

*Arab-West Report*, February 25, 2014

Title: Terrorists now also attacking tourists; AWR interns remain in Egypt

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*On February 16, 2014, a bus with 31 South Korean nationals on board was attacked by a suicide bomber while crossing the border between Egypt and Israel.<sup>1</sup> Korean pilgrims, who were travelling from St. Catherine, a popular tourist destination in the Sinai region to Israel, were targeted as their tour bus stopped at the Israeli border control, leaving three Koreans and an Egyptian dead. The body of the suicide bomber, who was carrying an explosive belt weighing 5-10 kg and packed with ball bearings 6mm in diameter, was found at the scene of the attack,<sup>2</sup> said Hisham Abdul Hamid, spokesperson for Egypt's forensic authorities, in an interview with a South Korean news agency.*

Tourism in Egypt, one of the most important sources of national income for the country, has declined significantly in recent months, mainly due to increasing political instability and continuing violence between Jihadist factions and the interim government, led by Hazem Al Belawi. Since Muhammad Morsi, voted in 2012 as the fifth president of the republic and the first Islamist to be the head of an Arab state, was overthrown by a military soft *coup d'état*<sup>3</sup> in June 2013, a number of terrorist activities were carried out nationwide, mostly targeting Egyptian security authorities. Although there is no direct evidence pointing to the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist organization with strong political overtones with which Morsi and his Freedom and Justice party are affiliated, the Brotherhood has been declared a terrorist organization by the state. Further, members of Morsi's former cabinet have been accused of a 'terrorist plan', which is said to involve Hamas, Hezbollah, and even the Iranian Revolutionary Guards.<sup>4</sup> The ouster of Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood led to strong dissatisfaction among their supporters, which frustrated Islamist elements throughout the nation; especially in the Sinai region, which has been a haven for Jihadist insurgents and has become increasingly lawless since the 2011 Revolution ousted Hosni Mubarak. Islamist insurgent groups based in the region, including Ansar Beit al-Maqdis, allegedly affiliated with al-Qaeda<sup>5</sup>, have been involved in various bombings and

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<sup>1</sup> "Egyptian bus bombing kills Korean tourists and driver," *The Guardian Online*, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/16/egypt-bus-bombing-koreans-sinai>, (accessed on 19.02.2104).

<sup>2</sup> '이집트 테러, 쇠구슬 파편 발견...대량살상 노려', *News Y*, <http://news.naver.com/main/read.nhn?mode=LSD&mid=sec&sid1=104&oid=422&aid=0000049942>, (accessed on 20.02.2014).

<sup>3</sup> The term *coup d'état* is debated in Egypt. Morsi's government is widely believed to have been a failure. There were no institutions that could impeach the president. Millions demonstrated on June 30-July 3 against Morsi. General al-Sisi asked president Morsi for new presidential elections which Morsi refused and consequently led to the Egyptian army removing president Morsi on July 3, 2013. The Egyptian constitution states that in case of a vacancy of the presidency the head of the Supreme Constitutional Court should become interim president. For this reason it is better to call this procedure a soft *coup d'état*.

<sup>4</sup> "Prosecutor orders ousted Egypt President Morsi's arrest over Hamas links," *Russia Today*, <http://rt.com/news/egypt-morsi-detained-hamas-624>, (accessed on 24.02.2014).

<sup>5</sup> "Egypt taking ultimatum against tourists seriously," *BBC Online*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-26248702> (accessed on 19.02.2014).

shootings against the military and police force. A series of attacks throughout Egypt have occurred since the military led by Field Marshal Abdel Fattah el-Sisi had removed Morsi, and their intensity has increased to a considerable level. Since then, violent clashes between the military and Islamist insurgents were followed in the Sinai region, including the Nile Valley and Delta, where regular bombings and shootings have been reported as lethal.

On February 16, 2014, a bus with 31 South Korean nationals on board was attacked by a suicide bomber, while crossing the border between Egypt and Israel.<sup>6</sup> Korean pilgrims, who were travelling from St. Catherine, a popular tourist destination in the Sinai region, to Israel, were targeted as their tour bus stopped for the Israeli border control, leaving three Koreans and the Egyptian driver dead. The body of the suicide bomber, who was carrying an explosive belt weighing 5-10 kg packed with ball bearings 6mm in diameter, was found at the scene of the attack,<sup>7</sup> said Hisham Abdul Hamid, spokesperson for Egypt's forensic authorities, in an interview with a South Korean news agency. Both the Egyptian and South Korean governments strongly condemned the attack, as South Korean foreign ministry stated; "We are shocked and enraged at the terrorist bombing on the bus...and strongly condemn the act".<sup>8</sup> This incident suggests that the political dissension between radicalized pro-Morsi Islamists and the military-backed interim government had evolved into a serious armed conflict. Shortly after the bombing of South Korean tourists in Taba, Ansar Beit al-Maqdis, who claimed responsibility of the attack, announced on its Twitter account: "[the bombing of February 16]...is part of our economic war attacks on this traitorous hireling regime, which plundered the nation's wealth...we recommend tourists to get out safely before it's too late".<sup>9</sup> The significance of this bombing, as the first attack on foreign nationals since the 2013 soft *coup d'état*, also indicates that the conflict between the Egyptian government and extreme Islamists in the region has taken a serious toll. The group's 'economic war' against the interim government has shown the public that the conflict is now no longer limited to targeting the local security forces, but that they are capable of launching deadly attacks on subjects, in which the interests of international parties are involved; for instance, raiding the gas pipeline from Egypt to Israel/Jordan and firing missiles at Israeli territories.<sup>10</sup>

Although the number of tourists in Egypt, mostly in Red Sea resort cities, had dropped significantly, c.a. 11.4 million foreign nationals were expected to visit the country in 2013. The Egyptian tourism industry contributed to around 13% of GDP in 2011 and nearly 13% of the population had been involved in the industry.<sup>11</sup> Last December in 2013, hotel bookings and the number of tourists have declined by 63.1% and 31%, which Tourism Minister Hashim Zazzou

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<sup>6</sup> *The Guardian Online*, Op. Cit.

<sup>7</sup> *New Y*, Op. Cit.

<sup>8</sup> "Egyptian bus bombing kills Korean tourists and driver," *The Guardian Online*, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/16/egypt-bus-bombing-koreans-sinai>, (accessed on 20.02.2014).

<sup>9</sup> "Egypt terror group gives tourists two days to get out," *Times World*, <http://world.time.com/2014/02/18/egypt-sinai-ansar-jerusalem/>, (accessed 20.02.2014).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>11</sup> "Arab Spring Back: Turmoil has scared off all but the rugged and the Russians," *The Economist*, <http://www.economist.com/news/business/21577089-turmoil-has-scared-all-rugged-and-russians-arab-spring-break>, (accessed on 23.02.2014).

called the “worst year on record”.<sup>12</sup> Regardless of the ultimatum given by al-Maquis and the Egyptian government’s official warning on travelling in the Sinai, foreign tourists in the region have not been completely evacuated. According to a report by RIA Novosti, the largest news agency in Russia, there is no evident sign that Russian tourists currently in Red Sea resort town are planning on leaving the country, and so are the future travelers who have already purchased package tours to such areas.<sup>13</sup> David Barnett, a research associate of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, stated in an interview with *International Business Times*:

Striking tourists is a big jump...while the Taba attack is an extremely worrying development that will likely result in a harsh response from Egypt’s rulers, it is too early to deem this a game-change...targeting tourists on a regular basis will over the long run likely do more harm to the group and its attempts to garner greater support...further attacks against tourists cannot be ruled out now that that line has been crossed.<sup>14</sup>

Cornelis Hulsman, Editor-in-chief of *Arab-West Report*: We offer condolences to the families of the victims. One of our Korean friends personally knew the Korean tour-leader who had been here for twenty years, knew Egypt well and loved the country.

*Arab-West Report* continues to receive non-Egyptian visitors and interns. No one cancelled their trip to Egypt, but of course we are taking precautions with security guidelines for our interns:

- No visits to Sinai,
- No traveling on desert roads after dark,
- Staying away from demonstrations, even if very small, since these easily can erupt in violence,
- No photos in areas where police or military are present.

The Egyptian population remains very friendly to foreigners. It is certainly no problem to move around Cairo.

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<sup>12</sup> “Terrorists target Egypt’s Red Sea Tourism...and it’s working.” *International Business Times*, <http://www.ibtimes.com/terrorists-target-egypts-red-sea-tourism-its-working-1556362>, (accessed on 20.02.2014).

<sup>13</sup> ‘러 관광객들 테러협박 불구 이집트 안 떠날 것’, *Yunhab*, <http://news.naver.com/main/read.nhn?mode=LSD&mid=sec&sid1=102&oid=001&aid=0006763192>, (accessed on 20.02.2014).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.