K4D | Knowledge, evidence and learning for development

Sinai Conflict Analysis

Iffat Idris
University of Birmingham
02. 03. 2017

Question

What does the literature indicate about the current conflict dynamics in the Sinai region of Egypt, including key actors, proximate and structural causes, dynamics and triggers, and opportunities for peace and institutional resilience?

Contents

1. Overview

The Sinai conflict has been underway since 2011 and has become progressively more intense and violent, fuelled by localised grievances as well as wider regional developments (Hart, 2016). The key actors involved are militant jihadist groups, local Bedouin tribes and the Egyptian government/military; others such as Israel, Gaza and the Multinational Forces and Observers (MFO) have varying influence on the conflict. This report looks at these actors, the underlying and proximate causes of the conflict and opportunities for peace. The literature reviewed largely comprised newspaper, magazine and think-tank articles rather than academic journals. More research is needed on militant groups involved in the conflict and on their relationship with Bedouin tribes.

Key messages

- **Conflict caused by Egyptian neglect of Bedouin needs**: The major underlying cause of the conflict is Bedouin anger at the Egyptian state's long-standing economic, social and political policies which serve to discriminate against and marginalise the Bedouin.

Key examples are lack of political representation of the Bedouin, denial of land rights, and exclusion from the Sinai's tourist industry – a major source of revenue for Egypt and employment for migrant Nile Valley Egyptians (Hart, 2016; ICG, 2007). Denied legitimate economic opportunities, the Bedouin have increasingly turned to illicit activities, notably smuggling of goods to Gaza (Rageh, 2013).

- **Marginalisation created a conducive environment for insurgency and militancy:** The proximate causes of the conflict were the 2011 Arab Spring and the opportunity it provided for Bedouin tribes to rise up against the Mubarak regime. The growth of militant Islam in Sinai – partly local and partly through the influx of foreign elements – is a further factor (Graham-Harrison, 2015; Hart, 2016). Local Bedouin tribes have joined militant groups in a 'marriage of convenience' driven by common anger towards Cairo (Rageh, 2013; Ashour, 2015).

- **The conflict has become more intense and violent:** The conflict has largely been focused on north Sinai. Militants have targeted the police and security forces. Attacks have increased in frequency in recent years (particularly since the ouster of Mohamed Morsi in 2013) and become more sophisticated and ambitious (Economist, 2015). In 2015 militants tried to seize the northern city of Sheikh Zuweid (Farid, 2015). There is a risk that militancy could spread to other parts of Egypt, though to date evidence of this is limited.

- **Egypt's response has been overwhelmingly security dominated:** Egypt has responded with counter-insurgency operations and security crackdowns which affect militants and locals, fuelling resentment among the latter. Egypt's steps to stop smuggling of goods through the underground tunnel system linking Sinai and Gaza has had a particularly detrimental impact on the local Bedouin population, and further alienated them from the state (Swale, 2015).

- **Bedouin tribes and militant groups are united by a common enemy:** Hostility to Egypt rather than belief in the jihadist ideology is the main factor drawing the Bedouin to the militants (Rageh, 2013). There is some evidence of local radicalisation, but equally of local alienation from the militants. This alienation has increased since the leading militant group in the conflict pledged allegiance to Islamic State (Colling, 2015; Graham-Harrison, 2015). Nonetheless, the ongoing security dominated response by Egypt means Bedouin anger and hostility towards Cairo persist.

- **The literature on the Sinai conflict is generally gender blind:** The vast majority of articles reviewed make no reference to the role of women in the Sinai conflict or its impact on them. However, one reports that WIlayat Sinai is making increasing use of females to carry out militant attacks, as well as for operational duties and recruitment (Sulaiman, 2016).

- **Peace can only come through Egypt addressing Bedouin concerns:** The literature highlights the need for a change of approach by Egypt – specifically measures to address Bedouin economic and political grievances – as key to ending the conflict (Ashour, 2015; Gold, 2016). To date, however, there is no indication that Cairo is willing to change its policies.

2. Sinai conflict

Key events

The Sinai Peninsula was captured by Israel in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war and, with the exception of a small stretch on the east bank of the Suez Canal which Egypt recaptured in the 1973 war, remained under Israeli occupation until 1982. The 1978 Camp David Accords and subsequent Egypt-Israel Treaty of Peace paved the way for the return of Sinai to Egypt in that year. However, mistrust between the Egyptian government and local Bedouin tribes, coupled with marginalisation of the latter and Cairo's failure to address the development needs of the local population, led to growing anger in Sinai.

The mid-2000s saw a number of significant terrorist attacks on tourist targets in Sinai: notably, on the Taba Hilton hotel and resorts in Sharm el-Sheikh. The Egyptian government under Hosni Mubarak responded to this threat to the country's vital tourism industry with a heavy and effective crackdown on Tawhid wal-Jihad, the group behind the attacks, and other militants/Islamists, but local anger persisted (Hart, 2016).

The trigger for the current conflict in Sinai was the 2011 Arab Spring uprising, which toppled the government of Hosni Mubarak. Sinai's location in the far north-west of Egypt meant the state was unable to exercise full control there, leading to 'an increasingly lawless scenario' (Hart, 2016). Bedouin took the opportunity to mount attacks on the security forces (Graham-Harrison, 2015), but the main actors in the insurgency quickly became jihadists. Diverse militant outfits 'coalesced' under the umbrella group Ansar Bayat al-Maqdis (ABM).

ABM initially claimed to be fighting against Israel, and there were some cross-border raids into Israel. But in practice its attacks mainly targeted Egyptian state infrastructure and security forces, e.g. police stations, checkpoints, the Arab Gas Pipeline between Egypt and Israel in north Sinai. In August 2012 militants attacked a border guard post killing 16 Egyptian soldiers and injuring seven others, before crossing into Israel seeking targets there (Colling, 2015). Egypt responded by launching major counter-insurgency operations in Sinai and greatly stepping up measures to destroy underground tunnels linking Sinai with Gaza – Cairo blamed the attack on groups originating in Gaza.

Morsi's ouster by the military in 2013 brought about radical changes in the nature of the Sinai conflict. It led, on the one hand, to a hardening of resolve in Cairo to eradicate opponents and subdue dissent through use of brute force - the so-called 'eradicationist' approach (Ashour, 2015). And on the other, it led to a significant intensification of militant attacks in Sinai. In 2014 ABM shot down an Egyptian military helicopter, and attacked an army checkpoint killing 30 (Hart, 2016). In November 2014 ABM pledged loyalty to ISIS and changed its name to Wilayat Sinai (Sinai Province), a move which was followed by an increase in both the scale and complexity of attacks 'signalling closer cooperation with IS leadership and possession of more advanced weaponry' (Hart, 2016).

In January 2015 the group simultaneously targeted 11 military and security posts in three towns: El-Arish, Sheikh Zuweid and Rafah. In July 2015 it launched a massive operation to try and capture the northern city of Sheikh Zuweid, but the Egyptian military were able to repel the attack. In October 2015 a Russian Metrojet plane flying from Sharm el-Sheikh was brought down by a bomb, killing all 224 people on board, the majority of them foreigners (Hart, 2016). The Egyptian response to the rising violence in Sinai has consistently been a security one, involving

counter-insurgency operations, detentions and curfews, as well as strengthening of border controls with Gaza – all of which have only served to further alienate local Bedouin tribes.

Key actors

Jihadi groups

Militant Islamist groups, notably Tawhid wal-Jihad, were operating in the Sinai in the 2000s. Despite the government crackdown on them, support for the jihadist ideology persisted, and many of those involved in those original groups went on to form new groups towards the end of the decade (Hart, 2016). Three factors contributed to the growth of militant Islamism in north Sinai: the social and economic marginalisation of the region, discrimination and harassment by the Egyptian authorities (e.g. mass arrests after the Taba bombing), and the spread of extremist ideologies from Gaza and further afield.

The dominant group in Sinai now is Ansar Bayat al-Maqdis (ABM), which changed its name to Wilayat Sinai (Sinai Province) at the end of 2014. ABM appears to have grown in numbers over recent years: a 2015 article in the Observer put the membership at 500 to 600, of whom 'the highly sophisticated militarist elements do not exceed a few dozen members and are highly protected, the rest of the group are simply foot soldiers which the group sends to the frontline of its operations' (Graham-Harrison, 2015). However, it added that 'The group's relatively small size belies its impact' (ibid). A June 2016 article estimated that Wilayat Sinai had 1,500 fighters and access to sophisticated weaponry (Hart, 2016). Other militant Islamist groups in Sinai mentioned in the literature include Jund al-Sharia, the Muhammad Jamal Network, and Ansar al-Jihad (Salama, 2013).

The literature does not provide clear figures for numbers of local and foreign militants fighting in Sinai.   ABM appears to have both local and foreign fighters, but mostly the former. The military reported that it had detained some foreign nationals, mainly from the Palestinian territories, but the vast majority of those arrested in Sinai were Egyptians (Salama, 2013). It should be noted that Tawhid wal-Jihad, the 'original' militant group responsible for terrorist attacks in Sinai in the 2000s, was affiliated to Al-Qaeda but founded by Khaled Musa'id, a dentist from Al-Arish belonging to the al-Sawarka tribe of northern Sinai (MEI). Most of the other leaders and members were also locals (Ashour, 2015). Nonetheless, there has been an influx of foreign fighters into Sinai (from beyond Gaza), including from Somalia, Yemen, Algeria, Libya, Syria and Saudi Arabia (Siboni & Ben-Barak, 2014). These fighters - many of whom have fought in other conflicts such as Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria - bring that experience to Sinai, and also provide local militant Islamists with links to the wider jihadist movement (ibid).

Local Bedouin tribes

Estimates for the number of Bedouin tribes in Sinai range from ten to 15-20 (MEI, 2014; Swale, 2015). An ICG reports notes that the tribes are differentiated by origin, traditions, economic activities, and even language; this and a history of inter-tribal competition and lack of pan-tribal leadership has prevented them from negotiating with the Egyptian state as a coherent group. There are no accurate population figures for Sinai: the official population is around 550,000 split between the governorate of North Sinai with around 400,000 and South Sinai with 150,000 (Walton, 2012: 1). However, the influx of people from other parts of Egypt into the Peninsula, to work in the tourism industry, and having holiday homes along the southern coast, has meant the

population share of the Bedouin has fallen to less than half, perhaps even under a quarter (Graham-Harrison, 2015).

Long-standing Bedouin grievances against Cairo meant that in 2011 'they were among the first to rise up and the fiercest fighters against the government' (Graham-Harrison, 2015). At least in the early years of the Sinai conflict, however, there was a distinction between Bedouin and militant attacks, with the former being less violent. Bedouin largely engaged in kidnappings for ransom or to get fellow tribesmen released from prison, and in blockades of MFO bases and camps – again to force the authorities to address their grievances (Colling, 2015). Various factors discussed below (notably the Egyptian security response) led to increased collaboration between insurgent Bedouin and militant Islamists.

The literature suggests that Bedouin tribes, where they are fighting with jihadi groups, are doing so not out of genuine conviction and belief in the militant/Islamist ideology but rather out of anger and frustration towards Cairo (Rageh, 2013). Zack Gold claims, 'Tribal leaders do not encourage violent extremism and, indeed, the current Islamist insurgency challenges the Bedouin tribal structure and wellbeing' (cited in Graham-Harrison, 2015). The link between Bedouin and militants has been portrayed as a 'marriage of convenience' spurred on by common opposition to Cairo. However, as noted above, there is also evidence of radicalisation of Bedouin tribes and of members joining militant groups. Omar Ashour claims that the loyalty of the local Bedouin population is divided: 'At least some members of almost every north-eastern tribe and clan have joined the insurgency or support it, but not all or even a majority. These divisions do not follow clear rural-urban, settler-Bedouin, tribal or administrative fault lines' (Ashour, 2015). Another analyst points out that, if the Bedouin were fighting with Wilayat Sinai, the group would have thousands of fighters in its ranks – which it does not (Mohammad Sabry cited in Graham-Harrison, 2015).

The literature also points to growing hostility to militants among the Bedouin tribes, particularly since ABM pledged loyalty to Islamic State. Wilayat Sinai have followed IS' example in Syria and Iraq of heavy-handed control of the local population, particularly in rural parts of north Sinai. The group distributed leaflets telling local residents to get permission before ploughing their lands (Economist, 2015). 'They have killed dozens as alleged spies, threatened tribal leaders who they believe oppose them, and tried to stop smuggling of cigarettes and marijuana because both are condemned as vices in their hardline interpretation of Islam' (Graham-Harrison, 2015). It should also be noted that Bedouin tribes have suffered considerable 'collateral damage' in militant attacks targeting the security forces. In April 2015 members of the Tarabin Bedouin attacked Wilayat Sinai positions south of Sheikh Zuwaid and El-Arish in retaliation for the execution of a youth and a tribal sheikh (Colling, 2015). While such incidents are evidence of Bedouin alienation from militants in Sinai, Egyptian policies mean their anger and hostility to Cairo also persist.

Egyptian government and military

Egyptian governments – under Sadat, Mubarak, the post-2011 Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), Mohamed Morsi and Fattah el-Sisi – have consistently pursued policies that marginalise Bedouin tribes in Sinai socially, economically and politically (see below). Insurgent and terrorist attacks have invariably led to a heavy security response. The only slight change was seen under Mohamed Morsi. He was elected on a manifesto that included outreach to Sinai with pledges to increase development spending in the region, issue land permits to the Bedouin population, change the discriminatory treatment of Sinai Bedouin and reinvestigate cases of

Bedouin jailed for extremist activities (El-Rashidi, 2013). None of these promises were kept and, following terrorist attacks in 2012, the army launched another offensive in Sinai.

Ultimately, it is the Egyptian military that calls the shots in Sinai, and it remains bent on pursuing a security response to the conflict. The military is somewhat limited in the actions it can take in Sinai by the terms of the Treaty of Peace between Egypt and Israel, which restricts the number of soldiers that Egypt can deploy in the peninsula. However, Israel authorized the Egyptian government to deploy two additional infantry battalions in Sinai to counter terrorist threats, following the ouster of the Morsi regime (Salama, 2013). The literature also suggests that the Egyptian government and military have used the Sinai conflict as justification to pursue other agendas, e.g. a crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, even though the movement eschewed violence; a blockade of Gaza to isolate and impoverish Hamas (Cairo supports the rival Palestinian Fatah faction) (Swale, 2015).

Multinational Forces and Observers (MFO)

The MFO is a peacekeeping force, comprising roughly 1,700 troops (Swale, 2015: 49) from 12 countries, which was permanently positioned in Sinai following the withdrawal of Israeli troops from the region in 1982. Funded largely by the United States, Israel and Egypt, its role is to monitor the terms of the Treaty of Peace between Egypt and Israel, and ensure that peace is maintained. It has acted as a mediator between Egypt and Israel with regard to security in Sinai. The MFO has bases in north Sinai at El Gorah, 20 km from Rafah, and in the south in Sharm el-Sheikh, as well as smaller observation camps across the Peninsula. The MFO does not have a mandate to play any role in the Sinai conflict, but it continues to serve as a useful intermediary between Egypt and Israel.

Until the Arab Spring, the MFO enjoyed good relations with the surrounding Bedouin tribes and had not come under attack. This changed in September 2012 when the MFO's North Camp was attacked by a militant group. Following that, MFO convoys were for a while escorted by Egyptian forces – something that distanced the MFO from Bedouin tribes. There have been other attacks on the MFO since then, though it has not been a major target of militants and has suffered no fatalities (Ashour, 2016). In September 2015, for example, four American and two Fijian peacekeepers were wounded in blasts near the MFO's North Camp (MEI, 2014). However, the rising insecurity and lawlessness in north Sinai makes it difficult for the MFO to operate and fulfil its mandate. Caught in the crossfire between militant attacks and Egyptian counter-insurgency measures, the MFO finds itself increasingly confined to its bases. In 2016 the US Defence Secretary formally notified Egypt and Israel that the US was considering reconfiguring its mission in Sinai by withdrawing troops from the north and increasing reliance on remote sensing technology (Ashour, 2016).

Israel

As noted, security cooperation between Israel and Egypt has increased since the Sinai conflict began. Israel has an interest in supporting Egypt to tackle militancy, violence and criminality in Sinai, and bring about peace and stability in the Peninsula. Since the Arab Spring, the number of attacks on Israel originating in Sinai has increased considerably (Swale, 2015: 60). Israel has responded to these by allowing increased Egyptian troop deployment in Sinai. However, Israel has also increased its own security forces along its southern border, and has built a 240 km long fence along the Israeli-Egyptian border. Designed to stop militant incursions, the fence has also

hampered smuggling and human trafficking. Influx of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa (notably Eritrea and Sudan) is a major cause of concern for Israel; its efforts have focused on preventing their entry from Sinai (Walton, 2012).

Gaza

There are strong ties between Bedouin tribes in Sinai and Gaza. Many of these are based on kinship and tribal loyalties, as Sinai's Bedouin are ethnically closer to Gaza and the Arab states to the east than to Nile Valley Egyptians in the west (see 'Demography' below). Even more important are the economic links between Sinai and Gaza, notably through the underground tunnel system. These links mean that developments in Gaza have knock-on effects in Sinai. In particular, Israeli and later Egyptian efforts to blockade Gaza (see below) have negatively impacted the Sinai economy. This has proved a significant factor exacerbating anger among locals in Sinai towards the Egyptian state – in turn sustaining the conflict. As Swale notes, 'The tactics that isolate and deprive the Palestinian people are unlikely to lead to greater security in the Peninsula in the long term' (Swale, 2015: 76). Gaza also serves as a source of Islamist ideology into Sinai: militant Islamists in Gaza used to train in Sinai, and some have joined militant groups in the Peninsula.

Women and Sinai conflict

The literature on the Sinai conflict is generally completely gender blind, making no reference to the role (if any) of women in the conflict or to its impact on them. This review found only a handful of articles that mention women in the context of the Sinai conflict.

A January 2016 article (Sulaiman) reports that the Egyptian authorities claim to have uncovered the first female cell belonging to Wilayat Sinai, after a woman was arrested trying to plant an improvised explosive device in front of Rafah hospital. The article claims that women were used by the group to carry out three militant attacks against security forces in Rafah and Sheikh Zuweid. Increased use of women by Wilayat Sinai is believed to have been prompted by the intensification of Egyptian army operations in Sinai; female recruits are used to carry out attacks since they arouse less suspicion. The article claims that scores of Sinai women are accused of aiding Wilayat Sinai militants. Their roles include providing logistical information about the movement of military convoys in north Sinai, carrying out operational duties, and recruitment of new members. Motivations for women to support Wilayat Sinai in this way include a sense of injustice – many have lost loved ones in the conflict or suffered ill-treatment at the hands of the security forces – and support for IS' Islamist ideology; some women join to escape their troubled lives. The article notes that use of women by Wilayat Sinai represents 'a major shift from earlier extremist ideologies *(including Al-Qaeda)* which strictly forbade the participation of women'.

A second article (Viersen, 2015) refers to women in the context of illegal prisoner camps in Sinai near the Israeli border, used by local criminals to hold trafficking victims, many from Eritrea. The article details the torture of women in order to persuade their families to pay ransoms for their release. A suicide bombing in November 2015 that killed four policemen in Al Arish was claimed by WIlayat Sinai to be in retaliation for the arrests of Sinai women by the government (Fahim, 2015) – indicating that the Egyptian policy of mass detentions is not confined to men. Finally a feature in Al Monitor (Mikhail, 2017) describes a project by Sinai Bedouin women to generate income through the sale of modern clothes with traditional Bedouin embroidery. One of the women involved is quoted claiming, 'women in Sinai often help their husbands in providing for

their families, to face the hardships of life in Sinai due to the war between the Egyptian army and jihadist groups'.

Trends

The Sinai conflict can broadly be divided into two phases: phase one from the Arab Spring, and phase two from the ouster of Mohamed Morsi's government. Phase one was marked by fewer and less violent attacks, but this changed with Morsi's overthrow. Since then attacks have increased in frequency, intensity, complexity and impact. The explanation does not lie in militant support for the Muslim Brotherhood and Morsi: quite the contrary, militants opposed the Muslim Brotherhood's moderate approach. However, its removal from power was seen by militant groups 'as justification for their claims that the creation of an Islamic state can only be achieved through violence, and not through the moderate political campaign waged by the Muslim Brotherhood' (Salama, 2013).

The figures point to a significant overall escalation in all measures of violence. The number of militant attacks was 357 in 2015 (up to mid-November), a ten-fold increase from 2012; the number of fatalities from terror attacks rose from less than 50 in 2012 to over 250 in 2015; fatalities from counter-terrorism operations shot up in the same period from 12 to over 3,000; and the number of detentions also soared from 16 in 2011 to over 3,600 in 2015 (Economist, 2015).

The literature also highlights a qualitative change, with militant groups mounting increasingly sophisticated and ambitious attacks. The July 2015 assault by Wilayat Sinai on Sheikh Zuwaid, involving 300-500 militants, was unprecedented (Farid, 2015). Another recent development is the group's increasing use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs). There are hundreds of these on the roads of north Sinai, and they represent the greatest cause of casualties and destruction there (Gold, 2016). Wilayat Sinai is also carrying out high-impact attacks which require little manpower, notably the bombing of the Russian Metrojet plane. That appeared motivated by a desire to avenge Russian action in Syria, as well as to destroy Egypt's vital tourist industry. In the same month there were other attacks on sensitive tourist sites at Giza and Luxor (Hart, 2016).

Farid argues that, unlike in Iraq where ISIS was able to gain control of significant swathes of territory, this appears difficult in Egypt: the Egyptian military is more cohesive, has greater firepower and greater capability than the Iraqi army (Farid, 2015). But the literature indicates there is a risk that militancy could spread from Sinai to the rest of Egypt. One analyst compared militancy to a virus: 'if it does spread to the Nile Delta and Upper Egypt, they *(the military)* won't be able to control it' (cited in Salama, 2013). Following the unsuccessful Wilayat Sinai assault on Sheikh Zuweid, the Economist (2015) warned that fighters could head to the Nile Valley, 'increasing the risk that violence confined to the periphery could flare in the heart of Egypt'. In 2015 IS cells in Egypt bombed police headquarters in Cairo and Mansoura and tried to assassinate the interior minister (Graham-Harrison, 2015).

3. Structural causes

History

From 1967 until 1982 the Sinai was under Israeli occupation. Since the Israeli withdrawal in 1982, 'Egypt has mostly treated the area as a threat rather than an opportunity; Sinaians are potential informants, potential terrorists, potential spies, and potential smugglers, rather than full

Egyptian citizens' (Ashour, 2015). One reason is the perception of Bedouin as collaborators with Israel against Egypt when Sinai was under Israeli occupation.[1] The Sadat government saw them as a group loyal to Israel living within Egyptian territory (Swale, 2015). In a notorious cable published by Wikileaks a senior Egyptian police official in Sinai told a visiting American delegation, 'the only good Bedouin in Sinai was the dead Bedouin' (Ashour, 2015). Official policies from Cairo (see below) have reflected this negative perception of the Sinai Bedouin tribes, and the desire to control and suppress them rather than include them as equal citizens.

Demography

The Sinai Bedouin are ethnically distinct from the rest of Egypt's population and their traditional lifestyle is different. They have different physical features, generally being darker skinned than the majority Egyptian population. They also came from different directions: Nile Valley inhabitants came from the west, Sinai Bedouin from the east. The Bedouin are traditionally nomadic, while those in the Nile Valley were agrarian. The Bedouin speak a different dialect to the rest of Egypt. They also are ethnically closer to Bedouin tribes in Israel and Gaza – links to Israeli Arabs, in particular, cause resentment in Egypt (Swale, 2015).

Neglect of Bedouin concerns

Egyptian social, economic and political policies - under successive Egyptian governments – have been among the biggest factors in alienating Sinai's Bedouin people from the Egyptian state. These policies have been consistently marked by discrimination and marginalisation of the local population. Thus Sinaians were not issued permits to own land, there was limited investment in development, local people were subject to invasive scrutiny, and they were not allowed to vote until 2007 (Walton, 2012). A 2011 article in the Guardian reported that they were not allowed to join the army, study in police or military colleges, hold senior government positions or form their own political parties.[2]

The Bedouin lack political representation at all levels: national, regional and local. Sinai's five governorates (out of 27 in the whole country) have always been headed by governors appointed by the president, almost always from the military or otherwise within the state security sector (Swale, 2015). Some Bedouin tribes, e.g. the Azazma, do not even have Egyptian citizenship as their territory straddles the north Sinai-Israel border. Lack of citizenship means they cannot access services or vote. Other Bedouin entitled to citizenship, lack the necessary documents or have difficulty with the procedures involved – meaning that they too are excluded from government and NGO (these require ID as well) services. Another blatant example of discrimination against the Bedouin is their exclusion from conscription: this is mandatory for males across Egypt, but does not apply to Sinai's Bedouin tribes – something they resent because it signals they are outsiders and denies them opportunities for paid employment (Swale, 2015).

---

[1] https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2011/jun/17/egypt-bedouin-risk-of-exclusion-citizenship-rights

[2] https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2011/jun/17/egypt-bedouin-risk-of-exclusion-citizenship-rights

There has been a persistent failure by Egyptian governments to address the needs of local people. 'The Peninsula remains devoid of basic amenities such as clean water, quality healthcare and education, adequate transportation and infrastructure' (El-Rashidi, 2013). A tribal leader cited high unemployment as the main reason for both criminal activity and extremism in Sinai (ibid). As of 2013, Sinai was the least developed part of the country and had the highest unemployment rate among all Egypt's 29 governorates (Salama, 2013). Cairo paid scant attention to local grievances: 'For decades their struggles with economic marginalisation and political repression were muffled by a virtual blackout on reporting from the region, or drowned out by heavy promotion of the sunshine and beaches of the southern coastal resorts' (Graham-Harrison, 2015).

Following the return of Sinai to Egypt in 1982, the Mubarak government developed the region as a tourist destination. Resorts were built in coastal areas in southern Sinai, notably Sharm el-Sheikh, which attracted western and other tourists and became a significant source of revenue for Egypt. However, the local Bedouin tribes did not share the economic benefits. Indeed, the Bedouin are excluded from the tourist sector – the significant employment in south Sinai generated by tourism has gone to Nile Delta Egyptians. Even attempts by Bedouin to earn a living by promoting their culture (e.g. selling souvenirs) have been curtailed by official harassment and red tape (Swale, 2015). Other development initiatives have similarly been geared to addressing the needs of Egypt's majority Nile Valley population rather than the Bedouin (Walton, 2012). The Al-Salam canal project, for example, involves reclamation of Sinai land to relieve overpopulation in the Nile Valley rather than to benefit Bedouin (Swale, 2015). The Bedouin have been denied access to the region's natural resources such as oil and gas (Hart, 2016).

The Mubarak regime as well as post-Arab Spring governments have all followed a policy of encouraging migration of mainland Egyptians into the Sinai, e.g. by offering attractive salaries and public sector employment (ICG, 2007: 11). The opportunities offered to migrant Egyptians but denied to native Bedouins have led to huge economic disparities between these population groups within Sinai. A related major source of grievance is state denial of Bedouin land ownership rights, as many have been displaced to make way for tourist infrastructure and homes for Nile Valley Egyptians (ICG, 2007; Walton, 2012).

While tourism grew in the south, the north's economy deteriorated and the region became increasingly associated with illicit activities such as drugs and weapons trafficking, smuggling (particularly to neighbouring Gaza), and terrorism training (Rageh, 2013). One study valued the size of the illicit economy in Sinai at USD 300 million annually, representing the main income source for many Bedouin (Siboni & Ben-Barak, 2014: 4). This situation has been made worse by the security vacuum since the Arab Spring revolution. Opium cultivation, in particular, has increased (Swale, 2015). So too human trafficking: one study conservatively estimated that between 25,000 and 30,000 people were victims of trafficking in Sinai in the period 2009-13, many from Eritrea (Swale, 2015: 42). The reliance of Bedouin tribes on drugs, smuggling and human trafficking reinforces stereotypes of them in the rest of Egypt as outlaws and criminals.

4. Proximate causes

Arab Spring and ongoing instability in Egypt

As noted, the trigger for the current phase of the Sinai conflict was the 2011 Arab Spring uprising. The Bedouin in Sinai were among the first to rise up against the Mubarak regime. The temporary withdrawal of police and other security forces from Sinai facilitated the insurgency, as well as growth of militant Islam. Colling (2015) notes that the unrest in Egypt in 2011 and 2012 produced conditions ripe for increased militancy, with Islamist extremists in the Gaza Strip and wider region flooding into the Sinai. The overthrow of the Gaddafi regime in Libya led to huge quantities of weapons becoming available, many finding their way to Sinai (Swale, 2015). Egypt's failure to establish true democracy – in particular the ouster of Morsi and return of authoritarian rule under Fattah el-Sisi – has fuelled the conflict in Sinai, in large part because it has meant a continuation of Cairo's security dominated approach to the conflict.

Islamic State

Militant groups in Sinai have been influenced by wider developments in the region and by wider militant jihadist ideologies and movements. In recent years, the most significant influence has been from Islamic State. Sinai is considered a new arena for Islamic State; after losing ground in Syria and Iraq, the group's focus seems to be shifting to North Africa, notably Egypt and Libya. Hart (2016) notes that the presence of IS in Sinai 'is becoming an increasing concern, especially after IS recently launched an extensive media and propaganda campaign, aimed at increasing recruitment in Egypt'. Soon after rebranding itself as Wilayat Sinai, the group carried out several beheadings of suspected informants – possibly in imitation of IS and 'the emphasis they place on the propaganda and demonstrative effects of terror' (Sharp, 2014). However, Wilayat Sinai's adoption of IS-style tactics, and particularly oppression of the local population, shows signs of alienating the Bedouin.

Egyptian security response

Just as Egyptian policies discriminating against and marginalising Sinai's Bedouin were the major underlying cause of the conflict, so Egyptian policies in response to the conflict are the major factor sustaining it. Cairo has persistently taken a heavy-handed security approach to the crisis. The initial October 2004 bombings of the Taba Hilton and Ras Shaitan were followed by a massive security crackdown in which over 3,000 predominantly Bedouin and Palestinian residents of north Sinai were detained; many were held for months without charge, and many were tortured. The same response was seen in the wake of the 2005 and 2006 terrorist attacks in Sinai, and resulted in deep Bedouin resentment and anger towards the Egyptian state. This was one of the factors in their rising up against the Mubarak regime during the Arab Spring. However, the state (under the SCAF) again responded with repression, mass detentions, torture and human rights abuses – fuelling rather than assuaging local anger and grievances. Even under Mohamed Morsi – who promised to end discrimination against the Sinai Bedouin and address their concerns – militant attacks led to the same security crackdown. President el-Sisi is continuing the same policies.

Large-scale arrests, detention of local people for months and years, use of torture and other human rights abuses, 'collateral damage' to civilians in military counter-insurgency operations (loss of life, injuries, destruction of property) and curfews – all these features of the Egyptian

response to the conflict only serve to further anger and alienate the local population. With the exception of a few tentative steps under Morsi, Cairo has made no attempt to understand the underlying causes of the conflict and address Bedouin grievances. Writer Fahmi Howeidi says the Egyptian state has made two big mistakes: one, seeking a purely military solution to the conflict in Sinai rather than a political or social one, and two, putting all Islamists in the same basket and considering them all suspects, which increases resentment against the regime (cited in Farid, 2015).

In recent years, Egypt has made increased efforts to enforce a blockade of Gaza, including stopping smuggling of goods through the underground tunnel system between Sinai and Gaza. Bedouin tribes in Sinai are heavily dependent on this smuggling for income. For them it represents a source of revenue when other legitimate opportunities are denied to them. The tunnel industry is also a major source of employment for Bedouin tribes, and was estimated to bring USD 300 million to Sinai annually (Walton, 2012: 6). As part of its security response to the conflict, and to weaken Hamas which derives revenue from the tunnel system, the Egyptian government took steps to destroy the tunnel system. In September 2013 the military bulldozed dozens of homes and removed trees along the roads from Al-Arish, a town in northern Sinai, to Rafah, the border city with Gaza. This was to create a 500 m wide, six mile long buffer zone around the Rafah border crossing (Salama, 2013; Michael, 2016). The buffer zone was later widened to a five km wide strip (Swale, 2015: 75).

Egypt's operations to close the tunnels negatively impacted both Gaza inhabitants and Sinai's Bedouin tribes. The former suffered massive shortages and price increases, while the latter – closely tied economically to Gaza – saw their incomes fall. Many also lost their homes in the creation of the buffer zone. The operations might have been effective in stopping smuggling through the tunnels, but they also served to further distance Sinai Bedouin from the Egyptian state.

5. Looking ahead

The Egyptian government's 'pursuit of a military solution is unlikely to bring a lasting peace' (Colling, 2015). 'Terrorism will only be eliminated through cooperation between the state and the locals of Sinai. The state needs to use their help instead of only pointing fingers at them. We have reached the point where almost all members of tribes are considered suspects' (an Al-Sawarka tribe member cited in Farid, 2015).

Signs of local anger towards ISIS means there is potential for the Bedouin tribes to become allies with the government in fighting the militant groups (Colling, 2015). One analyst claimed the Bedouin community had called on the Egyptian regime to include them in action against the militancy, but these calls were ignored (Mohammad Sabry, cited in Graham-Harrison, 2015). However, turning the Bedouin into allies against ISIS would require a significant change of policy on the part of the government, and significant measures to address the grievances and needs of the local population. As yet, there is no indication that Cairo is willing to adopt anything other than the heavy-handed, security response to both Islamists and Bedouin tribes that it has taken to date. As one analyst noted: 'Egypt's military leaders are like ostriches with heads in the sand. They say "We're winning hearts and minds with our great counter-insurgency plans," when they're just stirring animosity with their collective punishment' (Economist, 2015).

There is consensus in the literature that peace in Sinai requires a change of approach from the Egyptian state: no other opportunities for peace are identified. Based on the current approach by Cairo, one analyst predicts that, 'Even if the government succeeds in putting an end to the attacks, it will never succeed in putting an end to the radical, extreme and revenge-seeking resentment. It is a seed that eventually, in many cases, grows into an armed terrorist or militant organisation' (Mohammad Sabry, cited in Graham-Harrison, 2015).

6. References

Ashour, O. (2015). 'Sinai's Stubborn Insurgency: Why Egypt Can't Win'. *Foreign Affairs,* 8 November 2015. Retrieved from: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/egypt/2015-11-08/sinais-stubborn-insurgency

Ashour, O. (2016). 'Sinai Insurgency: An enduring risk'. *Al Jazeera,* 1 May 2016. Retrieved from: http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2016/04/sinai-egypt-160424074317507.html

Colling, A. (2015). 'In Sinai, Egypt Faces Tough Task to Counter Instability'. *Global Observatory,* International Peace Institute. Retrieved from: http://www.aljazeera.com/blogs/middleeast/2013/05/72146.html

Economist (2015). 'The Peninsular war: Egypt is losing control of the Sinai'. 14 November 2015. Retrieved from: http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21678260-egypt-losing-control-sinai-peninsular-war

El-Rashidi, S. (2013). 'Morsi's Failures in Sinai: A Cautionary Tale'. *Atlantic Council*, 4 September 2013. Retrieved from: http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/morsi-s-failures-in-sinai-a-cautionary-tale

Fahim, K. (2015). 'Suicide bombing kills at least 4 Egyptian police officers in Sinai'. *New York Times,* 4 November 2015. Retrieved from: https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/05/world/middleeast/egypt-bombing-sinai-police.html?_r=0

Farid, S. (2015). 'Egypt vs. ISIS: Is Sinai now an official battlefield?' *Al Arabiya*, 11 July 2015. Retrieved from: http://english.alarabiya.net/en/perspective/analysis/2015/07/11/Egypt-vs-ISIS-Is-Sinai-now-an-official-battlefield-.html

Gold, Z. (2016). 'After Failed 2015 Siege, Sinai State Fights On'. *Atlantic Council*, 30 June 2016. Retrieved from: http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/after-failed-2015-siege-sinai-state-fights-on

Graham-Harrison, E. (2015). 'How Sinai became a magnet for terror'. *Observer,* 8 November 2015. Retrieved from: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/08/sinai-magnet-for-terror

Hart, M. (2016). 'The Troubled History of Egypt's Sinai Peninsula'. *International Policy Digest*, 30 May 2016. Retrieved from: http://intpolicydigest.org/2016/05/30/the-troubled-history-of-egypt-s-sinai-peninsula/

ICG (2007). *Egypt's Sinai Question*. International Crisis Group, Middle East/North Africa Report No. 61. Retrieved from: https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/egypt/egypt-s-sinai-question

Laub, Z. (2013). 'Egypt's Sinai Peninsula and Security'. *Council on Foreign* Relations Backgrounder, 12 December 2013. Retrieved from: http://www.cfr.org/egypt/egypts-sinai-peninsula-security/p32055

MEI (2014). *Special Feature: Terrorism in Sinai.* Middle East Institute. Retrieved from: http://www.mei.edu/sinai-terrorism

Mikhail, G. (2017). 'Sinai women turn to embroidery to preserve Bedouin culture'. *Al Monitor,* 27 January 2017. Retrieved from: http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/01/egypt-sinai-women-embroidery-heritage.html

Rageh, R. (2013). 'The Root Cause of Egypt's Sinai Conflict'. Al-Jazeera, 23 May 2013. Retrieved from: http://www.aljazeera.com/blogs/middleeast/2013/05/72146.html

Salama, V. (2013). 'What's behind the wave of terror in the Sinai?' *The Atlantic,* 22 November 2013. Retrieved from: https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/11/whats-behind-the-wave-of-terror-in-the-sinai/281751/

Sharp, J. (2014). *The Islamic State in Egypt: Implications for US-Egypt Relations.* Congressional Research Service Insights. Retrieved from: https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/IN10199.pdf

Sharp, J. (2016). *Egypt: Background and US Relations.* Congressional Research Service. Retrieved from: https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33003.pdf

Siboni, G. & Ben-Barak, R. (2014). *The Sinai Peninsula Threat Development and Response Concept.* Brookings. Retrieved from: https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/web-Analysis-31-edited.pdf

Sulaiman, M. (2016). 'The "jihadi" women of Egypt's Sinai'. *Al Araby,* 29 January 2016. Retrieved from: https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2016/1/29/The-jihadi-women-of-Egypts-Sinai

Swale, D. (2015). *Discord in the Desert: Egypt's Sinai Peninsula in the Aftermath of the Arab Spring.* MA Thesis, Massey University, Manawatu, New Zealand. Retrieved from: http://mro.massey.ac.nz/bitstream/handle/10179/7883/02_whole.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y

Viersen, H. (2015). 'The Torture Trade in Sinai'. *Muftah,* 15 May 2015. Retrieved from: http://muftah.org/torture-is-trade-in-sinai/#.WLgNOZjcvIU

Walton, O. (2012). *Conflict, Exclusion and Livelihoods in the Sinai Region of Egypt.* GSDRC, University of Birmingham. Retrieved from: http://www.gsdrc.org/docs/open/hdq834.pdf

Key websites

Middle East Institute:
http://www.mei.edu/

Council on Foreign Relations:
http://www.cfr.org/region/egypt/ri356

Suggested citation

Idris, I. (2017). *Sinai Conflict Analysis.* K4D Helpdesk Report. Brighton, UK: Institute of Development Studies.

About this report

This report is based on five days of desk-based research. The K4D research helpdesk provides rapid syntheses of a selection of recent relevant literature and international expert thinking in response to specific questions relating to international development. For any enquiries, contact helpdesk@k4d.info.

K4D services are provided by a consortium of leading organisations working in international development, led by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), with Education Development Trust, Itad, University of Leeds Nuffield Centre for International Health and Development, Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine (LSTM), University of Birmingham International Development Department (IDD) and the University of Manchester Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute (HCRI).