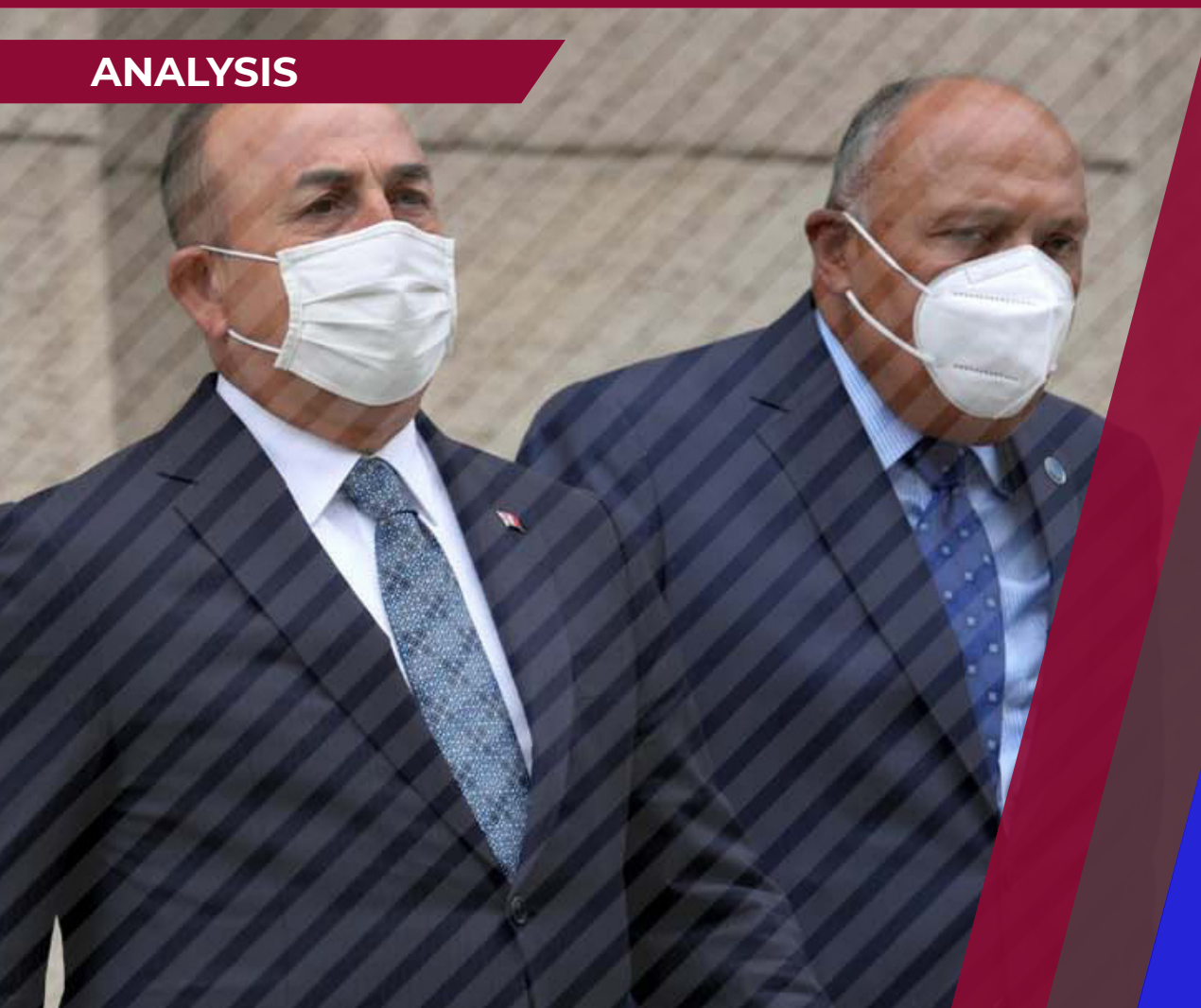


FACTORS DETERMINING EGYPTIAN POLICY TOWARDS TURKEY AFTER 2014

ANALYSIS



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للأبحاث الاستراتيجية

AL SHARQ
STRATEGIC
RESEARCH

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FACTORS DETERMINING EGYPTIAN POLICY TOWARDS TURKEY AFTER 2014

Abstract: *Egyptian-Turkish relations have been dominated by regional tension and competition over the past years. These tense relations have been critical for the entire region given the considerable regional weight of both countries. Hence, the tension in their bilateral relations has affected overall regional stability, especially in cases that affect both countries' interests, starting with the eastern Mediterranean and Libya, and even overall joint Islamic action on pivotal issues such as the Palestinian cause. However, there are currently serious steps that indicate that a positive shift in the relationship is taking shape. This essay analyzes these developments from Egypt's point of view, and explains Egyptian-Turkish relations in the context of Egyptian foreign policy since Abdel-Fattah Al-Sisi's rise to power in 2014. The essay presents an overview of Egypt's policy towards Turkey, analyzing the reasons for the years of tense relations, the current indicators of relative calm and this rapprochement's ultimate limits.*

Egyptian-Turkish relations have been dominated by regional tension and competition over the past years. These tense relations have been critical for the entire region given the considerable regional weight of both countries. Hence, the tension in their bilateral relations has affected overall regional stability, especially in cases that affect both countries' interests, starting with the eastern Mediterranean and Libya, and even overall joint Islamic action on pivotal issues such as the Palestinian cause. However, there are currently serious steps that indicate that a positive shift in the relationship is taking shape. This essay analyzes these developments from Egypt's point of view and explains Egyptian-Turkish relations in the context of Egyptian foreign policy since Abdel-Fattah Al-Sisi's rise to power in 2014. Since then, its foreign policy priorities have been to confront political Islam, maintain the status quo against the Arab uprisings, and restore Egypt's regional leadership. The essay presents an overview of Egypt's policy towards Turkey, analyzing the reasons for the years of tense relations, the current indicators of relative calm and this rapprochement's ultimate limits.

This essay argues that Egypt's foreign policy priorities directly clash with the rising Turkish role in the region, which makes geopolitical competition between Cairo and Ankara inevitable. It argues that Egypt, even in the unlikely chance it intends to, will not be able to abandon its obligations towards its anti-Turkish allies. This is due primarily to the assessment among Egypt and its allies that Turkish regional policies threaten their internal stability even more

Concerns for the regime's internal stability appear to be the fundamental determinant in how the Sisi regime perceives its relations with Turkey, exceeding in importance even the two countries' geopolitical competition

than their regional interests. In other words, concerns for the regime's internal stability appear to be the fundamental determinant in how the Sisi regime perceives its relations with Turkey, exceeding in importance even the two countries' geopolitical competition. Hence, Egypt will most likely seek to build a pragmatic working relationship with Turkey that serves tactical interests, rather than a deeper strategic partnership. Therefore, the process of building deeper Turkish-Egyptian understanding over their regional influence remains unlikely in the near term.

Opposite Sides of the Cold War

The rivalry and conflict of interests between Turkey and Egypt can be traced back to the Cold War era, when the two countries were associated with conflicting alliances. Turkey established a strategic relationship with the Western powers as represented by its membership in NATO. At the regional level, it supported the Baghdad Pact in 1955. Egypt, on the other hand, sought to lead an Arab national project based on resisting the colonial presence in the Arab region. It not only rejected the Baghdad Pact but leaned closer to the Soviet Union during this period due to its belief that the United States would not provide it with sufficient economic and military support.

In January 1954, Egypt declared the Turkish ambassador, Hulusi Fuad Tugay, a *persona non grata*.¹ It was not until January 1967 that relations were restored with Turkish Foreign Minister Ihsan Sabri Çağlayangil's visit to Cairo, when both governments agreed to exchange consular representation again through the Turkish Consulate in Alexandria and the Egyptian Consulate in Istanbul.² Even after Egyptian foreign policy turned towards a strategic partnership with the United States during the presidencies of Mohammed Anwar Sadat and Mohammed Hosni Mubarak, the relationship between the two countries did not develop to the level of partnership, perhaps except for the Egyptian role in the signing of the Adana agreement between Turkey and Syria on October 20, 1998.

During the era of the Justice and Development government in Turkey, Egyptian President Mubarak visited Ankara twice, in 2004 and 2007. The first was linked to efforts to revive peace talks in the Palestinian territories and developments in Iraq.³ Nevertheless, the

Turkish support for the movement of change was interpreted as an attempt by Ankara to extend its influence over the new Arab governments through its Islamist allies

second visit was more important in advancing bilateral relations, as it witnessed the signing of a framework for Turkish-Egyptian strategic dialogue. The first round of the strategic dialogue was held in September 2008. However, Egypt did not abandon its caution, and therefore, the relationship did not economically and politically develop to the level of partnership.⁴

With the January 2011 revolution, then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan was one of the few politicians in the world who implicitly called on the Egyptian president to step down on February 1, 2011,⁵ a position that put Turkey on the side of supporting the revolutions. This position was further confirmed when then Turkish president Abdullah Gul became the first president to visit Cairo on March 3, 2011, a few weeks after the Mubarak regime's overthrow. Erdogan also made two visits to Cairo, the first during the era of the Military Council on September 12, 2011, and the second during the era of the late President Mohamed Morsi on November 17. On both visits, Erdogan was accompanied by a large delegation of Turkish government officials and business elites, indicating Ankara's seriousness in developing its relationship with Cairo. The second visit resulted in the signing of 27 agreements, cooperation protocols, and memoranda of understanding in various fields, including trade, investment, infrastructure, transportation, and health, and providing a loan of one billion dollars to the Central Bank of Egypt.⁶

However, Egyptian state institutions interpreted this Turkish enthusiasm negatively. These institutions did not adopt a positive view of the wave of revolutions and considered them as a threat to the state's stability and possible foreign agendas. Given that the Egyptian regime blamed Islamists as the main culprit in causing this chaos, it was not surprising that Turkish support for the movement of change was interpreted as an attempt by Ankara to extend its influence over the new Arab governments through its Islamist allies.⁷

Egypt Foreign Policy Doctrine Since 2014

In order to explain Egypt's perception of relations with Turkey, it is essential to clarify the factors determining current Egyptian foreign policy. Sisi's regime seeks to establish his foreign policy based on three principles: a commitment to combating political Islam, defending the status quo and respecting the principle of sovereignty, and stimulating nationalism to restore Egypt's independent regional role.⁸

First: Fighting Political Islam

Confronting the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) is the Sisi regime's primary concern at both domestic and regional levels. The Egyptian state views the Brotherhood as the regime's main competitor both domestically and regionally and therefore works to weaken the chances of Islamic parties in the region, especially in Libya, Tunisia, Syria, Yemen, and Palestine, considering them to be all one trans-national network. This commitment is one of the main components of the alliance between Cairo and several regional actors, especially Saudi Arabia, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and international parties such as France and right-wing lobbying groups in Europe and the United States.⁹ In this regard, this commitment to fighting Islamism has become one of the primary elements for external support of the Egyptian regime.

Second: Defending the Status Quo

Egypt emerges as one of the most prominent regional players upholding the status quo.¹⁰ This can be seen from the clear divergence between it and Saudi Arabia regarding the escalation of regional confrontation with Iran, the Yemen war, and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's attempt to force Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri to resign in November 2017. Nevertheless, Egypt's defense of the principle of state sovereignty stems from its desire to impose stability on the region and confront the movement of change that has threatened Arab regimes since the Tunisian revolution. Cairo believes that defending the logic of the state and its borders is the only way to confront revolutions that, from the Egyptian regime's point of view, cannot continue without external interventions that support change or exert pressure on existing regimes.

Moreover, this doctrine has an internal dimension linked to the prospects for renewed protests in Egypt and the international criticism of the Egyptian government's repression of civil society and political opposition. As Lynch states, the Arab regimes, "For all their bravado they are terrified of another outbreak of popular protests."¹¹ However, it is essential to note that adherence to this principle becomes less important if it conflicts with the counter-revolutionary coalition's obsession with confronting Islamists. This was evident

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in the decision to blockade Qatar and perhaps even invade it militarily.¹² It also appeared in the policy of militarily supporting the Libyan general Khalifa Haftar and undermining the internationally recognized Government of National Accord.

Indeed, Egypt's commitment to regional stability has occasionally caused tensions in its alliance with Riyadh. Saudi Arabia viewed Sisi as abandoning it in its vital struggle against Iran, especially when Egypt supported the 2015 nuclear agreement, and firmly rejected the idea of undermining the Iranian regime, which it thought would cause more instability in the region. Moreover, Egypt adopted an anti-Saudi agenda in Syria when Saudi Arabia supported the efforts to overthrow Bashar al-Assad's regime in the revolution's early years. In addition, Sisi unreservedly offered support to the Nuri al-Maliki government in Iraq after Mosul's fall to the Islamic State, whereas Saudi Arabia completely ignored al-Maliki for being a reliable ally of Iran¹³.

Third: Stirring up National Spirit to Restore Egypt's Regional Leadership

Propaganda over Egypt's historical role is a traditional part of Egypt's political discourse, even during the fading years of Mubarak's rule. There is a strong public imagination of Egypt's centrality in the region. Hence, both the ruling elites and the general public expect the country to strive to lead the region. Nonetheless, this view ignores the major shift in the balance of Arab power after the rise of the Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia, due to their oil wealth and strategic alliance with the United States. It also ignores the rising influence of other regional powers, such as Turkey, Iran, and Israel, based on economic and military infrastructures that are significantly superior to Egypt's.

In general, Egypt's status as a regional power remains debatable. After achieving internal stability, regardless of how it was achieved,¹⁴ some argue that Cairo can restore its historical role as a middle power.¹⁵ This vision is based on Egypt's strategic location, demographic weight, and recent history as a historical leader of joint Arab action. Egypt also has the largest Arab military force and an experienced diplomatic corps. In addition, Egypt has succeeded in balancing its relations with major powers, as it receives annually more than one billion dollars of US military aid¹⁶, while also buying Russian military equipment and

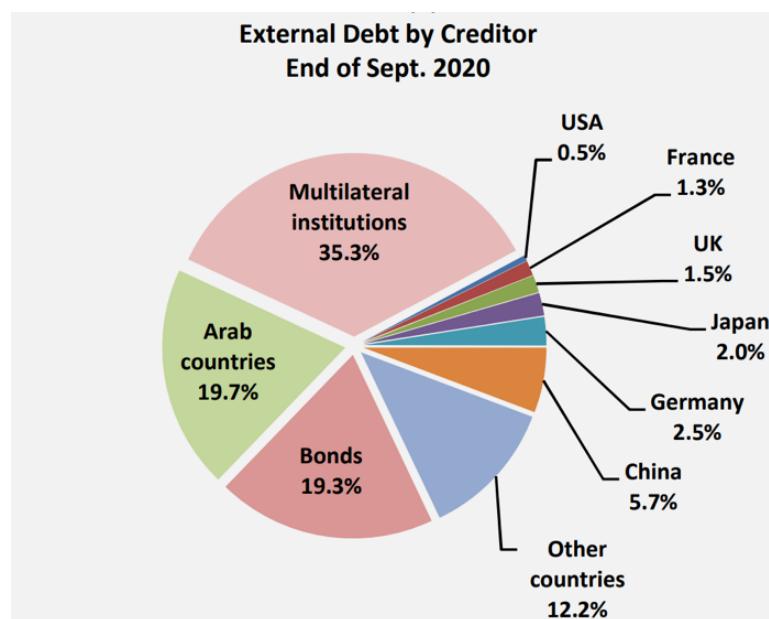
Even those who believe Egypt can restore some of its regional power do not expect Egypt to soon compensate for nearly four decades of declining regional influence

working with it to develop a peaceful nuclear energy program.¹⁷ China is also pumping large investment funds into Egypt after becoming its first trading partner to ensure easy access to the Red Sea and the Suez Canal as part of its Belt and Road Initiative.¹⁸

However, other estimates suggest that Egypt's position will remain stagnant for the foreseeable future as it is unlikely to overcome its fragile financial position¹⁹ or succeed in improving its domestic political economy, which limits its ability to exert power beyond its borders. Therefore, even those who believe Egypt can restore some of its regional power do not expect Egypt to soon compensate for nearly four decades of declining regional influence.²⁰ The case of Ethiopia's Great Renaissance Dam appears to reveal Egypt's weak influence in an issue as crucial for it as the Nile.²¹ Furthermore, Egypt is still too financially dependent on its allies in the Gulf Cooperation Council. In addition to fuel supplies and direct financial investments, long-term deposits with the Central Bank of Egypt amount to \$5.5 billion from Saudi Arabia, \$5.7 billion from the UAE, and \$4 billion from Kuwait. With a total of 15.2 billion dollars from the three countries, this represents 37% of the country's total cash reserve of 40.3 billion dollars in March 2021. Additionally, 19.4% of Egypt total foreign debts of 125.3 billion dollars are debts to these three countries worth 24.3 billion dollars, according to the the Central Bank of Egypt (CBE).

Figure 1

Egypt's external debt by creditor, end of Sep. 2020



Source: Central Bank of Egypt, March 2021.

*What makes Egypt's position as
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The Egyptian decision to succumb to Gulf pressures was severely evident in Egypt's handing over to Saudi Arabia of the strategic islands of Tiran and Sanafir in the Red Sea. Despite the wide opposition inside the country, Sisi decided to relinquish the two islands in exchange for continued Saudi financial support,²² a decision that even pro-Sisi Egyptian army leaders were not enthusiastic about and advised him against due to it being an affront to national dignity.²³

However, Egyptian domestic politics remains influential in the rest of the Arab world. This was evident when the rise and fall of Islamists in Egypt determined the region's character. Cairo has also demonstrated its ability to adopt a foreign policy independent of Saudi Arabia on several regional issues. In addition, Egypt refused to send a representative to the Islamic Military Coalition to Combat Terrorism led by Saudi Arabia.²⁴ It is important to note here the comment of a senior Egyptian official regarding Egypt's refusal to participate in the Yemen war: "We're Egypt—you cannot call us at three o'clock in the morning and expect us to go to war in the morning."²⁵ This comment clarifies Egypt's refusal to formulate its relationship with Saudi Arabia according to a logic of dependency. In other words, Cairo seeks to formulate its relations with its allies not according to a principle in which Cairo does not enjoy independence in forming its regional policy, but according to a principle of cooperation whereby the countries realistically deal with differences, rather than eliminate them.

While it may be difficult to determine specific preconditions by which a country can be classified as a regional power, there are general requirements: First, the state should be present within the region's geographical boundaries. Second, it should be able to stand up on its own against any alliance of other countries in the region. Third, it should have significant influence on regional affairs.²⁶ The political ambitions of the country's leadership play a crucial role in the country's regional stance. In Egypt's case, the role of political ambitions is apparent when comparing Nasser's Egypt's with Mubarak's Egypt.²⁷ Obviously, what makes Egypt's position as a regional power debatable is its inability to act regionally on its own. Therefore, Egypt constantly needs to work through a network of alliances to compensate for its economic and military weaknesses.

The Roots of Egypt's Mistrust of Turkish Regional Policy

From the Egyptian perspective, the aforementioned three commitments concretely clash the growing Turkish role in the region. This collision is not only caused by ideological

considerations and geopolitical factors, but also has a personal aspect that cannot be ignored, especially in the case of a regime highly centralized around the figure of Sisi. Egypt's apprehensions can be summarized as follows:

First: The Turkish model represents a disruption to the effort to confront political Islam. Not only because Turkey considers the Brotherhood a political current rather than a terrorist movement, but mainly because of the prevailing impression in Egypt among both state elite and Islamists that Turkey represents a remarkably successful regional model for parties with an Islamic reference. This impression remains relevant regardless of the nationalist nature of the current coalition ruling Turkey and the fact that the Justice and Development party (AKP) defines itself not as an Islamist party, but a conservative democratic party. From Egypt and its allies' point of view, Turkey has become a model that heralds the possibility of harmonizing Islam, democracy, and the modern state.²⁸ Hence, the Turkish experience has become a constant reminder to the Egyptian regime that its internal alternative, the Muslim Brotherhood, is a viable project. Therefore, it is no exaggeration to state that Sisi sees Turkish President Erdogan as personally embodying the threat of his Islamist political opponents.²⁹ Despite the secular nature of Turkey's political system, the Egyptian state does not view AKP any differently than any Islamic party in the Arab world. Indeed, during the trial of the "great intelligence case" against the late President Mohamed Morsi and Brotherhood leaders, the Egyptian security services investigations blamed Turkey for playing a role in supporting the MB's international activities and playing a mediating role between it and Western governments during the January revolution.³⁰

Second: Cairo's commitment to defending the status quo and the traditional Arab system conflicted with Turkey's approach of supporting the movements for change. Indeed, while Turkey did not instigate any of the Arab revolutions, it was one of the first voices to support the demands for change.³¹ Later, it became clear that most of the new post-revolution Arab powers adopted positive relations with Turkey, which strengthened its position as a supporter of change. Therefore, Egypt is working to confront the Turkish role by exporting itself as a defender of the Arab system and Arabism against the "Turkish hegemony."³²

Third: Egypt's quest to restore its regional position requires it to defend its existing influence and work to restore the influence lost over the years. This goal collides with the growing Turkish role in the region, especially in Egypt's traditional sphere of influence: the Gulf region, the Horn of Africa, Syria, Libya, Sudan, and the Palestinian cause. In general, Cairo views any growth of Turkish influence in the region as a loss of Egyptian

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influence. Thus, geopolitical competition has become inevitable between the two major Islamic centers of Cairo and Ankara. This rivalry derives its justification not only from their differences, but more importantly from the similarities of how each side defines itself and its role in the region.³³ Therefore, the Egyptian-Turkish rivalry has dominated the region's politics to an extent rivaled only by the Saudi-Iranian hostility.³⁴

Although geopolitical rivalry in the Middle East also includes Egypt and Saudi Arabia, one can argue that the deep intertwining of interests between Riyadh and Cairo and their regional dependence has mitigated this rivalry. On the other hand, until now tensions between Turkey and Egypt have only further intensified. Moreover, Gause shows that the region's leaders prioritize establishing a counterbalance to states hostile against their regimes and threatening their internal stability, regardless of strength or geographical distance.³⁵ This makes Egypt prioritize confronting Turkey, while neither Egyptian nor Saudi regimes threaten the other. On the contrary, both support the strengthening of the other's authority locally, which eases the regional competition between the two. That is, the fear of threatening internal stability takes priority in determining foreign policy directions, even at the expense of the country's traditional national security considerations.³⁶

Egyptian-Turkish Relations During Sisi's Era

The Turkish government took a firm stand against the military coup in Egypt on July 3, 2013, to the extent that Turkey asked the UN Security Council to impose sanctions on the Sisi regime in August following the Rabaa massacre.³⁷ The military regime in Egypt did not ignore the Turkish reaction, and accordingly, the Turkish ambassador was expelled from Cairo, and the level of relations was reduced to the level of Chargé d'Affairs since November 23, 2013. Later, the relationship between the two turned into a cold war in which both countries took opposing sides on all regional issues, whether in Syria, Libya, and the siege of Qatar, or their competing for influence in the eastern Mediterranean and Palestinian issues. However, in recent months, relations have witnessed a remarkable development that heralds the possibility of building understandings that were not expected until recently.

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Cold War indicators

The most prominent Egyptian anti-Turkey moves can be summarized as follows¹:

First, Egypt worked to exclude Turkey from the Small Group on Syria, whose members are Germany, Jordan, France, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, United Kingdom, and the United States. It also called for restricting the group's funding of Turkey's projects to resettle Syrian refugees in northern Syria. On the political side, Egypt provides full support to The Syrian High Negotiations Committee, which it promotes alongside the National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change and the Moscow Group. In return, it works with Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, and Jordan to marginalize the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, which they consider as being supported by Turkey.

Second, following Turkey's gas discoveries in the eastern Mediterranean, Egypt helped to establish the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum, which was officially established in 2019, with Cairo hosting its permanent headquarters. The Forum's membership includes Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, Israel, Greece, Cyprus, and Italy, whereas Turkey was deliberately excluded to isolate it.

Third, Egypt has obstructed the European Union's efforts during the past year to hold a summit on the eastern Mediterranean, aiming to reduce tensions with Turkey. Cairo considered that holding such a summit with Turkey's participation without any change in its policy would be akin to rewarding Ankara. In contrast, Egypt has insisted on continuing the policy of isolating Turkey.

Fourth, Egypt rejects the two agreements signed between the Libyan Government of National Accord and Turkey, putting pressure on the Libyan parties to cancel them. Cairo exerted intense pressure on the delegation of eastern Libyan forces at the Political Dialogue Forum's meeting in Tunis to refuse a clause that prevents the preliminary stage government (currently the Dbeibeh's government) from canceling any previous

¹- I was informed some of the following details by an Egyptian diplomatic source, 2021 March, on the condition of anonymity.

On March 4, 2021, the last ministerial meeting renewed condemnation of Turkish interventions, despite the meeting being chaired by Qatar

external agreements. However, this clause was approved, which implies the continuation of agreements with Turkey. After adopting this article, the eastern Libyan delegation was subjected to a sharp reprimand by the official in charge of the Libyan issue in the Egyptian Foreign Ministry, Ambassador Muhammad Abu Bakr.

Fifth, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates exercised pressure in the Arab League to put “Turkish interference in the internal affairs of Arab countries” as a permanent topic on the agenda of the ministerial council meetings. Moreover, since September 2019, a committee to follow Turkish interventions has been headed by Egypt and includes Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, Bahrain, and Iraq. Also, the closing statement of ministerial meetings regularly condemn “Turkish interference,” despite the reservations of countries such as Qatar, Somalia, Libya, and Djibouti. Indeed, on March 4, 2021, the last ministerial meeting renewed condemnation of Turkish interventions, despite the meeting being chaired by Qatar, which reflects Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE’s efforts for mobilization against Turkey.

Sixth, Egypt has worked to form an Arab security alliance whose mission is to counter the rising Turkish influence in the region. In early February 2020, Sisi inaugurated the Arab Intelligence Forum with the intelligence chiefs of most Arab countries. Cairo hosts the Forum, which aims at ‘restoring stability in all the region’s countries.’ Later, General Abbas Kamel, the head of the Egyptian Intelligence, visited Sudan, Eastern Libya, Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco to convince them to sign a security agreement to counter Turkish influence.³⁸

Seventh, using its warm relations with Israel, Egypt is working to ensure that any political normalization between Ankara and Tel Aviv will not allow Turkey to play any role in the Palestinian issue, something which threatens Egyptian influence.³⁹ It also exerts pressure on both the Palestinian Authority and Hamas to marginalize any Turkish role in mediating between them or in the Palestinian issue in general.

Signs of Normalization

The Libyan conflict witnessed the climax of the crisis in Egyptian-Turkish relations when Al-Sisi announced on June 20, 2020, that the advance of the Turkish-backed Government of National Accord forces towards Sirte-Jufra represented a “red line” for Egypt. Regardless of the serious

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threat of Egyptian military intervention, both sides decided to avoid a confrontation. This prompted them to start communications through a security channel, which later developed to represent a continuous communication channel to deal with their troubled relations. There have been several more indicators of a positive development in relations between Ankara and Cairo:

First: Economic Progress

In 2018 and 2019, the trade exchange between the two countries raised by more than 5.2 billion dollars, a level that exceeded even the peak of trade exchange recorded in 2012 at the beginning of the presidency of the late Mohamed Morsi, which amounted to approximately 5 billion dollars, as Table (1) shows. Even during 2020, when Egyptian and Turkish exports suffered due to the Coronavirus pandemic, Turkey became the fifth-largest supplier to Egypt with 5% of Egypt's total non-oil imports as shown in Table (2). Turkey was also the third-largest destination for Egyptian non-oil exports, with a share of 6%. This recovery in trade balance is taking place despite the suspension of all meetings of the bilateral cooperation mechanisms between the two countries since the military coup: the Joint Committee, the High-level Trade Negotiations Committee, the Business Forum, and the Business Council.

However, business groups in the two countries have maintained their relations. Also, Turkish investments in Egypt, amounting to about \$2.5 billion, maintained their level without damage, especially as they provide about 60,000 job opportunities.⁴⁰ Egyptian and Turkish business groups are pressing for the renewal of the free trade agreement that has been in effect since March 2007 and expired at the end of 2020.⁴¹ However, renewing the agreement is still ambiguous and subject to political bidding within the Egyptian parliament and media.⁴²

Table 1

Egypt-Turkey trade balance 2010-2020

Year	Turkey's Exp.	Egypt's Exp.	Total Trade Balance (b\$)
2010	1.900	1.000	2.900
2011	2.600	1.500	4.100
2012	3.490	1.570	5.060
2013	2.626	1.746	4.348
2014	3.301	1.437	4.738
2015	3.129	1.216	4.345
2016	2.733	1.443	4.177
2017	2.360	2.07	4.430
2018	3.055	2.190	5.245
2019	3.500	1.748	5.248
2020	3.100	1.662	4.700

Source: 2010-2011: Egyptian Ministry of Industry and Foreign Trade. 2012-2013: WITS. 2014 to 2018: Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, & Turkish Ministry of Trade. 2019-2020: Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics in Egypt (governmental).

Table 2

Egypt's top trade partners in 2020

Top Five Suppliers to Egypt 2020 (41% of Egypt's total non-oil Imports)		Top Five Egypt's Exports Destinations 2020 (35% of Egypt's total non-oil Exports)	
Country	Share	Country	Share
China	18%	United Arab Emirates	11%
United States	7%	Saudi Arabia	7%
Germany	6%	Turkey	6%
Italy	5%	United States	6%
Turkey	5%	Italy	5%

Source: The Egyptian Cabinet: Information and Decision Support Center (IDSC), January 2021

Second: Reduced Tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean

The maritime delimitation agreement between Egypt and Greece, signed on August 6, 2020, avoided demarcating the entire Egypt-Greek border and contented itself with the partial demarcation between the 26th and 28th longitudes. Egypt preferred not to expand the maritime borders in the agreement east of the coast of Rhodes, including the Kastellorizo Island. Article 1(e) of the agreement provided that any subsequent demarcation beyond the limits provided for in the Convention (east of longitude 28 or southwest of Crete) would be

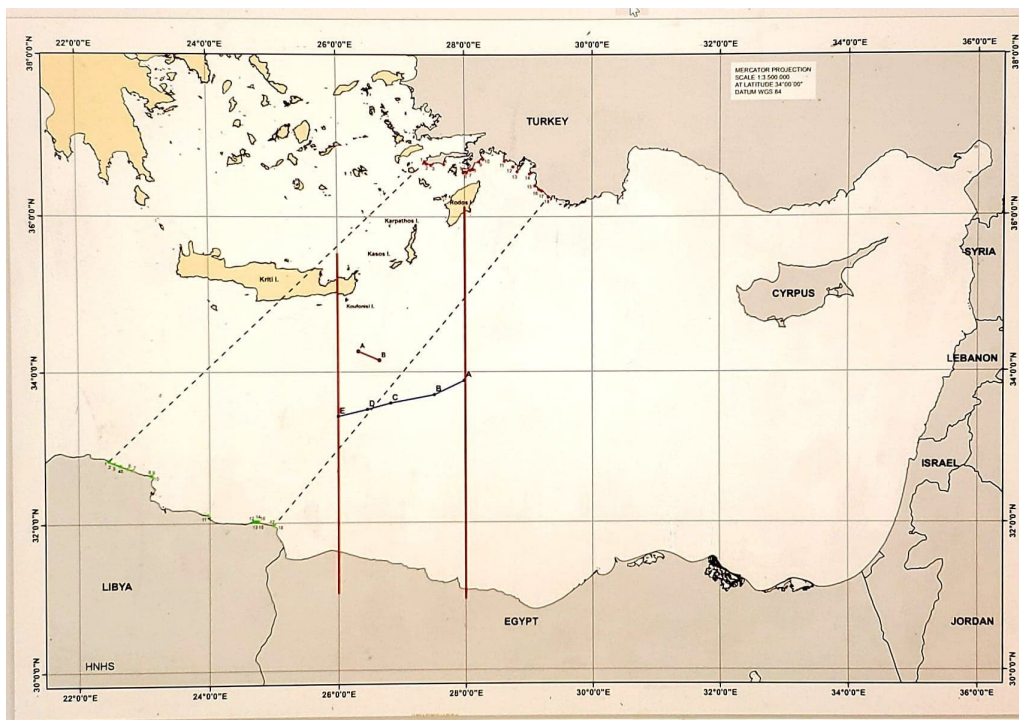
The Egyptian Ministry of Petroleum and Mineral Resources avoided any areas of dispute with Turkey when it announced last February the first global bid for oil and gas exploration

completed “in consultation with the neighboring States concerned”.⁴³ No doubt, this means that Egypt remains interested in a maritime agreement with Turkey. Although the agreement recognizes the islands’ rights to their continental shelf by initiating the delimitation of maritime boundaries from the two largest islands of Crete and Rhodes, its partial character is a clear message of Egypt’s unwillingness to become embroiled in the complex dispute between Greece and Turkey.⁴⁴

In addition, the Egyptian Ministry of Petroleum and Mineral Resources avoided any areas of dispute with Turkey when it announced last February the first global bid for oil and gas exploration in 24 regions, including nine regions in the Mediterranean, 12 regions in the Western Desert, and three areas in the Gulf of Suez. Although this represents only a direct implementation of the Egyptian-Greek agreement, Turkey regarded this as a positive step and deemed Egypt’s “respect as important.”⁴⁵

Figure 2

The maritime delimitation dispute in the East Mediterranean



Note. The maritime delimitation agreement between Egypt and Greece (Blue line: ABCDE) according to the two countries’ agreement in August 2020. While the red line (AB) represents the maritime delimitation deal between Turkey and the Libyan National Accord Government in 2019. Source: Stambolis, 2020; The Press Project, 2020.

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Third: Agreements over Libya

Although Turkish influence in Libya will remain unwelcome in Egypt, restoring the political track and forming a unified government to hold elections is a result of Egyptian-Turkish agreement. The two countries tested the results of avoiding conflict in Libya, and during the past months, progress has been made in the political process that has spared the country from further conflict. Remarkably, the new Libyan government enjoys a good relationship and support from both Cairo and Ankara, an outcome that could not have been expected without prior agreement between the two. Nonetheless, this understanding is still temporary and subject to tests considering the Egyptian rejection of the Government of National Accord's agreements with Turkey. This is a sign of the regional benefits that can be achieved with Egyptian-Turkish agreement.

Fourth: De-escalating Media Discourse and Discussion of Outstanding Issues

The mutual media truce represents the most prominent sign of the positive course of bilateral relations and the outcome of continuous contacts since the fall of last year. The progress is not limited to the de-escalation in media discourse. The two governments have also agreed on practical steps through the formation of specialized security, economic and political committees to discuss the outstanding issues that concern each party.⁴⁶ In addition to the start of the officially announced meetings, a high-ranking Turkish delegation held talks in Cairo on May 6, for the first time since the deterioration of relations in 2013. Although the joint statement at the end of the round of talks held in Cairo was brief, it left the door open for "next steps" that may be agreed upon.⁴⁷

Conclusion

Egyptian policy towards Turkey can be explained by considering the domestic factors related to the Egyptian regime's security. In addition to Egypt's foreign policy priorities, President Sisi's trepidations that Turkey is targeting his legitimacy has caused a further crisis in bilateral relations. The Egyptian regime still fears and feels threatened by the Arab uprisings and the recurrence of protests. Therefore, the main factor in determining the future of the relationship between Egypt and Turkey is not agreements over the sharing of geopolitical influence, but mainly to what extent the Egyptian regime is convinced that its internal stability will not be threatened by normalization with Turkey. This explains why Egypt aims

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to place restrictions on the Egyptian opposition's activities in Turkey, especially its media institutions. This may be a higher priority due to its domestic struggles. Therefore, Egypt seeks an agreement with Turkey that prohibits either government from allowing opposition activities to the other government from its territories.

Additionally, Egypt aims to weaken the popularity that Erdogan has achieved in recent years in the Arab World, which has resulted from several factors.⁴⁸ Rejecting the coup in Egypt, denouncing the Rabaa massacre, and hosting many of the persecuted Arab opponents in their countries, are among the factors that have increased Erdogan's popularity. Therefore, Egypt will portray this rapprochement as Turkey's recognition of the validity of the Egyptian position and Turkey's abandonment of its previous stances.

Moreover, Egypt pragmatically believes that it has the right to diversify its political alternatives for two reasons. First, Turkish influence is inevitable in Libya, the Eastern Mediterranean, and other regional issues. Secondly, Egypt's allies may reach separate understandings with Turkey, such as Saudi Arabia's reconciliation with Qatar. Nevertheless, these interests do not mean that the geopolitical calculations have changed. Cairo still seeks to assert its regional role as a leader of Arab action and a defender of its regional system. It overcomes its current weaknesses by strengthening its alliances with a diverse network of regional actors that converge with it on the basis of specific shared interests. It is not surprising that countering Turkish influence is one of the most important priorities. Therefore, it is not likely that Egypt will abandon its obligations towards any of these alliances as they relate to its foreign policy priorities. Also, its economic dependence on Saudi Arabia and the UAE puts some restrictions on its political options, and means it is still unable to act alone in regional affairs.

The conclusion is that any common understandings between Egypt and Turkey do not imply a strategic shift in Egypt's view toward Turkey. Thus, they are most likely tactical, stemming from pragmatic calculations, and do form a prelude to Egypt abandoning its traditional allies.

Endnotes

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