# Armed Groups in the Sinai Peninsula

Comprehensive Information on Complex Crises

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*This document discusses the growing presence of terror organisations in the geo-politically important Sinai Peninsula and their growing relationship with indigenous Bedouin tribes, and outlines the responses of the key actors in the region to the complex security environment. Related information is available at www.cimicweb.org.* **Hyperlinks to source material are highlighted in blue and underlined in the text. All maps are hyperlinked to their source locations.**

## Introduction

Two years after the fall of President Hosni Mubarak, the Sinai Peninsula remains a significant security challenge for the Egyptian government. In post-revolution Egypt, Sinai became less of a priority as the government dealt with increasing economic and political turmoil throughout the rest of the country. The resulting security vacuum attracted radical elements from all over the Middle East and has increasingly become a concern for both Egypt and Israel. The complicated security environment has allowed both local Bedouin tribes and radical Islamic organisations to operate with near impunity in the region and has presented a significant challenge the Egyptian government struggles to contain, according to the *Carnegie Endowment*.

This report summarises the politics and history of the Sinai Peninsula and the indigenous Bedouin tribes. It then gives a brief overview of the militant groups that have recently moved into the region as well as the responses by Egypt, Israel and the international community.

## Overview

Located in the easternmost part of Egypt bordering Israel, the Sinai Peninsula is separated from the Egyptian mainland by the Suez Canal. With a size of 60,000 square kilometres, Sinai is three times the size of Israel and contain 2 of Egypt's 27 governorates: North Sinai, one of the poorest governorates in the country, and South Sinai. Sinai's population of just 600,000 is composed of 30 major tribes, making the area difficult for organised political control, according to *Ahram Online*. Experts believe that the geo-strategic positioning and size are primary reasons for the area's continued instability: "Sinai is a borderland in which all types of illegal activities occur and is thus very difficult to control; this applies to all border areas around the world," according to Egyptian activist and political sociologist Saadeddin Ibrahim. Additionally, the rugged terrain, which includes both vast deserts and mountains, are full of landmines, caves and tunnels.



Source: NY Books

Furthermore, international accords – such as the 1979 Camp David treaty with Israel – coupled with vested parties that benefit from Sinai's geo-strategic positioning, affect the area's stability. Sinai was an active battleground dur-

ing the Israeli – Egyptian wars of 1956, 1967, and 1973. The Camp David Accords established a peace agreement between the two countries and returned the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt. The Accords specified that the region be divided into demilitarised zones, limiting the Egyptian army's operational capabilities. Today, the region remains largely under populated and underdeveloped, home to a majority indigenous Bedouin population.

**The Bedouin**

The Bedouin comprise approximately 200,000 people, allied with fifteen tribes, according to *Al Monitor*. These tribes have particular territories, and maintain a network of inter-tribal customs and agreements. The largest tribes are Sawarka and Tarabin in Northern Sinai and Muszeina in South Sinai. They are highly stratified societies governed according to tribal customs and laws. Sinai was a neglected region under former President Hosni Mubarak, which marginalised the local Bedouin population offering them meagre economic and social opportunities. The Bedouin were not able to serve in the army, police and other public services. While a surge of tourism in South Sinai offered some employment opportunities, most of the Bedouin were excluded. The result was a low-level conflict that dragged on for years between the tribes and government in Cairo. Bedouins found the prospect for economic survival vis-à-vis the smuggling industry utilising underground tunnels to Gaza. As a result of Israel's blockade in Gaza, Hamas found an alternative means of supply through Sinai tunnels, which have permitted the lucrative smuggling of goods and people, making Sinai a primary trade route into Gaza.



*The Bedouin Tribes of the Sinai Peninsula*
Source: All Sinai

As the Bedouin emerged from social isolation in the aftermath of the Arab Spring and asserted their new found freedom, concerns that new alliances were forming among the tribes and al Qaeda began to emerge. Indeed, the subsequent disorganisation resulting from the revolution created a security void that allowed Islamic militant organisations access to fertile ground in an already lawless region. *Al Monitor* reports that Islamic militants and their radical ideology became appealing to sections of the disenfranchised local population, particularly youth, who have increasingly embraced religious devoutness. Faced with poverty and few job prospects, Bedouin youth have been gradually influenced by the radical Salafi ideology. The Bedouin form a clan-based and patrilineal society; however, radical Islam defies the Bedouin family structure, which makes it unacceptable for Bedouin leaders, but may be more appealing to the less influential Bedouin.

**Armed Groups**

To date, there is no clear picture of the groups and numbers of terror groups in Sinai, informs *Al Monitor*. Western intelligence sources know of the existence of several dozen militant bases, with an estimated fifteen to twenty members each. However, according to the Israeli military, a common trait of all terrorist organisations operational in Sinai is their link to Gaza; most of the Sinai-based organisations are believed to be offshoots of Gaza terror groups and are active in both areas. According to *The Long War Journal*, Egyptian officials have also voiced fears that Algerian and Libyan militants are now present in the Peninsula. Sinai also serves as a transit point for weapons from Sudan and Libya to Gaza. Groups are funded through arms and human trafficking in addition to alleged support from foreign terror groups, such as Hezbollah and states like Iran. Almost all groups (with the exception of Hamas) are loosely organised and their membership often overlaps. These groups have capitalised on the general lack of oversight and rugged terrain to establish their operations in Sinai. Furthermore, *Ahram Online* reports that growing links with the Bedouin, based on mutual financial interests and sympathy, have provided them access to local knowledge resources as the local tribes give them refuge and share escape routes.

*Ansar Bayit al Maqdis (Supporters of Jerusalem)*

Also known as Ansar Jerusalem, the *Jerusalem Post* reports that this is considered to be the most active terrorist group in Sinai. It is based primarily in Sinai and consists mainly of local Bedouin, but also recruits members from all over the Middle East and North Africa, according to the *Times of Israel*. The group has taken credit for numer-

ous attacks against Israel, including rocket and mortar attacks on gas pipelines in Sinai which stretch to Israel. In September 2012, the group killed an Israeli soldier in an attack on the Israeli border patrol.

*Hamas*

The Palestinian organisation Hamas was formed in 1987 during the first Palestinian Intifada, according to the *US National Counterterrorism Center*. The group called for establishment of a Palestinian state and rejected all agreements between the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Israeli government. Hamas' fight for Palestinian statehood was marked by terrorist attacks ranging from large-scale bombings and rocket attacks to individual attacks. In 2006, Hamas won the elections in the Palestine Authority and for its first two years in power, Hamas continued to launch rocket attacks until Israel responded with greater military force in late 2008. Following a ceasefire in 2009, and having most of its infrastructure destroyed, Hamas agreed to negotiate and reduced the regularity of border attacks (although they still continue today). The de-escalation of activities caused some of the more radical factions to separate from Hamas and continue the militant struggle, moving their operational area to Sinai. Intense fighting with Israel broke out again in November 2012, when Hamas carried out several rocket attacks against Israel to which Israel responded with airstrikes. The 2012 attack is the most serious conflict between the two parties since the 2009 ceasefire, according to *Reuters*.

*Jaish al Islam (Army of Islam)*

The Army of Islam was founded in Gaza in 2006 by Palestine Dagmush clan, according to the Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center. Main activities include individual terror acts and kidnappings. The group rose to prominence with the kidnapping of *BBC* journalist Allan Johnston, but due to clashes with Hamas, its Gaza influence has waned. The focus of its activity shifted to mainland Egypt, with the Egyptian government accusing it of 2011 Coptic Church bombing in Alexandria, informs *The Guardian*. According to *The Long War Journal*, Jaish al Islam claims to be linked with al Qaeda. This link has been confirmed by letters found in Osama bin Laden's hideout after his assassination. Hamas denies linkage between Gaza groups and al Qaeda, claiming Jaish al Islam is using the media to raise its influence.

*Tafkir Wal Hijra (Anathema and Exile)*

Tafkir Wal Hijra is a radical Salafist group founded in 1969 in Egypt by Shukri Mustafa, according to *PBS*. The group is an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood. In 1977, Tafkir Wal Hijra kidnapped and killed a government minister, prompting a response by the Egyptian army which crushed and subsequently outlawed the group and executed Mustapha. Tafkir Wal Hijra is a loosely organised extremist group that allegedly maintains ties to al Qaeda, and defies local customs of tribal law, which makes it unpopular among the Bedouin population, according to *Time*. Tafkir is unique in that it allows its members to lead westernised lives for the purpose of deception (consuming alcohol, wearing Western clothing). It is believed to have cells in Europe (Spain), as well as across the Middle East. Its revival in Egypt came after the ouster of Mubarak. It preaches violence against all "infidels" including Muslims which do not accept their radicalism (this includes the indigenous Bedouin). It is believed to hold weekly meetings at mosques in the border town of Rafah. Methods of attack depend on the modus operandi and capabilities of local cells, but the overall aim is to achieve control of the territory. Egyptian authorities believe the group is responsible for the 05 August 2012 attacks which killed fifteen Egyptian security personnel near the Israeli border, according to *The New York Times*.

*Tawhid al Jihad (Monotheism and Holy War)*

Similar to Jaish al Islam, the Tawhid al Jihad is another organisation from Gaza active in Sinai. The group was involved in several attacks on South Sinai tourist centres over the last ten years, including the 2005 Sharm el Sheikh bombing which killed 88 people. The cell uses Gaza and the Northern Sinai mountains as its headquarters. Tawhid al Jihad actively carries out bombings, armed attacks and kidnappings, primarily against Israeli and Western workers and tourists, but also against Egyptian security forces. Its most infamous kidnapping was the Italian journalist Vittorio Arrigoni in 2011, who was subsequently murdered. According to *Africa Review*, Egypt sentenced fourteen of its members to death (eight in absentia) in connection with attacks on Egyptian army and police during 2012. The group is rumoured to have around 1,200 members in several organisations around Sinai.

*New Groups*

Three organisations were founded in 2012, according to *The Long War Journal*. The first group, the Mujahedeen Council of Shura in Environs of Jerusalem, regards itself as a coordinator between several Gaza/Sinai jihadist groups including Tawhid al Jihad and the Gaza group Ansar al Sunnah. It opposes a peace treaty with Israel and targets Israeli positions but has denied any involvement in attacks against the Egyptian army in August 2012. That same month, the second group, Jund al Sharia (Soldiers of Islamic Law), issued a list of five demands to the Egyptian and American governments. The demands included the introduction of Islamic Law into Egypt, release of all Islamic prisoners and retreat of peacekeeping forces from Sinai. The third and recently-founded group Ansar al Jihad (Supporters of Jihad) pledged allegiance to al Qaeda and its leader, Ayman al Zawahiri.
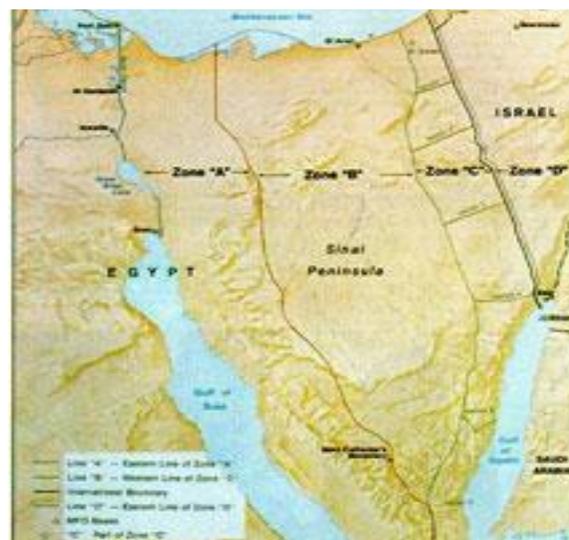
**Responses to Terrorism**

*Egypt*

Following a series of attacks on the Egyptian army in August 2012, *CNN* reported that the government launched *Operation Eagle*, later renamed *Operation Sinai*, cracking down on terrorism in Sinai. The operation marked the first major military campaign by the Egyptian army into Sinai since Camp David, informs *Ahram Online*. The main objective of the campaign was to pursue and eliminate terrorist cells. The military also began destroying a number of tunnels to Gaza to prevent terrorist movements and the passage of supplies between Gaza and Sinai, informs *Al Arabiya*. Many of the weapons originate from Libya, according to *Defence Web*. They are more modern and heavier than those from Africa and currently present the most serious arms smuggling issue in the region. *Operation Sinai* continues today, although with reduced intensity than in fall of 2012, when the Egyptian army claimed to have killed 32 terrorists and destroyed 31 tunnels. Further attacks in November 2012 in El Arish, which killed three Egyptian policemen, prompted President Mohammed Morsi to replace the northern Sinai security chief. Current Egyptian efforts aim at reconciliation and alliance with the local Bedouin population in order to address terrorism. In February 2013, *Reuters* reported that an Egyptian court has ordered the obligatory destruction of all tunnels. According to President Morsi's national security adviser Essam Haddad, Egypt "will not tolerate the two-way flow of smuggled arms through the tunnels that is destabilizing its Sinai Peninsula".

*Israel*

Israel warned Egypt and the international community that Sinai was becoming a terrorist sanctuary. In an attempt to protect Sinai from infiltration by enemies in Gaza, Israel built a steel fence along the border with Egypt, which was finally finished in early 2013; however, the extensive network of tunnels provides Sinai and Gaza with a way to circumvent the barrier. Israel has voiced concerns over Iran providing weapons for Sinai terrorists, says *CNN*. In October 2012, Sudan accused Israeli forces of bombing a weapons factory in Khartoum, reports *BBC*. Israel never confirmed responsibility for the bombing, but does regard Sudan as a destination point for Iranian weapons that are eventually smuggled to Gaza, according to the *New York Times*. Egypt's military operation in Sinai was welcomed by Israel; nevertheless, Israel still opposes the continued presence of Egyptian military in the region, according to *Egypt Independent*. Israel often resorts to air strikes targeting suspected terrorists in Gaza. Israeli military forces reportedly assassinated several prominent members of Sinai-affiliated groups during 2012, reports *The Long War Journal*.



*Demilitarised Zones of Sinai*
Source: MFO

*Hamas*

For several years, Hamas has used Sinai as the main transit route for weapons and commodities destined for Gaza. This includes, as both Egypt and Israel suspect, a supply of arms and financing from Iran and Hezbollah, says *al akhbar* news. Hamas taxes Sinai-Gaza smuggling activity, which remains one of its main sources of revenue. Since the group began negotiations with Israel, relations with some terrorist organisations have become strained. Hamas was involved in conflicts with the Army of Islam in Gaza, according to *Egypt Independent*, and, according to *Daily News Egypt*, condemned the August 2102 attacks on Egyptian soldiers near the Rafah border crossing. Initially Hamas viewed Egypt and President Mohammed Morsi as a major ally in the fight for a Palestinian state and did not want terror organisations jeopardising this relationship, according to *Y net news*. Although Egypt continues to destroy the tunnels leading to Gaza, many remain operational. However, Hamas has significantly reduced its dependence on the tunnel economy over the last year, and has made reportedly developed weapons of its own, reports the *New York Times*.

*International Community*

In 1979, the Camp David Accords established an international peacekeeping force in Sinai. The Multinational Force & Observers (MFO) consists of forces from thirteen countries and as of January 2013, the MFO numbered 1,660 personnel. The organisation has a civilian headquarters in Rome and does not operate under UN or NATO mandates. It is funded by the United States, Israel and Egypt, and assisted by contributions from participating countries. The MFO primarily controls security checkpoints in Sinai demilitarised zones and ensures adherence to the Camp David Accords. The recent surge in violence across Sinai resulted in an increased number of attacks against MFO bases. In the largest event to date on 15 September 2012, a group of armed Bedouin wounded four soldiers. The attack demonstrated that the force is lacking both the authority and resources to successfully engage, and defend against, the extremists. The US is currently working with Egypt to explore methods to increase its security support, including intelligence sharing and training of border police.

**Conclusion**

Pervasive insecurity in the Sinai Peninsula remains a serious problem in an area that serves as a strategic buffer zone between Egypt, Israel and the Palestinians. Egypt's inability to adequately maintain law and order has allowed the establishment of militant groups that are operating robust networks of arms and human trafficking across borders and carry out attacks on both sides of the Egyptian-Israeli border. While Cairo struggles to address both its national political and economic crises, it has had neither the resources nor the ability to adequately tackle the complex security environment in Sinai. Despite renewed efforts to destroy the tunnel network and target militant groups in late February 2013, some government officials realise that the lawlessness of Sinai needs much more than guns and containment. According to an Egyptian government source cited by *Ahram Online*, The neglected Peninsula requires financial investment and development initiatives that will promote growth and opportunity.