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**The Evolution of the Egypt-Israel
Boundary: From Colonial Foundations
to Peaceful Borders**

Nurit Kliot

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Contents

	Page
1. Introduction	1
2. The Development of the Egypt-Palestine Border, 1906-1918	1
2.1 Background to delimitation	1
2.2 The Turco-Egyptian boundary agreement of 1906	4
2.3 The delimitation of the Egypt-Palestine boundary	7
2.4 The demarcation of the Egypt-Palestine boundary	7
2.5 Concluding remarks on the development of the Egypt- Palestine border of 1906	8
3. The Development of the Egypt-Palestine Borders, 1918-1947	9
4. Boundary developments, 1949-1982	10
5. The Taba Dispute	14
6. Other outcomes of the Israel-Egypt Peace Treaty	18
7. Conclusions	18
References	20

List of Figures

Figure 1	Israeli-Egyptian Boundaries, 1906-1986	3
Figure 2	Israeli Occupation of the Sinai Peninsula	6
Figure 3	Demilitarisation Arrangement for the Sinai	13
Figure 4	An Aerial View of Taba	15
Figure 5	Taba and the newly demarcated border between Israel and Egypt	17

The Evolution of Egyptian-Israeli Boundaries: From Colonial Foundations to Peaceful Borders

*Nurit Kliot*¹

1. Introduction

The formation of the present Egyptian-Israeli border has taken place over a period of almost 80 years during which four wars have been fought between Israel and Egypt themselves as well as two world wars involving the colonial powers which formerly ruled Egypt and Israel-Palestine. The final border line thus reflects three major factors:

- The colonial struggle which took place between Great Britain and the Ottoman Empire, with the participation of such by-standers as Russia, Germany, France and Austria.
- The wars between Egypt and Israel, the most important being the 1948-9 war (the Israeli War of Independence).
- The Peace Treaty which was signed between Israel and Egypt in 1979 and which provided the final formal recognition of the border line as a mutually recognised permanent and peaceful border between the two nations.

This paper is divided into two main parts. The first (sections 2-3) examines the development of the border between 1906 and 1948, whilst the latter deals with development in the period 1949 to 1982. In addition, a special section (section 5) is devoted to the Taba dispute and its settlement.

2. The Development of the Egypt-Palestine Border, 1906-1918

2.1 Background to delimitation

The first stage in the formation of the Israeli-Egyptian boundary was comprehensively dominated by imperial colonial rivalry, mainly between the Ottoman Empire and a Great Britain pushing to expand its influence in the Middle East.

The first map to indicate the location of the Egypt-Palestine border appeared in 1841 in the Sultan's *Firman*² which delineated the boundaries of the area under Muhammed Ali's (Egyptian) rule. The map showed that the boundary between Egypt on one hand and Hejaz and Palestine on the other ran from Suez to Rafah (Biger, 1978: 325). It also showed that the Sinai peninsula

¹ The author would like to express her appreciation and gratitude to Professor Moshe Brawer for his remarks and personal communication which contributed to this paper.

² A *firman* or edict is a royal government order issued by the Ottoman Sultans in the process of administering their Empire.

remained under Hejaz (Turkish) administration and Palestine ended at the Rafah-Dead Sea line (see Figure 1).

On the map, the Sinai boundary ran along a line from Suez to a point on the Mediterranean between Rafah and Khan Yunis, both later attached to Palestine. It thus reduced Egypt's presence in Sinai to the northwest sector (Hurewitz, 1989: XII). The same *Firman*, authorised the ruler of Egypt to act in the Sinai Peninsula even beyond the above border line to safeguard the passage of Moslem pilgrims to Mecca (Brawer, 1988: 61).

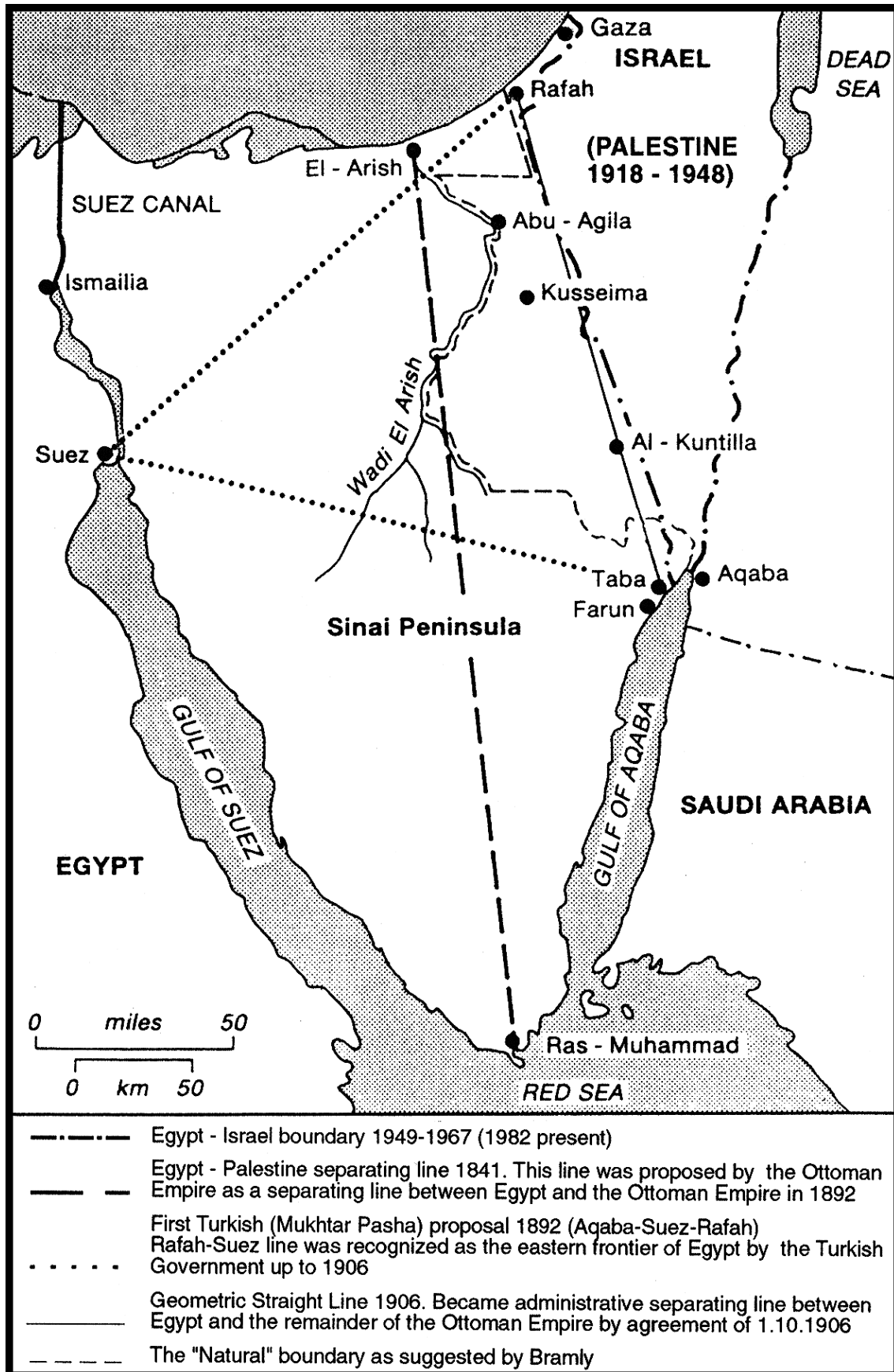
It became apparent after Britain gained control of Egypt and the Suez Canal that the 1841 border line crossed the southern tip of the Suez Canal so that 3-4km of its southern entrance were located within the Turkish territory of Sinai. This fact together with international developments caused Lord Cromer, the Governor of Egypt, to establish a new border in Sinai which would put Turkish forces at a greater distance from the Suez Canal.

The first two Turkish proposals for administrative borders for the Sinai were dated 1892 and were made by the Ottoman representative in Cairo. He suggested, first, that Egypt would have administrative control of two areas: the northwest part of the Sinai Peninsula and the southern mountain part whereas the Ottomans would continue to control the central part of Sinai (Figure 1). When this proposal was not accepted by the British Government of Egypt, a second proposal was presented: a division of Sinai by a north to south line, from El-Arish to Ras Muhammad which would leave the western part of Sinai under Egyptian control and the eastern part under Ottoman Control (Heyd, 1963: 198) (see Figure 1). This proposal was also rejected by Britain.

In 1892, the Sultan Abdulhamid II decided to re-establish his authority in Sinai on the basis of advice received from the German ambassador to Turkey. Heyd (1963) has suggested that the 1906 British-Turkish dispute over the establishment of the Egyptian-Turkish (Palestine) border was part of the Anglo-German competition for hegemony in the Middle East and elsewhere. The particular considerations of both colonial or imperial forces should, however, be examined in greater detail. The Ottomans, allied with Germany, wished to leave Sinai under Ottoman control, in connection with their strategic interests in the Hejaz railway. In the fall of 1904, the Hejaz railway line from Damascus to Ma'an was inaugurated. Ma'an, being only 120km from Aqaba, enabled the Ottomans to transfer troops, relatively rapidly from Ma'an to Aqaba and from Aqaba to Yemen. Were Turkey able to implement her plan to connect Ma'an to Aqaba by railway link, she would thus be able to free herself from her dependence on the British controlled Suez Canal (Graves, quoted in Heyd, 1963: 263).

The British were concerned about this Turkish plan which would advance Ottoman power dangerously close to the Suez Canal, and would endanger the sea-route from Suez to India. Lord Cromer and the British Administration of Egypt considered a border line between Rafah and Aqaba (i.e. the northern tip of the Gulf of Aqaba and not the site of Aqaba) to be a more satisfactory line which would distance the Ottoman forces as far as possible from the Suez Canal. This line would also guarantee that the Sinai desert would serve as a natural barrier and good defence for the Canal. Control over the Sinai Peninsula also made possible British supervision of any military forces positioned in Eastern Sinai or the Western Negev which could endanger British supremacy in the region (Brawer, 1979: 369-370). Napoleon (quoted in Lord Curzon, 1970: 16) specified that the Sinai Peninsula constituted a formidable obstacle to

Figure 1: Israeli-Egyptian Boundaries



any advancing army because of its total desolation and lack of settlements and sufficient logistic bases (Curzon is quoted by Brawer, 1988: 62).

2.2 The Turco-Egyptian boundary agreement of 1906

Allocation refers to a general political decision over the division of territory. The delimitation process of the Egypt-Palestine border was imposed on the Turks by the British in 1906, but not before the two were driven to the verge of war over the delimitation of the border. The evolution of this particular boundary has been well documented in both Turkish and British sources. Moreover, two of these sources are the accounts of the two men on the spot: Rushdi Bey, the Turkish Commandant of Aqaba, and W.Jennings Bramly, the British frontier administration officer in Sinai from 1902, who was in charge of the British Survey of Sinai which prepared for the delimitation of the boundaries. Rushdi Bey wrote a detailed account of the "*Aqaba Messelhessi*" (The Aqaba Problem) which was written in Turkish. W.Jennings-Bramly left his papers to the Royal Geographical Society in London and M.Brawer studied these documents. A third source consists of the official correspondence with the British Foreign Office and the Government papers of the years 1905-1907 regarding the frontier dispute. This availability of varied sources has enabled several researchers to make detailed analyses of the historical development of this boundary (Brawer, 1970, 1979, 1988; Heyd, 1963; Warburg, 1979).

Beyond the general motivation of the British to distance Turkish forces as far as possible from the Suez Canal, the British had three major motivations for the delimitation of the border on the Rafah-Aqaba line:

- The Sinai peninsula served as a natural barrier which would give Egypt enough time to prepare its defences in case Turkish forces invaded Sinai.
- The Rafah-Aqaba line also had several geographical advantages. It was the eastern boundary of the Sinai peninsula and almost the shortest line between the Mediterranean Sea and the Gulf of Aqaba. As a result of W.Jennings' Bramly's detailed survey of Sinai, the British also knew that this line had the advantages of nearby water resources and control over strategic routes (Brawer, 1988: 62-3).
- Lord Cromer and some of his advisers also believed that the Rafah-Aqaba line followed an ancient historical boundary which had been recognised as such since the first century. Turkish and Egyptian officials, however, and some British scholars, rejected this claim as false. Historical data pointed to the El-Arish stream (wadi) as the proper border between Israel/Palestine and Egypt (Brawer, 1988: 64).

The Turkish position regarding the delimited border between Palestine and Egypt was one which not only wished to preserve the *status-quo* but also insisted on the *de facto*, as well as *de jure*, implementation of their sovereignty over Sinai.

These conflicting positions brought Great Britain and the Ottoman Empire onto a collision course and to confrontation in the year 1906. The 1906 incident took place on 10 January, 1906. When Jennings-Bramly, a frontier administrative officer in Sinai, was ordered by Lord Cromer, the Agent and Consul General in Cairo and later Governor of Egypt, to deploy

elements of his frontier police at Naqb al-A'qabah which commanded the approaches from western Sinai to the northern end of the Gulf (Hurewitz, 1984: XV; a letter from Owen to Jennings-Bramly, 2 January 1906, in Toye, 1989: 222). Bramly, accompanied by five Egyptian policemen, told the Turkish officer at Aqaba that he had been ordered by the British Government to establish border posts in the western parts of the Gulf of Aqaba, Kuntilla and Kusseima. Bramly claimed that all these parts belonged to Egypt and that he therefore had to organise border guards for them (Heyd, 1963: 196; Warburg, 1979: 679). Rushdi Bey, the local Turkish officer, went to Damascus in order to establish whether Umm Rashrash was within the Turkish or Egyptian administrative jurisdiction. When he came back, he ordered Bramly and his men to leave Umm Rashrash immediately (Heyd, 1963). Bramly returned to his headquarters in Nakhil and the Turks established a Turkish border post in Umm-Rashrash.

The second stage of the incident began on 22 January, when a small Egyptian navy vessel under British Command, the *Nur al-Bahr*, anchored near Jezirat Farun. Bramly himself was ordered to return to the Gulf of Aqaba. Bramly told Rushdi Bey that he had orders to post 50 Egyptian soldiers in Taba and Umm-Rashrash (see Figures 1 and 2). Rushdi Bey who had succeeded in posting Turkish troops at Taba the night before, told Bramly that he had been ordered by the Ottoman Grand Vizier to oppose the Egyptian occupation of Taba by force if necessary (Heyd, 1963: 197).

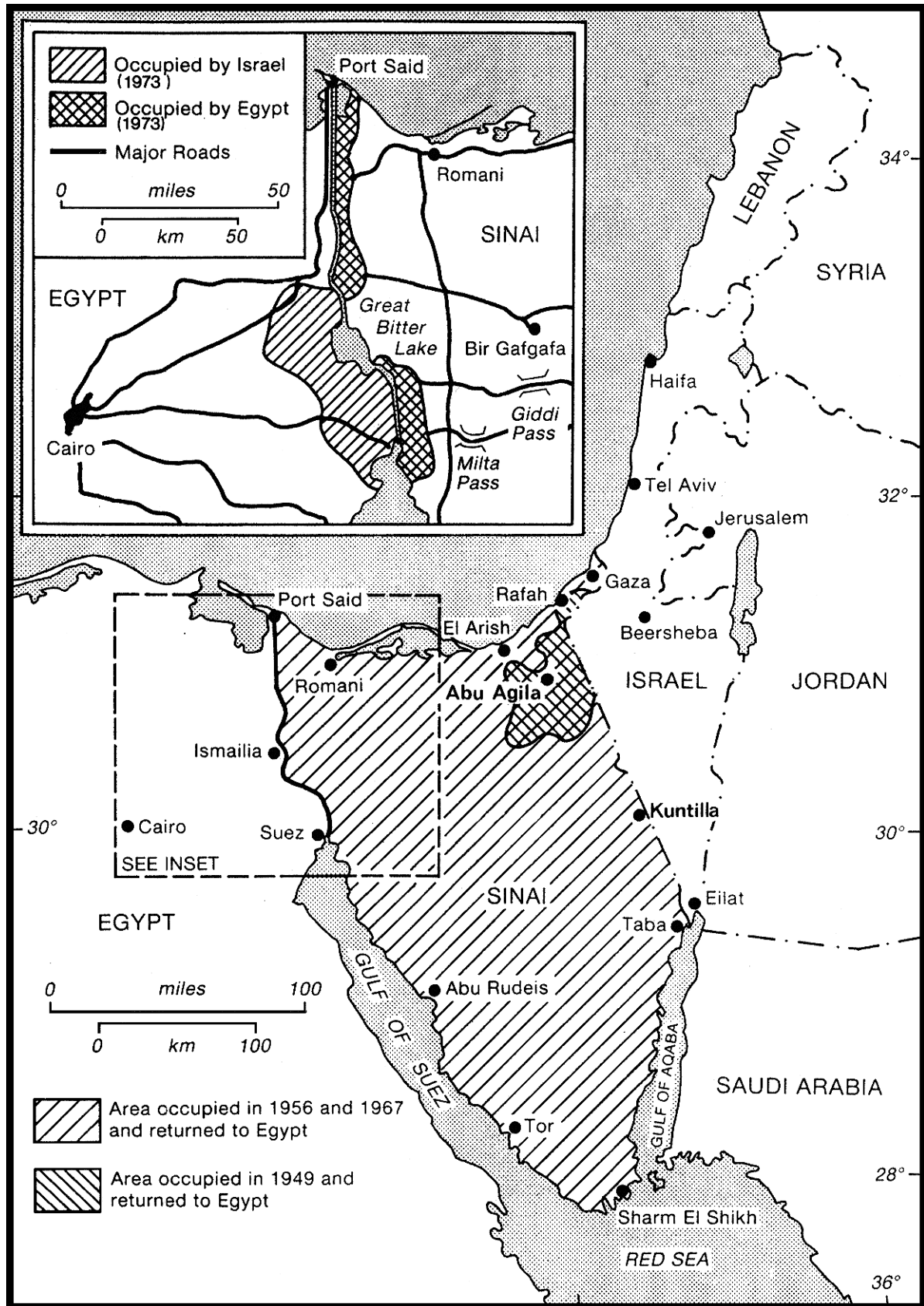
In February 1906 the Turkish government sent a large reinforcement of troops to Aqaba raising the number of Turkish troops there to 3,000 and more (Heyd, 1963: 197). The events of subsequent months brought about little change. A British gunboat, the *Diana*, was rushed to the Gulf of Aqaba while Turkey further reinforced its troops in Aqaba. In April, a British attempt to land troops in Rafah, the northern tip of the Turco-Egyptian border, was opposed by the Turks and had to be abandoned (Warburg, 1979: 680; Hurewitz, 1989: XVI).

Britain now resorted to diplomacy backed by force. Egypt (governed by Great Britain), demanded a demarcated line between the Egyptian and Turkish territories but the Sultan rejected this demand, claiming that Egypt was an integral part of the Ottoman Empire and that there was, therefore, no need for a formal boundary such as a boundary which separates two sovereign states.

These negotiations led to no agreement and on 3 May, 1906, Britain, supported by France and Russia, handed an ultimatum to the Sultan Abdulhamid II warning him that unless he agreed, within 10 days, to the proposed boundary leading from Rafah to the Gulf of Aqaba - and evacuated Taba, His Majesty's Government would be forced to take stiff measures (Gooch and Temperley, 1928: vol. V: 190-191). It is known today that at the same time Britain was making preparations to capture several important Turkish islands in the Aegean Sea. On 14 May the Sultan, realising that without German, Russian or French support he could not afford to resist, accepted the British demand and ordered the withdrawal from Taba and the delimitation of an administrative line between the Ottoman province of the Hejaz, the Governorate of Jerusalem and the Sinai Peninsula (Warburg, 1979: 681). The Turco-Egyptian boundary agreement was accordingly signed at Rafah on 1 October 1906. For the border dividing the Sinai Peninsula from the Vilayet of Hijaz and the Sancak³ of Jerusalem, the unique use of "*administrative*

³ Term as used by Hurewitz.

Figure 2: Israeli Occupation of the Sinai Peninsula



separating line” instead of boundary which conveyed an “*international*” or “*quasi-international*” meaning was deliberate. It served as a conciliatory gesture to Ottoman sensibilities (Hurewitz, 1989: XVI, letter from Owen to Mr Findlay, August 10, 1906, in Toye, 1989: 667).

2.3 The delimitation of the Egypt-Palestine boundary

Delimitation is defined as the final selection of a specific boundary within a broader zone. As Bramly had already prepared a survey and map of the area in 1902, he had all necessary details of tribal territories and water resources as well as all the major routes - all based on information provided by local Beduin tribes (Brawer, 1988: 65; Brawer, Personal communication, 14/12/93). On the basis of all the information he gathered in 1902, Jennings-Bramly suggested the establishment of a ‘natural boundary’ which would be founded on the geographical and topographical features of the area (Figure 1).

The line suggested by Bramly began at the Mediterranean coast northwest of Rafah, continued straight south for 16km then turned west up to wadi El-Arish (see Toye, 1989: 454, 594). From wadi El-Arish near Bir Lachfan, the boundary turned southeast along the wadi up to its connection with Wadi Moilech and Wadi El-Ein. Because this line was founded on natural features it was meandering and was thus rejected by the British command in favour of a straight (geometric) boundary line. The British were not concerned about dividing tribal territories or about the necessity for a boundary based on natural features but were preoccupied with their need for a boundary which would be short, easy to demarcate and defend (Brawer, 1979: 372).

Bramly’s natural boundary also included the extreme southwestern part of the Arava Valley (Wadi Araba) on the Egyptian side of the border - a major change to the border which the British knew that the Turks would never agree to. Hurewitz concludes the delimitation process with the following: “*By ending the boundary not at Aqabah as Cromer had urged since 1892, but six miles to its west at Taba, the British added yet another sweetener. It gave the unfolding Hijaz Railway uncomplicated access to Aqabah.*” (Hurewitz, 1989: XVI).

Consequently the final boundary ignored many of Jennings-Bramly’s proposals but still provided the British with all the advantages they had been looking for and almost all the available water resources were located on the Egyptian side of the border; all the major routes and important junctions in eastern Sinai remained on their side (Brawer, 1970: 131-2). The boundary did, however, cut across tribal areas and later on, after World War I, many of the tribes had to move to one side of the border or the other.

2.4 The demarcation of the Egypt-Palestine boundary

Demarcation is defined as the actual marking of a boundary location by posts and other markers. As stated before, the boundary agreed upon between the Ottoman and British Empires was meant to be a straight line stretching from Rafah to the Gulf of Aqaba. In preparation for the demarcation the British prepared a detailed map of the landscape features in a belt 10km wide along the Rafah-Aqaba line. According to the original agreement the boundary was supposed to begin at a point in the Gulf of Aqaba 3 miles (5km) west of the building of the Turkish military post in Aqaba (Brawer, 1988: 67). The British suggested that the boundary should originate in

Um Rashrash, 5.5km west of Aqaba. The two sides finally agreed that the border line would originate at Ras Taba 10km directly west of Aqaba and 14km from Aqaba along the Gulf of Aqaba. Thus, because the uncompromising Turkish refusal to give up access to the Arava Valley (Wadi Araba), Palestine was left with a good 10.5km strip of the coast of the Gulf of Aqaba (Brawer, 1988: 67). The final demarcated line deviated from the straight-geometric line in places where steep topography or deep canyons proved inaccessible to the surveyors.

The final demarcation of the Egypt-Palestine border took place during the summer months of June to October of 1906 with the British surveyors suffering from the heat and water and food shortage and wishing only to complete their job as fast as possible. Brawer (1988) provides excerpts from the diary of E.B.H. Wade, head of the surveying team, in which he describes all the difficulties posed by the inaccessible topography which caused a change in the final location of the demarcated line in Jabel Haruf (Mount Harif) (a deviation of 500 metres east from the proper border line) and in Mount Meara (Jabel Ma'ara) (Brawer, 1988: 69).

During the final stage of the demarcation process telegraph poles were located a distance of 1-2.5km apart so that they would be intervisible. According to Wade, the head surveyor, the locations of the telegraph poles deviated only slightly from the original straight line but Jennings-Bramly believed otherwise, and stated that the poles' final sites deviated several tens of metres from the original straight line (Jennings-Bramly quoted in Brawer 1988: 71). Near Eilat the final post (called the 'Parker stone') was positioned on a small hill some 100 meters from the sea. Brawer has suggested that this pole was not located on the beach itself because its exact site was supposed to have been in Wadi Taba where winter floods could have uprooted it; therefore the British positioned the telegraph pole on the hill near Wadi Taba where it is visible to the next border marker believing this to be a proper location. The question of the exact location of this border pole eventually became a matter of controversy between Israel and Egypt during the demarcation of the Egyptian-Israeli border line following the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty (see section 5).

After a period of time the telegraph poles were replaced by stone markers 1.5 metres high (Brawer, 1988: 73). Brawer also investigated parts of the Egyptian-Israeli border in 1956 and found that whilst some of the stone border markers were in good condition others had simply disappeared.

2.5 Concluding remarks on the development of the Egypt-Palestine border of 1906

The process of allocation, delimitation and demarcation of the Egypt-Palestine border clearly showed the British as well-prepared with professional surveyors, and broad surveys of the territories to be demarcated. The Turks, on the other hand, came to the process of boundary demarcation with very poor knowledge and had to rely on British surveys and mapping, a fact which made them totally dependent on British credibility being technically unable to review the British work. The Turkish officials obeyed orders only from their government and were very insistent over the exact location of the border in the Gulf of Aqaba, an issue over which they had received clear-cut orders from Damascus (Brawer, 1988: 74). The Turkish authorities still considered the new boundary to be an internal boundary and not an international one. Eventually, Turkey lost its control over the Sinai peninsula because it failed to impose its sovereignty there mainly between 1890 and 1905 - by not establishing any administration and by not maintaining military forces there. The British filled this vacuum and took advantage of

Ottoman weakness. After the First World War the Rafah-Aqaba boundary which had once been an Anglo-Turkish separating administrative line became a boundary between two territories administered by Britain.

3. The Development of the Egypt-Palestine Borders 1918-1947

In the years 1918-1922 the British government held major discussions over the exact demarcation of the 1906 border which had become the border between British-controlled Egypt on the one hand, and British-controlled Palestine and Transjordan on the other. There were two major trends in the varied proposals for a new boundary line between Palestine and Egypt. One was to move the border north and east and to include parts of the Negev (or all of it) in British-controlled Egypt. The other major trend was to change the location of the boundary in the direction of the south-west so that it would rely on the natural features of Wadi El-Arish. In addition to this there was also a proposal to establish a special British Administration for Sinai and parts of the Negev (Brawer, 1988: 75).

It should be noted that the debate over possible changes in the border took place between the British Administration of Palestine and the British Administration of Egypt with no consultation being held with the local population. The final decision was to leave the 1906 administrative separating line intact and to leave the question of Egyptian sovereignty over Sinai in abeyance. Some British Foreign Office papers pointed to the fact that at least some officials regarded the old separating line of Rafah-Aqaba to effectively be an administrative division between the two Ottoman provinces (Fischer-Williams 1926, quoted in Warburg 1979: 684).

In reality the British administrators of Palestine and Egypt imposed this border as an international border by exercising stricter control over crossings, especially over the 3,000 or so Beduin of the frontier zone. Only in the mid-1930's the British Administration of Palestine enhanced its control over the cross-border movement of the nomad Beduin of Sinai and the Negev. The border area along the Rafah-Taba line began to shape the lives of the population living on opposite sides of it (Brawer 1988: 374). Rafah evolved as a small boundary town which functioned as a trade and services centre for the semi-settled Beduin population, and during the Second World War it became an important British base (Brawer, 1988: 77). The Rafah-Taba line remained a border until the establishment of the State of Israel.

Following the Second World War the question of the boundaries of Egypt in the Sinai peninsula was once again raised in a letter to the *Times* by Jennings-Bramly. According to Bramly, the 1906 agreement had not settled the legal question of the Egyptian boundary in Sinai. He suggested that Great Britain should claim suzerainty in that area by right of conquest. He held that Sinai was either Turkish or 'no man's land' - but in no way Egyptian. The Foreign Office rejected Bramly's proposal stating that, since the First World War, the whole of the Sinai peninsula had been accepted by Britain and other states as Egyptian territory. In 1947 the British Foreign Office again took up the question of the legal ownership of Sinai and produced two different views: one which claimed that there was no legal owner to Sinai and an opposed view which acknowledged Egypt as a legal owner to Sinai (Howson, 1947, quoted in Warburg, 1979: 687). It seems that Warburg did not at that time have all the documents relating to this issue.

4. Boundary developments 1949-1982

After three decades of continuous conflict between Jews and Arabs in Palestine, in 1947 the UN proposed a plan to partition the country into a Jewish and an Arab state. It is important to note that during discussions over the future boundaries of the Jewish state the United States objected to the inclusion of the greater part of the Negev in the areas allotted to the Jews. The real issue was, of course, the traditional British colonial interest in control over the Suez Canal. The British did not want anything separating their bases in the Suez Canal zone from those in Transjordan (Cohen, 1970: 388). Furthermore, they considered the Negev to be an alternative base, were they ever forced to evacuate the canal zone. The Soviet Union, in contrast, opposed the reduction in size of the proposed Jewish state and the exclusion of the Negev from its territory.

In May 1948, one day following Israel's declaration of independence, the armies of its Arab neighbours attacked Israel, including Jewish settlements in the Negev, and reached Migdal-Ashqelon, Isdud and progressed to Beer-Sheba. Many settlements in the Negev were under total siege. Towards the end of the war, in March 1949, Israeli forces captured the whole Negev, except for the Gaza Strip, by reaching Um-Rashrash. The Israelis' pursuit of the Egyptian forces brought them into Sinai, and they captured a vast region between El-Arish and Nitzana (Lorch, 1976: 75; Cohen, 1970: 401-402). Israel had to withdraw all its forces from Sinai by 2 January 1949 and in the Armistice Agreement of 24 February 1949, Egypt acknowledged Israel's possession of the entire Negev with the Auja-al Hafir (Nitzana) area being demilitarised and made into a headquarters of the mixed armistice commission.

Whereas the United Nations partition plan had allotted Israel an area of 15,850 sq km, (over 9,500 sq km of this in the Negev) by the end of the 1948-49 Israeli War of Independence Israel held 20,770 sq km, with the Negev comprising two-thirds of the area of the state. The armistice boundary line between Israel and Egypt coincided exactly with the Egypt-Palestine international boundary as demarcated in 1906, with the exception of the Gaza Strip. On the Israeli side of the border a fence was constructed, and with frequent terrorist infiltration, from Gaza, this border became a 'frontier zone' during the early 1950s. The Beduin population of the border zone either moved to Egypt or to the Beer-Sheba region. Near Kerem-Shalom (Figure 2) the boundary deviated from the original 1906 boundary in order to leave the Gaza Strip under Egyptian rule - a situation which was based on the military positions held by both sides at the time of the ceasefire (Brawer, 1988: 129-30). The armistice line was *de facto* demarcated by the common Egyptian-Israeli military commission. The Gaza boundary passed along a line nearly parallel to the main communication artery - the Gaza-Rafah road, and was located on small sand hills 100 metres high. As a result many Gaza residents were cut off from their grazing and agricultural lands which remained in Israel.

The boundary between Israel and Egypt did not become a peaceful boundary when the war terminated and the armistice agreements were signed. From the time of the armistice up to the Sinai Campaign (October 1956) there were 11,650 incidents on the Israeli-Egyptian border (Cohen, 1970: 467). In the period 1951-56 over 400 Israelis were killed and 900 injured as a result of Arab infiltrations and attacks (Lorch, 1976: 83). Most of the incidents in the early 1950s occurred because of innocent activity such as Arab refugees trying to return to their villages, Beduin crossing the border with their animals, or accidental border crossing by both Arabs and Israelis (Khouri 1968: 183). But acts of sabotage, theft, and terrorist activity against

Israel increased in number and frequency, and Israel retaliated, especially when *Fedayeen* attacks on Israel intensified in 1955 and 1956. Between 1 January 1955 and September 1958, according to UNTSO sources, 496 Arabs were killed and 419 injured in such attacks (Khouri 1968: 188).

Another source of tension between the two states was the closing of the Straits of Tiran and the Gulf of Aqaba (and the Suez Canal) to Israeli shipping. In 1956 Israel cooperated with France and Britain in the Sinai Campaign - the last time when the strategic aim of maintaining control of the Suez Canal guided British and French geopolitical policy. Britain and France felt threatened by Nasser's nationalisation of the Suez Canal, whilst Israel wanted a secure border with Egypt and freedom of shipping in the Gulf of Aqaba and the Suez Canal. Israeli gains from this campaign included freedom of shipping in the Straits of Tiran and Gulf of Aqaba and a cessation of the *Fedayeen* attacks from the Gaza strip through the stationing of a UN force along the border in Sinai as well as in the Sharm el-Sheikh area. But Israeli shipping was still denied the use of the Suez Canal (Khouri, 1968: 218). Israel occupied the Sinai Peninsula from 29 October 1956 until 22 January 1957, when it returned most of it, except the Gaza Strip and Sharm-el Sheikh which were evacuated on 6-10 March 1957.

The United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF I) was established on 4 November 1956 after a UN General Assembly Resolution which called for the deployment of UN forces in the Sinai immediately after the retreat of the Israeli forces. The UNEF forces numbered 6,000 soldiers in 1956 when it was founded and 4,500 in 1967. UNEF had armoured units and planes to assist it in fulfilment of its tasks including patrolling the border. For 10 years relative calm prevailed along the border and, as a result of freedom of navigation for Israeli shipping, Eilat became an important port for Israeli trade with Africa and Asia (Downing and Herman, 1978: 75).

From 1965 on, however, attacks against Israel resumed and Israel retaliated. In 1967 Egypt demanded the UN evacuate its peace-keeping forces from Sinai and announced the closing of the Straits of Tiran and the Gulf of Aqaba to Israeli shipping. This resulted in the Six Day War which lasted from 5-10 June 1967, and led to Israeli occupation of Sinai, the Jordanian West Bank and the Syrian Golan Heights. Between 1968 and 1970 Israel and Egypt fought a war of attrition along the Suez front for more than a 1,000 days, but there were no territorial changes although both sides suffered heavy casualties.

In October 1973, the fourth war between Israel and Egypt began with a surprise attack on Israel on both the Syrian and the Egyptian fronts. When the ceasefire agreement was signed on the Egyptian front, Israel occupied 1,600 sq km west of the Suez Canal within Egypt, whereas Egypt held about 1,100 sq km of Sinai previously held by Israel. There is general agreement among most researchers that the outcome of the 1973 war, which ended with no clear-cut victory, enabled Egypt and Israel to realise their parity thus encouraging their agreement to end the state of war (Sobel, 1980: 7; Cantory, 1984: 173; Liska, 1982: 134; Mansur, 1985: 37).

The Israel-Egypt war termination process took place between 1973 and 1982 when the peace treaty between the two countries was implemented. The first stage in this process was a series of military agreements made between the two parties. In March 1974 Israel withdrew to the Mitla and Gidi passes, and in 1975, Sadat opened the Suez Canal to Israeli shipping. In the Interim Agreement of 1975, Israel withdrew from large areas of Sinai and UN peacekeeping troops (UNEF II) were deployed throughout a wide buffer zone. The UN peace-keeping forces in Sinai consisted of 4,660 soldiers assigned with the task of controlling and supervising the

cease-fire agreement and regular check-ups on the size and type of forces and weapons in the demilitarised zones.⁴

Sadat's visit to Israel in 1977 was a major breakthrough in the Jewish-Arab conflict and the 1978 Camp David Accords set the framework for peace. The Accords outlined provisions for full Israeli withdrawal from Sinai, the level of Egyptian force deployments there after withdrawal, and the right of free passage for Israeli ships through the Suez Canal. It also specified that full normal relations were to be established between the states. The Peace Treaty between Israel and Egypt was signed on 26 March 1979. By January 1980, Israel had withdrawn from two-thirds of the Sinai Peninsula, and the final eastern part of Sinai was returned to Egypt in April 1982 (Figure 3).

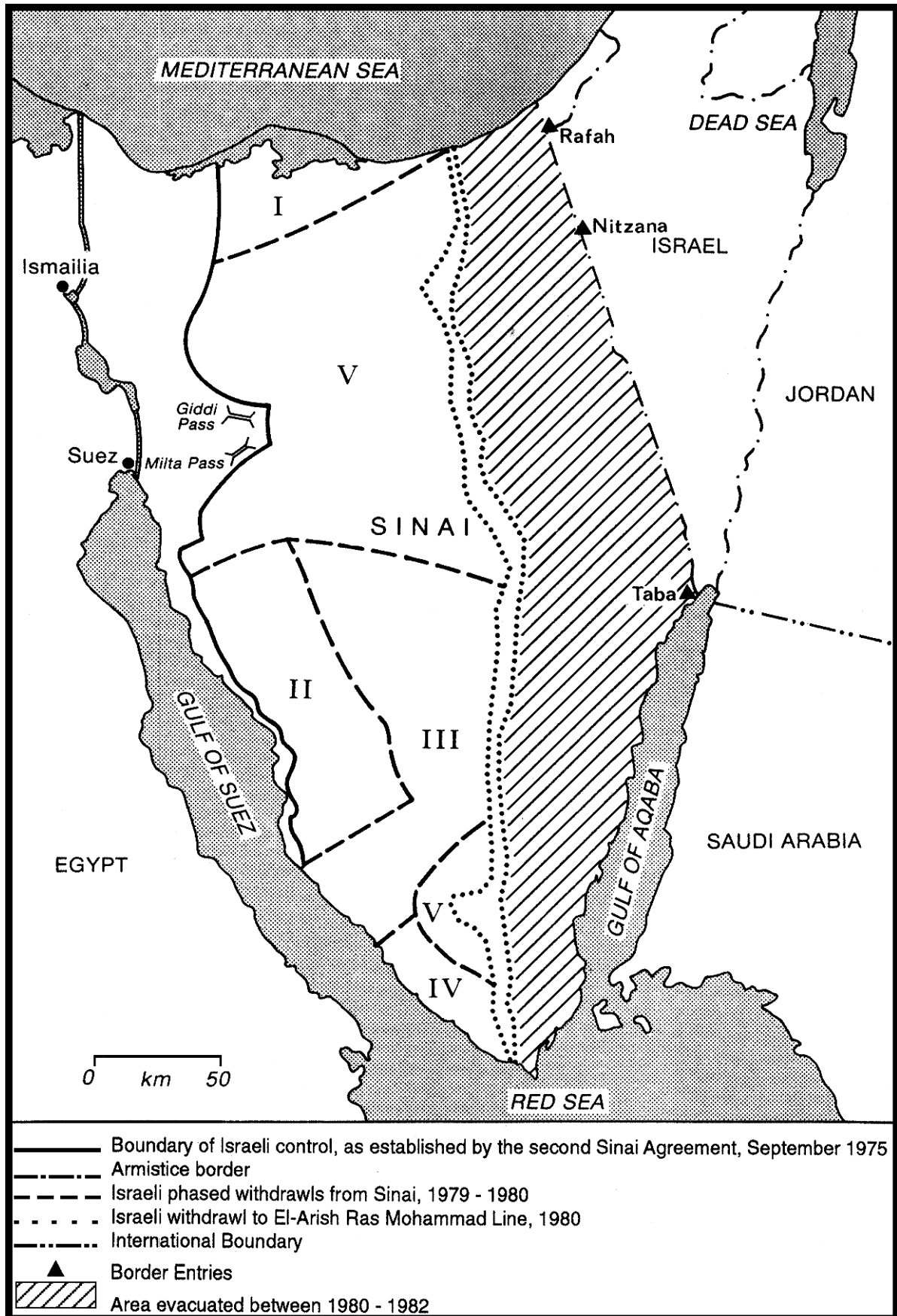
Article I of the Peace Treaty states that Israel would withdraw her military and civilian personnel behind the international boundaries between Egypt and mandated Palestine. Article II stipulated that the parties would recognise this boundary as inviolable but without prejudice to the issue of the status of the Gaza Strip which was to remain under Israeli control, at least until the implementation of the Palestinian Autonomy agreed to by the parties in the Camp David Accords. Article IV of the Peace Treaty stated that, in order to provide maximal security for both parties, UN personnel were to be stationed in specific areas in Sinai and zones of limited military presence were to be defined on both the Israeli and Egyptian sides of the border. Because of Soviet opposition to the deployment of UN forces in Sinai, an American supported Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) was established to fulfil the mission. Egypt could maintain very limited forces in Sinai, and the MFO, mainly based on American units, was stationed in Sinai to monitor the peace.

Sinai was divided into three zones: Zone C ran parallel to the international border and the Egyptian share of the Gulf of Aqaba, and no Egyptian forces were to be stationed there (Figure 3); the central zone, B, was to contain no more than 4,000 lightly armed Egyptian troops; in the westernmost zone, A, Egypt was limited to 22,000 armed men and specified numbers of weapons and armoured vehicles. As a reciprocal measure a narrow zone D, extending approximately 5km was established on the Israeli side of the international boundary in which Israel was to have a limited force of 4,000 personnel, with further limitations on the number and nature of their weapons and vehicles (James, 1981: 225; Sobel, 1980: 257). The Multi-National Force and Observers comprising 2,600 military personnel from ten countries were to supervise the implementation of the demilitarisation arrangement in Sinai and free navigation through the Straits of Tiran.

The Treaty also called for the establishment of normal relationships between the two states including full recognition, full diplomatic economic and cultural relations, the termination of both economic boycotts and discriminatory barriers to the free movement of people and goods. Adjustment of future disputes arising out of the application or interpretation of the Treaty were to be resolved by negotiations and conciliation or be submitted to arbitration. The Taba dispute, for instance, was resolved in this manner (see section 5).

⁴ The deployment of UN peacekeeping forces after the 1973 War was established by UN Security Council Resolutions 340 and 341 on 25 October 1973.

Figure 3: Demilitarisation Arrangements for the Sinai



The current realisation of the Peace Treaty has disappointed both sides. Egypt has been disappointed with Israel's refusal to implement the Camp David Accord articles which deal with autonomy for the Palestinians, whilst Israel complains about the non-implementation of the normalisation articles of the Peace Treaty, which deal with cultural and economic ties, trade and tourism. The peace between Israel and Egypt has therefore been colloquially termed a 'Cold Peace'. However, the two sides have adhered to the letter if not the spirit of the Treaty as the solution to the Taba dispute clearly demonstrates.

5. The Taba Dispute

Following the Camp David Accords, Egypt and Israel began to demarcate their boundary. During the demarcation of the boundary in 1981, fifteen points of dispute between the parties were identified. For most of them, the differences between the two sides ranged from a few metres to one sq km. The major controversy concerned the Taba area, a small area of about 900 square metres (0.9 dunam) south of Eilat which included a hotel and a resort village.

Ras Taba is located on the coastline of the Gulf of Aqaba about 10km southwest of Eilat. Part of Taba extends over the dry delta of Wadi Taba. The controversy between Israel and Egypt focused on the exact location of the international boundary in the northeastern part of Wadi Taba. Israel claimed that the eastern side of Wadi Taba and the northeastern Cape Taba (Ras Taba or Ras-El Massri) were located on the Israeli side of the border whereas Egypt claimed it belonged to Egypt (see Figures 4 and 5). Both official British maps and Israeli maps demarcated the border in this sector according to the Egyptian claims. Taba's total area, less than one sq km, at the time contained a luxury hotel, the Avia Sonesta, a vacation village (Rafi Nelson's village) as well as a public beach (Figure 4). Though Taba is extremely beautiful and contains an outstanding beach, the area has no strategic value, and it is difficult to understand why it became a matter of such deep controversy between the two countries. A secondary area of dispute between the two countries is located near Eilat and concerns Ras-el-Naqeb - a strategically important pass between Sinai and Eilat.

It is important to note that the 500 metres of Taba's beach were virtually undeveloped until the early 1980s when the Avia Sonesta Hotel was constructed. The resort village had operated since 1970, but the Avia Sonesta Hotel was built after the Camp David Accords were completed since Israel had adopted the view that the final demarcation of the border would leave Sonesta within Israeli territory.

As early as 1982 Egypt had suggested that Israel could have a long-term lease of the Sonesta and the resort village as long as Egyptian sovereignty over the territory were recognised by Israel. Israel disagreed. Israel insisted that any settlement in the Taba region would have to make it possible for Israeli citizens to have free access to the Taba resort area without passports. The Egyptians refused, stressing their rights to sovereignty over the area. As late as 1985 Egypt was still offering special arrangements for Israeli citizens entering Taba but Israel refused. The USA pushed both Israel and Egypt into reaching a compromise over Taba to avoid any arbitration which might leave one of the sides unsatisfied and thus adversely affect the already tense Israeli-Egyptian relationship. One of the compromise proposals offered Israel half of the management of the hotel; Israeli citizens would be able to enter Taba without visas, but Egyptian sovereignty over the area would be fully acknowledged by Israel. In September 1986 Israel and Egypt agreed to arbitration over Taba, according to Articles VII and VIII of the

Figure 4: An Aerial View of Taba

Source: Israeli Government Press Office

Peace Treaty which called for solving disputes either by conciliation or arbitration if negotiations did not succeed in bridging the gap between the sides to the dispute (Lapidot, 1986).

The exact location of the border stone No.91, referred to as the 'Parker Stone' stood at the heart of the Taba dispute. To understand the dispute one has to turn to the original 1906 agreement. Article I of the Agreement concerned the location of the Administrative Separating Line (between the *Vilayet* of Hejaz and the Governorate of Jerusalem and the Sinai Peninsula) as shown on a map attached to this Agreement. Here the line begins at a point in Ras Taba, on the western shore of the Gulf of Aqaba and follows along the eastern ridge overlooking Wadi Taba to the top of Jebel Fort; from here the separating line continues in a straight line "*..Article III provided for boundary pillars to be erected, in the presence of the Joint Commission, at intervisible points along the separating line..*". In reality the border was demarcated provisionally by telegraph poles which were replaced later by permanent masonry pillars. Both Israel and Egypt agree on the exact site of the border pillar No.90 but were at odds over the location of pillar No.91. It seems that the British had not attributed any importance to the location of the border east or west of Ras Taba and the meeting point of the border line with the coastline had not been demarcated on the beach itself which was susceptible to inundation which might have endangered the border poles. In such cases when a boundary had to cross a river or wadi, the habit was to locate the border stones at a nearby site (Brawer, 1988: 169).

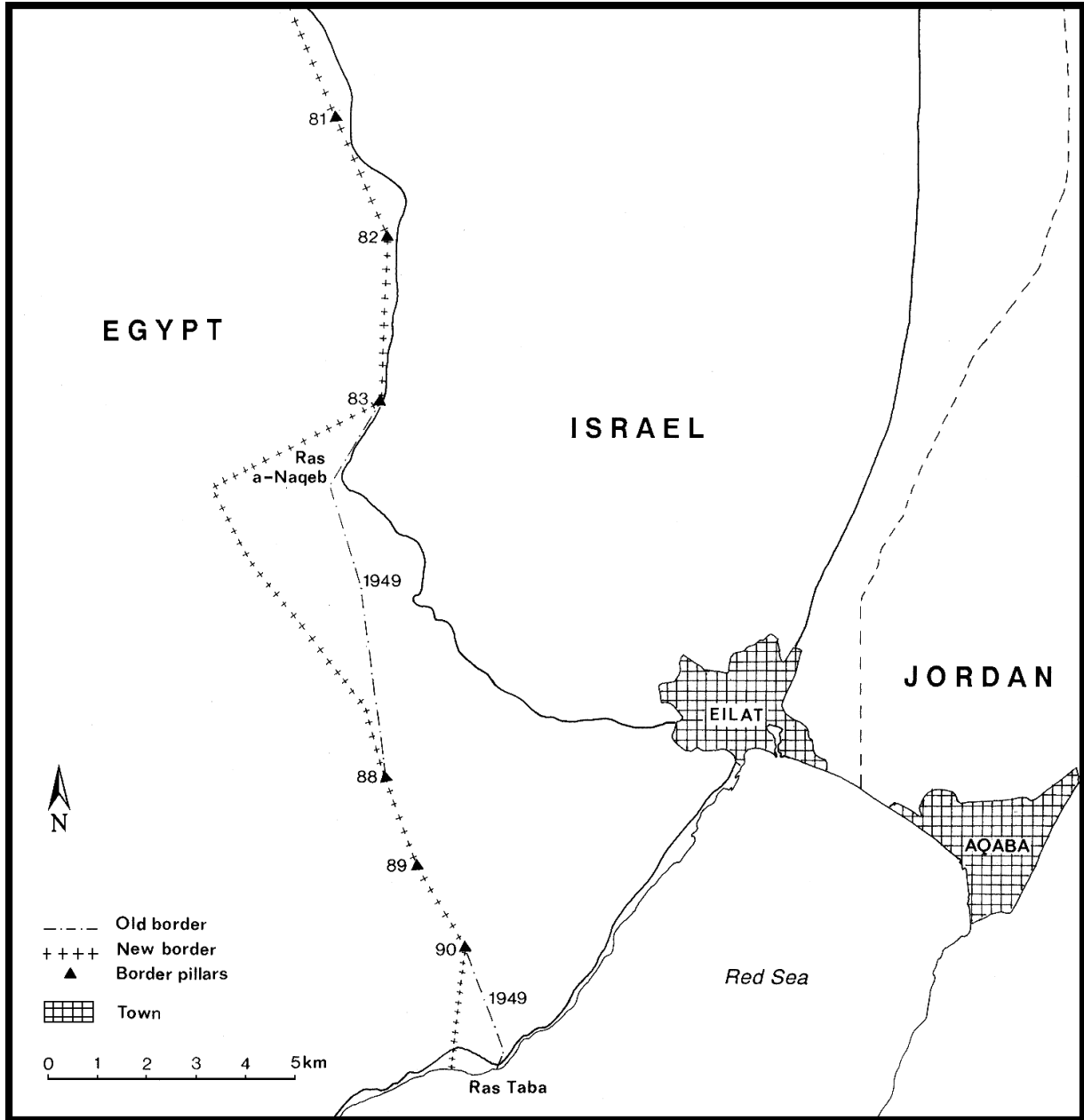
According to the Israeli position, the No.91 border stone was located on a rock near the mouth of Wadi Taba and the sea while the Egyptians claimed that the No.91 'Parker Stone' was at a further distance from the beach some 400 metres northeast of the mouth of Wadi Taba. The strongest Israeli claim in relation to the position of the 'Parker Stone' was that it was located in the wrong place because it was not intervisible to border post No.90, in contravention of the instructions of the 1906 Agreement. Thus, claimed Israel, the photos and maps which showed the exact location of the 'Parker Stone' in 1906 and 1949 did not provide any legal proof of the position of the border since pillar No.91 had never been located in its appropriate place and the arbitrators should rectify this erroneous decision (Dinstein, 1989). The 'Parker Stone' itself had disappeared after 1967 when Israel broadened the road from Eilat into Sinai.

In any case, there are many differences between British and Turkish maps in reference to the exact citing of the border and the descriptions of the demarcated border are also full of contradictions. In addition, the maintenance of the border stones also left a lot to be desired according to Brawer (1988) who, when he surveyed the border stones in 1956, found that many of the stones had disappeared and that the last time they had been maintained by the British was in the mid-1920s. Thus, the maps, photos, historical evidence and in situ evidence were contradictory and could not provide a clear-cut solution to the locational dispute between Israel and Egypt.

Israel and Egypt agreed in 1986 to take their dispute on the demarcation of the border to international arbitration and a tribunal of five members was established. In 1988 the arbitration tribunal resolved the dispute by deciding in favour of Egypt in her claims to the exact location of 10 of the border marker stones (including Ras Taba and Ras el-Naqeb) whereas Israeli claims were favoured in relation to 4 border stones (*International Legal materials*, 1988: 1427, 1432-33). The arbitrators' main reason for accepting the Egyptian position was that the only recognised international border between Egypt and Israel was the *de facto* boundary as demarcated in the 1906 Agreement. The arbitrators agreed that although the principle of intervisibility had not been observed for a number of points along the border (including Taba) it was acceptable as a border which was legally binding upon both Britain and the Turkish Empires (Dinstein, 1989). Moreover, the representatives of the Turkish authorities who had been present during the process of border demarcation had never protested about the *de facto* siting of the border telegraph poles. The arbitrators accepted the Wade Report as an appropriate explanation of the reasons for the deviation between the *de facto* demarcated border and the boundary as drawn in the supplement to the 1906 Agreement.

The basic principle which guided the arbitrators was the need to preserve the stability and continuity of international borders. This principle, confirmed by the International Court of Justice, requires that boundary markers, long accepted as such by the states concerned (Egypt and Israel), should be respected by both sides and not be open to challenge indefinitely on the basis of any error in their original demarcation. Israel had revealed consistency over the past decades in its presentation of its international border in maps based on the borders drawn by the British surveyors. Israel and Egypt accepted the arbitration's decisions and Israel withdrew from Taba. Handsome compensation was paid to the owners of the hotel and resort village, and Taba has since become one of the gates from Israel into Sinai although Israelis who wish to visit Sinai now need passports and visas, though visas are not needed to visit Taba.

Figure 5: Taba and the Newly Demarcated Border Between Egypt and Israel



The question as to why the tiny enclave of Taba became a core of dispute at all, however, remains. The main reason was Egyptian insistence that every centimetre of Egyptian territory must be returned to Egypt whereas Israel perceived this attitude as contrasting the spirit of peace, especially as the contested territory was tiny and held absolutely no strategic value. The second factor which had impact on the Taba issue was the deterioration of Israeli-Egypt relations. Egypt blamed Israel for not fulfilling all the articles in the Camp David Accords, especially those concerning autonomy for the Palestinians. Israel was very disappointed with the 'Cold Peace' with Egypt, especially the lack of Egyptian tourism, mutual trade, and mutual cultural exchange; and the murder of several Israeli tourists in Sinai had aggravated the already tense relations between the two states.

The psychological barrier of the Israeli-Egyptian conflict which had been visibly removed by Sadat's visit to Jerusalem returned to overshadow relations.

6. Other outcomes of the Israeli-Egyptian Peace Treaty

One of the outcomes of the Egypt-Israel boundary demarcation was the conversion of Rafah into a partitioned town at the gates of the desert. It is important to remember that Rafah had grown for 34 years under Egyptian administration without any consideration being taken of the old 1906 international boundary. In 1982 the new barbed-wire fence divided the city and its population into two. Families were separated, property was divided and many houses and orchards were cut across and destroyed by the new boundary, bulldozed, for security reasons, to form a belt on both sides of the border (Porteous, 1988: 9). In Canada Camp, which, unfortunately was located exactly in the border, all those Palestinian refugees who wished to cross the border and join their families in the Gaza Strip were allowed to do so. Thousands actually crossed from Egyptian to Israeli-held territory.

Another feature of the new border was its new role as an open border with three border points of entry - Taba, Nitzana and Rafah (see Figure 2). All the equipment was installed at the necessary border gate: custom and immigration posts, border police, check-up posts, etc; but the normalisation of relations between Israel and Egypt left the above border installations with limited functions. Trade (except for the Israeli purchase of Egyptian oil) remained at a very low level. Tourist activity was one-sided between 1980-1987 with 233,000 Israeli tourists visiting Egypt as compared to 14,000 Egyptian tourists who visited Israel (Meital, 1990: 39). In 1990 the number of Egyptian tourists visiting Israel was only 3,300 growing to 8,100 in 1992 and to 9,800 in 1993. Israel imports from Egypt amounted to US\$7.3 million in 1992 to US\$19.5 million in 1993 whereas Israeli exports to Egypt were lower: US\$6.7 million in 1992 and US\$14.8 million in 1994.

7. Conclusions

The international border between Israel and Egypt has been evolving for almost a century. Its delimitation was an outcome of imperial negotiations between the Ottoman and the British Empires and its original function was to serve British geopolitical interests. After Israel and Egypt became independent sovereign states the border between them became an armistice boundary line, which separated two enemy states.

The border zone became a military zone or, at best, a frontier zone with very little or no civilian activities. The international boundary was crossed three times by the Israeli army on the way to occupying the Sinai Peninsula. The last war fought between Israel and Egypt was the 1973 War which ended in a stalemate and put Israel and Egypt on the path towards peace. The final stage of the peace negotiations converted the international boundary into a peaceful border mutually acknowledged by both states.

There was no significant increase in the warmth of relationships between Israel and Egypt at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s. There was hope that the relationship between two countries will improve as a result of the Oslo Accord with the PLO and the Treaty of Peace with Jordan. But in the early months of 1995 the relations between Israel and Egypt were rapidly deteriorating. Possible reasons for that include the following overt and covert factors:-

Firstly, Egypt asked for changes, cuts and even removal of the MFO in Sinai - a step which Israel, with fresh memories of the events which led to the 1967 War, immediately protested. Egypt explained that the only reason for its request was her dire financial situation, which does not enable her to pay for the maintenance of the MFO.

A serious current conflict between Israel and Egypt also revolves around Egypt's international pressure on Israel to sign the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) which Israel refuses to sign at present. Egypt declared that she is not going to sign the NPT until Israel does; this issue has brought the relationship between the two states to a new level of tension.

Finally, Egypt's activities to 'cool-off' the new relationship between Israel and other Arab and Moslem states in the Gulf region and the Maghreb are highly resented by Israel. Some specialists believe that Egyptian policy is motivated by fear for her status as hegemon and leader of the Arab world while others consider Egyptian steps as merely measures to press Israel to submit to Egyptian demands.

The growing tensions between the two countries are currently dealt with by top government officials, and the differences will most likely be resolved in political and diplomatic negotiations and not by war.

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