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## New Strategic Momentum

**Will talks between Egyptian President Al-Sisi and Saudi King Abdullah provide the strategic momentum needed to respond to grave threats facing the Arab order**

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President Abdel-Fattah Al-Sisi paid his first visit to Saudi Arabia on Sunday, 10 August, and held talks with the Custodian of the Holy Shrines, King Abdullah. Their talks centred on three main questions. The first was bilateral relations, with special emphasis on the future international donors conference on the Egyptian economy.

The second related to the situation in Gaza, one month after Israel began its aggression on the Strip and following Egyptian efforts to secure a permanent ceasefire that would open a window of opportunity to find credible solutions to the overall situation in Gaza.

The third and most important question is undeniably regional developments, particularly in the Levant and Iraq, and Libya, in light of the sweeping advances by what is called the Islamic State (IS), formerly the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Four days before the visit, members of the Islamic State were 40 km away from Irbil, the capital of Kurdistan, and poised to attack the city, a serious development that led the US administration to launch air strikes on the positions of IS fighters.

The visit was preceded by IS threats to destabilize Lebanon and Kuwait. These dangerous developments coincided with Libya descending into near anarchy despite the recent election and convening of a parliament.

Egyptian-Saudi relations have always been critical for the stability and security of the Arab order, particularly in the Levant and the Arab Peninsula. In this context, the first precondition to facing the emerging threats to the Arab state system is a common strategy by the two countries that would contain the advance of IS and other terrorist groups in the Levant that have been growing in influence and power in their fight to overthrow the Assad government in Damascus.

The second precondition would be to de-emphasise the sectarian aspect in the current confrontation raging from Lebanon to Syria and Iraq. Admittedly, this will not be a foregone conclusion for the simple reason that this aspect is directly related to the current state of relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and Saudi apprehensions concerning future relations between the west and Iran once the Iranian nuclear question is settled.

Another problem in this complicated regional landscape is, surely, political stability in Iraq and Iraqi political parties in parliament reaching a consensus on their country's next prime minister. One of the reasons for the string of military successes of IS are the political deadlock in Iraq and the rejection of a third term for Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki. His sectarian policies have given rise to a Sunni alignment of forces against his rule that benefits IS strategy, at least so far.

Another unsettling aspect of this explosive situation in the Levant and the Middle East is the absence of a coherent Arab strategy to deal with all these threats. I would argue that the absence of such a strategy and the policies of some Arab and regional powers to bring down the Syrian government have been responsible for the current situation.

For the last three and a half years these powers provided financing, training, logistics and intelligence to an array of forces in Syria that have been only united by one objective — namely, bringing down the Assad government. Otherwise, nothing else holds them together. We have been witness to their differences, whether related to organisational questions or to more important issues, such as the future direction of Syria.

The question now is how to disengage gradually from an ill-fated attempt to unseat President Bashar Al-Assad. Secondly, and no less important, is how to work with all Iraqi political forces without political or sectarian considerations to encourage the emergence of an all-inclusive Iraqi government that would be in a position to deal with the threats against the territorial integrity of Iraq, as a unified state that defends the interests of all its people, regardless of faith, sect or ethnicity.

The role of Egypt in preparing the ground for the ultimate defeat of IS and other terrorist groups affiliated with Al-Qaeda, whether operating in the Levant and Iraq or in North Africa, is of critical importance. In this respect, this role will be the balancer among various opposing forces in the region.

Cairo is capable of shouldering that responsibility, based on historical precedents as well as the absence of sectarian or religious considerations in Egyptian foreign policy. The new Egyptian leadership has probably the political will to play this role, to facilitate a new Arab core alliance, strong and cohesive enough to deal effectively with the new existential threats facing the Arab state system.

Of paramount importance in this endeavour is that Egypt and Saudi Arabia hold a common perception of what these threats are. This calls for a reordering of Arab foreign policy priorities in the region. A basic question is whether or not this can happen without the cooperation of the Syrian government.

I understand that this is a very sensitive question for some, but I believe that facing the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda-affiliated groups in the Levant and North Africa calls for a drastic realignment of forces within the Arab system. The talks between President Al-Sisi and King Abdullah in Saudi Arabia may lead to this realignment, and in doing so, will have provided a new strategic momentum in the Arab world. The difficult challenge ahead will be to sustain this momentum.