EGYPT: Unrest Brews in Sinai

Recent violence in Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula has gone from the multiple car bomb attacks in Sharm El-Sheikh in July to attacks on the Egyptian police and the international peacekeeping contingent by the border with Israel.

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Emad Gad, an expert on Israeli affairs at the state-run Al-Ahram Centre for Political and Strategic Studies, says some areas of the Peninsula which remain outside police control have become nexuses of anti-state activity.

"The police know that some areas in the Sinai are controlled by criminal elements, and terrorists are using these as places to stage attacks from," Gad told IPS. "Now we're seeing cooperation between civil criminals -- like drug smugglers, who have modern arms -- and terrorists motivated by ideology."

In a recent attack, an Egyptian police vehicle was damaged by a landmine Aug. 27. A police colonel and a tracker from the Bedouin, a nomadic desert people, were injured in the attack.

Two days earlier a police general and a colonel were killed when their vehicle hit a buried landmine. A day before that an armoured vehicle was damaged by a landmine, and at least three policemen were injured.

All the incidents occurred in the Mount Halal area of northeastern Sinai, where the police have been combing the desert for suspects wanted in relation to earlier attacks on tourist resort destinations in the Red Sea area. These included car bombings at Taba in October last year that killed 34 people including several Israeli tourists, and the July car bombings in Sharm El-Sheikh that killed 65 people.

According to local reports, about 3,500 police personnel have been deployed across the Peninsula, that was for long an oasis of tranquility, to track down suspects in the Tabae bomb attacks. According to an interior ministry statement, the campaign "aims to achieve dominance over Mount Halal in northern Sinai with the goal of capturing a group of criminal fugitives with major roles in the planning and carrying out of the terrorist explosions in Sinai."

Police have not been the only ones attacked. On Aug. 15, not far from Mount Halal, two Canadians from the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) were lightly wounded when a gas canister packed with explosives struck their vehicle. The 1,800-strong MFO, which consists of contingents from 11 countries, has supervised the demilitarised zone between Egypt and Israel since 1982.

While this most recent violence suggests a shift away from tourists and vacation spots towards harder targets, Gad says the attackers’ motivations are the same. "They want to harm the MFO as a way to put pressure on the Egyptian government to hurt its image, like they did by hitting tourist destinations earlier."

The authorities are still unsure who is behind the incidents. Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif posited two theories in an interview with the New York Times Aug. 23. The first holds that security forces were overly aggressive in the wake of the Taba attacks, and that associates of those arrested hit back at the vital tourism industry. The second suggests a connection to international terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda.

"I don't think that we have enough evidence to prove the second assumption," Nazif was quoted as saying.

The wave of heavy-handed arrests of an estimated 3,000 Sinai residents following the Taba incident certainly did not win the government any friends. "Overly harsh tactics were used, which angered the locals," said Gad.

Another crackdown provoked perhaps by the attacks on police personnel appears to be in full swing. The Aug. 25 edition of Arabic language weekly Al-Aq Arabia, a mouthpiece of the officially banned Muslim Brotherhood, says 500 Sinai residents had been detained in the latest sweep. Security forces "are raiding one house after the next," the paper said. Most of those detained were said to be from El-Arish, the capital of north Sinai located on the Red Sea about 200 miles east of Cairo.

The concurrence of recent volatility with the highly publicised Israeli withdrawal from the Gaza Strip which officially kicked off Aug. 15 could also be a factor. The withdrawal raises geo-strategic issues for Egypt around the Salah El-Din Axis (or the Philadilphi Corridor), the line running along Egypt's border with the Gaza Strip.

Gad conceded that the timing was notable, but said the recent attacks on the police were an entirely domestic issue. "It's not a matter of borders or Israel. It has no relation to the Gaza Strip," he said. "The problem is that Egyptian security doesn't have control over all the areas of Sinai."

The Sinai Peninsula is home to Egypt's most lucrative tourist destinations such as the pyramids and the resorts by the Red Sea. The Sharm El-Sheikh blasts damaged hotel occupancy rates at the beach resorts, and the most recent incidents certainly will not help.

"Business dropped off sharply after the Sharm blasts and hasn't really picked up," Khaled Kandil, area director of business development for Sinai at multinational hotel-chain Accor told IPS. "It's still really slow; we were expecting a quicker recovery." Forecasts for the coming months remained pessimistic, he said.


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