

**Egypt**

**The powerbroker of Sinai**



With Egypt's blessing, Ibrahim al-Organj dominated trade into Gaza. Now the Bedouin leader has a security mission

**Andrew England**, Middle East editor 8 HOURS AGO

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Ibrahim al-Organi was languishing in an Egyptian prison 14 years ago, one of a number of Bedouin detained in a government crackdown in the restive Sinai during a period of tribal protests.

Today he is one of the Egyptian regime's favoured entrepreneurs, a man overseeing a construction-to-healthcare business empire that has flourished as a trusted affiliate of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's regime.

The connections to Egypt's military and security elites have given Organi a special influence in the Sinai and the neighbouring Gaza Strip. For years anybody wanting to get goods into the enclave through the Egyptian border has faced one main option: working with Organi's companies.

It is a role he cultivated over a decade that went largely unnoticed. But since Hamas's October 7 attack on Israel, Organi's interests have come under the spotlight, not least because of the vast sums his company Hala has earned helping desperate Gazans flee.

"Millions and millions they collect from us to get out of Gaza, and . . . they charge a large fee to secure and transport into Gaza," said a Gazan businessman. "He's the big guy."

Self-styled as a "tourism" company that facilitates travel between Egypt and Gaza, Hala offered a vital escape route for Palestinians. But the safe passage through the Rafah crossing came at a high price: \$5,000 per adult and \$2,500 for a child aged under 16, according to Palestinians.





Ibrahim al-Organi's company, Hala, has earned vast sums helping desperate Gazans flee © Abed Rahim Khatib/Anadolu/ Getty Images

Other companies in the Organi Group have over the past decade built up a near-monopoly delivering goods into the blockaded strip through Rafah, which until last month was the only Gazan border out of Israel's control.

Israel's offensive on Rafah has now shuttered the crossing indefinitely, stifling shipments and dealing a blow to Organi's business interests. More significantly, it has infuriated the Sisi regime, diminishing its influence in Gaza just as it frets about the war spilling across the border.

In a sign of Cairo's concerns, Organi, a leader of the Tarabin, Sinai's largest tribe, last month announced the formation of an "Union of Arab Tribes" to "work side by side with the Egyptian state" on security.

Experts viewed the move as a sign of an anxious government seeking the support of the Bedouin — once nomadic tribes that inhabit the Sinai — amid concerns that Israel's offensive could eventually drive Palestinians into Egypt.

"It is with one eye towards Rafah and long-standing fears about displacement [of Gazans]," said Michael Hanna, an expert at Crisis Group.

Sisi's military dominated government effectively turned to a trusted tribal leader. "He's risen to become a broker of the state — an affiliate to state power in Sinai," Hanna said.





Ibrahim al-Organi, left, with Egypt's Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouly, centre, during a visit to North Sinai © ON/Facebook



Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi with the Egyptian military units in Suez. Analysts say that it would be impossible for Hala to operate in Gaza without the Egyptian regime's blessing © Egyptian Presidency/Reuters

Organi's role in both the Sinai and Gaza offers a glimpse into the power dynamics under Sisi, a former military chief who allows zero dissent, distrusts the private sector and has deepened the role of the army within the state and the economy.

Analysts said that it would be impossible for Hala to operate in Gaza — as well as Organi's myriad activities in the Sinai — without the Egyptian regime's blessing.

“As they say in Sinai, no one can breathe or fart without taking military permission,” said Mohannad Sabry, a UK-based Egyptian journalist who authored *Sinai: Egypt's Linchpin, Gaza's Lifeline, Israel's Nightmare*.

Timothy Kaldas, deputy director of the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, said

the nature of the political economy under Sisi “means almost nobody can be a big player in business without co-ordination and some kind of dependence on the regime”.

“In the Sinai, it’s all the more so given its importance to the security apparatus,” Kaldas said. “You add to that amount of smuggling and illicit activities in the Sinai, and it’s all the more likely that anybody doing business on a significant scale will have to have collaboration with the different centres of power.”



Human Rights Watch cited two sources in 2022 saying Hala had strong links with Egypt’s security establishment and was staffed largely by former Egyptian military officers, enabling the company to reduce processing times and delays at checkpoints.

Organi Group did not respond to an email request for comment. A phone number listed on its website did not work.

Before October 7, wealthier Gazans could pay about \$700 per person to use Hala’s fast-track service to exit the strip through Rafah rather than spend months securing permits from the Hamas-controlled interior ministry, according to Palestinians. But the fees soared after Israel launched its offensive on Gaza and laid siege to the strip.

When Egyptian foreign minister Sameh Shoukry was asked in March whether the government condoned Hala now charging \$5,000 for Palestinians to leave the Gaza Strip, he said: “Absolutely not.”

strip, he said: Absolutely not.

“We will take whatever measures we need so as to . . . eliminate it totally,” Shoukry told Sky News.

Yet weeks later Hala was still providing the service.

Little personal information is public about Organi. But his rise traces its roots to Sisi seizing power in a popularly backed coup in 2013 and the near-simultaneous expansion of an Islamist extremist insurgency in the Bedouin’s backyard — the north Sinai.

After assuming the presidency, Sisi vowed to restore security and the Sinai, long rife with smugglers and banditry, was a prime concern. The Islamist insurgency, which began amid the chaos triggered by the 2011 popular uprising that ousted veteran president Hosni Mubarak, was escalating, particularly in North Sinai as militants targeted police and soldiers.

In 2014, the militants swore allegiance to Isis, the jihadist network, and Sisi turned to the Bedouin for support, with Organi becoming the leader of a tribal militia dubbed the Union of Sinai Tribes. Militants bombed a property belonging to Organi in 2015, accusing him of being an army informant.



Members of the Tarabin Bedouin tribe prepare for their iftar, or breaking of the fast, during the month of Ramadan © Ruth Fremson/AP

In an interview with Egyptian television that year, Organi spoke about the tribal

alliance's role in fighting against Isis, saying: "These people will wake up to find our shoes on their heads."

"We will not leave them, until the very last one," he said. "Everything [we do] in Sinai is under the supervision of the armed forces."

It was during this period that Organi began ferrying goods into Gaza. He told state media in December 2014 that his company had delivered hundreds of tonnes of bitumen and thousands of litres of fuel into the strip through Rafah.

That was four months after Israel and Hamas had fought a six-week war and Gaza was in urgent need of materials for reconstruction.

Sabry said Organi had links to the security apparatus almost as soon as he was released from prison. But after Sisi came to power, Organi became involved in "everything in Sinai".

"After the 2014 war [in Gaza] . . . a new map was settled, and within this new map was the Organi that we know today; the man who organised and financed the militias under the control of the military; the man who is the number one businessman for anything happening in Sinai."

Over the years his business grew so that "anything through Rafah came through him", said the Gazan businessman. "I have to communicate with his guys to be able to deliver my goods through Rafah."

It was not just the Gaza trade that was expanding. An Organi Group advert on YouTube provides a glimpse of the sprawling Egyptian part of the network. It lists a security company that employs 25,000 people, 17 hospitals, hotels, a car dealership, construction, manufacturing and a charitable foundation.

"Whatever is said, nothing will stop us," the advert boasts in Arabic. "Our target is in front of us and together we will reach it. The Organi Group, the biggest economic entity in the New Republic [Egypt]."

Organi's links to the state have deepened through business.

In 2014, Organi was quoted in the Egyptian press as saying that the military — which has become a dominant force in the economy under Sisi's rule — would own 51 per cent of Misr Sinai, one of Organi Group's entities which mines marble.

Two years, ago Sisi appointed him to the board of the state's Sinai Development

Authority in 2022. It is dominated by the military and is in charge of development projects in the peninsula, where the government says it has spent at least E£600bn (\$12.8bn) since Sisi took power.

It is not clear what his latest role as head of the newly established tribal alliance will entail. But it suggests he will continue to be involved on the Egyptian side of the Gazan border, even if the Rafah crossing remains closed.

Sabry said he saw no signs that militias were being re-established, but added that the military was likely to be “trying to organise a locally grown, broad network of spies and informants” to monitor events on the Sinai side of Gaza’s border.

Mostafa Bakry, spokesman for the union, has said the alliance would not be armed, adding that weapons were collected from the previous tribal union three years ago.

But he told a Saudi television channel that the alliance “comes at a very important moment”.

“We are surrounded by a ring of fire,” Bakry said. “We are facing a displacement plot and the president has been very clear from the start. We will not allow displacement [of Gazans].”

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