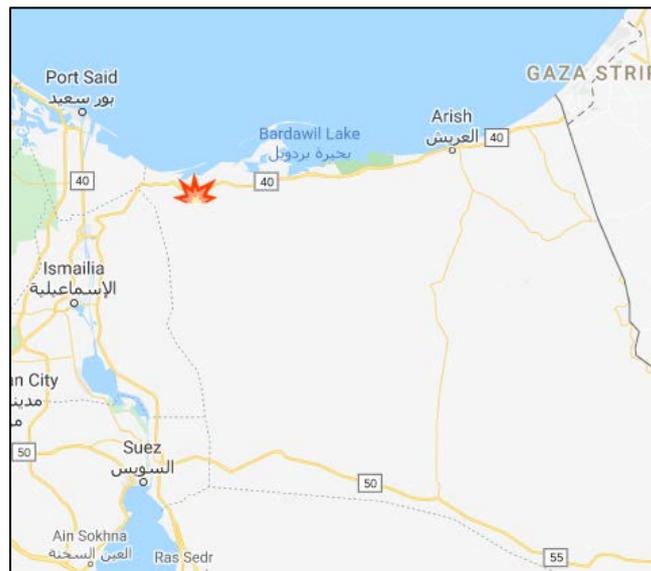**An ISIS large-scale attack in the northern Sinai Peninsula demonstrates well the improvement in its operational capabilities and the weakness of the Egyptian security forces**

July 29, 2020

Overview

On July 21, 2020, **ISIS carried out a large-scale combined attack against an Egyptian army camp near the village of Rabi'a, west of Bir al-Abd** (near the coastal highway, about 30 km from the Suez Canal). According to ISIS's claim of responsibility (which is in line with Arab media reports), **40 members of the Egyptian security forces were killed, and over 60 were wounded. Subsequently, ISIS operatives took over four villages adjacent to the site of the attack**, confronting the Egyptian security forces. It appears that **so far (July 29, 2020), the Egyptian security forces could not regain control over the region.**

Site of the attack near the village of Rabi'a, close to the coastal highway west of Bir al-Abd (Google Maps)

▶ ISIS's attack in Bir al-Abd and its activity following it **is the most outstanding** activity as part of the wave of attacks referred to by ISIS as **Raids of Attrition** (carried out by ISIS these days in its various provinces **in Asia and Africa[1]**). This is also **the most significant attack** carried out by ISIS's Sinai Province against the Egyptian army in recent years. It indicates an **improvement in the military capabilities of the Sinai Province, increasing audacity of its operatives, and the self-confidence** of the province.

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[1] For details, see Spotlight on Global Jihad, July 23-29, 2020.

▶ On the other hand, the blow suffered by the Egyptian army indicates **the weakness of the Egyptian security forces in northern Sinai** and the entire peninsula. This weakness recently came into expression **in the waning pressure** exerted by the Egyptian security forces on ISIS (in northern and central Sinai), **with the shift in Egyptian strategic attention to developments in Libya and the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam.** In the ITIC's assessment, ISIS may take advantage of the shifting of attention and resources **to step up its attacks against Egyptian security forces and strengthen its influence on the local population and the Bedouin tribes.**

▶ These developments pose **two important questions related to ISIS's strategy:**

◆ **Does ISIS's takeover (which is probably temporary) of the villages in the region indicate a change in its strategy, which refrains from controlling territory and population?**[2] In the ITIC's assessment, **no major change is expected in the near future.** However, the current event indicates that in view of noteworthy military achievements, ISIS may attempt to display **temporary governance of sorts** on population in its zones of activity, **for purposes of the battle for hearts and minds**, especially in front of its operatives and supporters. **This is aimed to demonstrate that ISIS has not relinquished the vision of the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate here and now** and still adheres to it, even if in the current era it is forced to act as a guerrilla organization.

◆ **Will ISIS's strengthening in Sinai prompt it to draw its attention to Israel?** On January 27, 2020, ISIS's new spokesman called on ISIS's operatives in the Sinai Peninsula and Syria **to attack Israeli communities.** So far, his call remained unanswered, in the ITIC's assessment, first and foremost due to the **high priority given by ISIS to the campaign against the Egyptian security forces.** ISIS's strengthening in Sinai and the decrease of pressure on it by the Egyptian security forces may **increase its self-confidence and raise the possibility of carrying out attacks against Israel.**

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[2] See the ITIC's Information Bulletin from July 26, 2020, "ISIS's current strategy: Relinquishing territorial control and focusing on intensifying local activity in the various provinces, mainly in Iraq"

Attack against the Egyptian army camp in Rabi'a (initial overview)

On July 21, 2020, ISIS carried out a **large-scale combined attack against an Egyptian army camp** and checkpoint near the village of Rabi'a, west of Bir al-Abd (near the coastal highway, about 30 km from the Suez Canal). **The attack began by the detonation of two car bombs by suicide bombers.** Then the camp was attacked by dozens of armed operatives who arrived at the site on foot and on motorcycles and other vehicles.

Right: ISIS operatives on their way to attack the Egyptian army camp in the village of Rabi'a. Left: Detonation of one of the two car bombs (Telegram, July 28, 2020)

The two suicide bombers who detonated the car bombs. Right: Karar al-Maqdisi[3]. Left: Abu Sanad al-Ansari (Telegram, July 28, 2020)

▶ According to ISIS's claim of responsibility, **40 Egyptian army soldiers and policemen were killed in the attack, and over 60 were wounded** (Telegram, July 24, 2020). This report was in line with initial reports published on Egyptian and Arab media outlets. **The Egyptian army has still not issued an official report on its own losses**, probably due to the embarrassment caused to the Egyptian regime over the many casualties (initial Egyptian media reports on two fatalities and four wounded are probably baseless).

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[3] Maqdisi means "from Jerusalem," and in a broader sense "Palestinian." Thus, the suicide bomber may have been Palestinian.

▶ According to Egyptian media, **after the attack, the ISIS operatives fled to a farm in the Bir al-Abd area.** The Egyptian security forces, with air support, allegedly attacked the farm and killed 18 "terrorist operatives" (i.e., ISIS operatives). One of them wore an explosive belt. In addition, three car bombs were destroyed (Al-Masry Al-Youm; Al-Youm Al-Sabea, July 21, 2020). So far, the ITIC does not have reliable information on ISIS's losses (usually, ISIS does not release information on its losses in its claims of responsibility).

ISIS operatives taking control over villages south of Rabi'a (initial overview)

▶ According to a media report based on eyewitnesses, on the day of the attack (July 21, 2020), **"hundreds of gunmen" spread in villages and roads in the Bir al-Abd area**. The gunmen set up roadblocks and planted IEDs. Some of the village residents, who were afraid of the ISIS operatives, fled their homes and found refuge in the city of Bir al-Abd. The Bir al-Abd municipality announced that it was preparing accommodation for refugees at schools and public institutions (Shahed Sinaa Facebook page, July 24, 2020).

Residents fleeing the villages taken over by ISIS
(YouTube, July 27, 2020)

▶ **During the activity in the Rabi'a region, ISIS operatives took control of four villages** south of Rabi'a while exploiting the blow suffered by the Egyptian army. **At this stage it is unclear whether this was an exploitation of success of the attack in Rabi'a, or advance planning to take over the villages immediately after the attack**. The four villages are **Aqtia** (2,550 residents), **Qatia** (3,155 residents), **Janain** (825 residents), and **Al-Marih** (2,635 residents) (Mada Masr website, July 27, 2020). On July 27, 2020, it was reported that ISIS operatives **were staying in these villages for the sixth consecutive day** (Al-Khaleej al-

Jadeed, July 27, 2020). According to the ITIC's assessment, **the Egyptian security forces have still not regained control of the region** (updated to July 29, 2020).

The four villages taken over by ISIS. The upper mark (with the skull) indicates the site of the attack near the village of Rabi'a (Mada Masr, July 27, 2020).

▸ **According to one report, ISIS operatives waved ISIS flags at the entrance to the villages they had taken over**. Some residents assented to the calls by the Egyptian army and left the villages, but many families remained in their homes. ISIS operatives began to communicate with the residents. They distributed candy to the children, held a joint meal with the residents in the village of Qatia, and asked them to observe their daily routine. The operatives asked some of the young people not to smoke, on the grounds that it is forbidden (according to ISIS's extreme interpretation of Islam) (Mada Masr website, July 27, 2020).

▸ **The Egyptian security forces blocked the roads leading to the villages. The international highway between Port Said and Al-Arish was blocked to traffic**. The Egyptian security forces reportedly **exchanged fire with ISIS operatives in these villages**. Aircraft and tanks fired at the villages (Anbaa Sinaa and Shahed Sinaa Facebook pages, July 27, 2020). **An Egyptian officer with the rank of lieutenant colonel was killed in these incidents** (Al-Khaleej al-Jadeed, July 27, 2020). ISIS activated IEDs on the roads, targeted the Egyptian forces with sniper fire and attacked an Egyptian army tank and a vehicle with antitank weapons (Telegram, July 27, 2020).

Abduction and execution of Egyptian military personnel

On July 25, 2020, during the incidents in the Rabi'a area, **ISIS operatives abducted an Egyptian officer** on the highway between Al-Qantara and Al-Arish (Shahed Sinaa – Al-Rasmia Facebook page, July 25, 2020). **He was executed, with ISIS claiming responsibility**. The abduction and execution were documented in a video and posted on YouTube. In the ITIC's

assessment, the documentation of the abduction is intended to **sow fear among the Egyptian security forces** and to enhance ISIS's image among the local residents (Telegram, July 28, 2020).

Execution of the Egyptian officer by an ISIS operative (Telegram, July 28, 2020)

IDs, a smartphone and cash that were in the possession of the Egyptian officer who was executed (Telegram, July 28, 2020)

▶ **On July 23, 2020, an Egyptian soldier with the rank of sergeant major was abducted from a checkpoint and executed shortly thereafter** (Shahed Sinaa – Al-Rasmia Facebook page; Al-Masry al-Youm, July 23, 2020). To date, no organization has claimed responsibility for the abduction, but it was apparently carried out by ISIS.

The Egyptian soldier who was abducted and later executed (Shahed Sinaa – Al-Rasmia Facebook page, July 23, 2020)