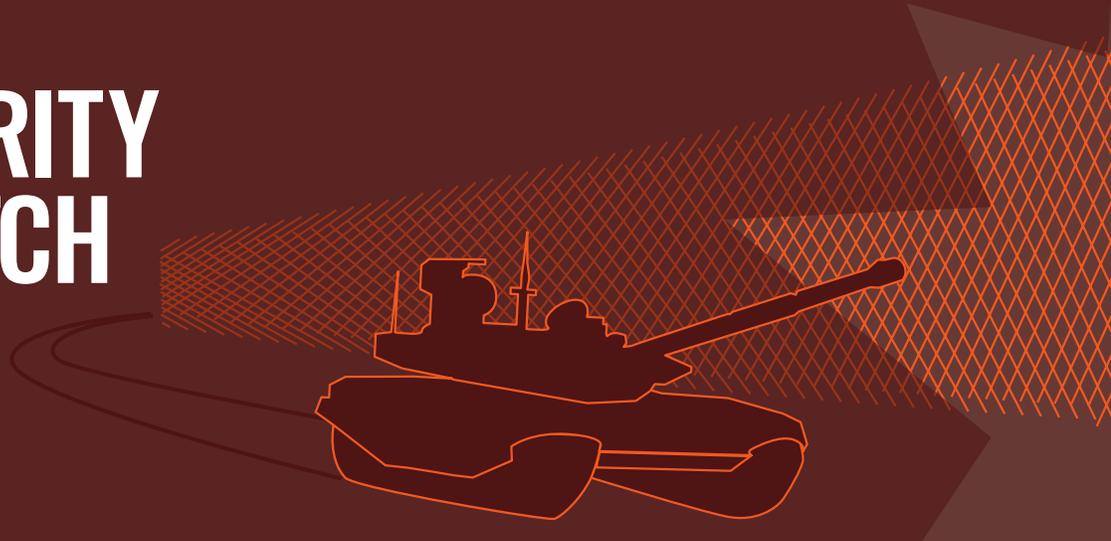




EGYPT SECURITY WATCH



WEEK IN BRIEF MAY 25–31, 2019

Summary

- Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army extradited Hisham Ashmawy to Egypt, handing him over to Egypt's General Intelligence Directorate. Ashmawy was captured in October 2018 in Derna.
- A Twitter report said that the Egyptian Army and the Sinai Tribes Union killed two suspected terrorists near al-Barth, south of Rafah.
- Mada Masr reported that four civilians, one of them a child, were killed and eight were wounded when a rocket shell hit a house in Goura, south of Sheikh Zuweid.
- Wilayat Sinai claimed responsibility for three attacks in North Sinai this week.
- The Supreme Military Court of Appeals rejected all appeals and upheld 17 death sentences and 19 life sentences in connection to the 2017 Palm Sunday bombings.

LNA Transfers Hisham Ashmawy to Egypt's General Intelligence Directorate

On May 28, the Libyan National Army (LNA) extradited Hisham Ashmawy to Egypt. The LNA transferred Ashmawy to Egypt's General Intelligence Directorate (GID) following a meeting between GID Director Major General Abbas Kamal and Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar. In October 2018, Ashmawy, a former officer in the Egyptian Armed Forces' Saeqa special forces unit, was captured in Derna by the Libyan National Army, which controls the eastern part of the country and is supported by Russia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates.

Ashmawy had been involved in jihadist activity in several different theaters around the Middle East. After expressing radical religious beliefs to other servicemen and making inflammatory remarks about the military while a member of the Egyptian special forces, Ashmawy was moved to an administrative position, referred to a military court, and eventually discharged late last decade. Since that time, Ashmawy has fought with several al-Qaeda-affiliated jihadist groups. Following the arrest of jihadist Muhammad Jamal in December 2012 (and Jamal's later conviction) for his connection to the September 2012 attack on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi, some Egyptian security officials believe Ashmawy may have succeeded Jamal in his leadership position. Ashmawy allegedly traveled to Turkey in April 2013, crossed into Syria, and reportedly visited a number of bases operated by al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra where he fought alongside them against Assad's forces.

Ashmawy operated under the umbrella of Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (ABM), the precursor to Wilayat Sinai, throughout 2012 and into 2013. Along with a few military acquaintances, including Major Emad al-Din Ahmed Mahmoud Abdel Hameed (known by aliases "Mostafa" and "Ramzy") he reportedly formed an operational cell that "specialized in teaching killing techniques." Some sources also claim that Hisham led a military training committee and acted as head of the organization's operational planning—whether these are the same roles is not clear. After an attack at Karm al-Quwadis on October 24, 2014—coordinated by ABM—Ashmawy likely fled to Libya, reportedly sustaining injuries from security personnel as he traveled on North Sinai's Suez Road. Ashmawy likely severed his relationship with ABM around the time of its pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State in November 2014 and Wilayat Sinai later branded him an apostate. Ashmawy was then reported to have trained in several al-Qaeda bases near their Derna stronghold, and to have fought alongside Majles al-Sahawat, an al-Qaeda affiliate that declared war on the Islamic State.

In a video that surfaced in July 2015, Ashmawy announced the formation of a new terror group, al-Morabitoon, and its ideological ties to the al-Qaeda organization. While the group made no formal claims, authorities suspect its members to have been behind several large attacks, including the June 2015 attack against Luxor's Karnak Temple and the assassination of Egyptian Prosecutor-General Hisham Barakat in July 2015.

Cairo's Sixth Circuit Criminal Court placed Ashmawy on a terrorist entities list for his alleged involvement in a number of high-profile attacks, including the attempted assassination of Interior Minister Mohamed Ibrahim in 2013.

For more on Ashmawy's group, al-Mourabitoon, see TIMEP's profile.

Egyptian Armed Forces and Sinai Tribes Union Conduct Joint Counter-terror Operation Near Rafah

A Twitter report said that two suspected terrorists were killed in a joint raid conducted by the Egyptian military and the Sinai Tribes Union, an unofficial coordinating body for the Sinai Peninsula's tribes. The report said the two suspected terrorists were involved in attacking a pro-government militia patrol. Wilayat Sinai claimed an attack matching that description on April 21, when an IED targeted a pro-government militia convoy in Rafah's Ajra neighborhood.

The Egyptian military has partnered with tribal militias in its counter-terrorism efforts since 2015, when the Sinai Tribes Union offered counter-terrorism recommendations to the government. In September 2018, reports emerged that the Egyptian government began equipping tribes in central Sinai for counter-terrorism duties. More commonly, tribespeople have provided intelligence to counterinsurgents in the Sinai—a practice for which Wilayat Sinai often targets them.

Four Civilians Killed, Eight Injured in Shelling Near Sheikh Zuweid

On May 27, Mada Masr reported that a rocket shell destroyed a house in Goura, south of Sheikh Zuweid. Four civilians, including a child, were killed and eight others were wounded. The source of the shell could not be definitively determined.

Two similar incidents have been recently reported from Sheikh Zuweid. Earlier this month, three were killed in the crossfire between security forces and militants, and in October 2018 a stray shell destroyed a home in Sheikh Zuweid. The North Sinai Social Solidarity Directorate estimated that 621 civilians were killed and another 1,247 were injured from stray bullets and shelling between July 2013 and mid-2017.

This week's incident coincided with the release of a Human Rights Watch report chronicling human rights violations by Egyptian security forces on residents of Sinai. Egyptian Military Spokesman, Tamer al-Refai categorically denied the report's contents, without specifically mentioning the report itself.

Wilayat Sinai Claims Three Attacks

Wilayat Sinai claimed three attacks in North Sinai this week. On May 27, the group killed a soldier in an ambush, east of Arish. On May 28, Wilayat Sinai claimed an improvised explosive device (IED) attack, which killed one soldier and wounded another near Rafah. On May 29, an IED attack targeted a military vehicle near Sheikh Zuweid.

The three attacks bring Wilayat Sinai's May total to 19, representing the most attacks conducted by the group since January. It appeared that Wilayat Sinai's operational tempo would slow, when, in February 2019, the group claimed just seven attacks. In the three months since, however, the group has recorded 13, 14, and 19 attacks in March, April, and May.

17 Death Sentences, 19 Life Sentences Confirmed by Supreme Military Court of Appeals

On May 28, the Supreme Court of Military Appeals rejected an appeal and upheld a ruling which sentenced 17 defendants to death and 19 to life imprisonment for their role in the 2017 Palm Sunday church bombings. The court's decision continues a trend of death penalties being levied and carried out despite concerns of due process violations. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has called on Egypt to halt all executions until sufficient reforms had been made to ensure due process.



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EGYPT
**SECURITY
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