

Though the Egyptian military deployment into the Sinai Peninsula includes a significant amount of firepower, the sheer size of the rugged terrain, as well as the number of hostile elements in the region, will severely restrict the military's efforts to suppress Sinai militancy. Unrest in Sinai had been climbing gradually, but the military's removal of President Mohammed Morsi on July 3 sparked a new wave of violence, with attacks occurring daily against Egyptian police and military targets. The military responded by sending armour, combat helicopters and personnel into the region. Ultimately, the deployment will not have much of a long-term impact on militancy there unless it is maintained indefinitely or the forces are increased significantly.

Reports indicate that the Egyptian military, with Israel's consent, bolstered its military presence in the peninsula above the restrictions in the 1979 peace accords. There are currently around 11 infantry battalions and at least one tank battalion in Sinai, and other reports indicate that more tanks, infantry fighting vehicles and armored personnel carriers have been shuttled into the region. There are also combat helicopters operating in support of ground operations.

One of the two most recently deployed infantry battalions is being moved to El Arish. Conflicting reports place the other battalion in Sharm el-Sheikh or Rafah. In early July, multiple tanks, armored personnel carriers and infantry fighting vehicles were reported to be operating at the border of Gaza and Sinai. The picture that is developing is of a concentration of forces primarily around El Arish and Rafah.

Growing instability

The amount of firepower deployed is among the most significant in these specific zones of the Sinai Peninsula since 1979. Sinai is demarcated into specific zones, each of which is permitted a specific allocation of forces under the watchful eye of a multinational peacekeeping force. Egypt and Israel have had little choice but to override these limits over the past three years as security incidents have steadily increased in number and intensity, including attacks across Israel's southern border and deadly ambushes on Egyptian police, border patrols and the military. To be sure, for more than a decade Sinai has been a chaotic place, replete with intermittent kidnappings, rocket attacks and pipeline bombings, but the pace and severity has become more acute recently.

In August 2012, militants ambushed and killed 16 Egyptian soldiers before stealing an armored personnel carrier, which they used to ram through the newly constructed Israeli border fence in an effort to conduct a complex suicide attack. An Israel Defense Forces helicopter was able to engage and destroy the vehicle. In response to this incident, Egypt was allowed to deploy several thousand infantry, hundreds of armored personnel carriers and infantry fighting vehicles and around two battalions of main battle tanks (similar in size and makeup to what we are seeing currently). Several weeks of operations were conducted against militants in the area. It is not entirely clear but it seems that most of these forces were withdrawn after the security operation was completed last year.

At the heart of the cooperation between the militaries of Egypt and Israel is the need to preserve the strategic truce in place since 1979. Egypt's security interests include protecting the free flow of commerce through the Suez Canal, keeping the various energy pipelines from being disrupted and preventing further kidnappings and extortions. But most important, it wants to limit logistical flows to Palestinian groups and keep militant attacks on Israel to a minimum so that Israel will not take unilateral action in Sinai and threaten Egypt's sovereignty. Israel desires a quiet southern border so it can concentrate on the many other threats it faces on its other borders, such as the Syrian civil war to the north and the always volatile Gaza Strip. Gaza in particular complicates the Sinai security situation. The Israeli

security perimeter and naval blockade effectively limit Gaza's logistics to its southern border with Sinai. While the Rafah crossing itself is heavily monitored and screened, smuggling tunnels beneath the border have served as the critical supply route for all of Gaza. Militants have traveled both ways through these tunnels, and while they initially conducted attacks mostly in southern Israel, the efforts of Egyptian forces to interdict the militants have made Egypt a target as well. Egyptian and Israeli officials have on several occasions voiced frustration over what they describe as Hamas' lackluster response to the flow of weapons and militants into Sinai. Hamas has taken action against some groups but has focused more on controlling threats to its power than assisting surrounding governments.

◆ In the wake of Operation Pillar of Defense in late 2012, Israel and the Egyptian military could not follow through on pledges to keep the Rafah border crossing open due to high militant activity in Sinai. Hamas was believed to be using the militant threat through the region as leverage in its negotiations with the Egyptian military and Israel. The Morsi government sanctioned some smaller operations to destroy some tunnels and root out some militants, but the Egyptian military restrained itself from conducting full-scale operations while the government tried negotiations with the various parties in the peninsula. The Muslim Brotherhood also did not want to be overaggressive and risk straining its relationship with Hamas. When domestic unrest captured Cairo's attention, these talks stalled and Sinai militancy began to escalate again, further frustrating the military.

A Pre-Planned Assault

The timing, pace and scale of the military buildup in Sinai indicates that an operation had been planned for some time. It also appears that while the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas are still trying to adjust to the new political reality in Cairo, the military is using the opportunity to conduct more thorough operations in Sinai.

One of the Egyptian military's interesting moves was the decision to deploy personnel and armor at the Gaza border just before Morsi's removal. (Reports suggest that as many as 50 tanks, infantry fighting vehicles and armored personnel carriers, as well as at least one battalion of troops, were deployed.) It seems the Egyptian command anticipated the potential for Gaza militants to respond negatively to Morsi's ouster and positioned forces in a way that they could not only threaten to completely sever the militants' important logistics line but also block militants from flowing back into Sinai. The current size of the Egyptian force in Sinai and the complete lack of movement by Israel Defense Forces suggest that Egypt has no intent to directly engage Gaza or enter its territory.

Considering the similarities between the latest deployment and last year's force, it is likely that the purposes are the same. Egypt's military is taking advantage of the recent political chaos to pursue its decided objective of bringing Sinai militancy back to tolerable levels. Though the deployed force seems large, the Sinai Peninsula is vast and rugged. The units will have to disperse into several smaller units to cover the entirety of the terrain and be effective in rooting out small militant cells.

The militants' preferred tactics will likely be ambushes and improvised explosive devices, the effects of which will be somewhat mitigated by the use of armored vehicles. Infantry and armor will likely work in conjunction to sweep through the territory, while airpower will be available when targets have been flushed out and identified. Militants in the region have also recently shown a propensity to attack fixed installations with predominantly small arms and rocket-propelled grenades. The abundance of armor will help protect against these types of attacks and shore up defenses.

Like many conventional responses to guerrilla-type combat environments in difficult terrain, the Egyptian military crackdown

will probably have limited effects and will only temporarily degrade or suppress militancy in the region. But dynamics have shifted such that this type of security operation in Sinai will become the norm. This operation is more about managing security than completely eliminating the threat -- a decidedly unrealistic goal -- and the main players in the region will have to adjust to the evolving security balance.