader of the MSC, 100 jihadists from Gaza have gone to Syria to wage jihad against the Assad regime, of which 90 are still alive. Military analyst Yaakov Lappin recently argued that "[t]he danger of these [Sinai-Gaza] networks merging with the extensive jihadist networks in Syria is substantial." There are other indications that the Salafi-jihadists may have relations within al-Qaeda. Some reports claim, for instance, that the considerable presence of Yemenis in Sinai strongly hints at AQAP’s involvement. According to US officials, some of its members have regularly communicated with combatants in Sinai. Furthermore, it is thought the former leader of TWJ and founder of the MSC, Hisham Ali Saidani, was closely tied to AQI. Before going to Iraq in 2003, he reportedly joined Abu Mohammed Assem al-Maqdisi, considered a main advocate of al-Qaeda’s ideology and the ideological mentor of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, AQI’s former representative. Saidani’s alias, Abu al-Walid al-

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Maqdisi, suggests he was clearly influenced by al-Maqdisi.\textsuperscript{221} Like Zawahiri, Saidani was a strong ideologue pushing for the unification of Salafi-jihadists, evidenced by the establishment of the MSC.\textsuperscript{222} In his eulogy for Saidani, Zawahiri called upon Muslims in Gaza "to unite under the word Tawhid."\textsuperscript{223} Other indications of possible al-Qaeda influence are the return of Egyptians and escaped prisoners who were members of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad and Gamaa Islamiyya, two Egyptian militant organizations previously very closely linked to al-Qaeda, and responsible for many high-profile terrorist attacks in the 1980s and 1990s.\textsuperscript{224} These included prominent jihadists such as Zawahiri’s brother, Mohamed al-Zawahiri, and Muhammad Jamal, though both have been arrested again. The latter used to work directly with Ayman al-Zawahiri and contacted him after his release. In 2011, he created the Muhammad Jamal Network (MJN), a militant group operating in Libya and Egypt, including Sinai,\textsuperscript{225} designated by

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the United States as terrorists. MJN has allegedly set up training camps in Sinai and close links to al-Qaeda’s central command, AQAP and AQIM.

Another example is provided by JAI, which used to be more than al-Qaeda-inspired. A document found in Osama bin Laden’s computer revealed it consulted with al-Qaeda’s then-emir in 2006. In the following year, JAI kidnapped BBC journalist Alan Johnston and demanded the release of the fundamentalist preacher Abu Qatada, who allegedly had close relations with al-Qaeda. Additionally, a top commander of the movement disclosed in 2007 that it had received coordination and funds from al-Qaeda, and that Arabs who had fought in Afghanistan had joined their forces. Taking into account these events happened years ago, and that little to no data has surfaced ever since, it is not clear if, and to what extent, these links still exist. While JAI as well as the other Salafi-jihadist factions in Gaza have never been officially recognized by al-Qaeda, not officially recognizing factions could very well be a calculated strategic decision. In the near future, it is possible al-Qaeda-inspired groups will not be officially accepted, not only to enhance its covert character but also in the light of a recent statement made by Gen. Martin Dempsey, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who asserted that the US

The army perceives itself legally prohibited from hunting down the militants responsible for the Benghazi attacks, unless they are affiliated to Zawahiri’s movement.\(^{232}\)

Apart from some concrete examples in the past, such as in the case of JAI, it does not seem the Salafi-jihadist groups currently operating in Sinai and Gaza are subordinates of an overriding al-Qaeda faction. For now, although many signs, such as the tactics employed in Sinai, could point to the possible influence of fighters connected to al-Qaeda (branches), these ties appear to be of an ideological nature. Nevertheless, ideological association could have opened up, or could eventually open up, gateways to human and material resources. It is likely, though, actors in Sinai have occasionally cooperated with members of al-Qaeda for specific purposes or operations in case of mutual interests. Considering the fluidity of the developments in Sinai, al-Qaeda’s potential to transform the peninsula from a jihadist hotbed into a stronghold, the strategically located safe haven the area provides in the proximity of Israel, and that al-Qaeda’s senior leadership comprises several Egyptians who are highly familiar with the local jihadist community,\(^{233}\) evidence of branches or cells with a more direct link to al-Qaeda may very well emerge in the near future.

**ANSAR BAYT AL-MAQDIS – A GLOCAL ORGANIZATION**

Considering ABM’s tactics and weaponry used, it is inconceivable it has no connections to other transnational networks for financial, material, logistical and/or training purposes. While its devotion to the local cause has likely played a major role in its evolution, it could not have become such a dominant organization without interweaving regional and

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global features. For instance, according to Mohannad Sabry, a journalist from al-Arish, a substantial amount of ABM’s weaponry derives from Libya’s looted arms stockpiles. These smuggling operations covering relatively long distances indicate cooperation with other transnational jihadist and/or criminal networks. Even though there is barely any concrete information regarding ABM’s sources of funding, it supposedly finances its operations through a vast arms smuggling network and human trafficking.

In combination with its dedication to, and co-optation of, the local struggles, it clearly pursues a global jihadist agenda as it aspires to "to liberate our Ummah and Muslim people from the slavery of the oppressive, apostate regimes, and establish justice, dignity and freedom for them, and that is only through servitude to Allah alone and implementing His proper Shariah." Not only does its name reveal its ultimate objective, some sources say it was originally founded to target Israel. After the Muslim Brotherhood’s overthrow, it shifted its prime focus on targeting the Egyptian security apparatus. Prior to July 2013, ABM claimed responsibility for several attacks on Israel, including bombings on the al-Arish-Ashkelon gas pipeline and rockets fired on Eilat. Recently, however, it has attacked the pipeline again as well as fired two rockets at Eilat. Following one of the rocket attacks, the group released a statement in which it


asserted that "Jews must understand that our war with the enemy inside will not make us forget the prime enemy of the (Muslim) nation, who occupies the land and defiles the sacred places." In January 2013, it also stated that "[t]he mujahideen don’t see a solution to confront Israel but with preparation and jihad." Furthermore, it described US President Barack Obama’s stay in Israel in March 2013 as a "cancerous tumor", which will have "important implications".

Though little is known with regard to ABM, it is obviously al-Qaeda-inspired. Often its members carry an al-Qaeda flag, and moreover, it exclusively communicates publicly through al-Qaeda’s main propaganda distribution network, the al-Fajr Media Center. In some of its videos, clips were shown of Ayman al-Zawahiri, Osama bin Laden, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi (former leader of AQI), and the spokesman of ISIS, Abu Muhammad al-Adnani al-Shami. On the other hand, Zawahiri has frequently praised attacks conducted by the group, and in response to the death of four ABM fighters in early

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August 2013, an official of AQAP referred to them as "our mujahideen brothers''.

Even though there is no evidence of organizational links between ABM and al-Qaeda (branches) thus far, there are many indications al-Qaeda may have a presence in Sinai, and therefore, the possibility of collusion in case of converging interests is probable. Proof may surface in the near future, however, particularly given the grown number of operatives in Sinai that have fought in al-Qaeda strongholds.

Various sources report on ABM’s alleged link to Gaza, although much remains murky due to varying claims and a lack of supporting evidence. While some reports argue, for instance, that the group was founded by Egyptians, others say it originates from Gaza and/or comprises both an Egyptian and a Gazan branch. Interestingly, a report published in March 2011 by International Crisis Group about radical Islam in Gaza, already mentioned the short-lived existence of a small Salafi-jihadist group named Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis. It is uncertain if this faction made up the initial stages of ABM as it is known today. Most sources, however, agree ABM is created by Egyptians, also declared

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by the movement itself. Aviv Oreg, for example, stated it is a ‘homegrown’ organization, referring to Northern Sinai, but added it has apparently organized attacks in cooperation with Gaza-based groups on a strategic as well as a tactical level. According to journalist Ismail Alexandrani, who has carried out research on-the-ground in Sinai, Palestinians are among ABM’s ranks. Additionally, Egyptian security sources claimed several of the group’s leading figures had fled to the Strip in December 2013 in order to escape from the army’s crackdowns. Whereas the Egyptian army accuses the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas for orchestrating terrorism in Egypt, the army has to date not provided any concrete proof that they have sponsored or coordinated attacks conducted by ABM. It is known that supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood have joined Sinai’s militant networks, but, similar to Hamas’s relationship with the Salafi-jihadists in the enclave, they have broken ties with the Brotherhood because they perceived the organization not dedicated enough to violent jihad.

What is clear, though, is that ABM is tied to the PRC, which has already been discussed above. For the purpose of this paper, it needs to be stressed that the PRC is a highly-

skilled militant organization which has managed to amass an advanced arsenal.\textsuperscript{257} It was created during the outburst of the Second Intifada in 2000 and has over time transformed into an umbrella organization, becoming Gaza’s third-strongest armed group after Hamas and the PIJ. Its members include ex-operatives of Fatah’s military wing (the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades), the al-Qassam Brigades and the PIJ.\textsuperscript{258} Others that have reportedly joined the PRC used to work for the Palestinian Authority’s security agencies.\textsuperscript{259} Taking into account these militants’ extensive expertise, PRC fighters have presumably been highly influential in the advancement of ABM’s operational capabilities. Even though ABM may have acquired more independence, it does by no means imply these connections have ceased to exist.

Some reports suggest ABM is also linked to the MSC.\textsuperscript{260} In addition, in response to Israel’s targeted killings of two leaders of the latter in October 2012, ABM threatened to retaliate at Israel.\textsuperscript{261} The MSC, on the other hand, has occasionally expressed its admiration for killed ABM militants.\textsuperscript{262} It is unclear, however, if, and to what extent, these ties have materialized in human and/or material resources. Nonetheless, considering the know-how and experience of Gazan Salafi-jihadists, the increased capabilities of


ABM, and the ideological similarities displayed, it is very possible members of ABM have in the past participated in military courses in Gaza and collaborated with Gazan counterparts other than the PRC on matters related to logistics and intelligence, in spite of a lack of credible information.

Except for its global jihadist agenda and the links to Gaza, there are other strong indicators of ABM being a glocal organization. Despite comprising mainly Sinai Bedouins, the movement counts battle-hardened Egyptian and foreign jihadists with experience in Afghanistan, Bosnia, Iraq and Syria among its members as well. Not only do they likely have connections to other terrorist organizations, the expertise and experience they bring are a main asset. The risen number of these fighters, and the limitation of movement between Sinai and Gaza because of the tunnel infrastructure’s demolition, could indicate on the one hand, that the influence of these jihadists has increased, whereas the role of Gazan Salafi-jihadists, on the other hand, has decreased. Regardless the reality of this balance, the mix of these similarly-minded actors has been fundamental to the rise of the global jihad movement in Sinai, and is undoubtedly applicable to ABM. Hence, The New York Times journalists David D. Kirkpatrick and Eric Schmitt argue that "Ansar Beit al-Maqdis has shown it can build and remotely detonate large bombs in strategic locations, gather intelligence about the precise timing of movements by their targets, record their own attacks and manage the complicated maintenance of an advanced portable surface-to-air missile – all suggesting combat

experience. What sets ABM apart from the other factions in Sinai, and possibly explains why it has become the dominant organization and foremost terrorist threat, is its strong commitment to both the 'near' and 'far' enemy by devotedly responding to the local causes in combination with the implementation of regional and global conditions and opportunities, in which the PRC and Gazan Salafi-jihadists’ expertise has played a key role.

HAMAS’S DOUBLE-GAME

The Sinai-Gaza terror link cannot be examined without assessing Hamas’s role. Even though it has regularly cracked down on Salafi-jihadists, it currently finds itself in a problematic position and is playing a controversial double-game, to which it probably deems itself forced to.

Increasingly isolated

For Hamas, 2013 turned out to be a disastrous year. It found itself increasingly isolated because its patron the Muslim Brotherhood was overthrown and subsequently crushed, and it lost support of Tehran and Damascus due to disagreements on what is happening in Syria (albeit Hamas and Iran have recently discussed improving relations again).

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Additionally, Qatar appears to have scaled back its sponsoring since its change of leadership. In March 2014, Cairo lawfully banned all activities of Hamas inside Egypt. The Egyptian army has also demolished arms storage depots in Northern Sinai reportedly belonging to Gaza’s leading organization. Moreover, Hamas’s most vital source of income (and arms), the tunnel infrastructure, has largely been destroyed by Egyptian forces. It is believed the tunnel economy constituted 40 percent of the movement’s budget, being the main factor contributing to its 2014 budget’s deficit of 75 percent, and why it has been unable to pay full wages to its 47,000-member staff for several months. Furthermore, the local populace’s opposition to Gaza’s leadership seems to be growing, mainly due to the deteriorated economic and humanitarian situation. Now the daily goods supplied by Israel are important for Hamas in order to prevent more local unrest and opposition – a main incentive why it needs to do


everything in its power in exchange to abide by the ceasefire after OPD and make sure no attacks from Gaza are staged at Israel.272

Hamas also faces severe ideological and security challenges. In combination with the increasingly tense relations with the PRC and especially the PIJ, both with whom it collaborated in the past,273 these also encompass the notable rise of Salafi-jihadist groups in Gaza since 2007. The global jihad-inspired militants reject Hamas because of its political pragmatism, failure to implement Sharia, relinquishment of jihad against Israel, compliance to ceasefires and crackdowns on them.274 Whereas their relatively small presence does not pose a direct serious military challenge to Hamas, it certainly does indirectly. Since Israel holds Hamas accountable for all attacks launched from the Strip,275 Hamas fears extensive retaliation from Israel, which could deal a final or at least major blow. At its weakest point since in power, Hamas therefore considers preserving the fragile lull with Israel after OPD critical for its own survival.276 Being well aware of

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the regime’s weakness, the Salafi-jihadists, the PRC and PIJ try to exploit the situation and drag Hamas into a full-scale war with Israel, possibly even preferring an IDF ground invasion. Consequently, Gaza’s leadership is to a large extent committed to making sure individuals or groups refrain from attacking Israel from the strip.\textsuperscript{277} Yet, a senior Israeli military official said in January 2014 that "Hamas is trying to do its best to prevent the launches, but it can and must do more."\textsuperscript{278} Until the volley of dozens of rockets and mortars launched from Gaza on March 12, 2014, the worst string of attacks on a single day since OPD (most claimed by the PIJ), aggression from Gaza had declined substantially since the truce. However, attacks did continue during the overlapping period\textsuperscript{279} and it is believed a considerable amount of them were carried out by the Salafi-jihadists.\textsuperscript{280} Because of Hamas’s problematic position, the more extremist actors, and particularly the PIJ, have the ability to manipulate the lull and command the outbreak of war. Following the barrage of rockets on March 12, Uzi Rabi, Professor at Tel Aviv organization based in the Gaza Strip, has recently become prominent for firing rockets and mortar shells into Israeli territory. April 22, 2013. http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/article/20504 [Accessed February 11, 2014].


University, stated that "[t]he Gaza Strip has been taken captive by [the Palestinian] Islamic Jihad... A sub-state actor has stolen the keys to escalation and de-escalation." At the time of writing, it is too premature to assess what the consequences for Hamas will be after the latest campaign of rocket fire (though the IAF has retaliated on some Hamas targets). Surely, the events have increased Israel’s decision-makers’ dilemma regarding alternatives for Gaza’s leadership. At least for now, a fragile Hamas regime is perhaps the 'best' option for Israel as the other short-term scenarios – lawlessness and/or a more aggressive faction such as the PIJ becoming dominant – are worse.

The movement has also encountered increased internal friction, predominantly regarding the issue of maintaining the ceasefire or continuing its original objective, fighting Israel. This became apparent, for example, in a document obtained by Ynetnews in early 2014 when Hamas’s border security forces had suddenly withdrawn from the coastal enclave’s borders, and were redeployed again after a few days. Gaza’s leadership is struggling to balance its image of leader of jihad and armed resistance against Israel while abiding by the lull at the same time, not only with respect to the threat the Salafi-jihadists, PIJ and PRC pose, but also to its internal cohesion, fearing more operatives might desert and join the more extremist factions.

Due to its weakness and isolation, Hamas appears to be mainly employing a monitoring strategy, waiting for the right time to respond to local and regional developments while using the time of relative calm for building up its forces as well as developing and upgrading its arsenals, such as the M-75 rockets, capable of reaching Tel Aviv.

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Additionally, while the al-Qassam Brigades have not conducted any attacks on Israel since the ceasefire, they continue digging tunnels into Israel covertly. Not only does it keep them busy in times of restraint, Hamas also hopes it eventually may lead to, for instance, the kidnapping of an Israeli soldier or civilian, which it can subsequently use as a bargaining chip it desperately wishes to obtain in these times of isolation.285

Hamas and the Salafi-jihadists

So how has Hamas responded to the ideological and security challenges the global jihadist fighters pose? It has, for instance, regularly clamped down on the Salafi-jihadist movements, most notably on Jund Ansar Allah (JAA) in 2009.286 However, while it had, and still has, the capabilities to crush these small factions entirely, it has not done so. Here is where its double-game comes into play.

Both internal and external criticism regarding Hamas’s image of leader of jihad and armed resistance and the importance of upholding the truce have pressured Hamas to continue jihad one way or the other. As Al-Monitor columnist Shlomi Eldar strikingly states “[t]he last thing that the Hamas leadership wants is to be portrayed as collaborating with Israel or as a group motivated by fear from it, taking action against Palestinian


groups to appease Israel.” Consequently, for a number of interconnected reasons it has, to a certain degree, granted leniency towards the Salafi-jihadists, likely including allowing sporadic rocket fire. Firstly, by exercising more tolerance, it hopes this will prevent, or significantly curb, attacks on Israel. Secondly, brutally cracking down on the Salafi-jihadists may increase sympathy for them, foment more internal divisions, and/or lead to the defection of more al-Qassam Brigades operatives. Therefore, by permitting their activities to some extent, Hamas tries to demonstrate its willingness to continue jihad against Israel in order to decrease criticism, not only from the Salafi-jihadists but also within its own ranks. And thirdly, Gaza’s regime also hopes the global jihad-inspired fighters might fight side by side with it in case a war with Israel erupts.

Various events demonstrate Hamas’s restraint to the Salafi-jihadists. For instance, detained JAA members, who challenged its rule fiercely, were all released from prison within a few months after the crackdown. Similarly, former TWJ’s leader Hisham Ali Saidani was released in August 2012 for no apparent reason. Another example is Hamas’s relationship with JAI. While having cooperated in the Gilad Shalit kidnapping, relations deteriorated after Hamas seized power in 2007 due to JAI’s ongoing attacks, kidnappings, apparent affiliation to al-Qaeda, and increased criticism of Gaza’s

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leadership. As a result, Hamas clamped down on JAI militants in 2007 and 2008, though not as decisively as it did on JAA. It seems Hamas only resorted to such measures in case its authority was severely undermined. Despite previous tensions and violent clashes, Hamas nowadays grants JAI more freedom and, according to the MAITIC, even preferential treatment. In August 2013, a Shin Bet official addressed Hamas’s leniency towards JAI’s training camps, in exchange for Dughmush’s guarantee that neither his movement nor his trainees will conduct attacks from Gaza.

This pattern became more evident in October 2013, when Hamas struck a deal with the Salafi-jihadists, brokered by Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi and Kuwaiti clerics. In exchange for the Salafi-jihadist groups’ abidance to the truce, and as long as they refrain from undermining Hamas’s rule, they are allowed "freedom to operate in politics, the military, religious advocacy, and civil and social organizations." So far, this has led to a decline in Hamas’s actions against jihadist dissidents and the release of numerous prisoners. According to Ehud Yaari, Lafer International Fellow at The Washington Institute, part of the deal is that Gaza’s rulers will not stop the militants from cooperating with their Sinai-based counterparts.

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Taking into account these developments and the many advantages of operating from Sinai, it comes as no surprise several attacks on Israel launched from Sinai bear a heavy Gaza footprint. Through turning a blind eye to the activities of Salafi-jihadists and consciously not taking strong enough action against them travelling to Sinai, Hamas passively supports terrorism from Sinai. But what about its active support? As mentioned above, the tunnel industry has been Hamas’s backbone since Israel’s disengagement of Gaza in 2005, not only for financial reasons but also in terms of arms proliferation (in both directions) and passage for Hamas leaders, operatives, military trainers and instructors.\textsuperscript{297} Whereas the al-Qassam Brigades have been active in Sinai for many years, it is unclear to what extent this has been the case after OPD, during which it was dealt a severe blow. Possibly it has covertly provided support and training to militants for the sole purpose to target Israel from Sinai prior to the military’s takeover in Egypt, but that these same fighters have over time joined the Salafi-jihadist groups and have since then staged attacks on Egypt’s security forces and Israel without its involvement.

Cairo has not permitted Hamas members to cross into the Sinai ever since, although that does not mean operatives have not been able to cross the border regardless. Gaza’s rulers have consistently denied any interference in Egypt’s internal affairs. Albeit Cairo blames Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood for the domestic bloodshed\textsuperscript{298} and their involvement cannot be ruled out, any credible proof of Hamas orchestrating or supporting terror in Sinai since the deterioration of violence in 2013 has not yet been presented publicly.\textsuperscript{299} Other than that, given Hamas’s stressed relationship with the Salafi-jihadists and that the latter’s ideology rejects Shi’a and Iran, close cooperation between Hamas and Sinai-

based global jihad-affiliated fighters in Sinai is unlikely. A boosted number of (well-trained) al-Qaeda-affiliated militants on its doorstep is probably the last thing it wants at the moment. It should, however, not be excluded rogue elements within the al-Qassam Brigades have provided guidance, weapons and/or assistance to factions in Sinai without the movement’s upper echelons’ consent.

More importantly, considering the many critical challenges Hamas faces in Gaza, it is more likely it has (almost) exclusively committed itself to consolidating power and building up strength. Through actively supporting or conducting terrorist activities in Sinai towards Cairo and particularly Israel, the beleaguered regime would run the risk of a devastating backlash (for instance by Israeli reprisal airstrikes or Jerusalem putting a halt to supplies), something it cannot afford and should avoid at all costs. Nevertheless, because Hamas still has the capacities to arrest or eliminate all of the Gazan Salafi-jihadists but has not done so thus far, and the latter have played a key role in the upsurge of attacks in and from Sinai, Gaza’s leadership’s policies of restraint have, irrespective of its intentions, highly influenced Sinai’s conflict. Hence, despite the absence of an active role, through Hamas’s leniency towards the Salafi-jihadists, to which it perceives itself forced to in order to preserve power, it indirectly yet consciously supports the latter’s belligerent activities in the peninsula.

CONCLUSION

Many heavily interconnected local, regional and global developments have shaped, increased, and provided opportunities for the Sinai-Gaza terror networks. These include, but are not limited to, the radicalization processes witnessed in both territories, the historical Bedouins’ grievances, internal conflict in Gaza, the lucrative illicit tunnel industry and its destruction, the limitations of the 1979 peace treaty, the strategic and
operational advantages of operating in Sinai over Gaza, the security vacuums following the Arab Spring, the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood and subsequent crackdowns by the army, the revival of al-Qaeda’s narrative, Hamas’s isolation and dubious policies towards the Salafi-jihadists, the increased transnational spread of global jihad-inspired fighters, and the proliferation of Libya’s plundered arsenals.

Albeit global jihadist ideology declined in the 2000s, it has paradoxically been revived throughout the Middle East, including Sinai, because of the security vacuums left by the developments of the Arab Spring. The breakdown of security in Sinai has provided a fertile ground for the rise of the global jihad movement and has resulted in a safe haven from which both Egypt and Israel can be targeted with relative impunity. The increased lawlessness has been exploited by various actors, most significantly by al-Qaeda-inspired militants which have hijacked the Bedouins’ longstanding alienation in order to fight the military-led government and Israel, and at the same time strengthen global jihadist ideology. Particularly after the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood, attacks in Sinai have accumulated rapidly, expanded to Egypt’s heartland, and become less exposed and more sophisticated, indicating combat experience.

Whereas jihadists with extensive experience in battle zones such as Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria have likely shaped the upsurge of (advanced) attacks as well, seasoned Gazan Salafi-jihadists have been highly influential in the establishment and growth of the Sinai-based terrorist infrastructure through providing training, planning, supervision and, sometimes, weapons. The extent to which coordination by Gazans still exists is unclear because of the limited passage as a result of the destruction of the majority of the tunnels on the one hand, and the grown independence and capabilities of some networks in Sinai, predominantly ABM, on the other. Nonetheless, providing coordination, advice or assistance does not necessarily involve travel across the border. Even though access to (training camps in) Gaza is restricted to a certain degree; Palestinian fighters still reside
in Sinai and could run training camps or direct operations there. While some organizations in the peninsula may have started to act more on their own, and/or the influence of the increased number of other battle-hardened jihadists might have risen, it is very likely the Sinai-Gaza terror link will continue to develop one way or another given the networks’ ideological similarities, innovativeness and adaptability. The role of severely weakened Hamas is complex yet significant as it basically allows the Gazan Salafi-jihadists to operate to a certain degree and travel to Sinai in exchange for their guarantee they will abstain from attacking Israel from the enclave. By doing so, Gaza’s leadership hopes to maintain the truce, consolidate power, preserve its image of leader of jihad and armed resistance against Israel, and lessen both internal and external criticism. Irrespective of its intentions, Hamas indirectly supports terrorism in Sinai through its leniency towards the Salafi-jihadists, even though it probably regards itself forced to making these arrangements.

For the time being, it does not seem probable the violence in Sinai will decline anytime soon. While the Egyptian army lacks the capabilities for an effective counter-insurgency strategy and Israel is officially restrained from combating the terrorist threat inside the peninsula, the terrorist networks probably keep on developing, among others because other Salafi-jihadists will likely continue to seek infiltrating Sinai or other parts of Egypt. This trend is unlikely to change in the near future due to ongoing regional political chaos and the opportunities Sinai’s non-existent governance offers. At the moment, there is no concrete evidence there is an official presence of al-Qaeda (branches), though many signs indicate this may be the case nevertheless. Potentially, al-Qaeda could transform Sinai from a jihadist breeding ground into yet another stronghold.
Because of these developments, Egyptian-Israeli bilateral cooperation on thwarting the terrorist threat emanating from Sinai has significantly increased. Furthermore, in recent years, Israel has reinforced its border security, including a barrier, high-tech cameras and radars, and the deployment of specially trained elite units. While these measures substantially decrease the likeliness of complex cross-border attacks, it is important to keep innovative since the Salafi-jihadist Sinai-Gaza networks have demonstrated their ability to adjust to changing circumstances more than once and will continue to seek for other security gaps to exploit.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY


