



Possible Withdrawal of U.S. Peacekeepers from the Sinai Peninsula

May 25, 2020

Overview

U.S. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper [reportedly is considering withdrawing the roughly 450 person U.S. military contingent](#) from the [Multinational Force and Observers \(MFO\)](#), an international peacekeeping mission formed in 1981 to monitor the demilitarization of the Sinai Peninsula and supervise the implementation of the historic 1979 peace treaty between Israel and Egypt. Explanations for the withdrawal proposal have centered on repositioning U.S. forces globally to better prepare for contingencies related to China and Russia, improved Israeli-Egyptian ties, and concern for the safety of U.S. peacekeepers. In recent years, U.S. forces in the Sinai have faced a heightened risk of terrorist attacks by groups such as the Islamic State’s Sinai Province (SP).

[Israeli officials](#) and the leaders of [American Jewish organizations](#) have voiced concern over a possible U.S. withdrawal, asserting that the mission remains important and that U.S. participation and leadership in the MFO is vital for its ongoing success. On May 13, [a bipartisan group of congressional committee leaders](#) wrote a letter to the Secretaries of Defense and State arguing against a U.S. withdrawal, stating that a U.S. force contribution to the MFO is critical to encouraging other countries to participate.

Background

For decades, the 1979 peace treaty between Israel and Egypt has been widely hailed as [a successful example](#) of how the United States can facilitate Middle East peace, and U.S. leadership of and participation in the MFO [has been important](#) in maintaining confidence in the treaty and dialogue between Israel and Egypt. When the MFO was established in a separate protocol between Israel and Egypt in 1981, then U.S. Secretary of State Alexander Haig [sent identical letters](#) to his Israeli and Egyptian counterparts pledging U.S. troops and funds for the MFO’s startup costs and annual maintenance, subject to Congressional authorization. Congress then authorized U.S. participation in the MFO in P.L. 97-132, in which lawmakers considered “the establishment of the Multinational Force and Observers to be an essential stage in the development of a comprehensive settlement in the Middle East.” The resolution also capped the number of U.S. military personnel who could be assigned to the MFO at 1,200. [In his 1982 war powers letter to Congress](#), President Reagan wrote that “The duration of this involvement of U.S.

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forces in the Sinai will depend, of course, on the strengthening of mutual confidence between Egypt and Israel. The U.S. contribution to the MFO is not limited to any specific period; however, each country which contributes military forces to the MFO retains a right of withdrawal upon adequate prior notification to the MFO Director-General. U.S. participation in future years will, of course, be subject to the Congressional authorization and appropriations process.”

For almost the first 20 years of the MFO’s history, Israeli-Egyptian relations remained steady and gradually matured, and the Sinai Peninsula was stable. During the Clinton Administration, U.S. policymakers began to **openly question** the necessity of a continued U.S. military presence in the MFO. During the George H.W. Bush Administration, **then-Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld** publicly questioned the need to contribute U.S. forces to the MFO indefinitely and announced that he would reduce the U.S. presence in the MFO from 865 troops to 26. Israel and Egypt **objected**, and the U.S. force presence was ultimately reduced by 20% instead.

Over the last nearly 20 years of the MFO’s history, the operating environment in the Sinai has been **quite different**. Between 2001 and 2011, Egyptian government neglect of the local population, coupled with regional events such as the 2007 Hamas takeover of Gaza and the 2011 Arab Spring, **gradually radicalized some indigenous Bedouin Arabs**. These radicalized elements were then joined by foreign fighters and Palestinian militants from neighboring Gaza to form terrorist cells that targeted Egypt, Israel, and occasionally **the MFO itself**. In 2012, Sinai tribesmen kidnapped MFO soldiers and **besieged an MFO base**.

By 2014/2015, the Islamic State affiliate Sinai Province (SP) began openly threatening MFO personnel, calling them “**Crusader Forces**.” Near-constant SP attacks in the Sinai, including **against Americans serving in the MFO**, led to discussions between the United States, Israel, and Egypt over how to increase force protection and possibly reduce the U.S. troop presence. **Israeli officials again objected** to any possible decrease of U.S. participation in the MFO. In April 2016, the Defense Department formally notified Israel and Egypt that it was **analyzing how to rebalance and reconfigure its force posture** within the MFO by partially replacing U.S. troops in the MFO with remote sensors and cameras. Over the next several years, MFO personnel moved from northern to southern Sinai and installed unmanned camera-fitted checkpoints to continue its monitoring mission. Between 2017 and 2018, the Defense Department ultimately reduced the U.S. contingent in the MFO by 36%.

Current Debate

In a February 2020 House Armed Services Committee hearing, Chairman of the **Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley** questioned whether the MFO was still a “valid mission for military forces.” Since then, some observers also have questioned **whether the MFO is still relevant** given that much of its monitoring and verification activities are now being conducted remotely. **Other arguments include** that strong Israeli-Egyptian military ties render the MFO “largely a vestigial entity that carries on, in spite of the fact that the problem it was created to solve no longer exists.” Finally, after years of insurgent warfare

Figure I. The Sinai Peninsula



Source: <http://www.mfo.org>

in the Sinai, concern remains that MFO personnel could be targets [without adequate force protection from the Egyptian government](#), which is responsible for their safety.

On the other hand, some experts caution that while Israeli-Egyptian military-to-military ties are strong now, the political situation could change rapidly; in such an occurrence, some argue, [the MFO would be vital for keeping open lines of communication open between both parties](#). The MFO Director General must be a U.S. citizen and usually plays the role of intermediary between the Israeli and Egyptian governments. Some Israeli commentators have suggested that even if the MFO is less functionally relevant from a treaty-monitoring standpoint, it [is a symbol of the peace treaty](#), and U.S. leadership in the MFO is emblematic of decades-long U.S. support for the treaty's endurance.

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