



***INSS Insight*** No. 816, April 19, 2016

**King Salman's Visit to Cairo,  
and the Transfer of Tiran and Sanafir to Saudi Arabia**

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During Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz's 5-day visit to Cairo, which began on April 7, 2016, Egypt and Saudi Arabia signed a series of agreements on a range of topics, reflecting stronger bilateral coordination and mutual aid and involving a total sum of some \$25 billion. For Israel, the most significant agreement authorized the transfer of the islands of Tiran and Sanafir in the Straits of Tiran from Egypt to Saudi Arabia. This was perceived in Egypt and throughout the Arab world as payment for the massive aid Egypt has already received and expects to receive in the future from Saudi Arabia, which in return expects Egypt to toe the Saudi line on a range of political issues.

While the two countries thus appear to be enjoying some kind of honeymoon, the agreements may have negative ramifications for Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, as well as for Egypt's standing within the Arab world. In addition, several disputes still divide Cairo and Riyadh, first and foremost, policies on Syria and Yemen, as well as the attitude toward the Muslim Brotherhood. Their differing stances on these issues may very well cloud the future of the bilateral relations.

**Conflicts of Interests and Disputed Policies**

Regarding desirable political settlements in Syria, the Saudis are actively advocating Assad's immediate removal as a condition for any political arrangement. In contrast, Egypt is not adamantly opposed to the continued rule of Bashar al-Assad. Against the alternatives of control by the Islamic State or other Islamist/jihadist parties, Cairo sees the secular Syrian regime as the least of all possible evils. Furthermore, as opposed to the view in some Western circles, the Egyptians apparently do not believe in the feasibility of a liberal-secular alternative to the Assad regime. Egypt is also not particularly happy about Saudi military involvement in Yemen, despite the fact that Egypt provided its own symbolic military contribution to the Yemeni arena.

Another point of contention between Riyadh and Cairo is the attitude toward Russian intervention in Syria. Riyadh perceives this as an attempt to preserve the Assad regime and make Russia a key regional player in the face of American weakness. Cairo, on the

other hand, gave its blessings to the increased Russian involvement in the struggle against "terror" in Syria, thereby adopting Russia's rhetoric, ignoring the differences among the rebel forces in Syria, and contending they are all terror organizations, even those relying partially on Saudi support.

Furthermore, Riyadh and Cairo do not see eye to eye regarding the Muslim Brotherhood. El-Sisi's secular regime views the Muslim Brotherhood as a subversive movement and an existential threat. For its part, the Saudi regime has a strong Islamic religious identity based on the Hanbali school of thought, which at its root is a Salafist approach, and is thus less ideologically alienated from the Muslim Brotherhood. To be sure, the Arab Spring led to a conflict between the Saudi regime and the movement, due to a concern that the Muslim Brotherhood was threatening the regime's stability. However, the Saudi approach to the movement has mellowed; already noticeable during the life of the previous king, Abdullah, Riyadh is more amenable now than in the past to understandings with the Muslim Brotherhood. Moreover, for Riyadh, the Iranian threat is tangible and overwhelming. In its view, it is worth swallowing the Muslim Brotherhood bitter pill in order to try to form a united anti-Iranian Sunni front. For this purpose, Riyadh has shown a willingness to move closer also to Qatar and Turkey, which are viewed by Egypt as the patrons of the Muslim Brotherhood. Indeed, following his Cairo visit, King Salman traveled to Turkey in an attempt to mediate between Ankara and Cairo, thus far with little success.

### **Shared Cairo-Riyadh Interests**

Although Saudi Arabia and Egypt are natural rivals for influence in the Middle East in general and in the Sunni camp in particular, there exists an understanding that reality necessitates cooperation between them – that they have what to lose by acting separately, and that coordination between the countries holds important advantages. While Egypt's self-image as the leading Arab nation does not allow it to completely nullify its interests to make room for those of Saudi Arabia, it does maintain mechanisms for dialogue and coordination with the Saudis in an attempt to contain the disputes and prevent them from rising to the surface. Coordination is made possible first and foremost by the fact that alongside the disputes, the countries share major interests, and these are driving the moves toward stronger bilateral relations.

Egypt, whose economic crisis is worsening, needs continued massive financial support from Saudi Arabia, which, along with other wealthy Gulf states – e.g., UAE and Kuwait – has committed to provide significant assistance. Although this may not have been expressed publicly, there exists among the Gulf states an expectation that in return for the financial aid, Egypt will make use of its military resources and political standing to further their interests. Indeed, Saudi Arabia needs military aid and political support from Cairo, based on Egypt's tradition of leadership in the Arab world.

Over the years Saudi Arabia and Egypt have been considered the anchors of the moderate pro-American camp that is a counterweight to the Iranian axis. In light of what is currently perceived in both countries as an American retreat from regional involvement, as well as the fear of a closer relationship between the US and Iran, Egypt and Saudi Arabia find themselves for the first time in years in a position requiring them to formulate independent policies that are free of American dominance; hence the heightened importance of coordination between them. Egypt, which feels abandoned by the US, is striving to develop its relations with Russia as a partial replacement, and perhaps mainly as a way of putting pressure on the US. Saudi Arabia, for its part, which attempted – and failed – to persuade the Russians through financial compensation to abandon the Assad regime and Iran, sees Russia as a member of a hostile axis.

### **El-Sisi's Standing**

The main weakness in the recently signed agreements is the potential harm to el-Sisi's standing and to the stability of his regime – a clear Israeli interest. It would appear that el-Sisi made a good deal. In return for territory, which was not originally Egyptian, he receives an economic lifeline. However, the Egyptian public is very sensitive to the loss of territory, and el-Sisi's internal critics likewise argue that Egypt has now lost its primacy in the Arab world to its "big sister" – Saudi Arabia. At this point, it is difficult to assess the dimensions that this political storm may reach within Egypt, and to what extent the regime's standing will be harmed. In response to the criticism, the regime embarked on a public relations campaign intended to convince the public that the islands of Tiran and Sanafir were never Egyptian territory, and to remind them that the islands were transferred by Saudi Arabia to Egypt in 1950 on loan for purposes of the struggle against Israel.

In the peace agreement between Israel and Egypt, there are commitments related to the freedom of navigation in the Straits of Tiran, including arrangements in respect to the two islands. Egypt and Saudi Arabia were aware of the need to make sure that these commitments would not be harmed, and thus there were talks with Israel on this topic, leading to an announcement by the Saudi Foreign Minister that his country would honor all the commitments regarding freedom of navigation Egypt has signed. This announcement was intended to remove any potential Israeli concerns in this context.

Moreover, Israel has a clear interest in stronger Egyptian-Saudi ties. A closer relationship can become a basis of Israeli cooperation with the both of them – two key states in the pragmatic Sunni bloc opposing the Iranian axis that is hostile to Israel. Therefore, Israel should take a positive attitude to the agreements made between Egypt and Saudi Arabia, including the transfer of control over Tiran and Sanafir to the Saudis.