



The Middle East's New Battle Lines

Summary: While the Middle East's central battle line is changing, Egypt is pursuing a strategy of opportunism that aims to maximize its returns and preserve its options.

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Riyadh and its Gulf allies view Cairo as a pivotal security partner. With the largest – and, arguably, most effective – standing military in the Arab world, Egypt has offered to become the ultimate bulwark of Gulf Arab national security. At a time when the Saudis and the Emiratis are focused on checking the expansion of Iranian and Sunni Islamist influence across the Middle East, the offer forms part of an opportunistic policy designed to guarantee inflows of Gulf aid. But, while it has provided wide-ranging support for the campaign against Sunni Islamists and their state sponsors, Cairo has refrained from substantive commitments to a dangerous confrontation with Iran.

Since 2013, Egypt has reaped handsome rewards from Gulf Arab states' intensifying rivalry with Iran, securing tens of billions of dollars in Saudi and Emirati funding. The Saudis and the Emiratis have helped the Egyptian armed forces purchase advanced weaponry from France, Germany, and Russia. Riyadh has committed to investments in the restive Sinai Peninsula worth at least \$10 billion. This economic and military assistance has been vital for Egypt as it struggles to recover from the economic, security, and socio-political repercussions of the revolution it underwent on 25 January 2011, and the military intervention that followed on 3 July 2013.

In return, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has repeatedly declared that the national security of the Gulf Arab states is a red line for Egypt. The allies have held joint military exercises, and Egypt has actively supported Gulf Arab – predominantly Emirati – efforts to battle Sunni Islamists in neighbouring Libya. Cairo was also quick to join the Saudi-Emirati blockade on Qatar, which it accuses of supporting the now outlawed Muslim Brotherhood. Symbolically at least, Cairo also joined the Saudi-led Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition, which focuses on countering Iran.

While the casual observer may conclude that Egypt has decisively sided with Saudi Arabia, a closer look reveals that Cairo has a more nuanced strategic posture, particularly on Iran. Under Sisi, Egyptian foreign policy centres on several strategic priorities: eradicating political Islam from Egypt and the region, due to the perceived threat it poses to the integrity of Arab nation-states; supporting armies, particularly those fighting local militias and terrorist groups; and maintaining a fine balance between world powers (the US and Russia) and regional heavyweights (Saudi Arabia and Iran) to secure strategic assistance from all of them.

Therefore, while Cairo is ideologically committed to the fight against Sunni Islamist movements, it does not wish to be drawn into a costly conflict with another regional power. Egypt has at times sought to placate the Saudis by talking tough on Iran. One example of this came in January 2016, shortly after Iranian protesters stormed the Saudi embassy in Tehran. Egypt forcefully stated that Iran's "transgressions throughout the region are numerous" and that it stood with Saudi Arabia. However, on more than one occasion, Cairo has resisted Saudi demands for it to escalate this apparent hostility by severing ties with Tehran's allies or other means.

Thus, Riyadh has failed to receive the quid per quo it expected. The Saudis have only secured two of their four main demands of Cairo: the reversal of the Islamist-led post-2011 political transition in Egypt, along with ongoing support for anti-Islamist efforts in the region; and the transfer to Saudi Arabia of two Red Sea islands, Tiran and Sanafir. The two unmet requests – for support for Gulf Arab-backed militias in Syria (no longer a priority for Gulf Arab states), and the deployment of Egyptian troops to fight the Houthis in Yemen – are both related to the Saudi rivalry with Iran. The Egyptians participated in the Saudi campaign in Yemen only symbolically, sending navy ships to the Bab el-Mandeb Straits, and have defiantly offered diplomatic support – and, reportedly, clandestine military aid – to the Assad regime.

Saudi-Egyptian tensions came to a head in October 2016, when Egypt voted in favour of a Russian resolution in the UN Security Council designed to support the Syrian government. The Saudi envoy to the council accused Cairo of assuming a "painful stance", and "breaking with [the] Arab consensus." Riyadh flexed its economic muscle in response, suspending valuable oil shipments to Cairo. Sisi, in turn, reacted with a furious statement that Egypt "bows only to God". Cairo also implemented several symbolic measures to remind the Saudis that it had options. These included an offer of diplomatic support to the Iranian-allied Iraqi government; a public reception for Assad regime security official Ali Mamlouk; and the publication in pro-government newspapers of articles denouncing Riyadh's alleged "embrace of terrorism". The crisis ended after only a few weeks with what was essentially a Saudi retreat.

After Saudi attempts to force the resignation of Lebanese Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri precipitated a political crisis in Lebanon, Cairo appeared to distance itself from Riyadh's grandstanding once again. The Egyptian president reportedly denied the veracity of the official Saudi narrative on Hariri's resignation, expressing hope that the crisis would soon end.

These incidents revealed the chasm between the Saudi and Egyptian views of rivalry with Iran. For the Saudis, Tehran poses a fundamental threat to their security and regional ambitions. Cairo, in contrast, is not only wary of committing its army to any war against Iranian allies but even sees Tehran as an important defence against the expansion of Sunni Islamism in the region. (And, as Cairo pursues warmer relations with Moscow, it is keen to eschew any unnecessary escalation of hostilities with Moscow's Iranian allies.)

Despite the fact that it has far fewer political and economic ties to Iran than to Saudi Arabia, Egypt may actually be closer to Tehran than Riyadh in its view of Sunni extremism and the fight against terrorism. Like Egypt, Iran seeks to prop up governments that battle Islamist militias in Syria and Iraq. This accords with Egypt's post-2013 strategic posture of supporting Arab states against non-state actors, particularly Islamists.

This posture also shapes Egypt's relations with Turkey and Israel. For Cairo, Ankara presents a more pressing regional threat than Tehran. Turkey continues to shelter and otherwise support Egyptian Islamists, allowing them to run television stations from Istanbul targeting an Egyptian audience. Meanwhile, a shared perception of the threat posed by Islamists has helped significantly strengthen Egypt's ties with Israel. The Israelis, alongside the Saudis and Emiratis, made immense efforts to persuade the Obama administration not to penalise the Egyptian military for overthrowing the elected Morsi government. Furthermore, Israel has reportedly supplied the Egyptians with

intelligence on, and coordinated military campaigns against, militants operating in the Sinai Peninsula. Overall, while it remains committed to combating the threat posed by Islamists, Egypt is pursuing a strategy of opportunism that aims to maximise its returns and preserve its options – options that include transactional relationships with regional powers such as Iran.

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