Executive summary

For more than 30 years, the Sinai peninsula was a stable security backwater, requiring little attention from Egypt and Israel, or from the broader international community including the United States, the strategic anchor of the peaceful relations between the two countries. This complacency is no longer tenable. Sinai, a triangular peninsula in Egypt about 60,000 km² in area, bordering Israel, the Gaza Strip, the Mediterranean Sea and the Gulfs of Suez and Aqaba, is increasingly unstable, as a consequence of dramatic changes in the region and a long history of neglect and discrimination by the central government in Cairo.

The collapse of the old order in Sinai creates new threats to Egyptian, Israeli and Palestinian security. The existing frameworks for bilateral and multilateral consultation and monitoring were devised to preserve an environment that no longer exists. The transformations taking place in Sinai (including the Gaza Strip) across multiple fronts, and the new relationships created between these developments and the unfolding revolution in Cairo, are harbingers of a new and different relationship between Israel and Egypt that risks challenging core elements of the foundational alliance between Israel and Egypt.

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Overview

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The collapse of the old order in Sinai creates new threats to Egyptian, Israeli-, and Palestinian interests. The existing frameworks for bilateral and multilateral consultation and monitoring were devised to preserve an environment that no longer exists. The transformations taking place in Sinai (including the Gaza Strip) across multiple fronts, and the new relationships created between these developments and the unfolding revolution in Cairo, are harbingers of a new and different relationship between Israel and Egypt that risks challenging core elements of the foundational alliance between Israel and Egypt.

The belated recognition of this process by the international community and to some extent by the parties themselves is noteworthy. International attention, led by the United States and the Quartet, has focused almost exclusively on the Ramallah–Tel Aviv axis, even though the region south of Israel’s border including the Sinai peninsula and the Gaza Strip has for many years been the scene of the most dynamic interaction – diplomatic, security and economic – between the parties. Egypt, Israel and Palestine (Gaza) have each seen essential elements of their national security challenged or even threatened by developments in this long-somnambulant region.

Sinai transformed

Sinai has been transformed by a number of dramatic changes, principally:

- A revolution in Israel’s security and economic policies towards the Gaza Strip, based upon the assessment that Israel’s security on its southern frontier could be enhanced by complete withdrawal of permanently stationed military and civilian (settlements) forces from the Gaza Strip. Implementation of this “disengagement” policy in 2005 reflected not only a rethinking of Israel’s views towards Gaza but, as a consequence, a more aggressive, antagonistic clash between Israeli and Egyptian interests.

- The creation of a new Palestinian entity in Gaza under the leadership of the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas). The government in Gaza exercises some attributes of sovereignty, including the creation and operation of a comparatively effective military force – the first in Palestinian history – intent upon monopolising force within Gaza and engaging in the creation of well-defined, albeit inherently unstable, military “rules of the game” with Israel.

- The unwelcome consequences for Egypt of the new Israeli strategy, including Israel’s permanent economic “siege” of Gaza, the conflict erupting most virulently in the Cast Lead campaign (2008–2009), and rule by an Islamist government in Gaza. Cairo’s historical view of Gaza as a security challenge was reinforced by these changes, at a time when Cairo’s power to address them was weakening.

Egypt is currently engaged in its most extensive military action in Sinai since the October 1973 War. The breakdown of law and order in Sinai, including the disappearance of Egypt’s civil police and the control exercised by Cairo over the local population, has created conditions that directly threaten Egypt’s national security. The most notable example of this development occurred when militants killed 16 Egyptian troops in August 2012 and breached the border with Israel, using stolen Egyptian military vehicles. Ironically, these developments highlight the need for increased security and intelligence cooperation between Egypt and Gaza (Hamas) and indirectly with Israel to address common threats posed by jihadi and other armed elements.

- Dramatic changes in Israel’s security and intelligence deployment along the Israel–Egypt border and transformation of the border into a “hot” arena for execution of non-conventional security threats against Israel.

- The absence of effective Egyptian ruling
Institutional shortcomings

Existing frameworks for diplomatic consultations, security mechanisms, and international presence (MFO, EUBAMM) are ill suited to this new reality. For example, bilateral consultations between Israel and Egypt are, when they exist, ad hoc and characterised by crisis decision making (security incidents, economic sabotage). Critical and legitimate Egyptian and Israeli military deployments have been made unilaterally and without notification. Many of the deployments of Egyptian forces are clear violations of the peace treaty with Israel. Some of these, notably the recent addition of Egyptian forces in Sinai, have, in contrast to earlier deployments in recent years, have been implemented without Israel’s consent.

Ad hoc, extra-treaty modifications of agreed-upon Egyptian force deployments in Sinai now define the bilateral modus operandi for security decision making. This method is preferred by all parties but recent events have exposed its limitations. In the current environment it represents an unstable and worrisome method of operation.

Egypt has for many years been uneasy with the treaty restriction on sovereign Egyptian action in Sinai – especially in the security realm. Recent attacks in Sinai on Egyptian forces and cross-border engagements with Israeli forces have created a new and potentially more compelling case for insistent Egyptian action in this sphere. As a statement issued on 8 August 2012 by the Muslim Brotherhood noted, “The assassination of our soldiers on the border near Rafah has proved beyond doubt the need for our military to focus on its core mission and duties, to protect the country and its borders, and the need to reconsider the Camp David Accords.”

The MFO’s mandate and operational activities reflect a mission and a strategic landscape that is shaking under its feet. In critical respects the MFO is simply not built to address the key security issues now evolving in Sinai and, more broadly, among Israel, Egypt and the Gaza Strip.

There is no architecture in place for trilateral (U.S.–Egypt–Israel) or bilateral (U.S.–Israel, U.S.–Israel, Egypt–Israel) consultations to modify the institutions created to consolidate the Egyptian–Israeli peace treaty or even to exchange views. Changes made under pressure of events have served to undermine rather than fortify strategic stability. More broadly, mechanisms created to consolidate the old order need to be reimagined in order to understand and address the dramatically different contemporary political and security environment.

Useful next steps

Interested parties should undertake a comprehensive review of the current state of play in and around Sinai, including the Israel–Egypt border, the Sinai coastal waters and the Gaza perimeter, including maritime deployments and issues, Egyptian security deployments in Sinai.

The international community should work with Egypt to restore and improve policing and governance in Sinai.

Treaty signatories and participating countries should develop options for operational and statutory modifications of the MFO.

Recent developments highlight the need for increased security and intelligence cooperation between Egypt and Gaza (Hamas) and indirectly with Israel to address common threats posed by jihadi and other armed elements. In addition, joint consideration should be given to creation of a new architecture for bilateral (U.S.–Israel, U.S.–Egypt) and trilateral (U.S.–Egypt–Israel) consultations on Sinai aimed at pre-empting
and defusing common threats – terror, arms smuggling, human trafficking – and developing agreed upon protocols for crisis management of bilateral relations (border security, Gaza).

Bilateral consultations between Egypt and Gaza on security and border/trade functionality should proceed, along with efforts to restore trade and travel links between the West Bank and Gaza via Israel.

Israel and Egypt, notwithstanding the dramatic political and security developments, remain united in their support for the core elements of their bilateral peace treaty. This unity needs to be encouraged and reaffirmed through a variety of mechanisms, including those in the security realm. Egypt must be permitted to deploy security forces adequate to address the current challenges to its own domestic and national security. It is best that such action be taken after agreed-upon consultations with affected parties, particularly Israel and the United States, in order to preserve the spirit of the treaty. Modifications of restrictions on the deployment of Egyptian forces in Sinai may well result from such consultations. Indeed, ad hoc decisions of this nature have been implemented for more than a year. There is some advantage in maintaining this type of ambiguity, but this is only a short-term, illusory fix. The interests of all parties are best served by adapting their relationship to the new context now unfolding.

Interested parties should reconsider the international, third-party presence in the Sinai region today, represented by the MFO in Sinai and (the moribund) EUBAMM along the Egypt–Gaza border. Neither organisation is currently configured to address contemporary challenges to their original missions, which themselves may need to be revised to account for the dramatic changes in the region.