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Egypt and Sudan: ambiguous paths

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Introduction

On January 9, 2018, Egypt's Abdel Fattah Al Sisi met with Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki. The two sides discussed the latest developments in the Nile Basin countries and the Horn of Africa region, as well as regional and international issues of common concern. Prior to his visit to Cairo, the Eritrean president visited the United Arab Emirates on December 31.

Before the visit of the Eritrean president to Cairo, Egyptian-Sudanese relations witnessed high tension which remarkably escalated after the visit of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on December 24, 2017 to the Sudanese capital Khartoum and the signing of several military and security cooperation agreements, including the construction of a "berth for the maintenance of civil and military vessels".

The most prominent agreements concluded between Turkey and Sudan was Omar al-Bashir's agreement to allow Turkey to re-develop the historic island of Swaken, which was considered one of the most important political and economic centers of the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East. On 25 December, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced from the Sudanese capital city Khartoum that the Sudanese government has allocated Swaken Island –on the Red Sea in eastern Sudan – for Turkey to administrate and redevelop for an undefined period. During the visit, the Turkish president also said that there is an undeclared supplementary chapter for the agreement on Swaken. This statement opened the door wide to speculations about this supplement. While some expected that the matter is mostly related to the establishment of a Turkish military base in Sudan, most likely on Swaken Island itself, while some went further to talk about the possibility of Turkey's establishment of a

military port on the Sudanese coasts. It is noteworthy that in recent years Ankara has sought to strengthen its naval fleet in the Horn of Africa and has developed its maritime warfare industries.

Turkey has taken over administration of Swaken island - opposite the coasts of Saudi Arabia and adjacent to Egypt – in light of the escalating tension between Cairo and Khartoum on the Halayeb and Shalatin border area, and amid rising tension between Ankara on the one hand and the axis of Saudi Arabia and the UAE and Egypt on the other.

After Turkish president's visit to Sudan, Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry held talks with his UAE counterpart Abdullah bin Zayed, confirming, according to an official statement issued after the meeting, the rejection of what he called "any foreign interference or presence in the Red Sea region," describing the Red Sea region as "part of the Arab national security". On December 28, 2017, Egypt's presidential spokesman Bassam Radhi said in a statement that Al-Sisi had received a telephone call from Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, during which they discussed "aspects of the Egyptian-Saudi relations and the ways to strengthen them in various fields."

After the visit of the Turkish president to Khartoum, the Egyptian media launched severe attack on Sudan, saying that the Swaken agreement harms the Egyptian national security and that it is aimed primarily at threatening the Egyptian state. Maj. General Samy Farag, former head of the Egyptian army's Department of Morale Affairs confirmed that Omar al-Bashir's decision to "grant" the Sudanese island of Swaken to Turkey is strange, surprising, and represents a direct threat to Egyptian national security. He also pointed out that this decision confirms the hostile attitude of the Sudanese president against Egypt, especially after his position of supporting Ethiopia in threatening the Egyptian water security. Farag added that the Egyptian leadership

will take many political and military measures to respond to the threat posed by Sudan's granting of this island to Turkey on Egyptian national security.

Indeed, events escalated and Ethiopian sources revealed the arrival of military reinforcements from Egypt, including modern weapons, military transport vehicles, and four-wheel vehicles to the "SAWA" military base in Eritrea. The SAWA Defence Training Center is a military academy in the Gash-Barka region of Eritrea, where the Eritrean Defence Forces (EDF), recruits, and national service conscripts are sent for basic military training. The sources said that a meeting was held at the military base, including a number of military and security leaders from Egypt, the UAE, Eritrea and the Sudanese opposition represented in some Darfur movements and movements of eastern Sudan.

Meanwhile, President al-Bashir announced the state of emergency in a number of Sudanese states, including the state of Kassala, eastern Sudan, adjacent to the Gash-Barka region of Eritrea. In the same context, a Sudanese parliamentarian said on January 8, 2018, that Egyptian-Eritrean military crowds reached the eastern border of the country, as part of a plan to create "tensions" in the region and provide support for rebels in the southern border. "We have confirmed information about this," said Tayeb Mustafa, chairman of the Sudanese National Council's Information Committee (The National Council is the First Chamber of Parliament in Sudan), without disclosing this information.

At the same time, the head of the technical committee for borders on the Sudanese side, Abdullah Sadiq, said that the continuation of what he called the "Egyptian aggression" on the Halayeb triangle aims to drag Sudan to engage in direct clashes with Egypt. Al-Sadiq, who is also the director of Sudan Survey Authority (SSA), described what the Egyptian authorities are doing in the "Halayeb" triangle as a continuation of

the encroachment on the Sudanese territory, stressing that this infringement will be counterproductive to the State of Egypt.

It is to be mentioned that the Sudanese government lodged a complaint with the UN Security Council, in which Khartoum complained of the deployment of an Egyptian infantry brigade in the disputed area between the two countries. It also pointed to the docking of a warship in the port of Halayeb Island, while Egyptian intelligence and police forces are stationed in other locations in Halayeb triangle.

The Sudanese government recalled on Thursday, January 4, 2018, its ambassador to Sudan, Mahmoud Abdel Halim, for consultations. Abdel Halim also said that the date of his return to Cairo “has not yet been determined”. He denied Egyptian press reports that the Sudanese ambassador had returned to Cairo, saying that these reports were not true and mere “premature talk”. Abdel Halim also said that the main reason for summoning the Sudanese ambassador to Khartoum was “the offensive attack against Sudan and its symbols in the Egyptian media, under the ears and eyes of the Egyptian leadership, especially that everyone knows that Egyptian media outlets which attacked Khartoum are affiliated to Egyptian security services.”

Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki has denied the presence of any Egyptian troops at the SAWA base in the Eritrean Gash Berkha region bordering Kassala state on the eastern Sudanese border, accusing parties in Sudan and Ethiopia of trying to create a clash between Khartoum and Asmara. The Eritrean president also accused Turkey of playing what he called an “expansionist role” in the Horn of Africa, especially in Sudan and Somalia. Afwerki wondered about the significance of such expansion, and whether it was to restore the Ottoman influence, adding that this presence is not justified. Afwerki also claimed that the interests of Ethiopia and Turkey are intersecting over the survival of Somalia as a failed state, and both countries instead of rebuilding Somalia and rehabilitating its institutions are deploying their soldiers under various pretexts.

On Monday, January 15, 2018, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi denied Egypt's intention to fight or conspire against Sudan and Ethiopia over the Renaissance Dam. He added that "Egypt" will not fight its brothers," referring to the tension with Sudan and Ethiopia over the Ethiopian Renaissance dam. "We have a fixed policy whose goal is building, development, and reconstruction; and we will not do otherwise. Our people need this and Egypt will not fight its brothers," Al-Sisi said.

Reasons for the Egyptian-Sudanese dispute

The dispute between the Egyptian regime and the Sudanese regime is not a result of the current moment, but it arose with the military transformation in Egypt in 2013:

1- Since Sisi's coup d'état on July 3, 2013, and the Egyptian regime's abuse of Muslim Brotherhood leaders and members, and with the strengthening of the security grip in Egypt, some members of the Brotherhood left Egypt for Sudan. When the Egyptian government demanded the expulsion of some opposition figures, the Sudanese government rejected the Egyptian demands based on the principle of reciprocity. Egypt had embraced the leader of the Sudanese regime's political opposition, Sadiq al-Mahdi, and allowed Sudanese opposition movements to open offices in Cairo.

2- The tension caused by the disputed Halayeb and Shalatin triangle between the two countries, where Sudan is constantly renewing its complaint for the Halayeb triangle with the Security Council. Recently, Sudan has renewed its complaint over Halayeb Triangle issue through a message forwarded by Sudan permanent envoy to the UN Ambassador Omer Dahab to the head of the Security Council in New York. Sudan permanent envoy has asked the Security Council's Chairman to distribute Sudan message among the council members as one of its documents. It is to be recalled that Sudan remained tabling its complaint on Halayeb since the year 1958 following

rejection of the Egyptian side to negotiate the issue or refer it to international arbitration.

3- The Sudanese position on the file of Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, which the Egyptian regime views as closer to the Ethiopian position at the expense of the Egyptian interests. This is added to the developing Sudanese relations with Qatar and Turkey.

Implications and interpretations

There are many interpretations for the course of the Egyptian-Sudanese relations, in light of developments during the past few weeks, as follows:

1- Armed conflict path

Despite the Eritrean president's denial that there are Egyptian forces in Eritrea, however this does not categorically deny the arrival of Egyptian soldiers to the Eritrean military base "SAWA". On the basis of what was revealed by the Eritrean opposition, Egypt has recently concluded an agreement to establish a military base in Eritrea, specifically in April 2017, and the UAE already has a base in the port of Assab. Some believe that in light of recent military movements in the Horn of Africa, the Red Sea, the Eritrean, Ethiopian and Sudanese borders, as well as the recent intensive presence of Egyptian intelligence officers in the area of Halayeb, the docking of an Egyptian warship in the Berth of Halayeb Island, especially after Sudan's Swaken agreement with Turkey, viewed by the Egyptian regime as a threat to the Egypt's national security – all these developments strengthen the hypothesis of a potential armed conflict between Egypt and Sudan. The Egyptian regime works to emphasize that the Swaken agreement is not only a threat to the Egyptian state but also to the Saudi state, for the proximity of Swaken Island to the Saudi territorial waters and the overall Red Sea water security.



On the other side, there are Sudan and Ethiopia, backed by Turkey and Qatar, especially after the visit of the Chief of Staff of the Sudanese army to Ethiopia, and the tripartite meeting of Chiefs of Staff of Turkey, Sudan, and Qatar in Khartoum for security and military coordination among the three countries.

Sudan is closer than ever to engaging in military confrontations with Egypt to solve major geopolitical problems facing the countries, the Middle East Monitor said, stressing that Egypt and the UAE are seeking to deploy troops at the Eritrean military base of SAWA. Sudan responded in kind by deployment of troops along the Eritrean border and imposing a complete closure of the border. Khalil Charles, the political analyst, linked these expectations to moves by Sudan for closing its border with Eritrean, the visit of the Turkish president to Sudan, Bashir's visit to Russia and his talks in Sochi in November 2017. Charles accused the United States of being behind the problems facing Sudan.

2- Tightening pressure on Sudan

Some believe that Al-Sisi backed by Saudi Arabia and the UAE are seeking to involve Sudan in their regional system. What is happening now is practicing pressure on Sudan to distance itself from the Turkish axis. They want cooperation between Khartoum and Ankara to be limited to economic cooperation only and that the memorandums of understanding on military affairs signed between Khartoum and Ankara should be suspended.

In this regard, some believe that the Egyptian regime will calm the situation with Ethiopia, so that the stage of conflict in the coming period will be focused on the Sudanese regime. Assistant Foreign Minister for African Affairs, Ambassador Mohamed Idris, has recently announced that the preparatory meetings for the sixth session of the Higher Joint Committee between Egypt and Ethiopia at the level of

senior officials and experts have been launched on January 16th at the Foreign Ministry headquarters. The Assistant Foreign Minister added that the current session of the Committee will be held at the level of the Egyptian President of the Republic and the Prime Minister of Ethiopia for the first time since the two countries' leaders agreed to upgrade the level of the Joint Ministerial Committee to the presidential level in 2015 during the visit of Al-Sisi to Addis Ababa.

3- Distraction of Sudan from Halayeb & Shalatin claims

This interpretation is based on the fact that Al-Sisi is seeking to distract Sudan from its demands for restoring Halayeb and Shalatin, especially in light of Egypt's upcoming presidential election and Sisi's desire to temporarily disable this file. Others believe that Al-Sisi wants to practice pressure on Sudan to support Egypt in the file of Ethiopian Renaissance Dam.

Conclusion

In light of the developments during the last four years since the military coup in Egypt in 2013, the Al-Bashir regime represents a real danger to the Al-Sisi regime, and vice versa. Therefore, it seems that the coming stage will witness more tense relations between Egypt and Sudan, especially that Egypt considers Sudan its backyard and believes that its influence has become threatened amid a growing Sudanese-Turkish-Qatari cooperation against a Saudi-UAE-Egyptian axis.