

(CRC/EGY)

**Alternative report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, consideration of Combined fifth and sixth periodic reports submitted by Egypt; Theme: Misuse and endangerment of schools in the indigenous community of North Sinai; Author: Sinai Foundation for Human Rights (SFHR).**

**Contact information:**

Contact person: Ahmed Salem, The SFHR Executive Director

Email: [a.salem@sinaifhr.org](mailto:a.salem@sinaifhr.org)

Phone: +447547106737

Office Address: 7 Bell Yard, London, WC2A 2JR, United Kingdom

Language: English

Date of publication: Jun 30, 2023

**SFHR** is an independent, nongovernmental, nonpartisan organization which focuses on monitoring, documenting and reporting on human rights abuses in Egypt, particularly in the Sinai Peninsula and other marginalized areas. Our work is based on universal human rights values and principles, and our ruler is the international human rights law and international humanitarian law.

## Table of contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| ➤ Introduction .....   | 3  |
| ➤ Methodology .....  | 4  |
| ➤ Substantive analysis .....   | 5  |
| • <b>General principles:</b> .....   | 5  |
| • <b>Violence against children</b> .....   | 13 |
| • <b>Education, leisure and cultural activities</b> .....  | 14 |
| • <b>Special protection measures</b> .....   | 19 |
| • <b>Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict</b> ..... | 22 |
| ➤ Conclusions .....  | 29 |

## ➤ Introduction

The alternative report prepared by the SFHR is largely based on a months-long investigation of the state of schools in North Sinai from 2013 up to its date of publication. Rigorous analysis of visual content mined by SFHR and open source satellite imagery helped us build a dataset listing all schools that were targeted in any form, as some are confiscated and used for military use. Out of the violations we documented against schools in all of North Sinai, 60 schools were demolished or attacked and 39 schools were used as military posts some of which continue to serve as army quarters till the day of publication. A compromised education system arises as thousands of students are left with no education and heightened illiteracy.

These transgressions don't include dozens of destruction and military use incidents against Azhar schools as they fall under Al-Azhar Al-Sharif Islamic body. All the schools mentioned in this research are public schools and are mostly dedicated towards elementary education.

Our witness testimonies highlighted the unnecessary targeting of certain schools as it caused a community-wide shock when many of the schools used were demolished overnight, with no prior explanation as to why such as in the cases of both [Arab Belli Joint Primary and Joint Preparatory School](#) in Al-Hasana.

The investigation quantifies the damage that extended to schools, which under the international humanitarian law still retains its civilian status, especially when none of these schools are rebuilt or replaced as the only working schools can be between 10 - 35 kilometers away. Post armed conflict, very limited and slow exception of a schools renovation have been carried out recently.

## ➤ **Methodology**

It's important to note the methodology which we've used to curate and document events where schools, students or school staff have undergone repeated attacks and consistent use of schools as military bases, making them obvious military targets from militants, we have amassed sufficient visual evidence and reliable witness testimonies to support our investigation. Below, we lay out how our investigation is structured and how our findings leave very little doubt (if any) that these schools were made redundant by one reason or another making education in many parts of North Sinai near-impossible.

Our substantive analysis has been divided into clusters according to the CRC guide and under which recommendations can be seen listed.

While we have rigorously verified how each school was targeted, there are schools we haven't included in the investigation or the final count of verified schools as the visual evidence of said targeting remains insufficient.

What we include in this report does not include all the visual evidence we have come to reveal but serves as a strong basis as our findings were backed by strong visual evidence and leaves very little room for doubt.

**Further information is available in Annex A**

## ➤ Substantive analysis

- **General principles:**

### **Best interests of the child**

While the State report asserted the best interests, complete respect and support for the children and their development, the systematic use and targeting of schools prove otherwise.

Our investigation on Al-Mahdeya Joint Primary School, has proven that the school started being used as a military base in 2015 and based on satellite imagery remains to serve as a military outpost, bearing in mind the school provided primary education to students between 6-11 years of age in Al-Mahdeya village, in Rafah.

The school witnessed huge installations which were verified by open-source satellite imagery as well as recent footage that we managed to mine from 2022. Based on our analysis and witness testimonies, the school was attacked in 2015 then used as a military base. A radio tower was set up around 2017 - 2018, while another was likely built in 2021, based on open-source maps.

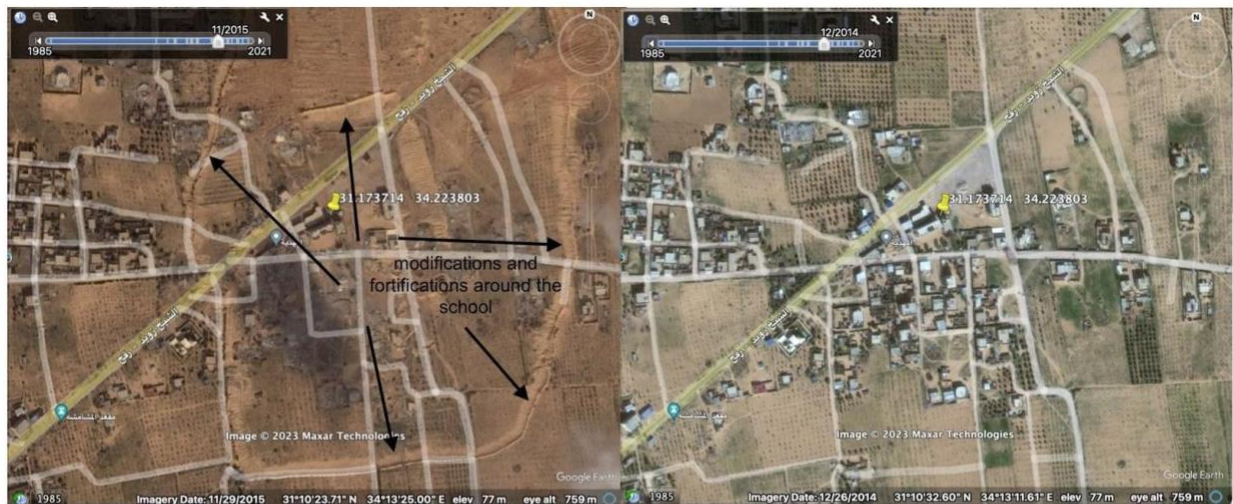


Fig 1: Modifications that can be seen in 2015 (left), compared to 2014 where the surrounding cultivated land was razed (right)

The alternative for students was Naga' Sheibana Primary School, approximately 4 kilometers away, on foot without a transportation means, in a war-like atmosphere. This alternative school has been targeted too in 2018 by the military forces. As a result, most of those students dropped out of education so far.

People were displaced in Rafah so not only did these children lose their schooling, but a stable environment meant for the development and nurturing of children were compromised in the name of national security which the State is yet to provide as militants appear in Sinai.

Not only did the State build one radio tower but two showing the blatant intent to keep the school as a military outpost with no regards for the welfare of the child.

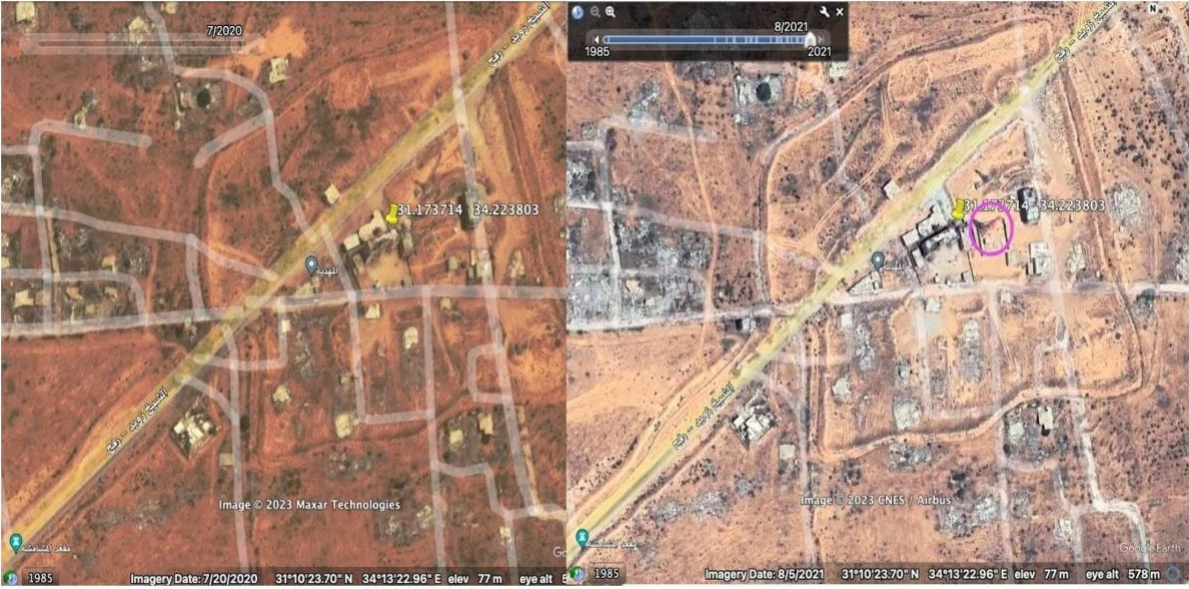
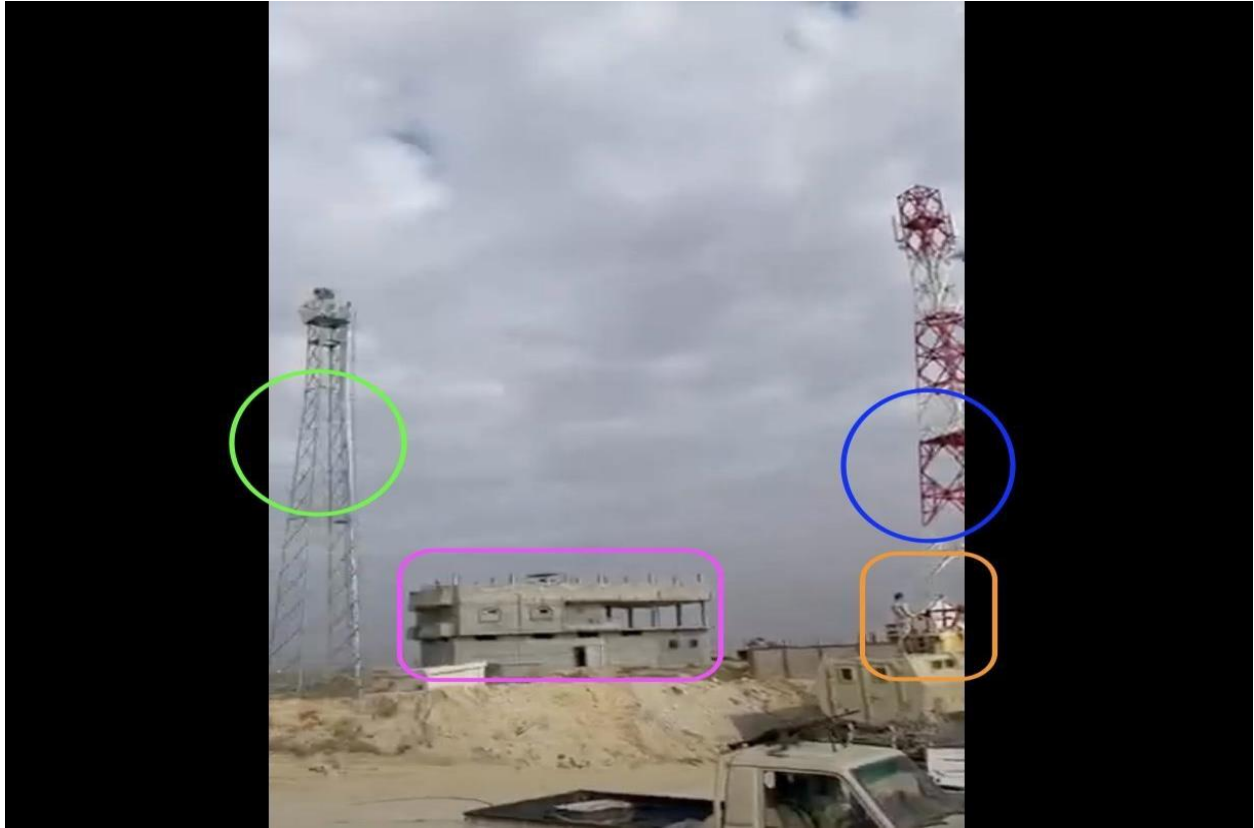


Fig 2: On the left we can see only one radio tower while on the right we can see the one that was added later

[Another video from 2022](#) that shows the school as a base as well as the pro-military Sinai tribes alliance.



Fig 3: Military personnel and vehicles can be seen in the footage





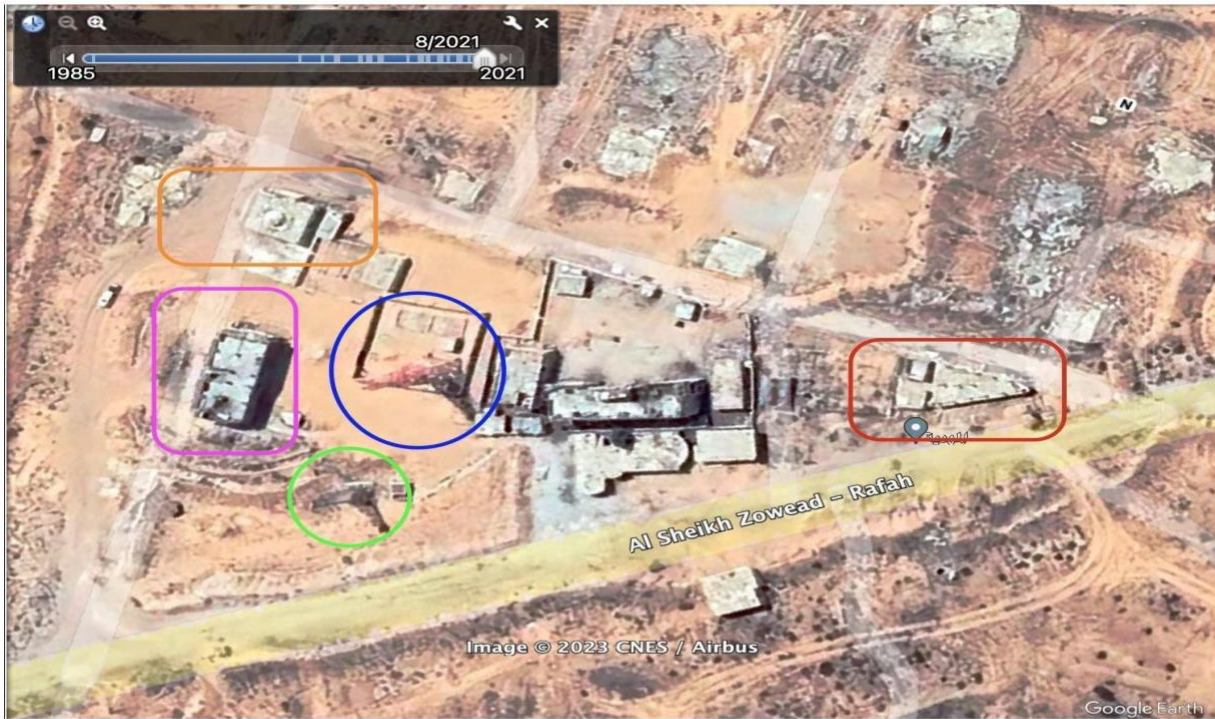


Fig 4: Geolocation of the school serving as a base.



Fig 5: Military cars and personnel seen again in different footages.

A father of three told SFHR that his kids changed schools at least three times as they were displaced from Al-Mahdeya then two more nearby villages. “Two of my children did not continue their education because of the disruption due to the ongoing war.”

But this is not a Rafah-only issue as we have also countless other schools that were also violated in other administrative cities in North Sinai such as Al-Shatea’ Joint Primary School and Al-Salam Joint Preparatory Schools who were both attacked. Till today, neither of the schools were rebuilt as you can see below satellite imagery and [exclusive video](#) from late 2022, prove that.

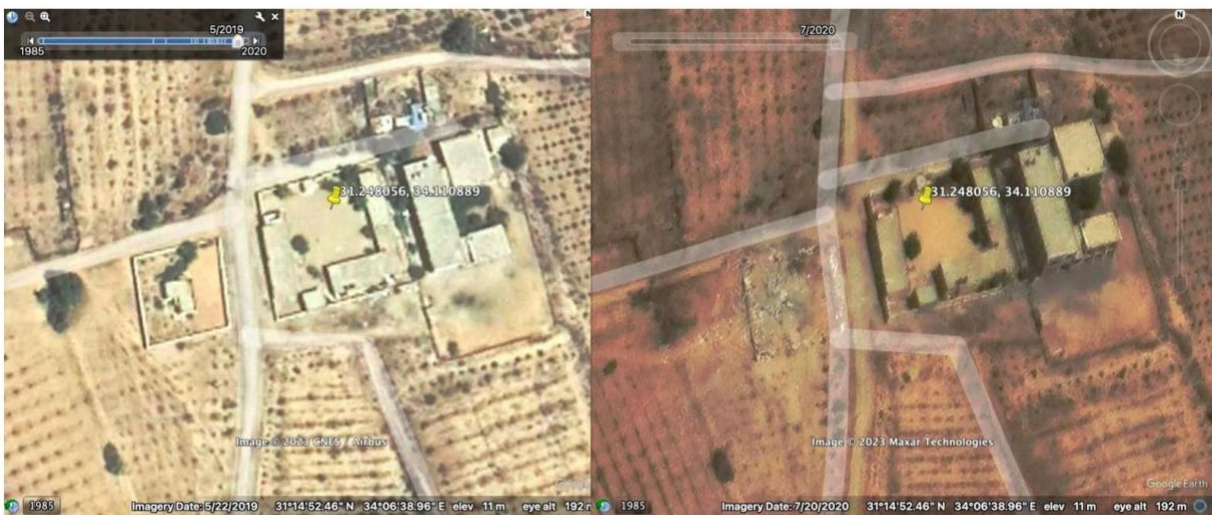


Fig6: Left: schools prior to attack, right: both schools showing signs of an airstrike



Fig 7: Top: Al Shate'a school building, bottom: how we verified it was one of the schools attacked

Our analysis matched the witness testimonies that the school was destroyed in 2020. Neither school was rebuilt.

Multiple videos published by pro-military Sinai Tribes alliance show that despite the destruction, they still continue to frequent what's left of the school such as in the case of this [video](#).



#### Recommendations:

- Attaching a special status to each school in North Sinai, especially those closer to the State's buffer zone in Rafah.
- Complete and immediate withdrawal of military forces from schools used as outposts and announcing them as civilian structures penalizing any violation by any member of security services and extremist insurgents alike.
- Giving priority to rebuilding, renovation and securing of all establishments that were impacted by the army and militants.

- **Violence against children**

SFHR have documented cases where schools were used as military bases as children continue to attend school in a complete disregard to the safety and psychological stability of the students.

Witnesses have confirmed that Mosafaq Joint Preparatory School in Bir Al-Abd city was never closed and started being used as a military base in 2019. We can see via Sentinel Hub (Sentinel 2) that fortifications likely started in 2019, as students continued to attend school making the school an obvious military target.

Sentinel 2 shows the fortifications likely started being built in late 2019.

Apple Maps showed fortifications and at least two new structures on school grounds and north or the school wall. The school is still used as a military base up to now.



Fig 8: Fortifications in black and structures in yellow show the school was used as a military base despite being open for schooling children (11-14 years old)

## Recommendations:

- Criminalizing any act of violence against schools, students and school staff including those perpetrated by the army itself.
  - Directed psychological rehabilitation of students and school staff to maintain a healthy presence at schools.
  - Scheduling activities at schools aimed at alleviating anxiety long-associated with schools
- 
- **Education, leisure and cultural activities**

Further evidence that schools in North Sinai are not safe and neither are buildings for leisure and sportsmanship. In the case of both Al-Wefaq Joint Primary and Preparatory Schools, not only did the State target the two schools, it also razed Al-Wefaq's sports club in Rafah.



Fig 9: Al Wefaq Sportclub can be seen in footage destroyed

By analyzing open-source satellite imagery, we can see that Al-Wefaq Joint Primary School was likely destroyed between 2017 and 2018, while the preparatory School was likely destroyed in 2020. The sports club likely met the same fate between 2020-2022.



Figure 10: Top: satellite imagery shows the elementary school was likely destroyed in 2018, bottom: satellite imagery shows the preparatory school was likely destroyed in 2020.

But this is not a Rafah-only issue as we have also many other sportclub that were also violated in other administrative cities in North Sinai such as Al-Zohor Sportclub in Sheikh Zuweid which currently serves as the main military base in the city since 2013, alongside with, the nearby Ahmed Abu-Salma Joint School which is serving as a shelter for dozens of military troops since 2017.



Figure 11: Top: satellite imagery shows Al-Zohor Sportclub, While the Egyptian army tank seen on the Sportclub premises.



Through a secret informant we managed to get an exclusive image of the school, which was captured in 2023, January.

The image clearly shows military structures on the school's roof. By examining open-source satellite imagery, we found that between late 2016 and May 2017, a lot of modifications were made to turn the school into a military base. The footage we found further documents that the school has been made redundant to serve as a complementary base to Al-Zohour Camp in Sheikh Zuweid.



Fig 12: Fortifications and potential equipment appears in the school's roof showing the school was used as a military base.



Fig 13: Satellite image shows fortifications and structures in black, proves that the school has served as a military base since late 2016 till now.

The State maintains in its report that it provides a wealth of educational and cultural facilities. Although it intentionally makes it harder to carry on a normal life in a region that has been inhabited by a peaceful indigenous community for centuries.

#### Recommendations:

- Ensuring that the pre-university education allocations in the state annual budget meet the constitutional obligation, which is 4% of the gross domestic product.
- Rebuilding the schools that were destroyed because of military operations as well as maintaining any educational facility that was affected by the conflict.
- Launching a comprehensive action plan to ensure the re-enrollment of any children who might have dropped out of school during the years of conflict.
- Rebuilding leisure and cultural centers and implementing a plan of erecting more structures as they remain a rather rare occurrence in North Sinai.

- **Special protection measures**

### **The rights of indigenous children**

The State report ensures the preservation of identity however they fail to prove that as we documented a complete disregard to the indigenous community and habitats of these children. The children of North Sinai are those in the midst of armed conflict where extra measures should have been implemented from the start to shield them from physical and psychological damage. Physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration all fall on the State but only parents are left with no options or support.

The previous examples are hard evidence that the education and identity of the children of North Sinai has never been a priority to the state as their peers seek and take up education furthering their knowledge and work opportunities. Schools are not only educational institutions that ought to be protected and proliferated but are small groups where children learn and grow a sense of community.

The State stipulated in its report that the rights and welfare of indigenous people were a collective priority, however it won't even acknowledge the fact that the educational institution not only ignored the parents pleas for new schools but denies the use and attacks on schools intended for the teaching of an already-marginalized indigenous community.

In some cases that we've documented, not only were the schools misused and partially destroyed, but an example where looting of school equipment take place and upon the return of displaced families and children in October 2020, the computers' processors and hard discs were missing from Salem Shtewi Joint Preparatory School, according to witnesses/school staff. The below images show a still from an open-source video and geolocation of the school. As shown, a military tank can be seen in place of a wall surrounding the school.



Fig 14: Top: the Egyptian army tank seen on school premises after part of the wall was taken down, bottom: the markers in satellite imagery that helped us geolocate it

At the beginning of the new school year in October, 2022, Undersecretary of the Ministry of Education in Sinai told Al Masry Al Youm that the number of students was at 120,228 students. In the year prior, he gave a lower number denoting that the number of students went up by 10,063 students over the course of one school year, when in reality, a total of 99 schools in North Sinai cannot be used. This number is nowhere near the actual number of students enrolled and recipients of education in North Sinai. According to our investigation, most schools impacted were largely primary and preparatory schools.

### انتظام الدراسة في جميع مدارس المحافظة

فيما أكد «رضوان» أن جميع المدارس بالمحافظة تعمل بشكل كامل اليوم الأحد، موضحاً أن عدد المدارس الابتدائية بالمحافظة 216 مدرسة تضم 61911 تلميذاً، و172 مدرسة إعدادية و فيها 28527 طالباً، و29 مدرسة ثانوية عامة تضم 9583 طالباً، والثانوي الفني 32 مدرسة وفيها 10143 طالباً، بإجمالي 449 مدرسة تضم 110165 طالباً في شمال سيناء.

Fig 15: Pro-state media outlet reporting that the number of students in North Sinai stands at 110,165 at the beginning of the 2022 school year

On the contrary, the deputy of North Sinai in the Egyptian Parliament, posted on Facebook [a photocopy of an official letter](#), was sent to the Minister of Education in 2021, demanding for urgent building of additional classrooms, mentioning that war on terror caused the destruction of 50 out of 72 schools only in Sheikh Zuweid city. As he said also in a video of a parliamentary session published in his [official FBpage](#).

Further evidence proves clearly that the official narrative is misleading, an [official letter](#) addressed by the Undersecretary of the Ministry of Education in North Sinai to Parliamentarian Ibrahim Abu-Shaira dated November 13, 2021 revealing that Al-Sekka Al-Hadid Primary School for Boys, has been used militarily by 14 troops of the Egyptian police. Our research proved that school was militarized for 6 years, from 2016 until the troop's departure in December 2022.

## Recommendations:

- Celebrating and amplifying culture and identity as well as criminalizing all acts of marginalization and vilification of the Sinai Peninsula natives.
  - Transparency in communicating shortfalls in schools, teachers, and school admissions along with appliances necessary to the educational process.
  - Working with civil society organizations to rebuild a community that was ravaged by war through a framework suitable to children of all ages.
- 
- **Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict**

Egyptian national law sets 18 as the minimum age for compulsory recruitment in its armed forces. In compliance with Article 3(2) in the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, which Egypt ratified in 2002, the state issued on February 6, 2007, a declaration stating that the minimum age for voluntary recruitment is 16. However, the Egyptian armed forces violated this declaration and kept officially announcing in years [2017](#), 2020, 2021, and [2023](#), that the minimum age at which it will permit voluntary recruitment is 15.

Additional commitments regarding child recruitment for both states and armed groups come under Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, Articles 1, 2, 3, 4 and 6 in the protocol were clearly violated by the Egyptian Authorities.

Child recruitment in military actions as part of pro-military tribal groups in the Egyptian military's war on the ISIS-affiliate "Sinai Province" group in North Sinai started early with the beginning of the armed conflict in late 2013. Still, it became increasingly and more publicly noticeable during the first half of 2022 till the war ended in the beginning of 2023. This recruitment took place with the knowledge of and under supervision from the Egyptian authorities.

We have documented dozens of child recruitment cases, spreading in many cities in Sinai. One of these cases is about "Mohamed Moussa Zire'e", 17 years, who was injured during a fight with members of the ISIS-affiliate, Sinai Province, in Muqataa village in southern Sheikh Zuwayed [on 13 May 2022](#). Mohamed was a soldier working among a pro-military militia based in Al-Okour Joint Preparatory School.

[An Exclusive footage](#) from 2022 shows the extent of use and circumstances under which the school is functioning as pro-army tribesmen can be seen talking about "killing the rats" as one person said, likely referring to the Wilayat Sinai militants. Mohamed Moussa Zire'e appeared armed, carrying a rifle and a radio device during this video in front of Al-Okour Joint Preparatory School in Sheikh Zuweid.



Fig. 16: Mohamed Moussa Zire'e appeared armed based on Exclusive video in front of Al-Okour Joint Preparatory School, and other open-source footage.

By examining open-source satellite imagery of the school, we can deduce that the school was first used as a military base in between October 2016 and May 2017.

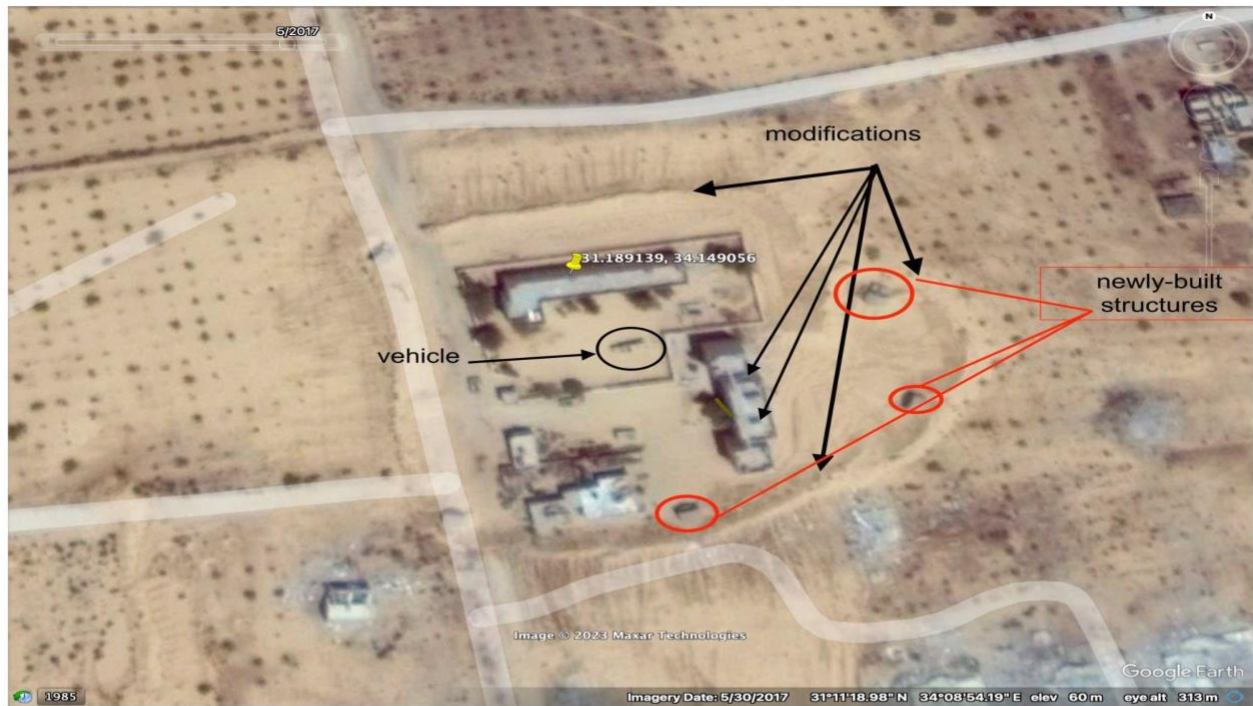
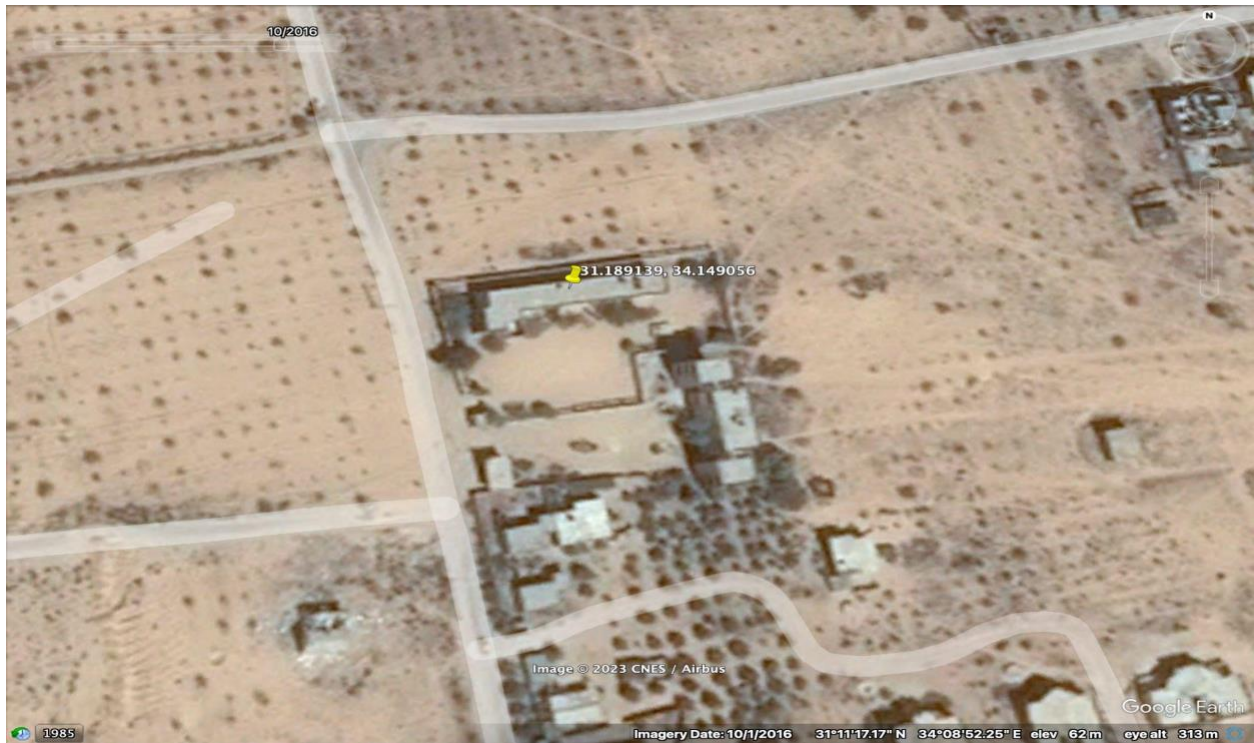


Fig. 17: Top: the school before it was used as a military base, bottom: the school under use as a military post showing all modifications.



Historical imagery from Google Earth Pro dated July 5, 2019 shows a military vehicle, most likely a tank north of the school, in addition to one more vehicle. Multiple vehicles can be seen parked inside and around the school as we assess more recent imagery. The school remains to serve as a military base to this day and was attacked previously once in 2017 or 2018 according to open-source satellite imagery.



Fig. 18: At least one military vehicle can be seen outside the school.







Fig. 19: Geolocation of the school from the video pro-army tribes can be seen carrying machine guns.

Recommendation:

- Immediately halt the recruitment, enlistment, and use of children under 18 as combatants or in military support roles that expose them to dangers.
- Prevent any recruitment or enlistment of children under 18 into pro-government militias and ensure the demobilization of those who are currently recruited.
- Investigate and punish those responsible for recruitment of children for combatant or military support roles.

## **Conclusions**

Apart from the recommendations we've listed under each cluster as per the CRC guidelines, an immediate plan needs to be in place. Something to note is that these violations have taken place and are ongoing till the day of publication. A committee dedicated towards the implementations of major reforms should be put in place by the government in partnership with civil society organizations and a representative from each administrative city. Any delay in executing said plan puts the future and welfare of alleged 110,165 students at risk and subject to irreparable harm.