



The Tahrir Institute
for Middle East Policy



Attack at Rawda Mosque



SPECIAL BRIEFING DECEMBER 7, 2017

Introduction

During Friday prayers on November 24, a group of armed assailants attacked worshipers at Belal Mosque in the village of Rawda in North Sinai, **killing 311 civilians**, among them 27 children, and injuring 128. Egypt's public prosecutor and eyewitnesses **placed** the number of assailants between 25 and 30, reporting that they used explosives and gunfire in an attempt to kill all inside, barring egress for those trying to flee. Reports indicate they also targeted male villagers in their homes and in the surrounding area, and burned vehicles and targeted first responders to prevent medical care for any wounded.

While no group has claimed responsibility for the attack, it bears many of the hallmarks of Wilayat Sinai, the Islamic State's branch in the peninsula, and in this way, highlights the persistence of violence amid a general obscurity around the actual security situation in the province. The massacre comes months after the emir of Wilayat Sinai's *hisbah* (Islamic police), whose identity is unknown, made public the group's intentions to target members of Egypt's Sufi community, and, specifically, members of the Jariri order in Rawda. Wilayat Sinai has previously highlighted the order's close relationship with the state.

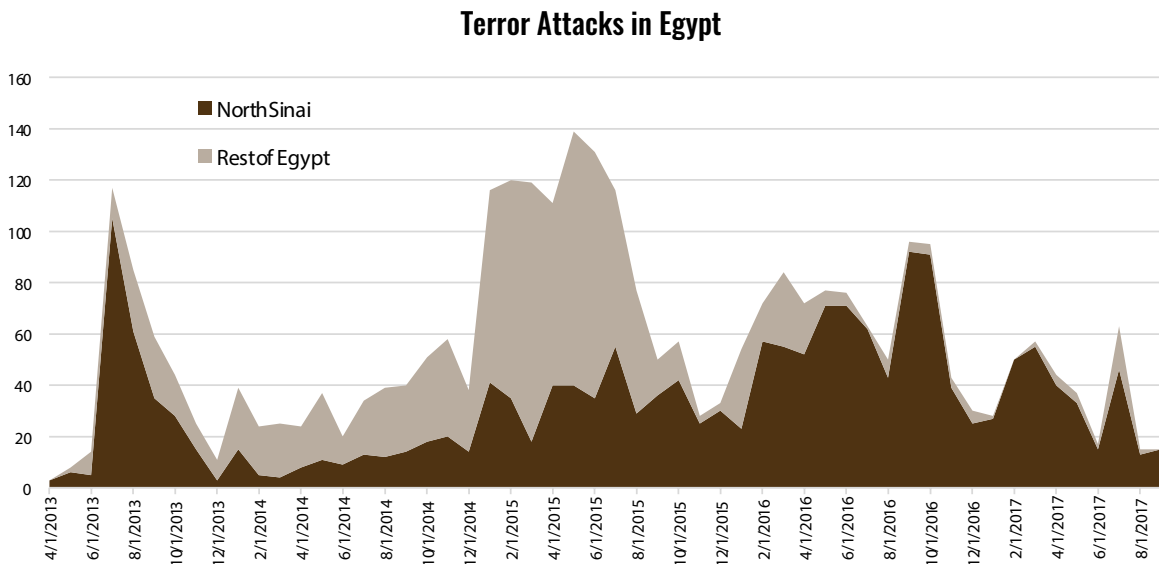
Surpassing the fatality count from the 2015 downing of a commercial aircraft over central Sinai, which killed 224 passengers and crew, the Rawda attack is the deadliest terror attack in modern Egyptian history, as well as the deadliest sectarian incident. It marks the greatest loss of life in a single incident since the Rabaa massacre in August 2013.

The attack brought strong condemnation and condolences from around the world, with leaders of state, **business**, and media commenting on the particularly heinous and tragic nature of the violence.



Satellite image of Rawda village, Google Maps, 2017, <https://www.google.com/maps>

Context: Terrorism in Egypt

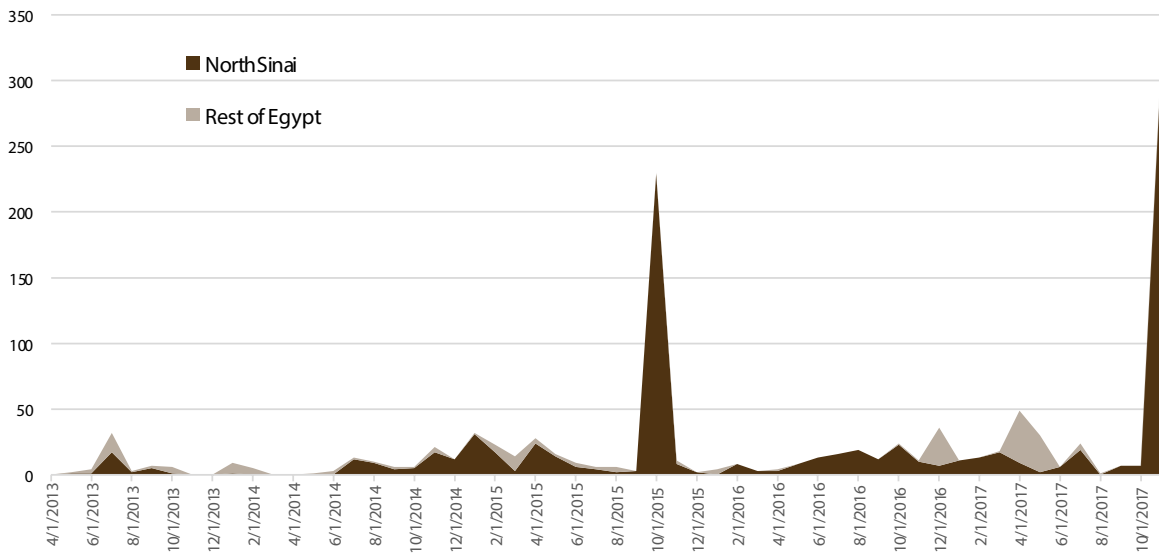


- The attack marks the deadliest event in an insurgency that has been raging in the North Sinai province since mid-2013. While the rate of attacks has seen some peaks and valleys since this time, it has by no means abated over the past three and a half years: the average rate of attacks reported per month was 11 in 2014, 34 in 2015, 57 in 2016, and 32 in the first nine months of 2017¹.
- The attack also mirrors trends throughout Egypt, where civilians have been increasingly killed in deadly attacks. In the three years from December 2013 to 2016, four mass-casualty attacks² were reported in which civilians have been killed, including the Metrojet bombing that killed 224 aboard a Russian passenger plane; since December 2016, there have been five such attacks. The total number of civilians killed in attacks has also increased: a total of 588 civilians were reported killed in the three years from December 2013 to 2016, and 507 civilians have been reported killed since then.
- While mass-casualty civilian attacks are on the rise, other attacks reported in North Sinai have overwhelmingly targeted security forces: 76 percent of attacks reported in the province this year have targeted security forces. At least 396 civilians and 292 security forces have been killed in terror attacks in North Sinai in 2017, surpassing last year's fatality total, in which 446 were killed in the province.
- North Sinai attacks have previously been carried out in and around Rawda, though the village is located to the west of the heart of the ongoing insurgency. In February 2016, assailants targeting a police armored personnel carrier [planted](#) an explosive on the side of the road in Rawda. More recently, on September 11, 2017, militants [attacked](#) a police convoy in nearby Tilul, reportedly killing 18 policemen.
- The Islamic State's media outlet al-Hayat released a video, *Flames of War II*, on November 30 that included a segment on North Sinai and appeared to show the Tilul attack. Though they made no mention of Rawda, the video highlighted the political and religious importance of Sinai due to Egypt's alliance with America and Sinai's place in Islam. Wilayat Sinai has claimed at least 861 attacks since it pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in November 2014.

¹ Due to TIMEP's methodology and vetting of data, only data reported through September 2017 has been reviewed. Any later data presented in this special briefing is of a preliminary nature, meant for the purposes of illustration.

² Mass-casualty attack here refers to attacks in which 10 or more have been killed. Other mass-casualty attacks were reported during this period but targeted only security forces.

Civilian Deaths in Attacks



Context: War on Terror

- In a speech given to mark the Prophet Muhammad’s birthday, President Abdel-Fattah El Sisi said that he holds the armed forces chief of staff, Lieutenant General Muhammed Farid Hegazy, along with the Ministry of Interior, responsible for restoring stability and security in Sinai within three months. Sisi notably authorized the use of “brute force” in fulfilling that goal. The mandate comes amid the state’s ongoing efforts in its [war on terror](#), which was declared in July 2013 after the ouster of President Muhammad Morsi, and a spate of attacks that plagued the country at that time.
- The Egyptian air force conducted a number of air strikes in response to the attack, reportedly [hitting](#) on Friday a number of vehicles the assailants had supposedly [used](#) to flee. The war on terror in North Sinai has involved a large number of air strikes and ground raids, and the Egyptian military and Ministry of Interior have reported the deaths of over 2,600 “terrorists” in these operations since the declaration of the war on terror.
- Years of military strikes, the creation of a buffer zone on the Gazan border, and the threat from militants in the east have pushed families out of their homes, often west and into city centers, and have changed North Sinai’s demographics. At least 12,851 residents in the cities of Arish, Hasna, and Bir al-Abd (near where the attack occurred) are internally displaced people, according to a government [survey](#). Similarly, after a series of sectarian attacks on Christians in February, nearly all of North Sinai’s Coptic population left the province, placing additional strain on the state and local communities outside Sinai to support them.
- United States President Donald Trump condemned the attack from his personal Twitter account, declared his commitment to defeat terrorists, and insisted on the construction of a border wall and a travel ban (though he did not clarify how the domestic measures might prevent future loss of life in Egypt). On November 29, the Pentagon spokesman [said](#) in a statement that the Rawda attack is an example of why the U.S. should remain involved in the Middle East. The U.S. has traditionally provided \$1.3 billion in annual assistance to Egypt in the form of foreign military financing, though some of this has been [withheld](#) under the Trump administration for failure to adhere to human rights standards.

Context: Sectarianism in Egypt

- Although no perpetrator has yet claimed the attack, the Islamic State's affiliate in the Sinai, Wilayat Sinai, had brought the village into focus with sectarian rhetoric since last year. In an interview with the emir of Wilayat Sinai's *hisbah* (or Islamic Police), published in December 2016, Wilayat Sinai warned that it would target the Jariri *tariqah* (order), "eradicat[ing]" its *zawiyas* (places where Sufi rituals are observed), specifically mentioning Saud (in the province of Sharqia in the Nile Delta), Arab (in the Suez Canal province of Ismailia), and Rawda. That interview came soon after the beheading of a well-known Sufi sheikh, Abu Heraz, and one of his followers. Just weeks before the massacre, Wilayat Sinai **distributed** leaflets to the residents of Rawda, warning them to halt the "heretical" Sufi rituals near the mosque.
- The attack marks the deadliest sectarian incident to take place in Egypt's recent history. Rawda village is home to about 2,000 inhabitants and is located between the Qantara-Arish highways 28 miles west of the North Sinai provincial capital, al-Arish, and is home to many who follow the Jariri *tariqah*. According to Eshhad, a nonprofit organization that monitors sectarianism in the region, the attack **brought** the total number of deaths in sectarian-related incidents in Egypt to 415 for 2017.
- Attacks on civilians at worship such as the one at the Rawda mosque have been on the rise. These have **included** a December 2016 attack at a chapel in the St. Mark's Cathedral complex that killed 25; twin Palm Sunday **bombings** in April 2017 that killed 47 in Alexandria and Tanta; an attack in May this year on a bus of pilgrims in Minya that killed 28; and an attempted attack on the St. Catherine's Monastery in April in which two security forces who prevented it were killed. All of these attacks were claimed by the Islamic State.
- In addition to the aforementioned attacks on Sufi sheikhs and anti-Sufi rhetoric from the Islamic State, North Sinai has witnessed attacks on the province's Christian population. Perpetrated by Wilayat Sinai, as well as anonymous actors suspected to be affiliated with Wilayat Sinai, a spate of killings in February 2017 targeted Coptic Christians in al-Arish. After seven men were **reported** killed, some of whose bodies were burned, Christians fled the city. Other sporadic instances of violence against Christians occurred between 2013 and 2016, but there was no discernible pattern to those attacks.

Incident Analysis and Implications

The timing and execution of such a large and brutal attack suggest a complex and multilayered logic that cannot be explained by any one causal factor. Several dimensions that are important to consider are:

- *Sectarian targeting:* The attack and the warnings delivered in the weeks and months prior undoubtedly display a sectarian element to the attack, targeting a community for its practice of Sufi rituals that do not conform with a militant interpretation of Sunni Islam. Such a sectarian framing—particularly the labeling of the victims as apostates and sorcerers—marks a tactic by militants to dehumanize their target and justify their deaths based on religious interpretation. This is particularly concerning, as Sufism is deeply ingrained in Islamic norms across Egypt (**and elsewhere**). While the Jariri order was specifically targeted in this attack, the sectarian justification could apply to a wide range of Egyptian Muslims.
- *Tribal dimension:* Rawda is also known to be home to many members of the Sawarka tribe. Most of these are from the Jarirat clan, the largest in Sinai; the Jariri order was founded by Sheikh Eid Abu Jarir, a member of the Jarirat. By virtue of the heavy Sawarka presence in Rawda, the attack

highlights important tribal dynamics. Sawarka leadership have declared the tribe's support for the state's counter-terror campaign through their leadership in the Unified Tribes of Sinai³. Though it is unclear to what extent this declaration represents the views of the entire tribe, Sawarka members have been previously targeted, kidnapped, and interrogated for their cooperation with the state, with no mention of their religious practice.

- *Undermining the state:* Militants in Sinai have been focused on their fight against the Egyptian state for years, and while this attack may appear a departure as it targets only civilians, it still managed to undermine the state's narrative of success. The Egyptian state has constantly declared its efforts in the province to be successful, and the attack showed its inability to protect the civilian population.
- *Global jihadism:* Amid losses in Iraq and Syria, the attack demonstrated the potency of militant jihadism in other areas. Although it was not explicitly claimed by the Islamic State, the brutal and sectarian nature of the attack still shows the strength of its vision and worldview. One eyewitness [said](#) that the militants were speaking a Levantine-like dialect of Arabic. While the report has not been confirmed, the mention of possible foreign fighters on the scene also underscores the importance of this global element at a time when fighters may be leaving the Levant in search of new locales.

Policy Analysis and Areas of Concern

The attack, as the deadliest in a recent history of particularly deadly attacks, marks both a tragic toll and a foreboding omen. The implications for this attack on Egypt's security landscape, particularly for its counterinsurgency efforts in North Sinai, are solemn.

- A local source reported to CNN that the site had been [threatened](#) at least five times before the attack and other reports suggest that Egypt's security services also [warned](#) of a possible attack. Locals [erected](#) waist-high sand barriers around the mosque and closed nearby roads to protect themselves. Having subverted road blockades, demonstrating knowledge of the mosque, and comprising dozens of militants, the Rawda attack was executed with a high degree of sophistication and planning, and suggests an enduring capacity to carry out large-scale attacks. No report has yet indicated precautionary measures taken by the government or security forces despite ample evidence of a threat. Particularly while threats remain on several other Sufi places of worship, security bodies must prioritize collecting, analyzing, and acting on intelligence to protect local populations.
- The incident has shone a new light on the government's inability to adequately and safely deal with the issue of internally displaced peoples due to the ongoing conflict, as many present and killed in Rawda were from elsewhere. Such displacement—without proper attention to housing, infrastructure, and economic activity—erodes human dignity and causes long-term policy challenges. While the Tahya Masr Fund⁴ announced that Bir al-Abd would [receive](#) 400 million Egyptian pounds for local services and development projects, it is unclear where these funds will be directed at present, and critical that resources are directed to address displaced populations.
- The potential engagement of other non-state actors, or the involvement of aggrieved, potentially highly armed, local populations, hints at Sinai possibly following in Libya's footsteps. The Unified Tribes of Sinai [released](#) a statement pledging to eliminate the perpetrators, saying: "We [the Sinai

³ The Unified Tribes of Sinai brands itself as a tribal coalition fighting militancy in Sinai, though the extent of their involvement in the state's ongoing counter-terror campaign is unclear. The primary source of information on their involvement is media controlled by the coalition, the credibility of which is questionable. It is also unclear how representative the views of the coalition are of the tribes they claim to represent.

⁴ In June 2014, Sisi created the Tahya Masr Fund to support Egypt's development efforts and economy through private donations. The fund is managed by an executive board, executive committee, and a board of trustees, and is under the direct supervision of the president.

tribes] do not have trials or prisons,” and one tribal leader also reportedly said during a television interview that tribes had formally requested to fight alongside the military. Though there has been no official response, these pledges, as well as [reports](#) of the state’s cooperation with local militias, raise serious questions about the involvement of these actors. As was seen in neighboring Libya, reliance on armed non-state actors without a strategic framework for post-conflict disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration can create long-lasting policy challenges and, at worst, lead to new forms of protracted conflict.

- The response to the attack signals the potential for human rights violations and continued deterioration of the rule of law. Sisi’s instruction to use “all brute force necessary” raises red flags about efforts that may not adhere to legal and international laws and norms on use of force. The aforementioned presence of non-state actors, incidents such as that of a video that seemed to show [extrajudicial killing](#) carried out at the hands of a state-backed militia, and the Sinai tribes’ rejection of due process raise even higher the concerns about breakdown of order. These concerns reaffirm the necessity of maintaining rule of law in conflict, and holding accountable, rather than emboldening, those who transgress it.
- The attack also underscores the historical, social, and economic marginalization of North Sinai, and the unique challenges the state faces in securing its border areas. As TIMEP [noted](#) in a previous briefing on the Bahariya Oasis attack, “Securing the border requires not only strong intelligence on militants’ operations and locations, but buy-in from local populations in the region who know these blind spots best, and who may otherwise be inclined to tolerate, deal with, or even directly support militant groups.” This is particularly salient for Sinai populations who have been at the brunt end of the conflict in their backyards, but who have failed to see meaningful investment in or respect for their lives and livelihoods.
- For the above mentioned reasons, Sisi’s call for an eradication of terrorism within three months sets an unreasonable timeline. Such demands, without an explicit strategy that upholds the rule of law, risk exacerbating the security situation, unduly harming the local population (including religious minorities), and further eroding state and military legitimacy if they remain unmet. Already, human rights abuses, excessive use of force, extrajudicial killings, and collective punishment have been concerns in the war on terror in North Sinai, and Sisi’s statement seems to call for an escalation of these worst practices for counter-insurgency. Countering an insurgency requires targeting threats based on intelligence, but also long-term strategies that address root causes of radicalization, and includes political, economic, and social responses as well as military ones.
- On the heels of a major attack in the Western Desert, the attack has shown the failure of the Egyptian state to adequately address terrorism, despite having built much of its legitimacy on the necessity of success in the war on terror and receiving ample international support for its efforts. This raises major concerns for the future of global efforts to combat terrorism, as Egypt appears to be emerging as a new frontier for jihadism. Al-Qaeda has reemerged in the country with recent activity, and the Islamic State’s new *Flames of War* video clearly identifies Sinai as a critical battle ground. International policymakers should thus view attacks like that at Rawda as globally significant and consider Egypt’s war on terror as not only of domestic import. Thus, it is of the utmost importance that material and political support be targeted to this threat, conditioned on best practices for counter-insurgency, and reflect long-term strategic objectives.



The Tahrir Institute
for Middle East Policy

1140 Connecticut Ave NW Suite 505
Washington, DC 20036
office 202 969 3343
fax 202 480 2178
timep.org

The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP), a nonpartisan and nonprofit organization, is dedicated to understanding and supporting Middle Eastern countries undergoing democratic transitions and committed to informing U.S. and international policymakers and the public of developments in these countries.