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## Egypt's president defends giving Red Sea islands to Saudi Arabia

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Egypt's president on Wednesday defended his country's declared intention to hand over control of two Red Sea islands to Saudi Arabia, saying Cairo did not surrender its territory but "restored" the rights of the Saudis.

The government maintains that the islands of Tiran and Sanafir at the mouth of the Gulf of Aqaba belong to Saudi Arabia, which asked Egypt in 1950 to protect them from Israel.

Israel captured the islands in the 1967 Middle East war, but handed them back to Egypt under the provisions of the 1979 peace treaty.

"We did not surrender our rights, but we restored the rights of others," president Abdel Fattah El Sisi said in an impromptu policy speech to a group of government officials and senior editors in the presidential palace that was broadcast live. "Egypt did not relinquish even a grain of sand."

"All the data and documents say nothing except that this particular right is theirs. Please let us not talk about this subject again. There is a parliament that will debate this agreement. It will either ratify or reject it."

Cairo's decision to transfer custody of the islands to Saudi Arabia, which must be ratified by parliament, has kicked off a storm of protest in Egypt. The decision was announced during a five-day visit by the Saudi Arabia's King Salman.

Egyptian media has been in uproar since the government announced on Saturday the signing of a maritime demarcation accord that puts Tiran and Sanafir in Saudi waters.

The islands are uninhabited but strategically located and the move caused consternation among Egyptians who say they have been taught at school that the islands are theirs.

Saudi and Egyptian officials say the two islands belong to the kingdom and were only under Egyptian control because Saudi Arabia's founder asked Egypt in 1950 to protect them.

Mr El Sisi said that former president Hosni Mubarak recognised in 1990 that the islands belonged to Saudi Arabia.

"We don't sell our land to anyone, and we don't take anyone's rights," Mr El Sisi said.

"Why are Egyptians more suspicious of each other than people are in other countries?" he asked, suggesting experts and religious clerics should look into the question.

Mr El Sisi also reiterated Cairo's position that Egyptian security forces had nothing to do with the torture and killing of an Italian student Giulio Regeni who was abducted and killed in Cairo.

The incident poisoned ties with Italy, which recalled its ambassador to protest what it called a lack of cooperation by Egyptian authorities in the investigation.

Regeni disappeared on January 25, the five-year anniversary of the uprising that toppled Hosni Mubarak, when police were out in force to prevent demonstrations. His body was found nine days later and bore signs of torture, leading some in the country to point the finger at security services.

Egyptian police have suggested a criminal gang – whose alleged members were all killed in a shoot-out with police – could have been behind the murder, an explanation Italy dismissed before recalling its ambassador last week.

Mr El Sisi suggested that "evil folks" were behind the incident.

The Egyptian leader has in the past accused unidentified parties of seeking to isolate Egypt and undermine its government by engineering the death of Regeni.

Italy is Egypt's biggest trading partner in the EU and the two countries have been coordinating on their handling of the rise of militants in Libya, Egypt's western neighbour and Italy's former colony.