



International Boundary Study

No. 46 – April 1, 1965

Israel – Egypt (*United Arab Republic*) Boundary

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**The Geographer
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INTERNATIONAL BOUNDARY STUDY

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ISRAEL – EGYPT (UNITED ARAB REPUBLIC) ARMISTICE LINE

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ISRAEL – EGYPT (UNITED ARAB REPUBLIC) ARMISTICE LINE

I. ARMISTICE LINE BRIEF

Located east of Sinai, the Israel–United Arab Republic armistice line extends between the Mediterranean and Gulf of Aqaba. It has a total length of 165 miles and is demarcated by pillars, except for the 37-mile sector along the Gaza Strip. Between the Gaza Strip and the Gulf of Aqaba, the armistice line follows the Egypt–Palestine boundary initially delimited in 1906 by Commissioners of the Turkish Sultanate and the Egyptian Khedivate. The sector of the armistice line between the Gulf of Aqaba and the Gaza Strip was established on February 24, 1949, and the sector along the Gaza Strip dates from February 22, 1950. A demilitarized zone was created surrounding Al 'Awja at the time the adjacent sector to the armistice line was established in 1949.

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Israel–United Arab Republic (U.A.R.) armistice line is situated across the eastern approaches to the Isthmus of Suez which has served as a land bridge between Asia and Africa since historical times. The completion of the Suez Canal in 1869 joining the Mediterranean and Red Sea gave additional strategic importance to the Isthmus of Suez as a world crossroads. Egyptian sovereignty over the Sinai affords the U.A.R. control of the land on both sides of the Suez Canal and territory in two continents.

Prior to 1906 the boundary between Egyptian and Turkish territories in Sinai was indefinite. On October 1, 1906, an agreement was signed between the two states, which placed the boundary east of Sinai in a nearly straight line between the Mediterranean near Rafah and the head of the Gulf of Aqaba.

A number of maps printed before the agreement of 1906 showed the boundary as extending southeastward from the vicinity of Al 'Arish to the head of the Gulf of Aqaba. Although nominally a vassalage of the Turkish empire in 1906, Egypt was in effect a United Kingdom protectorate under British occupation from 1882 to 1914. On May 8, 1892, a firman issued by the Sultan of Turkey granted to the Khedive Abbas of Egypt the right to administer Sinai, which right was reiterated in notes exchanged between the United Kingdom and Turkey in May 1906. Also, in 1892 a British unilateral declaration, to which Turkey did not respond, was made locating the boundary in a straight line from immediately east of Al 'Arish to the head of the Gulf of Aqaba. British policy at this time was twofold; 1) to keep Sinai under Egyptian administration as a wasteland buffer for protection of the Suez Canal and 2) to secure the Gulf of Aqaba against use by unfriendly states that might threaten the water route to India. In 1906 before the treaty was signed, Turkey claimed a boundary comprised of straight-line sectors from a short distance west of Al 'Arish to Suez and thence to the head of the Gulf of Aqaba. Also, an alternate Turkish proposal was made that the boundary consist of a straight line from a point a short distance west of Al 'Arish to Ra 's Muhammad on the tip of Sinai. The British viewpoint prevailed and a line was adopted similar to that of the declaration of

1892, although the entire boundary was shifted slightly eastward. A reason given for shifting the line eastward was based on historical precedence because boundary pillars had been located in Rafah since the Middle Ages.

Officially declared a British protectorate on December 18, 1914, Egypt was granted independence by the United Kingdom on January 28, 1922. The eastern boundary of Egypt was not explicitly delimited either at the time of independence or by the Treaty of Lausanne on July 24, 1923.¹ By the terms of the treaty, Turkey renounced all rights and titles to territories lying outside of her immediate boundaries. Since independence Egypt has exercised sovereignty in Sinai. Following World War I the League of Nations approved a Palestine mandate to be administered by the United Kingdom for the part of the former Turkish Empire adjacent to Sinai. The line established by the Turco–Egyptian agreement of 1906 was afforded the status of an international boundary by both the United Kingdom and Egypt between the mandate of Palestine and Egyptian Sinai.

Historically, Palestine has ranged widely in geographical extent and in administrative divisions. In accordance with the agreement of 1906, the territory adjacent to Sinai was called the vilayet of Hejaz and the governorate of Jerusalem. Prior to United Kingdom administration, Turkish administrative divisions in Palestine commonly were considered to include the independent sanjak of Jerusalem and parts of the vilayets of Beirut and Damascus. The United Kingdom mandate for Palestine was approved by the League of Nations in July 1922 and became effective as of September 29, 1923. The mandate included the Trans-Jordan area, and in May 1923 the United Kingdom announced that it would recognize the existence of a separate government in Trans-Jordan under the Amir Abdallah. This was formalized five years later by the United Kingdom–Trans-Jordan agreement of February 20, 1928, the ratifications of which were exchanged on October 31, 1929.

After World War II the newly organized United Nations voted on November 29, 1947, to partition Palestine into Jewish and Arab states by October 1, 1948. The partition to which Jewish representatives apparently had acquiesced, would have placed Palestinian territory along the northern part of the Egypt–Palestine boundary within a new Arab state and that along the southern part within the new Jewish state. The State of Israel was proclaimed on May 15, 1948, and British administration of the Palestine mandate ended. Immediately following independence hostilities started between Israel and the adjacent Arab States of Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. In the ensuing conflict, Egyptian military forces were engaged with Israeli armed forces in the vicinity of Gaza and south of Jerusalem along with Jordanian troops.

A General Armistice Agreement was signed by Egypt and Israel under the auspices of the United Nations at Rhodes on February 24, 1949. Egypt retained control of the area now known as the Gaza Strip, and a Demilitarized Zone was established about Al 'Awja. On February 22, 1950, modus vivendi to the General Armistice Agreement clarified the armistice line delimiting the Gaza Strip. The remainder of the armistice line followed

¹ The treaty went into effect on August 6, 1924.

the Egypt–Palestine boundary between the Gulf of Aqaba and the Gaza Strip to within about eight miles of the Mediterranean. Following a series of political maneuverings and armistice line incidents, Israeli military forces invaded the Egyptian Sinai on October 29, 1956, and remained for a short time before returning to the armistice line previously agreed upon.

On February 22, 1958, Egypt was united with Syria to form the United Arab Republic. Syria withdrew from the union on September 28, 1961, but the Egypt region has retained the terminology of the United Arab Republic as the official name of the state.

III. POLITICO–GEOGRAPHIC SETTING

Most of the Israel–U.A.R. armistice line traverses arid or semi-arid wastelands. Sparse water supplies are typical of most areas and many wells are brackish. Natural vegetation consists mainly of broad-leaved deciduous shrubs and some short grasses. Limited cropland is utilized primarily for citrus groves and grain fields.

The armistice line crosses steep slopes adjacent to the Gulf of Aqaba, which is part of the Great Rift valley that includes the Dead Sea and the Red Sea, and then passes northward alternately through hill lands and relatively level areas. Steep flat-topped hills are common, and some have elevations in excess of 3,000 feet. The relatively level areas usually are dissected by wadies and are covered by sand or gravel deposits. In the vicinity of Al 'Awja dunes are common. Northward of Al 'Awja elevations decrease rapidly to the sandy coastal plain of the Mediterranean.

Climatically, the southern part of the armistice line is located in a low-latitude desert and the northern part in a dry subtropical or Mediterranean type. Except for the Gaza Strip, most of the remainder of the area receives less than five inches of precipitation annually. From south to north, the Gaza Strip receives annually between 8 and 15 inches of precipitation which falls almost entirely in the winter months. Temperatures remain continuously hot throughout the year in the low-latitude desert, and although summer temperatures in the dry subtropical climate are hot, the winters are quite mild.

Although the principal activity along much of the armistice line continues to be nomadic herding, a number of relatively recent population changes have taken place. Israel has developed Eilat as a modern port on the Gulf of Aqaba, and a number of Israeli settlements have been established in the Negev. In the Gaza Strip, the population has increased from an estimated 72,000 persons in 1946 to more than 400,000 people in 1964. Of the total population, about 290,000 were registered as Palestinian Arab refugees.

The Gaza Strip is a part of the Mediterranean coastal plain less than thirty miles in length and between four and eight miles wide. It has an area of 140 square miles and is administered by the U.A.R. through an Egyptian Governor-General. Although only forty miles from the Israeli urban area of Tel Aviv, through transportation and

telecommunications the Gaza Strip is oriented to the U.A.R. and is virtually isolated from Israel. There is no port for cargo transfer and vessels are offloaded into lighters. Limited water supplies place severe restrictions on the production of irrigated crops and the ability of the area to support the large refugee population. At present about 60 percent of the Gaza Strip is under cultivation, of which about 15,000 acres are under irrigation. Oranges are the main export crop but various other crops are grown for local consumption. Because the economy of the Gaza Strip is unable to cope with the increased population, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) assists in the support of the refugees.

IV. BOUNDARY ALIGNMENT

The sector of the armistice line between the Gulf of Aqaba and the Gaza Strip follows the Egypt–Palestine boundary delimited in 1906. Through specifically delimiting the Gaza Strip and determining a demilitarized zone by reference to the Egyptian frontier of 1906, the General Armistice Agreement in effect designates this sector of the Egypt–Palestine boundary as an armistice line. The Egypt–Palestine boundary was surveyed and demarcated by pillars between 1912–14.² The following delimitation of the Egypt–Palestine boundary is quoted from the Turco–Egyptian agreement of 1906.

Art. I. The Administrative Separating Line, as shown on map attached to this Agreement, begins at the point of Ras Taba, on the western shore of the Gulf of Akaba, and follows along the eastern ridge overlooking Wadi Taba to the top of Jebel Fort; from thence the Separating Line extends by straight lines as follows:

From Jebel Fort to a point not exceeding 200 metres to the east of the top of Jebel Fathi Pasha, thence to that point which is formed by the intersection of a prolongation of this line with a perpendicular line drawn from a point 200 metres measured from the top of Jebel Fathi Pasha along the line drawn from the centre of the top of that hill to Mofrak Point (the Mofrak is the junction of the Gaza-Akaba and Nekhl-Akaba roads). From this point of intersection to the hill east of and overlooking Thamilet-el-Radadi (place where there is water), so that the Thamila (or water) remains west of the line; thence to top of Ras Radadi, marked on the above-mentioned map as A 3; thence to top of Jebel Safra, marked as A 4; thence to top of eastern peak of Um Guf, marked as A 5; thence to that point marked as A 7, north of Thamilet Sueilma; thence to that point marked as 8, on the west-north-west of Jebel Semaui; thence to top of hill west-north-west of Bir Maghara (which is the well in the northern branch of the Wadii Ma Yein, leaving that well east of the Separating Line); from thence to A 9 bis west of Jebel

² Sheets listed in map reference No. 1 of the Appendix show the location of the boundary pillars.

Megrah; from thence to Ras-el-Ain, marked A 10 bis; from thence to a point on Jebel-um-Hawawit, marked as A 11; ...³

The armistice line then extends from Jebel-um-Hawawit, A 11, in a straight line for about 25 miles to the Gaza Strip. Prior to establishing the Gaza Strip the alignment of the straight line was determined as extending from Jebel-um-Hawawit to half the distance between two pillars at Rafah.

An initial armistice line delimiting the northern and eastern sides of the Gaza Strip based verbatim on the U.N. Memorandum of November 13, 1948, was included in the General Armistice Agreement of 1949. Paragraph 1, Article VI of the General Armistice Agreement reads as follows:

1. In the GAZA-RAFAH area, the Armistice Demarcation Line shall be as delineated in paragraph 2.B (i) of the Memorandum of 13 November 1948 on the implementation of the Security Council resolution of 4 November 1948, namely by a line from the coast at the mouth of the Wadi Hasi in an easterly direction through Deir Suneid and across the Gaza-Al Majdal Highway to a point 3 kilometres east of the Highway, then in a southerly direction parallel to the Gaza-Al Madjal Highway, and continuing thus to the Egyptian frontier.

On February 22, 1950, a modus vivendi to the General Armistice modified the northern part of the Gaza Strip demarcation line and the eastern part opposite Khan Yunis. Except where the modifications were delineated, the armistice line remained parallel to and three kilometers eastward of the Gaza-Al Majdal Highway in accordance with the General Armistice Agreement. Following the Sinai campaign of 1956, a furrow was plowed to mark the armistice line between Israel and the Gaza Strip. Paragraph I, Article 1 of the modus vivendi indicates the modifications to the armistice line as follows.⁴

Article I

1. In the map^{1/} attached to the modus vivendi.

(a) the "A" zone is delineated as follows:

³ The remainder of the agreement of 1906, including that part which now forms the southern boundary of the Gaza Strip is as follows: "...from thence to half distance between two pillars (which pillars are marked at A 13) under a tree 390 metres south-west of Bir Rafah; it then runs in a straight line at a bearing of 280° of the magnetic north (viz., 80° to the west) to a point on a sand-hill measured 420 metres in a straight line from the above-mentioned pillars; thence in a straight line at a bearing of 334° of the magnetic north (viz., 26° to the west) to the Mediterranean Sea, passing over hill of ruins of the seashore."

⁴ Map references (MR) along the armistice line are based on the 1,000 meter Palestine belt grid. United States Army Map Service sheets listed in the map appendix show, in addition to the universal transverse mercator grid, the Palestine belt grid and geographic coordinates by ticks along the margins of the maps. Points referenced along the boundary indicate elevations in meters.

It is the zone between the demarcation line and a line from M.R. 10170-11160 in a straight line to point M.R. 10690-10740 at the railway crossing and then in a straight line to point M.R. 10795-10640, to point 72,9 M.R. 10900-10565, to point 95,7 M.R. 10880-10480, to point 82,2 M.R. 10810-10410 and then to the demarcation line at point 95,1 M.R. 10695-10240 (all points inclusive to Egyptian side).

(b) the "B" zone is delineated as follows:

It is the zone between the line delineated in paragraph (a) above and the Egyptian fighting line north of Reit Lahaya.

(c) the "C" zone is delineated as follows:

It is the zone between the demarcation line and a line from point M.R. 08935-08590 in a straight line to point 79,6 M.R. 09035-07970, M.R. 08970-07790 and from this point to the demarcation line at M.R. 08735-07670 (all points inclusive to Egyptian side).

In accordance with the General Armistice Agreement, an area adjacent to the armistice line and surrounding Al 'Awja was declared a Demilitarized Zone. Al 'Awja is strategically situated astride routes between the Gulf of Aqaba and the Mediterranean and between the Sinai of Egypt and Negev of Israel. Paragraphs 1 and 2, Article VIII of the General Armistice Agreement afford the following details on the delimitation of the Demilitarized Zone.

1. The area comprising the village of El Auja and vicinity, as defined in paragraph 2 of this Article, shall be demilitarized, and both Egyptian and Israeli armed forces shall be totally excluded therefrom. The Chairman of the Mixed Armistice Commission established in Article X of this Agreement and United Nations Observers attached to the Commission shall be responsible for ensuring the full implementation of this provision.

2. The area thus demilitarized shall be as follows: From a point on the Egypt–Palestine frontier five (5) kilometres north-west of the intersection of the Rafah-El Auja road and the frontier (MR 08750468), south-east to Khashm El Mamdud (MR 09650414), thence south-east to Hill 405 (MR 10780285), thence south-west to a point on the Egypt–Palestine frontier five (5) kilometres south-east of the intersection of the old railway tracks and the frontier (MR 09950145), thence returning north-west along the Egypt–Palestine frontier to the point of origin.

1/ Note by the Secretariat: The attached map consists of two sheets, with zones "A" and "B" appearing on Sheet 1, and zone "C" on Sheet 2.

V. PRESENT SITUATION

In lieu of a peace treaty, an armistice line supervised by the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) continues to separate the areas administered by Israel and the U.A.R. That it was not the intent of the General Armistice Agreement to influence the location of an international boundary between the two states by establishing an armistice line is indicated in Paragraph 2, Article V as follows:

The Armistice Demarcation Line is not to be construed in any sense as a political or territorial boundary, and is delineated without prejudice to rights, claims and positions of either Party to the Armistice as regards ultimate settlement of the Palestine question.

In addition to the problem of determining an international boundary, ultimately decisions will be needed on the ownership of the Gaza Strip, disposition of the large Arab refugee population in the Gaza Strip, and the status of the Demilitarized Zone around Al 'Awja.

For purposes of cartographic presentation, only the boundary between the U.A.R. and the Gaza Strip should be shown by an international symbol. A special symbol is required for the armistice line and the labeling of the sectors by data of origin is unnecessary. The Gaza Strip is to be indicated as under U.A.R. administration. Still a different symbol should be used east of the armistice line to delimit the Demilitarized Zone. An alternative would be to indicate the zone by a distinctive pattern. The Demilitarized Zone should be labeled on the map.

APPENDIX

Documents

1. Agreement signed and exchanged at Rafah on October 1, 1906, between the Commissioners of the Turkish Sultanate and the Commissioners of the Egyptian Khedivate, concerning the fixing of a Separating Administrative Line between the Vilayet of Hejaz and Governate of Jerusalem and the Sinai Peninsula. Triepel, Henrich, *Nouveau Recueil Général De Traités (Continuation Du Grand Recueil De G. Fr. De Martens), Troisième Série, Tome V*, (Leipzig: Librairie Dieterich, 1912) pp. 882–884.
2. Egyptian–Israeli General Armistice Agreement, United Nations Document S/126-/Rev. 1, 13 December 1949.
3. Modus Vivendi To the Egyptian–Israeli General Armistice Agreement (S/1264/Rev. 1) Signed at El Auja on 22 February 1950, United Nations Document S/1471, 1950, Maps of Ascalon and Khan Yunis.

MAPS

1. Sinai Peninsula: Africa 1:125,000; Geographical Section, General Staff (GSGS) No. 2230; published 1915 by War Office, United Kingdom; map sheets Wadi Jerafi (North H-36/Q II), El Mayein (North H36/K IV), Abda (North H36/K II), El Kossaima (North H-36/K I), and Rafa (North H-36, E III).
2. Israel: Series K736, 1:50,000; published 1960 by United States Army Map Service; sheets Gaza (2853 II), Ashqelon (2953 III), Talmei Bilu (2952 IV), and Khan Yunis (2852 I).
3. Egypt: Series P677, 1:100,000; published 1960 by United States Army Map Service; sheets Gaza (6188), Khan Yunis (6187), El-Qusaima (6186), Eilat (6284), and W. Watir (6283).
4. Israel: Series K632, 1:100,000; published 1960–61 by United States Army Map Service; sheets Beersheba (2952), Makhtesh Ramon (2951), and Har Sagi (2950).
5. Egypt: Northern Sinai, 1:100,000; published 1941–42 by the Royal Engineers, United Kingdom; sheets Rafah (3), El Qusaima (6), Bir El Ma 'Ein (10), El Kuntilla (14), and Ras El Naqb (18).
6. Armistice Line: Maps attached to S/1471, Modus Vivendi To the Egyptian–Israeli General Armistice Agreement; U.N. Presentation 1690 (b)-x; Map No. 264 (b)-x (Sheets 1 and 2), Scale 1:20,000, March 1950.

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