

Jerusalem Peace & Security Forum Explores Opportunities in Sinai Peninsula

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December 18, 2014



The Sinai Peninsula was the focus of the Jerusalem Peace and Security Forum on Dec. 18, 2014.

“Sinai Peninsula: A Regional Terror Threat or Land of New Opportunities?” took place at the Multi-Cultural Center in Modi'in.

The members of the forum explained that the Sinai Peninsula represents a trans-boundary area similar to that between Afghanistan and Pakistan where the militant Islamist group Al-Qaeda developed. The local population in Sinai comprises Bedouin tribes, who are officially Egyptian residents, though not necessarily Egyptians according to their cultural identity. The alienation that Bedouins have experienced from Egyptian authorities these many years—coupled with influences from Iran's Revolutionary Guards, the Muslim Brotherhood and terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State—have made Sinai a fertile plain for terror cells, weapons and drug smuggling, human trafficking and more.

Former Israeli Ambassador to Egypt Zvi Mazel, who is currently a senior researcher at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, showed in a very detailed briefing that Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi is investing a great deal of energy to curb terrorism in Sinai. However, without the support of the United States and the European Union, he is unlikely to be very successful in these efforts.

Since the Sinai Peninsula is a dangerous base of terrorist activities, Mazel strongly urged those nations and authorities fighting global terrorism around the world to provide the appropriate counterterrorism resources to buttress Egypt's efforts in the Sinai Peninsula.

Dr. Galia Press-Barnathan, senior lecturer in the Department of International Relations at the Hebrew University, said that the Sinai Peninsula should be seen as an area of limited statehood. Thinking in such terms raises several issues:

- The need to carefully compare the developments and challenges in Sinai with other areas of limited statehood, such as the Iraqi-Syrian and the Pakistani-Afghan border regions. In these areas the weakness or absence of a government presence creates a vacuum filled by Islamic fundamentalist groups.
- It is unproductive to think of areas of limited statehood as anarchic per se. There may be other, non-state-centered forms of authority in these regions. The challenge is to identify them and the key actors involved, along with their relationship to the areas in question.
- There is no similar in-depth understanding of the governance existing in the Sinai Peninsula. For example, while many associate Bedouin tribes with the Islamic Jihad, this is clearly not a

natural link for many of the area tribes. In many cases, the shift toward radical Islam came as a consequence of other grievances, including disappointing decisions made by Egyptian authorities, such as limiting the unofficial Bedouin autonomy throughout the area. Similar gaps in knowledge regarding the actual social and political dynamics on the ground were a key factor in early failures and setbacks of U.S. efforts in Iraq, so there is a need to learn from those mistakes.

- Unlike other regions such as Peshawar or the Syrian-Iraqi border, the Sinai Peninsula lies between two sovereign and relatively strong states. On the Israeli side there is a clear, official border. On the Egyptian side, Sinai is part of Egypt.

- And although the Jihadist threat in Sinai creates problems for both Egypt and Israel, it also presents opportunities for explicit and (more likely) implicit cooperation between the two governments and security forces.

- Beyond such bilateral cooperation, there is also the potential for more collaboration with international agencies, either as part of “the global war on terror” or as part of a concerted effort to upgrade the lives of the Bedouins in the Sinai Peninsula.



The participants in the forum were:

Professor Eliezer Glaubach, president of the Jerusalem Peace and Security Forum (AFP);

Ambassador Zvi Mazel, senior researcher at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, former Israeli ambassador to Egypt, former head of the Department of Egypt and North Africa of the Israel Foreign Ministry;

Dr. Galia Press-Barnathan, senior lecturer at the Department of International Relations at the Hebrew University, specializing in the theory of regional security cooperation;

Mr. Pinhas Inbari, veteran Arab affairs correspondent and analyst for the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs;

Mr. Jeremy Jordan, UPF;

Mr. David Byer, UPF;

Mr. Itai Raviv, strategic advisor;

Dr. Nurit Hirschfeld, secretary general, UPF-Israel;

Mrs. Adi Sasaki, director of the Jerusalem Peace and Security Forum