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Killing Fields in the Egyptian Desert

Eight vacationing Mexican tourists and four tour guides were gunned down — out of the blue — by Egyptian military aircraft. What happened?

BY TOM STEVENSON

IT WAS A CLEAR AFTERNOON IN EGYPT'S WESTERN DESERT on Sept. 13, 2015, and an AH-64 Apache helicopter was gliding over the Abu Muharek dunes. A hot sun was beating down, though the helicopter's pilots wouldn't have felt it in their air-conditioned cabin. Below, just over the next ridge, 14 Mexican tourists had paused their desert safari to enjoy lunch. They were a diverse group: accountants mixed with musicians; restaurant manager Israel González Delgadillo mingled with Vanessa Ramírez Letechipia, a worker at the cement company Cemex. They drank water, chatted, and took photographs of the dunes while their Egyptian guides prepared lunch in the calm and solitude the tour group had traveled so far to find.

As the Apache rose over the ridge, the rhythmic thumping of its blades pierced the quiet. It trained its weapons on one of the group's parked vehicles and then opened fire — beginning a brutal assault on the unarmed civilians that would see eight tourists and four of their guides killed.

It was an event that shattered families, set off a diplomatic incident, and badly damaged Egypt's fragile tourism industry. But the details of the attack would long remain confused: Egyptian officials made no statement acknowledging what had happened until almost a full 12 hours after the fact. When the statements did come, they were confused and contradictory, laying blame on the tour group itself. The Egyptian army had attacked and killed a group of foreign tourists in broad daylight, apparently without reason.

The attack is just one example of the escalating state violence and absence of accountability that have gripped Egypt under the military-backed rule of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. Although

the government pledged an official investigation into the incident, eight months later, the inquiry has become mired in bureaucracy. In that time, Egypt has experienced a marked increase in police brutality: The late January abduction, torture, and killing of Italian doctoral student Giulio Regeni in Cairo, allegedly by the police, is just the latest sign of security forces run amok.

What follows is **Foreign Policy**'s own investigation into the events of Sept. 13 and the climate of impunity surrounding the incident, which has become so pervasive in Egypt. The events were slowly pieced together over a period of months in interviews with eyewitnesses, families, and friends of the victims, as well as by consulting extensive documentation obtained from the tour companies involved.

FOR THE MEXICAN TOURISTS, IT WAS SUPPOSED TO BE TWO WEEKS OF SIGHTSEEING, ADVENTURE, AND MILD SPIRITUALISM. The 16 tourists had arrived together on Sept. 11, picked up at Cairo International Airport at 1:30 p.m., and taken in a 23-seat Toyota Coaster minibus to the Movenpick hotel, which sits just opposite the Great Pyramid of Giza. They stayed the night at the Movenpick and spent the following day visiting the pyramids and Cairo's Khan el-Khalili market, the most famous in the city. They then spent another night at the Movenpick before waking up early on the morning of Sept. 13, knowing a long journey was ahead of them.

Windows of Egypt, a well-regarded firm offering Nile cruises, temple visits, and seven-day camel trekking tours of the desert led the tour. Nabil El Tamawi, an experienced guide who spoke fluent Spanish and had worked with tour groups in Egypt for 25 years was the head guide. The tourists had been gathered together by Rafael Berjerano, a 41-year-old spiritual healer and musician, and his mother Marisela Rangel Ravalos, both of whom had visited Egypt on similar tours before.

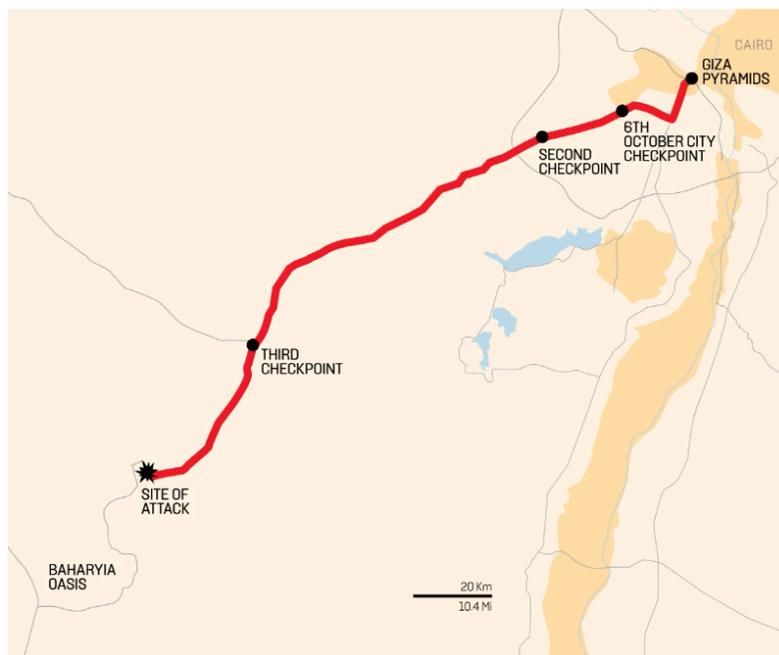
Having picked up their tourist police escort, the group set out from near the pyramids at around 8:45 a.m. in four Toyota Land Cruisers, vehicles ideally suited for desert driving. One of Windows of Egypt's guides, Awad Fathi, led the way along with another driver, Wael Abdel Aziz, who joined the group with his own vehicle. The other two cars and their drivers had been rented from a separate tour company, Sahara Egypt. All of the cars were emblazoned with the logos of the tour companies on their sides. The plan was to reach the Bahariya Oasis and stay at the Qasr al-Bawiti hotel, where Awad Fathi was general manager. From Qasr al-Bawiti, they would visit the area's most popular attractions: the black sand desert, the crystal mountain, and the white desert -- a vast expanse of natural chalk sculptures. It is a popular tour in Egypt, costing around \$120 per day.

The tour group never reached Qasr al-Bawati. They passed easily out of Giza and soon reached 6 October City, one of Cairo's satellite towns, where they were stopped at a permanent police checkpoint, a common feature on Egypt's roads. The guides and Shaaben explained — just as they had dozens of times before — that they were making a tour to the Bahariya Oasis. They presented their itinerary, and within minutes they were waved through.

As the convoy reached the start of the long stretch of highway that leads directly to Bahariya, it was stopped at another checkpoint, this time staffed by the border guards section of the Egyptian

army, and was again waved through. Nearly 100 miles farther down the road, the process was repeated once more at a third checkpoint, with the same result. None of the officers at the checkpoints warned the group of any danger in the area to which it was traveling, nor did they raise any questions about the group's permit. If the tour group were in a restricted area, as the government would later claim, the police and border guards had three separate opportunities to stop them from continuing.

Roughly 200 miles from Cairo, the group stopped for lunch. They pulled left off the road and parked the four vehicles at a point where the tourists would be able to see the dunes. It was around 3 p.m.; one of the tourists in the group was diabetic, so it was important to eat. The tourists took photographs while the guides erected awnings from two of the cars to provide shade and set about preparing a barbeque.



THE TOUR GROUP WAS NOT THE ONLY PARTY IN THE WESTERN DESERT THAT DAY.

Egypt's local branch of the Islamic State would, on the same day, release a photograph of an old man lying flat on his stomach in the desert, with his own head mounted on his back. The man, who it later emerged was a Bedouin named Saleh Qassem, had been accused by the Islamic State of being a security forces informant. According to residents in the Bahariya Oasis, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, there was some truth to the accusation: Qassem knew the desert better than anyone else and was rumored to have been helping the army locate weapons stores used by militant groups. He had been kidnapped three days before, and, as a high-value source, Egypt's military intelligence was keen to rescue him or punish those who had taken him.

On the morning of the attack, a police patrol in the area reported to the army that they had located a weapons cache based on an earlier tip from Qassem but that, while investigating, they

had come under attack by a group of armed men. According to a tour company employee who had been present during the testimony of a soldier at the prosecutor general's office, the army then ordered the police to withdraw. It sent in an air sortie to blow up the cache and "eliminate" the attackers.

It was now around 3:38 p.m., and the sun was high, beating down on the tourists. As the group prepared to eat, Sherif Farouq, one of Sahara Egypt's drivers, heard what he thought was the sound of an aircraft overhead. Fellow driver Ahmed Uweis was peeling vegetables when he heard the first explosion; he reacted quickly, grabbing one of the tourists and diving underneath his car. He took out his phone and dialed the number of his friend Mohamed Abdo, a colleague at Sahara Egypt, who he hoped would somehow be able to summon help.

Uweis's call didn't last long. All he could get out were the words: "Help us, help us, we're under attack, they're firing at us, send help."

Then the phone went dead. Abdo says he heard the sound of an explosion as the phone call ended.

Farouq, who was standing a short distance away with the tourist police escort, stood frozen and watched as a missile shrieked down from the sky and into one of the tour group's cars. He would later tell the authorities that he was knocked over by the force of the explosion.

"I didn't see the plane, or whatever it was, but I did see the rocket for a second," he told **FP**. "The blast was huge, and it sent debris high into the sky."

Due to the chaos, witnesses to the attack had some difficulty confirming to **FP** the precise number or type of aircraft involved in the assault. Egyptian military officials did not reply to multiple attempts to contact them. But Farouq and two of the tourists, Carmen Susana Calderón Gallegos and Juan Pablo García Chávez, would later recount similar stories of first being attacked by an aircraft and then a helicopter joining in.

The helicopter was an Apache, according to local Egyptian media. The American-made attack helicopter fired rockets and peppered the tour group with 30 mm rounds. Farouq picked himself up and set off toward some of the tourists, shouting at them to run, but another missile struck the second of the group's Land Cruisers. A piece of shrapnel cartwheeled from one of the vehicles and lodged into his leg, resulting in a minor wound. When he got to his feet again, he ran in the direction of the road, fleeing for his life.

MOHAMED FAROUK, AN ACCOUNTANT LIVING IN CAIRO AND WORKING WITH SAHARA EGYPT, WAS STILL IN HIS OFFICE AT 6 P.M. ON SEPT. 13 WHEN HE RECEIVED A CALL FROM A FRIEND, WHO TOLD HIM OF AHMED UWEIS'S PANICKED PHONE CALL.

He called Sherif Farouq as soon as he heard of the incident. By that time, Farouq and Hamdeen Shaaben, who had fled the attack, were sitting in a small building at an army checkpoint. Having fled the assault, they had made it to the road, stopped a passing car, and demanded to be taken to

the nearest authority.

As the police escort, Shaaben was supposed to be prepared to help in times of crisis. He was in full uniform and carrying a Heckler and Koch pistol. He was also carrying a broken walkie-talkie — something that perhaps could have been put to good use were it in working order.

Farouq and Shaaben had arrived at the checkpoint around 4 p.m. and recounted what they had seen but had been told to sit and wait for the police to arrive. They had no idea if there were survivors from the attack but repeatedly urged the soldiers to go to the scene. More than an hour later, no one from the military border guards or the police had come, let alone gone out to the site of the attack. The checkpoint happened to be equipped with ambulances, but they were unable to drive through the thick sand between the paved road and the attack site, so no medical assistance had been sent out to the scene.

Farouq's phone had been damaged in the explosion, and he had been unable to make outgoing calls, so he was relieved when Mohamed Farouk finally got through. He was in shock, but he told Farouk what he had seen: the attack, the missiles, and, through tears, how he had watched Uweis disappear in a fireball.

After the phone call, a police special forces team finally arrived at the border guards station and set out with Farouq and Shaaben for the attack site. It was now past 7 p.m., roughly three-and-a-half hours after the attack.

Once they arrived, they found a hellish scene of twisted metal, bloodied bodies, scorch marks in the sand, and wounded survivors lying among the dead. Some of the injured survivors were Marisela Rangel Dávalos, Rafael Bejarano's mother; Juan Pablo García Chávez, a worker at the Council of the Federal Judiciary; and Colette Gaxiola Insunza, from Sinaloa in western Mexico. Families were broken: Calderón and her niece Patricia Elizabeth Velarde Calderón survived, but not husband and uncle Luis Barajas Fernández; Gretel Chávez survived, but not her mother, Lilia Gabriela Chavez.

The head of the tour, Nabil El Tamawi, had been killed; so had Awad Fathi and Wael Abdel Aziz. In photographs taken by Farouq and seen by **FP**, their bodies were charred and mutilated. Farouq saw the remains of many of the tourists, but he couldn't find Uweis's body.

On the advice of Windows of Egypt, Farouq contacted Montassir Abbas, a desert tour guide based in Bawiti. Abbas and another guide immediately set out for the site in their Toyota Land Cruisers to help collect the injured and take them to Bawiti, the closest settlement. From there, the survivors were taken later that night by the authorities to the Dar Al Fouad Hospital back in 6 October City near Cairo. It is a long drive, and two of the wounded perished from their injuries on the way.

For Calderón and her husband, the trip was supposed to be the first leg of a world tour that would take them from Egypt to Paris and then on to Belgium, Germany, Austria, and Italy. Calderón would survive the attack with minor injuries, but her husband was killed. She would later recount to El Universal newspaper what she remembered of the attack and the hours in which police and

border guards had dithered and failed to send help to the site. She described being “bombed” five times: The helicopter, as she remembered it, had fired on those who ran and tried to escape.

García Chávez would also survive the attack. His account, which was given to the Mexican newspaper *Excelsior*, matched Calderón’s: There had been an aircraft overhead, then a helicopter, and multiple “bombings” of the group. “We prayed that God would be with us,” he would subsequently tell a radio program.

Friends of the Egyptian deceased set out for the attack site almost immediately after hearing of the incident; they were on the road by 5 p.m. Mohamed Abdo — who had received Uweis’s distress call — along with his colleagues Ahmed Shamy and Osama Abdel Moneim climbed into two cars and drove from Cairo to near the site of the attack. However, the military had set up a cordon and refused them access. They decided to spend the night in Bawiti and return to the site the following morning.

The next morning, at around 9 a.m., they were allowed access to the area. The dead bodies were still lying there in the desert, and Abdel Moneim found Apache shell casings the size of smartphones among them. Lifting up the charred remains of Uweis’s car, they finally found something of their friend. Desert safari cars often have larger, modified fuel tanks to allow them to cover greater distances; when the missile hit, the tank had exploded, feeding the conflagration. All they found of their friend under the car was an arm, one leg, and his spine.

Egyptian Tourism Minister Khaled Ramy leaves Dar Al Fouad Hospital after visiting the tourists injured in the airstrike.

THE EGYPTIAN GOVERNMENT TOOK ROUGHLY 12 HOURS TO COMMENT ON THE INCIDENT. When the responses came, from multiple parts of the administration, they were riddled with inaccuracies and implicated the tour group itself in the attack.

The first official statement about the attack came at 2:30 a.m. the following day, on Monday, Sept. 14, from Egypt’s Interior Ministry, announcing that 12 people had been killed and 10 injured by security forces who had fired on a tour group. These figures do not match FP’s tally; in all likelihood, the two injured Mexicans who died on the way back to Cairo were double-counted by the ministry, meaning there were, in fact, 12 dead and eight wounded. The statement also announced that a task force had been formed to investigate why “a tourist convoy was in a restricted area.”

A spokeswoman for Egypt’s Tourism Ministry echoed that line to the Associated Press, saying the tour company “did not have permits and did not inform authorities” that they were in the area.

The Foreign Ministry concurred in implicating the tour group. “[T]he Mexican tourists were present in a restricted area of operations during a pursuit conducted by military and police forces targeting terrorists utilizing four-by-four vehicles similar to those being used by the tourists,” an early statement read. The pro-government newspaper *Al-Wafd* even reported that security forces had “foiled terrorists’ attempts to kidnap tourists.”

The line was clear: The tour group itself was to blame.

But the initial reaction from the Egyptian government was quickly called into question when Hassan al-Nahla, the head of the tour guides' syndicate, released a copy of the group's approved permit — the one the Ministry of Tourism had claimed didn't exist. On the evening of Sept. 14, the day after the attack, the New York-based public relations firm Hill+Knowlton Strategies sent a note to the Ministry of Tourism advising it how to publicly respond.

"THEY WERE IN AN OFF-LIMIT AREA VERY CLOSE TO THE BORDER AREA WITH LIBYA, DANGEROUS AREAS, WHERE SMUGGLERS USED TO INFILTRATE WITH WEAPONS AND FOREIGN FIGHTERS."

— Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, to PBS on Sept. 28, 2015

Hill+Knowlton told **FP** the advice was “retrospective analysis” given “as a goodwill gesture” but that the company was not contracted with the Egyptian government. Sam Lythgoe, the global head of business development at Hill+Knowlton, told **FP**, however, that the firm had “previous engagements with different ministries.”

On Tuesday, Sept. 15, the Tourism Ministry backpedaled, modifying its position to say that while the group did have a permit, it wasn't sufficient approval for the tour and that the group had exceeded the number of tourists it allowed. While there are no restrictions on the number of tourists that can be taken on a tour, the group's approved permit did say it would be accommodating 10 guests — fewer than the actual number on the tour.

President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's response was even more forceful. “They were in an off-limit area very close to the border area with Libya, dangerous areas, where smugglers used to infiltrate with weapons and foreign fighters,” Sisi told PBS on Sept. 28.

But Sisi's description of the location is way off base. In multiple interviews with witnesses, **FP** has established the location of the attack as just roughly two-thirds of a mile off the road to Bahariya and roughly 200 miles southwest of Cairo — hundreds of miles from the border with Libya.

The government's statements also contradict the testimony of experienced tour guides and the word of the friends and families of the deceased. “They were never informed of any operation by the security forces in the area or that there was any danger in going there,” said Mohamed Salama, whose uncle, Nabil El Tamawi, led the tour group and was killed in the attack. “Nabil was a veteran guide; he always followed security instructions and had a proven track record on long trips into the desert.”

Ahmed Uweis knew the desert like the back of his hand, according to his friend Ahmed Khairy, an archaeologist from Cairo. “I've been on dozens of trips with Ahmed, and it's very unlikely that he would mistakenly drive into a prohibited area,” Khairy said. Uweis was from Imbaba, one of Cairo's poorest districts, and although he didn't speak any foreign languages, he had a good reputation as a driver in the desert safari business. He had rejoined Sahara Egypt just one week

before the incident. The company says that one of the Mexican tourists had, in fact, requested Uweis by name because he had been her driver on a previous desert safari in Egypt.

“If you’re asking whether Ahmed Uweis and Nabil El Tamawi would go into a military zone by mistake, it’s impossible,” Khairy said.

Khairy first heard the news that Uweis had been killed at around 7 p.m. on the day of the attack, when Mohamed Farouk told him of his phone conversation with Farouq, the surviving driver. “I didn’t know what to do,” Khairy said. “First, I called the army and tried to make inquiries with them, but I hit a wall. Then I rang a friend who worked in the press to ask what he had heard.”

Khairy’s friend, who works at the Egyptian daily newspaper Youm7, warned him that looking too closely into the story would be dangerous and that the paper wouldn’t be publishing anything involving the military unless it came from the military officials themselves.

Three days after the attack, and despite having promised a full and transparent investigation, the Egyptian government issued a gag order on publishing anything about the incident in the press. News about the attack simply disappeared.

Relatives of the Mexican tourists hold a prayer circle for the wounded and dead in Guadalajara, Mexico, on Sept. 19, 2015. (Photo by HECTOR GUERRERO/AFP/Getty Images)

BACK IN THE DAR AL FOUAD HOSPITAL ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF CAIRO, THE SURVIVORS WERE BEING TREATED JUST A FEW MILES FROM THE HOTEL THEY HAD SET OUT FROM THE PREVIOUS DAY.

While their injuries healed, government and foreign embassy officials, including the Mexican ambassador in Cairo, Jorge Alvarez Fuentes, struggled to confirm the identities of the deceased. Many of the victims’ passports were never recovered and presumed incinerated. The injured returned home on Sept. 18, but the identities of all the deceased were not conclusively confirmed until a medical examination back in Mexico after the bodies were repatriated on Sept. 23.

In Mexico, the news sparked an intense public backlash. A Mexican diplomat confirmed to **FP** that the Egyptian ambassador in Mexico City was summoned as a result of the attack — though the Egyptian government denied it — and that reparations were being sought. On May 9, the Egyptian Travel Agents Association paid the families of three of the victims \$140,000 each in compensation in exchange for their agreeing to drop legal proceedings against Egypt. Negotiations are still underway with the other five families who lost relatives in the attack.

For the Egyptians killed, there is no such recourse. The friends and families of the Egyptian victims remain bewildered and angry — not just about the attack itself, but also how the authorities have handled it. “The government has lied and lied about this from the very beginning. They even lied about the permit until [the group] produced the permit,” Khairy said. “It’s all so expected; the army probably didn’t even look before firing.”

What the soldiers who fired from the helicopter at the tour group below were thinking at the

crucial moment is unknown and in all likelihood will remain so. The Egyptian army is an opaque institution, and it is highly unlikely that if the soldiers were ever questioned fully, their testimony would be released. But many questions remain: Why were no warnings issued when a live-fire military operation was happening in a popular tourist spot? Why had those officers manning the checkpoints repeatedly waved the tour group through? How had the military mistaken a group of foreign tourists for terrorists when their cars were marked with the tour companies' logos? Why had it taken so long to send out medical assistance to the attack site? And why were helicopters available to attack the group but not to take the wounded to the hospital?

Mexican Foreign Minister Claudia Ruiz Massieu, left, speaks at a press conference after arriving in Cairo to meet the survivors of the Egyptian air attack on Sept. 16, 2015. Egypt's ambassador to Mexico, Yasser Shaban, right, gives a press conference in Mexico City, on Sept. 14. Egypt's initial response to the attack was confused and contradictory, as officials tried to lay the blame on the tour company. (Photos by MOHAMED EL-SHAHED/AFP/Getty Images and DANIEL CARDENAS/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images)

Egypt's prosecutor general is currently undertaking an investigation into what happened, but hopes are thin that any of these questions will be answered comprehensively, let alone truthfully. The investigation has already dragged on for more than eight months with little sign of conclusion. On Jan. 6, the Mexican Foreign Ministry claimed that, based on what it knew of Egypt's investigation, the Egyptian authorities were placing the blame for the killings on the tour agencies, which "should have had more clarity on the permit." The Egyptian government has not announced whether any members of the army have been suspended over the incident.

One question that the official investigation will not even broach is that of the weaponry itself. Apache helicopters are supplied by the United States and use U.S.-made Hellfire missiles. The U.S. State Department cleared a new sale of 356 Hellfire missiles to Egypt on April 8 and unfroze a shipment of 10 Apache helicopters to the country in December 2014.

"Whether the sale of these weapons to Egypt is defensible in light of how they have been used is an outstanding question for the United States government," said Joshua Stacher, an associate professor of political science at Kent State University.

The friends and families of the victims aren't holding their breath for justice. "There has been a mountain of lies from the authorities," said one managerial representative of Sahara Egypt and friend of Ahmed Uweis. "There was a mistake, we understand that, but the least they could do is apologize. Have the courage to say sorry for what happened rather than lying about it; that's the least we should expect."

In the wake of the attack, Windows of Egypt has shut down. Sahara Egypt has come under pressure from the Egyptian authorities, with its staff facing threats of violence. The company is nominally still in business, but it hasn't received any customers since the attack; its owner was forced to sell his house to pay the company's debts.

The only Egyptians to have survived the airstrike were the police escort, Hamdeen Shaaben, and Sherif Farouq. Before the attack, Farouq was a driver with connections and a record of tour

driving stretching more than two decades. But he was also a man with a car. Now there is no car, just a shrapnel souvenir and nightmares.

“Was I afraid? I am still afraid. I still can’t sleep,” Farouq told FP. “I flinch whenever I hear the sound of an aircraft.”

Tom Stevenson is a Middle East and North Africa correspondent based between Cairo and Istanbul.

Top desert photo credit: JASON LARKIN/Getty Images.