

Saudi Arabia pushes for alliance with Turkey and Egypt

Jean Shaoul**19 February 2016**

Saudi Arabia is pushing its allies, Turkey and Egypt, to restore diplomatic relations, following a Turkish delegation's three-day visit to Riyadh and talks on the side-lines of a meeting in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) earlier this month.

The Saudi monarchy is keen to effect reconciliation between the two countries before a summit meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in Istanbul in April, to which Turkey as the incoming chair has invited Egypt's President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, the OIC's outgoing chair, to attend. It is part of Riyadh's plans to strengthen its Sunni-coalition against Iran and prepare for a more direct intervention to unseat Syria's President Bashar al-Assad.

Egypt is dependent upon the Gulf monarchies to keep its rapidly sinking economy afloat, having received at least \$20 billion in 2013-14, with a further \$12.5 billion pledged last year, and has participated in the Saudi Arabian-led military intervention in Yemen.

Ankara would recognise al-Sisi as Egypt's legitimate ruler, who in return would lift the death sentences imposed en masse on the opposition Muslim Brotherhood (MB) members last year.

In 2013, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, at the time Turkey's Islamist Prime Minister, who is closely aligned with the MB, severed diplomatic ties with Egypt after al-Sisi, then head of Egypt's armed forces and Minister of Defence, led a military coup against former MB President Mohammad Morsi in 2013.

Since then, al-Sisi has instituted a reign of terror, implementing a brutal crackdown against the MB, killing around 1,000 of its supporters, imprisoning thousands more, and detaining journalists, academics and oppositionists in military prisons, many of whom have died at the hands of the authorities following torture and beatings.

Hundreds of MB members fled Egypt for Turkey, which is home to several TV channels virulently hostile to the al-Sisi regime. Egypt has responded by cancelling joint naval drills with Turkey.

Last July, Egypt reported that its military forces had captured Turkish intelligence officers and jihadists involved in guerrilla warfare in the Sinai Peninsula targeting the al-Sisi regime. Last December, the Turkish president met with Hamas leader Khalid Meshaal in Istanbul.

Other factors affecting the two countries' bitter relations include their rivalry for a leading role in the region and their different positions on the proxy war in Syria. While Ankara is insistent that the prime objective is Assad's removal, for Cairo, Assad's ouster is secondary to defeating Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), whose affiliates are active in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula.

Saudi efforts to effect reconciliation between Egypt and Turkey come in the wake of last December's framework agreement to restore diplomatic relations between Israel and Turkey.

Egypt was reportedly very concerned over Ankara's insistence that Israel lift its naval blockade on Gaza, which is controlled by Hamas, an affiliate of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, which it accused of aiding the Islamist insurgents in Sinai, something that Hamas has denied.

Erdogan said that Turkey wanted to send aid ships to Gaza to provide electricity and construction materials and that Israel had told Turkey that it would ease the siege as part of the agreement if aid to Gaza went through Turkey. According to the Turkish *Hürriyet Daily News*, senior Turkish officials said that if Israel allows this, Turkey would consider it a fulfilment of its condition that Israel lifts its siege.

This is an anathema to the al-Sisi government, which has worked closely with Israel, strengthening the siege of Gaza, turning the southern edge of the region into a buffer zone, occupying a large swathe of Gaza's land and destroying hundreds of tunnels used for smuggling basic commodities, people and weapons between Gaza and Sinai.

Much to Egypt's embarrassment, Israel's Energy Minister Yuval Steinitz blurted out earlier this month that al-Sisi had flooded some of Hamas's underground tunnels at Israel's request. Since mid-January, several tunnels have collapsed, leading to the deaths of 10 Palestinians.

Erdogan has so far agreed to ministerial-level talks with Egypt, but has ruled out meeting the Egyptian president.

This attempt at a rapprochement is taking place at the same time as a number of different framework agreements over oil and gas discoveries between Egypt, Israel, Cyprus and Greece, all of whom have had poor relations with Turkey. Israel-Cyprus-Greece, Egypt-Israel-Cyprus and Cyprus-Greece-Egypt have all signed deals on energy and security ties that include joint naval exercises.

In 2009 and 2010, Israel discovered gas reserves of 10 trillion cubic feet (tcf) in the Tamar field, and 22 tcf in the Leviathan field, both located off its Mediterranean coast, ensuring sufficient capacity for both its domestic needs and exports.

However, the development of the Leviathan field has been delayed by a 2014 ruling by Israel's antitrust commissioner and accusations that the government had given investors far too generous a deal while gas prices are low. Now the Supreme Court has challenged Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's decision to by-pass parliament by drafting a framework to jump-start investment.

In 2011, Cyprus discovered gas reserves in the Aphrodite field off the coast of Cyprus estimated to hold about four tcf.

Both countries had signed agreements to sell gas to Egypt, which has become a net importer due to rising demand, falling gas output and attacks on its pipelines in Sinai by Islamist militants. But last year, Egypt discovered gas in the Zohr field with an estimated capacity of 30 tcf -- far larger than Leviathan and possibly the largest in the world--that is likely to scuttle

Cypriot and Israeli plans to sell offshore gas to Egypt. The discovery would not only ensure Egypt's energy security, but also turn Egypt into a regional natural gas hub.

However, all these discoveries require transit routes for the European markets that must go through Turkey. It is this that has provided the impetus for restarting unification talks between the Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot leaders that are regarded as "promising," as well as attempts to normalise its relations with Israel and Egypt.

It takes on a greater urgency following Turkey's downing of a Russian plane over the Turkish/Syrian border last November, rupturing political and economic relations with Turkey's largest energy supplier. At the same time, Turkey's membership in the Saudi alliance against Iran and its increasing military involvement in Syria rules out reliance on gas supplies from Iran, which holds the world's second largest gas reserves in the world.



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