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President Trump Talks Terror with Egypt's Sisi

by [David Schenker](#)

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Brief Analysis

To help Washington in the war against the Islamic State, Cairo must first help itself, in part by adopting a modern COIN approach in Sinai and refocusing its military spending toward that end.

Seven years have passed since an Egyptian head of state visited the White House, but the April 3 Oval Office meeting between Presidents Trump and Abdul Fattah al-Sisi promises to be a warm homecoming. Although the two leaders have met only once previously -- prior to the U.S. elections on the sidelines of last year's UN General Assembly -- they have by all accounts established a good rapport. At the time, Trump described Sisi as "a fantastic guy," while Sisi has since praised his counterpart's "deep and great understanding" of developments in the Middle East and Egypt. To a large degree, their bond appears to be based on counterterrorism, a policy priority that both leaders have articulated frequently and that will likely be the focus of Monday's meeting. Given Egypt's ongoing terrorism issues, there is lots to discuss on that front.

SINAI QUAGMIRE

In 2016, Trump commended Sisi's counterterrorism policy, stating that his "tough approach" had "gotten the terrorists out [of Egypt]." Cairo has systematically decimated the social and political infrastructure of the Muslim Brotherhood, whose alleged links to terrorism remain unproven. But Egypt continues to face a pernicious terrorism challenge, especially in the Sinai Peninsula, where an estimated 600 Islamic State fighters are waging war against the state.

Indeed, Cairo's campaign against IS does not appear to be going well. Earlier this week, in what has become a routine occurrence, twelve security officers were reportedly killed in an IS attack in North Sinai. On average, nearly two dozen soldiers and policemen are being killed per month in the peninsula, a gruesome toll that has persisted for years. Egypt prohibits journalists from entering Sinai, but grim news continues to trickle out. Rumors of extensive collateral damage caused by the army, for example, are pervasive. In late February, reports emerged that Coptic Christians had fled al-Arish, the largest city in North Sinai, after IS perpetrated several atrocities against members of the community. This month, photographs published on jihadi websites appeared to confirm that IS was manning security checkpoints in the city and policing morality on the streets. While the insurgency is primarily located in northeast Sinai, the security situation is so tenuous that Israel has urged its citizens -- thousands of whom travel to south Sinai for the long Passover holiday -- to leave the peninsula.

The group's recent successes there follow a long pattern of high-profile attacks. In 2014, the year that Sinai insurgents pledged allegiance to IS, the group downed an Egyptian Mi-17 transport helicopter over the peninsula, reportedly with a surface-to-air missile, killing five. In 2015, it destroyed an M60 battle tank, then sunk an Egyptian patrol boat off the coast of al-Arish, in both cases using Russian-made Kornet antitank missiles. The same year, IS took responsibility for bombing a Russian passenger jet, killing 224 civilians returning from vacation in Sharm al-Sheikh. That attack had a profound impact on tourism and employment in south Sinai, an area that had previously been insulated from the economic consequences of terrorism in the north. Taken together, these operations showcased the group's increasingly lethal capabilities, which have been bolstered by advanced armaments supplied via Gaza, according to Egyptian intelligence.

In 2016, the deterioration in security persuaded the Obama administration to reconfigure the deployment of the Multinational Force & Observers mission in Sinai. The MFO had been monitoring the security provisions of the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty since 1982, with approximately 1,700 troops -- including 700 Americans -- disbursed between North Camp (located near Rafah) and South Camp (just outside Sharm al-Sheikh). Because Cairo was unable to provide adequate force protection, most of the MFO has been relocated to South Camp, and observation activities in North Sinai are now being carried out via passive monitoring and routine U.S. Black Hawk flyovers. These helicopters allow the MFO to avoid the most lethal IS tool, improvised explosive devices, which have emerged as a leading threat to Egyptian counterinsurgency forces. The group has also been making greater use of explosively formed penetrators (EFPs) against Egyptian armor.

In addition, IS still appears committed to expanding the fight beyond Sinai. While the security situation west of the Suez Canal has improved dramatically over the past two years, the threat persists. In December, a suicide bomber attacked a Cairo church, killing twenty-four. And earlier this week, a bomb in the upscale Cairo suburb of Maadi killed one person and injured three others. Equally troubling, authorities discovered an SA-7 surface-to-air missile -- capable of bringing down a commercial jetliner -- near Cairo airport in January.

COOPERATION WITH THE UNITED STATES AND ISRAEL

Amid the destruction, one of the few good news stories from Sinai has been the enhanced Israeli-Egyptian strategic cooperation taking place there. On nearly two dozen occasions since 2013, Israel has approved Cairo's requests to deploy additional equipment and personnel beyond the provisions of the peace treaty's security annex. Moreover, officials from both countries describe their ongoing intelligence sharing on IS as robust and unprecedented. Along these lines, Israel is now flying armed drones and manned fighter aircraft in Egyptian airspace with Cairo's permission, targeting IS terrorists at will.

Cooperation with Washington on Sinai has been slower in coming. For years, the U.S. government has unsuccessfully pressed Egypt to adopt a modern counterinsurgency approach in the peninsula, including both kinetic and economic aspects. Until recently, Cairo resisted U.S. offers of technical and tactical assistance. Lately,

however, Egypt has requested and received assistance with IED detection and explosive ordnance disposal. And to better protect against deadly EFPs in Sinai, Washington has been providing 762 mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicles (MRAPs) as excess defense articles, gifted to Egypt at no cost. The first of these vehicles arrived in May 2016.

TALKING TERROR WITH SISI

For President Sisi, the White House meeting is an opportunity to highlight Egypt's improving relations with Washington, and perhaps to request additional military funding beyond its current \$1.3 billion in annual foreign military financing (FMF). At minimum, he will ask President Trump to reinstate cash flow financing, a special provision that enables Cairo to make large-scale purchases of legacy weapons systems, essentially using U.S. financial assistance commitments a decade in advance as credit. The Obama administration canceled this perquisite in 2015 after the military coup that removed Muslim Brother president Mohamed Morsi from office. Yet the Trump administration seems less concerned about the implications for democratic development in Egypt, so it may be sympathetic to resuming cash flow financing (though more FMF appears unlikely given the administration's stated desire to reduce the State Department budget).

A more important avenue of discussion may be the setbacks to Egypt's counterterrorism campaign in Sinai. Years into the fight, and with little progress to show, it remains unclear whether the Egyptian military's underperformance is a problem of will or capability. Despite ample U.S. training/provisioning and increasingly close bilateral cooperation with Israel, the insurgency is arguably larger and more lethal than it was two years ago.

Following a January phone conversation between Trump and Sisi, White House spokesman Sean Spicer announced that the administration was committed to continuing Egypt's military aid and ensuring that U.S. assistance "effectively supports the military fight against terrorism." Yet Cairo may not be sufficiently committed to using this assistance for counterterrorism-related procurements. To wit, the Egyptian military continues to favor purchasing tanks, F-16s, and missiles with its FMF instead of equipment better suited for counterinsurgency and border-security operations. More troubling, the bulk of Cairo's discretionary military expenditures -- i.e., purchases using its own national funds -- have focused on European equipment intended for conventional warfare against an unidentified enemy. These major purchases inexplicably include four German submarines, twenty-four French Rafale fighter jets, and two French Mistral-class amphibious assault ships.

For its part, the Trump administration is focused on defeating IS, and its efforts to turn a new page with Cairo will be influenced by that goal. Yet while there is much Washington can do to help Egypt roll IS back in Sinai, the real question is what Cairo will do to fight the group. With an annual budget of more than \$8 billion and nearly 440,000 men under arms, the Egyptian military should be able to establish sovereignty over its territory, especially if it implements a modern counterinsurgency strategy backed by the United States and Israel. To help Washington in the war against IS, Egypt must first help itself.

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