

Sinai Militancy and the Threat to International Forces

Zack Gold

The Sinai-based jihadi group Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (“Supporters of Jerusalem,” ABM) pledged allegiance to the Syria-based Islamic State (IS) organization in November 2014, formally changing its name to Wilayat Sinai: a “province” of the so-called IS caliphate. Given the brutality of the Islamic State and the destruction it has caused in the swath of territory it controls or in which it operates across Syria and Iraq, the potential that the situation in Sinai could get much worse, quickly, has increased dramatically.

While the situation in North Sinai has indeed deteriorated over the months since ABM’s rebranding, Egypt and Israel have thus far dodged the nightmare scenario of the Islamic State in Sinai. As Wilayat Sinai, the group has been slow to drastically change ABM’s targeting objectives. Egypt and Israel, both of which have been targeted by ABM operations, perceive the group’s affiliation to the Islamic State to be about one thing: money. Caught in an existential conflict with Egypt’s military, Sinai’s militants sought a financial lifeline. Yet even if the relationship is transactional, the Islamic State is likely to want something from its investment.

A serious concern for Egypt, Israel, and the international community is that the IS price tag may be an attack by its Sinai affiliate on the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO), the 12-nation international force that oversees maintenance of the 1979 Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty. Indeed, some see a major attack on the MFO, with its North Camp based in the heart of militant activity (south of Sheikh Zuweid, in the al-Gura district), as inevitable. The threat increased on June 9, 2015, when Wilayat Sinai fired mortars at al-Gura Airport. In claiming the attack, the group specifically noted that the airport, adjacent to North Camp, is used by the MFO, which it labeled “crusader forces” protecting Israel.¹ A direct major attack on the MFO could

Zack Gold is a visiting fellow at INSS.

have serious implications for Egyptian-Israeli relations and for Egypt's ability to fight terrorism in Sinai.

The MFO: Then and Now

The original charge of the MFO was to monitor the separation of forces of Israel and Egypt. The 1978 Camp David Accords specified the terms agreed upon for force deployments, effectively setting the Sinai Peninsula as a buffer between the parties.² The 1979 Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty codified these limitations as international obligations in the treaty's Annex 1, also known as the Security Annex.³ The MFO was created to hold Israel to its limits on a strip along the mutual border and to ensure that Egypt maintained its obligations in the peninsula, which was separated into three zones.

As Egypt and Israel transitioned from enemy states and discovered overlapping interests, some in Cairo saw the Security Annex as an impediment to the ability to meet Egypt's (and, at the same time, Israel's) security challenges. Conversely, some in Jerusalem saw the deployment limitations as an excuse for Cairo to not meet its sovereign responsibilities. The situation has changed since 2011, with massive deployments in Sinai since the uprising against President Husni Mubarak. However, Egypt's military operations in Sinai today are not violations of the treaty but fall within a little understood mechanism known as "Agreed Activity."

The Security Annex itself provides for deployments in excess of the limitations if they are approved by mutual agreement, a process facilitated and monitored by the MFO. The value of the Agreed Activity mechanism was first recognized in 2005, when Israel withdrew from the Gaza Strip. Without formal treaty amendment, Egypt and Israel signed a separate agreement to deploy Egyptian guards to the Gaza border – in Zone C where, formally, the treaty allows only lightly armed police.⁴ For its part, the MFO took on the responsibility for monitoring and reporting on the operations of these border guards.

Since Mubarak's overthrow in 2011, Egyptian and Israeli military officials have maintained a regular direct link, but the deployment of excess forces still requires an Egyptian request of the MFO, which relays that request to Israel for approval. For example, in the summer of 2011 the Egyptian armed forces deployed tanks to Rafah for the first time since signing the peace treaty.⁵ The MFO keeps track of these agreed deployments and, in its regular reporting, notes whether Egypt adheres to its new limitations. Thus although it has long been primarily a monitoring and reporting organization,

in the current environment, the MFO also has a role in keeping the peace. MFO director general David Satterfield and his team continue to engage with both the Egyptians and Israelis “to ensure that small problems do not become big ones and to reinforce the climate of trust.”⁶

Threats to the MFO

There are a number of factors that make the MFO a prime target for local and transnational jihadis. At the local level, the initial targets of Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis were Israel and the Egyptian-Israeli relationship. The group’s first major attack, a 2011 cross-border raid, tested bilateral diplomatic relations. Its frequent targeting of the Arish-Ashkelon pipeline precipitated the messy cancellation of a 20-year energy contract, striking a blow at economic relations. The group could threaten bilateral military ties with an attack on the MFO, which serves as the facilitator of that relationship.

Attacking the MFO would also fit the model, used by al-Qaeda and its affiliates, of attacking “far enemy” targets where opportunity arises. In recent years, for example, Egyptian security services reportedly have disrupted plots to target the US and French embassies. Jihadis could attempt to justify an attack on the MFO as a response to the support of its contributing states for the government of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, or carry out the operation in an attempt to scare forces out of the peninsula. In addition, the Islamic State might use its remotely based affiliates to retaliate for military strikes the group is suffering in Iraq and Syria. In January 2015, Wilayat Sinai claimed responsibility for bombing the Egypt-Jordan gas pipeline. While the target was standard – since February 2011 militants have attacked Sinai’s network of gas pipelines around three dozen times – the message was new. No gas would reach Jordan, warned the IS-affiliate, as long as the country was involved in anti-IS military operations. This statement should likewise alert other members of the broad coalition conducting operations against the Islamic State: national interests of these states are vulnerable to retaliation. Seven of the countries that contribute to the MFO are also part of the anti-IS coalition: Australia, Canada, the Czech Republic, France, Italy, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Thus, it is significant that neither the MFO’s North Camp nor its Civilian Observer Unit (COU) has been directly attacked by Sinai’s jihadis.

Although the MFO has so far not suffered the types of full scale assaults that have targeted the Egyptian military and security forces, the international force in North Sinai has faced a number of challenging incidents. On

numerous occasions since Egypt's 2011 uprising, Bedouin activists have staged protests at MFO sites in order to draw government attention to their grievances.⁷ Over time, the MFO recognized a shift in the makeup of these demonstrators and the appearance of heavily armed individuals.⁸ Such incidents, if they turned violent, were usually limited to rock throwing, but local actors have occasionally attempted to breach MFO perimeters.⁹ On September 14, 2012, North Camp was actually breached by "a violent crowd," which caused "significant damage," including the destruction of a guard tower and the injury of eight personnel.¹⁰

In addition to political protests outside North Camp and other MFO sites, the local population has attempted to draw the Egyptian government's attention by blocking roads "to restrict the movement of MFO vehicles and those of locally engaged contract workers."¹¹ On occasion, violent means have been used in these efforts.¹² On April 13, 2013, a Hungarian MFO bus monitor was kidnapped while his vehicle was stuck in traffic and held briefly by armed men.¹³ Local MFO staff and contractors have also been detained traveling to or from North Camp. In one incident, perhaps in an effort to intimidate their captives, armed men shot at and injured Egyptian contractors.¹⁴

Masses have gathered outside North Camp not just out of anger or political opportunity, but out of fear as well. Especially during fierce fighting and military strikes south of Sheikh Zuweid, civilians have taken refuge outside the MFO base because they know the Egyptian military is unlikely to use its air power so close to the international force. Even if these civilians are not a direct threat to the MFO, their presence limits personnel operability. In addition, Egyptian security officials are concerned that militants might escape among the civilian population fleeing from villages during military operations; this could allow Wilayat Sinai operatives to blend in and get close to North Camp.

For a time in 2013, given the deterioration in the security environment, MFO units did not travel in the northeast corner of Sinai (the Northern Sector of Zone C) without an Egyptian military escort. Recognizing the coordination required for Egyptian escorts and the need for a longer term solution, in August 2013 the MFO's Fijian Battalion began escorting COU missions.¹⁵ The increased impediments to MFO ground travel have prompted greater use of aircraft for both transport and observatory missions. The one exception is in Zone C's Northern Sector, where the MFO halted observation flights after Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis shot down an Egyptian transport helicopter in

the area on January 25, 2014.¹⁶ That said, MFO aircraft are easily recognizable from the ground and have never come under attack, despite regularly flying over territory in which militants are believed to operate.

Overall, the MFO and contributing nations have sought to downplay incidents in which international forces come under fire. Given the limited media environment in North Sinai, it is unclear if these incidents were truly noteworthy.

On May 9, 2014, the *Cairo Post* reported that militants “for the first time” fired at MFO forces near North Camp, whereas *Aswat Masriya* reported that they fired on the camp itself.¹⁷ In its annual report, the MFO noted only that a “stray round” was found inside the camp, giving no indication that the MFO was targeted.¹⁸ In a similar incident, on August 4, 2014, local media reported that an American soldier was wounded by gun fire at North Camp.¹⁹ The following day, US State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki sought to correct the record, saying, “A U.S. contractor” – not a soldier – “was slightly injured as a result of a stray round fired in the vicinity.”²⁰ These and other incidents suggest that opposition to the MFO does exist. Even if the current level of opposition does not spread, it could be exploited by those interested in a large assault.

MFO personnel have almost a decade of experience operating in a non-permissive environment, and the MFO has been ramping up its defensive posture since before the 2011 uprising. However, militant activity in Sinai has increased exponentially. As its latest annual report notes, “the frequency and unpredictable nature of these activities increases the risk to [the MFO] from collateral fire or being in the wrong place at the wrong time.”²¹

MFO personnel, and specifically the COU, regularly use the same roads where militants plant improvised explosive devices (IEDs) daily. They also traverse areas where Wilayat Sinai sets up checkpoints in an effort to capture Egyptian security personnel and civilians it accuses of collaborating with the state. Even if the MFO is not currently being targeted, each convoy leaves North Camp or an isolated site aware that it could accidentally encounter an IED; each time an MFO vehicle approaches a militant checkpoint the driver cannot help but be concerned that this time he will be ordered to stop and consider how he should respond to the order. Occasionally, given the operating environment in North Sinai, MFO personnel and staff do find themselves in the wrong place at the wrong time. For example, on May 27, 2011, an MFO vehicle traveling along the Egyptian-Gaza border “sustained extensive damage” when a nearby IED detonated.²²

The challenges to the MFO's operations are not limited to local demonstrations or militant activity. Egyptian armed forces activities, in addition to increased MFO observation missions, have restricted MFO and support movement during periods of military engagement in certain areas and throughout curfew hours.²³ Although MFO units are technically not subject to the curfews imposed in North Sinai, personnel opt not to travel during these hours out of a concern that Egyptian soldiers manning a checkpoint could misidentify their convoy. Egyptian military operations have also restricted local staff and contractors from reaching North Camp. However, Egyptian military operations since September 2013 likewise have created "a corresponding change in the security environment," which has allowed for an "increase in routine operations."²⁴

No Major Attacks ... Yet

To date, MFO personnel, with Egyptian military cooperation, have managed to repel violent threats to MFO sites and operations, such as the September 2012 breach of North Camp. In the ensuing years, the MFO has stepped up force protection and self-defense training. However, a major concern is that the MFO is unprepared for, and may be incapable of responding to, a complex Wilayat Sinai attack like those that have caught Egyptian forces off guard: using a combination of vehicle-borne IEDs, rockets, snipers, and fighters.

Perhaps the main reason Wilayat Sinai has not targeted the MFO in a major attack is the importance of the international force to the local Bedouin economy. As noted in the MFO's 2012 annual report, "It is of some help to have, in the community, those who can speak accurately about what we do and the benefits of our activity."²⁵ That year, the MFO's payroll for Bedouin and other local staff amounted to roughly \$1 million, while the MFO made a "substantial contribution to the local economy" through its relationship with local contractors (almost \$2 million).²⁶ The MFO makes a deliberate effort to employ members of every Bedouin tribe in Sinai through its Bedouin Employment Program.²⁷

It could also be that there have been occasional attempts to target the MFO and that Egyptian security forces have disrupted plots to do so. However, Sinai militants have had ample opportunity to target isolated MFO sites and personnel if they so wanted. As such, it is unlikely that attacks have been avoided by strokes of luck, good fortune, and capable security measures.

If overall the MFO has been spared to date, there are a number of factors that could increase the likelihood of an attack on the international force. Financial assistance from the Islamic State, previously pledged or offered in the future, could come with the stipulation that Sinai fighters prove their fealty by broadening their targets to serve the IS agenda. Wilayat Sinai, which grew out of local militancy with local grievances, would likely only take such a measure out of desperation, because currently the group is dependent on the local population and the local population is dependent on the MFO for employment. However, as Wilayat Sinai attempts to project strength in northeast Sinai, the jihadi group is gaining enemies.²⁸ If Sinai's broader population completely rejects the group, Wilayat Sinai may retaliate by attacking the area's economic base. It is also possible that in targeting the MFO verbally following the June 9 al-Gura attack, Wilayat Sinai was testing the reaction of the local population, the Egyptian government, and the international community.

Wilayat Sinai remains a local group, and Sinai has yet to be a major draw for foreign fighters or even for Egyptians from the Nile Valley. This, however, could change over time, especially as IS calls on supporters to join the Sinai jihad. Another scenario, then, could see a cell of foreign IS fighters targeting Western interests in Sinai, including the MFO. These militants would lack the Bedouin ties of Wilayat Sinai's core fighters and would not be beholden to local interests or grievances. Whether tribal families are employed in Sinai is of no matter to an organization based in Syria.

A final scenario, less likely but still a possibility, would involve the local population turning on the MFO and no longer offering its "protection." This could happen if, due to budgetary issues or security concerns, the MFO is unable to employ from among Sinai's tribes. More likely, however, would be if the local population conflated the MFO with some of the heavy handed tactics used in Egyptian military operations.²⁹ In this context, the MFO is pleased that Egyptian forces are now deployed on North Camp's perimeter to better protect the camp and respond to threats against it.³⁰ However, there is concern within the MFO that Egypt's use of this deployment for offensive operations will be mistaken by the locals – who recognize the neutrality of the international force – as MFO complicity in Egyptian military strikes.

Implications of an Attack

The MFO has been building its force protection capacity since before the latest surge in Sinai militancy. Still, the MFO soldiers have a specific

non-offensive mandate, have not trained for a full jihadi assault on North Camp, and would be unlikely to repel such a determined attack without suffering a large number of casualties. Small, opportunistic attacks on COU convoys would limit or force adaptation of MFO operations. One or more coordinated assaults on North Camp, however, may change the calculus of the MFO and of contributing nations, whose forces would be isolated in hostile territory. Publicly, there is no indication whether MFO personnel would hunker down in such an environment or if they would withdraw, even temporarily.

In the current threat environment and under Cairo's current leadership, Israel trusts Egypt more than any other time in their history. The upshot is that while the MFO is an important facilitator of Egyptian-Israeli ties, a withdrawal of the international force would not necessarily result in strained relations. If the MFO withdrew, and if that trust did not exist, Israel might demand that Egypt withdraw its heavy weaponry and some of its forces from the peninsula, negating the Agreed Activity adaptations to the peace treaty.

The bilateral trust, however, is not comprehensive and is not without occasional misunderstandings. As the MFO has been a key to the rapid response to any issues, without its force on the ground the Israelis and Egyptians would need new mechanisms for addressing concerns. Of course, even if the international force withdrew from North Sinai, the MFO's "good offices" would not disappear overnight: its director general would continue to work with leaders in Cairo, Tel Aviv, and Jerusalem from MFO headquarters in Rome.

Recommendations

In order to continue with its force protection upgrades, the MFO needs greater donor country support. Understandably, the current environment increases both the threat and the cost of preparing for it. Militant activity and military operations have disrupted and slowed contract fulfillments to various force protection projects. The determination of donor countries is necessary to see these upgrades through, as is the continued cooperation from Egypt and Israel in transferring materials to North Camp and other remote sites.

The MFO's relationship with local Bedouin is extremely important to proactive force protection. As such, it is unfortunate that Denmark, a major donor to the Bedouin Employment Program for two years, is no

longer able to provide the MFO with budget support for the initiative.³¹ It is imperative that the MFO continue this program with the same fervor and that another donor nation assist in its continuity.

Frank, private discussions between the MFO and among the contributing nations and Egypt about what would happen in the event of an attack would also clarify expectations for the host country and for the force. How the international force and its contingents would respond to an attack, and in what manner they would require Egyptian forces to respond, would be part of these talks. After all, the MFO depends on the protection of Egypt for its operations and security. Looking past a potential incident itself, Egypt and Israel should be fully informed about the MFO's plan of action in the aftermath of such an attack: would the force withdraw from Sinai in the short term? Would individual contingents withdraw, and would they be replaced by personnel from other contingents? These are questions that should have answers before a major attack takes place. In addition, knowing the specific results of any attack may also impact on Egypt's preemptive operations to protect the MFO.

Egypt, as host country, has a responsibility to guard the MFO and its personnel from harm. An important part of harm prevention, though, is not implicating the MFO in Egyptian military operations. This line is blurred if the same units deployed to defend the MFO concurrently participate in offensive operations against surrounding villages. Unfortunately, as a neutral party, MFO leaders are awkwardly positioned when it comes to telling the Egyptians how to operate. If Cairo does not recognize how its operations may result in harm to the MFO, contributing nations, especially those with close military-military relationships like the United States, should be forthright with their Egyptian counterparts. Israel too can play a role here. To date it has chosen not to turn down Egyptian deployment requests; but, in consultation with its international partners, Israel could fully support defensive measures that protect the MFO while denying requests that may implicate the MFO in Egyptian military operations.

The MFO can prepare its defenses, and the Egyptian military can offer protection and response. Ultimately, however, if Wilayat Sinai decides to directly target the MFO it will do so, and likely in a forceful manner. Egypt and Israel must plan for the eventuality that the MFO will withdraw following an attack, even if just temporarily from the Northern Sector of Zone C. As this is the most volatile area of Sinai, it is also where the Egyptian military

carries out most of its operations: operations that would be sure to expand in retaliation for a strike on the international force.

Bilateral security relations between Israel and Egypt are stronger today than ever before, and the sides do not require the MFO to exchange messages. However, despite the current trust levels, the MFO still monitors and verifies bilateral arrangements. With the oversight of the MFO director general, who has found favor with both treaty partners, Egypt and Israel must make arrangements for self-reporting and verification without the MFO on the ground. If such arrangements are made, this may lead to discussions among the treaty parties and the MFO as to whether observer deployment in Sinai is even necessary. Withdrawal of international forces from Sinai in such a context could be seen as a successful completion of the mission to separate and build trust between two former enemies.

It is well recognized that an attack on the MFO could happen at any time. While this could have a major impact on relations between the treaty partners and their mutual interests, with adequate preparation, an attack on the MFO does not have to result in a major disruption in Sinai.

Notes

- 1 David Kirkpatrick, "Militants Hit Karnak Temple, in 2nd Recent Attack on Egyptian Tourist Sites," *New York Times*, June 10, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/11/world/middleeast/karnak-temple-luxor-egypt-attack.html>.
- 2 "Camp David Accords," Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, September 17, 1978, <http://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/foreignpolicy/peace/guide/pages/camp%20david%20accords.aspx>.
- 3 "Israel-Egypt Peace Treaty," Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, March 26, 1979, <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/ForeignPolicy/Peace/Guide/Pages/Israel-Egypt%20Peace%20Treaty.aspx>.
- 4 Brooke Neuman, "A New Reality on the Egypt-Gaza Border (Part I): Contents of the New Israel-Egypt Agreement," *Policywatch* No. 518, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 19, 2005, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/a-new-reality-on-the-egypt-gaza-border-part-i-contents-of-the-new-israel-eg>.
- 5 Salah ElBoluk, "Army Tanks in N. Sinai for First Time since Israeli Peace Treaty," *Egypt Independent*, August 14, 2011, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/army-tanks-n-sinai-first-time-israeli-peace-treaty>.
- 6 *Multinational Force and Observers Director General's Report to the 2013 Trilateral Meeting*, Multinational Force and Observers, November 21, 2013, p. 1, http://mfo.org/assets/docs/annual_report_2013.pdf.
- 7 *Multinational Force and Observers Director General's Report to the 2011 Trilateral Meeting*, Multinational Force and Observers, November 17, 2011, pp. 2 and 5,

- http://mfo.org/assets/docs/annual_report_2011.pdf; and MFO 2013 Report, p. 6.
- 8 *Multinational Force and Observers Director General's Report to the 2012 Trilateral Meeting*, Multinational Force and Observers, November 15, 2012, p. 6, http://mfo.org/assets/docs/annual_report_2012.pdf.
 - 9 MFO 2012 Report, pp. 6-7.
 - 10 MFO 2012 Report, pp. 1-2.
 - 11 MFO 2011 Report, p. 5; and MFO 2012 Report, p. 27.
 - 12 MFO 2012 Report, p. 1.
 - 13 MFO 2013 Report, p. 1.
 - 14 *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.
 - 15 *Ibid.*
 - 16 *Multinational Force and Observers Director General's Report to the 2014 Trilateral Meeting*, Multinational Force and Observers, November 20, 2014, p. 1, http://mfo.org/assets/docs/annual_report_2014.pdf.
 - 17 Mohamed Hussain, "Armed Men Attack North Sinai Peacekeeping Forces, No Injures," *Cairo Post*, May 9, 2014, <http://www.thecairopost.com/news/109784/news/breaking-armed-men-attack-north-sinai-peacekeeping-forces-no-injures>; and "Unknown Gunmen Open Fire on Peacekeeping Troops Camp," *Aswat Masriya*, May 9, 2014, <http://en.aswatmasriya.com/news/view.aspx?id=4f93f834-eb8c-44c9-b722-d7b58d056565>.
 - 18 MFO 2014 Report, p. 24.
 - 19 Ahmed Abu Draa, "Isaaba jundi Amriki min qawaat hafith al-salaam b'rasaas majhuleen b'shimaal Sinai" ["Injuring of an American Soldier from the Peace keeping Force by Unidentified Gunfire in North Sinai"], *al-Masry al-Youm*, August 4, 2014, <http://m.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/494829>.
 - 20 Jen Psaki, "Daily Press Briefing," U.S. Department of State, August 5, 2014, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2014/08/230249.htm#EGYPT>.
 - 21 MFO 2014 Report, p. 6.
 - 22 MFO 2011 Report, p. 5.
 - 23 MFO 2013 Report, pp. 3-4.
 - 24 *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 7.
 - 25 MFO 2012 Report, p. 4.
 - 26 *Ibid.*
 - 27 MFO 2014 Report, p. 35.
 - 28 Zack Gold, "Sinai Tribes: Between the Egyptian State and the Islamic State," *INSS Insight* No. 698, May 18, 2015, <http://www.inss.org.il/index.aspx?id=4538&articleid=9533>.
 - 29 Zack Gold, "North Sinai Population Continues to Sacrifice for Egypt," *Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy*, May 18, 2015, <http://timep.org/commentary/north-sinai-population-continues-to-sacrifice-for-egypt/>.
 - 30 MFO 2012 Report, pp. 2-3.
 - 31 MFO 2014 Report, p. 3.