

Egypt steps up anti-ISIS fight in Sinai



Radical shift. Troops on their way to Mount Halal.

(Facebook page of Egyptian army spokesman)



An ISIS vehicle burned by the army.

(Facebook page of Egyptian army spokesman)

Ibrahim Ouf

Cairo

The Egyptian Army's push into the Mount Halal region aims to destroy the Islamic State (ISIS) command centre in the area. However, such a move could cause friction with Israel, military experts said.

"By far, this is the most important military operation in the whole of Sinai since the beginning of the war on terror there," said Hesham Halabi, an adviser at Nasser Military Academy, the military science institute of the Egyptian Army. "Apart from containing huge weapons caches, the mount is an important training centre for the terrorists."

The army is increasing pressure on ISIS, which in recent weeks has tried to destabilise the government of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi by targeting the country's Christians, who are among his staunchest supporters.

This is the first time the army has

ventured towards suspected militant hideouts in the area, having previously been unable to attack the area because of the terrain and the absence of sufficient information about ISIS strongholds.

Military experts say Mount Halal is Egypt's Tora Bora as it resembles the mountain riddled with caves in Afghanistan where al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden took refuge after 9/11 before he escaped across the Pakistani border. The difficulty of the terrain explains why the Egyptian military has deployed nearly 40,000 troops to the area, along with its most sophisticated weaponry, including Apache helicopters, Chinese-made drones and missiles capable of destroying caves.

The army is reticent to discuss the operation, which has been ongoing since mid-February but local media report that vast caches of weapons, large amounts of money and the identification papers of non-Egyptian militants have been found.

"If anything, the amount of arms found in the mountain testify to the fact that it is the nerve centre

of all ISIS activities in Sinai," said security expert Khaled Okasha. "If eliminated, this centre will mean a lot for the war on ISIS."

“The amounts of arms found in the mountain so far testify to the fact that it is the nerve centre of all ISIS activities in Sinai.”

Security expert Khaled Okasha

The Mount Halal operations, military experts said, mark a radical shift in Egypt's war on terror in Sinai, a change that will significantly speed up the pace of the war. Since Egypt began operations against ISIS in Sinai almost three years ago, Egyptian troops and police at North Sinai checkpoints have been on the defensive, a strategy blamed for the high number of casualties security forces have sustained in ISIS attacks.

When it turned to an offensive strategy, the army forced the militants to change their tactics, going further underground and depending on improvised explosive devices against troops raiding their hideouts. The Mount Halal operations, military experts said, take the offensive strategy a step further by targeting the centre of militant activity in Sinai.

Most of the weapons found in the caves were said to have entered Egypt from neighbouring Libya and other places during the one year rule of Islamist president Muhammad Morsi, authorities said. Morsi, they added, allowed radical Islamists released from Egyptian jails after the downfall of the Hosni Mubarak regime in 2011 and those who had returned to Egypt from Afghanistan while Morsi was president to establish a base in North Sinai.

The operations in Mount Halal could cause concern in Israel, which has a border only about 50km away.

Mount Halal is in a demilitarised zone established by the 1978 Camp David accords, the first peace treaty between Israel and an Arab country.

Alaa Bazied, a retired army general and the head of local think-tank Security and Strategic Studies Research Centre, said Egypt can prevent this friction with proper political marketing for its Mount Halal operations.

"We need to convince the international community that these operations are indispensable for the security of Sinai and consequently the security of countries near it," Bazied said. "I think the Egyptian administration is doing this very well now."

Since Egypt started the anti-ISIS operations, Israel has allowed Egypt to deploy heavy equipment, including tanks, fighter jets and thousands of troops into demilitarised areas for the first time since the signing of the accords.

"Israel does this because it knows well that a secure Sinai is important for its own security," Bazied said. "This is why there is understanding in Tel Aviv for the importance of the Mount Halal operations."

Ibrahim Ouf is an Egyptian journalist based in Cairo.

Can 'Mubarak's widows' make a comeback in Egypt?

Viewpoint



Mohamad Abou el-Fadel

In addition to its literal meaning, the word *aramel* (widows) in Arabic carries a political reference. It was coined to refer to those who used to have political and economic privileges and suddenly lost their only source of support.

The word became popular following the demise of former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein. Those who had supported him were labelled "Saddam's widows". It was picked up again after the end of George W. Bush's term as president of the United States and the phrase "Bush's widows" was applied to all those who used to receive US financial support within the framework of backing for democracy and civil society.

The "Egyptian marines" is another phrase that had become popular during the period when US Marines were being deployed in many places outside US territory. Anyone who was accused of defending US policies and measures in the region was called a "marine".

The war of politically charged labels has never abated. Thus, after the disappearance of "Saddam's widows", "Bush's widows" and "Egyptian marines" came the

phrase "Mubarak's widows" – supporters of former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, toppled in the January 2011 revolution.

"Mubarak's widows" tried to rehabilitate the deposed president by launching social media campaigns under the banner "We're sorry, Captain". Their voices rose a notch every time the revolution failed to achieve one of its objectives.

It is true that failing to concretely improve living conditions for Egyptians works to the advantage of Mubarak's supporters who have become more and more emboldened. The latest life sentence against Mubarak for killing demonstrators during the revolution was challenged by an army of lawyers and experts. Mubarak was retried and the Egyptian Court of Appeal, the highest court in the country, on March 2nd declared him not guilty of the charge of committing manslaughter against demonstrators.

The new verdict was dubbed in Egypt as the "absolute truth" but many saw it as completely beside the truth. Many Egyptians are convinced that the former president ordered police to fire on the crowds. More than 1,000 people were killed and 6,000 others were wounded during the events.

It is strange that Habib el-Adly, minister of Interior under Mubarak, and his senior aides were

all found not guilty. The same is true for the majority of ministers and senior public servants who were tried on corruption charges. However, many of those who were arrested during riots following the demise of the Mubarak regime are still in prison.

During the three years following the revolution, pro-Mubarak backers were mostly absent from the public eye. From time to time, there would be a timid appearance in the media by people who were still acceptable to the masses.

With the January 30th, 2013, events that toppled the Muslim Brotherhood, Mubarak supporters became more visible. They believed that the new revolution rehabilitated them; some even indicated that they were behind this second revolution and that the good old Mubarak times were back.

Working to their advantage were the innumerable political, economic and social crises affecting the country. The slogan "Mubarak times were better" reflected the feeling of disappointment among the population. Egyptians had hoped that, with President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi at the helm, their lives would improve but they did not and people are once more hankering for the good old Mubarak days.

The verdict clearing Mubarak of the charge of killing rioters in 2011 represents a major turning point because it will also clear Mubarak

Failing to improve living conditions for Egyptians works to the advantage of Mubarak's supporters.

supporters of any political wrongdoing. It must be noted that Mubarak was still found guilty and sentenced to three years in prison in what is known as "the presidential palaces case" in which he was charged with corruption.

However, the not guilty verdict in the case of killing demonstrators carries psychological weight and will certainly be used by his supporters to woo back public opinion. Many Egyptians were willing to close their eyes to the numerous scandals that rocked the Mubarak era, but they were unwilling to overlook the criminal charge of manslaughter brought against him.

The latest verdict will allow Mubarak to regain his home. He had already served the 3-year sentence he received on corruption charges in a prison hospital. We are going to see more of his supporters in public life. The current regime does not have any convincing objections to their return to public life. It is expected that many politicians and media people emerge into the spotlight.

Seeing more Mubarak regime people on the public scene carries a risk of wider political problems. There is still in Egypt an influential political current that can never forgive what it considers crimes against the Egyptian people by Mubarak and his cronies.

Mohamad Abou el-Fadel is an Egyptian writer.

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