

**THE RE-EMERGENCE OF ANSAR BAYT AL-MAQDIS IN
EGYPT ILLUSTRATES THE INTERNAL DIVISIONS
OF THE IS WILAYAT SINAI**

By Eliska Puckova

On May 3, a senior leader of the jihadist group Ansar Bayt Al-Maqdis (ABM) Abu Hashem al-Tarbani issued an audio statement in which he criticized the ongoing conflict between the IS-affiliated Wilayat Sinai and the Tarabin tribe in North Sinai governorate. This statement **underscored the recent return of the ABM group to the Egyptian jihadist scene and further disproved the notion of Wilayat Sinai being the only jihadist actor in the region.**

Additionally, the ABM's re-emergence highlighted **the prevailing internal divisions within Wilayat Sinai** and suggested the possibility of future clashes between the two groups over the control of Sinai Peninsula. As the ABM shows a potential to impose itself in the area at the expense of Wilayat Sinai, the latter is increasingly criticized for being led by a foreigner and for not sufficiently targeting Israel while "killing Muslims in Egypt."

In the 11-minutes-long audio message issued by "Ansar Bayt Al-Maqdis Media", Al-Tarbani urged the Tarabin tribe and the IS-affiliated Wilayat Sinai to sign a peace deal and to cease their hostilities. Abu Hashem Al-Tarbani, who lives in Gaza but originates from the Tarabin tribe, claimed that some leaders of Tarabin tribe, including the tribe's spokesman Mousa al-Daleh, are allied to the Egyptian army and plan to create militias which would conduct a proxy war against Wilayat Sinai. Al-Tarbani also called on the Tarabin tribe to publish a statement specifying its position and to isolate the people involved in clashes with Wilayat Sinai, while urging Wilayat Sinai to cease its attacks against all the tribe members and to target only those who had attacked them.

Al-Tarbani's statement indicated the convoluted relations among Wilayat Sinai, Sinai Bedouin tribes and Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, and exemplified the ABM allegiance to the Islamic State as a major source of division within Wilayat Sinai.

To remind, on November 10, **2014**, **ABM had pledged allegiance to IS** and claimed having accepted the conditions imposed by the IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, including the appointment of Iraqi national Abu Douaa' Al-Ansari as the new leader of the group. Following this pledge, IS supporters in ABM formed an official branch of IS in the region labeled as "Wilayat Sinai." However, **this pledge was rejected by several senior ABM leaders.** As a result, at least 12 of them had been executed by the new Wilayat Sinai leadership, while at least 10 others allegedly escaped

to other Egyptian regions not controlled by IS (especially the northwestern Matrouh governorate) or to Gaza, and formed a **separate faction** which maintained the name “Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis.” Later on, further internal clashes within Wilayat Sinai were observed in August 2016, when Abu Douaa’ Al-Ansari was killed by the Egyptian army and a new Wilayat Sinai leader was appointed. The nomination of Abu Hajer Al-Hashemi – a former officer of the Iraqi army – was met with strong opposition from several Egyptian senior leaders of Wilayat Sinai (some of them initial founders of ABM), who demanded an Egyptian national to be named as the leader of Wilayat Sinai. The central IS leadership refused these demands, which resulted in yet another withdrawal of senior leaders from the organization. **Some of them reinforced the ranks of the ABM in Matrouh governorate or Gaza, others pledged allegiance to Al-Qaeda and joined the Al-Qaeda-affiliated group Al-Murabitun.** Al-Murabitun (not to be confused with the Saharan group Al-Mourabitoun led by Mohktar Belmokhtar), which had appeared in July 2015, has been led by Hisham Ashmawi, also known as Abu Omar al-Muhajir al-Masri – a former colonel of the Egyptian Special Forces as well as a former senior figure of ABM before its pledge to IS.

In this context, it is worth mentioning that the clashes between the current ABM and the former ABM members rebranded as Wilayat Sinai, as well as internal divergences within Wilayat Sinai itself have been **illustrated by the Wilayat Sinai’s fragile alliance with Hamas.** In view of the November 2014 ABM’s pledge to IS, Gaza was chosen as a hideout by escaped ABM leaders, because the majority of them had been previously members of Hamas military wing “Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades.” To remind, Al-Qassam Brigades had conducted series of complex attacks against Israeli security forces especially from 1994 to 2000 and had been known for their critique of the “softness” of Hamas policies vis-à-vis Israel. As such, from 2011 to 2014 the ABM leadership composed of former Al-Qassam members claimed responsibility for series of missile attacks against Israeli territories, in coherence with Al-Qassam’s Brigades approach. More recently, the links between Hamas and some members of Wilayat Sinai have been also highlighted in an investigative article published by “The Times of Israel” on February 8, according to which **the two groups cooperate by routinely smuggling supplies, weapons, and fighters in need of training or medical care back and forth across the Gaza-Sinai border,** while this cooperation is supposedly coordinated by Hamas leadership in Rafah.

However, **the instability of this cooperation** has been exposed in an interview given to the 60th edition of the IS weekly “Al-Naba” dated on December 22, 2016, in which Al-Hashemi called to conduct attacks against Hamas and its affiliates, while qualifying them as “apostates” and “Israeli allies.” This claim was reportedly sparked by the December 2016 arrest of Abed al-Wahad Abu Aadara – a defector from Hamas to Wilayat Sinai – by Hamas police in Gaza. As a result, **IS allegedly declared an economic war to Hamas** by slowing the flow of goods from Sinai to Gaza, in order to force Hamas to release Aadara. Hamas responded by intensifying arrests of IS-linked jihadists in Gaza: according to some security sources, 350 IS-linked jihadists have been arrested in Gaza by Hamas over the past 2 years. Moreover, on February 14, “Ibn Taymia Center for Media” linked to the IS-affiliated group “Al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad” in Gaza issued a statement in which IS promised retaliation to Hamas and its affiliates for having recently arrested family members of several Wilayat Sinai jihadists in order to force the latter to surrender to Hamas. By the same token, even though in the aforementioned “Al-Naba” interview Al-Hashemi labeled different viewpoints

among Wilayat Sinai members as the “conflicts of theological and ideological nature” which have been “settled peacefully,” several Egyptian media reported that **serious clashes erupted in Rafah between rival factions of Wilayat** as a result of the group’s leadership decision to conduct the above described economic war against Hamas.

In addition, the diverging interests of these factions were further shown by **the video claiming responsibility for bomb attacks conducted on April 9 against Coptic churches** in Alexandria and Tanta. Firstly, the video claim was not issued via the usual IS accounts, but posted directly on Twitter, Telegram and Youtube. Secondly, the video did not include any of the chants usually used in IS video claims. Thirdly, the attacks were claimed by the “Islamic State in Egypt” and not by the Islamic State or by Wilayat Sinai, which have both not been mentioned in the video at all. This suggests that the 2 attacks were conducted by a **group, which is ideologically loyal to the Islamic State but which wants to be autonomous from Wilayat Sinai** – although this hypothesis could not have been verified so far.

In addition to these internal clashes undermining the group, Wilayat Sinai has defied the pressure exercised by the army and by the Sinai tribes. On one hand, **Wilayat Sinai faces the retaliation of the Egyptian army** conducting a military campaign against the terrorist group in order to seize back the control over Sinai Peninsula. Most recently, on May 9 2 IS fighters were killed and 3 others captured in a military operation south of Sheikh Zuweid, while on the same day the army also seized substantial quantities of explosives in Rafah where the Egyptian air forces had previously bombed tunnels used by the terrorists. Nevertheless, for now Wilayat Sinai has maintained control over the area, as illustrated by numerous attacks against the army and police especially in the cities of El-Arish and Rafah. On April 11, the group issued a 17-minute-long video showing the training of IS snipers and at least 20 sniper attacks conducted against Egyptian soldiers in the Sinai over the past several months, which allegedly made in overall 60 victims among the army forces. On May 2, the Islamic State issued on Twitter a series of photographs showing the public execution of an Egyptian soldier in front of a shop in El-Arish.

On the other hand, although previously the Wilayat Sinai members used to be protected by Sinai tribes, they have been gradually losing this support over the past several months (while the terrorist group’s decision to alienate the Sinai Bedouins has allegedly also led to some internal clashes within Wilayat). The tribesmen have claimed to be bothered by the increasing presence of foreign fighters (of Chechen, Libyan, Moroccan, Yemeni origin) in Sinai, as well as the Wilayat’s crackdown against Bedouin cigarettes smuggling activities in view of the groups imposition of a strict version of Sharia prohibiting the sale of tobacco. **Most notably, the violent clashes have intensified between Wilayat Sinai and the Tarabin tribe** since April 17, when the terrorists captured 2 members of Tarabin tribe smuggling cigarettes to Gaza and publicly stoned them to death. As the latest part of incidents between Tarabins and Wilayat Sinai, on May 10 the Wilayat Sinai claimed having killed 15 Tarabin Bedouins in clashes near the village of El-Barth south of Rafah, while on May 12, at least 10 fighters of Wilayat Sinai were killed in clashes with Tarabin tribesmen in Al-Masura area near Rafah, including a senior IS leader charged with military training of new recruits.

The Tarabin tribe represents one of the largest and most widespread tribes in the Sinai, and as such, its disobedience towards the Wilayat Sinai means a threat for the IS control of the region which is its major stronghold in Egypt. This is illustrated by the **campaign launched on April 27 by Wilayat Sinai members against the Tarabin tribe on Twitter**. When addressing the Tarabin-linked militias, an IS terrorist wrote on Twitter: “Be happy because you will be attacked by car-bombs and bombs.” Another IS fighter qualified the Bedouins as “savages” and called on them to learn from the war which is currently happening in Sinai and to take note of the damages sustained by the trained soldiers in El Arish and Rafah by the Islamic State. Another IS fighter called on making “the Tarabins” a priority and encouraged the destruction the Bedouins’ houses and checkpoints. The IS jihadists also accused the tribe of supporting the army in their operations tracking jihadists and promised to “severely punish them” for this.

The army and the Sinai tribes including the Tarabin had not been previously able to achieve an efficient anti-IS cooperation, as **the relations between the tribes and the central Egyptian government have been deteriorating over the past year**. Although the tribes had been often portrayed in official government sources as “the army’s allies” and “shields against terrorist groups,” they had been also viewed with mistrust by the Egyptian government, whose members had occasionally accused the Sinai tribes of harboring loyalty to Israel, Gaza or Saudi Arabia. To remind, the tribes had been historically extended over vast territories and thus maintained numerous cross-border family ties: specifically the Tarabin Bedouins originate from the Negev area of today’s southern Israel. In addition, **the mutual distrust** was illustrated by the claim of General Mamdouh al-Kidwani in May 2016, who qualified Sinai Bedouins as “potential enemies of Egypt,” while the deputy Samir Ghattas stated that “Bedouin tribes offer to IS an endless supply of recruits.” For their part, the Sinai tribes accused the Egyptian army of involvement in executions of young Bedouins who were then presented in media as terrorists. Specifically, on January 14, the representatives of major Sinai tribes organized a congress in the city of El-Arish, situated in North Sinai governorate, in order to denounce the murder of 10 young members of local tribes, perpetrated by the army on January 13. The young Bedouins had been accused of involvement in an IS-claimed car-bomb attack conducted on January 9 against a security roadblock in El-Arish, killing one policeman.

However, **the army and the Sinai tribes have been gradually joining forces against Wilayat Sinai since March 30**, when major Sinai tribes organized a conference in the southern Sinai town of Aby Zenima aiming to discuss their support to the Egyptian army in its fight against the terrorist group, while several army and Interior Ministry representatives were also present. Furthermore, the conflict between Wilayat Sinai and the tribes expanded beyond Sinai Peninsula, as demonstrated by the statement dated on May 7, in which **the Union of Tarabin tribes of Ismailia announced its support to the Tarabin tribe in Rafah** and to the army in their war against the Wilayat Sinai, while claiming that the Union would send men and material to North Sinai governorate in order to fight the terrorist group. The spokesman of the Tarabin tribe Moussa al-Daleh claimed that the mission of Tarabin tribesmen of Ismailia would be the collection of intelligence on terrorist fighters, their families and their hideouts. More recently, on May 15, **the tribe of Sawarka**, which controls northeastern territories of Sinai and whose members live mostly in El-Arish, issued a statement in which it announced having **joined the war against IS**, while

proposing the creation of “common operations room” which would coordinate the tribesmen activities with the army.

In sum, while promoting its anti-Tarabin campaign, the Wilayat Sinai continues to take advantage of the insufficient cooperation between local tribal actors and the Egyptian army, and thus keeps asserting its control over the Sinai Peninsula. **However, the pressure from the army and the tribes in addition to the internal clashes within the group destabilize Wilayat Sinai’s position in the area,** as illustrated by the 79th issue of “Al-Naba” dated on May 4, where a senior leader of the group claimed that Egyptians are not receptive enough to the group’s jihadist discourse, as the army and the media managed to “brainwash them.” Conversely, **the ABM** adopted the same strategy as Al-Nusra Front, by first differentiating itself from Al-Qaeda and then making its name as an anti-Israeli group (benefiting from the support of Hamas) while remaining **strongly rooted in Egypt, as demonstrated by its excellent relations with Sinai tribes.**

It is therefore likely that the Wilayat Sinai and the Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis could enter in conflict over the control of Sinai in the future. In this case, new attacks against the Egyptian security forces as well as against Israel can be expected.

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