

The U.S. Must Help Egyptian President Sisi

The silence was truly deafening. Not a sound from Archbishop Desmond Tutu or Alice Walker or the eager boycotters of Israel or the United Nations Human Rights Council about the brutal massacre of more than 70, perhaps 100, Egyptian soldiers and civilians by Islamist terrorists in the northern Sinai peninsula.

Since Israel, after the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, withdrew all its forces and all settlements – including Yamit – by 1982, the Sinai peninsula has been plagued by terrorist attacks, especially against tourists, by kidnappings, and by violence. After the 2011 Egyptian revolution and consequent uprisings, a major terrorist group emerged and became even more belligerent after the coup that deposed President Mohammed Morsi on July 3, 2013. This was Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (ABM) that has claimed responsibility for numerous attacks against both Israeli interests and Egyptian personnel.

These assaults included an attack in July 2012 against a Sinai pipeline, a rocket strike in August 2012 on Eilat in south Israel, suicide bombings in el Tor in southern Sinai in May 2014, downing an Egyptian military helicopter in a missile attack, car bombings and hand grenades in Cairo, assassinations and attempted assassinations of Egyptian officials, beheading of four individuals in October 2014, an attack on a security checkpoint, and the June 29, 2015 murder in Cairo of Hisham Barakat, the Egyptian Prosecutor General, who in only two years in office had detained hundreds of members of the Muslim Brotherhood. He was the most senior Egyptian government official murdered.

In November 2014, ABM declared its allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (IS) and accepted the new self-

appointed Caliph. It appears to have several hundred trained operatives and collaborators. There are different opinions about the actions of the Sinai Bedouin population, especially that of the largest of the 10 major tribes, the Tarabin tribe in northern Sinai, a tribe that is notorious for drug dealing, weapons smuggling, and human trafficking in prostitutes and African labor workers. Tarabin is said to have called for unification of all the tribes against the terrorists, but rumors of clashes appear to be untrue, and some even allege collaboration with the terrorists. What is true is that local Bedouin tribesmen, alleging discrimination by the state against them, have launched attacks against government forces in Sinai.

Over the last two years ABM, now regarding itself as a dedicated affiliate of IS, has tried to undermine the rule of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. It has attacked Egyptian army posts, and security centers, and also the UN Multilateral Force in northern Sinai, that oversees the terms of the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel, and tried as well to infiltrate Israeli territory.

There had already been terrorist attacks on October 2014 and January 2015 when more than 30 were killed on each occasion in northeast Sinai. The most dramatic deed of ABM, which now seems to have changed its name to Province of Sinai, (POS) was the series of simultaneous coordinated attacks on July 1, 2015 on fifteen army centers of security forces and checkpoints in northern Sinai. The attacks, including three suicide bombers, killed at least 70 soldiers and civilians.

Evidently POS, imitating its mentor IS that has taken and now rules cities in Iraq and Syria, wanted to take over the city of Sheikh Zuweid, close to Israel, and cut off Rafah from al-Arish.

The danger to all of the democratic countries is immediate for a number of reasons. The first is that the success of the

terrorists in their daring ambushes, control of the roads, taking police officers hostage, and planting mines in the streets, indicates not only their disciplined activity but also the influence of IS operatives directly and indirectly through training. IS in Iraq and Syria has operated in just this aggressive and disciplined fashion. All authorities responsible for security in the United States should be conscious of and take account of this highly organized success and of the threat of future similar attacks in the U.S. itself.

The second reason is that Hamas in Gaza is providing support to POS with weapons and logistical support, and even with Hamas terrorists taking part in operations. These have come from Hamas commanders in the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades that have been prominent for anti-Israeli attacks, including suicide bombings against civilians inside Israel. One particular active commander is Wael Faraj, who has smuggled wounded fighters from Sinai into Gaza.

A third problem is the obvious attempt to undermine and aim at the overthrow of President Sisi, a voice of sanity in the Muslim world. He has courageously criticized the extremists of his religion. In his remarkable speech at al-Azhar University in Cairo on January 22, 2015, he said that fellow Muslims needed to change the religious discourse and remove from it things that have led to violence and extremism. The Muslim religion, he said to imams, is in need of religious reform.

Since he assumed power on June 8, 2014, Sisi has attempted to stem the tide of terrorism by reinforcing the Sinai, restricting traffic, imposing curfews in the area, and demolishing homes of suspected terrorists in Rafah. He sought to create a buffer zone along the border with Gaza, and to destroy the tunnels built by Hamas. But clearly Sisi needs help to survive. It is imperative for the U.S. together with Israel to provide that help to the overwhelmed Egyptian army and intelligence services.

Israel is acutely aware of the danger. P0S captured armored vehicles on July 1, 2015 that it can now use to penetrate the border fence between Sinai and Israel. That fence is unlikely to deter a trained terrorist group that now has combat experience. Israel responded by closing roads and two border crossings as a precautionary measure. But all the democratic countries, especially the United States, and also the United Nations because of its Multilateral Force, are now aware that the Islamist terror is at their doors as well as at the outskirts of Israel, and should act accordingly.

First published in the