

A New Crisis Area in the Middle East: Egypt's Sinai Peninsula

The Middle East continues to be a hotbed of conflict with the war in Syria and Iraq, the continuing Qatar crisis in the Gulf, trouble in Palestine, and the ongoing effect of the Arab Spring. In the region where there has been a systematic tension since the beginning of the Arab Spring, Egypt's military units, police stations and police checkpoints in the Sinai Peninsula have recently been suffering from an increasingly regular number of attacks.

The crises and conflicts occurring in the Middle East today are creating an environment of chaos and tension that is spreading everywhere, similar to that of the pre-First World War period. This environment of instability and conflict dominating almost the entire region is also quite similar to that of the period leading to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

The Egyptian territory of the Sinai Peninsula covers an area that includes the Suez Canal. Considering the fact that more than half of the world's passes through this region, the strategic importance of the region can easily be understood. The Suez Canal, which enables the transportation of the goods produced in Asia to Europe via the Mediterranean Sea after passing through Yemen's Bab-el-Mandeb Strait in the Red Sea, is one of the world's key points when it comes to the security of trade activities.

More than 500,000 people, who mostly have tribal connections with each other, live on the Sinai Peninsula, in an area covering 60,000 square meters. The Sinai Peninsula gained more importance with the creation of Israel in recent history and control of it passed to Israel for a short time as a result of the Six-Day War in 1967. However, with the heavy cost burdens and difficulties in maintaining control of the region sociologically, Israel returned the region to Egypt with an agreement in 1989.

The Sinai Peninsula has a 208km-long border with Israel. Any instability or mobilization in the region has a critical position in terms of the security of Israel and concerns Israel directly.

On the other hand, the Sinai Peninsula's 13km borderline with Gaza has a critical importance in terms of the control of the illegal embargo imposed on Gaza by Israel. As a matter of fact, the existence of the Rafah Border Crossing, which allows for the relief of great humanitarian victimization occurring in Gaza due to the embargo, and of tunnels which enable resistance groups in Gaza to connect with the world, makes the region very important for the people of Gaza. These tunnels have a key function for the people of Gaza in allowing them to access humanitarian materials. For all these reasons, the Sinai Peninsula is currently a vital area for Gaza and an extremely important strategic region for the Palestinians.

Considering the region within the context of Palestine, speculations that a Palestinian state could be established on the Sinai Peninsula have occupied the agenda at different times. It is quite meaningful that this old plan was brought to the agenda again with the rule of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, the President of Egypt who came to power with the coup. The King of Jordan's visit to Egypt President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi exacerbated such discussions and comments in the Arab media. Apart from all these assertions, there is no doubt that there are substantial attempts to destabilize the Sinai Peninsula nowadays.

Along with the Arab Spring, particularly after Mohamed Morsi's election by the government of Egypt, the Sinai Peninsula witnessed a series of events which left Morsi in a difficult position. During the two-year Morsi government, violent acts caused by radicals occurred frequently in the Sinai Peninsula. Particularly, the presentation of the region as the lands left to Daesh in Daesh's propaganda videos enhanced the pressures on Morsi to organize military operations here. These calls which aimed to pit the government against the people put Morsi in a highly difficult position and set the first steps toward the ensuing coup.

Daesh's activities in the Sinai Peninsula have increased more in recent times. There is news that Egypt and Israel, which have strong intelligence networks, are carrying out intelligence activities in the Sinai Peninsula. Furthermore, it is known that Israel has the capacity to affect and direct the internal politics of Egypt significantly. However, in spite of all these collaborations, Daesh is getting substantially organized and gathering supporters in the Sinai Peninsula, or this is at least how the situation is being presented to the public. In short, interesting developments are occurring in the peninsula and frequent terrorist attacks

aimed at security forces have been experienced recently.

The acts of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who came to power in Egypt through the coup, without considering the tribal and familial structure in the Sinai Peninsula, and particularly his good relationships with Israel, are slowly leading to a reactive movement in the region. Moreover, the economic problems that are heightening every day and high prices for food and transportation, particularly oil, growing unemployment, and dissatisfaction with both the regional and internal actions of the government are increasing radicalization in the region.

The coup, human rights violations, its policy toward Palestine and hard economic conditions have led to the formation of different radical groups in the Sinai Peninsula. Recently, 60 people died and many people were injured as a result of attacks carried out on a military point in the peninsula in the first quarter of this month.

On the other hand, it is another striking development that Christian families living in the Sinai Peninsula have started to migrate. In recent days, it is frequently being reported by the Arab media that the Christian community residing in the Sinai Peninsula are leaving the region and rapidly migrating to other places.

The Egyptian army is currently organizing operations in the peninsula. However, human rights violations, the severe torture of prisoners and the arrest of mostly innocent people during these operations can be counted as the major reasons for the increasing opposition and instability in the region.

The increasing activity of such groups as Ansar Bait al-Maqdis, Daesh and the Egyptian Hareket-u Savaidi in this province is also attracting attention. Of course, apart from sociological reasons, it is not possible to consider the formation of such groups separately from the Palestinian context. As a matter of fact, the Sinai Peninsula is a region which concerns Gaza significantly. Such problems are obviously related to the future and stability of Gaza, as well as the Sinai Peninsula and Egypt in general. Even though such organizations are currently only targeting the security forces in Egypt, their potential for attacking Israel gives Israel great reason to lay the ground for its intervention in the region. Besides, it is always possible for such extremist groups to target moderate groups in the region, as evidenced in Syria and Iraq. As a matter of fact, Daesh's armed conflict with local tribes in recent months is the most significant proof of this situation. It is also significant that this conflict is taking place in the city of Rafah which is close to Gaza. The last development strengthening these theories is Daesh's suicide attack against Hamas security forces at the border gate. One security officer died and many people were injured in the attack. This attack and other developments are striking evidence that Daesh is targeting all groups in Palestine, particularly Gaza.

On the other hand, the claim that Egypt has begun close work with Mohammed Dahlan, the former security chief of Palestine, and that Dahlan has established a camp of 8,000 people in the Sinai Peninsula is another indicator of the increasing chance of conflict in the region. Therefore, apart from all the developments listed, as a result of the intervention ground laid by Daesh, an attempt by Egypt to target Hamas in Gaza through Dahlan is more likely than ever.

Furthermore, the fact that regional and international powers, who do not want to see Egypt become a developed and prosperous country, support such extremist groups by using the current political uncertainty in Egypt, suggests the possibility that the country is being prepared for a new Syria-Iraq scenario.

In short, it can be said that things are going to heat up in the near future in this strategic and important region in terms of Israeli security, with the possibility for the presence of extremist groups in Egypt being higher than ever.