

# Sinai: The New Frontier of Conflict?

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Nov 20, 2011

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

*On November 16, 2011, Ehud Yaari and Normand St. Pierre addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Mr. Yaari is a Lafer international fellow with the Institute and a Middle East commentator for Israel's Channel Two television. Col. St. Pierre, a thirty-one-year veteran of the U.S. Army, retired recently after completing service as the Egypt representative of the director-general of the U.S.-led Multinational Force and Observers. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.*

## EHUD YAARI

The Sinai Peninsula is becoming increasingly anarchic, endangering the fragile Egyptian-Israeli peace. There are no fences dividing Sinai from Israel's Negev region, nor the Negev from southern Jordan, and local Bedouin barely recognize sovereign borders. In the past, the peninsula served as a buffer between Israel and Egypt, but it is now becoming a semiautonomous area inhabited by expanding terrorist networks. This process was accelerated by the Egyptian revolution and subsequent collapse of police forces in the area. Now, with the governing military council acting almost as an absentee landlord of the Sinai, the thirty or so Bedouin tribes in the central and northern regions have transformed into armed militias. From illicit drug smuggling and human trafficking to large-scale arms deals, these groups have developed elaborate supply networks.

Another new phenomenon that has emerged since the revolution is the proliferation of Salafi jihadist movements among the Bedouin population. Although Salafists first began making inroads into the community in the 1980s, never before have Bedouin left their traditional tribal homes to establish new, purely Salafi jihadist encampments.

Over the past few months, these groups -- as well as Palestinian organizations led by Hamas -- have increasingly engaged in terrorist activities, illicit smuggling through tunnels to Gaza, and attacks on the Egyptian gas pipeline to Israel and Jordan. In response, Israel agreed to the deployment of as many as six Egyptian army battalions (comprising approximately 3,000 troops) close to its border -- including, for the first time, some twenty tanks (though, in the end, these were not deployed). Israel has also doubled its own deployment along its side of the border from four to eight battalions, in addition to accelerating construction of a \$400 million, 17-foot tall, 150-mile long security fence.

In the past, the Egyptian military took pains to avoid any confrontation with the Bedouin, delegating full oversight to

the police. Accordingly, the total collapse of the police and general intelligence forces during the revolution has emboldened illicit Bedouin activity. For example, Bedouin have attacked the police station in al-Arish, orchestrated seven pipeline explosions, repeatedly disrupted traffic on the main road to the trade terminal with Israel, skirmished with Egyptian forces that have ventured into Wadi Amr and other Bedouin strongholds, and expanded their large-scale trade in organs harvested from African immigrants. The growing audacity and sophistication of these activities was evident in both the August 18 terrorist attack on Israel (designed to kidnap Israelis) and in the fact that one of the pipeline explosions was engineered to disrupt the flow of gas to Israel while maintaining the flow to Jordan.

Although former president Anwar Sadat once aimed to settle 2.9 million Egyptians in the Sinai by 2018 (adding to the indigenous population of around 500,000), funding for the program ceased as early as 1997. Even if the current government were to initiate a major Sinai development program, it could not compete with the existing black market trade, which is valued at approximately \$300 million per year.

If the current state of affairs in the peninsula is allowed to continue, the Sinai may soon devolve into a terrorist safe haven -- similar to what the Jordan Valley once was for Fatah, and what southern Lebanon currently is for Hizballah. This outcome will become increasingly likely as Hamas and Islamic Jihad continue to aggressively recruit Palestinians living in northeast Sinai, adjacent to Gaza. Both during and since the Mubarak era, Cairo has focused on protecting Egyptian national security interests within the Sinai while avoiding a crackdown on Bedouin smuggling and violence toward Israel. The challenge therefore lies not in Egypt's capabilities, but in its will. Although Israel could allow Cairo to deploy military units in additional parts of the peninsula, any attempt to amend the relevant peace treaty provisions could spur Egyptian politicians to tear the treaty apart entirely.

## **NORMAND ST. PIERRE**

**A**lthough the Sinai is a fairly new front of military concern, the troublesome developments taking place in the area date much further back. Many Bedouin felt they were treated well when Israel controlled the peninsula from 1973 to 1982. When Israel pulled out, the Egyptian government consequently viewed the tribes with suspicion and tightened military security in the Sinai. Over time, the Bedouin and military learned to cooperate by staying out of one another's way. Despite small-scale trafficking, the peninsula received little government attention apart from some tourism development, and the Bedouin community remained undeveloped and disenfranchised.

As a result, many Bedouin began sending their children to schools in Hamas strongholds and seeking jobs in Saudi Arabia, promoting Salafism in the Sinai upon their return. This faction created the logistical framework and infrastructure that eventually produced the terrorist groups responsible for the 2004-2006 attacks in Taba, Sharm al-Sheikh, and Dahab.

The Egyptian government's response to those attacks was to launch a wide investigation that bloated the ranks of the security services with an influx of police. It was at this point that the security services took over from the military in overseeing the Sinai. Many of these police had little experience in dealing with Bedouin, however, and their harsh treatment of the tribes severely damaged Bedouin relations with the state.

Meanwhile, Israel's Gaza blockade and 2008 Operation Cast Lead caused the demand for smuggled goods in Gaza to jump dramatically. This boom in business ushered in a new era of extensive smuggling tunnels and expanded cooperation among Bedouin tribes, and their profits in turn began to attract underhand dealings with the military. As the smuggling business thrived, many tribes developed into armed gangs, complete with guards, motorcycles, and machine-gun-mounted pickup trucks. Any police attempts to bring the gangs under control ended in defeat, and they were eventually free to operate without harassment.

Today, the Sinai is dominated by a religiously oriented, very capable, and well-armed criminal group led by Salem Abu Lafi. Based in in the Wadi Amr area and the Halal Mountains, the group includes numerous prisoners who broke

free from Egyptian jails during the revolution. This faction poses a particularly difficult challenge to regional security because it is willing to facilitate missions by Hamas or other Islamist militants for the right fee. Moreover, its ability to move about the Sinai easily and discreetly makes it difficult to defeat without a large amount of troops, while also enabling it to retaliate quickly and lethally to any crackdowns.

Having permitted these developments to continue for some time, the Egyptian government does not know how to stop them. And the Multinational Force and Observers is unlikely to become involved -- as an observing force, it would risk both its mission and its safety if it allowed itself to be drawn into such conflict.

Going forward, the Egyptian military's response to the situation will largely depend on what transpires in the upcoming parliamentary elections. Although the military is determined to retain sovereignty over the peninsula for nationalistic reasons as well as for the area's buffer role, the 22,000 troops currently stationed in Zone A are insufficient to stop Bedouin traffic between the Sinai and Negev. In practice, however, amending the Camp David Accords to allow more troops would be difficult. Therefore, the more likely option is additional provisional concessions allowing Egypt to bolster its military presence.

In the meantime, both the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas will try to exploit the situation, though to what degree remains unclear. After all, the Brotherhood may not affirm Hamas's desire to expand its axis of resistance from Gaza to Sinai. And despite its likely sweep of Sinai parliamentary seats later this month, the Brotherhood may not focus much attention on the peninsula if it begins to achieve some of its demands in Cairo.

*This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Olivia Holt-Ivry. ❖*

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