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Against the backdrop of the superficial and formal changes in the Egyptian discourse towards the military operations that erupted between the Palestinian resistance factions and the Israeli occupation from 11 to 21 May 2021; and before that, the Egyptian regime's approval of the de-facto consensus in Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean; or even the regime's attempts to build alliances with some African countries to strengthen the Egyptian position on the issue of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), definitive analyzes emerged, concluded that there are strategic changes in Egyptian foreign policy, just because of some change in the regime's discourse.

Therefore, it is important to explore how far there is real change in the Egyptian foreign policy, in light of the presence of some partial reviews to some of its aspects, taking into account the fact that any "change" can only be described as "strategic" if it has medium and long-term effect, planning and implementation, whereas it cannot be judged by mere media statements without achievement of significant drastic changes in policies on the ground. Here, an important question arises: What are the determinants of Egyptian-Emirati relations, and has there been any significant change in these relations?

In fact, the ruling regimes in both Egypt and the UAE have recurrently described their relations as "strategic" since June 30, 2013; and officials in both countries are keen to confirm this in every single visit, development, or coordination in joint regional issues. Even the Egyptian presidential institution describes relations between the two countries as "exceptional" relations¹.

This "strategic" alliance between the two regimes is based on several foundations, most prominently:

1- The extreme hostility to the Arab revolutions and turning them into a purely security issue. This hostility is clearly structural in this alliance, as the two sides share a purely Emirati vision of the Arab

¹ Wessam Abdel-Alim, Egyptian-Emirati relations.. a strategic partnership that achieves interests of the two peoples to face regional challenges , Al-Ahram Gate, 16 December 2020, [link](#) / Also: Amer Mustafa, Presidency: Sisi and MBZ have exchanged visits 23 times since 2014, Youm7, 16 December 2020, [link](#)

Spring as a conspiracy against the region led by political Islam currents to demolish their countries. Also, both the Emirati and Egyptian regimes hastily classify anyone that rejected the Syrian regime or the retired Maj. Gen. Haftar in Libya as “terrorist militias” facing “national armies”, against the truth, that ruling regimes were behind turning peaceful revolutions in these two countries into a situation closer to civil wars. This also led to a false propaganda that the regimes’ repression of revolutions and protest waves in the region is only a kind of “war on terror”. Accordingly, Egypt was drawn to the side of the Saudi-led Arab coalition in the Yemen war, and away from Iran; and it also led Egypt to support Haftar’s rebellion against the internationally recognized government and back his repeated attacks on western Libya, which made Egypt lose the mediation role in the crisis for about six years, and accordingly lose a large labor market that may even exceed the UAE labor market².

2- The hostility to the currents of political Islam, and conducting security and military coordination in confronting them, which the most significant starting point for this relationship, as the UAE believes that the currents of political Islam in the region, especially the Muslim Brotherhood, impede its pursuit of legitimacy for leading the region. In light of the rise of Mohammed Bin Zayed (also known as MBZ), who is considered by some to be the most influential politician in the region, the UAE has intensified its demonization of the political Islam currents from the first moment of the Arab Spring. MBZ sought to convince all regional actors of this vision, and to form an alliance for counter-revolutions³.

On this basis, the UAE supported the military coup led by Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi against President Mohamed Morsi and helped remove him only a year after assuming power. The UAE and Sisi regimes have created several alliances to confront the Arab revolutions under the cover of “countering terrorism and extremism”. The UAE has always sought to impose its vision related to relations with Turkey on Egypt, where it has completely succeeded in this, both in terms of portraying the regime in Turkey as the main opponent of the Egyptian regime and the strong backer of “extremists” currents,

² Mahmoud Sami, Egypt and the UAE in 2021.. Will contradictory interests force an exit from the warm zone?, Al Jazeera Net, on 29 December 2020, [link](#)

³ Robert F. Worth, ‘Mohammed bin Zayed’s Dark Vision of the Middle East’s Future’, New York Times, 9 January 2020, [link](#)

as they describe them, taking Egyptians away from pragmatic vision of Turkish policies, with disregard of the Egyptian national interest in any of the joint files, whether in Libya or the Eastern Mediterranean gas. It is noteworthy that after the Egyptian regime significantly contributed to the formation of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum and called the Emirates for joining it as a strategic ally, the latter, along with Israel, Cyprus and Greece, contributed to excluding Egypt from vital projects within the framework of this forum through the EastMed gas project or the electrical interconnection project between Cyprus, Greece and Israel⁴, although this made Egypt lose the chance to become a regional energy hub, within this grouping, after years of antagonizing Turkey in this file, against the Egyptian nation's higher interests.

The greatest effort of the UAE and its allies was not directed at "extremist" movements, but instead, it was targeting the moderate Islamic currents that believe in peaceful action and democratic mechanisms for the transfer of power, as well as the countries that supported them. Meanwhile, the efforts of this Egyptian-Emirati-Saudi alliance to confront ISIS in the region are extremely limited and dwindling.

3- Mutual economic relations between the United Arab Emirates and Egypt, albeit closer to dependency. It would not have been possible to inflict major blows against the Arab revolutions and the current of political Islam without the UAE's reliance on a strong ally such as the Egyptian army commanders, in addition to an elite backer such as the Egyptian National Salvation Front. It was also not possible for the commanders of the Egyptian army to meet the chronic financing needs of the post-coup regime, in light of Egypt's permanent and structural need for international sources of funding, without the generous Emirati and Saudi funding, as the two countries promised to provide 20 billion dollars to support the army movements before June 30, 2013. Later, the Sisi regime, at the Sharm el-Sheikh conference to support the Egyptian economy in March 2015, expected investments, loans and grants of up to \$182 billion!⁵

⁴ Al-Araby Al-Jadeed, excluding Egypt from gas and electricity projects accelerates its contacts with Turkey, 20 March 2021, [link](#)

⁵ Ayman Saleh, Final Results of the Sharm El-Sheikh Conference: \$182 Billion Real Gains for Egypt, El-Watan, 8 April 2015, [link](#)

It can be said that there is an Emirati-Saudi domination of political and military action within the movement circles of this alliance throughout eight years since it was established. This domination has been evident in most regional files, whether through enforcing the Emirati vision of the conflict in Libya and providing absolute support to retired Maj. Gen. Khalifa Haftar, or through the Emirates and Egypt's transformation of the Sudanese revolution into a revolution against the political Islam current, while supporting Sudan's military and enabling them to control the transitional period arrangements. In addition, this domination extended to the Egyptian interior, where the UAE sought to control Egypt's vital and strategic sectors, such as the media and press sector to direct it in favor of the Emirates and imposing its directives on Egyptian media outlets to serve its own orientations, most notably criticism of the Muslim Brotherhood and attack on Iran and its regional arms, as well as supporting common attitudes to regional and international issues, literally according to the UAE vision⁶. The UAE also dominates the private medical sector, including test labs and hospitals⁷ through major deals, most recently the acquisition of the Amoun Pharmaceutical Company, and finally engaging in the field of international schools, which contributes to the graduation of dependent elites.

We can only talk about an Egyptian foreign policy that is less dependent on the United Arab Emirates in case the current regime manage to return to the Mubarak regime's foreign policy level, with respect to its relative independence. However, the current foreign policy has become completely dependent on high-cost sources of international financing much more than the situation during the Mubarak era. For the first time in the history of Egypt, the government has received development aid in the form of major loans from the UAE, which has never been before. During the period following the July 3 coup (2013), net official grants rose during the period from July to December 2013 to about \$6 billion, compared to only about \$629.4 million during the same period of the previous fiscal year, due to the grants received from the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, where the largest part was from the UAE, according to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development⁸.

⁶ Lebanese Al-Akhbar, Emirati anger at the Egyptian media: Withdrawal is close?, 4 December 2019, [link](#)

⁷ Essayed Raafat El-Abed, The UAE and the health sector in Egypt, Egyptian Institute for Studies, 21 November 2017, [link](#)

⁸ OECD website, Open Data, ODA 2105, [link](#)

The UAE is still the largest Arab investor in Egypt, despite a significant fluctuation in the pace of its investments, based on various positions on regional issues. But the economic relations between the Egyptian and Emirati sides are still well-established, which was clearly reflected in the volume of trade exchange, direct investments, grants and aid, in addition to recurrent mutual visits and the tourism exchange between the two countries⁹.

The ruling regimes in Egypt and UAE still describe their relations as strategic, where no statement was monitored to officials in the two countries indicating any deterioration in the bilateral relations or a collapse in this strategic alliance. Despite the restlessness of some institutions in Egypt and their attempt to impose partial reviews or more balanced reactions towards the UAE actions in the region in light of the so-called current divergence between the two countries, the recent visit of Mohamed bin Zayed to Cairo confirmed the extent of "satisfaction with the level of cooperation and coordination between the two countries, while stressing the importance of supporting and strengthening them".

Conclusion

Egyptian foreign policy is still subject to the same principles of Egypt's stable alliance with the UAE. If Egypt really wants to take steps far from these policies and undertake real shifts, the regime must first prove its ability to conduct an internal political dialogue on the issue of water and the Renaissance Dam crisis and likely options to solve the problem, then to prove its ability to overcome the zero-sum conflict with the opposition at home, especially the currents of political Islam, as it is unreasonable to pursue external reconciliations with the continuation of that zero-sum internal conflict.

⁹ Basant Gamal, Egypt and UAE. A Model of Economic Cooperation, Marsad, 16 December 2020, [link](#)