

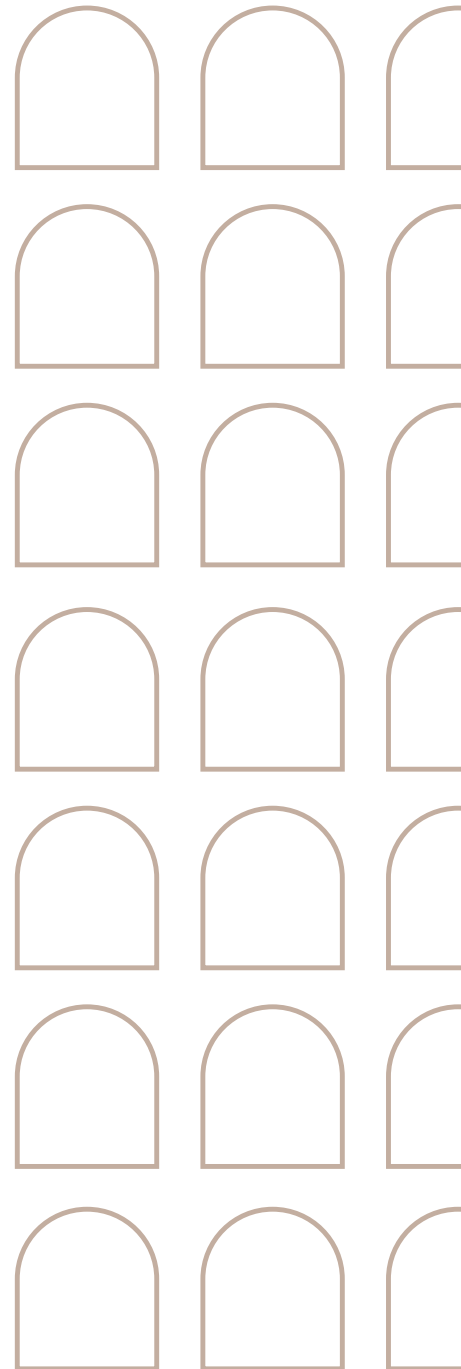
STG Policy Papers

# POLICY BRIEF

## THE FUTURE OF THE SINAI PENINSULA: SECURITY CHALLENGES AND REGIONAL DYNAMICS

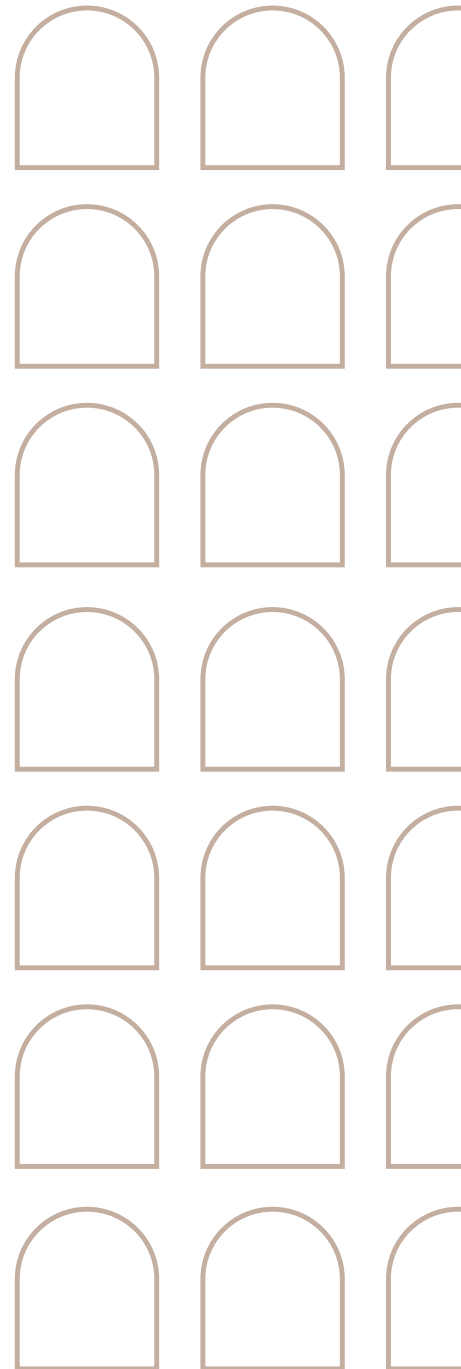
**Author:**

Abbas Sibai



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Sinai Peninsula, a strategically significant landmass in Egypt, has been a region of considerable concern due to its security challenges and implications for regional stability. Recent developments and ongoing dynamics suggest that the future of the Sinai Peninsula will continue to shape the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East. The Sinai Peninsula has long been a region of strategic importance, with a complex history that has seen it transition from a buffer zone to a security hotspot. Recent developments have brought the idea of populating the Sinai Peninsula with people from Gaza into the spotlight. This proposed move has raised questions about how it could impact the region's security dynamics, given the historical context and ongoing security challenges in the Sinai—considering the region's complex geopolitical landscape. This article explores the evolving situation in the Sinai Peninsula, its historical context, security dilemmas, the potential consequences of such a population transfer and the possible path forward.



**Author:**

**Abbas Sibai** | Policy Leader Fellows 2023-2024, School of Transnational Governance, EUI

## 1. A HISTORICAL BUFFER ZONE

Historically, the Sinai Peninsula has served as a buffer between Egypt and its eastern neighbours. Following the [Six-Day War in 1967](#), the [Israel Defense Forces \(IDF\)](#) captured the Sinai, providing a critical strategic depth to a nation surrounded by adversaries. It was only in the [Camp David Accords of 1978](#) that Israel agreed to return the Sinai to Egyptian sovereignty under specific security arrangements designed to demilitarise the region. These accords were established to ensure that Egypt's disposition toward Israel would not deteriorate in the future, with the Sinai acting as a buffer against any hostile Egyptian actions.

## 2. SECURITY CHALLENGES IN THE SINAI

Over the years, the Sinai Peninsula has faced numerous security challenges, many of which have intensified in recent decades. A combination of discriminatory policies, economic neglect, and social grievances created fertile ground for radicalisation. Various groups emerged in the region, including [Ansar Beit al-Maqdis](#), later becoming the [Islamic State-Sinai Province \(ISSP\)](#). Their attacks targeted security personnel, civilians, and strategic sites, jeopardising Egypt's stability and regional security.

The Sinai has witnessed numerous high-profile security operations, such as the [bombing of a Russian airliner in 2015](#) and the massacre at [al-Rawdah Mosque in 2017](#). These incidents underscore the extent of the challenge facing the Egyptian government and the broader region.

## 3. INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE AND ISRAEL'S ROLE

In response to the security deterioration, international organisations and states have taken steps to support Egypt's fight against the [Sinai jihadist groups](#). The United States established the [Multinational Force & Observers \(MFO\)](#) in 1982 to monitor Egyptian security activities in the Sinai and ensure compliance with the Camp David Accords.

Meanwhile, Israel has actively assisted Egyptian forces with intelligence and airstrikes in the region, strengthening cooperation in addressing shared security concerns.

## 4. THE POTENTIAL IMPACT OF POPULATING SINAI WITH GAZANS

Populating the Sinai Peninsula with people from Gaza is sensitive and could have significant regional implications:

1. **Security concerns:** Introducing a substantial population into Sinai may create new security challenges. Ensuring the region's safety and stability while addressing the incoming population's grievances would be complex. The Sinai's history of radicalisation and jihadist activity further complicates this prospect.
2. **Impact on regional dynamics:** The Sinai Peninsula is located at the crossroads of the Middle East, with Egypt, Saudi, and Israel as its immediate neighbours. Any change in the demographic composition of Sinai could alter the regional balance of power and influence, potentially affecting diplomatic relations and security dynamics in the broader region.
3. **Economic and social implications:** Populating Sinai with Gazans would require significant investments in infrastructure, services, and job opportunities. These initiatives could positively impact economic development but pose challenges, especially regarding allocating resources and ensuring social cohesion.
4. **The role of international actors:** International organisations and states would need to play a vital role in supporting and overseeing the population transfer and addressing potential security and humanitarian concerns.

## 5. THE FUTURE OF SINAI: A DELICATE BALANCE

The Sinai Peninsula's future is a delicate balance involving multiple dimensions and the interests of various stakeholders, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the USA, and Israel.

**1. Egypt perspective:** [Egypt](#) has a significant stake in the Sinai Peninsula, seeking to restore and maintain its sovereignty over the region. The Egyptian government has been fighting the jihadist insurgency that has plagued the area for years. Recent modifications to security arrangements have enabled Egypt to deploy its forces more effectively in the Sinai. This reflects Egypt's commitment to addressing security concerns while asserting territorial control. In addition to economic development, Egypt also aims to economically develop the Sinai Peninsula, which is crucial for the well-being of the local population ([Bedouin](#)) and the country. This involves infrastructure projects and investment in the region.

**2. Saudi Arabia's perspective:** Saudi Arabia wants a stable and secure Sinai Peninsula. They share a border with Egypt and are concerned about any potential spillover of instability or violence into their territory. [The Neom project](#) is a futuristic city development initiative led by Saudi Arabia, aiming to create a hub for innovation, technology, and economic development. While Neom is primarily located in Saudi Arabia, it is near the Sinai Peninsula. This geographical proximity makes Sinai an area of interest for Saudi Arabia, which seeks to ensure stability and security in the region to support the success of the Neom project. They [share concerns](#) with Israel regarding the rise of jihadist insurgencies and terrorist activities in the area. The recent diplomatic official/unofficial relations between these common security threats provide an opportunity for additional cooperation between Israel and Saudi Arabia. One potential avenue for collaboration could involve intelligence sharing and counter-terrorism efforts. Both countries have extensive intelligence networks and can benefit from exchanging information and expertise to combat the shared threat of terrorism in Sinai. This collaborative approach aligns with the broader objectives of the United States and its allies in the fight against global terrorism.

Furthermore, Saudi Arabia's financial and diplomatic influence in the region can be leveraged to support Egypt's efforts in

restoring sovereignty and development in the Sinai. Economic investments and development projects can help address some root causes of regional instability, such as unemployment and lack of economic opportunities. However, it's essential to tread carefully when involving Saudi Arabia in this delicate balance. Cooperation between Israel, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia may raise concerns among other regional players, and careful diplomatic efforts will be necessary to manage these sensitivities. A multilateral approach, potentially involving the United States as a mediator, could help build trust and foster collaboration among these nations.

**3. Israel's perspective:** Israel views the Sinai Peninsula as a crucial buffer zone that helps ensure its national security. While supporting Egypt to combat insurgency, [Israel also seeks to maintain the Sinai as a buffer against future conflicts](#). The presence of jihadist groups in the Sinai poses a security threat to Israel, and it is essential to strike a balance between supporting Egypt's sovereignty and ensuring its security interests.

**4. Iran's perspective:** Iran plays an indirect yet substantial role in shaping the future dynamics of the Sinai Peninsula. Iran's interests in this region are intricate and have multiple facets. Geopolitically, Iran considers the Sinai Peninsula a vital piece on its regional chessboard, particularly in light of its strained relations with key regional players, notably Israel and Saudi Arabia. Iran's support for Palestinian and Shia groups and its broader regional ambitions position it as a regional rival to Israel and a competitor for influence with Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, Iran's history of supporting non-state actors in the Middle East, such as Hamas in Gaza and Houthi in Yemen, raises concerns about its potential indirect involvement in the Sinai's instability. This dynamic necessitates a delicate balancing act for Egypt, which must carefully manage its relationship with Iran as it seeks to maintain diplomatic channels while also cooperating with regional powers like Saudi Arabia and the United States, who view Iran as a significant adversary. The instability in the Sinai Peninsula could potentially escalate into a proxy conflict between Iran and its rivals,

further complicating the region's security and impeding its stability and development.

**5. EU perspective:** The EU is deeply concerned about security and stability in the Mediterranean due to the Sinai Peninsula's proximity to the Suez Canal, a vital global trade route that could impact European trade and security. The EU is inclined to support efforts to combat terrorism and organised crime in the area to safeguard the uninterrupted flow of goods through the Suez Canal. Additionally, the EU typically advocates and often encourages dialogue and collaboration between Egypt and Israel, both of which have diplomatic relations with the EU, to address shared regional security concerns and other challenges. Counter-terrorism is a high priority for the EU, particularly in light of the Sinai Peninsula's history as a centre for extremist activities, including those associated with groups like ISIS. The EU may extend support to Egyptian and regional initiatives to counter terrorism. Furthermore, the EU holds economic interests in the Mediterranean, including trade and energy, and could find infrastructure development, such as transportation links and energy resources in the Sinai Peninsula, of particular significance.

**6. The USA's interests:** The United States has historically supported Egypt in its efforts to combat terrorism in the Sinai Peninsula. This assistance is rooted in counter-terrorism cooperation, as the Sinai has been a hotspot for jihadist activities. Furthermore, the USA has strategic interests in maintaining regional stability to safeguard its allies, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia.

The Sinai Peninsula remains a dilemma for Israeli policy. While supporting Egypt in restoring its sovereignty and combating the jihadist insurgency is crucial, maintaining the Sinai as a buffer against potential future conflicts is equally essential. Recent modifications to security arrangements have allowed Egypt to deploy forces in the Sinai, reflecting the need for flexibility amid evolving security dynamics. Moreover, the future of Sinai is intricately connected to multiple regional actors, and the Saudi dimension is a critical factor to consider. Collaboration between Israel, Egypt,

and Saudi Arabia in addressing security and development challenges in the Sinai Peninsula can contribute to its stability and prosperity while maintaining a buffer against potential future conflicts. While Iran's perspective on the Sinai Peninsula is not explicitly outlined, it is a crucial player in the broader regional context. Its actions and policies can have far-reaching implications for the future of the Sinai Peninsula, and as such, they must be considered when discussing the delicate balance involving multiple stakeholders in the region. Any effort to stabilise and develop the Sinai Peninsula will require careful diplomacy and an awareness of the broader regional dynamics involving Iran. Careful diplomacy and a multilateral approach are key to navigating this delicate balance effectively.

## 5. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS PER SECTOR

### A - Security Recommendations:

**1. Voluntary population transfer:** Any population movement from Gaza to the Sinai Peninsula should be conducted voluntarily and in consultation with all relevant stakeholders. Emphasizing the importance of a careful security assessment to identify and mitigate potential threats may involve phased population movements to ensure manageable security.

**2. Enhanced security cooperation:** To address the persistent security challenges in the Sinai Peninsula, it is imperative to bolster security collaboration involving Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and international allies. This encompasses the exchange of intelligence, joint counter-terrorism endeavours, and supporting Egypt's counter-extremism initiatives, with the [Multinational Force and Observers \(MFO\)](#) continuing to monitor the region. Additionally, recognising Saudi Arabia's contribution to enhancing regional stability and economic progress, there should be a focus on the Neom project, which closely connects to the Sinai Peninsula. Furthermore, Israel might adapt to the evolving regional security landscape while maintaining its [Qualitative Military Edge \(QME\)](#) by re-evaluating the concept of QME in the



current context and partnering with key allies, particularly the United States, to ensure the superiority of Israel's military capabilities.

**3. Counter-terrorism cooperation:** Enhance cooperation between Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and potentially other regional partners in counter-terrorism efforts. Sharing intelligence, coordinating military operations, and implementing joint counter-terrorism initiatives can help address security challenges posed by radical elements.

**4. Community policing:** Invest in community policing initiatives to build trust between the local population and security forces. This can help gather local intelligence, counter-radicalisation efforts, and improve overall security conditions.

**5. Diplomatic engagement:** A multilateral diplomatic approach involving critical stakeholders like Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the USA will be pursued. This approach can help build trust, foster collaboration, and address concerns from various parties. The involvement of the EU can also promote dialogue and cooperation in the Mediterranean region. Also, to safeguard the Suez Canal for global trade, international efforts should be made to ensure the security of this vital waterway. The EU, the USA, and regional partners should collaborate to counter-terrorism and organised crime in the region to protect this key trade route.

**6. Monitoring Iran's influence:** Recognising Iran's potential indirect role in the Sinai's instability, regional actors manage their relationships with Iran. This involves diplomacy and maintaining diplomatic channels while cooperating with regional powers that view Iran as a significant adversary.

**7. Balancing sovereignty and security:** Egypt's efforts to restore sovereignty over the Sinai should be supported while ensuring the region remains a buffer zone for potential conflicts. This requires flexibility in security arrangements to adapt to evolving dynamics.

## **B - Social and economic recommendations:**

**1. Integration, social cohesion, and resource allocation:** Promote integration and social cohesion between the incoming Gazan and the existing [Sinai populations \(Bedouin\)](#). Encourage dialogue, cultural exchange, and community-building activities to foster harmonious relations and minimise social tensions. Ensure fair and equitable allocation of resources and economic opportunities to avoid disparities between different population segments. Implement policies that prioritise the most economically disadvantaged areas.

**2. Civil society engagement:** Encourage the involvement of civil society organisations in the Sinai Peninsula to facilitate community development, provide social services, and act as intermediaries between the population and local authorities. Including Education and Awareness: Invest in education and awareness programs for incoming and existing residents. Programs focused on tolerance, intercultural understanding, and conflict resolution can help mitigate potential social conflicts and promote a sense of shared identity.

**3. Infrastructure investment:** Launch substantial infrastructure development projects in the Sinai Peninsula to accommodate the influx of new residents. This includes building housing, schools, healthcare facilities, and transportation networks.

**4. Job opportunities:** Create economic opportunities for both incoming and existing residents. This could involve attracting foreign investment, supporting small and medium-sized enterprises, and developing tourism and renewable energy sectors.

In conclusion, the population transfer from Gaza to the Sinai Peninsula will hinder the rights of the people of Gaza from returning to their homeland. The transfer is a complex and sensitive issue that requires a multifaceted approach. Addressing security challenges while simultaneously fostering social cohesion and economic development is vital. International cooperation and diplomatic efforts will be crucial in managing the delicate balance of interests and dynamics involving various regional actors.

The School of Transnational Governance (STG) delivers teaching and high-level training in the methods, knowledge, skills and practice of governance beyond the State. Based within the European University Institute (EUI) in Florence, the School brings the worlds of academia and policy-making together in an effort to navigate a context, both inside and outside Europe, where policy-making increasingly transcends national borders.

The School offers Executive Training Seminars for experienced professionals and a Policy Leaders Fellowship for early- and mid-career innovators. The School also hosts expert Policy Dialogues and distinguished lectures from transnational leaders (to include the STG's Leaders Beyond the State series which recorded the experiences of former European Institution presidents, and the Giorgio La Pira Lecture series which focuses on building bridges between Africa and Europe). In September 2020, the School launched its Master-of-Arts in Transnational Governance (MTnG), which will educate and train a new breed of policy leader able to navigate the unprecedented issues our world will face during the next decade and beyond.

The STG Policy Papers Collection aims to further the EUI School of Transnational Governance's goal in creating a bridge between academia and policy and provide actionable knowledge for policy-making. The collection includes Policy Points (providing information at-a-glance), Policy Briefs (concise summaries of issues and recommended policy options), and Policy Analyses (in-depth analysis of particular issues). The contributions provide topical and policy-oriented perspectives on a diverse range of issues relevant to transnational governance. They are authored by STG staff and guest authors invited to contribute on particular topics.

School of Transnational Governance  
European University Institute  
Via Camillo Cavour 65, Firenze, FI 50129  
Email: [stg.publications@eui.eu](mailto:stg.publications@eui.eu)

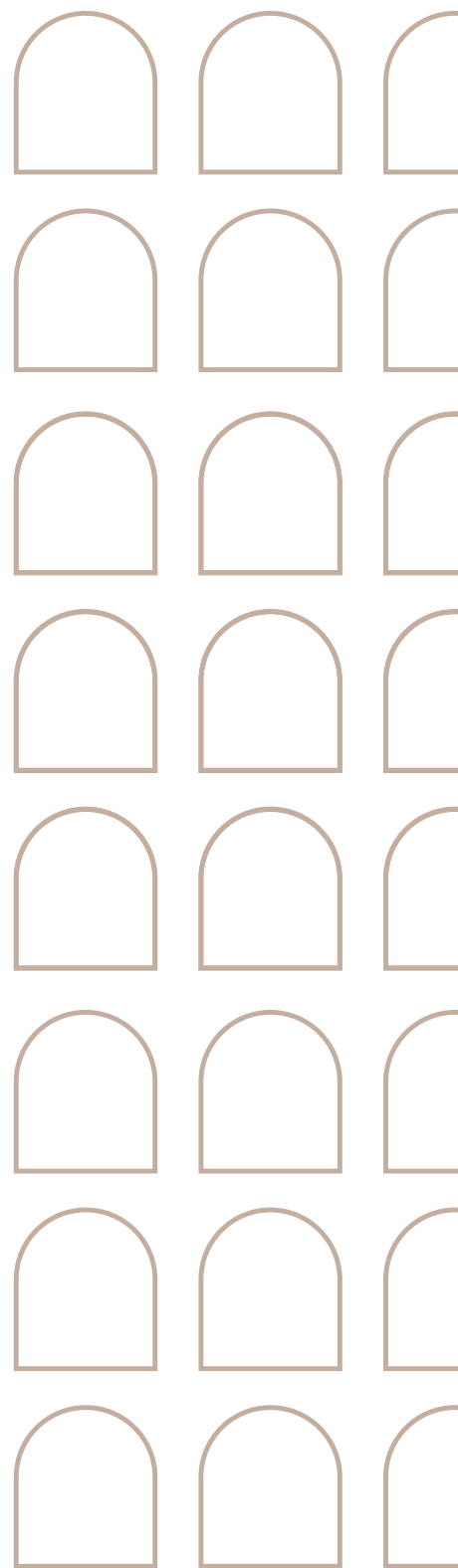
[www.eui.eu/stg](http://www.eui.eu/stg)



Co-funded by the  
Erasmus+ Programme  
of the European Union

Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Education and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). Neither the European Union nor EACEA can be held responsible for them.

This work is licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 \(CC-BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) International license which governs the terms of access and reuse for this work. If cited or quoted, reference should be made to the full name of the author(s), editor(s), the title, the series and number, the year and the publisher.



**doi: 10.2870/250187**  
**ISBN: 978-92-9466-466-2**  
**ISSN: 2600-271X**  
**QM-BA-23-028-EN-N**

© European University Institute, 2023