

## ASSESSING EGYPTIAN PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR SECURITY CRACKDOWNS IN THE SINAI

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This monograph examines the terrorism problem in Egypt emanating from the Sinai Peninsula and assesses Egyptian public support for the crackdown on such terrorist activity by the Egyptian security forces. Terrorist violence increased significantly in the summer of 2013 and, despite some periodic dips in the level of violence since then, has remained a serious problem for Egypt, hindering its ability to rebuild its moribund tourist industry and attract substantial foreign investment. Although Egypt's new government has tried to link the now banned Muslim Brotherhood to this violence, most probably the more extreme Salafi groups based in the Sinai took advantage of the political chaos that followed the ouster of Muslim Brotherhood president Mohammad Morsi in early-July 2013 to mount a terror campaign against the new regime. Newly-elected president (and former Field Marshal) Abdel Fatah al-Sissi has stated that eradicating terrorism is his first priority, and Egyptian military and police forces have used heavy-handed measures to try to crack down hard against the terrorist groups and suspected sympathizers.

The Egyptian public has long viewed the Sinai, except for the resort towns in the southern portion of the peninsula, as a wilderness area populated mainly by Bedouin who are not considered "fully Egyptian." Mainland Egyptians, who represent the vast majority of Egyptian citizens who live along the Nile and in the Nile Delta region, often see the Bedouin as a sort of rootless people who make their living by smuggling and other nefarious activities. Because much of the Sinai is a closed military zone and mainland Egyptians

have few connections to inhabitants in the area, most Egyptians—outside of human rights activists—are not disturbed by the heavy-handed security measures employed there.

As long as the extremists in the Sinai are seen doing damage to the Egyptian state and people—hitting the army, police, and civilians, as well as foreign tourists whose spending provides revenue to the state and helps to employ Egyptian workers—it appears that the majority of Egyptian citizens have no problems with the government's harsh tactics. Moreover, the more the extremists show their true colors by employing brutal tactics against ordinary Egyptian soldiers, the support for the crackdown is likely to increase. Most Egyptians desire stability, and the terrorist attacks in the Sinai and the Egyptian mainland are a threat to this goal. Furthermore, the chaos in Syria and Iraq—especially the brutal tactics of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, as well as the mounting instability in neighboring Libya—make most Egyptian citizens even more concerned about terrorism and instability than would otherwise be the case. Hence, they appear to give the government wide berth to carry out its campaign against the extremists.

A complicating factor is the periodic violence in neighboring Gaza, which borders the extreme northeastern portion of the Sinai. Because Hamas, who controls Gaza, has long been linked to Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and because the Egyptian government successfully attempted to tie the Brotherhood to terrorist violence in Egypt, there was little support for Hamas among non-Brotherhood Egyptians during

the latest mini-war between Hamas and Israel in the summer of 2014. Nonetheless, the high number of Palestinian civilian casualties during this conflict upset most Egyptians and made the Egyptian government's cooperation with Israel—such as keeping the Sinai-Gaza border closed as well as clamping down on the smuggling tunnels—somewhat controversial. This is one of the reasons why the Egyptian government tried to broker a cease-fire between Hamas and Israel early in the conflict. Should the more moderate Palestinian faction, Fatah, take over Gaza and another mini-war break out between Gaza and Israel, the Egyptian government would likely be even more in a quandary than it was in the summer of 2014. This is because the Egyptian public would unequivocally side with Palestinians in this case and might even countenance the extremists groups in the Sinai turning their guns and missiles on the Israelis.

This monograph argues for the resumption of a U.S. strategic dialogue with Egypt in which sensitive discussions can be held behind closed doors. U.S. Army officers should be part of this dialogue where they can brief their Egyptian counterparts on counterterrorism policies and what worked (and did not work) in the Iraq context as a way of drawing Egyptian military leaders out on their campaign in the Sinai. This monograph also argues for substantial counterterrorism education for Egyptian officers attending U.S. professional military education institutions, as well as training whole Egyptian military units, either in the United States or in a friendly Arab country, by U.S. Army counterterrorism specialized forces. Such training would hopefully move the Egyptian military away from its traditional heavy-handed measures of punishing whole Bedouin villages because one or two of the villages' youth were suspected of aiding the terrorists—a process that often results in the creation of more terrorist

recruits. Should the Egyptian military return to its old draconian practices even after receiving such specialized U.S. training, the U.S. Government should consider using levers—including holding up some military assistance, such as spare parts for Apache helicopters—to dissuade the Egyptian military from pursuing such counterproductive policies. In addition, the monograph argues for U.S. policymakers to persuade Egyptian officials to recruit Bedouin youth into the local Sinai police forces and the creation of a substantial job training program for Bedouin youth, funded in part by the United States, to prepare them for careers in tourism and other legitimate economic sectors in order to give them a meaningful alternative to joining the terrorist groups.

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