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## Issue Brief

*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*

# Regional Realignment in the Red Sea

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**Two small, deserted islands, Tiran and Sanafir, lie between Egypt and Saudi Arabia at the mouth of the Gulf of Aqaba. Recently, Egypt's parliament has voted to sanction a 2016 agreement under which Cairo would transfer the two Red Sea islands to Saudi Arabia. The agreement to hand over the islands was announced during the April 2016 visit to Cairo by the Saudi king<sup>1</sup>, leading to the largest anti-government protests since President Sisi took office in 2014.**

The island of Tiran controls a narrow shipping lane that leads to and from the ports of Eilat and Aqaba in Israel and Jordan correspondingly.<sup>2</sup> Egypt's decision to close the lane was one of the main reasons behind the occurrence of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, in which Egypt had to forfeit the entire Sinai Peninsula.

A court ruled against the islands' transfer in January 2017, but politicians who support the deal say that the parliament has the right to ratify the international agreements.

"There is nothing in the agreement that violates the constitution...it is designed to realise and perpetuate the mutual interests of the two nations and it also came in response to Saudi requests [to take back the islands] made in 1984, 1989 and 1990,"<sup>3</sup> stated the Chairman of the Defence Committee, Mr. Kamal Amer.

After three days of emotional debate, Egypt's Parliament voted to allow the controversial transfer of the islands to continue. The decision is also a sign of how Mr. Sisi can enforce his will, even in the face of stiff public disapproval, at a time when the political opposition has been crushed and the free press is under renewed onslaught - all as Egypt heads into a presidential election in 2018. Mr. Sisi's drive to end the fracas over the islands comes at a time when he has been bolstered by the strong support he was shown during his White House visit with President Trump in April 2017. The two leaders met again in Saudi Arabia and Mr. Sisi has since introduced a raft of new restrictions intended for his critics.

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<sup>1</sup> "Egypt: Parliament committee approves Saudi islands deal," *Al Jazeera*, June 13, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> "Egypt Panel Defies Parliament on Red Sea Islands Transfer," *VOA*, June 15, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> "Egypt parliament debates islands deal ahead of ratification," *News24*, June 14, 2017.

The decision provoked a storm of criticism from the Egyptians who accused Mr. Sisi of trading land for money. Saudi Arabia has pumped at least US\$25 billion in aid and investment into Egypt since 2014.<sup>4</sup> The government insists that the islands of Tiran and Sanafir at the mouth of the Gulf of Aqaba were always Saudi but were placed under Egypt's protection amid Arab-Israeli tensions in the 1950s. But few Egyptians seem to believe that.

But while the transfer has provoked extensive protests in Egypt, with opponents claiming it amounts to "selling off"<sup>5</sup> Egypt's sovereign territory, Israel has quietly given the deal its blessing. Israel has potentially much to gain from the handover especially given that its increasingly tight ties with both Cairo and Riyadh have made possible an increasingly relaxed attitude towards the 1979 peace treaty, which mandated Israel to pull its occupying forces out of Sinai.

Moreover, the benefits include increasingly normalised relations with Saudi Arabia and the chance to bring into the daylight an emerging Israeli-Arab military and diplomatic front against a common enemy: Iran.

Perhaps most importantly, improved relations will help Israel further quarantine the Palestinian leaderships in Gaza and the West Bank, which will add to the pressure on the Palestinians to accept the best terms possible for Israel.

All in all, Riyadh will now become in charge for maintaining the treaty's provisions relating to Israeli transport through the Straits. Undoubtedly, this is the start of a regional realignment. In the backdrop of the US-Arab Summit held in May, 2017, it is evident that if Iran is now the biggest enemy, then the Saudis believe they need Israel's military might and intelligence to help in the fight.

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<sup>4</sup> "Saudi Arabia to give Egypt up to \$4 billion more aid: report," *Reuters*, January 30, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> "Egypt defends transfer of Red Sea islands to Saudi Arabia," *The National*, June 25, 2016.