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Egypt becomes battleground for Arab world

By Monte Palmer

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The Saudi monarchy has declared war on the Muslim Brotherhood, an immensely popular Sunni Islamic movement with branches and businesses throughout the world. Not only has the monarchy labeled the Brotherhood a terrorist organization, but a photo chart of the major terrorist groups offered by the Saudi press gives the Brotherhood top billing. Not even al-Qaeda outshines the Brotherhood in the eyes of the Saudi regime.

Perhaps the Saudi monarchy had little choice in the matter. The Muslim Brotherhood swept to power in Egypt and Tunisia following the 2011 Arab Spring revolutions, and the Saudi monarchy openly worried that its kingdom would be next. Such is the price of being rich, weak, and unwilling to test the support of the masses in elections or a free press.

The Saudi monarchy's chosen battlefield for its war on the Muslim Brotherhood is Egypt. It is difficult to argue with its choice. The Brotherhood was founded in Egypt, its Supreme Guides have all been Egyptian, and Egypt is the center of the Brotherhood's global operations. Branches of the Brotherhood are guided by General Secretaries from their respective regions, but key policy decisions flow from Egypt.

The Saudis knew that attempts to destroy Brotherhood branches in the region would be futile as long as the Brotherhood leadership ruled from Egypt. Attacking Brotherhood branches would

threaten the stability of Jordan, Kuwait and other Saudi allies with deeply entrenched Brotherhood movements. To crush the Brotherhood in Egypt, by contrast, would be to sever its head and soul. The battle would also transpire far from the Gulf and leave the Saudi monarchy, the self-proclaimed protector of Islam without blood on its hands. In fact, they could avoid fighting altogether by outsourcing the job to the Egyptian generals.

It wasn't merely the popularity of the Brotherhood that alarmed the Saudi monarchy, but also the policies that the Brotherhood pursued upon being elected into office. The Brotherhood, or so it seemed to the monarchy, was intent on using the Egyptian government as a pulpit for spreading its seductive vision of pragmatic progressive Islam throughout the Arab world.

This posed a direct threat to both the Saudi monarchy and to the extremist Wahhabi vision of Islamic purity upon which its claim to religious legitimacy rests. The security of the monarchy demanded Wahhabi dominance of the Sunni Islamic world. The more the seductive moderation and pragmatism of the Brotherhood spread, the weaker the Saudis would become.

Particularly dangerous to Saudi control of the Sunni Islamic world were the Brotherhood's efforts to convert Al-Azhar, the oldest Islamic university in the world, to the Brotherhood's pragmatic and progressive vision of Islam.

The Saudis controlled Mecca and Medina, the two holiest shrines in Islam, but the Brotherhood was on the verge of controlling Al-Azhar, the reigning authority on Sunni Islamic theology in the Muslim world.

Meanwhile, Qatar, the main Saudi competitor for control of the Gulf and patron of the Brotherhood, seemed intent on using the Brotherhood's control of Egypt to break Saudi Arabia's domination of the Gulf. The ploy must have been effective, for an Egyptian opposition press financed by the Saudis screamed that Qatar had taken over Al-Azhar. Qatari efforts to bolster the Brotherhood's control of Al-Azhar were matched by Qatari efforts to strengthen Brotherhood branches in the Gulf and neighboring countries. Even today, the Saudis blame Qatar for supporting seductive Brotherhood doctrine in the mosques of the kingdom.

Qatar, to Saudi anguish, was joined by the government of Turkey in an effort to make Egypt the centerpiece of a Sunni Arab world ruled by a moderate and pragmatic vision of Islam capable of coexisting with the west to the benefit of both parties. Both Qatar and Turkey also viewed this new Islamic world as the foundation for reconciling the centuries old conflict between the Sunni and Shia.

This was a dire threat to a Saudi monarchy locked in a bitter cold war with Shia Iran. It was equally a threat to Saudi Wahhabi doctrine that views the Shia as apostates. Egypt's Saudi financed opposition press responded on cue with frantic warnings that the Brotherhood was going to convert Egypt to Shi'ite Islam.

Perhaps responding to Turkish influence, the Brotherhood pursued a remarkably democratic strategy in Egypt during its lone year in office. The press was free if irresponsible, demonstrations un-fettered, and all political groups, including the jihadists and extreme leftists,

were allowed to establish political parties. Far worse, the Brotherhood threw down the gauntlet to the Saudis by calling for freedom and democracy throughout the region.

Clearly, democracy had become the weapon of the Brotherhood for conquering the Arab world, and there was no weapon that the Saudis feared more. One fair election, if Egypt and Tunisia were any guide, and the Saudi monarchy would become a footnote in history. Brotherhood branches in Kuwait and Jordan picked up the call, throwing the two faux democracies into a state of confusion.

The US and the EU, by contrast, applauded this rare breath of freedom in Egypt and, with Turkish encouragement, aspired to wean the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt toward greater moderation. Whatever the case, the Brotherhood's pragmatism offered the West an alternative to a Saudi Wahhabi doctrine condemned by Washington for breeding extremism and terror.

The US and EU were also realizing that Islam was so deeply embedded in the Arab psyche that there could not be a stable government in the Arab world without Islamic representation, a topic treated at length in my book *The Arab Psyche and American Frustrations*.

Like it or not, Brotherhood doctrine inclining toward the moderation of Turkish Lite was their best option. Not only had the Brotherhood placed the Saudi monarchy's Islamic legitimacy at risk, but it was also on the verge of weakening the monarchy's ties with the United States, its major patron.

A counter-revolution supported by Saudi Arabia toppled the Brotherhood regime in Egypt, but did little to calm the monarchy's fears. To the contrary, the Brotherhood's resistance to the military coup in Egypt displayed a passion and organizational capacity that has thrown the country into chaos and casts severe doubts on the ability of Egypt's revived Mubarak regime to stay the course. This is all the more the case because various jihadist groups hostile to the Brotherhood have joined the fray by assassinating officers and establishing mini-caliphates in the Sinai and elsewhere.

It is unlikely that the Saudi regime could survive in the face of a parallel uprising by domestic supporters of the Brotherhood and Wahhabi jihadists returning from Syria and elsewhere. The Saudis claim that there are some 600 returnees from Syria. The Kuwaitis place the figure at 20,000. Whatever the number of Brotherhood supporters and jihadists in the kingdom, the king's warnings of sedition and terrorism have become commonplace as the monarchy's fears mount.

Putting their money where their fear is, Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies have pumped billions of dollars into Egypt with the hope that Egypt's latest military dictator will be able to crush the Brotherhood in its home base. Billions more are promised.

If the Egyptian military can crush the Brotherhood, everything in the Saudi plan should fall in place. Egypt will be firmly established as the centerpiece of a Saudi-Israeli-Egyptian alliance designed to return the Arab world to the era of tyrants that reigned before the Arab Spring revolutions of 2011.

Along the way, Egyptian authorities will promote stability in the region by severing the Brotherhood's lifelines to Hamas and stamping out jihadist and Brotherhood sanctuaries in Yemen, Libya and other areas within reach of Egypt's Saudi financed army. Democratic aspirations in the region will fade without inspiration from Egypt, and Saudi Wahhabi doctrine will find its way into Al-Azhar.

With the Muslim Brotherhood gone, the US and the EU will return to their traditional role of supporting tyrants and the Saudi monarchy will have returned the Middle East to the era of peaceful oppression.

The question is can Saudi money convert a poverty-stricken dictatorship teetering between chaos and civil war into the foundation of its war against the Muslim Brotherhood? If so, Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies should be able to buy the entire region.

Thus far, all the Saudi monarchy has bought is civil war and chaos in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and Pakistan. Egypt is following suit. Even Field Marshal Sisi, Egypt's latest pharaoh, yet uncrowned, warns that things will get worse before they get better, much worse.

The only optimist to be found is Sisi's latest hand-picked prime minister. A close friend of Hosni Mubarak, he oozes confidence that the Egyptian masses will put their shoulders to the wheel and sacrifice all for the good of the country. I doubt if the Saudi monarchy is quite so deluded. But, then, the Saudis may prefer chaos and civil war to Brotherhood rule in Egypt.