

America's Least-Known Mideast Military Force

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Articles & Testimony

A tragic plane crash should put a spotlight on the status of Washington's commitment to an important Sinai peacekeeping force.

This weekend, an Egyptian ISIL affiliate claimed responsibility for downing a Russian passenger jet over the Sinai Peninsula, killing all 224 aboard. Moscow and Cairo have denied a terrorist connection to the attack, claiming the airliner first experienced problems at 30,000 feet, an altitude beyond the capabilities of surface-to-air weapons systems possessed by the so-called "Province of Sinai." While this assessment of the local Sinai ISIL chapter's arsenal may be correct, there is little reason to be sanguine. Today, the Province of Sinai is deploying both MANPADS and advanced anti-tank weapons, and it's posing an increasingly lethal challenge to Egyptian security in the peninsula.

But the ISIL threat in the Sinai extends beyond Egyptian Government and tourist targets. On August 2, four American servicemen were wounded in a roadside bomb attack in Egypt. The soldiers were serving with the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) in the Sinai Peninsula, one of the most important and perhaps least well-known U.S. peacekeeping commitments. Since 1982, the United States has been contributing hundreds of soldiers and airmen to the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO), an organization tasked with monitoring the security provisions of the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty in the Sinai. In addition to ground operations, the MFO flies surveillance missions over the Sinai to determine whether Egypt's force deployments are consistent with its 1979 treaty commitments. This attack and the increasingly dangerous security environment in the Sinai in recent years have prompted the Obama administration to undertake a review of the MFO deployment and mission.

The MFO was originally conceived at the UN following the 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-quarter of the Sinai that runs along the border with Israel. Since then, the MFO, with U.S.-backing, has served at times as a buffer, confidence-builder, mediator and marriage counselor to the parties.

The MFO has 1,667 military personnel supplied by twelve countries and 17 civilian officials. But the United States is the heart and soul of the organization. Between the Infantry Battalion Task Force, the logistics unit that provides aircraft and conducts the air operations, and other staff, the U.S. contributes nearly 700 personnel to the MFO. Washington also picks up nearly a third of the organization's \$86 million annual budget.

Over the past 36 years, Israeli-Egyptian relations have had their ups and downs. During the Mubarak era, for example, Cairo routinely condemned Israeli military actions in the West Bank and Gaza. In 2003, Israel reportedly threatened to down an Egyptian UAV surveilling an Israeli air base. More recently, the yearlong tenure from 2012 to 2013 of Muslim Brotherhood president Mohammed Morsi -- whose organization pledged to cancel the peace treaty -- tested the relationship. Through it all, the MFO has been a steady and reassuring presence in the Peninsula, preserving the cold peace.

Today, at the official level at least, relations between Egypt and Israel have never been better. This beneficial development is largely attributable to the emergence of a persistent ISIL-backed insurgency in the Sinai. In recent years, as the Islamist rebellion has expanded, Israeli-Egyptian strategic cooperation vis-a-vis the militants has reached unprecedented levels. So much so that in April 2013, Israel reportedly targeted 5 Islamist militants from Sinai airspace with an armed UAV.

Paradoxically, while the mutual interest of containing ISIL in the Peninsula has driven Israel and Egypt together, the insurgency has threatened the continued presence of the MFO. Last July, the Obama administration, concerned about the safety of U.S. troops stationed in the Sinai, reportedly initiated a policy review of the MFO, with an eye toward withdrawing the contingent.

To be sure, even before the current deterioration of security, the MFO experienced casualties. In 2007, for example, an airplane with the MFO's fixed wing unit crashed in the Sinai, killing eight French and one Canadian soldier. During the course of its 33 years, however, the MFO has only periodically come under fire.

Lately, though, MFO troops have increasingly found themselves in harm's way. Two years ago in September, a group of Bedouin attacked, infiltrated and overran the MFO's North Camp, firing automatic weapons and tossing grenades, wounding four peacekeepers before a stand-down was negotiated. In August 2014, a member of the U.S. contingent was shot and wounded by an unknown gunman near the Camp. In June 2015, the MFO's airport adjacent to North Camp was shelled, and most recently in August, an ISIL IED wounded 6 MFO troops -- four Americans and two Fijians.

Although Cairo has deployed thousands of additional troops and heavy equipment -- including F-16 fighter jets and Apache attack helicopters -- to the Sinai, Egypt has been unable to contain the violence. More than 1,000 Egyptian soldiers and policemen have been killed in the Peninsula to date, including sixty-four soldiers on one day alone this past summer. Last year, Islamic militants downed an Egyptian military helicopter over the Sinai; this past July, they sunk a naval patrol vessel off the coast. In August 2013, these terrorists hit a ship traversing the Suez Canal with a rocket-propelled grenade.

Meanwhile, as the ISIL-led insurgency in Sinai grows, so does the threat to the MFO and its mission. Today, MFO patrols are escorted by Egyptian armor columns, and the organization has curtailed its air operations, and is limiting its postings of observers at remote locations.

Despite these limitations, U.S. forces remain critical. Not only would a U.S. departure lead invariably to the collapse of the MFO, it would confirm Washington's shrinking commitment to its regional allies and provide ISIL with a

significant moral and operational victory at exactly the wrong time. Egypt and Israel would also oppose the decision, and likely cooperate to reverse it.

If the Obama administration resolved to reduce the U.S. footprint in the MFO, it wouldn't be the first time. In the 1990s, the Defense Department floated an initiative to withdraw the contingent, which was subsequently quashed by the State Department. More recently, in 2002 during the early days of the "Global War on Terrorism," George W. Bush's Pentagon sought to free up additional manpower by downsizing its then 865-soldier contingent to a symbolic contribution of just 27 troops. In August 2002, the Defense Department hosted a trilateral meeting to discuss the planned reduction. Egyptian and Israeli pushback was so severe that the U.S. force contingent was cut by less than 20 percent.

Notwithstanding the currently improved bilateral climate, both Israel and Egypt recognize the fragility of the relationship. To wit, in September 2011, Israel responded to a large cross-border terrorist attack from the Sinai by mistakenly killing five Egyptian soldiers on the frontier. In the aftermath of this incident, a mob stormed the Israeli Embassy in Cairo, trapping six Israeli diplomats in the safe-room. If not for a reinforced six-inch door, the envoys almost certainly would have been lynched, imperiling the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty.

A six-inch door at the Israeli Embassy might have preserved the treaty three years ago, but even today, a significant number of Egyptians consider Israel to be their enemy. To be sure, the treaty is solid at the official level, yet thirty-six years on, it has not developed into a peace between the two peoples. Consider that in August, a lawsuit was filed in Egyptian court accusing an Egyptian-American graduate student who attended Tel Aviv University of "high treason" and demanding that his Egyptian citizenship be stripped.

Following the U.S. government policy review, this past September the Obama administration deployed an additional 75 soldiers to the Sinai MFO to bolster force protection capabilities. While this represented a good first step, more should be done -- including providing so-called armored MRAP vehicles for U.S. and other contingents of the MFO. At the same time, the Defense Department should consider modifying the MFO's current monitoring disposition to include employing more passive and standoff tools such as reconnaissance UAVs. Most importantly, Washington should also press Egypt to accept U.S. counterinsurgency training and adopt modern COIN tactics to help rollback the gains of ISIL in the Sinai.

With five failed Middle Eastern states and two more at risk, and with ISIL on the march, the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty stands as one of Washington's last remaining regional policy accomplishments. Given the tenuous nature of this peace, the continued U.S. commitment via its MFO presence to ensuring the endurance of Camp David is more critical than ever.

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