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Ansar Bayt Al-Maqdis's Oath of Allegiance to the Islamic State

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On November 10, 2014, the Egypt-based jihadist group Ansar Bayt Al-Maqdis (ABM) – already notorious for its attacks on Egyptian security forces and religious minorities, and for utilizing brutal methods such as beheadings – pledged its allegiance (*bayat*) to the self-proclaimed caliphate known as the Islamic State (IS). Though it might intuitively appear that this development creates an opportunity for the U.S. and other international actors to press Cairo for policy reforms, the opposite is likely the case. Indeed, the Egyptian government likely views ABM's *bayat* to IS as a vindication of its counterterrorism policies for several reasons: The pledge creates rifts within ABM, makes ABM appear more brutal (thus alienating it from the Egyptian population) and bolsters the perception that Egypt's harsh counterterrorism methods are justified.

ABM's *bayat* to IS does in fact weaken rather than strengthen the group, at least in the short-to-medium term. IS and Al-Qaeda have been locked in an often deadly struggle for supremacy over the global jihadist movement, and ABM is located in a neighborhood dominated by groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda. As such, becoming part of IS's network not only causes divisions within ABM, but also reduces its ability to both cooperate with other Sinai-based jihadist organizations and to take advantage of the strong jihadist presence in neighboring Libya.

This report provides a comprehensive analysis of ABM's *bayat* to IS by situating it in the history of Sinai jihadism generally and ABM specifically:

- The report begins by **exploring the recent history of Salafi jihadism in the Sinai Peninsula,** demonstrating that although Salafi jihadist groups have become more prominent there since Hosni Mubarak's fall and the subsequent coup that brought Abdel Fattah El-Sisi to power, Sinai jihadism has deep roots stretching back beyond the two recent changes to the Egyptian regime. Moreover, Al-Qaeda – whose emir, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, first made his name in the Egyptian jihadist milieu – was able to develop strong ties with Sinai militant groups years ago.

- The report then **traces ABM's past cooperation with both Al-Qaeda and IS.** It is clear that in the past, ABM has benefited from Al-Qaeda's web of connections stretching from the Sinai Peninsula into Libya and beyond.

- The report concludes by **exploring the implications of ABM's *bayat* to IS,** outlining the strategic, operational and tactical considerations for ABM and the Egyptian government. It concludes that this development is less worrisome to Egypt than many observers assume because the oath does not significantly increase the threat that ABM poses.

Jihadism in the Sinai Peninsula and Ansar Bayt Al-Maqdis

The Sinai Peninsula is an attractive environment for militant Islamic groups. A January 2011 post on the Salafi jihadist "Ansar Al-Mujahedin" web forum by an author known as "nosra" provides eight reasons that a new jihadist front in Sinai could be advantageous:

1. Favorable topography

2. Tribes who are "famous for their strength and chivalry"

3. The Egyptian state's weakness in Sinai "due to their agreements with the Jews"

4. The proximity of Sinai to the Suez Canal and Israel

5. The fact that, due to this proximity, "it is possible to target and shell the Jewish state easily from there"

6. The potential for a new front in Sinai to alleviate pressure on other fronts of jihad

7. The potential to revive jihadism in Egypt

8. An American troop presence in Sinai as part of the Multinational Force and Observers monitoring the 1979 peace treaty between Egypt and Israel

While there is no indication that this author speaks for the broader jihadist movement, these reasons are representative of why jihadists see Sinai as a desirable place for operations.

This being said, jihadist groups do not spontaneously emerge in an area simply because of an opportunity for the transnational movement to receive a strategic advantage. Rather, the emergence of a robust regional jihadist organization requires a favorable environment for the growth of militancy. The requisite conditions were present in Sinai at the start of the "Arab Spring." As the political scientist Hassanein Tawfik Ibrahim has noted, militant Islamic groups "represented a major challenge to the Egyptian political regime from the mid-1970s until the mid-1990s" – and by the beginning of 2011, these groups had already begun to make a comeback from setbacks they had experienced starting in the late 1990s.

In 1997, the militant group Gama'a Al-Islamiyya overplayed its hand in a major way, slaughtering 62 people – mainly foreign tourists – at the Temple of Hatshepsut in Luxor. Though Gama'a perhaps expected to devastate Egypt's tourist industry, instead the citizenry turned against it, rallying behind the government's escalating counterterrorism measures. Ibrahim explains that three components of the Mubarak regime's strategy allowed Egypt to "successfully confront the militant Islamic organizations that had challenged it for over two decades."

1. First, the regime developed a security confrontation strategy consisting of **intelligence collection, powerful strikes against the leading militant groups** Egyptian Islamic Jihad and Gama'a Al-Islamiyya, and a **clampdown on their sources of funding.**

2. Second, the government **actively removed extreme religious ideas from state institutions:** The Ministry of Education "removed hundreds of teachers with radical ideas who were trying to spread their views among schoolchildren," while the Ministry of Endowments brought "thousands of mosques under its control and

supervision." In bringing these institutions under state control, the Egyptian state was able to control – and moderate – their messages.

3. Third, Egyptian officials **focused on more effectively controlling the country's borders** to prevent militant Islamic groups from receiving outside assistance.

Despite the regime's counterterrorism successes, the Sinai Peninsula experienced a wave of bombings and acts of terrorism in the mid-2000s that primarily targeted Egyptian civilians and foreign tourists. Although these incidents were infrequent compared to those that would come after Mubarak's fall, a number of serious attacks during this period shed light on the militant networks now operating in Sinai.

The first significant post-9/11 terrorist incident in the Sinai Peninsula occurred in October 2004, when a series of car bomb blasts struck Sinai resorts, killing 34 people – including 13 Israeli tourists. Responsibility for this attack was claimed by the Abdullah Azzam Brigades (AAB) and – indicating the close working relationship between AAB and Al-Qaeda – Al-Qaeda also sent out a statement on October 14 claiming responsibility. Indeed, AAB's now-imprisoned emir Salih bin Abdallah Al-Qar'awi (Najm Al-Khayr) explained in a 2010 interview with the Al-Fajr Media Center that he went to Iraq in 2004 and met the leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi. Qar'awi said that Zarqawi "assigned [him] some tasks outside Iraq." In this way, both Al-Qaeda and IS have had ties to Sinai for over a decade, as AQI was IS's predecessor.

AAB struck again the following year. Two separate attacks occurred on April 30, 2005, as a bomb blast near Cairo's Egyptian Museum killed one person and injured eight, while two veiled Egyptian women in their twenties opened fire on a bus full of tourists before turning their guns on themselves. AAB claimed credit for the attacks, stating that they "shook the fortresses of the Pharaoh of Egypt" and "struck the ancestors of monkeys and pigs." In July 2005, car bombs detonated in Sharm El-Sheikh, a major Sinai tourist area, killing at least 88 people and wounding over 110. AAB claimed credit for this operation as well, describing it in a statement as "a fatal blow to the Crusaders, the Zionists and the Egyptian apostate regime." In a lengthy study entitled *The History of the Jihadist Movements in Egypt, Experiences and Events, 1946-2006*, Muhammad Khalil Hasan Al-Hakaymah[1] finds AAB's claims of credit plausible, classifying the aforementioned attacks as AAB's work. In 2006, three bombs struck another Sinai resort city, Dahab, killing 30 and wounding 115.

The jihadist presence in Sinai became noticeably more powerful following Mubarak's fall. One critical reason is that a significant pool of talent either escaped or was released from Egyptian prisons. In January 2011, even before Mubarak was toppled, it was widely reported that thousands of prisoners, including militants, had escaped from Egyptian jails. A lengthy hagiographical account of how "the mujahedin" had escaped from the Abu Za'bal prison appeared on the Ansar Al-Mujahedin network early that year. A large number of prisoner releases then followed Mubarak's fall. Hani Al-Saba'i,

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[1] Al-Hakaymah was Al-Qaeda's amir amniyat (head of security) and the leader of the Al-Qaeda–aligned faction of the Egyptian militant group Gama'a Al-Islamiyya until his October 2008 death.

a figure with deep ties to the jihadist movement who runs the London-based Al-Maqrizi Center for Historical Studies, published several lists of names of militant figures who had been released beginning in February 2011. He wrote on February 27 that the release of jihadists was "one of the positive outcomes of this popular Egyptian revolution that we hope to conclude with the application of the Islamic *sharia*."

Other jihadists also celebrated the release of the movement's prisoners, and by February 2011 a member of the Ana Al-Muslim militant forum was distributing press reports highlighting the growth of militant activities in Sinai. There would be even more of a surge of jihadist activity following the July 2013 coup that deposed Muslim Brotherhood–affiliated president Mohamed Morsi. ABM emerged as one of Sinai's most powerful militant groups in the post-Mubarak environment. As the U.S. State Department's terrorist designation of ABM (published in April 2014) explains, the group "shares some aspects of Al-Qaeda ideology, but is not a formal Al-Qaeda affiliate and generally maintains a local focus." ABM has managed to carry out a large number of technically impressive attacks in a short period of time. As the State Department's designation explains, the group:

> "… was responsible for a July 2012 attack against a Sinai pipeline exporting gas to Israel. In August 2012, ABM claimed responsibility for a rocket attack on the southern Israeli city of Eilat, and in September 2012, ABM militants attacked an Israeli border patrol, killing one soldier and injuring another. In October 2013, ABM claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing targeting the South Sinai Security Directorate in al-Tor, which killed three people and injured more than 45. In January 2014, ABM successfully downed a military helicopter in a missile attack, killing five soldiers on board, and claimed responsibility for four attacks involving car bombs and hand grenades in Cairo, which left six people dead and over 70 wounded, many of them civilian bystanders. ABM has also targeted government officials, including the September 2013 attempted assassination of the Egyptian Interior Minister, and the January 2014 assassination of the head of the Interior Minister's technical office. In February 2014, ABM expanded its targets to include foreign tourists, and claimed responsibility for the bombing of a tour bus in the Sinai Peninsula, killing the Egyptian driver and three South Korean tourists."

Given the chaotic environment in the Sinai Peninsula, it is likely that ABM is also responsible for other attacks that have gone unclaimed. Despite its military successes, however, there are several factions within ABM having conflicting interests and loyalties.[2] These divisions have been brought to the fore following ABM's recent pledge to IS.

ABM's oath to IS divides the organization for reasons of ideology, affinity and strategy. From the perspective of ideology and affinity, the State Department's designation of ABM notes that the group shares aspects of Al-Qaeda's ideology; indeed, ABM's propaganda has long reflected its affinity for Al-Qaeda, as it has frequently praised the organization's leaders. ABM's pledge to IS turns the organization's back on its relationship with Al-Qaeda, instead siding with Al-Qaeda's main competitor for preeminence in the world of global jihadism.

The oath to IS came after a significant disruption to ABM's senior leadership which occurred over the course of several months and escalated in October 2014. This disruption was particularly significant because ABM's total size in the Sinai is estimated at no more than around 200 full-time members (though ABM has a larger number of members outside the Sinai).

From March through October 2014, many top-level ABM leaders were killed. In fact, two key ABM leaders died on the same day in March 2014. One of ABM's founders and first leaders was Tawfiq Mohammad Faraj (Abu Abdullah), a veteran of the jihad in Iraq who helped the group organize itself in 2011. Faraj could also claim Thirwat Saleh Shihata –

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2 Much of these divisions are attributable to cultural differences between Sinai, metropolitan Egypt and Upper Egypt.

who served as a deputy to Ayman Al-Zawahiri – as a direct patron: In June 2014, Egypt's Higher State Security Prosecution confronted Shihata with evidence that Faraj had said during several meetings that Shihata had provided him with finances and weapons, and that Shihata both knew about future ABM operations and even issued a *fatwa* condoning some of them. This indicates that Faraj was likely receiving support from, and answering to, the highest levels of Al-Qaeda's senior leadership. Faraj *died on March 11*, as did Muhammad Al-Sayyid Mansur Al-Tukhi (Abu Ubayda), who was killed in a shootout with Egyptian authorities. After their deaths, Shadi Al-Menei assumed leadership of ABM until he was *shot dead* in Sinai on May 23.

Muhammad Al-Sayyid Mansur Al-Tukhi (Abu Ubayda),

After the successive losses of Faraj, Al-Tukhi and Al-Menei, other key ABM leaders lost to the Egyptian security services included *Khaled Al-Menei*, former commando Hesham Al-Ashamwy and Faysal Husayn Salim Sulayman. These deaths were a major catalyst for IS sending its representative Musa'id Abu Qatmah[3] to the Sinai Peninsula to exploit the rapid attrition of ABM's leadership cadre by attempting to lure it into IS's orbit. The group's new leader Shehta Al-Ma'atqa was then killed by Egyptian authorities in early October 2014, with around 20 other ABM members also killed in a one-week (October 3–9) Egyptian offensive. Shortly thereafter, Egyptian security forces captured ABM's military emir Walid Atallah, further eroding the bench of personnel who would have maintained loyalty to Al-Qaeda.

Around the same time Atallah was captured, two ABM envoys traveled to Syria, met with IS leaders and discussed IS providing ABM with resources (funding and weapons) in exchange for ABM pledging its allegiance. It is highly probable that no deal could have been struck between ABM and IS without the former's leadership experiencing such rapid attrition over the span of several months.

The major post-*bayat* rift within ABM is between the group's Al-Qaeda loyalists and those who support the new allegiance to IS. Though it is somewhat of an oversimplification to think of these factions as neatly divided geographically, Western officials have said that the faction most opposed to the pledge to IS is based in the Nile Valley. This faction's concerns not only relate to ideology and affinity – that is, loyalty to Al-Qaeda – but also to strategy, as it is concerned that IS's "reputation for careless violence will alienate other Egyptians, especially the disaffected Islamist youth that Ansar Bayt Al-Maqdis has sought to enlist." Many of the more educated Egyptian jihadists with ties to Egyptian Islamic Jihad and Gama'a Al-Islamiyya are more prone to introspection on issues of reputation due to the debates that followed the Luxor massacre, while Sinai jihadists were largely not a part of that intellectual milieu.

It is difficult to ascertain how many ABM members are associated with the pro-IS and pro–Al-Qaeda camps due to limitations on open-source information about ABM's inner workings.

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3 This report discusses Abu Qatmah subsequently.

Previous Links between ABM, Al-Qaeda and IS

Abdallah Al-Qar'awi

Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi

As previously noted, Al-Qaeda and IS have longstanding ties to Sinai jihadism, going back to 2004 when AAB emir Salih bin Abdallah Al-Qar'awi met with AQI leader Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi. Indeed, Tawfiq Mohammad Faraj was himself a veteran of the Iraq jihad, and he provided much of the structure and framework for ABM. AQI was both IS's predecessor and also a part of the global Al-Qaeda organization. There were thus cross-cutting connections between Al-Qaeda, IS and Sinai jihadism long before the Al-Qaeda/IS split.

Two overarching points are relevant to assessing the likely relationship between Al-Qaeda and ABM:

1. **Al-Qaeda has a strong relationship with other jihadist groups operating in the Sinai Peninsula,** including not only AAB but also the Muhammad Jamal Network and Al-Qaeda in the Sinai Peninsula/Ansar Al-Jihad. Furthermore, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula was reported to have "regular contact with jihadist groups in Lebanon and in the Sinai Peninsula." This claim is borne out by correspondence between the militant leader Muhammad Jamal and Ayman Al-Zawahiri that was recovered from Jamal's computer, and which authorities made public during a 2013 trial. In it, Jamal told Zawahiri that, for the purposes of forming jihadist groups in Sinai, "we received an amount of money from our brothers in Yemen."

2. **Al-Qaeda has done an effective job of finding a foothold in the post–Arab Spring environment in North Africa, including in neighboring Libya.** A comprehensive report published in August 2012 by the Library of Congress's Federal Research Division, entitled *Al-Qaeda in Libya: A Profile*, provides an indication of how Al-Qaeda has been able to benefit from the post-Gaddafi environment in Libya. One way Al-Qaeda derives advantage is via training for militant activities, as the jihadist group operates camps in Libya. These camps have significant connections to Egypt: As the *Wall Street Journal* has reported, the aforementioned Muhammad Jamal Network operates camps in southern Libya,[4] has demonstrated proficiency in smuggling fighters, and has connections to European jihadists. Furthermore, Al-Qaeda has been able to benefit from the new environment in Libya by using its territory as a safe haven. Following the January 2013 French intervention in North Mali, fighters from both Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and its close ally Ansar Al-Dine made their way into southwest Libya, where they succeeded in "blending with local militant groups."

Al-Qaeda's ties in the Sinai Peninsula and Libya thus made it advantageous for ABM to cooperate with Al-Qaeda's regional efforts. As noted, Egyptian security services have offered proof that Thirwat Saleh Shihata, who worked as Zawahiri's deputy, coordinated with ABM from 2011–2014, while Muhammad Jamal corresponded with Zawahiri from 2011–2012. Not all the contours of how ABM took advantage of Al-Qaeda's regional efforts can be discerned based on publicly available evidence, but that ABM did so seems largely established.

As for IS, some ABM members have traveled to Syria to fight under IS's banner, picking up skills and battlefield experience along the way. Rather than ABM's oath to IS being a sudden occurrence, IS had worked to procure it for some time. In August 2013, IS emir Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi set out to obtain oaths of *bayat* from Sinai-based jihadists. Al-Muhajirun wal-

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4 These camps include training for suicide missions, and they have provided Egyptian jihadists with training.

Ansar did pledge *bayat* to IS, and when its founder Adil Ibrahim[5] was captured, he told authorities about IS's attempts to secure his loyalty. Ibrahim reported that he spoke with Baghdadi in a voice call in August 2013, and that Baghdadi offered him $10,000 in return for his organization's pledge. *Al-Masry Al-Youm* noted that Baghdadi might have made further efforts to gain the loyalty of Sinai-based groups beyond Al-Muhajirun wal-Ansar, speculating that the larger jihadist organizations may have rejected similar offers.

In September 2013, IS spokesman Abu Muhammad Al-Adnani issued a statement invoking Ibn Taymiyya's famous *fatwa* calling on Muslims to fight the Mongols even though they had ostensibly converted to Islam: Ibn Taymiyya argued that because the Mongols followed their own *yasa* code rather than *sharia*, they were in fact infidels who should be fought. Similarly, Adnani said that the Egyptian military was "protecting the usury-based banks and the strongholds of obscenity and prostitution." The Egyptian military should be fought, Adnani said, because it is "the protective shield of the Jews, Copts and Christians who fight God and His prophet," while it also "follows orders about abandoning prayers."
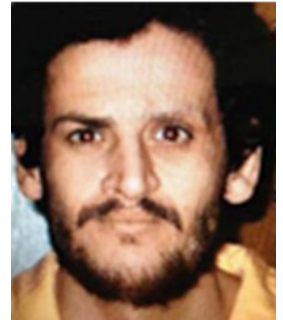
Abu Muhammad Al-Adnani

The year 2014 began with some reciprocation on the part of ABM's leaders. In January, Abu Usamah Al-Masri – who would later be one of the two ABM envoys who traveled to Syria in October and struck a deal to become part of IS's network – issued a statement just prior to IS's expulsion from Al-Qaeda that concluded with specific encouragement of IS. He said that IS should "show firmness" and "be patient." In late March 2014, nine figures associated with Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, including Abu Al-Huda Al-Sudani, publicly declared their allegiance to IS in an Arabic-language statement. The document concluded by noting other jihadist organizations to whom copies of the statement were sent, and ABM was listed amongst those factions.

The first indication of operational coordination between ABM and IS began over the summer, when Egyptian security forces began to arrest IS members traveling to Egypt through underground tunnels between Rafah and the Gaza Strip, with the likely intention of supporting ABM.

IS remained persistent in trying to lure an oath of *bayat* from ABM using other methods. Captured jihadists revealed to Egyptian prosecutors in August that there had been contacts between ABM and Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi in which an agreement was reached that Baghdadi would fund ABM and supply it with weapons in return for ABM providing him fighters and pledging allegiance to IS. It's not clear who in ABM struck this deal, but ABM did not decisively pledge *bayat* to IS until November 2014. Thus, this early agreement that ABM would pledge its allegiance to IS was not concluded with ABM's top-level leadership.

The Kuwaiti newspaper *Al-Shahid* reported in September 2014 that IS had dispatched a jihadist known as Musa'id Abu Qatmah to the Sinai Peninsula through Gaza – and that, once in Sinai, he set about trying to win oaths of loyalty from local militant groups. Nor was Abu Qatmah the only IS figure attempting to win over Sinai groups during that period. When Egyptian authorities arrested eleven alleged militants in early September, they found that the men were carrying three letters from a Libya-based IS figure known as Abu Ahmad Al-Libi; he encouraged Sinai-based jihadist groups to unite under a single banner of IS supervision in exchange for IS providing all the funding and arms that they required. On September 21, IS spokesman Abu Muhammad Al-Adnani praised ABM's operations in a statement extolling the successes of "our mujahedin brothers in the bold Sinai Peninsula." Adnani explained that "hope has emerged in Egypt and good news has loomed with their blessed operations against the guards of the Jews, the soldiers of Sisi, the new Pharaoh of Egypt." Adnani urged ABM to "carry on upon this path, for it is the correct path, may Allah bless you."

There was further operational cooperation between ABM and IS before ABM took its public oath. ABM carried out an attack against the Karm Al-Qawadis checkpoint on October 24, and according to Egyptian authorities the arrested

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5 Ibrahim is also known as Habarah.

suspects said that IS ordered ABM to execute the attacks with funding, weapons and explosives that the group had received from Palestinian jihadist groups.

Thus, it appears that IS had tried to convince ABM to join its camp for well over a year using a variety of enticements; its efforts were given unintentional assistance by the attrition inflicted upon ABM's leaders by Egyptian security forces. ABM's November 10 oath of allegiance is not the first time it was publicly claimed that ABM had declared fealty to IS. There were two such previous claims that were then promptly denied, seemingly reflective of internal jostling within ABM between pro-IS factions and those loyal to Al-Qaeda or simply unwilling to align with IS. The pro-IS factions were likely trying to use the group's propaganda apparatus to set a new course for the organization, forcing others in the jihadist group to quickly respond to their announcements.

In late June 2014, a Twitter account believed to be associated with ABM posted a message indicating that the group had become a part of IS. However, ABM swiftly released another statement saying it had no official Twitter feed, thus nullifying the alleged oath.

A similar sequence of events occurred on November 3. A statement went out in ABM's name pledging the group's loyalty to Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, but within hours ABM denied the statement's validity and scolded the media, telling them to "check the accuracy of their sources and to stick to ABM's official statements."

Finally, ABM again declared its allegiance to IS on November 10, this time in an audio message. Unlike the previous public oaths, no subsequent statement was released rescinding the announcement, leading observers to believe that this time the oath could be considered official. Despite this, the oath to IS was deeply divisive within ABM.

Implications of ABM's Oath to IS

There are a number of strategic and tactical implications to ABM's pledge to IS. Most, though not all, of these implications place ABM in a weaker position than it was prior to taking its new oath.

Internal fractures within ABM

ABM's oath to IS has exacerbated pre-existing divisions within the group. As previously noted, the split is roughly between the Sinai-based leadership that leaned toward an affiliation with IS for months, and the Nile Valley group that is generally pro–Al-Qaeda and skeptical of IS. Despite this pro-IS sentiment within the Sinai faction, the attrition of ABM's leadership in early October appears to have been a key turning point. The group's leader and around two dozen others were killed in rapid succession, and thus though there were already several connections between ABM and IS, the pledge of *bayat* to IS may have been a sharp shift in ABM's posture enabled by these deaths, rather than a natural evolution of ABM's stance.

As the *New York Times* has reported, ABM's Nile Valley group is concerned that IS's reputation and brutal methods could alienate the population. Their concerns have deep roots in the history of Egyptian jihadist movements: The *Times* notes that brutal excesses committed by militant Islamic groups in the 1990s "backfired, damaging the economy, alienating the Egyptian public, and increasing support for the government's security forces." As detailed earlier, this backlash helped empower the Mubarak government to essentially achieve a complete defeat of militant Islamic groups during this period. There are obvious concerns that IS's methods could trigger a similar backlash, and this historical precedent is not lost on the Egyptian government.

Shifting ABM's regional network

Al-Qaeda has deeper roots than IS in both the Sinai Peninsula and North Africa more broadly. ABM's pledge to IS will likely have the immediate effect of disrupting the associations upon which ABM has depended. The problems caused by this disruption could be mitigated over time in the Sinai Peninsula if other jihadist groups that make their home in the area also choose to align with IS. Even if this happens, however, IS will likely experience some difficulties in the short term. Ramzi Mawafi, a longstanding Al-Qaeda operative who had been Osama bin Laden's doctor, serves in a high-level role in the Sinai Peninsula, "coordinating among militant groups and helping to arrange money and weapons to support violent extremist activity." Given Mawafi's personal history and affiliation with Al-Qaeda, ABM may experience some logistical problems in these areas, at least in the short term.

ABM will also have diminished access to regional networks in the medium term. Al-Qaeda is better connected to the most powerful regional jihadist groups, including Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, and in countries like Libya. Despite some hyperbolic press accounts, such as the repeated claim that the entire city of Dernah had "joined" IS, Al-Qaeda holds the superior ground in Libya, and can claim both the best training camps and also the most capable cadres on the ground. Thus, ABM will be at a disadvantage with respect to the regional network in Libya – and hence at a disadvantage regarding access to training camps and munitions – unless IS manages to significantly expand its regional presence (which it is, of course, desperately trying to do).

Shifts in tactics, targets, and perceptions of ABM

IS is well known for its brutal tactics, and for crushing local populations – especially religious minorities – under its heel rather than attempting to win hearts and minds. While it is possible that ABM's oath of *bayat* to IS will not have a significant impact on its operations, it is more likely that the oath heralds ABM's move to more overtly cruel tactics.

Indeed, ABM has published relatively recent videos reminiscent of those that made IS infamous, including an early October release in which three Egyptians described as "agents of the apostate army" were beheaded. A January 2015 ABM video followed IS's formula of humiliation and execution, as the group captured a ports security officer, then forced him to denounce the police before they killed him. These releases may be indicative of what the IS-aligned ABM may have planned for the future tactically. Brutality is part of IS's calling card, and at the very least ABM's pledge is a strong indication that the leaders declaring their allegiance have a high level of tolerance for such conduct.

If ABM's tactics come to more resemble those of IS, ABM could experience more open conflict with two groups: the Sinai Peninsula's Bedouin population and Egyptian Christians. While ABM is militarily proficient, the Bedouins are also highly capable of employing violence to advance their own objectives. This is in contrast to the Egyptian Christian population, which generally finds itself on the receiving rather than the dispensing end of violent acts. Christians have already been targeted by jihadist violence in the Sinai Peninsula, and ABM's pledge to IS could be further bad news for the Christian population, as shown by IS's depopulation of Christians from the Iraqi city of Mosul.

If ABM follows IS's lead by adopting increasingly ruthless tactics or victimizing religious minorities, this path risks tarnishing the jihadist group's reputation and further alienating it from the country's population. Indeed, this reputational damage – as well as the fear and loathing instilled in Egypt's population – may occur even if ABM's tactics and targeting remain unchanged, due solely to the jihadist group's association with IS. ABM's affiliation with IS is likely to provide at least some additional internal legitimacy to the Egyptian state's fight against the group, and may provide Egypt's counterterrorism operations with greater international legitimacy as well.

Changing relationships with Gaza-based militant groups

Although Salafi jihadist groups have generally been hostile toward Hamas, the Palestinian militant group has had a largely cooperative relationship with the Sinai-based jihadist groups that are in close proximity to it. However, Hamas is keenly attuned to its international brand, and is unlikely to want an association with a group that has pledged *bayat* to IS. In addition to branding issues, Hamas may also keep its distance from ABM for strategic reasons, as IS takes a hard ideological line and is notorious for betraying groups that trust it.

Regarding Salafi jihadist groups in Gaza, IS has attempted to gain a foothold there in the past, just as it has in the Sinai Peninsula. ABM and IS may try to earn the allegiance of Gazan jihadist groups by providing them with money and weapons. While they may succeed, these efforts may also encounter logistical difficulties, as both Israel and Egypt have put more pressure on smuggling between Gaza and Sinai.

Strength through foreign fighters

One reason IS has been able to cause tremendous anxiety for a number of countries' security services is because it is constantly at war, with a truly international array of jihadists flocking to Syria and Iraq to help its cause (over 20,000, according to the most recent estimates). These foreign fighters, who gain training and battlefield experience, give IS the ability to project power internationally, and also to strengthen other militant organizations. Though IS's battlefield prowess may be used to strengthen ABM, there are limitations to how much this can actually bolster the Sinai-based group. It would not be difficult for ABM's fighters to make their way to Syria to train or gain battlefield experience, but Egypt's internal clampdown creates an increased likelihood that returnees would be arrested by security forces.

IS may also try to dispatch fighters to Sinai to bolster ABM. However, IS's ability to do so will be limited by the group's need for fighters in Iraq and Syria to maintain the territory that it already controls. Given the *immense military pressure* now being put on IS across multiple fronts, the group may feel that the military resources it can spare to help bolster ABM are limited. Further, non-Egyptian fighters attempting to join ABM in the Sinai Peninsula may find their efforts impeded by security sweeps. Thus, there exists the potential to strengthen ABM through foreign fighters (including both ABM members fighting in Iraq and Syria, and non-Egyptians dispatched to aid ABM), but Egypt's security measures and IS's own troubled position in Iraq somewhat diminish this possible advantage.

New funds for ABM

The *New York Times* has reported that IS pledged money to ABM in exchange for its oath of allegiance. This means that ABM has likely already gained some monetary resources due to its new loyalties. IS may continue to provide ABM with financial resources in the future as well, but this is an area where loss of access to Al-Qaeda's established pathways for moving arms and money into the Sinai Peninsula may impede ABM's ability to receive these resources. IS will need to secure or else create its own means of moving resources into the Sinai Peninsula. Further, if IS experiences a severe budget crisis, that will further diminish any advantage that can be derived in this area.

The perception that IS has momentum

Although there are several ways in which ABM's pledge to IS weakens ABM, it certainly helps IS. ABM is one of the most significant jihadist organizations to pledge *bayat* to IS, after significant efforts by IS to use money and other means of persuasion to entice other groups to join its network. IS has a strategy built around maintaining the perception that it has momentum: It is certainly pleased with ABM's public declaration of *bayat*, and is hopeful that this can also persuade other jihadist groups to seriously consider joining it as well.

Conclusion

Far from viewing ABM's declaration of *bayat* to IS with alarm, Egypt likely views it as a vindication of the state's counterterrorism policies. ABM's new allegiance has deepened its internal divisions, made the group appear more extreme (thus alienating it from the Egyptian population) and diminished ABM's ability to cooperate with Sinai-based and regional militant organizations that are more closely aligned with Al-Qaeda. Given IS's international notoriety, ABM's declaration may also make other states – both in the region and further afield – more likely to support Egypt's fight against jihadist groups. Egypt is thus unlikely to see ABM's pledge as a reason to either reassess its counterterrorism policies or look to outside states to provide it with new policy recommendations.

One major policy challenge Egypt faces is that its counterterrorism methods are already regarded as overly harsh, with some justification. Terrorist groups typically depend on a government's overreaction to drive the population into their corner, and ABM's new affiliation with IS appears almost designed to elicit such an overreaction on Egypt's part. The U.S. and European countries can play a positive role – though one whose advantage is perhaps limited – by emphasizing transparency and rule of law.

Rather than taking full advantage of the opportunity to overplay its hand, the Egyptian government should attempt to ensure that its counterterrorism policy remains seen as a means of keeping the population safe from violent actors rather than as a tool of repression. The advantages that can be derived from Western states' policies in this regard should be understood as limited by the fact that they inherently depend on Egypt's willingness to curtail excesses associated with its counterterrorism policies. But given that Egypt likely sees its policies as vindicated by ABM's oath to IS, it may prove unwilling to listen to outside states that counsel moderation.

Overall, ABM's declaration of allegiance to IS is likely detrimental to ABM, but it comes at a time when the Egyptian government has already engaged in counterterrorism excesses. Trying to correct Egypt's course away from overly repressive methods is important, but this development seemingly provides little opening for such a rectification.

Ansar Bayt Al-Maqdis's Oath of Allegiance to the Islamic State

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