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Egypt's Sphinx casts eyes on Syria

By M K Bhadrakumar

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It looks increasingly that solving the Egyptian puzzle is going to take us all to Syria. How far the army's coup in Egypt resets the geopolitics of the Middle East, or, conversely, whether the coup itself forms the commencement of a region-wide tectonic shift that is going to play out over time - this is the big question.

The cascading events this week indicate that the latter could well be the case. To be sure, even by the standards of the Middle East, the past week has been an extraordinary one.

There has been a strong expression of support from the United States and its Persian Gulf allies to the Egyptian military, which in turn is providing the political underpinning for a brutal crackdown by the junta on the Muslim Brotherhood, which has implications for the "Arab Spring" as a whole.

Russia's overture to the junta at such a point may come as quite a surprise but it is integral to the Russian strategy in Syria and the Russian skepticism of the "Arab Spring".

The isolation of Qatar, Turkey and Iran on the regional chessboard has accentuated through the past week with the junta in Cairo ticking off these countries for their pretensions of being arbiters or opinion-makers in Egypt's internal affairs. It so happens that these three countries have been deeply involved in the Syrian situation as well.

Meanwhile, Israel's openness to accept Russian peacekeepers on the Golan Heights could not have surged to the surface this week without US acquiescence - or even approval - and the timing of the leadership changes both in Syria's ruling Ba'ath Party and the Syrian National Coalition could be more than a coincidence.

There is a background to all this, lest it be forgotten amidst the cacophony of the coup in Egypt - Hassan Rouhani's thumping victory in the Iranian presidential election and the promise of an impending thaw in the Saudi-Iranian relationship.

A seminal event

If a seminal event is to be identified in this torrential flow of events in regional politics, it must be the visit by the US Secretary of State John Kerry to Saudi Arabia on June 25, which was embedded within a regional tour of the Middle East and was a diplomatic initiative on Syria.

In hindsight it becomes apparent now that the slow-motion coup in Egypt was well under way by that time in end-June and the US was already in deep consultation with the military leadership in Cairo regarding a political transition in Egypt. Without doubt, Kerry's talks with the Saudi leaders couldn't have ignored the gathering storms in Egypt.

In the event, of course, Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah became the first world leader to felicitate the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood government on July 2 - within hours of the coup unfolding - as if Riyadh had it all worked out in anticipation.

Again, the alacrity with which Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates simultaneously announced on Wednesday a US\$8 billion aid package for Egypt suggests that a blueprint was already prepared in consultation with the US.

Washington leaked to the press immediately thereafter that it too was going ahead with a planned supply of F-16 fighter aircraft to the Egyptian military, which means that despite the Obama administration's posturing of prevarication, suspending military aid to Egypt is the last thing on its mind.

Curiously, another regional leader who promptly welcomed - alongside King Abdullah - the ouster of the Brotherhood from power in Egypt has been Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

This wasn't an isolated act, either. On Monday, Assad announced the replacement of the entire Ba'ath leadership, with all 16 members who have been in the high command since 2005, making way for new blood. A younger generation of leaders, including former diplomats, has been brought in as replacements. Parliament speaker Jihad al-Laham and Prime Minister Wael al-Halqi are among them.

In an interview with the Ba'ath party's mouthpiece, Assad sought to explain that the leaders were removed from the high command because they made mistakes while in office. "When a leader does not solve a series of errors, this leader must be held accountable," he said without

elaborating. Of course, Assad continues as the party's secretary-general, being the only top leader who didn't make any mistakes.

In the same interview with the Ba'ath party's organ, Assad also renewed his criticism of the Muslim Brotherhood, saying it "takes advantage of religion and uses it as a mask ... and it thinks that if you don't agree with it politically, that means you don't stand by God."

Assad strives to convey the message to the people that he is responsive to their grievances over social problems such as inflation and worsening public security. But the fact remains that he is strengthening his control of the ruling party at a time when the Syrian situation is evolving in political terms, given the military stalemate, and all protagonists - Syrian as well as outside powers - anticipate the inevitability of a political dialogue in the next several months.

Equally, what needs to be noted is that the Ba'ath Party purge coincides with a change of leadership of the opposition Syrian National Coalition (SNC). New SNC president Ahmad Jarba is a Saudi-US nominee and has the reputation of being a "secular-minded" tribal leader.

Following Jarba's election, Ghassan Hitto, the prime minister and a businessman from America, who had enjoyed the backing of Qatar, Turkey and the US when he was appointed in last March, submitted his resignation.

In essence, the changes in the SNC signify - like in Egypt - an ascendancy of Saudi influence and the eclipse of the Qatari-Turkish axis. The Brotherhood's clout within the SNC has also suffered a setback. Evidently, the US is backing the ascendancy of Saudi influence within the SNC - as is happening in Egypt.

Demise of Islamism

What is the Saudi-US game plan? Going by the Ramadan message by the Saudi King and the Crown Prince on Wednesday, Saudi Arabia "will not allow religion to be exploited by extremists who only work for their personal interests, and who harm the reputation of Islam." The message said Saudi Arabia will "with God's help, remain the defenders of Islam ... and continue on our centrist, moderate approach."

Evidently, these are barbs aimed at the Muslim Brotherhood in the prevailing context of both Egypt and Syria, and the movement's principal backers in the region; namely, Qatar and Turkey.

On the other hand, Assad would find the Saudi King's Ramadan message quite agreeable. He cannot but share the Saudi perspective (which the US and Russia also share) that the specter of radical Islamists haunting his country's destiny is the core issue today.

Without doubt, these cross currents in regional politics have not gone unnoticed in Moscow, and they have prompted the Kremlin to lose no more time in making an overture to the Egyptian junta. Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Thursday,

We hope that all initiatives [by the junta], which are designed to launch the national dialogue, to stabilize the situation and hold free elections, will be successful.

Lavrov simply ignored that he was speaking while a violent crackdown on the Brotherhood by the Egyptian military was underway. He went on to propose that it could be business as usual between Russia and Egypt and, furthermore, that Russia's priority lies in the impact of the developments in Egypt on regional stability and the politics of the Islamic world. Lavrov said, As for cooperation projects [with Egypt], these projects are aimed at developing cooperation between the countries and peoples. Their implementation will benefit both the countries and the peoples.

We [Russia] want stability to be ensured in Egypt and in the entire region, which creates serious risks for international relations. Egypt is the region's key country. The development of events in the region and in the Islamic world will depend on the situation in Egypt.

This is realpolitik at its best. Simply put, without drawing allegations of interfering in Egypt's internal affairs, Lavrov has let it be known to the new leadership in Cairo, and an array of regional states - Saudi Arabia, Iran, Qatar, Turkey and Israel, in particular - and the "international community" as a whole that Russia is far from displeased with the turn of events in Egypt and its likely repercussions for regional security and stability.

Conceivably, Moscow, which never gave up its deep-rooted suspicions of the Muslim Brotherhood, may be feeling the winds of change to be quite conducive to the pursuit of its own interests and in harmony with its own assessments of the "Arab Spring".

Meanwhile, the Saudi establishment daily Asarq Al-Awsat reported on Wednesday that there has been a meeting between Lavrov and Israel's Justice Minister Tzipi Livni during which the latter indicated that Israel may allow Russian peacekeeping soldiers under the United Nations flag on the Golan Heights provided Moscow halted the transfer of advanced S-300 anti-aircraft missiles to Syria.

President Vladimir Putin had proposed last month that Russia is ready to replace the 380-strong Austrian contingent in the 1,100-strong UN Disengagement Observer Force in Golan.

Neither Moscow nor Tel Aviv has contradicted the Saudi daily's report. If it is true, as seems likely, it not only is in sync with the broad sweep of the above-mentioned developments but it unveils a tantalizingly new pattern of regional alignments involving Israel and Syria, with the US and Russia as the stakeholders - something unthinkable until now.

Clearly, the events in Egypt are increasingly finding the US, Saudi Arabia, Israel and Russia on the same page. All these four major protagonists are willing to wager that the controversial coup in Egypt might eventually stabilize the situation in that country and even strengthen democratic rule.

All these protagonists would agree that political Islam turned out to be the unwelcome beneficiary of the "Arab Spring." Indeed, by the analogy of Egypt, as hinted in the Saudi King's Ramadan message, big trouble seems to lie ahead for the Islamist movements in the region as whole, including the Syrian rebel groups.

As a former Israeli ambassador to the US, Zalman Shoval summed up in an article titled "New Dawn on the Nile" in Jerusalem Post,

All things considered, the possible demise of Islamism as the major political force in at least parts of the Arab world could eventually lead to a more secular, down-to-earth and less dogmatic and intolerant attitude on the part of our [Israel's] neighbors.

All in all, the struggle that lies ahead in Egypt and the turns that the Syrian situation is poised to take in the coming months have not only some striking parallels, but could be inter-related.