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People on the margins:

The Sinai in post-Morsi era^{*}

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In most of Egypt, the revolution that broke out on January 25th, 2011, took the form of non-violent protest but in Sinai, which has historically been more turbulent and unstable, the rebellion became a full-blown military insurgency. Since the ousting of President Mohamed Morsi on the 3rd of July, 2013, the situation in the Sinai Peninsula has become even more critical. The tense relations between the Egyptian army and Gaza, the declared war of the Generals against the Muslim Brotherhood and the Jihadists, and the necessity of the Egyptian government's compliance with the peace treaty of 1979 with Israel, all serve as factors to make things more complicated in times when the spirit of uprising is apparent all over the region.

^{*}The title of the article is a rephrasing of N.Z. Davies' book: "Women on the margins: Three 17th century lives".

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The Sinai Peninsula has been a traditionally unique region, with an exceptional place in human history and civilization. Its population is considered to be one of the most enigmatic and fascinating people in the Mediterranean basin and the imaginary concerning them include images from exoticism to lawlessness. Many of the characteristics that are attached to them have to do with the nomadic way of life that was once the core and essence of the tribes of Sinai. The emergence of the nation-states was hostile to this way of living, trying to construct a cohesive people and reduce the individuality and human movement that can undermine a collective identity, an example that can also be seen with the Roma people in Europe. The modernization of the Egyptian state by Mohamed Ali that took place throughout the 19th century included the nationalization of the land traditionally used by tribal communities as it was perceived to be against state interests. This triggered resistance by the indigenous populations of Sinai.¹ Gradually, the image of the Bedouins started to be constructed as the “outlaws” of the Egyptian state. Because the Bedouins were regarded as “second-class” citizens, they were excluded from most social and economic activities, as well as from obtaining high-ranking army positions. They therefore were forced to redirect their economic actions to provide themselves with quasi-legal or illegal financial sources. Thus, the foundations of the Bedouin economy were set and as the decades went by, it was enriched by many facets of underground trade activities.² After the 1967 war and the occupation of Sinai by Israel, the tribal communities were accused of collaborating with the enemy. The Israelis tried to build divides between the Bedouins and the Egyptian state by building some infrastructure for the Bedouins, thus providing themselves with a reliable tool for negotiation in the region. The promises that the Egyptian state made to help the nomads with economic development never materialized and the marginalization of the local population has always been used as a means for political exploitation.

After January 25th, the necessary deployment of the army in the capital and other strategic spots around post-Mubarak Egypt removed army units from Sinai, loosening the security apparatus within that region. The return of Sinai to Egypt in 1982 had meant that the peninsula always had some army forces within it, the number of which had to receive prior approval from the Israeli state in accordance with the Israel-Egypt peace treaty. The turmoil around the January 25th revolution in Egypt was seen as an opportunity by militants in Sinai to fight a state that had abandoned the area to severe financial, social, and humanitarian problems. The resulting numerous attacks on pipelines that provide gas to Israel challenged the sovereignty of the Egyptian state and its politics in the region, leading the latter to reorganize militarily but not to reconceptualise its policy in Sinai. In the year Morsi was in office, Egypt mostly witnessed a relatively tolerant policy towards such militant actions while simultaneously, there was an attempt to open dialogue with militant groups and tribal leaders. The military coup and the subsequent attacks on military personnel made the need for action more imperative. Army units were deployed in Northern Sinai, launching a “war on terror,” the aim of which was to fight the militant insurgents and the Muslim Brotherhood. The casualties have been heavy; since June 30th, 2013, almost 121 people have been killed and 321 injured, according to official medical sources. Among the 121 that have lost their lives, 69 were from the security forces and 59 were militants.³ This war was framed by wild propaganda in the media, describing the Islamists all over Egypt as criminals, terrorists, and outlaws. Specifically, the Jihadists in Sinai were accused of collaborating with Hamas and in some cases, Hamas was directly accused of carrying out attacks on Egyptian soil. Mohamed al-Bilal, former Deputy Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces reflected the official state position that Hamas is involved in many attacks in North Sinai and described the situation as being difficult for three main reasons: the very effective

training of the Jihadists, the vast size of the peninsula – which makes it difficult to control – and its challenging topography.⁴ The profile of the fighters is not clear; Analysts claim that the fighters are mostly local Bedouin jihadists or other Egyptians that flee Cairo or other major urban centres, but it seems that there are also other Arabs affiliated to al-Qaeda (e.g. Palestinians, Iraqis and Algerians).⁵ Many of the locals support that the fighters are not connected to a wider network of terrorist organizations, although armed groups like Tawhid wal Jihad, Ansar Bayt al-Maqdi, and Jund al-Islam have claimed responsibility for a series of attacks.⁶ This may be true when considering that not only is there growing divide between local tribes but also, there is a power struggle between local traditional leaders and the religious groups trying to gain control, like in Sheikh Zuweid.⁷ The “war on terror”, waged by what one may call an ancien regime, seems to have expanded in parallel with the extension of the state of emergency. Many activists claim that the state apparatuses are trying to silence and crackdown on leftist activists too, including many from the April 6 movement and the Revolutionary Socialists.⁸

Nonetheless, the Egyptian government has not really bothered to examine the causes for the spread of militancy, in an area that has historically had large social malaises. The context that Egypt sees things in Sinai Peninsula are dealt with in terms of security. Army operations strive to eliminate the Islamist militants, but without attempting to understand the core reasons behind the problem. Projects that would directly address the problems the Bedouins face in Sinai, such as repopulating the area, or encouraging its development, were to a very low degree done in the past by the Mubarak regime. Cement factories were built in North Sinai, but those ended up being staffed by workers that mostly came from the Nile Delta. In fact, only 15-20% of locals ended up working in those factories.⁹ The locals, as mentioned above, had built their own economy. With only 13% of a total of 400.000-500.000 inhabitants in Sinai officially employed, the Bedouins had to find a means for surviving. The nature of their trade is smuggling different kinds of goods, which vary from food and fuel to drugs and arms.¹⁰ This trade is too profitable to be abandoned without alternatives that offer equal levels of profitability. Lately, another lucrative business has been human trafficking and kidnapping of migrants arriving from the Horn of Africa.¹¹ But arms trade has not only provided the tribes with huge income but also, over the last few years, it has strengthened their grip on the region at the expense of the official state. This could be considered to be a threat for the Egyptian state as it potentially challenges the 1979 peace. The cross-border attacks and the missiles that have been occasionally fired against Israel might trigger a series of more harsh reactions from Israel, something Egypt most likely doesn't want, since it's trying to keep relations peaceful with Tel Aviv. Another strike to the local economy has been the shut down of the Saint-Catherine temple in Sinai for security reasons, where a lot of villages had gained their income from visitors.¹²

The situation in Sinai has caused troubles between the Egyptian interim government and Hamas, a relationship already stillborn. The alleged involvement of Hamas in the Sinai mutiny has been a casus belli between the Egyptian interim government and the Islamist offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood in Gaza. Some government sources are arguing that Hamas gave 400 landmines to Jihadist groups lately and that they are also involved in the assassination attempt of the Egyptian interior minister in Cairo, Mohamed Ibrahim, which has been claimed by Ansar Bayt al-Maqdi group.¹³ Egypt is also accusing the Palestinian Islamist movement that in cooperation with the MB, they had hired Palestinians to participate in the bloody protests that shook Egypt after the military coup of July 3rd.¹⁴ At the same time, there was a discourse in the media that the ousted President Morsi was in negotiations with Hamas for the colonization of Sinai by Palestinians, since the Gazans had experienced a demographic boom.¹⁵ In the meantime, the Egyptian army has destroyed

some 80%-90% of the tunnel complex that existed in Sinai and helped keep Gaza in contact with the rest of the world. The Gazan people are in an extremely difficult situation given the fact that there is a coordinated attempt from both the Israeli and Egyptian governments to expand its blockade by creating bigger buffer zones from both boundary sides.¹⁶ Previously, the Hamas government of Gaza had agreed with Morsi to destroy the tunnel complex under the condition that a free-trade zone would be created between the Rafah crossing and Gaza, allowing the people of Gaza to trade more and increase the availability of goods. But this agreement was never achieved and since then, the Rafah crossing has been more difficult to cross because of tightening security measures.¹⁷ Before the coup, an estimated 1,200 people/day were crossing Rafah but now, only around 250 people/day make the crossing, providing that it is open.¹⁸ Further humanitarian issues arise because of refusal to allow people through for medical treatment. Nevertheless, Hamas, in an attempt to avoid complete isolation, is trying to ease relations with the Egyptian interim government. But both exterior and interior conjunctures, such as the international negotiations for intervening in Syria and the emergence of Gaza's Tamarrud movement¹⁹, which is trying to oust Hamas, have slowed down this approach. The smuggled artillery, aimed for Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades, is sometimes confiscated, making the Egyptian army suspicious about the trustworthiness of Hamas. At the same time, Hamas tried to shut down the Egyptian Cultural Centre operating in Gaza, arresting its director with the charge excuse of issuing a pro-coup announcement. Notwithstanding, a representative of Hamas, Mousa Abu Marzouk, apologised publicly for any offensive gesture made by Hamas towards Egypt while the former is also trying to restrain the negative comments that are made within the Gaza Strip.²⁰

With the latest developments in Egypt and the "witch hunt" policy that has been adopted, the tension in Sinai doesn't look like it is going to end soon. Besides, the Egyptian authorities admit that they want to eliminate any trace of dissent in the area and that these operations might take a long time. The general crackdown on Islamists has been the toughest for many years. Operations like those in Kerdasah, where the military carried out an armed operation to arrest pro-Morsi supporters, and the ban of the Muslim Brotherhood and its activities, show the way in which the Egyptian state deals with the chronic problems of its fragmented society. The memories of the 90's, when another brutal repression took place against Islamists in Sinai should not be forgotten and another approach, one that is more holistic, should be made.

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