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The Rawda Mosque massacre

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The Rawda Mosque massacre .. In the absence of witnesses

Haitham Ghoneim

Introduction

On Friday, November 24, 2017, the village of Al-Rawda, east of Bir al-Abed town, 40 kilometers from Al-Arish in Egypt's North Sinai Governorate, witnessed an extremely horrible massacre, where about 312 worshippers were killed during Friday prayers, in the “deadliest terrorist attack in the country’s modern history,” according to Egyptian officials.

A group of militants stormed the Al-Rawda mosque and opened fire on worshippers inside and outside the village’s only mosque to kill them all. The militants (roughly 40 gunmen) also set the cars parked around the mosque on fire to prevent the rescue of any injured survivors. The number of victims reached 312 citizens, including 26 children, by about 25% of the number of males in the north Sinai village. The terrible attack was an unprecedented development in events in the northern part of the Sinai Peninsula.

In this report, we’ll try to analyze the attack, through reading:

- a) The history of the targeted village and spread of the Sufi order there,
- b) The way in which domestic and international media handled the attack,
- c) The map of actors on the ground in the Sinai Peninsula.

First: The crime Scene

The Rawda village is located in the east of the town of Bir al-Abed in Egypt's North Sinai Governorate. The village, which is closer to the city of Arish than to Bir al-Abed, has a population of 2400, divided into 490 families – including about 1200 males and 1180 females. The Al-Jarirat clan, a section of Al- Sawarka tribe, the second largest tribe of



the Sinai Peninsula, constitutes the main component of the village's population. In addition, there is a diverse mix of inhabitants who came to Sinai after departure of the Israeli occupation, as well as a number of people were displaced from areas of clashes in Rafah and Sheikh Zuwaid. The village has one large mosque, which was targeted in the latest attack, and a "zawia" (a little mosque where Sufis perform their religious activities), and a guest house for receiving the village's guests and holding the clan's social celebrations.

Second: Who was targeted?

Members of the Jariri Sufi order, centered in Al-Rawda village, have had strong relations with officers of the Egyptian army and military intelligence service over decades, including cooperation and coordination in security information. For example, the Sufis helped the army during withdrawal of the Egyptian forces after the tripartite aggression on Egypt, and during the war of attrition in the period from 1967 to 1973. It is noteworthy that Lt. General Mohamed Ahmed Sadiq, the Egyptian Minister of War (during the period from 1971 to 1972), praised members of the Jariri Sufi order and their role in the transfer of information about movements of the Israeli enemy during the war.

Third: The massacre

According to the imam (preacher) of Al-Rawda Mosque Mohamed Ruzeiq, about two minutes after he started delivering Friday sermon, the militants opened fire on people outside the mosque, and then they stormed the mosque and started shooting indiscriminately at all worshipers. Al-Ruzeiq was appointed as Imam of Al-Rawda mosque by the Egyptian Ministry of Wakfs (religious endowments) in 2015. Since then,



he never received any threats against himself or against Al-Rawda mosque, according to Al-Ruzeiq.

The attackers were about ten persons, dressed in army uniforms and carrying black flags with inscriptions of "There is no god but Allah and Mohamed is the Messenger of Allah" on them, according to one of the survivors. He said the attack lasted more than 30 minutes, adding that he heard one of the attackers while saying, "This is the penalty for those who humiliate Mujahideen."

Three hand grenades were also thrown during the attack on those who tried to escape from the windows of the mosque, and fugitives were hunted, according to eyewitnesses. An eyewitness named Atef said that he his cousin were in the toilets of the mosque for wudoo' (ablution) before the attack, adding that when the attack started, they kept hiding there. "One of the gunmen entered the place of ablution and toilets and shot one of the worshipers in the toilet, but he soon left after another gunman asked him to leave for somewhere else with him," Atef said.

Another survivor (about 40 years old), Mohamed, who was sitting in the middle of the mosque during the attack, said: "Nearly 15 gunmen stormed the mosque. They were shooting from behind the worshipers, who were sitting on the ground, as if they were carrying out an operation of mass execution. They shot directly in the head, and one of the gunmen screamed at his colleagues saying, 'Don't let anyone run away. Kill them all'," according to the eyewitness. "Worshippers were overcrowding at the front of the mosque, trying to escape through the library room which had a window overlooking the street and the old courtyard of the mosque, when one of the militants threw a hand grenade killing large numbers of them. Another gunman attacked worshippers inside the library room using small explosive devices, killing them all. The eyewitness pointed out that the killers' dialect did not belong to the people of Sinai, nor was it even Egyptian; but it was closer to the dialect of people in the Levant. The bodies of

attackers were huge unlike the small bodies of the Sinai people. "They were not Sawarkah, nor Bayadiyah, nor Armilat, nor Tarabin, nor from Arish," he said, pointing out that they appeared to be experts in killing, and highly-skilled in shooting.

Fourth: Some previous incidents

In general, the Sufi movements in Egypt have always been known for their good relations and cooperation with ruling regimes since the era of Gamal Abdel Nasser until now. However, with advent of President Sadat and the political changes that took place in Egypt, especially the emergence of the so-called "Islamic Awakening", clashes started between the young Islamic currents and the Sufi movements in the seventies of last century. Also, there were debates between the emerging Salafi currents and Sufi figures from the Al-Azhar institution.

The Salafi advocacy has spread in Sinai since the nineties of last century. With the end of the Israeli occupation of Sinai, some tribesmen started to adopt the Jihadi Salafi thoughts, and formed armed groups that did not clash with the Sufis or the Egyptian army at that time. These groups used to only target Israeli forces or tourists coming from the occupied territories in South Sinai. This situation continued until 2011 when the region of North Sinai started to experience a wave of armed clashes (with the Egyptian police and army forces), including:

- 1- The first clash was in May 2011 when one of the shrines in Sheikh Zuwaid graveyard was blown up.
- 2- In July 2013, two shrines belonging to the Sufi Jaririya order were blown up in Al-Rawda village.
- 3- In August of the same year, the shrines of Sheikh Salim and Sheikh Hamid in the village of Mazar in Arish, near the Rawda village, were attacked.



4- In October 2016, militants belonging to Wilayat Sinai ("Sinai Province", a Jihadi militant group that later declared allegiance to the Islamic State organization) kidnapped a number of Sufi sheikhs (leaders) and followers in the villages of Shaibana and Al-Dhahir in the southern areas of Sheikh Zuwaid and Rafah, prompted them to attend Istitaba (repentance-seeking) lessons, and later released them after pledging not to return to practicing Sufi activities.

5- In November 2016, the organization blew up the tombs of two women (Shemi'a and Sabiha) in the village of Mazar, in the center of Arish city, near the village of Al-Rawdah. During the same month, the Sinai Province organization abducted one of the prominent figures of the Sufi Jaririya order, Sheikh Suleiman Abuharaz, 98, and one of his followers, Shaikh Aktifan Al-Mansouri, and killed them using a sword, under the pretext that they practice witchcraft and sorcery, not because they were Sufis. The execution was carried out against Abuharaz and Al-Mansouri by relatives belonging to Sinai Province.

A video, released by the organization called "Sharia Light" showed scenes of the demolition and detonation of shrines. Also, Sinai Province held an interview with the so-called Emir of Hisba (accountability official) and published it in "Al-Nabaa" newspaper's issue No. 58, where he described the Sufis as being "Mushrikeen" (devoting worship to others besides Allah), and that guiding them (for repentance) is better for the organization than killing them. The Hisbah official pledged to destroy all "zawias" where Sufis practice their religious activities.

Fifth: How media handled the massacre

In the beginning, I'd like to point to a significant remark, namely, that the first media organ that announced the attack and covered it was not an Egyptian channel or

newspaper; it was the UAE's Sky News Arabic, which is not the first time in the Sinai attacks.

We have monitored media coverage on three levels, the local media, the international media, and the Israeli media, as follows:

1- The domestic media

In general, the Egyptian media did not provide the due coverage of the terrorist attack on the Rawda mosque - as the only TV channel that was allowed to cover the incident from the very beginning was the Emirati-owned Sky News Arabic which was the first to announce the attack as we said before. It was also noted that the military forces imposed control over the survivors of the incident as well as the movement of the media. Moreover, the funerals of the victims and their burial processions were not covered by the media. However, media outlets were keen on emphasizing the following points:

- a) The incident was the first of its kind in Egypt against an Islamic religious sect.
- b) The armed groups have changed their strategy. They moved from targeting army and police officers to targeting Christians, and are now targeting Muslim worshippers in mosques, as part of their plan to instill fear among citizens.
- c) The attack was not due to political factors as it targeted a village where the majority of population are known to be Sufis; and that the perpetrators of the crime were influenced by a fatwa (religious opinion) issued by Ibn Taymiyyah stating that the Sufis are “apostates”.
- d) The armed groups try to spread a state of frustration in the Egyptian street, after the great successes achieved by the Egyptian security forces in the fight against terrorism, particularly after the elimination of the perpetrators of the terrorist attack

in Al-Wahat, Western Desert, that claimed the lives of 16 police officers (October 20, 2017), according to the Interior Ministry statement.

e) The Al-Rawda mosque will not be the last incident, but there will be larger waves of violence during the coming period up to the middle of next year, coinciding with the expected presidential elections (although media stressed that there were no political motives behind the incident).

f) Continuing to stress that the elimination of terrorism in Sinai is only possible after carrying out mass eviction of citizens from North Sinai, so that the army and police forces can confront terrorists.

g) Accusing foreign parties of supporting the armed groups through inciting and financing them. Tariq Mahmud, a lawyer, filed a complaint (NO. 6549 of 2017) to the Alexandria Appeal Prosecution's Attorney General, against the Prince of Qatar and the President of Turkey for inciting and providing material and logistical support to the terrorist group that committed the massacre of Al-Rawda mosque. Also, Ahmed Ata, a columnist close to security and intelligence services, accused Turkey of supporting Takfiris and prominent figures designated as terrorists by the four Arab countries which are besieging Qatar, namely Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt.

h) Warning that there are attempts at the current period to incite the Egyptian people for staging an armed revolution against the regime before Al-Sisi completes his reign.

i) Exploiting the incident to escalate repression against opponents. For example, Amr Adib, one of the regime's close media arms, called for the execution of all sympathizers with terrorists.

2- The international media

The international media described the incident as a failure of the Al-Sisi regime in the face of bloody violence in the Sinai Peninsula, and that this was due to the Egyptian

regime's adoption of a policy of repression against opponents. Such policy has become the main feeder of terrorism in Egypt over the last period. Al-Sisi does not want to admit that he is facing insurgency in the Sinai Peninsula, not only terrorism; and therefore he does not deal with the problem in accordance with an appropriate counterinsurgency strategy (COIN), which further aggravates the problem. Many foreign media outlets highlighted the following points:

- a) The massacre was an evidence of the failure of Abdel-Fattah Al-Sisi's policy, in which he claimed that in order to eliminate terrorism, the political opposition must be crushed.
- b) The use of brute force does not work, as it has not achieved any positive results over the past years and was proven ineffective in solving the problem.
- c) The Egyptian regime must rely on a policy aimed at the reconstruction of Sinai and the improvement of social conditions.
- d) The attack might be a turning point in favor of the efforts of the Egyptian regime to eliminate the "Sinai Province" organization if they were the real perpetrators of the crime. After a massacre in Luxor in 1997 that killed 62 people, mostly tourists, former President Hosni Mubarak led a sweeping crackdown that crushed an Islamist insurgency centered in southern Egypt at the time. In fact, such incidents provoke the public opinion against the perpetrators, restrict the terrorists' ability to recruit new members or raise the funds that they need for carry out more operations, which could happen in the Sinai Peninsula.

In general, the Egyptian regime responded to all criticisms of the international media following the terrorist attack by accusing Western media of being biased and of applying double standards in the coverage of the incident, as expressed by the spokesman of Egypt's Ministry of Foreign Affairs Ahmed Abu Zeid in response to the coverage of the CNN channel, and The Guardian newspaper on his Twitter account.

3- The Israeli media

The Israeli media was keen on highlighting Israel's solidarity with the Egyptian regime, and its panic over the great Egyptian security failure, despite the intelligence support provided by the US and the "Jewish state" to the Egyptian regime. The Israeli media focused on the following points:

- a) The frustration of Israeli and U.S. circles toward the continuation of the Egyptian security failure in facing small numbers of militants, despite the support provided by Israel, including transfer of intelligence information and carrying out direct military operations such as bombing outposts belonging to the Sinai Province through Israeli drones.
- b) The absence of solutions by the Egyptian military and government, in light of the escalating numbers of armed operations in Egypt up to 1165 since the July 4 military coup.
- c) Expressing solidarity with Egypt, and the need to form a unified regional front to combat threats.
- d) The recruitment and involvement of the Sinai tribesmen in the war on terror could be a solution for the problem.

Sixth: Who is behind the massacre?

We're going to discuss here the scenarios of likely perpetrators of this horrible massacre. We have been keen on including all forces acting on the ground in this report, stressing that such massacre is the first of its kind in the Sinai Peninsula; amid fears that it may be the beginning for other operations:

1- The Egyptian regime

Some fingers pointed to the Egyptian regime, particularly Abdul Fattah al-Sisi - according to the rule of “looking for those who may benefit from the incident” - as some observers believe that the incident is directly in the interest of the Egyptian regime and what Al-Sisi calls ‘war on terrorism’ since July 2013. This argument is supported by many precedents of targeting civilians and mass killings carried out by the Egyptian regime. In fact, the current regime comes on top of perpetrators of mass killings in the history of modern Egyptian state, most notably on August 14 2013 when the Egyptian security forces carried out the most horrible massacre of peaceful civilians in modern history by killing more than 800 citizens during the dispersal of the Rabaa Square sit-in, as well as hundreds of killings since 2011. In the Sinai Peninsula, the army and police forces have carried out forced eviction and disappearance of the Sinai people, as well as torture and killing of civilians, either directly through the regime’s forces or through local militias formed from Bedouins and backed by the army, known as "Group 103".

Following are the two most recent incidents in Sinai in 2017:

1) “#Sinai_leaks” is a leaked video that was broadcast by the Mekameleen TV channel on April 20, 2017. The video shows an Egyptian army force led by a military intelligence officer, including local armed elements dressed in army uniform while carrying out extrajudicial execution of a group of civilian detainees, including a minor - which is considered a war crime. Later, on November 5 2016, the Egyptian army spokesman announced that they had been killed in armed clashes with the army forces. (They were the same persons who were extrajudicially killed and documented in the leaked video). According to Sinai Human Rights, the people who appeared in the leaked video were all detained by the Egyptian authorities, specifically in Batalion 101, east of Arish city,



in a cell lodging 18 people, until November 1, 2016. Then, they were moved on Wednesday, November 2, 2016, under the pretext of deporting them to Al-Azouli military prison, according to inmates, citing prison authorities. The extrajudicial killing took place on that day, according to the leaked video. It is noteworthy that this incident in particular was handled in detail in “Sinai Monthly Report” published by the Egyptian Institute for Political and Strategic Studies (EIPSS).

2) On January 13, the Egyptian Interior Ministry announced in a statement that its counterterrorism forces had tracked a group of suspected ISIS fighters to an abandoned house in al-Arish, a town on the northern Sinai coast, earlier that day and were preparing to raid the house when they came under fire. According to the statement, the troops returned fire and killed all 10 suspects inside. The ministry named six of the dead men and accused them of previously participating in killings and other attacks on security forces, including an attack on al-Matafi police checkpoint in al-Arish.

However, the names mentioned in the Interior Ministry statement had been detained and forcibly disappeared by the police. On October 24, 2016, the mother of Ahmed Rashid, who was then forcibly disappeared (before he was later killed), published a post on her Facebook account about her son’s detention. Amnesty International also confirmed that security forces had arrested and forcibly disappeared those youths a few months before the incident.

“The Egyptian judicial authorities must conduct an impartial, independent and thorough investigation into the killing of 10 men by the Ministry of Interior (MOI) on 13 January in al-Arish in the North Sinai governorate and bring those responsible to justice. Six of the 10 men were in police custody at the time of their killing, having been held incommunicado for up to three months,” Amnesty said.

“Egyptian internal security forces waging a campaign in the Sinai Peninsula against an affiliate of the Islamic State may have extrajudicially executed at least four and perhaps as many as 10 men in January 2017, Human Rights Watch said today. The security forces may have arbitrarily detained and forcibly disappeared the men and then staged a counterterrorism raid to cover up the killings,” the Human Rights Watch ([HRW](#)) said in its report.

Commenting on the short video that the Egyptian Interior Ministry released, purporting to show the raid itself, the HRW said that the video was "heavily edited" and that the raid was fabricated, which means that these young people were extrajudicially executed.

Some people may argue that all the incidents mentioned above were declared and adopted by the Egyptian regime, even if they were narrated in a different context. However, there are other incidents that were not adopted by the regime. For example, during the same month, January 2017, army forces stormed the Muthanna Bedouin community, central Sinai, and arrested four youths, namely Hussein Hassan Abu Ghabush (25), Ayad Salem Suleiman (44), Mohamed Eid Salman (21), and Khaled Mohamed Salman (22). The army forces took the young people out of the house, blindfolded them, handcuffed them, and then assassinated them in cold blood in front of their parents and children. Later, Al-Akhbar newspaper reported that unidentified gunmen killed them.

However, all the previous incidents came in the context of the Egyptian regime's violent treatment with political opponents, or in retaliation for any operation targeting the security forces. For example, the liquidation of the aforementioned ten youths in the city of El Arish came after an attack that had targeted al-Matafi police checkpoint. Also, the liquidation of 4 young people in central Sinai came after gunmen stopped a car and killed some recruits there.

There is another hypothesis that the operation was carried out by the local militias that were formed and backed by the army, called "Group 103". One of the most prominent members of "Group 103", Ibrahim Hammad, appeared in "#Sinai_leaks" video while carrying out extrajudicial executions. The last operation carried out by "Group 103" militia was on October 19, 2017, when some militants of this army-backed militia robbed some shops in the city of Sheikh Zwaid, and then informed Al-Zohour military camp that there were terrorists inside the city planting IEDs in the streets, to cover up their crime of robbery. However, the population informed the army forces of the reality, and Hammad was arrested temporarily before he was released later.

The question now is: why should a local militia, formed and backed by army, be implicated in such operation?

After the Egyptian army forces failed to effectively confront the Sinai Province organization, they formed various local armed groups to protect army and police checkpoints in cooperation with sheikhs (leaders) of tribes, most notably Ibrahim al-Argani and Mousa Abdel-Karim al-Dalh from the Tarabin tribe. These military-backed militias also participated in raids and arrests carried out by the police and army forces, and also engaged in military operations against the Sinai Province militants. These militias are active in Rafah and Sheikh Zweid.

Some pro-government tribe sheikhs attempted to mobilize the Sinai tribes through what they called, "Union of Sinai Tribes" against Sinai Province and declare war against the ISIS-linked jihadi organization, but they did not achieve much success. The organization called these militias "Sahawat" (likening them to the Iraqi Sahawat forces – mostly Sunni tribal groups that emerged in late 2006 to confront al-Qaeda in Iraq). However, many tribesmen refused to join these militias and refused to be likened to 'Sahawat' by the Sinai Province.



Later, the ISIS-affiliated organization dealt a heavy blow to the army-backed tribal militias on May 10, 2017, killing prominent field commanders, including Salem Abu-Lafi Al-Turbani and Tamer Al-Sha'ir, which EIPSS monitored in detail in "Sinai Monthly Report" of May.

Since then, local tribal sheikhs, including Mousa al-Dalh and Ibrahim al-Argani, have been trying to prove their competence, pushing the local environment in northern Sinai to clash with the Sinai Province but to no avail, due to several factors, including:

- First: The violent reaction from the militants of Sinai Province to any attacks targeting their outposts.
- Second: The fact that people in north-eastern Sinai strongly hate army and police forces because of evictions, shelling, indiscriminate killing, arrests and enforced disappearance practiced against their sons.

In this context, an incident such as Al-Rawda mosque massacre can be used to mobilize tribes against the Sinai Province. The first reaction to the massacre came from the Union of Sinai Tribes, where groups of its militias deployed and closed some main roads in southern Rafah. The Union then issued a statement following a meeting that discussed the implications of the al-Rawda attack. "We will take revenge on extremists," the union said. "The Sinai massacre will backfire. We will not rest before we take revenge." They called for the killing of all members of the terrorist organization, and called all young men and tribesmen of Sinai to join the Union's fighters.

However, the attack was outside the control and movement of the Union of Sinai tribes' fighters, specifically those belonging to the Tarabin tribe who are active in the south of Rafah. Also, the population of Al-Rawda village mostly belong to the Al-Jarirat clan, a section of Sawarka tribe. If it was proven that the Union was involved in this attack, this would likely lead to a massacre against all its members. Anyway, such

information is difficult to hide, except in the case of killing all those who carried out the operation.

2- Foreign parties

The second potential suspect in this massacre is: "unidentified" foreign parties. It is noteworthy that this is not the first mysterious incident in Sinai; as there are two previous massacres, where the perpetrators are still "unidentified":

First: The first Rafah massacre was carried out on August 5, 2012, during the month of Ramadan by armed assailants who killed 16 army troops and then commandeered two armored personnel carriers, reportedly used in an attempted attack on the Israeli border. They crossed the border from the Kerem Abu Salem crossing in one of the two armored vehicles before it was destroyed by the Israeli air force. The locals then said that those behind the attack were foreign parties, while Egyptian media men accused the Israeli government of being involved in the operation, but without providing tangible evidence. Also, the Egyptian security services, particularly the military intelligence, did not allow disclosure of the results of investigations.

Second: The massacre of Khuraiza village, central Sinai, on September 14, 2015, when gunmen attacked a wedding, killed the groom and 11 people, and kidnapped the citizen, Zidan Ibrahim Tihi, the brother of Hassanein Ibrahim Tihi, who was killed earlier in a bombing by an Israeli drone in August 2012. Commenting on this attack, Sinai Province implicitly accused foreign parties on the land of Sinai of seeking to drive a wedge between the Mujahideen and the people of Sinai.



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الأزمة الإسرائيلية ولاية سيناء

الإيقاع بين القبائل والمجاهدين، والانتقام من أرض أنجبت للجهاد ليوشا صناديد أمثال الشهيدين المجاهدين إبراهيم عويضة وحسين إبراهيم تقبلهما الله، خبيب الله سعيهم وأبان فعلهم، فتقبل الله من قضى من المسلمين، وأرانا الله في قتلهم على أيدينا في قابل الأيام آية.

قتلنا الطيبة هي سيئات:

لقد أثبت هذا الحدث وغيره من الأحداث أن حجم المؤامرة كبير، وأن الأعداء الذين يتربصون بنا كثير، وأنهم لن يتوقفوا عند هذه الحادثة والله يقول: "ولا يزالون يقاتلونكم حتى يردوكم عن دينكم إن استطاعوا"، وهذا يستدعي منكم عدم الانجرار خلف أي قول أو حادثة لاتهام المجاهدين أو الوقوع في شرك المتربصين ممن يريد زعزعة صفوف المجاهدين، بل يتحتم عليكم الالتفاف حول المجاهدين الذين خبثتم صدقهم وحرصهم عليكم، وهم يدفعون بأنفسهم للقتال أمامكم، ويقدمون دماءهم لربهم، لا لرضى اليهود وحلفائهم، وقد تيقنتم من حرصهم على دمايتكم، فمنهاجهم في ذلك ما رواه أبو هريرة رضي الله عنه أن رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم قال: "كل المسلم على المسلم حرام دمه وماله وعرضه" (صحيح مسلم).

وأخيرا يا أبناء قناتينا.. فإن الوقت عصيب والهجمة شرسة فأروا الله خيرا بالتحامكم مع جنود الولاية، فلا سبيل لكسر حدة هذه المكائد إلا بالجماعة، وإلا فإن الفرقة عذاب، فخذوا أمماتكم، وناصروا من تعلمون من أبنائكم بألا يقتفوا في صف اليهود والجيش المرتد، ويربؤوا بأنفسهم أن يكونوا حسب ملاحم قادمة، فالمجاهدون أولى بالنصرة والتأييد، وبثباتنا جميعا يعز دين الله ويخس الكافرون والمنافقون.

والله أكبر

والله غالب على أمره ولكن أكثر الناس لا يعلمون



These two incidents and others led Sheikh Aref Abu Akar, a senior tribal sheikh in North Sinai governorate to accuse the Israeli regime of being behind the incident, which was also confirmed by Major General Mohammad Rashad, former General Intelligence Service deputy. Also, TV Presenter Nashwa al-Hofi, close to the regime, said in her program on Al-Nas channel that what is happening in Sinai is not far from the Israeli "Giora Island" plan to annex areas from Sinai within a proposed settlement in the region. In fact, such accusations are repeated after any attack in Sinai, most notably the first Rafah massacre amid the silence of the security services.

But in view of the nature of the incident, its beneficiaries, the incident consequences, and the call by Israeli analysts that the Egyptian regime should involve tribes in the Sinai war, we conclude that the attack was not in favor of the armed organizations, but on the contrary, it can contribute to mobilizing people locally against them. It is also difficult for the Egyptian regime to directly carry out such operation in a village where its main clan has strong links to the security services.

This suggests involvement of foreign parties in the attack in the context of creating a state of terror among the local population that may accelerate their evictions. Also, the attack could create a state of anger among local population against the armed organizations, pushing the tribes to cooperate effectively with the Egyptian security forces and the army to eliminate them completely. Such confrontation would not only weaken the armed organizations, but it could contribute to the weakening of Sinai tribes and the depletion of their arms and sons, which directly serves the Israeli interests.

Similar mass massacres took place in Palestine when armed operations were carried out by the Zionist gangs in 1947 and 1948 against the Palestinian civilians to force their eviction.

So, the Rawda attack may be in the context of provoking the tribes in Sinai against the Sinai Province, and creating a state of domestic horror that could lead to a wave of mass migration. The attack may also lead to mobilizing behind the Egyptian regime, which openly supports the Israeli movement within the so-called “Deal of the Century”, including: the most recent decision by US President Donald Trump to recognize Jerusalem as capital of “Israel” and transfer the US Embassy to it. Although the attack exposes the failure of the Egyptian military in Sinai, it also represents an opportunity for carrying out more massive military and security operations in Sinai, of course in Israel’s interest.

Evidence supporting this suggestion:

1- An Israeli Channel 10 reportage in October 2016 said the Israeli army has recently formed a unit of the “musta’ribeen” (Arabized Israelis), where officers and soldiers are keen on using Arab uniform and language for disguise. The reportage said the officers



of this unit are training in the desert on tactics for fighting the Sinai Province in Sinai. This means that they are likely to carry out killings inside Sinai. The reportage also showed that there is coordination between the Israeli unit and the fixed sites of the Egyptian army along the border, including exchange of information, which allows freedom of movement for the officers of the Israeli unit.

There are two things that support this hypothesis:

First: There are no similar attacks or acts of deliberately killing civilians – particularly children – inside a mosque, that were carried out by Sinai Province militants, Egyptian army forces, security services, or the military-backed militias. (N.B. In fact, there have been previous incidents where the Egyptian army and police deliberately targeted mosques and killed civilians, as happened in Rabaa Mosque and Al-Fat’h Mosque in August 2013. However, this was in the context of demonstrations and sit-ins in which the regime considers a direct threat to its presence in power.)

Second: The testimony of Islam Mohammed Abdul Hamid, a surviving child, who said, describing the militants, "All of them had scary large bodies, not of normal human beings; and their dialect was not Egyptian. They were laughing with each other as if they were in a contest for killing the most number." Islam also said that they, sometimes, abused each other using indecent words, which is not normal to fighters of the armed jihadi organizations.

2) The existence of intelligence and security cooperation between the Egyptian and Israeli regimes, which may allow such operations. In February 2016, John Kerry, the former US Secretary of State, stated during a press conference with Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry that there is coordination in Sinai between Egypt, Israel, Jordan and America. Under this coordination, Israel allowed Egyptian military aircraft to penetrate the "Israeli" airspace and carry out operations against the rebels in Sinai. Finally and most importantly, the Israeli professor Ephraim Harara has revealed that



Egypt for security and intelligence assistance from Israel in the Sinai, which means that the Egyptian regime would allow the existence of Israeli work groups on the ground in Sinai.

3) The existence of recent declared precedents of carrying out killings inside Sinai by Israeli security forces, according to Israeli Defense Minister Lieberman who admitted to the Israeli radio in February 2017 that the Israeli army launched an attack in Sinai via a drone and killed some people there. In April 2017., the Israeli Channel 10 said in its account on twitter that: "Sinai: targeting a house south of Rafah, with an Israeli drone missile, to kill a person."



חדשות 10
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אלגז'ירה: אדם נהרג בתקיפה של מל"ט ישראלי
על בית ברפיח בדרום סיני

Also, Israeli security sources have disclosed to Western and Israeli newspapers (Yediot Ahronot and Ha'aretz, citing Bloomberg) that Israel carried out drone strikes in the Sinai Peninsula:

a- Yediot Ahronot: Israeli drones have reportedly struck terror targets in the Sinai Peninsula several times over the past few years, in cooperation with Egypt, a former Israeli official told Bloomberg.

b- Ha'aretz: Drone strikes have been carried out in recent years with Egypt's okay, former Israeli official tells Bloomberg. Israel's deputy army chief says cooperation between Israel and Egypt has never been better.

4- A previous massacre of worshipers on Friday, where drones believed to be Israeli launched an air strike after Friday prayers on Al-Agra area, south of Rafah in January 2017, killing about ten citizens in front of the mosque. While the Egyptian media



ignored the Israeli attack, Al-Jazeera TV reported that the bombing targeted a house belonging to Hussein Ali Hussein al-Sawarka in al-Agra area after Friday prayers during a gathering of members of the al-Sawarka family. A video clip was circulated showing the tragedy.

However, some may question the ability of foreign forces to operate freely in Sinai, but the Washington Institute for Near East Policy published in December 2016, a report entitled "Maintaining Relationships Behind Closed Doors", including an excerpt from a recent interview with David Schenker, director of The Washington Institute's Program on Arab Politics: The report explicitly states that "Egypt has reportedly allowed Israel carte blanche to deploy unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) over Sinai, with the authority to target Islamist militants at will." This gives freedom of movement to the Israeli army in Sinai under the pretext of targeting militants.

3- The Islamic State (IS)

The involvement of the Islamic State's local affiliate, Sinai Province, is the last and strongest hypothesis so far, for many reasons, including:

- The parent Islamic State (IS) organization has precedents in targeting Sufi groups in other countries;
- The Sinai Province organization had carried out an operation in Bir al-Abed before when they set up an ambush on August 9 and killed an army officer and three policemen. On September 11 the organization targeted a security convoy near the village of Taloul, Bir al-Abed, and destroyed it completely using a car bomb, and killed survivors.

It is noteworthy that Sinai Province always targeted Egyptian army and security forces, as well as Christians in the context of claims that the Coptic Church has allied with the

military regime. The IS-linked organization did not carry out any operations in Sinai or anywhere in Egypt targeting mass killings of Muslim civilians before. So, why do some accuse the Sinai Province of being behind the Al-Rawda mosque deadly attack despite the negative effect of this on the organization's popular incubator that was motivated by the severe repressive practices of the Egyptian regime against the people of Sinai?

Reasons behind these suspicions include:

1) The first and most powerful argument on the involvement of Sinai Province in the Rawda mosque terrorist attack is that the organization published a report in Issue NO 58 of its organ, Al-Nabaa, in December 2016, where Hisba (accountability) official described Sufis as polytheists, The Sufi 'zawia' in Rawda village was mentioned more than once during the interview, and the Hisba official pledged to remove this zawia at the proper time. He also stressed that the Sufis in Sinai are polytheists and infidels and that they should be killed. However, he confirmed that calling (preaching) and guiding them has the most priority. He stressed that he only wants guidance for the Sufis. More importantly, the organization has proven through its organ that they know exactly the timetable and places of the Sufi activities (i.e. Friday and Monday nights). The question now is: Why didn't they target the Sufis during their activities instead of targeting the Rawda Mosque during Friday prayer, in the presence of many non-Sufis, and dozens of innocent children? Anyway, such question may contribute to weakening this argument so much.

wedding, killing the groom and a number of attendees, and kidnapping Zidan Ibrahim al-Tihi.

This particular point is the most obvious argument, and a question arises: Is it possible that the Sinai Province was the perpetrator?

Yes, he is one of the main defendants for several reasons, including:

- a) The organization's carelessness towards the lives of civilians, especially after the death of Abu Doaa Al Ansari, the former leader of the organization in Sinai,
- b) The death of the organization's first and second ranks due to the military strikes launched by the Egyptian army forces within operations martyr's right (3,4), which contributed to weakening the organization's control over its fighters,
- c) Increasing psychological pressure on Sinai Province's fighters as a result of the continuing bombardment and intensified campaigns in light of the inability to open new fronts outside Sinai, as well as the elimination of the parent organization,
- d) The growing influence of al-Hazemi stream within the Islamic State organization, a fierce Takfiri stream resisted by the organization leadership.

It is likely that some elements of this stream joined the branch of the organization in Sinai. Several facts emerged in November 2017, including:

- On Friday, November 3, Sinai Province fighters stormed the Nqizat area, south of Rafah, and abducted several people from the tribe of Tarabin after Friday. This was not the first time that the Sinai Province targeted abduction of worshippers during Friday prayers, as a similar attack by the organization fighters took place on Al-Risan village, central Sinai, on Friday, October 27, 2017, where several citizens were arrested, 12 of whom were released 3 days later on October 30.

There is also another important development: On November 9, the organization stopped a number of vehicles on Al-Hassana road, central Sinai, and set them on fire under the pretext of cooperating with the army. This incident was repeated more than

once. On September 16, 18 and 27, the organization set 40 vehicles on fire. What is new in this incident was that the Sinai Province organization executed 9 drivers: Atef Mohamed al-Baghdadi (36), Eid Henry (61), Ibrahim Eid (31), Suleiman Abdulmaola Abbas (27), Muammar Fikri Desouki (47), Mohamed Ashraf Ahmed Awad (30), Ahmed Abdo Ali Yousef (50), Khaled Sami Meseilhi Ghoneim (46), and Sayed Ali Sayed Morsi (25), A question may arise here: Why do we suggest the involvement of Sinai Province organization in the execution of drivers, although the organization did not adopt it? The reason for this is that during the same incident, Lt. Colonel Ibrahim Hussein Sayed Ahmed, Commander of Operations 351-infantry and Colonel Mamdouh Al-Sayyid Al-Roubi, a soldier, were killed in the same incident. After their death, the organization ignored the execution of drivers while declaring the adoption of the attack against the military.



Previous incidents:

There are many other incidents that indicate the absence of discipline within the Sinai Province organization as well as their disregard for the lives of civilians that the organization had claimed that it came out to defend them, which indicates a change in

the organization's thought and capability recently, in terms of discipline and control of its elements, in addition to the low interest in the popular incubator or civilians compared to In the years of 2014 and 2015. For example, on July 19 2017 the organization fighters targeted the checkpoint of Al-Mahager, on the road to the al-Arish airport , with a car bomb, killing and wounding a number of military; however, the largest number of the dead were civilians, where 7 citizens whose cars were parked in front of the checkpoint , were killed (two women and two children). These incidents may be due to the growing number of fighters who left Syria and Iraq following the retreat of the organization there to joining the Islamic State's Egyptian affiliate In Sinai, or the absence of the ability to impose discipline on young newcomers from the local population, who usually have a desire to avenge in the lack of training and absence of Sharia science.

There were other incidents, including on August 5, 2017, when the organization's gunmen violently dealt with the local residents of Tawil al-Amir area, Rafah, while burying the body of Khaled Abu Melih, who was executed by the organization for collaboration with the army. The organization militants prevented the young man's family to bury his body in a Muslim cemetery on the grounds that he was an apostate, which angered people. The gunmen opened fire, injuring Abdallah Abu Gedei' with a bullet in the head, who later died on August 10.

Seventh: Why silence?

The Sinai Province's supporters defend the organization's silence by saying that it is not required to comment on the massacre, but this does not justify its silence in several ways:

- 1) The organization denied its involvement in a previous incident on September 14, 2015 - the attack on a wedding in Khuraiza village, central Sinai.
- 2) The Sinai Province claims that it is responsible for all the land of Sinai and that the organization has come to support all the Sinai people, and it has previous comments on major incidents targeting civilians; so why is it silent on this attack which is considered the largest mass killing of Muslims in Sinai so far?
- 3) It is in the interest of the organization to deny the incident and accuse others, which strengthens its popularity in the face of the Egyptian regime forces, maintain its popular incubator, and end the confusion among its supporters.

However, the Sinai Province organization has not commented on the incident so far, and its media organs ignored it completely, while continuing to publish daily news about the clashes with the army and security forces. This leads to the following hypothesis: A part of the organization, characterized by a degree of disorder, is responsible for this attack -that we believe is most likely. But this does not necessarily mean that there were orders given to kill the worshipers at Al-Rawdah Mosque. Also, the organization may be fearing the implications in the case of claiming responsibility for the attack, including the loss of a large part of its popular incubator in Egypt. This could also promote strong splits within the organization, and lead to the unification of tribes to fight against it in attempt to avenge the victims. In the case of the organization's denial of involvement, this would lead to a state of loss of trust among the organization's fighters in their leadership and accordingly weaken its military power.

All of the above information can help us to suggest a hypothetical scenario for the incident in the event that Sinai Province organization was really involved:

Some elements within the organization may have been implicated in the attack after receiving fake information that the people of Al-Rawda village were preparing an



ambush for them inside the village, which led them to attacking the village at that particular time. The source of such information could be a security breach inside the organization. According to some local sources, a member of the organization called "Eid Abu Azan Turbani" earlier drew the organization to clashes with members of the Tarabin tribe, before the organization later discovered that he had links with the Israeli intelligence and executed him. In this hypothesis, the second and third scenarios can be combined together. (Foreign fingers and Sinai Province combined).

In the same context, this hypothesis can be modified in part by the assumption that a group of the Sinai Province organization carried out the attack in an uncontrolled manner, either because it was mainly composed of foreign fighters who are alien to the region, or that this group may have been infiltrated by security agents and enticed to carry out such a massacre to force the Sinai people towards mass eviction, and facilitate the scenarios associated with the "Deal of the Century".

There is another hypothesis that the attack was an attempt from the organization to repeat what they earlier did on October 27 and November 3 when they arrested a group of worshipers during Friday prayers to interrogate them. Regarding the village of Rawda, the militants may have faced a kind of resistance at storming the village, which prompted them to decide to kill all the men in the village. In addition, the organization members are psychologically prepared after receiving fatwas that the Sufis are apostates and should be killed. (But deliberately killing dozens of children reduces the likelihood of this hypothesis).

Whatever the presumption is, it is clear that there has never been any targeting of Muslims with such mass killings in Sinai before. If it was proven that the Sinai Province organization was completely behind this brutal operation - the first time to target Muslims in Sinai in this way, this would likely lead to waves of mass migration from North Sinai. On the other hand, these incidents are likely to strengthen the Egyptian

regime and mobilize the Sinai community behind the government, in addition to having support from the Egyptian society in order to eliminate the largest armed insurgency facing the Republic of Egypt since its establishment after the coup of 1952.

Eighth: A future outlook

The incident of the Al-Rawda Mosque comes amid growing debate on the so-called Deal of the Century, and the disclosure of secret British documents on former President Mubarak's agreement to allow Palestinians to settle in Egypt upon an American request in 1983 - provided that it would be part of a work agreement for settling the Arab-Israeli conflict. This plan cannot be completed except through a deliberate neglect of the reconstruction and development of North Sinai. Hosni Mubarak was keen on this negligence, which was confirmed by Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ), a German newspaper. The German daily said that former President Mohamed Morsi's interest in the development of Sinai was one of the main reasons behind the military coup against him led by his Minister of Defense, and current head of regime, who has brought North Sinai back to the circle of marginalization. Based on this data, there is no indication that the situation in the Sinai Peninsula is likely to calm down in the few months and years to come. In light of this, some political actors desire to maintain the state of marginalization and violation of basic rights in the framework of supporting the so-called Deal of the Century, along with an absence of political freedoms and lack of public support for the regime's security policies. Also, the unprecedented security crackdown by the regime is likely to generate a permanent desire for retaliation and contribute to the deterioration of economic conditions. In addition, Sinai's common borders with Gaza Strip and the occupied Palestinian territory means that it would always be affected by the situation inside Palestine in

general, both positively and negatively. Also, Sinai has become a target for all jihadi organizations that wish to find a safe havoc, especially at the nearest point to Israel. Here we'll try to draw some possible scenarios for the future of the situation in the Sinai Peninsula, including:

1- Armed operations will be continued at the same pace

According to this scenario, the armed operations in Sinai will continue in the same way with emergence of new actors in the scene. Although the Sinai Province organization suffers from loss of many of its leaders and trained cadres as a result of the Egyptian successive military campaigns in addition to Israeli drone strikes and decline in the material and logistical support which the militants used to receive from the parent IS organization, yet, the IS-affiliate organization can still deal painful blows against the Egyptian army and police forces.

On the other hand, the last few weeks have seen the return or the recalling of the "Jund al-Islam" organization, which soon announced that it targeted a group affiliated with the Sinai Province organization. (N.B. The Union of Sinai Tribes also adopted the same operation before them, exactly on October 12, 2017, which raises suspicions about the return of the Jund al-Islam organization and its relationship with the security services.)

It is also expected that some foreign parties such as Iran and Salafi jihadist movements in Palestine, will be keen on maintaining a balance in the security situation in Sinai. Iran believes that a calm situation in Sinai is not in its favor at a time when the global system is looking for a new enemy to fight against and Iran is most likely to be such enemy. On the other hand, the jihadi movements in Palestine as well as all major powers believe that the explosion of the situation in Sinai may be in favor the so-called Deal of the Century. As for Israel, the continuing conflict in Sinai will certainly be in its favor,

for the continued depletion of the Egyptian army, as well as the acceleration of the Deal of the Century.

However, the IS organization and its local ally, Sinai Province, believe that Sinai represents an important point of struggle, where the terrorist organization could use it for launching its attacks both inside Egypt and Israel at the same time. This (act of launching attacks) is aimed at creating a momentum that will secure the continuation of recruitment of new fighters after the IS failure in Syria and Iraq.

In addition, the Egyptian regime tries to exploit the armed operations in Sinai to maintain the flow of the international community support, as Al-Sisi presents himself as a partner in the world's 'war on terrorism'. The Egyptian government also uses the events in Sinai as a bargaining card for maintaining Israel's political support for regime, and achieving more gains on the ground.

2- Explosion of the situation in Sinai

This scenario is likely to occur at any time due to the current political changes in the international and regional system and the state of liquidity in the region, and the desire of regional players to have quick gains.

Saudi role in Deal of the Century and Sinai

While the Israeli regime wants to accelerate the elimination and closure of the Palestinian cause, the Saudi regime is witnessing accelerating internal changes that go side by side with a covert rapprochement with Israel. The Saudi changes, which apparently include a shift in the kingdom's conservative nature, come within the framework of Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman's effort to gain the Western countries' support to his plans for accession to the Saudi Crown. Bin Salman has established strong relations with US President Trump, and plays a prominent role in

movements towards conclusion of the so-called “Deal of the Century”. In this context, Mohamed Bin Salman’s efforts included:

1- Concluding a deal with the Egyptian regime to give up the country’s strategic Red Sea islands of Tiran and Sanafir to Saudi Arabia, which helped turning the waterway in that area from exclusive (Egyptian) territorial waters to international waters.

2- Practicing pressures on Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to agree on a deal to end the Palestinian issue, in favor of Israel.

3- Providing a tacit consent – together with Al-Sisi – on US President’s decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem and recognizing the holy city as the capital of "Israel".

4- Seeking – together with Al-Sisi and Abbas – to end any armed Islamist resistance movements in the Gaza Strip, in favor of Israel.

5- Signing an agreement with Abdul Fattah al-Sisi, on establishing a free zone in North Sinai to link North Sinai with Saudi Arabia's NEOM project, which will have various ports in Saudi Arabia and Egypt to serve UAE’s Dubai, Bahrain, Kuwait, Egypt, Jordan, countries overlooking the Red Sea. “The purpose of signing this free zone north of Sinai is to link it with Neom,” the prince said, adding that “Neom will have a lot of ports. Some of them in Saudi Arabia and some of them in Egypt.”

In one way or another, Bin Salman’s NEOM project is connected with Egyptian investments in the Suez Canal area and Sinai, such as Essalam (peace) Canal (86,500 km long) that crosses the Suez canal through a siphon of four tunnels (100% completed) to the peninsula extending 175 km eastward in north Sinai. All works related to the canal, including industrial works were completed, including bridges, barricades, and others, as well as 12 irrigation and drainage pumps. The canal is planned to provide water for the cultivation of 150,000 hectares in north Sinai out of the total targeted 248,000 hectares.

In addition to the poor economic conditions that the Gaza Strip is undergoing as a result of the long-standing siege, there are attempts to force the Palestinian people to give up their historical rights. These factors make the area extremely sensitive and vulnerable at any time as a result of any sudden action outside the context.

3- Changing the political scene:

Although this scenario seems extremely difficult, at present, yet it is not completely excluded. Even a partial change in the Egyptian political scene – such as replacement of Abdul Fattah al-Sisi – could lead to reducing the internal tense situation, especially if this was accompanied by the issuance of a general amnesty for political prisoners, suspending the death sentences against defendants, and allowing political action for various political forces.

Also, the Egyptian army needs to focus its strategy in Sinai on fighting the Islamist insurgency there, and to stop using the military operations for gaining international support for the regime, under the pretext of counter-terrorism, this will gradually lead to weakening the operations carried out by the armed groups in Sinai, and elimination of the insurgency completely.

Conclusion:

The massacre of the Al-Rawda mosque marked a dangerous turning point in the scene in the northern part of the Sinai Peninsula. The massacre is the first of its kind in terms of the targeted victims, their number and the way of execution, which presupposes scenarios for continuation of bloodshed and instability in Sinai, which is most likely to escalate unless there is a political breakthrough in the Egyptian scene.

Though we believe that it is most likely that a group of Sinai Province carried out the deadly attack, however, we cannot confirm this because there is no conclusive evidence, especially that the Egyptian security and intelligence services do not allow the presence of field researchers or independent journalists or human rights organizations in Sinai.

As things used to be in previous massacres, the only declared data is that which the military spokesman releases in his statement. Regarding the attack on Al-Rawdah mosque, the official statement said that all those involved in the attack were killed, and that search is ongoing for other likely perpetrators to eliminate them. This means that there will be no witnesses and no serious investigation into the truth.

It is ironic that both the militants and the regime were keen on leaving no signs or witnesses behind them. As one of the gunmen screamed in the face of his colleagues during the massacre, saying "Don't let anyone escape. Kill them all," later, the spokesman of the Egyptian army announced that all the perpetrators of the massacre were eliminated, which means that both parties do not want to leave witnesses alive.