

Egypt launches Sinai crackdown in collusion with Israel

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Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood government has launched a crackdown after an armed raid at the Rafah checkpoint near the border with Gaza and Israel killed 16 Egyptian soldiers and wounded eight more. The action testifies to how closely the Brotherhood now works with Israel and the United States.

While both Egyptian and Israeli intelligence had been warned of an attack in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, Egyptian security forces apparently took no additional precautions. On Sunday evening, 35 masked gunmen launched an armed raid at Rafah. Several of the gunmen then seized two armoured vehicles and crossed into Israel. One of the vehicles exploded, apparently booby-trapped.

Israeli security forces, alerted by the Egyptian forces, then gave chase to the other, killing six men with aerial missiles. Most were found to be wearing explosive belts. Egyptian security forces killed and wounded a number of others who tried to escape into Gaza.

The raid follows an increasing number of attacks in the northern Sinai since the ouster of President Hosni Mubarak. There have been at least 15 attacks on the pipeline taking gas to Israel and Jordan, disrupting supplies. A few weeks ago, two Egyptian soldiers were killed.

Israeli intelligence chief Aviv Kochavi announced that the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) had stopped nearly a dozen recent attacks from the Sinai Peninsula.

Last August, Islamist militants crossed Egypt's border into Eilat, in southern Israel, killing eight people, including two security personnel, and injured dozens more. Israeli forces chased the attackers across the border and kill at least seven people, including several Egyptian policemen.

Sinai's 23,000 square miles is home to 600,000

Bedouin, many of whom are not registered as Egyptian citizens. Since the fall of Mubarak, some of the impoverished Bedouin tribes have begun to protest the tribal leaders and the Egyptian authorities. Others are believed to be making a good living through the smuggling of arms from Libya and Sudan for jihadist groups operating in the Sinai Peninsula, which is now awash with weaponry.

For some time, Israel has been ramping up the pressure on Egypt to mount a clamp down. A few weeks ago, Israel sent an official letter to the UN Security Council complaining about the security situation in Sinai. Last week, both Israel and the US warned their citizens not to travel to Sinai.

No group has claimed responsibility for the Rafah attack. Egyptian state TV said that the raid was carried out by foreign Islamic militants from a global jihad network with the help of Bedouins in the northern Sinai, who had entered from Egypt and Gaza.

Two leading officials in Fatah, the Palestinian ruling clique in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, accused its rival Hamas, which controls Gaza, of being responsible for the attack.

Hamas, a Palestinian offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood, accused Fatah of using the attack to create divisions between Egypt and Gaza. It denied any responsibility for the attack and, along with its Egyptian parent and Hezbollah in Lebanon, condemned it.

Hamas also condemned the Egyptian authorities for not taking pre-emptive action in the light of the warnings and also blamed Mossad, Israel's intelligence agency, who they said were trying to undermine the Egyptian government and worsen relations between Egypt and Gaza.

In recent weeks, Egypt's President Mohamed Mursi

of the Brotherhood has received both Khaled Meshaal, the exiled Hamas leader who has left Damascus and is now living in Dubai, and Ismail Haniyeh, the Hamas prime minister in Gaza. He promised them that he would ease the tight restrictions at the Rafah crossing, the only one not under Israeli control. The tiny enclave of 1.7 million Palestinians has been blockaded by Israel for more than five years.

Aware of the deep anger of the Egyptian people at the role Mubarak played in sustaining the Israeli blockade, Mursi initially wanted to be seen as effecting some change in this regard.

Mursi responded to the raid on the Egyptian soldiers by calling it a "vicious attack" and vowed "those behind the attacks will pay a high price as well as those who have been co-operating with those attackers, be it those inside or anywhere in Egypt."

He promised that the security forces would take "full control" over Sinai.

Additional pressure on Mursi was that he and Hisham Qandil, the newly installed prime minister, face accusations at home of involvement in the raid. Both attended the funeral prayers for the slain soldiers, where angry protestors chased Qandil, shouting, "You killed them you dogs" and chanted against the Brotherhood and Mursi. Neither man attended the military funeral on the advice of intelligence staff, who said they could not guarantee their safety.

Israel's Defense Minister Ehud Barak said the raid should be a "wake up call" for Egypt and demanded that Cairo take action. "The militants' attack methods again raise the need for determined Egyptian action to enforce security and prevent terror in the Sinai," he said.

Sources at Egypt's presidential palace told *Egypt Independent* that the palace had received calls expressing concern about the security vacuum in Sinai, including one that suggested that Israeli "constraint" in the event of any further attacks emanating from Sinai could not be guaranteed.

Cairo dutifully fell in line, with Mursi allying himself in a joint offensive with Egypt's Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) and with Israel.

Mursi sent in the security forces to close down its border with Hamas-controlled Gaza, the only one not under Israeli control, completely isolating the Gaza enclave. Heavy machinery was sent in to seal entrances

to tunnels--believed to number 1,000-- used to smuggle goods, fuel and weapons into Gaza.

Military forces launched a massive security crackdown, raiding hundreds of homes in northern Sinai to search for suspects, arresting several people, and deploying helicopter gunships to search out militants in their desert hideouts. After a number of armed clashes, the military launched aerial attacks on towns and villages in northern Sinai, killing at least 20 people. This was the first time Egypt has fired missiles in Sinai since the 1973 war with Israel.

Hours later, Mursi sacked Egypt's intelligence chief and the head of the North Sinai governorate. General Mohamed Murad Mowafi was quoted in the Egyptian media as confirming that the intelligence services had received warning of Sunday's attack. He had apparently only passed the information on, saying that the intelligence services' job was only to collect information. Mursi also dismissed the commander of the presidential guard and several other top security officials.

These actions were taken in close co-ordination with Israel, who agreed to the deployment of additional troops in Sinai over and above that set up in the 1978 and 1979 Camp David Accords. Danny Ayalon, Israel's deputy foreign minister, said that Israel and Egypt would increase security cooperation.



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