



# The end of an alliance?

Cairo and Riyadh retain mutual interests on Iran, but have clashed on Syria and relations with Russia

**2016 WAS** not a good year for either Egypt or Saudi Arabia, the twin pillars of the Sunni Arab bloc of states. Three years after taking power, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's initial popularity has waned as Egypt's intractable economic and social problems weighed more heavily on the populace, sparking criticism of the regime, even in the usually pro-government media.

Sisi's call for the populace to tighten their belts and remain patient rang increasingly hollow, as Egyptians confronted acute shortages and high prices of staples such as sugar, rice and cooking oil, a cut in fuel subsidies and a devaluation of the Egyptian pound.

The armed forces' failure to stamp out ISIS-affiliated insurgency in Sinai was disturbing enough, but then jihadist violence hit home on December 11 with the bloody bombing of a Coptic church, next to the main cathedral in central Cairo. The resulting anger against the authorities' alleged laxness was palpable.

Saudi Arabia's troubles were multiple as well. The precipitous drop in oil prices and lack of meaningful jobs for its youthful and increasingly educated population was calling into question the viability of the country's traditional policies of providing heavily subsidized goods and services in return for strict political quiescence. The regional outlook was especially bleak, as Shi'ite Iran's assertiveness loomed large and the Saudi effort to counter it foundered. The US-led international agreement to curb Iran's nuclear program was seen in Riyadh as a victory for Tehran; the Saudi-led war in Yemen against Iranian-backed Houthi rebels was stalemated, and faced increasingly strident international condemnation of the civilian casualties caused by indiscriminate Saudi air force bombings; and in Syria, Russian and Iranian support had conferred advantage to the Assad regime's bitter battle against the Syrian rebel groups who are largely funded by the Saudis and other Gulf Arab states, highlighted by the successful siege of rebel-held areas of Aleppo.

Over the last quarter-century, Egypt and Saudi Arabia had broadly worked in tandem: Egypt had provided the crucial Arab participation in the Saudi-Western coalition against Saddam Hussain in 1990-91, while Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies had provided tens of billions of dollars in vital aid to Sisi's regime. However, the Egyptian and Saudi leaderships did not draw closer together to jointly combat their difficulties. In fact, relations have deteriorated significantly in recent months, reaching a nadir not seen since the partial Arab boycott of Egypt during the 1980s, as punishment for Egypt's peace treaty with Israel.

To be sure, the Egyptian-Saudi alliance had never been friction-free. Egypt's self-view as the Arab world's natural leader was increasingly at odds with its deep-seated internal problems and the financial might of the Saudis and smaller Gulf principalities. Mutual sensitivities burst forth this past April, when Sisi sought to transfer two small islands at the mouth of the Gulf of Aqaba to Saudi sovereignty as a gesture of thanks for Saudi support. The



A man walks past graffiti depicting relations between Egypt and Saudi Arabia in Cairo, October 12

resulting public outcry and judicial intervention scuttled the move, to the Saudis' extreme annoyance. No less annoying was Egypt's refusal to participate in the Saudi-led military operations in Yemen. And most significant of all was Egypt's tilt in recent months toward the Assad regime in Syria and its Russian patron.

The simmering Egyptian-Saudi tension burst into full view in mid-October when Egypt voted in favor of Russia's draft resolution in the Security Council that emphasized that the battle for Aleppo was a fight against "terrorism," in line with the Assad regime's master narrative. Saudi anger was palpable. The very next day, shipment of Saudi petrol products to Egypt was suspended, and the two countries' medias unleashed blistering attacks against each other's leaders. Matters have since escalated further, as Sisi openly declared his support for the Syrian army as the backbone of a unified Syrian state; Saudi Arabia feted a high-profile Ethiopian government delegation – a direct slap to Egypt, in light of the current tensions between Addis Ababa and Cairo over the completion of a new Ethiopian dam on the upper Nile; and a UAE effort to arrange a reconciliation meeting in Abu Dhabi between Sisi and Salman failed, owing to Saudi recalcitrance.

Strategically, the two countries continue to share an interest in counterbalancing Iranian power in the region, and Riyadh has a fundamental interest in helping Egypt cope with its economic difficulties. But Sisi's expressed preference for a united "Arab" Syria and a strengthening of ties with Russia, as part of an effort to reassert Egyptian regional influence, clash sharply with Saudi priorities, particularly those of the young Deputy Crown Prince Mohamed Bin Salman. These differences and mutual sensitivities suggest that repairing the relationship won't be a simple matter. ■

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