

Egypt's ABM Declares Allegiance to ISIL; Al Nusra Joins ISIL Alliance in Syria

Middle East Briefing

January 2015

The idea that terrorism is “in retreat,” as has been alleged repeatedly during the last few years, should have been totally discredited by now. Only recently, we have witnessed an attack on an Egyptian Navy vessel off Egypt’s North Coast; reports of successful intermediation between Jabhat Al Nusra (JAL) and ISIL in Syria; the foundation of the Islamic State; the resumption of the insurgency in Mali; mounting pressures on the fragile situation in Yemen; and more graphic atrocities by Boko Haram in Nigeria.

But of that broad sweep, the most recent developments—those in Egypt and Syria—deserve special attention. Off the coast of Damietta in Egypt, a daring attack on a military Navy vessel by one boat carrying a group of well-armed radicals resulted in almost destroying the Navy boat and in killing several servicemen. The surprise attack was designed as a propaganda operation and revealed the creative tactics of Ansar Bait Al Maqdes (ABM).

ABM offered its “Bai’a” (allegiance) to Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi the Caliph of the Islamic State, and by this decision, ended a long internal debate. The organization followed the declaration of allegiance to ISIL with an escalation of its military operations in Egypt, while the political supporters of its ideology are preparing for a large scale confrontation with the authorities on the 28th of November, and on the 25th of January anniversary of the 2011 revolution.

The Salafi Front (SF) in Egypt is targeting these dates in intensifying its preparations for what it calls “the Islamic Revolution” in Egypt, that is, gathering in all squares across the country, plus demonstrations, and, violence. A good portion of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) youth are active in the preparation steps while the leadership of the organization whispers some scattered condemnation of violence from time to time. Repeating what happened between 1970 and the late 1990’s, the MB uses violent groups as a vehicle to advance its political objectives, namely regaining power in Cairo all the while keeping a formal condemnation and a good margin of deniability in its position towards them.

The escalation of Jihadist violence in Egypt, when added to the rise of ISIL in Syria and Iraq, will certainly lead to a regionally coordinated campaign which we see shaping up almost every day. The reported deal between JAL and ISIL in Syria is tactical and operational in nature. It does not mean that the two organizations have ended their bitter differences, as is obvious from the pressures exerted recently by Al Qaeda’s Ayman Al Zawahiri on ABM not to join ISIL. However, the spiritual leaders of the new wave of Jihadi Salafism are working hard to get the two groups together to unite in facing “the nonbelievers’ war on Islam”. The first step to achieve this objective is to get ISIL and JAN to “coordinate” their fight in the immediate range while continuing the debate to settle differences at the same time.

A similar deal was reached last October in Lebanon in parts of the East Qalamoun region, west of Beka'. This "rehearsal deal" specified the rules of engaging Shia and Christian populations and of dealing with army personnel prisoners. The Lebanese six-point agreement—of which the major points are that none of the signers should fight the others, that assigns Sharia courts to settle disputes, focuses the effort on fighting Hezbollah, and proscribes the armed groups from killing Christians—is the basis for what recently happened in the North of Syria.

But while it is obvious that we are in the midst of a high wave of religious radicalism in the Middle East, this crisis situation has been used to spread the intellectually bankrupt attack on Islam as a religion.

This attack on Islam ignores the fact that holy books and other religious texts are understood by people and that this understanding is therefore shaped by those people agencies and perspectives according to their times. This historic, and hence changeable, ability to understand and accordingly give an interpretation of the text is, in its turn, formed by the specific set of circumstances surrounding the people at any given time. A religious text could be understood in any number of ways, depending on how the people of the corresponding time see it. Their interpretation of this text is not a function of the text itself, but a function of the way they think and the conditions that shaped this pathway.