

## Post-Morsi Egypt: Saudi Manoeuvring and Iranian Dilemma

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## *Summary*

After the overthrow of Muhammad Morsi by the military, Egypt's relationship with two important Gulf countries – Saudi Arabia and Iran – has undergone dramatic changes. Saudi Arabia, which had differences with the Muslim Brotherhood on several issues, looks to regain the influence it had under the Hosni Mubarak regime that it lost with his removal. Under Morsi's rule, Iran and Egypt made attempts to resume the relationship between the two countries which had been cut-off since 1979. However, the Iran-Egypt relationship was shaken with the overthrow of Morsi and Iran now looks for fresh opportunities in Egypt. At present, the situation in Egypt clearly favours Saudi Arabia while Iran is at a disadvantage.

## Introduction

The military intervention in Egypt which overthrew Muhammad Morsi has impacted regional politics in West Asia. The victory of the Muslim Brotherhood in the elections changed the political alliances in the region, particularly with respect to Saudi Arabia and Iran. Former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak was friendly with Saudi Arabia and his ouster led to anxiety in Riyadh. While Saudi Arabia did not enjoy a close relationship with the Morsi regime, it managed to maintain a degree of stability. Riyadh is now looking to rebuild its relationship with Cairo as it was in Mubarak's time. Unlike Saudi Arabia, Iran never had a stable relationship with Egypt but the equation changed when the Muslim Brotherhood came to power. But the relationship has suffered as Morsi has been ousted from power. Iran is now looking for leverage to fix its relationship with Egypt. In this context, this issue brief intends to analyse the changing patterns of relationship of the two major players in the Gulf – Saudi Arabia and Iran – with Egypt in the backdrop of the removal of Morsi, and the subsequent political uncertainty and violence that has engulfed the country.

## Saudi Manoeuvring

Ever since the overthrow of Morsi and the appointment of an interim government in Cairo, Saudi Arabia has, once again, come into the limelight with its active support for the political developments in Egypt that included the installation of the new interim government and the side-lining of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Saudi excitement can be gauged from the fact that immediately after the overthrow of Morsi, it announced a \$5 billion aid package to Egypt. Saudi leaders have given statements supporting the post-Morsi developments in Egypt and have not come out openly against the killing of the Muslim brotherhood supporters on the streets by Egyptian security forces.

The Saudi-Egypt relationship has witnessed many trajectories in the past. During the Nasser era, the relationship between the two countries turned hostile as Nasser espoused the idea of Arab Nationalism and Socialism, which was contrary to the authoritarian Islamic and monarchical principles of the Saudi regime. Both the countries were on opposite poles during the Cold War political alliances. During the 1970s, Anwar Sadat also could not strengthen the relationship and his peace treaty with Israel in 1979 further deteriorated Saudi-Egyptian bilateral relations. The relationship improved significantly and reached its peak under Hosni Mubarak whom the Al Saud family was comfortable to work with.

When protests started in Cairo against Mubarak, Saudi Arabia openly supported him fearing that the protests may spread to the Kingdom and to other parts of the region as well. Saudi fears of the protests got further aggravated as the Muslim Brotherhood came out in support of the protesters against Mubarak. As Mubarak quit, Saudi Arabia was in

a dilemma, not being sure of the unfolding situation in Egypt. It soon realised that it would have to deal with an Egypt without Mubarak; and soon after the parliamentary elections, it became further clear that it would have to deal with the Muslim Brotherhood in power in Cairo. The Salafists, who are ideologically closer to Saudi Arabia, have had limited influence under Morsi's rule. The Salafi leaders now claim to have warned Morsi regarding the possible ploy by the military to remove him but were not taken seriously. Thus, Morsi seemingly misjudged the intention of the military to provide latent support to the protesters and, subsequently, remove him.

Saudi support for the new regime in Cairo is proportionately related to its disapproval of the Muslim Brotherhood. In the aftermath of the 2012 parliamentary elections, when it became increasingly clear that the Muslim Brotherhood is going to form the next government in Cairo, Saudi Arabia made attempts to accommodate the Muslim Brotherhood in its foreign policy thinking and behaviour: the Muslim Brotherhood was now reality in Egypt which the Saudis would have to accept. On its part, the Muslim Brotherhood also promised to maintain good relations with Riyadh. Despite this, both the parties could not build up the warmth required to establish mutual trust. While Saudi Arabia continued to believe that the Muslim Brotherhood is an ideological challenge to its Islamic authority in the world, the latter's popularity on the streets in the post-Mubarak era, and the subsequent electoral victory, gave it further confidence that it can do well and flourish even without Saudi support. More so as other countries like Qatar were ready to support the Brotherhood politically and economically. Besides, Morsi's attempts to reach out to Tehran did not go down well with Riyadh and made the latter feel that Morsi could not be a trusted friend in the fluid political environment in the region. This kind of thinking and perception on both sides led to an uneasy peace existing between the two major Arab countries. Thus, as the protests against Morsi began and later rapidly gathered momentum, which in turn led to the military's intervention, Saudi Arabia swiftly took the side of the military viewing it as the right time and opportunity to oust Muslim Brotherhood from power.

Saudi Arabia expected a subservient Muslim Brotherhood with a compromising disposition. For Saudi Arabia, as long as Muslim Brotherhood is ideologically non-challenging and financially dependent, the situation remains in its favour. The Saudi expectation was to make Muslim Brotherhood work as a subordinate ally who would be politically compliant in bilateral and regional affairs.

Further, being an authoritarian political system, Saudi Arabia is not in favour of letting democracy flourish in its Arab neighbourhood. Its apprehension is that blooming of democracy in one country may lead to similar demands in other countries. When it appeared that democracy as a political system and the Muslim Brotherhood as a political party were settling down in Cairo, it became a definite cause of concern for the Saudi royal family.

For Saudi Arabia, Egypt is an important ally in the region. A stronger relationship with Egypt in the current geo-political scenario in West Asia would work in its favour. Also, with uncertainty over the protests in other countries of the region, such as Syria and Yemen, continuing and the Iranian nuclear controversy unwilling to die down, this is the opportune time for Saudi Arabia to engage with Egypt. The Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al-Faisal visited Cairo on September 3, 2013, and met with the Egyptian Defence Minister and Deputy Prime Minister General Abdel Fattah El Sisi, and the Prime Minister Hazem El Beblawi. Prince Saud Al-Faisal also emphasised that the kingdom will continue to provide financial and diplomatic support to Egypt.<sup>1</sup> This friendly Saudi overture towards Egypt has been promptly acknowledged by Cairo, where an army spokesman said that “cooperation between Cairo and Riyadh is a cornerstone of Arab national security, through which the Arab and Islamic nation can face all challenges.”<sup>2</sup>

The current Saudi activism over the developments in Egypt has led to a stirring in the politics of the region. The strong stand taken by Saudi Arabia has also been at odds with the positions of the US, its ally, and countries like Turkey and Qatar. Saudi Arabia immediately supported the interim government in Egypt. Though the US supports the interim government as well, the killing of a large number of Muslim Brotherhood members in Cairo by the security forces has made it move cautiously on Egypt. It has also started the debate in the US over the financial aid given to Egypt, with some law makers calling for the suspension of aid to the latter.<sup>3</sup>

Turkey’s relationship with Egypt strengthened under the Muslim Brotherhood and has now been affected with Morsi’s removal. Similarly, Qatar, which happened to be a close friend and a major aid donor of Egypt during Morsi’s rule, now stands side-lined. Other Gulf monarchies have supported the Saudi position regarding the military intervention in Egypt. King Abdullah went to the extent of warning the external powers not to intervene in the Egypt’s political process. This demonstrates the Saudi keenness to engage with Cairo and, at the same time, keep the Muslim Brotherhood at bay and exploit the situation of uncertainty to regain influence over Egypt. The Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al-Faisal also warned the countries of the region about the negative impact of continuing insecurity in Egypt stating that, “the blaze and ruin will not be limited to Egypt alone, but

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<sup>1</sup> “Saudi and Egyptian Officials Discuss Cooperation”, *Asharq Al Awsat*, September 3, 2013, available at <http://www.aawsat.net/2013/09/article55315649>, accessed on September 5, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> “Saudi and US at Odds Over Egypt, Syria Strategies”, *The National*, September 11, 2013, available at <http://www.thenational.ae/news/world/middle-east/saudi-and-us-at-odds-over-egypt-syria-strategies>, accessed on September 11, 2013.

they will be reflected on all those who have contributed or stood by problems and disorders taking place in Egypt today.”<sup>4</sup>

The Saudis have played their diplomacy skilfully throughout the turmoil in Egypt. But they could find themselves in serious trouble if the political uncertainty continues and security and order is not maintained in Egypt, leading to a Syria-style civil war.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the Saudi proactive diplomacy establishes the amount of importance that Saudi Arabia attaches to Egypt in its attempts to maintain regional supremacy.

### Iranian Dilemma

The protests against Hosni Mubarak were welcomed by Iran as it was supporting anti-regime protests throughout the Arab world. After the initial fall of the regime in Tunisia, Iran believed that a similar situation might be replicated by supporting the protesters against the authoritarian Arab regimes. Thus, Iran continued to support the protesters on the Arab streets by giving pro-protesters and anti-regime statements. Iranian officials even went to the extent of describing the victory of Muslim Brotherhood as the “Islamic Awakening” in the Arab countries. Thus, the fall of Mubarak was viewed by Iran as the beginning of a new era in Egypt.

The electoral victory of the Muslim Brotherhood and coming to power of Muhammad Morsi in Cairo added further optimism in Tehran, not only for the possibility of improving bilateral relations but also for a possible strategic advantage in the region by reshaping the regional political landscape. Iran hoped to strengthen bilateral relationship with Egypt under Morsi. The “Islamic” agenda of both regimes drew them towards each other. Morsi visited Tehran to participate in the Non Aligned Movement (NAM) meeting in August 2012 – the first visit by an Egyptian head of state since 1979. In a similar gesture aimed at improving the bilateral relationship, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad visited Egypt in February 2013 to represent his country at the 12<sup>th</sup> summit of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) held in Cairo. During Morsi’s rule, both countries appeared to have realised the importance of their cooperation in the present political and security context and were slowly moving towards mending their past acrimonious relationship. Apart from the resumption of diplomatic relations, both countries moved further ahead to build up people-to-people contact as the Cairo-Tehran flight service was also resumed in March 2013 after a gap of 34 years. To attract Iranian tourists, Egyptian Tourism Minister

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<sup>4</sup> “Prince Saud: Arabs to Cover Any Foreign Aid Cuts to Egypt”, *Arab News*, August 19, 2013, available at <http://www.arabnews.com/news/461777>, accessed on September 1, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Lippman, “Support for El-Sisi: What’s in it for Al-Saud?”, Middle East Institute, September 3, 2013, available at <http://www.mei.edu/content/support-el-sisi-what%E2%80%99s-it-al-saud>, accessed on September 9, 2013.

Hesham Zazou visited Iran in February 2013. In May 2013, a group of 134 Iranian tourists visited Egypt amidst the Salafists' fear and warning that "[t]hey pose a danger to Egypt's national security" and that the "Egyptians might be deceived into converting to Shiism, giving Shia ideology a chance to spread in Egypt", while Zazou stated that it is "just business".<sup>6</sup> Iran also declared that Egyptian tourists would not require a visa to visit Iran.

Morsi's desire to strengthen Egypt's relationship with Iran did not generate any sympathy for the Assad regime – the most reliable ally of Iran in the region. Inspired by the anti-Mubarak protests and having won the elections in his country, Morsi projected himself as a champion of the liberty in the authoritarian Arab world and, thus, supported the anti-Assad protests in Syria. Without any sign of hesitation in his speech at the NAM summit in Tehran, Morsi called the Syrian regime "oppressive" and alleged that the regime has "lost legitimacy" to rule. He also announced his full support for the rebels and expressed solidarity with their protests. Such a bold and open stand by Morsi certainly did not go down well in Tehran and put Iran in a dilemma. On the one side there was Assad, the most trusted ally in the region, and on the other budding relationship with an important country like Egypt; a relationship with which was revived after decades of bitterness. Morsi's open stand came at a time when it looked like the revival of the Egypt-Iran relationship would lead to a change in the geo-political landscape of the region, with the re-emergence of Egypt and the rise of Muslim Brotherhood to power. Thus Iran was stuck between an old ally – Syria – and a new promising and a new potential friend – Egypt. For Iran, while a strong relationship with Egypt would have contributed to augment its stature in the region, the latter's open support for Syrian rebels proved to be fatal for the relationship. As a result, Morsi lost the new found warmth and sympathy from Tehran and Iran continued with its own battle of protecting the Assad regime in Syria.

Similarly, Morsi's attempt to reach out to Israel also upset the Iranians. With Muslim Brotherhood in power, Iran would have believed that the resistance against Israel would be strengthened. But to its disappointment, Iran alleged that Morsi continued to have good relations with Israel, the West and the Gulf states, like his predecessor Hosni Mubarak.<sup>7</sup>

For Iran, the removal of Morsi has been a mixed bag. Iran condemned the military intervention in Egypt that overthrew a democratically elected leader. The spokesperson

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<sup>6</sup> "It's Just Business' Says Minister on Phobia of Iranian Tourists in Egypt", *Ahram Online*, June 1, 2013, available at <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/3/12/72864/Business/Economy/Its-just-business-says-minister-on-phobia-of-Irani.aspx>, accessed on September 3, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> "The Shattered Dream: Iran and Egypt After Morsi", *Iran Daily Brief*, July 8, 2013, available at <http://www.irandailybrief.com/2013/07/08/the-shattered-dream-iran-and-egypt-after-morsi/>, accessed on September 3, 2013.

of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Abbas Araghchi, stated: “We do not consider proper the intervention by military forces in politics to replace a democratically elected administration.”<sup>8</sup> He also asked the Islamists and revolutionaries “not think that everything is over”, adding that Iran does not think that removal of Morsi is a “defeat for Islamic awakening.”<sup>9</sup> Iran is also critical about any intervention by the foreign elements in Egyptian politics.

After Morsi, Iran lost a potential friend in the region, though his ouster brought a temporary relief for Iran as he was trying to be vocal about the necessity of bringing about change in Syria. The interim regime that has now followed Morsi also supports the rebels against Assad, but it is more engaged in fixing domestic problems and is, thus, not exceptionally enthusiastic about the developments in Syria.

But on the negative side, the fall of Morsi brought Iran’s arch rival Saudi Arabia back to Egypt. This is big setback for Iranian foreign policy in the region.

With the situation deteriorating in Egypt and without having any leverage at hand, Iran now waits for the right opportunity to make its next move. It is unlikely that Iran’s relationship will improve under the present interim government. As promised by the interim government, the parliamentary and presidential elections will be held in early 2014.

## Egypt’s Response

The new interim government in Cairo has had little hesitation in changing sides. It immediately chose to accept Saudi Arabia as a friend and had no regrets in overlooking Tehran. Egypt accepted the Saudi aid along with the aid offers from other Gulf countries such as UAE and Kuwait, signalling a shifting of its priorities. Also, the fact that the USA’s response to the military intervention in Egypt was mostly muted indicates the American approval of the new regime and their unstated incompatibility with the Morsi regime. Thus, on the whole, the interim regime in Cairo seems tilted towards the US and Saudi Arabia. In such situation, there is little space available for Iran to operate and influence in Egypt. Iran’s response to the military intervention and overthrow of Morsi has also been rebuked by Egypt. While disapproving of Iranian statements on the developments, the Egyptian Foreign Ministry stated that such statements by Iran is

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<sup>8</sup> “Iran Calls Egyptian Military’s Overthrow Of Mohammed Morsi Improper”, *Huffington Post*, July 7, 2013, available at [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/07/07/iran-egypt\\_n\\_3559055.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/07/07/iran-egypt_n_3559055.html), accessed on August 29, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> “Iran Calls for Respect for Democratically Elected Governments”, *Tehran Times*, July 7, 2013, available at <http://tehrantimes.com/politics/109082-iran-calls-for-respect-for-democratically-elected-governments>, accessed on August 29, 2013.

tantamount to “unacceptable interference in Egypt’s internal affairs” and shows an “insufficient grasp on the nature of the democratic developments Egypt is currently witnessing.”<sup>10</sup> Such a strong statement from Egypt shows that Iran will have to wait for the new government to be elected to power in Cairo.

## Conclusion

The reverberations of the regime change in Egypt have been felt in the political landscape of the region and, more particularly, in the competition and rivalry between the two major Gulf countries – Iran and Saudi Arabia. The current situation in Egypt favours Saudi Arabia while Iran is at a disadvantage. Riyadh has successfully regained its influence in Cairo and hopes to continue its influence over the future political process of the country. After a period of over three decades, Egypt came as a flash in the pan for Iranian foreign policy and faded away before delivering anything concrete. For the time being, Iran has chosen to protect Assad and feels that Egypt can wait for the right time and opportunity.

Egypt’s economic and political situation also makes it prone to intervention by regional powers. At present, Egyptian society and polity stands polarised and the economy is in a bad shape, with rising inflation and unemployment. Despite its internal political uncertainty and a faltering economy, Egypt remains an important country for both Saudi Arabia and Iran for political and strategic reasons. Further, competition between the two powers for regional supremacy would direct both to vie for space in Egypt. As the state of affairs continues to unfold in Egypt, both the countries are hopeful that the situation will change in their favour. As Egypt navigates through the turbulent times to overcome internal instability, the time ahead would see Saudi Arabia and Iran continuing to strive for influence in the country.

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<sup>10</sup> “Iran Reaction to Morsi’s Removal ‘Unacceptable Interference’: Egypt FM”, *Ahram Online*, July 10, 2013, available at <http://english.ahram.org/NewsContent/1/0/76193/Egypt/Iran-reaction-to-Morsis-removal-unacceptable-inter.aspx>, accessed on August 30, 2013.