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Saudi Arabia and Egypt are redesigning the geostrategic landscape of the Red Sea region, with control over the Bab al Mandab straits and the construction of a bridge over the Red Sea connecting the two countries and Africa and Asia.

Saudi King Salman announced on April 8, 2016 an agreement with Egypt to build a bridge over the Red Sea connecting the two countries. “I agreed with my brother his Excellency President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi to build a bridge connecting the two countries. This historic step to connect the two continents, Africa and Asia, is a qualitative transformation that will increase trade between the two continents to unprecedented levels,” King Salman said.

President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi said the bridge, would be named after King Salman bin Abdelaziz. At the same announcement held at the Ittihadiya Presidential Palace in Cairo, Egypt’s President granted the visiting Saudi King the ‘Order of the Nile’ medal, Egypt’s highest state honor.

Following the announcement, representatives of both countries signed 17 investment deals and memorandums of understanding. Saudi Arabia is expected to sign a $20 billion deal to finance Egypt’s oil needs for the next five years and a further $1.5 billion deal to develop its Sinai region. The Saudi government is planning to invest $4 billion in the Suez Canal as well as Egypt’s energy and agriculture sectors.

Saudi Arabia’s Bin Laden Group, one of the country’s leading construction companies, had said it was willing to fund the project. Previous estimates for the bridge project suggested a cost of around $3-4bn, but no further information has yet been released for the latest plan. Planners believe that tolls paid by millions of Muslim pilgrims on their way to holy sites in Saudi Arabia could make up for the expected cost of the bridge within 7-10 years.

The historical visit of king Salman in Egypt is a part of a new strategy of Saudi Arabia and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and Saudi King are working together to redesign the regional security issues in Yemen and the Red Sea.

Saudi Arabia under a new king, Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, and his son prince Mohammed bin Salman, the kingdom’s defense minister, embraced a more assertive regional strategy, alarmed by concerns over Iran’s rise and worried that U.S is withdrawing from its role as security guarantor for the region. Saudi Arabia made reassessment of its security strategy and decided to build up its armed forces and to form new alliances to promote its strategic interest in the region.

In practice, that has meant the foundation of a 10 countries coalition with Egypt as a pillar of a coalition of Sunni Arab states battling Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen.
In parallel with the military intervention, Saudi Arabia made political efforts to win over countries along the African coast of the Red Sea — Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somalia. As a result, the Saudi presence along the African Red Sea coast has grown since March 2015 and in January 2016 — under pressure from Saudi Arabia — Djibouti, Somalia, and Sudan all cut diplomatic ties with Iran.

The most important geopolitical outcome of the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen and the diplomatic campaign, has been the geostrategic control over the entire African and Asian shores of the Red Sea from the straits of Bab al Mandab to the Tiran strait and the Suez Canal.  

**The Tiran strait**

At the southern end of the Gulf of Aqaba is located the Strait of Tiran. The Strait of Tiran is named after Tiran Island located at its east and having a total area of about 80 square kilometers. This island is about 5 or 6 km from the Sinai. To the east of Tiran lies relatively small Sanafir Island. Tiran and Sanafir islands, having a total area of about 113 sq kilometers.

The Strait of Tiran basically consists of three sea passages. Large ships can navigate through two of the channels, while the third one, being little in depth, cannot be used for commercial purposes.

The Strait of Tiran between the Sinai Peninsula and Saudi Arabia, at the entrance into the Gulf of Aqaba, is a waterway of highly geo-strategic importance for all the countries around the Gulf of Aqaba but mainly for Israel and Jordan.

**The dispute over Tiran and Sanafir islands between Egypt and Saudi Arabia**

Since 1906, Egypt and Saudi Arabia have disputed over the islands of Tiran and Sanafir, off the coast of Egypt’s South Sinai province. Tiran and Sanafir islands are geographically and historically part of Saudi Arabia.

Arab states fought against Israel in 1948 (Israel's Independence War). In this regard Egypt was playing the leading role. In 1949, Saudi King, on the request of Egypt gave control of the Tiran and Sanafir islands to Egypt to be used for military purposes.

Egypt has established military posts on these islands and in 1956 (the Suez crises) Nasser did not permit Israeli ships, military as well as commercial, to pass through the Gulf of Aqaba by enforcing blockade via these two islands. In 1967 he enforced again the blockade and in the war Israel occupied the islands and returned them to Egypt in 1979.

In April 8, 2016, the Saudi Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman who is also the Second Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister of Defense signed an agreement with Egyptian Prime Minister Sherif Ismail to demarcate the sea borders of both countries. There have been speculations about reaching an agreement between Egypt and Saudi Arabia on the two disputed Red Sea islands, Tiran and Sanafir, to be transferred from Egypt to Saudi Arabia. However, there was no official announcement on that issue.
The background of the bridge project

The proposal of linking both countries via a Red Sea Bridge was first raised by Egyptian officials in 1988. The original idea was to boost the Egyptian economy through trade and tourism and open a new route for pilgrims visiting Muslim holy sites in Saudi Arabia. Earlier proposals suggested the causeway would feature a railway line in parallel with the road lanes, integrating both countries' proposed high-speed railway systems. In that plan, the causeway would pass through Tiran Island, which would serve as a connection between the two countries. Since then the project has been proposed several times but has failed to become a reality.

In 2006, Bechtel a US company, which is engaged in the Egyptian oil and gas sector, has conducted a study in to the possibility of establishing a road bridge connecting the two countries.

In 2007, Saudi Arabia proposed to construct a bridge and a road from Tabuk in Saudi Arabia to Sharm el-Sheikh in Egypt but Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak put the project on ice shortly before construction began in response to security concerns voiced by neighboring Israel.

In 2011, plans called for the 32-kilometer bridge to cross the narrow Strait of Tiran from Ras Nasrani, near the Egyptian resort of Sharm el-Sheikh, to Ras Hamid in northwestern Saudi Arabia. Egypt and Saudi Arabia announced their hope to construct the bridge spanning the Gulf of Aqaba for road and rail traffic. Egyptian Prime Minister Essam Sharaf has reportedly put General Abdul Aziz, the chairman of the Arab Road Association, in charge of overseeing the project’s implementation.

The project was instigated by ousted president Hosni Mubarak only to be shelved. It has been revived post-revolution.

In June 2013 after El Sisi took power, Egypt raised the proposal to build the bridge but the Saudi transport minister at that time said that there was “no possibility” of constructing the project due to environmental issues.

The benefits for Egypt and Saudi Arabia

For the first time since 1948, when the state of Israel was founded, Arab states in North Africa would have a direct road link with fellow Arab states in the Middle East without having to cross Israeli territory.

It believes the bridge will ease the travel to Hajj and significantly increase the number of pilgrims.

Planners believe that tolls paid by millions of Muslim pilgrims on their way to holy sites in Saudi Arabia could make up for the roughly $3-4 billion the bridge is expected to cost.

It would increase the communication not only between Egypt and Saudi Arabia; but between Asia and Africa with a great benefit to the Arab common market.

It would save energy and expenses and reduces the cost of transporting goods between Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

It would reduce dependence on sometimes perilous ferry crossings over the Red Sea.
The risks and threats of the bridge

Concerns have been expressed about the possible effects on the marine environment and coral reefs in the Red Sea. Such damage could have a knock-on effect on tourism, something that is vital for the Egyptian economy.\textsuperscript{16}

The bridge over the Tiran strait located at the entrance to the Gulf of Aqaba would pose a "strategic threat to Israel" as it puts the freedom of navigation to and from the Israeli port of Eilat "at risk".\textsuperscript{17}

The importance of Tiran strait to Israel

Tiran Island marks the narrowest point in the Straits of Tiran, which is Israel’s only access point from the Gulf of Aqaba to the Red Sea and a crucial maritime route to the Far East. Israel has declared repeatedly that any closure of the Tiran strait will be "a direct cause of war". Therefore, free navigation through this strait was of special significance both in the Sinai war (Suez Crisis) in 1956 and 1967 "Six days "war.

Egypt closed the Straits of Tiran to all Israeli shipping and all ships bound for Eilat port first in 1956 and then again in 1967. As a result of this closure, Israeli commercial ships especially those carrying oil had to navigate around Africa to reach another Israeli port.

In order to get rid of this long sea voyage, Israel first occupied these two islands and other coastal areas in 1956 and gave their control to the United Nations. In 1967, Israel started the Six-Day war by again seizing these two islands.

Along with other terms, the agreements between Egypt and Israel, according to article 13 of Camp David contract, Egypt and Israel identified that Tiran strait and Aqaba Gulf is one of the international waterways which are open for all ships around the world and also the two sides recognize each other’s right in shipping and flying on Tiran strait and Aqaba Gulf to achieve their lands.

In addition, Tiran was enclosed in area (C) where Egypt wasn’t allowed to deploy any military forces in this area. Since then Tiran and Sanafir Island were occupied by a multinational force (MFO) under the Egyptian civil administration but citizens of both countries are allowed to visit the area with coordination with multinational UN force.
Summary

The war in Yemen and the competition over the control of the Bab al Mandab straits and the Red Sea maritime route are part of the regional conflict between Iran and its allies and Saudi Arabia and Egypt led moderate Sunni coalition.

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and Saudi King Salman bin Saud are working together to redesign the regional security issues in Yemen and the Red Sea. As President El-Sisi said: “We are adding a brick to the edifice of Egyptian-Saudi relations and forming a new chapter together that will go down in history and that will be remembered by future generations.”

The most important geopolitical outcome of the Saudi-led Yemen intervention has been the geostrategic control over the Bab al Mandab straits and the Red Sea maritime route. As a result, Iran’s strategic interests and influence in the region suffered a significant blow.

Saudi Arabia has typically used aid to curry favor among regional allies. Saudi donations have helped prop up Egypt’s struggling economy since President El Sisi came to power in 2013. Saudi Arabia is pursuing a more aggressive foreign policy, striving to contain the influence of Iran, its Shiite rival for regional power, while reassessing economic aid to allies in the face of dramatically reduced oil prices.

The kingdom was focused on development projects as a way to reach out to Egypt’s leaders as well as its people. Riyadh wants to push Egypt’s regional policy to align more closely with its own, particularly on Iran. The new agreement to build the bridge across the Tiran strait is another pillar of the strategic alliance between the two countries.

The Saudi investment is a political boost for President El Sisi, that has in recent months weathered criticism in Egypt over rising food and energy prices amid embarrassing public scandals and as an Islamic State insurgency in the north Sinai has all but stopped tourism, which is an important source of hard currency.

The Egyptian-Saudi agreement regarding the marine borders and construction of a bridge connecting Egypt with Saudi Arabia has to take in consideration the Israeli interests - an outlet to the Red Sea for its shipping and the Camp David accord.

Israel has to learn the new geostrategic landscape of the Red Sea region and to make reassessment of its diplomatic and security strategy to prevent potential risks and to identify strategic opportunities.
Notes

1 Saudi, Egypt agrees to build Red Sea bridge: king, Al Arabia, April 8, 2016.

2 Egypt, Saudi Arabia to construct Red Sea Bridge, Ahram Online, April 8, 2016.

3 ‘King Salman Bridge’ to Connect Egypt and Saudi Arabia Over the Red Sea, Egyptian streets, April 8, 2016.

4 Salma Mohamed, Will Egypt Abandon Tiran And Sanafir To Saudi Arabia? Middle East Observer, April 8, 2016.


6 The Bridge between Egypt and Saudi Arabia, A Dream Come True? Urban Peek, April 8, 2016.

7 Ibid.

8 Historic Agreements Include the Demarcation of Sea Borders and a Bridge Between Egypt and Saudi Arabia, Al Jazeera, April 9, 2016.

9 Egypt and Saudi Arabia to build Red Sea link bridge, Middle East Eye, April 8, 2016.

10 Saudi Arabia, Egypt agree to build bridge over Red Sea, Al Jazeera, April 9, 2016.


13 Egypt and Saudi Arabia to build Red Sea link bridge, Middle East Eye, April 8, 2016.


15 The Bridge between Egypt and Saudi Arabia, A Dream Come True? Urban Peek, April 8, 2016.

16 Israel hints at war with Egypt over bridge to Saudi Arabia, Middle East Monitor, February 11, 2013.

17 Ibid.

18 Historic Agreements Include the Demarcation of Sea Borders and a Bridge Between Egypt and Saudi Arabia, Asharq Alawsat, April, 9, 2016.

19 Salma Mohamed, Will Egypt Abandon Tiran And Sanafir To Saudi Arabia? Middle East Observer, April 8, 2016.