Report

Israel's Strategy toward the Sinai Peninsula: Continuity and Change

*Lihi Ben Shitrit and Mahmoud Jaraba ***

12 February 2015

The concern used to be that the Sinai was a source of weapons and fighters for Gaza [Reuters]

Introduction

The Sinai Peninsula represents a strategic depth for Egypt's security concerns on its eastern border, spanning 6% of the country's territory and containing a long border with Israel of over 200 kilometers. Sinai's strategic importance lies in its overseeing of the Suez Canal which is considered one of the most important waterways for international trade.

Israel came to occupy Sinai following the 1967 war, and agreed to withdraw from it only after safeguarding its strategic security objectives as part of the Camp David agreement of 1979. The central security guarantee of the peace accord was the demilitarization of Sinai, leaving it as a buffer zone between Egypt and the Israeli interior. The agreement stipulated the limiting of the presence of the Egyptian military in the Peninsula.

However, in response to the activities of a number of Islamist militant groups in Sinai in recent years, Israel has consented on several occasions to the increase of Egyptian military presence during the Mubarak and Morsi eras, and more intensively since the Egyptian military coup of 2013. Yet, Israel objects to a permanent military presence in the Peninsula that could change the strategic balance there, and therefore, the redeployment of Egyptian forces, heavy military equipment, and the timetables for deployment and withdrawal require coordination with Israel.

The shifting strategic concerns as Israel understands them, and political developments in Egypt, have brought Israel and the current Egyptian military regime closer in terms of their objectives and goals. The policies of both towards Sinai, however, have been to the detriment of the inhabitants of the Sinai Peninsula, the Gazan population, and ultimately

will do more to harm, rather than fortify, both Israeli and Egyptian security in the long term.

Historical Conditions

The Camp David accord stipulated Israel's complete withdrawal from the Sinai and the reinstatement of full Egyptian sovereignty. It provided securities to Israel in the form of limitations put on the scale of Egyptian military presence in the Peninsula, stating that no more than one armed forces division (mechanized or infantry) should be present in an area 50km east of the Gulf of Suez and the Suez Canal, and that only regular civil police forces could be deployed in the 20-40km area to the west of the international border between the two countries. Israeli military presence was to be limited in the 3km east of the border. An international force of observers was also to be deployed in some of the area, not to be removed without the agreement of the five permanent UN Security Council members. Access to the Suez Canal was a major concern of the agreement, which guaranteed "the right of free passage by ships of Israel through the Gulf of Suez and the Suez Canal on the basis of the Constantinople Convention of 1888 applying to all nations; the Strait of Tiran and Gulf of Aqaba are international waterways to be open to all nations for unimpeded and non-suspendable freedom of navigation and overflight."[1]

The Marginalization of the Local Population

Limited Egyptian sovereignty due to the conditions of the Camp David accord, alongside suspicion of the local Bedouin populations, which were at times viewed by Cairo as "collaborators" with Israel's 15 year occupation, led to their increased marginalization and deprivation.[2] According to a report by the Council on Foreign Relations, while the sparsely populated South of the Sinai saw tourism and energy development projects, the North received almost no investment. "Cairo encouraged labor migration to the Sinai from the Nile Valle, offering these internal migrants preferential access to land, irrigation, and jobs, while denying native Bedouins such basic services and rights as running water and property registration. They were blocked from jobs with the police, army, and the peninsular peacekeeping force, the Multinational Force & Observers (MFO), which is one of the region's largest employers.

In North Sinai, schools and hospitals were left unstaffed."[3] The maintenance of North Sinai sparsely populated area was also in Israel's security interests, but reports indicate that both the United States and Israel warned Mubarak that the neglect of the local population could lead to frustrations that would increase potential security threats.[4] And indeed, poverty and intentional neglect of the Bedouin residents led many to rely on smuggling and black markets for their livelihood. Increasingly since the Palestinian Hamas' takeover of the Gaza Strip in 2007 and the imposed blockade on the Strip, the

3

underground tunnel economy between Sinai and Gaza has been a major source of sustenance for the local Sinai population. Human trafficking and the smuggling of African refugees – mainly Sudanese and Eritrean - from Egypt to Israel, was another mainstay of the local economy, raising additional concerns in Israel. According to Israeli government sources, from 2006 to 2014, over 64,000 African refugees entered Israel through Sinai.(5) Cairo, in turn has increasingly viewed the North Sinai Bedouin population primarily as a potential security threat, rather than full citizens deserving of government services and protection, and has carried out a number of military operations officially aimed at curbing terrorist and criminal elements in the Peninsula, but severely and disproportionally harming local civilian residents. These policies have had the counterproductive effect of further alienating residents and increasing their frustration with both the central government and the army, leaving some with little choice but the join or to tacitly support new militant groups that have organized in the Peninsula.

Changes in Israel's Security Strategy

During the 2014 Herzliya Conference, several papers addressed Israel's changing strategic environment and the need for adaptation in response to regional and international developments. The annual conference brings together Israeli politicians, the security establishment, and the policy world, to discuss and articulate Israel's national security policy. Several of the 2014 papers mentioned that while in the decades after the establishment of the state in 1948, the main security threats the country faced were from the established militaries of its Arab neighbors, since the 1990s non-state actors have come to constitute the major security challenge for Israel.(6)

The Arab uprisings of 2011 and the destabilization of several countries in the region has led Israeli policymakers to further stress the rise of Islamist non-state groups as increasingly constituting the main security challenge and requiring redoubled efforts to create and strengthen regional alliances with governments and regimes who see these actors as their main challengers as well.(7) Therefore, while in the past it was the presence of the Egyptian military in the Sinai Peninsula that caused concern for Israel, today it is the vacuum that was created in this area, which has been filled by non-state militant groups, and their potential infiltration into the Gaza Strip or into Israeli territories, that constitute Israel's main security challenge in the Sinai, as Israel sees it. Morsi's coming to power in 2012 raised additional concerns in Israel due to the Muslim Brothers' ideological affiliation with the Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas), but the Morsi government upheld the Camp David agreements and even acted against militants in the Sinai on several occasions. Yet the underground tunnel economy between Sinai and the Gaza Strip, which served to import needed civilian supplies and products as well as military equipment into the Strip, operated with relative ease during Morsi's short reign.

The military coup of July 2013 has been viewed by the Israeli government as largely a positive development in terms of Israel's strategic interest in weakening Hamas in Gaza and countering the spread of jihadi elements in the Sinai peninsula. Al-Sisi's government has worked to effectively destroy most of the tunnels and tighten the stranglehold over Hamas in Gaza, which it views as a collaborator with the Muslim Brothers. Israel has also welcomed the Sisi government's increasingly harsh military operations against Islamist militants in the Sinai. Radical armed groups in the Peninsula, such as Ansar Bayit al-Maqdis, who announced their allegiance to the Islamic State (IS) last November, as well as other groups operating in the area, have targeted Egyptian police and military much more often and more successfully than they had any Israeli targets.

However, Israeli policymakers and policy experts have watched with concern the deteriorating security situation in the Sinai Peninsula and have therefore supported Sisi's military moves there, including the establishment of a buffer zone between the Gaza Strip and Sinai. Israel hopes that such actions will further isolate Hamas and diminish its financial and military capabilities, and prevent jihadi groups based in Sinai from attacking Israel. Yoram Schweitzer, a senior fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), an Israeli think tank, recently recommended in a policy paper that: "Egypt's campaign in Sinai has tremendous significance for Israel. Any intelligence, operational, or political assistance that Israel can provide to the el-Sisi regime, including support for improving its ties with the United States and a willingness to favorably consider requests by Egypt to expand its military presence in the Sinai, will serve Israel's security interests, the overall relationship between Israel and Egypt, and the necessary international campaign to block the spread of IS and its partners." (8)

The Likely Consequences of Current Policies toward the Sinai

As mentioned, with the approval of both Israel and the United States, Al-Sisi's government has worked to create a buffer zone between Gaza and Sinai, which entailed the complete destruction of the Egyptian Rafah area, and the eviction of its local residents.(9) The original plan of creating a buffer zone of half a kilometer has already expanded into a full kilometer and the demolition of thousands of homes in North Sinai, which has left their inhabitants without adequate compensation. It is clear that this policy has deepened the deprivation of North Sinai families, and has entailed wide-ranging human rights violations.(10) There is no doubt that rather than improving the security situation in the area, this policy is likely to fuel further alienation, frustration, and economic desperation, which will provide a fertile ground for the growth of militancy and radicalism. The closing of Gaza's only channel to the flow of goods from the outside world – the tunnel economy – is bound to deteriorate the already dire economic conditions in both Gaza and North Sinai. And while this may indeed destabilize Hamas' control of the Strip, as policymakers in Egypt and Israel hope, the creation of another

region (Gaza) lacking central control is a recipe for disaster. Such conditions are the growing grounds for Islamist radicalism that will inevitably be much more militant and uncompromising in its ideology and strategy than Hamas.

Some voices in the Israeli policy community have raised these concerns, but it appears that Egypt and Israel, with the approval of the United States, are determined to pursue and deepen their current security strategy. Zach Gold from the Israeli INSS has authored a policy report in November 2014 titled "The Buffer Zone between Gaza and Sinai: More Harm than Good to the Security of the Peninsula." In it, he pointed that any effective anti-terrorist policy must work together with the local population in order to deprive militant groups' of their civilian support and potential recruitment pool. However, the demolition of home, the destruction of the local economy, and the increased violation of human rights of the civilian population will inevitably contribute to, rather than weaken, radical militant elements in the region and the popular sympathy they enjoy.(11) Yet Benjamin Netanyahu's government, and Sisi's regime both brand themselves as "security oriented" and have marked the "war on terror" as their main political legitimation strategy. For both these leaders, the continued existence of a low-intensity conflict on the Gazan and Sinai border is an invaluable public relations asset in their own domestic political maneuvering against their respective domestic political oppositions.

Conclusion

The security concerns of Israel and Egypt in the Sinai Peninsula are not unfounded. Yet, the current situation is the result of years of neglect and marginalization of the local population in the area. The approach taken by Israel and Egypt appear to repeat, and exacerbate, the mistakes made in the past that have given rise to current conditions. An effective counter-terrorism strategy for both Israel and Egypt should focus on rehabilitating North Sinai's economy and the Gazan economy – as both are inherently linked. It should work to strengthen more inclusive governance that will give Sinai residents a say in the running of their public affairs. It should support an internal Palestinian dialogue of reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas (as Egypt has done under Mubarak and Morsi) that will facilitate their joint governing of the Gaza Strip and eventually democratic elections there. These steps will offer Sinai residents and Gazans alternatives to their current deprivation and marginalization, and will dry up recruitment pools and popular sympathy for militant jihadi groups. Unfortunately, such an agenda seems far from the prevailing thinking in Egypt and Israel, who both focus on short-term military action against terrorist elements, instead of on long-term policies that address the deep rooted causes of extremism and lay the foundation for stability.

***Lihi Ben Shitrit** is an Assistant Professor at the School of Public and International Affairs, University of Georgia, Athens. **Mahmoud Jaraba** is a Researcher at the Erlangen Centre for Islam and Law in Europe, Germany. He is the author of Hamas: Tentative March toward Peace (Ramallah: Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, 2010).

Endnotes

1) The Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum, The Camp David Accords, http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/documents/campdavid/frame.phtml

2) Nicolas Pelham, Sinai: "The Buffer Erodes", Chatham House, September 1, 2013. http://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/papers/view/186061

3) Zachary Laub, "Egypt's Sinai Peninsula and Security", Council on Foreign Relations, December 12, 2013. http://www.cfr.org/egypt/egypts-sinai-peninsula-security/p32055

4) Zachary Laub, "Egypt's Sinai Peninsula and Security", Council on Foreign Relations, December 12, 2013. http://www.cfr.org/egypt/egypts-sinai-peninsula-security/p32055

5) "Statistics on foreign residents in Israel," October 2014, Israel population and immigration authority. http://www.piba.gov.il/PublicationAndTender/ForeignWorkersStat/Documents/564899cce.pdf

6) See, http://www.herzliyaconference.org/eng/

7) "Israel's Security Approach", paper series, Herzliya Forum, 2014. http://www.herzliyaconference.org/eng/_Uploads/dbsAttachedFiles/Tbitachon1.pdf

8) Yoram Schweitzer, "Egypt's War in the Sinai Peninsula: A Struggle that Goes beyond Egypt", The Institute for National Security Studies, February 3, 2015. http://www.inss.org.il/index.aspx?id=4538&articleid=8667

9) 2015 ،13 يناير ،"رفح المصرية تختفي بعدما انفصلت عن توأمتها الفلسطينية" ،القدس العربي. http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=278930

10) Amnesty International, "Egypt: End wave of home demolitions, forced evictions in Sinai amid media blackout", November 27, 2014. http://www.amnesty.org/en/news/egypt-end-wave-home-demolitions-forced-evictions-sinai-amid-media-blackout-2014-11-27

11) Zach Gold, INSS papers, volume 632, November 2014. http://heb.inss.org.il/index.aspx?id=4354&articleid=8138