

**EGYPT: EXPANSION OF THE SUEZ CANAL AND INCREASED OPERATIONAL CAPABILITIES OF IS TERRORISTS RAISE CONCERNS OVER THE SECURITY OF THE STRATEGIC WATERWAY**

*By Leandro Di Natala and Olivier Loucheur*

**The recent rocket attack on an Egyptian navy vessel and the arrest of suspected terrorists allegedly plotting bomb attacks along the Suez Canal raise serious concerns about the security of this trade route of strategic importance for Egypt.**

On July 6, Egyptian authorities arrested 13 members of the Muslim Brotherhood suspected of having plotted bomb attacks along the Suez Canal to disrupt shipping. The men allegedly formed a 13-member cell that included an employee at the Suez Canal authority. Prosecutors ordered to detain the suspects for 15 days and said they had planted bombs in areas including sanitation and electricity facilities as well as on beaches.

On July 16, the Islamic State-affiliated Wilayat (Province) Sinai on Twitter claimed responsibility for an attack carried out with a guided missile against an Egyptian military ship off the coast of Rafah in the Mediterranean Sea. The terrorists posted photographs showing the missile exploding in a ball of fire as it slammed into the vessel. The Islamic State claimed to have hit a “frigate” and to have killed everyone on board. However the Egyptian military said that no casualties resulted from the incident and indicated that the targeted ship was a coast guard vessel. It is worth mentioning that last November 4 assailants in a fishing boat opened fire on an Egyptian navy ship north of Damietta port before being killed. Details on this incident are still unclear and it is not known to which terrorist group they belonged to.

The attack of July 16 appears to be the first on a naval ship claimed by IS Wilayat Sinai and it is a new evidence of the strong operational capabilities of the terrorist group in Egypt. Despite the government crackdown, the IS terrorists have managed to accomplish ambitious attacks across the country. On June 29, a car bomb killed the country’s top prosecutor Hisham Barakat in Cairo. On July 1, Wilayat Sinai gunmen stormed 15 army checkpoints near the Sinai city of Sheikh Zuweid killing at least 17 soldiers. On July 10, a car bomb exploded outside the Italian Consulate in Cairo as an alleged warning to Italy to refrain from intervening in Libya.

**The military capabilities of the Islamist terrorists along with the acquisition of sophisticated weaponry raise concerns about the security**

**of one of the most attractive targets for the terrorists, the Suez Canal.** It seems that the terrorists used Russian-made Kornet anti-tank missiles in their attack against military checkpoints on July 1, a sign of their expanding arsenal. Security experts say the missile fired at the naval ship on July 16 was probably a guided anti-tank missile with a range of about five miles.

It is then likely, that using their strong operational capabilities the IS terrorists could try to disrupt the opening of the newly expanded Suez Canal and the waterway, severely impeding Egypt's economic development.

On August 6 the 70-kilometre New Suez Canal, flanking the existing one, will be opened. It is expected to shorten navigation time for ships transiting the canal from 22 to 11 hours. The Egyptian government expects that this expansion will increase the number of ships passing through the waterway from 18,000 to 20,000. The existing canal earned around \$5.5 billion in 2014 and the new canal is supposed to increase revenues by 2023 to \$15 billion. The government also plans to build an international industrial hub near the Canal that would create thousands of jobs.

**In recent months jihadist terrorists have repeatedly called on attacks on the Suez Canal and its expansion makes it an even more tempting target.**

In October 2014, Al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) branch released its English-language online magazine, "Resurgence" urging attacks to "seek to paralyze international trade for the enemy states, or at the very least, increase its costs, by targeting their cargo ships and merchant marines in Islamic waters, ports, canals and straits, on the high seas, and in their own territorial waters, and by disrupting their shipping routes wherever and however possible".

In November 2014, Abu Moussab Al-Maqdissi, an Islamic State (IS) commander, released a statement on his Twitter account in which he urged the terrorist organization's supporters in Egypt to attack military targets located in big cities, as well as foreign vessels sailing on the Suez Canal.

The Suez Canal has been already hit several times over the past decade by minor attacks carried out by local insurgent groups but none of them succeeded in hampering Egypt economy.

The security of the Suez Canal was threatened on July 29 and August 31, 2013, when terrorists attacked two ships in the waterway with rocket-propelled grenades (RPG). In both cases, there was only slight damage to the vessels. The Furqan Brigades, an Al-Qaeda-affiliated group based in Sinai Peninsula, claimed responsibility for both attacks. The Furqan Brigades promised further attacks on maritime traffic, saying that the canal is an important trade route and has also "become the safe way for the Crusader aircraft carriers to cross in to assault Muslims." In the second attack on August 31, the Panamanian-registered container ship COSCO ASIA was attacked with RPG launchers in the northern section of the Suez Canal.

In June 2014, one man was killed and another one was injured, following an attempted attack against security forces securing a Suez Canal Authority building in the governorate of Ismailia. 2 armed men drove their motorbike into a security checkpoint despite soldiers' warnings.

These incidents demonstrate that the Suez Canal has always been considered by terrorist organizations as an efficient lever to put pressure on Egyptian interests. But so far no large-scale attack succeeded in striking efficiently the Canal. However **the dramatically deteriorated security in the areas surrounding the Canal, the increasing concentration of terrorists in Sinai Peninsula as well as in other parts of Egypt, together with an increasing number of threats from terrorist groups to attack the Canal and vessels, indicate that it could become an increasingly attractive target.**

Some experts say the use of land-based anti-tank rockets against naval vessels in the Suez Canal may have a chilling effect on shipping. Waterborne attacks using small boats, such as the one used against the USS Cole in 2000, cannot be ruled out in the future. Even suicide “frogmen” could be employed to attack vessels passing through the waterway. Securing the area is problematic because of the presence of fishing boats and numerous towns, villages and farms.

New attacks against the Suez Canal can be aimed to put pressure on international companies and to halt the inflow of new investments in order to wreck the canal project and undermine the stability of the country. **Any successful attack would inevitably have an important economic and media effect and would trigger long-term consequences for the Egyptian national economy, further destabilizing the political situation in the country.**

FIN

Copyright© ESISC 2015