

PolicyWatch 1946

## The MFO Under Fire in Sinai

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Deteriorating security in the Sinai Peninsula threatens not only the peacekeepers based there, but also the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty.

Since 1982, the Multinational Force and Observers has been monitoring the security provisions of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty in the Sinai. But three decades on, the fall of the Mubarak regime, the Muslim Brotherhood's electoral gains, the security vacuum in Sinai, and populist politics in Cairo have put the treaty and the MFO under unprecedented pressure. Although it is too early to write off either the monitors or the peace agreement, the changed status quo in Egypt and the growing security threat in Sinai have dramatically complicated the MFO's mission and could eventually erode international commitment to the peacekeeping force.

### BACKGROUND

The MFO was originally conceived at the UN following the 1979 Camp David Accords. After China and Russia vetoed the mission in the Security Council, Washington, Egypt, and Israel agreed to field the MFO outside the UN framework, determining the force's management and funding on their own. In accordance with Annex I, Article II of the treaty, the MFO was tasked with monitoring "Zone C," the roughly one-fourth of the Sinai that runs along the border with Israel.

Today, the MFO has 1,656 military personnel supplied by twelve countries in the demilitarized border zone, and 17 civilian officials in the rest of the peninsula. In addition to ground operations, the MFO flies surveillance missions over the Sinai to determine whether Egypt's force deployments are consistent with its commitments. Between the Infantry Battalion Task Force, the logistics unit (which provides the aircraft and conducts the air operations), and other staff, the United States contributes nearly 700 personnel to the MFO. In budgetary terms, Israel, Egypt, and Washington fund the force evenly, with each contributing \$25 million in 2011, supplemented by much smaller donations from other states (totaling less than \$4 million last year). In 2005 and 2007, the MFO's mandate was expanded to ensure that the augmented Egyptian presence along the Gaza border was consistent with the treaty.

### MFO TARGETED

Although the MFO has not experienced the level of violence seen by other monitoring and peacekeeping organizations such as the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), the trend lines in Sinai are not promising. Past attacks were infrequent -- in 2005, Bedouin attacked an MFO vehicle with an improvised explosive device, and a year later, another vehicle was targeted by a suicide bomber. Aside from these two incidents, however, the MFO was able to operate with relative security until now. As security has deteriorated post-Mubarak, the Sinai has become increasingly dangerous, with Egyptian authorities unable or unwilling to protect gas pipelines, defend the border with Gaza, or prevent infiltration from abroad.

Amid this security vacuum, al-Qaeda-style Islamist militancy appears to be taking root. In August 2011, a heretofore unknown organization called "al-Qaeda in the Sinai Peninsula" claimed responsibility for attacking al-Arish police station. Four months later, another Sinai-based group called "Ansar al-Jihad" declared its allegiance to al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri.

At the same time, Bedouin tribesmen are acting with less restraint in the absence of a credible state authority. In March, a band of armed tribesmen surrounded the MFO camp at al-Gorah for eight days, demanding the release of Bedouin imprisoned for the 2004 Taba and 2005 Sharm al-Sheikh bombings. And last month, a group of Bedouin detained an MFO vehicle between two checkpoints. Although no one was removed from the vehicle, the situation could have escalated. Indeed, after the incident, Egyptian daily *al-Masry al-Youm* reported that Bedouin had kidnapped and subsequently released ten MFO peacekeepers.

Sinai is also becoming an increasingly hospitable launch pad for Gaza-based terrorists to attack Israel. In August 2011, the Popular Resistance Committees -- a Palestinian terrorist organization working with both Hamas and the Gaza-based al-Qaeda poseur Jaish al-Islam -- launched a cross-border raid from Egypt that killed eight Israelis, including two soldiers. Palestinian militants are also now pre-positioning rockets in Sinai. These groups have not yet targeted MFO personnel, but they could do so in the future.

## **WANING EGYPTIAN SUPPORT FOR THE TREATY**

Between the Muslim Brotherhood and the ultraconservative Salafists, Islamists now control nearly 75 percent of the Egyptian parliament. Depending on the results of the presidential runoff later this month, they may soon control the executive branch as well. The Brotherhood has not stated outright that it will abrogate the treaty with Israel, but the organization's leadership at minimum intends to renegotiate the agreement. What exactly this means for the MFO is unclear. If given the opportunity, the Islamists will almost certainly lift restrictions on Palestinians entering Egypt from Gaza, which could make the Sinai even more dangerous.

At the same time, the Brotherhood could see an interest in reestablishing security in the Sinai -- notwithstanding its historical ties with al-Qaida, the group may feel pressure to get the flagging tourism industry back on track. Although Islamists won a majority of the Sinai vote during the parliamentary elections, it remains to be seen whether the government will have the political will and military acquiescence needed to initiate a crackdown. If the Brotherhood's candidate wins the presidency, the group will likely find itself at odds with the military almost at once, leaving the MFO to fend for itself.

## **THREAT OF ATTRITION**

In light of these factors, the MFO will face significant challenges in the coming months and years. To be sure, none of the twelve contributing states are threatening to pull out. In 2002, the Pentagon reportedly approached Israel and Egypt about downsizing the U.S. troop commitment, but the proposal did not get very far. Today, with the rise of the Islamists and the potential for sharp deterioration in Egyptian-Israeli ties, reducing the already-small international presence in the Sinai would meet with even less enthusiasm.

Yet insecurity in the peninsula will make it increasingly difficult for the MFO to accomplish its work on the ground. The force has upgraded its vehicles in recent years, and many of them are fully or partially armored. Yet growing abduction fears have led to the cancellation of many patrols, and reconnaissance flights have reportedly been scaled back due to concerns about terrorists or other actors fielding man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADS). Should the situation continue to deteriorate, the MFO might reduce its patrols even further, à la UNIFIL in Lebanon. Although the force has not suffered fatalities in recent months, donor commitment will erode if troop casualties begin to mount. Over time, the MFO's mission will simply become untenable unless security improves in the Sinai -- or unless the rules of engagement are changed, which seems unlikely.

For Washington, the increasing pressures on the MFO should be cause for concern. To date, the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty has proven remarkably durable, but lawlessness in the Sinai combined with an incoming Egyptian government that may be overtly hostile to the agreement is not a recipe for stability. To preserve both the MFO and the treaty, the Obama administration should engage Egypt and Israel on mechanisms for improving security efforts in Zone C, to include additional deployments of Egyptian border guard and military forces in the area. If the violence still does not abate, the partners may also need to redefine the MFO's rules of engagement to better reflect the increasingly unfriendly environment in which it operates. Absent these changes, the current trajectory could render peacekeeping operations in the Sinai unsustainable -- another blow to an already embattled treaty.

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