

# Strategy Research Project

## Multinational Force and Observers: Peacekeeping in Support of National Interests

by

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**Multinational Force and Observers: Peacekeeping in Support of National Interests**

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## **Abstract**

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## **Multinational Force and Observers: Peacekeeping in Support of National Interests**

On 7 May 2012, The Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) celebrated its 30th anniversary at Camp North in the Sinai Desert, only twelve kilometers from the Gaza Strip. Joining Ambassador David M. Satterfield, the MFO Director General, and Major General Warren Whiting, the Force Commander, in observing the occasion were Major General Ossama Abd El-Aziz, Chief, Egyptian Liaison Agency with International Organizations and Brigadier General Assaf Orion, the head of the Israeli Defense Force Strategic Division.<sup>1</sup> This ceremony was a modest celebration of the MFO's significant contribution to peace between Egypt and Israel.

The MFO was established to observe and report on compliance with the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty, which was designed to prevent two conventional military forces from engaging in conflict on a specific piece of terrain—the Sinai Peninsula. However, the original mandate does not account for groups such as the Bedouin tribes, Jihadist terrorist cells or organized criminal gangs that over the past decade have increasingly exerted influence in the Sinai.<sup>2</sup> The emergence of these non-state actors and other changes to the strategic environment today pose a more serious security risk to Egypt, Israel, and regional stability than does the resumption of conventional conflict between the Egyptian Armed Forces or the Israeli Defense Force (IDF).

The United States, Israel and Egypt share the broad objectives of increasing stability in the Sinai, reducing negative outside influences, countering extremist violence, ensuring access to key strategic waterways, and promoting economic growth in the region. However, the implementation of these objectives are not always aligned since the three partners in the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty have competing, conflicting, and complementary interests that each partner pursues to achieve their

shared objectives. The purpose of this paper is to outline these interests, examine how they achieve or conflict with the common goals of all parties involved, and then show how the MFO as a key implementing element of the Peace Treaty contributes to the overall goal of continuing the thirty-year peace between Israel and Egypt.

Continued security and stability in the Sinai Peninsula form an intersection of the national security interests between Egypt, Israel and the United States. For the Peace Treaty and the MFO to remain viable, the political, economic and security interests that Egypt and Israel have in common must be important enough to outweigh their competing interests. The U.S. has a dual role as both a mediator who exerts political pressure to push Israel and Egypt to cooperate in maintaining their shared interests, and acts as a partner whose interests both complement and conflict with a variety of individual goals among these two key regional allies.

Even though the last direct conflict between Israel and Egypt occurred in 1973, peacekeeping operations still play a vital role in maintaining stability throughout the Sinai Peninsula. Despite changes in the strategic environment such as regime change in Egypt, increasing regional instability that threatens Israel, and the perception of reduced U.S. regional influence, the MFO continues to play a pivotal role in Middle Eastern peace because it ensures the vital national security interests of the United States, Egypt and Israel.

#### The Changing Strategic Environment in the Sinai since 1982

Over the past three decades, the Sinai's strategic environment has grown more volatile and complex despite thirty-five years of peace between Egypt and Israel. Conditions in this strategic key terrain have changed far beyond the vision of the drafters of the Egyptian-Israeli Treaty of Peace and the 1981 Security Protocol.

Consequently, these changes require an examination of the reasons why the Sinai still matters to regional security and the national security interests of the U.S., Israel and Egypt in 2013 and beyond.<sup>3</sup> The combination of difficult geography, internal Egyptian politics, changing demographics, and external regional influences make the Sinai more rather than less relevant to peace and stability in the Middle East.

As the nexus linking Africa with Asia and Europe with the Asia-Pacific through the Suez Canal, the geographic location of the Sinai Peninsula places it at the intersection of national interests for the U.S., Egypt and Israel. The Sinai is surrounded by strategically important waterways. At the western boundary of the peninsula, the Suez Canal carries 8% of the world's sea trade and is the source of almost \$20 billion in much needed revenue for the Egyptian economy.<sup>4</sup> As a result, when the Suez Canal is closed by political or military actions, which has happened on several occasions, the international economy is severely affected. To the east, the Strait of Tiran at the Peninsula's southern tip is a key chokepoint that governs access to Eilat, Israel's only seaport on the Red Sea. Along with Egyptian forces moving into forward positions in the Sinai, any Egyptian blockade or mining of the Strait remains a stated "casus belli" for the Jewish State.<sup>5</sup>

The Sinai Desert provides an essential buffer that neutralizes Egypt's ability to attack quickly into Israel, which was a key consideration that sparked Israel's occupation of the peninsula in 1956 and from 1967 to 1979.<sup>6</sup> Far from featureless, the desert offers natural obstacles with lines of high ground from the north and south and easily defensible passes that have proved decisive in battles for both the Egyptians and Israelis.<sup>7</sup> Israel and Egypt have used the Sinai as a major battleground in every

conflict from 1948 until the conclusion of the 1973 War and both sides are aware of the military advantage gained by controlling the peninsula and by extension the Suez Canal and Strait of Tiran. In 1956 and 1967, the Israelis used overwhelming armored-ground and air power to quickly seize the Mitla and Giddi passes enroute to seizing control of the Suez Canal itself. In the 1973 Yom Kippur/Ramadan War, Egypt achieved both tactical and strategic surprise in recapturing the canal though they failed to seize the passes, which led to their military downfall. Egypt's ultimate goal (which would have been achieved much more quickly with a military victory) was a negotiated return of the Sinai to Egyptian sovereignty by achieving limited military objectives that facilitated a political solution. The 1978 Camp David Accords, 1979 Peace Treaty, and 1981 Security Protocol were the products of negotiations that recognized Egyptian sovereignty of the Peninsula in exchange for verifiable limitations on the militarization of the peninsula that gave Israel a secure southern boundary.

The Arab Spring movements and the Egyptian Revolution of 2011 have generated factors that have made the Sinai Peninsula more volatile and unstable as the Egyptian government retrenched to handle internal security affairs. The result was that the Sinai was under-governed as the Egyptian security forces focused first on defending the Mubarak-led government and then on re-establishing security in Cairo, the Nile Valley and Delta regions after the revolution and during the forming of the Morsi-led government. From the beginning of the revolution in December 2010 until the summer of 2012, the Egyptian government was unable to protect critical infrastructure such as gas pipelines, secure the border with Gaza or prevent the infiltration of people or contraband into and out of the Sinai.<sup>8</sup> Although instability in the Sinai started well before

the Arab Spring-inspired Egyptian Revolution, the lack of Egyptian control since January 2011 has threatened the 30-year peace between Israel and Egypt and, therefore, the viability of the MFO's peacekeeping mission.

Many examinations of the Sinai Peninsula's role in Middle East security treat it as a sparsely populated desert. In fact, the human terrain of the peninsula plays an increasingly important role in both the security of the region and relations between Egypt, Israel, the U.S. and other regional nations. Egyptians view the indigenous Bedouin tribes as foreigners, not entitled to own land or receive the benefits (such as identification cards and government jobs) of Egyptian citizenship.<sup>9</sup> Historically aloof from Egyptian culture and religious influences, the Bedouin have been drawn toward radical Islamic influences by economic, ideological and anti-Cairo interests since 2000.

Homegrown and external radical Islamist groups have taken advantage of this Bedouin disenchantment over economic disparity and social inequities to radicalize and recruit the local tribal population for attacks against Egyptian government officials, security forces, economic infrastructure, and even into Israeli territory. Al-Qaeda in the Sinai Peninsula and Ansar al-Jihad, a Salafist violent extremist organization (VEO), have both used the security vacuum and freer movement to and from Gaza to establish safe havens in the Sinai.<sup>10</sup> Radical Islamist militant groups using weapons obtained from Libya and Gaza have increasingly outgunned the Egyptian security forces in the Sinai.<sup>11</sup> The Bedouin themselves have periodically attacked MFO forces and installations to draw attention to their plight and redress grievances against the Egyptian government.<sup>12</sup> Since the Security Protocols do not address indigenous threats and limit Egypt's ability

to project military power in the Sinai to handle such threats, these attacks on both sides of the border cause friction between the Egyptians and Israelis.

The previous Egyptian government neglected economic development beneficial to the Bedouin. Out of necessity, the Bedouin took advantage of opportunities and their proclivity for black-marketing to advance illicit trade throughout the region. The opportunistic Bedouin have used the blockade of Gaza by the Israelis and Egyptians, corruption by Egyptian officials and a lack of general border security to create an incredibly profitable illicit trade enterprise.<sup>13</sup> Estimates of black-market activities in the Sinai are from \$300-500 million annually from both Gaza-based trade through sophisticated tunnels and traditional smuggling activities into Israel, Jordan and Egypt. Smuggled items range from necessary commodities (food, fuel and construction supplies) and consumer goods to human trafficking. The smuggling of sophisticated weapons is also on the rise, including weapons that have been used by both Hamas and Sinai-based VEOs to attack Egyptian security forces in the Sinai and the IDF across the border in Israel. As the new Morsi-led government attempts to reestablish political, economic and security control of the Sinai, there has been increasing friction with these groups, which have reaped the benefits of the Sinai's insecurity. Israeli and Egyptian forces could come into conflict either inadvertently or through frustration because of the activities of VEOs on either side of the Egyptian-Israeli border.<sup>14</sup>

Although it is unlikely that there will be a conventional military attack by either the Israeli or Egyptian military in the Sinai, the changing strategic environment makes that particular scenario far less relevant to the national security interests of Egypt and Israel and the regional security interests of the U.S. and its MFO partners. Any examination of

why peacekeeping operations are necessary in the Sinai, must take into account the increasing relevance of the non-state actors such as the restive Bedouin population, the Palestinians and jihadist groups. So the question remains: in this new climate, can the MFO, which was designed for the strategic environment in 1979, continue to serve as an effective peacekeeping force in the Sinai?

### Egyptian Security Interests

Since the regime change in early 2011, the Egyptian government has focused on reestablishing internal stability and improving its struggling economy. President Morsi has also had to balance his goal of reestablishing Egypt as a regional power and satisfying the ideological expectations of his anti-Israeli followers while adhering to the peace treaty with Israel. President Morsi stated during his inaugural address in June 2012 that Egypt would continue to uphold international agreements that include the 1979 Peace Treaty with Israel.<sup>15</sup> However, the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) and the Salafist Al Nour Party that shares power in the legislature both have stated platform goals of pulling out of the Treaty.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, fifty four percent of the Egyptian people, finally free to express their opinions, favor ending the thirty-four year treaty with Israel.<sup>17</sup>

The Muslim Brotherhood-dominated government has out of necessity adopted a more pragmatic and cooperative approach to relations with the Israelis when dealing with the increasing instability in the Sinai. President Morsi has appointed a new ambassador with Israel, secured commitments from Hamas not to launch attacks on Israel from Egyptian territory, and increased military-to-military contact through the MFO with the Israeli Defense Forces to solve day-to-day security issues.<sup>18</sup> At this early stage in the new government, failure to cooperate with Israel could result in Egypt's inability to

effectively govern the Sinai and, therefore, economically exploit the Sinai's resources. In a worst case scenario, continued instability in the Sinai and attacks into Israel by VEOs could result in Israel's launching cross-border operations to interdict attacks originating from the Sinai or a reoccupation of the Sinai by the IDF.

Another ambition of the Morsi government is to reassert Egyptian influence in the Arab World in order to play a leading role in the resolution of long-lasting issues such as the Palestinian problem. In November 2012, using his considerable influence with the Muslim Brotherhood-born Hamas party, Egypt's President brokered a cease-fire arrangement between Israel and Hamas over the conflict in Gaza.<sup>19</sup> This act of diplomacy bolstered President Morsi's image in the Arab World, something that President Mubarak (considered a pariah with most Arab governments) could not have managed. Respect for the Peace Treaty and continual engagement with Israel gives Cairo credible leverage to push Israel toward solutions that increase President Morsi's stature on the international stage. However, Egypt's detractors point out that Israel has taken advantage of the "cold peace" with Egypt to twice invade Lebanon, fight two Intifadas with the Palestinians, annex the Golan Heights, expand and consolidate settlements in the Occupied Territories, tighten their hold on Jerusalem and conduct air strikes into Syria, Sudan, and Iran.<sup>20</sup> While these are reasonable criticisms, the fact remains that Egypt is the only major regional actor with a signed diplomatic agreement that reduces Israeli security concerns. Accordingly, Egypt may leverage the threat of abrogating the Treaty as a means to moderate Israel's behavior towards its neighbors. In the future, Egypt will walk the fine line between its Islamist beliefs and goals such as



Palestinian statehood, continued stable relations with Israel, and working toward internal political and economic stability.

Egypt's economy is cash-strapped and highly dependent on tourism, foreign aid, and loans from Western Nations and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Since 2000, insecurity has hurt the economy through loss of tourism, a lack of direct foreign investment, and disruptions in oil and natural gas exports. Confidence in Egypt's economic stability will return when the Morsi government can convince the International Community that the security situation including in the Sinai is stable. International lenders and investors will continue to judge Egypt's worthiness for loans and other investment based on improving internal and external stability.<sup>21</sup>

Despite the change to an Islamist-based government, the U.S. remains Egypt's biggest contributor of foreign aid. Since 1979, Egypt has been the second largest recipient of U.S. aid after Israel and the Egyptian Armed Forces receive almost 20% of their total budget and 80% of weapon systems acquisitions from the U.S.<sup>22</sup> Tied to the \$1.55 billion in annual aid that the U.S. provides is a U.S. law that requires Egypt to adhere to the treaty with Israel.<sup>23</sup> Withdrawing from the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty would not only result in the loss of U.S. assistance but would also send a clear message to the international community that Egypt is not a safe investment. Because of Egypt's precarious economic situation and dependence on outside financial support, the government must continue to show it can effectively control its own territory in a stable and constructive manner. In the near term, breaking the Peace Treaty and sending the MFO from the Sinai would not be well received by the international community and would be seen as a major step backward for the new government.

The Sinai's proximity to key waterways, natural resources and western tourist destinations make it potentially a powerful economic engine in Egypt's stalled economy. A cash-strapped Egypt cannot afford to cut off a lucrative means of drawing foreign currency and investment, but instability in the Sinai has done exactly that and threatens to cripple the economy if not controlled.<sup>24</sup> Repeated attacks on the Trans-Sinai Pipeline have reduced natural gas sales to Jordan and Israel, thereby cutting off a vital source of currency. Attacks on the Sinai's Red Sea beach resorts and the kidnapping of foreign tourists have been compounded by the decline of tourism in the rest of Egypt. Bedouin snipers have interfered with the transportation of export goods at the Qualified Exclusion Zone (QIZ) crossing points with Israel. Finally, threats emanating from the Sinai have endangered shipping through the Suez Canal. In all, maintaining stability in the Sinai is key to bringing back badly needed foreign currency into the Egyptian economy.<sup>25</sup>

Improving stability in the Sinai will also mean that the Egyptian government must deal with its Bedouin challenge. Under pressure from the U.S. and Israel, the Egyptian government has begun to address the Bedouin's economic and social conditions in order to build confidence that Cairo will govern more with their interests in mind. The past development policies of Egyptian administrations focused on encouraging citizens from the Nile Valley to establish residence and businesses in the Sinai have been only marginally successful and have generated resentment among the Bedouin who viewed Egyptian settlers as interlopers.<sup>26</sup> President Morsi recently attempted to improve relations with the Bedouin tribes by making the first visit to the Sinai by an Egyptian

president in thirty years, easing restrictions on Bedouin owning land, and allowing more Bedouin to hold government jobs.<sup>27</sup>

Although the new Egyptian policies are a start, they are only small steps for Bedouin tribes who experienced a taste of autonomy with the collapse of the Mubarak government and resultant security vacuum in the Sinai. The Bedouin have mixed feeling about their own sense of nationalism and their tribal structure inhibits political cohesiveness across the twenty distinct tribes who have as many competing as shared interests. While not interested in governing the Sinai, the Bedouin are interested in the economic and social opportunities they think were denied them when Egypt reoccupied the peninsula in 1974. Since then, the two Sinai governorates have been by far the least developed among those in Egypt. Many Bedouin remember fondly the Israeli occupation because of the educational and health programs that benefitted the tribes.<sup>28</sup> The resentment of unfavorable treatment by the Egyptians has led to attacks on Egyptian government officials and security forces and also harassment and interference with the MFO forces in the Northern Sinai.<sup>29</sup>

Equally challenging for the current Muslim Brotherhood government is that it finds itself in the unusual position of cracking down on Islamist groups in the Sinai that share their same anti-Israeli ideology. Traditionally the Bedouin have been very reluctant to ascribe to external religious influences, but the tribal groups have been recently influenced by Salafists from the Gaza Strip and other radical Islamist organizations that have made the Sinai their home because of its relative lack of security. Tied to Hamas economically because of illicit trade into and out of Gaza, the Bedouin have become more ideologically aligned with Salafist philosophy. This in turn

has allowed Hamas to use the Sinai as a safe haven from Israeli interference.<sup>30</sup>

Ironically, the Egyptian government finds itself aligned with Israel's goal of increasing the security of the Sinai against Islamic extremists by reducing VEO and outside malign influence in the Sinai, and preventing attacks from Egyptian territory into Israel.

In the short- to mid-term (3-5 years), Egypt's national security interests of preventing armed conflict while solving internal political problems, preserving territorial sovereignty, stabilizing the Sinai, improving their economy and achieving regional leadership will be best served by respecting the 1979 Peace Treaty, supporting the MFO and cooperating with Israel. However, the Islamist government will need to walk a fine line both internally and diplomatically. Even though the Egyptian government has stated on several occasions that they intend to put the Peace Treaty to a popular referendum, Egyptian security forces continue to adhere to all terms of the Security Protocol, have secured MFO forces with Egyptian Security Forces, and have stepped up contact at all levels with the IDF.<sup>31</sup> Until President Morsi consolidates power, he must balance the pragmatic need for internal stability and economic prosperity with the desire to advance the Brotherhood's ideological principles.

#### Israeli Security Interests

Israel has felt a growing sense of insecurity as surrounding states become increasingly Islamist. President Netanyahu warned the Israeli public that the Arab Spring revolutions would be "Islamic, anti-Western, and most importantly, anti-Israel."<sup>32</sup> Growing security issues for Israel include a potential nuclear arms race in the Middle East, the Syrian Civil War, the danger of an Arab Spring movement in Jordan, continued instability in Lebanon, stalled settlement talks with the Palestinians and conflict with Hamas in Gaza. The deteriorating security in the Sinai presents the Israeli government

with the possibility of another hostile border that will force them to divide their security focus and their limited military resources.<sup>33</sup>

Israeli security since the end of the Yom Kippur War has depended upon maintaining tense but predictable relationships with surrounding Arab governments.<sup>34</sup> The loss of authoritarian but stable rule in Egypt and potentially in Syria is a serious, destabilizing situation for a state that sees itself without readily defensible borders.<sup>35</sup> Now faced with an existential threat from Iran and increasing instability in Lebanon, Gaza and possibly Jordan, Israel cannot afford another hostile neighbor.

The 1979 Peace Treaty has provided Israel with a secure southern border, freedom of movement through the Suez Canal and Strait of Tiran, increased trade through the Qualifying Industrial Zones (QIZ), natural gas imports and tourism trade with Egypt.<sup>36</sup> In 2007, Israel demonstrated their confidence in the security of the Egyptian border by removing their guards from the Sinai border. This was a tremendous act of confidence by the remarkably insecure Israeli state.<sup>37</sup> Israel has had two security expectations of the Peace Treaty. First, as long as the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty remained intact, Israel's neighbors would be divided and Arab governments would continue to agree that a "cold peace" with the Jewish state is preferable to renewed hostilities and the risk of losing more territory.<sup>38</sup> Second, Israel expects Egypt based upon shared interests to cooperate in stopping terrorism and managing illicit arms trafficking in the Sinai. Under the Mubarak regime that held true, but since 2000 Israel has grown increasingly frustrated by insecurity along their southern border and attacks into Israeli territory.

President Netanyahu has publically restated the importance of the Treaty to both Israel and Egypt in maintaining regional security.<sup>39</sup> The Israeli government declared that they expect Egypt to adhere to the Peace Treaty. On several recent occasions, Israel has agreed to temporary adjustments to the terms of the Security Protocols called “Agreed Activity Mechanisms” that allow Egypt to address security threats in the Sinai with military forces that are normally not allowed into the areas immediately adjacent to the Israeli border.<sup>40</sup> In August 2012, Egypt demonstrated this flexibility through an air attack on Jihadist terrorists operating in the north Sinai--the first use of air power on the Peninsula since 1973 and closely coordinated with and monitored by the Israelis. This was an instance of both sides pursuing pragmatism over principle. The Israeli hope is that this kind of security cooperation will continue with the current Egyptian Islamist government.<sup>41</sup>

Israel is dependent upon Egypt to contain VEOs and the transport of weapons through the Sinai to Gaza. With the security vacuum caused by the change in the Egyptian government, the plethora of tunnels to Gaza, and Hamas looking for strategic depth and sanctuary away from IDF interdiction, the Sinai has become a safe haven and staging area for Islamist terrorist groups launching attacks at both the Egyptian Security Forces and into Israel.<sup>42</sup> Egyptian and Israeli cooperation concerning the Sinai has continued despite the change of regime in Cairo, using the MFO structure to share information, resolve potential conflicts and reduce misunderstandings that are now rising to unprecedented levels since January 2012.<sup>43</sup> Although treaty obligations are met and military contacts have increased, relationships at the political level between the Egyptians and Israelis have become reserved and only occur through intermediaries

such as the MFO Director General in Rome who is seen by both sides as a politically acceptable channel to conduct indirect coordination.<sup>44</sup>

To continue to support the MFO and stay away from unilateral military actions, Israel must see Egypt improve their efforts to control smuggling of weapons into Gaza and stop attacks from non-state actors into Israel. Any unilateral actions by Israel to fix the instability in the Sinai could result in Egypt sponsoring non-state actor attacks on Israel either as a matter of policy or through intentional neglect. Such actions will require Israel to re-militarize the Sinai border while their attention and military assets are needed elsewhere.

Keeping the U.S. engaged in the Sinai and closely tied to Israel's security interests is a key objective of the Israeli government. The presence of U.S. leadership and over 700 American Peacekeepers along the Israeli border keeps the U.S. and Israel closely aligned in their mutual interests of containing VEOs, minimizing Iranian malign influence and denying Al Qaeda affiliated groups safe havens and operating bases in the Sinai. These allies also share the need to foster a closer, more constructive relationship with an Islamist government which both have struggled to do in the post Arab Spring period. In all, the MFO partnership allows the Israelis to advance all these objectives.

#### United States Interests in the Sinai

The "Defense Strategic Guidance" published in January 2012 states that the U.S. intends to rebalance America's focus to the Asian-Pacific region, but it also acknowledges the vital and important interests that will endure in the Middle East. As the U.S. advances important interests such as protecting the global commons, enhancing regional stability, and continuing the fight against extreme violence, providing

for Israel's security while working towards a comprehensive Middle East peace remains a top priority.<sup>45</sup> The Egyptian-Israel Peace Treaty and the MFO are critical political-military efforts that bolster U.S. leadership in the Middle East peace process. From the standpoint of U.S. national security interests, the MFO reassures the various stakeholders that the U.S. is committed to achieving a lasting peace in the Middle East.<sup>46</sup>

The unhindered passage of both commercial and military traffic through the Suez Canal advances U.S. interests by promoting a stable global economy and providing military access. Closure of the Canal would add several weeks of transit time for shipping and, in the short term, directly lead to a sharp rise in petroleum product prices across the Western world.<sup>47</sup> From a military standpoint, U.S. security interests would be hampered by the inability of U.S. warships to transit quickly to Middle East areas of operation. Egypt currently allows the U.S. expedited passage through the Suez and overflight rights through Egyptian airspace. These are key planning factors for the employment of European- and continental-based U.S. forces. During times of tension with Israel or Western governments, Egypt has historically either closed or restricted passage through the Canal on the Sinai's western boundary, which has not occurred since the signing of the Peace Treaty.<sup>48</sup>

Although Israel remains a key U.S. ally in the Middle East, Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperative Council states are important partners to deterring Iran's goal of exerting influence in the Levant to include on the Sinai Peninsula. Even though strange bedfellows, this informal coalition of the U.S.'s Middle East security partners provides flexibility and credibility for employment of military power against Iran



should the need arise. An Islamist government in Cairo also more effectively advocates for the interests of the Sunni Muslim world against the Shiite-dominated axis of Iran, Syria, Hezbollah and Hamas. A stable Egypt, that is at peace with Israel and cooperating with the U.S. on counterterrorism and intelligence sharing bolsters the U.S. interest of keeping malign influences out of the Middle East peace equation.<sup>49</sup>

Israel has become increasingly isolated in the region as a result of several factors that include the World Community's perception that Israel is not serious about the two-state solution with the Palestinians, Hamas' rise to dominance in Gaza, and continued Israeli settlement construction in disputed territories. Turkey, Qatar and other moderate Islamic governments have distanced themselves politically and militarily from the Jewish state by withdrawing from bilateral military exercises and intelligence sharing arrangements.<sup>50</sup> The International Community writ large have distanced themselves from Israel leaving the U.S. as the only stalwart that Israel can depend on militarily, financially, and (most importantly) morally. The U.S. has an important interest in ensuring that Israel doesn't become an international pariah. Keeping Israel engaged was relatively easy with an isolated Mubarak-led Egypt, but is very difficult with an Islamist government in power that is strongly pro-Palestinian, and has a stated antipathy for Israel. The MFO's trilateral agreement with Egypt, Israel and the U.S. requires each partner to remain engaged on a daily basis in order to accomplish routine administration and technical decisions and coordination. The United States leadership role exercised by diplomatic offices in Rome, Tel Aviv and Cairo along with militarily operations coordinated from the Sinai allows the U.S. to be a "full and persistent partner as a mediator (not advocate)" in dealing with key issues of interest to both Egypt and Israel.

Although the MFO structure is only one way that the U.S. exerts its influence in Egyptian-Israeli relations, it is through this role of solving routine problems daily, sustaining cooperation and building confidence with which all sides are comfortable.<sup>51</sup>

Also important is the U.S.'s role as the leader of the twelve-nation peacekeeping force. The MFO incorporates the support of eleven other nations with troop contingents ranging in size from two to almost seven hundred persons and depends upon both Egypt and Israel to provide for their overall security and living arrangements. The MFO is untenable unless both Egypt and Israel work hand-in-hand to coordinate the transportation, security and resourcing of the MFO contingents.<sup>52</sup> Through the MFO, the combined efforts of the U.S. and its partners help keep Israel and Egypt at peace. This supports the security of Israel, builds a U.S. relationship with an emerging Islamist government and regional power, supports unrestricted access through one of the World's critical waterways, and facilitates information sharing in the Sinai to contain the growth of violent extremism.

One of the United States' strongest means of demonstrating commitment to its national interests is to put troops on the ground and this commitment is never taken lightly. The lessons-learned from Beirut and Mogadishu illustrate that attacks on American troops regardless of the military impact carry a disproportionate political message. The continued presence of U.S. forces in a highly volatile area such as the Sinai (while simultaneously withdrawing from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Europe) sends a key message that America remains committed to the Middle East peace process, Israeli security, and security of vital global commons such as the Suez and the Strait of Tiran.<sup>53</sup> In 2002, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld unilaterally made a statement favoring

withdrawing U.S. forces from the Sinai. The Bush White House, and both the Egyptian and Israeli governments quickly agreed that such a position was in none of their best interests.<sup>54</sup> Even during the most resource-constrained periods of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, the U.S. Army has sourced almost 700 Soldiers to support the MFO. Because of the current volatility in the Sinai, Former Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta did not rule out deploying additional troops in support of the MFO.<sup>55</sup> In all, the MFO has allowed the U.S. for the last thirty years to show an enduring commitment to the security of its allies while bolstering U.S. national security interests in the Middle East through multinational peacekeeping operations.

#### The Future Approach to Peacekeeping in the Sinai

While the strategic environment and the national security interests of Egypt, Israel and the United States have changed since 1982, the mission and organization of the MFO has remained essentially unchanged. The MFO was designed to prevent two land powers from engaging in direct conventional warfare and is a true peacekeeping operation in that it “undertak[es] with the consent of all major parties to a dispute...to monitor and facilitate implementation of [a] peace treaty...and support diplomatic efforts to reach a long-term political settlement.”<sup>56</sup> The existing arrangements and security protocols do not address non-state actors such as the Bedouin, Palestinians, and violent extremists that have become increasingly important stakeholders in the Sinai.<sup>57</sup> However, future relations between the Egyptians and Israelis must consider these groups and address the proliferation of weapons (some of which could be weapons of mass effects) that are starting to transit into and through the Sinai from Libya and Syria, among other places. Future approaches to relations between Israel and Egypt and

peacekeeping operations in the Sinai must address the significant changes in the strategic environment to be effective and move both countries closer to a final peace.

Although not properly designed to accomplish current stability or policing tasks, the MFO has taken advantage of its liaison system to facilitate cooperation and information sharing with both sides as a venue for resolving issues not addressed in the Peace Treaty. The use of the MFO Liaison Branch has increased significantly since the start of the Egyptian Revolution in January 2011 by coordinating transportation and venues for face-to-face meetings, communications via electronic means and the use of MFO officers as intermediaries to resolve disputes and verify mutual compliance with treaty obligations.<sup>58</sup> In all, the MFO is the one entity that continues to facilitate cooperation, information sharing and trust between Egypt and Israel in an increasingly complex and uncertain operating environment.

If not the current MFO arrangement, then what alternatives could be implemented to take its place and address the changing security environment and the interests of Egypt, Israel and the U.S.? Three alternatives present themselves for future peacekeeping in the Sinai. The first would be to replace the MFO with a U.N. peacekeeping force. The Egyptians continue to point out that the Peace Treaty calls for the United Nations to provide an internationally-led peacekeeping force. The implementation of this type of force was originally blocked during the Cold War by the Soviet Union and the Arab states opposed to the Peace Treaty. If the Egyptians are serious about addressing the changing security and social problems in the Sinai, a UN peacekeeping operation (PKO) would be less restrictive. Egyptian security forces could deploy into the Sinai to address Bedouin unrest and actions by violent extremist groups,

which use the Sinai for refuge and as launching points, and this could also reduce Egypt's financial burden of \$25 million annually as their portion of MFO funding. Additionally, a multinational UN force would give Egypt a clearer sense of sovereignty over their territory and lessen the overt U.S. presence on Egyptian territory.<sup>59</sup>

However, Israel continues to have serious difficulties with the United Nations, which it believes is unsupportive of Israeli interests. The UN and U.S. would have to provide Israel specific assurances that the UN PKO would not interfere with what Israel views as its "internal security matters" regarding the Palestinians and the Occupied Territories. A robust liaison system such as the MFO currently employs would still be necessary to make the Israelis comfortable with Egyptian security forces operating close to the Israeli border and to reduce the risk of clashes due to misunderstandings.

The U.S. currently enjoys its leadership role within the MFO framework and along with Israel would be uncomfortable with the loss of influence in resolving Middle East conflicts.<sup>60</sup> Having the U.S. provide the UN PKO force commander and providing a sizable force contingent of U.S. troops could mitigate this perceived threat. A diplomatic benefit for the U.S. would be that the U.S., as a major partner in a UN PKO mission would be seen as more impartial and less as an advocate of Israeli interests. The U.S., Egypt and Israel would all have to become more comfortable with a loss of autonomy as equal partners in the MFO. The transition from the MFO to a UN PKO would provide a window of opportunity to design a termination framework for the peacekeeping force in the near future, something not addressed in the current security arrangements.

The second alternative, and most likely to result in long-term stability, is to modify the Egypt-Israeli Peace Treaty to eliminate the peacekeeping force and develop a

normalized bilateral relationship between Israel and Egypt. Confidence and security-building measures such as joint patrols, intelligence sharing and bans against alliances with belligerent third parties would be the basis for each side's trust in the other. Israel would favor this approach modeled on the 1994 Israel-Jordan Peace Treaty, which does not require any intermediary forces to monitor and ensure treaty compliance. There would also be no third parties to restrict Israel's ability to shape events along the Egyptian-Israeli border and along the border with Gaza.<sup>61</sup>

Egypt could be persuaded to adapt this approach if convinced that the benefits of freedom of action in the Sinai outweigh the short-term political costs of negotiating and dealing directly with Israel on a routine basis. The U.S. and the International Community could also provide financial incentives to offset the loss of jobs and other revenues that the MFO provides to the local economy. Unlike the option of deploying UN peacekeepers, this leaves the Egyptian government as the only entity that is responsible for the security of the border with Israel, the Strait of Tiran, the Suez Canal and the internal security of the Sinai. The removal of foreign forces from Egyptian sovereign territory would be a tremendous boost to the prestige and influence of the Islamist government and help restore Egypt to what it sees as its rightful place as an Arab leader.

The U.S. could benefit diplomatically from this approach as it did in acting as the facilitator of the Camp David Accords, the Peace Treaty and the lead nation in the current peacekeeping operation. Additionally, the reduction of the U.S. troop commitment would free up thousands of Soldiers and hundreds of millions of dollars in

salaries, training and deployments costs during a time of reduced resources for the Department of Defense.

A third alternative for future peacekeeping operations in the Sinai would be to expand the scope of the MFO security structure. In U.N. terms, the new effort would be robust peacekeeping operations conducted in a complex environment with expanded mission authorities to include peace enforcement and peace building operations, which are often referred to as “3rd Generation Peacekeeping.” This would update the existing MFO structure from a traditional 1st generation PKO, with no responsibilities to prevent instability in the Sinai.<sup>62</sup> Thus, the MFO security arrangements would be re-tuned to the current strategic environment, adding responsibilities for peace enforcement and humanitarian assistance to the current MFO mission.

This option would satisfy the Israeli and U.S. concerns that the Sinai is becoming increasingly unstable and volatile because of unaddressed security and social issues by the new Egyptian regime. The benefit to the Egyptian government would be an increase in the security of an area that provides valuable economic benefits from tourism and natural resources while simultaneously reducing nefarious activities such as the smuggling of weapons through the Sinai. The Bedouin traditionally have a better relationship with international forces than with the Egyptian security forces and this relationship can be improved through the MFO’s training and mentoring.

Recognizing the vulnerability of the MFO in an unstable region, the danger to the Peace Treaty, and Cairo’s challenges to restoring security in the Sinai, the U.S. government has reached out on both diplomatic and military fronts to help Egypt improve overall security in the Sinai. The U.S. Defense Department has offered to help

Egypt with training and equipping police, and offered surveillance equipment and intelligence sharing. Simultaneously, the State Department offered a \$50 million developmental package to improve infrastructure and jobs creation in the Sinai. The Cairo government initially turned down these offers, but became more receptive after the August 2012 attacks on Egyptian security forces.<sup>63</sup> The MFO is a mature structure with thirty years of organizational experience in the Sinai that can easily command and control these additional efforts. However, this option is not without risk and is contentious among MFO stakeholders because it potentially opens up the mission to attacks from terrorist groups who want to keep the Sinai unstable.<sup>64</sup>

All of these options to include the current security arrangements come with political risks to the U.S., Israel and Egypt. However, amid a changing security environment in the Sinai that includes a new regime in Egypt and a changing relationship between Egypt, Israel and the United States, new and innovative options for working toward a more permanent solution to Egyptian-Israeli peace have to be explored. A valid criticism of the MFO is that it is open-ended and provides no framework for either working towards a final solution nor even provides metrics for determining measures of effectiveness or measures of performance.<sup>65</sup> The MFO has been a tremendous success, but it cannot be a permanent, never-ending fixture of U.S. strategy in the Middle East.

### Conclusion

Regardless of whether the MFO continues to operate in the Sinai to celebrate a fortieth anniversary, the MFO or any peacekeeping operation must ultimately be judged a failure if it doesn't work toward to a permanent peace without the need for outside forces. This is outside the scope of this paper, except to acknowledge that a framework



for a final peace between Egypt and Israel that will include the MFO “working themselves out of a job” within the next 3-5 years is very unlikely.

The United States, Israel and Egypt all share the same core objectives of improving the stability, reducing outside influences, countering extreme violence, assuring freedom of access and ensuring economic stability and growth in the Sinai. However, because their interests are not aligned and are often conflicting, each party to the Treaty pursues these goals from a different perspective. The United States views stability in the Sinai as a way to support a broader Middle East strategy to support Israel’s security, reduce the influence of Al Qaeda and other malign actors, ensure stable oil prices and military access through the Suez Canal, and prevent the proliferation of WMD or extremist ideology while expanding the U.S.’s leadership role in a changing strategic environment post Arab Spring.

Israel must stem the deterioration of its relations with Egypt and other Arab governments while continually defending its borders against an increasing array of hostile non-state actors amid domestic unrest. Israel views VEO activities in the Sinai, the trafficking of weapons into Gaza, and the negative outside influence of Hezbollah and Iran as an indirect approach by its enemies with the purpose of threatening the Jewish states existence, something that various coalitions of Arab states, including Egypt, could not achieve through war from 1947 to 1973.

Egypt will need to stabilize its internal political situation and economy before it can achieve its goal of reemerging as the preeminent leader in the increasingly Islamist Arab World. Stability in the Sinai and continued peace with Israel are both necessary to achieve those goals. For the Sinai to contribute to the economic health of Egypt the

Morsi government must address the root causes of Bedouin unrest, curtail terrorist activities and restart the lucrative tourism and natural resource exploitation efforts that have been hampered by security concerns since 2000.

It would be easy to overstate the continuing importance of the MFO's peacekeeping effort, but it does "punch well above its weight" in addressing the shared objectives of the U.S. Israel, and Egypt. Primarily this level of influence stems from the confidence the three partners and the International Community have in the MFO's proven ability to keep Israel and Egypt engaged with each other, resolve conflicts as they arise and facilitate dialogue, which reduces misunderstandings.

Even so, the MFO is not the permanent solution. As outlined in this paper, political leaders do have options, which move all parties closer to a permanent peace. It will take the same moral courage that President Anwar Sadat, Prime Minister Menachem Begin and President Jimmy Carter displayed at Camp David in 1978 to break over three decades of stasis. The environment will see plenty of crises in the coming years. Relationships between Egypt, Israel and the U.S. will ebb and flow as the conditions caused by the Arab Spring mature. As the facilitator of the Egyptian-Israeli peace, the United States must take advantage of these crises to seize opportunities that will bring Egypt and Israel closer to a final peace.<sup>66</sup>

## Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup>The four missions of the MFO are to operate checks points, reconnaissance patrols, and observation posts along the international boundary and along line B, and within Zone C. Periodically verify the implementation of the provisions in the security annex to the treaty and

conduct additional verifications with 48 hours of a request from either party. Finally, ensure the freedom of navigation through the Strait of Tiran in accordance with the treaty. Both the Peace Treaty which addresses the peacekeeping force as the “United Nations forces and observers” and the Protocol to the Treaty signed in 1982 address the specific security measures, the composition of the force and protocols for addressing issues. Jimmy Carter, Menachem Begin, and Mohamed Anwar El-Sadat, “The Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty,” March 26, 1979, [http://mfo.org/assets/docs/treaty\\_of\\_peace.pdf](http://mfo.org/assets/docs/treaty_of_peace.pdf) (accessed 23 February 2013) 7.

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<sup>6</sup>Jeffrey S. Morton and Nicole Shortt, “The Arab Spring: Implications for Israeli Security,” *Mediterranean Quarterly* 23, no. 3 (Summer 2012): 35.

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<sup>12</sup>Whiting, “Multinational Force & Observers - Can Peacekeepers Keep the Peace?”, 25:30.

<sup>13</sup>St. Pierre, “The ‘Sinai Spring’ Hasn’t Altered Bedouin Culture.”

<sup>14</sup>Steven Lee Myers and Thom Shanker, “Egypt and U.S. Step Up Talks on Security Assistance,” *The New York Times*, August 11, 2012, sec. World / Middle East, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/12/world/middleeast/egypt-and-us-step-up-talks-on-security-assistance.html> (accessed January 12, 2012).

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<sup>17</sup>Morton and Shortt, "The Arab Spring: Implications for Israeli Security," 45.

<sup>18</sup>Pelham, *Sinai: The Buffer Erodes*, 23.

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<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>24</sup>Pelham, *Sinai: The Buffer Erodes*, 31.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 20.

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<sup>33</sup>Indyk, "Safeguarding Israel's Security in a Volatile Environment."

<sup>34</sup>Morton and Shortt, "The Arab Spring: Implications for Israeli Security," 49.

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<sup>36</sup>Qualifying Industrial Zones (QIZ) trade agreements allow goods manufactured at three designated QIZs in Egypt to enter the U.S. tariff free as long as 35% of the end product results from cooperation between Egypt and Israeli companies. The value of Egyptian exports to the U.S. in 2011 was estimated at 931 billion U.S. dollars by the Egyptian government. *QIZ Egypt*, [http://www.qizegypt.gov.eg/QIZ\\_Data.aspx](http://www.qizegypt.gov.eg/QIZ_Data.aspx) (accessed 23 February 2013).

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<sup>41</sup>The Economist Intelligence Unit, "The Need for Triangular Co-operation; Egypt, Israel and Sinai," *The Economist*, August 11, 2012, in ProQuest (accessed 26 October 2012).

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