

Crying in the wilderness

By Dan Rabinowitz

Published on Haaretz (Week's End section)
October 15th 2004

URL: <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/489027.html>

A land of riddles and paradoxes, question marks and pain: Sinai, a week after the terror attacks.

SINAI - "Tell me," says Juma, the proprietor of a restaurant in Nueiba, a member of the Nueiba town council and a real-estate entrepreneur. "Is it at all possible that a Bedouin would help terrorists commit this crime? After all, the Bedouin all earn their living from tourism. How could someone break the branch that he and his whole family are sitting on?"

The question of whether assistance was given to those who attacked Taba and Ras al-Satan is on everyone's mind in southern Sinai - Bedouin, Egyptians, Sudanese, tourists, businessmen, simple laborers (permanent and temporary), undercover intelligence investigators, officials and police in uniform. And there is a second question: When, if ever, will Israeli tourism come back here?

"Are there Israelis at the border crossing?" asked friends at the beach where I arrived this week. When I relate that when I came through into Sinai on Monday, I was entirely alone at the crossing, people look crestfallen and the subject of discussion changes.

Juma's restaurant is located 20 meters from the waterline at high tide. Visible through the gaps between his little camp of thatched bungalows, which now stand orphaned along the beach, are three figures standing waist-deep in the water. Salem, Juma's elder brother, has gone out with two friends - one of them a cabdriver, the other a silent partner in the restaurant - to spread fishing nets along the reef.

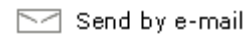
The economic prosperity of the past decade has



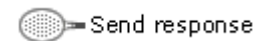
Tourists in Sinai this week. Says one Bedouin: "In a little while it will be so quiet here that you'll be able to hear our children wailing at home: `Daddy, Daddy, food, food.'" (AP)



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left a juicy imprint on the three old men, fisherman in an hour of need. Plump, heavy of movement, they spend hours figuring the correct angle and location of the nets. A young Bedouin who is watching them from the beach smiles bitterly. "Those old men are going to catch fish and there are no tourists to eat them. It looks to me like we, the Bedouin, will go back to eating fish now. We'll live a simple life like we used to."

The Bedouin version

In southern Sinai the mystery of who could have helped the attackers is not a rhetorical question, and the expected return of the Israelis is not a riddle when it comes to marketing tourism. This strip of land, which reinvented itself during the past two decades as a cosmopolitan Riviera of backpacker's pavilions and luxury hotels, developed a total dependence on tourists and their money. Terror, it is clear here to everyone, marked all the inhabitants of the peninsula, permanent and transient, as a target.

"Business is dead," says the Egyptian manager of a small hotel in almost a whisper.

"This bomb destroyed thousands of homes in Sinai," says a Sudanese cook at another place.

"It's quiet here, isn't it?" smiles a Bedouin from the Mazina tribe, waving his hand at the empty road and the abandoned hotels. "For years it hasn't been this quiet here. And it will go on. In a little while it will be so quiet here that you'll be able to hear our children wailing at home: `Daddy, Daddy, food, food.'"

Juma insists that under no circumstances would a local Bedouin help destroy tourism here. As he sees it, when the planners of a terror attack like this tried to buy support, information and help, they would have come up against a wall of tribal solidarity. The knowledge that an attack was liable to topple everything here should have deterred even someone momentarily blinded by greed. Not to mention of course the difficulty of concealing a significant sum of money from friends and acquaintances for very long.

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Look at them! At Uri, Yohanan and Dorit as they rub shoulders with artists, give platforms to performers and just contribute, contribute, and contribute more and more to the community.

By Guy Rolnik

Hatred of Israel is also not a valid explanation in southern Sinai. The Israeli presence there after the 1967 Six-Day War amounted to a "light" occupation that involved minimal friction with the Bedouin. The occupation did not frustrate any nationalist sentiments among the Bedouin, nor did it repress any real political project. Israel paved the Eilat-Sharm el-Sheikh road in 1971, thus linking the isolated communities in Nueiba, Dahab and other places to the metropolitan areas on either side of the desert. The smuggling stopped, but there was plenty of work and money, and these increased with the huge wave of development that Egypt brought when it renewed its control of the southern Sinai shore in 1982. In fact, the number of Egyptians killed in the terror attacks was nearly the same as the number of Israelis. But even if more Israelis had been killed, the damage to the Bedouin community itself is huge, and long-term.

Egyptian counter-version

Yet nevertheless, the doubts regarding local aid are nagging stubbornly, like the night breezes on the beach. It must be remembered that the tourism industry along the shore is a microcosm of Egyptian pluralism. The first right of refusal where purchase of lands was concerned went to the members of the Tarabin Bedouin tribe, in whose territory the Sinai shore between Taba and Nueiba falls. Some of the bungalow camps, including the two that were attacked, are indeed owned by Tarabin. Other guest facilities are owned in partnership with Egyptians, Sudanese and others; in some cases there is no Bedouin ownership at all. However, most of the workers are not Bedouin or are not from southern Sinai. If the terror attacks were indeed prepared in northern Sinai - an area that, during the intifada, has been rife with transport of materiel, smuggling capabilities and knowledge of preparing explosive charges - then collecting information about what goes on at the hotels and the thatched huts could have been accomplished relatively easily, by means of people from there who work on the Sinai beaches.

Subsistence in northern Sinai is not dependent on Israel. On the contrary: In recent years the area

has become dependent to a large extent on the smuggling of materiel through tunnels and other channels, and on bringing in women and drug shipments. The transportation links between northern and southern Sinai improved immeasurably five years ago with the opening of the new road that links the Suez Canal with the Sinai coast. This road, incidentally, reaches the coast only five kilometers south of Taba, one roadblock away from the parking area of what used to be the lobby of the Hilton Hotel there.

But information about the sites that were chosen as targets and the ways of getting there is not everything. The reports that were released to the media by the Egyptian investigating teams this week, which were reinforced by conversations with workers at the hotels along the shore, suggest that at least one of the attackers - certainly in the incident of the two car bombs that blew up at Ras al-Satan - had planned from the outset to escape under the cover of darkness and indeed did so. If we assume that the attackers themselves came from outside of Sinai, they would have stood out so prominently in the vicinity following the attacks that they would have been unable to fade simply into the landscape or vanish in a vehicle. The natural direction of escape for them would have been into the mountains west of the coast, on foot or by camel. For this, both the Taba Hilton and Ras al-Satan are good starting points. Two dry riverbeds open out into the Taba area - Wadi Taba and Wadi Tuweiba - which start in the vicinity of what is called Moon Valley, through which the attacker or attackers could have fled under cover of darkness. Ras al-Satan is located at the southern edge of the large delta of Wadi Malha, to which several riverbeds descend from the west. In all of them there are camel trails and relatively convenient foot paths, as well as caves and various other places in which to hide.

Bedouin involvement?

The point is, of course, that the attackers' successful escape to the mountains - as opposed to the gathering of information about a hotel or guest hut - requires the help of Bedouin in the territory. The likelihood that, in the hours and

days after such a sensational terror attack, a person not from the Tarabin tribe could traverse the territory to the west of the road along the coastline on foot or on camel without anyone from the tribe noticing him, or his tracks, is very small. Such a move could have been planned only with the help of local Bedouin, or at least with reliance on their silence.

All of this supports one of the working assumptions of the Egyptian investigative bodies, according to which Bedouin from southern Sinai were indeed involved in the terror attacks. This assumption was rooted in information they released to the media concerning widespread arrests among local Bedouin.

Even before the recent terror attacks, Egyptian security forces, like government representatives altogether, were known for their attitude of scorn and distrust toward the Bedouin in Sinai. The Bedouin's loyalty to Egypt is in doubt, both because they did not "suffer enough" under the Israeli occupation, and because of the open relations of closeness and friendship they display toward the young Israelis, their guests at the hut camps.

When the Egyptian media consistently reflect the ridiculous hypotheses that Israel was behind the terror attacks in Sinai, and President Hosni Mubarak does not appear in the Egyptian media to dismiss this possibility, it is no wonder that the country's security forces arrested and questioned dozens of Bedouin from southern Sinai this week.

It is also not surprising that I heard the comment from an Egyptian civilian, who is employed as a manager in one of the hotels on the beach, that Bedouin from southern Sinai did indeed help the attackers out.

"The dynamite need not necessarily have come from northern Sinai or from outside of Egypt," he explained. "There is a lot of dynamite in southern Sinai, for example in the area of Abu Rodeis and Abu Zanima. They are excavating a lot of roads there between the mountains and they use explosives to prepare the construction sites. Someone could have brought such materials to

the area close to here, in cars or on camels. Here, it would have been possible to hide it in the mountains, with the Bedouin, and to load the charge into the car only a short time before the attack. This would have saved a trip of hundreds of kilometers in a car loaded with explosives. Therefore, I don't discount the possibility that Bedouin from the immediate area helped here."

My interlocutor also offered a socioeconomic explanation for his thesis. "All that talk about how all the Bedouin here are benefiting from the tourism industry is a lot of nonsense. The owners of the bungalow camps and the restaurants are making big money. And the people who work for them are also living well. But they are just part of the tribe. There are many Bedouin who have not succeeded, or who did not get into tourism in time, and now all the good stretches of beach are used up and all that is left to them is to stand off to the side and see how the big money is flowing to other people. Maybe they don't hate Israelis or Europeans, but what do they care about harming tourism? Especially if someone convinces them that immoral and licentious things, and who knows what else, happen there."

"They also see that the Egyptian government is cooperating with the owners of the huts. Unlike with the big hotels, they received land almost for free - they don't pay a single cent in taxes, they build without restrictions and they are having a great time. As far as the oppressed of the tribe go, the state is part of social injustice. And then abetting terror that will also harm the state is reasonable as far as they are concerned. Do they need anything more?"

Now it is necessary to wait patiently for the information that will help clarify what really happened, to break and dispel the disturbing clouds of suspicion. Meanwhile Ayash's beach - where the people were miraculously saved because of a guard, who fended off the second explosives-laden car with the glare of a flashlight, managed to get a glimpse of a passenger or passengers from it disappearing into the dark seconds before the blast, and was then injured - will never be the same.

The pain of the inhabitants of the bungalow camps on the beach - one where there are tourists, including Israelis - hangs about like an oppressive heaviness that threatens never to be dispelled. Other Israelis, those who loved Sinai and remember their Bedouin and Egyptian and Sudanese friends from a carefree era of singing and laughter and dancing, of foolish rhyming in Arabic and Hebrew, and dreamy hours of music and backgammon and hallucinatory conversations till dawn, will no doubt take comfort in the thought that their friends had nothing at all to do with the horror. The workers at the rustic holiday camps who, like them, loved that life and did not want any of it to end, who helped them evacuate to the main road on the night of the horror and saw to it that they had transportation, and are continuing to keep an eye on their suitcases and packages that remained behind in the pandemonium of that night, are hoping like them that this nightmare will pass.

In a big city where every day thousands of people go past a place where something happened, good or bad - they remember it, they think about it, they re-experience it and afterward may even forget or ignore it - a knot is formed in mysterious ways that gives the event a presence and weaves it into the fabric of urban existence.

Four days after the terror attacks, the Taba Hilton is still a monument, with ripped wallpaper, to the horror. At Ras al-Satan, however, there is just a sooty hole in the ground, two meters by four. Even if a stone memorial is put up here, like the one for travelers to Petra in the Arava or, on the opposite side, the pillbox and the Egyptian flag that remind everyone who passes Ras Burka of the seven people who were killed there in 1985, the emptiness all around will continue to deceive, as though what did happen never really happened at all.