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The Struggle for Egypt: Saudi Arabia's Regional Role

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

Recent events in Egypt and Syria suggest a concerted Saudi effort to contain the wave of calls for change across the Middle East and North Africa. The move has led to the rise of Saudi allies in Egypt and Syria and the adoption of procedures that favour the kingdom and put the Muslim Brotherhood's main foreign backer, Qatar, under its new emir, on the defensive.

Commentary

WHEN EGYPT's military chief General Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi declared last week that President Mohammed Morsi had been deposed, standing next to him were leaders of the Saudi-backed Salafist Nour Party. This endorsement signalled Saudi support for the coup and gave the military the fig leaf it needed to assert that its intervention was against the Brotherhood rather than the rise of political Islam.

The Salafists' key role in doing the bidding of the Saudis was reinforced by their successful rejection of liberal opposition politician Mohammed el-Baradei as prime minister and the military's pledge to retain all references to Islamic law in the constitution. The Egyptian military coup was Saudi Arabia's third successful counter-strike in recent weeks against the wave of change in the Middle East and North Africa and its most important defeat to date of Qatari support for popular revolts and the Brotherhood.

Saudi's wider regional role

The role of the Salafists was coupled with a Saudi effort to counter Qatar's financial backing by withdrawing its comparatively limited financial support for the Morsi government and pledging to shield the Egyptian military from any international financial fallout from its intervention, including a possible US cut in military aid.

As the anti-Morsi protests erupted in Egypt, the Qatari-backed Syrian National Council (SNC) Prime Minister-in-exile Ghassan Hitto resigned under Saudi pressure and Saudi-backed Ahmed Assi Al-Jerba defeated his Qatar-supported rival, Adib Shishakly, in the SNC presidential elections. Earlier, Saudi Arabia succeeded in restricting Qatari support for the Brotherhood within the SNC and the Free Syrian Army as well as for more radical Islamists.

It did so by securing approval by the Obama administration to supply non-US surface-to-air missiles to Syrian rebels. US consent was on the condition that distribution of the missiles was handled by the rebel Supreme

Military Council to ensure that weapons did not flow to jihadist forces. Qatar is likely to have little choice but to follow suit.

Qatar's activist foreign policy

The Qatari setbacks raise the question of whether the Gulf state, seeking to carve out an identity and place of its own in the shadow of Saudi Arabia - the Gulf's dominant power - will be able to sustain its activist support of popular revolts and endorsement of political Islam in the Middle East and North Africa. They also call into question Qatar's ability, in opposition to Saudi Arabia, to continuously support change in the region as long as it does not occur in its own backyard.

To be sure, it is too early to suggest that Qatar's new emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, who last month took over the reins as ruler from his father, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, will adopt a policy more in line with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. There are however hints of change.

Host to the largest US military base in the Middle East, Qatar, like Saudi Arabia congratulated the Egyptian military for its ousting of Morsi. But unlike Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates who remained silent after the killing last week of 54 Morsi supporters and extended Egypt US\$3 billion in grants and loans, Qatar expressed regret at the incident and urged self-restraint and dialogue.

Qatar's expression of regret was nonetheless significantly different from the tone that Sheikh Tamim adopted in his first speech after taking office. Tamim pledged in his inaugural address that Qatar would continue to side with the "aspirations (of the people) to live in freedom and dignity, away from corruption and tyranny" and that his country would "remain the Kaaba (Islam's holiest shrine in Mecca) of the oppressed."

Despite the setbacks and the downfall of Morsi, Qatar is however unlikely to break its ties with the Brotherhood. Qatar's relationship with the group is longstanding and deep-seated, particularly with Doha-based, Egyptian-born Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, one of the world's most important Islamic thinkers and a significant influence in Qatar as well as within the Brotherhood. "Saudi Arabia has Mecca and Medina. We have Qaradawi," former Qatari justice minister and prominent lawyer Najeeb al Nauimi told *The Wall Street Journal* a decade ago.

Qaradawi's stunning speech

In the absence of an indigenous Qatari class of Islamic legal scholars, Qaradawi and to a lesser extent Libyan Muslim Brother Ali Al Salabi, while in exile in Doha, filled a void to influence policy. They helped shield Qatar, the only other Wahhabi state besides Saudi Arabia, against becoming totally dependent on the kingdom's ultra-conservative clergy.

A stunning speech by Qaradawi in late May before the ascension of Tamim, who was in recent years Qatar's main interlocutor with the Saudi kingdom, hinted that change may be in the air. In line with Saudi encouragement of the divide between Sunni and Shia Muslims, Qaradawi urged Muslims with military training to join the anti-Bashar al-Assad struggle in Syria. His condemnation of Lebanese Shiite Muslim militia Hezbollah (Party of God) was immediately endorsed by Saudi grand mufti Abdul Aziz al-Sheikh as was his assertion that al-Assad's Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shia Islam, was "more infidel than Christians and Jews."

As a result, the downfall of the Brotherhood and the recent counter-response by Saudi Arabia may not deprive the group of its main foreign backer but could well change the tone and approach of Qatari policy towards popular revolts in the Middle East and North Africa. It could also raise the bar for revolutionary forces in the region - a struggle that is certain to shape the Middle East and North Africa's identity and future.

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