

## **A formative attack**

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Sinai has been part of my life since I visited Santa Katerina at the age of 21. I lived there from 1975 to 1979 as a guide in the local field school of the Society for the Protection of Nature. It was there that I launched my professional life as an anthropologist and an author. For me, as for many others, the peninsula, with its magical landscapes and its hospitable inhabitants, was for years a window of hope in a hostile Middle East. The open passage at Taba provided a singular escape from the sense of land isolation that accompanies every Israeli from birth and sends backpackers from the country to all corners of the earth. Sinai was a sanctuary for an entire generation - my generation.

It is important to understand that even for those Israelis who did not go to Sinai - and most Israelis have never been there - the very existence of a calm Arab space as the direct land continuation of Israel was both significant and reassuring. The tendency to imagine a place and attach it to feelings such as "home," "quiet," "fear" and even "closeness" and "distance" is influenced mainly by subjective associations, not by geographic reality. We identify a space with

events, processes and experiences - both personal and collective. And for many Israelis, as for me, southern Sinai had a calming association.

True, it wasn't so for everyone. Last summer Israeli friends told me that they were afraid to visit Sinai "because of Ras Burqa" - a brutal place-specific event, but exceptional and a one-time occurrence, which took place almost exactly 19 years ago. In 2001 and 2002, the Bedouin and the Egyptians in Sinai couldn't understand why Israelis were staying away from the peninsula because of suicide attacks in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Afula. In those cases, what determined people's feelings were associations between Sinai and hostility harbored by part of the public. Now there is no longer any doubt: the association that will define Sinai for most of us in the near future was last Thursday cut off from magical sunrises and addictive stillness; it is now associated, by means of powerful television graphics, to a nightmare.

The source of the attacks in Sinai is apparently global Islamic terrorism. The Palestinian organizations desperately need the political support of Egypt and would not risk that support for anything. In terms of the perception of the regional space, however, the Islamic connection only aggravates the situation. In one fell swoop it severs Sinai from the space of stability in which it existed until now and attaches it to the world space that has been exposed to global terrorism since the collapse of the Twin Towers. September 11, 2001, left the entire world - not only the Americans and anyone who has ever visited the United States - in a less protected space.

The Sinai attacks are, of course, small in comparison to the scale of death and destruction that was wrought in New York; but the feelings of fear that redefined the space in Israel are similar. Even those whose resumes don't include the sunrise at Jebel Umm-Shumar or bathing in the Wishwashi cisterns lost the Sinai paradise this week.

Israelis have become accustomed to traumatic events and to the processes they set in motion. The efficient emergency reactions of the security

forces and rescue units in Israel have a concrete role, of course, but also an important symbolic role. They are the flashing life signs - from the first second after the trauma until the last of the memorial ceremonies - that prove that the world goes on, that the society continues to function. Despite the painful blow, there are still those who will rescue and evacuate, lead and treat, mourn and even, when needed, collect the body parts.

The trauma and the disorientation that were bound up with the events in Sinai, at least in the first hours, were intensified because of the haplessness of the Egyptians on the ground. The feeling that even at a time of crisis, when every minute determines life or death, the Egyptians were preoccupied with the question of sovereignty, sent a signal of despair attesting to the absence of support systems just when they were most needed. Terrorism is becoming a strategic global factor precisely because of its ability to foment ongoing damage in the consciousness of millions who were not at the site of the event but were burnt by it from afar. We, who had the skin of our faces burnt by the magic of Sinai, now stand with the soles of our feet singed by the scorched earth.