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2 APRIL
2021

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Limits & Dimensions of Egyptian-Turkish Rapprochement

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Contrary to popular belief, Egypt and Turkey -together- have been keen to maintain a relatively moderate degree of warm relations over the past seven years, which enabled bilateral ties to develop positively. Despite expulsion of the Turkish ambassador from Cairo on 23 November 2013, reduction of the level of bilateral diplomatic relations to the level of charge d'affaires, and the diplomatic strife that floated to the surface in some cases; the Egyptian state, in terms of the institutional formula of the state, not the individual Pharaonic formula, in addition to depth of relations at the popular level, were behind maintaining warm relations with Turkey after Egypt's 3 July coup (2013).¹

Unlike the Saudi model of relations with Turkey, where bilateral trade collapsed according to the trend of the ruling Saudi elite after the political dispute between the two countries, where Turkish exports to Saudi Arabia declined by 95% by the end of 2020; the Egyptian model is on the opposite of that, as the Egyptian-Turkish trade exceeded the threshold of \$ 5 billion by the end of 2018, which is a relatively large number in a country of the size of Egypt that has widely-diversified foreign trade sources. This difference between the Egyptian and Saudi models reflects the orientation of the Egyptian state, even after the military coup (2013) that led to displacement of a large segment of the Egyptian opposition elite to the Turkish state in particular.

While the Egyptian negative propaganda aims to secure a degree of legitimacy for the regime under the banner of subjugating Turkey, Turkish positive propaganda aims to preserve the positive trend of the Egyptian state and push it forward within the framework of enhancement of bilateral relations or at least maintaining warm relations at their current levels. However, relations between the two countries at the level of presidential institutions are still strained, which may be due to the pressures exerted by the Egyptian regime's Gulf sponsors, or to the Turkish presidency's rejection of the idea of military coups and violation of the will of the peoples.

¹ Deutsche Welle Arabic, Egypt expels Turkish ambassador and reduces relations with Ankara, 23 November 2013, accessed 15 March 2021, [link](#)

This paper attempts to identify features of the Egyptian-Turkish rapprochement. It also addresses the strategic and non-strategic motives of this rapprochement and seeks to explore its future prospects.

Current Egyptian-Turkish relationship

Regarding the current Egyptian-Turkish relationship, it can be said that Egypt's rapprochement with Turkey is a state orientation, not a leadership direction, although it is not unlikely that there are efforts from the leadership in this direction. Observers point to an important dimension in the behavior of the Egyptian presidential institution that made major concessions to ensure the personal security of the head of the July 3 authority (Sisi), as the entrance to the appease the United States (during the Trump era) was to cede the Tiran and Sanafir islands to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, in favor of the Zionist entity, in addition to appeasing the Europeans through arms deals and a share of the Eastern Mediterranean gas, and calming the Africans by signing the Khartoum the Declaration of Principles related to the Renaissance Dam, which occurred within the framework the Sisi regime's endeavor to remain in power.²

In addition to this institutional rapprochement, there are presidential ambitions for rapprochement with Turkey, as the behavior of Sisi's Gulf allies disappointed Egypt more than once. For example, Saudi Arabia recognized Greece's claim of right to the maritime sector east of the 28th meridian (against Egypt's interests); and then it held the Al-Ula Summit (for reconciliation with Qatar) without coordination with Egypt. Also, the regime cannot forget the UAE's marathon development of relations with the Zionist entity (without coordination with Egypt), and the support that Egypt's Gulf allies provided to Ethiopia in the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). These considerations raise Sisi's concern and threaten his regime.³

However, the views of the Egyptian state institutions and the behavior of the head of state are clearly contradictory, as state institutions try to exert pressure on Sisi who from time to time adopts approaches that contradict the visions of Egyptian institutions as well as the country's national

² Selim Azouz, Reconciliation Talk!, Arabi 21, 22 March 2021, accessed 15 March 2021, [link](#)

³ Deutsche Welle Arabic, Ahmed Shafiq announces running for Egyptian presidential elections, 29 November 2017, accessed 15 March 2021, [link](#)

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interest, prompting some institutions to uncover their views to the public through leaks or public comments. The Ministry of Irrigation for example leaked a document it had sent it to the Egyptian Presidency with recommendations not to sign the Khartoum Declaration of Principles regarding the Ethiopian Renaissance Dam⁴, as well as the response of Sisi to that. Also, the Egyptian Minister of Foreign Affairs declared that the Libyan-Turkish maritime border demarcation agreement does not violate Egypt's interests, in attempt to contain the negative propaganda pattern flowing in Egypt towards Turkey and its possible repercussions.

In this context, it can be said that the Egyptian institutions have a greater role in determining the direction of relations with Turkey, within the framework of Egyptian national security considerations.

Threats to Egyptian national security

The Egyptian Armed Forces institution is aware that they are facing threats on multiple fronts, and that any attempt to exhaust the army on one of these fronts may be at the expense of others, in light of the instability of Egypt's regional alliances, especially with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, in addition to the geostrategic challenges in the southern Red Sea and the Bab al-Mandab strait. In this context, Egypt's move to contain the Turkish presence in its Libyan courtyard is understandable, especially that Turkey is keen on adhering to the Egyptian national security. It should be noted here that Turkey clearly respected the red line limit that Egypt set in Sirte and Al-Jafra, and did not violate it except in response to the Egyptian Air Force's penetration of the Libyan border and incursion southward in December 2020.

The Turkish military superiority, the rapid growth of the Turkish military industrialization machine, the lack of clarity of the overall vision regarding developments in the balance of military power in the Eastern Mediterranean, and the mounting Turkish qualitative weapons, most notably communications and jamming weapons. All these considerations push the Egyptian armed forces to wait and avoid rushing in adopt certain positions towards Turkey.

⁴ Youm7, Former Minister of Irrigation submits his testimony on the Declaration of Principles (DoP) agreement related to the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), 28 October 2019, accessed 16 March 2021, [link](#)

While the Turkish forces have been involved in battles at the level of the Special Forces and the Air Force, with remarkable results in contemporary warfare against diverse Russian, French, and Israeli weapons in Azerbaijan's Nagorno Kara Bach, as well as the Turkish high jamming capabilities; in addition to Turkey's current leadership of the special forces and military intelligence of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), however, all information about the Egyptian combat readiness is only available through military exercises that have intensified and expanded during the recent period, in terms of their geographic scope and the range of types of forces participating in them - which requires patience on the part of the Egyptian side.

Egypt disappointed by Gulf allies

It seems that the policies of Egypt's Gulf allies are mostly contrary to the Egyptian interest. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia did not hesitate to ignore Egypt in the signing of the Al-Ula reconciliation statement (with Qatar), which sent a humiliating message that Egypt's subordinate position -as it was in the blockade against Qatar- would not affect Saudi foreign policies. Also, the UAE-Israeli normalization agreement led to enormous trade agreements between the two countries that are likely to harm Egypt's interests. In addition, Abu Dhabi and Tel Aviv are looking to establishing a pipeline that avoids passing through the Suez Canal. The planned pipeline is supposed to extend from Abu Dhabi through Saudi territory to the port of Eilat, to extend from there to the port of Ashkelon on the Mediterranean.

Saudi Arabia's position toward east of the 28th Meridien by recognizing Greece's claimed status on the island of Crete and the related exclusive economic zone poses a threat to Egypt's interests there. On the other hand, Israel, Cyprus and Greece ignored Egypt in signing an agreement for establishment of an EastMed pipeline for the transference of natural gas from the eastern Mediterranean region to Europe, extending from Israel to Italy, thus undermining the Egyptian dream of turning Egypt into a regional energy hub.⁵

On the other hand, the Egyptian state institutions prefer to sign an agreement for demarcation of maritime borders with Turkey rather than its Greek opponent, given that the agreement with Turkey

⁵ Dr. Sania Al-Husseini, Turkish-Egyptian Relations: An Objective Reading of Success and Failure Equations, Al-Rai Al-Youm, 19 March 2020, accessed 16 March 2021, [link](#)

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is more beneficial to Egypt in terms of its economic returns and also in terms of preserving the Egyptian maritime borders. This motivated the Egyptian state institutions (particularly, the foreign ministry and the ministry of petroleum) to show respect for the Turkish maritime border interests more than once, including the maritime demarcation agreement with Greece.

Observers also believe that the carefully designed messages between the Turkey and Egypt not only respond to their common interests, but they also respond to the changing international and regional dynamics, most notably the access of US President Joe Biden to power, which prompted many countries in the region -including Egypt and Turkey- to reset their policies to contain the new American administration, where in this context, Turkey, Egypt, the UAE and Saudi Arabia seem to be targeted by the Biden administration. While Saudi Arabia's response to the US administration's moves was different, Egypt and Turkey are moving toward building a common wall to counter Biden's arrangements against them. Perhaps this Turkish-Egyptian orientation is behind obliging Egyptian opposition TV channels that broadcast from Turkey to adhere to professionalism in addressing the Egyptian affair.

Limits of likely convergence

Regarding the limits of the convergence between the two countries, despite the intransigence of the heads of the executive authority in both countries, state institutions in both of them realize the significance of rapprochement on the grounds of achieving common interests. However, question remain about the limits of such rapprochement, such as:

Is reconciliation between Egypt and Turkey likely to take place?

In fact, this matter is mainly related to the head of the 3 July authority (Sisi). In many situations, Sisi sacrificed the interest of his country to ensure his personal security and continued recognition as the head of the executive authority in Egypt.

In addition, this matter is also related to the Gulf sponsors who have greatly invested in Sisi himself, and they are currently reaping the fruits of this investment, in anticipation of the post-oil era, albeit at the expense of Egyptian capitalism, and sometimes even at the expense of medium enterprises.

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Accordingly, observers believe that the most important obstacles facing the Egyptian-Turkish reconciliation come from the opposition to such settlements by Egypt's allies in Abu Dhabi and Riyadh. In this context, those allies could exploit the foreign debt issue, the shortage of foreign exchange reserves and the state of political instability to pressure Sisi.

As for the expected level of rapprochement between the two countries, this matter relates to the level of executive authority that handle the rapprochement process. Contrary to what most observers reiterate about the nature of politics and its surprises, the possibility of achieving the reconciliation targets without necessarily holding a meeting between the head of states of Egypt and Turkey seems more likely.

Egyptian opposition in Turkey

As for the future of the Egyptian opposition in Turkey, the researcher believes that the two countries may be heading towards settling this issue, especially after the acting Muslim Brotherhood leader Ibrahim Munir announced that the group would not object to Turkey mediating between it and the regime in Egypt.

In this regard, the writer expects that there will be no harm to the Egyptian opposition in Turkey, with the possibility of allowing them to return to the homeland on an optional basis. In this context, their return is likely to be accompanied by guarantees that the returnees would not be exposed to any harm, in exchange for a considerable calm on the part of the Brotherhood, with commitment to refrain from engaging in political activity in general, and calming its external discourse, in a way that may limit the expected reaction of the Biden administration. The success of this path depends on the two countries' agreement on such guarantees. Within this framework, rapprochement is most likely to take place, albeit formal and lukewarm, just like Egypt's relations with the Zionist entity. But such rapprochement would be sufficient to spare the two countries' likeliness of getting involved in a confrontation in which they will both lose.

The writer believes that the return of the Egyptian opposition to the homeland will be optional and not mandatory.

The writer also believes that the step taken by the Turkish authorities to oblige the opposition Egyptian TV channels to adhere to professionalism, and to control the resort by some media figures

to insulting Sisi, his elite, his wife, or his children, is a mechanism for showing goodwill that does not represent a violation of the overseas Egyptian opposition's right to expression; as freedom of expression is not intended to resorting to offense and attack, a behavior that cannot be said to be applicable to all channels, or to all media professionals in the opposition media channels abroad.

Conclusion

Rapprochement between Egypt and Turkey is a choice of countries, not a choice of a political leadership, with more openness on the part of Turkey, with the aim of calming down tension, intensifying contacts, and signing an agreement to demarcate the maritime borders between the two countries for the benefit of both.

Also, Turkish-Egyptian rapprochement may help the two countries to avoid the Biden administration's exploitation of the sharp divides in the region for harming the national security of both countries. The issue of the Egyptian opposition and its pacification is one of the most important aspects of such vision, if any.

However, this convergence is not certain, given the fact that the forces that oppose it are more than those that support it, especially the Gulf sponsors of the Egyptian economy and the July 3 elite, in addition to the French arms supplier. On the other hand, Sisi's desire to respond to the Egyptian state institutions' recommendations is conditional on absence of another path that would enable him to face the problems he himself had caused, mainly the escalating foreign debt and the GERD crisis. Sisi is likely to tend to confrontation with Turkey rather than rapprochement with it, provided that a certain sponsor country offers commitment to alleviation of the impact of these problems.