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Egypt: How Israel intervened in the transfer of Red Sea islands to KSA

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It is remarkable how far Israel has been engaged in almost all details of Egypt's waiver of the islands of Tiran and Sanafir to Saudi Arabia – as part of a deal concluded between the two Arab countries – whether with determining the size of the military force to be deployed on them, or requirement of Israeli approval to do so, and accordingly allowing Israeli aircraft to fly on their airspace, which will certainly have an impact on the future of Egyptian and Saudi security together – given the escalation of Israeli involvement in this sensitive area.

Geographical and historical reasons

The Tiran and Sanafir islands are six kilometers from Sharm el-Sheikh, Sinai. The two islands were occupied by Israel during the 1967 war, but were later restored as part of the 1978 Camp David Accords between Egypt and Israel. Despite being uninhabited, the two islands are considered an important strategic point for Israel because of their location at the crossing point in the strait, as they control the maritime entrance to Israel and Jordan. They are located in the north of the Red Sea, 6 km east of the Sinai Peninsula. The area of Tiran is 80 km² and that of Sanafir is 33 km².

Tiran is located at the entrance to the Gulf of Eilat. Therefore, it is of great strategic importance to Israel and Jordan, as all maritime traffic passes through it to Jordan towards the port of Aqaba, as well as most of the maritime traffic between Israel, Africa and the Far East is towards the port of Eilat. The Saudi coast overlooking the island is 15 km long to the north.

In 1949, during the war that followed the establishment of Israel, the Egyptian forces took control of the two islands of Tiran and Sanafir after the Israeli forces reached the Red Sea coast, known today as the city of Eilat, where one year later, Cairo declared its sovereignty over them, amid reports that Saudi Arabia granted Sovereignty over the two islands to Egypt in 1950.

The blockade imposed by Egypt on Tiran before the 1956 Sinai war and placing coastal cannons on them was one of the main reasons for the outbreak of the war. The Israeli withdrawal from the Sinai

July 19, 2022

Peninsula and Tiran Island only came after receiving written guarantees of freedom of navigation in the Gulf of Eilat from then US President Eisenhower to Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion.

However, Egypt closed the strait again on 23 May 1967, which was considered one of the reasons for the outbreak of the 1967 war, which ended with the occupation of the entire Sinai Peninsula, including the islands of Sanafir and Tiran, where their occupation continued until 1982, when the Israelis withdrew from them in light of the Camp David Accords.

Legal Dimensions

It is no secret that levels of Arab-Israeli normalization which have risen in recent years, though they have not yet reached their climax, as long as normalization has not yet included the "crown jewel" as the Israelis call it, that is Saudi Arabia. Therefore, the U.S. President Joe Biden administration is secretly mediating between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), Israel and Egypt in a deal that may be a first step for normalization of relations between KSA and Israel, a likely important achievement of its foreign policy in the Middle East.

Contacts for addressing the issue were delayed following the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018 and the consequent boycott imposed by the United States on Saudi Arabia, where the deterioration of their relations created difficulties for Israel itself.

Today, the U.S. mediation between them in this regard has been restored once again to settle the issue of the international force on the two islands, as well as other issues, including the opening of flight path for Israeli companies over Saudi Arabia.

The American mediation with regard to the two islands is not only political, but has legal dimensions and consequences, most notably the fact that the two islands are located in Area C, which is classified according to the Camp David Accords' military annex as a completely demilitarized zone, where only civilian police are allowed to be present, provided that they shall be subject to multinational force checks.

And since the two islands were uninhabited, the Egyptians used to make only periodic police patrols, as they as they used to arrive there by light boats, with only light weapons.

July 19, 2022

Under the new circumstances, the Israelis raise an important question: To whom does the multinational force report: to the Egyptian government to pass over to the Saudis, or to the Saudis directly?

According to the messages exchanged between former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry, Egypt's full commitment to the Camp David Accords and the agreement with the multinational force, as well as all the understandings signed between them, Saudi Arabia will also pledge to be committed to, which was confirmed by former Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Al-Jubeir after 11 rounds of negotiations in the past six years.

Security and military consequences

It is known that the Camp David Accords included the establishment of an international multinational force to be present on the islands of Tiran and Sanafir, where Israel agreed to end its presence there after 15 years of occupation, but it demanded a security alternative, especially since Egypt and Saudi Arabia were in talks to demark their maritime borders, based on information provided to Tel Aviv by Cairo. In this regard, the Saudis pledged to maintain the terms of the Camp David Accords.

At the same time, the location of the two islands can be described as frontal to Israel in relation to both Asia and Africa, where in such situation, the common interests between Riyadh and Tel Aviv are likely to increase, especially in the face of Iranian influence.

Meanwhile, KSA plans to establish huge industrial, commercial and tourism projects along its western umbrella in cooperation with Egypt, where a bridge will be built to link the two countries, amid talk about establishment of a joint \$10-billion fund to set up a similar economic zone in South Sinai.

It is no secret that the transfer of the two islands from Egyptian sovereignty to Saudi Arabia has repercussions on Israeli security, given that they are very close to its southern maritime borders, in addition to being an important point for maritime trade between Asia, Africa and Israel, which may require Israelis to insist on obtaining security guarantees so as not to harm freedom of navigation and flight there.

With the two islands coming under full Saudi control, Israel will need major and sustainable security alternatives, to ensure freedom of navigation and air activity in this sensitive area.

July 19, 2022

Former Israeli Defense Minister Moshe Ya'alon had admitted that "Israel and the United States are partners in approval of the agreement to transfer the two islands from Egypt to Saudi Arabia, and that the agreement led to reopening the military annex to the Camp David Accords, which reveals clear Israeli involvement in this issue, and that the issue is not Saudi-Egyptian only. He explained that the Egyptian presence on the two islands was based on Israeli approval, given that they are located in the Red Sea, 200 kilometers south of Eilat; and thanks to the agreement with Egypt, "Israel enjoys freedom of navigation in the area".

Despite the transfer of sovereignty over the two islands from Egypt to Saudi Arabia, and the fact that Riyadh had not concluded a peace agreement with Tel Aviv, yet, it seems to have pledged that they will remain demilitarized, with no armed soldiers will be allowed to enter them, where in this way, freedom of maritime activity in the Gulf of Aqaba will be preserved, despite the two islands being within Saudi territorial waters, according to the new reality.

Normalization Incentives

It is clear that the positive Israeli position on transferring the ownership of the two islands from Egypt to Saudi Arabia is due to the fact that it has correctly read the geopolitical map of the region. For Israel, like Saudi Arabia, the biggest threat that may become existential is currently Iran, so they cooperated together to transfer control of the two islands from Cairo to Riyadh, and agreed to build a bridge between Egypt and Saudi Arabia, highlighting a new cooperation axis between Cairo and Riyadh with Tel Aviv, as a prelude to sponsoring the secret strategic relations between Tel Aviv and Riyadh, which will ensure the success of the Israeli scheme.

It is no longer a secret that Cairo had consulted Tel Aviv and Washington during the negotiations that resulted in the deal with Riyadh. It also seems that the Israeli government did not raise any objection to the Egyptian and Saudi approaches, provided that the deal does not affect its shipping and navigation. While this confirms the strong relationship between Israel and Egypt and their current close cooperation in the areas of combating militant groups, as well as development of natural gas, this deal would reflect the growing maturity in the temporary relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel as well.

July 19, 2022

It is true that Riyadh still has not “officially” established public relations with Israel, but it is clear that they share similar views on major issues, such as the alleged threat posed by Iran, where the latest developments regarding the strait of Tiran confirm that their common-interest plans have been widening.

Though Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan did not deny occurrence of negotiations with Israel, he made it clear that diplomatic relations with Israel are not in the immediate horizon.

It is noteworthy that the Biden administration is conducting secret mediation between Saudi Arabia and Egypt about arrangements to complete the transfer of sovereignty over the two islands from Cairo to Riyadh, with a pledge to end the work of the international monitoring teams on the two islands, in return for keeping them without any military forces and guaranteeing freedom of navigation in the straits, while Tel Aviv was involved in all these arrangements.

The secret American endeavors aim to normalize relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel, through employment of the issue of the two islands, which would be a unique achievement for the government of Naftali Bennett and for the foreign policy of the Biden administration in the Middle East.

Conclusion

While Israeli preparations are underway for US President Joe Biden's visit to the region in mid-July, it is expected to announce Israel's approval of new security arrangements that allow Egypt to transfer control of the two islands to Saudi Arabia. Under the deal, Saudi Arabia will allow Israeli airlines to fly over its airspace to and from Israel.

It is clear that we are in front of a quadripartite deal on the two islands of Tiran and Sanafir, the parties to which are: Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Israel, and the United States, which leads to a repositioning of the region's alliances, and perhaps a change in its political geography.

It is true that the two islands have moved to Saudi control, but Israel, which is determined to normalize relations with Riyadh, will keep its eyes on them, in light of recent talk about of joint defense agreements led by the United States, which brings together Israel with the six Gulf states, in addition to Egypt, Jordan and Iraq.

July 19, 2022

With or without official normalization with Saudi Arabia, the limits of the Israeli role with regard to the two islands of Tiran and Sanafir will further expand, whether directly or implicitly.

It is true that the two islands will remain demilitarized, but this does not rule out the assumption that the Israeli security and intelligence services will extend to them, especially in light of the long-term technical and technological capabilities that the Israelis possess, which gives Tel Aviv the ability to control the area surrounding the two islands, especially with regard to the southern borders, where there are the Yemen beaches, with the Houthi presence, with the threats they may pose as a proxy to Iran¹.



¹ The views expressed in this article are entirely those of the author's and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Egyptian Institute for Studies