

ISIS Beheads 2 Elderly Men Accused of Witchcraft, Sorcery

Islamic State's branch in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula posted a video on Tuesday depicting the beheading of two men the militant Islamist group said it had found guilty of practicing witchcraft and sorcery.

The video, posted on a Telegram channel often used by IS, showed the group forming a religious police unit known as the Hasbah in northern Sinai, where it has waged an insurgency for years. The rugged, thinly populated peninsula borders Israel, Gaza and the Suez Canal.

No comment was immediately available from Egypt's military or Interior Ministry.

In the video, two elderly men appear in orange jumpsuits and are taken out of a black van and led to the desert, where they are beheaded. A man reads out what he says is a verdict from a Sharia court condemning them to death for "apostasy, sorcery, claiming the ability to tell the future and leading people to polytheism."

Islamic State uses the terms sorcerers and heretics to refer to adherents of Sufism, a non-violent form of Islam involving mystical rituals that has been practiced for centuries.

IS has killed hundreds of soldiers and police in Sinai since 2013, when fighting intensified, but the video shows the militants are expanding their activities to target civilians.

"Thanks be to God, who has allowed the Islamic State's soldiers in Sinai in applying his law and instituting religion in spite of all the infidels, apostates and envious Jews," one

fighter can be seen and heard saying.

In the video, which is also notable for the fact that the men speaking in it are unmasked, fighters are shown seizing trucks full of cigarettes and drugs, and then burning them.

They are also seen handing out fliers with religious advice to motorists at checkpoints and raiding a Sufi gathering and arresting a number of men, who are given a religious sermon and then made to sign a document saying they will repent.

Fighters are also seen smashing television sets and satellite dishes, destroying tombs they say go against Islamic burial laws, and using sticks to beat men accused of smuggling.

They are also shown blowing up what they describe as Sufi shrines.

Islamic State has instituted similar religious police units in Syrian and Iraqi territories it controls. The Egyptian branch first showed signs of expanding its goals beyond fighting security forces when in December it bombed a church adjoining Cairo's St Mark's Cathedral, the seat of the Coptic papacy, killing 28 people.

In February, the militants threatened all Egyptian Christians, the Middle East's largest Christian community, in a video, and began circulating names of Christians who must leave Sinai or die.

Within a period of three weeks they killed seven Christians, prompting almost 200 families to flee northern Sinai, church officials and human rights groups say. {eo}