A rare visit to Sinai shows that President Sisi’s crackdown on Egypt’s Islamists is beginning to work.

Inside Cairo’s fight with Sinai militants
HUSAYNAT, EGYPT, FEBRUARY 4, 2015

At a remote spot in the Sinai desert last month, a commander of Egypt’s most feared Islamist group outlined his hopes of toppling the country’s government.

“We execute the wishes of God,” the commander told a Reuters reporter who had been taken to the location blindfolded in mid-January. The militant spoke in a small room with an open window. Outside, a desert wind blew over the barren landscape. “We will create an Islamic state in Egypt,” he said.

The militant said he was from the Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis group, which has killed hundreds of security forces since the military ousted Mohamed Mursi of the Muslim Brotherhood from Egypt’s presidency amid popular unrest in 2013. Last week the group claimed responsibility for attacks on a military base and hotel in north Sinai that killed 25 and wounded at least 58, including nine civilians, on January 30. It was the heaviest toll on government forces for three months.

Despite those attacks, however, Reuters’ visit to the Sinai earlier that month showed how the jihadists’ mission has become tougher: Current President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, a former head of the army, appeared to be gaining ground in his drive to crack down on Islamist groups.

Even the militant commander said he faced greater difficulties. “Our numbers are smaller than before,” he said. “Lots of people were killed. Lots of people were detained. Security forces are everywhere.”

Since taking office in June 2014, Sisi has neutralised the Brotherhood, taken bold steps to repair the economy and announced a series of mega-projects designed to create jobs. He has also made a dramatic call for a “revolution” in Islam, saying that Islamist militants are destroying the religion and harming its reputation.

All those ambitions depend on maintaining national security and taming militants in Sinai, a remote but strategic part of Egypt located between Israel, the Gaza Strip and the Suez Canal. So Sisi has poured more troops into the area and appeared to be gaining ground in his drive to crack down on Islamist groups.

STRONG RETURN: Egyptians gather in Tahrir square (above) to celebrate former Egyptian army chief Abdel Fattah al-Sisi’s victory in the presidential vote last June. On the cover: An observation tower painted in the colours of the Egyptian national flag near the Nitzana crossing, along Israel’s border with Egypt’s Sinai. REUTERS/MOHAMED ABD EL GHANY, RONEN ZVULUN

We used to see lots of Ansar pass in front of our house. Now we barely see them. Life is much calmer.

Eid Salman
Sinai resident

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Violence in the Sinai Peninsula

The Egyptian government faces an Islamist insurgency in Sinai. Militants have killed hundreds of security officers since former president Mohamed Mursi was ousted in July 2013.

**DAILY FATALITIES**
Number of fatalities in the Sinai Peninsula as a result of an attack initiated by a militant group or government forces, January 2010 through January 2015.

- **Feb. 11, 2011**
  - President Hosni Mubarak is overthrown by a popular uprising.
- **June 24, 2012**
  - Islamist Mohamed Mursi is declared Egypt’s first freely elected president.
- **July 3, 2013**
  - Mursi is overthrown by Egypt’s armed forces.
- **May 29, 2014**
  - Abdel Fattah al-Sisi wins presidential election.

**FATALITIES BY GEOGRAPHY**
Each dot on the map represents an attack that has resulted in fatalities, January 2010 through January 2015. Darker colour represents multiple attacks in the same area.

- **Militant attacks**
  - On government forces or civilians
  - On militant groups

- **Government attacks**
  - On militant groups

Sources: ACLED (Armed Conflict Location and Event Data), Raleigh, Clionadh, Andrew Linke, Havard Hegre and Joakim Karlsen; Reuters.
traditional Bedouin galabia robe. “Now we barely see them. Life is much calmer.”

TUNNELS DESTROYED

One measure of the pressure on the militants was how hard it was to meet the Ansar commander. Last year similar meetings were far easier and fighters could be seen in the streets. This year, the militants were much more cautious.

After making contact with a Bedouin middleman, the reporter was blindfolded and had his cellphones taken away. The driver who transported the reporter paused at the roadside briefly every 20 minutes or so in an apparent attempt to evade anyone who might be following. Asked why he was taking such steps, he said: “It’s none of your business.”

Speaking with a heavy Bedouin accent, the militant said he and his comrades were inspired by Islamic State, the al Qaeda offshoot that has seized large chunks of Iraq and Syria, and imitated their practices. Ansar recently changed its name to Sinai Province after pledging allegiance to Islamic State, which has called on Ansar to keep up attacks against Egyptian security forces.

“We capture anyone who betrays us. We behead anyone who is a traitor. This scares other people so that they don’t act against us. This is the language and ways of Daesh,” the militant said, using an Arabic acronym for Islamic State.

But the militant seemed less confident than comrades interviewed by Reuters last year. “About 1,000 of us have been killed and about 500 or 600 arrested,” he said.

The government declared a state of emergency in parts of Sinai late last year and is clearing a buffer zone where Sinai’s northeast corner abuts the Gaza Strip. The militant said security forces have destroyed tunnels from the Gaza Strip, depriving fighters of what authorities say were vital arms supply routes.

“There are far fewer weapons because tunnels have been destroyed. It is difficult to move weapons,” said the militant.

Sources in Israel declined to comment on Ansar or the tunnels, but said relations with Egypt over unrest in Sinai were better than under Mursi. “The situation on the border is stable. The Egyptians have been taking action to secure Sinai, knowing that insecurity is a threat to Egyptian rule,” said an Israeli military officer briefed on ties with the Egyptian armed forces. “We coordinate when it comes to activities near the (border) fence in order to prevent terrorist attacks potentially spreading into Israel.”

An Egyptian official said that Israel was providing Egypt with intelligence help to track Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis. “I can’t say whether it is useful, but I can say that it is appreciated,” the diplomat said.

In Sinai, Egyptian security forces have boosted their presence across the north. They were better equipped with flak jackets and helmets and appeared far more alert than last year. To combat suicide bombers, security forces have stationed police vehicles in front of checkpoints and increased the number of metal detectors.

A senior security official said Sisi had doubled troops in Sinai since last year. He would not give specific numbers. Checkpoints once manned by a handful of soldiers are now being guarded by about 30.

Militants have responded with hit-and-run operations, kidnappings of police and assassinations of Bedouins suspected of cooperating with intelligence officials. They have released videos showing militant fighters beheading Bedouins whom the group said had cooperated with security forces.

AFRAID OF BOTH SIDES

Though Sisi’s forces have made gains, the...
EGYPT THE FIGHT IN SINAI

militants still pose a dangerous threat, both to lives and to Egypt’s fragile economy. Two of last week’s attacks were notable for targeting Port Said and Suez, cities at either end of the Suez canal, which is a vital source of revenue for the country. The military said those and the other attacks came in response to its success in putting the militants under pressure. Successive Egyptian leaders have found it impossible to stamp out militants completely.

Egyptian officials say they have valuable information on Ansar leaders, but that good intelligence on rank-and-file fighters is harder to come by. The militants still live among ordinary civilians, blending into the local populace in a way that makes it difficult for security forces to identify them.

“People could come by now and talk to us pretending to be civilians and after a few days they blow themselves up at a checkpoint,” said a senior police official. “Once we went to attack a village and found one of them (a militant) had passed by us days earlier telling us ‘may God give you victory over the terrorists.’ A few days later we arrested him during clashes in a village.”

Stepping up security operations could cause civilian casualties and spread resentment among Sinai residents, especially Bedouins who have long complained of neglect by the central government.

“The authorities have to find a way to protect us,” said Osama Shabana, a teenage student in the village of Toma. “We are afraid of both sides - the security forces and the terrorists. When we hear shooting, we hide at home.”

An army officer who has interrogated militants gained insight into the risks of pushing too hard. “One of them recalled how his brother was killed by security forces. He described how his sister-in-law cried and urged him to take revenge or else he would look weak,” said the officer.

He also noted that some fighters were foreign and had trained in Syria, complicating efforts to stabilise the Sinai. A further difficulty, said the police captain, is that after Egyptian authorities destroyed tunnels from the Gaza Strip, Ansar militants built similar structures in Sinai to conceal weapons and other equipment.

Tensions in the wider populace remain evident. In the run-up to the anniversary of the uprising that toppled autocrat Hosni
Mubarak in 2011, anti-government protestors clashed with security forces in the capital and other cities. Authorities said 25 people were killed. They blamed the Brotherhood for the bloodshed. Militants and opponents of the government accuse the security forces of being heavy-handed.

After the violence, authorities in northern Sinai extended the curfew there for another three months.

Sisi still faces a tough fight to impose his authority and maintain stability in the most populous Arab state. But he appears determined to do so, judging by a meeting with security officials a few weeks ago.

According to a senior security official he told the meeting that he wanted more progress and that within six months he “didn’t want to hear about any terrorism in Sinai.”

The name of the correspondent is being withheld for security reasons. Additional reporting by Ali Abdelaty in Cairo and Dan Williams in Jerusalem. Editing by Michael Georgy and Richard Woods

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TIME PAST: Tourists climb the summit of Sinai’s Mount Moses in 2006. Tourism has been badly hit by the fighting. REUTERS/GORAN TOMASEVIC