

Egypt-Israel ties in Limbo Post-Arab Uprising: Is situation in Sinai responsible?

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Abstract:

From 1956 to 1973, Egypt and Israel engaged in three significant battles over the Sinai Peninsula, and control of the region and its inhabitants alternated between the two countries during these conflicts. The peninsula was designated as a buffer zone between the two by the Camp David Accords of 1978 and the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty that was signed the following year. Following the 2011 Uprising, Egypt's nationwide unrest also contributed to a rise in unrest in Sinai. However, the problems of militancy, illicit trade in weapons, and human trafficking existed long before the Arab upheavals. For examples, the Sinai resort cities of Taba, Sharm al-Shaykh, and Dahab were heavily bombed between 2004 and 2006 years before the Arab Uprising.¹The situation exacerbated after the Arab Uprising as the attention of the security forces shifted to the Nile Valley region and at many junctures the strength of Egyptian-Israeli ties was tested. The underlying problem here is the marginalization of the Autochthonous people (Bedouins) of the Sinai Peninsula by Egyptian authorities and various other parties including state, quasi-state and non-state actors who have leveraged their grievances for their own interests.

Keywords: Geo-Strategy, Marginalisation, Bedouins, Militancy, Arab Uprising

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I. Introduction:

Sinai Peninsula is of paramount geo-strategic importance as it serves as the main artery between Egypt-Gaza and Israel. Moreover, it sits next to the geo-economically important maritime route, the Suez Canal. Thus, any unrest in Sinai Peninsula is bound have its impact various stake holders that surround it. Sinai became more important after the establishment of Hamas' control over Gaza in 2007 and Israel imposed a blockade to put the group under strain. Furthermore, African migrants travelled to Israel in search of employment opportunities and refuge from domestic strife. Consequently, Israel originally intended the fence it erected along the Sinai border, which has successfully deterred militant infiltration, to prevent unauthorised crossings by African refugees. For example, on August 18, 2011, militants assaulted an Israeli bus that was travelling to the southern city of Eilat from Egypt's Sinai Peninsula across the international border. During a difficult, multi-stage operation, eight people were killed and the responding Israel Defense Forces (IDF) came under fire. The IDF killed a number of genuine Egyptian border guards as they were hot on the trail of the infiltrators wearing Egyptian fatigues.²At the time, the circumstances behind the Egyptians' deaths were in question, but Cairo's response was fierce, criticizing Israeli activities, the invasion of Egyptian territory, and the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty itself.³Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak had to apologize⁴ to the Egypt for the death of Egyptian soldiers during the ambush and thereby, also allowed Egypt to deploy more troops in Sinai to maintain security.⁵ Therefore, it is important to analyse the situation in the Sinai Peninsula and only by addressing the root causes to it the situation can be improved.

Analysis:

The alternative outcome—and any Israeli response—could have had a chilling impact on bilateral ties if Egyptian special forces hadn't managed to rescue the last remaining Israelis immediately before the break-in. The August 2011 incident confirmed fears in Washington and Jerusalem that the Egyptian uprising could lead to the eventual collapse of the peace treaty, which has been a cornerstone of regional stability for more than thirty years. At the very least, the incident narrowly avoided becoming an international conflict. Since then, Sinai has in fact gotten more unstable—as has Egypt generally—and the threat of cross-border incidents has increased in numerous ways. The peace agreement has held at the same time. The bilateral relations between Israel and Egypt are cooperative in terms of security and intelligence.

Blanche's reasoning may have been incorrect, but his conclusion is largely accurate.⁶ Governmental tensions between Egypt and Israel have existed throughout the Arab Uprising, but never more so than after Israeli forces accidentally killed six Egyptian soldiers in August 2011 and that incident sparked unrest in Cairo. Two weeks after this incident, demonstrators ransacked the Israeli Embassy in Cairo.⁷ The growing dominance of Islamist political groups, according to scholars such as Liad Porat and Efraim Inbar is a major contributing factor to the hostility between Egypt and Israel.⁸ They go on to the length of asserting that anti-Israeli sentiment is widespread in Egypt, and it is made worse by the populist belief that the Treaty of Peace violates Egyptian sovereignty and restricts the country's capacity to send soldiers into its own territory.⁹

This lack of sovereignty, according to organisations like the Tamarod movement, has been the biggest hurdle and the major reason for Egypt's failure to successfully secure Sinai. This criticism assumes that Egypt's armed forces are the only ones responsible for maintaining security on the Peninsula, and as a result, their restricted access is a significant factor in the region's rising level of unpredictability. According to Israeli counterparts, this claim ignores the crucial role that should be played by police who are not constrained by the Treaty. Subsequently, the significance of Bedouin social, economic, and political integration is also undermined.

Before gaining power, the Muslim Brotherhood ran for office on an anti-Israeli platform, echoing the general anti-Israeli sentiment. But the reality in Sinai under Morsi did not match such rhetoric. After the Muslim Brotherhood took over, little was done to change the Treaty or the Peninsula's current situation, and Egypt's relationship with Israel remained virtually intact. Zack Gold pointed out that Mohammad Morsi had no desire to interact with his Israeli counterparts and instead left all relationship-management to the security forces.¹⁰ Morsi skillfully controlled a collaboration, preventing claims that he had renounced the anti-Zionist rhetoric of the Brotherhood. Morsi was also obviously aware that implicit acceptance of the status quo would help his government gain support from other countries.

As a result, he frequently affirmed that the Muslim Brotherhood-led administration would uphold its international commitments¹¹, just as the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) had done on February 12, 2011, immediately after President Mubarak's fall.¹² As a result, the relationship between Egypt and Israel did not undergo a significant change during the Islamist era under President Morsi, despite the grave forecasts of critics like Yossi Klein Halevi.¹³ The same kind of Egyptian-Israeli security cooperation that existed in the Sinai during the Mubarak administration persisted.¹⁴ In actuality, this collaboration peaked after the Arab Spring. The relationship between Egypt and Israel in Sinai has been managed by the Egyptian armed forces and intelligence agencies, whether under the rule of the SCAF immediately following Mubarak's overthrow, Morsi, or al-Sisi.¹⁵

Although it is likely that Egyptian military personnel have the same unfavourable opinion of Israel as their country as a whole, senior officials take a more practical approach to the situation. Sinai stability and security are important to both Egypt and Israel. According to Byman and Elgindy, Israel doesn't necessarily need friendly relations with its western neighbour, but it does want peace along its borders and a government in Egypt that can deal with crime and violence in the Sinai Peninsula responsibly and effectively.¹⁶ Israel would suffer from a lack of a secure environment of this kind. It can raise the possibility of cross-border assaults, which calls for increased security along Israel's southern border in order to thwart them.

Sinai: A Peninsula for Cooperation or a Security Threat?

The Indigenous Bedouin society of Sinai never did well with any authority that tried to dominate the Peninsula. It should also be noted that this is the result of the difficult history with the various states/empires that were successful in controlling Sinai as well as the Bedouin society itself, which is self-governed by customary law and historically inclined toward a nomadic life-style, often in opposition to the settlement attempts from Israel and Egypt. These complaints created the ideal environment in the Sinai Peninsula for the development of a possible insurgency,

“a struggle for control and influence, generally from a position of relative weakness, outside existing state institutions. Insurgencies can exist apart from or before, during, or after a conventional conflict. Elements of a population often grow dissatisfied with the status quo. Population or groups in a population are willing to fight to change the conditions to their favor, using both violent and nonviolent means to affect a change in the prevailing authority, they often initiate an insurgency. An insurgency is the organized use of subversion and violence to seize, nullify, or challenge political control of a region.”¹⁷

A state will deploy counterinsurgency, which is defined as “extensive civilian and military actions aimed to simultaneously fight and limit insurgency and address its core causes,” to try and put an end to it if a population or groups within a population are willing to launch one.¹⁸ Understanding the critical role of civilians in insurgencies is essential since they serve as the backbone of any successful insurgent or counterinsurgent operation. Kilcullen has noted as much, “all successful counterinsurgents have been willing and able to kill the enemy, often with great ruthlessness. But all have clearly distinguished that enemy from the population in which it hides [...] to win over the population.”¹⁹ Kilcullen has further explained that this feature is present due to two very distinct characteristics of insurgent movements: first, their reliance on local communities; second, the fact that while fighters are mobile, populations are static. An insurgent movement's connection to the local populace

in a specific area is its centre of gravity and the source of power that gives it its morale, physical strength, freedom to act and resolve to act. Armed with their access to a large support network, insurgents frequently ride and manage a societal wave of grievances, many of which are valid. Since it is underground and doesn't use weapons, this enormous foundation is largely untraceable to counterinsurgents.²⁰

“A violent struggle between state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant population(s)” is what irregular warfare is defined as when insurgents and counterinsurgents compete to win over civilian support.²¹ Competitors vying for the support of the populace use various leverage tools. The Egyptian and Israeli governments, on the one side, and the militant organisations, on the other, are the two rivals in the case of the Sinai Peninsula. The latter, though, is a novelty. In contrast to the historically poor connection between Bedouins and the two states, they therefore have an advantage. These immigrants may provide Bedouin society with yet another avenue through which to air its grievances and discover a framework to which it may more readily adapt.

As much as both the Egyptian and Israeli governments have tried to counter the insurgency it has boomeranged even more zealously. The first issue with the approaches employed by the states is that they use counter insurgency tactics instead of a full-fledged strategy. Insurgencies can be stopped in two methods, or oppositional movements can be avoided more generally. The first approach can be identified as “liberal approach”—policies intended to integrate individuals and address complaints inside a system—which tried to channel voice and dissent through political inclusion. Neither Egypt nor Israel ever applied this procedure to the Bedouins of the Sinai. Instead, their overall political strategy has always been some form of indirect authority, frequently implemented through repression. The so-called “welfarist approach,” which is typically intended to prevent political inclusion through aid and development, is another tool in the hands of nations.

Although, the few economic development initiatives that did reach the Peninsula were instead directed toward South Sinai, or foreigners, removing Bedouins from their economic benefits. In order to stifle Bedouin calls for political or economic inclusion, the authorities often used threats or other forms of repression, while the Bedouin society took a different course. On the other side, the militant organisations that developed in the Peninsula now give Bedouins a second choice by capturing their interest through innovation and appropriating the same issues that the Bedouins have.

Militants also infiltrate tribal systems using a different strategy than states do. Rather than interacting with Bedouins through a top-down strategy, as states used to do, militant groups start at the societal level and work their way up, taking a bottom-up communitarian strategy that is more receptive to tribal societies. They also have other means of influence, such as arming Bedouins with the combat skills necessary to fight the nations and persuading them to support them by using an approach which is ‘welfarist’ in nature. Terrorists can supply the means for fending off those trying to remove this source of money, given the significance of tunnel smuggling (between Sinai and Gaza) for the Bedouin economy.²²

The Way Out:

Al-Sisi replaced the army commanders in the Peninsula, but the implementation attitude is still the same, and it consistently fails in its counterterrorism duty because the army's normal operating procedures did not take into account an appropriate system for information collecting. The only way to map the entire Negev desert would be with the assistance of the native population, which is not possible with the intelligence currently available. Moreover, intelligence agencies prefer to use a repressive approach to information gathering by extracting it violently²³ rather than collaborating with Bedouins to obtain human intelligence. Additionally, frequent curfews and ineffective bombings by the Egyptian army add to the hostility of locals in Rafah, Al-Arish, and Sheikh Zuweid.²⁴ This antagonism, together with the Egyptian army's incapacity to protect the Bedouin people from militant threats, is wholly at variance with the upbeat assessments of the state of operations made by the military's top brass. The too confident manner in which the army officials have spoken demonstrates a profound miscalculation of the difficulty of the undertaking. Unrealistic expectations might undermine public support and aid in the militants' invincibility narrative.²⁵ A second barrier to Bedouins' ability to express disagreement and be included in the state's narrative on terrorism is the area's closure to reporters and journalists in North Sinai and the warnings issued to residents not to challenge official claims.²⁶

As has been mentioned, getting civilian support is essential for carrying out successful counter-terrorist operations in Sinai. To do this, Al-Sisi would need to overcome the terrorists' propaganda²⁷ and win his conflict with them on the basis of moral authority, which would foster a dialogue that might include Bedouin society. He must therefore learn to distinguish between militants and Bedouin problems, addressing the former while fending against the latter.²⁸ Even if militant organisations were to be vanquished, any long-lasting peace would be hampered by the failure to carry out this policy. The Bedouin community came to be accused of being terrorists by the state as well as by the actual terrorists, which is how the situation came to be regarded by the Bedouin community.²⁹

A peace process between Egypt and the Bedouins would be scuttled if the local population's complaints are ignored because a peace settlement would pose a danger to the latter's authority, worldview, and

interests. Even if all parties eventually come to cherish peace, this rarely happens all at once, and they frequently have quite different ideas about what constitutes an acceptable peace.³⁰ This would undoubtedly be the case if Bedouins could only continue to rely on tunnel smuggling and are consistently kept out of any inclusion process in the Egyptian state. Even though Egypt still has control over the Sinai Peninsula, Israel should not object if Egypt changed its counterinsurgency strategy to one that was more all-encompassing and gained the Bedouin community's support. However, even though the increase in violence against militants and Bedouins may breed resentment and could provide fertile ground for further radicalization, it is also true that those who anticipated a Sinai-style ISIS clone and feared a complete breakdown of security at the hands of the Egyptian government were mistaken.

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