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About this Series

Op-Med is an ongoing series of opinion pieces on topical issues in Mediterranean politics from a transatlantic perspective. The series brings together European, North American, and southern Mediterranean experts through the German Marshall Fund–Istituto Affari Internazionali strategic partnership. The series examines key questions surrounding the political, societal, and economic evolution of specific Mediterranean countries as well as the broader regional and international dynamics at play in the Mediterranean region as a whole.

Shifting Sands: Security and Development for Egypt's Sinai

by *Andrea Dessì*

Escalating tensions in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula have become a serious headache for the country's new rulers and a major test for Mohamed Morsi's presidency. As the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (MB) struggles to revamp the country's ailing economy, deliver on its campaign pledges, and restore Egypt's regional clout, widespread lawlessness along Egypt's eastern border risks undermining these efforts while further complicating the MB's nascent relationship with the West.

Reports of an increased penetration of radical jihadist groups in the Sinai surfaced soon after the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak in February 2011 and have since grown into a key domestic and foreign policy challenge for Egypt's new government. Beginning in August 2011, and following a first cross-border raid by Jihadi militants into Israeli territory, the Egyptian government approved a large-scale military operation in the Sinai in an attempt to re-establish central authority over Egypt's eastern governorates. The anti-insurgency campaign, dubbed "Operation Eagle," has had mixed results and over a year since its inception many of the prob-

lems plaguing Egypt's Sinai remain unaddressed.¹

If managed improperly, tensions in the Sinai could have destabilizing effects on Egypt, the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip, and Israel, potentially dragging the three into an escalation that could send ripples across the region. Given that a stable Sinai is in the interest of all parties and the region as a whole, the West should develop a two-track policy focusing on security and development for the area while devising strategies that could lay the groundwork for increased cooperation between the three neighbors.

Breaking the Cycle of Violence and Marginalization

Radical Islamism in the Sinai is not new, and a series of Salafi-Jihadi groups have been active in the area well before 2011. Major bombings occurred in 2004, 2005, and again in 2006, and each time the Mubarak regime responded with a security-first strategy, sending in the army to conduct punitive sweeps and mass

¹ Operation Eagle was initially launched in August 2011 but then expanded one year later following the deaths of 16 Egyptian border guards in an attack by militants in the northern Sinai.

arrests. More than 2,500 people were imprisoned following the 2004 attack and most were detained for years without charge while being denied visits by family members or lawyers.²

These harsh measures only added to the widespread marginalization of the Sinai Bedouins in Egyptian society, with many being considered as second-class citizens or simply as smugglers, arms dealers, or human traffickers. While such activities are indeed widespread, the lack of opportunities in the Sinai is such that many inevitably make a living through illegal activities or the shadow economy. Having for decades suffered from severe socio-economic discrimination, the Sinai's 61,000 square kilometer area is Egypt's least developed region, with the highest rates of unemployment and poverty. Little or no benefits have reached the local inhabitants from the development of the Sinai's tourism industry and Bedouin communities are largely prevented from working in these luxury resorts. A career in the army is also unavailable, given the Egyptian military's tendency to restrict Bedouin conscription.

Since the overthrow of Mubarak, there have been repeated attacks on Egyptian police and army units stationed in the Sinai, at least 14 separate bombings on pipelines carrying Egyptian gas to Jordan and Israel, and four deadly cross-border raids into Israeli territory. The security vacuum created by the fall of Mubarak coupled with the deteriorating economic outlook in Egypt as a whole are part of the problem. The gradual reopening of the Egypt-Gaza border also increased the penetration of radical elements in the Sinai. In the wake of recent attacks on the Egyptian army in the area, Hamas has offered to establish a new border security force in Gaza and increase security cooperation with Egypt. Moreover, in a sign that Hamas is itself growing increasingly worried about the growth of these extremist groups, authorities in Gaza are blocking attempts by Salafi groups to form a political party inspired by the Egyptian Salafi Al-Nour party.³

An Opportunity for Cooperation

Hamas's seeming willingness to cooperate, combined with Israel's clear interest in limiting the penetration of radical Islamism in the Sinai (and Gaza), prove that Egypt is by no means alone in having to devise a strategy for its eastern governorates. Security and development for the Sinai is indeed in the interests of Egypt, Israel, and Hamas as well as the international community, creating a unique potential for cooperation between this unusual set of bed-fellows. Notwithstanding various flare-ups, intelligence cooperation between Israel and Egypt has continued under the Muslim Brotherhood, and this welcomed development can also serve as a basis to preserve the 1979 Egypt-Israeli peace treaty.

The treaty has come under strain due to repeated attacks on Israel from the Sinai and Egypt's deployment of heavy military hardware into areas classified as partially demilitarized under the security annexes of the treaty. This however should not necessarily lead to serious tensions as the treaty itself allows for increased deployments into the Sinai as long as they are done in coordination with Israel. Such understandings could reassure Israel while allowing the Egyptian government to present the army's deployment into the Sinai as a response to those who charge that Egyptian sovereignty is undermined by the treaty. Moreover, such understandings would also allow Egypt to improve security coordination with Hamas and together limit the growth of radical Jihadi groups in the Sinai and Gaza Strip.

Any response to the Sinai's current troubles must however also address the socio-economic inequalities affecting the local inhabitants and avoid repeating past mistakes that have essentially tended toward a securitization of the issue. The punitive military campaigns unleashed by the Mubarak regime following each major bombing effectively only increased the feelings of marginalization present among the Sinai's local inhabitants while neglecting those social and economic grievances that in part can explain their radicalization. Thus, while Egypt's cash-strapped government is today in no condition to invest extensively for the development of the Sinai, regional and international donors should increase their focus on this area. In the West, the United States and U.K. have both shown a willingness to assist Egyptian security efforts in the Sinai. Such assistance must go beyond the security dimension and also promote long-term development projects to bring drinking water,

2 "Egypt: Mass Arrests and Torture in Sinai," *Human Rights Watch*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (February 2005), <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2005/02/21/egypt-mass-arrests-and-torture-sinai-0>.

3 "Salafis say Hamas security preventing new political party," *Ma'an News Agency*, 15 October 2012, <http://www.maannews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=529069>.

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electricity, and basic infrastructure to villages in the central and northern Sinai. In this respect, and notwithstanding the current financial crisis, the EU could play an important role given the extensive experience and tools at its disposal while the United States could earmark a fraction of its \$1.5 billion in yearly aid to Egypt for specific developmental projects in the Sinai. Moreover, the Egyptian government must also clearly engage with the local communities and promote their full integration into Egyptian society.⁴ Some belated efforts have been made by President Morsi in this respect, such as a pledge to review 252 charges brought against inhabitants in the Sinai under Mubarak and a proposal to allow residents to buy and own land in the Sinai, a practice that was prevented in the past on security grounds.⁵

Ultimately, security and development in the Sinai (and the region) is also dependent on external factors, such as a true and complete reconciliation agreement between the Palestinian factions of Hamas and Fatah, a full end to the Gaza blockade, and a just and lasting solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Given that these external aspects are unlikely to be resolved anytime soon, Egypt, Israel, Hamas, and the international community should make an effort to concentrate on those areas where their interests overlap. This cooperation could develop along the established bilateral relations between Cairo and Tel Aviv on one hand and Egypt-Gaza on the other and thus serve as a means to defuse tensions and prevent possible escalations that only serve the interests of the most extremist elements in these societies. The Sinai should no longer be considered a remote and inhospitable buffer zone between Egypt, Gaza, and Israel, but rather as a potential arena for cooperation between these three uneasy neighbors.

4 Nicolas Pelham, "Sinai: The Buffer Erodes," London, Chatham House, September 2012, <http://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/papers/view/186061>.

5 "Priority to Bedouins in 100,000-acre govt land sale in Sinai," *Egypt Independent*, 21 October 2012, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/priority-bedouins-100000-acre-govt-land-sale-sinai>.

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