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## Troubled Times for the Sinai Peninsula

The Sinai Peninsula has recently experienced an upsurge in extremist violence, particularly against its energy infrastructure. Improving the security of this fragile region, writes Sonia Rothwell, will depend on the domestic and regional policies of the Mursi government and the Obama administration.

By Sonia Rothwell for ISN

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The Sinai Peninsula, the de-militarized desert buffer zone which has helped keep peace between Israel and Egypt for 33 years, is the focus of increased tensions following a number of militant attacks along the border in recent months. On 5 August, 16 Egyptian soldiers were killed during an attack in the north of Sinai. It was the deadliest peace-time attack on an Egyptian military target in decades and prompted the government to launch Operation Eagle, [reportedly](#) killing 20 militants in airstrikes in retaliation. Egyptian president Mohammed Mursi also sacked high ranking security officials and the governor of North Sinai as a consequence of the attack.

Insecurity has been steeply rising in the already restive Sinai over the past 18 months following the uprising against former Egyptian leader Hosni Mubarak. As the new Islamist government of Mohammed Mursi establishes itself, the emerging security vacuum threatens to be exploited. Symbolically as well as physically, Sinai is a bridge between the African and Asian continents and also between Arab and Israeli cultures. Strategically, it provides a neutral space between Israel and Egypt which has helped keep tensions under control in the past. Should it become overly-militarized, there would be a higher risk of conflict between the two states.

Accordingly, the security situation in Sinai is dependent on a range of interwoven factors: Egypt's relationship with Israel and native Bedouin tribes in the region, and the interests of external actors such as Al Qaeda affiliates who can [successfully exploit the increasing instability](#) on the peninsula.

### Background

In 1979, after days of secret negotiations, Egypt and Israel signed a treaty to establish peace in the Sinai Peninsula. The breakthrough followed Israel's capture and occupation of the area after the Six Day War of 1967. Under the [terms of the peace agreement](#), Israel would withdraw from Sinai on the condition that Egypt would limit the number of troops stationed on the peninsula. During the uprising against the Mubarak regime in 2011, Israel allowed two battalions of Egyptian troops to move into the far south of Sinai for the first time since the signing of the 1979 [peace treaty](#). In September 2012, however, [Israel ruled out making any permanent changes](#) to the agreement to allow a larger Egyptian military presence in the area ostensibly to halt the deterioration in security.

This could cause serious problems for Egypt as due to its [geographic size and demographic features](#), the Sinai area is difficult to police and control. Among Sinai's 600,000 inhabitants are a number of Bedouin communities. The Bedouin have for a long time been side-lined by Cairo and have resorted to tactics such as the kidnapping of foreigners to draw attention to their economic and political grievances. Attempts by the Egyptian government to engage and integrate the Bedouin have largely failed. The Bedouin demand more state support, political recognition and the power to elect their own governor, who is currently appointed by Cairo. External actors such as terrorists and criminal gangs have also been able to [take advantage of this estrangement](#).

The Bedouin have intimate knowledge of the vast, inhospitable Sinai terrain, a useful asset for criminal purposes such as smuggling. Commentary from Stratfor has identified the Bedouin's poverty as a vulnerability which can be and is being exploited by groups with a vested interest in maintaining instability in the Sinai. Jihadists such as Ansar Bayt al-Maqdes, for instance, use the security breakdown in order to [mount attacks on Israel from Sinai](#). Others take advantage of the reported thousands of underground tunnels in Sinai to smuggle goods into the heavily fortified Gaza strip whose borders are tightly controlled by Israel. Egypt's land border to the territory is the only one not controlled by Israel. However, since the 5 August attack, the Egyptian government claims to have closed one tenth of the tunnels. Tribal people are also suspected of being complicit in smuggling drugs and trafficking people into Israel as well as ferrying arms into Gaza.

According to the [Economist](#), Bedouin leaders report that the militant Islamist movements on the peninsula are proving attractive to otherwise disenfranchised young Bedouin who are clamoring to join their ranks. The [Long War Journal reports](#) that since the beginning of the Arab Spring, a number of new jihadist groups have formed in Sinai. One of them, Jund al Sharia, announced its formation just days before the 5 August attack against Egyptian army personnel. In its inaugural statement, the group had threatened to carry out attacks against US peacekeepers in Sinai as well as the Egyptian military and government if its demands were not met. According to the Long War Journal, four new jihadi groups have emerged in Sinai since the beginning of the Middle East uprisings, capitalizing upon the security vacuum and uncertainty created by the overthrow of the Mubarak regime.

Apart from the violent incidents along the border, there have also been attacks on state symbols such as police stations and gas pipelines. Fourteen separate bomb attacks have been carried out since February 2011 on the gas pipeline and terminals in North Sinai near the town of Al-Arish, according to the [UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Office \(FCO\)](#) which has also issued travel warnings for Sinai.

Politically, it is important for the new Egyptian government to build stable relations with its neighbors. Mohammed Mursi's government has inherited ragged relations with Israel. Although Egypt was the first Arab state to recognize Israel, the deteriorating security situation in Sinai has rattled Tel Aviv's relationship with its Arab neighbor. This comes at a time when Israel is faced with threats from a potentially nuclear Iran which President Mursi made a point of visiting ahead of a trip to the United States. Further evidence of the agitation between the two countries came in spring 2012, when [Egypt revoked an agreement to provide natural gas to Israel](#) because of rows over Egypt failing to meet its contractual commitments. This was at least partially due to the continued attacks on the gas supply pipelines in the Sinai region.

Moreover, Mursi's Muslim Brotherhood background makes him an uneasy partner for Israel to deal with. Although he showed no intention of tearing up the Egypt-Israel peace treaty, he is cautious about being seen as too supportive of Israel. And while establishing himself as Egypt's new president, it can be expected that he seeks to establish a political style different from that of his predecessor, who was seen as a compliant friend of the West and therefore Israel.

A further factor impacting the stability of Sinai is its proximity to the Gaza strip and Egypt's relations

with Gaza's Hamas government. Reports suggest if not a *froideur* between Egypt and Hamas, at least an unenthusiastic reception from the new Mursi government by its fellow Islamists. Hamas may have expected the change in regime to an overtly Islamist government to benefit its cause. But by taking action on the Sinai tunnels and [sentencing Islamist militants to death for terrorist attacks](#) on army and police targets in the region Mursi has demonstrated his determination to crack down on militant groups.

## Outlook

The re-election of Barack Obama in the US may provide some external support for tackling the problems in the Sinai. As the incumbent President would not be dependent upon funding from Israeli affiliated groups for his re-election, he could act with more obvious consideration for both sides of the border. However, if Mursi intends to be his own man, he may reject help from the US, preferring to show his control both over the military and the militants by dealing with the problem himself. During the election campaign in Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood supported the Bedouin and promised help with grievances such as lack of employment and an improved infrastructure. If Mursi is able to keep these promises, he may have a hope of at least reigning in the mercenary inclinations of some Bedouin and at the same time, reducing the incentives to join the Islamists. But given other more pressing problems such as national reconciliation, rampant unemployment, corruption and poverty, it remains to be seen whether Mursi has the restoration of peace in Sinai near to the top of his 'to-do' list.

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For additional reading on this topic please see:

[Sinai Moves to Centre-Stage](#)

[Egypt-Sinai-Gaza](#)

[Egypt: An Era of Uncertainty](#)

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