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The Israeli Angle to the Saudi-Egyptian Island Deal

by [Simon Henderson](#)

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Brief Analysis

Riyadh and Cairo's new agreement on transferring islands and building a long-planned bridge between the Sinai and Arabian Peninsulas also signals emerging rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Israel.

The recent news that Cairo will return the Red Sea islands of Tiran and Sanafir to Saudi sovereignty has been greeted by angry opposition in Egypt. Announced during King Salman's five-day visit to Cairo, the deal also includes around \$22 billion worth of Saudi largesse for Egypt (in the form of oil products delivered over five years and development funds), as well as a Saudi-funded bridge project across the Straits of Tiran that will connect the two countries, easing both trade and pilgrimages to Mecca. Nevertheless, many Egyptians resent the appearance of national humiliation represented by the islands' return and the implication that their national economy depends on Saudi generosity. Both publics also seem to believe that an unpalatable accommodation has been reached with Israel on the bridge issue.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the Straits of Tiran were as well known a political hotspot as the South China Sea is today. The straits lie at the southern end of the Gulf of Aqaba (aka Gulf of Eilat), the part of the Red Sea to the east of the Sinai Peninsula and the route to the southern Israeli port city of Eilat and the nearby Jordanian port of Aqaba. Today, the straits are dominated by the Egyptian resort of Sharm al-Sheikh, which overlooks the two islands.

In 1949, during the war that followed Israel's creation, Egyptian forces occupied Tiran and Sanafir after Israeli forces reached the Red Sea coast at what is now Eilat. A year later, Cairo declared sovereignty over the islands. During the

1956 war, Israel seized the islands for a while before the United States pressed it to withdraw. In the weeks before the 1967 war, Egypt positioned artillery at the straits and declared them closed to Israel, which regarded the move as a casus belli. Israeli forces then reoccupied the islands and seized the Sinai Peninsula, holding them until the 1978 Camp David Accords laid out terms for withdrawal. Today, as part of the monitoring regime established by the 1979 Egypt-Israel peace treaty, units of the American-led Multinational Force & Observers patrol the island of Tiran.

According to Saudi foreign minister Adel al-Jubeir's televised remarks on April 10, the kingdom has had no contact with Israel on the Egypt island deal but will preserve the peace treaty's terms by keeping them demilitarized. It is not clear whether ships going to and from Eilat will pass through Saudi territorial waters as they navigate the deep westernmost strait, which is just three miles wide.

Further diplomatic challenges could arise if the bridge proposal actually goes forward. Israeli merchant ships usually fly flags of convenience (i.e., flags from other countries), but the prospect of Israeli naval vessels sailing beneath a Saudi-Egyptian bridge could prompt heartburn in the kingdom. For their part, Israel and Jordan will want to safeguard their rights to freedom of navigation under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, so they could demand that they be consulted on such details as the bridge's height (e.g., to allow tankers, container ships, and cruise liners to pass). The United States will also have an interest -- as recently as 2013, the amphibious assault ship USS *Kearsarge*, essentially a small aircraft carrier, passed through the straits to visit Eilat.

For now, the deal's biggest weakness is domestic opposition in Egypt, where President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi's position is not robust. The transfer of sovereignty is a sensitive issue even if, as reports suggest, the islands will remain under Egypt's effective control.

Cairo is believed to have consulted with Israel and Washington during the months of negotiations that led to these announcements, and the Israeli cabinet apparently raised no objection provided its shipping is not affected. While this seems to confirm the good working relationship between Israel and Egypt, which these days includes close cooperation on counterterrorism and natural gas development, it could also reflect a growing maturity in tentative Saudi links with Jerusalem. Officially, Riyadh still opposes formal relations with Israel, but both countries obviously share similar views on key issues such as the threat posed by Iran. The latest development in the Straits of Tiran suggests that their agenda of common interests is broadening.

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