



## **Egypt and Saudi Arabia: A Predictable Rapprochement**

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Saudi Arabian King Salman's five-day visit to Egypt and the extensive media coverage it garnered are an expression of the warming of ties since al-Sisi became president in June 2013. Morsi's overthrowing and declaration of the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization in December 2013 were welcomed by Riyadh and immediately rewarded with a tremendous \$12 billion aid package from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the UAE. The Egyptian-Saudi rapprochement manifests itself in various forms. In September 2014 the Saudis opened their largest embassy in Cairo, al-Sisi visited the kingdom three times in his first year in office and he was also awarded the prestigious Abd al-Aziz medal, which is reserved for prominent individuals such as Presidents Bush and Obama.

Yet with King Abdullah's passing in January 2015 it seemed that the two states were growing apart. The media was quick to point out disagreements on issues such as the countries' approaches to Yemen, the Muslim Brotherhood and Syria, where the Saudis demanded Assad's departure as part of any outcome and the Egyptian's saw Assad as part of the solution. In Yemen, too, despite expressing its support, Egypt was reticent to contribute troops to the Arab force. However, despite tactical disagreements, the two countries strategically continued to share common interests vis-à-vis regional threats and challenges.

Therefore, Salman's visit is a testament to the strong relationship – one might even say the alliance – between the two countries. Historically, cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Egypt has been a permanent feature of the Arab state system despite short periods of rivalry and the occasional military confrontation (e.g. the 1962-1967 conflict in Yemen).

The visit is consequential for the countries' bilateral relationship, primarily for Egypt. According to Egyptian media, no fewer than 36 agreements worth \$25 billion were signed during the visit, including establishing a Saudi investment fund worth \$16 billion. The headline is the provision of Saudi aid (perhaps even from the Gulf states) to rebuild Sinai, including creating a free-trade zone, building a university named after Salman, and erecting a bridge to connect Sinai and Saudi Arabia. This is not a new idea, but it did not materialize because of the peace accord with Israel (and perhaps additional internal

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reasons). The bridge will allow countless tourists and pilgrims, as well as goods, to cross from one continent to the next. Like the Suez Canal expansion, this project will also contribute significantly to the Egyptian economy. That Sinai is the focus of governmental aid is not surprising, because it is meant to be part of Cairo's response to the challenge posed by the radical jihadi organizations. The regime understands full well that the answer to the problems in Sinai is not purely military. Rather, it involves improving the lives of the peninsula's inhabitants.

The trip's religious dimension was evident in Salman's visit to al-Azhar, which represents the moderate school of thought struggling against the Islamic State. No less important, however, was his meeting with the Coptic Patriarch. As the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, Salman's meeting with the patriarch was an important symbolic gesture, meant to strengthen the perception that Islam is tolerant and respectful of other faiths, too.

During the visit, it was announced that the islands of Tiran and Sanafir, located at the entrance of the Gulf of Eilat, would be handed over to the Saudis, who previously controlled them. In 1950, the Saudis decided to lease the islands to Egypt in order to facilitate the Arab boycott and maritime quarantine of Israel. The islands were conquered by Israel in 1956 and again in 1967 but returned to Egypt after the 1979 peace agreement. Therefore, the current agreement will return them to the rightful owners. Israel has no reason to be concerned, despite the islands' strategic importance, as Saudi Arabia has not been involved in previous wars with Israel and has no incentive to threaten it.

The visit included also symbolic manifestations. The king, for example, was awarded the highest Egyptian honor – the Nile medal – reserved for those who have made a significant contribution to the state. This, of course, was a reciprocal gesture for the honor bestowed upon President al-Sisi in Saudi Arabia. According to the daily *al-Masry al-Youm*, the projected bridge will be called the King Salman and Sykes-Picot Bridge. At first glance, the name seems awkward; its first part seems logical, as it was meant to show appreciation for the king's support for the huge project. Yet, the second part of the name is purely symbolic, meant to signal an end to the artificial separation created between Asia and Africa following the signing of the imperial Sykes-Picot agreement, not incidentally signed one hundred years ago.

Contrary to the official media, social network commentary is highly critical of al-Sisi's self-deprecation in the face of Egypt's rich sister, which they perceive as unbecoming of Egypt's standing in the Arab world. Yet these critics, motivated by national honor, overestimate Egypt's strength and do not realize the magnitude of Egypt's dependence on the Gulf countries. Egypt is no longer the leader of the Arab world (as it was under Nasser) and not first among equals (as it was under Sadat and Mubarak). Al-Sisi's Egypt is searching for its place in the Arab world.

At this point, it is difficult to estimate whether, or to what extent, the agreements will be fulfilled. Yet it is clear that reports of deteriorating Saudi-Egyptian relations were exaggerated. The Saudi-Egyptian alliance is solid. This is good news for Israel, which is seeking out Arab allies in its struggle against Iran and the jihadis of the Middle East.