

Al Qaeda's Expansion in Egypt: Implications for U.S. Homeland Security

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Hearing on Al Qaeda's Expansion in Egypt: Implications for U.S. Homeland Security

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for this invitation to appear before you to discuss the situation in Egypt and how it affects U.S. national interests. For today's hearing, I will address broadly what is happening in Egypt, what is likely to happen in that country, the situation in the Sinai Peninsula, its potential to affect American national security interests, and what the United States can do to help the Egyptians meet the challenges they confront.

A little more than three years ago today, I returned home after witnessing first-hand the exhilaration and hope of protesters in Tahrir Square. Contrary to much of the commentary about that moment, economic grievances were not the primary factor that brought Egyptians into the streets. Rather, the crowd of tens of thousands that grew to hundreds of thousands two weeks later was demanding freedom, justice, dignity, and national empowerment.

Unfortunately, over the course of the last 36 months, Egypt's political development has not lived up to the aspirations of those heady 18 days in Tahrir Square. Instead, what we are seeing in Egypt is the reconstitution of a version of the old political order. The intention of those currently in power is to re-engineer the political

system in a way that makes it harder for events like the January 25 uprising to happen again. This reconstituted order is likely to be both more brutal and more adept than its predecessor. Yet Egypt's leaders face significant obstacles to achieving their goal of stabilizing the political arena. The events of January-February 2011 do not constitute a revolution, but if there has been one revolutionary development in Egypt over the last three years, it is the emergence of large groups of people who are determined to continue making demands on the government through street politics and protest. Much attention has been paid to the Muslim Brotherhood in this regard, but opposition to the new order exists among the non-Muslim Brotherhood, non-religious end of the political spectrum. It is important to point out that although the January referendum on the new constitution earned overwhelming support, only 38.6 percent of eligible voters participated.

In addition, based on the experiences of the last three years, Egyptian politics can change very quickly. The Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party won a plurality of votes in the parliamentary elections in 2011-2012, but now many of its members are in jail or on the run. Egyptians applauded when Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi, the former head of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, ceded power to Mohammed Morsi after the June 2012 presidential elections, but a year later millions mobilized against Morsi, culminating in the coup d'état of July 3, 2013. The political consensus since the military's intervention and the widespread popularity of Field Marshal Abdel Fattah al Sisi may be more apparent than real. This means that Egyptian politics will continue to be contested. The authorities' only answers to this political ferment are authoritarian tools—notably, coercion and violence. On the third anniversary of Hosni Mubarak's ignominious fall, political disappointment, enormous economic challenges, and an insurgency are Egypt's present and future reality.

This brings me to the situation in the Sinai Peninsula. The security problems there have become deeply worrisome. It is important to note that it is the scale of violence that is new, not the problem of terrorism nor its cause. Egypt is in many ways a crucible of transnational jihad and has produced a long list of notorious terrorists. For at least a decade before the January 2011 uprising, Israeli and American officials raised concerns to their Egyptian counterparts over the drug trade, the flow of weapons, human trafficking, and the presence of various extremist groups in the Sinai. There is no evidence that then-president Mubarak took American and Israeli disquiet seriously, but even if he had, there were important political and structural impediments that would have prevented him from taking any effective action.

First, the leadership in Cairo was not inclined politically to address to grievances of the population of northern Sinai, whether they be related to the lack of economic opportunity and development or to the poor treatment of the population at the hands of the Ministry of Interior. Although the Sinai is critical to a set of national myths related to past conflicts with Israel and national redemption, the area has not been incorporated into the political and economic life of the country. Given this neglect and the cultural differences between the largely Bedouin population of the Sinai and other parts of the country, residents of the Sinai do not feel Egyptian. To be fair, this situation is not necessarily unique to the Sinai. The same can be said of residents who live in the Nile Valley who also feel disconnected from the far-flung capital and its leaders who care little about developments outside the major population centers.

Second, Egyptian-Israeli security coordination was not as robust in the late 1990s and 2000s as it is now. During the mid-2000s, for example, there was considerable mistrust between the two security establishments in addition to thinly veiled Egyptian anger over the efforts of Israel and its U.S.-based supporters to draw attention to Cairo's lackluster approach to the problem of underground smuggling from the Egyptian frontier to the Gaza Strip.

Third, and most importantly, the primary state organizations that were (and remain) responsible for the Sinai—the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Interior, and the General Intelligence Service (GIS)—have maintained

different views on how to deal with problems there, have distinct missions, and are in competition with each other. Due to restrictions built into the Egypt-Israel peace treaty, the armed forces were only permitted in certain locations in the Sinai and only with certain pre-determined types of weapons. As a result, stability in the Sinai was largely left to the Ministry of Interior, which, as alluded to above, pursued its police functions with zeal and little regard for due process or human rights. For its part, the GIS was less interested in the quiescence of the population than it was in running intelligence operations in the Sinai. The inevitable result was the development of an environment conducive to crime, extremism, and violence.

After the uprising, the Ministry of Interior was badly battered and the Ministry of Defense was consumed with running the country. This almost immediately resulted in the deterioration of the security situation in northern Sinai. Attacks on police stations, bombings of the Trans-Arab and the al Arish-Ashkelon pipelines, kidnapping of security personnel, efforts to infiltrate Israel, and brazen attacks on state facilities in the region's capital al Arish all became frequent. Military operations during the summer of 2011 and 2012 did little to arrest this instability and violence. It is not accurate to suggest, as many in the media have, that the Sinai Peninsula is "lawless." There are informal legal institutions in the Sinai: Sharia courts are now taking the place of the tribal 'Urf court system, which the government under Mubarak was widely believed to have infiltrated. The spread of Sharia courts has become a way to propagate and institutionalize extremist ideologies and worldviews.

As the Egyptians celebrate today the third anniversary of Hosni Mubarak's fall, the insurgency that they are now confronting in the Sinai Peninsula is only one of many challenges, but perhaps the most serious one, that they face in the struggle to build a new and more just society. This is a conflict that the military is not well equipped to fight. Over the last three decades, Egypt's senior command have focused on a heavily mechanized force complemented by air power. The officers have also been resistant to American advice about how best to prepare for 21st century threats. Since the July 3, 2013 coup d'etat, there have been at least 22 terrorist attacks in the Sinai and a series of attacks in major population centers in the Nile Valley, including Ismailiyya, Mansoura, the Sharqiya governorate, and Cairo. A group called *Ansar Bayt al Maqdis* (Supporters of Jerusalem) have taken responsibility for most of the attacks, but other groups including the previously unknown *Ajnad Misr* (Soldiers of Egypt) and *Jund al Islam* (Soldiers of Islam) have also targeted the Egyptian state and security forces. Most ominously, in late July and again in early September, an extremist organization called *al-Furqan* Brigade fired on cargo ships in the Suez Canal with rocket propelled grenades, though no damage was reported.

Observers have speculated that the Sinai Peninsula will or already has become a haven for foreign fighters intent on carrying out jihad. Like the low-level insurgency of the 1990s, however, the evidence suggests that the violence in the Sinai Peninsula is largely an Egyptian affair. The Sinai may yet attract foreign jihadis, but thus far the Sinai has enticed Egyptians nationals who had been fighting in Syria and Iraq to return home in order to wage war against what they believe to be an illegitimate government. Ayman Zawahiri, the Egyptian leader of al Qaeda, has offered his support to *Ansar Bayt al Maqdis* and has encouraged Egyptians to take up arms against the state. There is currently a debate in Washington about Zawahiri and the extent of his control over al Qaeda and its affiliates, but it seems clear that he maintain influence among Egyptian jihadists.

Mr. Chairman, this brief overview depicts a profoundly worrying situation of political uncertainty, economic deterioration, and extremist violence. This instability poses a threat to American national security interests including navigation of the Suez Canal, providing logistical support to U.S. forces in the Persian Gulf, overflight rights, and the preservation of Egypt-Israel peace. Since Hosni Mubarak's departure, the analytic community has been debating how the United States can best help Egypt. There have been many good ideas. Much of this work has, however, focused on promoting democratic development in Egypt. This is a laudable goal—one that I share—but Egypt's current trajectory suggests an unstable and authoritarian future.

In an environment where the Egyptian leadership and its supporters have characterized domestic politics as an existential struggle, there is little that the United States can do to help secure a democratic outcome. Washington should speak out forcefully and clearly against, for example, human rights violations, attacks on press freedoms, and policies that contradict the rule of law, but policymakers must understand that this is unlikely to have a decisive effect on the quality of Egyptian politics. Some observers have advocated suspending, delaying, or outright cutting U.S. military assistance to punish the military for the July 3 coup and to compel the officers to put Egypt on a democratic path. It is hard to understand how such a policy would advance democratic change or help improve Egypt's security situation. The Obama administration has already withheld important weapons systems from the Egyptians, including F-16s and Apache helicopters in response to the military's intervention, but this has not had a salutatory effect on Egyptian politics. Critics also argue that U.S. support for the military will further destabilize Egypt, reasoning that the officers' harsh crackdown is contributing to polarization and violence. This "repression-radicalization dynamic" is real, but whether the United States provides assistance or not, the military and the Ministry of Interior seem likely to continue to try to establish political control through coercion and violence. Withdrawing American support will not make Egypt less unstable.

Against the backdrop of this difficult debate, the United States has security interests in Egypt that virtually all observers agree remain important in the short-run. The Egyptians have come to terms with the fact that they are likely to be battling extremists in the Sinai Peninsula for the foreseeable future. The Ministry of Defense is not always amenable to American advice because they fear that the United States wants to transform the military into a gendarmerie. There is no basis for this concern, but the Egyptians must break out of their outdated conception of security and rethink their doctrine to respond to the very real threats before them. This is where the United States can be most helpful, but to be successful, American policymakers will need to reassure Egyptian officers that Washington stands with them in the fight against terrorism and extremism. Specifically, the administration and the Congress should give the Egyptian military the tools and technology it needs to counter extremist violence; release suspended weapons systems, especially the Apache helicopters; establish a standing group of American and Egyptian officers to coordinate assistance coherently; and develop a trilateral American-Egyptian-Israeli security/intelligence/counter-terrorism mechanism that facilitates the flow of information among the security establishments of all three countries.

Mr. Chairman, my comments no doubt give rise to many questions and concerns and I look forward to discussing them with members of the Subcommittee. I am grateful to you for inviting me today and for holding this hearing on the difficult situation in Egypt.