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Israel's Sinai Dilemma

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Brief Analysis

Helping Egypt defeat jihadists is crucial, but it should be seen as a step toward ensuring the broader national security concerns that led Israel to call for a Sinai buffer zone in the first place.

In a February article for the *New York Times*, [David Kirkpatrick wrote](#) that Israel has conducted strikes against Islamic State elements in the Sinai no less than a hundred times since 2015. The story describes how jihadist forces operating in the peninsula under various names have been attacking Egyptian personnel for years. Yet it also highlights a broader security dilemma that Israel began grappling with well before the Islamic State entered the picture.

THE SINAI AS A BUFFER ZONE

Since ancient times, the Sinai has served as a buffer separating Egypt from the peoples living to the east. The Israel Defense Forces captured the peninsula during the Six Day War, providing a small country surrounded by enemies with strategic depth. When negotiators met for peace talks at Camp David in 1978, five years after the Yom Kippur War, Israel insisted on resolving national security issues before it would agree to return the peninsula to Egyptian sovereignty.

Annex 1 of the Camp David Accords established a system of security arrangements that enabled Israel to withdraw from Sinai without incurring serious risk. Unambiguous restrictions were placed on Egyptian military activities and deployments in the area. The rationale was clear—in the event that Cairo's disposition toward Israel changed for the worse, Sinai would continue to stand as a buffer between Egyptian forces and the Israeli border. If Cairo sent any

sizeable ground force or armed aircraft into the peninsula, it would constitute a clear violation of the accords and provide a warning of aggressive intentions. And if war broke out, Egypt's long Sinai supply lines would be exposed, especially to Israeli airpower.

To enforce the demilitarization, the United States took the extraordinary measure of supporting a permanent international troop deployment to the peninsula in 1982. Known as the Multinational Force & Observers, these troops were tasked with monitoring the Egyptian security presence in the Sinai to ensure compliance with the accords. The MFO remains in operation to this day.

In addition to suiting the logic of a country threatened by enemy ground forces, demilitarizing the Sinai also enhanced Israel's ability to defend against missiles and rockets. Naturally, the Egyptian army has continued to develop its missile capabilities over the years, so the existence of a huge 61,000-square-kilometer restricted zone is an important buffer against this potential threat, improving the IDF's ability to intercept incoming missiles if hostilities ever broke out.

In short, the Egyptian army was Israel's primary security concern on its southern border after the accords, so demilitarizing the Sinai was a good solution. This approach also enabled Israel to significantly reduce its own force size and defense budget relative to GDP.

JIHADIST REBELLION

The Mubarak government's decades worth of discriminatory political, economic, and social policies created fertile ground for radicalization in the Sinai, and terrorist organizations gradually exploited the population's resentment toward the authorities for their own goals. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the peninsula suffered a series of high-profile terrorist attacks. More recently, during the so-called Arab Spring, anti-government unrest trickled into the peninsula once again, while terrorist and guerrilla groups renewed their operations. Fueled by an influx of weapons—purportedly smuggled from post-Qadhafi Libya—the most important of these groups, Ansar Beit al-Maqdis, quickly developed into a local branch of al-Qaeda, then later became Wilayat Sinai, or the Islamic State-Sinai Province (ISSP).

The violence in Sinai soon threatened the stability of Egypt as a whole, which was already at risk following the 2011 revolution and Mubarak's ouster. In conjunction with unrest in the peninsula, attacks began to increase in the Nile Valley as well. ISSP has since made operating against the Egyptian government its top priority, focusing its attacks on three types of targets: civilian officials and security personnel in the Sinai, local residents who oppose the organization's activities, and strategic targets that affect Egypt's economy.

As a result, the situation in the Sinai has steadily deteriorated. Large ISSP raids on local towns are relatively common, with dozens of fatalities each time, totaling hundreds of deaths in recent years. The group's most notorious operations included the October 2015 bombing of a Russian airliner (which killed 224 people and severely damaged Egypt's tourism industry) and the November 2017 massacre at al-Rawdah Mosque in the North Sinai town of Bir al-Abed (which killed 300 worshippers and wounded more than 100). The latter attack purposefully targeted a site frequented by Sufis, whom ISSP regards as "heretics." It was the most lethal terrorist operation in Egypt's history, shocking local residents, Cairo, and the rest of the world.

At the same time, ISSP has frequently demonstrated its hostile intentions toward Israel, though its main objectives—and the vast majority of its operations—still focus on harming Egypt. This has remained the case even amid the numerous Israeli strikes described in Kirkpatrick's *New York Times* story. If estimates regarding those strikes are correct, then it is reasonable to assume ISSP leaders are aware of the IDF's growing role in the Sinai. So far, however, they have not changed their policy toward Israel.

Now that Islamic State forces in Iraq and Syria have lost nearly all of their territory, the Sinai may soon become the

organization's only remaining "province," making it a convenient haven for fighters from other fronts. The continued absence of Egyptian government control over the peninsula holds great appeal to the organization, giving it ample opportunities to extort resources from local residents and military personnel, expand its support among the population, and perhaps even capitalize on its proximity to the Israeli border. To be sure, the Islamic State and its supporters will do everything they can to continue operating in other countries. Yet realities on the ground will likely make Sinai their next focal point, so supporting the Egyptian army in its fight against ISSP is more crucial than ever.

ISRAEL'S DILEMMA

Bolstering the stability of the Egyptian state and strengthening its sovereignty in the Sinai is a strategic objective of the highest importance. In recent years, Israel has sought to facilitate this objective by agreeing to temporary modifications of the Camp David security arrangements. Since 2012, Cairo has repeatedly asked for permission to deploy large-scale armored forces in the peninsula, and Israel has generally assented, granting extensions to these treaty exceptions as needed. According to Kirkpatrick's report, Israel also actively assists Egyptian forces with intelligence and airstrikes in the area, while other Western analysts assert that Cairo has granted the IDF "carte blanche" to target Sinai militants with manned and unmanned aircraft.

Although helping Cairo is important, this objective does not obviate the original security concept underlying the Camp David agreement and military annex: namely, maintaining the Sinai as a buffer against any future hostilities from Egypt. The revolutionary events of the Arab Spring—especially the 2011 storming of the Israeli embassy in Cairo, followed by Egypt's election of a Muslim Brotherhood government a few months later—illustrated just how unstable the reality is, and how critical it is to keep the peninsula demilitarized in the long term.

Sinai therefore represents a dilemma for Israeli policy. On the one hand, Cairo should be offered as much help as possible to reestablish its sovereignty and prevent destabilizing shocks. On the other hand, as the fighting continues, it creates the potential for instability, and Israel should be prepared for any scenario. Thus, once ISSP is defeated, Israel should swiftly demand that Cairo reduce its Sinai deployment to a level approximating what is stipulated in the Camp David Accords.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The reality in the Sinai has changed completely since the accords, requiring occasional adjustments in the scope of the MFO's mission. Yet the organization will soon have a crucial role to play, not only in operational terms, but also as a show of American commitment to reinforcing the treaty's terms and demilitarizing the peninsula after the battle against ISSP is complete.

As for Israel's course of action, the Sinai dilemma requires a balanced and cautious policy in the immediate term. Assuming Kirkpatrick's report is accurate, officials on both sides are good at keeping their security cooperation a secret, but discretion alone is not a real solution to a deep problem. Israel and its allies should therefore focus on two main goals: restoring demilitarization in the Sinai by defeating ISSP, and maintaining Israel's "qualitative military edge" (QME) over neighboring countries.

Regarding the first goal, Cairo needs help from a broad international coalition to beat ISSP, so Israel and like-minded countries should equip it with the proper tools for that mission. Unlike Iraq and Syria, Egypt is a strong state that wants to take the lead in fighting ISSP. To do so, it would have to change its mode of operation, establishing a more effective command system and committing to comprehensive action on several different fronts simultaneously:

- **Defensive efforts.** To hinder ISSP's freedom of operation and prevent the group from entrenching itself, Egypt would need to build a defense force capable of holding liberated territory and remaining active in North Sinai's main villages, cities, and transportation arteries.

- **Offensive efforts.** Further progress against ISSP requires switching from a reactive approach (i.e., launching offensive operations only after terrorist attacks) to a proactive approach involving sustained offensive operations by special units based on precise intelligence. This strategy would increase the effectiveness of Egypt's campaign and decrease the number of civilian deaths, making it more difficult for ISSP to pit the population against the government.
- **Intelligence efforts.** A more comprehensive intelligence approach is needed to prevent terrorist activities, with agencies in Egypt and other countries concentrating their efforts and combining forces as much as possible to better target ISSP.
- **Civic action.** Reducing ISSP's recruitment numbers and improving intelligence collection against the group requires a more robust effort to improve living standards for Sinai residents. This could help isolate terrorists by creating distance between them and the wider population.

As for Israel's second goal, it should be remembered that demilitarization was not the only factor that enabled the IDF to feel comfortable about withdrawing from the Sinai. Just as important was the knowledge that its QME—specifically, its superior intelligence, fire, and maneuvering capabilities—would allow it to take advantage of conditions in the peninsula and defeat Egyptian forces if they attacked.

Israel used to be the only country in the region with advanced capabilities in intelligence gathering and precision attacks, but such features have become common to most armies since the Camp David Accords, including Egypt's. Two recent trends pose a particular challenge to Israel's QME.

First, Cairo has been acquiring advanced weaponry from abroad, and not just from the United States. It has purchased fifty MiG-29M/M2 fighter jets, fifty Ka-52 combat helicopters, and multiple S-300VM air-defense systems from Russia, along with four Gowind 2500 warships and twenty-four Rafale fighters from France. This gives the Egyptians strategic flexibility and lessens Washington's ability to limit what kind of military hardware they field.

Second, U.S. arms deals with other countries in the Middle East have reached massive proportions. Whatever the wider geostrategic purpose of such sales, they threaten Israel's QME.

The key to solving Israel's dilemma and strengthening its cooperation with Arab countries lies in (1) clearly defining what military superiority means in the current regional environment, and (2) helping the IDF increase and preserve this edge. Israel's excellent coordination mechanism with the United States has helped maintain QME in the past, but this coordination needs to be expanded in light of the above trends. A broad QME is the best way to encourage Israel's continued status as a stable and positive actor in the region.

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