

## **Territorial Conflict between Saudi Arabia and Egypt from the Perspective of the Political Geography of the Sea**

**Dorreh Mirheydar**

*Professor of Political Geography, University of Teheran, Tehran, Iran*

**Mosayeb Ghareh-Beygi<sup>1</sup>**

*Ph.D. Candidate in Political Geography, University of Teheran, Tehran, Iran*

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### **Extended Abstract**

#### **1. Introduction**

The recent visit of Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz to Egypt (April 2016) under which sovereignty over the two islands of Tiran and Sanafir, located in the carter of the Gulf of Aqaba, has reportedly been transferred by Egypt to Saudi Arabia. According to the Egyptian State Information Service, this agreement was signed on 8 April 2016 by the Egyptian Prime Minister, Sherif Ismail, and Saudi Deputy Crown, Prince Mohamed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz, in the presence of the Egypt's president, Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, and Saudi King Salman. While the text of the agreement has not been disclosed yet, Egyptian officials have reportedly made available documents supporting Saudi claims over the two islands. It was reported that the Egyptian Cabinet Information and Decision Support Center (IDSC) had asserted that all documents show Tiran and Sanafir are two Saudi islands according to geographic charts.

#### **2. Theoretical Framework**

Sovereignty over the islands of Tiran and Sanafir has long been a matter of controversy between Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Egypt had asserted, for instance, before the UN Security Council in 1954 that the islands of Tiran and Sanafir were under its sovereignty, having been occupied in 1906 at the time of the delimitation of the boundary between Egypt and the Ottoman Empire. Further, Egypt had referred to the evidence that the two islands had been used by it as a part of its war efforts during World War II. However, the Saudi government also claimed that the islands pertained to it, and in fact, the question of sovereignty over Tiran and Sanafir was left unaddressed in the Saudi-Egyptian agreement of 1949, under which the islands were occupied by Egypt with the consent of Saudi Arabia, in order to exercise control over the transit of ships bound to Israel.

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<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author. Email: m.garehbaygi@ut.ac.ir

### **3. Methodology**

The methodology of this study is descriptive-analytical and the required information has been collected through library research. The information was gathered from sources such as books, magazines, online articles, newspapers, etc.

### **4. Findings and Discussion**

As increasing a geopolitical tension between Arabs and Zionists from May 15, 1948, Israel occupied the islands of Tiran and Sanafir along with Sinai Peninsula in 1952 and again in 1967. As the result of the Camp David Accords and its framework in 1979, Israel withdrew its forces from the islands and Sinai Peninsula in 1982. The statement cited a number of sources in support of its argument, including a number of screenshots. The statement referred to a letter sent by Saudi King Abdulaziz in February, 1950 to a Saudi minister in Cairo, as well as the letters between the Egyptian and Saudi foreign ministers in 1988 and 1989, which ask that the two islands are returned to Saudi sovereignty. The cabinet also referred to a letter sent by the American ambassador in Egypt to the American secretary of state in 1950 proving that Tiran and Sanafir are Saudi. "Foreign Office informed Embassy that because of certain pretensions manifested by Israel authorities recently toward Tiran and Sanafir Islands in Red Sea at the entrance of Gulf of Aqaba, the Egyptian Government, had occupied the islands," the American ambassador's letter reads.

The statement also refers to the 1973 map which shows the islands are Saudi according to the international law and UN maritime law. The statement also is linked to a New York Times article on 19 January, 1982, which describes that Israel's fears that the Egyptians would give the islands back to their Saudi owners after Egyptian-Saudi relations return to normal". According to the article, "The two islands were transferred by Saudi Arabia to Egyptian control in 1950 because the Saudis feared an Israeli attempt to seize them. Along with the rest of Sinai, they fell under Israeli control in the 1967 war, but Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Fahd said recently that he would ask Egypt, after regaining them in April, to return them to Saudi sovereignty". Mohamed ElBaradei, an international lawyer and the former Egyptian vice president, also makes an appearance in the statement. A screenshot of an article by ElBaradei, taken from an unspecified international legal journal, is also included. The article, "The Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty and Access to the Gulf of Aqaba: A New Legal Regime," states: "The islands of Tiran and Sanafir, have been under Egyptian occupation since 1950". The article also says that the Strait of Tiran is "within the territorial sea of Egypt". The cabinet's statement also refers to a presidential decree in 1990 that mentions the maritime borders of the country, and cites the two islands as being outside Egypt's borders. According to the statement, the maritime border demarcation announcement came last week because of an agreement to build a bridge between Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

Simultaneously UNCLOSIII declared the strait of Tiran as "international" to give Israel the right of transit passage to the Israeli port of Eilat. Two significant events

have affected the sovereignty of the islands from April 8, 2016 to January 16, 2017: first, the transfer of sovereignty of Tiran and Sanafir from Egypt to Saudi Arabia by the head of the state; second, the Egyptian Court and the House of Representatives' announcement to block the islands handover to Saudi Arabia. The aim of this paper, however, was mainly to draw the changes that may occur in case of handing over the islands to any party.

**Keywords:** Strait of Tiran, Island of Tiran, Island of Sanafir, Political geography of the sea, Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

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