
ISRAEL
EGYPT

FROM RAFAH TO TABA

AN ADVENTURE THROUGH ISRAEL'S WILD WEST ALONG THE ISRAEL-EGYPT BORDER

BY ARIEH O'SULLIVAN

T.E. LAWRENCE ONCE DESCRIBED THE ISOLATED, VOLATILE, CORRUPT, BEAUTIFUL AND SEDUCTIVE BADLANDS THAT STRETCH FROM THE GAZA STRIP TO THE GULF OF AQABA AS A "NAKED DESERT, UNDER THE INDIFFERENT HEAVEN."

MOMENT CORRESPONDENT ARIEH O'SULLIVAN, ACCOMPANIED ONLY BY HIS 22-YEAR-OLD JEEP, "GENERAL LEE," TRAVELS ISRAEL'S 150-MILE BORDER WITH EGYPT, MEETING ANACHRONISTIC ZIONISTS, POSSESSED ARCHAEOLOGISTS AND STUNNING INFANTRYWOMEN.

A small rise marks the spot where Israel, Egypt and Hamas-controlled Gaza meet, seven miles from the Mediterranean. This is where the infamous patrol road between Gaza and Egypt, known as the Philadelphi Corridor, ends and the border between Israel and Egypt begins. The actual border crossing between Israel and Gaza is called Kerem Shalom, after the kibbutz that sits a mile and a half away. Even as I gaze beyond the border over the hilly desert brush that is Egypt, workers are feverishly extending Israel's sturdy fence and 20-foot cement wall.

Nearby is the squalid Hamas-controlled border town Rafah, home to the only (official) border crossing between Egypt and Gaza. If one could see through the cement border barrier one would view cinderblock homes, some still damaged as a result of Israel's strike against Hamas in January 2009, tin huts and a no-man's-land about as wide as a football field separating the Palestinian crossing point from its Egyptian counterpart on the other side of the double-fenced border. Not visible is the network of tunnels that smuggle goods and people in and out of Gaza, their entrances usually obscured by huts.

To my left stretches the Israel-Egypt border. Tourists cannot access the Egyptian side, open only to vigilant Egyptian police, Bedouin and contingents from the Multinational Force Observers who monitor the 1979 peace treaty. They travel along an American-built superhighway that parallels the border and cuts straight through mountains and valleys.

On the Israeli side of the border is Highway 10, paved with asphalt in the wake of the 1982 pullout from Sinai. The road is winding and narrow, thanks to a very stubborn Nature and Parks Authority ranger, who single-handedly prevented the Israel Road Works department from greatly disturbing the natural terrain. Although there are a few civilian communities, the Israeli side of the border is also a closed military zone. Israel only opens the highway to civilians during the holidays of Sukkot and Passover, and even then, travelers are required to coordinate with the military.

It is at the beginning of Highway 10 that I set out on my journey. Special permit in

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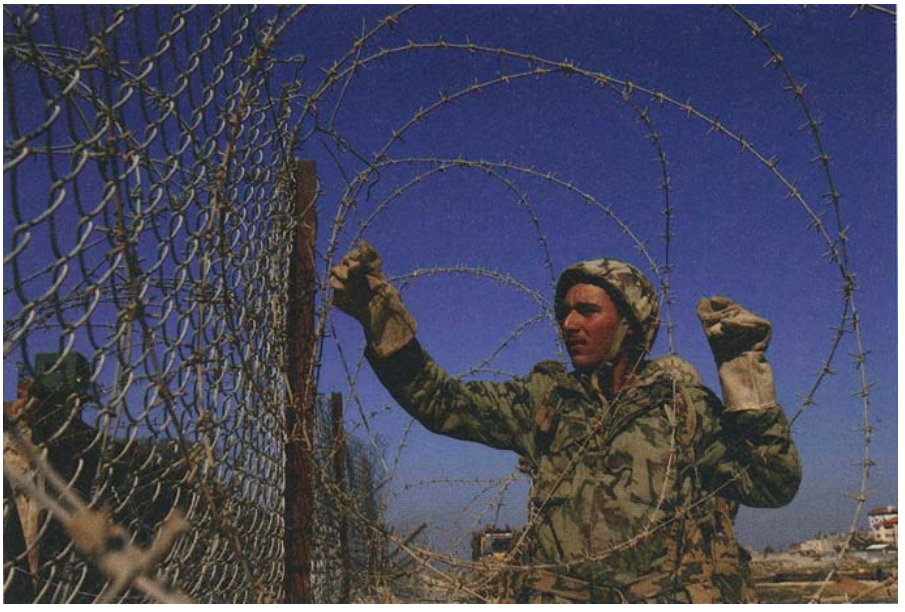


An Egyptian soldier places barbed wire in a breached section of the border wall between Egypt and Gaza.

AP PHOTO/EYAD BABA

hand, I approach an army roadblock. A soldier who looks like he just woke up from an afternoon nap appears and raises the barrier. He hands me a piece of paper with a phone number on it.

"If anything happens, an incident or whatever, call this number," he mumbles.

"Don't you want to see my permit?" I eagerly ask.

He shakes his head "no" and waves me through.

The border is punctuated by 91 mammoth cement markers, most accompanied by guard towers the Egyptians erected to ensure that the border does not move, as it has so many times in the past. It was first demarcated in 1840 so that the Egyptian warlord Muhammad Ali, the Pasha of Egypt, knew where Ottoman rule ended and his lands began. In 1906, the British, who by then controlled Egypt, pushed the border north. According to Moshe Brower, a renowned Israeli geographer, a joint Turkish-British delegation erected telegraph poles every mile or two. "The poles didn't stay for a long time because the Bedouin took them. They later returned to demarcate the points with stone piles."

In 1912, the British group co-led by T.E. Lawrence, known to movie-going romantics as Lawrence of Arabia, surveyed the border once again and took the liberty of moving it more northward still. The border's location became insignificant following World War I, as the British ruled on both sides, but it became important again when the armistice line was drawn in 1949 and then again when Israel and Egypt signed a peace treaty in 1979. According to Brower, then–Prime Minister Menachem Begin mistakenly agreed to borders based on a British Mandate–era map that included the "adjustments" since 1906. Only when he returned from Camp David did Begin realize that the 1949 border was north of the 1906 one.

Eighteen miles down the road I come to the moshav Kadesh Barnea. Two teenage girls are smoking outside a grocery store, waiting for it to open. A faded notice is tacked onto a bulletin board: "Beware of stray camels. Report all strays."

The communal settlement dates back to the heyday of Israel's post-1967 expansion into the Sinai wilderness. The founders settled at Kadesh Barnea, the site at which Moses is said to have struck a stone that gushed water, also known as Abu Ageila. The original settlers were the first to be "relocated" after the peace treaty with Egypt. They were placed here and their village was renamed Nitzane Sinai (the sprouts of Sinai), but the name never stuck; despite the road signs, everyone refers to the 280-person settlement by its original name.

I stop to talk with Charles Krauer, who immigrated from France and coaxes sweet cherry tomatoes and vegetables from the desert with salty, brackish water drawn from deep wells. Sturdily built, with a mop of unkempt hair on his head, Krauer tells me the salty water makes the fruits and vegetables sweeter.

"I feel I have a lot of space and tranquility out here," he says. "We aren't chasing after the clock. The security situation is relatively good, and we're raising our kids with a sense they can go around freely."

He warns me that farther along Highway 10, the border is open, although a barrier wall is being built to prevent infiltrators. And sure enough, as I drive southeast, the sturdy fence turns into rickety barbed-wire. Just past Kadesh, shifting sand dunes start to overrun it, and it disappears altogether.

My next destination is Ezuz, the most isolated settlement in Israel. Located about a third of the way between the Mediterranean Sea and Eilat, it looks as if someone with a cruel sense of humor mixed Santa Fe with a Mississippi trailer park: homemade adobe houses attached to old buses and pergolas fashioned out of palm tree trunks covered in sheets of tin.

I spent a month living here on reserve duty 21 years ago, when the first pioneers were putting down roots. Built near Beerotayim, an oasis the Turks used to fill their locomotive steam engines, Ezuz is an anachronistic throwback to the days of ascetic Zionism, inhabited by people with an ecological bent.

"Am I a Zionist? I don't know," says Ofer Har-Tuv, 49, the proprietor of the Beerotayim Inn. "I don't get up each morning thinking I am stopping the Egyptians with my presence here. I'm not crying out like Ben-Gurion, who called on everyone to help make the desert bloom. Quite the contrary. I say let's be the green lungs of the country and get back to core values."

Sipping a Heineken chilled by a solar-powered refrigerator, Har-Tuv considers the "nakedness" of T.E. Lawrence's desert. It is twilight. He wears a turban and baggy linens.

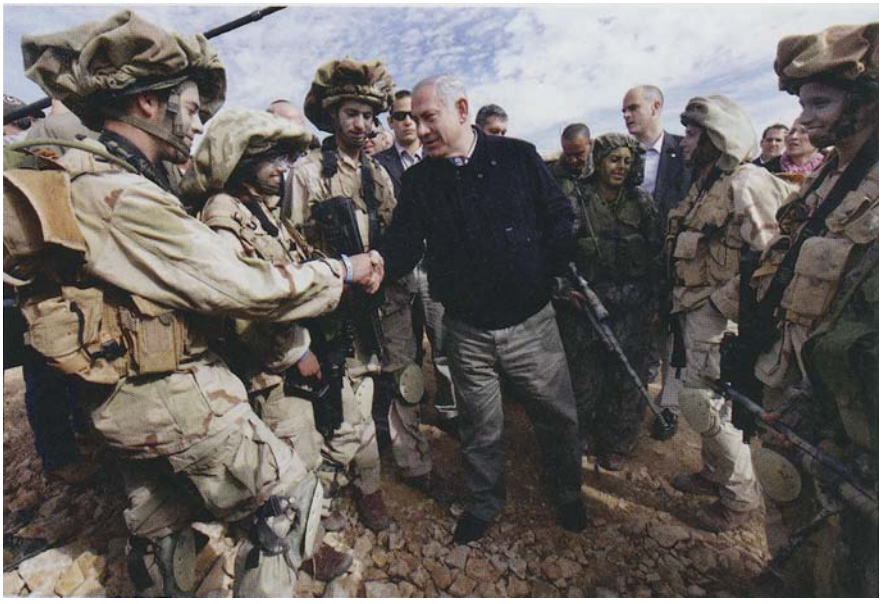
"The desert lays life bare before us," he tells me. "There are no trees to hide the landscape, which is a metaphor for our relationship with the earth, the land, our neighbors and spouses. You have to be special to live here. This place brings you to the extreme. The Negev is still wild. Israeli bureaucracy is weak here. I don't even have a permit to link up to the electric grid yet! Twenty years. But I don't care."

Har-Tuv and most of the other original founders were "Sinai Youth" who spent the tail end of Israel's presence in the Sinai in the military and on the beaches. He started leading donkey and camel tours, which led him to build his expansive handmade adobe inn.

When night falls, the entire settlement is lit by kerosene lanterns. New Age music fills the air and camels grunt in their corral. The inn, Khan Beerotayim, was a magnet for independent youth. When Har-Tuv came here there was nothing, and his guiding philosophy was to keep it that way.

"This is the Sinai of the Negev," Har-Tuv explains. "People tell me it would be perfect if only we had the sea next to us. But then we'd be like Eilat. We are not looking for Jacuzzis and luxury. We see the stars at night. My mobile phone doesn't even work here. Everything is solar powered and we recycle."

Bedouin guides often dump their flocks of weary African refugees on the outskirts of Ezuz and disappear. According to government figures and refugee rights organizations, some 20,000 people seeking refuge or work in Israel crossed the border by this route in the past three years. All are desperate to reach freedom inside Israel, but the unlucky are shot by Egyptian border guards. Bombarded by so many people, the Israeli government decided that infiltrations were a national threat with "security and demographic consequences." Interior Minister Eli Yishai from the ultra-Orthodox Shas Party labeled the situation a "social time bomb" and spearheaded attempts to deport asylum seekers. The cabinet approved nearly $400 million to erect a sophisticated barrier of fences, patrol roads and surveillance devices along the frontier.



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is briefed about the construction of Israel's new border fence

A handful of Eritrean refugees found their way to the inn one night, Har-Tuv recalls. "Some Dutch tourists staying at the inn woke up to see the Eritreans gathered around the fire, huddling and scared. They comforted them," he says. He called the army patrol to pick them up. "The soldiers arrived and they soon joined them around the fire and we were all together here until the afternoon. It was a surreal sight."

Ezuz, just a few hundred feet from the border, is dark and fenceless, unlike most Israeli settlements, which have towers, perimeter barriers and bright lights that broadcast a visible claim to the land. "The authorities are pressuring us to put up a fence and give us lighting, but we haven't caved in. We want to see the stars at night," says Har-Tuv. "And even if that big security fence along the border reaches us, do you think it will stop the human trafficking or the smuggling?

"Don't let the beauty of the desert deceive you," Har-Tuv continues. "It's the Wild West out here."

Setting out from Beerotayim in the morning, I follow the old railroad line laid by the Turks early on in World War I, now just a rampart—the valuable ties and iron rails long ago lifted by Bedouin. After a few miles, it meets Highway 10 and continues over the border toward the springs of the real Kadesh Barnea. A quick glance at a nearby army checkpoint tells me I can't just slip past the rickety fence across the border.

I enter the elevated region of the border, where monolithic mountains begin

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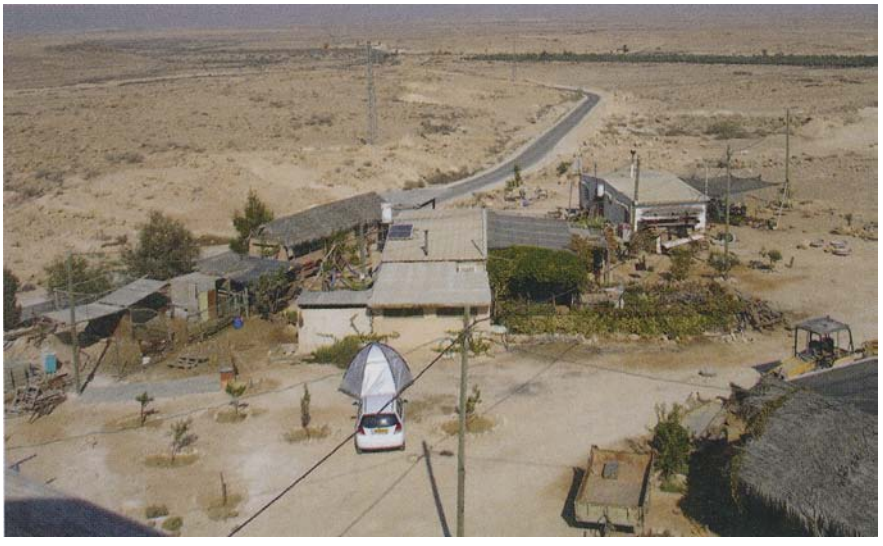

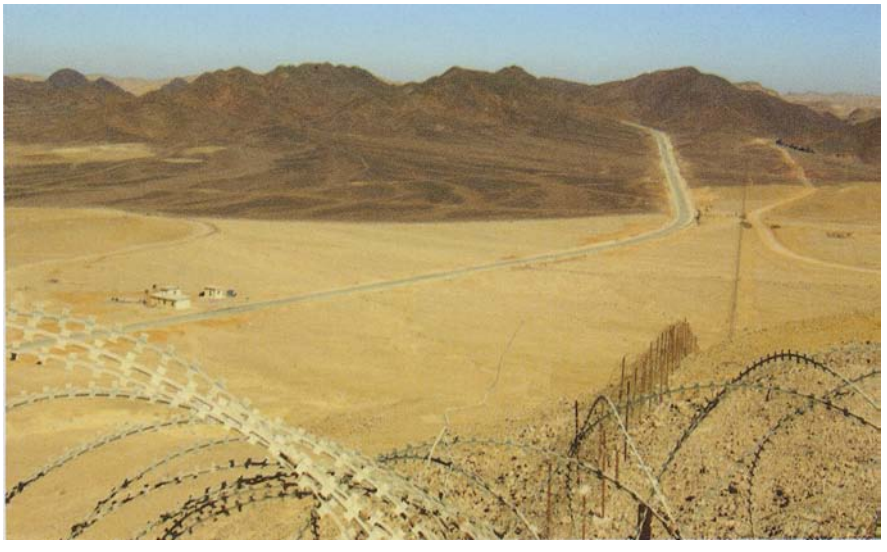

The Israel-Egypt border as viewed from Eilat (top). Ezuz, a settlement just north of the border (bottom)

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marking the horizon. This is the main route for smuggling drugs, prostitutes, illegal workers and weapons into Israel from the Sinai. Israeli soldiers led by Bedouin trackers wage a sort of chess game against the Sinai Bedouin, both intimately familiar with the terrain, as each tries to outwit the other.

I halt at the roadblock at Jabal a-Rahma. From the shade tent atop the hill appears an absolutely gorgeous woman, reminding me that the Sinai is patrolled by *Carcal*—the only mixed-gender combat unit in the country. She sashays toward me in a slow motion reminiscent of Ursula Andrews emerging from the sea in the first James Bond film, *Dr. No*, except instead of a bikini she sports baggy army trousers. Her long blonde hair is tied up in braids and wrapped around her head, an M-16 assault rifle slung nonchalantly over her shoulder, weighed down by webbing full of ammunition.

She comes up to my window, taking a quick glance right and left, and says: "Do you want to do something cool?"

I lick my lips. "Well, yeah."

She sticks her hand inside my window, reaches over my lap and grabs the map in the passenger seat.

"Do you have a weapon?" she asks.

"Ah've got this here knife on me," I say.

"I hope you don't stab anybody with it," she laughs. "Turn east at road marker 159. There's a well there where you can go swimming. It's so, like, cool. And what a cute Jeep you have."

A quarter-hour later, I stand before a black hole about 3,000 bouncy feet from the highway. A rope descends into darkness. I climb down and enter a cool cavern. My shouts echo shrilly as I plunge into the freezing waters, marveling at how it is still full after the summer, before the rains. It is all the more thrilling because this well is a reminder of the ancient peoples who inhabited this region and left their mark thousands of years ago.

Refreshed after my desert swim, I point General Lee toward Mount Harif, which at 3,000 feet above sea level is one of the highest peaks around here. The view from its summit is endless blue mountain ranges, seemingly pasted in a collage.

From here, the road takes me into perilous badlands—a main smuggling route. Only occasional iron posts remind me that there used to be a border fence here. Bedouin or storms have long ago carried it off. Soldiers who patrol this region zealously go after infiltrators smuggling weapons, terrorists or drugs, but have different rules when it comes to civilian refugees.

"You don't open fire at these guys," one lieutenant colonel who serves in the area tells me. "That is forbidden. It is true that they are violating Israel's sovereignty, but you aren't going to shoot at someone who is only coming to look for a job."

My next stop is Mount Sinai. Not *that* Mount Sinai. The other one, Karkom, which looms in the distance. An Italian archaeologist named Emmanuel Anati

has insisted for years that this is the real Mount Sinai, and this past summer the Vatican accepted his findings.

I turn off the highway at the army road marked "Gonga" and head toward Karkom. This huge and mysterious mountain can only be reached by foot or four-wheel drive. I push old General Lee through steep-banks, dry riverbeds, hairpin turns and axle-swallowing ruts along the treacherous path. Along the way I pass a rusted hulk of what looks like a World War II truck. It is apparently one of the vehicles the Negev Brigade abandoned on their push to the Red Sea in 1949. The going is slow, about seven-and-a-half winding miles in an hour.

Much has been written about this flat-topped mountain's fascinating excavations over the years, but few have actually visited the site. This is because it is in the middle of an IDF firing zone and closed to the public, which is only allowed access twice a year, during Sukkot and Passover. But even then it is pretty empty. Most Israelis have never seen Mount Karkom and know it only from legend or hearsay. A pilot friend has told me he'd "bombed the hell out of it hundreds of times," but he'd never actually been there. "Better be careful," he said. "The air force has used that place as a practice zone for decades."

Indeed, traveling along the wadi I am surrounded by craters, some with fins of unexploded bombs sticking out. There are also giant Atlantic pistachio and acacia trees. As I get closer to "the real Mount Sinai," I am reminded that the Israelites in the desert built the Ark of the Covenant from the wood of these trees.

When I finally arrive, an Israel Nature and Parks Authority ranger rushes out of her lean-to, offering me warm bottled water. She is obviously glad to see and speak to another human being. She'd been dropped off two weeks ago to guard the mountain during the limited time it was open.

From the traces of ancient civilizations uncovered here, it is clear that Mount Karkom is sacred. But Mount Sinai?

"There's nothing here," she exclaims. "Not even Bedouin. There are no water wells for miles. The only people here are Professor Anati and his volunteers," she says, pointing at a collection of tents at the foot of the mountain. I can't believe my luck. The jovial 80-year-old Italian has been researching the mountain ever since he stumbled upon it by foot as a young student in 1954. He has led expeditions of archaeologists and volunteers here for the past 30 years.

The mountain's main attraction is its petroglyphs, or rock drawings. From the traces of ancient civilizations uncovered here, it is clear that Mount Karkom is sacred. But Mount Sinai?

"Oh, this is Mount Sinai. There's no doubt about that," says Anati, running his fingers through his thick gray hair. "My archaeological discoveries here and my close reading of the Bible leave me with no doubt that this is the real Mount Sinai."

A self-proclaimed atheist, he's aware of the irony of his work. "I'm not saying that Moses existed," he says, pouring both of us a shot of Cutty Sark. "I'm just saying that if he did, then this was where Mount Sinai would be."

I am not sure the Egyptians would be pleased to hear this, since there is a booming pilgrim trade to Mount Sinai, a.k.a. Jabel Mussa, 150 miles to the south.

"Well, Mount Sinai has crossed the border," Anati chuckles. "Make that your headline."

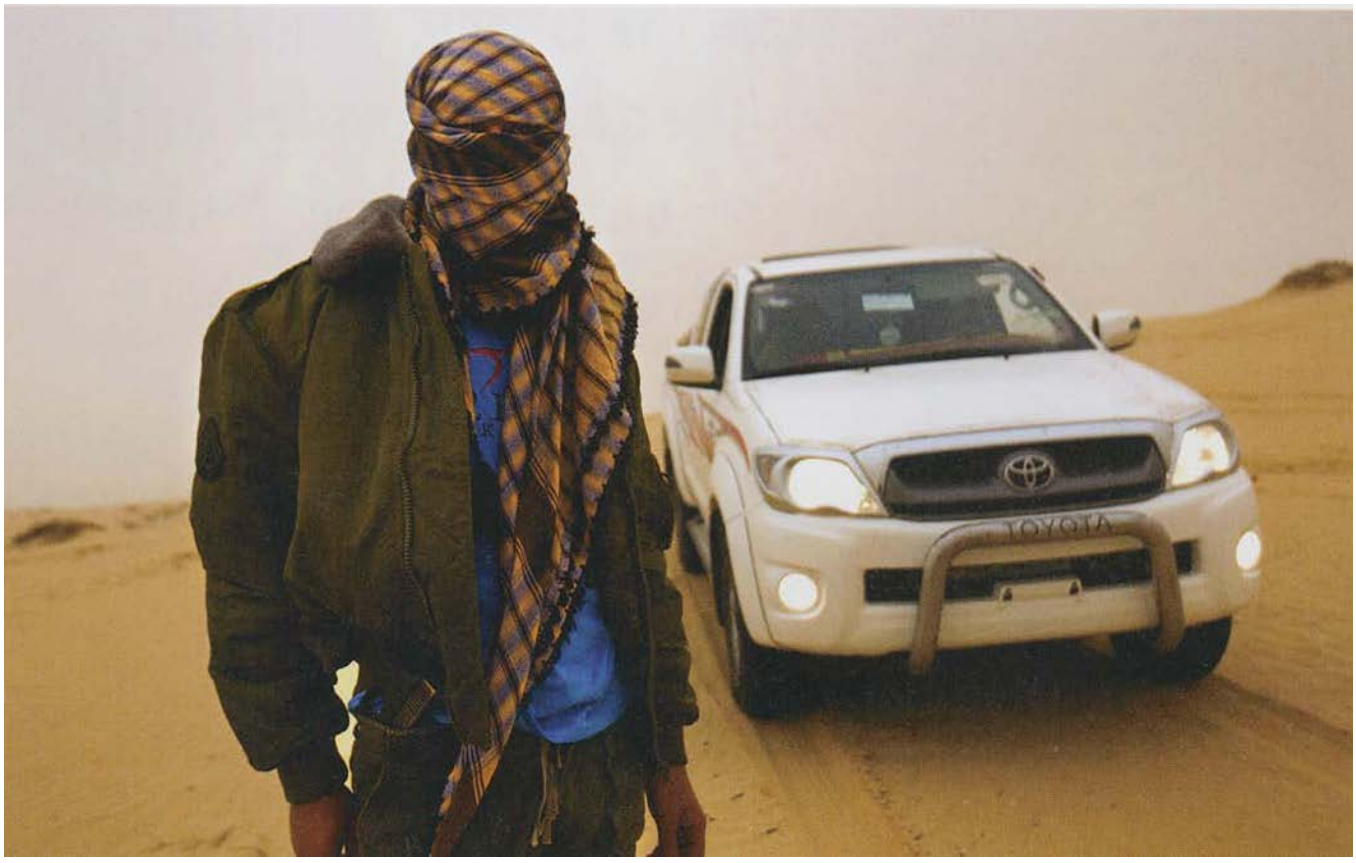
Recently his team has uncovered geoglyphs, large-scale drawings in the ground. Using cameras mounted on balloons, they have marked off dozens of the designs left undisturbed in the desert for thousands of years. Some are more than 300 feet long and shaped like elephants and rhinos. He dates them to 26,000 years ago, which he claims makes them the earliest in the world.

"This is the largest concentration of geoglyphs in the Near East," he tells me. "This mountain has always been a sacred place for Homo sapiens. This is really the oldest sanctuary in the world."

To make his theory jive with other theories, Anati pushes back the Exodus by a thousand years. According to him, the Israelites began their bondage in Egypt in 3,200 BCE and were led to freedom in 2,600 BCE. "I am revising the archaeology of the Bible and making order of the mess," Anati says. "I've found proof that the altars on the mountain were dedicated to the moon god. It was called Sin, which is the root of the word Sinai.

"There is a spiritual creativity here. Go to the mountain by yourself," Anati urges me. "You will feel the mountain's electricity."

I rise before dawn and climb the mountain alone, as Anati suggested. There is a great sense of being somewhere special. Flints undisturbed for thousands of years and altars set by human hand mil-



A Bedouin arms smuggler: Goods and people are regularly smuggled across Egypt's border with Gaza and Israel.

lennia ago pepper the mountain. On the far eastern side, I reach the remarkable Paleolithic sanctuary, where a group of monoliths stand like little men.

Scores of stones have rock drawings, some with stick people in battle or hunting the numerous ibexes with bows and arrows. As I head back to base camp I suddenly hear a voice. "Arieh," it says. Yeah, right, I think. And again: "Arieh." I stop. I definitely hear it. I scan the mountain around me—totally empty. By nature, I'm not a devout man. But just in case, I answer quite loudly: "Here I am."

It takes me more than an hour to traverse the five miles from Mount Karkom back to Highway 10. I pass the chassis of less fortunate Jeeps, and when I finally arrive at the road I pause to watch the cloud of dust General Lee kicked up slowly settle. On the other side of the border, two Egyptian policemen are perched in their shaded hut. They wave. They are so close I can see their smiling faces. They don't have many teeth.

Astonishingly, along the Israeli side of the border a vehicle appears in the distance. It gets closer and I think it is quite bizarre—after all, it is the first civilian car I've seen in more than a day. When it screeches to a halt in front of me and I see two dark-complexioned men inside, my first reaction is that they are bandits. I jerk old General Lee out of complacency and start hauling ass southward.

"Halt!" The fellow in the passenger seat shouts as he jumps out with a mini M-16 pointed at me. I stop. Now I can see he is wearing IDF-issued fatigue trousers and his assault rifle is military issue. "It's OK. We're reservists."

"Got any I.D.?" I demand in my most authoritative yet quivering voice.

He does and shows it to me as he asks incredulously what I am doing in these parts.

"I'm traveling down this highway. I've got an army permit."

"Does anyone know you're driving along the frontier?"

"Sure they do," I say, hoping the Ursula Andrews look-alike had registered me.

He radios to headquarters and informs them I am on the highway.

"Don't leave the road. There are mine fields everywhere."

Traveling southward I manage to pick up an AM radio station coming out of Cairo or some other Arab capital and let the slow melodies of the lute and drums accompany me as I cruise down the winding blacktop with the windows open, soaking in the crisp air; 10, 15, 20 miles pass as I cross the wilderness of Paran and head toward the red mountains far off in the horizon.

HOLLY PICKETT

The Egyptian policeman are perched in their shaded hut. They are so close I can see their smiling faces.

Fifty-five years ago, not far from here, Colonel Ariel Sharon and his paratrooper brigade punched into Sinai, capturing Kuntilla and linking up with his troops at the Mitla Pass. The same scene repeated itself in 1967. Looking at the Paran wilderness, I can't help but wonder two things: How did they get all those war machines out here in the middle of nowhere, and is this what they were fighting for?

On the outskirts of the Eilat mountains, I come upon another IDF roadblock. The soldier, a Russian immigrant, emerges from his shady guardhouse and watches me approach, then slowly opens the gate for me.

"How many have passed today?"

"You're not serious, are you? You're the only civilian I've seen for days."

When I reach border marker 82 overlooking Eilat, I pull over. It is one of the few areas accessible by civilians. I park, walk up to the marker, reach through and literally touch Egypt. The Egyptian police watch carefully from their tower.

I drive General Lee down past the headquarters of the 80th Division, where my daughter served last year, and suddenly the luscious blue waters of the Gulf of Aqaba appear before me. The narrow but deep gulf shoots out like a finger from the Red Sea. At its northern tip sit the Israeli resort of Eilat and its Jordanian counterpart Aqaba. Even from here, it's impossible to miss the football-field-size Jordanian flag.

But my destination is the Egyptian resort town of Taba, which is seven miles south of Eilat. Taba is all about recreation and leisure, scuba diving and, of course, gambling. Taba hotels are lit up like Las Vegas.

One of the hotels is the 400-room Taba Hilton, built in 1976, back when Israel controlled the Sinai. Its fate nearly ruptured the Israel-Egyptian peace deal when both sides claimed the luxury hotel. Eventually, international arbitrators ruled in Egypt's favor and ownership passed to the Egyptians, although a 28-foot bas-relief designed by Israeli artist Daniel Kafri still adorns a wall in the lobby.

The hotel is famous for hosting Palestinian-Israeli peace talks in January 2001 and being the target of an October 2004 double car bombing that ripped apart the front of the hotel, killing 26 people and wounding 160. It closed for two years of renovations after the bombing, but has come back strong. It is one of the few resorts on the gulf that has a private beach, and a third-of-a-mile-long, palm-shaded one at that.

It's time for a shower and a real bed, so I corral General Lee on the Israeli side and walk across the border, where two escorts in white shirts welcome me. Anyone going to the Taba Hilton receives VIP treatment, which means cutting in front of lines, no border crossing fees and a porter. To enter the hotel grounds one must pass three security checks and two x-ray machines. Since cars are no longer allowed to drive up to the doors, a valet carries your luggage from the gate. I barely notice the armed Egyptian police at the front door.

"Guests feel very safe. You are in a secure place. It is better, is it not?" asks Anwar Bakr, 34, the front desk manager. Bakr has no recollection of the dispute over the border or of Taba's history. He tries to avoid talking about the bombing.

"Our message is leisure," Bakr says, informing me that the hotel is so popular, particularly among Russians and Israeli-Arab tourists, that my hopes of a bed with fresh sheets and a sea view will remain unfulfilled. So with the same VIP treatment I received coming in, I am politely escorted back to the Israeli side to spend another night with the faithful General Lee.

Political change in Egypt has once again reminded Israel of the fragility of political borders. After more than three decades of cold but peaceful cohabitation, Israel can no longer take for granted that the Egyptian front will remain quiet should a military conflict break out with Gaza, Lebanon or even Palestinians in the West Bank. Any observer traveling this desolate border knows it cannot be dismissed as just another line in the sand.