

Dozens Killed as Israel, Egypt Strike Targets in Sinai

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Both Israeli and Egyptian military forces struck targets in the Sinai Peninsula over the weekend in what appears to be a coordinated campaign against Islamist forces active among the Bedouin tribes of the region.

The bloodshed involves at least two separate attacks, the details of which remain shrouded in secrecy. On Friday, a missile, apparently fired from an Israeli drone, slammed into Ajraa in the northern Sinai, near the border with the Gaza Strip. News reports claim the explosion destroyed a rocket launcher aimed at Israel, killing four or five Islamic militants.

On Saturday night, Egyptian army Apache helicopters, supplied by the United States, targeted supposed “terrorist sites” in the town of Al-Thoma, south of Sheikh Zuweid. Several four-wheel-drive vehicles were destroyed and at least 15 people killed. An Egyptian military spokesman later gave the toll as 25 killed or wounded.

Israeli officials, in keeping with their standard practice in regard to cross-border attacks against Arab neighbors, would not even confirm that the Israel Defense Forces had fired missiles into Sinai Friday, although the attack was widely reported in the international media and the death toll was confirmed by a spokesman for an armed Islamic group, Ansar Beit al-Maqdis.

The incident would be the first in decades in which Israeli forces deliberately attacked a target on Egyptian soil. Israeli forces have killed Egyptian soldiers while allegedly responding to cross-border attacks by Islamists, but the official claim has been that the soldiers were unintended victims.

Acknowledging the political sensitivity of the issue, Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Yaalon said that Israel “appreciated” actions taken by Egypt in Sinai over the weekend. He added, “Israel respects the full sovereignty of Egypt.”

Egyptian military officials initially claimed responsibility for Friday’s attack, evidently in an effort to disguise the collaboration between the Egyptian and Israeli armed forces in killing Egyptian citizens. Eyewitnesses on the ground told the press that Egyptian military helicopters had been circling the area before the explosion and may have helped pinpoint the target, but the blast was caused by a missile fired from an Israeli drone.

A Reuters report confirmed inter-state consultations. “Both Israel and Egypt were coordinating closely... this time around. I very much doubt that anything was done outside the framework of that coordination,” the news agency said, quoting a source “who declined to be identified by name or nationality.”

Saturday's attack was certainly carried out by the Egyptian military. Army troops used loudspeakers to warn residents not to leave their homes as the Apache helicopters swooped in and opened fire. Several houses were set afire as a result of the air strikes, according to the web site of the official newspaper *Al Ahram*.

An Egyptian army spokesman, Ahmed Ali, addressing a press briefing Sunday, confirmed the Sinai attacks in general terms, but refused to give any details, citing operational security concerns.

"Egypt's armed forces affirm that it's working in silence, in collaboration with the Ministry of Interior, to chase terrorist groups and to destroy criminal spots in North Sinai," said Ali.

Last week, the Egyptian army announced it had arrested 103 "terrorists," who are currently being interrogated, meaning they are likely being tortured, in Egyptian military prisons. Another 60 militants have been killed in Sinai during the monthlong period since the July 3 military coup.

Al Ahram carried a report Sunday, citing Egyptian military sources, that 600 Hamas operatives had entered Sinai from the Gaza Strip since the July 3 coup. The report cited this supposed invasion of "terrorists" as another reason for the military crackdown in the peninsula. It could also serve as a justification for further repressive measures against the Muslim Brotherhood by the Egyptian military regime.

The Debka Files web site, with close ties to Israeli military and intelligence services, gave an additional rationale for the intensive Egyptian-Israeli military collaboration. It reported that the leader of the Muslim Brotherhood's clandestine operations, Mahmud Izzat Ibrahim, had fled Egypt after the July 3 military coup and taken up residence at the Gaza Beach Hotel in the Gaza Strip, under the protection of Hamas, which was founded by Palestinian supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood.

According to this Israeli web site, "For effective action in the Gaza Strip, the Egyptian military needs help from Israel's Defense Forces, just as the IDF needs the Egyptian army to counteract Al Qaeda and other Islamic terrorists in Sinai who are dedicated to attacking Israel as well as Egypt."

The Obama administration is encouraging the collaboration between the Egyptian military and the state of Israel, which has been a keystone of the foreign policy of US imperialism since the Camp David accords of 1977. An array of US officials has traveled to the region since the military overthrow of President Mohammed Mursi in Egypt last month.

Most recently, Deputy US Secretary of State William Burns was in Cairo, meeting with the military leadership and its civilian front man, President Adly Mansour. Also visiting Cairo were two Republican senators, John McCain and Lindsey Graham, serving as informal political emissaries of the Obama White House.

Providing political cover for the joint Israeli-Egyptian military operation was the *New York Times*, which carried on Sunday a lengthy front-page article depicting the Sinai Peninsula as a lawless region beset by "something like an insurgency." Both the content of the article and its prominence suggested coordination between the US military-intelligence apparatus, the Netanyahu government in Israel and the editorial offices of the leading US newspaper.

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