

Obama's Big Egypt Test: Sinai

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The lawless desert on Israel's border presents immediate risks -- and possible opportunities -- for American interests in the region.

This piece is part of "[Obama and the Middle East: Act Two \(/policy-analysis/view/the-atlantic-obama-and-the-middle-east-act-two\)](/policy-analysis/view/the-atlantic-obama-and-the-middle-east-act-two)," a series of policy proposals for the president's second term by Washington Institute fellows. Further installments will be released in the coming days.

Egypt's mounting political and economic woes will cause many policy headaches for the Obama administration during the next four years. But in the short run, the Obama administration will have to confront a more immediate risk: that a major terrorist attack in the Sinai will catalyze a security crisis between Israel and Egypt, which the ruling Muslim Brotherhood may use as a pretext for downgrading Egyptian-Israeli relations and perhaps canceling the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace agreement altogether. To prevent this outcome, Washington should immediately press Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi to establish direct communication channels with the Israeli government to ensure that this kind of crisis will be managed responsibly.

A terrorist attack emanating from the Sinai that would endanger Egyptian-Israeli relations isn't a theoretical proposition, but an inevitability given Sinai's severe instability. The breakdown of Egypt police forces since the January 2011 anti-Mubarak uprising has rendered the 23,000-square-mile desert territory a security vacuum, which jihadi terrorist organizations -- including possibly al-Qaeda -- have rapidly filled. Some of these organizations have cells within both Sinai and Gaza, and northern Sinai has become a safe haven from which they have launched 15 attacks on the gas pipeline to Israel and Jordan in the two years since Mubarak's ouster. Meanwhile, jihadis have repeatedly attempted to use Sinai as a base for launching attacks on Israel, with the dual aim of killing Israelis and catalyzing a diplomatic confrontation between Israel and Egypt.

On August 18, 2011, terrorists nearly achieved both goals. Twelve militants dressed as Egyptian soldiers launched a cross-border attack on a bus near the Israeli city of Eilat that killed eight Israelis and wounded 30 more and, during a counterattack, Israeli forces accidentally killed five Egyptian soldiers. Apparently indifferent to the fact that

terrorists operating within its own country had sparked the incident, the proverbial "Egyptian street" responded with demonstrations that demanded closing the Israeli embassy in Cairo and ending the Camp David Accords. The furor culminated with a September 9 attack on the Israeli embassy that brought Egyptian assailants within one locked door of a potentially deadly confrontation with Israeli diplomats. Egypt's then-ruling military junta responded immediately thereafter by dialing down the tensions and signaling their commitment to maintaining relations with Israel.

The threat of this type of terrorist attack repeating itself remains quite high, as demonstrated by the August 5, 2012 attack in which terrorists killed sixteen Egyptian soldiers along the Sinai-Israeli border. But the Muslim Brotherhood's emergence as Egypt's new ruling party will make managing this kind of crisis even more challenging; unlike the former military junta, the Brotherhood refuses to maintain political relations with Israel and has repeatedly signaled its intention to unilaterally amend, if not end, the 1979 peace treaty.

More to the point, the Muslim Brotherhood has twice used Sinai attacks as pretexts for demanding an end to Egyptian-Israeli relations. It participated in the demonstrations against Israel's diplomatic presence within Egypt following the August 2011 incident, and blamed the August 2012 attacks on the Mossad, which the Brotherhood claimed was part of a plot intended to undermine Morsi's government. Add to this the Brotherhood's hostile recent statements, including Supreme Guide Mohamed Badie's calls for "jihad" to "recover Jerusalem" and Brotherhood official Essam El-Erian's declaration that Israel will be destroyed within ten years, and it becomes hard to imagine the Brotherhood working to contain the furor following another Sinai terrorist incident in which Israel becomes directly engaged.

Reducing the likelihood of such an incident requires a new security strategy for confronting Sinai's terrorist groups, as well as an economic strategy for developing the Sinai and providing its inhabitants with legitimate opportunities. But given Egypt's mounting political and financial woes, this strategy may take years to formulate, and the imperative is thus establishing channels through which the next Egyptian-Israel crisis -- which might happen at any moment -- can be managed.

Specifically, the Obama administration should focus on ensuring that President Morsi opens direct communications with the Israeli government. It should tell Morsi that the absence of these channels will complicate efforts to contain future Egyptian-Israeli crises emanating from the Sinai, which will threaten regional stability and further damage his government's ability to attract much-needed foreign investment. The administration should also tell Morsi bluntly that American economic and military aid is an investment in an Egypt that maintains peaceful relations with its neighbors, and that the status quo -- in which any spark in Sinai risks a rupture in Egyptian-Israeli diplomatic relations -- is untenable. Finally, the administration should propose that Israeli-Egyptian cooperation in stopping the flow of weapons between Sinai and Gaza could represent a starting point for direct contact between Morsi and Israel, and Washington should tell Morsi that his participation in this effort will be an important test of whether he puts national interests or ideological pursuits first.

To be sure, insisting that Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood president maintain open channels with the Israeli government isn't likely to moderate his anti-Israel ideology, much as U.S. "engagement" with the Muslim Brotherhood hasn't altered its fundamentally anti-Western outlook. But by emphasizing the risks associated with its current policy and applying the right carrots and sticks, the administration might be able to alter the Brotherhood's behavior. In fact, doing so is a necessity if the administration hopes to protect regional peace in the post-Mubarak era.

Eric Trager is a Next Generation fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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