



## An Excluded Population A Nuanced Approach to Sinai's Bedouin is Necessary to Secure the Region

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### SUMMARY

- Efforts to combat terrorism and extremism in the Sinai Peninsula have often been broad and sweeping in a manner that may foster greater radicalism.
- Sinai's Bedouin are marginalized but the majority have not been radicalized. Where radical groups do exist, they tend to be in the North Sinai region.
- Treating all Sinai Bedouin as extremists prevents constructive engagement with the many who want change.
- Development programs that tackle discrimination and build Bedouin capacity, especially through education, are critical to stabilizing the Sinai region.
- The United States should allocate a designated portion of its aid package to the Egyptian state to be used to support development in Sinai.

Recent attacks that killed more than 30 Egyptian soldiers have once again brought the issue of terrorism and security in the Sinai Peninsula to the forefront of discussions of Egypt. Unfortunately, international and Egyptian efforts to confront these threats have long been impaired by a failure to consider local dynamics and distinguish the small minority of violent radicals from the law-abiding majority. Bedouin groups in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula are seen as key drivers of terrorist and criminal activity both in the Peninsula and across the border with Gaza. But broad characterizations of Sinai's entire Bedouin population as radicalized and criminal miss the mark, and the failure to differentiate among Bedouin populations has resulted in counterproductive policies.

### THE BEDOUIN IN THE SINAI PENINSULA

Bedouin are desert-dwellers, of which there are an estimated 300-400,000 living in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula. They have long been marginalized by the Egyptian state and suffer from a woeful under-provision of public goods. Many in this dispersed population have no access to modern healthcare, little or no education infrastructure, and often live in cinder-block houses lacking floors, windows, water, sanitation, and electricity.

Climate change, economic developments dating from the Israeli Occupation (1967-82), and policies instituted by the Egyptian government have made traditional Bedouin livelihoods increasingly unviable. Pervasive discrimination means that Bedouin are excluded from all but the most menial jobs,

and over half in the South depend on uncertain self-employment in the volatile tourist industry. The lack of availability of legitimate work has led to the flourishing of an informal economy, often with the collusion of security personnel. In the South, this largely means narcotics cultivation. Reports of criminality in the Sinai that refer to other criminal or terrorist activity, including kidnapping, people-trafficking, arms- and drug-smuggling, are in practice confined to a few groups that tend to be located in Northern Sinai.

Exclusion breeds poverty, and in 2010, over half the working population of South Sinai Bedouin lived on around one dollar per day or less, while over 80 percent experienced food poverty, as compared with 44 percent of Egyptians nationally. Since 2011, the situation has only worsened. Long distances and reliance on road-imported commodities mean Sinai residents suffer disproportionately from recurrent fuel and food price hikes and shortages. In April 2013, the government introduced petrol rationing across the country, limiting individuals to five liters per day. In cities, this may have been workable, but in the desert, it made life impossible. Although this policy was not specifically aimed at Bedouin, it took no notice of their specific needs—and such sidelining of Bedouin-specific concerns has been typical across Egyptian governments. The result is that Sinai's Bedouin overwhelmingly live in poverty. In 2013, one Southern village of 80 homes surveyed by the author had just four men in legitimate paid work. Whole families subsist on bread, potatoes, and tea.

Tourism has collapsed in South Sinai, and Western development aid has been wasteful and ineffective due to misunderstandings of local power relations and delivery by compromised Egyptian institutions. The Bedouin feel that promises made to them are always broken. They are demoralized and disengaged citizens who have been failed by the state. This disaffection is compounded by the heavy-handedness of the state security presence that now dominates both halves of the Peninsula in response to radicalization in the North.

Although radicalization seems a predictable response to the Bedouin predicament, it is

far from universal. Presenting all Bedouin as fostering jihad-inspired terrorism across the Peninsula does an enormous disservice to the law-abiding majority and deprives policymakers of an opportunity for constructive engagement with this little-understood but potentially influential group. A more nuanced approach to Sinai offers much scope for positive change.

### WHY ARE BEDOUIN SEEN AS A THREAT?

Hostility between mainland Egyptians and the Bedouin is rooted in a common distrust of settled cultures for nomadic pastoralists. Governments across the Middle East have variously subjected Bedouin to settlement, land appropriation, detribalization, and neglect. Bedouin are often seen as somewhat primitive and requiring civilization, or are ignored as a people who lack aspirations to be modern citizens. The longstanding policy of the Egyptian government has been to “Egyptianize” the Sinai culturally and demographically by settling mainland Egyptians in the region, despite its absence of infrastructure and—critically—water. This has resulted in the widespread degradation of the Bedouin's environment, and one not undertaken for their benefit.

There is also an entrenched national discourse in Egypt that depicts Bedouin as inherently untrustworthy and un-Egyptian. They are barred from police and most military service, and they have historically not been given the same rights of representation as mainland Egyptians. Until 2007, for instance, the local council of Saint Catherine in Sinai was appointed by the governor rather than elected by the citizens as is the practice in the rest of Egypt. Since the Israeli occupation of the Sinai, Bedouin have also been widely seen as collaborators, often labelled “Sinai Jews.” Indeed, residents routinely contrast their life under Israeli rule favorably against their life under Egyptian rule.

In Northern Sinai, the perceived threat from a minority of Bedouin is real and active. Frustration bred of social exclusion and punitive security measures has radicalized many, notably in border zones, with reportedly up to 15 groups—some explicitly linked to international

groupings—regularly claiming responsibility for acts of terrorism and sabotage. These include repeated attacks on the gas pipeline to Israel and the 2012 cross-border attacks on security personnel that provoked military responses from both Egypt and Israel. With the terms of the 1979 peace treaty between Egypt and Israel limiting military deployment on either side of the border, Northern Sinai has been seen as a base from which attacks may be carried out with relative impunity. Most recently, Islamic State's public encouragement of Ansar Beit al Maqdis, the largest and most organized militant group operating in Sinai, may ratchet up the Sisi government's military response, with or without the tacit agreement of Israel. Following the deaths of more than 30 soldiers in attacks on October 24, 2014, for which Ansar is widely held responsible, the government has announced its intention to clear entire areas of North Sinai's population—a measure that will hit the Bedouin hardest. It is important to remember that extreme Islamist groups represent a small fraction of local people, but all will suffer retribution.

While the majority of criminal and terrorist activity is focused in and around North Sinai's border zones, some attacks have taken place in the South, including the bombing of resorts. Bombs exploded at Taba, Ras Shitaan and Nuweiba in July 2004, at Sharm el Sheikh in July 2005, and at Dahab in April 2006, resulting in substantial loss of life. Jihad wal Tawheed, a Palestinian and North Sinai Bedouin group, claimed responsibility. More recent attacks took place in el Tur, mostly targeting security personnel in the wake of Sisi's crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood. The Egyptian government's response has resulted in an escalation of security operations in the North and a proliferation of new checkpoints, road blocks, compulsory convoys and off-road bans in the South, resulting in a paradox whereby Sinai is invariably referred to as "lawless" and a "security vacuum," while experienced by its residents as under siege.

### THE UNITED STATES AND SINAI

The Sinai Peninsula has always been of particular interest to the United States, given its strategic position between the Suez Canal and Egypt's border with Israel and the Gaza Strip. Sinai has also long been viewed with concern as an area of

instability and potential violence, a concern that has only grown as attacks and violent incidents have become more common. Counterterrorism efforts in Sinai have become a top priority for U.S. military assistance and cooperation with Egyptian security forces.

Western policy has tended to accept oversimplified assumptions that all Bedouin are radicalized, and many Western nations discourage or ban their citizens from visiting Sinai, declaring the North as off-limits and restricting access to the South as unsafe. Such warnings have especially devastated tourism-dependent livelihoods in the South. Furthermore, the scale and frequency of terrorist incidents as a whole in Sinai are regularly overestimated because a lack of local intelligence means that violent incidents rooted in local grievances are not differentiated from jihad-inspired attacks. To date, broader jihadist struggles have had minimal appeal in the South, although the increased poverty and exclusion resulting from the collapse of tourism destabilizes the South, threatening to increase the susceptibility of the youth to jihadist influence.

Although Western donors have previously aimed to improve social and economic conditions in Sinai, these efforts often fail to account for Egyptian-Bedouin relations and tend to entrust management of Sinai programs to mainland Egyptians, predisposing them to failure. Bedouin themselves are rarely entrusted with funds, usually due to their lack of education. Money given to Bedouin without robust support has equally been shown to fail. As a result, Sinai is littered with the wreckage of costly, failed development projects. Rather than repeat those failures, Western donors should seek to give the Bedouin tools to take control of their own lives and run their own projects. Then economic development can be delivered effectively by Bedouin, for Bedouin. Encouraging civic engagement and building Bedouin capacity through education are key first steps.

### OPPORTUNITIES FOR CHANGE

In the window of opportunity following the 2011 revolution, thousands of South Sinai Bedouins participated in a series of community meetings, with 4,230 new voter registrations recorded. In

the 2012 parliamentary elections, eight of South Sinai's 12 elected MPs were independent Bedouin. Before the dissolution of Parliament several months later, they were properly represented for the first time in their history. These Bedouin wanted to be treated as citizens, to be given their rights, and to help create change.

There is real opportunity for expanding this work, but the punitive environment for NGOs, which is now even more repressive than under Mubarak, puts personnel at risk. A Byzantine system of permissions governing the receipt of foreign funds is frequently used to delay, hinder, or threaten NGOs, especially when their beneficiaries are a suspect group. External donors need to be far more aware of these risks and constraints, offering realistic operational criteria that take account of the environment, and fostering contacts at appropriate levels who can support delivery partners in negotiating the risks.

It is also crucial that education be properly expanded in South Sinai if the Egyptian government and the international community wish to secure the region in the long term. South Sinai Bedouin suffer a significant lack of educational opportunity compared with mainland Egyptians. Moreover, discrimination in employment means there is little relationship between education and subsequent earnings, removing incentives for parents to invest in their children's education. Bedouin need both more schools—including alternative models of education appropriate to dispersed populations—and better quality education. Almost all teachers are Egyptians who generally fear Sinai and have to be incentivized to teach in the region. It is critical to Bedouin prospects to encourage young Bedouin to pursue secondary education, and to make special provision for training Bedouin teachers—especially women—providing professional jobs for people who want to be in Sinai and understand the life and needs of its children. Only when Bedouin have a chance to rise and professionalize will they erode the entrenched prejudice of the Egyptian majority, and have access to real choices about how they live their lives.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **The United States should pressure the Government of Egypt to recognize the Bedouin as a minority with distinct needs and grant them relevant rights.** At present, the failure of census efforts to count Bedouin separately means that policymakers do not know how many they are or where they are. As they are so few and hard to reach, their experience is eclipsed in national surveys by the majority population, meaning Bedouin problems are not recognized and cannot be addressed. Their problems must be identified before they can be solved. Discrimination against Bedouin should be tackled by new equalities legislation which should identify the Bedouin as a distinct group and seek to address their specific economic and political marginalization.
2. **Governmental and non-governmental aid to Sinai from the United States should ensure that Bedouin partners are always included in the execution of local projects.** Bedouin should be lead partners and/or consultants in Sinai-based development projects. The deep, mutual mistrust between Bedouin and mainland Egyptians presents challenges for regular partnership approaches. Bedouin and mainland Egyptian citizens do not start from a level playing field. Bedouin capacity can best be built by teaming them initially with external project consultants, with other Egyptians playing support roles. Once Bedouin have learned skills and demonstrated their capacity, trust can be built and progress made towards integrated Egyptian-Bedouin approaches on which positive change ultimately depends.
3. **Congress should set minimum levels of assistance to be used for development in the Sinai.** Too often in Egypt “development” means commercial development, with human development neglected. Bedouin are unanimous that their children's future depends on education, yet the quality and range of opportunities available to them are wholly inadequate. The best investment possible in Sinai's future stability is to help Bedouin children—especially girls—



into secondary education and to facilitate training for Bedouin teachers. Congress has in the past earmarked levels of military and security assistance that must be used in counterterrorism efforts in the Sinai. While this is important, the counterterrorism fight in the Sinai is not merely a security issue, and similar steps should be taken to address the roots of radicalism in the Sinai through development assistance.

4. **The United States should encourage the Government of Egypt to grant Bedouin the right to serve in community police forces and the military.** South Sinai Bedouin voluntarily took up arms to man checkpoints and defend Sinai's security during the Revolution, but only a tiny fraction have been called upon to serve since then. This measure could reduce tension between Bedouin and local Egyptian administrators, reduce resentment towards central government, increase employment, and enhance effectiveness of police forces. There should be a meaningful quota of Bedouin serving and promoted, and access to training and promotion through the Police Academy, which is currently denied to them.
5. **The United States should recognize that South Sinai is relatively safe for tourists and modify its travel advice accordingly.** Nowhere in the world is immune from threat, but South Sinai—especially its mountainous heartland around Mount Sinai—has suffered no significant recent incident to justify the ruin of its economy through the continued absence of tourists. The Egyptian Ministry of Tourism is now keen to promote tourism, and Western governments can play their part in reviving South Sinai's economy through travel.

6. **The United States should encourage the Government of Egypt to build Qualifying Industrial Zones in South Sinai to boost employment opportunities in the area.** In the oil-producing areas of the Suez coast and its mineral-rich hinterland there is scope for increased industrialization. Such zones should focus on guaranteeing jobs and training for local Bedouin. Approximately half of South Sinai's landmass is covered by Protected Areas, including a UNESCO World Heritage site. In these areas employment can best be increased by assistance in with scaling up traditional livelihoods and products—chiefly wool-based textiles, embroidery and garden products such as olive oil and almonds—and through assistance with quality control and export marketing.



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