

Sufi mosque attack in Egypt elicits condemnations, creates new alliances

Even al-Qaeda supporters criticized the killing of more than 300 people at Friday prayers.

by [Taylor Luck](#) in the [January 3, 2018](#) issue

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) The militants who attacked an Egyptian mosque frequented by Sufi Muslims may have alienated the people they were trying to recruit, according to analysts.

The self-described Islamic State and its affiliates are the leading suspects in the deadliest act of terrorism in Egypt's history, which killed more than 300 people on November 24 and put a conflict between Islamic ultraconservatives and mystics front and center. By waging war on a centuries-old Islamic order and attacking a common ritual of Muslim life—Friday prayers—the perpetrators of the attack on the Al Rawda mosque are turning parties that were neutral toward them into their enemies.

The attack has led to widespread condemnation of the persecution of Sufis. It may have been an attempt to rally citizens in a Sunni-majority state, similar to the way ISIS has enflamed sectarian tensions in Shi'ite-Sunni communities in Iraq and Syria. ISIS has frequently listed Sufis among "heretics" and "soothsayers." In 2016, the group executed a 97-year-old Sufi cleric in Sinai and listed the Al Rawda mosque among Sufi places of worship to be targeted.

"They were unable to create a sectarian war between Christians and Muslims, and now they are just targeting Muslims writ large, irrespective of local dynamics," wrote H. A. Hellyer, senior nonresident fellow at the Atlantic Council in Washington, D.C., and an associate fellow at the Royal United Services Institute in London, in an email.

Calling Sufis heretics has been common among hard-line Salafists over the past two decades. The ultraconservative Sunni sect equates the Sufi movement's veneration of clerics, tombs, and spiritual festivals with polytheism and idolatry.

Salafi groups backed by Gulf clerics targeted Sufi shrines, tombs, and mosques in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt. ISIS has taken the campaign a step further by using violence, demolishing Sufi mosques in Syria, assassinating Sufi clerics in the Sinai, and attacking a shrine in Pakistan and now a mosque in Egypt.

In countries such as Egypt, where according to research there are 3 million official members of Sufi orders and 15 million who identify with the movement, ISIS's call to arms against Sufis has fallen flat. Sufi heritage runs deep in North Africa and is tied to local traditions and customs that predate Islam.

Sufi practices, such as celebrating the Prophet Muhammad's birthday, observed by millions of Muslims in late November, and the Hijri New Year, have become accepted in many Arab and Muslim communities.

"It is a very popular religious practice, and it is a popular religious order in Egypt," said Omar Ashour, visiting professor of security studies at the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies in Doha, Qatar. "By this, the group is making an enemy of a large portion of the population."

The use of violence against Sufis has forced many hard-line groups to condemn the attacks, though they are anti-Sufi.

Adding to the political fallout from the attack is the fact that the mosque, although founded by a Sufi order, was frequented by non-Sufis and Sufis alike. Mosques, although they may be founded by certain communities, are open to all Muslims no matter what school or order they follow. On Friday, the Al Rawda mosque was full of men, women, and children praying before Friday lunch, a ritual across the Arab and Muslim world that transcends boundaries, schools, orders, or doctrines.

It may be the reason, observers say, that ISIS and its affiliates did not claim responsibility for the attack, and why even al-Qaeda supporters criticized it.

ISIS has thrived by gaining the trust of disenfranchised communities across the Arab world. In the Sinai, local communities and tribes have been largely cut off from Cairo, seeing little development, investment, or job opportunities over the past two decades. Groups aligned with ISIS, such as Ansar Bait al-Maqdis, now known as IS Sinai Province, promised to provide protection against the government. The Egyptian military's response has been blunt and harsh, an indiscriminate campaign that has resulted in widespread civilian casualties and arrests and allegations of

torture, bringing life to a halt.

Caught between ISIS militants and the military regime, most citizens remained wary of getting involved. This has allowed Sinai Province, which numbers some 1,500 members, mobility in the region.

“So far in Sinai Province, the clan and tribal support has been divided about ISIS, and the majority is neutral, without large support for the regime,” Ashour said. “This could change.”

Already, the attack has united Sinai tribes in opposition to ISIS, with many signing up to join the Egyptian military’s operations and publicly urging all tribesmen to join the fight against ISIS.

The Union of Sinai Tribes, a grouping of one dozen clans formed in the face of the rising influence of ISIS, issued a statement calling on its followers to join the military in its operations against militants south of Rafah.

“We call on all men and youths of Sinai tribes to join their brothers,” the statement read. “Our men will not sleep until you are punished for your crimes.”

Such support from ISIS’s potential recruiting base, no matter its prior reservations, would significantly aid Egypt, which has struggled for three years to put down the Sinai Province insurgency.

“It will be increasingly unlikely that anyone in the Sinai is going to back anything other than the effort to defeat ISIS in the Sinai, irrespective of any grievances they have,” Hellyer said.

But it remains to be seen whether Arab states can take advantage of the potential shift in public opinion to build broader support for their campaigns against ISIS. In Egypt, the military has been heavily reliant on missile strikes and tanks to counter the insurgency, causing high numbers of civilian casualties without providing local communities alternatives or incentives to aid Cairo’s efforts.

Should President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi’s government extend a hand to an injured community, it may finally sway the campaign in Sinai and prevent ISIS’s expansion westward into Upper and Lower Egypt.

Yet in his public address after the attack, President el-Sisi indicated that his government was not going to change course in the Sinai, vowing to respond with “the utmost force.”

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