



ISIS attacks a strategic facility in Sinai – Significance and possible implications

May 16, 2022

Overview and significance

► On the morning of May 7, 2022, a group of operatives of ISIS's Sinai Province attacked a military post securing a water pumping facility in the northwestern Sinai Peninsula, about 26 km east of the Suez Canal. According to the Egyptian army spokesman, the Egyptian security forces thwarted an attack by Salafist-jihadi operatives directed at the facility. An officer and 16 soldiers were killed. **This was the largest attack carried out by ISIS operatives in the Sinai Peninsula since July 2020.**

► **The attack is part of ISIS's terrorist activity against economic infrastructure. The current target** was, for the first time, **a strategic water facility which is most essential for the local residents.** So far, there have been recurrent attacks against the natural gas infrastructure in the Sinai Peninsula, which usually did not cause significant damage and allowed for a quick return to normal. **In the ITIC's assessment, if the attack against the water facility had been successful, it would have disrupted the water supply to the residents of the region. Apart from a water shortage, it would have caused a public outcry against the Egyptian government, which was probably what ISIS was trying to achieve in its attack.**

► The attack, which was carried out not far from the Suez Canal, **raises the concern that ISIS will attempt to expand its activity in the Sinai Peninsula beyond the regions where it usually operates (Rafah, Sheikh Zuweid, and Bir al-Abd) and get closer to the Suez Canal and even to the heart of Egypt, the Nile Valley. The fact that the facility which was attacked lies in the vicinity of the Suez Canal (26 km east of the canal), which is an international traffic artery of the utmost importance for the international and especially the Egyptian economy, may subsequently lead to ISIS attacks on the canal itself.**

► The attack once again exposes the difficulties faced by the Egyptian army in coping with the operatives of ISIS's Sinai Province who, despite the severe blows they suffered in the past year, manage to continue striking the Egyptian security forces, the militias supporting them and the local residents. In this context, a researcher on Sinai affairs noted that **the attack**

had shuffled the cards in the North Sinai Province and had proven that ISIS's Sinai Province had the capabilities to recover and adapt itself to all circumstances. According to the researcher, ISIS's Sinai Province is required to show ISIS's new leader what it is capable of doing (Al-Araby al-Jadeed, May 9, 2022).

► This is not only an operational achievement on the part of ISIS's Sinai Province but also an achievement in the battle for hearts and minds, especially in view of the fact that over the past two years, the Egyptian security forces had recorded significant achievements against ISIS. The organization's propaganda message conveyed by the attack is that it still exists and continues to operate and is capable of carrying out complex attacks.

The course of the incident

► On the morning of May 7, 2022, a group of operatives of ISIS's Sinai Province attacked a military post securing a strategic water pumping facility in the northwestern Sinai Peninsula, about 26 km east of the Suez Canal. According to the Egyptian army spokesman, the attack was carried out by Salafist-jihadi operatives ("Takfiri elements") and was directed against the water pumping facility. An officer and 16 soldiers were killed (Al-Arabiya, May 7, 2022; Akhbar Sinaa al-Aan Facebook page, May 7, 2022).

► ISIS's Sinai Province claimed responsibility for the attack. According to its statement, its operatives attacked an Egyptian army post west of Bir al-Abd and killed 17 soldiers. In addition, they took control of the post, seized equipment and weapons, and set the post on fire. According to ISIS, the operatives returned to their base unscathed. At the end of its statement, ISIS noted that **"those who abandon Islam [i.e., the Egyptian government and security forces] must know that this is partial revenge for [the regime's attitude towards] the Muslim female prisoners [held] in Rafah and that jihad's wheels in Sinai will continue to turn, Allah willing"** (Telegram, May 8, 2022).

► According to another statement, released by ISIS's Amaq News Agency, **the Egyptian soldiers virtually did not resist** (Telegram, May 8, 2022). On May 10, 2022, ISIS released photos from the scene, intended to establish ISIS's claim, showing the operatives setting fire to buildings in the compound and displaying the weapons, ammunition and equipment seized. The photos also document at least 10 bodies of Egyptian soldiers. According to the photos, the operatives raided the compound with Kalashnikov rifles, machine guns and RPG

rockets, and at least one of them had a helmet camera to document the attack (Telegram, May 10, 2022).



Right: ISIS operatives getting ready for the attack; they are well armed and one of them has a camera on his helmet. Left: Buildings being blown up on the site (Telegram, May 10, 2022)



Right: The facility going up in flames. Left: Weapons seized by the operatives (Telegram, May 10, 2022)

► Following the incident, the Egyptian army attacked ISIS positions in the Sinai Peninsula, firing artillery and using air support. A total of 16 ISIS operatives were killed and three vehicles were destroyed in the airstrikes, which lasted for two days. The Egyptian army found and deactivated many IEDs. When Egyptian troops foiled another attempted attack against Egyptian forces, seven additional ISIS operatives were killed and some of the weapons previously seized by ISIS were taken back. The Egyptian army lost an officer and four soldiers in the fighting (Egyptian army spokesman, May 11, 2022).



Right: Egyptian helicopters used in response to the terrorist attack. Left: Egyptian army armored vehicles in Sinai (Egyptian army spokesman, May 11, 2022)



ISIS targets being attacked from the air (Egyptian army spokesman, May 11, 2022)



IEDs found and deactivated by the Egyptian army in Sinai (Egyptian army spokesman, May 11, 2022)

Reactions in Egypt and the Arab world

► Commenting on the attack, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi said that such terrorist attacks would not affect Egypt's determination to uproot terrorism (Al-Arabiya, May 7, 2022). Al-Sisi ordered to complete the mopping up of North Sinai from terrorist operatives. He praised the efforts made by the Egyptian forces in collaboration with the residents to uproot

the sources of terrorism in the Sinai Peninsula (Al-Shorouq, May 8, 2022). He also expressed hopes for deeper US counterterrorism ties (Reuters, May 9, 2022).

► Palestinian sources in the Gaza Strip condemned the attack. Hamas published an announcement expressing solidarity with Egypt and extending its condolences to the Egyptian people and the bereaved families (Hamas's Telegram channel, May 7, 2022). The Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) condemned the attack which, according to the PIJ, was intended "to detract attention from Zionist terrorism" (PIJ's Telegram channel, May 7, 2022).

► Mahmoud Abbas condemned the attack, referring to it as a "heinous crime." He sympathized with the grief of the bereaved families, stressing that the Palestinians stand by the Egyptian people in their fight against terrorism (Wafa, May 7, 2022). On May 8, 2022, the Fatah movement issued a strong denouncement of the attack, equating ISIS to Israel. In its statement, Fatah said it considered the attack "a treacherous stab in the back of Palestine and the Palestinian people." The attack is described as a "service for the racist Zionist mechanism of occupation and settlement," while ISIS and Israel are both presented as "terrorism whose perpetrators act under the same flag against the brothers in Arab Egypt and against the Palestinian people in occupied Palestine" (Wafa, May 8, 2022).

► Hezbollah strongly condemned the terrorist attack in Sinai and sympathized with the Egyptian people. According to Hezbollah, the purpose of the terrorist attack was to destabilize Egypt's security and "detract attention from Zionist terrorism" (Al-Ahed, May 8, 2022).