



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Sailing through the Straits

The Meaning for Israel of Restored Saudi Sovereignty over Tiran and Sanafir Islands

by Dr. Eran Lerman and Prof. Joshua Teitelbaum

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 340, April 17, 2016

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The fact that Saudi Arabia has now undertaken to uphold in practice the obligations assumed by Egypt under its peace treaty with Israel, means that Israel's place in the region is no longer perceived by Arab leader Saudi Arabia as an anomaly to be corrected. This is a far cry from normalization of Saudi relations with Israel, but it is nevertheless a welcome ray of light, demonstrating the benefits of cooperation and coordination in a region beset by violence.

For Israelis above a certain age, mentioning the name of Tiran and Sanafir islands is enough to send a thrill – or a chill – down their spines, bringing to mind the proud refrain of a popular song, written in the tense days just before the Six Day War: “We shall make our way/ at nighttime or day/ with our flag, blue and white/ through the Tiran Straits.”

Indeed, the Straits were the *casus belli* back in 1967, when Gamal Abd al-Nasser cast all caution (and international norms) to the wind and closed them to Israeli shipping. Eilat is a strategic asset and the terminus of Israel's trade with much of Asia and Africa. Even the secretive Protocol of Sèvres signed by Britain, France and Israel in October 1956 had included an explicit reference to Israel's needs concerning the two islands.

Israel captured the islands in the Six Day War, but the 1979 Peace Treaty between Israel and Egypt enshrined Egypt's commitment to international norms regarding the freedom of navigation and the islands were returned.

One of the region's neuralgic points was thus removed for many years from the headlines and from the field of conflict.

Will it now re-emerge again a source of tension? The answer, at least for the foreseeable future, can be deduced from the circumstances of the dramatic announcement this week. It came as the culminating achievement of Saudi King Salman's historic visit to Cairo, which cemented the vital relationship between these two pillars of regional stability and saw the promulgation of a long list of bilateral agreements on economic and strategic cooperation.

Having played a major role in sustaining the present Egyptian regime against political and economic challenges, the Saudis were now in a position to finalize the restoration of their sovereignty over the islands, control of which they have ceded to Egypt back in 1949 in the context of the latter's better ability to utilize them in the struggle with Israel – which has by now become irrelevant. Their legal case was apparently unassailable, and it was thus more a matter of when rather than whether they will actually assert their claim.

This came as no surprise to Israel. Back in July 2015, the "Cairo Declaration" issued during the visit of Salman's activist son, Muhammad – serving as Saudi Arabia's Defense Minister – included an explicit reference to the need to settle certain questions of maritime demarcation between the two countries – which could only mean the two islands. Egypt took care to explain its decision to Israel and to allay any fears that this may have any effect on the freedom of navigation. The Saudis did so as well, according to Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon, albeit in their own way, while asserting that no direct coordination with Israel can be expected (nor is it necessary).

Israel's freedom of navigation in the Straits was guaranteed in the deal, said Ayalon. And indeed, the restoration of sovereignty serves to bolster the Saudi commitment to Egyptian stability – which goes a long way towards explaining the rage expressed by the Muslim Brotherhood at this breach of Egypt's "national rights." With the need to confront Iran high above all other considerations in the Saudi and Egyptian national security playbook – and in Israel's – any major step that helps bring together the "camp of stability" in the region under joint Egyptian-Saudi leadership will also serve Israel's interests.

Moreover, despite the disavowal of any direct contacts over this issue – and other important issues – over the years, the very fact that Saudi Arabia now undertakes to uphold in practice the obligations assumed by Egypt under the peace treaty means that Israel's place in the region is no longer perceived by Arab leader Saudi Arabia as an anomaly to be corrected. This is a far cry from

“normalization” (*tatbi`*) – which remains a dirty word in the Arab dictionary. But it is nevertheless a welcome ray of light, demonstrating the benefits of cooperation and coordination in a region beset by so much violence.

Col. (res.) Dr. Eran Lerman is former deputy for foreign policy and international affairs at the Israel National Security Council. He served for two decades in Israeli military intelligence. Prof. Joshua Teitelbaum, an expert on the Gulf states, Saudi Arabia, and pan-Arab issues, teaches in the department of Middle East studies at Bar-Ilan University. Both are senior research associates at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies.