

How the Israeli Drone Strike in the Sinai Might Backfire

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If Israel continues to act as Cairo's proxy terrorist hunter, it could erode the Egyptian military's reputation, undermine General Sisi's popularity, and attract even more militants looking to wage jihad from the Sinai.

In April 1982, Israel withdrew the last of its military forces from Egypt's Sinai Peninsula. On Friday, for the first time in more than 30 years, Israeli military assets reportedly reentered Egyptian territory. On August 9, an Israeli drone operating in Sinai airspace with Egyptian approval killed five militants preparing to launch a rocket into Israel.

The proactive Israeli action may herald a positive new dynamic in Israeli-Egyptian relations. But for the Egyptian military -- which depends on popular goodwill to govern post-coup Egypt -- enhanced security coordination with Israel might not be politically sustainable. Already, this unprecedented move has provoked a backlash against the generals.

Ever since the toppling of Egypt's longtime President Hosni Mubarak in 2011, security in the Sinai -- a region long underserved by Cairo -- has become precarious. During the revolution, Egyptian intelligence, which had previously been responsible for securing the Sinai, was routed, leaving the task to the military -- the country's sole remaining, functioning national institution.

Unenthusiastic about and ill-equipped for the mission, the military did little, and security in the Sinai rapidly deteriorated. In a matter of months, Al-Qaeda and other dangerous Islamist elements started to take root among the increasingly radicalized local Bedouins.

Over the past two years, Egyptian and foreign jihadis -- as well as Palestinian terrorists entering the Sinai via tunnels from Gaza -- have launched dozens of attacks in the Peninsula. While most of the operations have targeted Egyptian police and border guards, on occasion soldiers have been killed and kidnapped and tourists abducted. Militants have also assaulted and snatched troops in the Multinational Force and Observers or MFO, which are deployed in the Sinai

to monitor the terms of the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty.

More potentially destabilizing, these terrorists have infiltrated Israel -- killing six civilians and two soldiers in one August 2011 operation -- and fired rockets across the border. Friday's drone strike came just one day after an unprecedented temporary closure of Israel's Eilat airport. At the time, militants in the Sinai were believed to be preparing to target Israeli civilian aircraft with rockets or shoulder fired missiles procured from post-Qaddafi's Libya.

On the positive side, the Israeli strike suggests extremely close security and intelligence coordination between the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) and the Egyptian military. The cooperation comes as little surprise: both sides quietly say that mil-to-mil cooperation has never been better.

Confidence is so high that just last month Israel authorized Egypt to deploy two additional infantry battalions to the Sinai to counter the terrorist threat. This comes after the militaries negotiated more than two dozen Egyptian requests since 2011 to move supplemental troops and equipment, including tanks, into the desert. In the past month, the Egyptian military has engaged in a crackdown on Sinai terrorism that reportedly killed some 60 militants.

This is great news, particularly given that since the revolution, official civilian government-to-government contact has practically ceased to exist.

At the same time, however, the high level of cooperation poses some potential challenges for Egypt's military. The Egyptian military -- and especially its commanding general Abdul Fattah al Sisi -- currently enjoys great popularity and a level of legitimacy that will be required to navigate this sensitive period of political transition following last month's coup that removed the democratically elected Islamist president. A majority of the population appears to support the president's ouster, but many people clearly do not.

While Egyptians remain divided about the coup, however, Israel remains a consensus issue: most Egyptians loathe Israel and find the notion of ongoing security cooperation with the Jewish state to be extremely distasteful.

Since the revolution, one of the more resonant tropes of populist politicians in Egypt has been the call to "renegotiate" the Camp David treaty with Israel -- and particularly the Sinai security provisions, which many Egyptians consider to be an unacceptable legal surrender of national sovereignty. News of the Israeli drone strike has reignited anger over perceived slights to Egyptian self-determination in the Sinai.

Muslim Brotherhood spokesman Ahmed Arif, for example, described the Israeli attack as "a national disaster and a flagrant violation of all the principals and traditions of the military." Meanwhile, the Foreign Affairs committee of the now-defunct upper house of parliament known as the Shura Council has condemned the "Zionist violation of Egyptian territory." These statements were echoed by Ansar Beit Muqaddas, the terrorist organization targeted in the attack, which issued a statement asking "What is greater treason than the Egyptian army allowing the Zionist drones to violate Egyptian airspace now and then?"

In addition to raising questions about Egyptian authority over the Sinai, the Israeli drone attack will foster the unflattering perception that the Egyptian military is unable alone to contain the terrorist threat on its soil.

To date, Egyptian supporters of the military's ouster of the Islamist president have refrained from criticizing the Israeli action in the Sinai. The prominent author Alaa Al-Aswany, a leading voice in this camp, has even gone so far as to accuse the Muslim Brotherhood of "exploiting" the strike for political gain. But it's not clear how long this cohort will continue to tolerate the collaboration. Al-Aswany's Twitter account is replete with condemnations of Israel and Zionists.

The Egyptian military is no doubt aware that its leading supporters will not abide Israeli drones over Sinai airspace

indefinitely. Clearly concerned about the impact of the reports, the military denied Israeli involvement in the Sinai incident in a statement on its Facebook page on Friday afternoon -- just hours after the reports of the drone strike appeared. Highlighting this sensitivity, shortly after the bombing, mobile phone service in the Sinai was interrupted -- most likely by the military -- to limit further damaging reporting of the story.

While this one incident may not have a lasting impact on the Egyptian military's popularity or local legitimacy, should Israeli strikes in the Sinai be sustained, it could erode some of the institution's luster. It could also undermine Sisi's popularity, and if he indeed harbors them, his hopes of becoming Egypt's next president. More troubling, though, if Israel continues to act as Egypt's proxy terrorist hunters, it could have the unintended effect of drawing even more militants looking to wage a jihad against Israel from this lawless desert expanse.

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