



**Assaf Orion and Denis Thompson**

## **AVOIDING AN EPIC MISTAKE**

**The Case for Continuing the U.S. Mission in Sinai**



As part of its 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS), the United States is seeking to focus on Great Power competition and withdraw from legacy missions it sees as irrelevant.<sup>1</sup> Yet one of the missions under consideration is hardly irrelevant. U.S. Army participation in the Multinational Force & Observers (MFO) in the Sinai Peninsula constitutes a vital part of the 1979 Israel-Egypt peace treaty architecture. While the NDS approach to legacy missions makes sense in principle, U.S. withdrawal from the MFO would be a colossal mistake. Indeed, Israel-Egypt relations are at an all-time high, but rather than showing the diminished importance of peacekeepers, it demonstrates the opposite: their essential role in having reached this summit and in climbing onward.

The MFO has been critical in helping the parties across volatile crises through its communication, trust building, and verification roles, and Israel-Egypt relations owe a great deal to these efforts. U.S. participation in the MFO appears to have generated an asymmetrical impact—a very small and increasingly efficient military



investment, with burden-sharing partners, has yielded lasting grand-strategic benefits. U.S. forces in Sinai are superbly positioned not only to advance American interests in the Middle East, but also to maintain a strategic foothold in the context of Great Power competition. With China and Russia increasingly involved in Egypt's economy, development, nuclear energy,<sup>2</sup> and arms acquisition,<sup>3</sup> the United States can still turn the tide in recommitting to its continued mission in Sinai. In doing so, Washington will communicate its unflinching dedication to preserving what is certainly its most important achievement in the Middle East: the Treaty of Peace between Israel and Egypt.

Since fall 2019, U.S. secretary of defense Mark Esper has repeatedly stressed the need to “focus on the National Defense Strategy, get rid of legacy programs and activities, and pivot toward the future,” with a focus on “China, and then Russia, as our nation’s top national security challenges.”<sup>4</sup> On February 26, 2020, Esper informed the House Armed Services Committee of a department-wide review seeking to reallocate resources from programs no longer viewed as central to NDS objectives.<sup>5</sup> Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, then demonstrated the Defense Department’s intent:

We have multiple things that have been built up over 20, 30 years...Take the Sinai, for example. You know, the Camp David Accords signed in 1981 [sic]. I served in the Sinai, is that still a valid mission for military forces? Does it still make sense according to the NDS?...If yes, check, continue, pass Go, collect two hundred, if not then we delete it.<sup>6</sup>

The same day, *Military Times* reported that “one mission potentially on the chopping block following the review is the Multinational Force and Observers mission, where several hundred U.S. troops have been participating in a peace-keeping operation between Egypt and Israel since 1981.”<sup>7</sup> Following these signals from the

Defense Department leadership, the Army began planning for serious cuts in 2020 and a total withdrawal from the mission by the end of 2021.

The coronavirus pandemic has placed further stress on U.S. armed forces. The National Guard, in particular, is expected to shoulder some of the responsibility of addressing the public health crisis, potentially making the planned Sinai pullout even more pressing.

## ORIGINS OF THE FORCE

In the wake of the 1973 Yom Kippur War—the fifth war pitting Israel against Egypt, and the worst—the United States played a pivotal role in achieving peace between the two sides. The Camp David Accords of 1978 were followed by the Israel-Egypt Treaty of Peace, which was signed March 26, 1979, and presided over by U.S. president Jimmy Carter.<sup>8</sup> The signatories sought security arrangements to solidify peace and mutual trust. Israel, particularly, attempted to offset its loss of strategic depth from returning Sinai to Egypt. In its security annex, the treaty imposed limitations on the Egyptian military presence in Sinai and on Israeli forces along the border. It also laid the groundwork for a peacekeeping force and liaison arrangements between the two countries. Moreover, the treaty allowed for the parties to agree to security arrangements outside those mentioned in the annex and for the existing security arrangements to be amended by mutual consent.

While the UN Security Council failed to establish a peacekeeping force over 1979–81, the United States provided a Sinai Field Mission until Egypt and Israel agreed on a multinational force and signed its protocol in August 1981.<sup>9</sup> The MFO began its mission on April 25, 1982, “to supervise the implementation of the security provisions of the Egyptian-Israeli Treaty of Peace and employ best efforts to prevent any violation of its terms.”<sup>10</sup>

MFO SINAI PENINSULA



The MFO's tools are observation, verification, and reporting of its findings to the treaty parties, as well as facilitating communication and dialogue between them. Observation and verification are implemented by the MFO's Civilian Observer Unit, which observes and verifies activity in the four treaty zones (A–D, oriented west to east across the peninsula— see map). Static observation sites, manned and unmanned, are located in Zone C, on the western side of the border. The force also undertakes mobile verification missions and maritime coastal patrols. The MFO's communication, facilitation, and trust-building missions rely on a robust liaison branch, augmented by senior military and civilian leader engagement.

Thirteen nations currently contribute 1,156 troops to the MFO: the United States (454), Colombia (275), Fiji (170), Italy (78), Canada (55), Uruguay (41), New Zealand (30), Australia (27), the Czech Republic (18), Norway (3), Japan (2), the United Kingdom (2), and France (1) (see figure 1). Its main base, South Camp, is located on the Red Sea coast at Sharm al-Sheikh, just across the strategic Straits of Tiran. The MFO operates the following: six remote sites; six camera checkpoints; seven communications sites; ten aircraft; a maritime patrol unit consisting of three vessels;

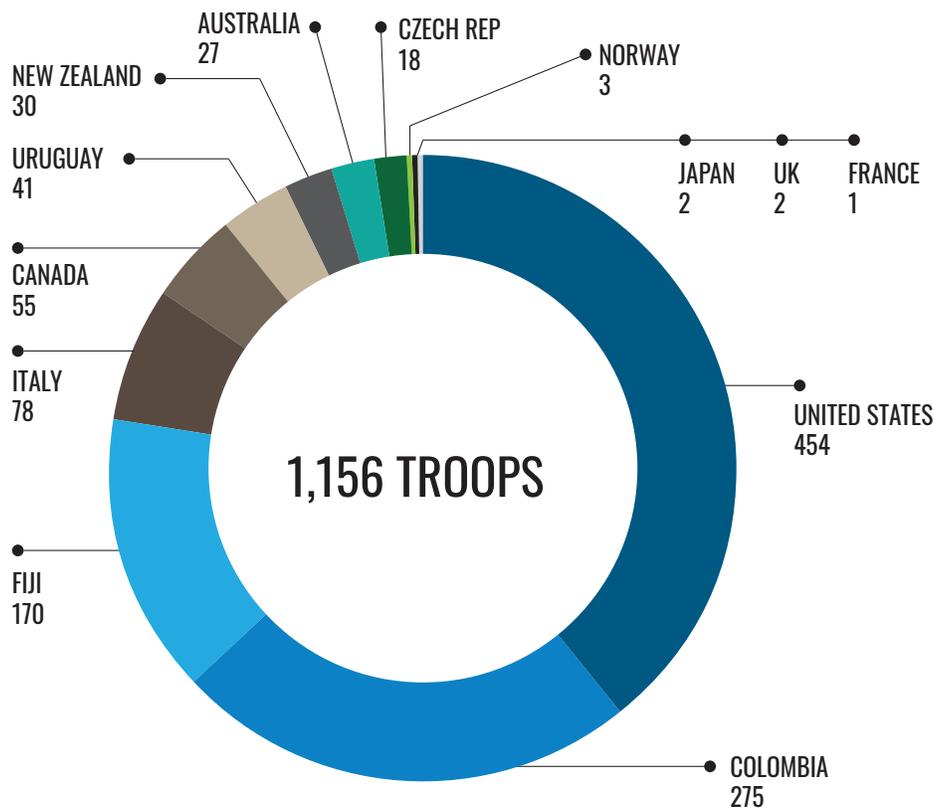
and Forward Operating Base North in al-Gorah, northern Sinai. Today's MFO posture reflects a deep redeployment and adjustment conducted between 2014 and 2017 to carry out its mission more efficiently and to minimize risk from a rising insurgency in Sinai. Whereas other peacekeeping missions, such as the UN Disengagement Observer Force, stationed in the Golan Heights, essentially collapsed under the weight of change in those tumultuous years of upheaval, the MFO remained strategically steadfast and demonstrated impressive operational flexibility.<sup>11</sup>

## DEFENSE DEPARTMENT ARGUMENTS

According to sources knowledgeable about the plan to terminate U.S. participation in the MFO, the Defense Department has three main arguments: (1) that the Egypt-Israel relationship has matured beyond the need for an intermediary; (2) that if the United States withdraws its troops, other countries will step in to fill the void; and (3) that the MFO's service to the U.S. national interest is marginal and troops could be put to better use elsewhere. But these arguments, as finer analysis shows, are based on incorrect assumptions.



FIGURE 1. MFO PERSONNEL



**SELDOM-STATED TRUTHS AND FUTURE CHALLENGES**

The good news is that, as noted, Israel-Egypt relations are at a peak, and the peace has stood both the test of time and several trials by fire. In 1982, shortly after Israel’s first war in Lebanon began, diplomatic ties grew strained between Jerusalem and Cairo, and the ebbs and flows in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have further fed tensions. One can hope that the current tide—in which Israel is a staunch supporter of, even a lobbyist for, Egyptian president Abdul Fattah al-Sisi in Washington and Cairo is a key facilitator of security arrangements with Gaza—will persist. But if history is any guide, the future is best served by treading carefully.

Egypt’s last decade saw the fall of President Hosni Mubarak, the short-lived rule of the Muslim Brotherhood under President Mohamed Morsi, and the return to power of the establishment under President Sisi. At every turn, the architecture of peace was put to the test. Israel was increasingly concerned about losing its erstwhile interlocutors in the swells of the revolution. Given the Muslim Brotherhood’s open hostility, Israel harbored serious doubts about Egypt’s adherence and commitment to the peace treaty on the strategic level. Before the Sisi presidency provided strategic reassurance and relief on this issue, serious trouble developed on the tactical level. Deteriorating security developments in Sinai added fuel to Cairo’s political fire, with terrorism and insurgency destabilizing the peninsula and the peace border.<sup>12</sup> In August 2011, with a transitional Egyptian government attempting to maintain order,

a lethal attack against Israel by terrorist groups in Sinai caused direct Egypt-Israel friction, with multiple fatalities on both sides.<sup>13</sup> A month later, an Egyptian mob stormed the Israeli embassy in Cairo, and its besieged staff was extricated by the Egyptian armed forces, apparently after U.S. president Barack Obama's personal intervention.<sup>14</sup> August 2012 saw another dramatic terrorist attack, with jihadists slaughtering sixteen Egyptian border guards, then using their armored military vehicle to breach the border with Israel. They were finally stopped by IDF tank fire and airstrikes.<sup>15</sup> This incident, occurring just months into President Morsi's term, was followed by the removal of Egypt's security and defense leadership: Minister of Intelligence Murad Muwafi, Minister of Defense Muhammad Hussein Tantawi, and Chief of General Staff Sami Anan.<sup>16</sup> General Sisi, newly appointed minister of defense, launched a massive military operation in northern Sinai, including an Egyptian army deployment that was not coordinated with Israel, sparking serious tensions between the parties.<sup>17</sup>

At a deeper level, Egypt's policy is a balancing act between contesting concepts and beliefs.<sup>18</sup> On the one hand, Israel is seen as a partner for peace, which is Egypt's strategic choice, a country whose lobbying in Washington benefits Cairo, as does its cooperation in addressing the Muslim Brotherhood, terrorism in Sinai, and Egypt's security challenges. On the other hand, Cairo clearly sees Israel as a regional competitor. Israel is highly unpopular among the Egyptian public, and the cold peace between the two countries has never spilled down from the governmental to the people-to-people level.<sup>19</sup> The picture is similar in the armed forces, where a small circle of senior-level and liaison officers is aware of the deep security cooperation with Israel, yet most of the Egyptian military is not. Israel, recognizing Egypt's security needs in Sinai, has promptly and willingly agreed to larger deployments of Egyptian forces there, especially since 2012. Israel's ongoing consent owes much to MFO reassurances, through verification and communication functions,

monitoring the actual deployments on the ground, and verifying adherence to the agreed activities. In February 2018, Egyptian army chief of staff Gen. Mahmoud Hegazy stated that eighty-eight Egyptian battalions were operating against terrorism throughout Sinai, in Zones A through C, even as the peace treaty limits Egypt to thirty army and four border guard battalions in Zones A and B, respectively.<sup>20</sup> Israel reportedly provides active support for Egypt's counterterrorism efforts in Sinai, yet the latter's ever-growing military presence in the area may also raise concerns for Israel over time.<sup>21</sup> Already, some Israeli analysts are warning that Egypt's long-term development of military infrastructure could support a wide-scale campaign beyond counterterrorism.<sup>22</sup>

President Sisi's statements make it clear that he supports the peace with Israel, but the Egyptian establishment from which he hails and his public harbor different views. The result in Sinai is erosion of the treaty limitations over time, which, regardless of the purpose, leads to gradual remilitarization of the peninsula. This is why the MFO remains crucial. Its observations and findings facilitate dialogue between the parties on security arrangements and continuously build trust through verification. MFO reporting provides solid, factual grounding on which the parties can establish new understandings in a complex and dynamic environment.

## UNSUNG PEACEKEEPING SUCCESSES

Amid persistent turbulence and a fast-changing security landscape, the MFO has proved agile and adaptive in assisting the treaty parties across highly sensitive periods. By facilitating communication and meetings in its bases, and by providing unbiased clarity about the objectively monitored reality on the ground, the MFO has helped establish and maintain mutual trust in times of peaking tensions. During the most critical crisis in August 2012, described earlier, the MFO's director-general,

Ambassador David Satterfield, shuttled between Cairo, Sinai, Jerusalem, and Tel Aviv, narrowing the gaps in understanding, carrying messages, bringing Washington’s weight and interests to the table, and devising procedures to address the new situation and allay the parties’ concerns. The MFO’s active role helped contain the crisis without further deterioration, perhaps making it easier for those not intimately involved to downplay what might have happened without MFO intervention.

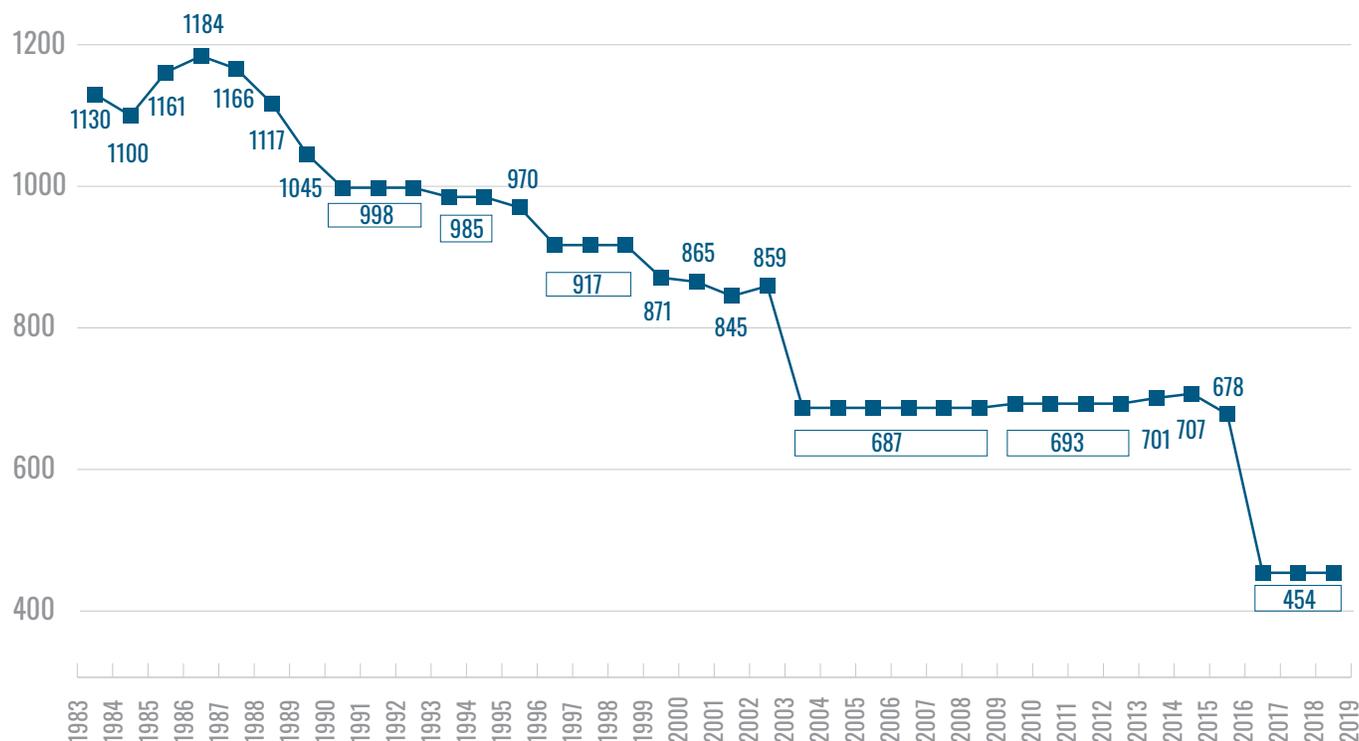
This unsung success was achieved thanks to the unique combination of MFO assets: unwavering U.S. support, world-class diplomacy, high levels of access and trust in both capitals, excellent field-monitoring capabilities, and the U.S. military as a backbone, securing and enabling mission continuity in times of heightened threats. The fact that so little is published about the MFO stems from one of its signature traits: a low profile and

quiet professionalism. The force has never sought headlines, and its discretion is key to its ability to gain the parties’ trust and to its continued success.

### PROS, CONS, AND POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS

The current attempt to terminate U.S. participation in the MFO is not the first.<sup>23</sup> In the 1990s, in 2002, in 2007, and again in 2015, the Defense Department undertook initiatives, reviews, and deliberations on the question.<sup>24</sup> Most of these ended with some downsizing but stopped short of a full U.S. withdrawal, thanks to unanimous opposition to such a move from Egypt and Israel. U.S. participation has been gradually reduced, however, from almost 1,200 troops in the mid-1980s to the current authorized strength of 454, reached in 2016 (see figure 2).

FIGURE 2. U.S. TROOP CONTRIBUTION TO MFO, 1983–2019



On the military and operational levels, the current U.S. force size fits its purpose, and thanks to its unique qualities, it serves as the backbone of an otherwise small and vulnerable MFO. The U.S. force is a critical enabler for the total MFO mission. Further reductions in U.S. numbers would affect mission-critical capabilities: rotary-wing aviation, which is vital for medical evacuation and aerial-monitoring verification/reconnaissance activities; information support; engineering; logistics; and the use of force-protection equipment that can only be operated by U.S. personnel. No other acceptable troop contributor has the capacity to replace the MFO's eight UH-60L American helicopters. More broadly, a U.S. exit would quickly lead to withdrawal by the remaining partner nations, likely unraveling the MFO and its vital mission altogether. By terminating U.S. participation, the Defense Department would free up only 452 troops (242 active soldiers, 205 soldiers from the Army National Guard, and 5 Army Reserve soldiers from the aviation detachment), a mere 0.05 percent of its 1,006,103 Army soldiers. This small savings in force and budget, although hardly discernible on an army-wide let alone Defense Department level, will have terminal implications for the MFO. Such a move would surely have strategic costs.

The Middle East has enough sources of tension—domestic upheavals, adventurous or erratic leaders, radical ideologies, and persistent strife—to justify the shock-absorbing system the MFO has been since the early 1980s. Without the MFO and its reassuring monitoring and facilitation, and with effective U.S. safeguarding of the peace treaty fading, the parties would be left on their own. Without a U.S. “tripwire” and the superpower shadow it casts, any Egyptian leader would face stronger pressures to further remilitarize Sinai. Israel would face a growing Egyptian military presence on its western border and might need to invest intelligence efforts and possibly add forces to hedge against a sizable risk near its border. Egypt, in turn, might find Israel's measures alarming and bolster its own posture

and activity in response, such as through fighter jet activity over Sinai that is not coordinated with Israel. It might also advance air-defense units east of the Suez Canal. Such military steps could lead to a spiraling escalation, despite the parties' basic interests and strategic choices, with far-reaching repercussions for regional stability and security.

## THE WIDER STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVE

The Israel-Egypt peace treaty is probably the single most important achievement of U.S. diplomacy in the Middle East, successfully breaking new ground in the generations-long Arab-Israeli conflict. The trailblazing treaty was the cornerstone of later breakthroughs such as the Israel-Jordan peace treaty, the Oslo process, and even the current warming of relations between Israel and other Arab and Muslim-majority states. On December 11, 2019, Defense Secretary Esper told the House Armed Services Committee that “the United States' strategy in the Middle East seeks to ensure the region is not a safe haven for terrorists, is not dominated by any power hostile to the United States, and contributes to a stable global energy market.”<sup>25</sup> This alone suggests that for a relatively small military investment in Sinai (in troops, funds, and risk), the United States reaps outsize strategic returns in regional security, in line with its strategy.

The value of the American military presence in Sinai as part of the MFO, however, goes beyond Middle East stability, the security of allies, and U.S. regional standing. While the Defense Department has framed its reassessment of the MFO in terms of Great Power competition, implying the force's irrelevance in this context, the bounds of the larger competition itself deserve closer scrutiny. The U.S. rivalry with China extends well beyond the western Pacific and the “pivot to Asia” into the Indo-Pacific and other strategic lines of communication, such as the Arctic. As China gradually expands its maritime presence

in the Middle East and surrounding seas—e.g., the ports in Djibouti, Gwadar (Pakistan), and Duqm (Oman)—it is also deeply invested in projects in Egypt itself and beyond in Mediterranean ports. Russia, which has shown its appetite for increasing its sway wherever the United States pulls back—Syria being the most obvious example—is energetically seeking a renewed foothold in Egypt through major arms sales and the Dabaa nuclear power plant project.<sup>26</sup> Egypt, in turn, has demonstrated a clear desire to diversify its strategic partnerships and is strengthening its ties with Russia and China.

If the United States pulls up anchor from the vital waterways of the Red Sea, U.S. interests would suffer a major setback in the Middle East, but also beyond it. These waterways are critical chokepoints for the U.S. Navy's movements to the Indo-Pacific, and the skies above are key routes over Egypt. The United States would be ceding the strategic high ground to China and Russia in the context of Great Power competition. If the United States leaves, future historians will undoubtedly lament that seldom was so much lost for so little savings.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The coronavirus pandemic could well deflect U.S. attention from seemingly peripheral issues such as participation in the MFO. Deep potential budget cuts, reassignment of troops, and other crisis measures could terminate the critical Sinai mission without due consideration. Indeed, the Defense Department has already withdrawn small troop deployments from Africa to protect U.S. forces from the coronavirus.

Only time will tell whether they return once the crisis has abated.<sup>27</sup>

The U.S. signature on the Israel-Egypt peace treaty is a strategic national security asset of the first order. As can be seen in the May 15 bipartisan letter urging maintenance of strong U.S. support for the MFO,<sup>28</sup> the Sinai mission has enjoyed decades of backing from both major parties on Capitol Hill and in the executive branch, from the White House to the State Department to the Defense Department. The U.S. signature is served by the superb diplomatic-military instrument of the MFO, a symbol of U.S. sponsorship, protected by the U.S. Army and flying the American flag over Sharm al-Sheikh, at Egypt's invitation. Far from being a military or even a defense decision, the participation or its potential termination is first and foremost a strategic national policy decision. The Israeli government should raise its concerns about the potential withdrawal with its various interlocutors in Washington—in the White House, in Congress, in the State Department, and in the Defense Department. Israel and Egypt, for their part, will benefit by joining together to express their unequivocal support for continuing, steadfast U.S. military participation in the MFO and protection of the peace treaty.

For almost forty years, the Multinational Force & Observers has protected the Israel-Egypt peace and acted as a stabilizing presence in the Sinai Peninsula. The MFO also fits within the Great Power context topping the U.S. National Defense Strategy. Therefore, the answer to General Milley's question is clear: the MFO is still a valid mission, making perfect sense according to the NDS. The bottom line, then, for the MFO should be "Check, continue, pass Go, collect two hundred."

## NOTES

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