

Sinai:

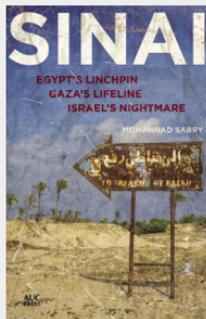
Egypt's Linchpin, Gaza's Lifeline, Israel's Nightmare

By Mohannad Sabry

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Reviewed by Abdulgani Bozkurt, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan University

The Sinai Peninsula has for years witnessed intense political and military clashes, and rebellions and even politically minor developments have attracted great attention among the countries neighboring the peninsula including Egypt, Israel, Gaza, Saudi Arabia and Jordan. The recent developments in Egypt, as part of the Arab revolutions, have further increased the significance of the region and the volatility it brings, not only to Egypt per se but to the entire Middle East. Considering the concentrated strategic importance attributed to the



peninsula by the above countries, elaborating the formation and the sustenance of its prominence and the strategies the countries follow to tip the scales in their favor becomes an ever-significant and necessary scholarly endeavor. Mohannad Sabry's book, *Sinai: Egypt's Linchpin, Gaza's Lifeline, Israel's Nightmare*, is one of those studies. It offers a comprehensive account of the recent history of the peninsula, more precisely the period between 2011 and 2014, and elaborates the dynamics of the conflicts in the region during the revolution in

Egypt. The narrative is enriched by occasional references to distant historical developments as determinants of recent events.

The book is a political history of the revolution as experienced in the Sinai region and follows a chronological order in narration. It is composed of ten chapters. The first chapter elaborates the reasons why rebellion first broke out in Sinai, as the revolution started earlier in Sinai than in other cities. The second and third chapters examine the underlying causes of certain attacks emanating from Sinai and targeting, for instance, pipelines or Israeli soil. The third chapter explains why and how Egyptian authorities allowed the arms flow to Gaza from Sinai; the fourth chapter furthers this discussion and examines the process of the building of tunnels to Gaza. The following chapter turns its focus to law and order in the peninsula and the role of tribal and sharia courts within it. The sixth chapter draws attention to the rise of Islamic militants in the region and their close ties with the Muslim Brotherhood; the following section, in parallel with the events set forth in the previous two chapters, explains the policies pursued by the Morsi-led government in the face of attacks on military facilities in Sinai. The remaining chapters are devoted to developments during the al-Sisi period and the shifts in the power balances among groups in Sinai.

Sabry's book has several positive features. The chronological narration makes it easy for readers to follow the turn of events and to grasp the development of political and military conflicts and the social and political structure of the region. Moreover, the author covers the bulk of available literature both in Arabic and English; he even managed to conduct interviews with prominent figures in certain tribes and with senior politicians and former soldiers. These accounts make the

book a useful resource for ordinary readers and scholars alike.

The book, however, also has some shortcomings that deserve mentioning. First of all, the work can be said to be biased toward certain political groups within Egypt, and the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) is the most prominent target of this bias. Throughout the book, the author draws a parallel between the MB and radical Salafists to justify his criticisms of the Morsi-led government in the country. He accordingly argues that, thanks to Qutbis leaders, the MB has had close ties with the radical Salafists in Sinai and has used them for its political interests (p. 153). Sabry jumps to an early conclusion here, disregarding the huge ideological differences between the two groups and simply taking the Qutbi leadership, a group within the MB, and their compromising attitude towards the Salafi belief, to draw a similarity and grounds for joint action. Indeed, as can clearly be seen in the MB, the movement is much more than its leader and his opinions. Moreover, the author also ignores that the Salafists in Sinai mostly act dependently on their global affiliation therefore lack the capacity to freely collaborate with the MB. Indeed, as I personally observed in the peninsula in 2013 during my fieldwork, the relationship between the Salafists and the MB was on a knife-edge and the Salafists generally followed a very pragmatic policy both in the Morsi and the al-Sisi period. In this context, it is necessary to underline that some Salafists even cooperated with the regime after Morsi was overthrown.

Second and relatedly, the author treats the Morsi period as an era in which the central governments secured a hundred percent control in the peninsula, and in which the military was submissive to the government. This is the ground upon which Sabry criticizes Morsi for not fulfilling his promises regarding

the conflict within the peninsula. Contrary to what is assumed, however, Morsi's control was limited, as the country continued to be ruled by the bureaucratic elites—for instance, Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, who served as a defense minister for 20 years, dissolved the parliament and staged a soft military coup and Morsi could not even properly take action against this coup (p. 165).

Third, as a minor issue, I believe that certain arguments the author makes require further evidence to support them; this includes the

assertions that Egyptian authorities allowed the gun flow to Gaza due to political interests (p. 60) and Hosni Mubarak supports Hamas (p. 64). By the same token, in the fifth chapter, the author indicates that Salafist clerics began to establish sharia courts and had a large impact on the order of the peninsula (p. 111); this statement requires tangible evidence. As a final point, the author provides the reader with only a single map of Sinai; perhaps more visual illustrations would have provided a better portrayal of the strategic importance of the peninsula.