The problems of border residents
The situation of Palestinians in North Sinai *

by:
Sari Hanafi ** and
Olivier Saint-Martin ***

in Web Site www.shaml.org, 1998

Ideas and opinions in this study represent the views of the authors, and not necessarily those of Shaml.

1. Introduction
2. Chapter One:
   The Egyptian Palestinian border sphere - present and past
   2.1 The general structure
   2.2 Demographic indications
   2.3 Exchanged influences across the borders

3. Chapter Two:
   Palestinians in North Sinai: Their Position as a Connecting Link

4. Chapter Three:
   "Canada" Camp, an exemplary pattern for the incredible
   4.1 The camp
   4.2 Challenges

5. Conclusion
6. Footnotes
7. References
8. Bibliography

I. Introduction

"Should borders be considered a frame, it is what is within this frame that matters, not the frame itself "

Lucien Febvre (1)
Sinai occupies a major place in the Egyptian political discourse over the peace process and projects of regional economic cooperation. The construction of a "Reviéra" for tourists on the Gulf of Aqaba and the SEMED project (The South East Mediterranean Economic Development), which is a joint project between Egypt, Israel, and the Palestinian entity, aim to speed up development of the border area and to link together infrastructure networks in the region. These projects give the Sinai Peninsula major place in the current re-structuring of the Middle East. The re-construction of Sinai to become an arena for peace rather than for war, is a significant symbolic challenge.

This discourse and the accompanying projects - which aspire to establish a new world - do not always take into consideration the social and spatial realities targeted for re-construction and could also obstruct their role.

There is a border sphere between Egypt, Palestine and Israel created by history. This sphere will also be forged by the peace process. Residents are expected to participate in exploring this sphere and its potential. According to Roger Brunet, there are not only scattered residential buildings all along the borders, but also genuine local systems and border areas where the other is always there through workers’ movement on both sides, and through trade or re-export areas, invested capital or building of factories, and even through the refugees resulted from it. (2)

This border space witnessed the phenomenon of travel and immigration. Our concern in this paper is for the Palestinian residents in particular as a way to tackle the complication of this sphere which is characterized by the interaction of its components on both sides of the fence. So at a time when peace negotiations are underway, the problem of Palestinian refugees erupts. Linking part of these residents to a specific geographical sphere (Northern Sinai) does not make the issue any easier. The variety of cases do not allow analyzing the Palestinian community in Egypt in accordance with the socio-economic standards alone, rather in accordance with the period of immigration as well. The spatial treatment if put in a more general context, can contribute to understanding challenges and diversity.

In fact the situation of Palestinians in Northern Sinai is peculiar if compared to the general situation of the Palestinian community in Egypt, where 100,000 people live among 60 million Egyptians, making less than 2 per thousand of the inhabitants.(3)

The Palestinians, who are scattered geographically, form different, structurally weak groups based on when they immigrated and their geographic and social background. They live in Cairo basically, as well as big cities in the north of the country. Their social integration was made easier because of similar social and family structures between Palestinians and Egyptians. This situation reduced conflict between them and prevented any ethnic influence on their social relations. Palestinians who had become refugees willingly integrated into society, while some of the figures influenced by the Nassarite ideology attempted to disturb the regional Palestinian identity. Nevertheless, the Palestinians remain hostage to political developments and their legal manifestations. In the beginning of the seventies, measures discriminating against them were adopted following deterioration of relations between Egypt and the PLO. These developments changed their situation and margined them socio-economically. Until then, they enjoyed most of
the civil rights, including holding public positions, and almost free public and higher education, etc. Then they became "foreigners" just like others, and their integration became at stake.(4)

While this study prefers to deal with socio-historic, and geographic matters, it will be based on three points. One is presenting some information on rehabilitating the place with the residents and as a result on the origin of the local residents and the resulting multi-identity nature there: What is the status of the Palestinian residents in the region? What are the implications of the border phenomenon (fait Frontalier) on the Arab-Israeli conflict? The second point will deal with the socio-economic situation of the Palestinians themselves, their integration in the city of El-Arish, the capital of Northern Sinai: How the Palestinians found themselves a connecting link? How was the question of identity discovered? What are the strategies by activists who find themselves in conflict between the local stability or lack of it? The third and final point is the case of "Canada" camp which is the only Palestinian camp in Egypt, located on the borders in the city of Rafah where people are always waiting to return to their homes but are constantly put off.

2. Chapter One:

The Egyptian Palestinian border sphere - present and past

2.1 The general structure

Identifying the regional and administrative framework of the area and its extent will allow having a better profile of the sphere in which inhabitants move and which are the core of this study. El-Arish area located in northeast Sinai, on the Egyptian-Israeli borders (which is now an Egyptian-Palestinian area (5)), is considered almost an unknown sphere. It is characterized by its comparatively low number of inhabitants, about 220,000 people in Northern Sinai district (6), in comparison with the high density of population in the areas located next to it, such as the Gaza Strip and the Nile Delta. It is also characterized by its military character, because it was a strategic location sought after by many powers during the century who wanted to have control over it, eliminating as a result its ancient role as trade area between Egypt and the orient. This area is not just a simple border sphere. It is also a transit area and one of shifting from the desert to the Mediterranean climate. Such a location led to unique socio-economic and regional features which changed as a result of political-military turnovers.

As a result of British pressure, the Turkish-Egyptian accord signed in 1906, forced the Ottoman Empire to recognize the administrative annexation of the total area of the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt. Delineating the border line inside the Ottoman Empire to match with the Rafah-Taba line led to eliminating the land dispute between Cairo and Istanbul which continued for more than half a century. The Sinai district was then established to the west of this line and El-Arish became its capital. Seventy years later, after the liberation of Sinai from the Israeli occupation in the aftermath of the Camp David Accords, Sinai was divided into a northern and southern districts according to the Suez-Taba line.
The area of Northern Sinai district is 31,000 square kilometers. Its population in 1986 was a little above 170,000 making 85% of the total population of the Peninsula. There are three centers in the north and northeast of the district, namely El-Arish, Al-Sheikh Zwaied, and Rafah. The total population of these centers makes 75% of the people living in the district and more than 90% of the urban population. It also occupies 7.5% of its area. The majority of the population are centered in El-Arish (86,000 people) - Rafah (21,000 people) axis.

For a long time Sinai remained under a special legal status, like other desert border districts surrounding the Nile Valley. This system was inherited from the Frontier District Administration (FDA), established by the British at the end of World War One, in order to put these desert areas under the control of the military authorities. Although army presence in this "sensitive area" is still strong, specially with the presence of the border guards, still its administrative organization is not different at all from that in other districts. These legal situations have been consolidated recently, but the Sinai inhabitants remained marginal until the Israeli occupation of 1967. They were not subjected to the Civil Status law and did not have personal identity cards. Historian Abbas Mustafa wrote in 1945 about the coercion suffered by Sinai Bedouins who travel in part of the year between Palestine, and east of the Nile Delta as a result of the presence of the customs authority in between political-military borders represented by the Rafah-Taba line, and economic borders represented by the Suez Canal. He wrote:

"The Egyptian customs officers collect one pound on each camel that crosses the canal and was sold. If the camel came back and was not sold then the tax collected on it is 30 piasters. There is no discrimination between Egyptian Bedouins and those from outside Egypt. Saying that it is difficult for customs officers to differentiate between the animals coming from Sinai itself and those coming from outside Sinai can not be an acceptable excuse. It is easy to watch the animals at the eastern borders not at the western borders of the Peninsula. (7)"

The writer added that the Bedouins were upset because of these special conditions which added to their poverty. There has always been a tradition of exchanges, movement of people and rooted economic relations with the east. The distance between El-Arish and Gaza is less than 80 kilometers, while it takes twice as long from El-Arish to the Suez Canal. So any restriction on the movement toward the coast should therefore be toward the west rather than toward the east, as a barren desert area has to be crossed before reaching the Suez Canal.

### 2.2 Demographic indications

From a historical perspective, Sinai residents basically came from the east and north of the Mediterranean. After the Turkish invasion of Egypt in 1517, Sultan Suleiman Al-Qanouni ordered in 1560 the renewal and strengthening of this stronghold of El-Arish and sent a military unit to protect it. The village of El-Arish was a main station on the way to Egypt and the last safe place for getting water before reaching the Nile Delta. The Ottoman authority maintained its military presence in the region until the British occupation. The British officer Claude Jarvis, who was working in the administration of border areas and as governor of Sinai from 1923-1936, said that the Turks kept there a squadron of soldiers from a Bosnian and Albanian origin.
all through the nineteenth century. Some of these soldiers got married and stayed in the region. Naoum Bey Shuqair, author of "Ancient and Modern History of Sinai and its Geography" published in 1916, differentiates between two groups among the 6,000 people who were living there according to 1907 census. One group is the Araisheh, all of whom were Turkish or Bulqan soldiers, and the other group called Al-Fawakhreh, "most of whom were immigrants from southern Syria who arrived after the establishment of the citadel to trade with its garrison. It was said that they were called as such because most of them traded in Fukhkhar (pottery) which they brought from Gaza."(9) It is not rare that one meets people from Al-Araisheh, whose memory is mixed with the current events and point to their Bosnian origin even though this origin had already disappeared amidst a turbulent history.

Three other waves of immigration have also fed the demographic growth in the area:

First:

Settlement of Bedouins: This is an old historical process, but has become an important wave during the first world war, due to the disturbances which broke out from the dispute over the construction of Palestine railway.(10) This phenomenon was escalated after 1948 and the establishment of Israel which resulted in restricting mobility between both sides of the borders and divided the territory of the tribes into two parts. The settlement of Bedouins under the Israeli occupation, whenever there was no confiscation or "seizure" of land involved, was a voluntary policy which aimed to better control the people. Irrigated agriculture and waged labor started to become a new source of income for Bedouin residents. The Egyptian authorities also sought to implement settlement, justifying that basically by its desire to provide Bedouins with the public services offered by the state.

Second:

Residents coming from the Nile Valley make the second source of immigrants. The number of those residents until 1948 was very small and included only few employees. Their number then increased as a result of the first Arab-Israeli war. The war attracted new military units to El-Arish, the border area and to Gaza Strip which was administered by Egypt until 1967. Creating administrative and semi-military jobs at the beginning of the fifties led to bringing employees and their families to the region. Starting with the beginning of the eighties, new waves of immigration coming from the Valley fed a demographic growth that represent, although still modestly, a real policy of reconstruction in Sinai, which Egypt is trying to implement with the aim of rehabilitating Sinai with three million people until the year 2015.

Three:

Immigrants from Palestine are the final group among those varied residents. Some of them came during the collective displacement in 1948. Most of those live in El-Arish and in the Egyptian part of Rafah where the only Palestinian camp in Egypt is located, namely Canada camp. It is difficult to find out the exact number of these people, but some indicators would help in estimating their number. Census conducted in 1947 stated that there were 12 foreigners in El-Arish. In the census of 1966 there were 2,563 foreigners which are about 10% of the population.
In 1982, census showed that there were 4,424 foreigners in Rafah (about 58% of the population), and only 3,388 people in El-Arish (about 7% of the population). The unchanging number of foreigners in El-Arish (Palestinians mainly) and the overall unchanging number of the total population between the two periods between 1966 and 1982 could be explained by the immigration of part of the population among whom there were Palestinians, specially towards Libya. During the two periods between 1966 and 1982, the number of El-Arish residents increased from 40,338 to 44,136, indicating an annual increase of 6%. This percentage reached 5.8% annually during the period between 1982-1986. It is deplorable that the census of 1986 did not provide us with the number of foreigners. But according to the Palestinians in the north of Sinai, El-Arish and the surrounding area had between 15-30,000 Palestinians, or about 10-20% of the population. Although one has to be careful in considering these estimates, still it is certain that this border area is the second most important Palestinian gathering in Egypt after Cairo.

While population rate in El-Arish increased from 6,000 to 10,000 from the beginning of the century to 1947, twenty years later it has exceeded 40,000 on the eve of the Israeli occupation. The population maintained this figure until 1982, then a continued growth was noticed bringing the number in 1995 to 100,000 people.

2.3 Exchanged influences across the borders

Historically, the permeability of the border area between Egypt and Gaza is very high. It is a sphere of interaction among the people on both sides of the border. Relations between "southern Syria" and El-Arish region existed since ancient times. The presence of Palestinian residents in the Egyptian territories helped in strengthening these relations.

El-Arish is a real oasis and a station for caravans on the way to Egypt. For the Syrian merchants, it is a place for exchanges. It is a city which is located on a commercial axis and it is a market for Sinai Bedouins. Some indications could also be found in the writings of Naim Shukair about the city on the eve of World War One:

"El-Arish is located on the well known commercial road which took its name and links Egypt with Syria. The town has a small market which comprises of 70 shops near the citadel ... At the east of the town, there was a customs point and a quarantine for camels and horses coming from Syria. Both, however, were removed to Qantara after the Urabi revolution. In 1906, the governorate changed the quarantine into a hospital and established a large garden in it. The hospital was run by an Egyptian physician who was an army officer. Its present physician is first lieutenant Dr. Shukri Afandi Mashreq who is one of the cleverest and most intelligent Syrian physicians. There are two schools - a national one in which Arabic and the Quran are taught, and another that belonged to an Evangelic society, which is a branch of an English school (Al-Mursaleen) in Gaza ... (11)

Starting the fifties under the Egyptian administration, Gaza has become an important commercial center. The special situation of Gaza Strip, and the legal vacuum resulting from the military administration, exempted this Strip from being subjected to restrictions imposed on imports starting in 1952.
Despite the military conditions, Gazans, being on the front line, imported "luxury" products which the socialist revolution in Egypt did not allow in. The small boats coming from Syria or Lebanon brought to Gaza many products which Egyptians bought including textile, food stuff, and home accessories. Palestinian merchants still remember how newly married people came to Gaza by train from Cairo and other places to buy furniture for their houses. This led to a great commercial development and wealth giving the opportunity to many Palestinian merchants to extend their activity to Cairo where they had customers who dealt with them previously. However, many Palestinian businessmen left Cairo after 1967.

At that time, El-Arish and Rafah have become commercial intermediary centers in which Palestinian refugees played a significant role. The following piece of biography of a Palestinian merchant who came to El-Arish in 1948 is a good example which explains the relations at that period:

"Khalil Majdalawi was born in 1937, in the city of Majdal Asqalan located on the coast of southern Palestine. In 1948 he crossed from Gaza and stayed in El-Arish with his family because his father, who was killed in the war of 1947, had many friends in El-Arish. Being the eldest son, he put himself under the patronage of a customer who was a friend of his father, so that he can help his family and to implement a suggestion made by an Egyptian who wanted to invest his capital with Palestinian experience. It is known however that the city of Majdal Asqalan was well known for its textiles. Majdalawi invested the little family savings in a joint project with his uncle who was a refugee as well. They bought a Syrian-made loom from Gaza, and worked together from 1952 until 1956. Things however did not go as expected. In fact lack of industrial infrastructure obliged them to bring threads from Gaza to El-Arish for weaving, then to send the textile to Gaza to be dyed before it is taken to El-Arish once again to be sold. At that point Khalil Majdalawi decided to work fully in textile. He became a salesman. In 1962, he rented his first shop. His work was flourishing until 1967 because El-Arish at the time was an important commercial city due to the army presence, and the "smuggling" coming from Gaza. Majdalawi believes that El-Arish today is a flourishing commercial city because of the Palestinians. He gives an example saying that three out of the five textile merchants in the city are Palestinians. He wishes to diversify his interests and is thinking of establishing a textile factory as there are markets for that. "El-Arish is the gate of Gaza, and Gaza is the gate of the Gulf via Jordan. But one has to wait until the political conditions are settled," he says.

In addition to the fact that Palestinians are major players in cross border trade, the dynamity of Gazans and the political-military results of the first Arab-Israeli war, including the occupation, had their repercussions on agricultural activity in El-Arish region. Before 1948, people would travel to Palestine where it was easy to obtain basic commodities. This restricted growth of local agricultural development. Starting that year, however, closure of borders and demographic growth forced people to develop agriculture and to establish cooperatives. In light of increasing demand due to the presence of Egyptian military units, specially after the first Israeli occupation of Sinai in 1956, the region witnessed a development in irrigated agriculture, production of food provisions and planting trees including olives, almond, peach, and citrus. Development was also witnessed in other cultivation including castor-oil plant used in the textile industry. Economist Muhammed Nasr Farid wrote:
"After the war of 1956, commodities flooded the residents of the Gaza Strip and active commercial interaction improved individual income. Sinai residents explored the Gaza Strip needs for agricultural products, which were at the time mainly (Al-Bafra paper) and seeds of castor-oil plant which was re-exported to Europe for a price that reached sometimes 1,000 pounds for a ton of seeds."(12)

In the eighties, experimental irrigated agriculture which relied on modern agricultural techniques (drop irrigation and protected cultivation) flourished. There was also lack of local manpower which motivated Palestinians from Gaza to come to Northern Sinai to work as farmers. This, however, changed in 1990 following the position taken by the PLO in the Gulf War and the borders were closed before these new immigrations.

Interactions were not restricted to the economic sphere alone. The movement of residents in the city of Rafah, which was divided into two parts, manifests another dimension. Many Palestinians who were aware of their uncertain future due to the political changes before 1967 registered their children in the Egyptian side, in an attempt to have the Egyptian nationality which they can obtain if they prove being related to the Egyptian territory for at least two generations. Lack of birth certificates and the tribal structure of these residents, some of whom live a Bedouin life, helped many to obtain this nationality. (13)

3. Chapter Two
Palestinians in North Sinai: Their Position as a Connecting Link

It is obvious that the Palestinians in North Sinai are very much attached to their identity. Those living in El-Arish, contrary to those in the rest of Egypt, feel that they belong to one of the minorities, such as Bedouins, Al-Araisheh descendants, and the Egyptians who come from all regions in Egypt. Even though this situation demands competition between the different groups, it did not seem however to create a state of introversion. Living in El-Arish and its environs has its own features which are different from living in exile. The elimination of distance, and the correspondence of dialect, the place, the culture, and ways of living give this area a special identity that has a Palestinian touch, as every one asserts.

Although the Palestinians who were forced out of their homeland in 1948 ,have played an important role in the economic relations which developed in the region, other events and fates played a role in the shape of this diversified group.

Abdel Rahman Khalil, known as Abu Imad, works as financial director at the College of Education at Suez Canal University. He lives in El-Arish since 1983 at a government residence where a number of employees live. He says that he is totally integrated, even though as a Palestinian he cannot own a home. He lives with his wife and three sons. His two daughters got married, one of whom lives in Port Said, and the other in Gaza.
Abdel Rahman left Gaza in 1962 to continue his studies at Port Said, which he left during the 1967 war. He went to Al-Mansourah then to Demyat. He did not think of returning to Gaza as a result of the occupation. After Sinai was liberated, he decided to live in El-Arish to be close to his country. His work in the public sector allowed him this opportunity. He stresses that this had helped his children keep their Palestinian identity because "El-Arish is a natural extension of Gaza." Abdel Rahman is a member in the PLO and the Palestine National Council. He supports the peace process and says that he is optimistic about the future of the region. He is also a member in the administrative committee of the General Federation of Palestinian Workers.

This organization, which is considered one of the most important Palestinian grassroots organizations in Egypt and whose activities go beyond the workers only, believes in organizing the community and bringing it to the surface. It opened two centers in El-Arish in 1981 with 1,300 members at the time, which is about 30% of the total number of members in the union.(14)

Members of El-Arish branch were estimated at 7,000 in 1995, while the total number in all Egypt was 10,800 members. (15) All those we spoke to, however, agreed that the conditions of the Palestinian community in Egypt have deteriorated and therefore there was a need to adopt new strategies to avoid a legal-administrative situation that has become fragile and unstable.

Khalil Majdalawi expresses his gratitude to the Egyptian state during the reign of Abdel Nasser because he was able to become a member of the Chamber of Commerce.(16) In the mid-1980s, however, businessmen from El-Arish complained against him because he was getting privileges which the Egyptians enjoyed and for getting supplies from public sector companies. The Palestinian businessmen won the battle due to the support of the governor. Nevertheless, the concerns of the community about their fait prevented Khalil Majdalawi from expanding his business and invest more. He, however, opened a store and built a building on top. He wishes to switch to ready-made clothes because he believes El-Arish is the "key to the Orient and it will be the best area in the Republic." As he works with his family, he seems to be interested in securing the future of his children, which, for the moment, is an Egyptian future.

The experience of another person demonstrates the same interest:

Fahmi Ghareeb, known as Abu Medhat, is from Yabneh in the Gaza Strip. He works at the Telecommunications authority at the governorate. He arrived at El-Arish in 1969 during the occupation as "in charge" of the telephone network in Sinai. He is married to an Egyptian women and is a father of nine children. In 1960 he bought a piece of land in southern El-Arish under his wife’s name, and got into the business of raising poultry and planting trees, while keeping his job at the same time. His business flourished and he wishes to invest in Gaza. But it seems to him that the situation is not settled yet. He does not have much confidence in the Palestinian National Authority. He says that he thought of starting projects of his own because he is concerned first of all for the future of his children since the law bans Palestinians from employment in the public sector and private companies cannot have more than 10% of their employees as foreigners. Abu Medhat is considering investing in El-Arish by building greenhouses for the production of vegetables and fruits.
In addition to the project owners, and those who are employed in the public sector, a group of Palestinians, particularly the young, live off an under the counter economy that is partially dependent on smuggling Israeli products. This important type of economic relations has witnessed a new expansion since the Gaza Strip won autonomous status.

Bootlegging in the eighties dealt mainly with agricultural products or spare parts needed for cultivation in North Sinai after the development of methods already adopted during the occupation. Muhammed Farid points to the state of Israeli seeds in particular, saying that they are fit for the agricultural conditions in the region. Farmers used to bring them secretly for a high cost because they preferred them to seeds provided by the Egyptian Ministry of Agriculture.(17) The gradual normalization of economic relations between Egypt and Israel, and the bilateral cooperation between both countries specially in the field of agriculture, allow from now on to import seeds legally.

Smuggling now deals with Israeli consumer products which have high appeal in Egypt just like all imported products. Many however feel guilty for this kind of relation with the "enemy". One of El-Arish residents says that he uses the Israeli soap because it is more effective with the saline water provided by the city water network. He justifies buying it saying that the Palestinians themselves import these commodities, and they are the people responsible for that. These commodities which support the unofficial retail trade in El-Arish are brought through Gaza by the Palestinian "visitors" who can go to Gaza more easily or by Egyptian "tourists", or Palestinians coming from Gaza who make profit from that.

The Rafah border, which is open 24 hours a day since 1994, has had an 80% increase in the number of people crossing between 1993 and 1994. (18) The natural result of this increase was the proliferation of bootlegging. An Egyptian customs officer says: "It is easy to hide most of the products. They can be brought across the border secretly without being subjected to customs."(19) This trade is made up of a large number of products such as cosmetics, coffee, house electric fixtures, clothes, shoes, and even kinds of "medicine" which is said to be good for every illness. In addition to the quality appeal of the imported product, and in addition to the desire of buying it which is even provoked by selling them "secretly", the prices of those products are relatively cheap.

A tin of instant coffee brought from Cairo is sold for 25 pounds, while it is sold for 15 pounds if brought from Israel. New commercial practices are produced by this market. Egyptian tourists for instance who come in an increasing number to El-Arish for summer vacation, go to Rafah, which is only few meters from the borders, to buy these goods for a cheaper price than that in El-Arish. Palestinian merchants establish make-shift shops waiting for the daily arrival of these tourists, who upon arrival come down from the busses and gather around the exhibited goods to bargain, according to what one merchant told us, showing us the bills and documents which prove how he sells cacao imported from Poland, bought in Cairo in wholesale and then re-packed in Israeli packages.

This smuggling has many effects which exceed the regional framework. Al-Ahram newspaper(20) says that the shekel (Israeli currency) rate has increase by 10% in relation to the Egyptian pound between December 1994 (the date when it was no more officially prohibited),
and May 1995. Al-Ahram adds that this rise is due to the increase in smuggling between Egypt and Israel through Rafah and to the influx of Israeli tourists whose number in 1994 reached 214,113 tourists, in return for 123,985 tourists in 1993.(21) As a result, the local authorities, which are fighting this illegal trade to protect the "interests of the people," called for the establishment of a committee to defend consumer interests in Rafah, and to authorize it to study the needs of the people and to stand against merchants who smuggle across the borders. (22)

It is clear, that consecutive Ottoman, British, Egyptian and Israeli regimes did not lead at all to severing relations that link the two regions of El-Arish and Gaza together in a joint destiny, neither before nor after the delineation of borders. Signing the Oslo agreements in 1993 and achieving the Palestinian self control in 1994 re-activated these relations despite the obstacles. The planning of an "international" highway(23) which will link the Suez Canal with the borders is a reflection on the revival of these relations. A Palestinian living in El-Arish also points at Yasser Arafat travel to El-Arish to fly out of there, because the airport in Gaza is not finished yet.

Although Palestinians living in the region, seem in general to be integrated to a good degree in the local socio-economic life, still, indications of ruptures in the modern post liberation history of Sinai must be studied. These ruptures are manifested in the division of Rafah and sacrificing the Palestinians living in "Canada" refugee camp.

4. Chapter Three:

"Canada" Camp, an exemplary pattern for the incredible

The history of "Canada" camp started in Rafah in 1973 when the Israeli military authorities decided, for alleged security reasons, to construct roads through the Palestinian camps in the Gaza Strip to make them easily accessible. Many houses were demolished and 500 Palestinian families were removed to a location in Rafah which the UN used in the past as a base for a Canadian unit.(25) After estimating the value of the old and new houses, compensation was paid accordingly to some people, while others had to pay the difference to the Israeli authorities (up to $700). In the aftermath of the Camp David Accords and returning the Sinai to Egypt, tragic developments took place. In April 1982 the city of Rafah was divided into two according to the border line of 1906, and Canada camp became located in the Egyptian territory. There are barbed wires and border line that separate thousands of Palestinians from their work, families and friends. Negotiations for six months led to Egyptian recognition of the camp dwellers status as "temporary refugees" carrying an Egyptian travel document renewable every six moths without a work permit.(26) The Israelis allow from their part for some family members to cross the border every week in order to work in Gaza or in Israel. The two parties asserted that this state is a temporary one, and agreed to secure the return of refugees to Gaza: the Israelis will prepare ready pieces of land in Tel Al-Sultan on the other side of the border, while the Egyptians will pay $12,000 for each family to build its own house.
To start implement the return of some of them was to wait until 1989. In fact the PLO is financing this return through Egypt. During the period between 1989 and 1991 about 150 families were allowed to cross the border, but the PLO financial crisis following the Gulf war suspended the operation. Three years passed without any family returning. But starting in 1994, fifty other families were able to return to Gaza Strip which has become independent. The Canadian government, which leads the work group pertaining to refugees in the multilateral negotiations, has decided to grant an assistance of $4 million to finance their reunification. (27)

4.1 The camp

The camp is located to the north of Rafah city, and is considered one of its neighborhoods. It is built on an area of 1.5 square kilometers. In 1993 Canada camp, which was administrated by UNRWA,(28) had 4,500 people living there, according to UNRWA figures.(29) Randa Sha’ath says that 45% of the population are between 12 and 15 years of age.(30) It is certain that the existence of this camp in the Egyptian territory meant the end of curfews and military patrols. Poverty however remain dominant and life is similar to that in Gaza refugee camps. Its streets are not paved and sewage lines are open, its houses are overcrowded and power failure is a daily occurrence. Drinking water has to be brought from a base used by the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO)(31) two kilometers away. In addition to these difficult conditions, people are suffering psychologically from the burdens and tense environment demonstrated in the barbed wires surrounding the camp to the east. Parts of the camp have also been demolished by the Egyptian authorities in an attempt to prevent re-occupying the houses after the departure of families from Canada camp. The only good thing about that, is the expansion of the area where the camp children could play.

Work remains to be the essential problem. In 1988 hundreds of families found themselves without any source of living, and were dependent on nothing but UNRWA provisions which included food and clothes.(32) As a result of having no official permit to work in Egypt, families lived of UNRWA support or by working illegally, smuggling, or migrating. Our interlocutor told us that Libya was for many years the major outlet for the people of Canada camp who were looking for work. Others opened small shops inside the camp. We can now see a commercial street in the Camp while others became taxi drivers or worked in farming. UNRWA pays wages for 50 people (teachers, health and maintenance employees). While this international institution provides full elementary education, Egypt also provides an assistance to preparatory and secondary education amounting to 20,000 Egyptian pounds ($6000). This means paying 2.5 pounds for each class hour. A teacher gets an average of 70 pounds ($21) every month. Regarding higher education, young people from Canada camp go to El-Arish,(33) Ismailia or Cairo. They are however subjected to a certain arrangement that does not allow their number in the Egyptian universities to exceed 50 students. This restriction, it seems, was taken at the end of the eighties in response to the politicization of the Canada Camp youths who tried to join the Intifada from Egypt. On December 1st, 1987, an Israeli soldier was injured in an attack against him by unknown people who came from the Egyptian sector. Two days later, the General Command of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine of Ahmad Jibril announced its responsibility for the shooting attempt. A hidden crisis occurred between Egypt and Israel as a result of this event. The Egyptian police, as a result, intensified their monitoring of the camp. At the beginning of January 1988, a demonstration broke out in Rafah which included 700
Palestinians and Egyptians. The Israeli media reported the demonstration and described its bloody crushing by the Egyptian authorities. The Egyptian authorities however denied that. At the end of the eighties, camp residents gave secret assistance to compatriots on the other side of the fence. The camp was the only place in Egypt where walls are full of graffiti against Israel. One of our interlocutors told us that there are still in Egyptian prisons some 100 young people from Rafah whom he describes as political prisoners.

Strange enough, however, that from now on, every one’s hope of return seems to be a matter for concern. UNRWA employees alone are certain of having work at its departments in Gaza. Others can only see a gloomy future ahead due to rise in unemployment resulting from the closure of the Israeli labor market to the Palestinians and the high cost of living which is above that in Egypt. None of the breadwinners of the 300 families who were living in the Canada camp in the mid-1995 is working in Gaza. Those who were able to keep their work were the first to be re-located. The conditions for return are also considered very complicated. The head of the family has first to go to Tel Al-Sultan to get plot of land 200 square meters in area, build on it, and when he finishes his family can follow him. Although only three kilometers separate Canada camp from Tel Al-Sultan, still each family has to cross with its furniture through Al-Ujah passage, 150 kilometers south of Rafah, which is the commercial border between Egypt and Israel so that they can be inspected by Israel. After the advent of the self rule, the Israeli authorities allowed Canada camp residents to chose a piece of land in Tel Al-Sultan before allowing them to re-locate, on condition that they pay for it. As a result some of those who were able to do that bought land directly or through others before they started their return. This shows that there are other motives behind this return which exceed economic considerations and that it is a decision that expresses dignity and pride before any thing else.

Abu Hani, mukhtar of Canada Camp, says that return has been speeded up recently, noting that the Israeli authorities started in 1995 making lists of family names according to which four families will be allowed to returned every week. The settlement of people allowed in the previous list should be fully executed before people on the following list are allowed to leave, and that normally takes a long time and causes anxiety and perplexity.

Constructing two floors in Gaza costs $40,000, forcing families to get loans and bring commodities with them when they move to Tel Al-Sultan. The mukhtar himself is an example. Due to his good relations with the Egyptian authorities, he was able to bring nine trucks loaded with commodities and construction materials, paying customs duties of no more than $1,800 to the Israelis.

The beginning of a relaxation following the self-rule agreements, was just like a breeze of fresh air for the Camp dwellers and El-Arish Palestinians. Building relations between people on both sides of the border will allow them to consolidate networks which will benefit from new commercial relations that have not been organized by the state yet. The expectations of return and the economic opportunities go together in favor of the peace process. The interest manifested by Canada camp dwellers in the elections of the self-rule council may be an indication to what they believe in. These camp dwellers are the only Palestinians living in camps outside the independent Palestinian territories who have a program prepared for their return.
4.2 Challenges

The history of Canada camp, which is a Palestinian enclave in the Egyptian territories, is before any thing else one of a continued effort to break the restrictions imposed so that contacts between both sides of the fence would not cease. Residents communicate daily with their families and friends across the 20-meter wide border line which is surrounded by electrified walls, barbed wires, and watch towers, which people pretend to ignore. Certainly there is a need to shout so that the others can hear. This however is another means to assert determination. A wedding party would split into two identical parts on both sides of the barbed wires because the Egyptian and the Israeli authorities refuse to grant visas to the invitees, whether family members or others. There are underground secret tunnels, however, opened to make contacts between residents located on both sides of the borders easier. This is also another means of maintaining contact between people and even to allow the passage of men, arms and commodities. During the Intifada this issue was often raised and still is the focus of the Egyptian and Israeli interest. The Defense Committee at the Egyptian People’s Council (the parliament) demanded at the beginning of 1995 the demolition of houses next to the borders in Rafah in an attempt to stop smuggling through the tunnels. These measures however seem to have failed in stopping the increasing exchange between the people on both sides. The Rafah story which was not met with due interest from the media is not important just because it is a unique case, but because it reveals the incredibility of the situation when the authorities try to impose their will on a situation which keeps coming back at every loophole.

5. Conclusion

Border areas are distinguished with their high sensitivity to geographical changes. Studying these areas is considered a beneficial method for an early detection of events and new phenomena. In this border area, a special identity is being created from various backgrounds including Egyptian, Palestinian, and Bedouin. This identity acquires its meaning from a dynamic exchange that is being activated by the peace process. Such a context allows for understanding various Palestinian positions in this region.

Although the variety of positions and conflict profiles do not negate a precaution exchanged between Egyptians and Palestinians, still the context of this study which is carried out on a small region shows the particularity of the feelings of this group. Only little feelings of isolation and marginality were generated in comparison with the general Palestinian situation in Egypt. It seems that integration accompanied or unaccompanied with some luxury is the characteristic distinguishing the situation of Palestinians in the region. This integration is done through strategies of adaptation with the crisis and conflicts. It is also accompanied with a clear pragmatism towards the prospects of peace in the region. Such a position was manifested in El-Arish after signing the Oslo accords, in the only demonstration that was staged in Egypt in support of peace. The people we spoke to seem to comprehend the results of the accords in a positive way. The existence of Gaza near them allows them to benefit from the information networks and the commercial possibilities without having to live the daily difficulties and conflicts which resulted from the establishment of self-rule. In addition to that, the numerical and economic weight of the Palestinians in the region gives them a distinguished presence in the social and urban scene. With the exception of Canada camp, there is no "ghetto" and Palestinian
merchants are considered among the local notables. The Palestinians who know Egyptians or Israelis can play the role of a connecting link. They are also distinguished by a desire to negotiate and reach compromises, despite the atmosphere of security measures taken after the Camp David accords or the self-rule accords.

A more optimistic scenario would allow the Palestinians to chose freely between staying where they are, or returning to the self-rule territories. (40) The Palestinians living in North Sinai should be given the chance to chose freely, not to be forced, so that they can maintain their role as a connecting link, especially by recognizing their historical role and long stay in the country. After three generations, they do represent an essential component of the regional identity. Egypt should therefore take into consideration the Palestinians staying in El-Arish when formulating its projects for the destiny of the region, and should facilitate the integration of the latent economic capability of these people. Will the Palestinians continue to work under the guardianship of others unable to run their life or will they become more effective?

The Palestinian flag is hoisted now on the borders along the Egyptian and Israeli flags.

End

* This work covers with two problems: one is the thesis of a Ph.D. that is being prepared which deals with the geographical treatment of integrating Sinai with Egypt, and the creation of a regional reality. The other is part of a research program on the Palestinian exile which focuses on the problem of Palestinian refugees in Egypt. In addition to the researches which were carried out separately, a joint study was made in El-Arish and in Rafah in June 1995, on ten Palestinian families of merchants, entrepreneurs, and local officials.

** Sari Hanafi, a researcher in the Center of Economic, Legal, and Social Studies and Documents (CEDEJ), Cairo.

*** Olivier Saint-Martin: URBAMA, Tour university /CEDEJ

Footnotes


2. Brunet (1990), PP, 115-116

3. In fact it is difficult to know the exact number of Palestinians because range of cases that could be included in this identity is large. The Egyptian administration however, conducted a census on Palestinians living in Egypt in 1995. This census was based on the waves of immigration which came to Egypt. Temporary results of this study show that more than 90000 Palestinians are living in Egypt. It should be noted however that this number does not include those who carry the Jordanian passport put at 20000-30000 people.
4. In light of recommendations made by the Arab League considering Palestinians as refugees not foreigners, Law 66 of 1962, permitted employment of Palestinian Arabs in state institutions, and in the public sector, and treating them as citizens of the Arab Republic of Egypt. This law was abrogated by the second article of the labor law pertaining the public sector (Law number 48, of 1978).

5. Not having a state of their own at the time being, Palestinians do not have sovereignty over these borders which remain under the Israeli control. However, the matter here is related to a border space not legal boundaries. It seemed to us that the border social and spatial situation is more important than the legal situation. This is in fact what we aim to show in this study.

6. CAMPAS (1995), STATISTICAL YEAR BOOK.

This deals with a 1995 census, which was based on the natural growth of population in all Egypt, not taking into consideration therefore, the influx of refugees.


10. The British during the First World War, decided to establish the Suez Canal- Rafah railway, to confront the Turkish assault in Sinai. This railway then became the Palestinian railway that linked with the Syrian, Turkish and European networks. This line functioned as such until 1948, when it linked Egypt and Gaza until 1967. It was then dismantled during the Israeli occupation. Studies are now underway on the possibilities of reconstructing it.


13. Al-Ahram newspaper reported in April 5, 1995, that the Ministry of Interior has examined reasons for not granting nationality to some people, and ordered investigation to settle this issue.


15. Adel Attiah, Head of the Union, statement given to Al-Ahram, October 10, 1995.

16. Among the measures which affect the Palestinians just like all foreigners, is the law issued in 1984. This law prohibits them from establishing companies in which the foreign capital is more than 49%, of the total capital, working in Exports and imports, and possessing a commercial record. Those who possessed such a record in the past could keep it, on condition that they do not change the nature of the institution.

17. See Farid, op.cit.
18. Census of North Sinai shows that the total number of people crossing the Rafah border in 1994 was 419,618 in comparison to 234,158 in 1993.


21. The number of Israeli tourists is increasing. It reached 295,933 according to the primary census of the Ministry of Tourism. This shows that the Israelis occupy number two position. The Germans are number one (312 319).


23. This is the name used for this way by the press and in documents related to its construction.

24. Data related to the population vary according to our resources as well as to the people we talked to. It should be taken into consideration that figures indicate only the degree of importance.

25. Related to the multilateral disengagement units dispatched by the UN to the region between 1956 -1967.


28. UNRWA


31. The Multilateral Forces and Observers (MFO) are considered "A peace keeping force, independent from the UN. It was formed in the aftermath of the Camp David Accords.

32. Shaath,op.cit, P.45.

33. In addition to the Education College already mentioned, there is an agricultural college in Al-’Arish as well.

34. UNRWA, op.cit.P5.


36. The border is called by the Rafah residents "Al-Selk- the wire".

38. G. Wackerman, Les + changes interculturels dans les spaces transfrontaliers, cit + par Picquet et Renard.

39. A political meeting was organized in the presence of Nabil Shaath. Cultural parties, songs, and folklore dancing were also organized.

40. Has such an idea which is reiterated in speeches any real value, when it is related to the return of Palestinian refugees of 1948 to their land which is Israel now??.

References

In Arabic

Bibliography

Brunet Roger, Dolfus Olivier, (1990), Mondes nouveaux, Geographic Universelle t.1, Paris, Hachette/Reclus, 551 pages.


Jarvis C.S. (1931), Yesterday and To-day in Sinai, Londres, William Blackwood, 312 pages.


UNRWA (1993), "Canada Camp. so near and yet so far", Palestine Refugees Today, n + 133, PP. 4-5.