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Saudi-Egyptian Relations at the Crossroads

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Saudi-Egyptian Relations at the Crossroads

By Fahad Nazer

Introduction

Saudi Arabia and Egypt, twin pillars of almost any viable unified Arab security and political front, have recently been moving to consolidate closer relations. Egypt is the largest Arab country by population, and the epicenter of much of the most influential Arabic popular culture and intellectual output. Saudi Arabia is the unquestioned religious center for Sunni Muslims, particularly in the Arab world, and the largest and most powerful of the oil exporting Arab states of the Gulf region. Harmonious relations between Egypt and Saudi Arabia symbolize, in the minds of many, the bringing together and cooperative utilization of the human and natural resources that are available to the contemporary Arab world. Strong Egyptian-Saudi ties, therefore, have symbolic as well as practical significance for the Arab world. This paper will review the background of Saudi-Egyptian relations in order to evaluate what is likely to be in store for the two countries as they work together to consolidate their alliance and cooperate to strengthen their individual and joint regional postures.

During the history of the modern Middle East, Riyadh and Cairo have been both allies and rivals. But since the 1980s, the two countries have generally regarded each other as important friends. During the era of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, Egypt and Saudi Arabia put aside the differences that lingered from the "Arab Cold War," and enjoyed very close relations. And, after some Saudi anxieties, especially during the brief rule in Egypt of President Mohamed Morsi, a Muslim Brotherhood leader who was overthrown in 2013, the two countries have been working to consolidate their alliance. Egypt's current president, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, has been regarded by former Saudi Arabian King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz and his successor King Salman bin Abdulaziz as an important friend to Riyadh and the representative of an Egyptian state supportive of the regional status quo that Saudi Arabia is comfortable embracing as a core Arab ally.

However, the mutual push toward warmer Egyptian-Saudi ties is not taking place in a vacuum. There are several significant policy differences between them, for example regarding Syria and Yemen, which the two countries must finesse in order to remain close. And Saudi Arabia, in particular, is developing a new and more assertive regional profile and proactive security doctrine that adds an additional context to relations with Egypt. Riyadh's unprecedented military operation against the Iranian-supported Houthi rebels in Yemen¹ and its publicly

¹ Oren Dorell, "Iranian support for Yemen's Houthis goes back years," *USA Today*, April 20, 2015, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2015/04/20/iran-support-for-yemen-houthis-goes-back-years/26095101/>.

acknowledged participation in U.S.-led airstrikes against strongholds of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Syria,² are a stark departure from Saudi Arabia's traditional security and foreign policy postures that favored behind-the-scenes diplomacy and accommodation.

The tumult created by the "Arab Spring" uprisings compelled Saudi Arabia to reassess many of its traditional foreign policy assumptions. The Saudis lost one of their closest allies when President Mubarak was overthrown. Iran, Saudi Arabia's primary regional adversary, exploited regional instability to extend its influence in various countries including Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and even Yemen. However, this Iranian "meddling"³ – as Saudi officials characterize it – is only one of two serious threats to Saudi Arabia's security.

The second source of instability is the rise of militant Islamist groups, especially ISIL, which now controls a wide swath of territory in Iraq and Syria. Al-Qaeda, too, continues to menace the region, especially in Yemen. Its affiliate there – Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) – has not only breached the Saudi border to conduct terrorist attacks inside the kingdom,⁴ but its leadership and rank and file draw heavily on Saudi nationals.⁵ With ISIL to the north in Syria and Iraq, and now increasingly manifesting in Yemen, AQAP well-established to the south in Yemen, and Iranian influence seemingly all around them, the Saudis feel encircled by very different but equally dangerous nemeses. Their anxieties are compounded by the perception that under the administration of President Barack Obama the United States has been disengaging from the Middle East. Questions have been raised in Saudi Arabia about the U.S. commitment to the region, despite repeated assurances from Washington. These doubts are exacerbated by the suspicion that the United States has softened its attitudes toward Iran. The deepest fear is that the United States may be seeking to build a new relationship with Iran at the expense of Saudi Arabia.

Egypt shares Saudi Arabia's concerns about radical Islamist extremists such as ISIL, particularly to the north in the Sinai Peninsula and west in Libya. Egypt is also profoundly concerned about the threat from radical Islamists within its own society and culture, and sees a direct link between domestic subversion in its major cities and the threat posed by extremists operating in remote areas. But Cairo seems less alarmed about the trajectory of U.S. policy and has a somewhat different view than Riyadh regarding the future of Syria, while being less categorical in opposing President Bashar al-Assad. However, Egypt has been keen to continue to receive significant financial support from the Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia, which it badly needs to shore up its economy. Moreover, Egypt and Saudi Arabia seem to share a common interest in the potential development of an independent Arab joint military intervention force to respond to regional crises and confront malevolent non-state actors. Indeed, the development of any such force must combine the high-tech weaponry and financial resources of the Gulf states

² "Saudi releases pictures of pilots who took part in strikes against ISIS," *Al Arabiya*, September 25, 2014, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/09/25/Saudi-Arabia-releases-pictures-of-pilots-who-took-part-in-strikes-against-ISIS.html>.

³ "FM: Saudi determined to confront Iranian expansion in the region," *Al Arabiya*, July 9, 2015, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/07/09/Saudi-is-against-Iran-s-interference-in-the-region-FM.html>.

⁴ "Attack on Saudi border post kills ten," *Al Arabiya*, July 5, 2015, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/07/05/Two-militants-blow-themselves-up-in-southern-Saudi-Arabia-.html>.

⁵ "Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)," *Council on Foreign Relations*, last modified June 19, 2015, <http://www.cfr.org/yemen/al-qaeda-arabian-peninsula-aqap/p9369>.

with the human resources and breadth of military experience that is still particular to Egypt in the Arab world.

Arab states have been threatened, weakened, and undermined by the recent wave of instability, chaos, and state fragmentation rocking the region. If the Arab world is to take the lead in restoring Middle East security, it is essential for these two large, influential, and complementary Arab powers to work together in order to reverse these damaging trends.

The Rise of Nasser

The 1950s and 1960s also saw serious political turmoil in the Middle East. Beyond two major wars with Israel, the Arab states witnessed the fall of several monarchies with which Saudi Arabia had maintained cordial relations. The 1952 military coup that ousted King Farouk in Egypt was a seminal event, as it inspired subsequent military coups in Iraq, Sudan, Libya, and Algeria. President Gamal Abdel Nasser's powerful oratory and charisma enhanced his seductive historical and political narrative, which stressed Arab identity, unity, and defiance of colonial powers. It resonated widely across the region, including among a segment of Saudis.⁶ During his visit to Saudi Arabia in 1956, he was greeted by enthusiastic throngs.⁷ However, President Nasser's brand of revolutionary politics, which challenged the political order in the Middle East, in addition to his quasi-socialist economics, contrasted sharply with Saudi Arabia's conservative posture that favored seeking accommodations over confrontations.

President Nasser portrayed Saudi policy as a form of capitulation that compromised the interests and "dignity" of the Arab people. King Saud, who took the Saudi Arabian throne after his father died in 1953, initially tried to accommodate President Nasser given the wave of popularity he enjoyed after

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his perceived triumph against the "tripartite invasion" by Britain, France, and Israel in the 1956 Suez conflict. However, the ideological divide was deep enough that relations between the two countries became very tense for much of the rest of President Nasser's rule until his death in 1970.

This deep ideological and philosophical divergence was most evident in the North Yemen Civil War that began in 1962. Saudi Arabia and Egypt were on opposite sides of this bloody war that lasted until 1970. Saudi Arabia considered the Yemen war to be a defining moment in confronting what seemed like an irrepressible wave of republicanism sweeping the region, much of which was inspired or actively supported by President Nasser. Due to their thousand-mile border and close ties with many Yemeni stakeholders – including political and tribal leaders⁸ – Yemen has long been a "red line" for Saudi leaders. Therefore, Saudi Arabia has

⁶ Mordechai Abir, *Saudi Arabia: Government, Society and The Gulf Crisis*, (New York: Routledge, 1993), 36.

⁷ Mordechai Abir, *Saudi Arabia: Government, Society and The Gulf Crisis*, (New York: Routledge, 1993).

⁸ Bernard Haykel, "Saudi Arabia's Yemen Dilemma," *Foreign Affairs*, June 4, 2011, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/saudi-arabia/2011-06-14/saudi-arabias-yemen-dilemma>.

invariably been drawn into Yemen's many conflicts.⁹ For the first three years of the war, Saudi Arabia provided financial support and weapons to Muhammad al-Badr and his royalist faction, which was ousted by an Egyptian inspired, and eventually supported, military coup. However, the conflict still reflected the Saudi preference for a cautious policy. The kingdom's limited military capability at the time ensured that Saudi troops did not become directly involved in the fighting. However, President Nasser was committed to "revolutionary" coups, and by 1965 Egypt had committed 70,000 troops to the conflict.¹⁰ An estimated 10,000 of them died during the fighting.¹¹ By most accounts, President Nasser's adventure in North Yemen sapped Egypt's resources, and many historians argue that this over-commitment played a major role in Israel's victory in the war with Egypt in 1967.¹²

After initially supporting President Nasser, in large measure because he still viewed the Hashemite kings in Jordan and Iraq as Saudi Arabia's main adversaries, King Saud soon changed course. He began viewing President Nasser and his revolutionary politics as more of a threat to the kingdom's security and stability, especially as some elements within the Saudi military, and Arab expatriates working the oilfields in the Eastern Province, became involved in various conspiracies to topple the government.¹³ The political differences between President Nasser and King Saud eventually became personal, but a combination of financial mismanagement and difficulty adjusting to the changing political landscape led to Saud's replacement as king by his younger brother, Faisal.

King Faisal and the "Pan-Islamic" Alternative

King Faisal had traveled extensively at a very young age and developed an appreciation for foreign affairs.¹⁴ His son, Saud, served as Saudi Arabia's foreign minister for 40 years. Together they played a major role in making engagement, pragmatism, and quiet diplomacy the hallmarks of Saudi foreign policy.¹⁵ While President Nasser preached Arab unity and a radical transformation of the regional order, King Faisal realized that, as the birthplace of Islam and the location of its holiest sites – Mecca and Medina – Saudi Arabia was uniquely situated to assume a leadership position in the Muslim world. Stressing the importance of Muslim identity, as opposed to President Nasser's secular Arab nationalism, Saudi Arabia constructed a conservative alternative narrative to act as a counterweight.¹⁶ This "pan-Islamic" narrative elevated Saudi Arabia's regional and even global status.

⁹ Fahad Nazer, "The Houthis Test King Salman," *Foreign Affairs*, January 29, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2015-01-29/houthis-test-king-salman>.

¹⁰ Ihsaan Tharoor, "How Yemen Was Once Egypt's Vietnam," *The Washington Post*, March 28, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/03/28/how-yemen-was-once-egypts-vietnam/>.

¹¹ Leila Fadel, "Some Egyptians Question Country's Role in Yemen Conflict," *NPR*, April 3, 2015, <http://www.npr.org/2015/04/03/397325247/some-egyptians-question-countrys-role-in-yemen-conflict>.

¹² Jesse Ferris, *Nasser's Gamble: How Intervention in Yemen Caused the Six-Day War and the Decline of Egyptian Power*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

¹³ Nadav Safran, *The Ceaseless Quest for Security*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1988), 128.

¹⁴ Alexie Vassiliev, *King Faisal of Saudi Arabia: Personality, Faith and Times*, (London: Saqi Books, 2013).

¹⁵ Ben Hubbard, "Saud Al Faisal of Saudi Arabia, quiet force in Middle East, Dies at 75," *The New York Times*, July 9, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/10/world/middleeast/prince-saud-al-faisal-longtime-saudi-foreign-minister-dies-at-75.html?_r=0.

¹⁶ Alexei Vassiliev, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

In his efforts to foster solidarity between Muslim-majority countries, King Faisal created the Muslim World League in 1962 and the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) in 1969. While the former focused on cultural and charitable activities, the latter became a forum through which Muslim-majority countries could develop a more uniform approach to political, economic, and social challenges. Although Egypt was a founding member of the OIC, President Nasser was keenly aware of pan-Islam's appeal, and its potential as a viable alternative to his own Arab nationalism.¹⁷ He also understood that Saudi Arabia would be its most logical leader and that he could not compete in that playing field.

Beyond the “Arab Cold War”

President Nasser's defeat in the 1967 war with Israel led many people across the region to view Nasserism as a hollow failure. President Nasser eventually came to terms with the futility of his Yemen adventure, and recognized the benefits of improved relations with Saudi Arabia, which seemed willing to help Egypt and Syria recover from the devastating 1967 defeat.¹⁸ President Nasser's death in 1970 ended the political tug of war between Saudi Arabia and Egypt, which had confounded King Saud and challenged King Faisal. Improved relations soon followed, kicked off by an early goodwill gesture by King Faisal, which was reciprocated by President Nasser's successor, Anwar Sadat.

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Although they were apparently never accepted, King Faisal reportedly offered President Sadat 20 British fighters who the Saudis had purchased just before the latter traveled to Moscow. In response, President Sadat ordered his army to take orders from King Faisal while he was abroad in the event of an emergency.¹⁹

While president, Nasser had developed close relations with the Soviet Union, on which he relied for military support, especially as the United States increased its backing of Israel. President Sadat however, showed early signs that he might be willing to curtail Egypt's ties to Moscow and tilt toward the United States.²⁰ He took many observers by surprise when he expelled Soviet advisors with little notice in 1972.²¹ This led to an almost immediate improvement in Saudi-Egyptian relations. As its oil revenue increased significantly by the 1960s, Saudi Arabia's support of the “confrontation states,” including Egypt, increased. However, Saudi policymakers maintained a delicate balance between support for Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and the Palestinians in their various crises with Israel, while simultaneously strengthening relations with Israel's main benefactor, the United States. Not only had Washington taken the lead in assisting Saudi Arabia in developing its vast oil fields, it was also providing advanced weapons and training

¹⁷ Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 133.

¹⁸ Youssef M. Ibrahim, “Arabs Smooth Way to restore Ties with Egypt,” *The New York Times*, November 12, 1987, <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/11/12/world/arabs-smooth-way-to-resume-ties-with-egypt.html>.

¹⁹ Nadav Safran, *The Ceaseless Quest for Security*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1988), 147.

²⁰ George Lenczowski, *The Middle East in World Affairs, 4th ed.*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1980), 606.

²¹ Nathaniel Harrison, “Sadat cracks down on Soviets still in Egypt,” *Christian Science Monitor*, February 15, 1980, <http://www.csmonitor.com/1980/0215/021545.html>.

to the nascent Saudi military, including the Saudi National Guard, which was tasked with maintaining domestic security.²²

Although President Nasser and other Arab nationalists had long argued that Saudi Arabia should use its oil leverage to pressure the United States and other countries against supporting Israel, it was not until 1973 that Saudi Arabia – along with the other Arab members of OPEC – experimented with “oil as a weapon” against countries supporting Israel’s war effort.²³ Although popular perception in both the West and parts of the Arab world portrayed Saudi Arabia as leading the embargo, in reality, Riyadh proceeded cautiously and agreed to it only as a last resort.²⁴ When it went into effect, Saudi leaders were careful to prevent the episode from doing irreparable damage to relations with Washington. Nonetheless, the embargo permanently changed the rules of the game when it came to “North-South” relations. Moreover, along with the pan-Islamic narrative, it helped elevate Saudi Arabia’s status to that of a regional heavyweight whose policies could also have global implications.

While the Saudis supported Egypt during and after the 1973 war, President Sadat’s decision to address the Israeli Knesset in 1977, and subsequently craft a “separate peace” with Israel, caught Riyadh by surprise. Although the Saudis tried their best to maintain an ambiguous position due to their vastly improved relations with President Sadat and the role that the United States had played in brokering the agreement, the backlash in the Arab world against the accord was intense. Saudi Arabia felt compelled to sever diplomatic relations with Egypt.²⁵ After President Sadat was assassinated in 1981, Egypt was integrated back into the Arab fold and Egyptian-Saudi ties were restored and strengthened.

Mubarak, the “Arab Spring,” and Sisi

During the era of President Mubarak, Egypt was one of Saudi Arabia’s most reliable partners. President Mubarak maintained close personal relations with King Fahd and King Abdullah. Unlike some other Arab leaders whose countries received substantial Saudi financial aid over the years, and who were therefore expected to support Saudi Arabia in its bid to expel Iraqi President Saddam Hussein’s occupying forces from Kuwait in the 1990-91 Gulf War, President Mubarak’s support for the Saudi position was unequivocal.²⁶

King Abdullah was evidently dismayed when President Mubarak was toppled in 2011.²⁷ While the Saudis maintained cordial relations with Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi,²⁸

²² Rachel Bronson, *Thicker Than Oil: America’s Uneasy Partnership With Saudi Arabia*, (London: Oxford University Press, 2008).

²³ F. Gregory Gause, III, *Oil Monarchies: Domestic and Security Challenges in the Arab Gulf States*, (New York: Council On Foreign Relations Press, 1994).

²⁴ Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 137.

²⁵ James Wynbrandt, *A Brief History of Saudi Arabia*, (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2010), 239.

²⁶ F. Gregory Gause, III, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 106.

²⁷ Angus McDowall, “Mubarak’s Departure Deals Blow to Saudis,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 12, 2011,

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703786804576138321598498188>.

²⁸ “Egyptian President Mursi and Saudi King Abdullah discuss regional stability,” *Al Arabiya*, July 11, 2012, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/07/11/225853.html>.

who was elected president in 2012, they were the first to publicly welcome his ouster in 2013.²⁹ From that moment until King Abdullah's death in January 2015, Saudi Arabia's support for the government of President Sisi was virtually unconditional. Not only did Saudi Arabia provide Egypt with billions of dollars in badly needed financial aid,³⁰ the Saudis seemed to approve of the Egyptian government's crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood and its supporters. In a surprising move, the Saudi government even designated the Brotherhood as a terrorist organization in March 2014.³¹

Not only did Saudi Arabia provide Egypt with billions of dollars in badly needed financial aid, the Saudis seemed to approve of the Egyptian government's crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood and its supporters.

Some Egyptian journalists and politicians expressed trepidation when King Abdullah died and King Salman assumed the throne.³² Their main concern was whether the new king would continue his predecessor's hard-line policies regarding the Brotherhood or would reconcile with it in some fashion, focusing instead on more immediate concerns, like ISIL and Iran.³³ Those fears were not unfounded. Some observers hailed the March 2015 Arab League summit as a turning point and considered the mere attendance of the majority of Arab leaders as a much-needed show of unity in a climate of unprecedented regional violence.³⁴ Others focused on the commitment to form a joint Arab security force.³⁵ However, the display of Arab unity was tarnished when the two countries at the center of the summit – the host, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia (which had begun airstrikes against the Houthis in Yemen) – publicly aired their differences on Syria.³⁶ Indeed, Syria is just one of several issues over which the two now differ. While ousting President Assad from power is among Saudi Arabia's top priorities – second only to restoring President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi's government in Yemen – Syria has garnered relatively little attention from President Sisi.

Even in some of the numerous areas in which they do broadly agree, the two countries have differing priorities. On terrorism and radical Islamists, Egypt's main concerns involve militants based in Sinai³⁷ to the north and chaos in Libya to the west. Saudi Arabia is confronting the

²⁹ "World reaction to the ousting of Egypt's Mohammed Morsi," *BBC*, July 4, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-23175379>.

³⁰ "Saudi Arabia pledges \$5 billion in aid to Egypt," *Associated Press*, July 9, 2013, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/saudi-arabia-pledges-5-billion-in-aid-to-egypt/>.

³¹ Mustapha Ajbaili, "Saudi: Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist group," *Al Arabiya*, March 7, 2014, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/03/07/Saudi-Arabia-declares-Muslim-Brotherhood-terrorist-group.html>.

³² Doaa El-Bey, "Threats to Egyptian-Saudi Relations," *Al Ahrām Weekly*, July 30, 2015, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/News/12862/17/Threats-to-Egyptian-Saudi-relations.aspx>.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Hashed Abdu Hashem, "The Birth of the Joint Force....a new historical beginning," *Al Riyadh* (Arabic), August 25, 2015, <http://www.alriyadh.com/1076202>.

³⁵ Bruce Riedel, "Can this joint Arab military force succeed where others have failed?" *The Brookings Institution*, March 30, 2015, <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/markaz/posts/2015/03/30-riedel-can-joint-arab-military-force-succeed-yemen-saudi-arabia>.

³⁶ Lizzie Dearden, "Saudi Arabia accuses Putin of hypocrisy over letter urging peace when Russia 'part of problem,'" *The Independent*, March 30, 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-accuses-putin-of-hypocrisy-over-letter-urging-peace-when-russia-part-of-problem-10143131.html>.

³⁷ Yusri Mohamed and Ahmed Hassan, "More than 100 dead as militants, Egyptian army clash in North Sinai," *Reuters*, July 1, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/07/01/us-egypt-security-sinai-idUSKCN0PB3VJ20150701>.

challenge of Yemen becoming another regional failed state, empowering not only the Houthis but also AQAP and even ISIL. It also must urgently deal with ISIL in Syria and Iraq. Indeed, closer to home ISIL has carried out three attacks inside Saudi Arabia since the beginning of this year; two against Shia mosques in the Eastern Province,³⁸ and a third against a mosque used by security services in the southern region of Asir.³⁹

In recent months, some Saudi⁴⁰ and Egyptian⁴¹ analysts have argued the two countries need to bridge their differences over Syria, Yemen, and the Brotherhood, or at least come to terms with the notion that their threat perceptions are not always perfectly in sync. Geography alone dictates that the two countries would likely view turmoil in the region through different lenses and with distinct priorities. Egypt has always been more intimately involved in the challenging politics of North Africa, whereas the Saudis are focused on security threats emanating from the Gulf region. This need not adversely affect their overall relations or negate the broader common ground they do share, such as their mutual commitment to vanquishing radical Islamists and their common suspicion of Iranian intentions.⁴² The challenge is how to balance addressing their own security priorities without seeming indifferent to the security threats the other country is facing.

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Riyadh Re-Evaluates the Muslim Brotherhood

Earlier this year, some prominent Saudi journalists advised Egypt to temper its stance on the Brotherhood, suggesting King Salman would likely adopt new policies on regional issues.⁴³ In the most telling public remarks by a Saudi official, the late former Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al Faisal, was quoted in February as saying “we do not have a problem with the Muslim Brotherhood. It is just a small segment of that organization.”⁴⁴ Since the Egyptian government continues to view the Brotherhood as a major threat, Saudi efforts to mend fences with the group’s affiliates inevitably strain relations.

Despite assurances that it was purely a “religious” trip, a visit by senior Hamas leaders to the kingdom in June – which included meetings with King Salman and his principal deputies, Crown

³⁸ Ahmed Al Omran, “ISIS Claims Bombing at Saudi Shiite Mosque,” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 29, 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-blast-kills-at-least-four-1432899194>.

³⁹ “Suicide bomber kills 15 in Saudi security site mosque,” *Reuters*, August 6, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/08/06/us-saudi-security-bomb-idUSKCN0QB18Q20150806>.

⁴⁰ Khalil al-Anani, “Is the Saudi-Egypt honeymoon ending?” *Al Araby Al Jadeed*, April 8, 2015, <http://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/comment/2015/4/8/is-the-saudi-egypt-honeymoon-ending>.

⁴¹ Dina Ezzat, “Sisi’s upcoming visit to Saudi Arabia: Mission possible?” *Ahram Online*, February 28, 2015, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/124089/Egypt/Politics-/Sisi%E2%80%99s-upcoming-visit-to-Saudi-Arabia-Mission-poss.aspx>.

⁴² Khalid Al-Dakhil, “A Disturbing Egyptian Concern,” *Middle East Monitor*, June 8, 2015, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/articles/africa/19098-a-disturbing-egyptian-concern>.

⁴³ “Saudi analyst expects the kingdom to change support for Egypt,” *Middle East Monitor*, August 17, 2015, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/news/middle-east/20468-saudi-analyst-expects-the-kingdom-to-change-support-for-egypt>.

⁴⁴ Samar Al Muqrin, “Two Hours with Saud Al Faisal,” *Al-Jazirah.com*, February 2, 2015, <http://www.al-jazirah.com/2015/20150211/ar6.htm>.

Prince Mohammed bin Nayef and Defense Minister Mohammed bin Salman – signaled that a new opening was potentially at hand. This came in the wake of visits to the kingdom by Rachid Ghannouchi of Tunisia's Ennahda Party, Sheik Abdul Majid al-Zindani of the Yemeni Al-Islah party, and Hammam Saeed of Jordan's Muslim Brotherhood.⁴⁵ In addition, the attendance of Sheik Yusuf al-Qaradawi – often described as the spiritual leader of the Brotherhood – at a Saudi National Day event in Qatar in September lent further credence to this interpretation.⁴⁶ These diplomatic moves suggest that King Salman is charting a new course regarding the Muslim Brotherhood,⁴⁷ particularly in the wake of the international nuclear agreement with Iran. Given that Riyadh has also established a new alliance with Sudan and strengthened ties to Turkey, Saudi Arabia seems to be forming a coalition across the Middle East that is as broad as possible in order to counter Iran's long-consolidated and expanding Shia axis.

Saudi Arabia's relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood is complicated.⁴⁸ While many Brotherhood members found refuge in Saudi Arabia in the 1950s and 1960s after their activities were suppressed in Egypt and Syria – with many of them filling the ranks of educational and religious institutions in Saudi Arabia – the Saudi government, and a wide section of the public, came to view the Brotherhood's brand of political Islam as a source of instability and an incubator of militancy, especially in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in the United States (in which 15 of the 19 perpetrators were Saudis).⁴⁹ And while some Saudis expressed support for President Sisi's crackdown on the Brotherhood in Egypt via both traditional and social media, another segment of Saudi society – whose exact size is difficult to determine – sympathizes with the Brotherhood and its melding of politics and religion.⁵⁰ A number of prominent Saudi clerics have long been loosely affiliated with the organization and its various branches across the region. Although support for more militant groups like ISIL and al-Qaeda appears to be limited in Saudi Arabia,⁵¹ there is a widespread and growing belief that painting all Islamist groups with a broad brush is counterproductive. While King Abdullah's support for President Sisi was very clear, King Salman's position toward the Brotherhood is more accommodating, and therefore runs at least somewhat counter to that of the Egyptian government.

⁴⁵ Hussein Ibish, "Saudi Arabia's New Sunni Alliance," *The New York Times*, July 31, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/01/opinion/hussein-ibish-saudi-arabias-new-sunni-alliance.html?_r=00.

⁴⁶ "Saudi Arabia Signals Easing of tension with Islamic cleric," *Reuters*, October 2, 2015, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/reuters/article-3257911/Saudi-Arabia-signals-easing-tension-Islamist-cleric.html>.

⁴⁷ Hussein Ibish, "Saudi Arabia's New Sunni Alliance," *The New York Times*, July 31, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/01/opinion/hussein-ibish-saudi-arabias-new-sunni-alliance.html?_r=00.

⁴⁸ Stéphane Lacroix, "Saudi Islamists and the Arab Spring," *The London School of Economics and Political Science* 36, (May 2014), http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/56725/1/Lacroix_Saudi-Islamists-and-theArab-Spring_2014.pdf.

⁴⁹ Saudi Researcher, "Surori Movement Most Dangerous to Emerge from the Muslim Brotherhood's Womb," *Al Hayat*, September 14, 2014, <http://bit.ly/1PdBQKu>.

⁵⁰ Stéphane Lacroix, "Saudi Arabia's Muslim Brotherhood predicament," *The Washington Post*, March 24, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/03/20/saudi-arabias-muslim-brotherhood-predicament/>.

⁵¹ David Pollock, "ISIS Has Almost No Popular Support in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, or Lebanon," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, October 14, 2014, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/isis-has-almost-no-popular-support-in-egypt-saudi-arabia-or-lebanon>.

Two Views on Syria

At the Arab League Summit in Sharm el-Sheikh on March 29, President Sisi took many of the attendees by surprise when he had a letter from Russian President Vladimir Putin read out loud. President Putin expressed concern about the continuing violence in the region, called for a peaceful resolution to conflicts, and advised against “external interference.” Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al Faisal, delivered a scathing rebuke to President Putin, in which he expressed dismay that Russia was “acting as if it has nothing to do with” the carnage. The foreign minister made it clear that Russia’s support for President Assad’s regime in Syria made it complicit in the Syrian bloodbath.⁵²

Saudi Arabia has invested significant political capital in trying to oust President Assad, and end his brutal tactics. This makes it practically impossible for the Saudis to deal with him.⁵³ Any change in the Saudi position would be portrayed by ISIL and other militant groups as an alliance with President Assad and his main benefactor, Iran. In addition, the Saudis blame President Assad for the rise of ISIL.⁵⁴ They make a powerful case that his brutality toward the Syrian Sunni majority enabled ISIL to construct a jihadist narrative that won support in that constituency and, worse still, drew many thousands of militants from around the world into the Syrian conflict over the past few years.⁵⁵

Russia’s recent moves to become directly involved in military support for President Assad’s regime threaten to escalate the violence and widen the scope of the conflict.⁵⁶ While the Saudi government’s response was initially muted, President Putin’s decision to launch airstrikes primarily in areas not under the control of ISIL beginning in October, hitting at least one U.S.-trained rebel group in the process, led Saudi officials to issue a strong rebuke at the United Nations.⁵⁷ Just as importantly, a number of Saudi writers have criticized what they characterize as the “irresoluteness” of the United States regarding Syria, which they argue, has emboldened President Putin to use the country as a bargaining chip to settle old disputes with the West over Ukraine and the expansion of NATO.⁵⁸ These views seem to reflect, at least to some extent, the thinking of Saudi policymakers as well.

President Sisi, by contrast, apparently views President Assad as the lesser of two evils compared to ISIL. Some analysts interpreted a visit by President Assad’s nephew to Cairo

⁵² Lizzie Dearden, “Saudi Arabia accuses Putin of hypocrisy over letter urging peace when Russia part of problem,” *The Independent*, March 30, 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/saudi-arabia-accuses-putin-of-hypocrisy-over-letter-urging-peace-when-russia-part-of-problem-10143131.html>.

⁵³ “Saudi Foreign Minister says Assad has no place in Syria future,” *Reuters*, August 11, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/08/11/us-meast-crisis-saudi-assad-idUSKCN0QGOYZ20150811>.

⁵⁴ “Saudi Arabia Rejects Russian Calls to Work with Assad against IS,” *Agence France Presse*, August 11, 2015, <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/187096>.

⁵⁵ Fahad Nazer, “Syrian Massacres: World Has No Appetite for Intervention,” *YaleGlobal Online*, January 12, 2012, <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/syrian-massacres>.

⁵⁶ Andrew E. Kramer, “Putin Defends Russian Military Aid to Syria,” *The New York Times*, September 15, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/16/world/europe/russia-syria-military.html?_r=0.

⁵⁷ “Saudi Arabia demands Russia end Syria raids, criticizes Iran,” *Reuters*, October 1, 2015, <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/saudi-arabia/saudi-arabia-demands-russia-end-syria-raids-criticises-iran-1.1593459>.

⁵⁸ Ayman Al Hamad, “Putin Punishes The West in His Own Way,” *Al Riyadh*, September 19, 2015, <http://www.alriyadh.com/1083940>.

in January as President Sisi's attempt to test how regional allies, and foes, would respond to a possible normalization of relations with Syria.⁵⁹ Others suggest that the legacy of the United Arab Republic – a nominal political union between Syria and Egypt from 1958-61 – and the joint Syrian-Egyptian military action against Israel in the 1973 war created a special bond between the two countries that is yet to be broken.⁶⁰ Just as importantly, and unlike Saudi Arabia, Egypt under President Sisi has only expressed tepid support for the Syrian opposition. While the Saudis have publicized the many rounds of humanitarian aid that the government has provided for Syrian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, and other countries, there are reports that Syrians living in Egypt have come under greater scrutiny since the toppling of President Morsi.

Yemen Revisited

Perhaps the most sensitive issue between the two countries is Yemen. As the near unanimous vote in the U.N. Security Council in April suggested,⁶¹ the international community considers the violence and political instability in Yemen to be a serious risk to the security of the Arabian Peninsula in general and to Saudi Arabia in particular. Not only did the Houthis clash with Saudi Arabia in 2009,⁶² but AQAP has taken advantage of the chaos to expand its presence in Yemen, particularly across its vast southeastern region of Hadramout. AQAP even breached Saudi Arabia's southern border in June 2014, killing five border guards during the first Friday of Ramadan.

That the internationally recognized president of Yemen, Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, officially requested that Saudi Arabia intervene militarily to repel the Houthi advance southward toward Aden, and the success the Saudis had in forming a coalition comprised of 11 countries, has given the military operation an air of international legitimacy. And while the Egyptians don't question whether Yemen poses a security risk to Saudi Arabia, it became clear early in the conflict that many Egyptians don't see it as much of a risk to their own national security.⁶³

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However, the war in Yemen is a defining moment for Saudi Arabia and its new king. One of his sons, Minister of Defense Prince Mohammed bin Salman, has become the public face of

⁵⁹ "What Was Bashar Al Assad's Cousin Doing in Cairo?" *CNN* (Arabic), December 18, 2014, <http://arabic.cnn.com/middleeast/2014/12/18/assad-cairo-egypt-visit>.

⁶⁰ Marc J. Sievers, "Questions About Egypt's Syria Policy," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, January 14, 2015, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/questions-about-egypts-syria-policy>.

⁶¹ "Security Council Demands End to Yemen Violence, Adopting Resolution 2216 (2015), with Russian Federation Abstaining," *UN.org*, April 14, 2015, <http://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc11859.doc.htm>.

⁶² Asher Orkaby, "Saudi Arabia's War with the Houthis: Old Borders, New Lines," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, April 9, 2015, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/saudi-arabias-war-with-the-houthis-old-borders-new-lines>.

⁶³ Michael Sharnoff, "Egyptian Attitudes Toward the Yemen War," *Your Middle East*, April 17, 2015, http://www.yourmiddleeast.com/culture/egyptian-attitudes-toward-the-yemen-war_31490.

the Yemen intervention.⁶⁴ The campaign is meant to send at least three different messages to three different audiences. Iran is being told that it will not be allowed to encroach on Saudi Arabia's traditional sphere of influence in the Arabian Peninsula. The United States is on notice that Saudi Arabia will not hesitate to take unilateral military action to protect its national security. Finally, the Yemen intervention is also an exercise in self-affirmation. It is a test of the capabilities of the Saudi military, especially given that its performance in the war against the Houthis in 2009 was not overwhelming, and an exercise in national assertion and unity.

In July, the Saudis and their allies made a breakthrough, driving the Houthis and their allies out of Aden and almost all of the south. Nevertheless, the operation comes at a significant price in lost soldiers and civilians, including dozens from allied states like the United Arab Emirates. Rather than straining the coalition, other members, especially the UAE, are expressing a similar resolve.⁶⁵ Yet Egypt remains somewhat aloof from the conflict. It is not merely the lack of geographical proximity that holds Egypt back from an extensive role in Yemen. In the 1960s, Yemen became Egypt's "Vietnam." After eight years of war, neither the Egyptians nor the Saudis achieved a clear-cut victory, despite any appearances that Egypt's allies won. This was a hard lesson that the Egyptians, and Saudis, are trying to avoid repeating.

While President Sisi has been unequivocal in his support for Saudi security, his statements have sent mixed signals regarding his commitment to the Yemen operation.⁶⁶ While some Egyptian media personalities argued that Egypt should steer clear of Yemen, others went further and declared failure inevitable.⁶⁷ Some Saudi journalists retorted by accusing Egypt of double talk, and even cited leaked recordings that purport to show then-presidential candidate Sisi and his top advisors deprecating Arab Gulf leaders, while plotting to solicit financial assistance from them.⁶⁸ Although Egypt is a member of the Saudi-led coalition and is contributing to the military operation, the scope of its involvement remains limited to naval support for the blockade and, according to some accounts, the contribution of about 800 infantry with tank and transport vehicle support. Despite reports that Egyptian ground troops have taken part in the campaign, the Saudi Ministry of Defense recently said that there are no Egyptian troops currently in Yemen, so the actual level of involvement is somewhat unclear.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ David D. Kirkpatrick, "Surprising Saudi Rises as a Prince Among Princes," *The New York Times*, June 6, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/07/world/middleeast/surprising-saudi-rises-as-a-prince-among-princes.html>.

⁶⁵ Adam Shreck, "Gulf stiffens determination in wake of troop deaths in Yemen," *Associated Press*, September 7, 2015, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/caaf045ce5c44feba2cb83feb87ce4c5/gulf-stiffens-determination-wake-troop-deaths-yemen>.

⁶⁶ Leila Fadel, "Some Egyptians Question Country's Role In Yemen Conflict," *NPR*, April 3, 2015, <http://www.npr.org/2015/04/03/397325247/some-egyptians-question-countrys-role-in-yemen-conflict>.

⁶⁷ "Haikal Attacks Saudi Arabia, Praises Iran and Hezbollah and maintains Egypt is seeking closer relations With Iran," *Al Quds Al Arabi* (Arabic), July 21, 2015, <http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=375218>.

⁶⁸ Yara Bayoumy, "Egypt's Sisi reassures Gulf leaders after alleged derisive audio leaks," *Reuters*, February 9, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/02/09/us-egypt-gulf-idUSKBN0LD1H720150209>.

⁶⁹ "There are no Egyptian ground troops in Yemen: Saudi-led coalition spokesman," *Al Ahrām Online*, September 11, 2015, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/140274/Egypt/Politics-/There-are-no-Egyptian-ground-troops-in-Yemen-Saudi.aspx>. See also, "Egypt sends up to 800 ground troops to Yemen's war - Egyptian security sources," *Reuters*, September 9, 2015, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2015/09/09/uk-yemen-security-idUKKCN0R911720150909>.

Crafting a Way Forward

Saudi and Egyptian policymakers clearly continue to recognize the benefits of strong bilateral relations. In August the two countries signed the Cairo Declaration in an effort to further boost military and economic cooperation.⁷⁰ This agreement recommits them to the formation of a joint Arab military force that would presumably be based in large part on combining Saudi and other Gulf air and high-tech military equipment with Egyptian manpower and experience. It also anticipates the expansion of a range of economic ties and trade, and the long-delayed demarcation of maritime borders for the two Red Sea powers.⁷¹ The day after the declaration was issued, President Sisi announced that Egyptian forces were extending their commitment in Yemen in support of the Saudi-led intervention by another six months.⁷²

For the Egyptians, Saudi oil wealth and de facto leadership of the Sunni Muslim world make it an indispensable ally, especially as the Egyptian economy's lifblood, tourism, continues to struggle as a result of unrest, particularly in Sinai. The Saudis recognize that Egypt is still a regional heavyweight. Its extensive military experience and relatively large armed forces, especially in terms of manpower, could prove vital for Saudi Arabia, especially if a joint Arab force is developed.⁷³ For its part, Egypt urgently needs the ongoing and significant financial support of the Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia.

A policy that declares "you're either with us or against us" is untenable and is bound to be counterproductive.

Both Egypt and Saudi Arabia need to augment their capabilities by tapping into what the other has and they lack. Moreover, broad agreement on most regional issues – some significant policy differences notwithstanding – means that this alliance is, for the most part, as convenient as it is logical. Seeking to be in perfect lockstep during a time of unprecedented tumult is unrealistic. A policy that declares "you're either with us or against us" is untenable and is bound to be counterproductive. Both sides appear to understand this, and to recognize the deep value of what the other has to offer, sufficiently to ensure that Cairo and Riyadh will continue to act as allies and not sink back into the rivalry of earlier eras.

⁷⁰ "Sisi: Egypt and Saudi are leaders of Arab security," *Al Arabiya*, July 30, 2015, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/07/30/FM-Egypt-Saudi-solidarity-key-to-protect-regional-security-.html>.

⁷¹ "Egypt, Saudi Arabia issue 'Cairo Declaration' to strengthen cooperation," *Ahram Online*, July 30, 2015, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/136591/Egypt/Politics-/Egypt,-Saudi-Arabia-issue-Cairo-Declaration-to-str.aspx>.

⁷² Khaled Dawoud, "Egypt and Saudi Make a Public Show of Support," *Atlantic Council*, August 11, 2015, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/egyptsource/egypt-and-saudi-make-a-public-show-of-support>.

⁷³ Heather Murdock, "Arab League Delays Forming Joint Force," *Voice of America*, August 27, 2015, <http://www.voanews.com/content/arab-league-delays-forming-joint-force/2934889.html>.

