



Egypt Twin Blasts: An Analysis

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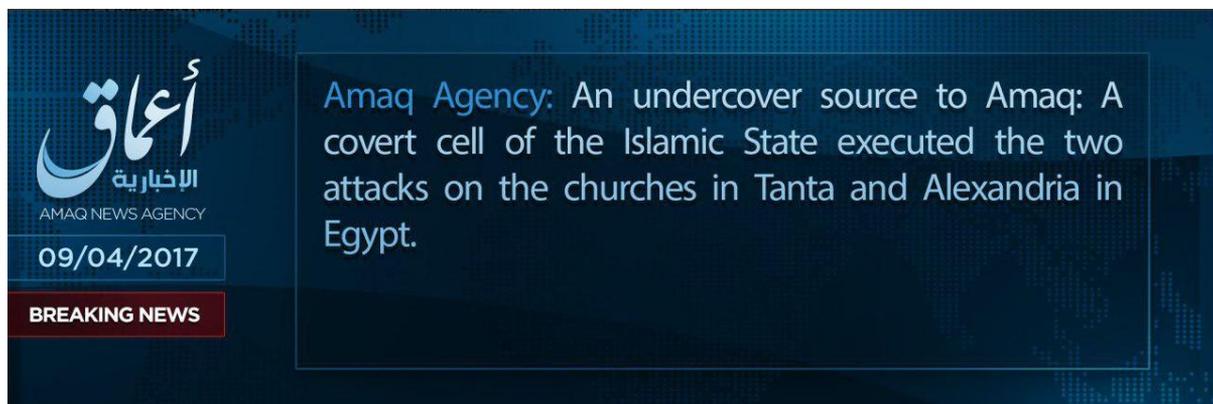
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INTRODUCTION

The Islamic State (IS) on April 9 claimed responsibility for twin suicide attacks targeting Coptic Churches in Nile delta city of Tanta and in Alexandria, killing at least 44 and injuring over 100. The attacks are particularly notable given the high casualties inflicted, as well as the high degree of coordination that was demonstrated in the two attacks, underscoring the Sunni jihadist militant groups overall operational capability to launch sophisticated attacks in the country. Furthermore, the latest attack follow a similar suicide bombing of a Coptic church in Cairo in December 2016 and continued targeting of the minority group in North Sinai Governorate's al-Arish, forcing a sizable section of population to relocate from the region. The paper thus aims to analyse the rationale behind the timing and selection of location of the April 9 attacks, trace IS's possible future plan of action in terms of its operational capabilities in mainland Egypt, as well as attempt to provide a forecast in terms of impact of the latest attacks on Egypt's overall security scenario for the coming weeks and months.



IS-linked media reports on the twin attacks

Furthermore, the latest attack follow a similar suicide bombing of a Coptic church in Cairo in December 2016 and continued targeting of the minority group in North Sinai Governorate al-Arish, forcing a sizable section of population to relocate from the region.

WHY NOW?

POLITICO-RELIGIOUS CAUSES

Unlike previous attack on a Coptic church in Cairo in December 2016, IS was relatively quick to claim the April 9 attacks. Furthermore, given that it occurred on Palm Sunday, which is significant for the Christians across the globe, including Egypt, as it commemorates Jesus's entry in Jerusalem and usually carry a relatively larger turnout to churches, thus providing additional potential targets for IS. Coptic Christians, as per IS's ideology are considered as apostates and thus liable to attacks. Additionally, the minority group also is a strong supporter of the Sisi government and the attacks are thus likely aimed at portraying the incompetence of the Egyptian authorities to protect the community from the threat of militancy, further pressurizing it to put in additional efforts to mitigate future potential militant attacks. Furthermore, the attacks are also likely to exacerbate the religious fault lines between the minority Christians and majority Muslim population, further worsening the security situation in the region and thus making room for IS to further consolidate its presence.



IS infograph indicating the three attacks in mainland Egypt since December 2016

OPERATIONAL FACTORS

Attacks like these are in line with the Sunni jihadist militant group's overall strategy to attract potential recruits and supporters. More importantly, the territorial reverses suffered by the group in Libya as a result of offensives by both the United Nations (UN) - backed forces in Sirte and the Tobruk based Libyan National Army (LNA) in Benghazi has forced a major section of the group to relocate and re-establish itself along the Libya-Egypt border, areas for future offensive operations in the region. That said, the militant group thus has the resources, both in terms of manpower and equipment to undertake asymmetric attacks in Egypt, as was recorded on April 9. Overall, given the timing and choice of target, the attacks possibly serve the purpose of demonstrating to the international community that despite the territorial losses suffered by the militant group in recent months especially in Libya, Iraq and Syria, it continues to maintain a high degree of operational capabilities and thus continues to be a force to reckon with. WHY

WHY TANTA & ALEXANDRIA?

Though most of the IS perpetrated attacks in mainland Egypt in recent months have occurred either in central locales like Cairo or along the Libyan border in Egypt's New Valley Governorate, as witnessed by killing of eight security personnel in al-Kharga region in January, it remains unspecified as to why the militant group specifically chose to target Tanta. One of the possible reasons for it could be that given the general heightened security protocol adopted in more central locales across the country following unconfirmed reports of possible threat of IS attacks, may have possibly left security gaps in areas like Tanta, which at best are considered of secondary importance. This view is further bolstered by lack of precedent of IS attacks in the region in the past. However, given that the region has a sizable Coptic Christian population and churches, coupled with relatively lighter security presence, provided a lucrative target for IS to undertake attack. It thus provided a window of opportunity for the jihadist group to capitalize on the aforementioned security gaps in Tanta, resulting in a successful attack. At the same time, it also demonstrates that despite recurrent government reports of thwarting of 'imminent' militants attacks, IS continues to maintain operational presence in and around Cairo, highlighting the limited effectiveness of the aforementioned operations in completely mitigating the threat posed by the group.



Location of current and previous IS attacks in mainland Egypt since December 2016

Alexandria, on the other hand is a major economic hub in the country as it has a port which handles a sizable chunk of international trade. It also witnesses a high foreign tourist and investor footfall throughout the year. An attack in the city thus has a symbolic significance apart from the operational aspect, as it may have been intended to discourage foreign investments as well as hamper the tourism industry in the country, further deteriorating the economic situation and fuelling the anti-government sentiments.

Overall, it cannot be completely ruled out that IS continues to hold at least a limited degree of logistical support between its strongholds in North Sinai and areas of interests in mainland Egypt which enables the group to organize and undertake militant attacks. This view is further bolstered by the geographical distance and difficulties involved in ferrying explosive making material as well as militants from the Libyan border region where heightened security presence significantly increases the probability of detection and arrest.

MODUS OPERANDI AS AN INDICATOR OF CAPABILITIES

The Modus Operandi employed in the April 9 attacks involving suicide bombings, though are not significantly different from previous attacks perpetrated by the group, as has been widely witnessed across the region, including Egypt. One primary factor that makes this attack distinct from other attacks previously recorded in Egypt is the involvement of high degree of coordination which resulted in two near- simultaneous suicide bombings, highlighting an uptick in IS's capabilities to undertake sophisticated and well-co-ordinated strikes in two separate cities, at any given point on time. Moreover, given the detailed reconnaissance and intelligence gathering operations preceding the actual attacks, including identifying the target, as well as exploiting the loopholes in the existing security apparatus, also demonstrates the possibility of local help that the attackers may have received throughout the planning phase of the attack. This is one of the reasons which may have enabled the suicide bomber in Tanta to slip past security measures, including metal detectors at the main entrance of the Church. Furthermore, initial images of the blast location in Tanta as well as high casualty rates among the choir, indicates that the attacker possibly placed the explosive in the centre-left section of the first few rows of the pew, mostly in close proximity of the aisle, gaining a central location within the structure, maximizing the impact of the detonation and inflicting higher casualties.

Moreover, given the detailed reconnaissance and intelligence gathering operations preceding the actual attacks, including identifying the target, as well as exploiting the loopholes in the existing security apparatus, also demonstrates the possibility of local help that the attackers may have received throughout the planning phase of the attack.



Bomb detonation site inside Tanta church

In case of attacks in Alexandria, the detonation took place near a metal detector outside the church as confirmed by CCTV footage as well as high security forces casualties which were deployed outside the facility.



CCTV footage of the suicide bomber outside Alexandria church

FORECASTS

SECURITY

Given precedent, a three month long state of emergency has been imposed across mainland Egypt, aimed at voiding possible additional attacks as well as arrest the possible perpetrators of the April 9 attacks. This may result in extended security operations across the country, ultimately resulting in killing or arrest of militants responsible for the attacks. In the short to midterm, it may also result in dismantling of various sleeper cells linked to IS, including weapons cache. Furthermore, it also remains likely that the security crackdown is not only likely to be limited to IS- linked militants, but the government forces are likely to capitalize on the additional powers vested in them during the emergency, which allows authorities to search homes and make arrests without warrant to arrest opposition members, mostly those who are or suspected of being linked to the Muslim Brotherhood and also forcefully disperse anti-government protests, especially those in central locales.

POLITICAL

Having said that, the opposition groups linked to the Muslim Brotherhood are likely to highlight the failure of the government in ensuring security of its citizens and call upon additional protests condemning the Sisi administration. This is thus likely to be the favoured theme for the upcoming weeklong protests usually called upon by the Pro-Muslim Brotherhood National Alliance to Support Legitimacy (NASL) following Friday prayers.

To conclude, as recorded previously, despite heightened security measures immediately following the attacks, additional attacks remain likely in the following months especially when security protocols are relaxed, bringing lapses in Egypt's security structure to the fore. Moreover, given the difficulties faced by the Egyptian authorities in tackling threat of attacks, attacks especially on days leading up to major festivals and notable national events remain likely to be recorded across mainland Egypt over the coming weeks and months. Moreover, given risk of a fallout as a result of existing turbulent security situation in neighbouring Libya is likely to continue, further keeping the security situation in Egypt in a critical state.

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