The Islamic State’s Pyramid Scheme: Egyptian Expansion and the Giza Governorate Cell
By Mokhtar Awad

With a presence in Libya and the Sinai secured, the Islamic State is taking steps to destabilize mainland Egypt by steadily making inroads in the vast Western Desert, Upper Egypt, and Greater Cairo. A new network of Islamic State-affiliated cells that has been operating in Giza is the latest effort to bring armed insurgency closer to the capital and Nile Valley, where disparate amateur militant groups have ineffectively operated in recent years. Thus far, the Islamic State has struggled greatly in advancing its Egypt agenda due to a lack of in-country resources and experienced recruits as well as the relative strength of Egyptian security services. However, given recent trends, there is a real possibility in the coming years that the Islamic State could consolidate mainland militants’ efforts and escalate insurgency in mainland Egypt.

Nearly 18 months after the Islamic State injected itself into the Egyptian jihadi landscape by securing the bay’a of the Sinai-based Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (ABM), the contours of an Islamic State expansion strategy in the Egyptian mainland are becoming clearer. The Islamic State has escalated activity in the Western Desert, Upper Egypt, and found new cells in the Greater Cairo area. The group is exploiting its Egypt presence to project terror by targeting Western interests as part of its broader external operations campaign. It is also steadily laying the groundwork for a mainland insurgency to link the Libyan and Nile Valley theaters and to consolidate control over a fragmented Nile Valley militant landscape made up of al-Qa’ida-aligned militants and violent actors associated with some factions inside the Muslim Brotherhood and their Islamist supporters. An Islamic State cell that surfaced in the Giza governorate last September, which this paper will focus on in detail, is the first effort made thus far by the group to bring armed insurgency closer to Cairo.

The Islamic State has struggled to execute this strategy, yielding mixed results with no shortage of spectacular failures. The lack of abundant local resources and experienced recruits in the Nile Valley, along with the relative strength of the Egyptian security services, has hindered the group’s designs. Nevertheless, if its strategy succeeds, the results could be devastating for Egypt’s security, economy, and for the region.

This article is informed in part by Egyptian State Security Information, investigations obtained by the author, Islamic State statements, militants’ social media profiles, and open-source reporting.

A Poisoned Chalice?
The Islamic State was able to pursue this nationwide strategy after it subsumed ABM, which changed its name to Wilayat Sinai, or Sinai Province. It has since increasingly played an outsized role in influencing the strategic direction and ideology of the affiliate to serve its regional and global agenda.

Last August, this author wrote a co-authored article in this publication that ABM’s allegiance to the Islamic State could prove to be a “poisoned chalice,” as the local group—despite its military strength in the Sinai—might in the long-term meet the same fate of Egyptian Islamic Jihad, which forsook its base of popular support when it became part of al-Qa’ida.

While the jury is out about the future fortunes of ABM, it is clear the Islamic State has gained from the merger as it is now able to use its Sinai host as a launching pad to reproduce in mainland Egypt and project terror. Wilayat Sinai’s Nile Valley operatives, cultivated by ABM since 2011, and a new crop of Islamic State mainland recruits now do the direct bidding of the group. And the integration of ABM into the Caliphate project provided the Islamic State with a new front to launch international terrorism. Wilayat Sinai’s downing of a Russian airliner over the Sinai in October 2015 killed 224, mostly Russian civilians. The attack may end up benefiting the Islamic State more than its Egyptian affiliate. In downing the Russian aircraft, Wilayat Sinai, which had long avoided mass civilian casualties to nurture its base of popular support, killed far more civilians than its previous four-plus years of activity combined. The group has also killed far greater numbers of local Sinai civilians in 2015 than previous years, for the first time targeting them with aircraft, Wilayat Sinai’s Nile Valley operatives, cultivated by ABM since 2011, and a new crop of Islamic State mainland recruits now do the direct bidding of the group. And the integration of Wilayat Sinai into the Caliphate project provided the Islamic State with a new front to launch international terrorism. Wilayat Sinai’s downing of a Russian airliner over the Sinai in October 2015 killed 224, mostly Russian civilians. The attack may end up benefiting the Islamic State more than its Egyptian affiliate. In downing the Russian aircraft, Wilayat Sinai, which had long avoided mass civilian casualties to nurture its base of popular support, killed far more civilians than its previous four-plus years of activity combined. The group has also killed far greater numbers of local Sinai civilians in 2015 than previous years, for the first time targeting them with the Islamic State-like abandon, risking a backlash from local tribes. Killing civilians in the mainland and harming the economy and livelihoods by attacks on tourism may also trigger a backlash from potentially supportive constituencies.

Wilayat Sinai’s November 2014 bay’a came at a particularly weak point for the group’s Nile Valley cells, which were already suffering from decapitation by authorities. After it joined the Islamic State fold, these cells were further degraded by Egyptian security services and the group’s Nile Valley operations were further weakened by defections by al-Qa’ida loyalists. The most significant defector was former special forces officer Hisham Ashmawy, who would later proclaim his command over al-Murabitun, a Libya-based, al-Qa’ida-affiliated group. Ashmawy was believed to have commanded cells in the mainland that after his defection were taken over by another senior leader in Wilayat Sinai, 33-year-old Giza resident Ashraf al-Gharably. Al-Gharably would become the Islamic State’s key lieutenant in executing its plan for mainland Egypt beginning in 2015.
Early Expansion on the Mainland

In the run up to the November 2014 Islamic State bay’a, ABM had begun to make inroads into Egypt’s Western Desert by carrying out several attacks in summer 2014, and clashed with authorities in the Galala Mountain in the desert east of Cairo in September 2014. In October 2014, the military revealed that it destroyed a small jihadi encampment southeast of el-Wahat el-Bahariya in Giza governorate. ABM only took credit for most of the Western Desert attacks after the Islamic State bay’a, raising the possibility that ABM’s Western Desert expansion may have been connected to the Islamic State bay’a deal. The Islamic State stood the most to gain, as it wished to secure smuggling routes in and out of Libya and to lay the groundwork for future militant activity.

But not much took place outside the Sinai following the Islamic State bay’a, and it was unclear if al-Gharably, once he took over from Ashmawy, would be able to regroup. For much of early 2015 it did not seem to be the case. But in analyzing new information obtained from State Security investigation files and open source reporting on claimed and suspected Islamic State activity in the mainland in 2015, it becomes clear that al-Gharably was planning what he had hoped would be a spectacular comeback to be unleashed in a dizzying succession of attacks last summer to destabilize Egypt significantly.

On June 10, 2015, al-Gharably allegedly dispatched three militants in an attempt to blow up the Karnak Temple in Luxor in Upper Egypt (the country’s south). Thanks to locals’ vigilance, the jihadis were quickly spotted and neutralized. Two of them had suicide vests, machine guns, hand grenades, and allegedly an RPG. State Security investigations revealed that the two would-be suicide bombers were allegedly from Tunisia and Sudan. The 12-member cell that helped facilitate the attack was based in the Upper Egypt province of Beni Suef. It is unclear if the two suspects came into Egypt from Libya or Sinai, but the alleged involvement of two foreign fighters suggests a new transnational dimension to the group’s personnel in the mainland. It may have been foreign Islamic State operatives were used because they had fewer qualms killing civilians in a suicide attack. The Islamic State never claimed responsibility for the foiled plot, which if successful, might have devastated Egypt’s economy early on in the year and killed untold numbers of tourists.

Islamic State mainland cells, commanded by al-Gharably, then executed a rapid succession of plots in the months that followed, according to Egyptian authorities. On July 11, the Italian consulate in Cairo was bombed. On July 15, a rare SVBIED in the mainland targeted a military installation on a major highway east of Cairo but failed to reach its target. On August 12, a Croatian oil worker who had been kidnapped a month earlier was beheaded by the group. On August 20, the State Security building in Shubra el-Kheima, part of Greater Cairo, was bombed using a powerful VBIED. In September, an assassination attempt against the State Security
Prosecution’s general attorney, Tamer Firjani, was thwarted. The Islamic State did not claim involvement in the foiled plot, but authorities alleged that the cell worked with the group.

Activity also escalated in the Western Desert when the Islamic State, after comfortably establishing itself in neighboring Libya, declared for the first time its presence in the Western Desert by issuing a statement with photos in fall 2015. Some clashes with unidentified militants took place early in 2015 and in the summer near Siwa Oasis, some of whom authorities alleged were veteran fighters from Sinai dispatched to the Western Desert. On September 12, Islamic State militants kidnapped a Bedouin desert tracker from Wahat el Bahriya, Giza, who worked with the military. In the ensuring two days, the Islamic State executed him and engaged Egyptian forces that were sent to sweep the area looking for the man. In the midst of the chaos, an Egyptian Apache helicopter pilot mistakenly fired on a group of Mexican tourists and Egyptians, killing at least 12.

The most intense battle waged by Egyptian security services occurred in the desert west of Upper Egypt in late September 2015 against an Islamic State force that the military said had crossed from Libya. The battle took place reportedly some 30 km west of Asyut in an area called Dayrut Mountain, where the militants were camped out. Elite military and police units were flown to the area and, with close air support, destroyed the camp and reportedly killed at least 10 militants and detained at least one. Some of these were allegedly foreign fighters. The incident revealed that the Islamic State may be planning to secure a foothold in the mountains and hills of Egypt’s deep south overlooking the Nile Valley, following in the footsteps of Gamma Islamiya in the 1980s-1990s.

In the fall of 2015 the Nile Valley Islamic State Jihadis lost their momentum. In late September, the Islamic State’s mainland operations suffered a major blow when in a raid in Giza authorities killed nine militants they alleged were under the command of al-Gharably and were behind all of the 2015 Cairo bombings mentioned above. Al-Gharably himself was killed by police in northeast Cairo in Nov-
vember, an area where jihadis have also operated. A fake ID for a petroleum company with operations in the Western Desert was found on his person, which he likely used to clear checkpoints in the area. As al-Gharably’s network suffered these setbacks, new cells made up of fresh Islamic State recruits whose loyalty is only to Abu Bakr al Baghdadi rose in their stead. They have shown a greater ambition to wage armed insurgency near Cairo and start to link the Western Desert with the capital and beyond, yet suffer from lack of experience and capability because of the decapitation of many of the former ABM Nile Valley operatives like al-Gharably.

The Giza Governorate Cell
In September 2015, a new Islamic State cell claimed responsibility for its first IED attack. The bomb targeted a Ministry of Foreign Affairs satellite building in the Mohandisin district of Giza, which resulted in two injuries and damage to the exterior facade.

How the Islamic State Giza cell came to be is made clear in the evolving jihadi dynamics in the Nile Valley. Unlike al-Gharably’s network, which was largely defunct Islamic State cells that were leftovers from joint ventures between mainland jihadists and ABM, the available evidence indicates that the Giza governorate cell may have some overlaps with militants from groups such as Ajnad Misr, a pro-al-Qa’ida jihadi group operating on the mainland, that defected to the Islamic State.

Ajnad Misr had dominated the insurgent jihadi landscape in the Greater Cairo area, specifically Giza, before the Islamic State came onto the scene. But it suffered successive blows from authorities when its leader, Hamam Attiya, an ex-ABM operative who left the group early on to focus on the Nile Valley, was killed in April 2015.

Even though mainland Egypt had long been turf for al-Qa’ida-leaning jihadis, the group and its leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, an Egyptian native, failed to exploit this fact. Frustration with these shortcomings was enough for some pro-al-Qa’ida elements in the Nile Valley to put aside ideological differences and join fledgling Islamic State-linked cells in the area.

The Topology of Terror
There is no one answer as to why Giza governorate, an Islamist stronghold since at least the 1950-1960s, was selected as a staging ground for Islamic State insurgency in the mainland. But analyzing the geography is instructive (see Map 1). The Giza province is huge, almost the size of Jordan. It has an urban core in the southwest of greater Cairo most are familiar with, but it is mostly rural. Giza’s farmlands hug the southern boundaries of the Delta to the north. It protrudes deep into the desert and its oases to the west, and to the south it expands into Upper Egypt on both the east and west banks of the Nile. This is thanks to largely illogical boundary-drawing by Cairo, but still largely represents the dynamics inside the governorate.

If there was an Egyptian Mason-Dixon line, it would cut right through Giza. Many immigrants from Upper Egypt have settled in the south of Giza governorate, bringing with them a conservative

---

a Al-Gharably was killed in the northeast district of Al Marj, which is close to Musturod, Khosos, Arab Sharaks, Ain Shams, and Matariya, which have witnessed attacks pre-2015 by ABM/Islamic State-affiliated cells and are strongholds of the Muslim Brotherhood. Militants’ presence and operations in such areas in north and northeast Cairo, in Giza to the west of Cairo, and Helwan to the south effectively form a belt around the capital. See Ahmad Moustafa, “Increased presence of militants in residential districts,” Al Hayat, February 4, 2016.

“Even though mainland Egypt had long been turf for al-Qa’ida-leaning jihadis, the group and its leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, an Egyptian native, failed to exploit this fact. Frustration with these shortcomings was enough for some pro-al-Qa’ida elements in the Nile Valley to put aside ideological differences and join fledgling Islamic State-linked cells in the area.”
culture that tolerates guns and vendettas. The farmlands border a desert where weapons and drug smugglers, as well as bandits, have long operated. All are ideal staging grounds and hospitable environments for jihadis wishing to strike anywhere in the Greater Cairo area and secure a presence in a corridor that links the historical smuggling routes between Libya and Sinai.

The other relevant factor is perhaps the recent history of violence between Islamists and the state. In Giza’s Nahda square, at least 87 Islamist protesters and two policemen were killed on the same day Rabaa square was cleared in August 2013. Islamist looked for revenge, and in the village of Kerdasa, at least a dozen policemen were brutally murdered and their bodies mutilated by a pro-Brotherhood mob. Police effectively lost control of the village before retaking it a month later following clashes.

Some violence also took place in Giza governorate during the 1980s-1990s insurgency. More recently areas of Giza City and the governorates hinterlands have been the home base of Salafist supporters of the former presidential candidate Sheikh Hazem Salah Abu Ismail—called Hazemoon—of whom traveled to join jihadist groups like the Islamic State or engaged in militancy at home. Giza Salafis have also been especially violent, for instance, inciting the lynching of four Shiites in June 2013.

**Leadership and Tactics**

According to ongoing State Security investigations, a 22-year-old called Ibrahim A. is one of the suspected leaders of the Giza cell. It is alleged that he contacted a Sinai-based Islamic State operative by the name of Abu Baseer, who authorized the cell. At least six others were detained in recent months, most of them in their twenties with backgrounds ranging from high school and university students to a barber and a pharmaceutical sales representative. An electrical engineer believed to have been a chief bomb-maker for the cell was arrested in late February 2016. It is reported that the network may include anywhere from 30 to 40 jihadis.

The amateur nature of the Islamic State Giza cell cannot be overlooked. Some of the “attacks” are simply absurd stunts, yet they still raise important questions. One example is when the Islamic State claimed that its “soldiers” had attacked Jews in a hotel near the Pyramids in Giza in early January 2016, answering Caliph Abu Bakr’s call to kill Jews. The actual incident, as eyewitness and security camera footage revealed, involved dozens of mostly teenage militants, armed with flares, fireworks, a few Molotov cocktails, and locally produced birdshot mobbing an empty tourist bus in front of a hotel. The assailants looked identical to typical local Brotherhood and Islamist protesters who use the same weapons and tactics in clashes with police, raising questions if they were perhaps unwittingly manipulated by Islamic State operatives looking to recruit them. There were no casualties and the targeted Jews turned out to be mainly Muslim Israeli Arabs. Yet the group still falsely claimed Jewish fatalities.

At least five of the group’s attacks and attempted attacks have involved IEDs of various sizes, most of which were spotted by civilians and defused by police. One target in mid-October 2015 was in front of a hotel directly opposite the Pyramids. It was about a week before Wilayat Sinai downed a Russian plane. A small explosion injured at least two policemen while attempting to defuse it. The repercussions would have been large if even a small attack had occurred near Egypt’s number-one tourist attraction.

IEDs have also targeted diplomatic and government buildings as well as police checkpoints on major roads such as the Cairo’s Ring Road, the capital’s beltway, which has numerous police checkpoints (see Map 2). A successful spree of shootings and IEDs on the road could have serious repercussions on the capital and the population’s sense of safety. Thankfully, the Giza cell has not perfected its targeting as of yet. One IED targeted a decommissioned checkpoint, another was defused, and one armed assault killed two workers of the Roads and Bridges Authority mistaken for police.

The more serious attacks have been hit-and-run shootings targeting policemen mainly in the rural south of Giza. They have all followed a similar modus operandi of the assailants looting weapons and ammunition from their police victims before fleeing. The attacks have forced Giza Police to adapt their police checkpoints by frequently changing locations and building more outposts. The assailants have been able to take advantage of the region’s topography, including farmland and the nearby desert in order to hide, and seem to be methodically picking soft targets to build fighting experience and stock their arsenal.

The deadliest incident was not the result of an attack but rather a police raid on an IED factory in the heart of Giza City itself. In January, police had raided a poultry farm used to manufacture large quantities of IEDs, and intelligence gathered there led them to the apartment hours later. Militants inside the apartment detonated their explosives, creating a powerful blast that killed at least six policemen, three civilians, and partially destroyed the exterior façade. The two intercepted warehouses had very significant quantities of explosives materials most likely to be used on the anniversary of the January revolution to blow up the Giza Security Directorate.

Interestingly, there were conflicting claims of responsibility for the apartment blast. One group called Revolutionary Punishment (RP), a non-Salafi jihadist militant group believed to be aligned

---

b The attack also serves as a reminder of Egyptian Islamists’ predisposition to attack religious minorities. An overlooked fact is that ABM’s Nile Valley operatives had partially financed their operations by stealing Christians’ cars and jewelry stores as they kept this activity secret. But an Islamic State-infused cell will almost certainly begin to target Christians methodically in the area for cash and attack houses of worship to instigate strife, much like the Islamist militants of the 1980s-1990s.

c These raids were all part of a pre-January 25 anniversary sweep as mainland militants have marked all previous anniversaries with violence due to its political significance and the usual presence of Islamist protests. For instance, the Revolutionary Punishment militant group announced its founding on January 25, 2015. Police found on a laptop in the Giza apartment pictures and plans to attack various security targets and the Giza Security Directorate as part of a larger spree of attacks marking the anniversary. Mohamed Abdel Rady, Bahgat Ab Deif et al., “Preemptive strike for security services...planned to attack police stations,” al-yawm al-Sabi’, January 22, 2016.
with some radicalized Brotherhood factions, claimed responsibility and so did the Islamic State.59 Both claimed that the apartment was a “trap” for authorities acting on intelligence they fed, but they failed to explain why it took more than one jihadi to ‘push the button.’ Evidence thus far strongly suggests that Islamic State militants operated the IED factory as authorities were able to establish a connection between the dead suspects and known Islamic State operatives.60 The large quantities of explosives found indicate that the group was on the cusp of a major terror campaign after being able to recuperate losses in previous months, serving as a reminder of the group’s resilience and the potential for future major terrorist operations as Islamic State cells improve their operational security.

This incident also raises questions about whether or not groups like RP are in anyway cooperating with the Islamic State. If they are, it would mean the Islamic State may be beginning to get non Salafi-jihadi militants to cooperate, at least tactically, with them.

Bandwagoning?

There are recent indications that the Islamic State has been able to either coopt or ally with additional leftover elements from the pro-al-Qa’ida Ajnad Misr. Police have killed at least eight alleged Ajnad Misr jihadis in major raids around Cairo this year. The cells allegedly carried out unclaimed attacks in the south Cairo area of Helwan. But authorities claim that some alleged Ajnad Misr elements carried out an October 2015 assassination of a Sinai Bedouin who lived in Cairo that Wilayat Sinai had claimed.61 If true, it would be further evidence of Islamic State-aligned jihadis building up support among Nile Valley’s militant groups that have hitherto leaned heavily toward al-Qa’ida.

**Conclusion**

The Egyptian government has thus far been able to check disparate militant groups in the mainland largely due to their amateurish nature and a home-turf advantage in intelligence that has helped thwart plots. Although the Islamic State’s attempts to expand in the Nile Valley through a network of cells in the Giza governorate have so far been uneven and sometimes faltering, if they gather momentum, they could pose a significant threat to Egypt’s security.

There is a real possibility the Islamic State could at some point in the future provide the training, weapons, and leadership to consolidate mainland militants’ efforts and transform them into hardened jihadis, thus escalating the insurgency. The more than 1,000 km-long border with Libya is extremely porous, and the vast bordering Western Desert is a natural sanctuary and staging area for such jihadi activity. How wisely Cairo prosecutes its counterinsurgency efforts in the coming years, and its ability to partner with allies such as the United States for training and modern equipment, will help determine whether the Islamic State will find fertile ground in the Nile Valley. CTC

**Citations**

1. Mokhtar Awad and Mostafa Hashem, *Egypt’s Escalating Islamist Insurgency* (Beirut, Lebanon: Carnegie Middle East Center, 2015);
10. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
23. Islamic State, “Repelling of the apostate Egyptian army’s campaign in Egypt’s Western Desert,” Twitter, September 13, 2015.
Protesters in Egypt, "Human Rights Watch, August 12, 2014.


Eshraqah Media (sendvid.com).


October 3, 2015.

leader trained with IS and pledged allegiance to al-Baghdadi, "Attacks, 

Online, July 29, 2015.

Shorouk TIMEP, September 18, 2014.

an IED in Giza, "Twitter, September 20, 2015.

Islamic State, "Targeting of Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs office with

October 3, 2015.

Shorouk, October 3, 2015.

Ministry of Foreign Affairs office, "Egypt’s Interior Ministry announces killing of 9 ‘terrorists’ accused with

staging an IED in Giza, "Official Page of Egyptian Ministry of Interior, Facebook, November 9, 2015.

Ibid.

Mohamed Ibrahim, "IS claims responsibility for explosion at Ministry of Foreign Affairs office in Mohandisin; "Dot Masr, September 20, 2015 -

Islamic State, "Targeting of Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs office with an IED in Giza; "Twitter, September 20, 2015.


"Head of recruiting in Ajnad Misr reveals secrets of its founding; "El Shorouk, February 23, 2015.

Ajnad Misr, "Statement number 18; "Twitter, July 29, 2015.

"Policeman killed in drive-by shooting at Niger Embassy in Cairo; "Ahram Online, July 29, 2015.


Ahmed al-Sharkawy, "Investigations with Niger Embassy cell: their


Al-Ahram, February 19, 2016.

Egyptian Ministry of Defense video, YouTube, September 21, 2015.


Bahgat Abo Deif, "Source: Captured terrorist cell led officers to


