

Ansar Beit al-Maqdis-- A New al Qaeda Franchise in Egypt_?

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Stratfor

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On the morning of Jan. 28, two gunmen on a motorcycle assassinated Gen. Mohammed Said, an aide to the Egyptian interior minister, during his commute to work. The assassination came four days after the Cairo Security Directorate was attacked with a large vehicle bomb. Both events were claimed by a group called Ansar Beit al-Maqdis, which has declared war on the Egyptian security establishment. Ansar Beit al-Maqdis, which translates to "Supporters of Jerusalem," also tried to assassinate Egyptian Interior Minister Mohammed Ibrahim in September 2013 and did assassinate Lt. Col. Mohamed Mabrouk, a senior counterterrorism official, on Nov. 17, 2013, in Cairo. Most likely, the group is also responsible for bombing a natural gas pipeline south of El Arish on Jan. 28.

Ansar Beit al-Maqdis seems confident and proficient in terrorism tradecraft. It was willing and able to kill Said even though security was heightened in Cairo after the Mabrouk assassination and the directorate bombing. The group has planned and executed multiple attacks against distant targets using different tactics, indicating that it has a relatively long reach. In fact, Ansar Beit al-Maqdis has rapidly become one of the most active jihadist groups in the world, and there are strong indications that it is an al Qaeda franchise group, though it has not

openly adopted the al Qaeda name. Because of this, it merits further investigation.

Group Origins

Ansar Beit al-Maqdis emerged in 2011. At least some of its members appear to be linked to a previous jihadist group that operated in the Sinai called Tawhid wa al-Jihad (Monotheism and Jihad). Like Tawhid wa al-Jihad, Ansar Beit al-Maqdis seems to be heavily influenced by Iraqi jihadists. A video released by the group on Dec. 1, 2013, featured part of a speech by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a deceased al Qaeda in Iraq commander. It also contained a statement from current Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani al-Shami urging Egyptians to take up arms against the Egyptian military.

A video the group released Oct. 26 claiming responsibility for the failed assassination attempt against Mohammed Ibrahim featured video clips of Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri and Abu Muhammad al-Adnani al-Shami. In the video, the purported suicide bomber denounced the Muslim Brotherhood and called on Egyptians to embrace jihad.

Included in the group's logo is the Rayat al-Uqab flag, which bears the round seal of the Prophet Mohammed and features prominently in its video. In the modern context, the flag was first widely used by jihadists in Iraq and has become the official flag of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. Other jihadist groups such as al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and al Shabaab have also adopted this particular variant of the "Black Standard," as it's sometimes called. The widespread use of this flag by Ansar Beit al-Maqdis therefore is symbolically significant.

Some observers claim that Ansar Beit al-Maqdis is linked to the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas. Some accounts even go so far as to claim that Ansar Beit al-Maqdis is the armed wing of the Muslim Brotherhood. Nabil Naeem, former leader of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad militant group, has accused Hamas of funding Ansar Beit al-Maqdis. But these alleged linkages appear to be politically motivated in an attempt to justify the Egyptian regime's crackdown on the Brotherhood, which it has designated as a terrorist organization.

Given Ansar Beit al-Maqdis' jihadist ideology, it is highly unlikely that the group would have any significant dealings with either the Muslim Brotherhood or Hamas, which are Islamist, not jihadist, organizations. The two ideologies are simply incompatible, and in fact they compete for recruits and resources. Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood have been heavily criticized in jihadist circles, even by Ansar Beit al-Maqdis itself. Hamas has also killed jihadists in the Gaza

Strip who were linked to Tawhid wa al-Jihad in the Sinai.

Indeed, any connections are tenuous. It's possible that some Egyptians have left the Brotherhood for Ansar Beit al-Maqdis. Some Brotherhood members have become radicalized since their party was ousted from power. Others have grown disillusioned and frustrated with the Muslim Brotherhood's policy of nonviolence. Thinking that violence is the only viable solution, they have turned to Ansar Beit al-Maqdis.

Anomalies and Linkages

In addition to the publicized links to the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, Ansar Beit al-Maqdis is also allegedly linked to al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, which has referred to the group as its "muhajideen brothers in the Sinai." The group also appears to be getting weaponry from Libya, including surface-to-air missiles.

There are also some very interesting reports that the group is linked to the Muhammad Jamal Network. Muhammad Jamal is a former member of Egyptian Islamic Jihad who was close to that group's former leader, current al Qaeda chief Ayman al-Zawahiri. According to the U.S. State Department, Jamal established a militant group after his release from an Egyptian prison in early 2011 following the resignation of former President Hosni Mubarak. That group reportedly opened training camps in Egypt and Libya. The U.N. Security Council's anti-terrorism committee has levied sanctions against the Muhammad Jamal Network, alleging that the group was involved in the September 2012 Benghazi attacks. U.S. counterterrorism sources also believe the Muhammad Jamal Network may have been involved in the attack on the Benghazi Special Mission Compound, even if Jamal himself was not in Libya at the time of the attack.

Jamal was reportedly re-arrested by Egyptian authorities in November 2012 and apparently remains in Egyptian custody. According to the U.S. State Department, Jamal had letters on his computer discussing the establishment of terrorist groups in the Sinai Peninsula when he was arrested. The Egyptian newspaper Al-Youm Al-Sabi published an excerpt ostensibly from one of the letters, in which Jamal wrote to al-Zawahiri boasting that he had set up solid organizations in Egypt, Libya and the Sinai. Jamal said that he had received some funding from al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula but was asking al-Zawahiri for additional funding since smuggling arms and missiles from Libya into Egypt is costly.

Past jihadist groups operating in the Sinai have shown the capability to strike soft tourist targets on the peninsula, bomb pipelines, attack some military and police targets and launch

occasional rocket attacks against Israel. Ansar Beit al-Maqdis has been able to accomplish all of these, but their reach has gone far beyond the Sinai, and their ability to assassinate government officials and deliver vehicle bombs to downtown Cairo is far beyond anything we have seen with past jihadist organizations operating from the Sinai Peninsula. These capabilities certainly hint at outside assistance -- the type that al Qaeda and its franchises could provide through a conduit such as Muhammad Jamal.

When we consider the timing of Ansar Beit al-Maqdis' creation and put it into the context of Muhammad Jamal's purported activities, there seems to be a strong correlation. That connection appears even stronger when one considers the advanced terrorist tradecraft displayed by Ansar Beit al-Maqdis in their operations.

Therefore, we believe it is highly likely that Ansar Beit al-Maqdis is actually an al Qaeda franchise group that is attempting to downplay its connection to the al Qaeda core by eschewing the al Qaeda brand name. This has been a trend in recent years as the al Qaeda name has become more of a liability than an advantage. Using the al Qaeda label and publicly swearing loyalty to al Qaeda leaders normally brings heavy attention from the United States and its allies, so many groups avoid it.

Groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria, Ansaru in Nigeria and Ansar al-Shariah in Libya and Tunisia have opted out of using the al Qaeda name. (Ansar al-Shariah is also very closely linked to Muhammad Jamal.) Al Shabaab in Somalia likewise kept its name even after it swore loyalty to al Qaeda's leaders. We have also seen a well-established al Qaeda franchise group, al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, try to hide its hand by using the pseudonym Ansar al-Shariah during its 2011 effort to capture and control a large portion of southern Yemen. These kinds of names do not have the same negative connotations as al Qaeda, which has been responsible for killing innocent Muslims.

The Egyptian government quickly shut down previous jihadist groups that operated in the Sinai. But the current regime is preoccupied with quelling the dissent generated by the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood government. With the government distracted, an al Qaeda franchise was able to quietly establish itself in the Sinai and in mainland Egypt.

This particular franchise appears to have links to organizations such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, groups that have mastered the art of surviving the pressure applied against them by the United States and its local allies for

many years. Such organizations can teach Ansar Beit al-Maqdis terrorist tradecraft skills such as operational planning and bombmaking. But more important, they can share skills such as operational security and clandestine activity. The group's operations inside Cairo indicate that it not only has infrastructure in the Sinai but also a network of operatives and safe-houses within mainland Egypt -- and likely within Cairo itself.

The Importance of Egypt

If Ansar Beit al-Maqdis continues to learn these lessons, it will pose a formidable challenge to Egyptian security forces, which are also struggling to put down the protests and violence of disaffected Muslim Brotherhood members. This will be compounded by the fact that Egypt is situated next to eastern Libya, a hotbed of jihadist activity awash in weaponry with a porous border.

Many countries have attempted to get a handle on the flow of militants and weapons from eastern Libya. It was a critical objective of the U.S. Special Mission in Benghazi that was destroyed in September 2012. After that attack, the Americans were forced to withdraw their personnel from Benghazi, and several other countries, including Egypt, have followed suit. Libyan security forces are also extremely limited in what they can accomplish in Benghazi and the east. Many Libyan security officials have been assassinated in the region, and those currently there are largely in a defensive posture and heavily constrained. Tripoli lacks either the capability or the interest to provide sufficient security to keep these security officials safe. More skeptical observers believe certain security officers have been intentionally sent to Benghazi to die.

At the very least, the attacks and assassinations in eastern Libya have driven foreigners out and have curbed Libyan security activities, providing jihadist groups like Ansar al-Shariah and the Muhammad Jamal Network significant operational latitude. The instability in eastern Libya is consequently affecting Egypt, as it is other countries in the region. But it is not Libyan militants who are targeting Egypt; rather, Egyptian militants are using eastern Libya for training, planning and logistical purposes.

If Muhammad Jamal's letter to al-Zawahiri is authentic, the jihadists he was associated with in Egypt were having financial problems in 2012. However, based on recent operations, especially the progression of attacks that began in mid-2013 and accelerated over the past quarter of the year, Ansar Beit al-Maqdis now appears to be sufficiently armed. This may

indicate that the group has found a new source of revenue either from foreign donors or from willing or extorted local sources. They also may be getting money by smuggling weapons from Libya to other militant groups in the region. The group does not yet appear to have followed the example of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, which fund themselves largely through kidnapping.

The group also does not appear to be lacking for personnel and infrastructure. This may be due to the fusion of older jihadists organized under Muhammad Jamal with newer recruits radicalized by the coup that overthrew the Muslim Brotherhood government.

The operational tempo of Ansar Beit al-Maqdis' attacks appears to be quickening. It conducted two major attacks in Cairo over the past week alone. It seems that the group may have been responsible for the two lower-level bombings in Giza on Jan. 24. (A related group appears to be behind the other two.) Over the past few days, the group has also conducted several attacks in the Sinai, including a pipeline bombing, attacks against army bases, checkpoints and an airport, and shooting down an army helicopter. If sustained, this level of operation will make them one of the most active jihadist groups in the world.

But unlike some other countries where jihadist groups are actively operating, such as Yemen, Nigeria and Somalia, Egypt is a core Arab country that matters geopolitically because it has the Suez Canal. Egypt's internal stability determines the stability of the surrounding region, which is especially important given the current anarchy in Libya and Syria. Historically, the Egyptian military has been the only institution capable of preventing Egypt from descending into chaos. Currently, the military is actively trying to regain its former political position and has been using the activities of Ansar Beit al-Maqdis as justification for harsher crackdowns on political rivals such as the Muslim Brotherhood.

However, if a professional al Qaeda franchise like Ansar Beit al-Maqdis entrenches itself in Egypt, it could foment a protracted insurgency that could destabilize the country. This not only has major implications for neighboring countries such as Israel and Jordan, which are nervously watching the rise of jihadist activity around them, but also the United States, whose damaged relationship with the Egyptian military will necessarily undergo repair as all sides try to cope with this emerging threat.