

Improving Egypt-Israel Relations in the Shadow of Gaza

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Brief Analysis

In addition to addressing each country's concerns about border sovereignty, smuggling, and other irritants, Washington should emphasize the longer-term need to return to the peace treaty's military limitations after the Gaza war.

When Secretary of State Antony Blinken traveled to Cairo last week to chair the annual U.S.-Egypt Strategic Dialogue, one of his main goals was to advance the stalled ceasefire negotiations between Hamas and Israel. A key sticking point in those talks is the disposition of the Philadelphia Corridor, a narrow portion of the Gaza Strip that runs along the border with Egypt. Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu is loath to depart this corridor because Hamas has often tunneled beneath it to smuggle weapons. Yet Cairo views Israel's continued military presence there as a violation of their peace treaty's security annex. This dispute—coupled with Israeli accusations that Egypt is complicit in Hamas smuggling—has become a serious bilateral irritant, potentially exacerbating other unresolved security issues in the Sinai Peninsula.

Camp David Security Obligations

The 1979 Camp David treaty detailed the security arrangements that Egypt and Israel would adhere to in the Sinai and along their shared border, in part by dividing the peninsula into three zones. In Zone A adjacent to the Suez Canal, Egypt was permitted to deploy one mechanized army division with up to 22,000 troops, 230 tanks, and 480 armored personnel carriers. In Zone B in central Sinai, only border guards were permitted. And in Zone C, the portion abutting Gaza and Israel, only police units were permitted. Limitations were also placed on Israeli military

deployments on its side of the border (Zone D).

The Philadelphia Corridor was not specifically mentioned in the treaty because Israel occupied Gaza at the time. Yet according to Annex I, Article II, Israel is allowed four infantry battalions along the entire frontier from the Mediterranean Sea to Eilat, with up to 180 armored personal vehicles and 4,000 troops, as well as installations and field fortifications. Tanks, artillery, and anti-aircraft missiles are not permitted in this area, though man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADS) are allowed.

Violations by Both Sides

Egyptian deployments in the peninsula remained more or less consistent with these terms until 2013, when a potent jihadist insurgency prompted Cairo to request exemptions allowing **additional forces and equipment** (<https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/06/03/egypt-israel-peace-sinai-islamic-state-military-terrorism-treaty/>) to counter the threat, including as many as 200 more tanks. Israel agreed to these requests via the Multinational Force & Observers (MFO), the organization that monitors compliance with the treaty. Today, an estimated 45,000 to 66,000 Egyptian troops are operating in the Sinai.

In addition, Egypt has built several military bases and airfields in the peninsula since 2013, all without permission from Israel or the MFO. Of the three unapproved airfields, one includes hardened aircraft shelters for six F-16s and ammunition bunkers. Command headquarters have also been constructed in the Sinai for the 2nd Army, 3rd Army, Unified Command, and 101st Special Forces Battalion. Two other facilities have been built in contravention of the treaty and without any credible counterterrorism justification whatsoever: an operations center in a bunker eighty-nine feet underground, and a naval base in east Port Said.

Israel has recently violated the treaty as well, deploying tanks and personnel in excess of the Zone D limitations during its May offensive against Hamas forces in Rafah. Absent heavy armor, however, a continued Israeli deployment in the Philadelphia Corridor would not technically contravene the treaty—though such a presence may not be advisable for other reasons discussed below.

Efforts to Secure the Border with Gaza

When Israel ended its occupation of Gaza in 2005, the Philadelphia Corridor became the Palestinian Authority's border with Egypt. Yet after Hamas brutally deposed the PA and took control of Gaza two years later, Egypt reportedly sealed the border.

Following the Egyptian revolution in 2011, Cairo began voicing concern that weapons smuggling into and out of Gaza was helping to fuel an armed rebellion in the Sinai. Around 2015, amid a burgeoning Islamic State insurgency in the peninsula, the government initiated a campaign to close the cross-border tunnels used by these smugglers, famously flooding several of them. By 2018, it had also razed the entire Sinai border city of Rafah, displacing some 70,000 citizens to create a buffer zone 1.5 kilometers wide. And in 2020, Egypt completed a concrete wall that reached sixteen feet below the surface and expanded the buffer zone to about 7 kilometers.

All told, Cairo claimed to destroy some 1,500 Hamas tunnel shafts between Gaza and the Sinai. Yet weapons continued to flow into the Strip, enabling Hamas to develop its military capabilities to a degree that eventually culminated in the October 7 invasion. When Israeli forces entered Rafah and the Philadelphia Corridor earlier this year, they announced that dozens of operational tunnels into Sinai had been discovered.

Even more troubling were the numerous reports of Egyptian state complicity in aboveground smuggling to Gaza. Apparently, this was a **collaborative effort** (<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/20/world/middleeast/egypt-tycoon-hala-palestinians-gaza.html>) between the Egyptian General Intelligence Directorate and a shady Sinai businessman named Ibrahim al-Organi. Former Israeli internal security chief Nadav Argaman has indicated that

most smuggling after 2018 took place through the Rafah and Kerem Shalom crossings, not via the tunnels.

Today, Cairo is increasingly annoyed with Israel's presence in the corridor and its control over the Gaza side of the Rafah crossing, long a symbol of Egyptian sovereignty. Meanwhile, it has taken steps to fortify the border with Gaza by constructing T-walls and reinforced fencing—though these measures are seemingly designed more to prevent potential mass breaches by Palestinians than to address concerns about Hamas smuggling. On September 5, Egypt's army chief of staff toured the frontier, visiting special forces, paratroopers, commando units, and nearby mechanized and tank units—all of which are currently stationed near the border in violation of the peace treaty. It is unclear whether any of these activities were approved by Israel.

Policy Recommendations

Washington has an abiding interest in de-escalating tensions between these longstanding peace partners and coordinating with them to ensure that Hamas cannot rearm and reconstitute after the war. Israel might be amenable to easing one of Egypt's top irritants—withdrawal from the Philadelphia Corridor—if effective arrangements are made to curb smuggling. With international support, Egypt could deploy deeper and more effective obstacles along its 14 kilometer border with Gaza, much like Israel has previously used to prevent Hamas tunneling. Cairo could also array tunnel detection sensors on its side of the border and share the information with Israel in real time. To prevent overland smuggling of military or dual-use equipment via border crossings—a much bigger problem according to [some analysts \(https://www.maariv.co.il/culture/tv/Article-1130574\)](https://www.maariv.co.il/culture/tv/Article-1130574) and the [Israel Defense Forces \(https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-declares-hamass-rafah-brigade-defeated-no-active-cross-border-tunnels-found/\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/idf-declares-hamass-rafah-brigade-defeated-no-active-cross-border-tunnels-found/)—Washington should press Egypt to implement a more rigorous inspection mechanism, perhaps in coordination with a European partner or Israel.

As Egypt-Israel relations regress amid the Gaza war, the MFO is more important than ever in ensuring mutual confidence and preventing further deterioration. The organization is sufficiently resourced at the moment, but its capabilities and insights [could be enhanced \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/uavs-and-abraham-accords-new-horizons-sinai-peacekeeping\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/uavs-and-abraham-accords-new-horizons-sinai-peacekeeping) if it made wider use of drones and added Abraham Accords signatories to its contributing countries.

Once the Gaza war is over, Washington should encourage both governments to revert to the treaty's original security provisions for the Sinai. Egypt has defeated the Islamic State uprising, so it can no longer justify deploying such a large troop presence in the peninsula. Its considerable Sinai military construction should be addressed as well. Among other postwar conversations, Washington and the MFO should engage Israel and Egypt on their treaty violations and return to what has been, for nearly five decades, the cornerstone of peace and stability in the region.

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