

**Sisi's Reelection:
Issues of Egyptian Security and Terrorism**

Sisi újraválasztása:

Az egyiptomi biztonság és a terrorizmus kérdése

BETH WAGONER

KKI Policy Brief

Series of the Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade

Publisher:

Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade

Typesetting:

Tamás Lévárt

Editorial office:

H-1016 Budapest, Bérc utca 13-15.

Tel.: + 36 1 279-5700

Fax: + 36 1 279-5701

E-mail: info@ifat.hu

<http://kki.hu>

© Beth Wagoner, 2019

© Institute for Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2019

ISSN 2416-0148



Abstract: This paper aims to analyze the relationship between Egyptian security issues and the regime of Egyptian president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, focusing specifically on insurgent groups in the Sinai. An examination of historical conflicts in the Sinai coupled with the recent rise of insurgent groups reveals a troubling security trend that could impact the MENA region, and by extension, global security as a whole. The paper examines how Sisi's 2018 re-election has the potential to be damaging to the already fragile security situation, focusing on four main factors that range from military tactics to oppressive political policies. The paper concludes with recommendations for the European Union on how to mitigate this security threat.

INTRODUCTION

In the last week of March 2018, Egyptian citizens voted to reelect Abdel Fattah al-Sisi as president of the country for his second term. The election holds great significance for Egypt on many levels, but in particular, in relation to issues of security and terrorism in the country. In the Sinai Peninsula of the Egyptian state, the Egyptian government faces a constant struggle to destabilize a major extremist group in the area while still working with and protecting residents living in the region. Sisi, a former military and intelligence leader, has been forced to confront this problem head on and has engaged in harsh crackdowns in the region, reportedly eliminating many local leaders of terrorist networks. However, the region is less secure today than it has been in the past, especially in light of the recent security incidents as well as political tensions which continue since Sisi's re-election. The analysis will provide historical context and background on the history of conflict in the Sinai and extremist groups. It will then examine the four main issues of Sisi's election with regard to security, concluding with recommendations for the EU that, if implemented, should create progress in the region and promote security and peace.

HISTORICAL CONFLICTS IN THE SINAI

Before discussing how the 2018 election has affected security issues in the Sinai, it is important to recognize the historical context of the region. Issues of instability in the Sinai did not begin with the roots of extremist activity in the twenty-first century. Before the Camp David Accords and subsequent treaty, the Sinai was a point of contention and conflict through the Arab-Israeli conflicts of the second half of the twentieth century. Egypt was a key player in these wars, and during the 1956 Suez Crisis, Israeli troops

were able to defeat Egyptian troops in the Sinai and actually take control of the Straits of Tiran, a [large point of contention](#) between the two powers. This set the stage for the Sinai to be a breeding grounds for conflict through the coming years and illustrated the inability of Cairo to keep a solid hold on the region. The process of removing Israeli troops from the area was difficult and required pressure from major UN powers like the US and the Soviet Union, and this trend did not stop with the ceasefire. During the 1967 War, Israeli forces penetrated deep into the Sinai, destroying Egyptian airfields and taking over large amounts of land in the Sinai. In just six days, the Israeli forces had conquered the area, once again challenging Egyptian reign in the region. It remained in Israeli control for over ten years, until the Camp David Accords and subsequent treaty [finally put an end](#) to the conflict and Israeli presence. However, by then the damage had been done. The Sinai, undergoing many conflicts and confused leadership, had become the grounds for extremist activity and violence.

INTRODUCTION TO EXTREMISM AND VIOLENCE IN THE SINAI

In order to understand current security issues in the Sinai and throughout Egypt and their relationship to the election, it is important to understand the history of extremist activity in the last decade. In 2011, Hosni Mubarak was ousted as president of Egypt, and subsequently, Ansar Beit al-Maqdis (“Followers of the Holy House”) (ABM) [emerged](#) as an extremist, violent group in the Sinai. This growth occurred in part due to the fact that during the ousting the Egyptian security forces were dealing with issues in Egypt proper. This allowed extremists in the area to gain a footing with tribal groups in the Sinai who resented the Egyptian government and security forces. The group’s self-acclaimed goal is in line with that of many other Muslim extremist groups – the liberation of Muslims from “[Western tyranny](#)”. In 2014, the militant group pledged its allegiance to the so called Islamic State and changed its name to Sinai Province, though [they sometimes refer](#) to themselves as Islamic State Egypt. The ultimate goal of the group is thought to be to take complete control of the region for the Islamic State, but the group also engages in terror activities outside of the region in areas like Giza and Cairo and even the Western Desert, an area previously frequented by tourists. The group [is thought to have](#) around 1500 active members. The group is based in the Northern part of the Sinai and have been very active since their appearance, taking responsibility for a number of attacks across the region. They employ the same tactics as the Islamic State, relying on radical ideology and brutal violence that includes bombings, beheadings, assassinations, and shootings.



Sinai Province has been active in the previous years as well. In August 2014, [the group decapitated](#) four men on the accusation that they were Israeli spies. Two months later, thirty-three security guards were killed in an attack for which Sinai Province claimed responsibility. These attacks are not only terrorizing residents and illustrating a security issue, but they have devastating effects on the entire country as well. In 2015, the group took responsibility for the attack on Metrojet Flight 9268 in which a Russian plane flying from Egypt was bombed, resulting in 224 deaths. As a result, Russia stopped direct flights with Egypt, and though they are beginning to fly again, the damage caused by attacks like this has severely hurt Egypt's tourism sector. [Attacks on tourists](#) visiting the region have caused all-time low hotel counts since 2016, and once popular resorts like those in Sharm el-Sheikh are struggling to get by.

THE ELECTION AND SECURITY IN THE SINAI

In 2013, Mohamed Morsi was ousted as president of Egypt in a military overthrow, only able to remain in power for one year. Mass protests marked the coup, and after Morsi was effectively removed as president, the then military chief Abdul Fattah al-Sisi took control of the country. Sisi's platform was based on promises of security and stability for Egypt, something that had been lacking since the Arab Spring. However, examining violence in the region since Sisi came into power raises the question of whether or not his leadership has actually worsened issues of security, and what that might mean for the future [now that he has been re-elected](#). I will examine the impact of the election on security in four parts.

First, through examining Morsi's overthrow and Sisi's subsequent step into power it becomes clear that both have, themselves, allowed militant groups to gain power and footing in Egypt. Before Sisi took power in 2013, militants mostly focused on attacks and consolidating power in the Sinai and against the Israeli border there. However, when Sisi came into power in 2013, the group immediately began to plan attacks that moved into the main part of Egypt. They also shifted their attention towards attacking security facilities and government and military officials, a trend that had not been seen before. In 2014, attacks by the group in Cairo were as frequent as those taking place in the Sinai, a disturbing change that illustrated an actual loss in security for the Egyptian government and a triumph for insurgents. In the year that followed Morsi's overthrow, a disturbingly large number of military officers and members left to join militant groups operating out of the Sinai. In October of 2014, 31 soldiers were killed in an attack at a military checkpoint in the Sinai. It was revealed that two former military officials who had defected to join the extremists had orchestrated the attack. Many also believe that the

group relies on information from these former officials to gain sensitive material about Egyptian military tactics, a [very worrying issue](#) that only **compromises security tactics further**.

Furthermore, Sisi's regime immediately began a crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) after ousting Morsi, a leader with ties to the MB. Sisi's harsh repression of the brotherhood, coupled with the coup as a whole, gave militant groups in the Sinai the opportunity they needed to spread their activities and power. After all, this crackdown on the brotherhood used up the resources of the Egyptian military which had previously been focused on containing violence in the Sinai under Morsi. The military was also focused on large urban areas and less concerned with the Sinai during this time. The coup allowed extremists to use Islamist anger and resentment to their advantage as Sisi's brutal crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood angered many, [particularly those living in the Sinai](#). Ansar Beit al-Maqdis even made a statement after Sisi's election confirming just that, referring to democracy and the MB as "the two idols that have fallen in Egypt." This coupled with Sisi's rhetoric that oftentimes equates the Muslim Brotherhood with IS groups in the Sinai has created tensions among Egyptians and has limited the military's ability to properly handle security issues in the country.

Second, security in the Sinai does not seem to be improving under Sisi's regime. It's true that unrest and instability in the Sinai are not new problems that emerged with Sisi's presidency, but they continue to grow. Issues in the Sinai have raged on for years due to a lack of authority or strength on the part of the Egyptian government coupled with the poverty of local residents. Access to government services is very limited, particularly in the Northern part of the region, and because this has gone unchecked for so many years, security is difficult to regain. Areas like this prove to be ideal for militant terror groups because they provide the physical space to train attackers and plan attacks without the threat of strong state military interference. These issues are even more complicated in the context of the local demography, which includes Bedouin tribes who have also contributed to holding back Cairo's power in the region. The tribes are not necessarily easy recruits for extremist groups, but their own involvement has made it more difficult for Egypt's government over the past years.

In the context of the MENA region as a whole, the lack of security in the Sinai is worrisome as its location as a pathway between Asia and Africa [makes it a prime route](#) for militants to move between different cells in the region. Israel in particular remains very aware of and uneasy about the growing number of militants in the region and buffer zones have been set up at the borders of the countries. However, attacks continue despite military intervention. A major security operation launched in 2015, Operation Martyr's Right, [promised](#) to eradicate violence in the region. However, November 27, 2017 saw the deadliest attack in the history of modern Egypt when more than 300 worshippers were killed at a Sufi affiliated mosque in the northern part of the Sinai region. The attack was orchestrated by a group allying itself with the IS, and the sheer magnitude of the violence illustrates the



weakness of the Egyptian government in controlling [what is happening](#) in the Sinai . Despite this, Sisi's government continues to announce victories that include eliminating individual key figures from the insurgent groups. To deal with the growing insurgency and keep his promises of security and ending terrorism, Sisi continues to adopt a military approach in the region similar to that of 2015 which includes curfews and air strikes.

Third, Sisi's tactics in the Sinai have had devastating results for its residents, which can create support for extremist groups in the area. In July 2014, Sisi declared a state of emergency in the Sinai and called for a mandatory evacuation of Rafah that displaced 10,000 people and took place in the midst of a violent attack against insurgent forces in the area. Residents were given only two days notice of the evacuation and many fled as their houses were destroyed in the government's goal of creating a wide buffer zone against the militants. The government announced that it would compensate those who had lost their homes, and Sisi himself publicly commended them for their bravery. However, it is difficult to be sure whether the demolition of the neighborhoods and homes was completely about militant groups in the area as [it also served](#) to shut down dissenting voices in the region who disagreed with Sisi's tactics . These issues have only worsened recently. Civilians living in the Sinai are being caught up in the violence raging between the Egyptian military forces and IS aligned groups in the region.

The current military operation is known as Sinai 2018, and it uses violent, blunt military force in an attempt to eradicate the extremist groups that includes wide scale attacks and assassinations of individual members. While the Egyptian government claims that these tactics are effective, recent acts of violence continue both in the Sinai and in other parts of Egypt. However, studies show that killing individual leaders of insurgent groups often does not decrease a group's power, but instead frequently has the opposite effect. Roads and water crossings have been restricted by the siege of the Egyptian army, cutting off residents in the Sinai from their ability to get food and water and restricting their ability to move in search of them. Shipments are also being blocked by the army and residents are unable to get supplies like medicines and fuel. El-Arish is Sinai's capital and largest city, and it has been hit hard by the blockages. The city has almost 250,000 residents. In Rafah, heavily hit after the evacuation in 2014, residents are unable to drive cars as Egyptian soldiers shoot at any moving vehicle in the street, regardless of who is driving. A resident told al-Monitor, "All we ask is for a law that distinguishes us from the terrorists." Other residents report their houses being demolished and their farms and land being burned by the Egyptian military, all of which points to the Egyptian government's inability or indifference to distinguishing between militants in the Sinai and Egyptian residents. The Egyptian government's tactics are meant to restore security in the region in time, but Sinai residents are suffering in the present which makes it difficult for the Egyptian government to use its hard handed tactics without inflicting damage on bystanders.

Furthermore, the military has effectively issued a media blackout on many areas of the Sinai. This is certainly due in part to terrorist activity in the region, but many believe that the media blackout also allows that the Egyptian military forces' [violations against residents](#) go unseen or unchallenged. This is reinforced by Sisi's decision to extend the state of emergency in Egypt for a fourth time, raising issues of human rights and questions about Sisi's government. This allows the security forces to have authority in tracking down extremists and terrorists in the country and gives them the authority to imprison anyone who does not comply with their orders. These extensions of the state of emergency also violate the Egyptian constitution. For individuals living in Egypt, this means a widespread lack of rights and a level of political oppression. This cannot be justified through security claims as there has been little success on the part of the government in reducing terrorist activity during this time frame. According to the government, the state of emergency protocols do not allow security forces to infringe on individuals' basic rights, although the [disappearance of prominent activists](#) may say otherwise .

What is most concerning about the above described is not only the violence, but its effects on the security problem. The aforementioned tactics employed by the Sisi government in an effort to suppress militant extremists may actually be generating support for the group they are hoping to eliminate. For individuals both in the Sinai and in greater Egypt, the repression of Sisi's government has created resentment and jihadists have capitalized on this. This is true both of the government's crackdown and tactics with regard to militants in the Sinai and the government's overall political repression of dissidents and groups like the MB. Examining the former, groups like the IS rely on the anger of local people to thrive. In Rafah, one resident stated that he was more afraid of the Egyptian military than the jihadists as the former had destroyed his home. Although the brutality of Sisi's tactics is meant to be aimed at the militants, it generates resentment toward the Egyptian government and allows militants to gain further access in the region while also recruiting more followers. Another Sinai resident stated that when most of his village was destroyed by the Egyptian military in a campaign, 40 residents [took up arms](#) with the jihadists even though there had only been 5 members of the group in his village beforehand. This illustrates the very concrete negative effects of these tactics that further isolate Sinai residents, a group that already lacks government support and help. These tensions are not limited just to those living in the Sinai, but extend to other groups as well. Sisi's actions in the Sinai coupled with his crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood have caused a divide between him and many moderate Muslims living in Egypt. [Some are joining](#) IS aligned groups after becoming disillusioned with Sisi's treatment of religion and Sinai residents .

Finally, in addition to extremetactics in the Sinai, Sisi's government as a whole has contributed to issues of security. Since taking office, Sisi has engaged in a crackdown on political dissenters as a whole. This is relevant to security as the link between oppression and terrorism is being cited as strong in modern scholarship. In August of 2013, at least 800 were killed at pro-Morsi sit ins in



Cairo when security forces stepped in. Thousands were arrested and detained in the year following Morsi's ousting, and individuals [have even disappeared](#) under Sisi's regime with no record of where they've gone. [According to the Human Rights Watch](#), 60,000 people are being detained due to political reasons and approximately 15,000 Egyptian civilians have been placed in military trials. An Egyptian rights researcher for the rights group, Amr Magdi, has stated that the current level of repression in Egypt is worse than what was seen under Mubarak who was overthrown in 2011. This authoritarianism illustrates how restricted Egypt has become for its citizens after since 2013, and this is only further reflected in the recent election which illustrates both the repressive nature of the current regime and raises the question of what another term of Sisi's tactics in the Sinai and political policies will mean for security in Egypt and the region.

THE SECURITY ENVIRONMENT AFTER THE 2018 ELECTION

On April 2, 2018, Sisi was officially reelected as president of Egypt, securing 97% of the votes. This result had been almost guaranteed due to the tactics cited earlier in this paper, although voter turnout was only 41%, lower than what Sisi's government had hoped for and lower than the turnout had been in his previous election. The results of the election were clear regardless – [Sisi was elected by a landslide vote](#).

Through examining the effects that Sisi's tactics have had on security in the Sinai and in Egypt as a whole, it becomes clear that the violence has had a negative and even paradoxical effect that has not eliminated militant power in the region. Furthermore, the resentment caused by the political repression of Sisi's government has also created tensions, and this is an issue for two reasons. Sisi has used the terror taking place in the Sinai as an excuse to implement policies that take away citizens' full scope of rights, all in the name of national security. One, as is aforementioned, is the government and military's preoccupation with cracking down on the MB and other political dissenters has left less resources available to use for security in the Sinai. The second is the harshness of the political crackdown that has created tensions that are used to the advantage of militant groups. Sisi's re-election means that we can expect to see a continuation of these issues and his policies in Egypt in the years to come. It is also important to note that if the events of the election itself are any indication, the political crackdown of Sisi's first term is not going to change in the near future.

It is important to note that Sisi has been able to use issues of security and terrorism to fuel his campaign and reelection. As was already mentioned, Egypt has been under a state of emergency for over a year now, allowing the

government and military far more power over citizens and limiting the latter's rights. While this is a result of the Egyptian government's effort to regain security, the election in March of this year illustrated how far Sisi's political agenda extends. By the time the election cycle rolled around in Egypt, all of Sisi's main competitors had dropped out except one, Mousa Mostafa Mousa, who had openly supported Sisi in the past. Those individuals who dropped out cited government intimidation and the corrupt system while others were detained by security forces. The former military staff chief, Sami Anan, was arrested by security forces and just days after, another challenger, human rights lawyer Khaled Ali, withdrew from the race as well. Ali cited issues with the electoral commission that favored Sisi while the commission maintained that [it would work to ensure fair elections](#) in Egypt. When faced with criticism, Sisi's government cited security issues, illustrating that violence in the [Sinai actually became a bolstering ground](#) by which Sisi pushed his policies that might not be otherwise justified. Sisi's re-election coupled with his tactics during the election cycle means that Egypt will see another period of tensions in the Sinai, a worrying prospect when taking into account the growing insurgency in the Sinai that has not been mitigated by these policies and tactics.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Regaining security and eliminating militant groups in the Sinai is not just a vital issue for Egypt but for the entirety of the Middle East and North Africa region and for global security as well. Sisi's actions in the Sinai have succeeded in eliminating some high ranking individuals, but residents suffer and tensions and resentments towards the government are growing as the number of attacks by extremists go up as opposed to down. Sisi's reelection means a continuation of the policies he has employed in the Sinai, the current Sinai 2018 being even more extensive than past tactics, and the political crackdown that took place during the election illustrates that actions against dissenters are likely to continue as well. With all of these factors in mind, it is difficult to see that security in the Sinai is improving, and this means issues that could destabilize not only Egypt but surrounding countries and provide a foothold for the Islamic State even as it is fought on other fronts.

Keeping this in mind, it is important to consider what role the EU can play in improving security in the Sinai and Egypt's stability as a whole. Most broadly, the EU should engage strongly with Egypt as a partner in foreign policy by investing in it as a country, providing leverage power. This means using the EU's ability to invest financially and industrially in the country, which is something Egypt has been interested in for decades. Leveraging what the EU can offer Egypt against ensuring human rights and better practices in the Sinai not only improves the lives



of those living in Egypt, but it also benefits the EU by helping to ensure security in the region as a whole. This occurs because more concern towards individuals living in Egypt and the Sinai means a cut back on military operations, which have been shown to be somewhat ineffective when countering terrorism. According to research conducted by RAND, military force is not a primary factor in eliminating terrorist groups, and is [less effective](#) than other methods of dealing with religious terrorist groups. Because of this, it is essential to recognize that the EU must place pressure on Sisi's government with regards to human rights in the fight against the Sinai insurgency. As mentioned before, one of the largest issues with Sisi's methods is that they not only are ineffective, but do more harm than good. As the [Brookings Institute](#) states in its article, "Authoritarianism can and will breed extremism, with dire consequences for Egypt and the region". It is essential for the EU to use its influence in the region to push for more consistent norms of basic human rights and enforcements of those laws, and to be sure that Sisi's government is aware of the firm stance EU member states take when it comes to controlling extremism and violence in such a pivotal area.