



INSS Insight No. 632, November 20, 2014

**The Egypt-Gaza Buffer Zone:
More Harm than Good for Sinai Security**
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The Egyptian military announced recently that it would put in place a long-planned “security zone” on its eastern border, where the Sinai Peninsula abuts the Gaza Strip. Egyptian forces began evacuating eight hundred homes in Egyptian Rafah, all within 500 meters of the Gaza border, displacing an estimated ten thousand Sinai residents; the size of the proposed secured area was subsequently doubled to 1000 meters. Policymakers in Cairo believe this buffer zone will stop the infiltration of weapons and militants through tunnels from Gaza. However, unless handled skillfully, such a move could drive an already marginalized population into the arms of Sinai-based militants, further complicating Cairo’s counterinsurgency operations.

A Drastic Move

Egypt has made major efforts to counter Sinai militants, and yet attacks against security forces in the peninsula continue. Recent months have seen the unfortunate trend of five to fifteen military and police casualties each week. The government of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has staked its reputation on restoring security in Egypt; and while the terrorism threat across the country is in many respects more manageable, the situation in Sinai does not present the image of a military “winning” a self-described “war on terror.”

Cairo’s decision to implement a closed-off security zone on the Sinai-Gaza border follows a horrific attack outside the North Sinai city of Sheikh Zuweid on October 24, 2014. In a multi-pronged attack that involved a suicide car bomber and rocket-propelled grenades, militants attacked a military checkpoint, killing at least 31 soldiers. The attack took the highest casualty toll since the 2004 simultaneous bombings in Taba and other resort cities, and took the single highest toll on Egypt’s military in decades. Egypt’s population, most of which lives far from Sinai, asks few questions about operations in the peninsula, and there is little independent reporting from the cities and villages in which security forces hunt down a shadowy threat. The government decided, however, that such a massive attack required an equally massive response.

The shock of the October 24 attack can be compared to the August 2012 “Rafah massacre,” in which sixteen soldiers were slaughtered on their base near the Gaza and Israeli borders. In 2012, then-President Mohamed Morsi responded to the attack by firing the defense minister and chief of staff, promoting el-Sisi to head the armed forces. Following this latest massacre, el-Sisi needed a drastic move of his own. For the retired field marshal, creating a buffer zone on the Gaza border was preferable to the prospect of ousting his former military colleagues.

The Gaza Connection

On November 14, 2014, in a 30-minute video, Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (ABM), the most organized and most lethal jihadi group in Sinai, claimed responsibility for the attack. Although made up primarily of Egyptians, ABM, whose name means “Supporters of Jerusalem,” likely had its origins in a Gaza jihadi camp, and it has maintained close ties with Gaza-based jihadi groups. ABM also recently pledged allegiance to the Islamic State organization, and the recent video was the first since the Sinai-based group’s rebranding as the “State of Sinai.”

As in August 2012, the Egyptian government claimed that the perpetrators of the October 24 attack received foreign assistance. Pointing the finger at Gaza justified the planned security zone. Although no evidence has appeared to prove Gaza’s links to the attack, Egyptian security sources claim that through the Gaza tunnels Hamas provides ABM with weapons in order to attack Egyptian security forces. Israeli intelligence sources concur that there is a connection between ABM and Hamas, although the Israeli view is that Hamas provides ABM with rockets to attack Israel, not Egypt. Yet in any event, given the precarious position of Hamas since the summer of 2013, and especially after the war of July-August 2014, it is unlikely the organization would want to provoke Egypt right now, shortly before a planned ceasefire follow-up meeting in Cairo. Another possibility is that a Gaza-based jihadi group or even a Hamas faction assisted the attackers specifically in order to spoil the planned ceasefire meeting, but this scenario is highly unlikely.

Indeed, the attack continued a trend in Sinai and was not necessarily an escalation: the target and method of the attack are familiar. Because attacks on checkpoints, even those using suicide bombers, are not new, foreign assistance was not necessary in the planning or execution of this attack. Internal terrorist groups, especially Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, could carry out such an attack on their own. Moreover, the broader insurgency in Sinai is based in the peninsula and not dependent on outside assistance, and therefore a buffer zone along the Sinai-Gaza border is unlikely to make a significant difference to the number of attacks in Sinai. In addition, since February 2013 the Egyptian military has cracked down on the smuggling tunnels under the border, and it has sustained this campaign by regularly returning to destroy them upon their restoration. However, these

measures did not affect the exponential increase in attacks Egypt has suffered since the summer of 2013.

Increasing Local Grievances

A buffer zone is likely to further damage the smuggling industry: any tunnel will have to be at least 1000 meters longer, and once discovered and destroyed would take more time to restore. However, what Egypt gains in further halting militant infiltration from Gaza would be wasted if the policy feeds the insurgency in Sinai itself. According to a press release from the Egyptian embassy in Washington, el-Sisi “stressed the need to provide the residents of this area time to evacuate and relocate,” although witnesses on the ground have described the expediency with which they were displaced.

Many residents of the border zone may be happy to leave an area prone to insurgent attacks, counterinsurgency operations, and the activities of smuggling gangs. Others may be less prepared to leave their homes, especially if proper compensation is not disbursed immediately. Sinai’s population is already marginalized from Egyptian society, and by driving residents from their land the Egyptian military risks driving them into the waiting arms of Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis and other violent anti-state groups.

ABM was eerily quiet last month, not commenting at the time on the “buffer zone” policy. However, ABM propaganda has previously decried displacement in Sinai to gain sympathy and recruits among the local population. In March 2014, an ABM video accused the Egyptian military of “creating a buffer zone” to “secure the Zionist enemy.”

Conclusion

For Gaza’s population, the buffer zone may signal further isolation, but the trade in smuggled consumer goods has already been halted to the point that this latest effort should have limited impact on the Strip’s already dire humanitarian situation. Israeli policymakers, therefore, need not worry about serious backlash from the Palestinian enclave, and indeed for almost a decade successive Israeli governments have encouraged more Egyptian activity on the Gaza border. However, Israel should be concerned that Egypt’s move could prolong instability in Sinai, which continues to bleed across the border.

Egyptian leaders, from the president down, repeatedly state that defeating the terrorist threat in Sinai will require cooperation from the local population. As such, the government in Cairo, with encouragement from its international partners, should enact policies that separate the Sinai population’s legitimate grievances from the irreconcilable grievances of Sinai-based jihadis. Evacuating law-abiding citizens from their homes goes against such efforts and may make it even harder for Egypt to extinguish the Sinai threat.