

# Cairo and Riyadh, Vying for Leadership

by Ilias Kouskouvelis and Konstantinos Zarras

In his first official trip abroad in March 2018, Saudi crown prince Muhammad bin Salman chose to visit Cairo, where he was greeted by President Abdel Fattah Sisi as “a dear guest in his second home, Egypt.”<sup>1</sup> The two agreed to enhance bilateral cooperation across the political spectrum, implementing ambitious development projects and strengthening



*Saudi crown prince Muhammad bin Salman (left) meets with Egyptian president Abdel Fattah Sisi, Cairo, March 2018. Saudi Arabia and Egypt have both claimed a leading regional role, and their relations have long swung between cooperation and indirect confrontation.*

bilateral strategic ties. This collaborative mood notwithstanding, the two states have yet to overcome weighty strategic and foreign policy differences that over the past decade often marred the bilateral relationship, first and foremost: What constitutes the gravest threat to regional stability?

<sup>1</sup> *Egypt Today* (Giza), [Mar. 3, 2018](#).

## An Oscillating Relationship

Saudi Arabia and Egypt have each claimed a leading regional role, and their relations have long swung between cooperation and indirect confrontation. During Gamal Abdel Nasser's rule (1954-70), Cairo emerged as the main claimant for regional hegemon. Saudi-Egyptian antagonism then came to the forefront and culminated in the proxy war in Yemen (1962-70) where the two states found themselves fighting on opposing sides. Yet Egypt's defeat in the June 1967 war and Nasser's death in September 1970 ushered in a thaw between the two states. Cairo gradually shifted towards the Western camp and recognized Riyadh's prominent role in the Muslim world, in exchange for generous economic support. Under Hosni Mubarak's rule, close relations with the desert kingdom became one of Egypt's foreign policy pillars.<sup>2</sup>

The revolutionary upheavals of 2011 and the ascent of the Muslim Brotherhood to Egypt's leadership ended the Mubarak era's three-decade long *modus vivendi*. Despite President Mohamed Morsi's efforts to reassure his Arab peers that his government would not disturb the regional order, the Saudis were uneasy with Egypt's political transformation. Not only was the Brotherhood's governance model menacing to the monarchy, but an emerging alliance between Egypt, Qatar, and Turkey created a powerful rival Sunni axis that threatened Riyadh's claim to Muslim leadership. Worse, a rapprochement between the nascent

Brotherhood-linked axis and Tehran could not be excluded. All this contributed to Riyadh's formal designation of the Brotherhood as a terrorist organization, and its assumption of a leadership role in defending the Persian Gulf monarchies and their regional allies in the face of the Obama administration's support for Islamist-backed revolutions.<sup>3</sup>

Morsi's overthrow by the Egyptian army in the summer of 2013 was thus viewed by the Saudis as a major step towards stemming the revolutionary tide throughout the region. They were the first to endorse Sisi's new regime and to extend economic and financial support. In return, Riyadh looked to Egyptian diplomatic and military support, especially in containing Tehran's growing influence.

Egyptian-Saudi relations went into temporary decline following King Salman's ascendance to the throne in 2015. The new monarch attempted to mend fences with Islamist figures and movements, so as to rally them for the struggle against Iran. But this rapprochement did not sit well with the Egyptian regime, which was busy suppressing the Brotherhood's remaining power.<sup>4</sup> Donald Trump's election, together with a number of regional developments (notably the deepening rift between Riyadh and Doha), brought the two Sunni powers together again. With Washington throwing its weight behind the regional effort to contain Tehran, Riyadh no longer needed Qatar and Brotherhood-linked Islamist forces

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2 Mustafa el-Labbad, "Egypt: A 'Regional Reference' in the Middle East," in Henner Fürtig, ed., *Regional Powers in the Middle East. New Constellations after the Arab Revolts* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), pp. 81-99.

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3 Efraim Karsh, "[Obama's Middle East Delusions](#)," *Middle East Quarterly*, Winter 2016.

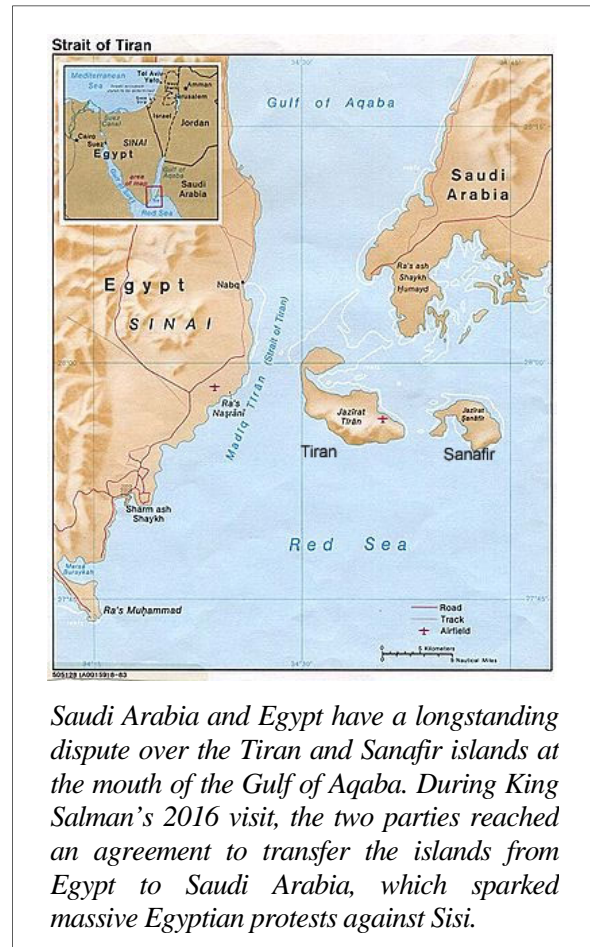
4 H.A. Hellyer, "[The New Saudi King, Egypt and the Muslim Brotherhood](#)," *Al-Monitor* (Washington, D.C.), Mar. 24, 2015.

for the pursuit of this goal.<sup>5</sup> The Saudis thus resumed oil supplies to Egypt. With Sisi reciprocating by actively participating in the blockade against Doha, common opposition to the Qatar-Turkey-Brotherhood axis has become a crucial bond between Cairo and Riyadh.

### Diverging Views and Conflicting Interests

During the early months of Sisi's rule, Cairo appeared to be firmly on the bandwagon with Riyadh, not least given its dependence on Saudi assistance to avoid economic collapse. But if the Saudis expected their financial support to ensure Egypt's unconditional and constant compliance on regional issues, they were to be quickly disillusioned.

The first foreign policy dispute revolved around the Yemeni civil war. While Cairo deferred to Riyadh and endorsed Yemeni president Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi upon the Houthis conquest of Sanaa in September 2014, it stubbornly resisted repeated pleas to join the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen, contenting itself with the dispatch of a token force.<sup>6</sup> This reluctance can be partly ascribed to the lingering trauma of the earlier Yemeni civil war (1962-70), where the Egyptian army suffered massive losses,<sup>7</sup> and partly to Cairo's refusal to compromise its traditional leadership role in the Arab world by playing second fiddle to Riyadh. Hence, Sisi



*Saudi Arabia and Egypt have a longstanding dispute over the Tiran and Sanafir islands at the mouth of the Gulf of Aqaba. During King Salman's 2016 visit, the two parties reached an agreement to transfer the islands from Egypt to Saudi Arabia, which sparked massive Egyptian protests against Sisi.*

proposed at the March 2015 Sharm ash-Sheikh Arab League summit to form a pan-Arab force that would defend the sovereignty of member states, in which Egypt would presumably play a leading role.<sup>8</sup>

Another source of Saudi-Egyptian contention related to the transfer of the Red Sea islands of Tiran and Sanafir, strategically located at the mouth of the Gulf of Aqaba, from Egypt to Saudi Arabia. During King Salman's visit to Cairo in April 2016, the two parties reached an agreement on the islands that provoked furious reactions from the Egyptian public, which viewed the move

5 Aaron David Miller and Richard Sokolsky, "[Donald Trump Has Unleashed the Saudi Arabia We Always Wanted—and Feared](#)," *Foreign Policy*, Nov. 10, 2017.

6 Amr Khalifa, "[Egypt's Yemen Misadventure](#)," *Al-Araby al-Jadeed* (London), Sept. 10, 2015.

7 Jesse Ferris, "[Egypt's Vietnam](#)," *Foreign Policy*, Apr. 3, 2015.

8 "[Final Communiqué of the 26th Arab League Summit](#)," Sharm ash-Sheikh, Mar. 29, 2015.

as an expression of Riyadh's regional pre-eminence at Egypt's expense.<sup>9</sup> An Egyptian court then suspended the deal, leaving the Saudis fuming, and it was only in June 2017 that the Egyptian parliament and presidency ratified the transfer agreement, sparking the first massive protest against Sisi.<sup>10</sup>

Policy differences have only become more obvious. Cairo has been preoccupied with preserving domestic stability in the face of jihadist insurgency in Sinai and simmering Islamist irredentism at home and has adopted a clear position against any non-state actor threatening its interests. In contrast, Riyadh has viewed regional politics through the lens of its rivalry with Tehran and has had no qualms about supporting non-state actors provided they opposed Iran and its allies. These differences came to the fore during the Syrian civil war, which was the main cause for the deterioration of the bilateral relationship in 2016.<sup>11</sup>

Riyadh was the first regional power to condemn Bashar Assad's regime and call for its overthrow after the initial 2011 incidents that sparked the Syrian civil war. The Saudis also became major contributors of financial and military assistance to the rebels in an attempt to undermine Iranian interests in Syria. Yet Riyadh's determin-

**The Syrian civil war was the main cause for the deterioration of the Saudi-Egyptian relationship in 2016.**

ation to prevent certain militant Islamist groups from gaining the upper hand in Syria put it on a collision course with Qatar and Turkey, which favored Brother-

hood-linked and Salafi-jihadi elements. As Tehran deepened its military presence in Syria, both directly (notably the Islamic Revolutionary Guards' Quds Force) and by proxy (Hezbollah and other Shiite militias), and as the rebels veered on the verge of defeat, Riyadh moved to support some of the Islamist groups it had hitherto refrained from backing.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, Cairo viewed the Syrian war through the prism of the regional fight against jihadism and regarded the survival of the Assad regime as a decisive win in this struggle, rejecting the persistent Saudi pressure to support the anti-regime rebellion.

A no less vivid illustration of the Egyptian reluctance to stir any escalation of regional tensions was afforded during the bizarre incident of Saad Hariri's resignation from Lebanon's premiership in November 2017 while on a visit to Riyadh. Not only did Cairo back Hariri's subsequent renegeing of the resignation, but it blocked the attempt to suspend the membership of the Lebanese government, in which Hezbollah is a member, from the Arab League. This reflected the Egyptian prioritization of Lebanese stability over the containment of Hezbollah, and more generally, the reluctance to become entangled in confrontation with Iran's proxies.

9 "[The Legal Status of Tiran and Sanafir Islands](#)," *Dirasat*, King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies, Riyadh, Apr. 2017, p. 65; *Ahram Online* (Cairo), [Apr. 11, 2016](#).

10 *Ahram Online* (Cairo), [Apr. 15, 2016](#).

11 Michael Hanna and Daniel Benaim, "[Egypt First: Under Sisi, Cairo Is Going Its Own Way](#)," *Foreign Affairs*, Jan. 4, 2018.

12 Yehuda U. Blanga, "[Saudi Arabia's Motives in the Syrian Civil War](#)," *Middle East Policy*, Winter 2017.



*Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu (left) meets with Egyptian president Sisi, New York, September 2017. Egyptian-Israeli security cooperation reached its peak after the ousting of President Morsi while Riyadh's warming relations with Israel have also strengthened Egyptian-Saudi cooperation in the face of the growing Iranian threat.*

### Complementary Interests

Their diverging policy conceptions notwithstanding, Cairo and Riyadh not only share common strategic goals, but recent developments have opened the possibility for overcoming differences and improving bilateral relations. Thus, for example, Moscow's direct military intervention in Syria has narrowed the gap between the Saudi and the Egyptian approaches to the conflict. By catalyzing the decisive defeat of the rebellion, the Russians made the overthrow of the Assad regime a moot point while their massive military presence in Syria has created a formidable counterweight to Tehran's predominance in the country. In these circumstances, and given Sisi's good standing with the Assad regime, Riyadh could see the benefits of Cairo assuming a mediating role in Syria to constrain further the influence of Tehran and its proxies. Egypt had already mediated a ceasefire between the Syrian government and rebel

factions in east Ghouta in July 2017, and its close relations with Moscow puts it in an auspicious position to play an active mediatory role in the future.<sup>13</sup>

An additional factor strengthening Egyptian-Saudi cooperation has been Riyadh's warming relations with Israel in the face of the growing Iranian threat. Both states see Tehran's hegemonic ambitions in similarly stark terms, and both have followed developments in Syria and Lebanon with considerable concern and have coordinated their efforts to delegitimize Hezbollah and restrict its power and influence. And while they have not yet established diplomatic relations, Jerusalem and Riyadh have exchanged working visits, and there are indications of significant bilateral intelligence cooperation.<sup>14</sup>

For its part, Egyptian-Israeli security cooperation reached its peak after the ousting of President Morsi. Mutual trust reached such a level that the Netanyahu government approved the deployment of thousands of Egyptian troops near the joint border (in contravention of the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty) to defeat the Islamist insurgency in Sinai. Establishing full control over the peninsula is a shared Egyptian-Israeli-Saudi interest considering not only security aspects—fighting jihadist groups and controlling Hamas—but also planned regional mega-projects.<sup>15</sup> Most importantly,

13 Amr Eltohamy, "[The limits of Egypt's role in the Syria crisis](#)," *Al-Monitor*, Aug. 9, 2017.

14 Reuters, Nov. 19, 2017.

15 "[Crown Prince and Egyptian President Witness Signing of Three Agreements, Investment Memorandum of Understanding](#)," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Riyadh, Mar. 6, 2018.

stabilizing the Sinai functions as a confidence building measure between the three states and facilitates further cooperation.

A no lesser catalyst for the consolidation of Egyptian-Saudi cooperation has been relations with Turkey. Since 2013, Ankara has led the anti-Egyptian camp with Cairo viewing the Turks as leading purveyors of Islamist extremism. In comparison to lingering political animosity between presidents Sisi and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkish-Saudi relations have seesawed due to differing perceptions of regional issues as well as competition for leadership among Sunni Muslims.<sup>16</sup> There was a temporary re-warming during the initial period of King Salman's reign when he was willing to cooperate with Islamist groups to counter Iranian influence. But by the summer of 2017, Saudis and Turks were yet again at loggerheads. Ankara's decision to position itself emphatically behind Qatar in its dispute with Riyadh, especially the deployment of Turkish troops at the Tariq bin Ziyad military base in southern Doha, was seen by Riyadh as a straightforward affront.<sup>17</sup> Turkish meddling in Persian Gulf affairs has contributed substantially to Qatari rejection of demands by the Anti-Terror Quartet (United Arab Emirates [UAE], Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Egypt) and facilitated Ankara's subsequent cooperation with Tehran—which further angered the Saudis.

**Turkish and Qatari activities in the Persian Gulf region appear to oppose Egyptian and Saudi interests.**

In the current strategic setup, Turkish and Qatari activities appear to oppose Egyptian and Saudi interests on different levels. One example is the Libyan

conflict, which Cairo considers part of the regional war against Islamist radicalism and a vital issue for its national security.<sup>18</sup> While Qatar and Turkey have backed the Islamist-leaning forces linked to the Muslim Brotherhood movement, Egypt and the UAE have assisted the Libyan National Army of Gen. Khalifa Haftar, the main anti-Islamist force in the conflict. In February 2015, after Qatar blocked an Arab League decision authorizing Egypt to intervene against the Islamic State (ISIS) in Libya, the Egyptian foreign ministry issued a statement condemning Doha for supporting terrorism.<sup>19</sup> Sisi has no intention of allowing the porous Libyan-Egyptian border to be controlled by groups collaborating with Islamist forces in Sinai and the Egyptian mainland.<sup>20</sup>

Middle Eastern rivalries (and their pro- and anti-Brotherhood components) are also intense in the Red Sea and East Africa regions where several states compete for influence. Both Egypt and Saudi Arabia attribute great importance to their presence in the region as it impacts other security issues. Cairo's primary objective is to secure free passage through the Bab al-Mandeb Strait and the Red Sea, which is vital for the operation of the Suez Canal. In addition, a

16 Konstantinos Zarras, "Prospects of GCC-Turkey Cooperation and the Syrian Crisis," in Özden Zeynep Oktav and Helin Sarı Ertem, eds., *GCC-Turkey Relations: Dawn of a New Era* (Cambridge: Gulf Research Center Cambridge, 2015), pp. 206-8.

17 *Hürriyet Daily News* (Istanbul), [July 14, 2017](#).

18 Wolfgang Mühlberger, "Egypt's Foreign and Security Policy in Post-R2P Libya," *The International Spectator*, June 2016.

19 *Al-Jazeera* (Doha), [Feb. 1, 2015](#).

20 *Al-Ahram Weekly* (Cairo), [Oct. 25, 2017](#).

strong presence at the Red Sea promotes Egypt's interests in the Blue Nile basin where it has ongoing disputes with Sudan and Ethiopia.<sup>21</sup>

**A solid Egyptian-Saudi-Emirati bloc will counter the Turkish-Qatari efforts to project power in the Red Sea and East African regions.**

The presence of the Turkey-Qatar axis in the region has provoked a shift in alignments and reignited the territorial dispute between Cairo and Khartoum regarding the sovereignty over the Halayeb Triangle. Sudan's relations with Egypt have severely deteriorated since Sisi's rise to power due to the pro-Brotherhood stance of President Omar Bashir. Khartoum sided with the Turkish-Qatari camp on several instances, such as the Libyan war. It has also coordinated its policy with Ethiopia on the issue of the Renaissance Dam project in order to put more pressure on Egypt.<sup>22</sup> A recent deal between Khartoum and Ankara over the Suakin Island, which may include construction of a Turkish military base, has contributed to the significant rise of tensions between the neighboring countries.<sup>23</sup> The restored Ottoman port will not only serve as a station point for the pilgrimage to Mecca but will also contain a dock for civilian and military vessels. Given that Ankara established a military base in Somalia in 2017, a permanent presence in the Red Sea signifies the projection of Turkish influence in the Egyptian and Saudi backyards. Cairo reacted to these developments by establishing closer ties with Eritrea and South Sudan and by sending more troops to the military base in Assab.

Ankara's policy of exploiting local

rivalries to expand its influence across eastern Africa, with Qatari backing, has offered more incentives for cooperation between Cairo and Riyadh.<sup>24</sup> The Suakin Is-

land deal might make Riyadh more responsive to Egyptian and UAE concerns. As long as the Saudi-Qatari rift remains active, Riyadh will seek to coordinate its policies with Cairo and Abu Dhabi in the Red Sea region. The return of the Tiran and Sanafir islands signals the kingdom's readiness to assume a more active role in the area. Ambitious projects, such as the development of the NEOM mega city,<sup>25</sup> highlight this aspect of Saudi policy.

The Yemeni civil war has further increased the Red Sea's strategic value for Riyadh. A scenario where Tehran, through its Houthi proxies, could block the maritime traffic of the Red Sea, bearing in mind that it already has the possibility to close the Straits of Hormuz, would be most unwelcome for the Saudis. With this logic, the formation of a solid Egyptian-Saudi-Emirati bloc in the Red Sea and East Africa will impede any Iranian attempt to supply the Houthi rebels, counter the Turkish-Qatari efforts to project power in the area, and reinforce Cairo's position in its bilateral disputes with Sudan and Ethiopia.

## Conclusion

Given their differences over what should be considered the foremost regional

21 Daniel Pipes, "[Can Egypt and Ethiopia Share the Nile?](#)" *The Washington Times*, Feb. 18, 2016.

22 *Mada Masr* (Cairo), [Mar. 8, 2018](#).

23 *Al-Arabiya* (Dubai), [Dec. 26, 2017](#).

24 Theodore Karasik and Giorgio Caffero, "[Turkey's move into the Red Sea unsettles Egypt](#)," Middle East Institute, Washington, D.C., Jan. 17, 2018.

25 Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, "[NEOM—The Destination for the Future](#)," Public Investment Fund, Riyadh, Oct. 24, 2017.

threat, it is difficult to predict which way the bilateral relationship between Egypt and Saudi Arabia will go. Cairo prioritizes the containment of Islamist groups while Riyadh seeks to curb Tehran's drive for regional hegemony (and its unbridled nuclear ambitions). In addition, Egypt is reluctant to play a secondary role in a Saudi-led Sunni camp. It is clear, however, that as long as Turkey and Qatar continue to consolidate their alliance and move closer to Iran, Riyadh and Cairo will need each other to curb their

rivals' regional influence and promote their own interests.

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