

Tiran and Sanafir: an Egyptian burden - Daily News Egypt

 web.archive.org/web/20160422003037/http://www.dailynewsegypt.com:80/2016/04/18/tiran-sanafir-egyptian-burden/

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18/4/2016

Saudi Arabian King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud's visit to Egypt on 9 April caused a startling disturbance.

Chatter across different social media platforms has peaked. The cause behind all this is Egypt's decision to transfer the sovereignty of Tiran and Sanafir islands to Saudi Arabia.

Egyptians on social media have hysterically opposed this handover, some resorting to historical evidence, some claiming it unconstitutional, and some showing extracts from year 4 primary school geography text books as evidence of Egyptian ownership.

Added to this mayhem are the conspiracy theorists who have gone into absolute overdrive. This idea of relinquishing land for a price, in the old Egyptian psyche, is a rather dishonourable one. Going back to our agrarian heritage, a person abandoning his land is scandalous.

Whether it is proven to be Egyptian or not, is it really worth keeping, and why such a ruckus?

Since the 1800s, both of these islands have exchanged ownership several times, which is confusing and leaves the ownership in a bit of a grey area. It is certain that the Saudi government handed over both islands in 1950, because at the time Egypt had the military capability to protect them from Israel.

Both islands at the mouth of the Gulf of Aqaba have a combined area of 113 sqkm and are both 8km from Egypt and Saudi Arabia. The lands of both islands are arid and uncultivated with undiscovered natural resources. The only significance Tiran has is its strategic advantages. It forms the narrowest section of the Straits of Tiran, which is an important passage to the ports of Aqaba in Jordan and Eilat in Israel.

Yet, this strategic significance played a disastrous role in Egypt's conflict with Israel. On 22 May 1967, then president Gamal Abdel Nasser ordered the blockade of the Straits of Tiran. This was perceived by Israel as an act of war; consequently, Israel launched its offensive on Egypt, Jordan, and Syria, leading to the Six Day War. This led to the loss of great areas of Arab land to Israel and the death of 20,000 Arab soldiers. And even though Egypt regained the Sinai Peninsula after the 1973 war and the Camp David Accords, the repercussions of the Six Day war remain with us until this day.

Currently, Tiran is included as part of the 1979 peace treaty signed by Egypt and Israel to guarantee freedom of Israeli shipping through the Straits of Tiran. Both islands are uninhabited and only Tiran has a handful of international peace keeping troops, mostly American and Egyptian soldiers. There are also claims that many beaches on Tiran Island are mined. On an international scale, the islands were referred to as non-Egyptian territory but of Egyptian administration, and claimed by Saudi Arabia.

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It is not wise for the people to let their emotions discern this transaction. The Egyptian presidency has handed these islands back to their owners with pragmatism. There is no real significance or benefit for Egypt to retain these islands, rather they have been nothing but a burden, especially the Straits of Tiran.

The Saudi government now has to agree to the same Camp David Accords in regards to guaranteeing safe passage for Israeli shipping through the Straits of Tiran, a burden Egypt should be content with being free from. Now the onus is on the Saudi administration to keep the Straits of Tiran open to Israeli shipping.

Nations in the past have exchanged and relinquished land amongst each other for various strategic reasons, what has transpired in Egypt is not something out of the ordinary. If we take a step back and look at other parts of the world, there are far more serious and controversial acts of land handovers. For example, the state of Alaska was not always part of the United States of America.

The majority of the land of Alaska was owned by Russia from 1733. The Russian regime decided to sell their portion of Alaska to the US due to military and strategic reasons. In 1867, the American administration purchased Alaska for the sum of \$7.2m, which was signed by then US secretary of state William Seward.

The purchase was met by substantial opposition in the US, some calling it “Seward’s Folly” or “Seward’s Icebox”. Yet, Alaska achieved statehood in 1959, and today it is a major source of minerals and energy for the US.

Whatever the strategic reason or cost benefit in handing over both islands to Saudi Arabia, the Egyptian community needs to handle such events with a more pragmatic approach. It does not help that the Egyptian administration has not explained the transaction clearly nor emphasised the positive outcomes of such handover to the general public.

However, it was made clear that the Saudis will compensate Egypt with investments worth \$25bn for projects in various areas. Also the proposed motorway linking Africa with Asia will have major benefits for both Egypt and Saudi Arabia and to the region as a whole.

So, at the end of the day, after taking into account the gains and losses, is it really worth quarrelling over a couple of tiny sand pits floating in the Red Sea, barren with no resources or life, when in the next 100 years they might just disappear due to the rising sea levels from the effects of climate change? Or have certain members in the Egyptian community become obsessed with taking every opportunity to push the country into a state of instability just for the sake of it?

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