

SINAI: The Middle East's New Hot Spot



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Summary

Since the revolution that toppled Mubarak, Sinai has become a no man's land where jihadists from Egypt and Gaza as well as local Bedouins have begun to engage in militant activities. Some Bedouin, especially those professing an extremist Islamist ideology, are well armed and have recruited other local tribesmen to co-operate with terrorists in several attacks since January 2011. The peninsula is becoming a major resistance base and may be in the process of becoming the next hotspot in an already volatile Arab world. Even in the recent conflict in Gaza, which commenced after Israel assassinated the Hamas military chief on 14 November, the role of the Sinai as a conduit for the supply of arms, rockets and missiles to fighters in Gaza has been highlighted. As Egypt and Israel are attempting to grapple with this emerging challenge, the unfolding situation is threatening to disrupt the fragile peace in the region that has prevailed since the full withdrawal of Israeli forces in 1982.

Introduction

On 03 November 2012, three Egyptian policemen were killed in the city of Al Arish by unknown gunmen, in a trend of increasing unrest in the Sinai Peninsula. Earlier, on 4 August 2012, 35 militants attacked the Egyptian-Israeli border at Rafah, killing 16 Egyptian soldiers. Israeli military spokesperson, Yoav Mordechai, said that the gunmen were members of the global jihad based in Sinai.¹ While the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood said that the attack could be attributed to the Mossad,² which has been seeking to abort the Egyptian Revolution, a Hamas spokesman, Tarek Zumar, claimed that the attack was an Israeli "attempt to tamper with Egyptian security and drive a wedge between the Egyptians and the residents of the Gaza Strip."³ Ehud Barak, Israel's Defence Minister, said that the attack showed the need for Egypt to take action to impose better security in the Peninsula.⁴

In addition to these attacks, during the past 21 months, a pipeline which carries natural gas through Sinai to Israel and Jordan has been attacked by militants 15 times, disrupting flow and causing millions of dollars in damage. The area is abuzz with armed gangs trafficking people fleeing from Africa and facilitating their passage across the Sinai into Gaza or even Israel. Smuggling of arms and goods across the border has become an industry. A steady stockpile of weapons is arriving from Libya, especially the missing 4,000-odd shoulder-fired MANPADS. Dozens of Egyptian Police stations, check points and government institutions in Sinai have been attacked by militant groups. The UN Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) monitoring the security provision of the Camp David peace treaty is constantly under threat. There were reports that some Bedouins in the Sinai had even kidnapped and subsequently released 10 peacekeepers. Even in the ongoing conflict in Gaza which commenced after Israel assassinated the Hamas military chief on 14 November, the role of Sinai as a conduit for the supply of arms, rockets and missiles to fighters in Gaza has been highlighted.

Since the January 2011 revolution in Egypt that toppled Mubarak, Sinai has become a no man's land due to the security vacuum in the peninsula. Jihadists from Egypt and Gaza have joined local Bedouins who feel neglected by the Egyptian government. Some Bedouins,

¹ *The Telegraph*, available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/egypt/9455131/Gunmen-who-shot-dead-16-Egyptian-guards-killed.html>, last accessed on 29 November 2012.

² *BBC News*, available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-19154090>, last accessed on 29 November 2012.

³ "Sinai rejoins anti-Israeli resistance front", *Press TV*, available at <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2012/08/10/255530/sinai-rejoins-antiisraeli-resistance/>, last accessed on 29 November 2012.

⁴ "Israeli Defense Chief Says Egypt Attack a 'Wake-Up Call'", *New York Times*, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/07/world/middleeast/sinai-attack-a-wake-up-call-to-egypt-israel-says.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0, last accessed on 29 November 2012.

especially those with an extremist Islamist ideology, are well armed and have recruited local tribesmen to co-operate with terrorists in several attacks. The area is becoming a major resistance base with fighters and could well become the next regional hotspot. The developing situation in the Sinai threatens to disrupt the fragile peace in the region which has been maintained after the full withdrawal of Israeli forces from the Peninsula in 1982 keeping with the provisions of Camp David accord.

Sinai: Geopolitical Significance and Historical Background

Sinai, despite being a largely underdeveloped desert area, is extremely important geostrategically. Egypt and Israel have fought three wars (1956, 1967 and 1973) over this region, which has served as a buffer between the two countries since the 1980s. Geographically, the Sinai is a triangular peninsula in Egypt and is about 60,000 km² in area situated between the Mediterranean Sea to the north and the Red Sea to the south. It is the only part of Egyptian territory located in Asia, thus effectively serving as a land bridge between Asia and Africa. To the west of the peninsula lies the Suez Canal, the vital waterway for global oil shipments and trade from Asia to Europe and beyond. To the north, Sinai shares a volatile border with Israel and the Gaza Strip; and to its east, across the Gulf of Aqaba, lie Jordan and Saudi Arabia. Because of its location, the Sinai has had a crucial role in maintaining stability in the Middle East.

Even after Israel vacated the Sinai as part of the Camp David accord, the region has never had a stable regime and has been largely neglected by successive Egyptian governments. It is divided into two governorates (North and South Sinai), with the largest population group in the region being the Bedouins. The Bedouin, numbering over 300,000, constitute roughly 70 per cent of the region's population; the rest are Palestinians (10 per cent), immigrants from across the Suez Canal (10 per cent), and the descendants of Bosnian, Turkish, and other settlers from the Ottoman period, mainly in al-Arish (10 per cent). North Sinai is one of the poorest governorates in Egypt; the economy of the South is more dynamic largely due to a burgeoning tourism industry. The territory never had a government of its own, nor did it play an independent role in shaping the course of events. In fact, very often Egyptian officials in the peninsula accused the Bedouin of being "Sinai Jews," thus expressing mistrust about their political allegiance due to the friendly relations between them and the Israelis who controlled the area between 1967 and 1982. For their part, the Bedouins viewed mainland Egyptian officials as a new form of occupation forces.

In 1994, the Egyptian government devised a Sinai development plan⁵ that called for settling 2.9 million Egyptians in the peninsula by 2018, which would have turned the indigenous

⁵ Ehud Yaari, "Sinai : A new Front", Policy Note No.9 Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 2012, p. 9, available at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PoolicyNote09.pdf>, last accessed on 29 November 2012.

Bedouin into a small minority. Around 75 billion Egyptian pounds (USD 12.5 billion) were allocated for the plan, which aimed to not only increase the area of cultivated land but also speed up the exploitation of local mineral resources. By 1997, however, with funds at a premium, Mubarak's closest advisors convinced him to give up the dream of settling the Sinai in favour of a different mega plan – the Toshka Project, which aimed at creating a second Nile Valley in southern Egypt. Funds initially earmarked for Sinai were subsequently channelled to Toshka. The peninsula thus once again returned to the bottom of the government's priorities list and even the famous "Peace Canal" bringing Nile water across the Suez was discontinued beyond Bir al-Abd.

Rising Bedouin Assertiveness

The Bedouin, the largest population group in the region, are a historically nomadic people, with tribes closely linked to other Bedouin populations across the Arab world. They are a diverse group, with 15 distinct tribes currently living in Sinai. Although historically associated with pastoralism, most Bedouin today have settled as farmers, fishermen, traders, civil servants, tourist guides or hotel owners. The clan is the basis of Bedouin society. Every tent represents a family; every camp makes up a clan. The spirit of the clan demands unconditional loyalty to fellow clansmen and a strong belief in tribal values in return for tribal security.

The Bedouin have been left to fend for themselves and neglected by successive regimes in Egypt. Even when economic development took place, especially by the government's main initiative in the Sinai – the tourism industry – the jobs went to Egyptians from the mainland. Other job opportunities too were taken by non-Bedouin residents inhabiting the few towns and areas in North Sinai. Most public-sector jobs went to mainland Egyptians as well. As one Bedouin intellectual put it, almost 30 years after the Israeli withdrawal, "Sinai returned to Egypt, but Egypt did not return to the Sinai." What led to the present Bedouin assertiveness and aggression is the cumulative effect of decades of marginalization, neglect and discrimination, as well as the opportunity provided by the security vacuum following the fall of Hosni Mubarak.

The security vacuum and the spread of terrorism in the Sinai as well as the rise of well-armed tribal militias were greatly accelerated by the collapse of the Egyptian police forces throughout the peninsula during the recent revolution. The Bedouin of northern Sinai were among the first to join the calls to topple the regime and launched attacks on numerous police stations. Armed Bedouins forced Egyptian security personnel to abandon their bases and flee. Weapons and munitions depots were plundered and several police stations burnt down in the clashes of January–February 2011. The Bedouin soon asserted their dominance over the North Sinai governorate and the Egyptian authorities have been unable to effectively resume operations in the area's 13 police compounds ever since.

Systematic neglect over the years had forced the Bedouins to engage in illegal trade, leading

to the emergence of a parallel economy centred on smuggling and other illegal activities. By the end of 2011, the annual volume of the region's black economy was estimated to exceed \$300 million.

As a result of these developments, the Sinai is slowly and virtually getting transformed into a semiautonomous player in the regional arena. The peninsula is consequently fast emerging as a new hotspot in the region, with an assertive population and an expanding terrorist infrastructure. The Bedouin are now in a position to affect Israel-Egypt relations, initiating crises that neither government wants, while also influencing the struggle between Israel and Hamas.

Sinai, Hamas and Gaza

Continued neglect by Egypt and the smuggling boom have economically linked the Sinai Bedouins to Gaza, which is being governed by Hamas since 2007. Economic ties and interdependence have led to political and ideological convergence. The Bedouins have become more sympathetic to the Palestinian cause and the Hamas doctrine and consequently more hostile towards Israel. The attack on Israel which killed eight Israelis on 18 August 2011 is a clear indication of Hamas' influence on them. Also, the assistance provided by them in smuggling arms, ammunition and rockets into Gaza for Hamas highlights a convergence in their stance against Israel. Helping them in their cause is the emergence of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, which has always had strong affiliations with Hamas. It however, remains to be seen whether the Muslim Brotherhood Government in Egypt continues its neglect of Sinai or its ideological affiliations would give a positive fillip to the Bedouins and the development of Sinai. President Morsi has also strongly supported the Palestine cause and has declared full support for the Palestinian nation's struggle to achieve its legitimate rights, an issue that was also an integral part of his speech in UN General Assembly in September 2012 wherein he said "From a premise of defending truth, freedom, and dignity and from my duty to support our Palestinian brothers and sisters... call for a peace that would establish an independent Palestinian state – sovereign Palestinian state..."⁶

From the point of view of Hamas, Sinai is safe from punitive Israeli strikes assuming that Israel would eschew any pre-emptive military strikes inside the peninsula for fear of jeopardising the peace treaty with Egypt. Accordingly, Hamas has continued to use Sinai as a relatively safe route for smuggling arms. It has also used the relative peace in the Sinai to plant its operatives there over the past four years to serve as recruiters, couriers and propagators. Post the ouster of Mubarak and the lawlessness in Sinai, Hamas has taken

⁶ Full Text of the speech of President Morsi at the United Nations, available at <http://www.whatthefolly.com/2012/09/27/transcript-egyptian-president-mohammed-morsis-speech-at-the-u-n-general-assembly/>, last accessed on 29 November 2012.

full advantage of the opportunity to smuggle in sophisticated rockets and arms into Gaza. The easing of the Gaza blockade by President Morsi only helped in this regard. According to some reports, MANPADS from Libya as well as Fazr-3 and Fazr-5 missiles from Iran have also found their way into Gaza. Targeting them was one of the stated aims of Israel's Operation Pillar of Defense, which was launched on 14 November 2012.

Terrorist Networks in Sinai and the Possibility of an al Qaeda Presence?

The security vacuum post the ouster of Mubarak has helped in some terrorist networks establishing a foothold with the Bedouins in the Sinai. Slowly thereafter, they have expanded their presence and activities throughout the peninsula. These networks are a mixture of old smuggling gangs, newly formed factions affiliated to Salafi jihadist doctrines, and affiliates of Palestinian organisations in Gaza, including Hamas and Islamic Jihad. In addition to the purely terrorist groups, new, smaller political groups have cropped up in the North Sinai, especially in the al-Arish area with names such as "Sinai Youth," "Sinai Revolutionaries," and "Sinai Shadow Government." These factions seek to redefine the Egyptian-Bedouin relationship and have offered their services as intermediaries between the government and the peninsula.

The terrorist networks have carried out regular attacks since the overthrow of Mubarak. The attacks started with the blowing up of the gas pipeline to Israel, which has been ruptured 15 times till now. There have been reports of kidnappings too wherein foreign tourists including American and Chinese citizens were kidnapped and later released. Among the most significant attacks was the one conducted into Israeli territory and in which eight Israelis were killed on 18 August 2011. Israeli forces responded immediately killing the eight terrorists. Five Egyptian soldiers were also killed by Israeli security forces while chasing militants across the Egyptian border. This resulted in a diplomatic row which was resolved only when Israel apologized to Egypt. At the same time, Israel has also permitted Egypt to increase its troops in the Sinai to eliminate the threat; Egypt subsequently moved 2,500 troops and 250 armoured personnel carriers and launched 'Operation Eagle'. Later, investigations revealed that all terrorists were Sinai residents, four of them on a suicide bombing mission. This was the first case in which Sinai operatives penetrated Israel wearing explosive belts aimed at killing Israelis. It was also the first time that shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles were fired from the Sinai against Israeli helicopters.

The second significant attack took place a year later on 5 August 2012 when a group of approximately 35 terrorists dressed as Bedouins approached an Egyptian military base at sundown, during the *iftar* meal and attacked the base with guns and rocket-propelled grenades killing 16 Egyptian soldiers. They then attempted to break through the Kerem Shalom checkpoint into Israel but were intercepted and eliminated by Israeli forces. Egypt was outraged by this attack. It responded by launching 'Operation Sinai' in which it used

helicopter gunships to launch missiles on terrorist locations. Egypt claimed to have killed over 30 terrorists in Sinai during this operation. As a fallout of the terrorist strike, President Morsi sacked the intelligence chief Murad Muwafi as well as the governor of Northern Sinai Abdel Wahab Mabrouk and ordered the Defence Minister to relieve the head of the country's military police.

Subsequently as well, attacks by terrorists in Sinai have continued with the attack on Egyptian Security HQ on 16 September killing one policeman and a clash in the area of Mount Arif in Sinai on 20 September resulting in the death of one Israeli soldier and three militants.

As regards al Qaeda, Egypt has consistently denied reports of the group's presence in the Sinai. There was a brief proclamation announcing the alleged establishment of an al Qaeda "Emirate of the Sinai Peninsula" in August 2011, which appeared on the network's official websites but was quickly removed. On 20 December, another statement proclaimed the establishment of a new al-Qaeda-affiliated group in the Sinai, Ansar al-Jihad, dedicated to struggle against "the Jews." Although the actual existence of such links is uncertain, al Qaeda chief Ayman al-Zawahiri's statement in October 2011 praising the 18 August cross-border terrorist attacks on Israel and the recurrent sabotage of the gas pipeline to Israel clearly indicate al Qaeda's recognition of Sinai as a fertile ground for expansion of its operations.

This mix of terrorist activities coupled with existing Bedouin grievances also indicates the possibility of some segments of the Bedouin population being influenced by al Qaeda and therefore opening up an affiliate or alternately even al Qaeda deliberately courting the Bedouins given the strategic pay-offs in the region. Some of the terrorist strikes like the attack on Egyptian Police stations or even the blowing up of pipelines could indicate towards some such link. The pipeline bombings were in fact publicly praised by Ayman al-Zawahiri, who called for further operations against Israel.

The Possible Iran Factor

Iran sees the present situation in Sinai as a strategic opportunity. The improved relations with Egypt and the common understanding with Hamas are helping its cause. Iran has, in the recent past, offered help and aid to the Bedouins, luring them to their side. Sinai offers the perfect route to supply arms and rockets to Hamas in Gaza. This has been one of the reported reasons for the sudden increase in the quality and quantity of Hamas' arsenal. In the recent conflict in Gaza, Israel has reported the firing of Fazr-3 and Fazr-5 Iranian rockets. A destabilized border in Sinai, worsening Egypt-Israel relations and Israel's additional focus on security concerns in Sinai gives Iran the perfect breathing space against the threat of Israeli military action against its nuclear programme. It also helps divert the international attention towards the Israel-Egypt and Israel-Palestine issues. Given Sinai's common border with Saudi Arabia across the Gulf of Aqaba, Iran could find adequate opportunities to further its interests from Sinai against Saudi Arabia.

The Israeli Dilemma

Over the past one year, Israel has been compelled to reassess the situation in Sinai. It initially permitted additional Egyptian military deployment east of Zone A to conduct operations against terrorists post the August 2011 attacks. Simultaneously, Israel has adopted new defensive measures on its side of the border including the stationing of additional troops, surveillance sensors and a 240-kilometre double fence, 5.5 meters high and extending 1.5 metres underground, to serve as a physical barrier between the two countries.

Relations between Egypt and Israel are in a state of transition. With the change of regime in Egypt, speculation is rife about the continued validity and acceptance of the Camp David Treaty by Egypt and consequently relations with Israel. A porous border regime could lead to a situation where Sinai militias operate freely, leading to renewed friction.

Israel is already feeling the impact as seen in the recent military conflict in Gaza wherein Sinai has emerged as one of the major routes for smuggling large consignments of rockets into Gaza which Hamas has used to target Southern Israeli cities. In fact, reports suggest that some militants in Sinai are joining with Hamas in the war against Israel. However, Israel has so far decided to stick to its longstanding policy and has refrained from pre-emptive measures on Egyptian soil in Sinai. Given the uncertain situation along its borders with Syria and Jordan and the conflict with Hamas in Gaza, Israel cannot risk jeopardising its 33-year-old peace treaty with Egypt in Sinai by initiating action.

A major terrorist strike from Sinai could, however, change the situation and, perhaps, lead to Israel taking pre-emptive action. The threat of al Qaeda and Iranian influence add to Israel's concerns. As Zvi Mazel, a former Israeli ambassador to Egypt, noted, "If terrorism continues from Sinai to Gaza or from Sinai directly to Israel or from Sinai-Gaza-Israel, at a certain time at a certain point Israel will be forced to act, even to penetrate into Sinai, and it may change everything."⁷

Looking Ahead

The Sinai Peninsula has emerged as a new hotspot in the complex Arab-Israeli conflict with an expanding terrorist infrastructure that makes it another front of potential confrontation. The Bedouin are now in a position to initiate crises that neither Israel nor Egypt wants. As Sinai militant groups continue to exploit the window of opportunity to forge closer military, political, ideological, and economic ties with the neighbouring Gaza Strip, parts of the Sinai are beginning to resemble an extension of the Palestinian areas in

⁷ "Can Egypt secure Sinai Peninsula?", *Al Jazeera*, available at, <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/insidestory/2012/08/20128106214624974.html>, last accessed on 29 November 2012.

Gaza. Hamas is slowly carving out Sinai as an extension of its area of influence, not only by cultivating the local population but also by preparing Sinai as a potential flash point between Egypt and Israel.

The combination of Hamas and other Palestinian terrorist networks, armed Bedouin and the extensive smuggling infrastructure has turned the peninsula into a safe haven for terrorists. These armed groups are exploiting both the weakness of the regime in Egypt and Israel's reluctance to undertake military action against them for fear of jeopardizing the peace treaty. A major terrorist attack from the Sinai, whether by Palestinians or Bedouin, could endanger the fragile peace treaty. The same would be true if Israel were compelled to launch a preventive strike in the Sinai.

Sinai terrorists have definitely brought life to a sleepy desert stretch along the Egypt-Israel border. Concerted diplomatic and security initiatives would be required, especially from Egypt, to minimise the risk of peace between Israel and Egypt imploding under the pressures of lawlessness and the terrorist threat in Sinai. As for Israel, it has to exercise patience, adopt passive defence measures and hope that Sinai does not explode into a situation that endangers the fragile peace maintained over the past three decades. Egyptian journalist Sakina Fouad aptly summarised the situation as "a ticking time bomb waiting to explode."⁸

⁸ Cited in Ehud Yaari, "*The black hole of Sinai*", *Jerusalem Post*, available at <http://m.jpost.com/HomePage/FrontPage/Article.aspx?id=86261506&cat=1>, last accessed on 30 November 2012.