Egypt's long war on terror

ANALYSIS

By ARIEL BEN SOLOMON

The Egyptian military-backed regime's crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups that participated in the recent elections, following the toppling of Mohamed Morsi, is creating a serious dilemma within their leadership over which direction to follow.

Although the Brotherhood has used violence against its opponents during the recent upheaval, it has tried to project itself as a nonviolent movement, as opposed to jihadist groups in Sinai and elsewhere that are intent on killing soldiers and carrying out terrorist attacks at will. The protests and violence incited by the Brotherhood have already led to a split in the movement, with some youths calling for a new and younger leadership that rejects the recent brutality.

On the other hand, there are those who would feel frustrated if the leadership decided to move in a more pragmatic and accommodating direction. A decision to compromise with the Egyptian government could cause some of the group's more extreme followers to break off and join jihadists or form new offshoot movements.

Ely Karmon, senior researcher at the Institute for Counter-Terrorism and at the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya's Institute for Policy and Strategy, told The Jerusalem Post that he believes there are two main terror threats emanating from Egypt.

The first is the violence in Sinai caused by a combination of jihadist and Salafi groups with some fighters coming from abroad, particularly from the Arabian peninsula.

Fighters who escaped from prison as well as some Palestinian jihadists and radicalized Bedouin are participating in the violence, he said.

The recent car bombing targeting the minister of the interior points to the second threat, he explained. The situation is reminiscent of Egypt in the 1970s, when the regime cracked down hard on the Brotherhood. It caused a split between the Islamist groups, creating several violent offshoots such as Takfir wal-Hijra and al-Gamaa al-Islamiya.

The current military campaign in Sinai is possibly the biggest operation staged by Egypt in the last decade, Karmon pointed out. The army, he said, had to act because the lack of stability in Sinai and the rest of Egypt was hurting the tourism industry, which is important for Egypt's economy, especially in Sinai. The military understands that Hamas has probably been involved in the violence in Egypt, and that is why the army is destroying buildings and tunnels in the bordering area. This squeeze on Hamas's ability to smuggle in aid or weapons could make governing Gaza more difficult, he said.

Karmon believes said that “the leadership of the Brotherhood will have to decide either to continue violent popular resistance or to return to some kind of participation in political life,” noting that this may not be possible, since the army seems intent on completely crushing and outlawing the group.

From an Israeli perspective, it is important for stability and security cooperation that Egypt manage to contain terrorist attacks against Israel emanating from Egyptian territory; otherwise, relations between Egypt and Israel would deteriorate and the peace treaty would be at risk, he asserted.

Compared to Egyptian military action in Sinai during president Hosni Mubarak's rule, we are now seeing the army acting much more successfully against terror and smuggling networks, he said. “Now the army is more effective because they understand it is an Egyptian priority.”