

The Future of the Multinational Force and Observers in Sinai

Jan 25, 2002



Brief Analysis

Growing U.S. military involvement in new locations such as Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, and the Philippines has raised concerns in the Pentagon about overstretching the military and has prompted a call to reassess the future of America's long-standing contribution to peacekeeping missions worldwide. One of the missions at risk of being curtailed is the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO)—an independent, international peacekeeping and verification organization established by Egypt and Israel to monitor the security arrangements of their 1979 peace treaty. The idea of downsizing the 900-man U.S. contingent in the Sinai Peninsula has been raised several times by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld. "I do not believe that we still need our forces in the Sinai," he said in a recent public statement. But the timing of such a change—especially in light of the deterioration in Egyptian-Israeli relations since the beginning of the al-Aqsa intifada—is questionable. At a time when other voices are calling for the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Saudi Arabia, a withdrawal from Sinai—even if only a reduction—could symbolize to many a decreasing U.S. interest in the region. It could also deny the recently violent Egyptian-Israeli-Palestinian border area an important and necessary cooling-off mechanism.

U.S. Involvement in the MFO

Since its establishment in 1982, the MFO has proven to be an effective mechanism of supervision and verification of Israeli and Egyptian military activities on both sides of the common border. The MFO staffs thirteen checkpoints and seventeen observation posts in Sinai and along the Egypt-Israel border. Its members conduct ground and air inspections on a regular basis and issue reports on the countries' compliance. It also maintains a coastal patrol unit to confirm freedom of navigation through the Strait of Tiran. The MFO addresses violations of the peace treaty and facilitates good working relations between the Israeli and Egyptian militaries. The American contingent of the MFO consists of an infantry battalion on a six-month rotation period and an army logistic component that includes an aviation company and a medical company. The cost of the MFO is shared evenly by Israel, Egypt, and the United States—each contributing \$15 million per year in addition to smaller donations by Germany, Japan, and Switzerland. The United States has not only been the largest contributor of forces to the MFO, but has also taken the most casualties in the peacekeeping endeavor, due to a tragic December 1985 plane crash in which 248 American soldiers were killed on their way home from Sinai.

Situation along the Egyptian-Israeli Border

While the United States has clearly paid its dues in both casualties and treasury to the Egyptian-Israeli peace endeavor, withdrawal of its forces from the MFO may come at the lowest point of Egypt-Israel relations since the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. This current decline in relations originated in the outbreak of the al-Aqsa intifada and the Israeli use of heavy weapons against Palestinian targets. In November 2000, Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak recalled Egypt's ambassador to Israel, and since then, Egypt has conditioned the return of its ambassador to Israeli implementation of the Mitchell Report.

Though the 140-mile Egyptian-Israeli border has generally been a peaceful area, the portion of the border that runs between the Sinai Peninsula and the southern tip of the Palestinian-held Gaza Strip—especially along the Egyptian

and the Palestinian parts of the divided city of Rafah—has been increasingly volatile. Under the Oslo agreements, Israel controls the international Rafah border checkpoint as well as a thin strip of land—ranging from 15 to 100 yards wide—that separates the Palestinian Authority (PA) from Egypt. Even before the al-Aqsa intifada, the Rafah border was a zone of turmoil. In the September 1996 riots—which broke out following the Israeli opening of the Hasmonean Tunnel in Jerusalem—the border area experienced the heaviest exchange of fire.

Since the beginning of the intifada, the narrow buffer zone has become the center of some of the most violent clashes between the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and Palestinian fighters. Approximately 50 percent of the shooting incidents and roadside bombs in the Gaza Strip have occurred in this area. The latest incident was the January 10 attack by Hamas on the IDF's "Africa" border outpost in which four Israeli soldiers were killed. Israel, in response, bulldozed dozens of Palestinian houses on the border strip in an attempt to create a buffer zone between Gaza and Egypt. The border area is also known for extensive underground Palestinian smuggling activity by means of a system of tunnels connecting houses on the Egyptian side of the border with those in the PA-controlled area. Rafah is also loosely controlled by the PA; it has become an autonomous zone run by the powerful Samadana clan, which operates many of the tunnels and is involved in terror activities against Israel. The Samadana group is waging an ongoing battle against the IDF along the borderline in order to secure the inflow of weapons, drugs, and other merchandise, and to prevent the IDF patrols from thwarting their smuggling operations. Members of the group do not allow the Palestinian police to operate in their territory and refuse to submit to their authority.

Implications of U.S. Withdrawal

The combination of Egyptian and Israeli troops, Palestinian policemen, and unruly warlords all operating in an area no wider than a football stadium is a recipe for instability. In past incidents, Egyptian soldiers stationed on their side of the border were mistakenly hit by Israeli or Palestinian bullets. The role of the MFO in mitigating the tension in such incidents was crucial. In the absence of such a cooling-off agent, Israelis and Egyptians, who are already at odds with each other, will find it more difficult to restore stability in the area. Additionally, the debate over the future of the MFO and the prospect for U.S. withdrawal from Sinai comes during a period in which the Bush administration is already being criticized by many in the region for its insufficient involvement in the Arab-Israeli conflict. At a time when Arab countries are urging the United States to introduce peacekeeping forces in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the sight of U.S. troops departing the region is not likely to be well received; it will enhance the image that the United States is abdicating its responsibilities in the region.

How to Do It Right?

If U.S. commitment to the MFO must be reduced, how can it be done without negative ramifications? Full withdrawal of the American contingent without providing a suitable substitute means that the MFO would be stripped of its main combat component—perhaps even bringing about the demise of the entire organization. The Pentagon should search for more restrained alternatives, such as a piecemeal withdrawal over a period of several years or sharing the burden on a rotating basis with countries of comparable military quality (e.g. NATO countries). The United States could also settle on partial withdrawal of the 350-member logistic component while retaining the combat battalion. Whichever path the Pentagon chooses to take, it should act with awareness that the MFO's role is more than symbolic. Without the presence of U.S. troops in the region, it is doubtful whether the MFO could continue to play an important role in keeping the peace between Egypt and Israel.

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