

Securing the Sinai MFO Without a U.S. Drawdown

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Brief Analysis

The Obama administration should dispel the current uncertainty over the MFO's future by conferring with Egypt and Israel about how best to secure the peacekeepers, and by improving counterterrorism coordination in the Sinai.

In the wake of a June 9 jihadist rocket attack on the Multinational Force of Observers (MFO) and other dangerous incidents, the U.S. government is reviewing the future of its military deployment in the Sinai Peninsula. While Washington does not appear to have any near-term plans to substantially alter, let alone end, its MFO deployment, the ongoing deliberations about force protection have led some outside the government -- including the *New York Times* -- to call for a U.S. troop withdrawal. Whether or not these calls are answered, the current situation bolsters the narrative that America is withdrawing from the Middle East and undermines Washington's ongoing efforts to reassure regional allies about the Iran nuclear deal.

BACKGROUND

The MFO, which consists of military and civilian personnel from twelve nations, was founded in 1981 to supervise the security arrangements established by the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty. Specifically, it verifies that both countries observe the limitations on military forces and equipment within the four zones demarcated in Article II of Annex I, and also monitors freedom of navigation through the Straits of Tiran. The MFO carries out this mission by operating checkpoints and observation posts in Sinai and along the international boundary, and by conducting periodic verifications of the treaty's enforcement. The force has thus been critical to ensuring the durability of Egyptian-Israeli peace for more than three decades, and in recent years it has facilitated unprecedented security cooperation between the two countries despite their notoriously "cold peace."

Yet the MFO's success is now raising questions in Washington about the mission's long-term future. While Egypt and Israel strongly support keeping the MFO at its current strength -- 1,667 personnel, including 692 Americans -- some

U.S. officials argue that this force size is no longer necessary given the depth of Egyptian-Israeli security cooperation.

NEW DANGERS

The primary reason for the latest deliberations about the MFO's future, however, is the deteriorating security situation in Sinai. In recent months, Wilayat Sinai -- a jihadist faction that was known as Ansar Beit al-Maqdis until it declared itself a "province" of the so-called "Islamic State"/ISIS in November -- has increasingly threatened peacekeeping forces. The most significant incident occurred on June 9, when it fired a rocket at the MFO's al-Gorah air base. It has also fired mortars and planted improvised explosive devices (IEDs) on roads that the MFO uses. Meanwhile, the group has demonstrated improved capabilities against Egyptian security forces, deploying vehicle-borne IEDs, suicide bombers, and antitank missiles against police and military targets, and even hitting a navy patrol boat. For this reason, some U.S. officials believe it might only be a matter of time before Wilayat Sinai executes a major attack on the MFO.

Cairo's outdated approach to fighting the northeastern Sinai jihadists has exacerbated these concerns. Two years into its current operation, the Egyptian military still relies on tactics that are more suitable to conventional combat than to a counterinsurgency campaign. According to U.S. officials, the military has alienated the local population by entering villages in large formations, targeted the enemy imprecisely by relying on standoff firepower (artillery and airstrikes), and failed to support its special forces operations with targeted intelligence.

To be sure, the Egyptian military has often been responsive to MFO security requests. It has increased patrols, reinforced some of its checkpoints, and -- after the MFO threatened to abandon certain outposts -- established a protective presence in the most dangerous areas where peacekeepers operate. But there is still ample concern about the force's longer-term security: whenever MFO units have faced potential attacks, the Egyptian military has not moved out of its hardened positions to engage Wilayat Sinai, leading U.S. officials to question whether Cairo is merely trying to contain rather than defeat the jihadists.

NEW DELIBERATIONS

As a result of the bleak security outlook in Sinai, MFO officials have urged Washington to alter its deployments for more than a year, and some U.S. officials have advocated concluding the force's mission in the long run. In the immediate term, Washington and the MFO have responded by hardening the MFO's positions and focusing on force protection. Improved sensors and barriers as well as additional guard towers have been erected around MFO outposts over the past two years, and peacekeepers have received weapons upgrades in recent weeks.

Yet Washington is now deliberating more significant changes. These include the MFO's proposal for closing isolated manned outposts (e.g., on an island in the Straits of Tiran) that are more vulnerable to attack and more costly to operate, and replacing them with mobile surveillance. U.S. officials are also considering a multiyear drawdown that would reduce the MFO to a fraction of its current size or close it down altogether. As part of this process, the MFO would rely more on unmanned remote sensors while continuing to build confidence between Egypt and Israel.

The Egyptian and Israeli governments have responded negatively to these deliberations, however. Both sides view the MFO as an important mechanism for facilitating bilateral cooperation, and they argue that "now is not the time" for considering changes given the region's political uncertainty.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

This is not the first time that Washington has considered drawing down the MFO. During the previous two administrations, the Pentagon briefly advocated this approach because it wanted to direct personnel elsewhere. Yet the Obama administration's deliberations are driven by entirely different -- and quite valid -- concerns about

ensuring the security of MFO personnel. The jihadists' increased sophistication, coupled with the Egyptian military's outdated strategy, significantly endangers a peacekeeping operation that was previously considered very low-risk.

Despite these concerns, however, the administration should keep in mind the dangers of changing the MFO's deployment anytime soon. First, any decrease in the MFO's strength risks weakening a multinational institution that has not only verified the 1979 treaty's enforcement, but also encouraged the unprecedented Egyptian-Israeli strategic coordination that exists today. This coordination is not inevitable: bilateral relations nearly collapsed in September 2011, when an Egyptian mob attacked the Israeli embassy in Giza three weeks after Israeli forces accidentally killed six Egyptian soldiers while chasing jihadists back across the border. Later, Muslim Brotherhood president Mohamed Morsi downgraded diplomatic relations with Israel during his year in office. Throughout this uncertain period, the MFO facilitated bilateral cooperation and, in the face of a burgeoning Sinai insurgency, even secured Israel's permission for Egyptian troop deployments that exceeded the treaty's limitations. If anything, today's robust strategic coordination is an argument for the MFO's importance, not its superfluosity.

Second, given that the MFO is among the few U.S. policy successes in the Middle East, any plans to draw it down would further trouble those allies who are concerned about America's perceived departure from the region, and undermine the Obama administration's efforts to reassure these allies following the Iran deal. For this reason, if the administration is serious about altering the U.S. MFO deployment, it should coordinate these changes with Egypt and Israel to show that it is fully engaged with its allies in pursuit of mutual interests. Unilateral deliberations send the exact opposite message and indicate that Washington just wants out.

Meanwhile, the Obama administration should continue encouraging the Egyptian military to update its strategy against Sinai jihadists. While Cairo previously refused U.S. offers of counterterrorism training, Egyptian military officials signaled their interest following this month's U.S.-Egypt Strategic Dialogue. Washington should therefore explore opportunities for better counterterrorism coordination, since a more effective Egyptian strategy would mean better security for MFO personnel and millions of Egyptians alike.

Eric Trager is the Wagner Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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