

Helpdesk Research Report: Conflict, Exclusion and Livelihoods in the Sinai region of Egypt

20.09.2012

Query: What does the literature say about patterns of conflict, exclusion and livelihoods in the Sinai region of Egypt? With particular reference to Bedouin livelihood strategies, government policies and other tensions emerging with other groups operating or migrating through the area.

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1. Overview

The Sinai region is a peninsula bordering Israel and Gaza in the East and the Suez Canal in the West, which separates it from the rest of Egypt (see Figure One below). The population is divided into two governorates (North and South Sinai). Around 550,000 people live in the Sinai peninsula (400,000 in the North and 150,000 in the South).¹ The largest population group in the region are the Bedouin (a historically nomadic people), though their total number is difficult to estimate (ICG 2007). They are likely to number somewhere between 200,000 and 250,000 (see ICG 2007, Strasser 2012). North Sinai is one of the poorest governorates in Egypt, while the economy of the South is more dynamic, due largely to a burgeoning tourism industry (ICG 2007).

This report summarises the literature's findings on patterns of conflict, exclusion and livelihoods in the Sinai region. The most rigorous academic research on these issues focuses on changes in Bedouin livelihood strategies, with a particular focus on South Sinai. This literature draws some links between Bedouin livelihoods and patterns of exclusion and conflict in the Sinai region. A large body of more

¹ Based on official Egyptian government statistics presented here http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Governorates_of_Egypt#cite_note-3

recent literature, drawn mainly from news and policy reports, focuses on growing violence and extremism in the region, and the response of both the Egyptian state and Israel. A small number of recent reports examine tensions caused by migration, particularly at the border with Israel, but largely from a security or human rights perspective.

Key findings include the following:

Livelihoods

- Since the 1960s, Bedouin have moved away from agro-pastoralist livelihoods and become increasingly reliant on insecure paid work.
- Although the Sinai region has seen rapid economic development through tourism and donor investment since the resumption of Egyptian government in 1982, few benefits have passed to the Bedouin population. They remain marginalised, while resettled mainland Egyptians have been the chief beneficiaries.
- There is widespread poverty amongst the Bedouin population in Sinai which remains largely unacknowledged and unaddressed by the Egyptian state.
- A decline in the traditional Bedouin 'core occupations' of pastoralism and horticulture can largely be attributed to economic shifts that occurred during the Israeli occupation of Sinai and a lack of water.
- Bedouin involvement in the drugs trade has been driven primarily by a lack of alternative income generating activities.
- The war in Gaza in 2008 and the Israeli blockade created renewed demand for smuggled goods.
- The border with Israel is also an important site of trafficking, particularly for migrants and prostitutes. Some reports suggest that Bedouins have become increasingly involved in the trafficking of African migrants to Israel in recent years. Growing concerns about trafficking have led to an increasingly hard-line security response from Israel and the Egyptian government.

Exclusion and conflict

- People from Sinai are distinguished in terms of identity from the state-promoted national identity based around Pharonic heritage.
- The Bedouin are perceived negatively by many Egyptians. They are also distrustful of the government and perceive its development strategies in the region with suspicion. Until recently the Bedouin did not have the right to vote.
- The terrorist attacks that occurred in the 2000s further damaged relations between the Bedouin and the Egyptian government. A few reports state that issues of exclusion and unemployment amongst Bedouin have driven the rise in terrorist and Islamist groups in the region.
- Driven by growing instability in the region since 2011, the Egyptian state has increasingly recognised the need to address underlying issues of social exclusion and under-development in Sinai. Some commentators suggest that recent efforts have not signalled a fundamental shift in the government's approach to the region and that it lacks the means or will to deal with Bedouin demands.

Background

The Sinai region has historically been the site of geopolitical conflict and was occupied by Israel between 1967 and 1982. Following the Israeli occupation, the peninsula was occupied by a Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) whose numbers have gradually reduced since 2002. Sinai's proximity to Israel and Gaza makes it sensitive to developments in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (ICG 2007).



Figure One: Map of Sinai peninsula (© Google Maps 2012)

The Bedouin, the largest population group in the region, are a historically nomadic people, with tribes closely linked to other Bedouin populations across the Arab world. The Bedouin are a diverse group, with 15 distinct tribes currently living in Sinai (ICG 2007). Although historically associated with pastoralism, most Bedouin today have long been settled as farmers, fishermen, traders, civil servants, tourist guides or hotel owners, while a minority continue to engage in pastoralism (ICG 2007). Another important minority population living in the Sinai region are the Palestinians (numbering between 50,000 and 70,000), who remain 'extremely conscious of [their] identity and ties to the populations of Gaza and the West Bank' (ICG 2007, i).

The Egyptian state has pursued a series of socio-economic development programmes in Sinai since regaining control over the region in 1982, but these have largely promoted the settlement of Nile valley migrants. The state has systematically discriminated against the local population in jobs and housing in North Sinai, and in the development of tourist resorts in the South (ICG 2007). The

Bedouin have been further isolated by the government's security-focused approach to the region, which emerged in response to a series of terrorist attacks since the mid-2000s.

2. Livelihoods

Gilbert (2011) provides the most comprehensive contemporary account of changing Bedouin livelihood strategies in her study of South Sinai. She describes how the Bedouin have moved away from agro-pastoralist livelihoods that provided subsistence for ten months a year, and become increasingly reliant on insecure paid work. She argues that this shift has led to high rates of poverty amongst the Bedouin (Gilbert 2011). Women have virtually no paid work opportunities outside the home (Gilbert 2011).

Although the Sinai region (and particularly South Sinai) has seen rapid economic development through tourism and donor investment since the resumption of Egyptian government in 1982, few benefits have passed to the Bedouin population. They remain marginalised, while resettled mainland Egyptians have been the chief beneficiaries (Gilbert 2011). State development programmes have led to conflicts around Bedouin land rights, access to services and natural resource management (Gilbert 2011).

The main economic activities of North Sinai are fishing and agriculture. There are few quarries in the centre of the governorate, and a limited amount of domestic tourism along the North coast. Bedouin have been deterred from working in industrial plants along the Suez coast (which produce petroleum, manganese, mining and quarrying) due to corruption. Jobs in these industries are usually filled by Nile Valley Egyptians (Gilbert 2011). The government has made several ambitious plans to develop agriculture in the North, but the results have been limited. A plan to construct a canal to divert waters of the Delta eastwards was drawn up in the 1990s, but is still only a third completed (ICG 2007).

Official statistics from the UN's 2010 Human Development Report for Egypt suggest that North and South Sinai's human development indicators are around or above average compared with Egypt as a whole (UNDP 2010). According to the UN report, adult literacy rate in North and South Sinai is 75.8% and 88.4% (compared with an Egyptian average of 70.4%), while life expectancy is 71.2 and 71.1 (compared with an average of 71.7) (UNDP 2010). As Gilbert (2011) argues, however, these figures are probably a misrepresentation of the real situation as Bedouin are largely excluded from official statistics.

Gilbert's (2011) survey of Bedouin in St Katherine in South Sinai highlights widespread poverty that is unacknowledged by official statistics. While official statistics from 2005 state that the poverty rate in Sinai as a whole is 5.3%, Gilbert (2011, 27) finds that 53% of her interviewees live in poverty ('whether measured in earned income, material goods and services, or food consumption'). Gilbert and Al-Jebaali (2011) find that around half of South Sinai Bedouin engaged in work live around or below \$1 per person per day, and that almost double the percentage (81% vs 44%) of South Sinai Bedouin experience food poverty compared with the general population. Gilbert's interviewees describe how their shift in occupations has also led to a declining sense of freedom and how they preferred the old way of life, based around agro-pastoral livelihoods, even if conditions were harder (Gilbert 2011).

Pastoralism and the shift to paid employment

Pastoralism (the herding of sheep, goats, and camels) has long been the primary economic activity of the Sinai region, especially in the mountains, and the central and southern plateaus. These activities were traditionally supplemented with horticulture (the cultivation of orchard fruits and dates), hunting and fishing (Gilbert 2011). These 'core occupations' were historically supplemented by paid work and their significance receded when wage labour was widely available (Gilbert 2011).

In South Sinai, orchard horticulture was rarely practised systematically or as a primary means of subsistence. It was practised mainly by the Jebeliya tribe, whose territory was at high altitudes that were more suited to this type of cultivation. A typical mountain garden might include apples, apricot, almond, quince, pear, grapes, plums, figs, walnuts and mulberries (Gilbert 2011).

Bedouin have traditionally turned to paid work to supplement core occupations when opportunities arose. In South Sinai, paid occupations included charcoal manufacture, camel transport, guiding, working as guides, hunting and fishing (Gilbert 2011). When there are fewer opportunities for legal work, some Bedouin have turned to smuggling or more recently to drugs (Gilbert 2011).

Gilbert (2011) describes how and why Bedouins' occupations shifted under Israeli occupation. Paid work became more widely available, and the Bedouin lost Egyptian markets for fruit, which made keeping gardens unaffordable. Similar effects occurred in herding (Gilbert 2011). The cost of living increased, encouraging more people to live closer to urban areas to find paid work. These changes led to dramatic changes in flock sizes in the late 1960s and 1970s (Gilbert 2011). Based on interviews in South Sinai, Gilbert (2011) argues that herding has been badly affected by a decline in rainfall, which has depleted vegetation and encouraged many to reduce the size of their flocks or give up this activity entirely. Despite the challenges, Gilbert (2011) found that in the St Katherine region of South Sinai, 80% of households retained some animals, highlighting the symbolic and strategic importance of livestock to the Bedouin. The decline in horticulture can also be partly attributed to a lack of water (Gilbert 2011). As Gilbert describes in a forthcoming article, the notion that over-grazing by Bedouin is a key driver of environmental degradation has been prominent in the environmental literature on Sinai, despite a lack of evidence to support this theory (Gilbert forthcoming).

Tourism

South Sinai had 2.6 million foreign tourist visitors in 2003, more than a third of the total for Egypt (ICG 2007). This industry has grown rapidly – only 3.5% of tourism was based there in 1994. Tourists are concentrated in Sharm Al-Shaykh, which has a standard of living roughly comparable to Europe. Few local people remain in the town, with most new building plots being allocated over the last 15 years to Egyptian and foreign companies (ICG 2007). Bedouin have been consigned largely to the desert. Hotels have created jobs, but these have been predominantly given to non-locals (ICG 2007, Gilbert 2011). Work in the tourism sector is volatile and insecure for those who can get it – political or economic changes can lead to sharp falls in income (Sowers 2007, ICG 2007). Although there have been some attempts by donors to promote Bedouin participation in tourism and alternative livelihoods (most notably in the St Katherine Protectorate – a national park), these have not proved effective in practice (Gilbert 2011).

In the 1990s, the EU contributed €23 million to environmental protection programmes, including the management of four nature reserves. Resources have been particularly focused on the St Katherine Protectorate. Sowers (2007) describes how international donors and local scientists were able to establish a well-managed network of nature reserves in South Sinai in the 1990s, but that these

achievements were gradually undermined in the 2000s, when emerging tourism development institutions challenged their authority. Bedouin have been almost entirely absent from negotiations around the selection of projects in these programmes (ICG 2007).

Illicit drug economy

Cannabis smuggling began in Sinai in the 1950s, and grew rapidly so that by the mid-1960s it made up around 30% of the aggregate income of the Bedouin population (Marx 2008). The trade stopped during Israeli occupation but was revived under Egyptian rule. Opium production began more recently, in the early 1990s (Hobbs 1998). Hobbs (1998) argues that Bedouin men were drawn to growing poppy primarily due to a lack of alternative income generating activities. Although Bedouin are often involved in the production of cannabis and poppy, they are not necessarily its main beneficiaries. Hobbs (1998) estimates that an individual growing poppy can earn as much as four times legitimate wages, but the occupation is dangerous and insecure and most growers would prefer a more low paying and secure form of income (Hobbs 1998). Poppy growers face social problems from other tribes-people who are not involved in the business. Tensions exist because many Bedouin consider poppy farming as sinful and see growers as 'outlaws and thieves' (Hobbs 1998). Hobbs (1998, 80) argues that official claims about levels of opium production in Sinai are overstated, arguing that 'not enough opium is grown in the Sinai to sustain a heroin industry', and that all evidence points to 'only the production of raw opium'.

The war in Gaza in 2008 and the Israeli blockade created renewed demand for smuggled goods. In this environment the smuggling business thrived and Bedouin criminal groups became more sophisticated, developing into armed gangs, 'complete with guards, motorcycles, and machine-gun-mounted pickup trucks' (Yaari & St Pierre 2011, no p.n.). Smuggling consists primarily of contraband and weapons into Gaza, mainly delivered through tunnels but also sometimes using coastal access. The smuggling routes into Gaza are controlled by a consortium of families, in some cases acting in close cooperation with factions within Gaza (ICG 2007). Yaari and St Pierre (2011) value the black market trade from Sinai at around \$300 million per year. The government has embarked on several campaigns to try to eliminate illegal plantations (ICG 2007), although Gilbert (2011, 18) notes that several interviewees informed her that the trade could not continue if the authorities did not also 'profit from, and therefore tolerate it'.

Trafficking and Migration

The border with Israel is also an important site of trafficking, particularly for migrants and prostitutes (ICG 2007). Some reports suggest that Bedouin have become increasingly involved in the trafficking of African migrants to Israel in recent years. This trend has led to pressure from Israel to curb the flow of migrants, which in turn has led Egypt to adopt a new hard-line policy against migrants passing through its borders. Around 30 migrants were shot dead at the border in 2010 alone (Mohyeldin & Makary 2010). Another report from 2010 describes a hostile situation for migrants, who faced a growing threat of capture by armed gangs and an increasingly ruthless approach towards them from both Bedouin trafficking gangs and the Egyptian forces (Bradley 2010).

In 2012, Israel has become increasingly concerned about the inflow of migrants from Sinai. Israel government statistics state that 58,000 Sub-Saharan nationals have entered Israel from Sinai since 2007, 56% of them Eritrean, 26% Sudanese (HRW 2012). A recent report from a group of human rights organisations has claimed that Israel has sent soldiers into the Sinai desert to stop them before they reach Israel (Lavie 2012). Human Rights Watch has recently described how thousands of migrants have been captured by traffickers in Sinai, abused and held to ransom (HRW 2012).

3. Exclusion and Conflict

Exclusion

People from Sinai are distinguished in terms of identity from the state-promoted national identity based around Pharonic heritage. Islam is 'the primary aspect of Bedouin identity, and non-Muslim elements are absent from the region' (ICG 2007, 22). There is a widespread sense among Egyptians that Bedouin are 'other'. According to Gardner (2000, 51), Egyptian officials 'can treat the Bedouins with mistrust at best, or contempt at worst'. Gardner (2000, 49) also states that 'I know of no Bedouin who consider themselves, or Sinai, as Egyptian'. A recent survey in St Katherine found that 51% of Bedouin did 'not feel confident at all' in the government (compared with 21% of Egyptians as a whole) (Gilbert & Al Jebraali 2011). Another interesting finding from the same survey, which focused disproportionately on the young, was that Bedu living in South Sinai showed a 'significantly lower interest in political Islam than in Egypt as a whole' (Gilbert & Al Jebraali 2011, 11).

The Bedouin are perceived negatively by many Egyptians. They are seen by some as traitors for collaborating with their Israeli occupiers (ICG 2007). They are also tainted by association with criminal activity (particularly the drugs trade (Hobbs 1998), and are increasingly linked with terrorism in policy discourse and the popular imagination (ICG 2007). As Gilbert and Al Jebraali (2011, 3) note, Bedouin 'are mistrusted, and they mistrust'. Government resettlement programmes that seek to encourage Bedouin populations to move by providing food assistance or upgraded housing have been questioned as reinforcing economic dependence of Bedouin communities or posing a threat to Bedouin culture (ICG 2007, Gilbert 2011).

People living in Sinai, especially the Bedouin, perceive government economic policies to be discriminatory since the only measures targeted at them (the resettlement programmes) are primarily driven by security concerns and a desire to control these populations (ICG 2007). Bedouin's access to political institutions is historically closely controlled and co-opted, with the representation and leadership of Bedouin tribes subject to police regulation and approval (ICG 2007). Bedouin are disbarred from serving in the Egyptian army and until 2007, Bedouin did not have the right to vote – their local councils were appointed by the governor rather than elected (Gilber & Al Jebraali 2011). Many Bedouin are not registered as citizens, which means they are missed by official statistics and have been unable to vote in elections (Gilbert & Al Jebraali 2011). These factors have encouraged or allowed their problems to remain 'unrecognized and unaddressed by the state' (Gilbert & Al Jebraali 2011, 3).

Land in Sinai is largely governed by customary law, applied by Bedouin families that have been settled for generations. The historical position of these families is a major obstacle to the acquisition of land in Sinai, but also serves as a key economic resource for Bedouin communities (ICG 2007). Gerges (2012) states that the Mubarak regime sold large tracts of Sinai land to crony capitalists, angering Bedouins and increasing their sense of exclusion. Mubarak's security forces are also accused of insulting and humiliating Bedouin leaders (Gerges 2012).

The Egyptian government has assigned LE 1.65 billion (c. \$US 270 million) for development and infrastructure projects in Sinai during the 2012-13 fiscal year (Egypt State Information Service 2012). The government has also recently sought to revive the Sinai Development Agency (SDA) in an attempt to address issues of under-development and social exclusion that are seen as the underlying cause of extremism in the region (Abdel-Meguid 2012). President Morsi acknowledged that Sinai citizens have 'suffered a lot', and stated that 'it is time to compensate them for deprivation' (Egypt

State Information Service 2012a). Abdel-Meguid (2012, no p.n.) states that the SDA has not yet drawn up any concrete plans and that the SDA head 'talks as if it were a military agency not a development one by focusing on cleansing Sinai of terrorists'. Gerges (2012, no p.n.) argues that although the post-Mubarak authorities 'recognise the gravity of the crisis in Sinai, their plate is full, and there is a lack the means and will to effectively deal with the Bedouins' legitimate demands, such as community empowerment and allocating a share of tourism in Sinai to the local economy'.

Violence and Extremism

Between 2004 and 2006 the Sinai region experienced a series of terrorist attacks targeting tourist resorts, together killing nearly 200 people (both Egyptians and foreign tourists). The government's response and the wider public discussion of the attacks has focused mainly on the security dimensions, neglecting broader issues that may be driving extremism such as economic underdevelopment, social exclusion, and the problematic relationship between the Sinai region and the Egyptian nation-state (ICG 2007).

The Egyptian government responded to these attacks by imprisoning Bedouin activists and increasing the role of the police in Sinai. The police had little experience of working with Bedouin populations, however, and relations between the Bedouin population and the state were further damaged. A report from 2010 estimates that between 1,000 and 3,000 Bedouins were held in Egyptian jails (Mohyeldin & Makary 2010). The Egyptian government made some attempts to heal relations with Bedouin tribal elders in 2010, when 200 Bedouin activists who had been arrested in the aftermath of the bombings were released from jail (Mohyeldin & Makary 2010).

Since the revolution, which began in early 2011, security and the rule of law have deteriorated across Egypt, but particularly in the Sinai region. Criminal and terrorist groups have taken advantage of the lax security to conduct operations against Israeli, Egyptian and foreign targets. Major attacks include bombings of gas pipelines, raids on tourist resorts and most recently the killing of 16 Egyptian soldiers in northern Sinai early August 2012 (Sharp 2012, Strasser 2012). The number of Egyptian forces in the area is limited by a treaty with Israel but may be allowed to increase as a result of the recent instability (Sharp 2012, Strasser 2012). Fighting between security forces and militants has continued since the 16 soldiers were killed (Batrawy 2012).

Salafi jihadist groups in the Sinai region have proliferated in recent years (Yaari & St Pierre 2011). One such group known as Takfir wil-Hijra or Takfiris has grown in number considerably in 2012 from a few hundred followers to at least 4,500 according to some recent news reports (Batrawy 2012). Recruits have been drawn mainly from Bedouin youth living in poor towns in North Sinai and their rise has been driven over time by lack of jobs, poverty and government repression (Batrawy 2012). Although some reports have linked this group with the recent killings of 16 Egyptian soldiers in Sinai, there is little hard evidence to support this claim (Bonesh 2012).

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5. Additional Information

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