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UAVs and the Abraham Accords: New Horizons for Sinai Peacekeeping

by [Assaf Orion](#)

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Brief Analysis

Replacing manned monitoring missions with drone sorties and inviting Gulf countries to participate would help improve security, reduce America's burden and risk, decrease costs, and bolster the regional peace architecture.

In February 2020, the Pentagon leadership raised the possibility of terminating U.S. military participation in the Multinational Force & Observers (MFO), the invaluable peacekeeping mission in the Sinai Peninsula. At least for the time being, this potentially **epic mistake** has been taken off the table, especially after its main champion, Secretary of Defense Mark Esper, was "terminated" from office in November. Yet other developments in the MFO's strategic environment deserve revisiting, both to address threats and to take advantage of new opportunities.

For one, the Islamic State has escalated its challenge to Egyptian government control in North Sinai. Mid-July saw a staggering attack against an Egyptian army camp in Rabeah, with dozens of casualties. Jihadists then captured five villages in the Bir al-Abd area for several months, displacing thousands of residents and repelling the army's attempts to dislodge them. As the Islamic State marches west, the military has sought to reinforce the Suez Canal, clear captured villages, hunt insurgents down, and raze their hideouts.

The Israeli government has presumably assented to this growing Egyptian military presence, which far exceeds the Sinai deployment limitations set forth in the 1979 peace treaty. Despite the unprecedented cooperation that has characterized recent bilateral security relations, however, some Israeli intelligence veterans fear that Egypt's

buildup in Sinai reflects a longer-term goal of preparing for future war with Israel. Hence, the MFO also remains important as a mechanism for building trust between the treaty parties through liaison and monitoring, laying a common situational baseline for their discussions.

Why Drones?

In recent months, security threats and the COVID-19 pandemic have limited the MFO Civilian Observer Unit's ability to conduct ground verification missions. And for several years now, Sinai monitoring has increasingly relied on MFO aerial assets: namely, eight U.S. Army UH-60 Blackhawk helicopters, one U.S. Army Beechcraft C-12 Huron plane, and a Czech Air Force Airbus/CASA C-295M cargo plane. While partially decreasing the security hazards, such makeshift air monitoring offers relatively poor visibility. And although air missions face fewer threats than ground patrols, they still entail risk, as Sinai jihadists have ominously mentioned "crusaders' planes" in their social media posts.

Increased air activity also increases safety hazards, since air accidents—however rare—usually entail multiple fatalities. In mid-November, for example, an MFO helicopter crashed on Tiran Island during a logistical mission, tragically killing seven peacekeepers: five of them American, one French, and one Czech. A previous accident in May 2007 killed eight French soldiers and a Canadian.

Under the incoming Biden administration, the Pentagon will no doubt continue reconfiguring America's military posture in the Middle East, allowing it to shift weight toward emerging challenges from China. Some of the desired defense flexibility could be found by asking regional partners to take on some of the burden—an option that became more evident late last year after the Abraham Accords opened the way to [sizable arms sales](#). As Emirati ambassador to Washington Yousef Al Otaiba tweeted, "The F-35 package...enables the UAE to take on more of the regional burden for collective security, freeing US assets for other global challenges." The same can be said for Abu Dhabi's \$2.9 billion purchase of MQ-9B armed drones. Putting new unmanned aerial vehicles in the hands of partner states is not just a good way of enhancing these countries' capabilities and boosting American defense industries—it could also reduce China's market share in regional drone sales.

The emerging situation calls for introducing drones into the MFO's aerial monitoring missions. The most important benefit would be to reduce exposure to hazards for aircrews and observers, most of whom are U.S. nationals. UAVs would also greatly enhance monitoring quality by improving surveillance capability and providing longer air time compared to current rotary- and fixed-wing platforms. In the past three years, air monitoring missions have accounted for an average of 35-40 percent of the MFO's UH-60 flight hours per year, 10-12 percent of its C-12 hours, and around 25 percent of its C-295 hours, totaling nearly 600 hours of manned air monitoring per year.

Replacing these manned operations with unmanned platforms would decrease operational costs as well. A typical flight hour costs roughly \$2,000-\$3,000 for manned aircraft compared to around \$1,000 for UAVs. Moreover, replacing UH-60s with UAVs on monitoring missions could allow the MFO to cut two of its eight helicopters (along with their U.S. aircrews), while the remaining six continue the force's vital medical evacuation, troop, cargo, leadership, and liaison missions. To enable UAV missions, the MFO could either acquire a ground station and three to four drones or lease UAV services from private contractors.

The Gulf Role

Gulf states, especially the UAE, can strengthen the Egypt-Israel peace architecture by supporting the MFO in various gradual ways. At the lower end of the spectrum, the UAE could join the list of MFO donor states, which include Finland, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, South Korea, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States. Donor contributions currently add nearly \$4 million to the MFO's \$75 million yearly operating budget, whose cost is equally divided between Egypt, Israel, and the United States ([see the MFO website](#) for full budgetary details).

The UAE could also donate to specific MFO projects, such as adding a UAV component or improving conditions for troops. In addition to funding, the Emiratis might consider sending officers to MFO staff positions, including UAV-related personnel.

More broadly, Gulf states may see the MFO as a good opportunity to win points in Washington, tighten their defense partnerships with Egypt and Israel, and contribute to regional stability. Yet savvy observers may correctly point to the potential regional sensitivities that might emerge from allowing Gulf participation in Sinai peacekeeping or introducing new technologies to that theater. Cairo was traditionally reluctant to consider either of these changes, partly due to fears of being spied on (mirroring Israeli concerns about Egypt's military buildup). Yet Egypt now seems to be marching with the times. Since 2015, it has allowed remote cameras and C-RAM counter-rocket systems in the MFO for enhanced U.S. force protection, and this same need should be the main driver for allowing the MFO to deploy drones. Maintaining Egyptian liaison-in-the-loop and instituting other security and control measures might further assuage Cairo's concerns about Gulf participation and UAVs.

In strategic terms, Egypt has already demonstrated its regional approach to collaborative security by providing base access for Emirati jets used to strike their common rivals in Libya. More to the point, Cairo's long counterterrorism campaign against Islamic State insurgents in the Sinai has reportedly enjoyed support from Israel's air force (including UAVs) and, possibly, Emirati drones as well.

In the diplomatic arena, the parties were ostensibly ready for regional security cooperation in the Sinai years before the Abraham Accords. In 2017, Egypt agreed to transfer the islands of Tiran and Sanafir to Saudi Arabia despite public pushback, while Riyadh accepted the treaty limitations in these Sinai territories, making the kingdom subject to continued MFO monitoring there. Moreover, Egypt has enjoyed almost \$15 billion in economic aid from the UAE since Sisi ascended to power. And if anyone needed additional proof of these converging regional interests and the new trails blazed to promote them, they need only look to Emirati leader Sheikh Muhammed bin Zayed's mid-December visit to Egypt, or Abu Dhabi's recent decision to join the Cairo-based East Mediterranean Gas Forum as an observer.

Conclusion

The Egypt-Israel peace treaty remains the apex of America's achievements in the Middle East, and the MFO has played a vital role in upholding it since 1982, building trust and verifying its conditions on the ground. Four decades later, the MFO's enduring vitality depends on whether it can **continue adapting** to a changing environment. As the United States sets its eyes on great power competition, the Biden administration prepares to begin its term, and the Abraham Accords open new horizons for regional security, it is time to reinvigorate the Egypt-Israel peace architecture with new partners and new technologies, perhaps in combination.

Assaf Orion is the Rueven International Fellow with The Washington Institute and former head of the Strategic Division in the IDF General Staff's Planning Directorate. This article is dedicated to the MFO peacekeepers who have given their lives on the mission, to their families, and to their comrades currently on guard in the Sinai. ❖



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