

Analysis | May 2022

Between North Sinai and South Yemen:

"Terrorism" is Making a Comeback



| Farida Ahmed



The latest comeback of the "terrorist" organizations in Egypt's North Sinai and some areas in South Yemen has stirred much interest and concern. Despite the ongoing terrorist activities in other areas such as Syria, Iraq and Libya, the operations in Egypt and Yemen are apparently more prominent due to their joint connection with the parties which stand behind them and finance them. Some "terrorist" groups such as the AQAP and ISIS consider South Yemen as their safe haven due to its vast area (two thirds of Yemen's total area) and its mountainous, and sometimes bumpy, topography, especially when they find cooperation, protection and support. The same applies in Sinai Peninsula as the presence of "terrorist" groups in North Sinai, particularly in Sheikh Zuwaid, Arish's Airport Farms and both North and South of Rafah made the task of chasing them more difficult. Furthermore, these areas border Gaza and there are several tunnels between them which serve as smuggling outlets for these groups¹.



Source: Sky news Arabia

Extremist groups often exploit the changes in the countries where they settle to expand their reach and sometimes to control some areas for more enablement of their groups. For example, after the Houthi control on Sanaa in 2014 and the outbreak of the Yemeni War, the AQAP exploited the state of chaos and conflict and controlled the Southern city of Al-Mukalla in April 2015

¹ [Has terrorism reactivated in Sinai? The 10-year journey from the Brotherhood to ISIS \(alain.com\)](http://alain.com)

for a whole year² before being driven out by the Hadrami Elite Forces, backed by the UAE forces, in 2016. Moreover, following the Yemeni 2011 Revolution of Change, the organization tried to seize districts in both Abyan and Shabwa governorates. Before assassinated by the AQAP in 2012, Major General Salem Ali Qatan was able to lead a successful war against the organization and forced it to withdraw after losing more than 429 of its fighters³.

The same applies to Egypt, as these groups exploited the state of confusion that hit the country during the Jan. 25th 2011 Revolution. During such a period, the activities of the cross-border extremist groups increased greatly and areas in Sinai witnessed intense operations against Egypt's military and security forces. They became more extended after President "Mohammed Morsi" was deposed. They were extended from North Sinai to Greater Cairo and then it moved northward to Al-Delta. Later, they moved towards the far west and to the south⁴. Ansar Bayt Al-Maqdis group which pledged allegiance to "Al-Baghdadi" and was affiliated with "ISIS (It later changed its name to "Welayet Sinai" in July 2014) was at the forefront and implemented most of the "terrorist" operations.

In February 2018, Egypt's military and security forces tightened the noose on these groups by launching the so-called the "Comprehensive Operation⁵". It reduced the influence of the terrorist groups after the latter's attempts to make Sinai peninsula one of their strategic centers in the region along with Iraq, Syria, Libya and Yemen. However, Egyptian President, Abdulfatah Al-Sissi has been keen to deal with the terrorism phenomenon and combat it. This is due to his former military Intelligence experience. Such intentions which are accompanied with actions allowed Sinai to restore some of its activities and normal life through the return of its residents to their homes and showing interest in developing its infrastructure.

² [The Yemeni city of Mukalla breathes a sigh of relief after a year of suffering under the AQAP grip SWI swissinfo.ch](#)

³ [The AQAP in Yemen again: Why now? \(south24.net\)](#)

⁴ [Sinai's ISIS.. Hostility and War against all \(study\) - Najeh Ibrahim - Shouk News.com](#)

⁵ [The Comprehensive Operation "Sinai 2018"... Statement No. "1" from the General Command of the Armed Forces to Confront Terrorism - YouTube](#)

Regarding these Egyptian efforts, Dr. Mohammed Zaki Al-Alfi, Egyptian Major General and the Adviser at Nasser Higher Military Academy⁶, spoke to "South24" about the gradual strategy adopted by the Egyptian Army more than one decade ago to eliminate the terrorist groups not only in Sinai Peninsula but in the entire Egypt. This is more intense and concentrated in the periphery and the depth of the state. He pointed to Operation Eagle (Nisr) in



Major General Mohammed Zaki Al-Alfi

2011 followed by Operation Martyr's Right (Haq Al-Shaheed) in 2015 and the eventual launch of "the "Comprehensive Operation" in 2018 as well as the ongoing hunt of these groups' remnants to eradicate them. Al-Alfi added that the strategy has been based upon a

number of rules and bases in the short, medium and long terms. All state institutions, especially those interested in education participated in the strategy in addition to families and religious facilities including mosques and churches. Likewise, media outlets play a role in raising awareness about the danger of these groups and how to face them in general.

The timing indication

On May 7th, 2022, ISIS killed 10 Egyptian soldiers and injured five others in a shootout west of Sinai which targeted a water pumping station⁷. It was an unexpected operation after approximately 5 years since the last campaign carried out by the army in 2018. This came at a time when Sinai restored its activities and agility after years of staying under the state of emergency amid remarkable decline of extremists' operations. The attacks basically focused on military and security forces in addition to other attacks that carried sectarian

⁶ An interview conducted by the writer with Major General / Dr. Muhammad Zaki Al-Alfi, advisor at the Nasser Higher Military Academy, on May 28th, 2022.

⁷ ["ISIS" claims responsibility for the Sinai attack, which killed 11 soldiers - RT Arabic](#)

features. As a reaction towards the latest operation, the Egyptian Army made a quick and a qualitative response as it declared the killing of 23 "takfiri elements" in the same governorate. This was followed by several scattered operations in Sinai⁸. This constitutes a new security challenge for the army after a state of strategic inactivity by which these groups try to rearrange and organize their ranks, especially after losing important leadership figures. This may denote that there are new elements that are more professional and equipped with qualitative weapons and high-level technology compared with the former consumed and embattled groups. This is likely enhanced by the continuous smuggling of weapons and fighters to Sinai and supporting them with money and weapons to strengthen their presence and confuse the political scene in Egypt, especially after President Al-Sissi's declaration in late April about launching the "National Dialogue" with all political forces without exception or discrimination⁹.

On the other hand, it is clear that the extremist groups select a suitable timing to arouse chaos and violence. The political changes in the Yemeni presidency structure on April 7th irritated "terrorist" groups which launched several terrorist attacks in more than one site. This began with the jailbreak of about 10 AQAP suspects from a prison in Wadi Hadramout under the protection of the "1st Military Region" affiliated with the Islah Party. Moreover, AQAP elements attacked a Security Belt's headquarters in Al-Dhale which led to the killing of two security commanders and seven terrorist attacking elements. The governorates of Abyan and Shabwa witnessed ongoing operations against Southern elements from Shabwa Defense Forces and the Giants. "South24" published a paper about this matter¹⁰ which demonstrated the connotations and the reasons behind the recent increase of terrorist activities in the Yemeni Southern governorates. The most prominent of which is to pressure the new Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) and to confuse it in its first days, especially after sacking Yemeni Vice President "Ali Mohsen Al-Ahmar" who is

⁸ [The Egyptian army kills 23 terrorists in Sinai \(almasryalyoum.com\)](http://almasryalyoum.com)

⁹ [Egypt towards an "inclusive national dialogue" .. and experts: a "qualitative shift" | Sky News Arabia \(skynewsarabia.com\)](http://skynewsarabia.com)

¹⁰ [The AQAP in Yemen again: Why now? \(south24.net\)](http://south24.net)

accused of forging links with these groups over decades¹¹. Parallely, the influence of the Islamic Islah party which controls the presidential decision since the beginning of the Yemeni Civil War in 2014 was reduced.

In Egypt, Major General Al-Alfi said: "The timing of the latest operations came as a result of international transformations, especially the Russian-Ukrainian War and its ramifications on the whole region as well as the attempts by some parties which participate in the war to pressure some Arab states to move their capabilities and wealth to certain directions. Furthermore, this includes President Al-Sissi's declaration regarding ending the state of emergency in the country and his call to launch a national dialogue between all political forces in Egypt and presenting proposals and solutions to treat all important files, foremost of which is probably the counterterrorism file. These events may contribute in awakening these groups to launch new terrorist attacks".

It is important to say that using the hard power (the military) is not enough alone to run some complicated crises such as the terrorism file as sometimes its long-term results are not guaranteed. Therefore, some countries adopt the "soft power" approach along with the hard one due to its ability to influence and convince. It seems that Cairo began to adopt this approach within its policies and ideas to present an attractive and less costly pattern which may be more guarantee of its influence. Egyptian media outlets talk about the impact of drama and cinema as a soft power. Some works of art have been able to formulate the awareness in Egypt towards the danger of the violent and terrorist groups and their negative role in one of the stormy phases experienced by the country. For example, the three- season TV series "Al-Ikhtiyar" (The Choice) contributed in forming the social awareness in Egypt regarding the terrorism phenomenon. It depends on a narrative built upon facts, real photos and records. This constituted accumulated knowledge about the scale of dangerous acts carried out by such groups and the efforts done by the state to counter them. The latest "terrorist" operation in Sinai may be a response on that according to an Egyptian thinker¹².

¹¹ [Yemeni Military Leader Tied to Terrorism Pledges to Protect Protesters | The Washington Institute](#)

¹² [An Egyptian thinker: The terrorist operation in West Sinai came in response to the leaks of the series "Al-Ikhtiyar 3" - RT Arabic](#)

Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood

The latest "terrorist" operations whether in South Yemen or North Sinai reopened the file of the links between these groups and the parties which finance and cooperate with them. The latest political changes in Yemen irritated the AQAP. In a 7-page statement¹³, the latter attacked the PLC and advised the Islah party to "quickly control the situation before everyone drowns". This confirms the accusations about the close relationships between the AQAP and the Islah Party which ideologically affiliated with the "Muslim Brotherhood", especially that the political transformation in Yemen pulled out the rug beneath the Islamic party which was almost completely in control of the decision making of the Yemeni presidency.

Several incidents proved the connection between the "Muslim Brotherhood" in Yemen and the AQAP, foremost of which was the famous attack against the American USS Cole in 2000 which had direct links with Islah-affiliate Abdulmajeed Al-Zandani¹⁴. Furthermore, former President "Ali Abdullah Saleh" supported the Afghan Arabs who fought as "jihadists" in Afghanistan in the 1980s. These radical groups were used to launch a campaign to assassinate senior Southern officials including military figures and civilians during the first years of the Yemeni Unity. Later, in 1994 and after that date, these groups continued committing their crimes even after the outbreak of operation Asifat al-Hazm (Resolve Storm) in 2015. This was followed by the control of the Southern forces' control of most of South Yemen's geography. Therefore, these groups sought to make security chaos and commit terrorist acts to disturb the political scene after the "Riyadh Agreement". These attacks particularly targeted Southern security and military forces.

The focus of these operations on South Yemen stirs many questions, as top Southern commanders were the target of intense assassination operations recently, latest of which was the assassination of Brigadier General "Thabet Jawas" in a car bomb explosion in the capital Aden in late March. In mid May,

¹³ [the AQAP statement taken from the official Twitter account of the British researcher "Elizabeth Kendall on April 19th, 2022. twitter.com](https://twitter.com/ElizabethKendall)

¹⁴ [Yemeni Allegedly Decreed Cole Strike - Los Angeles Times \(latimes.com\)](https://www.latimes.com)

there was an attempt to assassinate Major General Al-Dharhani. The security forces arrested two brothers who are members of a terrorist group affiliated with the Houthis. They are suspected of involvement in the attempted assassination of Al Dharhani, as well as Brigadier General Jawas¹⁵.

It is important to remember that the successive defeats in Marib, Al-Bayda and Shabwa's three districts inflicted by the "National Army" which was managed by Ali Mohsen Al-Ahmar over the two last years before being liberated by the "Giants Forces" at the beginning of this year were a result of corruption, nepotism and lack of efficiency which spread in the army for years since the beginning of the civil war¹⁶. The more dangerous is the collusion with the Houthis to hand over some of these areas¹⁷. This also opens the door for questions about how the qualitative weapons incessantly reached the Houthi hand over all these years and how they passed through land and sea from areas controlled by the former internationally recognized government especially in Al-Mahra and Hadramout¹⁸.

These facts enhance the allegations about the relationships between the MB and the AQAP in Yemen on one hand, and between these organizations and the Houthis on the other hand. This is related to the role played by Iran in hosting prominent AQAP commanders. Last year, the Yemeni government sent a report to the UN Security Council¹⁹ in which it accused the Houthis of cooperating with the AQAP and ISIS. The report said that the Houthis released 252 prisoners who are AQAP elements, and they released a planner of the USS Cole attack. The report also pointed out that the Houthi operations against the AQAP in Yemen are nominal. The report confirmed that the Houthi relationship with terrorist organizations reached the level of the joint coordination and

¹⁵ [Al-Ayyam newspaper - Two people involved in the attempt to assassinate Major General Al-Dharhani were arrested in Aden \(alayyam.info\)](#)

¹⁶ [Experts comment on the biggest military corruption operation in Marib - 26.02.2018, Sputnik Arabic \(sputniknews.com\)](#)

¹⁷ [Brigadier General Nasser Elwi Al-Nassi, Director of the Office of the Ataq Axis Commander, accuses the pro-reform Shabwa authorities of treason - YouTube](#)

¹⁸ [The Islah Party's involvement in smuggling dangerous weapons to the Houthis.. Details from Al-Mahra reveal the secrets: Press 24 Net \(sa24.co\)](#)

¹⁹ [Yemeni memorandum to the UN Security Council accusing the Houthis of collaborating with the AQAP and ISIS \(alarabiya.net\)](#)

exchanging roles which threaten Yemen's security and stability as well as its regional surroundings and the international navigation lines.

It is clear that such a connection between Iran and the extremist groups is not different from their coordination and support inside the Egyptian territories. During raids implemented by the Egyptian Army, Iranian-made weapons were detected in more than one place including Alexandria, Al-Beheira and North Sinai. The links between Tehran and the Muslim Brotherhood were proved through the continuous supplies of weapons and enabling these groups to destabilize the regional security²⁰. [20] Such a support may be tied with Hamas which controls Gaza and receives weapons and financial support from Iran²¹. The distance between Gaza and North Sinai is about 12 km. Some extremist factions have been able to smuggle weapons and extremist elements through concrete tunnels between Sinai and Gaza for years. The latest of this smuggling operation was carried out days ago when Mohammed Fayad, an ISIS commander in Palestine, whose nickname was Abu Yahya Al-Ghazawi infiltrated but the Egyptian Army destroyed him by a special operation in North Sinai's "Al-Lifitat"²².

Mounir Adib, Egyptian researcher in the Islamic movement and the international terrorism affairs²³ believes that Iran has connections with most violent incidents that hit the Arab region whether in the northern part of Sinai or what happened in Syria, Libya and Yemen. He told "South24" that "Iran's Revolutionary Guards previously established relationships with the Muslim Brotherhood when the latter was holding power in 2012. Tehran still maintains these relationships whether with the Muslim Brotherhood or other violent and extremist organizations including the AQAP and ISIS in Egypt and other countries".

²⁰ [Investigations into ISIS'S possession of Iranian weapons in Sinai - Al-Ghad channel \(alghad.tv\)](#)

²¹ [Haniyeh thanks Iran for supporting Hamas with money and weapons | DW Arabic news | Breaking news and opinions s from around the world | DW | 21.05.2021](#)

²² [After he infiltrated from Gaza..a Palestinian ISIS terrorist was killed in an Egyptian Amy qualitative operation in Sinai \(alarabiya.net\)](#)

²³ An interview conducted by the writer with the Egyptian researcher in the affairs of Islamic movements and international terrorism, on May 28th, 2022.



Egyptian researcher Mounir Adib

Regarding the role played by these groups in North Sinai and their connection with the MB even after the 30th June Revaluation in 2013 which deposed President Morsi, they carried out some terrorist operations during that period. The MB's involvement in these attacks was proved through a video statement by the MB leader "Mohammed Al-Beltaji" who said: "What happens in Sinai will stop

immediately if Morsi returns to perform the duties of his position". This is a clear admission by him that the MB leads the terrorist operations in Sinai²⁴. Adib also agreed with such a view.

The Egyptian researcher believes that "those who are affiliated with the MB in Yemen were and still are backers of the Houthi coup against the Yemeni state even if they show otherwise as they are the ones who helped the Houthis to reach power by military power".

According to Adib, this cooperation has been very clear through supporting the AQAP, especially that the AQAP commanders were helped to escape from prisons controlled by the Houthis. Additionally, the latter receive support from the MB and the AQAP. "These contexts demonstrate how a pragmatic approach the violent religious groups adopt in their attempt to regain their influence through building interest networks with more than one party even at the expense of their principles and ideologies".

The violent religious groups, even those which adopt dodgy political discourse such as the MB, Hezbollah and the Houthis, began to lose their presence within their societies given their catastrophic experiences. Their ideologies are strategically related to achieving the goals of international parties and

²⁴ [Al-Beltagy admits and confirms his involvement in the Sinai events - YouTube](#)

organizations rather than achieving national goals. Their opportunities in entering the peace field became less acceptable and more suspicious according to events and experiences.

Recently, according to American media outlets, Biden administration intends to remove 5 extremist groups from the list of foreign terrorist organizations including the "Islamic Group" (Al-Jama'a al-Islamiya)²⁵. The latter is responsible for assassinating former Egyptian President Anwar Al-Sadat. It also carried out a wave of attacks against security forces and tourists in Egypt during the 1980s and the 1990s. This American decision has stirred much controversy in Egypt. Biden is accused of reactivating these entities and giving them legitimacy while others consider this move as a violation against Egyptian sovereignty²⁶. Prior to that, Washington studied removing Iran's Revolutionary Guards from the terrorist list for making progress in the Iranian nuclear program negotiations. However, Biden decided days ago not to omit them from such a list according to Israeli PM, Bennett, in what is believed to be a strong blow to the opportunities to revive the Nuclear Deal²⁷.

Accordingly, in light of the common links between these extremist groups in Yemen and Egypt, there are some relevant recommendations as shown below:

-The Yemeni newly-formed PLC should address the "terrorism" crisis according to the root of its connection, and to exclude any roles of the political parties and military commanders involved in enabling the Houthis to seize control on the Northern governorates or those which have direct or indirect impact in the spread of camps and assassinations in South Yemen.

-The PLC can benefit from the Egyptian experience in using the soft power through drama to combat the ideology of extremism and

²⁵ [US set to remove 5 groups from foreign terrorism blacklist - ABC News \(go.com\)](#)

²⁶ [A researcher in terrorist groups to RT: Omitting the "Islamic Group" from the terrorism list is an unacceptable attack on Egypt - RT Arabic](#)

²⁷ [Biden to keep Iran's Revolutionary Guards on terrorist list, Israel claims | Iran nuclear deal | The Guardian](#)

terrorism as this has been proven to increase the social awareness towards this phenomenon.

-As for Egypt, the development of the security and intelligence agencies can play a big role in tightening the noose on the terrorist elements and also to reduce the border tracks and the external finance networks.

-The "National Dialogue" launched recently by President Al-Sissi can open larger horizons for political reforms and addressing the most sensitive files. It can gradually reduce the most violent and radical ideas.

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