

January 31, 1978

THE SINAI: EGYPT'S JUST DESERT?

by Elmo Zumwalt, Jr.
and Worth Bagley

Perhaps the most formidable hurdle on the road to an Egyptian-Israeli peace accord is the issue of security arrangements in the Sinai. Sadat has declared the peninsula "sacred" and demands its complete return. The Israelis, despite the high temptation of an accord with Egypt, refuse to abandon the region in return simply for professions of goodwill.

In the Sinai, there stand no cities to speak of. Aside from an abundance of dust, the desert there contains no substantial natural resources. Though its value to Israel as a military buffer is apparent, this can hardly account for Jerusalem's profound reluctance to part with it. After all, any conceivable Egyptian-Israeli accord would provide for buffer zones. Moreover, the very fact of accord would reduce the threat posed by Egypt's army. Nor can Israel's stand on the Sinai be explained simply as a combination of expansionist inertia (settlements being up, there is natural resistance to tearing them down) and bargaining tactics (a tough stand on Sinai settlements allows an even tougher stand on settlements in "Judea and Samaria"). Rather, full appreciation of the Israelis' position requires reference to the Sinai's large role in overall Israeli defense planning.

Israel and the Sinai comprise a land mass three times larger than Israel without the Sinai. The peninsula, since 1967, has become the home of a number of Israeli military bases containing a sizeable portion of the total military equipment at Israel's dis-

posal. It surprises many people to learn that Israel's five major air bases in the Sinai represent more than half of that country's total number of military air bases.

The Israeli defense forces have grown dependent on the vastness of the Sinai. The skill of these forces is honed nowadays in large-scale maneuvers impossible to perform within the confines of Israel's pre-1967 borders. Israeli pilots and gunners avail themselves in the desert peninsula of firing ranges that cannot, for reasons of space and cost, be reconstructed inside the old borders. And the quantities of equipment and ordnance needed by Israel to sustain the current regional arms balance cannot be concentrated within Israel proper without greatly endangering their safety.

Dispersing military stores over a large area minimizes their vulnerability to attack, in addition to allowing their ready use in diverse theaters. Israel's Sinai bases, including the important naval facility at Sharm-el-Sheikh, afford strategic advantage over the Eastern Mediterranean, Central Israel, the critical Red Sea straits, and beyond. (It bears noting that Israel's strategic potency pays dividends to the United States, as evidenced during both the Jordanian and Lebanese civil wars.) Israeli civilian settlements in the Sinai, like those in Rafiach that have engendered such controversy, form part of the strategic picture. The Rafiach settlements serve to defend the important Eytam air base in the Northern Sinai. The issue of dismantling Rafiach is not, as certain reports suggest, simply a question of disappointing a small group of desert pioneers.

Should it consent to total withdrawal from the Sinai, Jerusalem will face two tough military problems; first, where within Israel are

all the former Sinai-based soldiers and hardware going to be accommodated, and second, once accommodated, how is this military might to be protected. The logistical problem is serious in that it may dilate the timetable for withdrawals in order to permit construction of needed facilities in Israel. The Begin Government could, I trust, work out the logistics with relative ease, however. Protecting its soldiers and armaments, once they have been narrowly concentrated, represents a more worrisome challenge.

The more complete Israel's withdrawal from the Sinai, the more concentrated grow its forces, the more inviting the few military bases within Israel become as targets for heavily-armed "rejectionists" like Syria and Iraq. The arsenals of sophisticated weaponry that have already been supplied them by the Soviet Union, including advanced ground-to-ground missiles, would allow these countries, should they attack with limited military objectives (as in 1973), to cause grave damage to a tightly concentrated Israeli defense structure. Complete Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai would thus increase the benefits to be had from a first strike against Israel. A concomitant of this result would be the adoption by Israel of the preemptive strike strategy that openly and decisively governed Israeli military doctrine before and during the Six Days' War of 1967. If Israel is placed in a position where it simply cannot afford to suffer a first strike, then it must preempt all threatened strikes as they arise. Both Egyptians and Israelis, and their American "moderators," should be fully aware of how Egypt's total withdrawal demand would likely affect military stability in the Mideast.

The upshot of this analysis is not that Israel should sit pat

in the Sinai. The political and military value of an accord with Egypt, depending on its terms and on the prospects for progress on other fronts, could be considerable; and it could justify major territorial concessions and risks. But Americans that urge Israel to take risks should appreciate that what is at risk is the very existence of the Jewish State. They should also appreciate, as an Israeli once commented to me, that Israel is within America's margin for error: if the risks we urge are foolish, we will not perish, but the Israelis might.

Admiral Zumwalt recently visited Israel and its various Sinai military bases.