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“BRITISH SINAI”

“Its Geopolitical Significance in the Middle East and its Strategic Role in British Colonial Policy”

by

Karim Zaki-Khalil

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Centre for Middle Eastern & Islamic Studies

University of Durham

September 1998



22 JUN 1999

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“BRITISH SINAI - Its Geopolitical Significance in the Middle East and its Strategic Role in British Colonial Policy”. (Univ. of Durham : 1998)

Abstract

The focus of this thesis is to assess the strategic role and geopolitical significance of the Sinai peninsula in the Middle East in general and its importance for British colonial policy in particular. As Egypt became progressively more autonomous from the Ottoman Empire during the nineteenth century the question of territorial sovereignty arose, which moved the Sinai Peninsula from being a barren stretch of desert with little economic value within the Ottoman Empire to becoming a disputed boundary region. The construction of the Suez Canal and its subsequent control by European powers, headed by Britain, further highlighted its strategic position. This led to a series of successful diplomatic efforts on the side of Britain, which had occupied Egypt by 1882, to include the peninsula within the boundaries of Egypt. After the military confrontation with Turkey during the First World War, and the subsequent breaking up of the Ottoman Empire, an international boundary separating Sinai from Palestine was established. Egypt became officially independent in 1922. However British control of the Sinai Peninsula continued until well after the Second World War.

This thesis demonstrates the importance of Sinai for British colonial policy, which was reflected in the great efforts exerted to retain control of the peninsula as long as possible. The recognition of this importance was not shared by the nationalist Egyptian government. Thus Britain is to be credited for having pursued vital diplomacy to establish a recognized international boundary, as well as creating an effective administration system to control this remote border desert area in the form of the Frontiers Districts Administration (FDA), founded in 1917. The "reserved clauses" in the unilateral declaration of independence of 1922 gave Britain the right to provide for the defense of Egypt, which would mean that the Egyptian Army would remain under the control of British officers. The primary vehicle for government in the Sinai was the Frontiers Districts Administration, a department of the Ministry of War. This made it convenient for Britain to remain in charge of the peninsula by means of a British officer serving as governor of Sinai. This thesis shows that as the number of British personnel employed in the Egyptian government was drastically reduced after independence, Britain pursued a covert policy to retain as many Englishmen as possible in the FDA, for the purpose of continued control over Sinai. Even after the Second World War no efforts were spared to try to retain Sinai under British control, which became a central issue in the dispute between Britain and Egypt over the latter's independence and national sovereignty.

Acknowledgements

I am most grateful to my supervisor Dr Ewan Anderson, Professor of Geopolitics at the University of Durham, whose guidance was vital for shaping my research into this present thesis. I greatly benefited from his comments and discussions. His support with excellent knowledge and experience was instrumental in the completion of my work. I would also like to express my sincere appreciation to Dr Peter Sluglett who was my previous supervisor and instructed me in locating the various sources for my research.

My thanks are also due to the "Barbaras" at the University of Durham: Barbara Minto and Barbara Farnworth at the Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies who kept track of my whereabouts and academic progress over the years, as well as Barbara Leach at Van Mildert College who always managed to provide me with accommodation during my numerous stays in England.

I am also indebted to Professor Marsden Jones at the American University in Cairo, whose kind and personal instruction during my graduate studies there shaped my devotion to the field of Middle Eastern History and Politics.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this work to my late grandfather, Mohammed Zaki, who after studying in Paris and London in the 1920's, dedicated his lifetime efforts to his work at the Ministry of Education in Cairo. His lively first hand accounts of Egyptian administration under the British occupation and the famous personalities of the time, inspired my interest in dedicating my further studies towards investigating this particular period of history. It was him who had sown the seed from which this tree has grown.

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate and highlight the geopolitical significance of the Sinai Peninsula in Middle Eastern power politics and its strategic role in British colonial policy in particular. Sinai had been neglected as a key geopolitical entity until this was first recognized by the British in the mid-nineteenth Century. There is of course a pattern in history that shows that Britain always did have a keen interest for geopolitical systems, and, in the case of Sinai, put a lot of effort into controlling this territory for the Empire. The main chronological emphasis of the thesis is therefore on the period of British occupation and subsequent administration of the Sinai between 1882 and the Second World War.

My initial interest in this study was conceived during the period of my graduate studies at the American University in Cairo, when I had the opportunity to spend several months on field work living with the bedouin of southern Sinai. This was at a time when the Sinai Peninsula had just been returned to the sovereignty of Egypt (1982) after fifteen years of Israeli occupation. The indigenous population had to adjust to

yet another new system of administration on the local level, as well as a new allegiance towards Egypt, which defined the Sinai in a regional geopolitical context. When examining the history of Sinai one is struck by the fact that a stretch of rugged desert so limited in size, natural resources and population would feature so prominently on the world stage of 19th and 20th Century international relations. The peculiar entanglement of this territory in military conflict, questions of sovereignty, creation of nation states, and the larger regional and international politics merits to be studied as a distinct entity in its own right. The role of British colonial policy in acquiring and maintaining control of the Sinai in particular, as distinct from the occupation and politics of Egypt, has so far not been the subject of specific investigation and is therefore the primary focus of this thesis.

Whereas the involvement of Britain in Egypt from 1882 until after the Second World War is well documented and researched, very little specific academic work has been done on the geopolitics of Sinai as a distinct entity. I will show that there was a covert, yet distinct, British policy that can be traced throughout the period investigated, from the occupation of Egypt until well after the Second World War, to maintain

military and administrative control over the Sinai Peninsula. This control and *de facto* British government of Sinai was continued even after the official independence of Egypt in 1922, despite Egyptian nationalist resentment.

This study focuses on the following areas: First, how a *de facto* autonomous territory was gradually incorporated into the Egyptian nation state as the political power of Egypt eclipsed the domination of the Ottoman central authorities from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards. Second, the emergence of the strategic role of the peninsula after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and its importance for the defense of this important waterway. Third, the British early recognition of this geopolitical position and the formulation of policy for the creation of an effective military administrative system for a remote desert frontier area. Finally, this thesis will demonstrate the specific efforts of Britain to retain control of the Sinai Peninsula, even after officially granting Egypt independence in 1922, through the positioning and retention of British personnel within the Egyptian government, particularly in the Frontiers Districts Administration which was in charge of the Sinai.

As no specific study had previously been conducted on these aspects of British involvement in Egypt most of the material used for the core of this thesis is from the Consular and Embassy correspondence and other British Foreign Office documents kept at the Public Records Office in London. It is from these documents that I have systematically demonstrated that as British influence in Egypt was being undermined by the progressive strengthening of the nationalist government after independence in 1922, a covert policy for the continued occupation of the Sinai Peninsula emerged. British colonial interest in Sinai, and the resulting efforts to hold on to the territory, was highly exaggerated considering the natural and human resources the peninsula has to offer. It was, however, the strategic location of the Sinai at the junction between Asia and Africa, between Mediterranean and Red Sea, that made it indispensable for Imperial communications and defense of the British Empire. The Suez Canal became a central issue in the rivalry between the empires of Europe and the control of this waterway would ultimately tip the international balance of power in the favour of Britain.

General Pattern of Events

In order to effectively defend, as well as control, the Suez Canal it was necessary to be in control of the Sinai. Since prehistoric times the rugged, deserts and difficult mountain passes made the peninsula the natural shield of Egypt against invasions from the East. This was always well understood by the rulers of Egypt and throughout history they maintained military and administrative control of Sinai in their hands in Cairo. When Egypt was part of the Ottoman Empire the Sinai was merely a dangerous stretch on a long highway traversing the peninsula, linking Arabia and Asia to the North African Provinces of the same empire. The local bedouin governed themselves according to their customary law and the caravan routes were protected by forts manned by soldiers from Egypt. There was no dispute over the ownership of the Sinai, until the height of the reign of Mohammed Ali in the 1840's, who as the viceroy of Egypt defied the authority of the sultan in Istanbul over the sovereignty of Egypt. Subsequent to his attempt to secede from the empire and the settlement of grievances, documents for Mohammed Ali's reaffirmation on the throne of Egypt, confirmed that his administrative territory of Egypt includes the Sinai Peninsula.

The Suez Canal opened to navigation in 1869 and was at the centre of European aspirations from the beginning, but Egyptian financial mismanagement of the economy and subsequent bankruptcy of the country gave Britain the "legitimacy" for the 1882 occupation of Egypt in order to rescue European creditors. British administrators recognized early the importance of gaining control of the Sinai as insurance for the safety of the Suez Canal and they pursued their objective on both the international and domestic fronts. Tensions between Turkey and Britain were mounting reflecting the deteriorating relations between the European empires culminating in the First World War, as well as the "veiled" occupation of Egypt, the prized province of the Ottoman Empire. In 1906 the British reacted to a number of boundary incidents between Turkish and Egyptian troops in the Sinai by a major show of military might, which persuaded Turkey to agree to a formal demarcation of an official boundary between Egypt and the rest of the Ottoman territories to the East. This move, that was initiated and carefully monitored by the British High Commissioner in Cairo, Lord Cromer, after detailed consultations with London, would greatly facilitate decisions on territorial issues subsequent to the breakup of the Ottoman

Empire after the First World War. On the domestic front, British officials were in the awkward situation of being only advisors to the Egyptian government rather than being directly in charge themselves, as would have been the case if Egypt was a colony, rather than just a protectorate. Englishmen were only directly in charge of some ministries one of them notably, the Ministry of War. So in order to gain control of the Sinai, the British persuaded the Egyptians to move the local administration of the peninsula from being under the Ministry of Interior to the Ministry of War, thus making a British officer the governor of Sinai. A situation which prevailed until after the Second World War.

In 1915 the British suspicions of Turkey were confirmed when Ottoman forces stormed through the Sinai and laid siege to the Suez Canal. It took heroic performances and a heavy toll on British lives to recapture the peninsula, a lesson that would firm British determination not to lose control of the Canal or the Sinai Peninsula again. The Sinai proved to be a valuable training ground for British soldiers unacquainted with desert warfare and would shape British experience with both military campaigns in the desert, as well as skills in administering nomadic tribes inhabiting border areas of the Middle East. The knowledge and

impressions gained by British officers would also influence their perception and execution of Britain's Arab policy after the War. The Sinai was also a focus for development and communication links between Egypt and Palestine with the building of roads, railway, water pipeline, airports and other infrastructure.

The Middle East went through major adjustments after the breakup of the Ottoman Empire in the aftermath of World War I and Britain was involved in the forefront of making the decisions over the future of the region. One item was very clear on the British agenda : by all means to maintain control of the Suez Canal and therefore of Sinai.

Several problems would face British efforts to maintain control of Sinai and the security of its Eastern boundary. New Nation States (Saudi Arabia, Palestine, Jordan, Syria, etc.) with unclear policies and security were to be formed to replace Ottoman regional governments. The Zionist movement intensified its emigration to Palestine particularly encouraged by the Balfour Declaration opening the door towards forming a separate state, independent of British influence, bordering on Sinai. On the domestic front, British administrators were seeing their influence

dismantled and were now facing nationalist revolt and an irreversible drive towards the independence of Egypt.

British concern was reflected in the great efforts made at the peace negotiations in Paris to settle the international boundary of Egypt in favour of good security of both the Canal and Sinai. In Sinai the Desert Mounted Corps of the War had given way to the Frontiers Districts Administration (F.D.A.) a special division under the Ministry of War that was in charge of the border desert provinces of Egypt. But the country was in revolutionary turmoil heading towards the declaration of independence in 1922. This meant the eventual elimination of British officials working inside the Egyptian Government. No area was more sensitive to British interests than the military security and the continued control of the Suez Canal. Therefore we find that the High Commission in Cairo went to great efforts to ensure that the officers in charge of the F.D.A. are to remain Englishmen. Even after the takeover of power we can trace a distinct policy by Britain to retain at least the control over the Sinai province, by having an English officer in place as governor. This was achieved by using two strategies : the first; to constantly point out the inefficiency of Egyptian Officers in administering desert areas a

compared to their British counterparts. And, the second, to focus on the claims of discrimination against the indigenous bedouin population by Egyptian authorities. In essence Britain used the excuse of being the protectors of a prosecuted minority in order to hold on to power. This exemplifies a pattern of British colonial policy that was found elsewhere in the British Empire. In the case of Sinai this policy proved to be very successful. British leadership within the F.D.A. had an excellent record of service and the ability of officers to deal with their bedouin subjects was greatly highlighted. Also, their achievements in improving the infrastructure and the economic and social situation of the Sinai helped persuade the Egyptian government to continue to retain British officers in Sinai, although their loyalty was more towards the High Commission and London than to their Egyptian superiors at the Ministry of War in Cairo.

Britain successfully continued its occupation and administration in the Sinai throughout the 1930's and the threat of a new war gave her the necessary excuse to reoccupy the country under the guise of a military defense cooperation treaty between Egypt and Great Britain. The Sinai remained under direct British administration until well after the war and

the last attempts to hold on to it failed during the final negotiations for British withdrawal and independence for Egypt. However, the last attempts to claim the Sinai for Britain were made in 1946 and again in 1949 where diverse schemes were brought forward in which Britain would enter into a long term lease or even outright purchase of the territory to establish naval and air-force bases in Sinai, which would make it, as in the words of one contemporary British Politician, another “Gibraltar in the Eastern Mediterranean”. The schemes failed in the face of intense nationalist resentment towards any British military presence on Egyptian soil, so the Sinai finally was confirmed as an integral part of Egypt under Egyptian sovereignty. This was to be challenged again in the Egyptian Israeli conflict, where sovereignty over the peninsula became a central issue of dispute. The understanding of these unique aspects of British colonial policy and how history came to bear on geographical arrangements is in essence the unique aspect of this study.

In **Chapter 1** I will first give a geographical description of the Sinai and its population highlighting its local, regional and global position. I will then document that the recognition of the strategic significance of the Sinai was a gradual process that went through several historical phases in

Chapter 2. The first section covers the early period before the 19th Century. In this phase the Sinai was left to govern itself through tribal customs internally and on an international level it was part of the Byzantine Empire followed by the various Muslim Khaliphates and lastly the Ottoman Empire. Sovereignty and rights of government, however, was at all times in the hand of the rulers of Egypt and the peninsula was throughout the ages administered from Cairo. The extent of Egyptian influence over neighboring territories to the East fluctuated according to the strength of different governments in Egypt. Whenever a strong leader was on the throne of Egypt his domain would extend far beyond the boundaries of Sinai into Palestine, Syria and Arabia, but the peninsula itself was at all times under Egyptian control. This control was however limited to securing the caravan routes for trade and pilgrimage through the Sinai by holding a number of forts along these routes. Very little direct control was exercised over the bedouin tribes of the area who were *de facto* autonomous from any government until well into the middle of the 19th Century.

The second section deals with the first extension of Egyptian government control over the Sinai and the rise of a more structured awareness of the

strategic importance of the peninsula in international geopolitics. This recognition started with Napoleon's campaign to Egypt, which drew British interests to this country and started a century of rivalry between England and France over colonial possessions. His scientists were the first to document to Europe the wonders of Egypt, which started a wave of intellectual, religious and scientific interest in exploring not only Egypt but also the biblical lands. Sinai thus became the target of a stream of European travelers and explorers. Their reports, although quite often very biased, give us an excellent insight into the actual life in the Sinai during the early 19th Century.

During the reign of Mohammed Ali Egypt went through a remarkable transformation from a purely rural society to becoming a serious power in the Eastern Mediterranean. His expansion of industry, public works, communication and military capabilities were soon seen as a threat by the European Powers. His military campaigns succeeded in conquering Palestine and Syria and he put the holy places in the Hijaz under his protection. When Mohammed Ali threatened Turkey and the Ottoman sultanate itself the Powers intervened and his influence was limited to the province of Egypt. He was invested, however, with hereditary rights to

the throne of Egypt and with a high degree of autonomy to rule over the country.

When his rule was confirmed in 1841 by the Ottoman Sultan, the *firman* issued by Istanbul set the administrative boundary of Egypt as a diagonal line from Al-'Arish to Suez, thus severing the eastern and southern parts of the peninsula from Egypt. In practice this was never the administrative boundary because throughout the Nineteenth Century Egypt continued to administer all the forts in the Sinai, as well as beyond the border the forts of Hejaz along the pilgrimage route, which were not handed over to Ottoman control until 1892.

Although Egypt retained sovereignty over the Sinai, this incident signaled the beginning of the struggle over Sinai and Egypt's eastern boundary, which would last until well into the twentieth century. The spotlight was directed towards the Sinai again when the Suez Canal went into operation. Britain by then clearly recognized the importance of the Canal for the supremacy of British imperial communications and the Sinai as its defensive shield. The events in Egypt would pave the way for eventual British occupation.

Chapter 3 deals with the British occupation of Egypt and the Sinai until the First World War. This phase of developments in Sinai sees a more conscious formulation of British security policy regarding the Suez Canal and a clear change towards the recognition of Sinai as an integral element in this policy. Already before the British attack on Egypt in 1882 it was recognized that the cooperation of the Sinai bedouin would be very useful. Consequently, Professor Palmer was sent out at the head of a mission to buy their allegiance. This was the beginning of a long relationship between the Sinai tribes and their British rulers, which would last until final British withdrawal from Egypt.

During the following decade Britain consolidated her control over Egypt to the dismay of the Ottoman Sultan, who still considered the country as a province of his empire. The Ottoman government therefore seized the first opportunity to assert its sovereignty over Egypt when a new Khedive, Abbas II, was to be instituted. His *firman* of appointment specifically severed the Sinai Peninsula from his dominion. Seeing a possible erosion of control over the Sinai as a definite threat for the security of the Suez Canal it was the High Commission in Cairo that

protested most diligently and the “*firman* crisis” was averted by exercising British pressure on Istanbul. Relations with Turkey deteriorated further in subsequent years particularly after the British - French treaty of 1904, in which the two powers settled their colonial interests in Africa, which was seen by the Ottoman Sultan as a confirmation of the sinister intentions of Britain in Egypt. The tensions led to the border incidents between Turkey and Egypt and eventually to the demarcation of the Sinai-Palestine boundary in 1906.

Meanwhile Britain had also secured internal control of Sinai by being very active on the domestic front towards gaining ownership and permanent control of the peninsula. The Sinai had been under the administration of the Ministry of Interior until 1906 when it was placed under the control of the Ministry of War. This had the advantage that the commander in chief of the Egyptian Army was an Englishman ensuring that from that year onwards and well until after WW II the Governor of Sinai would also be a British officer.

It was becoming increasingly evident that relations between Britain and Turkey were deteriorating, thus focusing the attention of Britain on

further securing the Eastern boundary of Egypt. They adopted a policy of development and improvement of facilities throughout the Sinai with the understanding that if the local population could be convinced of the advantages of British government, they would be a vital ally in the case of military conflict in the Sinai. Britain remained in control of the peninsula until driven out by the advancing Turkish army during the early part of WW I.

Chapter 4 covers the events of World War I in Sinai. After the successful Turkish invasion of Sinai, Britain became thoroughly convinced of the strategic importance of the peninsula and employed great resources to regain military supremacy. The campaign for Sinai saw the introduction of the Desert Camel Corps and the formation of an Arab Legion under British command. British officers became experienced in desert warfare and built skills in dealing with bedouin subjects, which would enhance their future role as administrators in desert areas. Great emphasis was also on the development of infrastructure in the Sinai such as the building of the railway, roads and communications. This was promoted by Britain in order to strengthen

security and government control in the Sinai, but also to link the Suez Canal to Palestine and to the railway systems of Asia.

The vehicle for controlling the Sinai came in the form of the Frontiers Districts Administration (F.D.A.) which, formed in 1917, was in charge of administering all remote desert areas along Egypt's borders. The British protectorate over Egypt ensured that the command of the Egyptian Army was staffed by English officers, and since the F.D.A. was a department of the Ministry of War, the director of the F.D.A. was therefore also a British officer. This chapter will show that a great deal of care was taken to make the F.D.A. a very efficient department. Some of the best officers were chosen for service with this unit, good education and language skills were mandatory for the FDA. Their understanding of the bedouin society and their desert environment made British administration very popular in Sinai. In fact, when Egypt became independent there was great concern amongst the tribes that the new nationalist government would discriminate against them because of their known collaboration with the British occupation.

Chapter 5 deals with post war adjustments in the Middle East and their influence on Sinai. The war had transformed the Middle East. The breaking up of the Ottoman Empire and its division between British and French spheres of influence (Sykes-Picot Treaty) and the formation of new nation states, the Balfour Declaration and Zionist Movement, the imminent independence of Egypt, were all factors that would again put the Sinai Peninsula in the limelight of British Middle East politics. British interests in retaining the Sinai were again threatened on the international front by new states being formed just beyond its boundary, as Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Palestine were trying to work out their territorial claims. The boundary between Egypt and the former Ottoman Palestine would become an international boundary, but this was not to happen without another round of discussions over which line the boundary would follow. At the peace conference in Paris, British negotiators tried to extend the boundary of Sinai to include parts of Southern Palestine on the recommendation of Lord Allenby. However, French resentment towards what they saw as an attempt to increase the territory under British rule prevented any changes to the previous line of the administrative boundary demarcated in 1906 and the new international boundary was settled. Another challenge to British control

in the Sinai was to contain the attempts by Zionist to extend their purchases of land for colonization across the boundary from Palestine.

The Frontiers Districts Administration became the primary vehicle for perpetuating British rule in the Sinai Peninsula. Britain's fear of losing control over Egypt in the wake of revolution and struggle for independence meant that new political strategies were needed in order to stay in Sinai. The unilateral declaration issued by Britain confirming the independent status of Egypt contained several conditions which would make it possible for British troops to remain in the country. One was Britain's responsibility for external security, which meant that the Egyptian army remained under British command. This chapter will show that there was a conscious British policy for retaining control of the FDA in order to secure the Sinai Peninsula and the Suez Canal for imperial communications.

Chapter 6 explores in more detail the British administration of the Sinai in the inter-war years. With the emergence of new nation states east of Sinai the question of territorial sovereignty and boundary security became the paramount concern of the governor of Sinai. As British

personnel within the Egyptian administration was being continually reduced after independence, the threat of losing control over the Sinai became acute. British diplomacy therefore focused on retaining senior officers within the FDA. Their efforts were rewarded with the conclusion of the 1936 treaty of Alliance between Egypt and Britain, which *de facto* meant that British troops remain in Egypt and the Sinai remains under a British governor. This governor was more responsible to Whitehall and the Embassy in Cairo than to his superiors at the Egyptian Ministry of War.

Chapter 7 covers the reoccupation of Egypt during World War II and the last attempts by Britain to retain the Sinai. Britain by that time had formulated its geopolitical interests in the Middle East and part of that would be maintaining a permanent presence in Sinai. Officially, Britain was committed to grant Egypt full and unconditional independence after the war, but this would not include the Sinai. The peninsula was seen as an integral part of the Suez Canal security and therefore several schemes were put forward to claim it for Britain. The political climate between Egypt and Britain by that time had reached an all time low and diplomatic attempts to remain in Sinai soon had to give way to a more

straightforward approach of offering to lease the peninsula. The last attempts to hold on were made in 1949, but eventually Britain had to evacuate her troops from Egypt and Sinai reverted to Egyptian sovereignty after almost 80 years under foreign administration.

Chapter 1

Geography and Population

The Sinai Peninsula forms the land bridge between the African and Asian continents; it has an area of 60.714 square kilometres and stretches for 430 km from the Mediterranean coast in the North to the Southern tip of the peninsula at Ras Mohammed, which divides the Red Sea into the Gulf of Suez and the Gulf of Aqaba. The distance from the Palestine border in the East and the Suez Canal in the west is approximately 220 km. Its location between the 28th and 31st parallel and the 32nd to the 34th meridians places Sinai in the centre of the Middle East and the civilisations of the ancient world. (see figure 1, p.28) A number of uninhabited desert islands are scattered around the southern tip of the peninsula, the largest of which are Tiran and Sanafir Islands which command the southern narrow access of the gulf of Aqaba. The northern coastline of Sinai has no suitable locations for deep sea harbours due to its shallow and broad tidal strip. Also the coast of the Gulf of Suez has only one small fishing port at al-Tor, but the gulf Aqaba offers a well sheltered natural harbour at Sharm El-Shaikh, and smaller fishing ports at Dahab and Nuweiba.

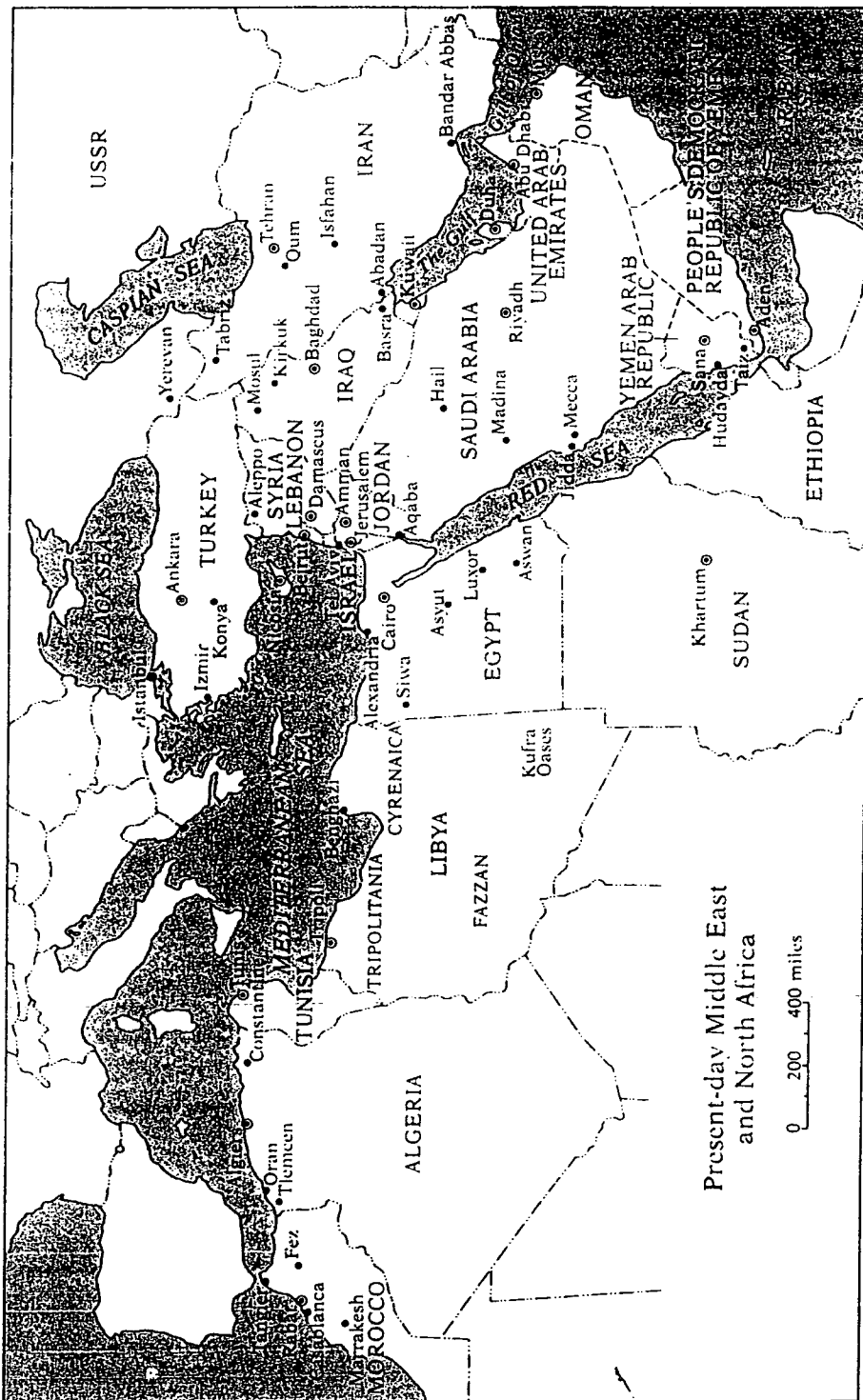


Figure 1 : The Sinai Peninsula in the Centre of the Middle East

The climate of Sinai is typical of a desert environment, with temperatures in summer exceeding 40 degrees celsius during the day. The winters can be very cool with minimum temperature at night as low as 8 degrees and maximum temperatures between 15 and 20 degrees. The central highlands around mount Sinai are well known for their very cold winter when temperature can reach the freezing point. The whole peninsula has very little rain, with an annual average below 20 millimetres, but although extremely rare, flash floods can within hours turn the steep valleys of the southern Sinai into gushing rivers, that can destroy anything in their path. The water marks along the walls of the *wadis* are a good reminder of the dangers of camping in the course of such a dry river. This low level of precipitation supports very little natural vegetation. The proverbial thorn bushes that grow in the St. Catherine area and very few small palm groves are the main exception.

The peninsula can be divided into three major geographical areas : the coastal plain of al-`Arish in the north, the central al-Tih plateau and the high mountain region of Southern Sinai. Northern Sinai is a limestone plateau sloping gently down to the salt marshes caused by the sinking of the shore. The eastward drift of the silt from the Damietta arm of the Nile

has slowly widened the northern coast and the ruins of Pelusium, which was a port at the mouth of the now dried up Pelusiac branch of the Nile during Roman times, are now almost 4 kilometres inland. A dune belt stretching from the Bitter Lakes on the Suez Canal to the Palestine border is dotted with small palm groves thriving off the shallow water table. The bedouin settlement of Qatia forms the centre of these oases where ground water is abundant enough to support some agriculture. The wells of Qatia were also the last watering station before the wadi al-'Arish, for east-bound caravans and armies on the ancient Via Maris. ¹ (Murray : 1953, pp142-144)

Today a modern road follows the same route, avoiding the thickest sand dunes south of Romani, however, still many sections are buried frequently after sandstorms. The same problem was faced by the Sinai railway which was in operation until the late 1940's when through-passage by rail from Cairo to Beirut was possible. Travel along the Mediterranean shore is hampered by the marshes and the Bardawil lake which changes its contours with the seasonal rise and fall of the sea level. The road crosses the Wadi al-'Arish just south of the town of al-'Arish, which is Sinai's largest settlement and administrative centre. The narrow streets of the

settlement surround the ruins of its once imposing castle and the town is separated from the sea by the largest date palm grove on the peninsula. Both road and former railway then cross the most fertile agricultural plain of Sinai where grain is grown in winter and melons in summer, until crossing the Palestine border at Rafah. The wadi al-`Arish and its tributaries reaches far south into the peninsula to its watershed at the edge of the Tih plateau forming the largest drainage basin of Sinai. During the winter months flash floods frequently carry a heavy load of silt down the wadi and obstruct a number of dams that have been erected throughout the basin to utilise the scarce water for agriculture. Further south from the coastal plain, and almost parallel to the Via Maris, is the main highway of the peninsula connecting Ismailia at the midpoint of the Suez Canal with al-`Auja in Palestine and onward to Beersheba. Even further to the south running parallel is the pilgrimage route, Darb al-Haj, which originates East of Suez and crosses the Mitla Pass to Nekhl, now a small settlement. The town was an administration centre until the turn of the century, and the traditional midway stop for caravans between Egypt and Arabia from where the road continues via the wells of El-Themmed and then descends the steep slopes toward the Gulf of Aqaba near Ras El-Naqb to Taba. Travelling along this road one can see the imposing silhouette of the high

mountain range of Southern Sinai beyond the escarpment that forms the boundary of the el-Tih plateau which rises to over 1000 metres above sea level. (see figure 2, p.33)

Southern Sinai is reached from Suez by the coastal road running along the shore of the Gulf of Suez to the town of Abu Zeneima, which is the centre of the oil fields and produces the bulk of the Egyptian output. From there a desert track leaves the coast turning inland towards Serabit El-Khadim, the site of the Pharaonic copper and turquoise mines. There the ruins of the Hathor temple and the nearby Wadi Mukkatab, where the famous inscriptions of Sinai were found, are proof of the earliest civilisation in the peninsula. These inscriptions represent the “missing link” between the pharaonic pictograms and the cuneiform writing of the Phoenicians, and thus represent the oldest alphabetic inscriptions known.² (Ritter : 1865, pp 330-334) Continuing South along the coast from Abu Zneima one reaches the mouth of Wadi Feiran which connects the coast to the central mountain region surrounding the convent of St. Catherine. This valley, which at some points is very narrow, is bordered by the highest peaks of Sinai with Gabal Katharina and Gabal Musa rising over 2,700m. The road through Wadi Feiran also climbs gradually and the settlement at the foot of Mount

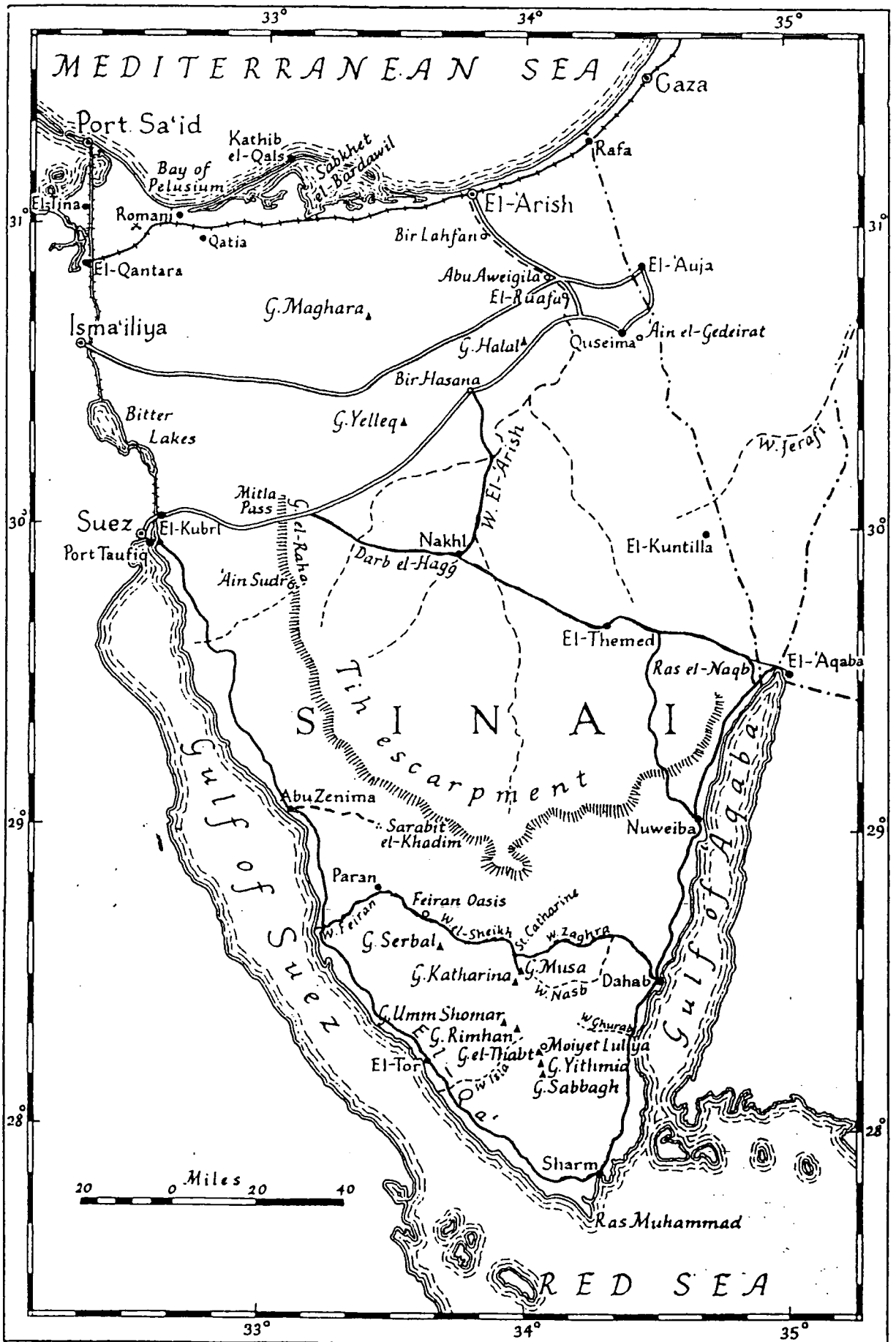


Figure 2: The Sinai Peninsula, Terrain and Roads

Sinai is over 1,500m above sea level, which gives it a most pleasant cool and dry climate throughout most of the year. The valley also supports a number of orchards, growing peaches and almonds, in addition to the abundant crop of dates. From St.Catherine, a road winding through the steep walled wadis runs east to meet the Gulf of Aqaba at Dahab, where two oases near the beach form the basis of a bedouin settlement. Nowadays Dahab sports a modern tourist resort, but much smaller than Sharm El Sheikh, which is located 100 km to the south near the tip of the peninsula. An international airport and dozens of hotels have transformed Sharm El Sheikh from a tiny former Israeli settlement into the primary beach resort of Sinai and the centre of the scuba diving industry. El Tor another 100 km to the north-west of Sharm is now the administrative capital of the Province of South Sinai. Until the end of the 19th century it was the quarantine station for pilgrims making the sea voyage from Jeddah to Suez and used to accommodate up to 30,000 people every season. Today, a small fishing fleet operates out of this harbour, the only one on the eastern shore of the Gulf of Suez.

Further North along the Gulf of Aqaba, about 80km before the Israeli border, is the oasis of Nuweiba the site of a bedouin settlement

surrounding an old fort located in the northern end of the bay. A modern beach resort further south is near the marine terminal from where ferrys link the Sinai with Aqaba port in Jordan. In the south eastern mountain region the most important oases are `Ain-Hudhra and `Ain Umm-Ahmed both home of the prominent Terabin tribe, who's tribal territory stretches well across the eastern boundary of Egypt into the Negev desert. The South also had substantial wild life, but the larger antelopes such as the Ibex and Oryx, as well as ostriches and leopards are now all extinct due to heavy hunting with the use of rifles. Presently only some gazelles (Dorcas), hyena, foxes and desert rabbits can be found.

Traditionally the Sinai is the home of a predominantly Bedouin or pastoral nomadic population. It is believed that "Bedouin" or "Badu" is derived from an ancient Arabic word meaning "original" (or "aboriginal"). In Egypt the word "Badu" has come to be used interchangeably with the word "Arab" referring to the desert inhabitants outside the Nile Valley. The term "Arab" is used to describe nomads regardless of whether they are actually descended from ancestors from the Arabian Peninsula or not.

Ibn Khaldun believed that nomads preceded agricultural societies in the Middle East, thus calling them the original inhabitants of the area. But modern research suggests that about the same time as the agricultural revolution during which man learned to domesticate animals, pastoral nomadism emerged as a consequence of the immediate ecological situation of the Middle East, particularly in Sinai which certainly cannot support a population on agriculture alone. Nomads started exploiting the vast arid zones that were otherwise unfit for cultivation, thus making maximum use of the total land available. The bedouin adapted their lifestyle to the climatic conditions of the desert by living in tents with a minimum of household utensils, which can be packed and easily moved during migration. They have also developed a range of special skills necessary for survival in their harsh surroundings. Most of these are directly related to their herding activities, such as a wide knowledge of geographical features and of plant and animal life.³ (Awad : 1959, pp.25-56)

From a very early age they learn to distinguish and explain tracks of animals and humans which makes them excellent trackers. This along with their exceptional sense of direction and ability to find water in the

desert has made them far superior to any towns-folk in overcoming the hardship of desert travel.⁴ (Jarvis : 1936, pp. 167-170)

To survive with their animals in areas of very sparse vegetation a pattern of migration has evolved in which the bedouin follow the rainfall with their flocks over large areas of the desert, always moving to fresh pastures.

The size of the grazing area needed for their cyclical migration depends on the relative amount of rainfall. The distances travelled during their annual migration range from about 60 kilometres in Sinai to 100km in Libya. The bedouin of Arabia move even up to 800km every season in search of pastures.⁵ (Cole : 1985) In order to retain control over such vast areas, they were compelled to form strong territorial organisations. This explains the formation of bedouin tribes which provide their members with the necessary access to and protection of pastures and water resources during every season of the year. Tribalism can therefore be seen as a natural outcome of ecological necessity. The group solidarity or `assabyya is based on a common genealogy in which each tribe ascribes their origin and history to a common ancestor. Although no written history of the bedouin exists, their genealogy is the base for innumerable folk tales

related orally from one generation to the next, and forms a vital component of the social life of the tribesmen.⁶ (Marx : 1978)

The tribe also provides for the protection of its individual members. As every male bedouin is essentially a soldier, their leaders have to rely on them for defence, and are therefore compelled to rule them kindly and not to antagonise them. This led to the emergence of a highly egalitarian system so typical of bedouin tribes, and very much in contrast to the sedentary populations of the Middle East.

Sinai has been traditionally inhabited by almost twenty tribes who were also subdivided into smaller clans. Each tribe has its own genealogy and tribal history detailing wars, migrations and affiliations with other tribes.⁷ (Oppenheim : 1941, pp.135-166) Many scholars have concentrated their research on this aspect of Sinai's history and for the purpose of this thesis the Sinai bedouin are treated as one social unit in relation to the Egyptians on the Nile and other populations outside the peninsula. The exact boundaries of tribal territory held by each tribe were not stable and varied as tribes made a "hifl" and formed into larger confederations, raided neighbouring tribes and claimed their territories, or migrated (and also

settled) in an entirely different area of Egypt, or even in another country.

Fig. 3, p.40 shows the location of Sinai tribes as recorded by G.W.Murray in 1935. As tribal territories have more or less stabilised since, his map is still generally valid today.⁸ (Murray : 1935, p.247)

The Bedouin have also adapted their manners and customs to the necessities of life in the desert. They are known for their hospitality that follows ancient traditional rules, as well as their high esteem for such virtues as bravery, honour and group solidarity. The bedouin identity is most evident in their ethics and values that led to the emergence of a legal system called "*urf*". This can be directly related to the specific desert environment they live in and to their fundamental belief that the welfare of the community takes precedence over that of the individual. '*Urf*' is essentially a system of justice based on retribution and restitution: an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Its basic logic and characteristics can be found again in the Jewish law of the Old Testament and, in fact, it is believed that Moses learned from his bedouin hosts during his sojourn in the Sinai. Upon the committing of a crime restitution is demanded from the individual accused, if possible. Otherwise, his next of kin is held responsible. When a certain specific harm is inflicted, the same will be

ARAB TRIBES OF SINAI

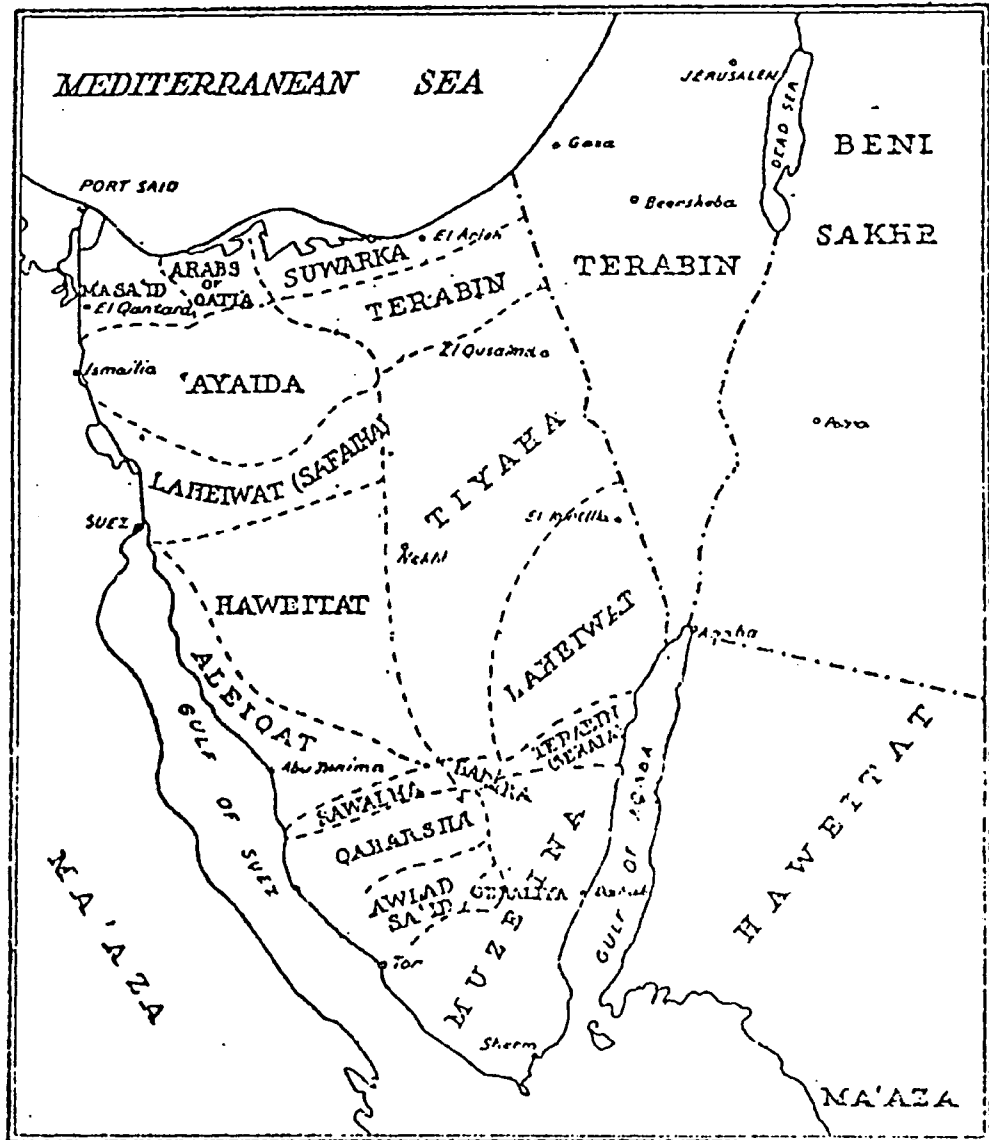


Figure 3 : The Tribes of Sinai

inflicted on the aggressor in revenge if he does not pay for his crime in money or in kind according to the decisions of a court formed by the tribal elders. In Sinai certain sheikhs became specialised in dealing with specific disputes, e.g. inheritance, blood feuds, divorce, etc. due to the great respect of the tribes for them and their wide knowledge of procedure and precedent cases. In complicated cases, a preliminary court would decide on who should preside over the trial.⁹ (Austin : 1925)

There is no punishment in the sense of modern penal law to prevent similar deeds from occurring in the future. The acceptance of collective responsibility of the family or tribe of the accused greatly facilitates the administration of justice, as in the vastness of the desert it would otherwise be almost impossible to track down an individual criminal. These fundamental differences between tribal customary law and the Islamic law (shari`a), which was practised in sedentary Middle Eastern societies, are believed by the bedouin to be of vital importance to ensure tribal harmony in their desert environment.

Although the bedouin have excelled in inhabiting and utilising the deserts, they have also entertained a vital and close relationship with urban

centres. In the city they found markets to conduct trade and obtain the necessary agricultural and manufactured goods. The city dwellers in turn depended on the bedouin for transport of their trade between urban and agricultural centres. The bedouin not only controlled the highways due to their skills and military capabilities, but also possessed the most important beast of burden, the camel, for traversing the large deserts. Therefore trade and protection of caravans were their most important sources of income besides animal husbandry. This income was also frequently complemented by raiding and plundering caravans and villages on the fringe of the desert. Such practices produced the often violent symbiosis of settled and nomadic peoples in the Middle East.

According to the last Census in 1986 the indigenous population of Sinai numbered 200,500 most of whom are bedouin although their degree of sedentarisation varies greatly. Approximately half of this population is now centred in the towns of Sinai.¹⁰ (Mawsu`at Sina : 1992)

NOTES Chapter 1

- ¹ Murray, G.W.. "The Land of Sinai", The Geographical Journal, vol.119 : 1953, pp140-154
- ² Ritter, Carl. "The Comparative Geography of Palestine and the Sinaitic Peninsula". Haskell House, New York : 1865, pp.330-334
- ³ Awad, M., "Settlement of Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Groups in the Middle East". International Labour Review 79 (1959), pp.25-56
- ⁴ Jarvis, C.S., "Three Deserts". John Murray, London : 1936. pp. 167-170
- ⁵ Cole, Donald. "The Bedouin of the Pre-Modern Middle East". Cairo : 1985
- ⁶ Marx : Emanuel. The Ecology and Politics of Nomadic Pastoralists in the Middle East". Mouton, Paris : 1978
- ⁷ Oppenheim, Max Freiherr von, "Die Beduinen". vol.2, Harrasowitz & Co.,Leipzig : 1941, pp.135-166
- ⁸ Murray, G.W., "Sons of Ishmael". George Routledge & Sons, London : 1935, p.247
- ⁹ Austin, Kennet. "Bedouin Justice : Law and Customs among the Egyptian Bedouin". Frank Cass & Co., London : 1925

¹⁰ Mawsu`at Sina'. Al-hai'a al-`ama lil-kitab. Cairo Government Press :
1992

Chapter 2

Sinai before the British Occupation

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will show that the Sinai was always part of Egypt administered by military control from Cairo and its historical role as the “Eastern Shield” of Egypt. It will also document the first recognition of the strategic importance of the Sinai and the ensuing rivalry over its control between Egypt and the Ottoman government in Istanbul.

The Sinai Peninsula has been inhabited and well known to the people of the ancient Middle East for several thousand years. It has always served as the land bridge between Asia and Africa linking the civilisations of pharaonic Egypt with those of Mesopotamia and the Levant. Traversed by many conquering and reconquering armies in both directions, the inhabitants of the peninsula itself have, however, remained outside the direct government control of any regime of the time. Nevertheless, the

peninsula was part of Egypt and since the early Middle Ages was recognised as such by all contemporary historians.

The Sinai is the eastern shield of the nilotic civilisation that devours, or at least weakens, invaders before reaching Egypt proper. The small and few pharaonic mining settlements in Sinai, even at times of their best production, must have had very low yields to make them of significant economic interest to the pharaohs of Egypt. The small workers garrisons seem to have been used more as penal colonies, as well as, functioning as advance warning posts against invaders from the east. However throughout the ages the importance of the geo-political position of the Sinai for Egypt's defense was recognised and whatever government was ruling in Memphis/Cairo manned forts along the land routes to the East to control Egypt's access through the peninsula. Various buildings and artefacts found throughout the deserts of Sinai, some dating back to Pharaonic times, clearly document the continuous and vital economic, political, administrative, and cultural/religious links to Egypt along the Nile.

The central government in Cairo always recognised the indigenous nomadic population as being ethnically different from the Nile valley inhabitants. Egyptian sovereignty was therefore focused on the control of the main trade routes through the peninsula by means of a series of manned forts along the way. The archaeological remains in the Sinai are overwhelming proof. This left the local nomadic social and cultural system intact over the centuries.

It was not until the 19th Century that the question of who the legitimate ruler of the Sinai is would arise. Mohammed Ali, the Viceroy of Egypt, soon became the sovereign power in his Ottoman province on the Nile, defying the sultan in Istanbul and bringing Egypt towards *de facto* autonomy. Over the first decades of the 19th Century Mohammed Ali modernised Egypt to the extent of creating a new autonomous military and political power in the Eastern Mediterranean that was able to counterbalance the influence of the central government of the Ottoman Empire.

Napoleon's march through Sinai and Mohammed Ali's campaigns against Syria marked the beginning of the modern age and first

recognition of the strategic importance of Sinai for the defence of the eastern boundary of Egypt. As a result, Mohammed Ali started containing the hegemony of the bedouin tribes and confirmed their allegiance to his government. His military control was expanded by renovation and manning of the Sinai forts, improvement of the caravan routes and institution of regular postal services. This was in preparation for the *de facto* secession of Egypt under his rule from the Ottoman Empire. After consolidating his position as the sovereign of Egypt, he conducted a series of campaigns into Palestine and Syria and his navy went as far as challenging Turkey herself. His expansion was only contained after the intervention of the other European powers who had come to the rescue of the Ottomans.

As a consequence of these wars Mohammed Ali wanted to confirm his rule over Egypt and founding his dynasty that would remain in power until Egypt became a republic in 1953. It was therefore also necessary to fix a boundary between his domain and the rest of the Ottoman Empire. So the 1840's witnessed a series of political moves to confirm that the Sinai was indeed inside the international boundary of Egypt which was countered by Turkish political moves to undermine the Egyptian

position. Thus the sultan's *firman* instituting Mohammed Ali's hereditary rights as the ruler of Egypt in 1841 included a map which designated the administrative boundary of *wilayet misr* as a line running diagonally from Rafah to Suez. This meant that the rest of the peninsula was not included in the boundary of Egypt. However, the practical reality at the time was different as Egypt was in charge of all the forts along the pilgrimage route from North Africa. This not only included forts in Sinai east of that administrative line, but also the forts of Hijaz along the pilgrimage route. The Egyptian sovereignty over the Hijaz forts was not given up until after the *firman* of 1892 instituting Abbas II on the throne of Egypt.

The opening of the Suez Canal focused the interest and colonial aspirations, of the rivalling imperial powers of Europe on Egypt. The control of this waterway linking the Mediterranean to the Red Sea was recognised by Britain as her primary link to the colonies in the east. The Canal and the adjacent Sinai therefore became vital for the security of Imperial communications and continued British dominance in her rivalry with other colonial powers by maintaining supremacy of sea power. The rise of the "Egyptian Question", after the bankruptcy of the country due

to lavish overspending and corruption, led to the establishment of the “Dual Control” of Egypt’s internal affairs by France and Britain. The revolt of the Egyptian army under Ahmed Orabi gave Britain the legitimacy needed for a full military invasion and subsequent occupation of Egypt in 1882.

2.2 Early History until 1517

No evidence has been found of permanent settlements in the Sinai from before the Roman period. The Pharaohs only interest in the peninsula was as an effective shield against invasions from the East characteristic throughout Egyptian history. They did leave their traces though at the turquoise and copper mines of Serabit al-Khadim which were active from before the invasion of the Hyksos during the 14th Dynasty and were redeveloped in 1580 BC during the reign of Senusert I of the 18th Dynasty. ¹ (Hitti : 1943, p.70) He also commissioned the building of the temple and barracks for guards protecting the mines from bedouin raids. There one can see a rock tablet depicting King Khufu (the builder of the Great Pyramid at Giza) beating the Amu, a nomadic race from the East inhabiting the Sinai. Mt.Sinai, the resting place of the Israelites during

their exodus in the 15th or 14th Century B.C., is only 80 kilometres away. It is therefore highly unlikely that Moses and his people, having just made a narrow escape from Egypt, remained unmolested by the troops guarding the mines. This fact gave rise to theories that a more northern (and more direct) route had been taken by the Exodus, making Jabal Hilal the mountain of the lawgiving rather than Mt.Sinai.² (Jarvis : 1931, p.102-105)

The only other prehistoric buildings found in the Sinai are a water reservoir, canal and protective wall at Ain Gudeis, the biblical Kadesh Barnea, built by the Hebrews. Other sources attribute the structures to the Nabateans of Petra who controlled the East-West trade routes around 500 BC and held outposts throughout the area. Many armies crossed the Sinai peninsula during ancient times: Assyrians, Hittites, Babylonians, Darius the Great, and Alexander who established the Ptolemaic Dynasty, which ended with Cleopatra and the Roman rule in 30 BC.³ (Jarvis : 1931, pp. 110-112)

According to the Antonine Itinerary (285-305 AD) the Via Maris was one of the most important trade routes of the Roman Empire. It crossed

northern Sinai connecting Egypt with Palestine and was lined with a row of flourishing towns. About 40 Roman miles apart (the average marching distance) these were, from West to East: Pelusium (Tell el-Farama), Casium (Katib el-Qals), Ostracine (el-Filusiat), Rhinocolorum (al-'Arish), and Raphia (Rafah). Pelusium was an important port at the mouth of the now dried up Pelusiac branch of the Nile. Extensive ruins of stone buildings, with mosaics and carvings, can still be seen today. The other towns were dismantled and their stones used for building material and only classical writings record their past splendour. ⁴(Ball : 1942, pp.138-158)

During the early Christian period the Sinai became a magnet for pilgrims, Pelusium and Rhinocolorum became cathedral and convent cities. Convents at Paran (now Wadi Feiran) and Mt.Sinai were built, and the Emperor Justinian commissioned the fortification of St.Catherine's monastery in 550 AD. He also gave the monastery a party of Bosnian slave soldiers for its protection, who are believed to be the ancestors of the Jebelyya tribe living in the vicinity. These bedouin later converted to Islam, but their offsprings still bear European features, fair complexion and green eyes, and are the traditional servants and protectors of the convent today. With the thriving of pilgrimage the Sinai bedouin had been

given an important additional source of income: the protection and carrying of pilgrims and supplies along the major travel routes of the peninsula. Treaties to this effect made with the bedouin, some dating back to 800 A.D., are kept by the monks of St.Catherine's. ⁵ (Jarvis : 1931, pp. 225-230)

In 639 `Amr Ibn al-`As set off at the head of a small force numbering only 3500 to 4000 horse-men to conquer Egypt. The Caliph `Umar was reluctant to allow him to proceed and sent a letter of recall the venture. It stated that if the Muslim forces should have not yet entered Egypt they must return, but if they were already on Egyptian territory they should continue in order not to embarrass the troops by making a premature withdrawal. The messenger reached 'Amr at Rafah, and anticipating the content of the letter, `Amr did not open it until reaching el-Arish, where he read it out to his companions to confirm his ambitious plan. The significance of this anecdote is that even at this early date the border between Egypt and Palestine was recognised to be at Rafah where it still is today. 'Amr celebrated the feast of the year 18 Hijra at el-Arish and was joined by many bedouin from Sinai who scented the booty ahead, should they join his conquest of Egypt. They also readily embraced Islam, since

this desert religion appealed to their egalitarian tribal lifestyle. The ease with which `Amr swept through the Roman towns on his way reflected the disarray of the Roman Empire in Egypt, and he was even helped by the Copts who hoped to escape the tyranny of Roman administration.⁶ (Butler : 1902, pp.194-198)

The Sinai bedouin indirectly prospered from the Muslim conquest of Egypt and North Africa due to the development of Darb el-Haj, which became the principal pilgrimage route from Suez via Nekhl and Aqaba onwards to the Hijaz. The roads through Sinai were improved, wells repaired and new ones dug. The bedouin tribes divided the responsibility for transport and protection, as well as the supply of provisions to the pilgrims, each according to their tribal territory. The Towara did the carrying from `Aidab (near Suez) to Jabal Hassana, the Tiyaha onwards until Nekhl, and the Uheywat controlled the road between Nekhl and `Aqaba. Also trade flourished between the provinces of the Muslim Empire and the Tarabin, Sinai's largest tribe profited from caravans on the road from Nekhl to Bersheeba, and from Nekhl to al-`Arish and Ghazza.

But with the increased traffic also came tribal disputes, and raiding became a particular menace to tribes and travellers alike. During the reign of the Omayyad and Abbasid caliphates it was virtually impossible for the government in Egypt or Palestine to control the Sinai bedouin. The nomads refused to pay any taxes, plundered travellers and merchants, and frequently raided into Egypt and Palestine lifting cattle and destroying whole villages. Many attempts were undertaken to restore order, but peace would not last long before rebellion breaks out again. When the Khaliph el-Ma'mun came to Egypt with 4000 Turkish solders in 829 he even found Cairo itself besieged by the bedouin.⁷ (Lane-Pool : 1968, p.37)

It was not until Ahmed Ibn-Tulun established his reign over Syria in 878 that the Sinai trade and pilgrimage routes became somewhat organised and safe. On the other hand, the numerous military campaigns of that period which traversed the peninsula always put the bedouin in a state of great excitement, which resulted in an increase of raiding and inter-tribal warfare. This state of affairs did not change much in the following two centuries. The Shi`a revolution and the establishment of Fatimid rule in Egypt did not affect the tribes of the Sinai who remained Sunni Muslims and enjoyed their freedom, not giving allegiance to any one of the

competing parties. They continued with their activities in the caravan trade and were not influenced until the dawn of the age of the Crusades.

The main significance of the Crusades for the bedouin in Sinai was that the Christian armies drove a wedge between the Muslim centres of power cutting off Egypt from Syria. They had soon recognised the strategic importance of gaining access to the Gulf of Aqaba and proceeded to build fortresses at Shobek, Kerak and Eyla (Aqaba). Also the magnificent castle on Gazirat Phara'on, just south of Taba, served to control the head of the gulf and was the launching point for the brief naval expedition of Renaud de Chantillon to attack the ports of Quseir and Jeddah by carrying his disassembled ships across the desert. Salah el-Din imitated the feat in 1170 and had ships carried across the Sinai and assembled there to be used in supporting his land troops in recapturing Eyla.⁸ (Jarvis : 1931, pp.123-125)

For the tribes of Sinai the turbulent troop movements caused great agitation, and this period was characterised by turmoil and insecurity. But more significant for them was the fact that from 1060 until 1268 when the Mamluk sultan Beybars repelled the Crusaders, caravan traffic and

pilgrimage across the peninsula practically ceased. During this time pilgrims and traders preferred the much safer route down the Nile Valley, then traversing only a short stretch of desert to the Red Sea port of Quseir and onward by ship to Arabia. This curtailed the main legitimate income of the bedouin and caused a great deal of hardship, so they had to rely on their flocks and the limited agriculture for survival, which led to an increase in raiding activity.⁹ (Holt : 1986, p.81)

Salah el-Din, being himself a Kurd, serving his Seljuk Sultan, had brought Turkish slave soldiers to Egypt. They soon not only controlled the military, but the influence of their officers grew to the extent that they became the effective rulers of the country, and the Mamluk dynasties were born. Their power was based on their superb military skills and organisation. Egypt's army and navy was revived, fortresses reconstructed, and the Mongol invasion halted. Also, the power of the bedouin was greatly reduced throughout the country. An Arab revolt in 1253 was severely crushed. Where the Mamluks were not able to control the bedouin directly, they played off different tribes against each other, thus reducing their power.¹⁰ (Irwin : 1986, p.27, 140)

Egypt's countryside was organised under the iqta` system : a feudal organisation in which Mamluk officers and notables, each heading their own private army, were given agricultural land from which they extracted the peasants' surplus and paid dues to their sultan's treasury. In return the Mamluks protected the peasant population from bedouin raids, and, as a result, many plots that had been deserted were brought back under cultivation.¹¹ (Irwin : 1986, p.141)

Under the Sultan Beybars, the Mamluk empire stretched from Sudan in the south all the way to the borders of Persia, where the Mongols had also been pushed back. An extremely efficient postal system for its time had been introduced, which ensured good communication with every corner of the Empire. This general state of stability has also brought peace and safety to the Sinai highways, bedouin attacks almost ceased in fear of the sultans army. But also the resumption of trade along the caravan routes gave the Sinai tribes a good source of income.

Sea trade through the Red Sea to China, India and Ceylon flourished, and the bedouin benefited from the caravans that transported spices to the Mediterranean for onward shipping to Europe, and copper from Europe

destined for India. Additional income for the bedouin came from joining the Mamluk army on their numerous campaigns into Palestine and Syria, returning with ample booty. The Mamluks also employed bedouin horsemen for the *barid* (postal service) between the provinces, and as patrols for the highways.¹² (Irwin : 1986, p.50)

The heyday of the bedouin came under al-Nasir Mohammed Ibn-Qalawun (1310-41) who was infatuated with horses and Arabs. He sent his three sons to Kerak to be trained by the bedouin. The *amir akhur* (emir of the stables), which traditionally was a rather unimportant position at the court, was elevated to cover the sultan's relations with Arab tribal chiefs.¹³ (Irwin : 1986, p.115)

The initial stability of the early Mamluk Empire was later undermined by internal rivalry of factions. Not only the two main divisions were fighting (the Bahri Mamluks of Turkish origin stationed on Roda island in the Nile, against the Burji Mamluks of the Citadel who were mostly Circassians), but also emirs throughout the countryside were battling to control land. Conditions further deteriorated with incidents of plague and famine. The central government soon had no more control over individual

lords, and could no more enforce law and order, and oppose insurgencies from the bedouin tribes.

The bedouin again experienced a decline of the caravan trade when Vasco da Gama discovered the sea route around the Cape of Good Hope in 1497, and the India trade passed into Portuguese hands. Previously Arab traders (and Mamluk ships) had controlled the East-West transit trade for centuries, a great part of which passed through the Sinai, bringing great wealth to its people. Even the great efforts of Kansuh El-Ghuri, who ruled the country at the time and managed to improve conditions in Egypt, could not stop the Portuguese expanding their control in the Red Sea when they occupied Aden in 1513.¹⁴ (Lane-Poole : 1968, pp.350-351) By 1517 Egypt's defences had practically disintegrated and the country was easily conquered by Selim I to become part of the Ottoman Empire.

2.3 : Ottoman/Mamluk Sinai 1517 - 1800

When Selim I came to Egypt he brought with him a powerful army equipped with artillery, and soon broke the remaining resistance of Mamluks and bedouin alike. The Ottomans also introduced a new political

order : all land became state property, and was assigned to administrators to exploit in the name of the sultan, with revenues going to his treasury. Administrators received a fixed salary from the state and therefore lacked the incentive to extract maximum returns from the peasants. Local security, formerly in the hand of Mamluks, was provided by salaried troops. The large costs of this administration soon exceeded revenues and the state had to resort to a system of tax farming called *iltizam*, to make ends meet. The only available and suitable landlords were still the Mamluks, who soon resumed their former positions of power throughout the country.¹⁵ (Shaw : 1968, p.91-95)

To pacify the bedouin the Ottoman government also appointed tribal sheikhs as *multazims*, and gave them control over some villages. This led to the first great wave of sedentarisation of nomads, especially in Upper Egypt. But it also undermined the egalitarian tribal structure, as sheikhs became hereditary feudal lords, while tribesmen were reduced to sharecroppers or even simple agricultural labourers. This process was a gradual one, and varied in direct relation to the power and stability of the central government in Cairo. In some districts such as Behnasa the tribes

remained in control until the middle of the seventeenth century.¹⁶ (Shaw : 1968, p.101)

The lack of agricultural land and peasant communities in the Sinai forced the government to resort to other methods to control the tribes there. Some were resettled to the eastern provinces of the Delta such as Sharqiya, where until now the majority of the population is of bedouin origin. Selim I had put a prominent Arab shaikh, `Abd al-Da'im ibn Badar, in charge of the province, thereby both obtaining ready money, and putting an ally on his exposed Syrian flank.

Yet more bedouin arrived from Arabia to occupy the emigrants place in the Sinai deserts. The Egyptian government recognised the importance of controlling the peninsula that divided the Empire in such a strategic position. Therefore, the government in Cairo employed two main policies to achieve its goal : first, extending its military control over the Sinai by constructing forts along the major caravan routes; and second, buying the goodwill of the tribes with generous allowances for protecting and transporting the annual pilgrimage through the peninsula.

The Sinai slowly came under control of the Egyptian government and fortresses were constructed by the Ottomans at `Ajrud (near Suez), al-`Arish, Khan Yunis, Nekhl, al-Tur, and `Aqaba. Some of these had existed before or during the Crusades and were only improved, but it was the duty of the governor in Cairo to provide for their staff and maintenance. From 1595 onwards the Egyptian treasury had to pay for the cost of troops, usually between 50 and 200 men, garrisoned in each fort. Their purpose was to secure the vital roads that connected Egypt with Palestine and Arabia, from bedouin raids. A special body of infantrymen called the `Azab, Turks that were among the original conquerors, were used to staff forts throughout Egypt.¹⁷ (Shaw : 1962, p.191, 211-2, 394-5) But also other foreign recruits were used. A group of Moorish soldiers for example was stationed at Nekhl. Traces of their dark features can still be found amongst their descendants in the area today. In any case, the forts served their purpose well and highway robbery was greatly reduced.

By the 18th Century the annual pilgrimage had developed into a massive operation, with tens of thousands of pilgrims from all over North Africa participating, which necessitated a likewise elaborate organisation to conduct them safely through the Sinai to the Hijaz. High-ranking officers

of the Ottoman army were assigned to more important and remunerative positions in the administration, one of these was Emir al-Hadj. It was his responsibility to organise the pilgrimage caravan, arrange for its provisions and transport and provide for its safety during the course of the journey.

Beasts of burden and guides were recruited from the tribes according to their respective territory along the course of the caravans. They were commissioned to improve the wells, and transport advance provisions to the forts. In 1538 Emir al-Hadj was provided with 450,000 paras for the expenditure of the operation, this sum had risen to 3,662,893 by the year 1742. Although the caravan was accompanied by 500 soldiers in addition to the ones stationed at the forts, whose number had reached 2000 in the 18th Century, part of this sum was paid to the bedouin tribes on the way to secure their protection. When the Emir failed to pay this tribute and keeping the money to himself, which did occur on numerous occasions, the caravans were raided and plundered. The power of the bedouin was so highly feared that a special guard of 300 men accompanied by relatives of the pilgrims was sent to Azlem with provisions to meet the pilgrims' caravan half way on their return journey.¹⁸ (Shaw : 1962, pp. 242-3, 394-5)

Apart from al-`Arish, that had been a small port since Roman times, al-Tur the present seat of administration for South Sinai developed to be the mid-way rest point for ships sailing between Suez and Jeddah. The Ottomans had established a small garrison there, but the town itself was controlled by the Towara tribe. They also held a monopoly on transporting Christian pilgrims and provisions between the coast and St.Catherine's monastery. This is documented in a series of treaties between the Towara and the monks of the convent recorded in the Kitab al-Umm kept by the Qadi of al-Tur (1592-1851).¹⁹ (Oppenheim : 1943, p. 137)

One can conclude, that throughout the Mamluk period, and even later, well into the 19th century, the bedouin of Sinai never paid taxes and remained an expenditure item on the balance of the Empire's treasury. Whereas the rest of Egypt, including most of her bedouin, by 1800 served the purpose of their Ottoman rulers in exploiting the country's wealth, the Sinai retained a high degree of *de facto* autonomy.

2.4 First European Encounters : Napoleon

The landing of Napoleon's troops near Alexandria in 1798 was the first step towards a long history of European involvement in Egypt. Not only would the French invasion and the subsequent opening to the West of a hitherto traditionally Islamic society transform the social and political fabric of the country, but it also marked the beginning of awareness of the European powers of the economic and geopolitical importance of Egypt. It can be rightfully argued that it was this French invasion which first aroused the interest of Britain in Egypt, and the rivalry between the two powers contributed significantly to the actual occupation in 1882.

One of the most ambitious plans in history for the conquest of the Orient was the dream of the Corsican general who set out for Egypt in 1798. Egypt being at that time in a state of internal disarray and decline under a corrupt Mamluk Sultanate offered little resistance to the well equipped and disciplined French forces. Although the English had warned of an impending invasion Napoleon had little trouble landing near Alexandria, taking the city and moving onwards through the delta towards the west bank of the Nile near Cairo. He brought with him a force of 30,000

soldiers accompanied by scientist and engineers with the hope to advance through Egypt, Syria and Persia to ultimately conquer India from the British.²⁰ (Herold : 1963, pp.2-4) He hoped to enlist locals along the way and thus enlarge his forces to be capable of accomplishing this grand feat. Having taken Cairo after an easy battle with the Mamluks he set out in January 1799 for the advance into Asia through the Sinai Peninsula. On his way he would have to overcome Turkish forces that manned the forts from Sinai through Palestine and Syria. So he sent off an advance party into the Sinai of about 600 men led by his General Lagrange who succeeded after three days in establishing an outpost at Katia. He faced little resistance from the Turks and proceeded to recruit the local bedouin to form a Camel Corps that would provide the necessary transport for the French desert expedition. Another French party set out by sea travelling close to the coast towards al-'Arish. Three weeks later Lagrange was joined by 13,000 men consisting of infantry and cavalry under Generals Kleber and Reynier who pushed onwards to al-'Arish.²¹ (Herold : 1963, pp.267-268) Although they had no problem pushing the enemy forward they found the town heavily fortified and the troops at their disposal insufficient. The narrow streets inside and surrounding the fort made it very difficult to storm the town without suffering heavy casualties. When

Kleber arrived one week later the siege of al-'Arish was still unsuccessful in breaking the Turkish resistance who were meanwhile supported by an additional force that had arrived from Khan Younis in Palestine and set up camp just outside the town towards the east. Kleber ordered a night attack, which proved to be a partial success, and quite a number of Turks fled eastward to Ghazza. On February the 10th, Napoleon set out to join his troops in al-'Arish to find the town still holding out. He ordered the large guns to advance and proceeded with a heavy bombardment, but still could not break the resistance of the barricaded troops inside. Not wanting to lose more men, he resorted to diplomacy by sending a letter to the Commander of the fort Ibrahim Nizam Bey, offering him an unharmed retreat, which was accepted by the defenders. Having taken al-'Arish, Napoleon advanced on the 21st of February along the Mediterranean coast to take Ghazza and onwards to lay siege to the fortress of Acre.²² (Al-Jabarti : 1801)

Acre proved to be impossible to take due to the reinforced and much larger Turkish force guarding it and the support of the British fleet under the command of Sir Sydney Smith. This was the turning point of Napoleon's campaign which shattered his dreams of conquering Asia, so he had to turn

back and retreat towards Egypt. By June he was back in al-'Arish with his troops and although they had only suffered moderate casualties the plague broke out and started extracting a heavy toll from amongst the French. He left a force of about 500 men under the command of Colonel Cazal in charge of the fort at al-'Arish and another guard at Katia to prevent an advance of the Turks and withdrew back towards the Nile Delta. Meanwhile England and Russia allied themselves with the Turks with the aim to oust the French from Egypt and reinstating control over the imperial eastern trade routes considered so vital to Britain. Realising the hopelessness of his situation Napoleon left General Kleber in charge of his forces in Egypt and left for France after evading the British blockade of his navy. The Turks had prepared a huge army of some 70,000 men to expel the French from Egypt while a British Expeditionary force was on its way. Realising the impossible situation Kleber entered into negotiations for a withdrawal from Egypt and an armistice was arranged. This was broken by the Turks in Sinai and at al-'Arish the small French force soon found itself facing an onslaught of some 30,000 Turkish troops aided by British officers that laid siege to the fort. Cazal and his men put up a heroic resistance to the overwhelming Turkish forces and endured several days of merciless bombardment causing heavy casualties, but finally had to

surrender. Kleber continued negotiations at al-'Arish and partly on a British battleship anchored offshore and pleaded with Sir Sydney Smith for being allowed an honourable withdrawal from Egypt. Britain refused to accept such generous terms and asked for unconditional surrender. By March 1800 the Turkish force under Youssef Pasha reached Egypt and defeated the French at Mataria near Cairo. Kleber was assassinated later in Cairo and was succeeded by his deputy General Menou who in turn was defeated by Sir Ralph Abercrombie near Alexandria. The British had also sent another force from India under General Bird who joined the fighting and the French were finally defeated and capitulated on the 31st of August 1801.²³ (Elgood : 1931, pp. 207-251)

2.5 The Reign of Muhamed Ali and the Rise of the “Eastern Question”

One of the young officers who had come with the Turkish army to expel the French was Mohammed Ali, the ambitious future ruler of Egypt. By clever diplomacy and sometimes ruthlessly cunning methods he took advantage of the disarray of affairs in the country and in a few years had

effectively established himself as the paramount ruler even defying the authority of the *Porte* in Istanbul. The French General had brought modern science to the country, but his stay was cut short by the disastrous campaign through the Sinai and destruction of his navy by Admiral Nelson, and it was left up to Mohammed Ali the Ottoman Viceroy of Egypt to put grand modernisation schemes into practice.

He succeeded in transforming Egypt from a rural backward country in 1802 to a nation that by the 1830's would challenge the Powers themselves in supremacy over the Eastern Mediterranean. Mohammed Ali's grip over power in Egypt soon made it evident that he is in fact a sovereign ruler of an increasingly independent country. This meant that the administrative boundary of his territory was being increasingly defined, and under his reign Egypt's administrative control extended not only over the Sinai peninsula, but also included several forts on the eastern shore of the Gulf of Aqaba protecting the pilgrimage route to Mekka. It can be ascribed to the reign of Mohammed Ali that the Sinai bedouin tribes were first brought under the control of the Egyptian security forces and the movement of caravans across the peninsula became safe and orderly. His campaigns in Syria and the Levant were all

too successful and the Ottoman Sultan in Istanbul had to resort to the help of France and England to restore his control over the rebellious province of his empire. By 1841 Mohammed Ali had to concede the conquered territories back to Istanbul's control, but was in return rewarded with hereditary rights to the throne of Egypt, thereby advertedly further confirming the country's semi-independent status. The successors of Mohammed Ali continued his policy of becoming more and more independent of Istanbul and the Sinai Peninsula was increasingly being developed and integrated into Egypt's administration.

When Mohammed Ali established himself on the throne of Egypt, Sinai was also under his authority. Yet the bedouin of Sinai were largely administering themselves ruled by their tribal sheikhs. The town of al-Tur was under the administration of Suez governorate, the fort of Nekhl and other forts in Sinai were under the authority of the Egyptian treasury and the administration of al-'Arish was taken care of directly by the Ministry of Interior Affairs. When the Wahabi uprising started in 1811 Mohammed Ali was put in charge of subduing the revolt by the Porte in Istanbul. He contemplated on whether to send his troops by land through the Sinai desert but due to the limited water resources opted for sending them by sea

from Suez to Yanbu. He thus founded the Boulaq shipyards and started constructing ships which were transported in parts to Suez where they were assembled. The fleet then transported 8,000 men under the command of his eldest son Tousson Pasha to Arabia where they established an operations base in Yanbu and then proceeded onwards to Mekka and Medina. After a series of intensive battles Mohammed Ali had to go to his rescue in 1814, he performed the holy pilgrimage but could not subdue the revolt of the Wahabis. Tousson returned with him to Egypt and shortly after succumbed to a serious illness and died in Cairo. So in 1816 he sent his second son Ibrahim Pasha who proceeded to Arabia with a new army down the Nile valley to Qena and crossed the Red Sea from Qusseir to Yanbu. This time the campaign was a success and Ibrahim reached Nejd the capital of the Wahabis where he captured their leader `Abdullah, who he sent back to Egypt and then onwards to Turkey to be executed in 1818. Ibrahim was rewarded by the Sultan with the title Wali of Makkah (Keeper of the holy places).²⁴ (Al-Rafii : 1947 pp. 95-127)

In 1821 Greece, which was under Turkish rule at the time, revolted and started its fight for independence from the Ottoman Empire. The Sultan asked Mohammed Ali for help, who had just subdued the revolts in Sudan,

and a fleet carrying 16,000 men was sent for Greece again under the command of Ibrahim Pasha. The campaign was successful and Ibrahim subdued many cities and town in Greece until the Great Powers England, France and Russia intervened and beat the Egyptian and Turkish navies at the famous battle of Navarin in October 1827. Turkey had to grant independence to Greece and Ibrahim returned to Egypt. Mohammed Ali was compensated by the Sultan for his efforts and expenses by granting him the rule over the island of Crete.²⁵ (Dodwell : 1931 pp. 69-93)

But Mohammed Ali had even greater aspirations, he wanted to conquer Syria and all the lands in between, which resulted in complete deterioration of his relations with the Ottoman *Porte*. He took a disagreement with the ruler of Acre as a pretext and sent a fleet, as well as a 24,000 strong ground force via the Sinai Peninsula under the leadership of his son Ibrahim, to put siege to Acre, which fell in May 1832. Ibrahim proceeded to conquer Damascus and continued towards Asia Minor after subduing the Turkish forces at the battle of Homs and was now threatening the very existence of the Ottoman Empire. The conquests of Ibrahim greatly alarmed the European powers as they had been warily watching the expansion of Russia's influence in the Balkan and Asia minor, what

became known as the “Eastern Question”. A victory of Mohammed Ali’s forces over the Turks they feared would lead Russia to intervene and consequently occupy the Dardanelles and control the entire Black Sea. In order to preempt against Russia’s single action, Lord Palmerston rallied the support of Prussia and Austria to join England in an alliance to counter the Egyptian threat. A strategic move which was seen as necessary at that time to prevent the powers from falling out amongst themselves in containing Russia’s ambitions. The Egyptian army in Syria could not withstand the combined power of the Europeans and finally Mohammed Ali had to give in and restrain his rule to Egypt and evacuate Syria and Palestine.²⁶ (Weigall : 1915, pp. 73-77)

European intervention broke Mohammed Ali’s expansion, but it was also with the support of Lord Palmerston that he was granted the hereditary rights to the Throne of Egypt. It was by no means altruistic motives that drove Britain’s policy, but it was seen as favourable to support Egypt’s autonomy from the Ottoman Empire which would decrease Turkey’s influence and maintain the balance of power in the Eastern Mediterranean in favour of Britain. The British navy had also been expanding its bases in the Indian Ocean, Red Sea (Aden) and Persian Gulf creating a chain of

harbors and trade posts along the route to India. Even before the Suez Canal was built Egypt had already been recognized as the land Bridge between the Mediterranean and the East and was therefore drawn into the wider schemes of British long range colonial policy.²⁷ (Dodwell : 1931, pp. 147-153)

It thus came as no surprise that Mohammed Ali had the support of Britain when he disputed the eastern boundary of his domain. The *firman* of 1841 installed Muhammed Ali and his dynasty as the hereditary rulers of Egypt in return for the payment of an annual tribute, but restricted the Egyptian army to 18,000 men.²⁸ (White : 1899, p. 450-3) A map accompanied the Sultan's *firman* which showed the eastern (administrative) boundary of Egypt to be a straight line from Al-'Arish to Suez, thus excluding the whole of southern Sinai from Egypt's territory. However, this was never the case in practice as Cairo continued to run all the forts in Sinai and the Hejaz forts until 1892. It also came accompanied by a map showing the territory of Egypt, the eastern boundary of Sinai shown as a straight line from Suez to Rafah, leaving most of the Sinai outside Egyptian territory. Again it was with British intervention that Egypt's administration would

include all of what is present day Sinai in addition to the forts along the eastern shore of the gulf of Aqaba.²⁹ (Kliot : 1986, p. 153)

2.6 The Reign of the Khedives and the Rise of the “Egyptian Question”

Mohammed Ali fell ill in 1848 and instituted his son Ibrahim as his successor. But Ibrahim did not last more than a few months on the throne before he also became seriously ill and died in November 1848, and Mohammed Ali died shortly after in 1849. The grandson of Mohammed Ali, `Abbas Pasha, became the ruler of Egypt in 1848, until his assassination in 1854. Despite his reclusiveness and aversion towards foreigners he was a great supporter of modernization and introduced the first railway to Egypt. Said Pasha followed on the throne of Egypt and it was in his reign that one of the greatest works of the century was started, the construction of the Suez Canal, which had the greatest impact on the future of the Sinai Peninsula.

Said Pasha was succeeded by the son of Ibrahim, Isma`il Pasha, in whose time the Suez Canal was completed. Isma`il upon being confirmed as the ruler of Egypt in 1867 managed to have the line of succession altered to be premogeniture in his own family in exchange for raising the annual tribute to be paid to Turkey to 682,000 pounds, from 377,000 paid during the reign of Mohammed Ali.³⁰ (Cromer : 1911, p. 667) The Suez Canal was inaugurated in November 1869 with some of the grandest celebrations the world has ever seen at the time. Isma`il provided the most lavish entertainment and hospitality to his guests that had arrived from all over Europe. About halfway on the course of the 176 Km long canal he built a new city to carry his name, Isma`ilia. On the other side of the Canal another settlement was founded which would become very famous during the First World War called Kantara. Isma`il had endless projects and plans for the modernisation of Egypt which he pursued uncontrollably. He built thousands of schools, hospitals, museums, railways, roads and bridges, telegraph lines and a modern postal service transforming Egypt to match the most advanced European powers of the time. But the spree of rapid expansion was also matched by his extreme squandering of money on feasts and presents until he effectively drove the country to bankruptcy. Large loans were procured from usurious European lenders and his

inability to service them finally opened the door to European intervention.³¹ (Weigall : 1915, pp.102-114)

The Eastern Question had intensified after the Crimean War (1854-58) and the opening of the Suez Canal created another Bosphorus right on Britain's trade route. This intensified the interest of Britain in gaining control of this vital waterway in order to expand her supremacy of the sea. When the Egyptian economy collapsed the creditor nations forced Isma`il to share his hitherto absolute power by forming a council of ministers under Nubar Pasha as Prime Minister which included two European Ministers, an Englishman, Mr Rivers Wilson as Minister of Finance, and the French Monsieur de Blignieres in charge of Public Works. Thus the "Dual Control" was born in 1876 and the Commission of Public Dept was set up to supervise the repayment of loans, one of its members was Major Evelyn Baring (who later became Lord Cromer). Isma`il, not being used to having to share his powers with a cabinet, did his best to obstruct their work which was not taken kindly to by Europe and upon their pressure the Sultan finally dismissed Isma`il and his young son Tewfik was instituted as Khedive of Egypt. His reign lasted until 1892, during which the Orabi revolt almost toppled the throne of Egypt were it not for British military

intervention which led to the occupation of Egypt in 1882. ³² (Dicey : 1902, pp.287-335)

2.7 The Domestic Situation in Sinai

The modernisation and progress of Egypt during the 19th Century had very little effect on the state of affairs in the Sinai itself until the 1880's when a more formal administration was set up for the peninsula. Thus most first hand information we have from earlier periods is from European travellers and adventurers that traversed the desert. One of the earliest well known traveller was Johann Ludwig Burkhardt whose vivid accounts of his journey in 1810 give us a good insight into bedouin life. He was followed by a number of other famous explorers such as Alexandre Dumas, Carl Ritter and Richard Burton. Although their accounts are often exaggerated and biased we can synthesise a general picture of affairs in Sinai at the time.

During the campaign of Napoleon, and also of course when the various armies of Ibrahim Pasha crossed the Sinai, bedouin were always involved

in some way as trackers, guides and carriers with their camels. They invariably changed sides either acting for the French or Egyptians invaders or helped on the side of the Ottomans as the opportunity arises. The frenzy of activities across the Sinai provided them with a great deal of legitimate and other income at various times, but their true allegiance never lasted long with any one side. The greatest impact of the various military activities was probably the fact that they got hold of large amounts of modern weapons and ammunition which they put to good use in raiding caravans and inter tribal warfare. The tribes of Sinai, as all other bedouin in the Middle East, each have their own tribal area known as *derak*, the boundaries of which have been over centuries the subject of feuds and litigation. The ambiguous boundaries of these territories give the perfect excuse for disputes arising over grazing rights, the ownership of plots of palm trees or the rights to the waters of a particular well. The fact that their flocks of camels freely roam the desert in search of pastures make them the frequent target of theft, again the perfect reason for another tribal war. It is difficult to separate fact from fiction when such disputes are analysed in a historical context as no written records exist. The accounts of famous battles are passed on verbally and tend to be elaborated in colourful stories of heroic feats and are the centrepiece of evening

entertainment around the campfire. Yet some larger battles can be seen to have a historical foundation and they shape the traditions and relationships between the various tribes until modern times. The highways of Sinai at the beginning of the nineteenth Century were by no means safe for travellers or trading caravans. Merchants were always at the mercy of the bedouin and had to pay for safe passage to every tribe on their way. Protection money from the caravans was one of the most significant sources of income for the inhabitants of Sinai, although they did frequently render actual services also in the form of hiring out their camels to carry goods and people through their respective tribal territories. Under Mohammed Ali the bedouin started feeling the strong arm of authority, as he made a great effort, particularly in the course of his Syrian campaigns, to make the roads through Sinai safe. Thus Burkhardt writes : "At the time when Mohammed `Ali, Pasha of Egypt, had reduced all other Bedouins on the Egyptian *hadj* road to complete subjection, the `Omran still proved obstinate. In the year 1814 they attacked and plundered a detachment of Turkish cavalry near Akaba, and in 1815 they pillaged the whole advance corps of the Syrian pilgrim caravan from Medina to Damascus."³³ (Burkhardt : 1831, pp.221-2) The Sinai bedouin by no means limited their raiding to the confines of the peninsula itself but also

attacked caravans on the Suez-Cairo road and well into Palestine and Arabia.

Ibrahim Pasha before proceeding with his campaign in Syria had renovated and improved the wells at Katia, Bir el-`Abd and at Shaikh Zuwaid and appointed *`ghafirs* (guards) for each in charge of their upkeep. He also instituted a very efficient and regular postal service that carried mail by camel across the Sinai to Palestine and Syria, with stations at Kantara, Katia, Bir al-`Abd, al-`Arish, Rafah and Ghazza.

His successor, Abbas Pasha seemed to have a special liking for the Sinai where he had a spa built at the sulphuric springs near al-Tur and constructed the first road linking the coast to the convent of Saint Catherine. He acquired some orchard lands from the convent and compensated the monks lavishly by granting them ownership of some very fertile land in the delta in exchange. He had planned to build a summer palace in the high valley of St.Catherine's and a paved road linking it to al-Tur, but his plans did not materialise by the time of his death.³⁴ (Dicey: 1902, pp.20-25)

During the reign of Said Pasha the most important project in Sinai was the building of the quarantine station at al-Tur in 1858. The pilgrimage route from North Africa led almost exclusively by land through the Sinai Peninsula but towards the second half of the 19th Century more and more pilgrims preferred to take the sea route from Suez to Arabia. The port at al-Tur was consequently expanded and improved and due to its secluded position was a good choice for a suitable quarantine station. But the station was not fully utilised until its expansion and modernisation in 1893 when it was brought up to an internationally acclaimed standard of the time as will be mentioned later.³⁵ (Shukeir : 1915)

2.8 Conclusion

Egypt continuously controlled the Sinai since pharaonic times. During the 19th century law and order was progressively extended to the highways and towns of Sinai. By the 1880's the peninsula was well integrated into the territory controlled by the Egyptian government with its eastern boundary well defined as being a line running from Rafah on the Mediterranean to Taba, a small bay just west of Aqaba on the Red Sea. The highways, border and forts were under the control of the Egyptian army, while the

civilian administration based at Sinai's capital of the time, Al-'Arish, was controlled by the Ministry of Interior. The bedouin population was largely autonomous and managed its own affairs under their customary law and tribal traditions. However the international geopolitical position of the Sinai had been given very little attention by the Egyptian government. It was the British who first recognized the unique strategic position and geopolitical importance of Sinai in the wake of Mohammed Ali's conquests, the rise of the Eastern Question, accelerated Imperial expansion and colonial rivalry. They then consistently pursued international diplomacy towards Turkey, manipulating policy to ensure the inclusion of the Sinai in Egypt's territory, in order to secure British naval supremacy and along the route to Asia through control of the Suez Canal.

NOTES Chapter 2

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Chapter 3

The British Occupation 1882 until World

War I

3.1 Introduction

The protection of British investors' interests and the protection of foreigners' lives during the Orabi revolt may have been the official reasons for Britain's occupation of Egypt, but there were also more far reaching geo-political considerations involved. The Suez Canal had by that time proven to be of key importance for British imperial communications with colonies in Asia and its control became vital in the mind of late 19th century strategists. The security of the Suez Canal, however, also necessitates the control of its eastern shores and the Sinai Peninsula.

The first years of the veiled occupation saw the British more preoccupied with the affairs of Egypt's debt and internal politics, but soon the split

with the Ottoman Empire started to emerge. Turkish displeasure with the occupation of Egypt and souring of relations with Britain over other issues gave rise to a “Turkish Threat” on the eastern boundary of Britain’s most cherished possession. The rising importance of the Suez Canal to Imperial communications made British control of the Sinai imperative policy. “Gibraltar, Malta, Cyprus, Egypt ... The Mediterranean may be compared to a bridge, uniting Great Britain with India and the Far East, of which Egypt is the keystone.”¹ (White : 1899, p.103)

Importance of control over Egypt and the Suez Canal intensified with the widening of the “Eastern Question” which used to be localized to south eastern Europe. The Powers were contesting Russia’s grab for Constantinople as the Ottoman Empire was crumbling. They were reacting to Russian expansion in Central Asia, the German entrance into the pursuit of colonial ambitions, the rise of Japan as a military and commercial power in the Far East, and America’s entry into the Far East with the occupation of the Spanish Philippines in 1898. All this shifted the Eastern Question towards Asia and the Pacific and made British naval communications even more important. Britain’s continued military

control of the Canal was of course in direct contravention of the Treaty of Neutrality signed in 1888 by the European Powers which was to guarantee free access and navigation to all shipping regardless of nationality. The control of the Sinai Peninsula became an integral part of this policy.

Two matters became central to British colonial policy for the Sinai :

One, encountering the Turkish claim to their “province” by furthering the creation of an international boundary between Egypt and what would later become Palestine in order to legitimize any future territorial claims.

The urgency became particularly evident as to contemporary statesmen future armed conflict seemed unavoidable. Marking their exact claims beforehand was a feature of colonial territorial policy of Britain. Two, devising a system of efficient military and administrative control for the Sinai peninsula with direct communications to British authorities, became a policy issue that entertained decision makers up to the highest levels in London.

The Ottoman sultan tried again to sever the Sinai from Egypt’s control in the *firman* of 1892 instituting 'Abbas II as the ruler of Egypt. This was in

reaction to the British occupation, which Istanbul saw as an infringement on their rights over their territory, and now after 10 years it did not look like the British presence was of temporary nature. With the personal efforts of Cromer and British intervention the *firman* crisis was overcome and Egypt remained in control of Sinai, but had to relinquish the administration of the Hijaz forts to Turkey.

Deterioration of relations with Turkey by 1906 and agitation on the boundary led to the “Taba Incident” and another incident at Rafah that was resolved just short of military confrontation. The British having by then recognized the strategic importance of retaining supremacy in the peninsula reacted by a show of power. In reaction to the two incidents, they sent a destroyer in both cases to counter a small party of Turkish infantry. The skirmishes resulted in the setting up of a boundary commission and the subsequent demarcation of the boundary in 1906. Although still only an administrative boundary between two provinces of the Ottoman Empire it was very significant that Britain should go to such trouble to demarcate this boundary.

Secondly, on the domestic front, British control over Sinai was achieved by changing the administration of the province to be under the Ministry of War. It was at British urging that the administration of Sinai was put under the Ministry of War rather than the Ministry of Interior as had previously been the case. Since the commander in chief of the Egyptian Army was an Englishman it would therefore be easier to retain direct British control over the Sinai through the Army. More attention was to be paid to the development and administration of Sinai than before the 1906 border incident and a British officer became the governor of the Sinai, a position that would remain English until after the Second World War. Also an improvement of infrastructure and general development of the peninsula under British administration was to bond the Sinai bedouin to their British masters.

This chapter will show that the control of the Sinai peninsula had become an integral part of British security policy in the Middle East leading towards the outright military confrontation with Turkey during the First World War, who entered the war on the axis side and attacked the Suez Canal.

3.2 Britain's Occupation of Egypt and International Diplomacy to secure Possession of Sinai - The Boudary of 1906

By the time the British occupation of Egypt began in 1882 the Sinai peninsula had been firmly controlled and integrated into the administration directed by Cairo. The influence of Egypt's Khedive extended over the boundaries of Sinai to include forts in the Hejaz. The peninsula enjoyed a good deal of modernization and the trade routes running through it had been secured. It had also been noted for its strategic importance for the security of British imperial communications and this would be the pretext for occupying the Sinai for another 70 years.

As a consequence of the disastrous financial situation brought about by the squandering of Isma'il Pasha the Khedive of Egypt, and the turmoil of the Orabi revolt that followed, Britain had to intervene in order to protect European investments in Egypt, most importantly of course the Suez Canal, the access to India and Asia. Their first encounter with the Sinai was of a rather unfortunate nature. In the wake of the impending invasion of Egypt, the British sought to protect their eastern flank by pacifying the

Sinai bedouin and win them over to their side should military action be necessary in the peninsula. So they sent Professor Henry Palmer accompanied by Capt. Jil an engineer, Lt. Charleston from the Royal Navy, a Syrian interpreter and nine camel drivers headed by Mutir abu Safih from the Laheiwat tribe of Sinai. Officially they were supposed to purchase camels for the British campaign, but their real purpose was to bribe the bedouin to stand against the Ottomans and cut the telegraph line between Egypt and Syria. The Navy allocated 20,000 pounds for the undertaking of which Palmer took 3,000 pounds with him on the expedition. The Arabs of Sinai were in a very excited state at the time having heard of the Orabi revolt and believed the British occupation to be near its end. The party was attacked by robbers from the Howeitat and Terabin tribes, with an intriguing involvement from Mutir and the Englishmen were killed and the money stolen in an ambush in Wadi Sudr on the 11th of August 1882. When the Orabi revolt was subdued a mission under the command of Colonel Sir Charles Warren was sent to Sinai to investigate and they returned with the culprits who were tried in Tanta. Five were executed and another seven received long prison terms. The remains of Professor Palmer and his party were also found and transferred to London where he was buried in St. Paul's Cathedral, a marble plaque details the

circumstances of his death. Colonel Warren published a book about the incident and a map detailing the location of Palmer's murder is kept at the Public Record Office in London.

Nevertheless, the invasion of Egypt and subsequent occupation of the Canal and Sinai succeeded and the country came under direct British administration. Although the British were in Egypt with the consent of the Ottoman Sultan, by the late 1880's the Ottoman government had become very suspicious of the motives of continued occupation and started to demonstrate its sovereignty by issuing orders to Cairo regarding territorial arrangements. As a first move the *Porte* asked for the return to its sovereignty of the forts in the Hijaz which had until then been administered by Egypt. When Mohammed 'Ali was confirmed as the hereditary ruler of Egypt by the Ottoman Sultan, the *firman* was accompanied by a map on which the Eastern boundary of Egypt was drawn as a line from Suez to Rafah. The Pasha never recognised this as being the boundary of his country, but designated a straight line from Rafah, about 45 Km east of al-'Arish, down to the Red Sea coast in north western Hijaz. The territory included all the forts of north-western Arabia from al-Wagh to Aqaba, as well as the whole of the Sinai peninsula. However,

when Turkey asked them to be handed over, Egypt did not resist, since it was just spending money on the upkeep of these garrisons. It was therefore decided to comply with the orders of the sultan and withdraw from al-Wagh and Moweilah in 1887/8, followed by Aqaba in 1891 and the Eastern boundary of Egypt became an almost straight line from Rafah to a point just 5 Km South of Aqaba on the gulf of Aqaba.² (Rizk : 1989, p. 46)

When Abbas Hilmi II followed Tewfiq Pasha as the ruler of Egypt in 1892 the Sultan sent his *firman* to confirm him as Khedive of Egypt, but again attempted to sever the Sinai Peninsula from his sovereignty. The British High Commissioner, Sir Evelyn Baring (Lord Cromer), keeping in mind the strategic importance of the peninsula, refused to accept the *firman* and it was not announced until a correction from the sultan was sent by telegram on the 8th of April 1892 conceding all of Sinai to Egypt. In order to avoid future misunderstandings Lord Cromer sent a note to the British Ambassador in Turkey to inform the Ottoman government that no *firman*s are to be changed that concern the affairs of Egypt without the consent of Great Britain. The Khedive visited al-Tur in June 1896 and another visit to al-'Arish in 1898. During this second visit he inspected the border post

at Rafah and had an inscription made on the granite pillars that demarcate the boundary to commemorate his visit. These pillars would become an important evidence in the boundary dispute of 1906 between Egypt and the Ottomans.³ (Rizk : 1989, p.64-66)

By the mid 1890's Cromer had restored Egypt's finances and the continued British presence was now being questioned, not only by the Ottomans, but even by the British themselves. Cromer evidently favoured the withdrawal of Britain from Egypt and even solicited the support of Gladstone who had also advocated independence on many occasions since 1882. Gladstone, then in opposition, wrote to Cromer in 1896 siding him against the imperialist attitude of the government in London that favoured the continued occupation for geopolitical reasons : "I am totally devoid of power. My opinion has always been the same; that we ought to quit Egypt after having fulfilled the work for which we went there with honour and profit to that country. So far as I know that time arrived some years ago."⁴
(Mansfield : 1973, p.164)

In 1898 Kitchener reconquered the Sudan officially in the service of the Khedive, by a mandate confirmed by the Ottoman Sultan, the Khedive's

overlord. “Legally the Sudan was simply a province of the Turkish Empire, reconquered for the Sultan by British aid.” But Britain announced that “henceforth these reconquered provinces should be under the explicit joint control of England and Egypt; and the suzerain rights of Turkey were tacidly ignored.”⁵ (Weigall : 1915, pp.196-7) The final confirmation of Turkish suspicions came when England and France signed the *entente cordiale* in 1904, a treaty which provided for a settlement of colonial territories between them, in which Morocco was allocated to France in return for control over Egypt to be left for Britain.⁵ (Mansfield : 1973, p.166)

The High commission in Cairo meanwhile succeeded in positioning a British officer in charge of the Sinai in 1905, when Mr Bramley became the inspector for Sinai and started modernising the administration, which included the organisation of a local mounted police force and the building of the flood dam in Wadi al-'Arish. Egyptian nationalism under the leadership of Mustafa Kamel had become very active in attacking the British occupation at every possible occasion. Some local papers, opposed to the British occupation, claimed that Britain was sending her troops to Sinai to build forts on its border to cut it off from the Ottoman Empire.

When this news was conveyed to the Sultan by the Governor of Syria he ordered the establishment of military posts at Kusaima and Kuntilla which are both inside the boundary of Sinai. The Ottoman troops in Bersheeba had already been upgraded previously in 1899. Cairo being suspicious of the Ottoman movements ordered Mr Bramley to position troops at Ras Nabek to monitor the activities on the border. When Bramley found that the location was not suitable due to a lack of water he continued with his men to the Gulf of Aqaba, where he was met by the Turkish commander of the Aqaba fort, General Rushdi Pasha, who asked him to withdraw from this area. Bramley complied to avoid a military confrontation, but consequently Egypt asked the Sultan to form a joint Egyptian-Turkish commission to demarcate the exact course of the boundary between Egypt and Syria, this was refused.⁷ (Rizk : 1989, p.68-70)

Egypt, having been alarmed by the Ottoman actions, sent a small force by sea under the command of Miralay Sa'd Rif'at Bey, the former military governor of the Sinai, to land at Taba and secure the boundary. When they arrived they found Rushdi Pasha's soldiers had taken defensive positions round the bay of Taba, so he had to withdraw to avoid unnecessary bloodshed. So on the 17th of February 1906 the British destroyer Diana



left Suez commanded by Capt. Fips Hornby, who was accompanied by the Egyptian representative, Na`um Shoucair Bey, headed for Taba. They picked up Mr Bramley and his men at Phara`on island and continued towards Aqaba. They observed the Turks still occupying Taba, with a backup force of had more than 2,000 men entrenched at Aqaba ready for battle. Nevertheless, the overwhelming firepower of the destroyer, and the smooth negotiation skills of the Egyptian delegation, soon persuaded Rushdi Pasha that it would be better to solve the problem diplomatically. Having made their position clear, the destroyer then retreated to Phara`on Island to wait for the joint Turkish-Egyptian delegation that would settle the boundary issue. Rushdi Pasha was under the impression that the British were pursuing some dark and ulterior motive in Sinai and sent troops to Taba to stir up trouble. Naum Bey continued to meet him during the following days and explained that the primary reason why the Egyptian government wanted to mark the exact course of the boundary was to control cross border raids by the bedouin, which occurred frequently, with the culprits often fleeing to Palestine or Hijaz after committing crimes in Sinai and vice versa. As for the British they were helping to improve the economic and administrative situation of the peninsula with the only probable long term motive of securing the safety of the Suez Canal. The

Turkish delegates finally arrived in Cairo and continued from there by sea to Palestine and onwards to Aqaba, but then left without meeting their Egyptian counterparts. This angered both the Egyptians and British and the border negotiations were moved to take place between London and Estana. Turkey made several proposals for a new border : one was a triangular line joining al-'Arish with Suez and Aqaba, leaving the Tih plateau area of Central Sinai under Turkish administration; and another proposal was a line down the middle of the peninsula from al-'Arish to Ras Muhammad. Egypt continued to insisted that the border should follow the old line from Rafah to Taba.⁸ (Shoucair : 1916, pp. 588-594)

Shortly after the incident in Taba the Turks sent troops to Rafah in April 1906. There they removed the ancient granite border pillars and replaced several Egyptian telegraph poles with Turkish ones inside Egyptian territory, and then set up a military camp there. The Egyptian government again sent Shoucair Bey from the Military Intelligence Department as the Egyptian representative, and Captain Weymoth as the British representative, and they embarked on the destroyer Minerva from Port Said to investigate. They picked up a party of Arab sheikhs who were well familiar with the Rafah area and the position of the pillars, as well as

several desert policemen from al-'Arish and continued towards Rafah. There the Arab experts identified the correct former location of the pillars and testified that they had been removed by the Turkish soldiers two weeks earlier. Furthermore they had witnessed the replacement of the telegraph poles. Shoucair Bey then met with the Turkish commander at the site who, despite being confronted by the bedouin witnesses, denied that there ever were any boundary pillars at this location. He claimed that there were many pillars scattered in the area which were remains from the ruins of an ancient temple. Seeing that any further negotiations on this basis would lead to no results, Shoucair returned with the destroyer to Port Said. In the following days there were hot discussions in the Egyptian press on the legitimacy of Egypt's owning the Sinai or whether it should be returned to Turkey like the Hijaz forts. Also the implications of British intervention between the Ottoman Porte and Egypt, which was still officially a province of the Empire, were debated feverishly. To put an end to the speculations either way Britain issued an ultimatum to Turkey on the 3rd of May 1906 to evacuate its troops from Taba and Rafah and reinstall the boundary pillars to their old location within ten days or she would see to it that this was done, if necessary, by the use of force. It was suspected at the time also that Germany had some role behind the scenes in

instigating the Turks to cause trouble in the Middle East. Even if this was the case the *Porte* soon realised that Germany would not come to Turkey's help militarily and ordered his troops to withdraw in the last hours before the ultimatum expired and two new border pillars were erected at the location of the old ones. This was followed by a message from Turkey that they never intended to rescind their agreement of 1892, but they had only issued orders to their military representatives in Aqaba, Ghazza and Bersheeba to investigate the course of the boundary. They agreed that the boundary should be defined along topographical features that coincide approximately with a straight line between Rafah and a point at least five Kilometres south of the fort at Aqaba.⁹ (Shoucair : 1916, pp. 594-602)

Upon this Abbas Hilmi Pasha, the Khedive of Egypt, issued the order on 22.5.1906 to form a commission headed by Ibrahim Fathi Pasha and Miralay Roger Owen, aided by Na`um Shoucair Bey to meet with the Turkish envoys and proceed to finalise the border between Egypt and Palestine. This Egyptian delegation, augmented by two British surveyors and a number of other assistants, arrived in Aqaba by sea on 26.5.1906 to meet Rushdi Pasha and the Ottoman representatives and proceeded with the survey of the Aqaba area. It was agreed that the boundary should start

at a hill just East of the Taba bay and proceed along the peaks of mountains that coincide approximately with a straight line to Rafah. This being the best solution from a military point of view. So the two delegations proceeded following the surveyors as they marked the course of the boundary along prominent landmarks until they reached Rafah on the 28th of June 1906 and determined the location of the border on the Mediterranean to be at 35 '52 "8 degrees East and 29 '36 "1 degrees North. This boundary line coincided almost exactly with a straight line as agreed upon, but still it was disputed by the Turkish side who suggested that an administrative boundary should be established, which would give consideration to the allocation of tribal territories of the area. This would mean that some areas inside Sinai should be administered by the Ottomans for tax purposes. The Egyptian delegation of course protested against such a settlement and the matter was raised to their respective higher government entities.¹⁰ (Rizk : 1989, p.70-82)

It was not until the 13th of September 1906 that the two boundary commissions received the final decision arrived at between Turkey and Britain. It was decided that the Ras Naqb area to the East of Taba to be included in the Ottoman territory, but that `Ain Gudeis and Kosaima

should belong to Egypt. From then on the boundary should follow an almost straight line to Rafah. Boundary pillars should be erected along the entire course of the frontier. The bedouin tribes along both sides of the border should have the same access to wells as prior to the settlement. Ottoman soldiers should be allowed to use wells that would be located within Sinai, just west of the border. Land ownership rights of the bedouin tribes along the boundary should be respected by both parties.

These guidelines were incorporated into the final settlement signed by the dual commission on the 1st of October 1906. Documents and maps were drafted accordingly and the major points of the agreement were further defined in detail according to the survey. Boundary pillars were to be erected along the entire course of the frontier each within visual contact of the other and are to be kept in good condition by both sides. Access to water sources should be granted to the bedouin residing on either side of the frontier, but Ottoman soldiers wishing to use wells West of the boundary were not to cross while carrying weapons. Land ownership of bedouin on either side of the border are to be respected.¹¹ (Shoucair : 1916, pp. 604-614)

Finally the actual boundary pillars were erected as agreed starting on the 31st of December 1906 at Taba and the last one of the 91 pillars was completed on the 9th of February 1907 at Rafah, each being within visual range of the other. The issue of this border would again become the subject of heated discussions and international diplomacy after the First World War in the light of the division of the Middle East between Britain and France. But for the time being Egypt had established police posts at Themmed, Kuntilla, Kosaima and Rafah to protect its border and things remained calm until the Ottomans entered the first World War on the side of Germany in August 1914.¹² (Shoucair : 1916, pp. 614-615)

3.3 The Advent of Modern Administration in Sinai

The efforts of the Egyptian government to control the Sinai during the early part of the 19th Century concentrated on the upgrading and securing of the various forts along the main transit routes through the peninsula and there was very little interaction between the government and the local inhabitants until the 1880's. The main administrative posts were developed later towards the end of the 19th Century at the locations of

traditional trading centres and settlements. The most important being : al-`Arish, Sheikh Zuweid and Rafah along the Northern coast; Nekhl, Themmed, Kuntilla and Koseima along the central route through the peninsula; al-Tur on the Gulf of Suez, and later police posts were established at Nuweiba and Taba. Two towns which were not under the Sinai administration but are nevertheless closely related to activity in the peninsula are Kantara on eastern bank of the Suez Canal opposite Isma`ilia and just beyond its eastern border the town of Aqaba.

Although quite a number of forts were built during the Middle Ages all over Sinai there were only three main ones in operation when Mohammed `Ali became ruler of Egypt in 1805, al-`Arish, al-Tur and the fort of Nekhl. Then he conquered Arabia and later Syria, so the forts in these territories were also put under his administration. However, after his war with Turkey he had to return Syria and Hijaz in 1840 to the Ottoman Sultan. His forces only continued to hold the forts located immediately along the pilgrimage route in Sinai and Arabia, until these were also neglected when the pilgrimage went by sea starting in 1885. Since the Sinai pilgrimage route was no longer used the Egyptian government issued cabinet decree no. 133 of 21.May 1885, announcing their decision to put the

administration of the forts of Hejaz and Sinai under the responsibility of the Ministry of War, instead of the Ministry of Finance, as had previously been the case. Thus the director of the Intelligence department in Cairo became the overall governor of Sinai. [It should be noted here that the Sinai Peninsula remained under a military administration well into the latter part of the 20th Century, until the end of Israeli occupation in the 1980's]. Al-Tur was prior to that administered as part of Suez governorate when it was joined to the al-Tih area's administration in 1893 and a military officer was appointed as commander of the Sinai Peninsula, with his headquarters at Nekhl. Both Nekhl and al-Tur were administrative centres and had a police post with an officer as director. When the Egyptian troops evacuated Aqaba in 1892 they set up a police post at Taba for some time, but due to the shortage of water built the fort at Nuweiba' in 1893 to administer the gulf of Aqaba area. Since the retreat of Ibrahim Pasha's army from Syria in 1843 the military was withdrawn from the fort at al-'Arish and a civilian director was appointed answering to the Ministry of Interior. This state of affairs remained unchanged until the border incidents of 1906 when the Eastern frontier of Sinai was settled. From then on the three directorates of al-'Arish, al-Tur and Nekhl were consolidated under one military command based at Nekhl. In order to

patrol the Palestine frontier effectively further police posts were established at Kuntilla, Themmed, Kosaima and Nuweiba`, each headed by a deputy director recruited from the local bedouin. An irregular police company was stationed at each location composed of infantry and camel mounted troops.¹³ (Shoucair : 1916, pp. 285-288)

As for the judicial administration of Sinai, legal disputes between the bedouin were heard by the traditional *`urf* courts, except for the towns of al-`Arish and al-Tur, which each had a judge appointed by the regular court in Suez. After 1884 only minor cases involving sentences up to one week imprisonment or a maximum fine of 15 pounds were decided in Sinai, larger cases had to be referred to the municipal court responsible for Sinai which was located at Zakazik, Sharkiya province. In 1911 the first Ministerial decree regarding the reorganisation of the court system in Sinai was issued by Isma`il Sirri Pasha, Minister of War. This stipulated that a specialised tribunal court should be formed in al-`Arish that would look into a much larger scope of cases. This would be headed by the military governor of Sinai assisted by a number of respected bedouin elders. These courts were then responsible for all civil and criminal cases in which the sentence does not exceed one year imprisonment or a 100 pound fine.

Larger cases were still referred to the district court at Zakazik.¹⁴ (Shoucair : 1916, pp. 288-296)

The government of Sinai, as previously mentioned, was the responsibility of the Ministry of War in Cairo and therefore the Commander in Chief of the Egyptian Army was in effect the highest authority of the peninsula. Since the occupation of Egypt this position was usually held by a British officer : Sir Francis Granville 1885-1892, General Kitchener 1892-1899, Sir Reginald Wingate 1899- 1914. The actual administration of Sinai was the responsibility of the Military Intelligence Department within the Ministry of War, which was also usually headed by an Englishman : Sir Wingate from 1894 until he became Commander in Chief of the army in 1899, followed by Count Callahan, Lord Edward Cecil, General Roger Owen, General Stark, and General F. Clayton who served during the First World War. The Directors of Sinai, or later Governors, were appointed by the Military Intelligence Department : Sa`d Rif at Bey 1892-1900, Hamed Mukhtar Bey 1900-1904, Mohammed Kamil Bey 1904-1905, Mr W.J. Bramley 1905-1906. After the boundary incidents of 1906 the strategic importance of the Sinai Peninsula became increasingly clear to the British and they made sure that the peninsula would continue to be administered

by an Englishman. In 1911 the position of Director was upgraded to be Governor of Sinai. Colonel Parker ruled the Sinai, first as Director then as Governor, from 1907 until 1912 and again after the War from 1918 until 1923. He was succeeded by C.S. Jarvis who remained Governor until 1935 followed by G.W. Murray who stayed until the Second World War.¹⁵ (Shoucair : 1916, pp. 302-310)

3.4 Economic and Social Development of Sinai under British Administration

The largest settlement since ancient times was always al-`Arish, which is located about halfway between the Suez Canal and Ghazza and was built on the ruins of the Roman town of Rhinoculorum. The Arabic name is said to be derived from the thatched palm reed roofs (`Arish) so typical of its houses. The little town consists of a number of narrow streets clustered around its ancient fortress which has featured in many battles and has been inhabited since prehistoric times. The fort is located on the southern edge of the settlement on a hill with its gate opening out towards the market of the town. The fort was in constant use throughout the 19th century and

also became a Turkish stronghold during World War I, when the imposing four corner towers were each equipped with a powerful Krupp cannon. Several inscriptions are carved into the stone at the gate and inside the fort dating from various points in history commemorating the battles or visits by Sultans and other dignitaries in Turkish or Arabic and the older ones in Roman and even Hieroglyphic. The fort, as it stood in the 19th Century, is believed to have been expanded in the 16th Century on the foundations of the older antique fort. Since before the reign of Mohammed `Ali the administration of al-`Arish was directly under the Ministry of Interior until 1906 when it was put under the Ministry of War. The town also had the only secondary school in the peninsula at the time, a hospital and a court that was under the higher court of Sharkia Province. According to the census of 1907 the population of the town stood at 5,851 almost all being settled bedouin, and are engaged in trade as well as agriculture. The main produce was barley, melons , cucumbers, citrus fruits and dates from the famous palm tree orchards, which are still the main crop today. Several shrines of Muslim shaikhs are found in al-`Arish and the town has lovely well kept gardens.

Rafah is a small border post 65 Km east of al-`Arish with about 200 inhabitants who were mainly engaged in border trade, or smuggling, as the case may be. The police post there was not established until 1907 after the boundary between Egypt and Ottoman Palestine had been fixed. Also on the route from the Suez Canal to the Palestine border is the settlement of Katia approximately 50 Km north-east from Kantara, which often served as an advance post for military purposes. It has a number of palm groves around its wells tended by their bedouin owners.

Almost exactly in the centre of the peninsula halfway between Suez and Aqaba is Nekhl, which for centuries served as the most important rest point on the pilgrimage route. In the 19th Century it became the administrative capital of Sinai. A company of soldiers was stationed at the fort of Nekhl in charge of securing the safe passage of pilgrims, traders and travelers. The inscription at the gate mentions Sultan Kansuh al-Ghuri as the builder of the fort in 1516. Its location, on a hill in the middle of a wide plain flanked by mountain ranges on the North and South sides, gives it a perfect commanding position for controlling this important East-West route, as well as the junction with the Wadi al-`Arish draining from the al-Tih plateau towards the Mediterranean. Since the reign of Mohammed

`Ali the fort was upgraded and a weekly postal service connected it to Egypt and Palestine. The importance of the location was always connected to the three wells, which have abundant water throughout the year, to supply even large caravans. In 1906, under the British administration of Wilfried Jennings Bramley, a dam was built about two kilometres South of Nekhl to hold the flood waters of Wadi al-`Arish and put a large area in the Wadi under cultivation. Nekhl continued to serve as the centre of administration throughout the British occupation and well into the middle of the 20th Century. After 1906 administrative police posts were also established at Themmed, Kuntilla and Kosaima to control the eastern approaches of the peninsula.¹⁶ (Jarvis : 1931, p. 126)

On the western coast of Sinai the most important settlement is al-Tur located 220 km South of Suez. For centuries the little town served as the starting point for visitors to the convent of St.Catherine's about 150km inland. The fort at al-Tur dating back to the 16th century, probably also built around the same time as Nekhl, held a very important register called Kitab al-Omm. This was administered by a court scribe and contained all the land deeds made out between bedouin tribes of the area and treaties of various kinds with the monks of St.Catherine's. Unfortunately, the

existence of this book has only been passed on verbally and no trace or copy of it remains today. It was said to contain records of alliances entered into between the tribes and also rights to the protection of the Convent and carriage of goods and pilgrims between al-Tur and St.Catherine's, which was always an important source of income for the bedouin.

1884 was the last season in which the pilgrimage caravans went by road from Suez via Nekhl to Aqaba and onwards to Arabia. Until then the provision of camels and guides for the pilgrimage was one of the most important economic activities for the Sinai bedouin, and the rights were divided up very carefully between the tribes of the area. When this legitimate activity was progressively curtailed by the increasing popularity of the more comfortable sea route, the bedouin could only resort to smuggling and raiding to compensate for the income. Money earned from the sale of livestock to mainland Egypt and Palestine, together with some trade in tobacco and coffee was not enough to sustain a living. This led to large outward migrations from Sinai and the population dropped by half by the beginning of the 20th Century.

In 1858 the first quarantine station was built at al Tur to house pilgrims traveling between Suez and Yanbu or Jeddah and it was expanded and modernized in 1893. The station was equipped with the most modern facilities of the time : Three jetties across the coral reef connected arriving ships with the fumigation rooms and a narrow gauge railway took pilgrims to their living quarters; a water supply plant and electricity generation unit; four clinics, a pharmacy and post office; telegraph and telephone line was added in 1907. Regular steamer service connected al-Tur to Suez twice weekly and more often during the Hajj season. The centre could hold tens of thousands of pilgrims at the same time and the statistics show that between 1900 and 1914 358,341 persons passed through it, the highest number was the season of 1907 when 43,271 pilgrims used the facility. Most illnesses were noncontagious diseases but some cases of yellow fever and very rarely also plague had to be isolated.¹⁷ (Shoucair : 1915, pp. 134-138)

As for the finances of Sinai the military administration gradually increased the budget allocated to developing the peninsula from 3,857 pounds in 1906 to 14,711 pounds in 1914. Apart from salaries for the police and administrators, the various bedouin sheikhs were given a salary by the

government. Previously this was meant as compensation for providing carry camels and provisions for the annual pilgrimage. After these services were no longer needed the government continued to make these payments and the sheikhs were responsible for keeping peace and order within their tribal boundaries and were held personally responsible for any robbery committed in their area. This was very much in line with bedouin tradition where the tribe held collective responsibility towards outsiders for any crime committed by one of their members and could therefore be seen as an extension of this age-old system of justice. Considering the environmental and geographical factors it was also the most efficient and economic way for the government to control public order in Sinai.

The inhabitants of Sinai enjoyed special privileges granted to them by Mohammed `Ali in recognition of their difficult life in a hostile environment, and in return for their loyalty to Egypt against any intruders from the East. This was in form of an exemption from the compulsory military service and an exemption from paying taxes on the usage of land for palm groves or other agriculture. Only the Bardawil lake was rented out annually by public auction from which the government gained about 100 pounds every year. The government also had some other income in

the form of customs duties paid for livestock transiting through the Sinai coming from Syria and Iraq, which was then sold east of the Suez Canal. In 1906 over 27,000 camels and 54,000 head of sheep passed through customs at Kantara and Suez with the government collecting 8 % import duty on the estimated value of livestock.¹⁸ (Shoucair : 1915, pp. 297-299)

Regular weekly postal services in Sinai date back to the early 19th Century and continued to be carried by Camel, except al-Tur which was serviced by a steamer line that stopped there between Suez and Jeddah. The first telegraph line between Egypt and Syria via al-'Arish was completed in 1865 and the line to al-Tur went into operation in 1896. When the Eastern boundary of Egypt was fixed in 1906 a telephone line was installed linking Suez with Nekhl, Themmed, Kuntilla, Kusaima, al-'Arish and Rafah. This enabled the governor of Sinai based in Nekhl to have direct communications with all the major police posts of the peninsula.¹⁹ (Shoucair : 1915, pp. 297-299)

3.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown that until the late 1890's Britain's presence in Egypt was officially and legitimately to restore public order after the Orabi revolt in 1882 and protect foreign investments and residents, as well as supervise Egypt's finances until the public debt is settled. By 1900 it was clearly evident that these objectives had been met, and from then on it was Britain's geopolitical goals of imperial supremacy that became the primary focus in Egypt : to retain control of the world's most important shipping route, of which the Suez Canal was the vital link. To maintain the security of the Canal the Sinai had to be also controlled by Britain. Although the *Porte* at first approved of Britain's presence in Egypt, relations with Turkey soured progressively, coming close to a military confrontation in 1906. It was at Britain's initiation that the eastern boundary between Egypt and the rest of the Ottoman Empire would be clearly demarcated, thus including the Sinai in Egyptian territory. Once this had been achieved a British officer was put in charge of the Sinai, a position that would be held by an Englishman until after the Second World War.

But not only was Britain very active on the international front in securing the Sinai for Egypt but a domestic strategy was implemented through which British administration would be deeply implanted in the peninsula. Having consolidated the administration of Sinai to be under one central command headed by a military officer, great attention could be given to the economic and social development needs of the governorate. Several positive policies were thus implemented which improved life for the local inhabitants tremendously. The underlying logic was that if the local population starts to see the benefits of British government they would render their support at times of war or other threat from abroad. A number of achievements can be credited to the British occupation of Sinai in the period before World War I such as the unification of the entire peninsula into one governorate, which streamlined and standardized administration. The foundation for organized judicial proceedings were laid incorporating the traditional *`urf* system of law, which for the first time brought order to the bedouin tribes and greatly reduced armed disputes. Public security was greatly enhanced by the formation of an organised police system, with posts throughout Sinai to enforce law and order and reduce smuggling. The local tribal chiefs were involved in this administration and annual allowances were provided for the sheikhs of the bedouin tribes. Also the

economic situation progressed with improvements in the infrastructure of the peninsula, such as the building of rest houses for travellers, renovation of the forts of Nekhl and al-`Arish, digging of modern wells and improvement of existing ones at Rafah, Nekhl, Kuntilla, al-`Arish and al-Tur, building the dam in Wadi al-`Arish and expanding the agricultural land available in the area and linking the main administrative centres by paved roads, telegraph and telephone. Thus the Sinai had been brought into the realm of modern administration, and when the First World War started the peninsula was firmly under British control.

NOTES Chapter 3

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- ³ Ibid., pp.64-66
- ⁴ Mansfield, Peter. "The British in Egypt" Wiedenfeld & Nichoson, London : 1971, p.164
- ⁵ Weigall, Arthur E.P.Brome. "A History of Events in Egypt from 1798 to 1914". William Blackwood and sons, Edinburgh and London : 1915, pp. 196-197
- ⁶ Mansfield : 1971, op.cit., p. 166
- ⁷ Rizk : 1989, op.cit., p.68-70
- ⁸ Shoucair, Na'um Bey. "Tarikh Sina' wal Arab". Cairo : 1915, pp.588-594
- ⁹ Shoucair : 1915, op.cit., pp. 594-602
- ¹⁰ Rizk : 1989, op.cit., p. 70-82
- ¹¹ Shoucair : 1915, op.cit., pp. 604-614
- ¹² Ibid., p. 614-615
- ¹³ Ibid., p. 285-288

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 288-296

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 302-310

¹⁶ Jarvis, Claude Scudamore. "Yesterday and Today in Sinai". William Blackwood & Sons, London : 1931, p.126

¹⁷ Shoucair : 1915, op.cit., pp. 134-138

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 297-299

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 299-301

Chapter 4

World War I in Sinai

4.1 Introduction

By 1914 Britain had clearly recognized the strategic position of Sinai and the need to defend the Canal from Turkish attack. Two factors shaped British policy towards Sinai and also influenced the military history of British engagement in the Middle East.

One, during the Sinai campaign it had become clear that the Sinai's terrain was more suitable for mounted infantry than tanks which led to the formation of the Camel Corps and the development of a symbiotic relationship between British officers and the bedouin. The Sinai Campaign and the subsequent British/Arab conquest of the former Ottoman provinces had for the first time given the Imperial Army a test training on how to master the adversities of the Middle Eastern deserts with their bedouin inhabitants. Fueled by the heroic tales of British officers like T.E. Lawrence and the successes of the Arab legion this

relationship would influence British military strategy in the Middle East for the half century to follow.

Two, Britain's larger Imperial scheme started to unfold and the grand plan of the British Empire in the Middle East would include roads and railway linking Egypt to Syria, Iraq and beyond became a British dream to be realized. A formulation of an Arab policy for the future of the Middle East inspired statesmen of the time. The Sinai would be the link between the African and Asian parts of the British Empire and it benefited from the War and the attention it received. In Sinai the war meant the building of the railway, roads, airfields, pipeline, telegraph and telephone communications.

This chapter deals with the events of World War I in Sinai, and how British policy towards the peninsula was formulated. When the importance of Sinai to British interests became increasingly evident no measures were spared to recapture the peninsula from the Turks who had invaded the Sinai early on in the War. The British also entertained a keen interest in the bedouin and their desert environment, which was put into practice by forming the Camel corps and the Arab legion. Great emphasis

was also put on the infrastructure development in the Sinai. A spree of construction during the War created roads, a railway, water pipeline and modern communications. The economic improvements and better living conditions were also directed towards serving British policy in gaining the trust and loyalty of the bedouin.

Finally, from the experiences of the War Britain developed a special administration that would be suitable for controlling frontier desert areas inhabited by bedouin in the Middle East. This would materialise in the form of the Frontiers Districts Administration, a department in the Egyptian Ministry of war, which would be commanded by British officers and would become the primary vehicle for retaining British control in the Sinai until the Second World War. It is evident from the records of the High Commission in Cairo that great emphasis was put on the quality of personnel recruited for the Frontiers Districts Administration, as these British officers in charge of the deserts would serve as role models and their strong leadership would bind the bedouin to the British administration rather than to the Egyptian government in Cairo.

4.2 Military Campaigns in the Sinai

It was evident from the start of hostilities between Turkey and Britain in the Middle East that the former was ill advised to enter the war and its efforts were doomed to failure. The main reason why Germany pushed Turkey to engage in fighting in Sinai was not with the hope of reconquering Egypt, but more to occupy Britain and divert her military resources from Europe and therefore relieve the pressure on the Germans on their Western front. When war was declared in July 1914 the Allies tried to persuade Turkey to remain neutral and not to side with Germany, but to no avail. Germany had persuaded them to engage on two fronts, one army would attack Russia in the Caucasus and another would launch attacks from Iraq and Syria on the British in Egypt with the aim to block the Suez Canal. The British reacted by proclaiming their protectorate over Egypt, and the secession of the country from the Ottoman Empire. The Khedive Abbas Hilmy, a sympathiser of the Ottomans, was in Turkey at the time. He was deposed during his absence and replaced by his pro-British uncle Hussein Kamil who assumed the title of Sultan to reflect the new status of Egypt.¹ (Newman : 1928, pp.206-207)

The Ottomans recruited armies from their provinces, Baghdad, Basra, Mosul, Kirkuk, Aleppo, Damascus, Beirut, until they had more than 120,000 men at their disposal for their campaign. They also pushed forward the construction of a railway with great speed, one line would connect Asia minor with Damascus and onward to Medina in the Hejaz. At Deraa another line branched off from the Hejaz railway to Haifa and down the Mediterranean coast, a line connecting Jaffa with Jerusalem, and a branch running towards the south via Nablus to Bersheeba. When Turkey officially entered the war on the 30th of October 1914 their commander in Syria, Marshall Zaki Al-Halabi, was not very enthusiastic and believed that a campaign against Egypt would not be very successful since he had failed to collect enough camels and could not persuade the bedouin tribes to join him. So he was replaced by Ahmed Jemal Pasha as commander in Chief who proceeded to reinforce Ottoman defences on the coastline and brought the troops from Mosul to Aleppo to be his rear guard. He then prepared three Arab battalions from Syria and two Turkish ones from Izmir and Estana, together some 60,000 men for the attack on Egypt. To this army he added 9,000 men from Syria and about 1,000 from Hejaz to bring the total number to engage in Egypt to 70,000 men. Heavy long range artillery was brought in from Estana and over 8,000 camels

were collected for carrying of rations and ammunition. The army also included a number of doctors and engineers, and 36 specially constructed boats that would be connected to form pontoon bridges across the Suez Canal. Meanwhile Turkish, German and Austrian agents were instigating unrest and opposition to the British inside Egypt and they also managed to persuade the Senussi tribes from Libya to harass Allied forces in the Western Desert. The British launched long range operations to contain the provocative actions in the Western Desert and on the domestic front arrested many Germans and Turks and others were deported to Malta. By 1915 Britain had come in control of the major shipping lanes in the Western Mediterranean and landed thousands of troops in Egypt in preparation for action in the Sinai. The peninsula had been partially evacuated in the Autumn of 1914. Troops were withdrawn from al-'Arish on 24th of October, Nekhl was evacuated on the 30th of the same month and the Turks occupied the Eastern part of Sinai and the central al-Tih plateau.² (Jarvis : 1938, pp. 144-146)

But the defences on the Suez Canal zone were multiplied and British troops spread throughout Egypt to every town and village in the Delta and also southward all the way to the Sudan. The free spending soldiers

brought a boom to the Egyptian economy and more than compensated the country for the slump in cotton prices at the time. The Sinai was evacuated after the major wells were blasted to make the difficult terrain of its desert into a buffer between the canal and the Turks. They also destroyed the flood dams on the north-western coast of Sinai and flooded a huge area extending as far south as Kantara. Trenches were dug on both sides of the canal and were manned with some 50,000 men, with another backup force of 40,000 stationed mainly at Zakazik and other towns in the eastern Delta. Patrol boats were launched on the Bitter Lakes and heavily armed trains patrolled along a railway line connecting Port Said with Suez along the entire length of the Canal. The Royal Air Force was brought in and started reconnaissance flights over Sinai and all other possible measures were taken for the defence of Egypt.³ (Wilson : 1939, pp. 138-139)

Anyone familiar with the history of military operations across the Sinai had no doubt at all that the Turks were going to experience a heavy defeat, not only because of the defences that had been erected. The difficult terrain and inhospitable weather, with the lack of water has proven for many centuries to be the best defence Egypt had for its Eastern front.

From Alexander to Napoleon every campaign in the Sinai was doomed and could only be carried out if naval support was available. Alexander had to conquer the ports of Palestine and Syria first before he could venture through Sinai supported by the Phoenician ships travelling parallel to his army, and Napoleon's miserable experience I have already mentioned earlier. Also Ibrahim Pasha's army did not venture through the Sinai until a naval invasion of Syria was successful. He himself also preferred to make the trip by sea. But in order for a successful naval campaign to be launched from Syrian ports every general throughout the ages realised that he must also control Cyprus. Even Ptolemeus knew this and made all effort to occupy Cyprus before attacking Phoenicia. But the Turks in World War I had no other choice but to take the land route to Egypt since Cyprus then was firmly in British hands. Furthermore, there is no place in Sinai that was suitable to establish a base camp where troops can rest and consolidate their strength before launching an attack on Egypt. So every invading army must carry its entire food rations, ammunition and water supply needed for the entire campaign, back and forth for over 250 km each way, because the existing wells can not support an army of any significant size. In the best case, if the campaign was to be held during winter and it coincides with ample rains in that year, the maximum number

of troops that could make it would not be more than 20,000. Even then they would be under enormous psychological stress hoping not to run out of water, marching through inhospitable terrain to reach the canal exhausted in order to face a much larger and well rested defensive force there.

These considerations did not deter the Ottoman army from starting their move through Sinai at the end of January 1915. (see figure 4, p. 135) The most direct route from Palestine to the Suez Canal is the Northern road from Rafah via al-'Arish and Katia to Kantara, since al-'Arish can offer the largest water resources, but Jemal Pasha knew too well that he would suffer heavy losses if he moves that close to the coast, well within the firing range of British naval artillery. He therefore chose a more central route from Jerusalem to Bersheeba where he set up his headquarters for the whole campaign. There he divided his army into three sections and each would take a different route to the Canal. A small force composed of Syrian volunteers and bedouin led by Mumtaz Bey advanced along the coastal road and occupied al-'Arish and continued via Katia to Kantara. Another section headed south-east to occupy Nekhl and advance towards Suez along the hadj route to attack at the Suez bridge. And the bulk of his

TURKISH ATTACK ON SUEZ CANAL.

February, 1915.

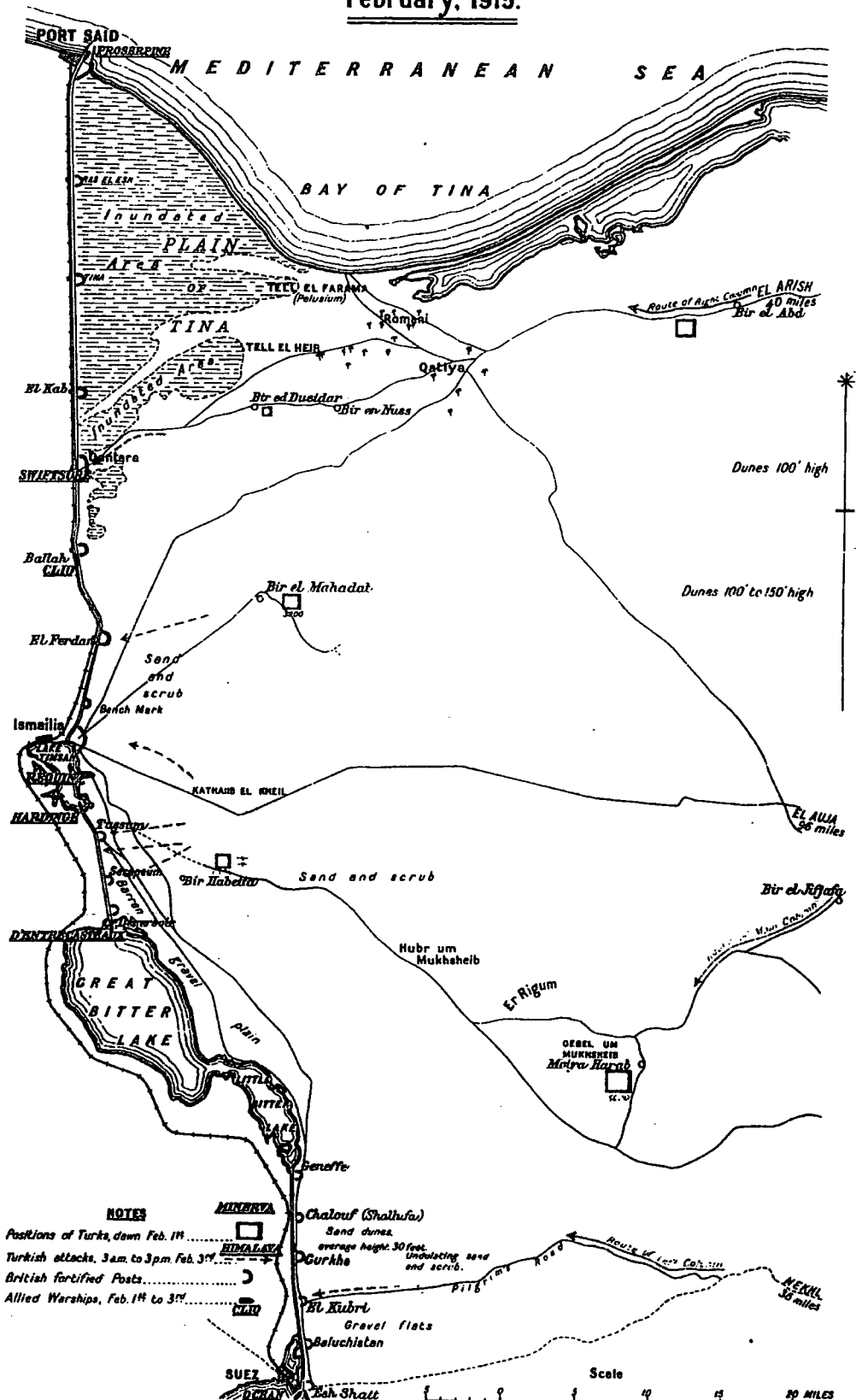


Figure 4: World War I in Sinai

forces took a central route via Bir al-Hammad, Bir al-Gifgaf and al-Khabra to attack near Isma`ilia. When he reached al-Khabra he again split his forces, a small party led by Kaman Bey continued towards the bridge near Isma`ilia and the rest moved under his own command to Kathib al-Nasari located within three hours marching distance of the Canal at Serapeum and Tousson. The Turks had been accompanied by several German officers who co-ordinated the Turkish attack to be simultaneous at all four points of the Suez Canal front in the morning of February the 3rd, 1915. Only 20,000 men had actually reached the front line, but they probably speculated that they might be lucky and catch the British and Egyptians off guard and that maybe the internal unrest in Egypt would ferment to outright rebellion and the Ottomans would stand a chance. Even if no victory was to be won they would have achieved their ulterior motive of having diverted British resources from the war in Europe.⁴ (Crutwell : 1939, pp. 351-352)

One can deduce that Jemal Bey must have had orders to attack regardless of any circumstances, because when he reached the Canal he did not bother to send reconnaissance teams to assess the strength of the defendants as is customary in warfare. Also, when he actually attacked he

only sent in about half his troops. This advance party was mainly composed of Syrians and other Arabs, and held the Turkish soldiers back at a distance of about 5 Km inland. In any case, they ended up as cannon fodder for the defending forces across the Canal that reduced them by the end of the day to a pitiful lot. The strongest attack came at the battle of Serapeum where the Ottoman army fought bravely as even the British later conceded. Their six inch artillery even managed to hit the "Harding" a British destroyer before it was silenced, and even launched some attack boats, but nevertheless by 6 p.m. the exhausted attackers had to withdraw and the British did not even find it worthwhile to pursue them into Sinai. Only a small party stayed in the trenches on the eastern bank of the Canal for the night and continued sniping at the defensive positions. So, on the morning of the following day, February 4th, the British launched a counter attack which at first was met with heavy fire, but when assisted by reinforcements stormed the Ottoman positions at bayonet point and inflicted heavy losses on the enemy before capturing the rest of about 250 men. The Ottoman losses in this battle came to 1250 dead, 2000 wounded and 750 prisoners of war. As for the defending British and Egyptians their losses were not more than 60 men wounded or killed.⁵ (MacMunn & Falls : 1928, pp.37-46)

Having already suffered a great deal on the way through the Sinai to Egypt, Jemal Pasha saw it wiser to withdraw his forces and save their energy for the long road back to Bersheeba and not attempt to challenge the Suez Canal line another time before having reinforced his army with many more men and equipment and continued building the railway further into Sinai. Meanwhile the British had landed their troops in Iraq and the Russians made headway from the North and were now both threatening Baghdad which made another Turkish attack on Egypt even more questionable. Still the Suez Canal was further reinforced with artillery and trenches and troops on the Eastern bank as well making it into one of the strongest fortresses of the time.⁶ (MacMunn & Falls : 1928, p. 47)

When part of Jemal Pasha's army had reached Nekhl on their way to the Suez Canal a small party of about 70 men had split off and headed towards the Gulf of Suez to attack al-Tur. When the Commander in Egypt heard of this expeditionary force he ordered the evacuation of al-Tur and the quarantine station there and all civilians were brought to Suez or Cairo. He then sent a company of 200 men for the defence of al-Tur. One side of the quarantine station was fortified and the troops were joined by a party of

300 Ghurkas under the command of the former governor of Sinai Colonel Parker. The Ottomans were led by a German officer and had reached al-Tur on the 18th of January and took their positions on the hills surrounding the town. They had persuaded about 100 of the Sinai bedouin to join them promising them ample booty to be had in al-Tur. This expedition was even more risky than the attack on the Suez Canal, because these Ottomans were at a distance of seven marching days from their last camp at Nekhl and over 20 days away from their headquarters in Bersheeba. When they reached al-Tur they had run out of food and water and forced the monks of the convent there to hand over their supplies. Colonel Parker with the Egyptian and Indian force arrived by sea and after midnight on February the 12th they moved onto the Ottomans who were camped in the wadi. They split at dawn, with the Egyptian Party confronting the enemy, as the Ghurkas attacked them from behind. The Ottomans were taken by surprise and suffered great losses, with the remaining 20 men being taken prisoner, while the Ghurkas only lost one man. The commanding German officer managed to escape capture, as he had left earlier with a group of bedouin to Abu Zneima where they destroyed the warehouses of the Manganese Mining Company.⁷ (Shoucair : 1915, pp. 749-750)

By the end of 1915 Salonika had replaced the Dardanelles as the focus of Allied-Ottoman confrontation in the Eastern Mediterranean. When more British and ANZAC reinforcements arrived in Egypt the Egyptian Expeditionary Force absorbed the rest of the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force after the evacuation of Gallipoli and offensive operations across the Sinai were planned. Sir Lloyd George, British Prime Minister at the time, recorded in his memoirs that he had advocated strong and decisive military action against the Turks in Sinai in order to break their resistance and sway the balance of the War into Britain's favour. His views, however, were not shared by the war-time cabinet's military advisors such as Sir William Robertson. Their position was "that the Egyptian campaign was useful so long as it went no further than the defense of the Suez Canal, but that these operations later became objectionable, for they absorbed troops which should have been sent to the Western Front, where every available man was needed to assist in the great struggle then approaching its decisive phase." "Decisive phase" is hardly an accurate description of the mud-crawling strategy of the Flanders campaign. If one-fifth of the men sacrificed in a venture which every General in the British Army (except Haig) condemned had been sent to Allenby, the Turk would have been so

completely crushed that he would gladly have accepted peace terms. But Sir William Robertson's resistance delayed and hampered the Sinai and Palestine campaign.⁸ (George : 1934, p. 182)

Lloyd George held the view that had the Turks been overthrown at an earlier stage of the war, it would have led to the collapse of the Central Powers on the Balkan Front, and brought about an earlier end to World War I. Sir Archibald Murray, the commander of British forces in Egypt, although having been denied any additional forces or supplies, finally received his orders to advance into the Sinai. The first Allied offensive started in April 1916 with the pursuit and engagement of the Ottomans at Katia on the 23rd of the same month. The battle of Rumani took place on the 4th and 5th of August 1916, then the British moved forward to take al-'Arish with little resistance after having heavily bombarded the town from the sea. On the 23rd of December they clashed again with the enemy at Magdhaba and drove the Turks towards the border, taking over 1,200 prisoners and reaching Rafah in early January 1917.⁹ (George : 1934, pp. 1821-1823)

The extremely difficult desert conditions and absence of roads suitable for motor transport made the movement of supplies, artillery and ammunition a major problem. Water supplies were another serious restriction on any larger movement of men and camels and the British did not want to be caught in the same mistake as the Turks on their way to Egypt. The advances in Sinai were determined more by the construction of the military railway and a piped water supply alongside the tracks, than by the availability of the required forces. Therefore, careful preparations were made, the railway was rapidly pushed forward and the famous Desert Camel Corps was formed and trained near Isma`ilia. Kantara became an enormous military town stretching over five kilometres into the Sinai Desert and became one of the best known stations for almost every soldier to have served in the Middle East theatre.¹⁰ (Crutwell : 1934, pp. 352-354)

It was not until March 1917 that the Palestine Campaign was launched with an attack on Ghazza, which proved extremely difficult to subdue. The first battle of Ghazza on the 26th and 27th of March went inconclusive and another attack with more reinforcements was launched 17th to 19th of April, again without success. The Sinai Military Railway had been completed through the entire peninsula and more men and

material arrived. General Edmund Allenby took over the command in June as GOC (General Officer Commanding) and the breakthrough came at the third battle of Ghazza and the capture of Bersheeba between the 27th of October and the 7th of November 1917. Meanwhile T.E. Laurence made his famous campaign by organising the Arab revolt in the Hejaz and moving with irregular bedouin forces northward to capture Aqaba and onwards through Transjordan to Damascus, thus successfully flanking Allenby's troops' advance into Palestine.¹¹ (MacMunn & Falls : 1928, p. 279-372)

4.3 Formation of the Arab Legion

In April 1917 Sir Mark Sykes, after considering the political and military value, suggested the formation of an Arab legion composed of Arab prisoners of war and Syrians residing in Egypt. the troops would be recruited from prisoners of war camps in India, Mesopotamia and Aden and would be primarily used to assist the bedouin forces of Sherif Faisal in Arabia against the Turks. The formation of such a force had several advantages : from a political point of view it can serve as a rallying point

for Arabs deserting from Turkish control out of conviction rather than cowardice and would stimulate enthusiasm for the Arab movement and unity. Militarily it would give the British a force capable of being used in the Hejaz at any time without breaking their policy of not landing European troops on sacred soil. In case of an impending advance of Arab tribes across the Jordan and onwards to Damascus the Arab legion can serve as a liaison between the Bedouins and regular British forces. During any further advance into Syria it would be an inducement to desertion by Arabs from the Turkish enemy ranks. The need for such a force had been obvious to the War Office since Makka and Medina were threatened in the summer of 1916 and the time of implementation had arrived.¹² (FO 141/746/4833 Arab Legion for Hejaz 1917/18)

The scheme was rapidly advanced and troops were brought from away as far as India to be trained and equipped at Isma'ilia and Suez before being sent to Arabia. The formation of this Arab legion has also been supported by M. Picot and was to be under a joint British-French command, with both providing advisory officers. Also the cost would be shared between the two colonial powers. Soon British-French rivalry in expanding their spheres of influence and mistrust on both sides overshadowed the Arab

legion, particularly since the French had already started a Legion of the Orient recruited from areas which were to become French under the Sykes-Picot agreement. Also the Arab officers themselves resented being commanded by Europeans and preferred to be under direct control of the Arabian King Hussein and Sherif Faisal. Due to the unexpected successes of the Bedouin troops under T.E. Lawrence the Arab Legion never made it to Arabia proper but joined the conquest of Syria at Aqaba in November 1917. In the turmoil to follow the Legion soon dissolved into the larger Sherifian Arab forces. By 1918 the last allowances for services were disbursed by the British government and the Arab Legion as well as the Arab office in Cairo was disbanded.¹³ (FO 141/746/4833 : 1918)

4.4 The Egypt Palestine Railway

The first official proposal for the construction of a standard gauge from Kantara to Rafah, Haifa and up the valley of the Litani river to join up with the existing Homs-Aleppo railway came in a letter addressed to the High Commissioner of Egypt, Sir Henry McMahon, on 15.3.1915. The proposal included an estimation of cost, approximately L.E. 4,114,000.¹⁴ (FO

141/512/623) In anticipation of prosecuting the war effort across the Sinai peninsula the building of a railway between Kantara on the Suez Canal and the border of Palestine at Rafah started in March 1916.¹⁵ (FO 141/478/2201) The first section of this standard gauge railway between Kantara and Katia was driven diligently. In view of its importance all other railway needs in Egypt were made subservient and the line went into operation by the summer of 1916. (see figure 5, p. 147) Much rolling stock and materials was withdrawn from the Egyptian State Railways and manufacturers in Manchester worked around the clock to keep up with supplies of engines and wagons. By 1917 the line had been completed all the way into Palestine and at its peak time was operating 1,200 wagons and burning 40,000 tons of coal per month.¹⁶ (FO 141/478/2201)

Not only troops were moved along this line, but it was vital in supplying everything from weapons and ammunition, fuel, food and all other items necessary for the upkeep of the British forces in the Palestine Campaign. To enable thoroughfare traffic from the heart of Egypt a special swing bridge was constructed across the Suez Canal at Kantara in 1917. In consequence of the rapid advance of the British forces in Palestine it became necessary by November 1917 to double the line and plate layers

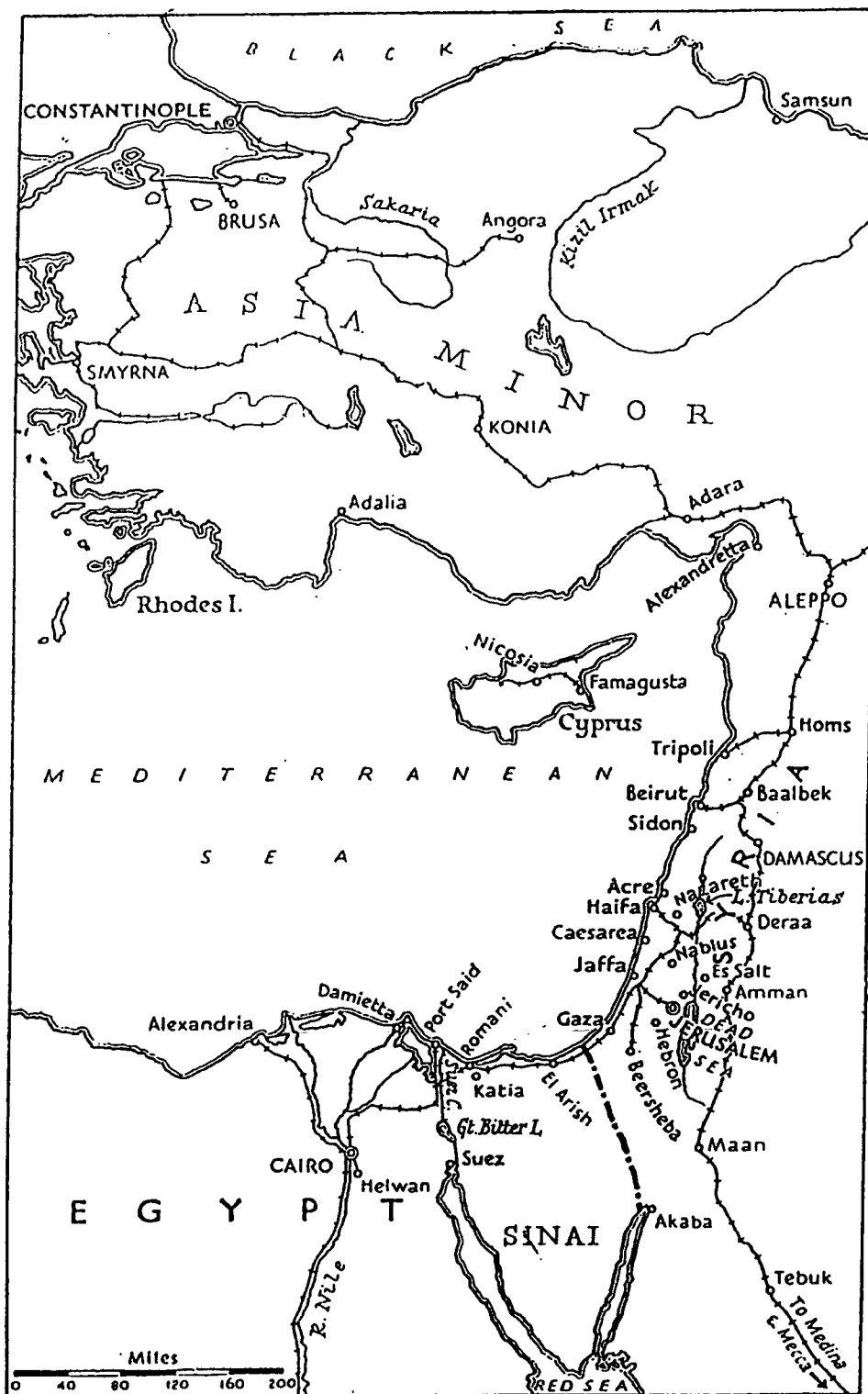


Figure 5: The Sinai - Palestine Railway

were brought in from as far away as the Sudan to complete the job.¹⁷ (FO 141/478/2201 : 1917)

One of the most important factors in the rapid success of the Palestine campaign was the ingenuity and diligence of the railway engineers and the thousands of Egyptian labourers that completed this railway in record time and operated it throughout the war under the most severe climatic conditions. Yet as important as the railway may have been during the war it rapidly lost favour with the various responsible authorities as soon as its military importance ceased. By mid 1918 negotiations were on their way to withdraw all military personnel operating the railway and handing its facilities over to the Egyptian State railways. Negotiations on costs, terms and conditions continued until well into 1919 when they met a relapse in the light of the political unrest in Egypt under the Zaghloul uprising and drive towards independence. Consequently, Lord Allenby decided to delay the handover, and the Kantara - Rafah section remained under military control until the end of that year.

Although the railway's geopolitical importance was recognised by the colonial government, particularly in view of Britain obtaining the mandate

for Palestine, it was clear that this line is of little commercial use considering the small volume of traffic during peace times. Several other problems would face its operation as well : The military staff after demobilisation would only stay on if high wages are paid and the local labour situation was not secure. The State railways would want their rolling stock back, which was supplied under wartime emergency measures. The line runs parallel to the sea coast, so that coasting steamers would successfully compete for freight, and the port of Haifa was to be improved and expanded to enhance this alternative sea route. The railway runs through waterless country, which means that the pipeline constructed during the war would have to be maintained which creates problems for the Suez Canal Company since the pipes in the bed of the Canal prevent them from dredging. Alternatively the railway would have to provide condensers or run tanks of water on each train, all of which are very expensive alternatives. One section of the line runs along the Bardawil flood lake fisheries which were inactive during the war. Should these be put into operation again it would threaten flooding of the tracks at several points and would therefore necessitate to raise the tracks and reinforce them, again at considerable cost.¹⁸ (FO 141/478/2201 : 1919)

Another matter was the high cost involved in running the railway that was estimated to be about 650,000 L.E. annually not including the capital expenditure needed for a new Suez Canal bridge or tunnel, rolling stock, etc. This is held against an estimated income of only 200,000 L.E., which would mean an annual loss of 450,000 pounds which the State Railways suggested the War Office in London should pay if they wish to retain the line for strategic purposes.¹⁹ (FO 141/478/2201 : 1920) Even the bridge over the Suez Canal was to be demolished. The Suez Canal Company gave its consent to building it in 1917 on the condition that it would be removed after the war. Already the company was not allowing regular thoroughfare traffic and would keep the bridge open to allow the passage of ships at most times. As an alternative they proposed a high level bridge or a tunnel, but considering the economic viability this plan was never to see the light of day. By the December 1920 the bridge was to be removed and all railway traffic was moved by the rail ferry at Kantara. The ferry was able to move five loaded railway carriages at a time and made the round-trip in about 30 minutes, but since this traffic was subordinate to the passage of ships it became a very slow and cumbersome undertaking, especially since the Suez Canal Company would allow the ferry to operate for three hours a day only.²⁰ (FO 141/478/2201 : 1920)

Egypt was least interested in the continuation of the railway across the Sinai, not so the British army and the government of Palestine. Sir Herbert Samuel the High Commissioner in Jerusalem at the time protested heavily to the Foreign office regarding the removal of the Kantara bridge stating that the railway is vital for supplies from Egypt and the alternative sea route is impractical through heavy weather.²¹ (FO 141/478/2201 : 1920)

The argumentation continued through 1921 with the Egyptians holding firmly to their view that the railway was of no commercial value and the State Railways were not interested in taking it over or operating it even if they would get it free of charge. In April 1921 it was suggested by the Palestine government to dismantle part of the double track to be used as materials for repairs near Haifa and in fact operated the Kantara-Rafah section on behalf of the British army during that year.²² (FO 141/478/2201 : 1921) The situation prevailed through 1922 with the Palestine government operating the line and sharing costs with the War Office pending the outcome of the Anglo-Egyptian negotiations regarding the independence of Egypt and the consequent take-over of the railway. In April 1922 it was agreed with the Egyptian government that the Air

Ministry would substitute for the War Office in the agreement with the Palestine government for the operation of the Sinai railway. This also involved the operation and maintenance of the telephone and telegraph lines running alongside the train tracks.²³ (FO 141/478/2201 : 1922)

Things remained unchanged for the following few years until the end of 1926 when the railway moved into the spotlight of discussions again and a suggestion was made by the Palestine government to lease the Kantara-Rafah line for a period of twenty years. As mentioned above the Egyptian government back in 1920 was not interested in operating the Sinai railway because of financial considerations and the British government was eager to get rid of it at that time for the same reason. Yet the situation changed in Palestine with an increase of Zionist activity and Jewish immigration it became a priority to try to expand the sphere of influence of the Palestine government. The original arrangement for the operation of the railway included a provision that the Egyptian government has the right to rescind that informal agreement with a six months notice period, new ways were being investigated to get around this agreement.

It has been the policy of the British administration to "let sleeping dogs lie a little longer", as has been literally mentioned more than once in official correspondence, but once the matter has been stirred up a wave of consultations and discussions followed involving the Foreign Office, High Commissions in Cairo and Jerusalem, War Office and Suez Canal Company. Opinions had greatly changed since 1920 : the Army Council now regarded the railway of higher strategic importance as before. Whereas the main entry port to Palestine is the port of Haifa the Army wants to retain the railway to have a direct link with British forces on the Suez Canal should rapid mobilisation be necessary in case of war or maintenance of internal security. With the Suez Canal having become the main artery of Imperial East West traffic the attitude of the British changed dramatically and plans were drawn up to prevent by legal and diplomatic means a take-over of the Sinai Railway by the Egyptian authorities. By January 1928 Abdel Hamid Suleiman Pasha stated that the Egyptians were definitely determined to take over this railway even if they had to pay for it. This raised great concern with the British army over the proper continuity of services and proper maintenance.²⁴ (FO 141/478/2201 : 1928)

To further complicate matters the Egyptians were planning on complying with the wishes of the Suez Canal Company of moving the railway ferry from Kantara and to construct a new terminal at Port Said. This would involve the extension of the existing tracks from the railhead at Kantara to Port Fouad at the northern entry of the Suez Canal. The British were now putting in their best efforts to delay any further decisions regarding the Sinai railway and to diffuse the situation as much as possible. The deviation of the railway to start at Port Said would mean that mainly passenger traffic would be using the line linking the Suez Canal to Palestine and onwards to Syria. Due to cost considerations cargo traffic would be more inclined to use the alternative sea route. A technical study was drawn up and the matter became the subject of great controversy and concern involving everyone all the way to Sir Austin Chamberlain in London.²⁵ (FO 141/478/2201 : 1928)

In the subsequent months all efforts were made to distract the Egyptian government from raising the issue and a strategy was laid out to employ all diplomatic negotiation tactics in order to retain effective control over the Sinai railway. In case the Egyptians would raise the issue an unattractively high price would be asked, previous ambiguous points in the agreements

would be argued and the matter would be made part of the greater settlement between the Egyptian and British government, thus delaying the take-over indefinitely. In general, the view in London was that the railway should by all means remain under the supervision of the Palestine government, which Britain was hoping to dominate for a much longer time, after their influence in Egypt ceased.

4.4 The Frontiers Districts Administration (F.D.A.)

It was clearly recognised at an early stage of the First World War that controlling vast areas of the deserts surrounding the Nile valley forming Egypt's borders would necessitate a very specialised type of administration, very different in scope and function to the administration of settled areas. This was due to two main factors : One was the military or police control of the boundaries themselves against infiltration and contraband activities, and secondly the effective civil administration of the bedouin inhabitants of these deserts, who are ethnically and culturally very different from sedentary Egyptians. The inhospitable terrain and enormous distances between settled oases and water sources made the use

of modern transport inferior to the qualities of the camel, the traditional beast of burden. Different culture and administration of law as traditionally practised by the desert Arabs made it impossible to directly copy the systems used in settled Egypt which would alienate the bedouin and would lead to them to evading any effective government control.

Little attention had been paid to these aspects by various central governments in Cairo, who limited their control to positioning a number of garrisons along the main caravan routes, leaving the rest of the country effectively outside government jurisdiction. The deserts were always a suspicious and undesirable place for any Nilotic Egyptian to be avoided if possible. Military or any other government service in the desert was seen as a punishment, an asylum from civilisation. This was the situation until the early Twentieth Century and effective control was not introduced until these areas came under British administration. It was a small number of British officers whose love for the desert and their romantic preconceptions of its nomadic dwellers that shaped the first real government of Egypt's deserts. They developed an in depth understanding of the physical terrain and its limitations, as well as a system of

government based on such values of chivalry, honour and discipline so well accepted by the Arab tribesmen as being their own.

This understanding was well reflected in the various policies that were implemented under British control in Egypt's deserts, and particularly in the Sinai Peninsula, which remained under British administration until well after the Second World War. The first aspect of military control was characterised by the formation of the famous Camel Corps, which would prove so effective in early desert warfare before the introduction of motorised transport capable of surmounting the difficulties of the terrain. This also meant that it was necessary to integrate the bedouin into these forces in order to make use of their special knowledge of their camels and the Desert.

The Camel Corps was first started in 1916 in preparation to pursue and engage the retreating Turkish forces across the Sinai, but it was soon detached from the Egyptian Army proper and was transformed into the Frontiers Districts Administration (F.D.A.) in May 1917. The formation of the F.D.A. can be credited to General Sir Archibald Murray Commander of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force.

In charge of the Sinai Peninsula at the time was Lt. Col. Wilfried Jennings Bramley. He had been Governor of the Sinai before in 1905-1906. He was appointed Governor of Sinai again in 1913 until he was ordered to evacuate the peninsula in September 1914, owing to the imminence of war with Turkey. He was personally very interested in the Arabs and the desert, which in turn accounted for his popularity with the bedouin. After the Sinai was evacuated many bedouin remained loyal to the British despite subversive efforts by the Turks and he brought with him to Suez a large number of tribesmen from Nekhl and Al `Arish that would later form the core of his Camel troops. These mounted troops were concentrated in Kantara on the Suez Canal the main operational base of British forces during the Palestine campaign against Turkey. From November 1914 until the recapture of Sinai and victory at Rafah Bramley was employed as Chief Intelligence Agent for the Suez Canal defences and together with his bedouin agents he would prove crucial to the success of the British war effort.²⁶ (FO 141/710/3072)

Thus the Frontiers Districts Administration was formed in 1917 as a special military administration for all the areas along Egypt's frontiers.

And was divided into three commands : the Western desert, The Eastern and Southern Desert, and the Sinai Peninsula. It was headed by an Egyptian officer reporting to the Egyptian Minister of War. The post of Assistant Director was filled by an Englishman and so were the posts of Governor of each of the three districts. It was common for Egyptian ministries and government departments at that time to employ British or other foreign personnel. The newly acquired ex-Turkish territories of Palestine, Transjordan and Iraq were put under the Occupied Enemy Territories Administration (O.E.T.A.). Allenby had recommended not to mix the administration of the newly occupied territories with the already administered border districts.²⁷ (FO 141/783/5289)

Bramley's ideas on the necessary qualifications of British officers for service in the F.D.A. are well represented in the guide lines issued by the Ministry of War in 1920. Consequently the following memorandum was sent from Cairo through the Foreign Office to Gen. Murray in London as guidelines to help in interviewing and selecting suitable officers for the F.D.A. on 29. January 1920.

“ Qualifications for Officers to serve in the F.D.A. Camel
Corps

- Subaltern officers of the regular forces, preferably only infantry or cavalry are required
- They must be unmarried and should be between the ages of 22 & 26, and be of an active nature
- They must have seen active service in some field of operations
- It is desirable that they should have had a public school education
- Those with Camel Corps experience and with some knowledge of Arabic should be given preference
- Their medical classification should be A.1.”

The pay for officers was at the following rates :

a- Basic salary p.a.	L.E.300
<u>b- Bonus subject to modification</u>	<u>L.E.188</u>
total	L.E.488

c-Desert allowance varying from 1/8th to 1/3rd of salary plus 20% according to the locality in which the officer is stationed.²⁸ (FO 141 436/10229 : 1920)

One major feature was that a good educational background and total dedication was required. Officers that want to get married would have to hand in their resignation. Officers were also required to learn Arabic and were required to pass an examination before being eligible for any promotion.²⁹ (FO 141 436/10229 : 1920) These measures insured that British officers in the F.D.A. would serve as role models to impress the bedouin and command their respect and loyalty.

Since the founding of the F.D.A. it has been assumed that all expenses of positioning of British officers are borne by Britain and are regarded as a good insurance against turmoil on the Egyptian borders. In May 1920 the War Office raised objections in regard to the incidence of the cost of the pensions of officers seconded to Egypt. They stated that by pre-war arrangement pension contributions for officers lent by the British to the Egyptian government were borne by the British government up to a limited number of officers only. Since this number had already been exceeded and the F.D.A. wanted to further expand its work, they could not agree to bear the additional cost and wanted the Egyptian government to pay.

These comments were highly opposed by British representatives in Egypt pointing out that if the Camel Corps had already existed in 1915 the Senoussi invasion of the Western Desert would never have succeeded. This would have saved the British millions of pounds which they later had to spend on restoring order. If they tried to reduce pay or pensions in any way the quality of officers attracted to the job would sink and again defeat the purpose.

In the words of Brigadier General Major Wallace, Deputy Director of the F.D.A. : "... the candidates for posts with the F.D.A. must be officers with sound professional training ... We should I imagine, if we cannot get Regular Officers, have to fall back on the failures of life and derelicts. ... To turn to the larger issue the training and experience that would accrue to officers when serving with the Camel Corps would be most beneficial. Any officer who spends five years with this force would have such an experience of deserts that no matter how difficult the country he may be asked to traverse in his subsequent career, he will feel at home in it."³⁰ (FO 141 436/10229 : 1920) He also recommended that no change would be made with the officer's pension arrangements paid by the British government, since during the period they serve in Egypt the whole pay they would otherwise have drawn from British funds would be saved to the British government.

In November 1920 Allenby went personally to the War Office in London to explain the urgency of the matter : " I am to state, for the information of the Army Council, that the Frontiers Districts Administration require these officers immediately, and, if their appointment is deferred until the future political status is finally settled, the efficiency of that Administration may

be seriously impaired."³¹ (FO 141 436/10229 : 1920) Continued British control inside the F.D.A. would insure that the Sinai Peninsula is to remain under a British governor, an aspect that was seen as vital for the strategic position of Britain in the Eastern Mediterranean and her control of the Suez Canal.

The officers of the F.D.A. in their capacity as Governors were also responsible for all aspects of civil government in their provinces. Thus they administered local courts which applied bedouin systems of justice known as *`urf* rather than the laws of mainland Egypt. The main feature of bedouin law is that it is remedial in nature and criminals are not usually punished by imprisonment for crimes committed. Thus a bedouin convicted of a crime such as assault or even murder would have to pay restitution to the aggrieved party, usually in the form of camels and goats, rather than face a prison sentence. Several governors such as A.C. Parker and his successor C.S. Jarvis (Governor of Sinai 1922-1936) held their own courts in the traditional Arab manner by forming tribunals of tribal elders and handing down "bedouin" sentences. This made the bedouin willing to come to the government for justice instead of taking it into their own hands.

The British administrators were also very much concerned with developing their areas economically by establishing trade centers and creating opportunities for employment for the bedouin. One such center was the town of Burg Al `Arab west of Alexandria, which was a lifetime project for W.J. Bramley. This was a fortified little town, which he developed, and which became an important centre of administration and commerce for the bedouin of the Western Desert. In 1923 he reported famine due to harvest failure for four consecutive years and urged the government to allow the sale of land to merchants within the walls of Burg Al`Arab under the condition that they must build a house on it. This would provide his bedouin with jobs and income as construction workers. He also persuaded the ministry of *wakfs* to build a mosque in order to make the place a religious and educational centre.³³ (FO 141/710/3072)

Another means for the locals to earn income was to be employed into the service of the F.D.A. itself. The bedouin made excellent scouts, policemen and drivers with special knowledge of the desert. Their service was seen by the British officers as far superior than recruits. It was even suggested to form a specialized Arab battalion on a voluntary basis. The battalion would be split into companies each raised and stationed in a different

district : one company in Sallum District, another in Sidi Barrani and a depot at Matrouh. All officers below Yusbashi should be Arabs. Their pay should equal the normal police in addition to providing them with tents for their families. This would highly economize on police expenditure at Barrani and Matrouh.³¹ (FO 141/514/12462 : 1926)

In consequence of their insight and dedication the British governors enjoyed great respect and loyalty amongst the Arabs in Egypt's deserts and their achievements in creating an atmosphere of law and order and improving living standards could not be denied. Nevertheless, the independence of Egypt would eventually change things in the desert.

4.5 Conclusion

The outbreak of the First World War with Britain and the Ottoman Empire on opposing sides would bring major changes in the Middle East. As soon as Turkey joined the Central Powers Britain announced her protectorate over Egypt, turning the Suez Canal Zone into one of the largest garrisons for British, ANZAC and Indian troops, as a launching pad for the expected

hostilities in the Sinai and Palestine, as well as being a back-up depot for military activities in the Mediterranean. The pro-Turkish Khedive was deposed during his absence and replaced by his anglophile uncle, Hussein Kamil, who from then on assumed the title of Sultan, reflecting the newly “independent” status of Egypt.

The Turkish attack on the Suez Canal, although coming as no surprise, confirmed the geopolitical and strategic importance of the Sinai, and strengthened British determination to establish permanent control of this peninsula. To achieve their objectives the British devised several policies in preparation for the military campaign to re-conquer the Sinai from Turkey and maintain control over this vital sea-route to their colonies in Asia. First, some significant infrastructure developments were implemented such as the railway, water pipeline, roads and communications. Second, was the experience in desert warfare gained from the campaign, particularly the cooperation between irregular bedouin Arab troops and the British Army. This led to the development of the mounted Camel Corps which significantly contributed to the success of the Palestine Campaign, and the formation of the Arab Legion, which augmented British troops in the conquest of Palestine, Jordan and Syria.

And thirdly, the experiences in Sinai gave birth to the formation of the Frontiers Districts Administration, a specialized military government for Egypt's boundary desert areas, which would become the primary vehicle for securing continued British presence in Sinai.

The events during World War I underscored the British concern with security of the Suez Canal and Sinai became an integral feature in Britain's colonial policy. This is clearly reflected in the keen interest in developing administration and infrastructure in the peninsula and the reaffirmation of British military control. However, the spectre of independence of Egypt was looming over British rule and this necessitated a rethinking of strategy which is discussed in the next chapter.

NOTES Chapter 4

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- ¹² FO 141/746/4833 Arab Legion for Hejaz 1917/18
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ FO 141/512/623 Cairo -Syria Railway Proposal
- ¹⁵ Letter from the commander in chief of the Mediterranean expeditionary force to the High commissioner in Cairo, 10.03.1916, in FO 141/478/2201 Egypt - Palestine Railway
- ¹⁶ Letters from Sir George Macauley, Director Egyptian State Railways, to Director of railways and roads, War Office, London, 2.9. & 26.10.1917, FO 141/478/2201 Egypt - Palestine Railway
- ¹⁷ Telegram High Commissioner for Egypt to Mr Stack, Khartoum 27.11.1917 FO 141/478/2201 Egypt - Palestine Railway
- ¹⁸ Report by Egyptian State Railways to the High Commissioner, Cairo, 9.1.1919, FO 141/478/2201 Egypt - Palestine Railway

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- ²⁰ Minutes on Residency paper No.2201/208, 15.9.1920, FO 141/478/2201 Egypt - Palestine Railway
- ²¹ Telegram from Foreign Office in London to High Commissioner in Cairo, 21.12.1920, FO 141/478/2201 Egypt - Palestine Railway
- ²² minutes of meeting at the residency, Egypt, 4.4.1921, & document no.2201/404, 12.6.1921, FO 141/478/2201 Egypt - Palestine Railway
- ²³ letter General Command, Egyptian Expeditionary force to War Office, London, 25.4.1922, FO 141/478/2201 Egypt - Palestine Railway
- ²⁴ memorandum, High Commissioner of Egypt, 23.1.1928, in FO 141/478/2201 Egypt - Palestine Railway
- ²⁵ Confidential print J 3202/3202/16 9.11.1928 in FO 141/478/2201 Egypt - Palestine Railway)
- ²⁶ Record of service of Lt.Col. W.J. Bramley in FO 141/710/3072
- ²⁷ Report of the conference of chief Administrators, Mount Carmel, 12.5.1919, in FO 141/783/5289
- ²⁸ FO 141 436/10229 British Officers for Frontier Districts Administration : General Conditions 1920

²⁹ FO 141 436/10229 British Officers for Frontier Districts Administration
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³⁰ letter to High Commission on 6. June 1920 in FO 141 436/10229 British
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³¹ FO 141 436/10229 British Officers for Frontier Districts Administration
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³² FO 141/710/3072

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Chapter 5

Post World War I Adjustments in the Middle East

5.1 Introduction

The war had shown that the security of Egypt, or more particularly that of Imperial communications through the Suez Canal was a paramount element in British world policy. The geopolitical significance of continued British control of the Sinai Peninsula had become unquestioned, but new problems and threats to British interests emerged.

After the War three concerns for Britain often put the Sinai Peninsula in connection with the safety of the Suez Canal at the top of the agenda of the British Parliament. On an international front was the establishment of newly independent nation states just beyond the boundary of Sinai and the Zionist movement's push towards establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. Inside Egypt was the threat of independence, which would undermine British control of the Sinai.

The first factor threatening the boundary of the Sinai and thus of the Suez Canal arose after the Sykes-Picot Treaty for the division of the Middle

East after the war. The eminent formation of new nation states in the region made the settlement of Sinai's international boundary along the lines of 1906 a primary concern of British statesmen involved in the 1919 peace conference. Britain's "Arab Policy" would lead to the establishment of new Arab States in the former provinces of the Ottoman Empire : Palestine, Jordan, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia.

A second threat to the Sinai came from the British commitment towards the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine. The increase of Zionist migration after the Balfour Declaration was challenging British authority in Palestine. Therefore, fixing the eastern international boundary of Sinai in respect to Turkey's ex-territory of Palestine became a major policy issue. Britain also contained attempts of Zionist colonization of land in the Sinai itself as this would have posed a serious threat to British security interests.

On the Domestic front Britain faced nationalist uprising and the expected independence of Egypt would reduce the presence of British officials in the Egyptian government. The preparation for the eminent independence of Egypt and the implications of losing direct control over the

administration of Sinai and the Canal Zone for the security of the Suez Canal, by then the most important Imperial waterway, became a central subject in London.

Britain's policy to counter these problems was first to secure the international recognition of Egypt's boundary at the 1919 peace conference in Paris. The delegation headed by Lord Balfour made a great effort to secure the status of Sinai and the boundary based on the recommendations of British officers in Egypt. This chapter will show the intricate diplomatic moves and countermoves that finally secured British interests in Sinai.

On the domestic side Britain's policy to remain in control of the Sinai was to somehow persuade the Egyptian government that the Sinai should remain under a British governor. The independence of Egypt would mean the loss of direct British control over the government and the reduction of British officials employed by the Egyptian government. However, the so called "reserved clauses" of the unilateral declaration of independence in 1922 would provide that Britain was still responsible for the defense of Egypt, giving her the legitimacy to retain control over the

Sinai through her clout inside the Ministry of War in Cairo. The primary vehicle for continued British control over the administration of Sinai was a division of this ministry, the Frontiers Districts Administration, in which a number of Englishmen held the top ranks. This would enable Britain to retain control not only over the vast desert areas in the south and west of Egypt, but also enjoy complete control over the Sinai and thus, all eastern approaches to the Suez Canal.

The British argued that retention of British control over the administration of the Sinai through continued control of the F.D.A was absolutely necessary for two reasons : One, was the inefficiency of Egyptian officers in desert service and their adversity to the harsh living conditions versus the superiority of well trained British personnel. And, secondly, highlighting the preference of the local bedouin population for British military officers to rule over them, pointing out concerns over discrimination of ethnic minorities under the nationalist government. The bedouin particularly resented the conscription system of the Egyptian army and the different legal system implemented, clearly showing their preference for traditional law as administered by the British governors in Sinai. This attitude of the bedouin greatly helped

continuation of Britain's control and the British employed their famous "divide and rule" policy to undermine the authority of the central governments of newly formed nation states to control boundary minorities. Protecting the interests of such ethnic minorities often helped the efforts of British diplomats in legitimizing the continued presence of British administration in areas of geopolitical interest.

5.2 Formulation of Britain's Arab Policy

In recognition of the great help the Arab forces under T.E. Laurence rendered to Britain and the role they had in bringing about a much speedier victory over the Turks Britain expedited the formulation of the "Arab Policy". The main line of thinking was that eventually independence should be granted to the Arabs and they should be allowed self determination. Yet some geopolitical aspects had to be solved, a task which would prove much more complicated than the principle itself. Consideration had to be made for the conflicting aspirations of Britain and France for control in the Middle East. How the actual inhabitants of the different former Turkish provinces viewed what constitutes independence

and self determination was another matter. The first official communications regarding independence and the rise of the "Arab Question" was around September 1918. "I am suggesting to French Govt. that in view of recent developments we should now recognize belligerent status of our Arab Allies fighting for independence from Turkish rule. This formula while recognizing Arab National movement and identifying all Arabs therewith, will not give impression that we wish to impose King Hussein upon Syria."¹ (FO 141/776/70 : 1918-1928)

But what would constitute the future Arab State and which government would be recognized by all Arabs in Syria, Palestine, Jordan and Arabia proper, as well as the various smaller tribal entities along the Persian Gulf and Southern Arabia as a legitimate paramount leadership was the most complicated problem that would face British diplomats for years to come. The British government therefore proceeded very cautiously in recognizing any particular Arab ruler as their favorite to govern over this vast area in the Middle East. The two most prominent Arab leaders King Hussein and Emir Feisal were informed first of the British plans and an official statement was issued in October 1918 accordingly, it was communicated by Lord Allenby the Commander in Chief of the allied

forces : " I am authorized to inform your Highness that the British and French Governments have recognized officially as allies the Arab forces fighting with them against a common enemy...The Arab Flag is now flying over Damascus."² (FO 141/776/70 : 1918-1928) An official telegram of congratulations from King George to the King of the Hejaz followed on 5.10.1918, but still there was no mention of independence and self determination until an actual policy was formulated. The first suggested framework came to the Foreign Office in a secret communication from the Residency in Egypt and it may be interesting that this early outline would be reflected in the overall course adopted for British Policy during the peace negotiations throughout 1919 and for many years to follow.

By 1918 the British had formulated a clear policy towards dividing up the former Ottoman provinces under her control and the eventual formation of nation states. This policy was summarized in a report prepared by the High Commission in Egypt and is contained in the papers of the residency.

The main features of the British plan were as follows :

Moslem Government where there are large Moslem majorities is a necessary but transitional stage, essential to satisfy Islamic sentiments : but theocratic systems will be generally combated and gradually discarded for National ones except in Hejaz, which can be preserved as an archaic enclave. Racial (Nationalist) ideals require to be cultivated

and utilized as a counterpoise to Islamic (reactionary) political tendencies.

King Hussein to be the symbol of Arab racial aggregation and dignified as such throughout (Asiatic) Arabic-speaking countries. His political power outside Hejaz to be completely restricted by the grant of separate constitutions and by agreements with local governments and ruling chiefs. His religious significance to be recognized by the mention of his name in Friday prayers in Mosques throughout the entire region.

Skeleton Constitution

In Hejaz - Central (theocratic) Moslem Government and Conservative theological centre.

In Yemen and Asir - Local government in correspondence with Central (Hejaz) Government.

Interior of Arabia - Tribal system under Chiefs in friendly relations with King of Hejaz.

Damascus Region (with direct access to sea) - An autonomous province, under a constitutional regime, of the Central Government.

Palestine - Nominally International. Zionist finance.

Coastal Syria - Arab Local Government under French tutelage.

Mesopotamia - Under British tutelage with Arab facade.

Flags.

Central Government flag to be flown in Hejaz and Damascus Province and, where possible, South Western and Central Arabia. Elsewhere this flag to be flown alongside of an European flag or a local flag. In latter case it might be possible and would seem desirable to avoid use of Central Government flag.

Foreign Affairs.

Of all areas directly (politically) subordinate to Central Government to be conducted in theory through King Hussein, who should be consulted on such matters as would affect future of region taken as a whole. External affairs of European-controlled areas and, if possible, of Damascus Province, to be in the hands of Power, or Powers, controlling.

Finance.

All settled portions of area to contribute in proportion to their local budgets to expenses of Central (Hejaz) government. This contribution to be apart from payments in connection with Pilgrimage. Subsidies to Native Rulers and Governments, where necessary, to be paid direct by Power controlling adjacent settled area or Government."³ (FO 141/776/70 : 1918-1928)

So this was the blueprint of policy formulated as early as October 1918 which would guide British negotiations throughout the peace conference that would last for more than one year. It is noteworthy that there were two elements that were central to British thinking. One, the British wanted to curtail as much as possible the influence of French control in Syria under the guise of Arab sovereignty; and, second, the understanding that the Arabs will have to be divided according to individual national aspirations of each future country. This, of course, raised the crucial issue of where to draw the political and administrative boundaries of the future Arab Middle East.

5.3 The Sykes - Picot Treaty

At the Sykes-Picot Treaty in 1916 Britain and France agreed that after the War they would divide up the former territories of the Levant belonging to the Ottoman Empire between them. Syria and Lebanon would become French and Mesopotamia (Iraq), Palestine and Transjordan would be British. The British government had also agreed to give the Zionist Organisation Palestine as a Jewish national home.

After the defeat of Turkey and the peace negotiations in 1919 boundaries were to be drawn for territories now ruled by the O.E.T.A. (Occupied Enemy Territory Administration). In December 1919 the northern boundary was first fixed to separate Syria from Turkey. The boundary separating British from French territory, known as the Sykes-Picot line was a more complicated matter. The general line of strategy for Britain was to keep their railway access from the Mediterranean ports of Palestine to their territories held in Mesopotamia, and the security of a vital oil pipeline running from Iraq to Haifa had to be secured. The co-operation of the Arab sheikhs of the area was therefore of critical importance and the High Commissioner in Jerusalem was much preoccupied with this task.

Confidential telegrams from the O.E.T.A. officer to the General Headquarters in Cairo highlight the problematic : "Cession of Tel El Arbein to Ajlun and extension of Sukhur El Ghor to O.E.T (South) has been approved by G.O.C in C. I could not wire Military governor Galilee for Southern boundary Sukhur El Ghor, exact location of which is immaterial provided railway and bridges are in our area."⁴ (FO 141 435/10168 : 1919-1925)

Prince Feisal, who was holding the settlement of Deraa which was north of the Sykes-Picot line and disputed by the Damascus government, asked for British assistance. Other Sheikhs of that area, as well as Arab tribes West of the Jordan river represented to favour British rather than French occupation. Yet the Foreign Office in London thought it unwise to occupy any places in the French sphere although it would clearly represent a strategic advantage.

British officers in Palestine also favoured occupying the lands east of the Dead Sea and Jordan valley to give them better control of Palestine and its water resources, as well as the desired access to Mesopotamia. The Foreign Office suggested to the High Commissioner of Egypt that the

"Eastern boundary of Palestine will be fixed by agreement between us and the French down to the Sykes-Picot line but south of that line by agreement between us and the local authorities." And they asked : "Where is Emir Zeid now ? Is there any prospect of his being accepted as Emir in the area between Palestine and Hejaz south of the Sykes-Picot line ? If so it might be desirable to negotiate boundaries etc. with him." Cairo consulted Jerusalem on this matter and the answer received by telegram on the following day summarises the general line of thinking which led to the annexation of Trans-Jordan to Palestine and eventually to the establishment of the State of Jordan as separate from Arabia. So the High Commission wrote back to London :

"Records here define Sykes-Picot line as line Tiberias-Bosrah-Eski-Sham, map 1 in 250,000 shows Deraa south of this. As to the country southwards present Jordan line is very bad line strategically, economically and politically. ... Information here emphasises conclusions. Territory up to Hejaz railway could be administered through tribal organisation supervised by two British district Governors and small staff. Police force drawn from tribes with British officers. Country [is] agriculturally rich, [therefore] revenue could cover cost of administration, road building schemes and leave considerable surplus after this year for general expenses of Palestine. This year's small cost of administration could be met by certain taxes still uncollected and obtainable without difficulty. Very small number of troops required as occupation greatly desired by the tribes and economies in garrison of Palestine facilitated by better frontier. Political effect on all sections of the population west of Jordan [is] excellent because final recognised occupation would prevent raids being organised, would enable small parties of robbers

to be arrested, would prevent possibility of a stoppage of Palestine food supplies as happened last year with disastrous effect on prices and would prevent another power establishing influence there. After fall of Damascus fortnight ago leading Trans-Jordan Sheikhs came here [to] invite British occupation. Are now leaving Jerusalem at no answer and disturbed at constant reports of French propaganda through Trans-Jordania. Could summon them all to fresh meeting where formal invitation would be given by them. These conclusions embody unanimous opinion of all my officers with knowledge of the country, and I can give assurance that occupation can be effected without fighting and maintained without additional expense. Am advised present tranquillity of the country due to general expectation of British occupation. If decision delayed inter-tribal quarrels and disturbances almost inevitable with probable development of French activity. Zeid is in Haifa. Will go with Feisal to Europe when ship available and enter Oxford. Sheikhs and tribes east of Jordan utterly dissatisfied with the Sherifian Government most unlikely would accept him on even less efficient basis and even smaller resources. It would mean continuous disorder on our border. Zeid carries little weight and lacks personal qualifications needed to establish authority. I suggest that the Hejaz railway and the sparse population eastward could be under control of the King of the Hejaz if undesirable to bring within our sphere.⁵ (FO 141 435/10168 : 1919-25)

Many inter-departmental committee meetings were held in London between August 1920 and March 1923 before the final draft of the Anglo-French agreement regarding the boundaries of Palestine was ready. A lot of lobbying came from the Zionist Organisation to secure a maximum of territory for its project of a Jewish National Home. Important points of concern were the inclusion of water sources of the upper Jordan River and

around lake Tiberias which were evidently located North of the Sykes-Picot line in French territory.

Priority throughout the negotiations was given to establishing the northern and north-eastern boundaries of Palestine and the northern and eastern boundary of Mesopotamia, which necessitated involving the French administration. It was perceived of lesser importance to fix the Southern boundary of Palestine since Egypt was under British control anyway, or the eastern boundary of Trans-Jordan, which would be settled later when the tribal situation in Arabia was clearer. Yet the Zionist Organisation pressed for definition of all borders and they also claimed an access to the Gulf of Aqaba / Red Sea. The original Sykes-Picot agreement vaguely defined the southern border of Palestine and the High Commission in Egypt made note of this on 12.03.1920 as follows:

"b) Arab Contrats. Syria to be under French mandate, with southern boundary from mouth of IHUN, thence running north to railway so as to include AINTAB, URFA, MARDIN, and GAZIRAT IBN OMAR on TIGRIS.

Mesopotamia to be under British mandate including Mosul, boundaries still to be determined, British mandate over Palestine with

boundaries as defined in accordance with phrase "DAN to BEERSHEBA".⁶ (FO 141 435/10168 : 1919-1925)

At the committee meeting held on 31.08.1920 Colonel Meinertzhagen presented his suggestions for a boundary of Palestine which became known as the Meinertzhagen line : "South of the Dead Sea his [Col. Meinertzhagen's] decision has been influenced by Dr. Weizmann, who was anxious to have a Palestinian port at Aqaba. Aqaba would be of no use to anyone for fifty years. If it were included in Palestine it was true that it would exclude any future State lying to the east of Palestine from an outlet in the gulf. Further than this the line was the same as the old boundary between Sinai and Palestine. Egypt could not be asked to give up the Sinai boundary."⁷ (ibid.)

5.4 The Balfour Declaration and the Zionist Movement

Right after the Balfour Declaration promising the Jews of Europe the creation of their own National Home in the British protectorate of Palestine the first wave of immigrants arrived. Loans and financial

assistance were organized for the purchase of land previously in Arab ownership. All tactics were used regardless of being unethical or not to get hold of as large an area as possible. The British administration assisted greatly in diverting land which had no formal title deeds or whose ownership was disputable towards Jewish deeds. "The Jewish National Fund in the Hague collected over [a] million francs from all parts of the world [with the] object [of] purchasing land [in] Palestine as inalienable property [of] Jewish people."⁸ (FO 141/803/4759 : 1917-1920)

Naturally great resentment to the zealous efforts of the Zionist organizations was soon expressed by the majority Arab population which felt betrayed by the British whom they had helped during the war against the Turks. Now the British were giving away Palestine to alien European immigrants who have no traditional claim to land in the Middle East. The Zionist Organization in Egypt was instrumental in furthering their cause and acting as a liaison between Britain and activities in Palestine. In the year to follow the true intentions of the Zionist movement, i.e. the colonization and control of Palestine was becoming more and more apparent, and the darkest suspicions of the Arab population was confirmed. Soon the Jewish immigrants were pressing the British

government to grant them preferential treatment over the original inhabitants.⁹ (FO 141/803/4759 : 1917-1920)

By 1920 open hostilities and demonstrations against the Zionist movement swept Palestine and Syria, but with the backing of Britain it had entrenched itself in the very heart of the Middle East and the Arab-Jewish conflict was born.

The main driving force behind the Zionist movement was its ability to mobilize substantial monetary funds from all around the world to further its aims in acquiring as much land as possible in Palestine and providing emigrants with the necessary starting capital to succeed in their new homeland. Also the Zionists of Egypt managed to collect large sums of money from their members and sympathizers to fuel the movement. The British on the other hand seemed to be taking a diplomatic course by which they were trying to conciliate the Arab and Jewish camps, and probably believed the intentions of the Zionists to be honest. It is well documented in consular correspondence that they at least tried to promote an atmosphere of mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence. The well organized propaganda of the Zionist organizations gave the British

confidence that they are their allies of choice in a future independent state of Palestine. The only worries were that several leaders of the Bolshevik movement so violently opposed to royalist principles are themselves Jews and outspoken Zionists. The British authorities pushed for these elements to be excluded from any activity in Palestine. However, Britain had actively promoted inclusion of Jewish settlers in their war efforts against the Turks, as this was perceived to give a future legitimacy for claiming Palestine as their permanent homeland.¹⁰ (141/805/4759 : 1917-1920)

The Balfour Declaration of 2.Dec.1917 gave a new boost to the Zionist Organization in Egypt and their application to publish a weekly journal was approved by the High Commissioner in Cairo, Sir Francis Reginald Wingate, after having consulted with the Foreign Office in London about the matter. Extreme caution and close censorship of the periodical was suggested. The first issue of the French language "La Revue Sioniste" was published on 4 Jan. 1918 by the Zionist Organization of Egypt, whose president was Mr J. Mosseri. After disagreements within the organization he resigned and the publication was temporarily suspended. He was succeeded by Mr. Joseph Cicurel in June 1918 after receiving approval

from Dr. Weizmann following the latter's visit to Cairo.¹¹ (FO 141/790/5825 : 1917-1918)

The Zionist efforts finally bore fruits in May 1920 when the British government formally gave its support to the Zionist cause of converting Palestine into a Jewish National Home. The Egyptian Zionists sent a formal letter thanking the King of England for his support and formally accepted the Protectorate of Great Britain over Palestine.¹² (FO 141/802/4759 : 1920)

5.5 Jewish Colonization of Sinai

A rather lesser known fact is that the Zionists also had designs for colonizing the Sinai Peninsula from as early as 1908 and used British sympathy to further their scheme. Their target was a stretch of land between Al `Arish and the newly established border between Egypt and Turkish Palestine at Rafah, the only agriculturally usable land in Sinai. The project would have involved the creation of a colony for settling an initial 100 families of Jewish immigrants from Russia.

In early 1908 The Anglo-Palestine Development Company, a Zionist organization based in Jaffa, sent their representative Samuel Frumkin, a British subject, to source out the possibilities of purchasing Land from the local Bedouin in Northern Sinai. He initially approached Mr Knesevich the British Consular Agent at Ghazza for help and was sent onwards with a recommendation to meet the British Inspector of Al `Arish, Beamish Bey. The latter and his superior Col. Parker, Governor of Sinai, initially had no objections to the plan, but warned that they may meet with resentment from the local Bedouin. Thus Mr. Knesevich, being an unpaid consular officer allowed to trade, was commissioned to purchase 50,000 “deunums” on behalf of the Zionist organization and he acquired an initial 10,000 “deunims”. He wrote in his report for 1908 : “The only hope of improvement here is the advent of Europeans and with them European methods of agriculture. I have strongly recommended British Jews to start a colony in this district, and they empowered me to buy sufficient land for the purpose. I endeavored to secure for them a tract of land near the frontier ...”¹³ (FO 141/683/9355 : 1910-12)

Although it had been represented to the British authorities that the land purchases were conducted on behalf of British Jews, and are therefore in the interest of Britain, an application to settle 100 Russian Jewish families was made in December 1909. This stirred up British concern as it would have jeopardized their own relations in Egypt, so they took to great pains to discourage any further progress on the grounds that unsettled land ownership titles will lead to disputes between the bedouin and settlers. This, however, did not deter Mr Frumkin who sent an emotional appeal for support to Sir Eldon Gorst, High Commissioner for Egypt in April 1910, but to no avail as the Department of Intelligence in Cairo had warned the Residency of possible adverse repercussions.¹⁴ (FO 141/683/9355 : 1910-12) However, the Zionists would not give up their plan easily and they mobilized the press in London to appeal to public sentiments claiming that they are being discriminated against by British administrators in Egypt. The issue would dog the High commission in Cairo for years, but they stood firm in face of Zionist pressures in London, although they repeatedly had to justify themselves. Thus Sir Milne Cheetham explained the whole affair in a detailed report in June 1911 and his successor Viscount Kitchener summed up the position again in a report to the Foreign office in October 1912.¹⁵ (ibid.)

But there were also British officials that openly advocated Jewish colonization of the Sinai Peninsula. The champion of their cause was Colonel Richard Meinertzhagen, who was a member of the Paris Peace Delegation. He summarized his views on the future of the Sinai in a letter to the British Prime Minister Lloyd George, in order to persuade him to include Sinai in the proposed Jewish state :

Paris, 25.3.1919

My Dear Prime Minister,

You asked me yesterday to send you an unofficial letter on the subject of the sovereignty of the Sinai. I regard this question as supremely important – not at the moment but in years to come. May I enter more fully into the question than I was able to do yesterday.

We are very wise in allowing the Jews to establish their national Home in Palestine; we have also freed the Arabs from the Turkish yoke and we cannot forever stay in Egypt. This Peace Conference laid two eggs – Jewish Nationalism and Arab Nationalism; these are going to grow up into two troublesome chickens : the Jew virile, brave, determined and intelligent; the Arab decadent, stupid, dishonest and producing little beyond eccentrics influenced by the romance and silence of the desert. The Jews, despite dispersal, have distinguished themselves in the arts, music, science and gave Britain one of its distinguished Prime Ministers.

In fifty years time both Jew and Arab will be obsessed by nationalism, the natural outcome of the President's self-determination. Nationalism prefers self-government, however dishonest and inefficient, to government by foreigners, however efficient and beneficial. Nationalism moreover involves the freedom of the State but ignores the freedom of

the individual; it is a sop to professional politicians and agitators, and may involve gross injustice to the people.

A national home for the Jew must develop sooner or later into sovereignty; I understand that this natural evolution is envisaged by some members of H.M.G. Arab nationalism will also develop into sovereignty from Mesopotamia to Morocco.

Jewish and Arab sovereignty must clash. The Jew, if his immigration programme succeeds, must expand, and that can only be accomplished at the expense of the Arab, who will do his utmost to check the growth and power of a Jewish Palestine. That means bloodshed.

The British position in the Middle East today is paramount; the force of nationalism will challenge our position. We cannot befriend both Jew and Arab. My proposal is based on befriending the people who are more likely to be loyal friends – the Jews; they owe us a great deal and gratitude is a marked characteristic of that race. Though we have done much for the Arabs, they do not know the meaning of gratitude; moreover, they would be a liability; the Jews would be an asset....

With Jewish and Arab nationalism developing into sovereignty, and with the loss of the Canal in 1966 (only 47 years hence), we stand a good chance of losing our position in the Middle East. My suggestion to you yesterday is a proposal to make our position more secure.

Previous to 1905 the Turkish-Egyptian frontier ran from Rafa in the north to the neighbourhood of Suez. The whole of the Eastern and Southern Sinai was part of the Hejaz province of the Ottoman Empire. [Which is not true, of course, as has been discussed previously in this thesis.] In October 1906 Egypt was granted *administrative rights* in Sinai up to a line drawn from Rafah to the head of the Gulf of Aqaba, Turkey expressly *retained the right of sovereignty*. General Allenby with British forces, unaided by the Egyptian Army, conquered and occupied Turkish Sinai which, by right of conquest, is at Britain's disposal. This bare statement can be verified by the Foreign Office.

If Britain annexes Turkish Sinai, the following advantages accrue:

1. It establishes a buffer between Egypt and Palestine.

2. It gives Britain a strong foothold in the Middle East with access to both the Mediterranean and the Red Sea.
3. It gives us room for a strategic base and, with Jewish consent, the best harbour in the Eastern Mediterranean.
4. It not only places us in a position whence we can frustrate any Egyptian move to close the Canal to British shipping, but it enables us to build a dual canal connecting the Mediterranean with the Red Sea.
5. No question of nationalism can arise in Sinai, as its nomad inhabitants are but a few thousand.

R. Meinertzhagen ¹⁶ (Bernstein : 1980, pp.18-20)

Although private purchases of land by Zionists continued on a small scale, the Sinai was spared from becoming a Jewish colony and further expansions were halted. The recommendations of Col. Meinertzhagen were not followed and the British did not claim the Sinai as their own, but the same line of argument would arise again after the Second World War when the status of the Sinai was again contested.

5.6 The Egypt - Palestine International Boundary

Although the boundary between Egypt and Ottoman Palestine had been settled on both sides in 1906, the matter was by no means final, as after the First World War during the conferences in Paris when the victorious allies

divided up the Middle East the issue was brought up again. Britain, having made a commitment to establish a Jewish national home in Palestine and consequently expecting to eventually lose control over their mandate, was now more than ever eager to secure the best possible strategic position for herself in the Sinai Peninsula. The British authorities in Cairo had good insight into the various aspects that had to be considered from a geopolitical point of view. First, there was the military security of the eastern access to the Suez Canal. During the war the shortcomings of having a mere straight line as a border between Egypt and its neighbour became all too apparent. The boundary did not adhere to any physical features such as valleys or mountain ranges, which made it very hard to patrol against smugglers and infiltrators, or defend it in case of war. Second, there was the issue of arable land and aquifers necessary to sustain the local population. Third, Britain had built the Palestine Railway at great expense and was planning to exploit mining operations on the Dead Sea and would have liked to see an access corridor from the mines to the Mediterranean included in the boundaries of Egypt. Fourth, there was the Zionist organisation, which wanted to secure a maximum of territory for its future Jewish homeland. Fifth, there was the problem of dividing traditional tribal territory borders which would put bedouin from the same

tribe on two different sides of an international boundary, under two different state jurisdictions with the social and political implications this would entail. Sixth, Britain had agreed not to increase its colonial possessions or spheres of influence at the expense of Germany and its allies, in this case Turkey, without equal territorial concessions to be won by the other allies. "Article 13 of Agreement between Allies and Italy of April 26th 1915 provides that if France and Great Britain increase their Colonial possessions, at Germany's expense, those two powers recognise in principle that Italy could claim equitable compensation notably in settlement in her favour of question concerning frontiers of Italian Colony of Eritrea, Somaliland and Lybia and neighbouring British and French Colonies."¹⁷ (FO 141/664/8002 : 1918)

And, finally, there were the Egyptian nationalists to please and in consideration of the tense political atmosphere leading up to the 1919 revolution and Egypt's independence this could not be taken lightly either.

Leading the negotiations in Paris on behalf of Britain was Lord Balfour. He was left with the thankless task of trying to balance all these sides. He therefore was in constant communication with the High Commission in Cairo seeking the advice of British officers who were much more familiar

with the actual situation in Sinai and Palestine. A particularly controversial issue was that both Palestine and Transjordan wanted to retain at least a narrow strip of territory which would give them each an access to the Gulf of Aqaba and Red Sea, thus separating Egypt from Arabia. As negotiations in Paris were proceeding Balfour consulted Cairo : "A provisional Southern Boundary for Palestine has been drawn up by British delegation here, which starts from a point five miles west of Et-Tafila and runs due west till it strikes Sinai frontier just below El Auja. It has been so drawn as to leave room for a line of railway from south of Dead Sea (where it is supposed that works might be established for dealing with Dead Sea mines) to Beer Sheba. Is there any objection from an Egyptian point of view to line striking Sinai frontier just below El Auja ?"¹⁸ (FO 141/664/8002 : 1919) This would have meant expanding Egyptian territory into the Negev Desert at the expense of Palestine's access to the sea, and giving Palestine the north eastern part of Sinai, thus altering the boundary of 1906.

The High Commission forwarded Balfour's question to seek the inputs of the Frontiers Districts Administration and Lt. Col. Parker, the governor of Sinai, as well as Field Marshal Edmund Allenby, G.O.C. British Forces in

Egypt. Their answers seemed to reflect the various considerations mentioned above :

“On the one hand it seems desirable that all cultivated or cultivable land on the southern borders of Palestine, in the neighbourhood of Gaza, Rifa, and Beersheba, should go to Palestine. But, on the other hand, it would be preferable that the Palestinian State should not have jurisdiction over Bedouin tribes. The tribes south of the Rifa - Beersheba line and west of the Wadi Arabah go naturally with those of the Sinai peninsula, and the pre-war frontier between Turkey and Egypt, which separates them, was quite an arbitrary line. It might be desirable, therefore, to attach this triangle of former Turkish territory to Egypt. But the consent of the inhabitants would have first to be manifested in some clear form, in order to preclude any possibility of misinterpretation. For, since Egypt is a British protectorate, the attachment of these tribes to Egypt might otherwise be represented as an annexation of free Arabs to the British Empire.”¹⁹ (FO 141/664/8002)

From the Egyptian (or, at present, the F.D.A.'s) point of view I see no objection if, in any case, the pre-war Egyptian frontier line is to be adhered to (as this telegram seems to imply). It matters little at what point a

tangent starts eastwards, separating "Palestine" from "Hejaz". But I can conceive some advantage to Egypt if no such tangent were drawn from its frontier at all; i.e. if the present Egyptian frontier itself were taken as the south-western boundary of Palestine; and a line of demarcation were drawn southward from Tafiila to the Gulf of Aqaba in such a way that Egypt would be at no point conterminous with Hejaz. In that case, if Palestine fell under a civilised government, Egypt would be spared difficulties of tribal control and contraband prevention, which a frontier with Hejaz is sure to occasion in a greater degree than a frontier with Palestine."²⁰ (FO 141/664/8002 : 1919)

Lt.Col. A.C.Parker, who had first hand knowledge of the peninsula, did not quite agree : "The present boundary line of Sinai coincides with no physical feature, nor is it a satisfactory dividing line between Arab tribes, cutting as it does the territory of three large Arab tribes, namely the Teiaha, the Terabin and the Lehaiwat. The line which has been suggested as separating Palestine from the country under Arab dominion, from a spot 5 miles west of Tafiila to the Egyptian frontier immediately south of Auja, follows no natural feature. Such a line leaves to the south of it a mass of rough country, the ready refuge for thieves, raiders, and malefactors

operating both in Sinai to the west and in Palestine to the north; nor is it possible to believe that the Arab Authorities will ever attempt to administer or control the Arabs there resident. What may be called the Sinai Arabs are quite distinct from the Hejaz Arabs. They extend only to Bir Sheba and to the western edge of the Wadi Araba. A line is marked on the attached map ... Such a line would give to Egypt all the Arab tribes up to Wadi Araba. It would give to Egypt control of all the passes from Wadi Araba into Sinai. While leaving some Arab owned lands north of the Wadis Ghazze and Saba, it would secure to the Arabs a large area to the south of these Wadis which they would be free to develop without fear of penetration and occupation by the Jews.”²¹ (Parker : 1919)

Thus the High Commission summarised its concern to Balfour in Paris. This was also the view expressed by Field Marshall Allenby, who of course had excellent knowledge and experience of the area in question. : “The provisional southern boundary of Palestine proposed appears to presuppose no change in the existing Eastern boundary of Egyptian Sinai. If there is to be no such change, the proposal is open to serious objection from the point of view of the administration of Egyptian Sinai for these reasons :

A. It will subdivide still further certain bedouin tribes ... and render tribal control , already unsatisfactory, still more difficult.

B. The boundary dividing Egypt from this will be a conventional one, following no line of demarcation or of strategic defence.

C. The desert point where three territories meet ... will present special attraction to contrabandist and escaping criminals.

These difficulties will be lessened if the present Egyptian frontier ... were advanced to the crest of the western escarpment of the Wadi Arabah ... Still better however would be a rectification of all her Sinaitic frontier carried out so as to include in Egyptian Sinai all that lies south of the Wadi Ghuzzeh, together with the town of Beersheba, the frontier being prolonged thence to the foot of the Dead Sea and returning south down the western crest of the Wadi Arabah to the Gulf of Akaba.”²² (FO 141/664/8002 : 1919)

Balfour agreed with the recommendations and tried to include them in the negotiations, but he was weary of Zionist opposition. He therefore suggested to trade arable land in Northern Sinai, between al-‘Arish and Rafah, which previously had been the target of Jewish colonisation attempts, for the Southern part of Palestine : “We agree as regards West

escarpment of Wadi Araba as Eastern Frontier of Egypt and will endeavour to obtain this line. As regards Northern Frontier, in the event Great Britain not obtaining a mandate in Palestine, we would endeavour to obtain line recommended. If we do obtain a Mandate it will be difficult and in fact impossible to begin our regime by insistence on a territorial rearrangement which Jews would consider greatly to their disadvantage.”

²³ (FO 141/664/8002 : 1919)

The High commissioner also had the concerns of the Egyptian government in mind : “1. Proposed boundary gives to Palestine practically all the land in Sinai which is of any value in exchange for a worthless tract of country. 2. It hands over to Palestine sedentary Arab people who have always been under Egypt. In view of the above two considerations the proposal is hardly likely to be well received in Egypt, especially at present.” ²⁴ (FO 141/664/8002 : 1919)

Balfour tried to incorporate the suggestions received from Egypt, i.e. extending Egypt’s territory to the Dead Sea without giving away any territory in Sinai. He did not, however, succeed and finally had to yield to Zionist and French pressure. On April 15th he telegraphed to Cairo : “The

objections to including Beersheba within Egypt appear insuperable. ... It is generally agreed that the Western Escarpment of Wadi Araba should be Western Boundary of Arabs. In the circumstances it is suggested that the pre-war Frontier of Egypt should stand and that the triangle between Akaba, Rafa and the southern End of the Dead Sea should be included in Palestine. ... Egypt will thus avoid a common frontier with Arabs.”²⁵ (FO 141/664/8002 : 1919)

The High Commission made a last attempt to persuade Balfour to try again, rightly pointing out the grave deficiency of maintaining the straight line from Rafah to Taba, explaining the reasons, but to no avail. “I note that there are held to be insuperable objections to the inclusion of Beersheba in Egypt. I must make it clear that the frontier, which I recommended in my telegram No. 293, includes the only satisfactory line of defence of the Suez Canal. By maintaining the present frontier we abandon the whole system of strategic railways constructed during the campaign as well as the defensive positions against an attack on Egypt. In the event of attack we should be forced to fall back on the line of the Canal which is rendered useless as a line of defence to Egypt by the recent development of long range gunfire and aeroplane activity. Hence the

present frontier is most unsatisfactory from a military point of view unless we obtain complete and permanent control of Palestine. In any case I am opposed to interposing between Sinai and the Arab territories a narrow triangle such as that proposed in the latter part of your telegram which will be under the administration of Palestine. I would prefer the frontier to follow the line originally suggested by you.”²⁶ (FO 141/664/8002 : 1919)

Sir Milne Cheetham was of course right and his words would resonate for the rest of the twentieth Century as every military conflict in Sinai has proven. But the agreement was sealed and thus came about the straight line international boundary between Sinai and southern Palestine, and between Palestine and what later became Jordan, which are still in place today.

The boundary itself had thus been settled but there were also practical administrative arrangements to be considered in controlling the newly established international boundary. The tasks of controlling contraband activities, health and passport controls had to be adjusted to the new situation. In view of Egypt's independence the issue was also of sensitive political importance.

In preparation of the resumption of control by the Egyptian government over the Suez Canal and the Sinai Peninsula another question remained unresolved: exactly where should the actual customs, quarantine and passport control be carried out. Several points were under discussion : Kantara on the eastern bank of the Suez Canal being the railhead of the Sinai railway and was previously the main customs check point; or, al-'Arish where the main caravan routes and roads across the peninsula converge; or, Rafah the small border town situated on the actual political frontier between Egypt and Palestine. Several arguments were put forth by various British entities in Jerusalem and Cairo and the Foreign Office in London was consulted. The authorities in Jerusalem took a practical standpoint and were thus in favour of establishing a joint Egyptian-Palestinian Customs and Quarantine station at al-'Arish for travellers by road, and Kantara to be the checkpoint for the railway, rather than at the exact border. Although several precedents were given of similar arrangements existing for example between Switzerland and Italy on the Simplon railway, and between Holland and Germany, Brazil and Uruguay, this proposal was wholly unacceptable for the Egyptian government in Cairo. They objected to having Palestinian authorities operating inside

Egyptian territory and favoured the actual border point at Rafah to be the location of all customs, passport and health formalities. The Frontiers Districts Administration, at that time still under British command, favoured al-'Arish for practical purposes of being the topographically best suited point of effective border police control. The Public Health Ministry also preferred to base its facilities in al-'Arish in order to more effectively control road traffic. This was also supported by the Ministry of Agriculture, which was concerned about infected produce from the Rafah area reaching Egypt proper without inspection. The Customs Authority preferred to retain their former checkpoint at Kantara, the Suez Canal being a most effective barrier for controlling the influx of contraband from Sinai. They also considered the loss of income from duties on from imports of sheep and camels raised in Sinai for sale west of the Canal, particularly since it was much more difficult to control the movement of livestock into Sinai from Palestine and Arabia.²⁷ (FO 141/443/12136 : 1920-25)

The discussions continued until April 1921 when an acceptable arrangement was agreed upon and a period of trial and error followed. The different authorities agreed that the real line of fiscal and health defence

should be maintained, as it was before the war, along the Suez Canal with the coast guard patrolling the western bank of the Canal. This meant that quarantine for livestock and agricultural produce, and customs were to be located at Kantara and east of Suez, while passport controls would be performed on the train between Kantara and al-'Arish for eastbound travel and between Ghazza and al-'Arish for travellers from Palestine to Egypt. Other travellers were to be checked at the Suez Canal facilities. This effectively made the Sinai peninsula "infect" from a quarantine point of view and extra territorial from a customs point of view, thus effectively isolating its inhabitants from mainland Egypt.²⁸ (ibid.) A situation which prevailed well into the 1980's.

5.7 Egypt's Independence

Egypt's national movement was of course at the forefront of British attention and it was clear to the High Commissioner in Cairo Egypt will eventually have to become a sovereign state. Yet it was not beneficial for the interests of Britain to have independence come too soon and the political activities that swept the country right after the First World War

were seen with great concern. The Egyptians were very hopeful that as soon as the war ends the military restrictions and martial law would be lifted and the country would become independent. But the British had very little intentions to live up to their promises of granting Egypt independence although their control over the country became increasingly difficult to sustain. T.E. Laurence, who himself felt rather cheated and embarrassed, vented his disenchantment in various newspaper articles that became more and more critical of British policy in Egypt. In an article that appeared in the Sunday Times on 30.5.1920, titled "The Middle East - how we are losing prestige", he wrote : "... Egypt expected the end of martial law and a return to the path of self government, toward which affairs had been slowly moving in the days of Eldon Gorst, and which had been since Muhamed Ali Pasha her ideal. Everywhere...it was felt that the war cloud had lifted, and that the brown peoples who had chosen to fight beside the Allies would receive their need of friendship in the work of peace, that new age of freedom of which victory was the dawn. Since November 1918 disillusionment had come upon these peoples of the East. The delay of framing the Peace Treaty with Turkey was made the excuse for continuing the irritating restrictions of military administration. All constructive measures - political, industrial, social, commercial - were

blocked everywhere. This excuse of the incomplete peace was dishonest. ... In days of peace Egypt used to have a garrison of five thousand British troops, and there was an embryo Parliament, the Legislative Assembly, for the educated Egyptian. Unfortunately, this class are nationalist now, and will not endure either our appointed ministries, or our Sultan of Egypt. Consequently we have suppressed the Legislative Assembly, and, in compensation, increased our garrison. The Streets of Cairo have become unsafe for Englishmen, and they are no longer able to wander without escort in the provinces." ²⁹ (Laurence : 1920)

The situation of uprising and anti-British agitation in the provinces was closely monitored by a number of British intelligence officers stationed in all the various provinces of Egypt. They reported that the Egyptians in the countryside were largely indifferent to the political turmoil in Cairo, but they watched the developments in Cairo closely. "The only agitation comes from students that organized in small groups and stirred up anti-British agitation amongst the fellahin. There is a general lack of sufficient police forces to contain the unrests and most police are paid too little. *Ghaffirs* for example were only paid 200 to 250 piastres per month, while

an ordinary labourer earns 12 to 20 piastres per day.”³⁰ (FO 141/514/12487 : 1920)

Although the British colonial administration was very busy keeping up with the developments in the urban centres of Egypt, a great deal of attention was nevertheless also given to the security situation of Egypt's boundaries. The events during the military campaigns against the Turks through the Sinai Peninsula and the infiltration into the Western Desert by Senoussi forces had left their mark on military security thinking of Britain in Egypt. The control of the Suez Canal, Britain's vital artery of lucrative trade with India and the rest of the Far East overshadowed any other strategic concerns at the time. The securing of the Sinai Peninsula therefore became a central issue to any future policy in the Middle East. The Eastern boundary of the Peninsula had to be firmly established in order for any future administration to be able to act legitimately if military defense should be needed.

As for the bedouin of Sinai, and other desert areas, the implications of Egyptian independence on their special status was seen with great suspicion. The new nationalist government clearly expressed its policy of

equality for all Egyptian citizens alike. Mohammed Ali had granted the bedouin special rights, they were exempted from taxation and military service. Equality under the nationalist government would now mean the end of tax exemption, which was originally granted to them in consideration of their harsh living conditions and meager sources of income. They also highly feared being drafted into the regular Egyptian army where they would be subject to abuses by their Egyptian superiors, particularly since they were viewed as collaborators under the British. Another concern was the extension of legal jurisdiction to the desert areas. This would mean prison sentences in an Egyptian town for even minor offenses. Knowing the nature of the bedouin even relatively short prison stays were like a death sentence. Many bedouin subjected to it died in custody.

In 1920 the news was out in the deserts that Egypt was drafting a new constitution in preparation for independence. This constitution proposed the elimination of the exceptional status of the Egyptian bedouin and cancellation of liberties granted by the Khedives. The tribes viewed the imminent internal control of their areas by Egyptians with great apprehension. Old resentments and the traditional cleavage between

nomads and settlers thrived again. Moreover, many bedouin closely collaborated with the British occupation forces and now feared revenge from the nationalists. The British did, however, show great concern for their former protégés in the desert and the High Commissioner urged the British officers in the F.D.A. to report to him on the attitude of the bedouin under their respective jurisdiction.³¹ (FO 141/514/12462 : 1920-26)

As the reports were pouring in it became all too clear that no one in Egypt's deserts welcomed the change of control and several tribes even went as far as petitioning the High Commissioner and Gen. Allenby, who was a great favourite with the bedouin of Sinai, for protection. Here a synopsis of some of its correspondence :

“View of the Mariut Bedouin towards the Milner-Zaghlul agreements with skepsis. Awlad Ali from Behera fear ill treatment by the nationalists because of their open support of the occupation. But in general bedouin in this district will offer little opposition since recruiting will anyhow be restricted to the Nile valley, so that the poor bedouin will have the desert as a refuge and the rich will pay their exemption. Mismanagement as well as heavy taxation is a greater factor of alienation.”³² (FO 141/514/12462 : 1920-26)

“The transfer of control from the British to the Egyptians is viewed with great disfavour. The Shaikhs of the Ababda, Assabab, Jouazi and Gincha tribes have freely expressed their unwillingness to serve under Egyptian control in protecting the railway line. There also seems to be a widespread ignorance as to how the changes will affect them ... little propaganda. 80 - 100,000 Arabs in the Nile Valley would constitute a serious obstacle for the government should they be alienated. In Luxor views circulate that the Egyptians would be incapable of running the country.”³³ (FO 141/514/12462 1920-26)

“Shaikhs and inhabitants view the proposed independence with uneasiness. They trust the integrity and justice of the British government and fear the corruption of 40 years ago, and the oppression of the *ma'mur* and tax collector. The British also built wells and hospitals in both oases, now they fear to be neglected as before.”³⁴ (FO 141/514/12462 : 1920-26)

The Sinai bedouin went as far as presenting a long well written petition to Allenby. They asked him to interfere on behalf of them regarding the

suggestion of the “*Dastour*” [constitution] Commission to abolish special right for bedouin. They referred to Allenby’s letter of 22nd of February 1922 on the *Protection of Minorities*, which they considered applied to them in view of their census. They related that they aided Mohammed Ali against Syria and Sudan and in return were exempted from military service and *Corvee* [tax]. They also did not take part in the 1919 uprising against the British and alleged that Saad Zaghlul threatened to deprive them of their rights.³⁵ (FO 141/514/12462 : 1920-26)

The petition was accompanied by a 24 page booklet titled *Al `arab al badu fi misr : bahth haul imtiyazatihim* (The bedouin Arabs in Egypt - a study about their privileges) by Abdel Megid Lotfi Bey, a nobleman from the Khowayled tribe dated 25.9.1922, here a brief content : After a preface of bedouin history and past military services since Mohammed Ali the writer deals with the customs of the bedouin pointing out the differences to sedentary Egyptian society. The writer does not aim at getting exceptional rights for the bedouin, but explains how these arose. The bedouin always responded to an appeal for military service as they are naturally warlike people, but they want to perform this duty according to their own habits and in due time. As for the “Duty of Nile Protection” (*wajib hefz al nil*)

they bring forward the fact that the bedouin are guarding the boundaries near the hills and desert at all times and should therefore not at the same time be recruited for Nile Protection. They were also excluded from receiving free government medical service a disadvantage that they have not realized it to be. All rights previously granted to the bedouin are in conformity with the laws, which should be respected by all, and they are confident that these laws will be respected as long as the house of Muhamed Ali is reigning in Egypt.”³⁶ (FO 141/514/12462 : 1920-26)

The bedouin had one representative in parliament who also served on the constitution committee; he tried to petition the High Commission for intervention. “In your absence I interviewed Saleh Pasha Lamloom and another bedouin *omda* who came to ask for British intervention at the Constitution Committee. I told him that it would be up to the Council of Ministers and the King to make decisions on such a principle. S. Lamloom will meet with bedouin and come again to see H.E. since they had hitherto been accustomed to look to the Residency for protection.”³⁷
(141/514/12462 : 1920-26)

Allenby wrote back in January 1923 : “You had asked for British interference to secure your privileges and I told you that it was up to the Egyptian government to decide. The Constitution Commission, of which Saleh Lamloum Pasha was a member, recommended that the rights and duties of all Egyptians should be the same. 20 Years ago Cromer promised to preserve these privileges granted by Khedive Ismail in 1264H provided you use them as privileges and not as means of making money by securing exemption from military service for *fellahin* who called themselves Arabs.

Also when these privileges were given the bedouin were expected to provide horsemen if needed, such volunteers are no longer required.

Times changed in England and are now changing in Egypt : all people have the same rights and privileges.” He then continued to praise the Arabs and their great role in the past war and suggested that they should lobby for the formation of a purely Arab battalion to avoid discrimination.

³⁸ (FO 141/514/12462 : 1920-26)

But the Sinai bedouin would not give up easy and tried to persuade Allenby again to intervene on their behalf. They wrote back to him assuring him of their continued loyalty and friendship and thanked him for his valuable suggestion regarding a purely Arab battalion. However, they

argued, that although they do agree to supply men at wartime, there is no need to do service in Nile Protection as they are anyway engaged in guarding the hills at all times. Furthermore, shaikhs that included *fellahin* in their census count by passing them off as Arabs, were fined. At the Constitution Commission Saleh Lamloum Pasha was the only one to speak up for them with the result that it was decided to grant privileges only to bedouin who live under canvas (wanderers). This led to Arabs who possessed no land to join the nomads. Because voluntary horsemen were no longer needed did not mean that they were not willing to fulfill this obligation and Arabs never absented themselves from war. The bedouin also brought up a good point by arguing that Egypt was different from other purely Arab countries who had a good disciplined army because of their uniform education level in all parts of the population. When education in Egypt were to be extended to the bedouin, more interaction with the rest of the population would result. The High Commissioner should, therefore, have reconsidered helping the Arabs. ³⁹ (FO 141/514/12462 : 1920-26) They received a firm and final answer on the same day: that the British government declared the independence of Egypt, and it was therefore up to the Egyptians to decide what to do about the bedouin issue. As for the protection of minorities, the government must

treat all the Egyptians as equal, only if it discriminates against a particular group would the British defend it. So the matter was to be laid before the King, the descendant of Muhamed Ali, who granted the privileges in the first place.⁴⁰ (FO 141/514/12462 : 1920-26)

The argument continued for years and in 1926 even the Egyptian director of the Frontiers Districts Administration, Lewa Ahmed Shafik, took their side. Having been in his post for several years by then, he came to appreciate the military effectiveness of the bedouin when allowing him to operate on his home turf, rather than being arbitrarily displaced as a recruit in the Egyptian Army. He therefore explained the matter to his superiors at the Ministry of War and Marine. Bedouin despite their warlike nature resent drafting which is contrary to their way of life. This was the motive for Muhamed Ali to exempt them and only call on them when needed at times of war. The Khedive Ismail tried to restrict the bedouin and failed and now it is still not the time to try again. Forcing them will result in them evacuating the Western desert and Sinai, which many of them have done already. Ahmed Shafiq therefore suggested the formation of voluntary police units that could operate in the desert much better than the regular forces as experience has show. The F.D.A. has taken men

successfully into the mounted and dismounted police, the Camel Corps and Armed Car Patrols to act as anti contraband and public security force in addition to defense. This would also decrease unemployment in the desert areas. "The artillery forces in the forts of Sinai in Akaba, Nuweiba and Nekhl were once from local Arabs. One way of securing many volunteers was by posting them near their native province as was the policy before. It should also be encouraged to appoint N.C.O.'s and junior officers from among the sons of shaikhs. The cost of a volunteer equals the recruit, as the former has higher salary but causes much less wastage on provisions, clothing and accommodation. Their income will provide for their families during times of barrenness." ⁴⁰ (FO 141/514/12462 : 1920-26)

His suggestions were eventually but only partially implemented, with the exception of Sinai. Maj. C.S. Jarvis was ruling the peninsula like a colonial governor and was not too interested in following guidelines from Cairo. As most Sinai bedouin were anyway classified as living under canvas, they managed to continue to evade recruitment and stay outside the main system of Egyptian jurisdiction. Jarvis as governor did make use of them though and preferred to recruit them into various functions of

military and police services. He greatly relied on his bedouin subjects in keeping law and order in the peninsula as well as securing the Eastern approaches to the Suez canal which became his main objective for the following decade to come in line with British policy for Sinai.

5.8 Conclusion

The disintegration of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War meant major political adjustments were to follow, with important consequences for the status and control of the Sinai Peninsula. The formation of new nation states, namely Jordan, Arabia, Palestine, would carry far reaching implications for the political situation of the time. Three factors were central to the shaping of British Middle East policy : Arab nationalism and the war time promise of creating independent nation states just beyond Egypt's eastern border to replace the Ottoman Empire ; the Zionist movement and eminent creation of a Jewish state in Palestine; and preparations for granting Egypt independence. All these factors would overshadow Britain's main concern of maintaining control over her naval

communications through the Suez Canal. This chapter discussed how these interrelated issues were addressed and dealt with by Britain.

Although the Ottoman Sultan as the head of the Islamic world tried to rally for Arab support against the “infidel” foreigners invading his Empire, his efforts were met with an Arab revolt against the Turks, which eventually resulted in the expulsion of Turkish government from the Arabian Peninsula and the Levant. Britain therefore started formulating her “Arab Policy” to serve as a blueprint for the formation of new states during negotiations at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. The guidelines for this policy was also based on the Sykes-Picot treaty which had been concluded in 1916 and set out the terms of how Britain and France would split their respective spheres of influence in the Middle East after defeating the Ottomans. Thus, the setting of the eastern boundary of Egypt became a major issue at the Peace conference because this new international boundary had to take a number of issues into consideration. The new boundary had to satisfy several criteria : the military security of the Sinai and the approaches of the Suez Canal, the fair allocation of arable land and water resources along the border, the unity of tribal territories located along the border, the fate of existing infrastructure such as the Sinai-

Palestine railway which was constructed during the War, clarification of the status of Zionist immigration and the push towards the formation of a Jewish state in Palestine, and, finally, the rivalry between the European powers for increasing their colonial territory and political influence. These issues were more or less resolved by 1921 and the final international boundary was fixed.

The impending independence of Egypt created another problem for the British control of Sinai. In practical terms it meant that the British officials previously employed by various government departments would be gradually replaced by natives, and the colonial control over Sinai would have to cease. This problem was overcome by the circumstance that the administration of Sinai was run by the Ministry of War and the unilateral declaration of Egypt's independence included the so called "Reserved Clauses". These clauses provided that Britain will remain in charge of Egypt's independence and therefore the command of the Egyptian Army was headed by British officers. Their presence in the Frontiers Districts Administration ensured that the governor of Sinai would remain an Englishman.

NOTES Chapter 5

- ¹ Telegram from Balfour, Foreign Office in London to High Commissioner for Egypt, 28.9.1918, in FO 141/776/70 Arab Policy 1918-1928
- ² Telegram C.in C. to High Commissioner for Egypt, 3.10.1918, FO 141/776/70 Arab Policy 1918-1928
- ³ report dated 21st October 1918 recorded in the papers of the British Residency, Ramleh in FO 141/776/70 Arab Policy 1918-1928
- ⁴ telegram from the O.E.T.A. officer to the General Headquarters in Cairo, 20.4.1920, in FO 141 435/10168 Boundaries Palestine & Syria 1919-1925
- ⁵ Foreign Office telegram of 6.8.1920 to the High Commissioner of Egypt in FO 141 435/10168 Boundaries Palestine & Syria 1919-1925
- ⁶ FO 141 435/10168 Boundaries Palestine & Syria 1919-1925
- ⁷ *ibid.*
- ⁸ REUTERS, 5.Aug.1918, in FO 141/803/4759 Zionist Movement 1917-1920

- ⁹ report by Brig.Gen. G.F. Clayton, General Headquarters, Egyptian Expeditionary Force, to Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, London, 16.Jun.1918, in FO 141/803/4759 Zionist Movement 1917-1920
- ¹⁰ Telegram High Commissioner for Egypt to Foreign Office, 3.Jun.1917, in FO 141/805/4759 Zionist Movement 1917-1920
- ¹¹ FO 141/790/5825 The Zionist Movement in Egypt 1917-1918
- ¹² FO 141/802/4759 Jewish National Home 1920
- ¹³ Report signed H.E.Satow, High Commission for Palestine, Jerusalem to Foreign Office, 27.04.1911, FO 141/683/9355 Jewish Colonization in Sinai 1910-1912
- ¹⁴ FO 141/683/9355 Jewish Colonization in Sinai 1910-1912
- ¹⁵ (ibid.)
- ¹⁶ Bernstein, Burton. "Sinai the Great and Terrible Wilderness". Weidenfeld & Nicholson, London : 1980, pp.18-20
- ¹⁷ telegram from High Commission in Cairo to Lord Harding Foreign Office, 20.12.1918, in FO 141/664/8002
- ¹⁸ telegram from Balfour, Paris to High Commissioner for Egypt, 18.02.1919, in FO 141/664/8002
- ¹⁹ High Commission to Foreign Office FO 141/664/8002

- ²⁰ Frontiers Districts Administration to Sir Milne Cheetham, High Commission Cairo, 20.2.1919, in FO 141/664/8002
- ²¹ report from A.C. Parker. governor of Sinai, to Frontiers Districts Administration, 27.02.1919
- ²² telegram from High Commissioner for Egypt to Lord Balfour in Paris, 7.3.1919, in FO 141/664/8002
- ²³ telegram from Lord Balfour in Paris to High Commissioner for Egypt, 31.3.1919, in FO 141/664/8002
- ²⁴ telegram from High Commissioner for Egypt to Lord Balfour in Paris, 7.3.1919, in FO 141/664/8002
- ²⁵ telegram from Lord Balfour in Paris to High Commissioner for Egypt, 15.4.1919, in FO 141/664/8002
- ²⁶ telegram from High Commissioner for Egypt to Lord Balfour in Paris, 7.3.1919 in FO 141/664/8002
- ²⁷ FO 141/443/12136 Egypt - Palestine Frontier : Control of Customs, Quarantine and Passports Aug 1920 - Sep 1925
- ²⁸ (ibid.)
- ²⁹ Laurence, T.E. "Middle East – how we are losing prestige". The Sunday Times, London (30.5.1920)

³⁰ Report by inspector R.S. Stafford to Ministry of Interior [British] advisor, 20.Nov.1920, in FO 141/514/12487 General Situation in the provinces

³¹ memo from High Commission, Ramleh, to Frontiers Districts Administration, 25.10.1920, in FO 141/514/12462 The Bedouin 1920-1926

³² Maj. W.J. Bramley to High Commission, 31.10.1920, in FO 141/514/12462 The Bedouin 1920-1926

³³ Col. P.C.Joice, Governor South and Eastern Desert Province, Luxor to F.D.A., forwarded to Chancery, Cairo; 4.11.1920, in FO 141/514/12462 The Bedouin 1920-1926

³⁴ Maj.C.S.Jarvis, C.C. Kharga and Dakhla Districts to F.D.A. forward to Chancery, Cairo; 10.11.1920, in FO 141/514/12462 The Bedouin 1920-1926

³⁵ Petition in Arabic signed by a large number of bedouin shaikhs to Allenby, High Commission; 2.9.1922 in FO 141/514/12462 The Bedouin 1920-1926

³⁶ FO 141/514/12462 The Bedouin 1920-1926

³⁷ minutes on residency paper no. 12462/15, M.Kerr to Gayer Anderson, 2.12.1922, in FO 141/514/12462 The Bedouin 1920-1926

- ³⁸ H.E the High Commissioner for Egypt to Deputation of bedouin shaikhs, 16.1.1923 in FO 141/514/12462 The Bedouin 1920-1926
- ³⁹ Letter from Arab notables to the High Commission, 21.3.1923, in FO 141/514/12462 The Bedouin 1920-1926
- ⁴⁰ High Commissioner for Egypt to bedouin shaikhs, 21.3.1923, in FO 141/514/12462 The Bedouin 1920-1926
- ⁴¹ memo from Lewa Ahmed Shafik, Director General, Frontiers Administration to the Minister of War and Marine, 24.8.1926, in FO 141/514/12462 The Bedouin 1920-1926

CHAPTER 6

British Sinai After Egyptian Independence

6.1 Introduction

Britain granted Egypt independence in 1922, but did not intend to hand over total control to a nationalist government that would then be in a position to compromise Britain's geopolitical and colonial interests. Therefore an abundance of British officials in the service of the Egyptian government was seen as an insurance of continued influence in the domestic affairs of its former protectorate. Questioning their loyalty, a reduction of English civil servants in the employ of the Egyptian government became a primary objective on the agenda of the new independent government. The British embassy, on the other hand, made it its primary mission to legitimise to the Egyptians retaining each and every Englishman. Nevertheless, the number of British, as well as other foreigners working for the various ministries in Cairo, was drastically

reduced in the years following independence and their influence in administering the country was greatly diminished.

This was the case everywhere, except in Sinai which was still ruled by a British governor in the traditional colonial manner, presiding over his own courts and being more responsible to Whitehall and the British Embassy than to his Egyptian superiors in Cairo. This feat was possible because Britain paid particular attention to retaining control of the Frontiers District Administration of which the governor of Sinai was an officer. The "reserved clauses" of the unilateral declaration of independence gave Britain unlimited control over the defence of Egypt, the security of British communications, primarily in form of the Suez canal, being the reason. This meant that Britain would remain in control of the Ministry of War, along with the requisite continued presence of British troops in Egypt, much to the annoyance and resentment of the Egyptian nationalists.

British officials went to great pains to legitimise their situation in Sinai, pointing out both international threats to the eastern boundary of Sinai, and domestic problems of administration that may destabilise the strategically

important peninsula. On the international front boundary security became Britain's major policy issue in Sinai. The threat to the boundary of Egypt by "hordes of invading Arabs" was always grandly communicated to London emphasising the need for continued British control over the Sinai to ensure the safety of Egypt and, of course, the Suez Canal.

The Wahabi uprising in Hejaz made the threat of cross boundary raids into Sinai by bedouin from neighbouring countries a reality which became a major concern for Maj. C.S. Jarvis who governed the Sinai from 1922 until 1936. When Trans-Jordan was proclaimed an independent state in 1924, with southern boundaries wedged between the Hejaz and the protectorate of Palestine, the problem was further exacerbated. Questions of territorial sovereignty and jurisdiction on boundary control were evoked.

Britain also took a keen interest in undertaking several investments for improving the infrastructure of Sinai. Although meant to serve British imperial interests in preparation for the defence of Egypt in World War II the improvement of the Sinai railway, the construction of military roads

and expansion of modern communications with the Sinai telegraph route also benefited the local inhabitants.

On the domestic side British diplomats were quick to point out that their military administrators were more efficient in the F.D.A. than their Egyptian counterparts. This claim was not entirely without foundation as several very able administrators emerged from the ranks of British officers. The concerns of the British governors for welfare of the bedouin inhabitants of Sinai, their understanding of bedouin customs and desert environment was in contrast to Egyptian officers who regarded the posting in the hostile desert as a punishment for inferior personnel.

The independence of Egypt was also not particularly welcomed by the bedouin, and the tribes did not fail to show their preference for British administration. This was because they rightly feared the cancellations of their special rights, exempting them from military service and taxes, which were granted almost a century earlier by Mohammed Ali. However, the bedouin's collaboration with the British occupation made them the target of retaliation and abuse under Egyptian administration. The extension of Egyptian civil and criminal law to the desert areas in

replacement of bedouin customary law, which had continued to be applied by the British governors, was another point of dispute.

Britain, therefore, remained directly in control of Sinai despite nationalist resentment to British involvement in domestic administration. The threat of War and the Anglo Egyptian treaty of Alliance in 1936 again revived the legitimacy of continued British control. And when martial law (*Etat de Siege*) was proclaimed in 1939 British troops eventually reoccupied Egypt and Sinai.

6.2 The Wahabi Uprising and Security of the Eastern Border

After the official declaration of independence of Egypt all British officers employed in the Egyptian armed forces came under Egyptian command, rather than being part of the British army as had been the case before. This meant that the British Governor of Sinai was no longer reporting to the British authorities but to his superiors at the F.D.A.. However, unofficially his links with the High Commission in Cairo were very much intact and British policy was followed in every way. The main concern of Britain for

holding the Sinai was of course the security of the Suez Canal. Therefore, Britain had to rely on the few British officers who remained employed in the service of the Frontiers Administration, one of these was Major C.S. Jarvis who was the governor of Sinai From 1922 until his retirement in 1936 and looked after the defence of the Eastern border.

Although it was Britain that encouraged and armed the Arabs of Hejaz during the War against Turkey, they soon proved to be a menace for the security of Sinai and southern Palestine, which had come under British mandate. In September 1922 a force of 1500 Wahabis advanced on Aqaba and Ma'an which alarmed the British and steps had to be taken to contain this threat from the East.¹ (FO 141/504/14928 : 1922) An emergency meeting was held on the 13th of September 1922 attended by the six most senior British officers in Egypt representing the Egyptian Army, Royal Airforce, and F.D.A. to draw up a contingency plan on how to deal with a possible invasion of Egyptian territory from the East. It was clear to all present that it would be impossible for the Governor of Sinai with his limited F.D.A. troops to oppose any significant size of enemy forces larger than small raiding parties which they were able to contain on their own. It was therefore decided to reinforce the existing troops with a company of

Egyptian Infantry, a machine gun platoon, light car patrols and two Bristol fighters from the Royal Air Force. Maj. Jarvis would coordinate all the operations under his command. Elaborate arrangements had to be made for supplies of these troops and also for the maintenance of any refugees who may be driven ahead by the invading Arabs.² (FO 141/504/14928 : 1922) Although by that time it was under consideration to change the status of the F.D.A. and the involvement of British troops in general due to the independence of Egypt, the country was still under martial law which gave powers to the British to act if there was an attack from abroad.³ (FO 141/504/14928 : 1922)

The boundary had thus been secured and the Arab invaders decided it would be too costly to oppose the British in Sinai, but the build-up of troops in Sinai was seen with great apprehension by the Wahabis and they were under the impression that Egypt had plans to take over Aqaba, which had become part of Hejaz. In addition, there was quite some controversy between Egypt and the Hejaz regarding the responsibility for carrying the *mahmal* during the pilgrimage and where it would be handed over from the Egyptians to the Arabians. Some clashes with raiders from Arabia and the Egyptian F.D.A. added to the anxiety of the rulers of Hejaz. This

prompted the chief British representative for Transjordan, J.B. Philby to write to the High Commissioner in Jerusalem : "Both Amir Abdullah and King Feisal are under the impression that the Egyptian government has designs on the Hijaz port of Aqaba. They are highly alarmed at the impending visit of Mohammed Azmi Pasha the Egyptian Minister of War to the Sinai and possible visit to Aqaba itself."⁴ (FO 141/793/16674 : 1923) Col. Parker the director of the F.D.A. explained that they had never planned to visit Aqaba, nor has anything to that effect ever been mentioned, but they would only be inspecting the eastern frontier by motor car and would stay well within the border of Egypt. This information was passed on to all concerned authorities to alleviate their tension.

The problematic security situation on the Eastern border of Sinai was further complicated when the new state of Trans-Jordan was founded in 1924. the news was distributed by REUTER's : "Jerusalem, 18th March 1924. Since King Hussein has ceded Aqaba and Tebuk from his original territory to that of Transjordan, the Emir Abdullah has created a new villayet including these territories with the world reknowned and ancient City of Petra with Maan as the Capital, and Major General Ghalib Pasha

Shalan has been appointed Governor General and Commander.”⁵ (FO 141 813/17052)

In 1924 the King of Hejaz ceded the port of Aqaba to the newly established Territory of Trans-Jordan, which would be ruled by Prince Abdullah. The problem of defending against cross boundary raids was further compounded when this separate mandate was established in Trans-Jordan which included Aqaba and meant a meeting of three jurisdictions in very close proximity at the head of the gulf of Aqaba. Now there were three independent states whose territories met in a narrow stretch of land. In fact it is only about six kilometres from the Egyptian border at Taba across Palestine, which today is the port of Elat, to Aqaba.

Therefore, the main concern for the Sinai administration of Major C.S. Jarvis were the frequent cross border raids into Sinai by bedouin tribes living under the independent Arabian jurisdiction of the Hejaz and Jordan. He frequently had to follow raiders across the eastern border of Sinai and various correspondence shows that he had established good cooperation with the police force in British Palestine. In June 1924 he verbally asked the British governor in Jerusalem for a definition of the eastern boundary

Governor of Sinai since the latter was an employee of the now independent Egyptian government. The message from Jerusalem would be forwarded to Sinai in an unofficial manner as noted in the minutes of the residency :

"This is slightly awkward as we cannot communicate directly with Mgr Jarvis nor through official channels to him as we were not in the first place approached by the Eg. Govt. on the subject. ... I have written privately ..."⁷

(FO 141 813/17052 : 1924)

He therefore had to somehow make his own arrangements in order to insure efficient border security. His main problem was not being allowed to pursue raiders across the boundary, but being a practical man he found his own solutions. He did, however, regard the new boundary between Palestine and Jordan as an expansion of his British jurisdiction as he related to the High Commission : "Many thanks for your 23rd... I gather from the extract that all the country between the Centre of the Wadi Araba & the Egyptian Frontier in Sinai is Palestine. This is very useful information as I have a private arrangement with Palestine by which either side can cross over the Frontier when chasing raiders. That means I can now cross over as far as Wadi Araba in the South ... I shall have to go carefully as the Hashemite government claim I keep a post of police a

of Palestine to be communicated to him through official channels. Sir Herbert Samuel wrote back to the High Commission in Cairo on 13.06.1924 : ... The following extract from Command Paper No. 1785 of 1922 provides the definition : "The following provisions of the Mandate for Palestine are not applicable to the territory known as Trans-Jordan, which comprises all territory lying to the east of a line drawn from a point two miles west of the town of Aqaba on the Gulf of that name up the centre of the wadi Araba, Dead Sea and river Jordan to its junction with the River Yarmuk; thence up the centre of that river to the Syrian Frontier. I shall be grateful if your lordship will cause this information to be conveyed to Major Jarvis; it is required by him in connection with the measures which he is called upon to take from time to time to co-operate with the Palestine Police and Gendarmerie when engaged in pursuit of raiding parties from across the Jordan." This was also the definition of the territory of Transjordan approved by the League of Nations on 23rd September 1922.⁶ (FO 141 813/17052 : 1922)

Although Jarvis wished to cooperate with the British authorities in Palestine he was not allowed to do so directly. Also the High Commission in Cairo was officially not allowed to communicate directly with the

good bit west of the line i.e. at Bir GATTAR on sheet 4 1:250,000 Sinai - Aqaba. It will probably be advisable to wait till the Palestine people establish their claim before I cross over as I don't want to embroil Egypt with the Hejaz. Moreover the arrangement is a purely private one that I have with the Inspector of Police, Jerusalem, & Governor of Gaza. It is, however, an eminently satisfactory & sensible one & has completely put a stop to raiders & bandits crossing the frontier ... the pursuit got too hot." ⁸

(FO 141 813/17052)

Back in London the issue of who owns Aqaba was still unclear. Even one year later, there still was a major perception that this town is within the boundaries of Egypt prompting questions and answers in the British parliament : "Although between 1841 and 1892 the Porte permitted the establishment of the Egyptian police posts at certain places on the Eastern shore of the Gulf of Aqaba, including Aqaba itself, for the protection of the Egyptian pilgrims, the Sultan resumed possession of these posts in 1892 and no objection was raised from the Egyptian side. The line dividing the territories under Egyptian and Turkish administration respectively was defined in 1906 by a boundary commission and has not

since been modified. Aqaba lies a few miles east of this line.”⁹ (FO 141/4074/68/91)

By 1925 the problem of Arab raiders on Eastern Sinai was still not contained and the issue became one of international law. In fact, cross border raids by bedouin from Palestine into Sinai actually intensified. It seemed that the bedouin understood the limits placed on the Egyptian Frontiers Administrations of not being allowed to pursue them across the boundary now separating two sovereign states. This led to a formal complaint being sent by the Egyptian government to the High Commission for Palestine explaining the situation, accusing the Palestine administration of a lack of control over their bedouin and asking for permission to allow Egyptian forces to cross the border in pursuit of criminal raiders.¹⁰ (FO 141/508/18236 : 1925)

The matter seemed to be such a great nuisance for the Governor of Sinai at the time that he even raised the issue formally to Mr Austen Chamberlain during his visit in London. He asked for urgent instructions to be given to Jerusalem and for a formal agreement to be entered into by both countries.

The Palestine government sent its approval on 25.10.1925. But, as

thoroughness of British administration has it, matters were taken even further and an ordinance was drafted that should detail under what circumstances and how far Egyptian police were to be allowed to enter into Palestine territory in pursuit of criminals, exactly who may be arrested and how long such a person may be detained pending an application for his extradition. Similar arrangements were also proposed for the Syrian and Transjordan boundary with Palestine.¹¹ (FO 141/508/18236) In the view of the High Commission in Egypt this was really taking matters too far: "The Colonial office have made a mountain out of a molehill of the request of the Eg. Govt. for an informal arrangement with the Palestine Govt. for the occasional pursuit of a few stray marauders over the frontier." And this was quite true considering the flood of correspondence that followed concerning this matter. It was of course worked out in detail and the line until which the Egyptian police was to be allowed to operate ran through the police posts at Khan Yunis, Imara, Beersheba, Asluj and Auja Hafir. Suspected criminals if arrested by the Egyptians inside Palestine would then have to be handed over to Palestinian police pending extradition procedures and would also have to appear before a Magistrate. The agreement should also be on a reciprocal basis. The matter was elaborated to great length, but in the course of various correspondence and

negotiation the original wishes of the Administration of Sinai had been entirely lost sight of. The F.D.A. was seeking permission to chase into Palestine bedouin who had stolen cattle in Sinai. These persons were coming from the Palestinian side and then returning there. The Colonial office on the other hand had drafted a lengthy ordinance of guideline for the pursuit of fugitives from Sinai that cross the boundary to escape the law in Egypt. In short, much more correspondence was necessary until the agreement finally went into effect almost one year later, but it opened the door to further cooperation between the administration of Sinai, under Maj. C.S.Jarvis, and neighbouring Palestine on matters of public security and boundary control. In 1926 the Palestine Government further improved control of the bedouin on its side of the border by establishing another police post at Al-Auja.

The British also paid great attention towards improving the infrastructure of Sinai to support and expand Imperial communications, but this also benefited the inhabitants of the peninsula. A conference to discuss the establishment of wireless communications between the different police posts of Egypt, Transjordan and Palestine was held at Cairo from December 15th to 18th 1926 and the Sinai administration proposed

wireless telephone services for police posts on both sides of the border to improve security. The Transjordanian government was unfortunately unable for financial reasons to participate in a wider communication scheme but the Egyptian and Palestine government certainly took their cooperation much further and the proposed wireless services were installed to help police on both sides to pursue offenders. By 1929 several treaties regarding joint efforts for the security of this boundary were effected. A powerful wireless station went into operation in 1929 at Giza near Cairo which was able to communicate effectively with stations in Sinai and other desert areas conveying messages regarding border security, civil aircraft messages, meteorological routine messages and various emergency communications.¹² (FO 141/508/18236 : 1929)

The British also saw it as vital to retain control of the communications in Sinai. The Palestine railway line was rented out to the Egyptian government and they had an option to purchase it which the British were pushing to be exercised. But when operating the line, which had been built as a strategic supply route during the First World War, became no longer viable the Egyptians wanted to discontinue their rental contract and discontinue the service. This was, however, not in the interest of Britain

and a new policy was adopted not to press Egypt to purchase the railway and also not to insist on rental payments. This policy was mentioned by the British air vice-marshal in Egypt : “I have the honour to refer to the previous correspondence ... to say in deference to the wishes of his Excellency, The High Commissioner, that no steps be taken which might possibly raise the larger issue of the acquisition of the Sinai Railway Line, no further requests for payment of rent, even on the old basis, have been preferred since April 1929. A year's rent on the old basis viz : LE 880 and 600 m/ms ... up to 30th April 1930, has, however, been received from the Minister of Communications, and it is thought that you would wish to be informed of this.”¹³ (FO 141/708 : 1931)

6.3 Domestic Policy : Concerns over Reduction of British Control in the Frontiers Districts Administration

It was the Egyptian government's policy after independence not to renew the contracts of British officers in their service upon expiration and replacing them with Egyptians. As the number of British officers in the F.D.A. was steadily declining in line with this policy the quality of the

administration was also rapidly deteriorating. Foreign staff had been reduced by 85% and the F.D.A. was being held together by the few remaining English officers. "Egyptians of the official class are quite unsuited for desert conditions. They do not like the isolated life even for short periods. Frequently they do not command the respect of the independent Arab."¹⁴ (FO 141/514/1411/60)

It was therefore seen by Britain as being of utmost importance to retain British control within the F.D.A. for both political reasons and security concerns. If Britain was to guarantee the military security of Egypt she must retain a number of British officers within this administration for the reasons given in the first report. Much correspondence to that effect took place between the Foreign Office and the War Office and the High Commission in Egypt. One point raised was that the pensions of officers should be paid by the Egyptian Government, since the British Officers in question are in the service of the Egyptian army. But on intervention of the High Commission it was pointed out that this matter should not be raised as it might affect the reappointment of British officers, which should be retained even at extra cost to the British government for strategic reasons given above. If the F.D.A. was abandoned as a separate body and

its function were integrated into the Egyptian armed forces, then the troops will be put under the command of the Coast Guard, with headquarters in Alexandria to cover the Western Desert , and Port Said covering the Sinai.

This was to be avoided at all cost since it would prove disastrous for the security of the country. ¹⁵ (FO 141 576/4253)

By the beginning of the 1930's British control of the F.D.A. and the Sinai Peninsula was being curtailed. Two policies were being put forward towards that end : One was to push for turning the FDA into a civilian administration. The most apparent feature would be that the officials would not wear uniforms anymore. And second, that British officers in the high ranks of the FDA leaving the service would not be replaced by foreigners. And, finally, there was great discussion to not only end the military control of the FDA, but to disband this specialised administration altogether and integrate the districts into their pre-war attachments. ¹⁶ (FO 141/726/18 - 1931)

In 1931 C.S.Jarvis was still Governor of the Sinai, Green Bey governor of the Western Desert, Hatton Bey Commander of the Camel Corps and Wallace Bey Deputy Director General of the FDA. Major General Spinks

was the Inspector General of the Egyptian Ministry of War and Marine. Before 1922 frontier officials wore British uniforms, but after the independence of Egypt this practice was discontinued and they were put into Egyptian uniform, without badges which resulted in the diminishing authority of these officials. Responsible for making decisions in this regard was the Army Council and the officers' Committee, which were instituted in January and May 1925 respectively. The question of uniform was first raised in 1926 when a board was formed at the War Office to discuss the matter.¹⁷ (FO 141/703/45 : 1931)

This question came up again in an acute form in the spring of 1931 and resulted in disputes among the British officers themselves. General Spinks suggested that the FDA officials should have their status reduced to that of civilian officials. This would have meant a great loss of prestige and authority for FDA personnel, particularly when dealing with the bedouin in the desert.¹⁸ (FO 141/703/45 : 1931)

Major C.S. Jarvis, governor of Sinai in 1931 based in Arish, tried to get his son in law, Captain H.S.Eagle the post of second in command of the Frontier Administration Camel Corps and light Car Patrols. The latter had

previously served in Sinai in the Camel Corps from August 1921 until September 1922. But there was already great resistance from the Egyptian government under Sidky Pasha to the further appointments of Englishmen to high military posts. On the other hand, attempts were made to prolong the service of Egyptian officers. The first Egyptian appointed to the post of Director General of the FDA was Ahmed Shefik Pasha. He was to retire on reaching the age of 60 on 4.9.1931 but was granted a two year extension of service. This was met with a large number of complaints by other army officers who have not been promoted to the rank of Lewa.¹⁹
(FO 141/703/45 : 1931)

Finally came the recommendation by the Financial Committee of the Senate to abolish the FDA altogether. Mahmoud Azmi Pasha, former Minister of War with a known anti-British attitude, was behind the move. Another suggestion was that the FDA would be amalgamated into the coast guard, which was opposed by the Wafdist government, unless it would be under the command of an Egyptian officer. The British would have been willing to go along with the scheme if this commander was to be Ahmed Shafik Pasha with whom they had a very good relationship.²⁰
(FO 141/703/45)

But the FDA survived these attacks to its status and its excellent performance in securing the desert areas of Egypt was recognised by all sides alike. By Spring 1934 Major Wallace was even in the position to come forward with a request for more equipment and men to improve his light car patrols and the Camel Corps. He mentioned in his petition that the present performance of the FDA was being highly praised by everyone, but the corps needs the expansions proposed in order to cover the large areas of desert it was in charge of. The main security problem the FDA was facing at the time is bedouin smugglers along the coastlines and bedouin raids. But with the internal political situation in Arabia deteriorating there was also fear of trans border attacks from Hijaz that may even threaten the Suez Canal.²¹ (FO 141/718/709 : 1934)

Also the replacement of high-ranking British officers in the FDA by Egyptians was halted, although the salaries of these officers were paid by the Egyptian government. Thus we find for example that R.D.W.Uniacke, Officer Commanding Area in the Camel Corps and Light Car Patrols, was replaced by Capt. A.J.Bather in August 1934.²² (FO141/718/709 : 1934)

In 1935 the general defence scheme for Egypt was being studied and in the course the F.D.A. was being re-examined again. Discussions were held at the High Commission regarding its organisation "drawing attention to the special position of Sinai which Col. Jarvis governed like a colonial governor, administering tribal law, etc. ... The G.O.C. pointed out that as a defence scheme for the Suez Canal was based on Sinai it was essential that the Governor of the Sinai should be an Englishman." It was decided to examine what value the FDA were to the British Army and that the High Commissioner himself would visit Sinai. It was also pointed out that it was desirable to increase the number of British officers in the FDA despite the Egyptian resentment to have resigning British officers replaced by Englishmen.²³ (FO141/539/578 : 1935)

It was clear that the British never had the intentions of loosening their control over the FDA or the Sinai peninsula in particular. So it was rather alarming when their friend Shafik Pasha was likely to resign from his post of Director General of the FDA. "In view of the great importance of getting a new Director General who will work to be a rubber stamp" the question of a successor could not be left to chance.²⁴ (FO141/539/578 : 1935)

Just a month later Lewa Mohammed Tawfik Pasha was appointed Director-General of the FDA who seemed to be the person they wanted. Col. Forbes in a letter from the Ministry of War to the High Commission : "I have a good opinion of this officer, while not being of the clever type and perhaps rather stupid, I consider him loyal to the British and straightforward. I have consulted Wallace Bey and he likes what he has seen of him so far, and thinks that he will be able to work amicably with him." ²⁵ (FO 141/539/578/21/35 :1935)

Meanwhile a report was compiled on the value of the FDA to the British army. It held that it was of utmost strategic importance that British officers would continue to command the detachments in the Western Desert and Sinai, to ensure efficient security at both borders, and the restoration of the British second in command of the Frontiers Defence Force. Thus the British set out to lobby the Prime Minister regarding the desirability of having a British second in command, who agreed, and the appointments were officially approved by the Council of Ministers on 15.8.1935. They would have the rank of Bimbashi with full pay and privileges under the Egyptian Army.²⁶ (FO 141/539/578)

Relations with the new Director General, Lewa Ahmed Shafiq, soured by mid 1936. He proved not to be as stupid as had been assumed and he made some cunning moves. In June 1936 he brought charges against D.J.Wallace his deputy in an attempt to sack him and have him replaced by an Egyptian. He maintained that Wallace was guilty of serious misconduct by attempting to obstruct and acting against the orders of the director General, illegal usage of government money, and hindering the orders of the High Authorities. Wallace vehemently denied any wrongdoing and held that it was the Director General who persistently acted against his recommendations. But Ahmed Shafik was not a rubber stamp like his predecessor and did his best to get rid of Wallace. Even C.S.Jarvis came to the latter's defence, although they were never close, and wrote to Sir Miles Lampson praising Wallace.²⁷ (FO141/604/146/49/36)

Also the Residency came to Wallace's rescue and the charges were finally withdrawn. It was not much later that Green, the governor of the Western Desert had a row with the Director General of the FDA. "The latter seems once more to be going out of his way to make trouble. He has challenged the right of the local Governors to move their men about at their

discretion." Although under the regulations of the Council of Ministers clearly have this discretion left to them.²⁸ (FO141/604/146/64/36 : 1936)

But the incident clearly reflected the general atmosphere of anti-British feelings perpetuated by the Wafdist government of the day and the discussions regarding the future of British control within the FDA went all the way to London. The War Office, in consultation with Sir Anthony Eden, agreed "that it was very desirable that the Frontiers Districts Administration should remain under the Egyptian Minister of War, [rather than become a civil administration which would mean that the British Military Mission would loose its control over it] and that the Governor of Sinai and the Governor of the Western Desert should be British subjects."

²⁹ (FO141/604/146/56/36)

Meanwhile the whole existence of the FDA was being overshadowed by the developments of the Alliance Treaty between Britain and Egypt which was due to be signed in September 1936. The entire defence of Egypt would be reorganised as soon as the Military Mission arrived from England. In October 1936 Major Wallace was replaced by Lewa Abdel Magid Pasha who became Deputy Director General of the FDA, while

Wallace was given the lesser post of legal secretary. And there was trouble again in November between Green, Wallace and the Director General. Green eventually retired from the service in March 1937.³⁰

(FO141/604/146/66 to 68)

The Alliance Treaty had stated that British officers would be withdrawn from the Egyptian army and the Egyptians acted upon that. This caused great concern for the British regarding border security on smuggling and the Italian reinforcements along the western border. These concerns were expressed in a report by the Military Mission. The report pointed out that the FDA although not directly linked to the Army is doing a great job in patrolling the desert against incursions and smugglers. The efficiency of the FDA has been built up and maintained by the devotion of British officers and their Bedouin voluntary recruits, who had a very close acquaintance with the environment and sympathy for the nomad inhabitants. The special nature of their work could not be carried out by conscripts or natives of the Nile Valley. The Frontiers Administration formed a vital screen for intelligence and security essential for the British troops stationed in Egypt. Furthermore, the Egyptian Army did not have officers experienced in intelligence work nor trained administrators

accustomed to dealing with Arab Tribes. It was therefore essential to retain British control of the Sinai and Western Desert. ³¹

(FO141/534/286/11/37 : 1937)

C.S. Jarvis had one of the most illustrious careers in the Administration of desert areas in Egypt and could claim an extensive experience and knowledge of the Bedouin. He joined the FDA in 1918 and served as director of the Amria district, a desert outpost west of Alexandria until 1920. Then he spent two years governing the Kharga Oasis until he became governor of Sinai in 1922. He asked for a raise in pay in a letter to the Ministry of War dated 28/11/1935, which was refused. Thus he retired from the service in Egypt upon the expiration of his contract in 1936. ³² (FO141/539/578/50/35) He was replaced by Major Hamersley who was appointed the new Governor of Sinai on 1.7.1936. It did not seem that this officer's dedication was the same as Jarvis as he went to great length to get a leave starting 10.7., just ten days after taking up his post. This was postponed to 25.7. and it was well that he stayed behind as during these two weeks there were attempts to sabotage the railway line and bomb the Jerusalem Express. Hamersley's contract would end in July

1939, thus marking the end of an era, as the last British governor of the Sinai peninsula.³³ (FO141/604/146/60/36)

The Egyptian government under Mustafa El Nahas Pasha was not very sympathetic towards retaining any Englishmen in the FDA. Wasfi Bey was appointed Governor of the Western Desert and Ali Bey Abdel Wahab Governor of the Southern Desert Province. But the British held on to the Sinai which they considered unalienable from the vital security of the Suez Canal. However Major Hamersley, governor of Sinai, was severely criticised by the press, which publisized that he received secret correspondence from the British Embassy and from Palestine, he had five servants paid for by the Egyptian government, great luxuries such as a large garden, a tennis court, a lavish house, usage of cars to entertain friends and family, etc.³⁴ (FO141/534/286/8/37 : 1937)

The British also had to take flack from their own camp. Thus the British Financial Adviser to the Egyptian government pointed out to the Ambassador that their actions were contrary to the Alliance Treaty which holds that H.M.G. should refrain from pressing the Egyptians to retain British personnel they did not want, and that no Englishman in the

Egyptian government service should work as a British agent. ³⁵

(FO141/534/286/23/37)

Thus the British were compelled to tone down their demands in their meeting with Nahas Pasha who maintained that all British officers must leave the Egyptian Administration. It was pointed out by the British Ambassador that Major Hamersley's position as governor was a civilian post under contract and he should be retained until that ends in 1939. It was agreed that the British governor in the Western Desert was to be replaced by an Egyptian, while a British liaison officer was to be appointed to work under the governors in the western and southern desert. As for Sinai, Hamersley should stay until the end of his contract and during this time he was to train the Egyptian deputy governor to take over. (Minute of meeting British Ambassador, G.O.C. British forces in Egypt and Nahas Pasha, Prime Minister on 29th June 1937. ³⁶ (FO141/534/286/46/37)

6.4 Conclusion

The independence of Egypt changed the status of Britain from a colonial power in control of all aspects of government to a tolerated military presence under the pretext of defending Egypt from foreign aggression.

This chapter has shown that it took some careful diplomacy to further the geopolitical interests of Britain without offending the Egyptian nationalist government. In order to remain in control of the Sinai the British Embassy was quite busy to legitimize the presence of every Englishman in the employ of the Egyptian government. We can deduce from the consular files and correspondence that there was a conscious policy to manipulate the opinions of both the Egyptian government and the international community to accept the continued British control of Sinai.

On the international level Britain exaggerated the threat of a possible invasion of the Sinai from the east by Arab tribesmen, to justify the presence of British troops in the peninsula. On the domestic level the continued control of the command of Sinai was legitimized by showing how much more competent the British administrators were in comparison to their Egyptian counterparts. Consequently, great care was taken to find

very dedicated English officers to serve in the Frontiers Districts Administration, while highlighting the aversion of Egyptians towards service in the desert.

Another policy pursued by the British authorities was to point out the animosity between the local bedouin inhabitants and the central government in Cairo. The new independent status of Egypt would mean that a uniform system of law would be extended to all regions and citizens of the country. The bedouin previously had been granted certain privileges, which would now be cancelled in order to bring them into line with the rest of Egypt. This was of course resented by the bedouin and the British showed sympathy towards them in order to gain their support for continued British administration of the Sinai.

The threat of war led to the conclusion of the Anglo-Egyptian treaty of alliance in 1936, which came as a great relief, because it would secure the continued presence of British troops in the Canal area and Sinai. Thus at the outbreak of the Second World War, Sinai was still firmly in British hands and when a state of emergency was proclaimed for the whole

country the Sinai and the Canal Zone was converted into a huge military camp for Imperial troops in preparation for the War.

NOTES Chapter 6

- ¹ telegram from the High Commission for Egypt to Foreign Office, 12.9.1922 in FO 141/504/14928
- ² minutes of conference held at Headquarters, 13.9.1922, in FO 141/504/14928
- ³ letter from F.D.A. to the British residency, Ramleh, 11.9.1922, in FO 141/504/14928
- ⁴ letter from the Chief British Representative for Trans-Jordan J.B.Philby to the High Commissioner in Jerusalem 4.August 1923 FO 141/793/16674 (Egypt - Hejaz Boundary 1923)
- ⁵ Reuter March 19, 1924 ; No.89 in FO 141 813/17052 Transjordania Boundaries
- ⁶ FO 141 813/17052 Transjordania Boundaries
- ⁷ Minutes on residency paper No. 17052/2 dated 19.06.1924 in FO 141 813/17052 Transjordania Boundaries
- ⁸ C.S. Jarvis, F.D.A. to High commission, 25. June 1924, in FO 141 813/17052 Transjordania Boundaries

⁹ McNeill, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, answering a parliamentary question by Mr Harris (for Captain W. Benn), 9th of July 1925, in FO 141/4074/68/91

¹⁰ Memorandum by Egyptian acting Prime Minister sent via Neville Henderson, Acting High Commissioner for Egypt, to be forwarded to the High Commissioner for Palestine, 4.9.1925 FO 141/508/18236 Arrangement between Egypt and Palestine for the arrest of bedouin raiders 1925-1929, and other frontier affairs affecting public security

¹¹ letter from Downing Street, signed S.H.Wilson, to the Colonial office 30.11.1925 FO 141/508/18236 Arrangement between Egypt and Palestine for the arrest of bedouin raiders 1925-1929, and other frontier affairs affecting public security

¹² Report Egyptian State Telegraphs and Telephones, 17.4.1929 in FO 141/508/18236 Arrangement between Egypt and Palestine for the arrest of bedouin raiders 1925-1929, and other frontier affairs affecting public security

¹³ letter from the Royal Airforce, Middle East Headquarters, Cairo, Air Vice Marshal to the Residency, Cairo 13. January 1931 FO 141/708 Sinai Telegraph route 1931

- ¹⁴ Report on the deterioration in the Egyptian Administration since 1922 by Cecil Campbell to Lord Lloyd of Dolobran, High Commissioner for Egypt, 26.8.1926 in FO 141/514/1411/60
- ¹⁵ FO 141 576/4253 Egypt Desert Frontiers 1927-29
- ¹⁶ FO 141/726/18 - 1931
- ¹⁷ letter from D.J. Wallace, Deputy Director F.D.A. to Mr Smart, Residency, Cairo, 31.12.31 in FO 141/703/45
- ¹⁸ minutes on residency paper no. 18/13/31, 5.6.1931 in FO 141/703/45
- ¹⁹ FO 141/703/45 : 1931
- ²⁰ Residency minute no. 45/56/32 , in FO 141/703/45 : 1931
- ²¹ Petition of Major Wallace to the Residency, Cairo no. 709/2/34, 1.5.1934 in FO 141/718/709
- ²² Correspondence Sir Miles Lampson, Ambassador in Cairo to Sir John Simon, Foreign Office, London and Ministry of War, Cairo no. 709/3/34, 17.8.1934 in FO 141/718/709
- ²³ Record of conversation between HE and C.I.G.S. regarding Frontiers Administration on 20.3.1935 in FO141/539/578
- ²⁴ Memo from Maj. Wallace to the High Commission 15.4.1935 in FO141/539/578
- ²⁵ FO 141/539/578/21/35 :1935

- ²⁶ residency memos and correspondence numbers 578/8 to 578/17 in FO 141/539/578
- ²⁷ FO141/604/146/49/36
- ²⁸ memo conversation between the High Commissioner and General Spinks on 10.8.1936 in FO141/604/146/64/36
- ²⁹ FO 141/604/146/56/36
- ³⁰ FO141/604/146/66 to 68
- ³¹ Conclusions regarding the Frontiers Administration by General Marshall Cornwall Chief of the Military Mission after his visit to the Western Desert and Sinai. in FO141/534/286/11/37
- ³² FO141/539/578/50/35
- ³³ FO141/604/146/60/36
- ³⁴ article published in "Al Masri" 13.2.1937 in FO141/534/286/8/37
- ³⁵ FO141/534/286/23/37
- ³⁶ FO141/534/286/46/37

Chapter 7

World War II and the Last British Attempts to

Maintain Control over the Sinai

7.1 Introduction

The threat of War and preparations for conflict in the Middle East gave Britain the opportunity to renew her control over the Sinai given its strategic importance. The Sinai, along with the Suez Canal zone, was reoccupied and Al-Kantara again saw a revival of its heydays becoming a huge barrack for Anzac and Indian troops and the central base for operations in the Eastern Mediterranean. Keeping the supply routes from Asia to the Mediterranean open became a primary objective for the British command. Although there was no repetition of the events of the First World War, i.e. no land based combat taking place in Sinai, the Canal came under bombardment from the air, thus heavily curtailing navigation during the war. For the duration of the war Britain's position in the Sinai and the Canal was never seriously challenged, but with the

end of hostilities in 1945 the spectre of Egypt's independence would again lead to a diplomatic battle over the sovereignty of the peninsula. The nationalist government resented all British attempts to reinstate military and administrative control. The strategic importance of the peninsula produced the last attempts for Sinai to be contested by Britain. A champion of the British cause was Col. Jennings Bramley, a retired officer and expert on Egypt's desert, who made it his personal crusade to persuade the British government to retain the Sinai indefinitely. His argument was based on the question whether the peninsula was really under Egyptian sovereignty at the time when the Ottoman Empire disintegrated, or if it had only been administered by Egypt on behalf of the Ottoman sultan. In the latter case this would mean that during the First World War it was not part of Egypt and therefore it was acquired by conquest by the British during their campaigns against Turkey. It was therefore suggested that Britain is the rightful sovereign in the territory and should therefore put forward her claim, if necessary by military force. Egypt was thus again in the precarious situation of having to fight a diplomatic battle to establish her rights over Sinai. The situation was exacerbated by the Arab-Israeli conflict that followed the declaration of independence by the Jewish state in 1948. Zionist attempts to annex the

Sinai also interfered with British ambitions for the creation of a strategic base from which it would be possible to control the Eastern Mediterranean and the vital maritime access route to Asia. This chapter will discuss the events of the Second World War in Sinai and the subsequent last attempts by Britain to retain the peninsula in 1949.

7.2 World War II in Sinai

The *Etat de Siege* was proclaimed on the 2nd of September 1939 and diplomatic relations with Germany were severed four days later, however, Egypt did not declare war on Germany. Article 10 of the *Etat de Siege* law of 1923 which was reinforced by the proclamations of Aly Maher, Prime Minister of Egypt, in September 1939, stipulated that martial law would be installed in Egypt if Britain goes to war. This essentially meant the reinforcement of British control over Egyptian politics by using censorship, requisitioning for military purposes, reservation of communications for military purposes and various security measures to further their goals. Particularly the misuse of censorship was highly criticized by the opposition Wafd party who saw their political freedom

curtailed by the government. Modifying the martial law status was opposed by all British officers consulted as it would highly limit their freedom of action and they would have to deal with the delays and possible complications of normal legislative procedure.¹ (FO371/24598/15 pp. 139-149)

Egypt's commitment to the war effort on Britain's side was by no means for free, in fact, the Egyptian government was compelled by the treaty to pay for all the military assistance it received from England. In late 1939 the Foreign Office in London produced a report on finances needed for the defense of Egypt. Military hardware supplied from England alone amounted to L.E. 5,800,000. In addition Egypt would be responsible for expansion and development of Alexandria harbour L.E. 3,000,000 ; coast defenses at Alexandria and Mersa Matrouh L.E. 1,000,000 ; and other miscellaneous items such as war-time coal reserves at L.E. 650,000, civil defense measures, strategic communications, etc. In addition, Egypt had committed herself under the treaty to build accommodations for British troops in the Canal Zone at a cost of L.14,000,000 half of which Britain would reimburse. Nevertheless, this was an enormous burden on the

economy of Egypt considering the total government expenditure budget in 1939/40 was L.E. 41,847,000.² (FO 371/24608/31 folio 185-190)

Consequently, it became more and more evident that the Egyptian government was neither able nor willing to repay the military expenditures related to the preparation for the defense of Egypt. These debts would become a major point of dispute after the war. But not only direct military expenditures burdened Egypt but also participating in economic warfare meant putting various produce under the disposal of “war-time supplies”. Thus, Egypt became a major source of agricultural produce, raw materials, cotton, etc. for the Imperial armed forces and their allies throughout the Mediterranean. ³ (FO 371/24611/31 folios 110-298)

The declaration of September 1939 (*Etat de Siege*) asked for the creation of special military zones for the defense of Egypt. Zone 3 was the Suez Canal Zone, which initially covered specified areas west of the canal and a strip 50 kilometres wide east of it. This would have left the rest of the Sinai under the Frontiers Districts Administration, a division of the Egyptian government. Although the governor of the Sinai was still an

Englishman he was not under control of the British Armed Forces. The discrepancy was again brought up in May 1940.

In addition to the Sinai railway, water pipeline and telegraph communications, Britain was anxious to improve roads in the peninsula. By early 1940 it was evident that Egypt would be involved in military action as the war was spreading from Europe. The Anglo-Egyptian treaty of alliance signed on August 26th, 1936 contained a program of road and rail construction which now had to be revised and modified to serve the British war effort. The treaty was highly criticized by Egyptian political and official circles for the large amounts of funds that Egypt was spending in supporting British imperial interests. The British insisted that the Egyptian government spend 160,000 pounds on building a first class road across the Sinai peninsula to meet their strategic requirements. The Egyptian criticism was well founded, particularly since the British did very little to complete the road on the Palestinian side between Al Auja and Beersheba. In anticipation of military activities the road completion became an urgent priority and moneys were requested by General A.P.Wavell, Commander in Chief of the Middle East Forces.⁴ (FO371/24598/15 pp. 91-93)

On February, 12th 1940 the first contingents of Australian and New Zealand troops arrived. This was to coincide with the visit of Sir Anthony Eden, Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs to Egypt. On 15.2.1940 he traveled to Ghazza to greet and inspect the Anzac troops.⁵ (FO 371/24609/31 folios 93-100)

The entry of Italy into the war transformed the British position in the Middle East by bringing the entire shipping corridor from Gibraltar to Port Said under the influence of Axis air-power. This made Britain's Mediterranean command a beleaguered garrison connected to England only by the over 12,000 mile sea route around the Cape of Good Hope. In essence the Suez Canal became a back door to the Mediterranean rather than a short cut to Asia. The joint Anglo-French control over Syria and British presence in Palestine, however, at least kept the Eastern flank free from enemy attack. This was, however, compensated by Italian air raids on the Canal Zone launched from Sicily which reached their peak in 1941. Moreover, German submarine activity against Allied shipping in the Mediterranean trapped ships in Egyptian ports. Hitler's plan, after advances in Russia, to launch an offensive against Persia and Egypt would

connect Germany and Italy with Japan and complete Axis supremacy in the Mediterranean. This compelled Churchill to send reinforcement troops to Suez for a last ditch attempt to defend Egypt. The Mediterranean fleet was removed from Alexandria to Haifa, Port Said and Beirut and the air head-quarters were moved from Cairo to Ismailia on the Suez Canal. The Americans criticized Britain for making too many sacrifices to maintain an undefendable position in Egypt, particularly at a time when Japan was expanding her territory in Asia opening a third front for defense of the British Empire. The German threat to Egypt inspired Churchill to fly to Cairo where he ordered the building of a bridge for the Sinai railway to replace the ferry at Kantara which made a through-journey from Cairo to Beirut possible.⁶ (Farnie: 1969 , pp.620-630)

Montgomery's successes in El-Alamein turned the tide against the Axis powers and reaffirmed British supremacy in the Middle East by autumn of 1942. The Anglo-American invasion of North Africa and the Russian breakthrough at Stalingrad in November of the same year turned the attention of Germany away from Egypt and the Canal Zone. Sinai from then on was turned into a vast training ground for Allied troops bound for warfare in Europe and the Far East. The Canal region had become an

enormous military base with 150 depots the largest at Tel el Kebir had a circumference of 28 miles.⁷ (Farnie : 1969, p. 632) This expansion of British military presence was greatly resented by the Egyptian government as it exceeded by far the limitations agreed upon in the 1936 Treaty of Alliance both in number of troops stationed and in the size of area occupied. The Wafdist government had come into power in 1942 and forced King Farouk to accept the latently anti-British Nahas Pasha as Prime Minister. The Middle East and Sinai as its fulcrum, on the other hand, had been the focus of the British war effort and the fate of the Suez Canal was given almost the same importance as the defense of England itself.

7.3 Last British Attempts to Retain Sinai under their Control

After the end of the Second World War in 1945 Egypt, like a number of other British controlled nations, was striving to achieve full independence and the departure of all British troops from her territory. The British government on the other hand tried its best to retain control over the

country and protect its strategic and economic interests. Major points of contention were control of the Suez Canal and the future of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. Negotiations with the government of Sidky Pasha were breaking down as the Egyptians were not willing to make concessions on their sovereignty.

The 20-year treaty of 1936 between Egypt and Britain, which was signed in the light of the Italian threat in the Mediterranean, gave the latter the right to station troops in the Canal Zone and Sinai. With the end of the War Egypt sought to cancel the treaty and resume complete sovereignty over her territory. But it was precisely at this stage that the Cold War was starting to take shape and the presence of Britain in Sinai was regarded as a formidable launching ground for an attack against the Soviet Union to supplement military action in Europe.⁸ (Slonim : 1987, p.137)

Negotiations between the two countries resulted in deadlock and anti-British sentiments in Egypt ran high. Col Wilfried Jennings Bramley whose knowledge of Egypt and its deserts was highly respected by the British government, came up with an idea to retaliate for the anti-British resistance and demonstrations condoned by the Egyptian leaders. He

proposed that Britain should challenge Egypt's rights over the Sinai Peninsula by claiming that it was Turkish territory before the First World War only "administered" by Egypt. Since Britain beat Turkey, she should claim back "what really belongs to us ... a small portion of the country we gave you." ⁹ (FO 371/53433/3264 : 1946) British officials in Cairo took to discussing the "geographical aspect of the Egyptian Question" which would highlight the importance attached to the continued British claim to the Sinai. The experience of the war showed that the Suez Canal itself was vulnerable to ever improving air-force capability and may be rendered useless if blocked by sunken ships. The Sinai, however, if remaining in British hands, would still provide the central operation base in the Middle East : "...the possession of the Canal is desirable, but that of the Sinai Isthmus, which means the Sinai Peninsula, is vital." Furthermore, the peninsula was of little economic importance to Egypt, but of great strategic importance to Britain. The acquisition could be financed through taking over of Egypt's debts to England. A new inland port would be built in the Kantara region that would also service British Palestine and the Sinai would be transformed into an "Imperial training ground where British, Indian, Australian and New Zealand troops and flying units could work out problems together."¹⁰ (FO 141/1139 ; 1946)

Although the proposal was very appealing, as it would give Britain a permanent presence in a highly strategic position, it was not taken further at that point in time as they recognized that it would undermine the already troubled relations with Egypt. However, Col. Bramley continued his crusade from his retirement in his desert home in Burg Al Arab near Alexandria by communicating his ideas regarding the Sinai to various politicians in London. The basis of his argument was the question of sovereignty over Sinai and he insisted that the boundary agreement of Egypt and Turkey in 1906 gave only administrative rights to Egypt, a status, he claimed, that remained unchanged after the settlements of 1918-19. Therefore, when Britain beat Turkey in the First World War it acquired Sinai by conquest and should now exercise her legitimate rights.¹¹

(FO 371/53433/3264 : 1946)

The issue was taken up by Sir M. MacDonald and a member of parliament Brig. Maclean, as well as H.Mcneil at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and became the subject of their correspondence with Anthony Eden in July and August 1946. They suggested that if Egypt was not willing to sell the

Sinai maybe a 99 year lease would be in order, or even a trade, Sinai in return for the Sudan.

My Dear Anthony,

22nd August 1946

It looks as if the Egyptian negotiations were breaking down completely. Does that not give us a chance of re-opening the whole situation on what I believe would be a much more hopeful basis, I mean the suggestion which I put to you two or three years ago, that we should stay on the other bank of the Canal with a 99 year lease of Sinai and in return let the Egyptians have the Arab-speaking Sudan up to Fashoda, we retaining the Nilotic Sudan as going naturally better with Uganda. That would not only give us an admirable central air base in between Egypt and Palestine without directly occupying Palestine itself, but would also make us a riparian sharer in the control of the Suez Canal."¹² (FO 371/53433/3264 : 1946)

The correspondence shows that the matter was not taken lightly and various investigations were made towards its feasibility. The proposal of purchasing or trading the Sinai for part of Sudan, met with great opposition from the Egyptian government and the British were forced to tone down their request and asked for a 99 year lease on Sinai instead. However, the Egyptians stood firm on their rights and even refused the last British attempt to control some airfields and technical installations in Sinai, and insisted on complete evacuation of the peninsula. Britain's politicians now had definite grounds for certainty that no Egyptian

government would look at the Sinai proposal favourably and in his speech at Tanta on 10.10.1946 Sidky Pasha took the credit for having stood his ground and having pushed the British out of the suggestion.¹³ (The TIMES 11.10.1946)

Another onslaught on the sovereignty of Sinai in 1946 came from the Zionist camp. Immigration of European Jews to Palestine in the aftermath of the war had increased manifold and started to pose a serious problem for British control of the country. Jewish terrorism against British personnel and installations had risen drastically and the problem had been further complicated by President Truman's demands for unlimited immigration of a large quota of Jews into Palestine. Immigration numbers had previously been limited by the British administration and the number of immigrants was not to exceed one third of the total population. Also, the policy of interning the intending immigrants in camps in Cyprus was seen as a temporary measure particularly since it increases their hostile attitude towards Britain. The Jewish underground was increasingly looking towards the Soviets for support, very much to the dismay of the Western powers in the wake of the Cold War. However, the Zionists proposed a solution to the British Foreign Ministry which would appease themselves

and, so they assumed, would also satisfy the interests of Great Britain : they proposed to transfer the Sinai to their control. They would develop the untapped resources of the peninsula and turn the desert into arable land that would provide sufficiently for the settlement of hundreds of thousands of colonists. This solution would be welcomed by the Zionist movement and its supporters particularly due to the historical biblical connections of the Sinai which would motivate ample cooperation internationally. ¹⁴ (FO 371/52562/10506 : 1946)

Egypt's intervention in the Palestine conflict in 1948, oddly enough, led to an improvement in Anglo-Egyptian relations. Egypt refrained from invoking the Treaty of 1936 and inviting of British troops to aid in the defense of Egypt even when Israeli forces managed to cross the international boundary and approached Al-Arish. After this war the Egyptian tone towards Britain changed as Egypt needed fresh supplies of arms and ammunition in order to launch a second round in the Palestine War. Britain was delighted to oblige with the supply of arms since tying Egypt into her defense scheme would not only repel Soviet expansionism in the area but would also attenuate the dispute over British presence in the Suez Canal Zone and Sinai. ¹⁵ (Slonim : 1987, p. 138)

Col. Bramley, however, continued his efforts in early 1949 mobilizing all his connections in England and Egypt to press for a revision of the status of Sinai. Having not succeeded in 1946 in gaining acceptance for his assertions regarding Egyptian sovereignty over the peninsula, he toned down his claims and urged British officials to ask for Southern Sinai only. He based his argument on the Sultan's *firman* of 1841 giving sovereignty over Egypt to Mohammed Ali and his successors which included a map showing the boundary between Egypt and the rest of the Ottoman domains to be a straight line between Suez and Rafah. The land south of this line would therefore be part of Hijaz and since the British conquest of 1917 therefore belong to Great Britain. The issue of the boundary had, of course, been settled after the First World War and the British government was therefore not interested in actively pursuing the argument any further. Bramley, however, was relentless and wrote to Sir Ronald at the Suez Canal company : "Glad to hear that Britain still wants no one near the Canal." He was referring to an article in *News Review* on 16.2.49, and proposed the company should lay claim to South Sinai [according to the 1841 boundary] as this would include 5 miles along the canal as well as Port Tewfik. Egypt is an unreliable partner in the Suez Canal Company

therefore joint control of Southern Sinai would secure British interest in the Company. Lord Cromer acquired only administrative rights for Egypt over Southern Sinai in 1906, but Allenby conquered the Turkish possessions in 1918. ¹⁶ (FO 141/1372/568 : 1949)

Bramley's last attempt to stir up the issue was by writing to Mr Bertram Thomas at the Shell Company, in his capacity as a shareholder, asking on what grounds the company was paying agreed sums to the Egyptian government in return for exploration and development rights of their oil fields in South Sinai. He urged to bring the issue of sovereignty of the Sinai before the British Embassy and the Egyptian government. England if in control of the territory would ensure the well-being of Shell company and its concessions. ¹⁷ (FO 141/1372/568 : 1949)

The issue was brought up for the last time at a meeting between the British Ambassador and H.R.H. Prince Mohammed Ali. The British suggested at the meeting that their troops should be removed across the canal to southern Sinai which is a no-man's land in compliance with their evacuation of Egypt. The Prince, however, was well informed about the historical facts regarding the status of Sinai and eloquently explained the

matter, firmly rejecting the British proposal. The insinuation that Egypt was not sure where her boundary was would furthermore increase Egyptian suspicion that Britain may be playing the Israeli game by questioning the validity of including Southern Sinai in Egyptian territory. Bramley was told by the British authorities to desist : “I feel inclined to suggest that the time has now come to tell Jennings Bramley to pipe down, if we can do that without hurting his feelings.” A hand written comment on the same embassy minutes reads : “We said to Mr J.B. plainly enough when he came to lunch a few weeks ago that his idea would not suit our military interests anyhow, but he wouldn’t take notice and I fear a hammer blow is required.”¹⁸ (ibid.)

7.4 Conclusion

The Anglo-Egyptian treaty of 1936 had provided Britain with the legitimate right of reoccupying the Canal Zone and the Sinai as soon as war was proclaimed in 1939. British and other allied troops were again stationed in the Peninsula, but there was no repetition of the land based warfare of the first World War. However, the Canal came under serious

air attack which closed the waterway for navigation for most of the duration of the war. When the war ended in 1945 the nationalist government insisted on the withdrawal of all British troops from Egyptian soil and negotiations to that effect commanded the political scene between London and Cairo. This again jeopardized British ambitions to retain control of the Sinai. Consequently several attempts were made in 1946 to challenge the sovereignty of Egypt in Sinai. It is interesting to note that the same arguments as in 1919 were revived. Was the Sinai really part of Egypt when it was conquered from Turkey by British troops in 1917 ? It was clear to all that this was hardly a strong argument, but nevertheless it formed a basis for challenging the status of Sinai again.

The geopolitical balance of power had changed though and new factors would be driving Britain's attempt to continue her presence in Sinai. One, the war had shown the supremacy of air power over naval strength with the development of new technologies. This reduced the importance of maintaining direct control over international shipping lanes, in favour of strategically situated air force bases. And, second, the deteriorating security situation of Britain in Palestine at the hand of Jewish nationalists that were preparing for proclaiming the independence of a Jewish state in

Palestine. Terrorism against British troops stationed there had reached alarming proportions and the war of independence in 1948 ended the mandate in Palestine. This increased British interest in negotiating for the Sinai Peninsula to become their permanent base in the eastern Mediterranean. Several schemes were proposed the most viable was the possibility of a long term lease of the territory similar to Hongkong or other British colonies. Britain would then develop the Sinai into a naval and air force base, with access to both the Red Sea and the Mediterranean. The Egyptian government was opposed to any settlement other than the permanent departure of British troops and all attempts to remain in Sinai failed. Nevertheless it would take several years for Britain to actually evacuate from the Canal and Sinai, which would not happen until after the tripartite assault on Egypt in 1956, which was condemned by the international community, and finally the peninsula would revert to full Egyptian sovereignty. However, the hostile climate between Egypt and Israel prevented any major integration of the Sinai into the Egyptian nation state and it remained a military area, off limit for ordinary citizens save the small number of original bedouin inhabitants. Even these had decreased greatly due to migration to neighbouring countries and infrastructure which had suffered from the wars was never repaired until the peninsula

again changed hands in 1967 when Israel occupied it during the Six Days War.

Notes Chapter 7

- ¹ correspondence between Miles Lampson, Ambassador in Cairo, and General A. Wavell, General officer commanding in chief, Middle East, Air Chief Marshal William Mitchell, Commander Royal Air Force, Middle East, Lt.Gen. H.M. Wilson, CiC, British troops, M.E. in FO371/24598/15 pp. 139-149
- ² FO report dated 20/10/1939 in FO 371/24608/31 folio 185-190)
- ³ FO 371/24611/31 folios 110-298
- ⁴ letter from General Officer Commanding in Chief, Middle East, to War Office, London on 29/01/1940 in FO371/24598/15 pp. 91-93
- ⁵ Telegrams from Foreign Office London, M.Lampson Ambassador in Cairo, and High Commissioner Jerusalem 11-13.2.1940 FO 371/24609/31 folios 93-100
- ⁶ Farnie, D.A., "East and West of Suez: The Suez Canal in History 1854-1956", Clarendon Press, Oxford: 1969
- ⁷ *ibid.* p.632
- ⁸ Slonim, Shlomo. "Origins of the 1950 Tripartite Declaration on the Middle East"; *Middle Eastern Studies* vol.23 Nr.2 (Apr.1987) pp.135-149

- ⁹ correspondence with Sir Anthony Eden and notes, 22.8.1946 in FO 371/53433/3264 Status of Sinai Peninsula 1946
- ¹⁰ letter from J.I. Craig, Ministry of Finance, Cairo to the British Embassy, 9.4.1946, in FO 141/1139
- ¹¹ letter from Mr Maclean, House of Commons, to Mr McNeil, 22.7.1946, in FO 371/53433/3264
- ¹² letter from Les Amery to Sir Anthony Eden, 22.8.1946, in FO 371/53433/3264
- ¹³ (The TIMES, 11.10.1946, titled "Egypt and Britain : Sidky Pasha on Alliance" , in FO 371/53433/3264
- ¹⁴ Memo by M.Almega to the Foreign Office, 11.10.1946, in FO 371/52562/10506
- ¹⁵ Slonim, *ibid.*, p.138
- ¹⁶ Memorandum by Col. Jennings Bramley to British Consulate in Alexandria, 10.2.1949 in FO 141/1372/568 Egypt's Claim to Southern Sinai
- ¹⁷ letter by Col. Jennings Bramley to Shell Company, Egypt, 7.9.1949 in FO 141/1372/568
- ¹⁸ *ibid.*

Conclusion

This thesis is demonstrating the geopolitical importance of the Sinai Peninsula in the Middle East and its strategic importance in British colonial policy during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Although the peninsula is mainly comprised of a barren stretch of desert, sparsely populated and devoid of any significant resources, its location at the crossroads of east and west, between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea had given it a very special position in international politics. In the first chapters I have demonstrated that throughout ancient history the peninsula was always recognized as being part of Egypt. In prehistoric times Sinai was controlled by the Pharaohs of Egypt who set up garrisons and mining communities, but its harsh climate and rugged terrain made it a very inhospitable place for settlement. Although this served as an excellent shield against invasions from the East it often did not deter conquerors, who frequently crossed the peninsula in either direction in quest of wealth and glory. During the Muslim invasion of Egypt under 'Amr Ibn al-'As historical accounts point to the fact that even at such an early time the Sinai was recognized as an integral part of Egypt, quite distinct from neighbouring Palestine. During the Middle Ages this link

between the rulers of Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula has been reinforced by the construction of fortresses, manned by Egyptian troops, to protect the by then busy caravan routes linking North Africa with Asia.

When Mohammed Ali became the ruler of Egypt at the beginning of the nineteenth Century he reinforced his military control over Sinai, but the actual eastern boundary was always in flux. Whenever the strength of the government in Egypt increased, their influence would extend well into the Fertile Crecent and sometimes as far as Mesopotamia and Arabia. However Egypt was nominally part of the Ottoman Empire, paying tribute to the Turkish Sultan, and therefore it was not necessary to establish an exact boundary. It was not until the Middle of the nineteenth century after some magnificent conquests under Mohammed Ali and expansions into the Levant that Egypt made the first steps toward establishing her autonomy. When Mohammed Ali was invested with a hereditary title as the ruler of Egypt, his territory was defined by an Imperial *firman*. Britain had been involved in helping Turkey to contain the expansion of Egypt after the latter had challenged Turkey at her own shores. Britain's motives were far reaching as the fall of Turkey to Muhammad Ali would have shifted the balance of power between the empires of Europe : Russia, Austria, France and Britain

were all competing for the supremacy on the continent and the weakened Ottoman Empire was the target of their expansions. This competition focused their interest on Egypt and other parts of the Middle East.

Egypt meanwhile had developed into a modern country that had to be considered seriously. The building of the Suez Canal opened Egypt to the involvement of the European powers, and the strategic importance of this waterway became pivotal in the colonial ambitions of France and England. Although Egypt herself had largely neglected claiming ownership of the Sinai Peninsula it did not slip the attention of Britain that it is part and parcel of the security of the Canal. So it was Britain that first directed her efforts towards including the peninsula into the territory of Egypt. As the financial position of Egypt deteriorated it became more and more evident that direct involvement by the European powers on behalf of the creditors of Egypt was inevitable. By the time of the Khedive Isma'il Britain and France had established themselves deeply in the administration of Egypt. As a consequence of the Orabi revolt Britain invaded Egypt in 1882 under the pretext of reestablishing order and started an occupation that would last for over 70 years. Although Egypt never formally became a British colony, only a protectorate, Britain would play the major role in her affairs. By the

late 1890's the finances of Egypt had been restored and the country prospered under the administration of Lord Cromer who personally advocated withdrawal of Britain from Egypt after having completed his mission. But the geopolitical considerations of Britain and the security of her naval communications to Asia would take precedence. Since control of the Sinai was necessary to effectively protect the Canal, Britain started to develop a special policy that would be geared towards retaining control of the peninsula well into the middle of the twentieth century. Thus a British administration was installed in the Sinai that would develop the peninsula's infrastructure and befriend its inhabitants to gain their loyalty and distance them from the government in Cairo. Alternatively, Britain embarked on diplomatic moves to establish a firm boundary between Egypt and the rest of the Ottoman Empire, of which Egypt was still nominally a province. As relations gradually deteriorated it became obvious that Britain and Turkey would be on opposite sides during the First World War, with the latter taking the side of the Central Powers. The Turkish attack on the Suez Canal across the Sinai proved the importance of continued British control over the Peninsula, which Britain took great pains in reconquering. The war also changed the political face of the Middle East. Several developments were a direct outcome of the war : the establishment of nation states in the former

Ottoman provinces; the Zionist movement and the drive towards establishing a homeland for Jews in Palestine; and the nationalist movement in Egypt claiming independence. All these factors needed the attention of Britain which had her own priorities for retaining a presence in the Sinai. Thus it was Britain that was the primary player in establishing an international boundary between Egypt and Palestine which would include the Sinai in Egyptian territory. Britain was also instrumental in establishing independent sovereign states in Arabia and Jordan, as well as allowing Jewish immigration to Palestine in wake of the Balfour declaration. All this would add to the problem of maintaining security in Sinai. Thus it became necessary to counter Zionist designs on gaining control of Sinai, as well as protecting it from Arab raiders.

The larger threat to British control came from the impending independence of Egypt which had as its aim the expulsion of all British troops from the country, which was totally unacceptable to Britain. Therefore great diplomatic manouvers were necessary to remain in control of the Sinai. The vehicle for continued involvement was the Frontiers Districts Administration (F.D.A.), the department of the Egyptian Ministry of War, which was in charge of governing the desert boundary areas of Egypt. Since Britain had

reserved the rights of defending Egypt, even after granting independence in 1922, the Egyptian Army remained under the command of British officers, and consequently the governor of Sinai remained an Englishman.

I have shown in this thesis that during the two decades after the First World War there was a deliberate, although covert British policy to stay in charge of the F.D.A. and the Sinai, even after formally granting independence to Egypt. The importance of the Sinai was always highlighted by the statesmen of the time and the government in London condoned this policy even after the Second World War. The 1936 treaty between Egypt and England renewed the legitimate right of British troops remaining in the Sinai (and Egypt), and the outbreak of the War turned the peninsula into a huge allied garrison.

After the war Egypt demanded the departure of the British forces but was met with foot dragging and a series of attempts to sever the Sinai from her control and it was not until armed confrontation in 1956 that Sinai finally reverted to Egyptian control. By that time, however, the strategic priorities of Britain had also changed. India was no longer a colony, and thus the

control of the sea lanes to Asia became less important. Also Britain had established alternative strongholds in Cyprus and Aden. The former became Britain's base in the eastern Mediterranean, and the latter was strategically located to control the southern access of the Red Sea. Technical advancements have led to the superiority of air power over the navy, and the improvement of aircraft carriers made the necessity for naval bases obsolete. All these factors combined to make the Sinai no longer valuable for British interests.

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