A New Authoritarian Alliance over the Muslim Brotherhood?: Egypt's anti-Islamist Foreign Policy and Re-formation of the Arab Security Alliance[1]

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1. Introduction

The 2013 second revolution in Egypt or alleged military coup fully blew the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) away from political power. The new Egyptian government has strengthened control over terrorist-labelled MB and also called the other Arab governments to participate in its transnational anti-Islamist network.

Curiously, Egypt's efforts to eradicate authority of MB at international level have successfully attracted not only the hitherto anti-Islamist states but also some pro-MB states such as Qatar. In addition, due to the deteriorating regional security situation chiefly caused by the rise of ISIS in 2014, these states are likely to be stretching the bounds of threat unlimited in scope of target.

Alliance theories in International Relations (IR) traditionally have an assumption that an alliance is basically inter-state and thus should be strategically formed on a principle of balance of power among the existing nation states (e.g. Snyder 1997; Walt 1987; 1997). However, the anti-Islamist alliance in the Middle East is chiefly aiming at confronting *non-state* actors *within* states. Hence, the traditional IR balance of power theory may reveal its limit to explain rise and decline of such alliance in the region.

This paper will try to understand the broad context of the unprecedented anti-Islamist alliance and also to investigate the deep cause of this new phenomenon in the post-Arab Spring Middle East and what kinds of factor has driven Egypt to hastily form the alliance in such short period. The study will employ the Copenhagen school of security studies claim, a theory of *securitization* in particular. Are the objectives of these unique "alliance" just supportive measures against the potential political rival, namely MB and its affiliates? Or else, are we witnessing a totally new "security community" among the resurgent authoritarian states done up in anti-terrorism guise? The paper will also be willing to give great attention to single or collective reaction from the Islamist side, particularly MB in Egypt, Jordan, and Syria.

2. Historical Development of "anti-Islamist alliance" in the Middle East

(1) Historical Origin

The origin of anti-Islamist alliance in the Middle East can be traced back to the late 1970s when the world witnessed the significant rise of radical Islamists being involved in brutal political violence, Mecca Grand Mosque seizure in 1979, assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in 1981, anti-regime violent struggle of the Syrian MB from 1976 to 1982, and of the most notable, the Iranian Revolution in 1979. Those events urged both Arab republics and monarchies to tighten their security so that the regimes could remain in power and thus ensure their future survival. It was Saudi Arabia that led to forming strategic alliance to contend growing "Islamists' threat" in the region, whose main target was virtually the revolutionary Iran, which showed a clear position to oppose to the monarchy's de facto patron – United States. Hence, one should not ignore that the Saudi-led anti-Islamist alliance, consisted of mainly GCC states and Jordan, came into birth as a pro-American force in the Middle East.

As the end of Cold War and the subsequent outbreak of the Gulf Crisis/War unleashed structural changes in the Middle East politics, the alliance's major target shifted from Iran to MB. There were three reasons for such a strategic shift: gradual decay of the radical Islamists across the region due to successive failures in its violent struggles, expansion of popular mobilization and electoral basis of moderate Islamists as proved in the 1989 Algerian general elections, and Iran's moderation in its foreign policy partly as a result of the death of Khomeini. Eventually, MB, as a moderate and mainstream Islamist movement in the Middle East, began to be perceived by the Arab republics and monarchies as significant security threat that could topple the decades-long secular/Islamic authoritarian regimes. Moreover, there was a remarkable perceptual and ideological gap in policy toward the Gulf Crisis/War between Riyadh and MB, this decisively led to deterioration of their ties which had been essentially cooperative from its very beginning in 1930s (Aarts and Roelants 2015: 120-123).

(2) *Securitizing* Islamists

It can be helpful for understanding policy of the Saudi-led anti-Islamist alliance to employ the Copenhagen school of security studies claim, a theory of *securitization* in particular. This is because the alliance's threat perception was likely to depend not on objective but subjective policy evaluations concerning political development of Islamists in the region.

According to the *securitization* theory, security is only an intersubjective perception, which is to be socially constructed by *speech act*. An actor tries to move a topic away from politics into a security concerns through a series of *speech act*, repeating the topic is threat for it. By doing so, the actor aims to legitimize extraordinary means to defend itself from the threat. Yet it has to be noticed that *securitization* of a subject depends on an audience accepting the securitization *speech act* (Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde 1998).

The Saudi-led alliance has been striving for *securitization* of Islamists, regardless of sectarian difference of Sunni and Shiite, and has shown remarkable successes in generating and maintaining common security perception among the allies as well as other state actors inside and outside of the

Middle East.[3] Although each ally strived to make the securitizing statement in its own political environment, the alliance as a whole recognized that setting up an enemy by *speech act* was vital for its survival that was heavily depending on its calling for "true Islam" in a sharp contrast to Islamists' "false Islam." By doing so, it has successfully implemented *securitization* of newly emerging Islamists as common threat for both the Arab republics and monarchies among the allies.[4]

It should be noted that the alliance's success in the *securitization* actually inflamed MB's extreme cautions to it and also their radicalization. This has brought about a vicious cycle of mutual distrust and hostility between the two camps – anti-Islamist alliance and MB, which seriously hinders internal and external security in the Middle East since the end of Cold War by shaping patterns and configurations of the political/military alliance.

(3) Limit of the Alliance Formation before the Arab Spring

Nevertheless, from the very beginning, the Saudi-led anti Islamist/MB alliance attempt before the Arab Spring lacked substantial impact to catch attention of both the Arab governments and publics. Husuni Mubarak's regime in Egypt, perhaps one of the strongest allies of Saudi Arabia, was formally anti-MB but in reality reluctant to terminate the whole MB network that had been deeply rooted in Egyptian society. Rather, the regime occasionally and secretly allied with MB to utilize them to deter the presence of (more) radical Islamists, who could be serious security threat to its authoritarian rule. The Mubarak regime also allowed the MB members to stand for the general elections as independent candidate (Zahid 2010); unless these MB-affiliated MPs could manage themselves to stay in a minority group and not to challenge the rule of the hegemonic party National Democratic Party (NDP) in the parliament. Even during the crackdown on the opponents in the 1990s and the late 2000s, the Mubarak regime did not terminate the MB's activities totally and the MB was the de facto largest opposition party in Egypt (Tardos 2012).

The 911 terror attacks in 2001 and subsequent widespread of Islamophobia at international level were severe political blow for MB. However, even under such circumstances, the Saudi government could not form any effective regional alliance to contain the MB network. This was partly because MB was perceived as and also strived to represent "moderate Islamists" that could be significant counter-balance of the radicals. Therefore, the well-prepared *speech act* made by Saudi could not mobilize the Arab governments (Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait and Qatar) nor publics, because the attempt still lacked enough *securitization* impact to have spillover effect among the *audience*.

3. The Rise of the Anti-MB alliance in the Era of the Arab spring
(1) Background of the Formation

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[3] Saudi Arabia and the other GCC states may be all seen as "securitizing agents" (promoting the securitizing move) as well as "audiences" (being persuaded and accepting it), because while each of them has its own actual security concern and attempts to securitize it through the *speech act* respectably, they all share a common friend/enemy perception. This point remains matter for further analysis.

[4] In this sense, the alliance meets the two types of "facilitating conditions," which influence success of the securitizing move; internal conditions of linguistic-grammatical form and external conditions of social or contextual form (e.g. the position of the securitizing agent and threatening features of the portrayed issue) (Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde 1998: 32).

Here one question comes up. What made it possible – the successful formation of new anti-MB alliance in 2014? We can list at least four deep causes.

Firstly, the collapse of the Mubarak Regime in 2011. As noted above, the Mubarak Regime has been in the Saudi-led anti-Islamist alliance but was not serious to purge MB, because the regime and MB were essentially in an informal interdependence. Theoretically speaking, the collapse of the Mubarak Regime could lead a way toward democratization in Egypt and in fact the following landslide victory of the MB affiliated Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) in the 2012 general elections seemed to work as anthrax for the alliance among the Arab authoritarian regimes. Rather, ironically, the strong presence of MB in Egypt and it's overstretch toward the other Arab states simply caused serious security dilemma among the authoritarian regimes particularly the Saudi government that the MB network was potential security and political threat to challenge the state authority. The MB and newly-elected president Muhammad Mursi also sought for a new diplomacy different from Mubarak's one in terms of selection of its alliance members. While Mubarak emphasized the diplomatic cooperation with Saudi Arabia, the MB and Mursi tried to extend diplomatic ties with Iran, Turkey, and Qatar based on its common "Islamic" interests.

Moreover, the rise of ISIS in Iraq and Syria in mid-2014 evoked broader concern against Islamism *in general* at international level. The Mursi regime was perhaps the largest victim in this new global anti-Islamism trend. The regime often got cold shoulder from the Western governments along with Saudi Arabia, and a series of political mishandling made by President Mursi were criticized and even attacked from inside/outside of Egypt as failure of Islamism, although most of the policy deficits came from Mursi's amateurism in real politics (Milton-Edwards 2015: 47-48).

The second cause is the stronger diplomatic presence of Saudi Arabia in the post Arab Spring Middle East following the political turmoil in Libya, Bahrain, and Egypt. For example, after the alleged Egyptian coup in 2013, Abdul Fattah al-Sisi's regime – in fact a military junta –, which had to tackle a difficult issue, economic stagnation, become heavily dependent on financial support from the new president's strongest ally, the Saudi government.[5] Also one should not forget another background factor that empowered Saudi Arabia's diplomatic offensive, the temporal oil price rise after the Arab Spring that enabled the government to provide larger budget to support anti-MB states (Gause 2014).

The third cause is the power transition within Qatari politics, particularly the end of the Qatari Emir's multifaceted but often personalized diplomacy. Former ruler of Qatar Sheikh Hamad is well known for his remarkable commitment to the support for Islamists, particularly limitless aid for MB and Palestinian Hamas. Thus, Qatar was the biggest donor for Mursi's Egypt and had given "sanctuary" to the MBs on its soil. As this policy had made the Saudi government irritated, the response from Saudi Arabia to Qatar was very quick and harsh: in 2014, the Saudi, Bahraini and the UAE government accused Qatari government's pro-MB policies and decided to return their ambassadors to Qatar and it lasted for eight months (Lynch 2016).

The fourth factor is the strong presence of ISIS in Iraq and Syria, and particularly its *blitzkrieg*

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[5] Soon after the ouster of Mursi, Saudi Arabia announced the aid to the Egyptian interim government worth 5 billion US dollar and has been the most generous donator to Egypt so far. In April 2016, Saudi and Egypt signed new MOUs worth 60 billion Saudi riyal.

attack and seizure of western Iraq. The June 2014 ISIS's declaration of independence and its seriously violent operations no wonder caused a global Islamophobia syndrome, which seemed more serious than that of the early 2000s when al-Qaeda and its offshoots were in active across the Middle East as well as other parts of the world. In short, ISIS was nothing but a global threat. However, the states under the threat of comparatively moderate Islamist presence also utilized this "crisis" to purge both the radical Islamists and the moderates and successfully got mass support for security enforcement by labeling all anti-state Islamists "terrorist" (see Osman 2016).

(2) Theoretical Explanation

The success of Saudi-led MB purge after the Arab Spring can be explained by the notion of *securitization*. Thanks to growing anti-Islamist sentiments among the Egyptian publics who were deeply disappointed with President Mursi's poor socioeconomic policy and its outcomes (*existential threats*), the Egyptian armed forces led by al-Sisi was able to expel Mursi and FJP from public sphere not with violent means but with mass support (*emergency action*), then both the Egyptian government and its allies worked together to outlaw the whole MB network across the Middle East, labelling MB as a part of the global Islamist terrorist network (*effect on interunit relations by breaking free of rules*) (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde 1998: 26).

It should be pointed out that al-Sisi also needed to maintain his strong anti-MB posture because his legitimacy mainly depended on his achievement in "salvation" of Egypt from the Islamist domination of power. Therefore, in September 2013, the Cairo Court of Urgent Matters ordered a ban of the activities of the MB and its affiliated groups or NGOs. The ruling actually ordered the dissolution of the MB, which the MB unsuccessfully appealed. The MB was deprived of its NGO status by the interim government in October 2013. After the explosion at the security headquarters in the Dakhahliya governorate in December 2013, the interim government declared the MB as a "terrorist organization." Al-Sisi stated in his inauguration speech in June 2014, "therefore uprooting terrorism and establishing security is one of the main priorities in the coming phase."[6] The FJP was also dissolved by a court order in August 2014, and the MB completely lost its legal political status and has been suppressed as a terrorist organization. It has become common among many Egyptians to regard the MB as one of the most dangerous terrorist organization, and his oppressive policy is broadly supported by the anti-Islamist sentiments in Egypt.

Apparently, growing public notion that Islamists were significant threat to stability in the Middle East and the rest of the world, and the Western strong advocacy of "new war on terror" led by US facilitated extension of the anti-MB network. In other words, the scale of the potential *audience* that could accept the securitizing agents' *speech-act* became larger and larger, as ISIS's brutal operations were being repeatedly reported throughout the world. Al-Sisi's regime strived to utilize such notion in fostering *securitization* of MB and even Islamists in general: by showing strong and aggressive posture towards them, it strived to appeal and reinforce its raison d'etre as a vanguard of the anti-Islamist

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[6] State Information Service, "Statement by President Abdel Fattah El Sisi at the ceremony marking his inauguration at Qasr el-Qubba Palace (June 8, 2014)," (http://www.sis.gov.eg/En/Templates/Articles/tmpArticles.aspx?ArtID=78278#.V2Z0LOQkphE) accessed on June 6, 2016.

alliance in international political arena and thus to avoid criticism with its authoritarian nature.

(3) MB's Reactions

Al-Sisi was elected as a new president in 2014 amid the widespread anti-Islamist sentiment in Egypt. He stressed his achievement to have rescued Egypt from the MB as the main pillar of his legitimacy, and it allows him to employ suppressive policies to protect Egypt from "terrorist organizations." As a result, his rule has become more authoritarian now and the regime suppresses not only the MB but also other political groups, such as 6 April Movement, some Tammarud members, and journalist syndicate. Furthermore, he has an incentive to strengthen his oppressive policy toward the MB because Egypt suffers from the economic recession, which has caused the decrease of foreign currency reserves and high inflation, and needs more economic aid from the anti MB alliance members, especially Saudi Arabia. Today Egypt is one of the core members in the alliance[7]. On the other hand, the EMB assigns the highest priority to survive the oppression by maintaining its social activities, which have formed the strong constituency in Egyptian society, and shuns most political activities.

In Jordan, a local MB group which is called as Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood (JMB) has enjoyed its legal status over seven decades thanks to the historically conservative nature of the Hashemite monarchs. For JMB, the sudden fall of the EMB government in 2013 was a great loss. The JMB leaders occasionally condemned the 2013 counter-coup and showed their unchanged support for the ousted Mursi Administration (Yokota, Suechika, and Kikkawa 2015: 68).[8] However, the circumstances surrounding JMB got worsen. In addition to the formation of a strong anti-EMB alliance including Jordanian government and a growing anti-radical Islamism public opinion since the early 2015, JMB's failed attempt to lead the Arab Spring in Jordan between 2011 and 2013 also forced the JMB leaders to develop a passive attitude on international MB movement.[9] The Saudi led anti MB alliance has produced a side effect on the MB's international network. Although the existence of the network has long been discussed and even questioned (Milton-Edwards 2015: 165), most of the MB members did not deny the cross-border individual or ideological cooperation. However, after the emergence of the alliance, the ties have weakened gradually. In February 2016, the JMB cut ties with the EMB and turned to emphasize domestic issues.[10]

4. Conclusion

To sum up, the radical structural change brought by the Arab Spring fostered the Saudi-led anti-MB alliance, which has suffered from lack of power and legitimacy to catch attentions of anticipated *audience* in its *securitization* scheme to renew and strengthen its ties with the alliance members, Egypt

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[7] In general, security threats in the scope of the Saudi government include not only bellicose states and terrorism but also imply social forces with potential to challenge the authority, such as MB. See, Cordesman (2003).

[8] Also see the JMB's homepage (http://www.ikhwan-jor.com/Portals/Content/?info=YVdROU16RXlPU1p6YjNWeVkyVTlVM1ZpUdGblpTWjBlWEJsUFRFvSt1.ikhwan), accessed on July 7, 2013.

[9] Although the JMB leaders strongly condemned the Jordanian King Abdullah's courtesy visit to Cairo two weeks after the 2013 coups, JMB refrained from collective action such as mass gathering. For detail, see the JMB's homepage (http://www.ikhwan-jor.com/Portals/Content/?info=YVdROU16STRPU1p6YjNWeVkyVTlVMVZDVUVGSFJTWjBlWEJsUFRFvSt1.ikhwan), accessed on July 20, 2013.

[10] Haaretz (http://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/1.703577), accessed on 6 June, 2016.

in particular, leading to re-formation of the new Arab security community. Al-Sisi's Egypt perceived this as an opportunity and thus determined to utilize it for its future survival. It actually succeeded in obtaining strong legitimacy to remain in power, albeit it is de fact military junta: al-Sisi enjoyed de facto international approval to be in power as long as he was to fight radical Islamist inside and outside of Egypt. Then, the al-Sisi regime, in turn, became one of the major "securitizing agents" along with the Saudi government. Through its brutal suppressions of Islamists as well as other oppositions, al-Sisi's Egypt could consolidate its power and authority as a vanguard of the anti-Islamist network in the post-Arab Spring Middle East. In this sense, Egypt's February 2015 air strikes against ISIS in Libya should be regarded as al-Sisi's political performance so that Egypt strived to represent it as an integral part of the anti-Islamist alliance in the region.

The strong anti-MB alliance since 2013 had successfully contained the resurgence of MB in the region then both Saudi and Egyptian leaders could terminate their strongest political rival's networks in formal political spheres through securitization. However, one should not ignore the alliance's inconsistent actions in the policies of *securitization* against another political rival, Basshar al-Assad's Syria. The Saudi and GCC governments have called for ousting the existing Syrian government and supported all anti al-Assad factions in Syria including Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, and even al-Qaeda's offshoots and ISIS affiliated since the breakout of the Syrian civil war (Holliday 2012; Lister 2015). Now the alliance seems suffered from the paradoxical facts that would threaten the Saudi-led security community – stronger ISIS and the resurgent al-Assad regime, but more than anything, the changed trend of public opinion in the Arab states. If the alliance leaders foresee a lack of public consensus namely stronger anti-radical Islamism but pro-moderate Islamism opinion may spread among Arabs, then these leaders would have to deconstruct their *securitization* policy being out of touch with the *audience*.

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