



Commentary

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The conflict in Egypt's Sinai offers insights into U.S. foreign policy priorities. As part of our series [The Legacy of 9/11 and the "War on Terror"](#), Michael Wahid Hanna argues Cairo has used the jihadist spectre to scare off critics and keep U.S. military aid flowing.

How the Counter-terrorism Imperative Has Warped U.S.-Egyptian Ties

IN THE SWEEP of events following the 11 September 2001 attacks, the low-level, intermittent jihadist insurgency in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula is understandably outside the spotlight. While posing a persistent threat to Egypt, Sinai militants have only occasionally attracted significant notice outside the country, usually following spectacular attacks on tourist or other civilian sites. To a degree, the scant attention is a function of isolation: the Egyptian state has made the northern Sinai, the primary theatre of violence, off limits to journalists and researchers.

Though lack of access has hindered understanding of Sinai events, Egypt's experiences with Islamist militancy, the broad contours of which remain visible from a distance, can still offer insight into how the 9/11 attacks shaped U.S. priorities in relations with Egypt and how Cairo used the jihadist threat to ensure the continued flow of U.S. aid, stigmatise political opposition and give cover to autocratic repression. The compromises involved in such arrangements extended to the tactics of Egypt's counter-terrorism campaign, in effect making the U.S. complicit, through its military support, in its partner's excesses. The small conflict in

the Sinai is but one of many such stories associated with the so-called global war on terror.

From Washington's standpoint, 9/11 transformed the U.S. role in the world as the anti-jihadist fight became the animating rationale of U.S. foreign policy. As such, counter-terrorism came to dominate U.S. relations with partners around the world, including Egypt. When competing U.S. priorities arose, as they did during the George W. Bush administration's push for democratic reform in the Arab world (which it referred to as the freedom agenda) and after the fall of President Hosni Mubarak in 2011, Egyptian leaders invoked the menace of terrorism as a brake on both international criticism and the domestic push for political change. In both instances, the U.S. appetite for promoting democratisation diminished due to developments on the ground and gave way to the ordering principles of the bilateral relationship, chiefly stability, with counter-terrorism an important tool for achieving it.

Of course, U.S.-Egyptian cooperation on counter-terrorism was not simply a post-9/11 phenomenon. The present U.S.-Egyptian relationship grew out of U.S. diplomacy following the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, which led to Egypt's



A picture taken on 25 November 2017, shows the Rawda mosque, roughly 40 kilometres west of the North Sinai capital of El-Arish, after a gun and bombing attack. STR / AFP

realignment away from the Soviet Union and Egypt's peace treaty with Israel. Growing U.S.-Egyptian ties were buttressed by significant U.S. support, including military aid. While Egypt's support for U.S.-led Middle East peace efforts was a cornerstone of the bilateral relationship, an additional basis for cooperation soon emerged: in the 1990s, Cairo became a key early partner for a Washington alarmed by transnational jihadism. The Mubarak regime used the spectre of Islamist militancy to scare off critics of its deeply entrenched and heavy-handed rule. Under President Abdelfattah al-Sisi, who took over in 2013 after the Muslim Brotherhood's brief turn in power, Egypt revived and expanded these same tactics in an effort to blunt growing U.S. disenchantment with its resurgent authoritarianism and to brand all political opposition as a form of terrorism.

The [conflict in the Sinai](#) can be traced back to the October 2004 terror attacks on Red Sea resorts in Taba, the first of a series stretching through 2006 in southern Sinai that replicated tactics employed by jihadist groups in the Egyptian mainland in the 1990s. These attacks sought to undermine the Egyptian state by

targeting the economically indispensable tourism industry.

The Taba attacks jolted Egypt, which had seen a period of relative calm following the gruesome massacre at the major archaeological site in Luxor in 1997. On that occasion, jihadists had killed 62 people, mostly tourists, in a culmination of violence that had marred much of the preceding decade. The Luxor attacks provoked a furious public response that sowed division and prompted reflection within militant ranks, eventually leading the Gamaa Islamiyya, Egypt's most prominent militant group, to renounce violence. The Sinai events marked an important shift of militancy's centre of gravity from the mainland to the peninsula with the advent of new militant actors. Militancy in Sinai found fertile ground among the peninsula's poor and neglected population. Cairo has long viewed Sinai's Bedouin population with suspicion, which only grew during the Israeli occupation of the peninsula from 1967 to 1982. Political conditions created an atmosphere fraught with grievance and alienation.

For the Mubarak regime, the dual threat posed by jihadism and mainline Islamists like

the Muslim Brotherhood, a large bloc of whom had entered parliament as independents in 2005, made for a convenient way to deflect the Bush administration's short-lived push for democratisation. While the U.S. stepped up public criticism of Egypt's democratic record, it let the security partnership proceed uninterrupted. In any case, the U.S. pressure soon evaporated as increasing concerns about the Iraq war's direction and regional spillover eclipsed the freedom agenda.

For a brief period following Mubarak's ouster in February 2011, it appeared that U.S. foreign policy, which traditionally privileged interests over values, had entered a new phase in which support for a democratic transition could bridge this persistent gap and satisfy both imperatives. As uprisings toppled long-time rulers throughout the Arab world, many in Washington saw an opportunity to rid the region of autocracy while also repudiating the nihilism of jihadist violence. But in several countries the popular revolts failed or dissolved into civil strife, producing instability and fear that displaced the initial aspirations for change. These developments pushed U.S.-Egyptian relations back into their familiar but dysfunctional pattern, with counter-terrorism and security cooperation at the core.

The destabilising impact of Egypt's uprising and its aftermath created new openings for militancy in the country, particularly in the Sinai, as little progress had been made in addressing the underlying issues that had produced violence. Even as the country enjoyed a brief opportunity for transformational political change, militancy in the Sinai accelerated amid the security vacuum left by the notorious police force's functional collapse. A group calling itself Ansar Beit al-Maqdis took centre stage in July 2012 by repeatedly trying to blow up a pipeline bearing natural gas from Egypt to Israel and Jordan. This and other groups were buoyed by the weapons that flowed unchecked into Egypt from Libya, as that country fought its own internal war following the ouster of long-time autocratic leader Muammar Qadhafi.

The July 2013 coup that deposed Mohamed Morsi's government and set the country on the path toward a military-led political order seemed poised to fundamentally alter bilateral relations, with the Obama administration suspending portions of military aid following the massacre of Morsi supporters in Cairo's Rabaa square the next month.

But as the Sisi regime gradually consolidated its hold on power and countries like Libya and Syria descended into chaos, the traditional imperatives re-emerged, with the usual emphasis on combating terrorism and establishing stability. Sisi was aided in fending off U.S. pressure by the decision of Ansar Beit al-Maqdis to affiliate with the Islamic State, or ISIS, which had burst into global infamy in Iraq and Syria, and by fears that violence would spill over into mainland Egypt. In November 2014, Ansar declared its allegiance to ISIS, renaming itself the Islamic State-Sinai Province (Wilayat Sinai), seeking to bolster its profile as the leading jihadist actor in Egypt at a time when the Islamic State's fortunes seemed to be ascendant across the Middle East. U.S. fears about the group grew accordingly. Of course, Egypt's approach to Sinai was itself a major contributing factor to the internationalisation of a local conflict, making it more complex to resolve. As important, this evolution is reflective of the ways in which a purported global struggle gives local groups reason to seek international affiliations and helps produce new international threats.

Wilayat Sinai has trained its sights mainly on Egyptian security forces, but it has also undertaken high-profile attacks on civilian targets, including the October 2015 bombing of a Russian passenger jet that killed all 224 passengers and crew. In 2017, militants launched a brutal raid on a northern Sinai mosque during Friday prayers that left 305 dead and 128 others wounded, many of them Sufi Muslims. Such attacks focused attention on Egypt's persistent struggle with jihadism and offered a continuing rationale for maintaining the usual pattern of U.S.-Egyptian relations.

The longstanding U.S. security partnership with Egypt has raised serious questions about Washington's support for Cairo's often heavy-handed approach to counter-terrorism. Despite the northern Sinai's isolation, credible allegations of human rights abuses dog Egypt's military campaign. The U.S. State Department's annual [Country Reports on Human Rights Practices](#), for example, have consistently catalogued serious and widespread abuses associated with the effort. A 2019 Human Rights Watch [report](#) accused Egypt of committing "war crimes" in its fight to defeat Wilayat Sinai. Two years later, the organisation issued another [report](#) finding "a pattern of suspicious killings and probable extrajudicial executions". In the wake of these allegations, some U.S. lawmakers have asked if the Egyptian military has deployed U.S.-provided weapons in suspect operations, which might violate U.S. law that prohibits military units that have perpetrated human rights abuses from receiving U.S. aid. The [U.S. military says](#) it has not been given sufficient access to the Sinai to confidently assess "whether U.S.-origin defense articles were used in a particular operation or maneuver". The concerns about end use, however,

have not fundamentally altered how the U.S. cooperates with Egypt on counter-terrorism.

In this respect, Egypt is by no means unique, as counter-terrorism cooperation has been a central imperative for U.S. policy in the years after the 9/11 attacks and shaped how Washington has dealt with all its autocratic partners. But the U.S.-Egypt bilateral relationship is an important window into the ways in which the singular focus on fighting terrorism has warped U.S. policy and implicated Washington in its allies' abuses.

For the moment, it appears that Egypt's heavy-handed counter-terrorism efforts have contained the conflict to northern Sinai, and brought down levels of violence, but at great cost to the area's civilian population. It remains unclear, however, if these changes represent durable progress or are merely a temporary, cyclical reduction.