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Summer August 25, 2013

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A fragile alliance: how the crisis in Egypt caused a rift within the anti-Syrian regime block

by *Ahmed E. Souaiaia**

Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirate (UAE), Turkey, and the West condemned in unison the Syrian regime for its harsh treatment of Syrians from the first day of the uprising in that country. Many observers were skeptical of the stated reasons for this sudden interest in human rights issues given that the Gulf States are in fact models of repressive governance. As the reaction to the Egyptian crisis revealed, the opposition to the Syrian regime was not motivated by its stated goals (support for democracy and condemnation for authoritarianism). It was dictated by narrow political, ideological, and sectarian interests.

For the West, the Syrian government was not to be trusted because it is part of the “non-moderate” clique of countries. It was therefore a welcomed development when the Arab Spring reached Syria’s shores. Countries that hesitated to support the uprisings that ousted Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak (both dictators, but part of the “moderate” group of Arab nations as defined by the West) were eager to throw their support behind al-Qaeda elements, or have looked the other way as governments and private entities supplied al-Qaeda-like fighters with deadly (and possibly chemical) weapons in Syria.

The rulers of Qatar, who leveraged money, media, and the Muslim Brotherhood to play a disproportionately significant role, turned against Assad in favor of the Muslim Brotherhood. They used Aljazeera to bolster the propaganda for the opposition and spent nearly \$4 billion on weapons and salary to the Syrian rebels.

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are the two main patrons of Salafism, a brand of Islam that is dogmatically opposed to any expression of Islam that does not fit theirs. Rulers of these two countries see Shi`i Islam as a heretic deviation that must be eliminated. Moreover, they see in the Iranian model of governance (*wilāyat al-faqīh*) a direct threat for their clannish rule. For them, Assad’s regime was the door through which Shi`i Islam and Iranian influence entered the Arab world. They wanted that door shut.

Turkey, under the rule of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the leadership of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, gravitated towards a form of religious conservatism not dissimilar from the Muslim Brotherhood’s. Without doubt, Erdoğan, like the leaders of Muslim Brotherhood, acted on his sectarian impulses in dealing with Iraq, when he harbored a fugitive politician, and in dealing with Syria.

An alliance united by hate and narrow interests is not a reliable or sustainable one. The second uprising in Egypt that removed Mohamed Morsi, an elected president who governed with the singular aim of entrenching the Brotherhood into the institutions of governance instead of solving the critical problems facing the country, revealed the uneasy terms of an alliance that united disparate actors.

Immediately after the June 30th uprising and the subsequent military intervention in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Kuwait pumped vast amounts of money and energy assistance to help the new rulers of Egypt overcome the difficult economic conditions facing the country. Qatar, now ruled

by the son of the ailing Emir, kept a low profile—although Aljazeera gave away the country’s position when it continued to broadcast news sympathetic to Morsi’s supporters.

Saudi Arabia on the other hand, launched strong diplomatic, political, and economic campaign to legitimize, support, and sustain the military-installed rulers of Egypt. Meeting with European leaders in France and Germany, Faisal, the Kingdom’s foreign minister, insisted that what happened in Egypt on July 3rd was not a coup and that the military was not suppressing Egyptians. It was fighting terrorism (i.e., the Muslim Brotherhood). He argued that the military acted because 30 million Egyptians wanted it to do so. Dismissing Western threats to the Egyptian army, he promised that Saudi Arabia would replace any cuts in Western aid.

The hypocrisy could not be more obvious: in two days, the Egyptian military regime killed as many people as the total number killed in Syria in the first two months of the Syrian uprising. Yet, the Saudis and their allies armed all kinds of fighters, including known terrorists, to fight the Syrian regime. Yet, Saudi Arabia did not see a problem with a regime that had reportedly killed nearly 2000 Egyptians in two separate days.

Highlighting the fragility of this alliance and the hypocrisy of its members, Turkey’s rulers lashed out at Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Jordan, and UAE accusing them of bankrolling a military coup in Egypt, undoing legitimacy, and killing Egyptians. The so-called Friends of Syria are now enemies because of Egypt.



(Reacting to the Gulf States’s role in the ouster of Morsi, a Turkish pro-APK news outlet dubbed the rulers of UAE, Saudi Arabia, PA, Jordan, and Kuwait the “axis of evil.”)

These developments have serious implications for each of the members of this alliance.

The United States’ credibility will be further and irreparably damaged. Pursuing a hostile policy against a repressive regime in Syria while appeasing an equally repressive regime in Egypt relativizes its commitment to its declared values. Taking cues from Saudi Arabia about the U.S. foreign relations in the region is not a wise approach.

Turkey will continue to lose economically and politically for pursuing a foreign policy built on sectarianism and imperial ambitions and contradicting its own principles of pursuing a zero-problem foreign policy in favor of economic opportunities.

If Saudi Arabia manages to control Egyptian Salafi Jihadists and prevents an armed struggle in Sinai and other Egyptian provinces, its role as the sole patron of global terrorism will be reaffirmed. If Egyptian Salafi Jihadists engage in armed struggle in Egypt, it will signal Saudi Arabia's loss of control over a sect that it created and nurtured financially and ideologically since the 1980s in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Both possibilities are evidenced by two key developments.

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مسيرة حاشدة في أبي سليمان بالإسكندرية تكسر حظر التجوال وترفض الانقلاب

شارك الآلاف من أهالي منطقة أبو سليمان بمحافظة الإسكندرية في مسيرة حاشدة مساء اليوم لرفض الانقلاب العسكري، رغم سريان فترة حظر التجوال.

محليات عربية | محليات مصرية | محليات سعودية

(Unlike the Kingdoms official media coverage and the Egyptian Salafis', Saudi Salafi websites' and TV channels' coverage of Egypt is decidedly anti-military; Screen capture date, August 25, 2013)

First, as indicated by conservative satellite channels' programming, Salafis within Saudi Arabia remain supportive of Morsi and continue to attack the leaders of the coup. Second, Egyptian Salafis have supported the military and are hoping that the crackdown against the Muslim Brotherhood will enable them to become the sole voice for Islamists in the next elections.

Money and sectarianism are not the only tools that enable Saudi and Emirati meddling in Egyptian affairs. Social and economic factors are generally overlooked, but they are equally important in determining Egyptian relations with the Gulf States. An estimated 9 million Egyptians live abroad and contribute about US\$ 14.6 billion annually to the Egyptian economy. Many of these Egyptian migrants live in the Gulf States (1.8 million in Saudi Arabia, 550,000 in UAE, and 500,000 in Kuwait). The Gulf States have used the presence of Egyptians to influence its foreign relations: for instance, they often threaten to expel workers in response to political disputes. Most recently, UAE threatened Egyptians after discovering an alleged plot by the Muslim Brotherhood. In addition, the Gulf States acting as a block within the Gulf Cooperative

Council (GCC) collectively threatened extreme measures against Lebanese workers unless the Lebanese government acted in line with the GCC foreign policy.

These social and economic factors, along with sectarian and ideological issues, must be taken into consideration when attempting to explain the fall of the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood and resurrection of military rule in Egypt. The U.S administration should develop new calculus for its Middle East policy, especially in the light of the Arab Spring events and the possibility of energy independence. Outsourcing U.S. foreign policy to allies who do not share a commitment to combatting racism, sectarianism, and (*takfiri*) terrorism will continue to diminish U.S. standing and credibility.

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