



Terrorism Monitor

In-Depth Analysis of the War on Terror

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Strategic Partnership Agreement

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NORTH AFRICAN SALAFISTS TURN ON SUFI SHRINES IN MALI

The Salafist war on the physical legacy of Sufi Islam has opened a new front in the northern Malian city of Timbuktu, home to a number of ancient mosques and the famous tombs of 333 Islamic “saints.”

The May 5 attack on the tomb of Sidi Mahmud Ben Amar (1463-1548) confirmed the fears of many in Mali that the Salafist Ansar al-Din occupiers of Timbuktu would turn their energies towards the destruction of the city’s religious heritage. The attackers prevented worshippers from approaching the tomb before tearing off its doors, breaking windows and setting flammable portions on fire. One man who attempted to stop the destruction was bound and forced into a car (al-Jazeera, May 7). The men were reported to have told shocked onlookers: “What you are doing is *haram!* [forbidden]. Ask God directly [for intervention] rather than the dead.” Before leaving they promised to destroy other tombs in the city (Reuters, May 5). An Ansar al-Din spokesman described the leader of the attack as a “new member” of the group (a Mauritanian according to some sources) and suggested that his actions would be investigated (al-Jazeera, May 7).

Sidi Mahmud Ben Amar (1463-1548) was from a family of Godala Berbers from the Atlantic coast of Mauritania. He achieved fame as a *qadi* (Islamic judge) and his tomb in Mauritania became a major site of pilgrimage after his death. Sidi Mahmud was attributed with many miracles during his lifetime and his descendants were renowned as Islamic scholars, especially his nephew Ahmad Baba al-Doudani, whose tomb is one of the most important Islamic sites in Timbuktu. Sidi Mahmud’s tomb is classified as a UNESCO world heritage site, one of 16 such sites in Timbuktu. Mali’s military government responded to the

unprecedented attack by issuing a statement on national television that condemned “in the strongest terms this unspeakable act in the name of Islam, a religion of tolerance and respect for human dignity” (Reuters, May 5).

A local official told the French press that the Salafists have promised to destroy other tombs as well as take possession of the collection of manuscripts accumulated during the city’s days as Africa’s most famous center of learning (AFP, May 6). Many of the estimated 100,000 invaluable mediaeval manuscripts kept in Timbuktu are reported to have been removed to private homes for safekeeping until the Salafist occupation of the city ends (Asia Times, May 9). Written both in Arabic and Fulani, the manuscripts cover aspects of science, the arts and theology.

Though many commentators refer to Sufi Islam as the “peaceful, moderate and mystical” face of Islam, it was in fact the Sufist trend that was the greatest proponent of armed jihad before the 20th century, particularly in the Sudanic belt of Africa. In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, however, it is the Salafist trend that has become most closely identified with jihad through its resurrection of the thought of Shaykh Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328).

The attack in Timbuktu is just part of a growing trend towards the Salafist destruction of Sufi shrines and monuments:

- In the Sinai, the shrine of Shaykh Zuwayid in the town named for him was destroyed by a bomb in May, 2011 by Salafists opposed to the Sufi rituals carried out there (Ahram Online, May 14). [1] Shaykh Zuwayid came to Egypt with the army of ‘Amr ibn al-‘As, a companion of the Prophet Muhammad who conquered Egypt for Islam in 640 C.E. and built the first mosque in Africa.

- Elsewhere in Egypt, some 20 Sufi shrines have been attacked by Salafists since the January 25, 2011 revolution. The assaults on Egypt’s religious heritage have led Sufi leaders to threaten counter-attacks, raising the possibility of a sectarian conflict within Egypt (*Egypt Independent*, May 17; al-Masry al-Youm [Cairo], March 30, 2011).

- In the North African Spanish enclave of Ceuta, Salafists recently burned down a shrine containing images of Islamic saints from the region (El Pais, April 26).

- In Somalia, the militant Salafist al-Shabaab movement has attacked Sufi shrines in Mogadishu and elsewhere, throwing the human remains of Islamic saints into the street while promising to continue “until we eradicate the culture of worshipping graves” (AFP, March 26, 2010). The campaign has spurred recruitment by al-Shabaab’s Sufi opponents in the Ahl al-Sunna wa’l-Jama’a militia (see *Terrorism Monitor* Brief, April 2, 2010).

- In Libya, the fall of Mu’ammarr Qaddafi was followed by Salafist attacks on Sufi shrines in and around Tripoli that the Salafists claimed were being used for “black magic” (AP, October 13, 2011). Some of the attackers were reported to have come from Egypt for the purpose of destroying Sufi tombs (see *Terrorism Monitor* Brief, October 20, 2011).

- Earlier this month the Nowshera district tomb of Pashtun poet and former leader of the Awami National Party Ajmal Khattak was destroyed by a bomb planted by Pakistani Salafists (Associated Press of Pakistan, May 11; Dawn [Karachi], May 9). Salafists have carried out a broad campaign of destruction of Sufi shrines in Pakistan, often killing scores of worshippers in the process (see *Terrorism Monitor*, April 22, 2011; *Terrorism Monitor* Brief, March 19, 2009).

Note:

1. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gWLF84dIn_o

DESTROYING MECCA: AN IDEA WHOSE TIME HAS COME AND GONE?

The United States military came under fire earlier this month when it was revealed that a course taught at the Joint Forces Staff College in Norfolk, Virginia advocated a “total war” against Islam using tactics similar to the fire-bombing of Dresden or the nuclear devastation of Hiroshima against the holy cities of Mecca and Medina (Wired.com, May 10). After the content of the course was made public, it was condemned at the highest levels of the U.S. military as “totally objectionable” and “against [American] values.”

While the advocacy of such tactics in the “War on Terror” has become a mainstay on the websites of anti-Islamic extremists, it has also occasionally penetrated the American political mainstream, most notably when Republican Representative Tom Tancredo advocated the destruction of the holy cities in 2005 with the following justification: “When we bombed Hiroshima, when we bombed Dresden, we punished a lot of people who were not necessarily [guilty]. Not every German was a member of the Nazi Party. You do things in war that are ugly” (CNN, July 22, 2005; see also WFLA-AM, July 15, 2005 and AP, July 18, 2005 for similar remarks).

The idea of destroying Islam’s holy cities is not a new one, however, and the most serious threats to their existence have actually come at the hands of fellow Muslims. In 930 C.E. a radical Isma’ili sect known as the Qarmatians based in the eastern coast of the Arabian Peninsula attacked Mecca, causing widespread destruction before stealing the Black Stone of the Ka’aba, a pre-Islamic relic that survived the iconoclasm of the Prophet to become a highly revered element of the pilgrimage to Mecca. The Black Stone was eventually ransomed at a great price, but was returned broken into seven pieces.

In the early 16th century Portugal, then a world power, embarked on an aggressive campaign against the Muslim world for control of global maritime trade routes. The fighting was vicious, without quarter and marked by frequent atrocities. The Mamluk empire of Egypt and Syria stood to lose much by Portuguese re-routing of the spice trade but the Mamluks had no navy and little experience in naval matters; most Mamluks, in fact, could only be persuaded to board a ship by coercion or compulsion. To avoid an unfamiliar and expensive naval conflict, the Mamluk Sultan Qansuh al-Ghawri sent monks from the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem to the Pope in Rome to warn

him that if he did not persuade the Portuguese to back down, Qansuh would order the destruction of all the Christian sites in the Holy Land. The threat had little impact, as the Portuguese reminded the Pope that pilgrimage to these sites was a major source of revenue for the Mamluks and Qansuh was therefore unlikely to pursue their destruction. In the end Qansuh was forced to build and man a navy with help from the Ottomans and the Venetians to battle the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean. Afonso de Albuquerque, a veteran of the brutal Portuguese campaigns in Morocco and a pathological enemy of Muslims everywhere was sent to establish Portuguese supremacy in the Indian Ocean and Red Sea, where he turned Qansuh’s threats around by suggesting the destruction of the Islamic holy cities of Mecca and Medina as well as stealing the body of the Prophet Muhammad. Fortunately for the Muslims, de Albuquerque was unable to carry out his plans, though he did apply fire and sword to expand the new Portuguese Empire as far as the island of Timor in Southeast Asia.

The real destruction of Mecca began with its conquest by the 18th century Islamic reformer Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-87). Al-Wahhab believed the pure monotheism of Islam had been corrupted through the introduction of *bid’a* (innovation) and *shirk* (polytheism), which the Wahhabis saw expressed in the saint worship and religious ritual they believed had no basis in the Islam of the Prophet and his immediate successors (the *Salaf*). His success as a religious reformer accelerated after he formed an alliance with the ruler of the Najd region of Arabia, Muhammad ibn Sa’ud. The new movement destroyed the holy places of Shi’a Islam in Karbala in 1802 and then turned their attention the next year to the holy cities of the Hijaz, Mecca and Medina. The destruction of many of the tombs, mosques and mausoleums of holy men in Mecca, the conversion of the *Baqi’* (graveyard of the earliest generations of Muslims) into a garbage dump and the desecration of the Prophet’s tomb in Medina (which they intended to demolish) was a humiliation to the Ottomans, who turned to their Viceroy in Egypt, Muhammad ‘Ali, to drive the Wahhabists (as they came to be called, though they themselves rejected the term) from the holy cities, which were retaken in 1812. The Egyptian campaign against the Wahhabis continued until their near total destruction in 1818, after which their leader, ‘Abdullah ibn Sa’ud, was sent to Istanbul, where his head was crushed in a vice after refusing to recant the teachings of al-Wahhab.

However, the Wahhabi/Sa'udi alliance was far from finished, and once again the Bedouin tribesmen of the Najd took the holy cities in 1925 under the leadership of 'Abdulaziz ibn Sa'ud. The movement promptly began demolishing the extensive Ottoman reconstruction of various holy sites, including mosques and tombs honoring members of the Prophet's family.

In the last 20 years the Saudis have applied Wahhabi principles in destroying most of the remaining historical-religious legacy of the two holy cities in the name of expanding facilities for the ever-growing number of pilgrims, despite frequent protests from Muslims across the world. [1] In 1998 the tomb of the Prophet's mother was bulldozed and the remains set afire with gasoline. Mosques have been dynamited and leveled to make room for parking lots and banking machines while archaeological remains have been bulldozed into oblivion. The Mecca home of the Prophet's first wife Khadijah was replaced by a public toilet for pilgrims (*Independent*, September 24, 2011). Even the tomb of the Prophet in Medina and his birthplace in Mecca are once more scheduled for demolition. Most of the old city of Mecca has now been obliterated to make room for luxury hotels, shopping malls and banking towers, while the billion dollar expansion of the Grand Mosque in Mecca has wiped out most of the remaining portions of the historic mosque, which were found offensive by Saudi clerics.

In reality, the destruction of the religious legacy of the Islamic Holy Cities, with the exception of the Ka'aba and the tomb of Muhammad (whose ultimate fate is still unsure) has been largely accomplished by their self-proclaimed protectors, the Sa'udi royal family, with the approval of the Saudi religious establishment. Even the most rabid Islamophobe would now find little to destroy that could be authentically described as "Islamic" in these new cities of glass and steel towers built on the bulldozed heritage of Islam.

Note:

1. See Irfan Ahamed, "The Destruction of the Holy Sites in Mecca and Medina, *Islamica Magazine* 15, <http://islamicamagazine.com/?p=424>.

Hurdles to Peace: Afghanistan Beyond the Strategic Partnership Agreement

Wali Shaaker

The Afghan-American "Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement" was signed by President Barack Obama and President Hamid Karzai in Kabul on May 2. The impact this agreement will have on the Afghan conflict is not yet clear. However, it could affect Afghanistan in one of two ways. On the one hand, it could embolden the insurgents and encourage them to launch deadlier and more frequent attacks against the Afghan state with the aim of achieving a sweeping victory. On the other hand, concurrent with the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan, many among the militants could lay down their arms believing that their mission of "liberating" the country has been accomplished. This could serve as a severe blow to the military strength and morale of the insurgents. Whatever the outcome, neither of these scenarios would result in the overthrow of the Karzai regime or the complete surrender and defeat of the opposition. In other words, a light U.S. military footprint in Afghanistan as called for in the agreement is not likely to end the conflict since there are other domestic and regional issues that affect stability in Afghanistan. A criminalized economy of war, an underlying ideological rift, and lasting regional rivalries are among the key hurdles obstructing Afghanistan's path to peace and prosperity.

Afghanistan's geopolitical location has complicated its internal politics while affecting the nature of enmities and competition between other relatively powerful states in the region. Currently, India, Pakistan, and Iran strive to play a part in shaping Afghanistan's domestic politics to serve their own interests. In the past three decades of war, they have remained engaged in the "game" to manipulate the domestic politics of Afghanistan. To counter each other's regional interests and influence, they have supported and encouraged various Afghan militant factions to choose violence over compromise and negotiation. This has largely undermined regional peace and stability while contributing to ethnic and religious polarization among the ethnically diverse population of Afghanistan. As long as Afghanistan serves as the object of this regional game, it will continue to remain vulnerable to militancy and radicalism. Since this has proven true for the past decade despite the presence of

U.S. forces in Afghanistan, there is no reason to believe that the nation's regional position will improve after the withdrawal of the United States. As President Karzai noted shortly after the signing of the agreement:

When we speak of security... for individual Afghans in terms of law and order – it is an Afghan issue. But when we speak of security for Afghanistan in terms of terrorism and the War on Terror, it isn't an Afghan issue: it is a collective issue of the international community, in which the international community has not done as well as it promised. (*The Nation* [Islamabad], May 14).

Another relatively less visible element keeping the fire of war ablaze in Afghanistan is the prevalence of the economy of war on and around the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. For decades, the development of this economy has depended on weak, corrupt, and often non-existent governing capacity on both sides of the Durand line. The narcotics trade, human trafficking and the smuggling of weapons, IED components, precious stones, archeological artifacts, timber, and imported goods are among the major illegal activities rampant in this area. In addition to a steady flow of money from the Gulf states, the revenues generated through these practices help fund terrorism and violence throughout the region. Subsequently, a network of criminals, warlords, corrupt politicians, and leaders of radical-militant groups on both sides of the border view the establishment of peace and stability as contrary to their own political and economic interests. Therefore, these war profiteers will continue to resist a peaceful resolution to the conflict in Afghanistan.

Nevertheless, while the unbridled economy of war and shortsighted views of Afghanistan's immediate neighbors fuel terrorist operations within its borders, the conflict is also rooted in opposing ideals between the Salafist radicals on the one hand and moderate seculars on the other. Between these two, a number of other schools of thought remain politically active. The moderates argue that the radicals' interpretation of Shari'a is largely irrelevant to the contextual realities of the 21st century. They argue for incorporating secular laws and institutions, exploiting modern technology and systems, and practicing various aspects of Western culture while upholding their sense of religious identity.

Nevertheless, the radicals deem this impossible. In general, they believe in a strict and violent interpretation of Quranic verse and *hadiths* (sayings and deeds ascribed to the Prophet Muhammad). They claim that the implementation of Shari'a according to their interpretation provides the answer to all social, political and economic problems of the Muslim community. The degree to which individuals adhere to these ideologies varies in both groups. Nonetheless, what is clear is that radicals and moderates have been locked into a stalemate in resolving such fundamental value-driven issues. Achieving peace and stability in Afghanistan depends in part on the ability and willingness of both sides to choose negotiations and compromise over war. So far, the Taliban have continued to show resistance to existing peace initiatives. According to Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid:

The United States and its allies have so far not recognized the mujahideen, who are not fighting for positions or greed. Rather we are doing jihad as an independent nation and representatives of Pashtuns for freedom... They [the United States and its allies] should not expect anyone among the mujahideen to surrender in the name of reconciliation. (PakTribune, April 29).

Due to Afghanistan's geostrategic position as well as the domestic economic and political challenges that the country faces, the Afghan conflict seems likely to carry on for many years to come. Its conclusion will depend primarily on the Afghan state's aptitude in handling domestic politics and coping with regional challenges that threaten its stability. To do this, the continuation of the United States' military and economic aid, however indirect, seems an absolute necessity. However, it is important to remember that the involvement of the United States and NATO in Afghanistan is only one of the many factors shaping the future of Afghanistan. While it is imperative to acknowledge the significance of matters such as foreign military operations, governance, and socio-economic development, it is also important to recognize there are other factors affecting security and peace in Afghanistan.

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Syrian Kurds Play the Russia Card in Pursuit of Autonomy

Wladimir van Wilgenburg

The ongoing political and security crisis in Syria has provided unexpected opportunities for Syria's Kurdish community to initiate diplomatic discussions with Russia, China and Iran in its pursuit of regional autonomy, a near impossibility under the Assad regime before the outbreak of political violence as part of last year's "Arab Spring."

The Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan (PKK – Kurdistan Workers Party) and its Syrian affiliate, the Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat (PYD - Democratic Union Party), Russia, Iran and China are opposed to outside intervention by the Western states or Turkey and prefer to find alternatives. This has resulted in the reshaping of relations in the region.

In the past, Russia has utilized the PKK as a lever against Turkey to deter possible Turkish support for Chechen insurgents. [1] After 2008, Russia emerged as Turkey's largest trading partner and relations improved, but now Turkey and Russia have differences over Syria. [2] For Russia, Syria is a long-term ally in the Middle-East and the naval supply station in the Syrian port of Tartus is of strategic value (see Eurasia Daily Monitor, April 19). This has caused friction in Russia's relations with Turkey, which has abandoned its ties to Syria and now supports the removal of the Assad-government while opposing any role for the PKK and the PYD in a post-Assad Syria.

Turkey supports the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the Syrian National Council (SNC - allegedly formed in Istanbul) and tries to pressure Massoud Barzani, the president of the Iraqi Kurdistan region, to force Syria's Kurdish National Council (KNC) to make concessions with its Syrian counterpart and exclude the PKK from the process. It is therefore logical that the PKK and its PYD affiliate have tried to counter Turkish influence by joining the National Coordinating Body for Democratic Change in Syria (NCB). The NCB supports the Kofi Annan plan and a peaceful transition and dialogue with the regime and is against any foreign intervention (see Eurasia Daily Monitor, April 19). Therefore the NCB is a useful opposition alternative to the SNC for Russia (AL Monitor, May 8).

Due to these different interests, PYD leader Salih Muslim has said that Syrian Kurds would defend Syria as "Syrian patriots" against a Turkish intervention, while senior PKK leader Cemil Bayik claimed that Turkey wanted to target the PKK through its relations with Iran and Syria (Diekurden.de, May 10; Firat News Agency, May 5). This made some Syrian Kurds worry that the PKK is more opposed to Turkey than Assad, and this has fueled rumors of alleged PKK-Syrian cooperation, despite the fact there were clashes and tensions between the two in Aleppo in which some PYD members were killed earlier this year (DieKurden.de, March 10, May 10; Kurdwatch, February 22).

Moreover, the fact that the PYD and NCB are talking with the foreign allies of Assad does not change the fact that toppling the Assad-government will be difficult without foreign intervention. This creates suspicions among the opposition parties over the role the NCB plays in Syria. The Russian state-dominated media have also been portraying the PYD in a positive light and its delegates have visited the PKK in Aleppo (*Russia Today*, April 30).

Despite this, the PYD has indicated in all its statements that it still opposes the Assad regime (Roj TV 2011). Several PYD members have been killed in clashes with the regime and a number of PYD members are still in Syrian prisons. This may indicate that there is no cooperation between the PYD and Assad or that a temporary alliance is breaking down. It may also indicate that the Assad regime simply ignores PKK activities from time to time to focus its energies on the Arab opposition. [3]

However, not everyone is critical of the NCB's-policies, and some opposition members recognize that a dialogue with Russia is necessary, given the fact that Russia as a UN Security Council member can support or veto UN motions and is also in a position to pressure Assad to make changes. The same goes for Iran and China.

Although the PYD claims its talks with the Russian government are designed to support the Annan peace plan and to force the Ba'ath-regime to end its attacks on demonstrations, in reality it wants to prevent an international intervention led by Turkey or the creation of a Turkish-supported humanitarian corridor that could lead to Turkish dominance over Kurdish areas in Syria similar to the establishment of Turkish influence in the Kurdistan region in post-invasion Iraq. [4]

Furthermore, if the NCB does succeed in creating a transitional government, the PYD would be assured of future influence in the Syrian government through the role it played with Russia and could then play a stabilizing role in a post-Assad Syria. PYD leader Salih Muslim has claimed Russia is not against a form of Kurdish autonomy in Syria (Diekurden.de, April 26).

If the Assad-regime does fall due to a civil war, the PYD can create its own “democratic autonomy.” There are already rumours that the PYD is slowly preparing to take over the Kurdish-dominated areas, and this might explain why the Assad-regime is trying to curb the PYD’s activities and attempting to arrest its members. Thus while Turkey continues to be more isolated due to the new relations emerging between Iran, Syria and Iraq, the PKK has found more room to manoeuvre due to the current crisis between Turkey and Syria. Its collaboration with the NCB has enabled it to meet with Russian officials such as Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov and the chairman of the Duma’s international affairs committee, Aleksey Puskov, as well as various Iranian and Chinese officials (*Ozgur Gundem*, April 27). The Arab spring has proven to be beneficial to the PKK and has empowered the role of stateless Kurds in the region.

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Notes:

[1] Svante E. Cornell, “*The Kurdish Question in Turkish Politics*,” ORBIS 45(1), pp.31-46, http://www.cacianalyst.org/Publications/Cornell_Orbis.htm.

[2] Sergey Markedonov and Natalya Ulchenko, “Turkey and Russia: An Evolving Relationship,” Carnegie Endowment Commentary, August 19, 2011, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2011/08/19/turkey-and-russia-evolving-relationship>.

[3] Author’s e-mail interview with PYD foreign affairs representative Alan Semo, May 6, 2012.

[4] A document leaked by defected Ba’athist civil servant Abd al-Majid Barakat indicates the Ba’ath regime was coordinating with the PKK to ensure security around Aleppo, but PYD-supporters claim this is part of a Turkish disinformation campaign (al-Jazeera, March 20).

Thirtieth Anniversary of Sinai’s Liberation Marked by Libyan Arms, Bedouin Militancy and a Growing Rift with Israel

Andrew McGregor

Though Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula has just marked its 30th anniversary of liberation from Israeli occupation, the region is perhaps less integrated with the rest of the Egyptian state now than at any time since the Camp David Accords returned sovereignty of the Sinai to Cairo. An influx of arms from Libya and elsewhere is fuelling a growing insurgency amongst an alienated and disenfranchised population and deteriorating relations between Egypt and Israel are threatening to once more make the Sinai borderlands a battleground between these regional rivals.

Egyptian security authorities blame most of the scores of attacks on police since the January 25, 2011 Egyptian uprising on Gaza-based Palestinian militant groups such as Jaljalat, Jaysh al-Islam, Izz al-Din al-Qassam and the local al-Qaeda in the Sinai Peninsula (Egypt Independent, May 1). [1] However, while radical Islamism and close ties to Palestinian militants in Gaza play an important role in the unrest, there is little question that the core of the Sinai insurgency consists of armed Bedouin who exist largely on the fringes of Egypt’s Nile and Delta-based society.

Law enforcement has declined in the Sinai to the point that the police exist mainly to protect police installations that increasingly resemble improvised fortresses protected by large sand berms and steel walls to repel RPG attacks. The security situation is not helped by continuing protests against the military government by disgruntled police across Egypt, including in the towns of the northern Sinai. The Bedouin tribesmen have little fear of government authorities – security checkpoints are routinely attacked and security men and soldiers assassinated.

The Bedouin Factor

Tribal chiefs have issued demands for the establishment of a free trade zone and open passage for trade between Gaza and the Sinai, a move that would provide much needed employment and opportunity for local tribesmen, but which is unlikely to ever receive the necessary

approval of Israel (MENA, April 21). It is estimated that 90% of the Bedouin population is unemployed and prevented by law from seeking employment in either the security services or the resorts of southern Sinai. The Bedouin are demanding the right to participate in the local security apparatus, but the idea has met resistance in Cairo where lingering questions about Bedouin loyalty to the state have deterred providing the Bedouin with modern arms and training. The release of Bedouin prisoners seized before last year's Egyptian Revolution and the right to own land are also high on the Bedouin agenda.

The military government used the Liberation Day holiday to announce the commitment of \$66 million to development projects in the northern Sinai, the largest project involving an upgrade to the port at al-Arish (Ahrām Online, April 25). Further agreements to initiate a labor-intensive extension of water supply lines in north and south Sinai were signed the next day (*Bikya Masr* [Cairo], April 26). However, there is little chance of significant progress being made until after Egypt's presidential elections, a multi-staged process which will begin on May 23.

The Sinai as an Election Issue

As the elections approach, it has become clear that local issues in the Sinai have become irretrievably interwoven with Egypt's changing relationship with Israel, as revealed by an examination of the platforms of several leading candidates:

- Moderate Islamist candidate Muhammad Salim al-Awa has called for negotiations with Israel to amend the Camp David treaty in areas “that go against Egypt's interests, like dividing the Sinai into three demilitarized zones, allowing Israelis into the Sinai without visas and other privileges given to Israel that should stop immediately” (*Al-Ahrām Weekly*, May 10-16).
- Amr Moussa, a secular candidate and former chairman of the Arab League, has called for a new agreement with Israel for the export of Egyptian natural gas across the Sinai based on current global market prices, adding that Israel must abandon its “policy of intransigence,

threatening, [development of] settlements, occupation and [allow] the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian state” (*Business Today Egypt*, May 8). Moussa has promised to restore stability in the peninsula, end the marginalization of the Bedouin tribes and overturn the prohibition against Bedouin owning land in the Sinai (Ahrām Online, April 21).

- Neo-Nasserist candidate Hamdeen Sabahi (Karame Party) has promised to create a new local police force that is in tune with the rights and traditions of the Bedouin as part of an effort to turn the Sinai into “a paradise.” Nonetheless, his recent visit to the peninsula was cut short after receiving threats on his life from a Salafist group in the northern Sinai town of Shaykh Zuwayid despite promising to release all Bedouin political prisoners and suspected militants without conditions if elected (Ahrām Online, April 21; April 29).
- Muhammad Mursi, the head of the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party, has called for urban development in the Sinai and the resettlement of millions of Egyptians in the sparsely inhabited region as Egypt's population surges towards the 90 million mark, far more than can be comfortably supported in the Delta region and the slim fertile strip along the Nile (Ahrām Online, April 29). A message from Muslim Brotherhood leader Muhammad Badi on April 26 said that the Mubarak regime had persecuted the Bedouin as criminals when they were, in fact “patriotic citizens.” Badi added that a mass transfer of Egyptians to the Sinai from other parts of Egypt would “frustrate Zionist ambitions to seize Sinai once again” (EgyptWindow.net, April 27).

However, these pledges have had only limited resonance with the Sinai Bedouin. As North Sinai Bedouin writer Ashraf Ayoub put it, “Sinai doesn't need promises – what it really needs is reconciliation between the locals of Sinai and the rest of Egypt which looks at them like

foreigners who plot against the country. We are more than a group of people who live in a strategic location” (Ahrām Online, April 29).

In the meantime there is growing evidence that Libya’s looted armories are now being used to equip militants in the Sinai much as they have provided modern weaponry to militants in parts of North and West Africa. Egyptian security forces reported the seizure on May 10 of a large quantity of weapons being transferred to the Sinai for use against Egyptian security forces by a convoy heading east from the Mediterranean port city of Mersa Matruh. Among the weapons were 50 surface-to-surface rockets, 17 grenade-launchers, seven assault rifles, a mortar and a large quantity of ammunition. The three smugglers arrested were reported to be Sinai Bedouin (*Daily Star* [Beirut], May 10; AP, May 10).

Israeli authorities announced on April 5 that one or two rockets possibly of Libyan origin had been fired at the Israeli Red Sea port of Eilat from the Egyptian Sinai, though Egyptian spokesmen claimed Israel was only “spreading rumors” (*Al-Quds al-Arabi*, April 7; NOW Lebanon, April 10; AP, May 10). Israel is preparing to link Eilat to an early-warning system in anticipation of further rocket attacks from Egypt.

Israel sees the hand of Shiite Iran behind the turmoil in the Sunni Sinai. According to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu: “The Sinai is turning into a kind of “Wild West” which ... terror groups from Hamas, Islamic Jihad and al-Qaeda, with the aid of Iran, are using to smuggle arms, to bring in arms, to mount attacks against Israel” (Voice of Israel Network B, April 24). Egyptian security sources are reported to have expressed their own suspicions of Iranian funding for weapons transfers from Libya to Sinai, though Iran has denied any such activities (*al-Sharq al-Awsat*, May 8). Egypt and Iran have not had diplomatic relations since Egypt’s recognition of Israel in 1980, though efforts have been underway to re-establish relations since the overthrow of Mubarak.

Severing Israel’s Natural Gas Supply

A persistent irritant in Egyptian-Israeli relations are the long-term contracts for the supply of Egyptian natural gas to Israel at below market rates negotiated by corrupt businessmen within the inner circle of former president Hosni Mubarak. With the pipeline to Israel having been blown by Sinai-based militants 14 times since Mubarak was deposed in January 2011, Egypt finally announced

on April 23 that the natural gas agreement had been scrapped. The pipeline, which has not been operational since March 5, was last bombed on April 9 when militants mistakenly believed it had been returned to use after noting the Interior Ministry had sent some 2,000 Special Forces officers to guard it (Ma’an News Agency, April 9; April 15). A dispute over missing payments appears to have been the main cause for the termination of the contract.

An official in Egypt’s oil ministry commented: “It was a popular demand to call off this treaty, as we export gas to [Israel] cheaper than market prices... Their error was not to pay on time, and we have taken the opportunity to stop this shameful deal” (*Bikya Masr* [Cairo], April 23).

According to an official of the East Mediterranean Gas Company (EMG), Egypt has the right “to cancel its contract with the company as... [Israel] has not paid its commitments for several months...” (*al-Hayat*, April 29). EMG was founded by fugitive financier Hussein Salim, a former crony of Mubarak. However, international shareholders in the EMG are trying to paint the cancellation as a political move as the basis for an \$8 billion lawsuit (Ahrām Online, May 3). A statement from the shareholders claims that the Egyptian Natural Gas Holding Company (ENGH) failed to protect the pipeline, though the latter describes the repeated bombings of the pipeline as a force majeure situation and insists that it was non-payment for gas received that led to the cancellation of further shipments in line with the terms of the contract (*al-Hayat*, April 27).

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has tried to downplay suggestions that Egypt’s cancellation was a form of aggression against Israel by confirming the decision was part of a “legal-commercial dispute” that would not have long-lasting effects due to the development of natural gas resources in the Mediterranean that would make Israel “a major exporter of natural gas in the world” (Voice of Israel Network B, April 24).

A Greater Threat to Israel than Iran?

Israeli foreign minister Avigdor Lieberman recently described Egypt as “more troubling than the Iranian issue” and advised Prime Minister Netanyahu to move three to four divisions up to the Sinai border, complaining that the seven Egyptian battalions currently operating in the Sinai “aren’t carrying out real antiterrorism activities” (*Ma’ariv* [Tel Aviv], April 22). Though

offered several opportunities to do so, Lieberman has not backed away from his assessment that Egypt will commit a major violation of the 1979 peace treaty after the upcoming presidential election in order to unite the nation around a common enemy.

The publication of Lieberman's remarks was followed by an immediate request by Egypt's foreign minister Muhammad Kamel Amr for "clarification" on their accuracy (Ahram Online, April 24). Lieberman's assertion was also challenged by Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak: "The Iranian threat is a threat with existential potential. At the moment this is not the case [with Egypt]..." (Globes Online [Rishon Le-Zion], April 25).

Israel's Counterterrorism Bureau issued a warning on April 21 for all Israelis in the Sinai to leave the region and return to Israel after it claimed to have determined that terrorists were planning an attack against resorts in the southern Sinai that are highly popular with Israeli tourists (Ahram Online, April 21). However, the warnings appear to have had little resonance with Israeli holiday-makers in search of a cheap vacation, with border authorities reporting more Israelis entering Egypt than leaving and resort owners in South Sinai reporting that most hotels were fully booked (*Jerusalem Post*, April 23). South Sinai Governor Major General Khalid Fouda suggested that Israel spread rumors of imminent terrorist attacks whenever Egypt's tourism industry showed signs of recovery from the low point reached during the 2011 revolution (Ahram Online, April 21).

Members of the largely Bedouin "Sinai Revolutionaries Movement" attempted to strike a symbolic blow against Israel on Liberation Day by planning to paint an Israeli memorial in the Sinai to ten Israeli soldiers killed in a helicopter crash during the Israeli occupation with the Egyptian colors (*al-Youm al-Saba'a* [Cairo], April 25). The effort was prevented by Egyptian security forces who are obliged to protect the memorial under the terms of the Camp David agreement. Israel in turn maintains a memorial to fallen Egyptian troops in the Negev Desert. A spokesman for the northern Sinai tribes, Abd al-Mun'im al-Rifa'i, said the people of the Sinai reject this provision of the treaty and cited a "need to demolish the rock [i.e. the memorial in the form of a large rock] because it stands as a provocation" to the Sinai tribes who "do not want any memorial for the Zionist entity on their land" (*al-Hayat*, April 27). The movement cites

Israel's reluctance to agree to a greater Egyptian security presence in the Sinai as a principal cause of the region's instability (Ma'an News Agency [Bethlehem], April 12). Annex 1 of the Camp David Accords divides the Sinai Peninsula into four zones running roughly north-south ("Zones A to D"), with the Egyptian security presence in each zone decreasing as they grow closer to the Israeli border. Any change to these deployments must be made with the agreement of the Israeli government, severely limiting Cairo's ability to meet security challenges in the Sinai.

A state-controlled Egyptian media source suggested it was time to "change the rules of the game" imposed on Egypt by the Camp David agreement:

It is no longer acceptable to tolerate tipping the balances of power in favor of the Israeli enemy. It is no longer possible to submit to conditions of capitulation that undermine Egypt's sovereignty or allow its resources to be stolen. It is no longer possible to be tolerant with Israel's conspiracies against Egypt's interests in the waters of the Nile (*al-Akhbar*, April 29).

In an effort to permanently cut off Hamas-governed Gaza from Egypt, Israel is constructing a new security barrier along its border with Sinai that is expected to be finished later this year. The new fence will be five meters high, covered in barbed wire and augmented by dozens of radar installations. 120 km have been finished so far, with work continuing on a further 100 km (*Jerusalem Post*, April 25). After five failed attempts, the new fence was successfully breached by Bedouin smugglers using hydraulic tools in early May, though the infiltrators were quickly caught by the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) (*Arutz Sheva* [Tel Aviv], May 2; *Times of Israel*, May 2).

Israel is also increasing its military presence along the border. The IDF's 80th "Edom" Division has experienced significant upgrades since it was redeployed along the Sinai border following cross-border attacks last August (*Ma'ariv* [Tel Aviv], April 6). In addition, the IDF announced call up orders for an additional six battalions to man the Sinai and Syrian borders on May 3 (*Arutz Sheva* [Tel Aviv], May 3).

Last month, Egypt's Second Army commenced Nasr-7, one of the largest live-fire exercises carried out in years in the Sinai. The commander of the Second Army, Major

General Muhammad Farid Hijazi, announced that the Egyptian military was fully capable of defending the Sinai against attacks from any quarter (MENA, April 23). Field Marshal Muhammad Hussein Tantawi, the head of Egypt's military government, adopted a belligerent tone during the exercise, telling troops of the Second Army: "We will break the legs of anyone who dares to come near to the borders" (Ahram Online, April 23).

International Peacekeepers under Pressure

Attempting to ensure that the security provisions of the Camp David agreement are maintained is the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO), consisting of some 1400 soldiers and civilians from 12 nations, including 800 Americans operating as a sub-unit known as "Task Force Sinai."

With the parties of the 1978 peace treaty having failed to obtain backing for a UN peacekeeping force, the MFO was created in 1981 as an alternative, equipped with a mandate to supervise the security provisions of the treaty and to use its influence to prevent treaty violations. Financing for the force is divided three ways between the United States, Israel and Egypt. The MFO deployment began on April 25, 1982, as Israel withdrew from the Sinai and returned sovereignty to Egypt. Increasingly, however, the MFO is finding its ability to carry out its mission restricted by growing levels of militancy in the Sinai.

In mid-March, some 300 Bedouin armed with automatic rifles surrounded a MFO base holding hundreds of U.S., Colombian and Uruguayan troops to pressure Cairo to release five tribesmen facing possible sentences of death or life in prison for their alleged role in the 2005 bombings of the Sharm al-Shaykh resort in southern Sinai (Ahram Online, March 15). On May 7, ten Fijian soldiers belonging to the MFO were kidnapped along the Auja-Arish highway in northern Sinai by Bedouin demanding the release of several tribesmen from prison. The Fijians were released later that day following negotiations with Egyptian authorities in which the kidnappers were assured their demands would be met (Ahram Online [Cairo], May 7; AFP, May 7).

Conclusion

While Egyptian relations with Israel continue to cool, the interim military government in Cairo has no wish to become involved at this point in a military confrontation with Israel sparked by the activities of militant groups

in the Sinai. While Field Marshal Tantawi talks tough about defending Egypt's borders, he and the rest of the military command are aware that even defensive clashes with the IDF could jeopardize ongoing U.S. funding of the Egyptian military, particularly in a sensitive election year in the United States. At the same time, Israeli demands for greater security in the peninsula cannot be met without revisions to those parts of the Camp David treaty governing the number of troops and types of military equipment that can be deployed there. Most important, however, is the need to address the long-standing grievances of the indigenous Bedouin population who find themselves unhappily trapped on a traditional Egyptian-Israeli battleground while held in suspicion by both parties. In the absence of meaningful efforts to resolve their economic and social issues, the Bedouin will continue to find themselves attracted to militancy, a situation that has the potential of igniting a new Middle Eastern conflict.

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Note:

1. For al-Qaeda in the Sinai Peninsula, see Andrew McGregor, Jamestown Foundation Hot Issue, "Has al-Qaeda Opened a New Chapter in the Sinai Peninsula?," August 17, 2011, [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=38332](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=38332)