

# ISSUE BRIEF

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## U.S. Should Insist Egypt's Military Buildup Must Comply with Peace Treaty

*James Phillips*

Egypt is preparing a military offensive against Islamist militants in the Sinai who have launched a series of terrorist attacks against Egyptian border guards in an effort to weaken the central government and provoke a war with Israel. This campaign is expected to include armored forces and air strikes in the first major Egyptian military action in the demilitarized Sinai Peninsula since the 1973 Arab–Israeli war.

Although the ostensible counter-terrorism goal of the operation is a valid one, Washington should closely monitor the situation to prevent Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood–dominated government from undermining Egypt's peace treaty with Israel.

**The Sinai Snake Pit.** Security conditions in the Sinai have severely deteriorated in recent years as indigenous Bedouin tribesmen, who have long resented what they see as

neglect and discrimination against them by the Egyptian government, have become increasingly infected with Islamist extremist ideology. Bedouin networks that controlled lucrative smuggling operations, moving goods, people, and arms into Hamas-controlled Gaza, also facilitated the spread of Islamist militancy and terrorism in the other direction.

In 2004, a militant Islamist group, Monotheism and Struggle, emerged with a mixed Bedouin–Palestinian membership and launched terrorist attacks against Israeli and Western tourists in the Sinai. More recently, other militant groups, such as the Youth of Islam, have been formed to promote radical Islamist agendas that include the imposition of strict Sharia law, the formation of an Islamic emirate, and the destruction of Israel.

These Islamist shadow groups expanded their operations to include repeatedly blowing up a pipeline carrying Egyptian natural gas exports to Israel and Jordan and launching increasingly sophisticated cross-border terrorist attacks into Israel.

The fall of the Hosni Mubarak regime in February 2011 exacerbated the situation by emboldening Bedouin tribesmen to attack police

stations in scattered Sinai towns, creating an atmosphere of lawlessness in Egypt's "wild east." An influx of arms smuggled out of Libya after the fall of the Muammar Qadhafi regime later that year greatly strengthened the coercive power of fiercely independent Bedouin tribes, criminal networks, and Islamist militant groups.

Egypt's transitional military regime, engrossed by the intensifying power struggle in post-Mubarak Cairo, responded lethargically and downplayed the growing challenge in the Sinai, which it may have perceived to be more of a threat to Israel than to itself. But that complacent attitude was exploded by an August 5 terrorist attack in which Islamist militants killed 16 Egyptian soldiers at a border post, hijacked an armored vehicle, and used it to launch a cross-border attack into Israel.

This attack was especially humiliating, because not only did the army suffer a stinging defeat that undermined its claim as the nation's defender, but the terrorists were quickly killed by an Israeli air strike without inflicting any Israeli casualties.

Egypt's President Mohamed Morsi opportunistically exploited the August 5 Sinai incident as a

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useful pretext for removing holdovers from the Mubarak regime from the top of the army's chain of command. He sacked Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi and replaced him as defense minister with General Abdel Fattah al-Sissi, who reportedly harbors sympathies for some of the goals of the Muslim Brotherhood. This bold move removed important constraints on Morsi's power and cleared the way for his Muslim Brotherhood movement to consolidate its control over Egypt's state institutions.

Under the guise of fighting terrorism, Morsi is likely to use the Sinai campaign to boost his political position at home, thumb his nose at Israel, and escalate Egypt's cooperation with Hamas—the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood that controls Gaza and remains wedded to a terrorist war of attrition to destroy Israel.

**Implications for the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty.** After the August 5 terrorist attack, Egypt dispatched helicopter gunships and tanks to bolster its forces in the Sinai. Although Israeli officials were consulted and approved of the helicopter deployment, the Egyptians reportedly failed to coordinate with Israel on the movement of the tanks in close proximity to the border, which is a clear violation of Egypt's 1979 peace treaty with Israel. Under the terms of

that agreement, tanks are restricted to the western Sinai within about 30 miles of the Suez Canal.

Israel, troubled by Egypt's unprecedented unilateral deployment, has requested that the tanks be withdrawn. Israeli officials are rightly concerned that Egypt's new Muslim Brotherhood-dominated government will use the deteriorating security situation in the Sinai as a means of undermining the peace treaty, which the Muslim Brotherhood has long criticized.

Washington should insist that Egypt's military buildup be acceptable to Israel, as stipulated under the U.S.-brokered peace treaty. President Morsi is no friend of the U.S. or the West, let alone Israel. He has already announced that he will visit Iran on August 30 to attend a summit of the Non-Aligned Movement that will boost Iran's efforts to wriggle out from under international sanctions imposed due to its nuclear weapons program.

Washington should warn Egypt's Islamist government that if it ignores Egypt's legal commitments under its peace treaty with Israel, then the United States will:

- Suspend \$1.5 billion in annual foreign aid for Egypt.
- Block urgently needed loans from international financial

institutions that Cairo needs to ameliorate its worsening economic crisis. Christine Lagarde, the head of the International Monetary Fund, is meeting today with officials in Egypt to discuss Cairo's request for a \$4.8 billion financial aid package.

**Needed: Red Lines for Cairo.**

The Obama Administration, which earlier this year unwisely rejected congressional efforts to leverage U.S. foreign aid to press Cairo to abide by its international commitments, should firmly act to enforce Egyptian compliance with the peace treaty.<sup>1</sup>

The Muslim Brotherhood needs to be quickly disabused of the notion that the U.S. will subsidize its rule by continuing foreign aid and facilitating cheap loans if it continues its efforts to embrace Iran and undermine Israel.

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1. See James Phillips, "Greater U.S. Pressure Needed to Ensure Successful Egyptian Transition," Heritage Foundation *Issue Brief* No. 3554, March 27, 2012, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2012/03/us-egypt-relations-greater-pressure-needed-to-ensure-successful-egyptian-transition>.