

political
Reports

17 SEPTEMBER
2019



المعهد المصري للدراسات
EGYPTIAN INSTITUTE FOR STUDIES

Sinai Deportees and Prospects of Protracted Conflict (2)

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Development projects target Sinai, but not its people...

The [first part](#) of this work has examined political strategies to dismantle the local identity of Bedouin tribes in northern Sinai, first by political mediation then by coercion and offense to end two communities' physical presence in the governorate. This paper gives more details on the economic and humanitarian costs borne by the Sawarka and Ermilat members. In doing so, I examine how their victimhood is constructed in socio-economic contexts both in origin and destination governorates.

Besides the loss of land and orchards, farmers, craftsmen, and merchants were heavily afflicted by military operations in Rafah, Sheikh Zuwayyid, and then Arish. The economic cost of dislocation has affected livelihoods of different types of population but mostly farmers. In an interview with Dr. Ahmed Salem, an active academician from north Sinai, he narrated that government officials, bureaucrats, and white collars were easily [relocated](#) across different governorates. Some were sent to schools and offices in Arish where the army siege of certain districts, e.g., Al Karama, has hindered their access to schools and stopped all means of livelihood in the area, leading, on top of all, to their [dismissal from work](#) for failure to attend to classes. Craftsmen were also affected by the military operation across the governorate. As they fail to supply construction and work materials, e.g., plumbing tools and supplies which have been banned since [9 February 2018](#) on grounds of their suspicious use by ISIS-affiliated militias, many

have lost their income sources and were affected by the closure of the 'industrial zone'.

The situation was not any better for suppliers and merchants. In [12 May 2018](#), peach merchants complained from the siege of northern Sinai governorate and the ban of trucks from moving in and out the governorate, leading to the loss of traded crops; the harvest was sold for 1 pound per kilogram which did not cover the cost of production. The remaining traders in Rafah and Sheikh Zuwayyid suffer from increased losses as they try to afford living by bringing goods from Nile Valley governorates; obtaining a permission to pass from Al Salam bridge is costing, financially, and could be obtained after weeks in which duration many goods would have rotten.

Hence, only few traders and factories have pursued working in the two cities. Some [reports](#) detail the humanitarian suffering of Sinai people during the siege; olive pressers and oil merchants in Sheikh Zuwayyid had to close their shops and move to Cairo to avoid discrimination in Ismailiya and Arish, according to Salem. In 17 January 2018, local sources informed that two marble and olive factories in Arish, working since 1992 and 2004, have been destroyed to the disadvantage of nearly 500 indigenous workers.

Yet, farmers have been the most affected group by deportation. On one hand, they lost a valuable source of wealth- fertile lands especially in Western Rafah. The area is well-known for high productivity and farmers' good acquaintance of modern agricultural methods. In 2013, these lands contributed a great share of the total olive-cultivated area in northern Sinai governorate, which was nearly

37.8 thousand hectares, with 19 percent of relative importance of the total cultivated area in Egypt (around 200 thousand hectares). This means that the levelled land in north Sinai used to contribute 56.8 thousand tons of olive to the country. The productivity of north Sinai lands used to range from 1.5 tons to 3.88 tons per hectare¹.

On the other hand, even if authorities compensate the affected farmers, the later will have to invest several years in new orchards, according to Al Akhrasy, because peach fruition period ranges from four to five years. Additionally, they will have lost the higher value of Sinai products that benefits from abundant well water and manure of the livestock that Bedouins used to breed in large swathes of land. In sum, the dislocated farmers have lost farms and orchards, free clean water, organic fertilizers, and the distinctive quality of Sinai soil²

Moreover, as they seek to retain farming livelihood, integrate in local markets and income systems of destination governorates, and accustom their farming methods and traditions to low-yielding lands, the affected households need to pay for water, land rent, services, and fertilizers, all while struggling to keep and nurture the identity of their cultural products .

¹¹ Hassan B. A., Haitham, Zaghloul A., Ezzat, R.Al-Gebaly, Mahmoud, and S.Abd el-Ghani, Salah. 2014. "An Economic Study of Olive Crop in North Sinai Governorate". *Middle East Journal of Agriculture Research*. Volume 3, issue (4). Electronic source. URL: <http://www.curreweb.com/mejar/mejar/2014/994-1001.pdf>

² https://issuu.com/magdymohamed/docs/conf_book

The situation is no different to farmers in Arish, whose farms were bulldozed to create the buffer zone around the new Arish Harbor. One local informant said to HRW that in March 2018 the army has levelled an 18-hectares orchard of his family which has been inherited for 70 years and was the only income source to his father, brother, and many farmers working there. The army uprooted their trees without counting them first to estimate a fair reparation. He said, 'this is a systematic policy to uproot trees and oppress the local population'.

On macro level, the levelled lands in north Sinai have costed the country near a quarter of its fertile olive-yielding lands that worth billions of pounds of high-quality production³. Estimates indicate the uprooting of around 4 million olive trees and a loss of 80 percent of olive harvest in 2018⁴. Above all, the impact of wide-range bombardment on the chemical balance of soil, has affected both fertility and safety for growing crops. A report of Human Rights Watch on 22 May 2018 reported the spread of remnants of heavy military equipment on hundreds of kilometers of agricultural lands in northern Sinai.

³ An official estimate of reparation for levelled lands in Rafah, Sheikh Zuwayyid and Arish is around one billion pound only, while a handful of local source complain that their lands and trees were not registered or counted properly before demolition in order to pursue their right for compensation. See Mohamed, Khaled. 04/08/2018. 'Disposing 117 million pounds as compensation to the affected farmers in north Sinai' Al Masry AlYoum. URL:<https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/1312724>

⁴ Maqled Mohamed. 04/05/2018. 'North Sinai Agricultural Ministry: 20 thousand feddans in Bir Al Abd are distributed to afflicted farmers'. El Watan News. URL: <https://www.elwatannews.com/news/details/3333310>

Cynicism in numbers?

The affected deportees of Rafah and Sheikh Zuwayyid were promised to receive compensation for roof-topped houses which were demolished during the 'Comprehensive Operation'. Landowners were not compensated because authorities argue that 'all Sinai is a state-owned land', but orchards were said to have been valued on some terms. Northern Sinai governorate has [announced](#) in February 2018 the discharge of reparations to 36 farmers from Sheikh Zuwayyid, Abu Tawela and Kharouba villages, by counting 100 trees per each levelled hectare, fruit type and tree age. Compensation for demolished houses counted the value of 1 squared meter of concrete roofed houses as 1200 EGP and 700 for brick buildings. The affected households were shocked at the numbers they should receive.

On the one hand, compensation estimates reflected the same pricing of houses in 2014, not-considering the tri-fold rise in prices of construction materials (e.g., a ton of reinforcing steel costs 12,000 EGP in 2017 compared to 4,000 only in 2014). On the other, even those deserving a compensation have found great difficulties pursuing their claim. Many were [not allowed time](#), help, or opportunity to have their homes and lands examined by relevant authorities, before bulldozing them, some were denied the compensation despite providing an official estimate of their property value⁵, and farmers of [Al-zaheir, Al-shallaq, and Abou Alarraj villages](#) in Sheikh Zuwayyid could not acquire

⁵ Ghoneim, Haitham. Personal communication. 22/7/2019.

an official estimation of the value of uprooted orchards and destroyed properties in order to fill the relevant forms.

Others in western Rafah reported in 6 October 2017 that they could not afford the transportation of their packed furniture because operations took place suddenly, sometimes on 24-48 hours-notice, and corrupt bureaucrats in Rafah Local City council did not provide the afflicted households with needed trucks. A dislocated family from Rafah had to sell their daughter's earring to pay the driver who carried their stuff as they could not afford money to move out of Rafah. Two days later, in 8 October 2017, some households informed that they could not get approval to take their furniture out of houses, since security forces said "we would not allow you to pass. This time is an exception. Afterwards, no one will pass with furniture. We have been ordered so".

When all these are put beside the official announcements of development projects in the area, one may ask: what has left of the area's natural, human, and productive resources? and why the compensation amounts sound like black comedy besides the economic value of announced projects

Tens of news examine the state's 'development projects' in the area. In 7/05/2017, the ministry of Agriculture and Land Reclamation offered [an open auction](#) of 7500 hectares for farming and reclamation in Be'r Al-Abed. Ten thousand hectares were initially put on auction; 2,500 of which were offered to Sinai people, exclusively, but only 713 hectares were sold, then, for 29 million and 592 EGP. A quick calculation shows that the price per square

meter was 42,000 EGP. So, it shows as the state has appropriated the lands of Bedouins only to sell other parcels to them for millions of pounds! Or else, to change the demographic composition of the region by selling more parcels (almost two thirds of the announced area) to Sinai and non-Sinai population.

Had a society-oriented economic rational been driving policy makers, they could have bought the highly-fertile olive and peach orchards in Western Rafah from their owners, invest in their generous harvest, and benefit from the qualified labor in the area. Other business and state-society partnerships could have been possible to invest in the area's human and natural resources without risking the livelihoods of more than 100,000 now-deportees.

It is, though, unwise to neglect the economic rational of state authorities. Sinai development plan and vision 2022 promises incentives for investment and sedentarization in the area. [The plan](#) entails dividing the governorate into 6 areas, establishing a trade harbor and international airport, reclamation of 400,000 hectares (!) and establishing residential cities that include agricultural and industrial activities, each city on a 50-hectares area. Another [version](#) was announced, also in 2018, promising the establishment of small cities on 200 hectares amidst 10 residentials, industrial cities for each resident on 1000 hectares, 'Salam' city on 25,000 hectares between Bir Al-Abed and Port Said, to house 1.5 million people and become Egypt's economic capital.

All sounds good, but not for Egyptians, because the 'Comprehensive Operation' took aim at government facilities in Rafah and Sheikh Zuwayyid,

e.g., education and health administrations, Rafah Girls' Secondary School and other official facilities. The damage inflicted on the two cities' infrastructure is incalculable, if we consider that surfacing only 5 kilometers in Sadat and Salmana villages and a 750 meters leading to the Public hospital in Bir al-Abed costed the government [EGP 24,169 million](#).

And nothing sounds good for Sinai people as well, for they are addressed with other policies.

Collateral protracted punishment

Local narratives of unjust and humiliating treatment of the population in Rafah and Sheikh Zuwayyid, even in destination locations, raise serious concerns about the extent of underlying grievance resulting from what HRW describes as amounting to ['war crimes'](#).

The Bedouin populace of Sawarka and Ermilat tribes who lived in Rafah and Sheikh Zuwayyid are being punished on several grounds. Politically, the two tribes have included staunch supporters of political Islamists in the last decades. Dislocation has taken aim of southern villages in Sheikh Zuwayyid and 95 percent of Rafah people, according to Al Akhrasy, whose people voted for the Muslim Brotherhood candidate, Dr. Mohamed Morsi, against Gen. Mohamed Shafiq in the first-round presidential elections in 2011. The gap in votes amounted to [23,963 votes](#) in favor of Morsi. Al Akhrasy adds that the pattern of 'religiosity' among the two communities is closer to the pure *nomad* culture compared to that of those from Arish and Bei'r Al Abd who were dislocated between 1967 and 1977 and had a greater share of education, sedentary life,

and exposure to city life and direct interaction with official state authorities in Nile Valley governorates. Also, studies report that since 1970s a rise of Shari'a courts has started to defy the supreme role of Urf councils that state authorities had appropriated for decades to its own interests. Hence, the two tribes' political and religious attitudes have put them in direct enmity with the state.

In this regard, testimonies by local informants recount how authorities inflict extensive [reprisals](#) against families of late or incarcerated participants in Rab'a and Al Nahda sit-ins, those reported to have [rebelled](#) against the rule of ex-president Mubarak in 2011, and previously arrested political opponents. For example, in 12 December 2017, a pronounced figure of Arish city and a previous victim of illegal arrest and torture in security premises, Sheikh Basheir, had his house demolished on arbitrary accusations of supporting militants. In 24 February 2018, a whole residential bloc was demolished in Al Atlawy square in Arish on grounds that a son of one of the residents was wanted. Likewise, police officers broke into a [Mekameleen TV presenter's house](#) in Arish, himself living in Turkey, hit and offended his 60-year old mother and female relatives, burnt the entire five-story building before taking it down and warning nearby neighbors that nobody should host women and children from this building.

Perpetual revenge is sought even through children. On their facebook page 'Sinai Media', [deportees appealed](#) to the President and parliament representatives of northern Sinai to stop security offences on children in Al Salhiyya Al Jadida, Ismailiyya, where security officers fabricate accusations against 16-years old children, youth, and deported males from Rafah and Sheikh Zuwayyid. The

governorate has been reported to discriminate against newly relocated Sinai families in the deserted outskirts of its villages. Sinai Deportees sought to resume farming livelihood in 'Abou Tufeila' village in Ismailiyya and employment in local landowners' farms, only to find the council bulldozers demolishing their homes, on grounds that they build illegal houses on agricultural lands. While true, reported clearance campaigns in [2015](#) and [2016](#) targeted, solely, Sinai deportees in winter, and left them in desperate search for [shelter and warmth](#) during the cold.

Also, deception and humiliation have been reported in many complaints. In 23 September 2017, some armed officers have robbed sheep and furniture from households in Dawwar Selim, Al Aggalin, and Al Rahhal villages in western Rafah. Later in 9 October, A family in Alahrash village was forced to leave their house because army forces needed to demolish some buildings around it, again on grounds that they host militias. On return, they found nothing in their house. Furniture, even doors and windows....all stolen. Another incident showed officials' disregard of safety concerns by the dislocated households. Youth hostels in Arish city were evacuated in June 2016. At that time, 15 households where asked to move to another residential bloc in the Midan square. When families asked to see the place they were being moved to, they found gunfire holes on water tanks and the apartments' walls and, thus, refused to leave before officials secure a safe place for them and their children only to get forcefully dislocated from the hostels.

In sum, political motives lie behind the arbitrary humiliation of Rafah and Sheikh Zuwayyid communities, but a broader socio-ethnic stigmatization has also affected the deportees' ability to coop with the crises. Salem reported that the dislocation of Sawarka and Ermilat Bedouins between 2014 and 2016 have revived social cleavages between them and city-centered families of Palestinian origins who root back to the [Iqla'yyin community of Khan Younes](#). Where 'blood ties' are highly cherished as base for solidarity and mutual support, Bedouin households were estranged and lacked sufficient social networks to coop with dislocation.

Earlier marriage and trade relations existed between Bedouin and city dwellers but stark differences in lifestyle, income earning and livelihood activities kept the two sides apart. In his work on 'Social transformations in the Egyptian Society', [Ali Leila](#) discussed the Bedouin's turn from mobile pastoralism to trading in [arms](#), [drugs](#), and [smuggling goods](#) across borders, as a result of state negligence of development needs in the region. This continued to concern [scholars](#) and involved policy makers but, meanwhile, created significant variance between lifestyles of Bedouins and those living in the city center- state officials, bureaucrats, artisans, and immigrant laborers in construction and quarries sectors.

The situation was no better for those dislocated to Arish, where Al Shorbagy, Al Kashif, Al Beik and other Bushnaq families - who used to live around the Arish Castle during the [Ottoman rule](#) - exchanged a sense of superiority with the Bedouin people. Bedouins used to live in the city outskirts before assuming more lands

by arms and money, later on. Al Akhrasy describes the two communities' relation as: "the Arishian people (Bushnaqs) hate Bedouins but fear them. They feel they are uncivilized, vulgar, and primitive. But when they fall in trouble (among each other), they call their Bedu connections to prey upon each other".

Al Akhrasy continues that the situation is similar in Beheira, Sharqiyya, and Ismailiyya governorates where Bedouin deportees suffer social discrimination in schools, hospitals, tenancy, and livelihood activities. He highlights the difficulty to integrate in the receiving communities' economic and social life compared to those in Bir Al Abd and Ismailiyya's desert hinterland where similar Bedouin communities and living environment allow less discrimination and abuse of the deportees, whom the media shows as responsible of the bloodshed in Sinai.

Summary and recommendations

This paper sheds light on the practices and perceptions that result into long-term disturbance of over 100,000 citizens livelihoods and deepen already existing social cleavages through discriminatory policies and continual subjugation of north Sinai deportees. This part has depended on information from two local sources, HRW reports and direct communication with human rights activists who are concerned with violations in the peninsula.

I started by examining the situation of merchants, artisans, and white collars before moving to examine the multiplied harm inflicted on Rafah and Sheikh Zuwayyid farmers, showing the irrelevant compensation given to deported households in comparison to the true economic value of the land, and the state's

intentional will to deprive this population of what is termed 'development' projects.

I then moved to show the reasons behind this, drawing attention to the political enmity between 'Sawarka' and 'Ermilate' tribes and the state authorities since the 1990s, which culminated into bloody offenses on Bedouin households after 2004 bombardments in Taba and Nuweiba', the course of action that resumed right after 2013 to avenge the state of 2011 uprisings.

I also showed the socio-ethnic dimensions affecting state and society relationship with the deported population especially in destination areas leading to estrangement and maimed social relations with the affected community.

Thereof, the paper concludes the following...

- 1- Fair compensation should be considered by relevant state authorities in light of the true economic value of the seized lands, should their true owners accept to live elsewhere. Else, authorities hold all responsibility to return the affected households to their homeland and provide sound protection and infrastructural services that help indigenous workforce gain the fruits of development.
- 2- The dislocated households should benefit directly and financially from prospect projects that will take place in the area to which they belong. Positive discrimination policies to distribute employment opportunities, encourage and enable the indigenous population's investment in the area, and enable their relocation should be designed and followed to deflate the rage and avoid counter retaliatory acts in future years.

- 3- Clear violations to announced policies on the terms, operational due diligence, and compensation criteria and value should be examined by a specialized body joining relevant judicial, executive, security, and army officials who are deemed responsible for massive losses in the region under the excuse of 'fighting terrorism' .
- 4- Legal constraints on the spread of hatred and discriminatory treatment of Sinai deportees should be applied on relevant media outlets to stop the urge of revenge on the deportees' side.
- 5- Short-term policies regarding the housing, employment, and small business initiatives of the deported community should be designed, followed, and checked by each governorate to help alleviate the deportation cost of the affected households, until they receive an adequate compensation or return to Rafah and Sheikh Zuwayyid.