



Sinai: A New Front

By Ehud Yaari

Since Israel's 2005 withdrawal from Gaza and last year's Egyptian revolution, the Sinai Peninsula has emerged as a new hotspot in the complex Arab-Israeli conflict, with an expanding terrorist infrastructure that makes it another front of potential confrontation. The Bedouin are now in a position to initiate crises that neither Israel nor Egypt wants, while also influencing the struggle against Hamas. Measures are needed to prevent the total collapse of security in and around the peninsula, avoid the rise of an armed, runaway Bedouin statelet, and minimize the risk of Israeli-Egyptian peace imploding under the pressures of the wild Sinai frontier.

THROUGHOUT HISTORY and until quite recently, the vast, arid expanses of the Sinai Peninsula served mainly as a formidable buffer zone between the Nile Valley rulers and their adversaries governing the Levant and Mesopotamia. In modern Egyptian historical literature, the area is often referred to as “Box of Sand,” while the great Israeli strategist Yigal Alon, in a 1959 book describing the regional military equation, called it the “Screen of Sand.”¹

Although, in itself, the peninsula was never considered a coveted prize by invading armies, it did constitute a transit route for troops moving along the ancient Via Maris, the coastal road connecting the Fertile Crescent to North Africa. The only exceptions were the Israeli conquest of the Sinai in 1956—which included David Ben-Gurion's short-lived attempt to annex the area as part

of the “Third Kingdom of Israel,” a plan foiled by President Dwight Eisenhower—and the Israeli settlements established after the 1967 war in the northeastern Yamit area and along the Ophira strip on the Gulf of Aqaba coast (all of which were uprooted following the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty of 1979).

Egyptian analysts have calculated that approximately 90 percent of raids into their country over the ages came through the Sinai.¹ Indeed, Egyptian military experts often describe the area as the “Eastern Gate”² of the Nile Delta region. Yet despite falling under mostly nominal Egyptian control throughout much of its history, the peninsula was never really integrated into mainland

1. Yigal Alon, *The Sand Screen* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv, 1959).

2. See for example Muhammed Afifi, “Sinai: The Eastern Gate” [in Arabic], *al-Shurouk* (Cairo), October 21, 2011.

Egypt. Sparsely populated, with no more than 40,000 inhabitants recorded as late as 1947, it was traditionally neglected.³ The indigenous nomads were allowed to retain their own separate culture, and even today, the Bedouin still have not adopted the Egyptian dialect of Arabic.

Indeed, the Sinai's 61,000 square kilometers—almost three times the size of Israel—remained a backwater domain through most periods, removed from the Middle East's major upheavals. (See fig. 1) The territory never had a government of its own, nor did it play an independent role in shaping the course of events. The local Bedouin, who now number over 300,000, constitute roughly 70 percent of the total population, the rest being Palestinians (10 percent), immigrants from across the Suez Canal (10 percent), and the descendants of Bosnian, Turkish, and other settlers from the Ottoman period, mainly in al-Arish (10 percent). All of these groups were spectators rather than actors on the stage of history, immersed in numerous intertribal wars, some lasting for several decades. Even during the post-1948 wars between Israel and Egypt, the Bedouin were not involved in the fighting, though both sides managed to recruit some tribe members for intelligence purposes and, less frequently, covert operations behind the front lines.

More recently, however, the Sinai has undergone rapid and dramatic change, particularly just before and after the fall of Hosni Mubarak's regime in Cairo. Its inhabitants are transforming the area into a semiautonomous player in the regional arena, with the Bedouin for the first time assuming an independent role in determining control over the peninsula and its relations with adjacent areas. As a result, the Sinai is fast emerging as a new hotspot in the complex Arab-Israeli conflict, with an expanding terrorist infrastructure that makes it another front of potential confrontation. The Bedouin are now in a position to affect Israeli-Egyptian relations, initiating crises that neither government wants, while also influencing the struggle between Israel and Hamas.

Three decades years after the signing of the 1979 treaty, some Israeli military leaders believe that the 240-kilometer border with Egypt is no longer a "border of peace," but rather a "boundary with some peace."

The danger of a flare-up on that frontier has become a constant concern, with the added risk that local developments in the Sinai could break a fragile bilateral peace that is already challenged by growing post-Mubarak demands to abrogate, review, or amend the treaty and all subsequent agreements.⁴ In this sense, the peninsula is becoming a kind of black hole that threatens to swallow the triangle of peace between Egypt, Israel, and Jordan.

Moreover, parts of the Sinai are beginning to resemble an extension of the Palestinian arena, as certain groups forge close military, political, ideological, and economic ties with the neighboring Gaza Strip. Because Egyptian authorities have been hesitant in asserting control over the peninsula, Hamas has come to perceive the area as a sphere of influence, reaching out to the local population and manifesting an ever-growing confidence in its ability to obtain substantial freedom of maneuver for its activities there.

Addressing these problems is no simple matter and will require joint and unilateral Israeli-Egyptian measures on several fronts. Yet ensuring the success of these efforts—and appropriately prioritizing U.S. aid in support of them—requires a fuller understanding of the current state of affairs, the factors that produced it, and the national interests at risk if prompt, targeted action is not taken.

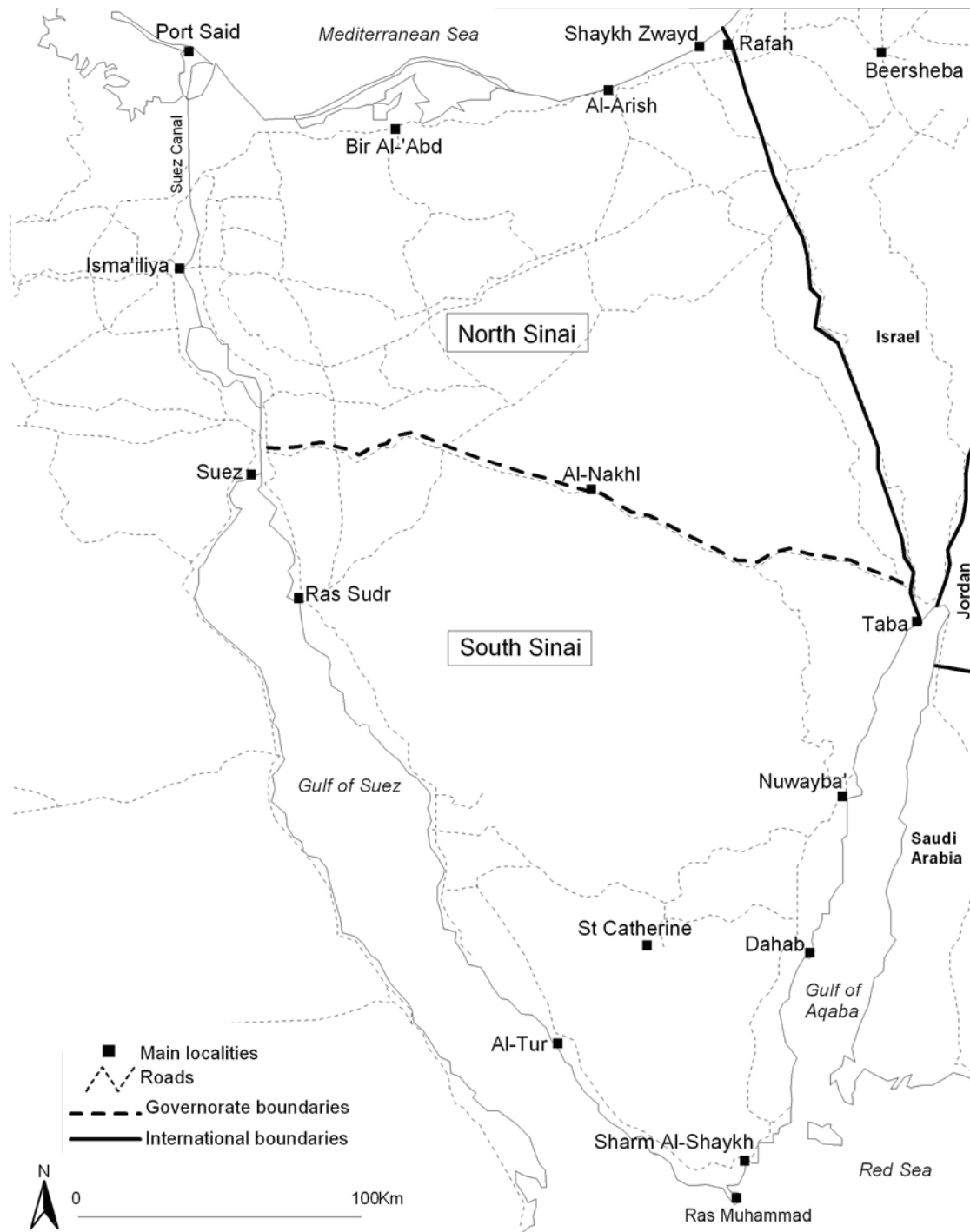
Emerging Terrorist Networks

Recently, a growing number of terrorist networks have expanded their presence and activities throughout much of the Sinai. These networks—some clandestine, some with significant public profile—represent old smuggling gangs partly converted to terrorism, newly formed Bedouin factions adhering to Salafi jihadist doctrines, and affiliates of Palestinian organizations in Gaza, including Hamas, Islamic Jihad, the Popular Resistance Committees, and the Dughmush clan's Army of Islam.

Egyptian authorities have also uncovered Hizballah penetration of the Sinai, capturing several members of the organization and sentencing them to as many as fifteen years' imprisonment in 2010.

3. See Kadri Yunes al-Abd, *Sinai: Confronting the Israeli Activities* [in Arabic] (Cairo, 1988).

4. See for example Omar Halawa, "Former Egyptian Ambassador to Israel: Peace Treaty Should Be Modified," *al-Masry al-Youm* (Cairo), August 25, 2011.



Source: Annual Report 2004, Multinational Force and Observers

FIG. 1 The Sinai Peninsula

Yet most of these operatives managed to escape their jails during the Egyptian revolution, with cell commander Sami Shihab, a Lebanese Shiite, receiving a hero's welcome by Hizballah chief Hassan Nasrallah upon his return to Beirut in February 2011.

Egypt has consistently denied reports of an al-Qaeda presence in the Sinai, however. In August 2011, a proclamation announcing the alleged

establishment of an al-Qaeda "Emirate of the Sinai Peninsula" appeared on the terrorist network's official websites but was quickly removed.⁵ Leaflets bearing the proclamation were also distributed around al-Arish on the northern Sinai

5. See Robin Simcox, "An Emerging Threat: al-Qaeda in the Sinai Peninsula," Henry Jackson Society, August 30, 2011, <http://www.henryjacksonsociety.org/stories.asp?id=2395>.

coast. The announcement itself reiterated long-standing Bedouin complaints about the conduct of Egyptian security forces and called for struggle against the Jews. One of the peninsula's Salafi factions was likely responsible for handing out the leaflets as a way of boasting that it had already established links to the leadership abroad. Although the actual existence of such links is uncertain, al-Qaeda chief and former Egyptian Islamic Jihad leader Ayman al-Zawahiri issued a statement in October 2011 praising the August 18 cross-border terrorist attacks on Israel and the recurrent sabotage of the gas pipeline to Israel. On December 20, another statement proclaimed the establishment of a new al-Qaeda-affiliated group in the Sinai, Ansar al-Jihad, dedicated to struggle against "the Jews."⁶

Over the past two decades, Sinai has also served as a passageway for Palestinian terrorists seeking to infiltrate the West Bank or Israel through the Negev, as seen in the 2007 suicide bombing conducted by an Islamic Jihad recruit at a bakery in Eilat, Israel. More recently, however, the emphasis has shifted to local Bedouin groups that threaten the stability of the border region, with or without Palestinian backing. Analysis of the August 18 attacks, in which eight Israelis were killed and thirty-one injured, reveals that all twelve operatives were Sinai residents, four of them on a suicide bombing mission. This was the first case in which Sinai operatives penetrated Israel wearing explosive belts aimed at killing Israelis (though one of them ultimately blew himself up instead while targeting Egyptian policemen). It was also the first time that shoulder anti-aircraft missiles were fired from the Sinai against Israeli helicopters. In addition, this watershed operation reflected the Bedouin determination to mount an attack in close proximity to the Egyptian Central Security Forces position no. 421 (located north of Eilat), whereas past Palestinian infiltrators always made sure to keep a fair distance from Egyptian outposts.

The attack itself was the most elaborate to ever come from the Sinai, employing new ambush tactics

and advanced improvised explosive devices. Given their choice of target—along Route 12 just north of Eilat—the attackers likely intended to kidnap one or more Israelis. Yet it remains unclear whether the initial plan called for hiding hostages in the Sinai or moving them through the Rafah tunnels to Gaza.

The aftermath of the attack also demonstrated the severe threat that Sinai border incidents pose to Egypt's peace with Israel. Protesting the deaths of five Egyptian policemen during the shootout, thousands of Egyptians stormed the Israeli embassy in Giza on September 9–10. An elite Egyptian commando operation was required to rescue the Israeli guards locked inside the embassy. The incident forced Israel to evacuate all diplomatic staff from Cairo for a few months amid a chorus of demands by various Egyptian politicians to close down the embassy and recall the Egyptian ambassador from Tel Aviv. These calls were accompanied by numerous expressions of discontent with the peace treaty and proposals to amend the Military Protocol prohibiting the stationing of Egyptian army units close to the frontier.⁷

The August attack was also a departure from the pattern established by previous Bedouin terrorist operations, which all aimed at hitting targets within the Sinai rather than Israel. For example, the bloody attacks of 2004–2006 were directed against tourist resorts along the Gulf of Aqaba: Sharm al-Shaykh, Dahab, Nuweiba, and Taba.⁸ Most of those killed in these strikes were Egyptians, while the rest were foreign tourists, including one Israeli. Suicide bombers were already being employed at the time, following the model set by the second Palestinian intifada. And years earlier, on October 5, 1985, seven Israeli tourists were killed in southern Sinai in an isolated attack by Central Security Forces policeman Suleiman Khater, who later committed suicide in jail. Khater was pronounced a "national hero" by Egyptian opposition groups.

7. The most detailed treatment of this issue is Maj. Gen. Talat Muslim, "Modifying the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty," *Middle East Monitor*, October 16, 2011.

8. The best accounts of these bombings can be found at <http://muslim.net/vb/showthread.php?+319248> [in Arabic] and International Crisis Group, *Egypt's Sinai Question*, Middle East/North Africa Report no. 61 (January 30, 2007), <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/egypt-syria-lebanon/egypt/061-egypts-sinai-question.aspx>.

According to Egyptian authorities, the perpetrators of the 2004–2006 attacks were members of the underground al-Tawhid wal-Jihad group established in 2000 by Khaled al-Masad, a dentist from the Sawarka tribe, with his friend Nasser al-Mallahi, a Sinai Palestinian. This mixed Bedouin-Palestinian organization was apparently the first terrorist movement created in the peninsula by indigenous activists—the first generation of Bedouin to actively pursue their Salafi jihadist convictions. Although their base was the northeastern Sinai, they began their armed struggle against the Egyptian regime on the peninsula’s southwestern shores, where they could threaten vital economic interests. In time, Egyptian security forces crushed the group through a massive wave of arrests—estimated at more than 3,000 detained tribesmen—and raids on member hideouts. The group’s leaders—including military chief Salim Khidr al-Shunub—were killed. Yet most of those sentenced to prison either escaped or were released during the revolution, allowing them to return to the Sinai. Quite a few of them have joined the peninsula’s new Salafi groups, together with dozens, if not hundreds, of runaway jihadist-oriented inmates from other parts of the country, especially the al-Daqahliyah and al-Sharqiyah governorates in the eastern Delta.⁹

Al-Tawhid wal-Jihad was the product of Salafi doctrines that had proliferated among the Bedouin since the late 1980s. These doctrines were imported to the Sinai by Bedouin students returning from universities in the Egyptian Delta (especially in Zaqaziq, known as a stronghold of Islamist radicals), as well as tribesmen who had spent years working in Saudi Arabia. The new Salafi associations were initially based in Rafah, Sheikh Zuwaid, and Bir al-Abd in the North Sinai governorate, along with a few smaller villages in the central region. As one Bedouin report put it, every tribe and family in the Sinai saw “a number of its youth joining these Salafi trends.”¹⁰ Young Bedouin were

growing beards, changing their clothes, and replacing women’s traditional headwear with the stricter niqab. Contrary to Bedouin culture, they began to allow marriages between members of rival tribes. They also pursued a partial boycott against dealings with Egyptian officials, challenged the supremacy of sheikhs in Bedouin society, and launched a campaign of Islamist education and preaching. In individual terms, Salafi leader Sulaiman Abu Ayub was—and probably still is—the movement’s most prominent spokesman.

Prior to this dramatic shift, the Sinai Bedouin were never known for religious piety. Although they always regarded themselves as good Muslims, they kept their distance from fundamentalist trends in the Arab world. For example, in his famous 1916 book on the Sinai, Syrian-born British intelligence official Naum Shuqair wrote that the Bedouin hardly knew much about prayers or the teachings of Islam: “I did not see among them more than a handful of people who pray...If it was not for Idd al-Adha and references to the Prophet and his disciples I would not know that they were Muslims.”¹¹ In other words, the relatively recent emergence of radical Islamist groups in the peninsula is an unprecedented development that departs from longstanding Bedouin traditions. Religion is becoming an important feature in the worldview of an increasing number of tribesmen, reflected by the establishment of hundreds of new mosques—a campaign funded mainly by the Egyptian government.

By the early 1990s, the Salafis were engaged in a fierce confrontation with previously established Sufi orders in the Sinai. Years before, sheikhs such as Muhammad al-Saafin, a Palestinian, had brought the Sufi message to the Bedouin, and many tribesmen began to join Sufi communities in the late 1950s. The Jariri was probably the strongest—but by no means only—Sufi order in the peninsula. The Salafis evidently viewed Sufi practices as non-Islamic, while the Sufis tended to accuse the Salafis of being Western-manipulated Wahhabis.

This confrontation led to splits within tribal and family units, undermining the social structure of

9. See “Former Detainees, Not Recruits, Stiffen Sinai Jihad,” Reuters, September 15, 2011.

10. According to an article that appeared in *al-Masry al-Youm* (Cairo) on November 2, 2011.

11. Naum Shukair, *History of the Sinai* [in Arabic] (Cairo, 1916), p. 352.

many Bedouin communities. And the large-scale smuggling networks that emerged in the middle of the first decade of this century further eroded the traditional hierarchy, transferring actual authority from tribal elders to Islamists and gang leaders. Today, all over the peninsula, one finds new Salafi encampments composed of Bedouin who have left their tribes to conduct their daily life according to their new Islamist beliefs.

One such encampment has existed for more than five years, at Jabal al-Halal in central Sinai. Located within the Tarabin tribe's turf, this area has become a stronghold and refuge for Salafis, including famous fugitive Salem Abu Lafi, who barricaded himself there with hundreds of others in defiance of Egyptian authorities after escaping police custody in 2008. Thereafter, Bedouin were able to defend the stronghold's mountain caves against police raids, inflicting considerable casualties on Egyptian forces sent on search-and-destroy missions and even capturing high-ranking officers. Such incidents led locals to dub Jabal al-Halal the "Tora Bora of the Sinai." Currently, Abu Lafi's followers enjoy freedom of movement all over the peninsula.

In operational terms, the Salafi jihadists rely on the wide infrastructure serving the smuggling industry, as well as the presence of Palestinian terrorist organizations in the peninsula. As early as 1995, shortly after the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, Hamas embarked on clandestine activity in the Sinai, especially among the Palestinian inhabitants of the Rafah/al-Arish coastal region. Islamic Jihad and other groups soon followed suit. Many operatives dug tunnels beneath the Israeli-controlled Philadelphia Corridor, allowing for weapons transfers from the Sinai into Gaza. Israeli forces were never able to destroy all of the tunnels, most notably within the densely populated suburbs of Rafah. In addition, Hamas often sent operatives through the tunnels into Sinai and thereafter into Israel and the West Bank, bypassing strict Israeli supervision at the border terminals and security barriers surrounding Gaza itself.

Yet the true surge in such activity came after Israel's 2005 disengagement from Gaza and

subsequent removal of troops from the Sinai-Gaza border—as Bedouin political activist Ashraf al-Anani put it, “a fireball started rolling into the peninsula.”¹² Illegal trade and arms smuggling volumes rose to new records, and ever-larger sectors of the northern Sinai population became linked to Gaza and fell under the political and ideological influence of Hamas and its ilk. Sympathy and support for the Palestinian battle against Israel grew; according to al-Anani, the closer one got to the Gaza border, “the more people are inclined toward Hamas.” In short, despite then prime minister Ariel Sharon's quiet hope that Cairo would assume unofficial responsibility for Gaza affairs, the Israeli withdrawal instead allowed Hamas to export its influence into Egyptian territory.

Facilitated by the dramatic increase in the number of tunnels—which numbered no less than 1,200 at their peak¹³—the expansion of Hamas and other Palestinian activities in the Sinai was unprecedented. In fact, the arms flow was often reversed, with weapons going from Gaza to the Sinai. During the revolution, for example, observers noted a huge demand for firearms in the peninsula.¹⁴ And even in late 2010, well before Mubarak's ouster, Hamas was already in the process of transferring heavy long-range missiles to secret storage places in the Sinai, including Grad rockets and extended-range Qassams. On October 6 of that year, the Israeli port of Eilat and its Jordanian sister town of Aqaba were hit by a salvo of missiles fired from the Sinai. The attacks took place despite stern Egyptian warnings to Hamas not to use the peninsula as a launchpad for strikes on Israel. In a response that has since become the norm, Hamas military commanders simply ignored the Egyptian request and later denied responsibility, although both Egyptian and Israeli intelligence had more than sufficient information to prove it.

From the point of view of Hamas and other

12. See “The Fireball Rolled into Sinai” [in Arabic], <http://www.alanany.wordpress.com/2011/08/22/Sinai-73>.

13. According to a report that appeared in *al-Youm al-Sabe* (Cairo) on September 3, 2011.

14. See Tim Whewell, “Egypt Revolution Leaves Sinai Increasingly Lawless,” BBC, June 1, 2011, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/programmes/newsnight/9501505.stm>.

Palestinian terrorist organizations, Sinai is immune to Israeli preventive and retaliatory strikes. They are well aware that their numerous plots to kill or kidnap Israeli tourists on the southern Sinai beaches have been foiled through fairly close intelligence exchange between Egypt and Israel. Still, they are justifiably confident in assuming that Israel would eschew any preemptive military strikes inside the Sinai for fear of jeopardizing the peace treaty. Accordingly, Hamas has continued to plant its operatives throughout the peninsula, whether among the Palestinian communities of the al-Arish/Rafah corridor¹⁵ or in Bedouin encampments.

Today, a significant number of Hamas military operatives are permanently stationed in the Sinai, serving as recruiters, couriers, and propagators of the Hamas platform. A solid network of the group's contact men, safe houses, and armories covers much of the peninsula. Hamas has also established a clandestine operational office in Cairo, which the Egyptian authorities choose to ignore. This office is linked to both the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades command in Gaza and the Hamas "Military Council" in Damascus. So far, Egypt has not reacted publicly to Hamas offers to "coordinate" activities in the peninsula. In addition, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and other factions have been moving some of their explosives workshops—which produce homemade missiles, rockets, mortars, improvised explosive devices, and so forth—from Gaza to the Sinai in recent months. In many ways, the Sinai has already become a sort of hinterland for Hamas military forces in Gaza. Dual-purpose materials used for the production of explosives are regularly transferred to the peninsula, allowing the group to place a significant part of its military industry beyond Israel's reach. To date, no action has been taken to deal with this relatively new phenomenon.

The Hamas network in Sinai is also responsible for transferring arms into Gaza, most of them smuggled from Iran through Sudan into Egypt and, from there, across the Suez Canal and through the peninsula. Weapons have also arrived from the

Balkans at times. This flow of arms, which includes advanced Fajr-3 and Fajr-5 missiles capable of reaching the outskirts of Tel Aviv, has been supplemented by equipment smuggled from Libya, such as the fairly advanced Russian-made SA-14, SA-16, and SA-18 anti-aircraft missiles, which could pose a threat to Israeli aircraft and the Eilat airport. Third-generation antitank missiles are also becoming available in the area and could be used to target the city of Eilat as well as villages close to the frontier and even ships sailing through the Straits of Tiran at the entrance to the Gulf of Aqaba. More broadly, one Bedouin source estimates the overall number of weapons in the peninsula at no less than 100,000 pieces of all sorts. Given rising demand, prices have reached new heights, with a Guryanov heavy machine gun currently selling for 50,000 Egyptian pounds (USD 8,300).¹⁶

The combination of Palestinian terrorist networks, armed Salafi jihadist Bedouin, and extensive smuggling infrastructure and activities has turned the peninsula into a safe haven for terrorists with heavy, advanced arms and wide freedom of action. In other words, it has become a huge arms depot with hundreds—perhaps thousands—of operatives bent on fighting for their causes. According to one Egyptian estimate, the area is now home to around 1,600 Salafi jihadist militants.¹⁷ Egyptian journalist Sakina Fouad aptly summarized the situation, calling the Sinai "a ticking time bomb waiting to explode."¹⁸

Growing Bedouin Power

The spread of terrorist strongholds in the Sinai and the rise of well-armed tribal militias were greatly accelerated by the collapse of the Egyptian police forces throughout the peninsula during the revolution. The Bedouin of northern Sinai were among the first to join the calls to topple the regime and were quick to orchestrate attacks on numerous police stations. Armed Bedouin in fleets of pickup trucks and motorbikes chased Central Security personnel, compelling them to abandon their bases

15. For more on Sinai Palestinians, see Mustafa Sanjar, "Palestinians in Sinai: Foreigners in the Second Homeland" [in Arabic], *al-Shurouk* (Cairo), April 5, 2011.

16. See <http://sinai11.blogspot.com>.

17. See the post dated August 25, 2011, at <http://sinaitoday.wordpress.com>.

18. "Why Are Sinai's Sons Absent from the Solution of Their Own Problems?" [in Arabic], *al-Tabrir*, September 1, 2011.

and flee. Weapons and munitions depots were plundered and several police stations burnt down. No less than 100 people, including many policemen, were killed in the clashes of January–February 2011. The Bedouin soon asserted their dominance over the North Sinai governorate, and Egyptian authorities have been unable to effectively resume operations in the area’s thirteen police compounds ever since. (See fig. 2.)

In the months following Mubarak’s ouster, the Bedouin solidified their position through further aggression. On July 29, a 200-strong force attacked a police station in the provincial capital al-Arish. Other armed Bedouin groups set up roadblocks on the main axis of the peninsula, demonstrating growing confidence in their military supremacy. They also frequently blocked the road leading to the Auja (Nitzana) trade terminal on the Israeli border and on several occasions blocked the road to the main base of the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO). Wadi Amr, Jabal al-Halal, and other locations were turned into well-defended bases, and Bedouin occasionally kidnapped Egyptian policemen. Tribesmen also bombed the gas pipeline supplying Israel and Jordan on ten different occasions, causing long interruptions in the flow of gas and losses conservatively estimated at half a billion Egyptian pounds (U.S. \$80 million).¹⁹ Some of the explosives planted in the pumping stations or along the pipeline were quite sophisticated. In one instance, for example, charges were expertly configured to damage the line to Israel without disrupting the twin line to Jordan.

In addition, many Bedouin have held armed demonstrations and protested mistreatment by the authorities, putting forward petitions with long lists of grievances and demands. These include sacking of the governors and security chiefs, recognizing Bedouin land ownership, granting citizenship to the more than 100,000 Bedouin who remain noncitizens, abolishing the list of 10,000 “wanted” tribesmen, releasing detained Bedouin, providing public

services, and so forth.²⁰ Yet even as the Bedouin insist on ending government neglect of their needs, they have simultaneously worked to minimize the state’s interference in their affairs. Indeed, the Bedouin continue to pursue Cairo’s de facto acceptance of their semiautonomous status. Although they request more investment in the Sinai, more job opportunities, and better health and education facilities, they also plead for reduced law enforcement presence and an end to Cairo’s interference in determining their sheikhs and parliamentary representatives.

In 2010, Mossad Abu Fajr, a poet and blogger, offered an eloquent example of the Bedouin attitude toward Egyptian authorities after serving three years in prison:

We drink torture, discrimination, deportation and despotism minute by minute, so that some of us felt that humiliation, just like blood, runs in our veins... The greatest sheikh of our tribe is sent by the police informer to buy him cigarettes from the kiosk in front of the police station... And as to us, we have become like circus acrobats between the ropes, playing with National Security to get protection from State Security. Those who did not find their place with National Security played with State Security to be protected against the Bedouin Affairs Department... We, the ordinary people, had to bypass the (police) roadblocks... to change our dwellings and the license plates on our cars so as to avoid insults... We try, as much as possible, to avoid government offices, and if we are obliged to go there, we would seek a go-between, whom we pay, to relieve us from the humiliation we encounter dealing with officials brought by the state from far away to become our new rulers.²¹

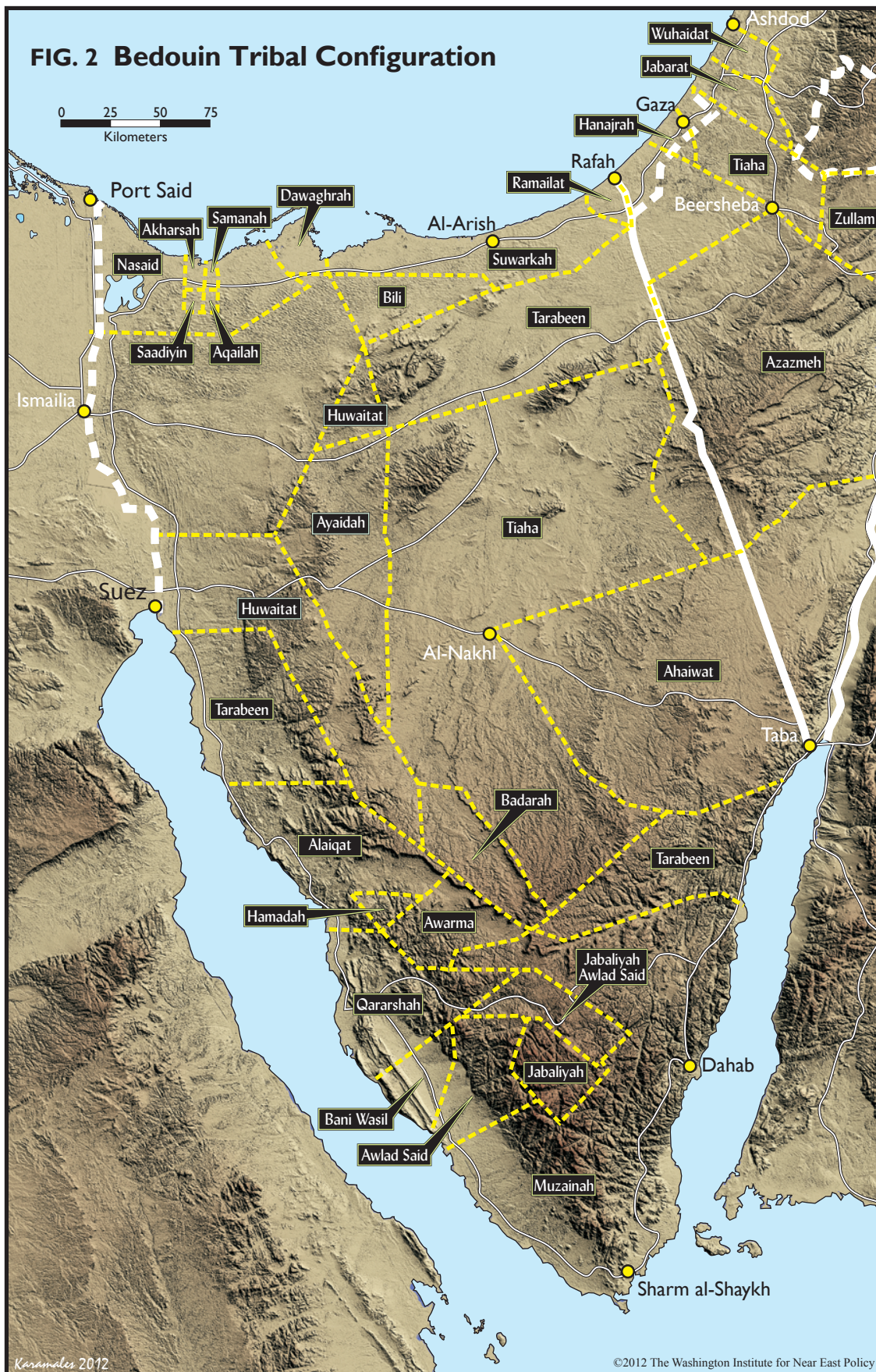
He also traced the final rift between the Bedouin community and Egyptian authorities when describing a notorious police raid in the mid-1990s on the Tiaha tribe in central Sinai: “The Jeeps dragged their sheikhs on the asphalt, women were tied up and men forced to walk on all fours with Central Security soldiers riding on their backs, hitting them with batons, as they do with donkeys in

19. See an article on the subject in the October 11, 2011, edition of *al-Masry al-Youm* (Cairo).

20. See “The Sinai Bedouin Marginalized,” *The Sinai Peninsula* (blog), September 28, 2010, <http://rassudrsinai.blogspot.com/search/label/bedouin>.

21. Quote taken from his blog *Wedna Neish* (“We Want To Live”), <http://wednane3ish.katib.org>.

FIG. 2 Bedouin Tribal Configuration



their land... This was not a simple incident for us, but like a September 11—before and after!”²²

Another forceful illustration of Bedouin animosity was a letter sent to the Cairo daily *al-Masry al-Youm* in 2010 by Moussa al-Dalah, then wanted by the police and now a political activist:

In the vast far-off deserts of Sinai, evil no longer hides: it rears its ugly head in plain day. It does not submit to rule or legislation. A Bedouin poet once said: “Overnight, the sheep dog transforms into a wolf, only his rules they must follow. It is true that people should obey their governments. But that only happens when a government is wise, looks after the interests of its people, and does not let them fall prey to the evil wolves that impose their own unfair rules, under which a victim is turned into a criminal and the criminal into hero... Why are we deprived of land ownership? Why are our youth arrested and hunted down? Why are we harassed and persecuted at border points and humiliated in the press and television? Why is our image always negative, and why are we always regarded with suspicion?”... Bedouin are compelled to use violence to show that the use of excessive force to quell us will not work!²³

In the past, Egyptian officials in the peninsula accused the Bedouin of being “Sinai Jews,” expressing mistrust in their political allegiance and alluding to the friendly relations between them and the Israelis who controlled the area between 1967 and 1982. For their part, the Bedouin viewed the arrival of mainland officials as a new form of occupation. Repression by various government agencies, especially the Central Security Forces, only widened the gap between them, as did Cairo’s efforts to impose its own candidates as tribal sheikhs and People’s Assembly representatives.

Despite the increasing tensions and armed clashes, no systematic effort was ever undertaken to curb the emergence of a Bedouin parallel economy centered on smuggling and other forms of illegal trade. By the end of 2011, the annual volume of this black economy was estimated to exceed U.S. \$300 million.

To be sure, smuggling is a traditional Bedouin occupation, not a new development. For decades, such activity focused on transporting drugs and other commodities (e.g., cigarettes, alcohol) across the Israeli border without paying customs and taxes. Typically, the goods would be carried by a lone smuggler or a small squad of Bedouin with intimate knowledge of the desert topography, moving along hidden trails up to 3–4 kilometers from the border. A Bedouin partner from the Israeli side would then come to collect the merchandise and take it into Israel or even southern Jordan. The operation worked in reverse as well. Tribes such as the Azazmeh, who reside on both sides of the Egyptian-Israeli frontier, were the main culprits.

Neither Cairo nor Amman ever mounted measures to curb smuggling to and from Israel—the standing policy was to turn a blind eye. In fact, Egyptian officials and police based in the Sinai were often accomplices, taking their cut of the action. And the absence of security barriers made the whole operation relatively easy.

By the mid-1990s, these activities had been supplemented by trafficking via Gaza tunnels. New paths were charted, and smuggling gangs gradually evolved into wider networks that covered much of the peninsula and increasingly turned to arms and munitions in addition to drugs and the like. Tribes such as the Ramailat, Sawarka, and Tarabeen became dependent on the smuggling industry, creating alliances with clans in Rafah and local Palestinian inhabitants. Each tribe controlled its own sector, taking a cut from anyone asking permission to pass.

As described previously, the smuggling business has further boomed since Israel’s 2005 withdrawal from Gaza, bringing unprecedented prosperity to many Bedouin. This new affluence manifests itself in, among other things, the acquisition of numerous vehicles—mainly pickups, Jeeps, and other trucks. In Bedouin eyes, Toyota pickups have become the new camel, allowing them to mobilize hundreds of warriors on very short notice. Often equipped with heavy machine guns or rocket-propelled grenades, these trucks have become the symbol of Bedouin power, illustrating their determination to defend

22. Ibid. For more on Abu Fajr, see <http://anhri.net/lit/08/p20603/shtml>.

23. “A Letter from a Sinai Bedouin: We Do Not Hate Our Homeland,” *al-Masry al-Youm* (Cairo), July 19, 2010.

their new prosperity and their rejection of Egyptian control and interference in their affairs. One illiterate Tiaha poet even composed an ode to the vehicle in the old Bedouin style of rhyming:

Oh rider of the noble mount
 No camel-stick can steer
 Whose name in date and numbers
 On her mouth is picked out clear
 She'll do 200 kph according to the dial
 Like Saddam's army, launching a Scud missile!
 Toyota is her model
 And Toyota is her make,
 The workmanship won't disappoint; these foreigners
 don't fake!²⁴

This “noble mount” has helped transform smuggling networks into highly mobile, large-scale militias, well equipped with modern means of communication. These networks are rapidly extending their business contacts far into Egypt, Libya, and beyond. For example, one scheme involved importing cement from Turkey, unloading it from boats at al-Arish's small port, and then smuggling it into Gaza. The networks also maintain pipelines that pump gasoline through the tunnels to Gaza, where prices were once four times higher than in the Sinai.

Indeed, the smuggling boom linked the Sinai Bedouin economically to Gaza, governed by Hamas since the group's 2007 coup. As interdependence between the two regions grew, economic ties were followed by political and ideological influence. The Bedouin became more sympathetic to the Palestinian cause and Hamas doctrine, and more hostile toward Israel as it worked to stop the tunnel smuggling. Against this background, Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood quickly emerged in 2011 as the most prominent political party in the settled coastal strip along the Mediterranean.

In addition, new, smaller political groups have cropped up in the al-Arish area with names such as “Sinai Youth,” “Sinai Revolutionaries,” and “Sinai Shadow Government.” These factions seek to redefine the Egyptian-Bedouin relationship and have

24. See “Ode to the Bedouin Camel the Toyota,” *The Sinai Peninsula* (blog), April 30, 2010, <http://rassudrsinai.blogspot.com/2010/04/ode-to-bedouin-camel-toyota.html>.

offered their services as intermediaries between the government and the peninsula. Realizing the potential cost of any fresh clash with the tribes in the post-Mubarak era, Egyptian authorities have been eager to open dialogue with Bedouin leaders—though so far with no real results. In the meantime, official promises to address major Bedouin grievances have not been fulfilled, and hundreds of tribesmen are still considered outlaws, though the government has not vigorously pursued them.

Egypt's Sinai Policy

The gradual consolidation of the smuggling industry as the mainstay of economic activity in the North Sinai governorate and parts of the south is at least partly attributable to successive Egyptian governments abandoning their ambitious development plans for the peninsula. Prior to his assassination in 1981, President Anwar Sadat contemplated settling no less than 5 million people from the densely populated Nile Valley in the Sinai. He instructed his ministers to bring fresh water from the Nile all the way up to the Israeli border, spurring heated debate over accusations that some of the water would ultimately be pumped on to Gaza and end up in Israel. Sadat also marked some 643,000 acres for irrigation and agricultural cultivation in different parts of the desert. New towns and villages were to absorb immigrants from the mainland.

In 1994, under Mubarak's rule, the government's revised Sinai development plan called for settling 2.9 million Egyptians in the peninsula by 2018—thus turning the indigenous Bedouin into a small minority. Around 75 billion Egyptian pounds (USD 12.5 billion) were allocated for the plan, which aimed to not only increase the area of cultivated lands, but also speed up exploitation of local mineral resources.²⁵

25. For more on development issues, see for example the Egyptian State Information Service webpages titled “Silver Jubilee of Sinai Liberation,” <http://www.sis.gov.eg/VR/sinia/html/esinia.htm>. See also “The Strategy for the Settlement of Sinai” prepared by the firm Dames & Moore in March 1985 and presented to the Advisory Committee for Reconstruction at the Ministry of Development. On the retreat from most of these projects, see for example Ashraf Said, “Experts: Mubarak Ignored Sinai Development to Please Israel” [in Arabic], *al-Yaum al-Sabe* (Cairo), September 5, 2011.

By 1997, however, Mubarak's closest advisors convinced him to give up the grand dream of settling the Sinai in favor of a different mega plan—the Toshka Project, aimed at creating a second Nile Valley in southern Egypt. Funds initially earmarked for Sinai were subsequently channeled to Toshka, which was intended to be Mubarak's lasting stamp on Egypt's history and geography. The peninsula soon returned to the bottom of the government's priorities list—the famous “Peace Canal” bringing Nile water across the Suez was discontinued beyond Bir al-Abd, and the much-publicized plans to increase the Sinai's cultivated area were carried out slowly and inefficiently.

The one significant achievement of the Sinai development plan was the establishment of a flourishing “Tourism Strip” along the Gulf of Aqaba, with over a hundred modern hotels and resorts stretching from Taba to Sharm al-Shaykh. Private-sector investors such as Mubarak's old friend (and, by some accounts, business partner) Hussein Salem were granted beach plots. With the help of a new airport expansion, they managed to draw international (and Israeli) sun seekers to the posh resorts. Mubarak himself spent a great deal of time in the area, turning Sharm al-Shaykh into Egypt's unofficial “summer capital.” In contrast, attempts led by businessman Hassan Rateb to create a tourism center around al-Arish²⁶ did not achieve similar success due to lack of sufficient infrastructure. Today, the various al-Arish projects are in different phases of decay.

From the Bedouin point of view, however, the bottom line was that most of the jobs created by the government's main initiative in the Sinai—the new tourism industry—went to Egyptians from the mainland, many of whom kept their families on the other side of the Suez and had no intention of becoming permanent residents of the peninsula. Other job opportunities were taken by non-Bedouin residents and farmers inhabiting the few towns and agricultural areas in North Sinai. Most public-sector jobs went to mainland Egyptians as well.

26. Rateb had a detailed vision for the future of the peninsula. See his book *Sinai: Egypt's Gateway to the 21st Century* [in Arabic] (Cairo, 1995).

As one Bedouin intellectual put it almost thirty years after the Israeli withdrawal, “Sinai returned to Egypt, but Egypt did not return to the Sinai.” Indeed, the dream of Egyptianization of the peninsula came to naught, with the Bedouin retaining their solid numerical majority. Many of them still do not even enjoy Egyptian citizenship and, as a rule, are not conscripted into the army.

Following the retreat from early development plans, Egyptian authorities switched to a policy of preserving stability in the peninsula in order to protect the mainland. The task of keeping an eye on the local population was entrusted to a series of governors, all of them hailing from a military establishment whose main tool for enforcing a semblance of control was the police. Few of these governors—with the notable exception of Gen. Munir Shash—were keen on cultivating cooperation with the Bedouin sheikhs. Most governors and security chiefs did revert to a system based on numerous ad hoc deals with the Bedouin, such as payments for helping to protect the gas pipeline. Apart from the 2004–2007 campaign aimed at dismantling local terrorist groups, the tribes were left to pursue their main business—smuggling—quite freely. Tight security was imposed only around the most sensitive areas: the tourism strip in the southeast, the oil installations in Abu Rudeis and Ras al-Sudr, and government offices in al-Tur and al-Arish. For years, then, much of the Sinai had no significant Egyptian state presence, making Cairo seem like an absentee landlord.

Until recently, General Intelligence (Mukhabarat) was the main agency entrusted with following Bedouin affairs, but military intelligence assumed that role after the revolution. Under Gen. Abd al-Wahab Mubarak, the current governor of North Sinai, the military has sought to reassert control over key parts of the peninsula. Beginning in August 2011, six battalions of the Second Army, commanded by Gen. Muhammad Hejazi, mounted “Operation Eagle” in the northeastern Sinai and along the Coastal Road. But after a few months it became evident that the objective was not to disarm the Bedouin militias or restrict

their movements—the military has refrained from operating in fortified Bedouin strongholds such as Jabal Halal and Wadi Amr, concentrating instead on maintaining a presence in Sinai towns via road-blocks and defensive positions. Smuggling to Gaza has been allowed to proceed without interruption; the weekly closures of two or three tunnels have not impaired the scope of illegal trade.

This strategy is in line with the longstanding refusal among the highest military echelons to allow army involvement in any confrontation with the indigenous population. Field Marshal Muhammad Hussein Tantawi, head of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), has consistently and adamantly opposed such involvement, even prohibiting the army from assisting with pipeline protection in the Sinai. As defense minister during the Mubarak era, Tantawi turned down several Israeli requests for army help in dealing with smuggling to Gaza and Palestinian terrorist activities throughout the peninsula. The Egyptian high command's policy was to keep the police alone in charge, and once the police forces collapsed during the revolution, many posts were abandoned throughout central Sinai.

According to the signed Military Protocol between Egypt and Israel, the army is permitted to keep 22,000 soldiers in the Sinai, limited to Zone A, the westernmost portion of the peninsula. But during most periods, the Egyptian army has stationed only 70–80 percent of that number in the area. The military has never established a separate command headquarters for the Sinai forces. Each of the rotating four brigades remains under direct control of its divisional operations room west of the Suez. At all times, each brigade belongs to a different first-echelon division of either the Third or Second Army. And during the revolution, some of these forces were withdrawn to the mainland and have yet to return. Moreover, when Israel consented to allowing Egyptian troops into Zones B and C in central and eastern Sinai, Cairo deployed the limited battalions already stationed in the peninsula instead of bringing in reinforcements from the mainland. Israel also agreed to allow twenty Egyptian tanks into Zones B and C, but Cairo abstained from sending them.

This attitude reflects the military's limited interest in the Sinai, despite constant domestic criticism of treaty restrictions on Egypt's ability to exercise sovereignty over the entire peninsula. Since the army was not prepared to oversee the Sinai, it had no incentive to commit even the number of units allowed by the Military Protocol. The army, in short, perceived its role to be purely defensive, occupying itself with routine training for crossing the Suez while keeping as much distance as possible from Bedouin affairs.

Meanwhile, the 300 positions along the border with Israel—basically observation towers—are manned by Central Security policemen. These isolated outposts have no electricity or running water and have always been poorly supplied by headquarters. In fact, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) have often had to provide them with basic provisions.

Another factor contributing to the ineffectiveness of these positions is that they are turned toward the Israeli border and do not really monitor movements behind them, in the Sinai. The Bedouin usually treat these border guards as no more than a nuisance, storming and even occupying their positions at times of tension with the authorities. And many of the outposts are partly manned with “work prisoners,” who, of course, are unarmed. Thus, Egypt's control of the border has long been precarious.

Regarding Bedouin smuggling activity into Israel, the general thrust of Cairo's policy was—and remains—not to interfere. Even when caught, Bedouin drug smugglers headed for Israel have received much lighter sentences than those carrying drugs into Egypt.

This attitude may help explain Egypt's relative tolerance of the latest Bedouin business endeavor: guiding massive numbers of illegal African immigrants into Israel. At least 50,000 such immigrants, mainly Sudanese and Eritrean Muslims, are estimated to have arrived in Israel as refugees since this practice began. They usually pay their Bedouin guides between \$500 and \$3,000 per head for leading them from mainland Egypt to the Israeli border. Bedouin tribes have even established fenced

enclosures to keep the immigrants on the route, and Cairo has made no sustained effort to disrupt this traffic.²⁷ During the past two years, some Bedouin have also expanded this business into a brand new field: harvesting human organs to be sold abroad. Several mass graves containing the bodies of unfortunate African immigrants murdered for their organs have been uncovered in central Sinai, and rival tribes such as the Nakhlawis and Tiaha have reportedly clashed over “ownership” rights of Africans earmarked to be harvested. Protests by Salafi associations in the Sinai against both the organ trade and the smuggling of Eastern European prostitutes to Israel have not had much impact so far.²⁸

Israel has encouraged Cairo to take a more proactive role in securing the border against such trafficking for years, but these efforts have not borne fruit. On a few occasions, Egyptian police have killed illegal immigrants instead of turning them back, but no real effort was undertaken to stop the flow. In Israel, it should be noted, the army and police are not allowed to open fire on civilian infiltrators, and so once immigrants have crossed the border, they often simply wait along the highway to be picked up by the next Israeli patrol. They are then fed, registered, and driven to Eilat or Beersheba.

Egypt has also been quite tolerant of Hamas activity in the peninsula. Authorities did imprison one Hamas military commander—Ayman Nofal, in charge of the Khan Yunis Brigade—for trying to establish cells in the Sinai. Yet his arrest was exceptional, and he escaped from jail during the revolution. When the group’s military intelligence chief, Muhammad Dababish, was arrested for similar reasons in September 2010, Egypt quickly bowed to Hamas pressure and released him. Along with other Palestinian terrorist organizations, Hamas operatives have gained a sense of immunity from

Egyptian countermeasures as long as they are not too blatant in their activities. For example, once the group realized how alarmed Cairo had become when Palestinians crossed into the Sinai en masse in January 2008, it prevented further such attempts.

In sum, Egypt—both before and after Mubarak’s ouster—has treated the Sinai as a neglected backyard, keeping investments as well as governance and military attention at a minimal level. Authorities have generally tolerated porous borders with both Israel and Gaza, allowing the Bedouin to build up their own separate economy and armed militias while ignoring the rise of terrorist networks. As one Egyptian politician put it, Sinai is a “magnifying mirror of Egypt’s faults.”

The Challenge to Israel

Initially, the Israeli defense establishment was ill prepared for the new situation in the Sinai. Over the years, Israeli intelligence agencies have paid only limited attention to the peninsula, diverting resources to more troublesome fronts such as Gaza and Lebanon. Successive governments also imposed numerous restrictions on employing agents inside the Sinai in order to avoid any friction with Egypt. In fact, most of Israel’s information on developments in the Sinai was obtained via close monitoring of Palestinian activities emanating from Gaza. Not until mid-2011 did Israeli intelligence wake up to the urgent need to learn more about the emergence of terrorist threats from the peninsula. Yet in 2010, Israeli analysts at both military intelligence and the General Security Service noticed the steady weakening of Egyptian police and the rise of new terrorist challenges, warning that “the post-Mubarak period has already begun in the Sinai, although the president was still in power.”

The scarcity of detailed intelligence has been complemented by Israel’s relatively meager deployment along the border. Currently, the 80th Territorial Division retains sole responsibility for a huge area stretching from Nitzana in the north all the way down to Eilat, and along the Jordanian frontier from Eilat up to the Dead Sea. Until recently, the division was able to devote only four battalions to the Sinai border, often composed of reservists. Border Police

27. See Liat Schlesinger, “Slaves in the Desert” [in Hebrew], *Maariv* (Tel Aviv), September 9, 2011. See also Rebecca Furst-Nichols, “Shift in Sinai Security Strategy Must Include Crackdown on Torture Camps,” *al-Masry al-Youm* (Cairo), October 29, 2011. For more on Salafi opposition to human trafficking, see the September 17, 2011, issue of *Sinai Today*.

28. See for example “Human Organ Trafficking War Waged between Sinai Bedouins,” November 14, 2011, *al-Masry al-Youm* (Cairo), <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/en/node/514726>.

units stationed in the southern Negev were pulled out for budgetary reasons in 2007, and some responsibilities on the Jordanian front were taken over by the less-combat-ready Karakal Battalion.

This posture was seemingly in line with the relative quiet along the Israel-Egypt border, which apart from smuggling and human trafficking activities was interrupted only occasionally by sporadic fire from Egyptian forces engaged in skirmishes with Bedouin. And although the counterterrorism advisor to the prime minister consistently warned Israeli tourists in the peninsula about the risk of being murdered or kidnapped by local radicals, these warnings usually failed to stem the flow of visitors to Sinai beaches, particularly on the part of Israeli Arabs.

Over the past year, however, Israel has been compelled to conduct a thorough reassessment of the situation on the Egyptian frontier, and policy changes have quickly become evident. First, as discussed above, Israel has gradually dropped its objections against Egyptian military deployment east of Zone A, allowing units with an agreed number of soldiers and specified equipment to enter Zones B and C for predetermined periods. This process actually began in January 2008, after around half a million Palestinians stormed into the Sinai. Later, after the revolution, consent was given for the introduction of 750 Egyptian soldiers to the al-Arish/Rafah area. And in September 2011, Cairo obtained authorization to deploy seven battalions into the “forbidden zones.” It had previously requested permission to send two tank companies there, but as mentioned previously, it never acted on this proposal despite receiving Israel’s consent. In short, Israel has essentially agreed to reverse the demilitarization of the eastern Sinai and accept a semipermanent Egyptian military presence close to its border, all in the vain hope of improving the security situation.

Second, Israel has adopted new defensive measures along its side of the border. The most important of these is the “Sand Clock” operation, which involves accelerated construction of a 240-kilometer double fence, 5.5 meters high and extending 1.5 meters underground, to serve as a physical

barrier between the two countries. The new fence will have a variety of electronic devices capable of detecting suspicious activities on the Sinai side. The budget for the project is estimated at 1.35 billion Israeli shekels (USD 350 million), though the actual cost will likely be much higher. Once completed, the fence is expected to stop the flow of illegal immigrants, hamper large-scale smuggling, and, most important, provide an obstacle against terrorist incursions while giving local commanders enhanced early warning. As of this writing, 70 kilometers of the fence have been built, with completion scheduled for the end of 2012.²⁹

Third, the IDF has beefed up its own deployment along the Sinai border, doubling the number of battalions from four to eight, intermittently stationing regular first-echelon units there (e.g., the Golani infantry), and establishing a new Territorial Brigade for Eilat and its vicinity. This new deployment reflects the realization that the main task on the border has changed from curbing criminal activities to countering terrorist threats. In addition, all Israeli villages close to the border have been instructed to establish armed emergency squads and take other steps—such as building fences surrounding the villages—to impede terrorist infiltration.

At the same time, Israel has decided to stick to its longstanding policy of refraining from preemptive measures on Egyptian soil. Instead, it regularly relays intelligence obtained on Sinai terrorist activities to Egyptian authorities, who act on some of it but set the rest aside. Yet an imminent threat of a large-scale terrorist offensive would probably force Israeli leaders to consider the tough dilemma of whether to order a preventive operation across the border. Claims that Israeli commandos from the Sinai have abducted at least one Bedouin terrorist cannot be verified.

On the political level, the Israeli government has so far kept silent amid growing calls by Egyptian politicians, journalists, retired military figures, and former intelligence officials to abolish all restrictions on the Egyptian military presence in the peninsula, as set forth in Article 4 of the peace treaty.

29. See Yehuda Lakhyani, “The War Over the Fence” [in Hebrew], *Maariv* (Tel Aviv), September 9, 2011.

Most prominently, such arguments have been made by former chief of staff and current presidential candidate Gen. Magdy Hatata, likely reflecting a trend among his former subordinates in the SCAF.³⁰ Some Egyptian officials have interpreted Israel's lack of official response to these calls as a sign of flexibility on the issue, though the silence probably derives more from a desire to avoid public debate over the treaty's future.

The Muslim Brotherhood's rise to power in Egypt raises additional concerns for Israel. A government in which the Brotherhood plays a key role might allow the border to become an area of constant friction, where Sinai militias operate freely in the same way that Fatah used to operate along the Jordan Valley in the late 1960s, or that the Palestine Liberation Organization, the Amal movement, and Hizballah successively operated along the Lebanon-Israel frontier. Indeed, one can no longer ignore the possibility of a situation in which peace is nominally in force but hostilities are recurrent.

Policy Recommendations

There is no quick fix to the problems posed by the current situation in the Sinai. Remedying the tensions between Egypt and the Bedouin and curbing the rampant smuggling industry are both long-term endeavors. Reigniting large-scale economic development plans would also require funding that is presently unavailable given the transitional government's financial agonies. Even if the money were available, such plans would take many years to achieve tangible results. And disarmament of tribal militias is not a realistic option for Egypt's leaders, who are reluctant to spark violent reactions from the Bedouin.

Despite these constraints, Egypt, Israel, and the international community should still take steps to prevent further deterioration. A major terrorist attack from the Sinai, whether by Palestinians or Bedouin, could endanger the fragile peace treaty. The same would be true if Israel were compelled to launch a preventive strike in the Sinai in order to avert loss of Israeli lives. The border's potential

transformation into a zone of friction and perpetual skirmishes would certainly create a climate of renewed confrontation between the two countries, even if the Egyptian army initially refrained from direct involvement. In both southern Lebanon (since 1969) and the Jordan Valley (1968–1970), Israeli clashes with terrorists ultimately dragged each country's regular army into clashes with the IDF—a most dangerous development if it were to occur in Egypt.

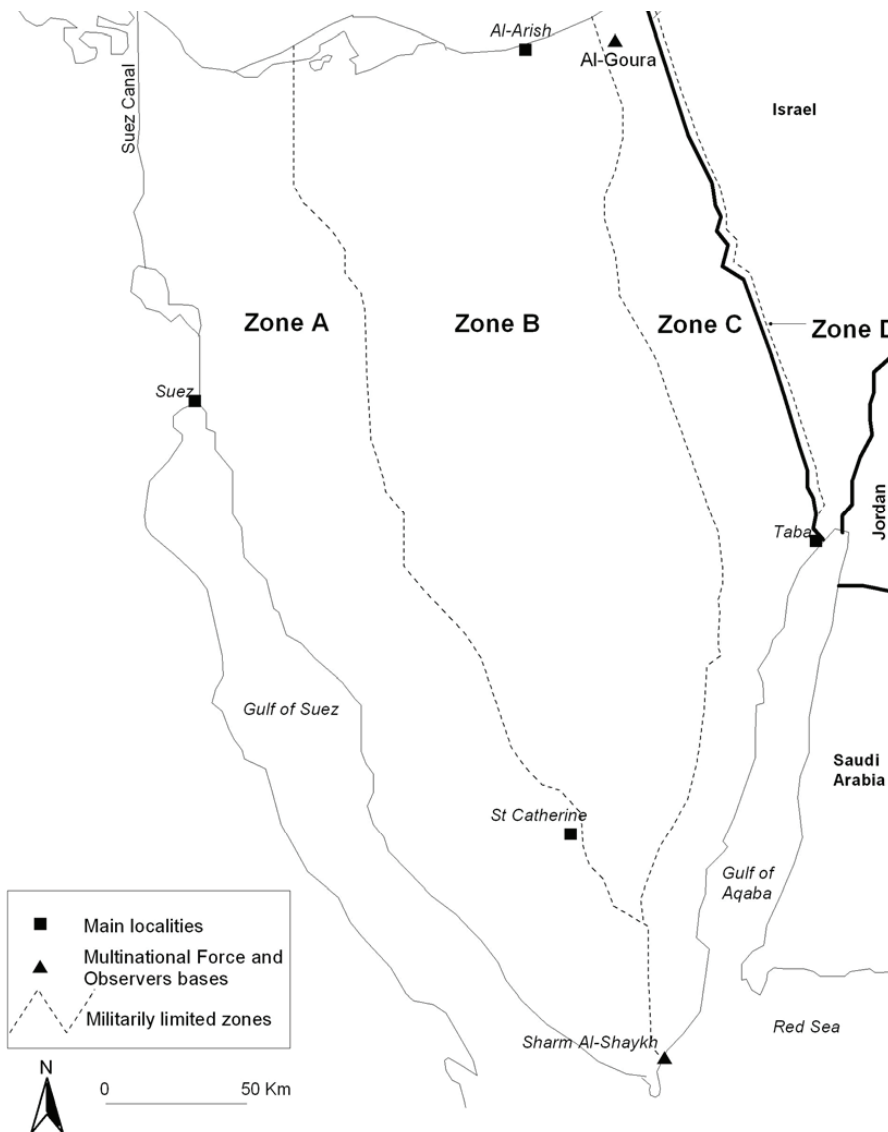
To avoid such scenarios, all parties should consider several policy suggestions aimed at countering the growing terrorist threat in the Sinai.:

► Deploy the Egyptian military along the border.

Egyptian police units—whether from the Central Security Forces or other branches—are clearly inadequate to deal with the threat of major terrorist operations emanating from the Sinai. Israel has already recognized the need for larger numbers of Egyptian military units in the peninsula. To address this need, more army units could be allowed into Zones B and C through the decade-old “Agreed Activities Mechanism,” concluded privately between Israel and Egypt under the auspices of the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO). (See fig. 3.) This unpublished, unannounced arrangement enables the parties to effectively bypass the peace treaty's prohibition against stationing Egyptian army units east of Zone A. Such understandings have been reached and implemented for various periods both before and after the 2011 revolution.

Going forward, Israel should permit Egypt to deploy a military force roughly half the size of an infantry division (up to eight battalions) in several key areas: along the Coastal Road and adjacent population centers in North Sinai; along the Gaza-Sinai boundary, especially Rafah; along the U.S.-funded highway running parallel to the border with Israel; and in sensitive areas of central Sinai such as An-Nakhl. Preferably, half of the additional battalions could be drawn from brigades already positioned in Zone A. (See Fig. 3.) Assuming that Cairo issues clear orders, these battalions should be able to deter terrorist activity along the frontier. The top priority should be to foil spectacular terrorist attacks such as the firing of anti-aircraft missiles

30. See for example his “Welcome” page on Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/magdyhatata?sk=app53267368995>.



Source: Annual Report 2004, Multinational Force and Observers

FIG. 3 Militarily Limited Zones

at Israeli civilian planes around the Eilat and Ovda airports, or the firing of antitank missiles against ships sailing to and from Eilat's port. An Egyptian military presence is also needed near the narrow Straits of Tiran, the gate to the Gulf of Aqaba located south of Sharm al-Shaykh.

A deployment of this scope would obviously entail dramatic change in Egypt's methods of controlling the Sinai. It would also alter the peace treaty's vision of separating Egypt and Israel's armies with a wide strip of demilitarized areas covering most of the Sinai. Yet contrary to what many

Egyptian politicians and media outlets have argued recently, moving in this direction would not require amending the treaty itself. The Agreed Activities Mechanism already provides ample, undisputed legal room for upgrading the Egyptian army's order of battle in the peninsula and expanding its deployment areas. In contrast, any attempt to initiate a review of the treaty's provisions on this issue is bound to spark fierce debate in Egypt over the wisdom of maintaining the treaty at all. Presidential candidate Amr Mousa—the former foreign minister of Egypt and secretary-general of the Arab

League—has advised his countrymen “not to touch the treaty,” and his advice should be taken seriously.

To be sure, any understandings regarding Egyptian military entry into eastern Sinai would have to be concluded individually and for specific periods of time, with the option of renewal. Yet Israel would presumably have no reason to refuse said renewals. Therefore, the SCAF would be able to argue that, for all practical purposes, the “restrictions” on Egyptian sovereignty in the Sinai no longer existed—a strong card to play in the expected debate with the Muslim Brotherhood on whether the peace treaty should be submitted for approval by a new national referendum.³¹

► **Tighten Egyptian-Israeli coordination.**

Cairo has been reluctant to allow direct contact between local Egyptian and Israeli commanders. Although frequent coordination meetings have become routine between Israeli and Jordanian commanding officers, contributing significantly to the stability and calm on their border, Egypt has traditionally preferred to restrict communications to liaison officers. This system functions reasonably well so long as the two armies lack proximity. Yet in the event of expanded Egyptian deployment in the eastern Sinai, closer coordination between commanders on the ground would be indispensable. As in the past, MFO representatives could facilitate such contacts.

Indeed, much more intense coordination would become inevitable if—as recommended here—the Egyptian army switches from the Central Security Forces modus operandi of fixed positions along the border to a system that includes mobile patrols and reconnaissance by light helicopters. Such missions would improve control over not only the border region, but also areas that could serve as launch pads for missile strikes against Eilat or Israeli villages in the northwestern Negev. Yet care would be required to avoid misunderstandings between the two armies.

In addition, special attention should be devoted to intelligence cooperation along the Gaza-Sinai boundary given the large-scale smuggling of weapons—including heavy missiles—in both directions. Although Egyptian authorities have tended to turn a blind eye to what transpires along the Philadelphia Corridor, they certainly do not wish to see Hamas or other Palestinian terrorist organizations put down further roots in the Sinai and continue turning the peninsula into a hub of arms workshops and depots. Cairo is also quite uncomfortable with the unrecorded human traffic through the tunnels. Closer exchange of information with Israel would help the Egyptian military gain a better grip over this sensitive area and establish tighter supervision on the type of trade conducted there.

► **Adjust the MFO's role.**

Any substantial modification of Egyptian or Israeli military deployments in or around the Sinai would require adjustments in the way the MFO—a product of the peace treaty—functions. This does not mean changing the force's mandate, however. Instead, the two countries need only reach mutual understandings on matters such as increasing MFO inspection missions to verify that they have maintained their obligations concerning deployment in the four zones charted in the Military Protocol. In this manner, Israeli consent on Egyptian military deployments in the eastern Sinai should be accompanied by agreements allowing closer MFO surveillance. As mentioned previously, MFO personnel could also be helpful in sponsoring more frequent meetings between Israeli and Egyptian officers and arranging the infrastructure for faster communication in emergencies.

► **Realign U.S. aid priorities.**

The struggle to dismantle the Sinai “time bomb” could benefit from American assistance in two domains: curbing arms smuggling and revising plans for economic development. Regarding efforts to stem the flow of arms—especially from Libya, Iran, Syria, and Sudan—the United States could exercise its still-considerable influence in Cairo to encourage much stricter supervision over the transfer of goods across the Suez Canal. The limited

31. For the case against allowing more troops into the Sinai, see Amr Yossef, “Securing the Sinai,” *Foreign Affairs*, September 28, 2011, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/68304/amr-yossef/securing-the-sinai>.

number of crossing points—whether tunnel, bridge, or ferry—can be effectively monitored, and the provision of advanced U.S. technology would help Egypt implement better surveillance over shipments making their way to the Sinai. Since most arms transfers pass through Egypt on their way to the peninsula, the Suez should be viewed as a crucial line of defense against the Sinai's transformation into a terrorist safe haven.

On the economic side, much of the recent talk regarding a new Egyptian agency to develop the peninsula is bound to crash against financial constraints. Only a small number of the current proposals for Sinai investment can be expected to materialize in the foreseeable future. Yet the United States—especially the U.S. Agency for International Development—could support programs aimed at those Bedouin tribes that are not yet incorporated in

the smuggling business or the new terrorism networks. These tribes—most notably in the South Sinai governorate—crave services that could be provided at relatively little expense, such as mobile clinics and better employment and educational opportunities. Demonstrating that the state cares for their needs could go a long way toward convincing them to avoid the risks entailed in smuggling or terrorism.

Whether pursuing the above recommendations or examining other options, all parties should remain focused on the most immediate and important goals: preventing the total collapse of security in and around the peninsula, avoiding the rise of an armed, runaway Bedouin statelet, and minimizing the risk of the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty imploding under the pressures of the wild Sinai frontier.



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