

# Egyptian-Saudi Relations: Managing a Difficult Marriage

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المركز العربي واشنطن دي سي

An iconic image from President Donald Trump's visit to Riyadh last May was when he, Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi all had their hands around a glowing globe that seemed to be imbued with special powers. The leaders were all smiles. Symbolically, this image of the three heads of state underscored Trump's alliance with two major Sunni Muslim Arab leaders, but it was also meant to show that Egyptian-Saudi relations were on the mend.

Given that Egypt and Saudi Arabia have experienced many ups and downs in their relationship, it would probably be prudent to bring out this globe every now and then for reassurance purposes. Nonetheless, both countries need each other, and this interdependence works to keep them together in a symbiotic relationship despite occasional strains.

### **A Checkered History**

The Egyptian-Saudi relationship is a marriage of convenience and requires constant attention. Historically, the two countries have been both allies and enemies, but more so the former than the latter. Egypt was traditionally the strongest Arab military power with a large population, a highly competent diplomatic corps, and prominent intellectual institutions. Saudi Arabia was the country of large oil resources that would provide financial aid to so-called frontline states, like Egypt, in past confrontations with Israel. It would also shore up Egypt's often-troubled economy. Saudi

support for Egypt in the 1973 Arab-Israeli war and its aftermath was a prime example of this type of arrangement. Egyptian teachers and workers also found jobs in Saudi Arabia and sent substantial remittances home.

Egypt often returned the favor by coming to the aid of Saudi Arabia in its time of need, such as when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990. Egypt played a crucial diplomatic role by leading the anti-Iraq faction in the Arab League to condemn the invasion, supporting the idea of foreign troops on Saudi soil and sending about 30,000 of its own troops to defend the Saudi kingdom and help eject Iraqi troops from Kuwait.

There were also times when the two countries were bitter enemies. During the so-called Arab Cold War, Egypt under the charismatic leadership of Gamal Abdel-Nasser and his brand of radical pan-Arab nationalism was seen as a threat by Saudi Arabia. The two countries became involved in a costly war in Yemen that lasted from 1962 to 1967, and which the Egyptians, in particular, have never forgotten.

Outside of politics, there are stereotypes of each other that have adversely affected bilateral relations. The educated Egyptian elite tend to view themselves as culturally and intellectually superior to the Saudis, whom they perceive, by the grace of God, as largely benefitting from the unexpected fortune of finding oil under their desert sands. As for the Saudis, they tend to see the Egyptians as having an inflated sense of their own importance, resentful when they are not leaders of the Arab world (like the situation

now), and ungrateful for the largesse that has been given to them. During tensions in the relationship, such attitudes bubble to the surface.

### **Support for Sisi, but Differences over Regional Issues**

In the summer of 2013, the relationship swung back to becoming very close again as the Saudis supported then-Defense Minister Sisi's overthrow of President Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood—an organization that the Saudis had come to see as a threat. Saudi Arabia showered Egypt with billions of dollars in aid thereafter (perhaps as much as \$20 billion) and this assistance, along with aid from the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait, helped keep the Egyptian economy afloat. This was a crucial act that warmed and solidified the bilateral relationship for a time.

In return, Egypt under Sisi lent political and some military support to Saudi efforts to oppose the Houthi rebels in Yemen who took over large sections of that country, including the capital city of Sanaa, in 2014-2015. Egypt did send some naval vessels near the Yemeni coast and reportedly undertook airstrikes against the Houthis from these ships in the spring of 2015, but it refused to send ground troops into the conflict, undoubtedly with the unhappy experience of their involvement in Yemen in the 1960s still in their minds.

Although Egypt did not like the fact that Iran was meddling in the conflict by supporting the

Houthis, who follow the Zaydi branch of Shi'i Islam—and Sisi stated publicly that Arab problems should be handled by Arabs alone—Egypt never saw Iran in such stark terms as did Saudi Arabia. In fact, during the final stages of the Iran nuclear negotiations between the P5+1 countries and Iran, the Egyptian and the Iranian foreign ministers had what appeared to be a friendly meeting on the sidelines of the Nonaligned Movement ministerial in 2015.

The Egyptians have also been wary of Saudi support for Sunni Islamist groups in Yemen like the Islah party, which is considered the Yemeni branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. Egyptian officials believe that the Saudis' obsession with Iran and Iranian-supported factions and regimes leads them to support Sunni Islamist groups that are also quite extreme.

### **Sharp Differences Particularly over Syria**

Indeed, such differences have come to the forefront over Syria, in particular. In March 2015, Sisi bruised Saudi sensitivities over Syria when he read aloud a letter from Russian President Vladimir Putin (Egypt's new friend under Sisi) at an Arab summit meeting held in the Egyptian resort town of Sharm al-Sheikh. Then-Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal stated that the Russians "speak about tragedies in Syria while they are an essential part of the tragedies befalling the Syrian people." This statement resonated throughout the Arab world.

Despite some attempts thereafter to gloss over differences regarding Syria, the Egyptian and Saudi positions continue to be at variance. Cairo does not believe that Syrian President Bashar al-Asad should step down from power (as does Riyadh) and worries that a collapse of the Syrian regime would benefit Islamist groups, like the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, and even more radical groups like Al-Qaeda's affiliate (now called Jabhat Fateh al-Sham). Egyptians also believe that Saudi support for Islamist opposition groups in the Syrian civil war is like playing with fire, not knowing where it will spread. From Cairo's perspective, a radical Islamist regime in Damascus would be a disaster not only for Syria and the Levant region, but for Egypt as well.

In August 2016, Sisi told Cairo's leading newspapers that Egypt's policy is based on "respecting the unity of Syrian territory and the Syrian people's will, finding a political solution to the crisis, disarming the militias and radical groups, and reactivating the role of state institutions."

In September 2016, Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry underscored to these same newspapers that armed struggle in Syria "will decide nothing, and there is no place for terrorist organizations in the new Syria." Reiterating Egypt's stance in favor of a political solution, Shoukry said that the Saudi belief that armed struggle will lead to change in Syria "will not happen." As for Asad's fate, Shoukry reportedly said "that is the affair of the Syrian people," and contrasted this stance with Saudi

Arabia's position of supporting regime or leadership change.

Tensions between Riyadh and Cairo mounted in October 2016 when Egypt supported a Russian resolution at the UN concerning the situation in Aleppo. The Russian resolution predicated a call for a ceasefire on Syrian opposition groups distancing themselves from groups like Jabhat Fateh al-Sham. The Saudi ambassador to the UN charged that the Egyptian vote was against the Arab consensus, and Riyadh recalled its ambassador to Cairo for a time. Indeed, Egypt today feels that it is in decline and has lost its leadership role in the Arab world.

### **A Religious Row**

As if these tensions were not bad enough, a religious spat ensued between Egypt and Saudi Arabia stemming from a Muslim conference that was held in Chechnya in August 2016, and it simmered for several months. The Saudis were not invited to the conference and were angry that its final communiqué did not mention Wahhabism (the doctrine practiced in Saudi Arabia) as part of the list of "true Sunni" followers, and that Egypt's Grand Imam, Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb, did not defend Saudi interests at this gathering. Although officials at Egypt's Al-Azhar (the famous Sunni Islamic university in Cairo) tried their best afterward to smooth ruffled Saudi feathers, conscious of the fact that Saudi Arabia had given Al-Azhar millions of dollars for various projects over the

past decade, this dispute added to the list of problems in the bilateral relationship.

### **Saudi King's Visit and the Islands Dispute**

Ironically, these renewed tensions came several months after the visit by Saudi Arabian King Salman to Cairo in April 2016, during which Sisi rolled out the red carpet for his royal guest. In addition to pledging aid and closer ties, the Saudi monarch promised \$1.5 billion for development projects in the Sinai Peninsula, where Egyptian security forces have been battling a stubborn terrorist insurgency, in the hope that such funding would give disaffected Bedouin inhabitants of that region an alternative to joining the terrorists.

But at the end of this successful state visit, Sisi's attempt at a magnanimous gesture—announcing the return of two islands by the Straits of Tiran to Saudi Arabia that had been lent to Egypt in 1950 because the Saudis could not defend them against Israel—touched off a political firestorm in Egypt. Demonstrations broke out against Sisi for supposedly selling Egypt's patrimony, and he ordered the security forces to arrest the protestors. Undoubtedly, some of the protestors, upset with Sisi over other issues like restricted political space, were using hyper-nationalism—which Sisi had encouraged since 2013—as a way to get back at the Egyptian president. Not helping Sisi's case later was the fact that Egypt's High Administrative Court in January 2017 issued a ruling blocking the transfer of the islands.

The protests against the proposed transfer of the islands and differences over Syria put Egyptian-Saudi relations on ice for a time. Saudi Arabia's state-owned oil company, ARAMCO, even halted fuel deliveries (which were provided on favorable terms) to Egypt in early November 2016. Egyptians saw this cutoff as a gesture of Saudi anger over political issues.

### **Relations on the Mend Again**

In more recent months, however, Egypt and Saudi Arabia appear to have better managed these disputes. Egypt's Court of Urgent Appeals in April 2017 ruled that the High Administrative Court did not have jurisdiction over the islands transfer and said that only parliament had the right to rule on an issue of territorial sovereignty.

Given the fact that parliament is dominated by pro-Sisi legislators, it is likely that Sisi will probably have his way on this issue at some point. Whether Sisi pressured the judges on the Court of Urgent Appeals to issue this ruling is not known, but the decision was likely appreciated by Saudi officials. Around this same time, ARAMCO resumed fuel deliveries to Egypt.

The fact that Sisi was greeted warmly by King Salman in Riyadh in May during Trump's visit to the kingdom is an indication that relations are indeed improving. For his part, Sisi made the best of his visit, cementing Egypt's relations with the kingdom as well as the Trump Administration, which obviously wants these

erstwhile allies reconciled. It also wants them to cooperate on what it sees as important issues in the Middle East, especially fighting extremism and challenging Iran's designs.

Egypt also joined Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Arab states in severing diplomatic relations with Qatar on June 5 largely over its overtures to Iran. Egypt, under Sisi, has had troubled relations with Qatar for the past several years; this is because of Qatar's support for Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood as well as Al Jazeera's critical coverage of domestic developments inside Egypt. In this case, Sisi wanted to show solidarity with Saudi Arabia.

Hence, despite the many disputes over the past few years between Egypt and Saudi Arabia, it appears that the two countries cannot afford a divorce and are dependent on one another. Saudi Arabia wants a stable and supportive Egypt, and Egypt wants to remain in Saudi

Arabia's in its good graces, especially as it is going through a difficult economic reform process and needs continual Saudi largesse. Jealousies over leadership positions in the Arab world and differences over regional issues will occasionally mar the relationship, but the foundations at this point appear fairly strong. And the fact that President Trump favors both leaders, as was on display during the summit meeting in Riyadh, and may have even played a role in patching up their differences, is also an incentive for both Egypt and Saudi Arabia to keep bilateral relations on an even keel for the immediate future. It appears that Sisi will do what he can to show the Saudi leaders that he has their back, and the latter will continue to aid Egypt financially to ensure it remains stable.

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