

Egypt launches Sinai offensive against Islamic militants

Israel welcomes response in chaotic region but Gaza feels wrath of Cairo after it claimed attackers came through tunnels

- Harriet Sherwood in Kerem Shalom and Abdel-Rahman Hussein in Cairo
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Egyptian forces take position on a sand dune during an operation in the northern Sinai peninsula. Photograph: AFP/Getty Images

The Egyptian military launched operations from the air and ground against suspected Islamic militants in the Sinai on Wednesday, in a move that could herald a sustained campaign to regain control of the anarchic region.

In a further sign of a tougher approach the Egyptian president, Mohamed Morsi, sacked his intelligence chief, Mourad Mowafi. According to Egyptian TV, the intelligence services had advance warning of Sunday's attack but failed to act in the belief that Muslims would not attack fellow Muslims during the meal to break the Ramadan fast. The governor of north Sinai and the head of the military police were also removed from their posts.

Air strikes on targets near the town of Sheikh Zuwaid, close to the border with Gaza, left at least 20 militants dead. Egyptian troops raided villages in the area following attacks overnight by gunmen on checkpoints around the north Sinai city of el-Arish, in which five security personnel and one civilian were wounded.

Security forces shut the main highway close to the city as the air strikes began; and power, internet and mobile phone networks in the area were shut down.

It was the Egyptian military's first use of air power in the Sinai since its 1973 war with Israel. The Sinai was declared a demilitarised zone under the 1979 peace treaty between the two countries, and military presence in the region is strictly constrained.

In a statement read out on state TV, the military said the aim was to "restore stability and regain control" of the Sinai. It followed an attack on Sunday, in which Islamic militants killed 16 Egyptian border guards before breaching the border and penetrating more than 1km inside Israel. An armoured vehicle commandeered by the militants was blown up in an Israeli missile strike close to several kibbutzim and other agricultural communities. Scorch marks, burnt rubber and bullet casings still littered the site of the explosion and subsequent gun battle on Wednesday.

Egypt's response was welcomed by Israel, which has exerted intense pressure on its neighbour to crack down on militant activity in the Sinai. The area has become increasingly chaotic and violent in the 18 months since the Egyptian revolution. "What we see in Egypt is a strong fury, a determination of the regime and the army to take care of it and impose order in Sinai because that is their responsibility," a senior Israeli defence official, Amos Gilad, told Israel Radio.

However, it was not immediately clear whether the Egyptian operation was the start of a long campaign to root out militants and smugglers from the Sinai or a one-off response aimed at calming popular anger over the deaths of 16 soldiers while breaking the Ramadan fast at sunset.

"Once the regime in Cairo decides to clean up Sinai, it could take one month, two, three, five, a year, but it will happen. It's not mission impossible," said Major-General Yom-tov Samia, a former head of the Israeli military's southern command. "With the right will and the right plan they can do it. But am I sure this is the first step of many? No, I'm not sure. It was a reaction. I hope it's part of a plan."

Egypt also closed the Rafah border until further notice, leaving Gaza largely cut off from the outside world. It also began sealing the tunnels underneath the border between Egypt and Gaza, which have been used for the past five years to smuggle people, consumer goods, construction materials and weapons. Egypt has claimed Palestinian militants from Gaza were involved in Sunday's attack.

Gaza's ruling party, Hamas, which swiftly condemned the cross-border attack, also moved to shut down the Gaza end of the tunnels, prompting long queues at petrol stations. The vast majority of fuel used by Gazans for cars and generators is smuggled and costs around half the price of fuel imported legally from Israel.

Hamas is anxious to distance itself from the attack and also to co-operate with the Egyptian government, although it described the closure of the Rafah crossing as "collective punishment". Hamas, which has close ties to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, had high expectations of Morsi's stated intention take steps to ease Gaza's isolation.

At the Kerem Shalom kibbutz, tucked into a corner of southern Israel where the Gaza and Egyptian borders intersect, Andy Breakell said the community was accustomed to mortars and rockets being fired from Gaza, "but [Sunday's attack] was an escalation, a different ball game". Residents of the kibbutz were ordered to take shelter in protective rooms during the attack, from which the Manchester-born Breakell, 58, watched 100m sprinter Usain Bolt win a gold medal at the London Olympics.

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