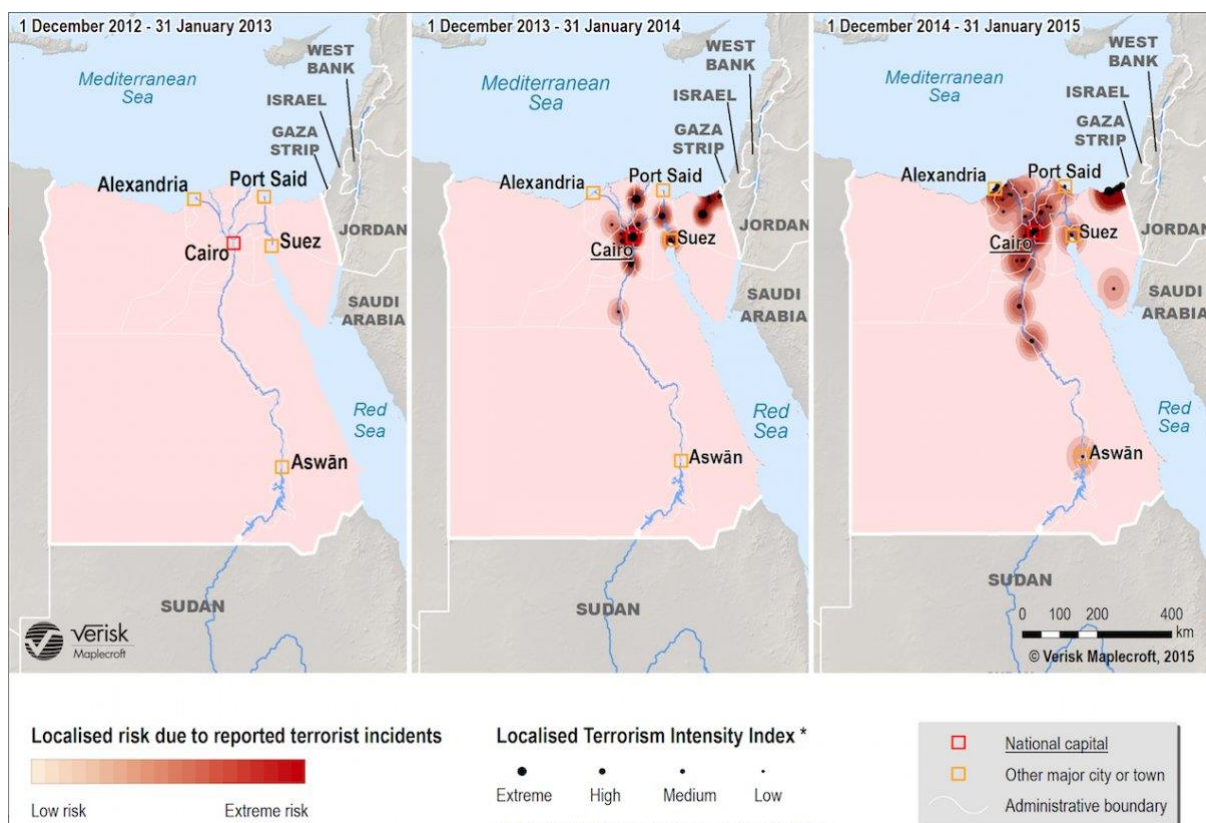


**Editor’s Note:** Below is the first segment of a four-part regional document which will include analyses on MENA hotspots such as Egypt, Yemen, Libya and Tunisia. This note has been designed by *OTHER SOLUTIONS Consulting* research team as an overview of security concerns in Egypt.

## 1. Egypt

In light of Egypt’s positive foreign policy initiatives highlighted in signing a historic agreement with Sudan and Ethiopia over Nile disputes, in addition to hosting the Egypt Economic Development Conference (EEDC), one could assume that March has brought the hope of reviving stability for President Sissi’s regime. Nevertheless, ‘Om el-Donia’ (translated: Mother of the world), as it is commonly referred to by its Arab counterparts, is still home of jihadist-inspired violence centred in the traditionally volatile Sinai peninsula. The Islamic State epidemic has caught up with Egypt leaving in its aftermath a newly branded group named ‘Wilayat Sinai’. The group has carried a series of attacks outside its periphery; spreading fear across Egypt’s territory during the first quarter of 2015.

### 1.1 Map



(Source Business Insider; using Verisk Maplecroft; 2012-2015)

### 1.2 Key Players

Security issues in Sinai are not a new phenomenon as the region has been home to militant Islamist groups that have challenged the Egyptian armed forces throughout the decades (e.g. al-Gamaa al-Islamiyya during the 1990’s). As shown in the maps above, current terrorist operations have intensified since 2013. The expansion of this crisis is directly correlated to ex-general Abdel Fatah al-Sissi’s crackdown on the Muslim brotherhood; now disbanded and labeled a terrorist organization. After the events in Rabaa al-Aadawiya Square and the harsh punitive measures taken against key members of the group, the military has ultimately eliminated any major

political contenders within the country. More relevantly, doing away with the *Ikhwan*<sup>1</sup>, has meant that there is an ever-narrowing space for participation in political Islam. Despite the existence of the Salafist al-Nour party, this faction has distanced itself from the brotherhood and sufficed itself by participating in constitutional reform to fit into the new status quo.

Consequently, in the aftermath of a severely weakened brotherhood, a stifled economy and trans-border security challenges, Sinai was the ideal haven for radical militias. Armed groups have also taken advantage of the power vacuum preset since the 1978 Camp David Accords, and Cairo's negligence towards the local tribes. Ansar Bait al-Maqdis (ABM) created in 2011, is the current protagonist conducting operations away from its base; across the Suez Canal cities, the Nile Delta and strikingly in the country's largest metropolitans Cairo and Alexandria. The groups' allegiance to IS under its new name 'Wilayat Sinai'<sup>2</sup> (translated the Sinai province/state) has left multiple questions with regard to future coordination and mimicking of IS's core in Syria and the Levant. Meanwhile IS's provocations in eastern Libya followed by Sissi's airstrikes in Derna during February 2015, signals at the existence of a dual threat from both the east and west.

To make matters worse, 2015 has also seen the appearance of new militant groups in Egypt such as 'Ajnad Misr', 'Revolutionary Punishment' and 'Popular Resistance', all dedicated to undermining the security apparatus. All groups cite the 2013 Rabaa Massacre and the intense crackdown on opposition by President Sissi as the root cause for their actions. Another important point is that Ajnad Misr is an Islamist organization operating near Cairo and classified as a terrorist group by the US Department of State, however the other two are not affiliated with any jihadist agenda and arguably represent a violent backlash of marginalized youth. These organizations have all claimed responsibility for attacks outside banks and police stations in key cities reflecting the negative impact of Cairo's emphasis on hard power and security-based solutions.

Other players outside the Egyptian theatre include Israel that is also on the enemy list of Wilayat Sinai. As Egypt has scrutinized Hamas's position and closed its borders last year during the Gaza crisis, the relationship between Tel Aviv and Cairo has become more intimate, eroding the idea of a fragile or cold peace. The Annual Humanitarian Overview published by the UN stated that 2014 was a 'devastating year' for Palestinians, leaving a record number of deaths surpassing any year since the 1967 war. Despite these conditions and widespread anti-Israeli sentiment within the Egyptian psyche, Sissi similarly to ex-president Mubarak has chosen to act as a friend, rather than an enemy of the Jewish state. During 2014 there was also speculation with regard to Israeli counterterrorism initiatives in Sinai, a matter which would not be surprising considering the correlation between both countries' foreign policy agendas.

Noteworthy is the stake of Gulf countries such as the UAE and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia that have strongly supported Sissi and the military establishment. Billions flowing as 'aid' into the Egyptian treasury have been sent to ensure there is no resurrection of the Brotherhood in Egypt, which would inevitably strengthen their position across the Middle East. The *Ikhwan* have similarly been outlawed in UAE and KSA further proving the common consensus between Cairo, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. In the opposite camp stands Qatar that was until recently a refuge for key brotherhood clerics. Consequently, Qatar and Egypt's relationship has deteriorated on a diplomatic level over issues such as the Brotherhood and Libya; even affecting the work of the Qatari-based Al-Jazeera network, scrutinized by Cairo and state media. Therefore upcoming events will also be affected by the evolving political dynamics between these influential regional powers.

### 1.3 Latest Developments and Forecast

North Sinai represents the pinnacle of security and humanitarian concerns for Egypt with curfews in place, on-going displacement, lack of access to basic services and daily counter-terrorism operations. In the period between 1<sup>st</sup> - 21<sup>st</sup> March, the Egyptian army claimed the killing of nearly 160 "terrorist elements" in security operations varying between air raids and fire exchange. The operations concern the cities of al-Arish, Sheikh Zuweid and Rafah. In comparison, at least six security officers were killed and over 50 were injured in different terrorist attacks.

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<sup>1</sup> *Ikhwan* translated from Arabic 'the brothers' is commonly used across MENA to refer to the Muslim brotherhood since the days of Hassan al-Banna who founded the group in 1928.

<sup>2</sup> ABM swore allegiance to Abu-bakr al-Baghdadi and IS on 10<sup>th</sup> November 2014

Despite the alleged success of the Egyptian military, the tactical sophistication and effectiveness shown by the Sinai Province attacks earlier in January/February 2015 is noticeable. The jihadist group mounted simultaneous attacks against military checkpoints and facilities in northeast Sinai on January 29<sup>th</sup> killing at least 32 Egyptian soldiers and policemen, making this among the deadliest attacks in Egypt in decades. The group claimed that it used more than 100 militants for this assault and publicized details of the operation<sup>3</sup>.

The destructive nature of the January attack, which involved the use of multiple suicide attackers against well-defended targets, coming so soon after the group's pledge to the Islamic State, suggests that the group may be now actively accessing IS expertise. In particular, attacks employed Rocket-Propelled Grenades (RPGs), Grad rockets and mortars, while the group is also reported to possess Man-Portable Air-Defence Systems (MANPADS). Additionally, since pledging allegiance to the Islamic State, there has been a dramatic advance in ABM's media capabilities, as well as an overall rebranding, that further underline the group's strengthening ideological, and perhaps actual, ties to the Islamic State.

Nevertheless, ABM has not yet employed the Islamic State's advanced video production techniques, at present mainly posting propaganda photos showcasing their operations against security personnel as well as photos of their social activism; these are aimed at winning local residents to their side. Moreover they also do not have the same control over territory that al-Baghdadi and his men have, and are still considered a guerrilla force trying to fight rather than govern.

The humanitarian crisis in Egypt also continues to evolve amidst this new 'war on terror'. The government's decision to raise thousands of homes has brought about increased displacement without appropriate compensation or efficient relocation plans. The imposed curfews have also led to an inability for health and emergency services to access areas such as Sheikh Zuweid and Rafah during late hours. Attacks on gas pipelines have frequently disrupted life in the region particularly in Arish, where an attack during December 2014 resulted in 13,000 homes being left without electricity. In light of the ongoing energy shortage, such disruptions have been costly for the residents of Sinai and in turn the Egyptian authorities.

If Cairo remains negligent in its policies towards Sinai and other dissidents more widely across the country, the consequences can be significant. Security problems will continue, however the rate of attacks may also rise as the authorities keep their hard-line stance. Sissi has tried to rectify this issue and appeal to the people in his address last month where he promised justice to those innocently imprisoned. However despite the progress in the widely covered case of the three al-Jazeera journalist, thousands still remain incarcerated, hundreds are receiving death sentences whilst Mubarak with his 'mob' of NDP politicians and business man are being freed and acquitted from their criminal charges.

The threat of greater ties being established with IS in Syria, as well as a free flow of jihadists from Libya's porous borders remains a significant threat to Egypt. The administration will hope to revitalize its image and more importantly its economy through the latest diplomatic and investment successes it has achieved. However will Sissi's political finesse, military prowess and acceptance amongst the bigger players of the international community be enough?

The Egyptian armed forces will continue trying to decisively put an end to the 18-month long insurgency but may find themselves overstretched soon. Egypt has already marked its involvement in Libya this year and more recently Yemen as it promised to contribute in naval, military and aerial combat against the advancing Houthi rebellion. With plans of creating a joint Arab military force<sup>4</sup>, Sissi may find himself involved in an economically-draining war on multiple fronts. The rise of other more miniscule militant groups also signals at the necessity of re-opening political space and providing some of the basic demands called for in January 25<sup>th</sup> revolution. Examples include the establishment of a long awaited democratically-elected parliament to regain the trust of millions of youth affected by the nightmare of a 'lost revolutionary cause.' Without political, legislative and economic improvements, Sissi will be unable to contain the tide of jihadism and terror that has already penetrated his borders.

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<sup>3</sup> Jamestown foundation, Egypt struggles with Jihadist challenge in Sinai, available online:

[http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=43619&cHash=0abac27ab9f921b584bf811e03fccb92#.VRVn9O6sW28](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=43619&cHash=0abac27ab9f921b584bf811e03fccb92#.VRVn9O6sW28) (Accessed 27<sup>th</sup> March 2015)

<sup>4</sup> Announced by President Sissi on 29<sup>th</sup> March 2015 during Arab League Summit in Egypt