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Evil Develops in the South

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It was recently reported that Egyptian authorities have arrested five people, including Mohammed Eid Musleh Hamad, the leader of al-Mujahideen al-Takhfirin. Hamad's organization was established in early 2011, following the Tahrir Square demonstrations that led to the toppling of President Husni Mubarak's regime and the dismantling of Egypt's powerful internal security mechanisms, which had been responsible for the brutal as well as effective suppression of activity by Islamic organizations in Egypt. Once these security mechanisms were dismantled, the campaign led by Egyptian authorities against Islamic terrorism essentially ended. The recent arrest of the suspects exposed the existence of the new organization and its involvement in a long list of terrorism activity stemming from the Sinai Peninsula, including seven attacks on the gas pipeline from Egypt to Israel and Jordan, attacks on members of the regime, policemen, and police stations in the El Arish area, and the August 18, 2011 attack in southern Israel. The establishment of the organization and its activities demonstrate the risks inherent in developments that may emerge from the Arab spring, especially the growing strength of global jihadists in areas with only loose governmental control.

This past July the new organization announced itself to be an affiliate of al-Qaeda in the Islamic emirate of the Sinai Peninsula, declared its intention to apply *sharia* law in the Islamic emirate it has established in the Sinai, and demanded the ouster of all Egyptian security services and other foreign elements from the area. Beyond the activities of the specific group, this may reflect an attempt by Ayman al-Zawahiri, an Egyptian and the heir to Osama Bin Laden – and as such the new leader of al-Qaeda – to focus special efforts on realizing the historic vision of turning Egypt into a nation subject to the rule of Islamic law and to single it out as the spearhead for similar revolutions throughout the Muslim world.

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The political and security changes in Egypt since the start of the Tahrir Square protests have drawn the Egyptian regime's attention away from occurrences in the Sinai and turned what was, until very recently, Israel's quietest border for 30 years into a complex security challenge. For several months Israel's security establishment has been of the opinion that the Sinai has to a large extent become a no-man's-land, serving as a repository of sophisticated weapons smuggled in from Egypt and Libya and populated by terrorists of an uncompromising radical world view, including Bedouin extremists who have embraced Salafist jihadism. Although between 2004 and 2006 some Bedouins participated in showcase terrorist attacks in Nueiba, Ras a-Satan, and Sharm el-Sheikh, the Egyptian security services managed to neutralize their continued operations with sweeping arrests among the clans that were involved in the attacks.

Thus in addition to the terrorist attacks carried out by Salafist organizations from the Gaza Strip against Israel, primarily through rocket and mortar fire, booby trapping attempts, and attacks against patrols, there is now a growing risk of cooperation between Gaza Strip terrorists and Sinai-based terrorists. The August 18, 2011 attack near Eilat, in which eight Israelis were killed and 28 wounded, and eight Egyptians were killed (three died as a result of the attackers' suicide bombings and five were killed by IDF defensive fire aimed at those shooting towards Israel from the Egyptian side) was an example of this cooperation. The IDF's investigation concluded that the attack was a precedent: operationally, it was a cooperative effort between operatives of the Popular Resistance Committees, a splinter group that broke off from Fatah and in recent years adopted a Salafist world view, and the Egyptian organization. The attack bore the nature of an organized military operation and displayed some of the trademarks of al-Qaeda and its affiliates: a high level of operational ability, extensive and meticulous planning, resolve on the part of the attackers, and dedication to the mission. The attacking force numbered 15 terrorists, of whom 13 were killed in the course of the attack. One team of this unit placed itself on the Israel side and created a corridor of fire, directed at Israeli civilians, along the road leading to Eilat. Two other teams provided back-up fire on the Egyptian side of the border, and the final team lay waiting in the Sinai, ambushing the Israeli security services; this last team was armed with anti-helicopter missiles.

On the basis of the manner in which it was carried out, the strategic objective of the operation was presumably to draw Israel into a military response inside the Egyptian area in order to arouse a severe political reaction from Egypt. This goal was partially attained as Israeli fire directed at Sinai caused the deaths of five Egyptian soldiers, arousing furious responses from Egyptian public and leadership figures hostile to Israel. However, Israel was not drawn into engaging in extraordinary or immediate measures in the Gaza Strip, which could have exacerbated public reactions in Egypt. Rather, it cooperated with Egypt in investigating the affair and apologized for the soldiers' deaths.

The repeated attacks by Salafist terrorists in the Sinai against Israel and Egypt are intended to lead to an abrogation of the peace treaty between the two countries by creating escalating provocations, damage mutual Egyptian-Israeli economic interests (chiefly the gas supply agreement), and strengthen ties with Salafist jihadist groups in the Gaza Strip. Operational and ideological cooperation between Egyptian and Gazan Salafists is also a blatant challenge to the Hamas regime in the Gaza Strip. All these elements could drag the region into a comprehensive war in the south, something neither Hamas nor Israel is interested in, and even cause the military and political ties between the new regime in Egypt and Israel to deteriorate.

The developments along the Egyptian border in the last year compel Israel to consider it as a "hot spot," and therefore make new arrangements there, different from those of the past. The long desert border, the proximity to the Gaza Strip, and the terms of the peace treaty with Egypt, which enabled the maximal calm during the Mubarak era, limit Israel's ability to act militarily with regard to the Sinai. In light of this, Israel has in recent months accelerated construction of the border fence, reinforced its presence along a fenceless portion of the border, and established a regular brigade headquarters in the southern sector of the border, manned by Nahal soldiers (Amos Harel, *Haaretz*, November 11, 2011). Comments by the Chief of Staff that the situation in the south might escalate into a new campaign in the Gaza Strip, and the heightened alert in the IDF and the security forces with regard to the Sinai, also require political awareness to make sure that Israel does not fall victim to strategic ambushes set by various terrorist groups seeking not only to cause harm to Israeli civilians and soldiers but also to drag Israel into high intensity combat on two fronts in the south. From Israel's point of view, effective Egyptian security control over the Sinai and the avoidance of military and political escalation are a shared Israeli-Egyptian interest. It appears that this challenge will confront Israel again in the not too distant future.

