



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Saudi-Egyptian Tensions: Rifts Within the “Camp of Stability” Serve Iran’s Interests

by Col. (res.) Dr. Eran Lerman

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 384, December 4, 2016

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: A dangerous rift has developed in Saudi-Egyptian relations on two fronts. The Saudis, for whom the Iranian-backed Houthi uprising in Yemen has become an existential issue, are aggrieved that Egypt is not pulling its full weight in that campaign. The Egyptian leadership fears that Saudi policies in Syria play into the hands of the Muslim Brotherhood (and the Brotherhood ally in Ankara), as well as other Islamist radicals. This crack in the already ramshackle edifice of the "Camp of Stability" should concern all who seek to contain and roll back the Iranian threat and the rise of totalitarian Islamism across the region.

On July 31, 2015, the dominant player in Saudi Arabia today, Defense Minister (and the King's son) Muhammad Bin Salman, met Egyptian president Abd al-Fattah Sisi and signed the Cairo Declaration, which pledged closer ties. On April 9, 2016, the Egyptian government declared – against strong opposition at home – that the Red Sea islands of Tiran and Sanafir would be restored to Saudi sovereignty.

This burgeoning relationship appears to have soured. On November 7, 2016, the Saudi authorities let it be known that they are indefinitely halting oil shipments that were to have been provided under a US\$23 billion aid package agreed to during King Salman's visit to Cairo in April. This signaled in no uncertain terms that a dangerous rift has emerged between the two pillars of the "Camp of Stability" in the region.

Though the two countries have common enemies, important strategic differences have come to the fore, mainly on two points of regional policy.

On Yemen, the Saudis – who, together with the Emiratis, have been fighting a long and bloody war to dislodge Iranian-backed Houthi forces – are bitter about the underwhelming Egyptian response to their calls for help. From their perspective, a Shiite stronghold in Yemen, heavily armed and actively supported by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), is a dagger pointed directly at the Hijaz and the two holy cities of Mecca and Medina. It is, in other words, an existential threat.

For the first time, the Saudis have engaged in active fighting in a neighboring state, with significant losses, rather than letting the US do their fighting for them. (The Obama administration, while willing to respond locally to a Houthi attack on US naval assets, has been careful to steer clear of the Yemeni conflict.) It is thus not surprising that Riyadh expects, and resents its failure to obtain, more effective support from the largest standing army in the region, beyond a limited involvement by the Egyptian Navy.

The Egyptians, in turn, raise an eyebrow at Saudi policy in Syria. They see Assad not as an Iranian agent busy murdering his own people, which is how he is viewed by Riyadh and most other Gulf states (including Qatar, whose policies are a source of serious concern in Cairo), but as an element of stability. He is a "devil we know," and his survival is preferable to the rise of an Islamic State or Muslim Brotherhood regime (which, for Sisi, would be as bad or worse).

In the Egyptian view, the alternative to Assad's rump state will not be a peaceful Syria but an even worse slaughterhouse than it is already. Saudi policies are thus causing growing concern in Cairo: not least because they coincide with the course set by Erdoğan, who remains a virulent opponent of Sisi's.

Quick to fish in these murky waters were the Russians, who endorse the Egyptian point of view. They are highly suspicious of the Saudis, primarily because the Saudi-produced glut in the oil markets is threatening Russia's economic future. This position explains Russia's strategic embrace of Egypt, as well as of Sisi's surrogate in Libya, General Hiftar, who recently paid his second visit to Moscow in recent months.

Military links between Egypt and Russia are tightening. While Cairo cannot afford to shed its dependence on American military aid, its developing relationship with Moscow is part of a general drift away from the firm US alliance that has marked Egyptian relations with the Obama administration since 2013.

The danger, not only for Israel, is that the Saudi-Egyptian rift will play into Iranian hands in Yemen, in Syria, and on other frontiers. The IRGC is vocal about Tehran's revolutionary ambitions and the growing spread of its influence across the region. They now see one of their enemy camps cleaved in half.

Moreover, the decline in Saudi aid to Egypt comes at a delicate moment. Sisi has devalued the Egyptian pound as part of the measures required for its IMF loan. Tensions are growing over shortages from baby formula to sugar. The potential consequences cannot be overstated. If Egypt were to sink into social and political chaos, the implications for the Mediterranean and beyond are unthinkable.

It should thus be a top priority for the incoming Trump administration (as neither side, unfortunately, has much trust in the outgoing administration) to work hard to patch up this rift. Each side must respond to the legitimate concerns of the other and restore coherence to the forces of stability as they face a mounting Iranian challenge.

Col. (res.) Dr. Eran Lerman is a senior research associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, and former deputy for foreign policy and international affairs at the National Security Council. He is also a member of the faculty at Shalem College.

BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family