

Chaos in the Sinai: Will International Peacekeepers Be the Next Casualty?

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The MFO faces growing pressure in the Sinai, but its presence remains crucial to maintaining peace between Egypt and Israel.

Earlier this week, seven Egyptian security officers were released after being held hostage for a week by Bedouin tribesmen in the Sinai. The abductions are the latest in a series of now commonplace hostage events and armed attacks in the Sinai that highlight the deterioration of security in this desert expanse. While most of these incidents have been aimed at Egyptians, Sinai peacekeepers -- the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) -- are high on the target list. Rising insecurity in this increasingly unstable region, along with a ruling Muslim Brotherhood in Cairo overtly hostile toward Israel, could test the durability of the 1979 Egypt-Israel peace treaty.

The MFO was deployed in 1982 to monitor the Sinai security provisions of the Egyptian-Israeli treaty, but for the past two years, the contingent has come under frequent attack from local Bedouin and Islamist militants affiliated with Al Qaida. Just last month, a Hungarian peacekeeper was kidnapped by tribesmen. The detained soldier was subsequently released, but the trajectory of these developments is not promising.

To be sure, the MFO was targeted prior to 2011 -- in 2005, for example, an MFO vehicle was hit by a roadside bomb -- but the operational tempo of military actions against the troops is increasing. In March 2012, a band of armed tribesmen surrounded the MFO camp at al-Gorah for eight days, demanding the release of Bedouin imprisoned for the 2004 Taba and 2005 Sharm al-Sheikh bombings. A month later, a group of Bedouin detained an MFO vehicle between two checkpoints. Most dramatically, last September dozens of Bedouin attacked, infiltrated, and overran the MFO's North Camp, firing automatic weapons and tossing grenades, and wounding four peacekeepers before a stand-down was negotiated.

Islamist militants as well as Bedouins are gunning for the MFO. According to the Egyptian daily *Al Ahram*, members of an Islamist cell under interrogation after trying to bomb a Rafah military installation last month admitted their

objective of forcing UN peacekeepers from the Sinai.

Given the dangers, it is perhaps not surprising the MFO patrols these days are escorted by Egyptian armor columns. Amidst the worsening security environment, however, curtailed observation and a heightened focus on force preservation may not be sufficient to protect these troops. If the eleven nations that along with the United States contribute troops to the MFO start to take casualties, the force could face attrition. Under similar fire on the Golan Heights over the past year, three of the six contributing nations to the UN's Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) separating Israel and Syria since 1973 have withdrawn their contingents.

Unlike UNDOF, the end of the MFO is by no means imminent. Yet it's difficult to imagine how the mission will be sustained under current circumstances. The problem is not just the physical insecurity in the Sinai, which reportedly resulted in a temporary shut-down of Suez Canal shipping this week. It's the danger of spillover into Israel like the August 2011 cross-border terrorist attacks. After several Egyptian border guards were accidentally killed during Israel's hot pursuit of the perpetrators (who were dressed as Egyptian soldiers), the Israeli embassy in Cairo was stormed, and a catastrophe that might have brought an end to the peace treaty was narrowly averted.

Cross-border terrorist attacks between friendly states occur, and do not necessarily result in state-to-state hostilities. But the ruling Muslim Brotherhood's animus toward Israel increases the risk of a deterioration along the border. The organization is not yet openly discussing an abrogation of the peace treaty with Israel, but it is making no secret of its antipathy for its neighbor.

Lately, the top leadership of the Brotherhood has been talking a lot about Israel. On May 10, Secretary General of the organization's Freedom and Justice political party Mohammed Biltagi led an anti-Israel demonstration at Al-Azhar Mosque in Cairo replete with Israeli flag burnings, where he proclaimed that "Israel is our enemy." In an interview with *Al Monitor* published on May 16, Rashad al-Bayoumi, the deputy supreme guide of the Brotherhood, said "We in the Muslim Brotherhood reject the Camp David [peace] Accords, and have never changed our position on this." The same day, his boss, Supreme Guide Mohammed Badie, issued a statement comparing Israel with the French colonial position in Algeria and the Italian one in Libya, predicting the Jewish state, like Europe's colonies in the Middle East, would disappear.

Fortunately, at least for the time being, the military -- the leading supporter in Egypt of the peace with Israel -- retains authority over national security matters and continues to work closely with Israel in the Sinai. Eventually, however, the Muslim Brotherhood's populist anti-Israel politics, like its calls to unilaterally revise the security annex of Camp David, may complicate the coordination. This dynamic makes the continued presence of the MFO, which in recent years has taken on a border monitoring role, all the more important.

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