

Position Papers

Egypt: North Sinai Crisis Deepens

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Newly-imposed buffer zone in Sinai is a result of Israeli-US demands and signals the Egyptian government's new policy approach to Gaza and resistance groups in the area [Reuters]

Abstract

The overthrow of Mohamed Morsi and the continuing deterioration of the relationship between Hamas and the current Egyptian government has caused significant convergence of Egypt and Israel's attitudes towards Hamas and the situation in the Gaza Strip, with the common goal of weakening Hamas and containing its influence in the Gaza Strip. Therefore, the Sisi regime's recent decision to establish a buffer zone on the border has nothing to do with the fight against terrorism in Sinai and dealing with armed groups there; rather, it has everything to do with Israeli-US demands for such a zone. It is important to note that this decision is not expected to impact, positively or negatively, the ongoing war between the Egyptian government and armed groups in northern Sinai. In the same context, the opposition group Ansar Bait al-Maqdis (ABM) has recently started to follow the Islamic State (IS) group's methods with their opponents in incubator areas, including killing those accused of being collaborators with Egyptian and Israeli security services and then explicitly claiming responsibility for the killings. Externally, in the context of the collapse of central control in Libya after the revolution, and the escalating hostility between Libyan rebels and the Egyptian regime, it is also no longer likely that armed groups in northern Sinai and Libyan armed groups will coordinate, even with their shared ideological backgrounds. This paper addresses two key questions: To what extent can the Egyptian government's approach succeed in containing the escalating wave of armed violence in this highly turbulent region? Is the decision to establish the buffer zone aimed at aiding counter-terrorism efforts in North Sinai, or is it designed to achieve other goals?

Introduction

On 24 October 2014, an armed attack on an Egyptian security detail in the Sheikh Zuweid area of the North Sinai Governorate left more than thirty soldiers dead and dozens wounded. Though the details of the attack are still unclear, the Egyptian government immediately declared a three-month-long state of emergency in the North Sinai Governorate and deployed additional military and security troops to the region adjacent to Egypt's eastern border with the Gaza Strip and Israel.

Moreover, Cairo closed the Rafah Crossing with the Gaza Strip until further notice, and postponed the round of indirect negotiations between Hamas and the Hebrew State, which were scheduled to be hosted by Cairo at the end of October. Subsequently, the Egyptian authorities began establishing a buffer zone along Egypt's border with the Gaza Strip, ranging from four hundred metres to two kilometres and forcing thousands of residents living in the targeted area to abandon their homes and agricultural lands.

Given the Egyptian president's declaration that the attack aimed to break the will of Egypt and its army, and that his government would take all necessary measures to combat terrorism in Sinai, it is likely that the state's actions in North Sinai will extend even further. Local human rights activists have reported that Egyptian army units have unleashed a heinous campaign against residents in the area who are suspected of embracing militant groups.

Cairo's strategy in Sinai raises two key questions: To what extent can the Egyptian government's approach succeed in containing the escalating wave of armed violence in this highly turbulent region? Is the decision to establish the buffer zone aimed at aiding counter-terrorism efforts in North Sinai, or is it designed to achieve other goals?

Troubled governorate

The recent armed attack was not the first offensive against Egyptian army forces in north and east Sinai, although it was the deadliest. Since the summer of 2012, six major attacks and several minor incidents have occurred. The first, known as "the Rafah Massacre", occurred on 5 August 2012, and caused sixteen soldier fatalities at a border crossing. Shortly thereafter, former President Mohammed Morsi dismissed then Defence Minister and army Commander-in-Chief. Morsi's political efforts and the major development plans announced by his government in North Sinai resulted in a lengthy period of calm in the region, which extended beyond his ouster until the "Second Rafah Massacre" which occurred on 19 August 2013 and left twenty-five military personnel dead. On 11 September of the same year, the Military Intelligence building on the

Egyptian side of Rafah was blown up, causing eleven fatalities. Eleven soldiers and four military personnel were also killed in attacks in al-Arish and Rafah on November 2013 and June 2014, respectively.

According to official statements, a suicide bomber driving a vehicle conducted last month's attack. However, leaked images of the attack site show large-scale damage, including the destruction of armoured military carriers, which implies that this was more than a mere suicide car bomb and could have been a mortar bomb attack. The official statements have significantly offered no explanation for the deployment of such a large number of military personnel at a small military check-point. Adding to the mystery is that more than a week after it occurred, no side has claimed responsibility for the attack.

The presence of Salafi groups in North Sinai, according to an earlier report by AlJazeera Centre for Studies, arises from the permeation of the Jihadist Salafi Movement into the region during the 1990s. It is clear that most early Salafi organisations vanished or split, and ended up as two main groups. The first aims to support the resistance movement in Palestine by attacking the Israeli occupation and its influence in North Sinai. The second considers that the Egyptian government's injustice and tyranny against the people of Sinai and its complicity with the Israelis has made it illegitimate and therefore it should be resisted and toppled. Attacks launched by militant groups in the north and south of Sinai during the 1990s and the first decade of this century resulted in the Egyptian government waging large-scale military and security campaigns in the region. However, such campaigns have undoubtedly worsened the situation rather than containing the insecurity.

Most of North Sinai's population, which is less than 750,000, live in the coastal strip extending from al-Qantarah al-Sharqiyya, past the town of Bir al-Abed, to the Egyptian Rafah on the border with the Gaza Strip. The capital city of the Governorate, al-Arish, is the most heavily populated. The majority of North Sinai's population fall into two main categories. The first comprises Bedouin tribes, especially al-Tiaha, al-Sawarka, al-Turabin, al-Rumailat, al-Mesaieed, and other small tribes of Taei origin who settled in the villages and towns of the small governorate. They are involved in agriculture and animal farming. Some of these tribes, which have links with corresponding tribes in the south of Palestine and in Jordan, predate the advent of Islam in the region. Others are the result of successive waves of immigrants over centuries and are strongly attached to Sinai and the land. The second category includes the descendants of immigrants from the Balkans and the Caucasus, who were brought to al-Arish City by the Ottoman Empire

during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to protect the coastal road and maintain its security.

During their long occupation of Egypt, the British separated the Sinai Peninsula from the Nile Valley, and Nile Valley citizens, including government employees, had to obtain special permits to enter Sinai. For reasons which have never been clear until now, the Egyptian Republic maintained similar administrative restrictions during the Nasser era. Such coercive separation had serious economic and social repercussions. Life in North Sinai became a real struggle for survival and the relations between local residents and those in the Gaza Strip (which was under Egypt's rule at the time) were consolidated.

Prolonged separation and the reluctance of successive Egyptian administrations to open the doors of the military, security and bureaucratic establishments to the people of North Sinai have created a cultural and social chasm between the tribesmen and al-Arish residents on the one hand and state officials from the Nile Valley who took control of the North Sinai resources on the other hand. Egypt's state officials have been unwilling to respect the values of honour, revenge and affinity prevailing in North Sinai, and on many occasions, they could not even comprehend the Arab accents spoken there.

After the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, and despite the involvement of many Sinai residents in resisting the Israeli occupation, the Israelis treated the Sheikhs of tribes with some degree of respect. They provided health and education services, opened Sinai markets to those in Gaza and Occupied Palestine, and introduced new technologies in agriculture and animal rearing, which contributed to tangibly improving social and economic conditions. After Israeli withdrawal, and the return of Egypt's sovereignty over Sinai, Sinai residents expected Cairo to honour its pledges to enhance comprehensive development in the region. However, the only projects implemented by President Hosni Mubarak's government were restricted to tourism development, mainly in south Sinai. Tourism, which is linked to mega foreign companies, not only provided limited economic opportunities to locals, but also surprised Sinai communities. It allowed the entry of strange and unacceptable moral values, ignited conflicts over land ownership and exposed the Egyptian government's complicity in keeping Sinai open to the Israelis, all of which paved the way for the arrival of religious groups, especially the Salafi ones.

The Egyptian military campaigns launched in the 1990s and 2000s were characterised by excessive violence and disrespect, which reflected and exacerbated the enormity of the existing cultural and social distance between the establishment and Sinai society.

Inevitably, they failed to eliminate militant organisations which have become relatively well-established within the local community.

During the post-Revolution period, the religiosity of Sinai society and the gap that had existed between it and the Mubarak regime meant that the vast majority of Sinai voters supported Morsi in the presidential elections. After the first Rafah incident, Morsi became aware of the need to establish a new relationship between Cairo and Sinai, and intensified interaction between the Presidential Office and tribal figures, heads of families and human rights and Islamic activists. The government of Hesham Qandil also embarked on a comprehensive Sinai development project costing more than four million Egyptian Pounds.

True war situation

The coup d'état against Morsi re-established the suspicion and fear-based relationship between Cairo and Sinai residents. With the launch of large-scale military operations after the second Rafah incident, which are still ongoing, and the regime's vow to destroy the tunnels between Gaza and Egypt, which have long been a major economic resource for Sinai citizens, Sinai has become a real battlefield between the State and the local community.

The most influential organisation currently operating in Sinai is Ansar Bait al-Maqdis (ABM) which emerged in late 2011 and early 2012. The group reportedly gained many supporters during the year following Morsi's overthrow. First, the military campaign in North Sinai used similar tactics of repression and humiliation to those used by Mubarak's regime, but in a more destructive and provocative manner. Second, the coup reinforced the belief among the Sinai militants that using political and democratic means for dialogue with Cairo would lead nowhere, and that weapons were their only recourse. In the post-Morsi period their operations extended beyond the Sinai Peninsula, to targets in Cairo, Dakahlia, Port Said, Ismailia and Suez. Although it is difficult to confirm, the ABM has also claimed responsibility for the bloody incident that led to the death of 28 military personnel in Farafra Oasis, in Egypt's western desert, on 19 July 2014.

There are various factors behind the scourge of attacks against military and security targets in North Sinai and the expansion of war between ABM and the state during the past year, including:

1. Clear increase in the number of ABM militants since Morsi's overthrow. Video footage of Eid prayers and ABM members' funeral prayers shows hundreds of

militants, dozens of four-wheel-drive vehicles and relative freedom of assembly and movement in isolated areas of the peninsula.

2. Tribal incubators for the group. Taking advantage of the mass education establishment, the social cohesion provided by the stable residential communities and its Islamic background, ABM has been able to break tribal barriers, recruit militants from most northern Sinai tribes and enjoy the benefits provided by various tribal incubators.
3. Return of the locals. The tight security pressure on ABM has obliged many of its militants to return to their villages and towns in the Nile Valley, where they began forming armed groups, which appear to have played a major role in the attacks on some cities of the valley.
4. Relations with other, similar groups. ABM has benefited from foreign expertise, particularly IS (Islamic State), with whom it appears to have forged a relationship, though perhaps this is still limited to Internet communication. In an interview with Reuters on 5 September 2014, an ABM official confirmed the relationship and exchange of expertise with ISIL.
5. Steady flow of arms. The Egyptian government's troubled relations with the rebels in Libya, and its keenness to cut the arms supply to the Gaza Strip has, paradoxically, ensured an increasing supply of arms, ammunition and explosives in North Sinai.

Recently, ABM has adopted the deterrence methods employed by ISIL against its opponents, including execution of collaborators with the Egyptian and Israeli security services, and explicit claims of responsibility for these killings. If reports that the recent attack on Sheikh Zuweid was carried out through a suicide car are confirmed, that would be an even stronger indicator that ABM is resorting to similar methods as those routinely used by ISIL in its war against the Iraqi army and security forces.

The oppressive and humiliating nature of the state's military campaign in Sinai for over more than a year, combined with the recent measures following the Sheikh Zuweid attack, will deepen resentment of the Egyptian government's approach in Sinai. Recent measures include lengthy curfews, restrictions on means of communication, public insults, and the destruction of houses, farms and property, resulting in the mass displacement of Sinai residents. Sinai is clearly becoming a wider battlefield between the Egyptian state and part of its people. Whenever repression and collective punishment escalate, the gap between state bodies and residents widens, and opportunities for insurgents to recruit followers and provide incubator environments increase.

Consequently, the ongoing confrontation with the Sinai community can be described as a war.

Gaza blockade and the Jewish state's security

Armed groups have constituted a major threat to Israel since the 1990s, as they tended to pursue Israeli tourists and other targets near the two countries' borders. The Israelis dealt with this development in their habitual manner, forming a network of agents in Sinai who masterminded the assassination of numerous local militants. However, Israel's major concern was not the groups' attacks against Israeli targets, but rather their role in supplying arms to the Palestinian resistance organisations in Gaza. Israel stepped up its pressure on Egypt to close the border tunnels, which had been allowed by the Egyptian authorities in order to reduce the sufferings of the Palestinians in Gaza since the 2008-2009 war. Since Egypt and the US played a key role in brokering the cease-fire, the pressure on Egypt did not come from Israel alone, but also from Washington. It is likely that the US security delegations which visited the Egypt-Gaza Strip border in early 2009 submitted proposals such as the establishment of a buffer zone, the building of an iron wall, or digging a canal in order to put an end to the tunnels.

However, Egypt's apparent readiness to cooperate in closing the tunnels was somewhat disingenuous. The Mubarak government was aware that complete closure of the tunnels would lead to a large-scale security disruption in the border area, so Egyptian politics revolved around keeping the tunnels partially open to help provide basic necessities for the Gazans.

Following the Egyptian Revolution in January 2011, the number of tunnels increased dramatically, and the smuggling of goods and weapons from the Egyptian side to the Gaza Strip flourished. Simultaneously, pressure on the Military Council to address the situation was stepped up, from both the Israelis and the Americans. It is believed that the Military Council had already taken a decision to establish a buffer zone prior to the Egyptian presidential elections in mid-2012. However, Morsi's accession to power removed the buffer zone plan from the Egyptian government's agenda altogether, especially given that Morsi quickly realised the negative impacts such a move would generate, both on the situation in Gaza and on his relationship with Sinai residents.

Since Morsi's overthrow, and the deterioration of the relationship between Hamas and the current Egyptian government, the Egyptian and Israeli stances towards Hamas and



the Gaza Strip have become strikingly similar, with the common objectives of both sides being to weaken Hamas and contain its influence within the Gaza Strip.

The Egyptian intelligence and military communities are undoubtedly aware that the tunnels are used to convey goods and weapons from the Egyptian side to the Gazan side, and not vice versa. They also know that while Egyptians living along the border are linked to the economy of the tunnels, they have nothing to do with terrorism, since their main concern is trade with the Gaza Strip. But with each attack against the military or security forces in Sinai, the pro-coup media campaign against Hamas mounts, accusing Hamas members of supporting the militants in Sinai, or planning and participating in the attacks. Perhaps the recent allegations that the Sheikh Zuweid attack was perpetrated by Mohammed Abu Shamala and Raed al-Attar, who were both martyred in the recent Israeli war on Gaza, best exemplify the Sisi regime's intention to taint Sinai with false accusations of infiltration by Hamas. Thus, the decision to establish a buffer zone on the border, which is presented by the Sisi regime as a solution to address the security failures exposed by the Sheikh Zuweid attack, has nothing to do with the fight against terrorism in Sinai, nor efforts to deal with the armed groups there.

Rather, the buffer zone was originally an Israeli-American demand, and is related to the new Egyptian policy towards the Gaza Strip and the resistance within Gaza. Consequently, it will have little effect, positive or negative, on the ongoing war between the government and armed groups in northern Sinai. US support for the buffer zone, expressed by a State Department spokesman on 30 October, despite the constitutional, human rights and humanitarian problems, clearly indicates that Egypt has responded to Israeli-American demands in this regard.

Conclusion

There is no armed challenge confronted by a country that can be as serious as that based on socio-political and ideo-cultural grounds. The Egyptian regime's problem is no longer restricted to a few dozen Salafi Jihadists, but now encompasses a broader element of Sinai society. Cairo has had several opportunities to bridge the historical gap between the Sinai people and the government, but successive regimes have failed to respond appropriately, instead adopting policies that exacerbate the situation.

The short-lived Morsi administration can be credited for beginning to implement a comprehensive development approach to restore North Sinai, and it was able to win the confidence of most members of the community. However, the toppling of Morsi not only

re-established the suspicion and fear-based relationship between Cairo and Sinai residents, but also reinforced the most radical and extremist opinions among insurgents.

The Egyptian government's recent actions in North Sinai indicate that it has dropped the development and dialogue approach, and is increasingly leaning towards repressive security policies and collective punishment. Also, the close rapprochement between the Egyptian security establishment and their Israeli counterparts will only reinforce the hostility of the discourse, lending credence to the Salafi Jihadist groups' accusation that the Egyptian regime lacks integrity.

Because these repressive policies have failed in the past, toughening them is not expected to yield better results in the near future. On the contrary, the social incubator for militancy is expected to widen, and more individuals from the Sinai tribes in particular are likely to join militant groups. In addition to the emerging evidence of links, albeit indirect, between ABM and IS, it is worth noting that many ABM members arrested by security forces are from governorates of the Nile Valley and not only the Sinai tribes. With the collapse of the fragile central government in Libya, and the growing hostility between Libyan rebels and the Egyptian regime, rapprochement between the armed groups in North Sinai and their Libyan counterparts (with whom they share ideological backgrounds), is not improbable.

Briefly, Sinai is slated to remain a source of concern and a challenge to the Egyptian authorities, whose current approach to addressing that concern and containing the consequences of that challenge appear to be misguided, at the very least. More seriously, the Sinai armed organisations are also evidently capable of establishing a solid support base in the Nile Valley governorates, which would pose a new challenge to the state in the future.

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