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Normalizing expansion: Israel sets its sights on Egypt's Sinai

Israel's ironic and brazen accusations of Egyptian treaty violations in Sinai point to a deeper agenda, raising fears of further territorial expansion by Tel Aviv and a growing threat to regional stability.



Photo Credit: The Cradle

As Israel accuses Egypt of military buildup in the Sinai Peninsula, tensions between the two states – bound by their 1979 normalization treaty – are reaching a boiling point. Israeli officials and allied neoconservative think tanks are now actively escalating rhetoric alleging Cairo's breach of the peace treaty while hinting at Tel Aviv's ambitions to expand into Egyptian territory.

In September 2024, the Washington-based Foundation for the Defense of Democracies (FDD) published a report accusing Egypt of allegedly aiding Hamas through tunnels leading into Gaza to enable the Palestinian resistance movement to build its military capabilities. The

charges are a stretch, given Cairo's long-held acrimony toward Muslim Brotherhood-linked organizations.

Sinai standoff intensifies

These claims were further contradicted by recently leaked documents showing Egypt's aggressive measures to destroy over 2,000 tunnels between 2011 and 2015. Senior Egyptian military officials even explored the construction of a canal to obliterate these underground networks.

Also in September, Israeli military analyst Alon Ben-David admitted on Channel 13 News that “no single open tunnel has been found in the Egyptian territory. No single usable tunnel has been discovered under the Philadelphi Corridor.”

However, Tel Aviv's allegations did not end there. Israel's former ambassador to Egypt, David Govrin, has now accused Cairo of violating the normalization treaty by strengthening its military presence in the Sinai. He was quoted by *Yedioth Aharonoth* as saying, “after all these years, and even after 7 October 2023, questions remain about Egypt's genuine recognition of Israel within its 1948 borders.”

On 7 January, the occupation state formally demanded explanations from Egypt regarding its military activities in Sinai, citing treaty violations related to demilitarization. The US, which brokered the 1979 treaty, joined the chorus, withholding \$95 million in military aid to Egypt – a recurring tactic used to exert pressure on Cairo.

Washington then redirected those funds to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), echoing similar cuts in 2023 when Egypt-bound aid was diverted to Taiwan. The move ties with intensified pressure on Beirut, aiming to coerce and incentivize compliance with US influence over its internal affairs, especially with newly-elected President Joseph Aoun.

While Egypt's human rights violations have been copiously documented, this is a card that the US government will routinely roll out when they want to see their North African ally play ball. It is worth noting that Egypt has historically been the second-largest US foreign aid recipient after Israel.

Stand-off in the Sinai

In 2005, following Israel's withdrawal from the Gaza Strip to its periphery, an agreement was reached allowing 750 Egyptian security personnel to enter the Sinai Peninsula.

At the time, Yuval Steinitz, then chairman of Israel's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, vehemently opposed the deal, calling it a “black day” and cautioning:

“We are inviting the cat to keep the cream. This is a solar eclipse that has befallen the government, which is giving up on demilitarizing Sinai in exchange for a lentil stew of compliments and gestures.”

Since then, Cairo has submitted hundreds of requests to deploy additional forces and equipment into Sinai, most of which were approved by Tel Aviv, especially after the rise of a takfiri insurgency in 2013. In 2018, the *New York Times* revealed that Israel had conducted airstrikes inside Sinai at the request of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi to counter the insurgent activity.

In the aftermath of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, relations between Cairo and Tel Aviv began to sour significantly. The occupation state initially proposed that Egypt facilitate ethnic cleansing via a mass expulsion of Gaza’s population into Sinai, creating a buffer zone between Gaza and occupied Palestine. President Sisi outright rejected the plan, sparking further tensions.

By early 2024, the occupation military had intensified its invasion of Gaza, with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu signaling an assault on Rafah, Gaza’s southernmost city. Egypt swiftly issued warnings against any attempt to reclaim the Philadelphi Corridor, a border area that separates Egypt and Gaza, arguing that such actions would breach the 1979 normalization treaty.

In a dramatic escalation on 6 May, Israel launched its Rafah offensive on the same day Hamas agreed to a ceasefire proposal. This offensive, which included the seizure of the Rafah Crossing and the Philadelphi Corridor, drew condemnation even from former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, who described it as “a blatant violation of the peace agreement with Egypt.” Despite threats from Cairo to annul the treaty, Sisi’s primary response was to join South Africa’s case at the International Court of Justice (ICJ), accusing Israel of genocide in Gaza.

When Israeli tanks first entered the Rafah Crossing, they desecrated the area and taunted the Egyptian guards stationed there. Later that same month, a clash broke out, and Israeli soldiers killed an Egyptian soldier. Israel then launched a series of airstrikes in June against targets in the Sinai Peninsula.

The Zionist vision for expansion into Egypt

Last year, uncovered documents in the British National Archives shed light on Israel’s historical campaign to legitimize its claim over the Sinai Peninsula. During Israel’s occupation of Sinai following the 1967 war, pro-Israel lobbyists and think tanks in the west disseminated narratives to delegitimize Egyptian sovereignty over the strategic region.

Only two years after the occupation of the Sinai, which had come as a result of Israel's war of aggression in June of 1967, the *Jewish Observer* and *Middle East Review* published an article that featured a provocative front cover, "Sinai without the Egyptians — a new look at the past, present and future."

The Zionist Federation of Britain even argued that since Sinai had been under Turkiye's control until 1923, it should have been incorporated into the British Mandate for Palestine, laying the groundwork for Israel's claims to the territory.

Fast forward to today, similar arguments have resurfaced to justify Israel's expansionist ambitions. On 6 January, Israeli-Arabic social media accounts published a map showcasing the supposed territories of the ancient kingdoms of Judah and Israel, sparking condemnation from Jordan and the Persian Gulf states. While these claims overtly target Jordanian, Lebanese, and Syrian lands, they also subtly include parts of modern Egypt, particularly Sinai.

In July of last year, Israel's Heritage Minister, Amichai Eliyahu, retweeted a post made on X that called for the occupation army to occupy the Sinai Peninsula, along with southern Lebanon, southern Syria, and eventually part of Jordan.

Back in September, as Israel was launching its assault on Lebanon, the *Jerusalem Post* ran an article entitled 'Is Lebanon part of Israel's promised territory?' that was later removed after considerable backlash.

An existential threat for the WANA region

At this current moment, Israel is openly talking about remaining in southern Lebanon even after the 60-day ceasefire implementation period, as it currently expands its occupation further into Syrian territory by the day. It also seeks an imminent annexation of the occupied West Bank. All of these moves are indicative of Israel's seriousness in expanding its undeclared borders.

In March 2023, Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich openly displayed a "Greater Israel" map, fueling speculation about the Zionist leadership's long-term goals. The "Greater Israel" vision encompasses parts of Lebanon, Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq.

Israeli leaders employ fluid justifications – historical, religious, and political – to advance these claims, a strategy the late Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah warned would continue unabated unless confronted by a unified Arab resistance.

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