

Sinai's Emergence as a Strategic Threat to Israel

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

If international awareness does not spur immediate Egyptian action to address the growing security vacuum and increased terrorist incidents on the border with Israel, the Sinai powder keg may soon explode.

Yesterday, Israel launched an airstrike in Gaza targeting and killing a jihadist operative whom it linked to a June 18 cross-border attack from the Sinai. Monday's attack had claimed the life of an Israeli worker involved in construction of the border fence; a jihadist group claimed responsibility for the incident, saying the perpetrators included an Egyptian and a Saudi. Two days earlier, a pair of 122-millimeter Grad rockets were fired from the peninsula, landing close to a town and a military base deep in southern Israel. These incidents highlight Sinai's devolution into an active terrorist front and a strategic challenge for Israel -- a development that could undermine fragile relations with Egypt.

The latest incident marks the fourth serious terrorist attack from Sinai into Israel in less than a year. In August 2011, eight Israelis were killed near the Red Sea port of Eilat in a cross-border attack planned by a Palestinian Islamist group in Gaza and perpetrated by Bedouin. And in early April 2012, three 122-millimeter Grads were fired from Sinai into a residential construction site in Eilat, though without casualties. That same month, Israel's director of military intelligence, Maj. Gen. Aviv Kochavi, disclosed that the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) had foiled more than ten terrorist plots emanating from the peninsula in the preceding two months. According to the Israeli defense establishment, the volume of threat information relating to Sinai is now comparable to that relating to Gaza.

POWER VACUUM IN SINAI

Amid the uprisings that led to Hosni Mubarak's ouster, a power vacuum emerged in Sinai, one quickly filled by jihadists from mainland Egypt and neighboring Gaza. They joined local Bedouin, many of whom felt alienated from the central government and hoped to improve economic conditions in their underdeveloped region through activities such as cross-border smuggling. The Bedouin, especially those in the northeast and the mountainous

central areas, are well armed and increasingly influenced by Islamist/Salafist ideology. They cooperate closely with Hamas and other Palestinian terrorist groups from Gaza, who have established a foothold in Sinai and recruited local tribesmen for various operations.

Egyptian authorities have evidently lost effective control over large parts of Sinai, and the peninsula has become a no man's land. In the past eighteen months, militant Egyptian and Palestinian groups have attacked dozens of police stations, checkpoints, and government institutions there, killing several policemen, while the Egyptian-Israeli gas pipeline in northern Sinai has been sabotaged fourteen times. Late last month, two American tourists visiting the Egyptian Red Sea resort town of Nuweiba were temporarily abducted by Bedouin demanding the release of one of their tribesmen.

Meanwhile, the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO), the Sinai body tasked with monitoring the security provisions of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, is under constant assault. According to its commander, Maj. Gen. Warren Whiting, MFO personnel were targeted by 187 live-fire incidents between January and May of this year.

Egyptian authorities seem helpless in the face of this lawlessness. Cairo's attention and resources are focused on the mainland, and there is little the few, second-rate forces stationed in the peninsula can do to reverse the problem. Occasionally, they stage operations against Sinai militants with great fanfare but limited overall effect; such efforts usually focus on specific threats to Egyptian national security, some of which originate from Gaza.

Cairo also realizes that force alone cannot address the situation; long-term dialogue with the local tribes and heavy economic investment in the peninsula are required as well. Given the economic crisis in the mainland, however, such investment is unlikely in the foreseeable future. Even the military has essentially given up on restoring security in Sinai, deploying only a small part of the seven additional battalions agreed to by Israel as a temporary exception to the peace treaty's terms. (For a more detailed discussion of developing realities in the peninsula, see Ehud Yaari's recent Policy Note *Sinai: A New Front* (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/sinai-a-new-front>).

CONSEQUENCES FOR ISRAEL

Israel faces a new reality: its once-peaceful border with Egypt has turned hot. The chaos and violent Islamist entrenchment in Sinai make it a mounting security threat to Israel on several fronts.

First, the situation in the peninsula allows for increased weapons smuggling into Gaza. Most conspicuous in this regard are items taken from huge, unsecured arms depots in postwar Libya, including advanced SA-24 shoulder-launched ground-to-air missiles. Yoram Cohen, the head of the Israel Security Agency (Shin Bet), recently described the Libyan depots as "the new gate to hell."

More important, Sinai has become a launch pad for terrorist attacks, as described above. Israeli intelligence believes that most, if not all, such attacks over the past year were planned by Gaza groups using Sinai Bedouin. For Palestinian terrorist groups, using the peninsula provides several benefits: relatively easy access to Israel; cover for operational infrastructure (including the test-firing of an Iranian rocket from Gaza into Sinai several months ago); a way to disguise the origin of attacks and thus lower the chances of Israeli retaliation in Gaza; and immunity against Israeli preventive and responsive measures in Sinai itself, given the treaty with Egypt.

Sinai also creates other serious problems for Israel. In recent years, tens of thousands of Africans have crossed illegally into Israel seeking work, and hundreds of thousands more are waiting to cross. This influx puts tremendous pressure on the country's domestic fabric and immigration policies.

In light of these issues, Israel is adjusting to the new reality along its southern border. Going forward, it must improve its intelligence on a previously peaceful and pastoral region that has not been a focus of attention since the

signing of the 1979 treaty. This is a challenge given the nature of the terrain, the actors operating in it, and the time required to build an effective intelligence network.

In the meantime, Israel is working to finish a sophisticated security fence along its 150-mile border with Egypt. About two-thirds has been completed, and the entire fence is scheduled to be in place in several months. In addition, the IDF has upgraded its intelligence efforts and beefed up its deployments along the border, including elite units and improved equipment. It is also considering future deployment of the Iron Dome rocket-defense system near Eilat, as well as early-warning systems that would alert residents there of incoming rockets.

Nevertheless, Israel believes that its hands are partially tied in countering threats from Sinai. It does not want to violate Egyptian sovereignty or the terms of the peace treaty, yet Cairo appears unable to control the situation. Until now, Israel has taken preventive or responsive measures in Gaza, not Sinai, usually leading to violent clashes with Gaza militants. Yet a devastating cross-border attack could ultimately force Israel to act in the peninsula itself, a scenario that would put tremendous strain on already-fragile Israeli-Egyptian relations.

The domestic Egyptian context only exacerbates the challenge. Israel still enjoys good operational relations with the Egyptian military, but the latter is increasingly limited by anti-Israeli public sentiment and a politically empowered Muslim Brotherhood. Although Brotherhood leaders have stated that they will honor Egypt's past international commitments, they have also promised to review the contents of the peace treaty with Israel. In particular, they have targeted the Military Annex, which stipulates Sinai's demilitarization and is depicted as infringing on Egypt's honor. It is not clear whether a Brotherhood-run government could or would de-escalate the border situation through its good relationship with Hamas. Yet if tensions erupt between Israel and militants in Gaza or Sinai, the pressure to alter the treaty would come to the fore and threaten bilateral relations.

CONCLUSION

Israel should ask Washington and the international community to give due attention to the reality of a large, failed region in a turbulent Egypt, one that is fast developing into a source of instability and a threat to the Israeli-Egyptian peace agreement. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces and the new civilian administration in Cairo should be encouraged to take several immediate measures in Sinai:

- Enhance Egyptian forces in both quantity and quality along the border with Israel
- Enhance efforts to fight smuggling, including improved control over the Suez Canal and routes from mainland Egypt to Sinai
- Provide protection to the MFO and adjust its role
- Continue behind-the-scenes coordination with Israel

Looking ahead, Egyptian authorities should also be encouraged to address the situation in the peninsula through nonmilitary means, such as better integration of local Bedouin and economic investment, to which the international community could provide specific support. Without immediate action on these fronts, the Sinai powder keg may soon explode.

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Previously, he served as head of the IDF's Strategic Planning Division and chief of staff to the minister of defense. ❖



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