

EGYPT IS DESTROYING THE PROTECTORATE, TOWN & WORLD HERITAGE SITE OF ST. KATHERINE IN SOUTH SINAI

URGENT CALL FOR IMMEDIATE INTERVENTION AND ACTION

i. Summary

In March 2021, the Egyptian government announced a mega development project named “The Great Transfiguration Project.” While this project is said to be aimed at the governorate of South Sinai, the vast majority of it was planned for execution within the protectorate of Saint Katherine, in the town surrounding the ancient St Katherine's Monastery, and within the World Heritage Site.

The "development" project, announced by the Ministry of Housing, Utilities and Urban Communities, entails massive plans of construction in and around the town of St Katherine, minutes away from the sacred monastery and Mount Sinai, an area designated a World Heritage Site and forming the heart of the St Katherine Nature Protectorate. Such plans -in clear defiance and violation of laws and regulations of protectorates and world heritage sites- include the construction of at least five hotels, hundreds of villas, chalets and private houses as well as other facilities, roads and highways.

Within weeks of announcing the plan, government authorities along with private companies began construction and demolition works inside and around the protectorate and town of St Katherine, on levels unseen before in this area that is known globally for its religious sacredness, unparalleled cultural wealth and unique nature.

Numerous experts and observers, many of whom are contributors to this statement, confirm that this project has already caused serious levels of irreversible destruction to the nature, environment, ecosystems and heritage as well as to the local population of the protectorate and town of St Katherine. Such destruction will continue to grow, swallowing the entire ancient town, inflicting severe damage on the monastery, and contaminating and poisoning the atmosphere and environment of the protectorate unless immediately stopped.

The following segments of this statement provide a detailed description of the government's project, the situation on the ground in and around the protectorate of St Katherine, the current conditions and struggles of the local communities and NGOs, remarks by experts on St Katherine and South Sinai, as well as other informative and supportive materials and links to external resources.

ii. Project details, scale of destruction, legal violations

According to the official announcement made by Egypt's Ministry of Housing, Utilities and Urban Communities, the government's "development" project includes 14 parallel and interconnected plans on massive scale of construction, the vast majority of which take place within and in the immediate vicinity of the town of St Katherine, minutes away from the ancient St Katherine's Monastery.

The official statement listed the 14 construction plans as:

- Renovation of the existing ecolodge
- Construction of the new ecolodge – 216 rooms, 16950 square meters of construction
- Construction of the Peace Arena
- Construction of the mountain hotel – 150 rooms, 20855 square meters of construction
- Construction of the new visitors centre - 5876 square meters of construction
- Construction of the new administrative compound - 80 chalets, reception building and restaurant, shopping bazaars, social and cultural club
- Renovation of the tourist district
- Renovation of the historic town
- Renovation of the Bedouin housing district - including construction of foot paths, roads, two service buildings, and renovation of currently existing buildings
- Renovation of the Monastery valley
- Construction of the new housing district – 700 housing units
- Construction of the new tourist district - 440 Chalets, 450 villas, 4 hotels, 490 health and recovery chalets
- Construction of the roads and infrastructure network
- The rainfall and floods protection project

NOTE: the official document published by the Ministry of Housing, Utilities and Urban Communities, which includes details and maps of each of the 14 plans is attached alongside this statement for reference.

While the various Egyptian government departments involved in the construction of this project continue to promote it as a great development planned carefully to conserve and protect the unique heritage, the nature reserve, as well as the local communities, it has been confirmed to the authors and contributors of this statement that the government authorities have failed to include or even consult the various local organizations, experts, representatives of the local community, or even the oldest standing structure and its revered representatives, the St Katherine Monastery and its monastic inhabitants.

“Unfortunately, the monastery lacking representation was not informed of the Government's intentions before the projects started,” said one official of the St Katherine's Monastery. “The projects have an immense scale and the situation is irreversible.”

The local community of St Katherine were not only sidelined and left out of any planning or dialogue prior to this project's execution, but they were the first to begin suffering gravely. With indescribable disrespect to the local Jebaleyya tribe, known historically as the Guardians of St Katherine, and the general population of the area, government bulldozers arrived without any prior notice and razed the local cemetery, leaving the locals to collect the remains of their buried relatives for days after. The destruction and desecration of the cemetery, which is an ancient and sacred part of the town of St Katherine, is a vivid example of the serious violations and lack of minimum levels

of respect this project entails. It is an unforgettable insult to the proud Bedouin community and will leave a sense of popular anger that will remain for decades and generations to come.

“The survival of Bedouin culture in the face of challenge and social exclusion has been a matter of concern for decades. The current development of St Katherine threatens to be the final nail in its coffin,” wrote an expert on St Katherine's local community, asking that their identity be concealed for fear of reprisals against their local partners in South Sinai.

“Their homes are being demolished without compensation. Part of their mosque has been demolished. The cemetery has been dug up. The hospital is closed. The pharmacy is due for demolition, along with the bakery, greengrocers, shops and cafes. ‘What are you supposed to do?’ a local man was asked. ‘Pray’, he answered,” said the expert, describing the conditions of the local St Katherine's Jebaleyya tribe in an article attached alongside this statement.

One resident of St Katherine and a keen observer of the situation said that “construction began very quickly, some 3000 construction workers were brought in to begin implementation. People here were not prepared for this at all, and the fate of personal property that falls in the way of this construction remains unclear. Assurances and fake promises change day by day.”

“For the first time in a long time, everyone's face looks concerned. They watch their landscape change, many trees in the way of construction are removed carelessly, old olives and pistachios were dug up and thrown aside and many locals worked together to save the trees with live roots still attached and planted them in different gardens,” the eyewitness added, on condition of anonymity.

The government's blatant disregard to the welfare of St Katherine's Monastery and that of the local Jebaleyya tribe isn't surprising, but is rather expected by locals and observers. Mohannad Sabry, a journalist and researcher of the Sinai Peninsula, witnessed and documented such government negligence in his 2013 news article [“Sinai's St Catherine's Starves, Monastery Shuts Down.”](#)

“The government's decision to shutdown the Monastery in 2013, without any regard to the impacts, caused serious harm to the entire town of St Katherine, but it was reversible and was eventually contained. This time the government's plans are catastrophic and irreversible, neither the community nor the environment can recover,” said Sabry, author of [“Sinai: Egypt's Linchpin, Gaza's Lifeline, Israel's Nightmare.”](#)

In addition to the massive construction works taking place in and around the town of St Katherine, the authorities decided to build a new 70 kilometre highway to connect the administrative city of Al-Tur, on the gulf of Suez, with the ancient town. This highway runs through the valley of Hebran, carrying a level of environmental destruction that will, according to experts, surpass that of the construction works in the town itself. This [shocking video](#) was published on YouTube less than two weeks ago, entitled “inspection of the path of Al-Tur to St Katherine road.”

One lecturer and expert on St Katherine's nature protectorate said: “This highway destroys an area designated by Egypt's government as a nature protectorate, it cuts through the protected area and splits it in two, causing environmental ruin.” He spoke to the authors of this statement on condition of anonymity for fear of government intimidation and possible reprisals, adding that Egypt has legal obligations but is clearly ignoring them by “building this road before hosting the UN Climate Change Conference this year.”

Another road is planned to be built through the even more precious Wadi Isla, regarded as the most remote, most beautiful and most biologically rich wadi in the entire peninsula of South Sinai. Such destruction of an area supposedly designated for conservation calls into question Egypt's entire

strategy of environmental protection.

In addition to the environmental impact, there are serious concerns about the safety of the new highways built in the bed of an active valley flooded by rainfall almost every year, the lecturer referred to annual incidents in South Sinai where roads are flooded and sometimes severely damaged by heavy floods. “The lives and welfare of tourists and residents shouldn't be undermined..” he said.

As for the purpose, benefits and logic of building the highway, he sees little to none. The highway connecting Al-Tur to St Katherine won't serve tourism because religious tourism arrives from Sharm El-Sheikh, Dahab and Taba, all three of which are major tourist hubs connected to St Katherine by roads that have been active and secured for decades.

The water demand of the large number of houses, and their wastes, will be serious issues in this fragile environment, to say nothing of the impact on Egypt's only endemic animals, the two species of butterflies that live on the mountaintops around the Monastery. One is the Sinai Baton Blue butterfly, officially categorised as Critically Endangered by the IUCN Red Listing - it occurs only in a tiny area around Mt Sinai, and it is therefore Egypt's responsibility to ensure its long-term survival. How will this be possible with thousands of people flooding into the landscape?

What is happening now in St Katherine, in the name of development, is erasing decades of efforts by dozens of Egyptian and foreign experts as well as hundreds of ordinary people to protect this unique part of the Sinai Peninsula. In 2001, prominent author and essayist Lance Morrow witnessed a past attempt by Egypt at, as he called it in his TIME Magazine article, “[Trashing Mount Sinai](#).”

“The pilgrim will no longer have to make the 2½ hour climb from the monastery, on the steep steps carved in rock by Byzantine monks who began the task in the 6th century. Unless better angels intervene, there is to be a cable car to whisk the pilgrim up the volcanic rock. At the upper terminus, according to one plan, he will find a restaurant, a casino (which in Egypt is not a gambling house but a nonalcoholic nightclub) and probably an asphalt walkway lighted at night to take the visitor to where Moses and God met.” Thus wrote Morrow 21 years ago about a similar plan that thankfully never saw the light.

Today is unfortunately not so different. Joseph Hobbs, renowned author of “[Mount Sinai](#),” describes how the holy site is being desecrated once again.

“Few places are sacred to all three Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Mount Sinai – widely believed by their followers to be Egypt's Jebel Musa (“Mount Moses”) is one of them. Also in these ranks are Jerusalem's Temple Mount and Noble Sanctuary (*al-Haram al-Sharif*) and the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron. These sacred places are so important in humanity's heritage that they need special protection, especially against the kind of ill-conceived development now targeting Mount Sinai.” Hobbs wrote in his article “On Mount Sinai,” attached in full alongside this statement.

Hobbs adds that “The master plan for development of this area would sprawl pavement and infrastructure across and near these sacred places. The Abrahamic faithful and people in search of an inspiring wilderness will not want or need this profane development, which will certainly result in the shameful de-listing of St. Katherine as a World Heritage Site and perhaps in a tourist boycott.”

By launching this project, Egypt is in clear violation of international and local laws, regulations and treaties the country had previously signed, and it risks the future of prospects of the protectorate and

the World Heritage Site.

“The Vision for the Saint Katherine Protectorate is that it is 'One of the world’s great mountain parks.' This vision would be attained in part by the declaration in 2002 of the 641 sq km core of the Protectorate as a Cultural World Heritage site – the Saint Katherine Area that embraces Mount Sinai and the Monastery. According to UNESCO, a World Heritage Site has legal protection from the World Heritage Convention, so having World Heritage status increased confidence that the values of the St Katherine Area and the wider Protectorate would be secured in perpetuity,” John Grainger, former EU Project Manager for St Katherine Protectorate between 1996 and 2003, wrote for this statement. It was during his time in St Katherine that he oversaw its designation as a World Heritage Site.

“UNESCO describes heritage as '*our legacy from the past, what we live with today, and what we pass on to future generations. Our cultural and natural heritage are both irreplaceable sources of life and inspiration.*' World Heritage sites are usually within a nation’s jurisdiction, but they also belong to the world, and nation states that have World Heritage sites are obliged to conserve and protect them from any threats which could have deleterious effects on their inherent characteristics and values,” added Grainger, co-author of “[Around the Sacred Mountain. Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Landscapes – an example from the Saint Katherine Protectorate.](#)”

“When the Government of Egypt requested that St Katherine be included on the list of World Heritage Sites, it accepted the conditions for inscription which included preventing inappropriate and unsustainable development within boundaries of the WH site. The current tourism development now being carried out at pace within the St Katherine WH area, is in total contravention of this agreement with UNESCO and must place the St Katherine Area on the list of World Heritage in Danger.

The prospect of St Katherine Protectorate being one of the world’s great mountain parks, sadly, has also receded.”

iii. Silencing of local communities and civic society

Over the past weeks, several sources in the town of St Katherine have confirmed that the local community lives in a state of constant fear, not just due to the destruction inflicted by this project on their environment, but also of the possibility that they will be stripped of their real estate, homes, farms, and be forced out of where they lived, and their ancestors before them, for decades.

Those concerns are neither exaggerated nor unfounded, confirmed the local observer who contributed to this statement. “They first started construction in Wadi El Raha and people were informed of the homes that will be demolished and were promised compensation, but what that compensation is and when it will be paid is not clear to anyone.”

“The former Bedouin neighbourhood of Zatouna, just before town, is now crammed with four-story apartment buildings, huddled up filling the plot of land assigned by the government project to a 'new residential area.' Many fear they would be compensated with an apartment, which does not suit their way of life. They need outdoor space, space for their livestock and to plant,” said the local observer, adding that the prevailing question is “Where to go next?”

“Some believe reverting back to a life in the mountains is the only way to protect their freedom and way of life. Of course this is not an exciting prospect for many who found comfort in the pleasures of settling in town, and invested their life savings on building their permanent homes.”

Given such conditions, the local community of St Katherine, including ordinary civilians, local activists as well as organizations, have been silenced. Those who dare speak or pursue their activities are forced to do it anonymously out of fear for their freedoms and well being.

In the case of the protectorate, monastery and town of St Katherine, the local community, activists and NGOs, as well as journalists and researchers are simply unable to voice their concerns, let alone oppose or attempt to publicly protest against the ongoing destruction happening to their heritage and environment. We, the undersigned, and those supporting this submission anonymously, feel impelled to speak out on their behalf. This vandalizing of one of the world’s great cultural and natural treasures must not be allowed to continue.

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Best Regards
Signed By:

Mohannad Sabry
Journalist and Sinai Researcher
Author of “[Sinai: Egypt's Linchpin, Gaza's Lifeline, Israel's Nightmare](#)”

John Grainger
Manager of the EU Project for Developing the St Katherine Protectorate 1994 - 2002
Author of “[Around the Sacred Mountain. Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Landscapes – an example from the Saint Katherine Protectorate](#)”

Joseph J. Hobbs
Professor Emeritus of Geography, University of Missouri
Author of “[Mount Sinai](#)”

The following photos, showing the scale of construction, or rather destruction, were captured by the local St Katherine observer who contributed anonymously to this statement.

- 1) Remains of a demolished local building. A small olive tree was buried in the rubble and large Christ-thorn tree was dislodged. Remaining trees expected to be eventually removed.



- 2) View from El Melga area, near Sheikh Mousa Camp. Road diversion into area entrance with deep digging, overlooking government buildings which authorities say will be demolished. What will be built there remains unknown.



- 3) The town centre by night. The main road partially closed off as a huge plot of land is dug up to build the foundations of what people have been saying will be a mall or shopping area.



- 4) Wadi El Raha hotels on the right, stand alone units along main road on the left.



- 5) Ironic image of the protectorate's garbage disposal bins with a backdrop of Wadi El Raha construction. Arabic text translates to “Project for environmental improvement in the Town of St Katherine.”



- 6) Digging in centre of town.

