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Avoiding an Explosion in the Sinai Powder Keg

By Itamar Rabinovich

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The crisis in the Sinai Peninsula seems to have been dwarfed by Sunday's drama in Cairo. But Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi's civilian coup, in which he dismissed General Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, the leader of the army's supreme command, has not diminished the importance of the trouble there.

Earlier this month, jihadi terrorists ambushed an Egyptian military base in Sinai, killing 16 Egyptian soldiers. They then hijacked two armored personnel carriers and sped toward the frontier with Israel. One vehicle failed to break through the border crossing; the other penetrated Israeli territory, before being stopped by the Israel Defense Forces, or IDF. In response, Egypt's military and security forces launched an offensive against Bedouin militants in Sinai, while Morsi forced the General Intelligence Service's director to retire and dismissed the governor of Northern Sinai.

These episodes highlight the complexity of the Middle East's changing geopolitical landscape,

the fragility of Egypt's post-Mubarak political order, and the explosive potential of Sinai, which, though sparsely populated, includes Egypt's borders with Israel and the Palestinian enclave of Gaza. Indeed, since Hosni Mubarak's ouster last year, security in Sinai has deteriorated, and the region has become fertile ground for Islamic extremism.

The 1979 Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty mandated that Sinai be largely demilitarized in order to serve as a buffer zone between the two former enemies. Tourism and natural-gas pipelines linking the two countries provided economic resources for the local Bedouin.

But as Mubarak's regime declined, so did the government's control over the Bedouin. Palestinian militants from Gaza — an active arena of Israeli-Palestinian confrontation since Hamas gained control in 2007 — and jihadi terrorists affiliated with al-Qaida and the larger "global jihad" network penetrated Sinai, exploiting the government's neglect of the region and inflaming the local population's feelings of anger and disenfranchisement.

Israelis complained about Mubarak's "cold peace," but they appreciated that he adhered to the treaty's fundamental provisions. Now the behavior of his successors from the military and the Muslim Brotherhood has revived security challenges and raised difficult questions about the region's future.

For example, in August 2011, a jihadi group from Gaza seized control of an Egyptian outpost on Israel's border and killed eight Israeli civilians. Their objective was to damage the Israeli-Egyptian relationship further, which is already more fragile than ever, and they succeeded: The IDF accidentally killed several Egyptian soldiers during the incident. The Egyptian security forces' subsequent failure to prevent demonstrators from storming Israel's embassy in Cairo brought matters to the brink of calamity.

The uncertainty and disorder that have plagued Egypt for the last 18 months are fueling increasing lawlessness in Sinai. Last month, a pipeline carrying Egyptian natural gas to Israel and Jordan was bombed — the 15th such attack since Mubarak's regime was toppled — and remains out of commission.

There are four principal actors in this arena: Israel, Egypt, Hamas, and the Sinai jihadis. Israel wants, first and foremost, peace and stability. To this end, Israeli leaders expect Egypt's government to reestablish its authority in Sinai, and, despite the peace treaty's provisions, have agreed to Egyptian requests to increase its military presence in the region.

Moreover, Israel has practically abandoned any hope of receiving agreed gas supplies from Egypt, and has not pressed its demand that Egypt block the passage of sophisticated weapons to Gaza. Israel is determined not to act against terrorist groups and infrastructure on Egypt's territory. And, in view of Hamas' close links with Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, whose political party backed Morsi's successful presidential run, Israel has restrained its response to terrorist and rocket attacks from Gaza.

But Egypt's divided government has not established a correspondingly coherent policy. Relations with Israel are managed by the defense minister, now Lieutenant General Abdul Fattah al-Sisi, and the military security establishment, whose leaders are determined to maintain a peaceful relationship with Israel and to secure Egyptian sovereignty in the Sinai. For them, the lawless Bedouin, the Sinai jihadis, and Hamas and other groups in Gaza

threaten Egypt's national security. But their will and ability to translate this view into policy are limited.

Meanwhile, Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood are playing a double game. While Morsi denounced the recent violence (particularly the deliberate killing of Egyptian policemen) and issued an implicit threat against Hamas, the Brotherhood published a statement accusing Israel's Mossad of perpetrating the attack —a claim that Hamas's Prime Minister of Gaza, Ismael Haniyeh, has repeated.

In fact, Hamas, too, is playing a double game. Having lost Syrian backing, it is hoping that the Egyptian Brothers will provide its kindred movement with political and logistical support. Yet it allows radical Palestinians and jihadi groups in Gaza to conduct operations in Sinai.

The fourth actor, the Sinai jihadis, comprises primarily Bedouins, whose distinct origins and long-time marginalization have led some to identify with radical Islamist groups (often while working in the Arabian Peninsula). While this group's primary goal is to undermine Israel-Egypt relations, they do not shy away from operating directly against the Egyptian state. Given their strategic location, Sinai jihadis could easily be used by larger terrorist networks to target strategically vital locations, such as the Suez Canal.

Egypt's government was humiliated and incensed by the recent terrorist provocation. But it is too early to tell whether its security crackdown in Sinai is a one-time operation, intended to placate angry citizens, or the beginning of a serious effort to address the interconnected problems in Sinai and Gaza. It is also too early to tell whether Morsi's shakeup in Cairo was related to, or expedited by, the Sinai events. But Sinai's explosive potential clearly has been increased by the Muslim Brotherhood's takeover.

Israel's longstanding channel of communication with Egypt through the military has disappeared, and may or may not be replaced by a similar channel. Hamas and the Bedouins in Sinai have most likely been emboldened by the latest developments in Cairo.

But, as Egypt's domestic politics take their course, Israel, which has had to tread softly in its relationship with Egypt and in Sinai since January 2011, will have to behave with even greater sensitivity in the days ahead.

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