

# Sisi and the Absence of Politics

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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.



## Articles & Testimony

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German philosopher and political scientist Hannah Arendt stated in one of her lectures that it is a problem when politicians make wrong decisions, but a catastrophe when they do not know how to present their decisions to the people.

This saying perfectly encapsulates the Egyptian president's latest decision to transfer the Tiran and Sanafir islands to Saudi Arabia. The Kingdom has long considered these islands Saudi property and has demanded them from successive Egyptian governments for years. Yet the current government's decision to accede to the Kingdom's demands—along with the way in which the government announced its decision and managed the Saudi king's visit to Egypt—roused extreme anger from many Egyptians. Had the president managed the situation better, he may have been able to avoid his people's current ire. The issue raises the important question of whether the Egyptian president is capable of dealing with such major national issues.

## Why The Secrecy?

On April 10, Egypt's primary national newspaper Al-Ahram ran the headline, "The government announces that the Tiran and Sanafir islands are Saudi Arabian and an agreement to designate borders is awaiting parliamentary approval."

Egyptians woke up to this announcement with no forewarning or introduction, discovering from Al-Ahram that their government had already reached a highly sensitive agreement with Saudi Arabia that would redraw Egyptian borders. Clearly, this is a major issue of interest to all Egyptians.

The obvious question for most Egyptians is: why the secrecy? Why didn't the state announce from the get-go that it was negotiating the ownership of the two islands with Saudi Arabia? Had these negotiations been announced and had they proceeded with transparency, the Egyptian people could have been involved and understood the negotiations process. Even if the state believed that giving away the islands was in its best interest, this transparency could have mentally prepared the Egyptians, which would've minimized the current response of frustration to a major decision agreed upon behind closed doors. As it is, Egyptians are left feeling that they had little share in their country and that the government believes it has a stronger grasp on the right course for Egypt.

This instance highlights General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's striking attitude; he has consistently acted like an intelligence officer, running all of his affairs in secrecy and never revealing his next step. Yet a strategy that suits intelligence work is not suitable for politics. Instead, transparency and public inclusion during times of crisis is integral to his new position as the president of all Egyptians.

### **Negotiations or Transaction?**

If the Saudi Arabian king's visit to Egypt had been confined solely to discussing an agreement that would redraw naval borders, and was then followed by Saudi Arabia obtaining the Tiran and Sanafir islands, Egyptians would have also found this decision easier to handle. Yet the agreement with Saudi Arabia to redraw borders occurred simultaneously with Saudi investment in Egypt. It became apparent to all that Egypt was trading the islands for a Saudi investment of up to 16 billion dollars. In a way, it was as if Sisi had simply sold the islands to Saudi Arabia! Egyptians found this extremely insulting.

Yet again, there was an absence of a political process. Had the president consulted political experts, they would have informed him how sensitive a simultaneous land exchange and influx of Saudi Arabian money would be for most Egyptians. Yet this is what happened, and social media commentators sarcastically asked: "So when is el-Sisi planning on selling them the pyramids?"

This sarcasm reflects more than momentary feelings of distress. It brings into question the nationalism of a man who until very recently was considered by many to be a hero. Inexcusably poor direction has now replaced the image of heroism with a catastrophic impression.

### **Arrangements for the Visit: Wholesale Errors**

The Saudi Arabian king's visit to Cairo coupled with the funds deal made it seem as though the country was caught in a moment of submission, not negotiation. Moreover, the five day trip was filled with further political miscalculations. The most important of these errors was when the king chose, instead of following custom and staying in the presidential palaces, to pay for his own stay at a five star hotel. Many considered this an intentional show of disrespect. The political researcher Dr. Omar Abdel Rahman summarized it on his Facebook page: "If King Salman stays at the Four Seasons, should the Koubbeh and Tahra (the presidential palaces) be rented out per night or what?!"

Another political error was the Saudi king's placement during his address to the Egyptian parliament. King Salman was seated next to the speaker of the house, an honor that has never before been bestowed – not even to Egypt's presidents. When former president Anwar Sadat, who Egyptians consider a hero of both war and peace, addressed the parliament with his famous post-October War speech, he stood in the area for speakers at the bottom of the podium. Yet here was the king of Saudi Arabia giving his speech atop the podium! Politically, this sent the message that this foreign leader was higher than those who represent the Egyptian people. More angry comments resulted, such as, "When Salman climbed on top of the podium, he climbed on top of the people." It was a provocative scene that roused anger towards the president and humiliated the Egyptian people without any resulting political gain.

### **Shocking Explanations**

Yet the Egyptian government's biggest mistake was that, in addition to the inexcusable secrecy of negotiations, its official reasoning was hidden and ultimately flimsy. The government hesitated to reveal to the Egyptian people its reasons for handing over the islands to Saudi Arabia. But when government finally did publicize the documents that purportedly demonstrated proof of the Saudi claim over Tiran and Sanafir through the prime minister's official "information center," the results were shocking. What the government called documents couldn't actually be taken as serious evidence. For example, one of its official documents was a New York Times article that discussed Israel's fears if the island were to be given to Saudi Arabia. The other documents were just as unimpressive.

## State Media: Friendly Fire

Satellite programs and newspapers greeted these so-called documents with anger and ridicule, while social media users vehemently attacked them. One of the most prominent Egyptian Facebook pages “the Egyptian Stance” analyzed these articles and posed questions regarding the issue that placed the government in a position of a conspirator.

In contrast, the regime’s “loyalist” media not only desperately defended the government’s decision and tried to convince Egyptians that Saudi Arabia was entitled to the two islands. It went so far as to accuse anyone who opposed the decision of betrayal and treason. Ahmed Moussa, a pro-regime television host, ridiculed the Egyptian people, saying that, “Now in Egypt we have 90 million geologists and geography experts.”

The pro-regime media’s awkward stance led the researcher and former parliamentarian Amr al-Shobaki to write an article in Egypt Independent, the most widespread newspaper in all of Egypt. In the article, titled “Are You Not Ashamed?” he attacked the regime’s media by asking, “What is this foolishness, lack of nationalism, and cheap hypocrisy that pushes you, as an Egyptian, to spend hours day and night to prove that the islands aren’t Egyptian territory?” Al-Shobaki’s fury matched the state of rage that has settled in people due to the regime-affiliated media performance. Not only did it instill feelings of defeat, but it also instilled humiliation. The day has now come when we not only squander land, but also accuse those who are angered by and fight against such an action of treason. If the regime had instructed its media to deal with the issue using extreme sensitivity, the level of rage would’ve undoubtedly been more limited.

All of these factors helped push Sisi’s opposition along with those fighting for Egypt’s dignity to once again take to the streets. Last Friday, calls to participate in protests called “Land Friday” spread. These protests are considered to be the first of their kind since Sisi took the reigns of power in Egypt, a clear expression of collective rage. In conclusion, the intelligence style of policy in lieu of political reasoning during Egypt’s transfer of the islands to Saudi Arabia is primarily responsible for the explosion of the Egyptian streets. Undoubtedly, continuing to follow this strategy will pose a danger to Sisi himself before it begins to pose a danger to the regime as a whole.

*Maged Atef is a journalist living in Cairo. This item was originally published on [the Fikra website \(http://fikraforum.org/?p=9223&lang=en#.Vx1f0\\_krLIU\)](http://fikraforum.org/?p=9223&lang=en#.Vx1f0_krLIU). ❖*

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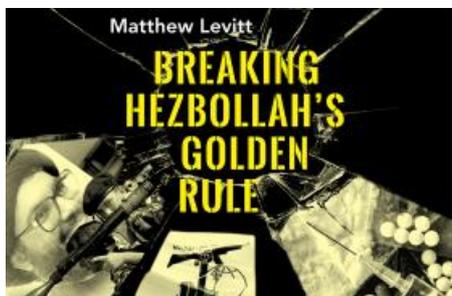
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