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EGYPTIAN INSTITUTE FOR STUDIES

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Khaled Fouad



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[f](#) Eipss.EG [t](#) Eis_EG

TURKEY- ISTANBUL

Bahçelievler, Yenibosna Mh 29 Ekim Cad. No: 7 A2 Blok 3. Plaza D: 64
Tel/Fax: +90 212 227 2262 E-Mail: info@eis-eg.org



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Introduction

The remarkably growing relations between Egypt and Russia over the last few years prompts us to pause a little and think deeply to understand the nature of this development at the political, military and economic levels. This paper attempts to examine the motives of the Egyptian-Russian ties after the July 3 coup (2013) to determine whether the relations between the two sides can be considered a "strategic alliance", and explore the implications of this rapprochement on the relations between Egypt and the United States.

There are several determinants that we should address in more detail to establish a significant approach for understanding the nature and dimensions of Egyptian-Russian relations in the current period. We will also shed more light on the Russian foreign policy towards the Middle East and attempt to understand the Russian position on the Arab Spring revolutions.

Russian Policy in the Middle East

The geographical dimension is the most prominent dimension of the Russian foreign policy towards the Middle East, where it is possible to understand the strategic and geopolitical importance of the region to Russia. We can realize how important the Middle East is to Russia, we should put into consideration the frozen Russian coasts throughout the year. There is a persistent Russian pursuit of maintaining an effective presence in the East Middle region to ensure access to warm water across the Arabian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea.

There are two main dimensions that can help us understand the relentless Russian action in the region from the east to the west:

First: This dimension is related to the Russian insistence on the need to reshape the balance of world powers, and accordingly crowding out the United States in the Middle East region, especially as the U.S. policy towards the region under Barack Obama witnessed a U.S. withdrawal in many files, according to many political analysts, which gave Russia a chance to fill the American vacuum in the Middle East. Russia's vision on the Middle East has clearly reflected in involvement in the Syrian crisis and in its pursuit of deepening the political, military and economic relations with three key states in the region, namely: Egypt, Turkey and Iran.

Second: This dimension is linked to the economic interests of Russia in the Middle East. In addition to the geostrategic dimension of Russia's relations with the countries of the region, the economic dimension is considered a priority by the Russian side. The size of Russian arms deals with various countries in the region indicates the enormous financial resources that Russia gains through its presence in the Middle East - as one of the major arms suppliers – as well as the influence it achieves through these deals, including the imposition of its political vision in the region. In addition, Russia also exports nuclear technology to the Middle East through the construction of nuclear power plants, such as the contracts it signed with Egypt and Turkey in this regard.

There is another influential factor that cannot be overlooked in the Russian view of the Middle East, and can provide a deeper explanation of the development of relations between Russia and the countries of the region, namely, Russia's relations with Europe in the last few years, which almost coincided with the Arab Spring revolutions. The Russian intervention in Ukraine and later its occupation of the Crimean Peninsula in March 2014 strained the relations between Russia and the European Union and led to imposition of a package of sanctions on the Russian government. This, of course,

reflected on the goals and dimensions of Russia's policy in the Middle East, and established one of the significant motives behind the Russian intervention in the flaming crises in the region for achieving several goals, most notably:

- The incursion into the eastern and southern Mediterranean waters to cordon off Europe from the south
- The re-positioning of Russia in the Middle East for intersection with European interests and negotiating on lifting the sanctions imposed on Russia, away from the file of eastern Ukraine.

Understanding the Russian position on the Arab Spring revolutions

The Russian belief that the stability of the Middle East affects directly the stability of the areas adjacent to the southeastern border of Russia and consequently the stability within Russia is behind Russia's rejection of any changes that could affect the stability of the region in accordance with its view. In addition, Russia also believes that the United States wanted to bring about new changes in the Middle East region, in coincidence with the Arab Spring revolutions, to maintain its interests and influence in the region, which prompted the Russian Federation to pay close attention to rivalry with the United States on influence and control in the Middle East. Moreover, Russia is aware that the stage of liquidity, that the region has experienced, is characterized by rapid and sudden changes and can lead to redrawing the map of powers and alliances in the region, which requires Russia's presence for playing an active and prominent role in this regard. Furthermore, Russia still has a strong opportunity to achieve more gains through exploitation of the U.S. administration's decision of recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Accordingly, Moscow can further deepen its roots in the region through the Palestinian cause by playing a role that seems neutral and different from the apparent U.S. bias toward Israel.

This Russian vision on the Middle East and the U.S. presence in the region constitutes the general framework that was behind abstention from commenting on the Arab Spring during the early stage of revolutions. Although at the beginning, Russia did not rush to express its stance, but later, it adhered to providing support to the regimes that the peoples of the region rose up against. Seven years after the outbreak of the Arab Spring revolutions, Russia seems to be the greatest winner during that period, as it is now obvious that Moscow has become a major player in the Syrian crisis. Moreover, the apparent Russian support for retired Maj. General Khalifa Haftar, the commander of the so-called Libyan National Army, shows Russia's desire to become a major player in the Libyan crisis. Also, Russia has remarkably developed its relations with Egypt, which is the subject of this study.

In addition, Russian gas pipelines can help us better understand the Russian position on the Arab Spring revolutions. Russia controls the European gas market through pipelines that extend from its territory to Europe via Turkey; and accordingly any competition in this regard is considered a threat to one of the most important economic and strategic cards possessed by Russia.

What does Russia want from Egypt?

By shedding light on the Russian policy in the Middle East and trying to understand the Russian position on the Arab Spring revolutions, we can touch on the general lines in Egyptian-Russian relations and define the interests Russia seeks to achieve through its relations with Egypt.

Regional pillars

Egypt, the strategic ally of the United States, is one of the main pillars in the Middle East that Russia seeks to develop relations with: politically, militarily and economically

– alongside Turkey and Iran – in order to regain its status and strength in the region that it lost after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late eighties of the last century and the end the Cold War. Therefore, Moscow sought to re-position its presence in the Middle East, especially with the traditional regional powers of Egypt, Turkey and Iran to increase its influence in the region and create an active and influential role for rivalry with the U.S. role in the region.

Incursion into the Mediterranean waters

In the light of the tense Russian-European relations which motivated Russia to expand in the Mediterranean waters from the east to the southern coasts through Egypt and Libya - to cordon off Europe from the south - the Russian desire appeared serious in penetrating the waters of the Mediterranean. The Egyptian government's rejection of a Russian demand to establish an air base on the Mediterranean Sea coasts, western Egypt, did not hinder its attempts to maintain its presence, albeit indirectly, through an agreement between the two sides allowing Russian military aircraft to use the Egyptian airspace and air bases. The agreement gave Russia a greater presence in Egypt than that limited presence it enjoyed before 1973. The draft agreement also grants Egypt reciprocal rights in the use of Russian airspace or air bases. However, it is not clear whether Egypt can benefit from using the Russian airspace and air bases. Closer to reality, the Egyptian government might have received pledges from Moscow to resume Russian flights to Egypt and to start construction of the nuclear power plant in the Dabaa area.

However, there are some unconfirmed signs that the Egyptian regime has made these arrangements to facilitate Russia's intervention upon the regime's request – such as what happened in Syria – in case of being exposed to a threat of popular uprising or



public rebellion, which is one of the alternatives that do not rule out a likely internationalization of the crisis of governance in Egypt for the benefit of Russian ally. Russian insistence on maintaining presence in the east and south of the Mediterranean increases the likelihood of a Russian military intervention in Libya for supporting retired Maj. General Khalifa Haftar in eastern Libya, or at least to use the Egyptian territories for providing Russian military aid to Haftar. Anyway, it seems that the Egyptian role will be the backyard for Russian intervention in Libya, and will accordingly lead to further Russian incursion into the southern Mediterranean.

Economic gains

A quick look at the declared figures of deals between the Egyptian and Russian sides is sufficient to show the size of investments and economic gains that Russia gets through these deals. The value of Russian arms deal signed in late 2014, whereby the Egyptian side will receive a number of warplanes, helicopters and missiles, was 3.5 billion dollars. On the other hand, the Russian side will grant Egypt a loan of 25 billion dollars for financing the construction and operation of the nuclear plant. The loan time span is 22 years with an annual interest rate of 3 % while the investments planned by Russia in the industrial zone east of the Suez Canal amounts to 4.6 billion dollars, and will serve as a platform for Russia to access the African and Middle East markets. In addition, Russia is looking forward to cooperation on the natural gas projects with the Egyptian side in pursuit of tightening its grip on the natural gas market in Europe. It is noteworthy that Russia is aware that Egypt will become one of the largest suppliers of natural gas in the near future, which prompted Russia in late 2016 to buy 30% of Eni stake in Zohr gas field through Russian "Rosneft", which will become party to the project for developing the largest gas field in the Mediterranean.

What does Egypt want from Russia?

After the coup d'état on July 3, the Egyptian regime realized that finding alternatives and creating a map of new alliances might provide some space away from U.S. pressures in terms of sanctions and suspension of military aid. Perhaps the Egyptian regime's movement towards Russia coincided with the Russian desire to penetrate the Middle East and fill the American vacuum, which made the tracks of relations between Egypt and Russia seem to be consistent to a great extent and expandable in multiple areas politically, militarily and economically.

In light of the Egyptian regime's adoption of a strategy to find alternatives, we can identify the main interests it sought through building strong relations with Russia:

- Finding an international supporter

Since the first moments of the July 3 coup, the Egyptian government has suffered from a shaky internal legitimacy which could only be reduced through a violent security grip, violations, repression, and suspension of political life in Egypt. At the same time, the regime realized that this internal rift cannot be addressed through security policies only, and accordingly it sought international support from major world powers which did not only establish strong relations with the Egyptian government, but they even secured their survival. In light of this equation, the Egyptian regime rushed to build strong relations with Russia and opened the door for Russian investments and huge arms deals, hoping for obtaining Russian support in the international arena. It is sufficient to point out that the first visit of Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi abroad days after the July 3 coup d'état, when he was still the Egyptian defense minister, was to Russia, which apparently was the first step in seeking Russian support.

Diversification of armament sources

The sanctions imposed by the Obama administration following the July 3 coup against the Egyptian regime, including suspension of military aid, prompted the Egyptian regime to seek alternatives to U.S. armament which the military has mainly relied on since the 1979 Egypt-Israel peace treaty.

The development of Egyptian relations with the Russian side, in coincidence with the strained relations with the Obama administration, was an opportunity for the Egyptian regime to search for alternatives to the U.S. outstanding military aid. Therefore, it was not surprising that the regime in Egypt concluded those enormous arms deals with Russia at that time, in addition to the significant military cooperation and joint exercises between the two sides. However, despite the big arms deals outside the U.S. framework, it will be difficult for the Egyptian military to give up its main arms supplier, the United States. Perhaps, the regime will at best seek getting conventional armament from Russia and other world powers such as France and Germany.

Between rapprochement and blackmail

It seems that the policy of alteration between rapprochement and blackmail is one of the most prominent orientations of the Egyptian regime's foreign policy. While the regime appears to be striving for rapprochement with certain international and regional powers, it tends to blackmail them through enhancing relations with other rival countries and powers. It seems that the growing Egyptian-Russian relations and continued cooperation between the two sides while the Egyptian regime is maintaining strategic relations with the U.S. can be understood in light of that policy.

Seeking support for regional orientations

The Egyptian regime seeks international support for its orientations and views on the inflaming issues of the region, especially in Syria and Libya, and accordingly, the relations with the Russian side provides support for the Egyptian viewpoint on these issues, especially that there is a remarkable consensus between the two sides on the solutions proposed for the Syrian and Libyan crisis.

Impact of Egyptian-Russian rapprochement on Egyptian-American relations

In the light of the growing relations between the Egyptian and Russian sides, a question may arise on the U.S. view towards this issue and how far this can affect the Egyptian-U.S. relations. Before we start to answer this question, we must be aware that the situation in the Middle East is very complicated, which means that strong relations between the Egyptian and U.S. sides should not necessarily mean consensus in all or most of the regional crises.

U.S. view of Egyptian-Russian relations

The confusion of US foreign policy after the access of Donald Trump to the White House makes it difficult to precisely predict the U.S. policies towards the Egyptian-Russian rapprochement, especially in the presence of a clear division in many issues between the presidential team under Donald Trump on the one hand, and the State Department and the Pentagon on the other. This makes the U.S. position on the Egyptian-Russian rapprochement seem hesitating and ambiguous. For example, while Republican Senator John McCain was criticizing the practices and violations of the Egyptian regime, Vice President Mike Pence was praising and expressing support for the Egyptian regime and Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi in Cairo.

U.S. aid may be one of the U.S. administration's significant pressure cards for addressing the relations between Egypt and Russia – as happened in the issue of Egypt's relations with North Korea. It is noteworthy that between 1948 and 2016, the United States provided 77.4 billion dollars of aid to Egypt, including \$ 1.3 billion on an annual basis in the form of military aid from 1987 to 2016, approximately \$ 39 billion of the total U.S. aid to Egypt. Through these figures, we can understand how the Egyptian military depends on the U.S. aid and the American armament.

The United States is aware of the Russian desire for not only rivalry with Washington in the Middle East, but also in competition with the U.S. on its role and position in the international system. In light of this competition between the U.S. and Russia, which is likely to escalate, the U.S. will probably pay greater attention to the Egyptian affair than it used to do before. However, the United States under Donald Trump is suffering from confusion in its policy towards Egypt. While some officials believe that the U.S. should maintain its support for the Egyptian regime because of what it can offer for the conclusion of the so-called "Deal of the Century", however, there are others that are not satisfied with the benefits received by the U.S. in return for the big funds paid to the Egyptian side in the form of aid, particularly in light of the situation in Egypt that does not suggest any prospects for change under a regime that reached the height of its tyranny – amid the recent violations that accompanied the opening of candidacy for the presidential election.

Egyptian view on relations with U.S. and Russia

Egypt still keeps strategic relations with the United States, especially in the military field. Despite the fact that relations between the two sides are no longer as strong as they used to be during the eras of Sadat and Mubarak - in addition to the military institution's move to diversify sources of armament, contrarily to the approach it

adopted over decades of reliance on US armament – however, the Egyptian regime is still keen on maintaining strategic relations with the United States to ensure continuation of the flow of U.S. aid. However, the regime will, at the same time, maintain rapprochement with Russia and enhancing relations with Moscow; but still we cannot call this a “strategic alliance”.

