

# Deterioration in the Sinai

by [Ehud Yaari \(/experts/ehud-yaari\)](/experts/ehud-yaari)

Jul 11, 2013

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Ehud Yaari \(/experts/ehud-yaari\)](/experts/ehud-yaari)

Ehud Yaari is a Lafer International Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

---

## The uptick in Sinai attacks since Morsi's ouster has raised political and security concerns that may force Egypt's military to assert itself in the peninsula.

**T**he security situation in the Sinai Peninsula has rapidly deteriorated since President Muhammad Morsi's fall, with armed Bedouins mounting repeated attacks against Egyptian military personnel and the Interior Ministry's Central Security Forces. Bedouin groups -- mainly from the Sawarka, Tarabin, and Breikat tribes, and led by Salafi jihadist militias -- have also announced the formation of a "War Council" aimed at responding with force to any countermeasures taken by the Egyptian authorities.

Although many of these attacks have gone unreported by the media, a climate of chaos and rebellion now reigns in the northeastern populated area of the Sinai adjoining the Gaza Strip and Israel, and incidents have also occurred in the barren central Sinai and close to the Suez Canal. For example, Egyptian security roadblocks, patrols, and convoys have been subject to sniper attacks over the past few days, while other militants have attempted to kidnap government security personnel and storm military compounds in al-Arish (the capital of northern Sinai), Sheikh Zuwaid, al-Gorah, and Rafah. Just yesterday, Bedouins in Sheikh Zuwaid attacked Second Army chief Ahmed Wasfi's car with heavy fire.

Mainland protests against Morsi's removal have given the Bedouins an excuse to challenge Egyptian forces. Although Morsi won a majority of votes in the Sinai during last year's presidential election, the Bedouins have never been adherents of the Muslim Brotherhood. Rather, they sense weakness in the Egyptian military during the transition and see an opening to push their traditional demands for release of Bedouin prisoners, clemency to the many tribesmen still on wanted lists, and a different system of administration in the peninsula.

The latest violence has left Cairo particularly concerned about the Suez Canal. Egypt's Second Army (responsible for the northern sector) and Third Army (responsible for the south) are taking extraordinary measures to prevent attacks against ships sailing through the international waterway. Since Morsi's fall, militants have made at least one attempt to fire Grad missiles toward oil installations in the city of Suez, located at the canal's southern entrance.

They have also assaulted customs offices in the Port Said free trade zone at the northern entrance. In fact, it would be quite easy for even a lone jihadist in the Sinai to fire a third-generation antitank missile or rocket-propelled grenade at a ship moving slowly through the Suez.

As head of the Second Army, General Wasfi is in charge of Egypt's military response to the Bedouin challenge and recently reinforced his troops with a mechanized brigade, commandos, a few tanks, and -- perhaps most important -- Apache attack helicopters deployed to al-Arish airbase. This effort began under Morsi but accelerated after his ouster. Israel consented to the deployments, which were arranged through the Agreed Activities Mechanism and facilitated by the Multinational Force of Observers; such mechanisms permit the parties to temporarily introduce military forces to areas where they are prohibited under the 1979 peace treaty.

Even after these deployments, however, the Egyptian army maintained its traditional stance of avoiding proactive measures against Bedouin militia strongholds. The military's official policy is that its troops are in the Sinai to "assist" the Interior Ministry's forces. In practice, this means taking a backseat despite being fully aware that police are incapable of confronting the well-armed Bedouin militias, which are gaining confidence and seem to hold government forces in low regard. The army rarely conducts operations after dusk; most troops stick to their roadblocks and camps, and no attempt has been made to threaten the Salafi jihadists in their well-known safe havens (e.g., Wadi Amr and Jabal Halal).

The one sector in which the military has displayed initiative is Sinai's fourteen-kilometer border with Hamas-controlled Gaza. There, Egyptian troops have blocked many -- though not all -- of the illegal tunnels between the strip and the peninsula. Some were flooded with sewage water, but in most cases Egyptian General Intelligence (now under Defense Minister Abdul Fattah al-Sisi's old confidant Gen. Muhammad Farid al-Tohami) has simply warned tunnel contractors to stop doing business with the Palestinians. General Sisi is worried that Hamas may send weapons and trained fighters to help the Brotherhood, especially if Morsi's supporters decide to pursue a terror campaign in mainland Egypt in response to his removal. Indeed, a dozen armed Palestinians were recently captured while crossing into the Sinai.

At the same time, the military remains attentive to the situation in Gaza itself. For instance, it still allows fuel deliveries to the Palestinians through some tunnels in order to prevent an outcry in the strip. Meanwhile, the blocking of other tunnels has almost completely halted arms shipments through the Sinai to Hamas. As a result, the group can no longer rely on the arrival of long-range Iranian missiles, so it has resorted to experiments aimed at upgrading the weapons already in its possession.

On the political front, the Sinai situation is becoming a major topic in Egypt's public discourse, frequently covered by the media and mentioned at official press conferences. Many commentators tend to blame Hamas -- at least partly -- for the peninsula's destabilization. Such rhetoric is putting pressure on the military to take action it prefers to avoid, while seemingly deterring Hamas from taking advantage of the latest upheaval.

Going forward, Sinai's security climate is bound to affect the post-Morsi transition and the army's standing in the country. General Sisi may therefore feel the need to order more-daring military action in the peninsula, at least in part to show the Bedouins and outside parties that he is not going to lose control of any part of the country.

*Ehud Yaari is a Lafer International fellow with The Washington Institute and a Middle East commentator for Israel's Channel Two television.* ❖



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

## [How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## [Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## [Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

[\(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis\)](#)

### TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

[Military & Security \(/policy-analysis/military-security\)](#)

[Terrorism \(/policy-analysis/terrorism\)](#)

## REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Egypt \(/policy-analysis/egypt\)](/policy-analysis/egypt)

[North Africa \(/policy-analysis/north-africa\)](/policy-analysis/north-africa)

[Palestinians \(/policy-analysis/palestinians\)](/policy-analysis/palestinians)