

Al-Quds Interview: The new troika in the Middle East?

Written by Eric Walberg, Эрик Вальберг/ Уолберг ██████ ██████
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Egypt's hand-over of Tiran Island to the Saudis, Saudi flirting with Israel, Turkish disarray -- all conspire towards an unholy alliance. [al-Quds](#)

1/ What is your opinion about a recent agreement between Saudi Arabia and Egypt over the Tiran Island? Do the Israelis gain from the deal?

Tiran is strategically located at the narrow straits separating the Gulf of Aqaba and Red Sea. It is part of the Ras Muhammad National Park, set up in 1983 by the Egyptian Environmental Affairs Agency as a marine reserve for the protection of marine and terrestrial wildlife, and to protect against urban sprawl from Sharm el-Sheikh. The Straits of Tiran is Israel's only access from the Gulf of Aqaba to the Red Sea, and Egypt's blockade of the Straits of Tiran on 22 May 1967 was the casus belli for Israel in the Six Day War.

Israel briefly took over Tiran Island during the Suez Crisis in 1956 and again from 1967 to 1982 following the Six Day War. The island is currently inhabited only by military personnel from Egypt and the Multinational Force and Observers. In April, the Egyptian government signed an agreement to give Tiran and Sanafir Island to Saudi Arabia. The agreement has angered Egyptians, thousands of whom have been out on the streets to protest, despite the brutal crackdown on any demonstrations since the military seized power in 2013.

The handover is part of a plan to build a bridge from the Saudi mainland to Egypt. The move came during a five-day visit to Cairo by Saudi Arabia's King Salman, who signed 20 agreements with Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi, including petroleum supplies over the next five years to the tune of \$23 billion, which Egypt will be able to pay for over 15 years.

The Egyptian government claims the islands are Saudi territory that Egypt has administered since the 1950s by agreement with the Saudi government, but 19th century maps say otherwise, and ownership is fuzzy in this area, which lacked any borders at all until the British arrived in the 19th century and began carving the region up into nation states. 'Possession is nine-tenths of the law' and 'who pays the piper calls the tune' are more credible as proof of ownership. Protesters insist the islands are Egyptian, and they have a strong case.

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80% of diving spots are in the Straits of Tiran, a snorkeller's paradise, not something the Saudis will take advantage of. A bridge supported by piers in the water will damage coral reefs which are extremely sensitive to pollution and sediments. Because the objective of the bridge is to increase trade it will transform Sharm el-Sheikh from a resort that offers snorkelling and sunbathing into a commercial hub.

This move by Sisi is a gamble on just how much power he holds. The Arab Spring changed the rules of the game in Egypt. Egyptians have had a taste of popular will and people are more openly defiant against injustice. The parliament will probably confirm the deal, given it represents mostly supporters of Sisi, but Tiran will remain a bitter pill for restive Egyptians.

Israel's concern is free passage through the straits, which its peace treaty with Egypt of 1979 guarantees. Whether the change of ownership is 'good for the Jews' isn't clear. It means a bit more control in Saudi hands, but Saudi nonrecognition of Israel is really not such a big deal. If Sisi is happy to barter away sovereignty for Saudi money, that's fine by Israel. The hand-over has the advantage of pulling Riyadh unwittingly into the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace agreement, which the Saudis have loudly boycotted for decades.

According to *Haaretz*, Israel was notified of the Egyptian-Saudi maritime agreement two weeks before it was made public and did not oppose it as long as the security arrangement in the straits of Tiran, as fixed by the peace treaty, is honored. This, Riyadh has confirmed, though it continues to maintain the pretense of nonrecognition of Israel, and insists the Egypt-Israel peace treaty is not part of the deal.

2/ The Saudis have been supporting ISIS in Syria, and are also said to be secretly getting security information from Israel. How do you put the two facts together and what is the Israeli position in the regional map concerning the ISIS terror group?

It is hard to know what is fact vs rumour on the relationship of the Saudis and ISIS. Though rich Saudis have been channeling funds to ISIS-type groups for years, officially, the Saudis are fighting ISIS along with the US. In 2014, the Saudi Interior Ministry formally designated ISIS as a terrorist entity along with Jabhat al-Nusra, the Muslim Brotherhood, Yemen's Houthi rebels, and Saudi Hezbollah.

ISIS gets funds primarily from oil smuggling, extortion of local businesses, and booty (e.g., Mosul's central bank), but private funds and logistical support still continue to go to them via Kuwait. Despite its profession of opposition to ISIS, Riyadh has taken pleasure in its advances against Iraq's Shia government, and in jihadist gains in Syria at Bashar al-Assad's expense.

As the Saudis and Israelis don't have direct contacts, any coordination between them is secret. Israel's objective interests are really in line with Russia, Iran and now the West -- to stabilize a Syria which is not controlled by terrorists. The idea of direct US military intervention and a collapse of the Syrian state, a la Libya, is not on the books. Only Saudis can contemplate a Wahhabi-led regime in Syria--very foolishly, considering ISIS plans to dismantle the Saudi state. This makes no sense from Israel's point of view, either. So I can't take this idea of a

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Saudi-Israeli conspiracy in Syria too seriously.

There is a natural alliance between Israel and the Saudi monarchs, both of whom want the oppressive Saudi system to continue, though for very different reasons. And both of who want the destruction of the Iranian state.

"Our relationship with Saudi Arabia is good, and we hope for more peaceful relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia," said Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in December 2013. Israel's Energy Minister Silvan Shalom led a delegation to the International Renewable Energy Agency's annual conference in Abu Dhabi in 2013 in the first such visit since the Israeli assassination of a Hamas commander in Dubai in 2010.

The Palestinian magazine al-Manar reported that a delegation from an unnamed Gulf monarchy, assumed to be Saudi Arabia, visited Israel to discuss Iran with high-level Israeli officials in 2013. Saudi Arabia agreed to let Israel use its airspace to attack Iran last year, as talks on Iran's nuclear program were coming to fruition, in exchange for "some kind of progress" on the Palestinian issue, Israel's Channel 2 TV station stated, quoting an unnamed European official.

3/ Turkey has repeatedly voiced a willingness to restore ties with Israel. Is Turkey as an honest agent in its position concerning the Palestinian issue?

As a devout Muslim, Erdogan is a strong supporter of the Palestinian cause, but as head of the most powerful Muslim nation in the region, he must have correct relations with Israel. Erdogan paid a state visit to Israel in 2005. Israeli President Shimon Peres addressed the Turkish parliament during a visit in 2007, the first time an Israeli leader had addressed the legislature of a predominantly Muslim nation. To Israel's relief, it looked like relations would stay normal under the Islamist government.

But storm signals soon arose, first at the 2009 World Economic Forum conference, where debate became heated in relation to the Gaza War. Peres responded to Erdogan, stating that Turkey would have done the same if rockets had been hitting Istanbul. Erdogan angrily reminding Peres of "how you killed the children on beaches..." When interrupted by the moderator, Erdogan left the panel, accusing him of giving Peres more time than all the other panelists combined.

This small incident electrified the world and marked Erdogan as a brave opponent of the persecutors of the Palestinians. An aid flotilla to Gaza the next year with many Turkish peace activists onboard was attacked by Israeli helicopters, killing nine Turks, leading Erdogan to condemn the raid as "state terrorism", cut relations with Israel, and call for Israel's nuclear facilities to come under IAEA inspection.

Israeli crimes against the Gazans stepped up, and Erdogan lashed out in 2013, calling Israeli actions a "genocide" against the Palestinian people, and Zionism a "crime against humanity", comparing it to Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, and fascism.

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Erdogan's branding of Zionism as a crime against humanity was condemned by Europe, the US and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. Moon forgot that the UN itself had 'branded' Zionism as racism in 1975. Erdogan retracted his statement, mostly certainly under US pressure, which helped elicit a grudging apology from the Israeli prime minister for the murder of the Turkish peace activists in 2014.

But there was no sign of more restraint from Israel. The 2014 Israeli attack on Gaza killing 2,310 Gazans prompted Erdogan to accuse Israel of being "more barbaric than Hitler". So he continues to speak bravely and continued to provide material assistance to Gaza, unlike Sisi, who speaks regularly (though unofficially) with Israeli leaders, and follows Israeli policy in persecuting Gazans.

Turkey under President Recep Erdogan has burnt many bridges in the past decade and has few allies. Erdogan's decision to abandon the Syrian government to the fate of the confusing array of opposition groups created nothing but problems for him, with Kurds now becoming a force to contend with in fighting the ISIS terrorists, and bombings in Istanbul and elsewhere, killing more than a hundred civilians in the past year.

Israel has a pair of new allies -- Egypt's Sisi and Saudi King Salman. If we add a humbled Turkey back in the list of Israeli 'allies', that makes the troika a quartet ruling the Middle East in an unholy alliance, though Erdogan is still fence-sitting on who to ally with.

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