

Will the Sinai Peninsula See an Influx of Palestinians? What Will be Its Impact?

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The Sinai Peninsula is the only part of Egypt which is considered a part of Asia. This is regarded as a bridge between Asia and Africa. The Sinai Peninsula is spread over about 60,000 square km. area or about 6% of the total area of Egypt.

However this is not its only claim to fame. This is a region known for many biblical memories and locations including Mount Sinai. This as well as its vast areas of solitude are likely to attract many spiritually inclined persons. The coral reefs and the special beauty of deserts close to beaches is likely to attract other tourists as well.

Yes, this region has some well-liked tourism resorts, some famous places, but by and large this is an arid zone vast parts of which are very sparsely populated.

What is more important for most analysts in the context of the tension and conflict-ridden realities of the Middle East region is the geo-strategic importance of this region. You can stand at certain points in its coastal areas and point out — look it is Israel there, Gaza there, Jordan there and Saudi Arabia there.



Perhaps most important just now is its border with Gaza. Rafah town used to be actually on both sides and after the artificial border was fenced heavily, the Sinai side of the town was gradually depopulated due to security-related factors including creation of buffer zones.



It is often said that when countries engage in avoidable but highly destructive wars, it is people in border areas who suffer the most. Yes, people on both sides of this border zone have suffered a lot, and not just during wars. To fortify their security preparations, Israeli forces have repeatedly carried out large-scale demolitions of houses in Rafah and nearby areas over the decades. Hamas and related organizations dug long and fortified tunnels and while searching for these tunnels on both sides of Israel and Egyptian authorities carried out very strong actions in which innocent people were caught badly. The Egyptian authorities have also carried out large-scale demolitions on their side of the border. In addition in the course of their other operations including anti-terror operations, Egyptian forces have carried out demolitions and forced displacement on a large scale in several parts of the Sinai Peninsula.

In the 1967 war the Sinai desert was captured by the Israeli forces and remained under Israeli control for over a decade. In 1979 an agreement was reached between Egypt and Israel which included the return of this vast territory to Egypt. Over the next decade Egypt got back this entire territory.

Subsequently there have been some incidents of violence and terrorism, including those reflecting the anger of some local people against the neglect of their welfare while promoting high-profile tourism.

However ever since the October 7 attack on Israel by Hamas and the subsequent invasion of Gaza by Israel, more attention has been concentrated on whether this will lead to an influx

of the people of Gaza into the Sinai Peninsula. Some extreme right wing forces of Israel actively promoted the idea of using the conflict for driving the people of Gaza outside Gaza, and the most obvious destination to them appeared to be the Sinai desert with, as one such source noted, 'its huge expanse and endless space'. What such suggestions ignored was that if vast parts of the Sinai desert have been very sparsely populated, there are environmental reasons for this including freshwater scarcity and livelihood constraints. If even the relatively smaller number of Bedouins and other local communities have found it difficult to sustain livelihoods, how can pushing a large number of people into the desert area be justified. When asked about the prospects of being sent to Sinai, several Palestinians who were interviewed have rejected the idea very strongly.

Some other Israeli sources have suggested that the people of Gaza should move to Sinai only temporarily and they can return when the action against Hamas is over. This is seen by some as a trap while even others fail to see how this can work out in practical terms. Egyptian sources have said that if at all a temporary shelter has to be found, Israel can use its own Negev desert.

Despite all this, the idea of several people of Gaza having to move to the Sinai Peninsula has continued to be in the news for some months. In February 2024 it was widely stated in sections of media, on the basis of satellite photos, that a large security enclosure is being created in Egypt adjacent to Gaza. This was confirmed by local sources who spoke of contracts having been given for this. Various reports suggest a 12 square km. area surrounded by a 23 feet high wall, capable of probably sheltering about 100,000 people in a tented city. However, given the fact that nearby urban locations such as Rafah and Sheikh Zuweid are reported to have suffered depopulation in recent times, it may be possible at relatively short notice to arrange some sort of shelter for more people. At the same time, local people who have been displaced in Sinai may not like the idea of others moving in while they have not been rehabilitated yet.

A recent report dated May 7, 2024 published first in Middle East and then in Middle East Monitor titled 'Rafah Invasion: Egyptian army turns to Sinai tribes to prepare for the influx of Palestinians' indicates that preparations for an influx of Palestinians into those parts of the Sinai peninsula which are closer to the Gaza border are still being made.

One part of the preparations may be to organize some of the local people into some sort of a para-military to take care of new security responsibilities if and when a significantly large number of the people of Gaza take shelter in Sinai, or rather are forced to take shelter here.

The Egyptian authorities have been apprehensive from the start regarding Hamas and other radical Palestinian elements coming along with Palestinian refugees and increasing security risks for Egypt. If, for example, they try to mobilize more fighters for the Palestinian cause in Egypt, or if they use the Egyptian territory for launching attacks across the border into Israel, this can create serious problems for Egypt's relations with Israel, and if the Israeli forces come chasing them into Egyptian territory then the situation becomes even more precarious for Egypt.

Despite such serious apprehensions, however, it has been widely discussed that there is one factor which can still sweeten this bitter pill of increased security problems, and this factor is the possibility of Egypt getting big debt relief and other generous economic assistance from the USA in particular but also from its allies including oil-rich allies. Egypt is a very heavily indebted country and this makes it increasingly difficult for the Egyptian regime to meet the

needs of its people, increasing discontent. If this factor is taken into consideration, then the chances increase that several people of Gaza may be forced to move towards the Sinai Peninsula.

A big question is—how big this number will be and for how long will they move to the Sinai Peninsula?

However if the number is very large and if the move is seen as a more or less permanent move, then certainly this will be a big blow to the wider Palestinian cause and to the two-state solution. The cause of the people of the West Bank region too will be weakened further once a very large number of people move away from Gaza.

Hence such forced displacement should be opposed by all people who stand for peace with justice, and instead solutions based on people of Gaza remaining in or very close to their original residential places within Gaza should be advanced and supported.

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