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Remarks on Likely Egyptian-Turkish Rapprochement

Mohamed Elhamy

In light of the latest numerous warm statements made by Turkish officials and the few cautious statements made by the Egyptian side on the likely rapprochement between Turkey and Egypt, the initial reactions of the Egyptian official and pro-regime media appeared to be obviously raucous, as if Sisi were able to subjugate Turkey and Erdogan.

However, apart from this media uproar (which subsequently subsided), the Egyptian-Turkish rapprochement move at this particular time raises some important remarks within the recent regional and international context, as follows:

1 -Notes on the Egyptian-Turkish file

In democratic countries that adopt independent policies, the decision-making process is almost overt and known to all, as it is undertaken by relevant institutions and agencies in a decentralized way, most prominently the role played by democratically elected parliament. These countries are also exposed to foreign pressure sometimes focused on economic and media files, and sometimes through direct contacts and exchanged messages with officials, away from any direct interference in the decision-making process. Thus, the decision is basically made domestically, albeit sometimes influenced by foreign pressures.

In Egypt, as in many non-democratic countries, decision-making is not related to state institutions as much as it relates to the position of power represented by the president himself. Therefore, there is a state of extreme centralization in decision-making while overlooking the recommendations of the sovereign bodies and institutions. In addition, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi is characterized by extreme centralization, to the extent that he reportedly holds about 22 meetings with the government for only one month, as well as inspection field trips to follow up on very precise details. There are many leaked documents and information that fully prove that Sisi takes the decision unilaterally, ignoring recommendations of sovereign bodies and services, as happened in his waiver of the Egyptian islands of Tiran and Sanafir to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia; insistence on commenting on the video clips released on social networking sites by the actor and contractor Mohamed Ali accusing Sisi and army commanders of corruption, which sparked a wave of popular protests two years ago; signing the

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Declaration of Principles (DoP) on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) [on 23 March 23 2015]; and signing maritime border demarcation agreements with Cyprus [in 2013] and Greece [in 2020]. In all these cases, leaked documents indicated that Egyptian sovereign bodies had submitted recommendations to Al-Sisi including their views on these issues, but he completely ignored them and made decisions to the contrary.

It cannot be said that the pressures of some sovereign bodies has ever led to a change in Sisi's convictions or decisions, as Sisi in reality is more powerful than those bodies. But the talk about pressures and different views can only be used by the Egyptian negotiator as pretexts to acquire further room for maneuver and possibility of retreat if necessary.

It is natural that the policy of any state is a mixture of the general national interest and the private interest of the regime; where the interest of those running the political system is essential for understanding their orientations. Although the Egyptian regime suffers from several problems, this article will only focus on those related to the relationship between Egypt and Turkey, most notably the internal popular situation: as the Egyptian arena is like a powder keg awaiting a spark. Despite the tremendous repressive power of the Sisi regime and the excessive security policies adopted over about 11 years, some incidents indicate that the popular situation may explode at any time. These incidents occur almost once or twice a year, as for example: ('Be assured, You're Not Alone' Campaign: April 2019), September 2019 protests, and September 2020 protests, where the regime was sometimes prompted to reverse some of its decisions in anticipation of a societal explosion.

Accordingly, the first concern of the Egyptian regime now is to extinguish this spark represented by the opposition satellite channels, based in Turkey, whose presenters have become popular stars in Egypt, noting that they have acquired such status due to the fact that they are the only oppositional voice that the Egyptians may listen to. Thus, the regime that came after a military coup, adopted excessive security policies, and suffered from many popular protests, will definitely place the opposition file among its priorities within the framework of arranging its relationship with Turkey.

In another context, the policy of US President Joe Biden pays attention to the human rights record in Egypt, which negatively affects the image of the Egyptian regime as a strong and controlling regime, and provides a broader opportunity for the opposition forces overseas and their TV channels in Turkey to focus on the human rights issue. Although Sisi hopes to influence this American position via Israel

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(as the frequency of Egyptian-Israeli mutual visits by security, political and economic delegations has recently escalated), yet he will certainly view the issue of rapprochement with Turkey as an opportunity and a means to curtail the opposition voices, and thus reduce the shift in US policy related to this file.

Regarding the rest of the files, Turkey does not pose any harm to the Egyptian regime in the eastern Mediterranean file. On the contrary, the Egyptian-Turkish understanding will achieve significant national interests for each of the two countries. Nevertheless, Sisi is getting closer and closer to the Greek-Cypriot alliance against the Turkish interest, which proves that Sisi's personal interest is much more important for him than the general Egyptian interest. Therefore, the Sisi regime may seem not enthusiastic about negotiating the Mediterranean file.

In the Libyan file, the Egyptian regime is keen on absence of any Islamic regime in Libya, or even a democratic one that Islamists can benefit from. In this context, the Egyptian regime has supported with all its might, General Khalifa Haftar. had it not been for the Turkish intervention in Libya to support the UN-backed Government of National Accord, Haftar would have succeeded in controlling Tripoli as well as the entire Libyan territory. Therefore, the Libyan file can be the focus of negotiations between Egypt and Turkey as it reflects their conflicting goals there. However, the Egyptian presence and experience in Libya is relatively stronger than the Turkish presence and experience there, given the fact that Egyptians' containment of the political and tribal forces in eastern Libya seems stronger than the Turkish containment of political forces in Tripoli and Western Libya, which will require a great effort from the Turkish negotiator in managing this file.

This assessment indicates that the Egyptian regime will benefit from boosting relations with Turkey mainly in the Libyan file, through which it can benefit in easing tension in western Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean, to focus its attention on the other urgent problems that it suffers from, most prominently the problem of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam - GERD (where Ethiopia intends to start the dam's second filling next July). Some Turkish officials have stated that they could intervene as a mediator in this file, but the question is: Can Turkey really influence the Ethiopian position? In fact, this issue seems difficult according to the current available data on the dam crisis, the nature of the Abiy Ahmed regime, its relations and projects, and the centrality of the GERD project in Ethiopian politics and economy.

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Anyway, the Egyptian-Turkish rapprochement is not expected to reach the level of complete reconciliation, normalization, or regional policy coordination, as each of the two countries has its own doctrine and personality that was formed in certain historical circumstances. Since the time of Muhammad Ali Pasha, the doctrine of the Egyptian state has been characterized by hostility to Turkey, as it considers the Turkish state a threat to it. On the other hand, the Turkish state that was established in 1923 used to adopt a nationalist and secular doctrine that is hostile to Arabs and Islamic orientations respectively. That is why Egypt and Turkey were not able to establish strong bilateral relations over one hundred and seventy years, where tension and competition were more present than achievement of their great common interests.

Although each party believes that their relations will not reach the level of alliance or even friendship, yet each side seeks to make the most of this relationship, especially in the basic and easy files for the two regimes, such as the Egyptian opposition in Turkey and the Fethullah Gulen group in Egypt.

Turkey hopes to boost its relationship with Egypt and resolve the tension issues in the eastern Mediterranean, but this seems to be unattainable at the moment. Egypt views its relationship with Israel, Greece and Cyprus as a strategic relationship and a win-win card to put pressure on Turkey, and that it cannot easily abandon it; that is why the Egyptian Foreign Minister hastened to reassure the Greek side that rapprochement with Turkey will not affect their relationship or joint agreements.

Through rapprochement with Egypt, Turkey also hopes to make a breakthrough in the wall of regional isolation that many countries seek to impose on it, and not to leave Egypt completely to the anti-Turkish axis represented by Israel, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Although Turkish economic interests in Egypt has not been affected by their poor political relations, the development of political relations may lead to more growth in trade and economic exchange.

Through rapprochement with Egypt, Ankara also hopes to weaken the anti-Turkey alliance in the Eastern Mediterranean, and calm the inflamed external fronts in preparation for reforming its internal conditions for the approaching elections, which may also include another referendum on a new Turkish constitution.

Because of these interests and others, the idea of restoring relations with Egypt was present in the mind of Turkish politics even after the coup in Egypt, when Turkish President Abdullah Gul

congratulated al-Sisi for winning elections in 2014, a step that was criticized by then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. However, the Turkish political corridors have always indicated the need to restore relations with Egypt.

Soft power

As for the soft power, Turkey enjoys great popularity at the level of the entire Muslim nation due to its adoption of moral attitudes towards the issues of Palestine, Uyghurs, Burma, Qatar and Libya; with the Turkish attitude towards the Egyptian coup (in 2013) at the forefront of these stances as it contributed to building the bright positive image of Turkey in the Arab and Islamic world as a whole. In fact, Turkey has achieved many interests and gains through this positive image in the first place, as Arab capital has poured into it, its Turkish products spread in the Arab and Islamic markets, and many political, economic and cultural spaces were opened for its influence in any region where there are Muslims, in addition to gaining Arab and Muslim voices that defend it in many different forums across the world.

However, Turkey's investment in soft power through adoption of moral attitudes may also represent a kind of restrictions on Turkish political stances, particularly those related to the humanitarian issue. On the contrary, when Sisi handed over Al-Azhar students from the Uyghurs to China, his image was not affected to a great extent as Turkey's image might have been affected if it had handed over some Uyghurs living on its territory to China.

Hence, the Turkish rapprochement with Egypt, Saudi Arabia or the UAE represents strong scratches in Turkish soft power, which requires the Turkish decision-maker to manage this file with the highest degree of skill and calm, in order to achieve balance between the two interests.

2 -Notes on the regional and international situation

This soft power enjoyed by Turkish President Erdogan and the Turkish policy during his reign, is considered an important asset of the Turkish state. On 4 March 2021, the American [Time](#) magazine published an article titled "How Erdogan's Increasingly Erratic Rule in Turkey Presents a Risk to the World". This article, written by Ian Bremmer, best explains the nature of the Western view of Turkey. Also, George Friedman, the American geopolitical forecaster, and strategist on international affairs, predicted the Turkish rise in the first half of the twentieth century in his book "[The Next 100 Years: A Forecast for the 21st. Century](#)", and suggested that the United States may use Arab nationalism as

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a pressure card against Turkey with the aim of disintegrating the Arab Islamic sentiment that is likely to increase around Turkey.

This American strategic path is manifested in a number of procedures that may explain the Egyptian-Turkish rapprochement, within the broader picture regionally and internationally.

The expansion of any power represents an opportunity and a challenge at the same time. If that power manages its expansion well, especially its relationship with rival powers and the powers that aspire to inherit it in the long run, then this expansion will be in its favor, otherwise such expansion may become a kind of dilemma and unfortunate crisis.

Some observers of the American policy during the past few years note that the United States has turned a blind eye to Turkey's expansion, especially in some regional files, probably with the aim of implicating it and overloading it with additional burdens without likely achievement of parallel gains in return. Therefore, the US administration continued to oppose Turkey's active intervention in the Syrian file, to the extent that Turkey was the last to enter and the least to win in Syria, despite the fact that it bears the greatest burden of refugees and threats to its national security. Likewise, Turkey did not intervene in Libya except in the last moments when Tripoli was about to fall, which threatened the loss of the Turkish interest in Libya as well as in the Mediterranean waters.

Most recently, it seems that there is a tendency to let Turkey intervene in the Yemeni file, engage in the intra-Afghan negotiations between the government and the Taliban, and assume the burden in the Horn of Africa with the withdrawal of US forces from Somalia.

Undoubtedly, any Turkish expansion in these files is perceived positively by large sectors of the peoples, and that some of them seek and even demand it, but there are fears from likely success of the Western implication schemes.

There are three main powers in the Middle East, namely, Israel, Turkey, and Iran, that are obviously contestant and even hostile towards each other, with Turkey seemingly in-between them. It also appears that US President Joe Biden's new policy is to further tighten blockade on Iran to reach a new nuclear agreement between them. Therefore, there is a tendency to cut Iranian ties or reduce them to a minimum. In this context, one can understand the Gulf reconciliation that apparently

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targeted reducing the Qatari-Iranian rapprochement. In this context, it is also possible to understand the likely Turkish engagement in the Yemeni file and the pacification of relations between the Quartet: Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Israel and the UAE on the one hand, and Turkey, on the other hand.

Last year, the Turkish operation in northern Syria resulted in the killing of three thousand elements affiliated with the Syrian regime, but they are in fact Shiite elements coming from Iraq, Lebanon and others, which was understood in the context of the Turkish response to the bombing and martyrdom of thirty of its soldiers in northern Syria.

The Turkish intervention in Syria and Yemen is sought and desired by almost all Muslims, particularly Sunnis, but it must also be said that Turkey's entry into a bone-breaking war with Iran is not in the interest of the two countries, or the Muslim nation. There are fears that Turkey be a means to trim the nails of Iranian influence and a tool to subjugate Tehran to Western and Israeli demands. With full understanding of the contestant nature of the relationship between Iran and Turkey, however, the significant weakening of Iran at this moment is not in Turkey's interest, because the next step will certainly be Turkey itself, as Ankara is the only remaining power in the region that enjoys a kind of independent decision-making.

In another context, the Egyptian-Turkish rapprochement will negatively affect the Russian presence in Libya, which is also an American goal. If the Egyptians and the Turks reach an understanding formula acceptable to the United States on the Libyan file, the Russian presence will be almost useless. This situation also requires extremely skillful management from Turkish politicians in order not to get involved in the mud of the US-Russian competition in Libya, or to be a tool in the war between them.

Conclusion

The file of rapprochement with Egypt requires skillful management by Turkey, so that Turkey can avoid getting involved in outstanding regional files or turning into a tool for implementation of international policies related to Iran or Syria; and also avoid losing its moral capital and soft power that have been established over nearly twenty years, or losing its proven allies from various Islamic movements. As for Egypt, although the situation seems stable, however, this stability is so fragile that can immediately disappear due to any fleeting spark or unforeseen change. Therefore, it is wrong to view the Egyptian file as having turned into only a humanitarian and refugee issue.