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The destruction of smuggling tunnels connecting the Gaza Strip with the Sinai Peninsula is one of several counter-terrorism initiatives taken by the Egyptian government in recent years. Egypt sees the tunnels as a passageway for arms and militants it has been fighting in North Sinai, posing a risk to the country's security.¹

Egypt's military has destroyed more than 1900 smuggling tunnels in the Sinai Peninsula, between January 2011- December 2015.

The network of smuggling tunnels connects Sinai with the Palestinian Gaza Strip, controlled by the Islamist Hamas movement. Armed groups, notably Hamas, operate secret tunnels to facilitate the flow of weapons and militants into and out of Gaza strip. Palestinian smugglers in Gaza have built thousands of underground tunnels to bring a wide range of goods from food and medicine to cement and iron. Hamas, which controls Gaza, effectively licenses the tunnels, providing electricity, taking a tax on smuggled goods and banning the import of drugs, alcohol and cigarettes.²

The excavation of smuggling tunnels in the Rafah area began in 1982, subsequent to the division of the Rafah city between Egypt and the Gaza Strip. The average smuggling tunnel is approximately 500 meters in length, and 20 to 25 meters deep. The tunnels may be equipped with wood-paneling, electrical infrastructure, communications gear, and rudimentary elevators in vertical shaft, to transport people or the freight of goods. The openings of the tunnels are often located within private Egyptian homes or other buildings, near or next to the border with Egypt.

Israel and Egypt imposed restrictions on Gaza after Hamas seized control of the territory in 2007. Egypt has put even more pressure on Gaza through prolonged closings of the Rafah crossing.

Since 2013, Egypt's army has been waging an offensive in North Sinai to counter a rising Islamist insurgency of ISIS (Vilayet Sinai) that has left hundreds of police and army personnel dead in the last years.³

The relations between Egypt and the Hamas

Hamas, the Palestinian Islamist Resistance Movement, is an ideological offshoot of the now-banned Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. It was founded in 1987 at the height of the first Palestinian intifada against Israel.

The relationship between the group, which has controlled the Gaza Strip since 2007, and the Egyptian authorities has soured since the ouster of Muslim Brotherhood president Mohamed Morsi in July 2013.

Egyptian officials have accused Hamas of providing support to Islamic militants who have increased their fatal attacks on security forces in the Sinai Peninsula since Morsi's ouster. Hamas has repeatedly denied any such involvement. Egyptian authorities have also accused several Hamas members of undermining national security by involvement in a series of jailbreaks at the beginning of the Egyptian revolution in January 2011.

Authorities have also charged former president Morsi of espionage with Hamas officials. Muslim Brotherhood members, including Morsi, are currently being prosecuted for charges of espionage. The prosecution accuses the Brotherhood members of collaborating with Gaza rulers Hamas, Lebanese Shia group Hezbollah and other organizations "inside and outside" Egypt to smuggle arms, organize military training for group members in the Gaza Strip, and funding a scheme to stir chaos and threaten national security in Egypt.

Hamas has denied any involvement in prison breaks or illegal cooperation with the ousted Islamist leader, Mohamed Morsi.⁴

President El - Sisi saw the tunnels not only as a boon for Hamas — which he despised as an arm of the Muslim Brotherhood — but also as a direct threat to Egypt's security, asserting that arms and militants were flowing through them.⁵

The Egyptian armed forces are using different tactics and technologies against the tunnels:

The detection of the tunnels

In early 2008, the US gave \$23m in military aid to the Egyptians to stop the tunnels, sending in a team from the engineer corps to advise and train in several techniques, including ground-penetrating radar.⁶

In September 2013, foreign media report ted that the US Department of Defense has awarded a nearly \$10 million contract to defense contractor Raytheon to provide Egypt with cutting-edge tunnel detection technology. US system Raytheon with its advanced sensor technology is able to detect more tunnels, invisible to human eyes.⁷

In October 2013, the Egyptian military intelligence – have begun combing over 13 kilometers along the Rafah borders with "developed equipment" that can detect underground tunnels.⁸

The underground "still wall"

As early as 2009, Egypt started to build an underground barrier of 100-foot-deep "steel wall", to prevent tunneling by smugglers along Egypt's border with the Gaza Strip.

Egyptian officials defended the effort against accusations of the Palestinians that: "Whether it is a wall, sensors or tapping devices. . . what matters is that Egyptian territory must be protected," Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit was quoted as saying by Al Ahram al Arabi weekly magazine. "Whoever says Egypt is imposing its control on the border, we tell them this is Egypt's full right."⁹

The "Buffer zone"

Following the Ansar Beit al Maqdis attacks of October 24, 2014, President El Sisi has ordered the creation of a "buffer-zone" along the Egyptian border with Gaza in an attempt to quash the illegal tunnel trading between Sinai and the Gaza Strip. According to the Egyptian Defense Ministry, the tunnels are an important method for "armed Takfiri groups to infiltrate Sinai to supply militants with arms, logistical assistance and shelter after staging their heinous attacks on the Egyptian army."

In January 2015, Egypt began work on doubling the width of the "buffer zone" along the border with the Gaza Strip. The "buffer zone" was initially planned to be 500 meters wide, but is now being expanded by another 500 meters.¹⁰

The Egyptian army gave over 1,100 families who lived within the "buffer zone" only 48 hours in order to evacuate their houses. North Sinai's Governor Abdel Fattah Harhour has stated that every family will receive EGP300 (US\$40) in housing allowance for three months, and further compensation will be given for demolished buildings. However, tribal leaders from the region have expressed their dissatisfaction with the sums offered.¹¹

Ansar Beit al Maqdis issued a statement on its alleged Twitter account condemning the Egyptian army's recent operations to form a "buffer zone" on the Rafah-Gaza border. Using strong language as well as Quranic verses to justify its actions, the group said the government's decision to evacuate hundreds of houses in the planned "buffer zone" was only helping the "Jews". The statement added that the buffer zone further tightened the ongoing Israeli blockade of the besieged Palestinian enclave. The group also called on local Sinai tribes to join the fight.¹²

Since October 2014, the Egyptian armed forces have demolished more than 3,000 homes on its side of the border to create the "buffer zone".

Flooding the tunnels

Filling the tunnels with sewage – since 2013, the Egyptian military is resorting to a new tactic to shut down the smuggling tunnels, flooding them with sewage. It's since been revealed that this was not a flood of water, but rather human excrement — hundreds, thousands of gallons of raw sewage pumped into the tunnels¹³

Filling the tunnels with sea water - The Egyptians dug a trench on the Sinai side of the border and then laid pipes parallel to the "buffer-zone" road, known as the Philadelphia route. Water from the nearby sea was pumped in, creating a canal. The water channel flooded the tunnels, causing them to collapse. The Palestinians are trying to reinforce and waterproof their tunnels with cement and steel bars, hoping they would be saved from collapse if more flooding occurred.

Egypt is creating a large fish farm in the Sinai peninsula on the border with the Gaza Strip, providing an economic opportunity while also trying to halt smuggling through the network of tunnels between Sinai and the Palestinian territory. Tons of sand has been carried away and huge tubes placed to pump seawater to destroy the smugglers' tunnels and form the base of the fish farm.¹⁴

The challenge of "Iron tunnels"

On November 27, 2015, Egyptian border guards discovered a first of its kind underground tunnel network made of iron under the country's border with Gaza. The tunnel was discovered at a depth of 10 meters near the northern part of the Rafah crossing.¹⁵

It was later discovered that the tunnel reached 200 meters into Egyptian territory and was presumably still under construction. The tunnel stretched 70 meters into Palestinian territory as well and its walls were made of 40cm-thick iron. According to Egyptian intelligence, the advanced tunnel network includes some 17 iron tunnels from Gaza. The Egyptian officials said that building such a tunnel would be an extremely expensive endeavor. Egyptian forces destroyed the tunnel using vast quantities of explosives.¹⁶

Fighting the tunnels by legal means

President El -Sisi has decided to combat Hamas's smuggling tunnels also through legal means. In April 2015, he signed a new law, according to which anyone who digs a tunnel along Egypt's borders would face life

imprisonment. The new law came amid reports that some anti-government jihadists from Sinai had received medical treatment in hospitals inside the Gaza Strip. The reports confirmed fears of Egyptian government officials that the jihadists in Sinai are working together with Hamas to undermine security and stability in Egypt.¹⁷

Summary

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's uncompromising war on terrorism, especially along the border with the Gaza Strip, seems to be bearing fruit. According to rough estimates, nearly 2,000 tunnels were operated by Palestinian smugglers and the terror organizations under the Egypt and Gaza border. According to Egyptian reports about 1900 tunnels have been destroyed in the years 2011 – 2015 most of them in the last two years.

Egypt says the closing down of the tunnels is part of a crackdown against Islamist militants in Sinai Peninsula and their supporters in the Palestinian territory of Gaza strip. As a result of this war -- which began in 2013, shortly after El -Sisi came to power, with the destruction of hundreds of smuggling tunnels along the border between Egypt and the Gaza Strip -- Hamas and other armed groups are now more isolated than ever.

El - Sisi has shown real guts and determination in his war to drain the swamps of terrorists. The tough measures he has taken along the border with the Gaza Strip have proven to be even more effective than Israel's military operations against the smuggling tunnels.

The destruction of these tunnels will be a major counter-terrorist move, reducing the motivation and capability of Hamas to initiate new offensive from Gaza Strip against Israel. Reliance on the tunnels seems to have progressively declined and Hamas has also been unable to acquire more weapons and ammunition, owing to the ongoing Egyptian campaign to eliminate the tunnels.

Notes

¹ 20 Sinai smuggling tunnels destroyed by Egypt's military in November: Spokesperson, Ahram Online, December 7, 2015.

² Rory McCarthy, Egypt building underground metal wall to curb smuggling into Gaza, The Guardian, December 10, 2009.

³ Egypt criticizes New York Times for 'false claims' on Gaza smuggling, Ahram Online, October 31, 2015.

⁴ Egypt's army has destroyed 1,813 tunnels in Sinai since 2011: MENA, Ahram Online, October 9, 2015.

⁵ Daa Hadid and Wissam Nassarcot, As Egypt Floods Gaza Tunnels, Smugglers Fear an End to Their Trade, the New York Times, October 7, 2015.

⁶ Rory McCarthy, Egypt building underground metal wall to curb smuggling into Gaza, The Guardian, December 10, 2009.

⁷ Egypt uses US technology to locate and destroy Gaza tunnels, Strategic Culture Foundation, September 18, 2013.

⁸ Egypt destroyed 1055 Gaza tunnels since January 2011: Army official, Ahram Online, October 4, 2013.

⁹ Jeffrey Fleishman and Amro Hassan, Egypt's barrier along Gaza border called 'wall of shame', Los Angeles Times, December 21, 2009.

¹⁰ Roi Kais, Report: Egypt uncovers explosives-laden tunnel between Sinai and Gaza, ynet, January 17, 2015.

¹¹ U.S. to 'assess' Egyptian militant group's links to IS, Al Ahram Online, November 11, 2014.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Adam Clark, Egypt's Fighting Palestinian Smugglers with Sewage, The Wire, February 20, 2013.

¹⁴ Amr Emam, Egypt uses fish farming to fight tunnel smuggling, The Arab Weekly, October 2, 2015.

¹⁵ Roi Kais, Egypt discovers iron tunnel network under Gaza border, ynet, November 27, 2015.

¹⁶ Roi Kais, Egypt discovers iron tunnel network under Gaza border, ynet, November 27, 2015.

¹⁷ Khaled Abu Toameh, Gaza: Egypt Responsible For Weapons Shortage, Gatestone Institute, April 13, 2015.