

# Sisi's Predicament

by [Maged Atef \(/experts/maged-atef\)](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

### [Maged Atef \(/experts/maged-atef\)](#)

Maged Atef is a freelance journalist based in Egypt. He has contributed to a number of publications, including Buzzfeed, Foreign Affairs, and the Daily Beast.



### Brief Analysis

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On June 14 the Egyptian parliament approved the agreement delimiting the maritime borders between Egypt and Saudi Arabia as well as the transfer of the two disputed islands of Tiran and Sanafir, fueling anger among opponents of the agreement, with terms such as “treason” and “setback” making the headlines. King Salman’s visit to Cairo in April 2016 to sign the agreement for the Egyptian state’s handover of the two islands came as a surprise to many Egyptians.

The islands have long been the subject of dispute between the two countries. While Saudi Arabia claims ownership of the islands and states that it merely lent them to Egypt in the wake of the 1948 war, Egypt holds fast to the 1906 agreement on the borders between the Ottoman Empire and Egypt, placing the islands under Egyptian jurisdiction.

Regardless of the legitimacy of the act and which country is the rightful owner, the way in which the Egyptian regime handled the issue played a central role in exacerbating anger. Despite the serious and sensitive aspects of the negotiations, they were held in total secrecy, without the knowledge of the people. King Salman was invited to Cairo to sign that agreement along with seventeen others, all of which involve economic projects. This has created the impression that he bought the islands with his money. Then, he was received at the rostrum of the Egyptian parliament as if he were conducting the session.

The decision was received with hostility by many, prompting Khaled Ali, a prominent human rights lawyer and a former presidential candidate, to file a lawsuit to invalidate the agreement. The prosecution took a few different paths and was concluded with a ruling by the Supreme Administrative Court rejecting the agreement and confirming Egyptian ownership of the islands. However, the regime decided to ignore this ruling and submitted the agreement to Parliament, which gave approval.

When Sisi decided to move forward and relinquish the islands to Saudi Arabia, he was certainly aware of the domestic calculations and considerations. The internal opposition primarily stemmed from the trinity of activists, human rights advocates, and journalists, which had already suffered severe blows restricting their roles and were thus already in opposition to Sisi.

The majority of political activists and human rights advocates have either been arrested or have the threat of incarceration hanging over their heads, accused of receiving funds from foreign parties. Security forces raided the premises of the journalists' syndicate in May 2016, which was the main point of contention between Sisi and the media. President Sisi came out as the winner in that conflict, after charges were raised against Yahya Qalash, the head of the journalists' syndicate, who was later released on bail pending further investigation, then lost his seat to the pro-regime Abdel Mohsen Salama. Sisi thus managed to silence the journalists' syndicate and was left only with journalists in the "private" sphere, where he recently succeeded in restraining opposition voices, thereby triumphantly ending the fight against journalists opposing his decision.

Furthermore, the president also benefits from the deep and acute conflict between the two wings of the opposition, the civilians and the Muslim Brotherhood, which is at the point of enmity and hatred and prevents their unification as well as coordination among them. If we look beyond those who are "concerned with public affairs" towards Egyptian society as a whole, we notice that the current balance seems to tip far towards the regime.

We are talking here about 100 million citizens, a large number of whom are not interested in the issue of the two islands. They might express dissatisfaction; however, such issues would only elicit the faintest grunting or complaining on their part. There seems to be no initiative in sight for an action or reaction from that population, either because the case is not directly related to their daily lives or because they are generally convinced that any protests would bring the country back to the first stage of the revolution and the ensuing security chaos and deadlock.

Another group is the supporters of the president and the army, who mostly belong to the middle and upper classes, as well as a significant number of Copts, who support Sisi for two main reasons: the first is a phobia of the Muslim Brotherhood, and the second is the impression that the army and the president are one entity and that any blow to either of them will turn Egypt into another Syria.

Then there are those who benefit directly from Sisi's rule and represent institutions of power (the army, police, and judiciary). So far, this category seems to be backing the president.

In short, it can be concluded that Sisi decided to adopt the agreement on maritime borders because he was fully aware of the strong domestic support for his position. However, as the date of the parliament's vote neared, a number of striking positions surfaced. Well-known media figure Wael el-Abrashi received a phone call from Lieutenant General Ahmed Shafik viciously attacking the Egyptian regime and criticized Sisi personally as well as the Speaker of the parliament and the Prime Minister. It was quite obvious that he was portraying himself to the Gulf as an alternative to Sisi, describing the regime's control of the country as an attempt to sow dissension.

This interaction was deemed important given the background of those concerned: Shafik is an Emirati resident who would not have appeared on TV and attacked the current regime had he not first obtained the green light from Abu Dhabi. As for Wael el-Abrashi, he is known for his support for the General Intelligence, so the fact that he took such a step and allowed Shafik time to voice his opinion on air proved for many that he was authorized or even encouraged by the intelligence services to do so.

In the meantime, two strongly-worded statements were made by Sami Anan and Majdi Hatata, who both served as the chief of staff of the Egyptian army under Mubarak and the military council. Not only did the two retired generals state that the islands are Egyptian but also doubted the legitimacy of whoever says the opposite, in reference to the president.

Shafik's appearance and the intervention of the former chiefs of staff may be the first real threat to Sisi; such signals indicate that some state bodies are not content with Sisi's performance. Moreover, the UAE's position is quite confusing to everyone.

Up until now, no accurate information accounted for the UAE's strange behavior, although speculation revolves around two potential interpretations: the first is that Sisi's actions are a matter of mounting concern for some Gulf elements, since they might trigger a reaction that would destabilize the country. Therefore, these elements decided to find at the heart of the regime a practical alternative to Sisi with whom they can deal.

According to the second interpretation, Abu Dhabi's actions may be the result of its muted struggle against Saudi Arabia to establish control over the region. As a result, Shafik's appearance is perceived as a message to Sisi reminding him of the need to acknowledge the UAE's presence rather than turning his attention solely towards Riyadh.

The fall of Sisi is still a remote possibility, since the streets remain under control and the army remains loyal to the president. Furthermore, Saudi support will certainly expand once the two islands are relinquished and Egypt joins the Saudi-led alliance against Qatar. At the domestic level, Egyptians do not seem currently ready to be dragged into another maelstrom of protests, especially in the absence of a strong opposition entity that can present itself as an alternative. Therefore, the real danger for the Egyptian regime lies in the economic crisis sweeping the country, and the most dreadful scenario for Sisi would be an Emirati or Saudi decision to cut off material support for the regime. Such crises would escalate with suppressed popular anger, sparking chaos and causing the demise of the regime. ❖

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