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## Is there a real shift in Egypt's regional policy?

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Some may wrongly consider changes in the Egyptian attitude towards the Libyan crisis and some other moves such as boosting relations with Iraq and Jordan, the limited electrical interconnection projects and some trade, economic and military agreements with Ethiopia's neighboring countries, as a breakthrough or an unprecedented strategic shift.

This paper will review these moves and address these changes, in attempt to introduce an assessment of them, in the context of the desired shifts in Egypt's regional foreign policy.

### First: Iraq, Jordan

With regard to Egypt's attempt to ally with Jordan and Iraq, this alliance has been on the table since 1989 under the name of the 'Arab Cooperation Council'. Moreover, Egyptian foreign policy moved more effectively in this direction this year during President Morsi's one year in power (as the reformist wing of the January revolution). On 4 March 2013, Egyptian Prime Minister Hisham Qandil visited Iraq at the head of a delegation comprising 6 ministers, namely the ministers of Foreign Affairs, Industry, Trade and Petroleum, Manpower, Electricity and Energy, and Planning and International Cooperation, along with 60 Egyptian businessmen in all fields, which indicates the size and importance of that visit<sup>1</sup>, where Iraq decided to compensate for the lack of Saudi oil supplies when Aramco had decided to cut off these supplies to Egypt to contribute to further fueling the gasoline crisis at the time, which was exploited in the counter-propaganda against President Morsi<sup>2</sup>.

This alliance (Egypt-Iraq-Jordan), which the Sisi regime entered into, is of course important, as it is not directed at opposing Emirati policies or towards taking a distance from its policies, as some say, but mainly to confront Turkish and Iranian influence<sup>3</sup>. Through this alliance, Egypt retreated from a previous position where Egypt was improving its relations with Iran in violation of the stable Gulf veto

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<sup>1</sup> BBC Arabic, Egyptian Prime Minister Hisham Qandil visits Iraq, on 4 March 2013, [link](#)

<sup>2</sup> Al Jazeera Net, Iraq and Egypt activate their economic relations, 3 May 2013, [link](#)

<sup>3</sup> Tariq Dilwani, Cooperation between Jordan, Egypt and Iraq crystallizes in economy and politics, The Independent Arabic, 17 February 2021, [link](#)

on Egyptian foreign policy, and in light of Turkish-Egyptian relations that would have reached a real strategic alliance had they been left to the natural development of post-revolution policies, whoever was in power.

## Second: Libyan file

With regard to the Libyan file, the current regime also needs a decade to restore relations to the way they were before, then we can talk about a shift in its policies that is not to be considered strategic change, but rather a transformation of policies to compensate and correct previous mistakes. It is noteworthy that on the eve of 30 June 2013, Libya was hosting about one and a half million Egyptian labor spread in all Libyan cities, but after the Egyptian policies biased towards Haftar undeservedly, Egyptian workers in Libya faced severe challenges, where many of them returned to Egypt against the backdrop of the civilian war that Egypt, under Emirati guidance, contributed to fueling, only for the regime's fears of dealing with the political Islam stream in the Libyan West, where its foreign policies and alliances are based on a single, well-established goal, namely besieging political Islam current at home and overseas and seeking to classify its groups as "terrorist" organizations.

Even though the political relations improved after Egypt had been prompted to accept the results of the Geneva political process, which resulted in the election of the Dbeibeh-Manfi government, yet, it cannot be said that Egypt has a clear vision for dealing with Libya after the elections that will be held in December 2021, nor even a vision for dealing with the likeliness of failure to hold them. Therefore, we cannot say that there is a strategic change Egypt's attitude towards the Libyan issue, while the Dbeibeh government itself came against the desire of Egypt that was prompted to deal with it within the framework of international consensus, nothing more.

In other words, we cannot say that there are strategic transformations of policies of the current Egyptian regime towards Libya except after the Egyptian labor and investments in Libya are doubled or returned to the limits of 2010, from an economic point of view. But, from a security and military point of view, we cannot say this unless the regime proves its ability to force out all foreign forces, not excluding the Turkish forces that maintain at least two military bases on the Libyan territory, and to expel the Wagner mercenaries and other foreign militias in southern Libya, and completely eliminate ISIS in Libya in cooperation with various Libyan parties. In addition, the Egyptian regime should play an effective role and provide major contribution to the process of building state's security

and military institutions and participation in its training and arming, so that the Egyptian participation would be stronger than its Turkish counterpart, and necessarily stronger than the Emirati participation, or at least equal to it. Then, we would say that there is a real change in the Egyptian foreign policy towards Libya and talk about its ability to influence the course of events there and contribute to maintaining its stability. Otherwise, it would not be possible to talk about strategic changes in Egypt's attitude towards the Libyan crisis.

### Third: Sudan and Ethiopia

While the UAE is trying to establish strategic alliances in Africa, especially with Sudan and Ethiopia, Egypt is taking only formal procedures.

Some may talk about the limited electrical interconnection projects and about some trade, economic and military agreements with Ethiopia's neighboring countries as a historical strategic achievement. Although these projects are extremely positive moves, yet they are too late. Also, it is unreasonable to call raising the rates of supplying Sudan with electricity from 80 megawatts to only 300 megawatts<sup>4</sup> as a strategic change, especially that Egypt has an electricity surplus of 16,000 megawatts that suffices all Sudan's needs of electricity, especially since many stations have been taken out of service for the production surplus.

Meanwhile, the UAE has militarily consolidated its presence in the Horn of Africa, by acquiring important infrastructure projects and ports, without significant coordination with Egypt, which is supposed to be its strategic ally; or even as a dependent follower, the UAE should have notified it of these moves and coordinated with it therein. According to some studies, these moves were intended to be a punishment for Egypt for not participating sufficiently in the Yemen war<sup>5</sup>, which means the application of the hidden Emirati conditionalities that accompanied the generous support it provided to the Sisi regime since the July 3, 2013, coup.

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<sup>4</sup> Asharq Al-Awsat, raising the capacity of the electrical interconnection between Egypt and Sudan from 80 to 300 megawatts, 31 March 2021, [link](#)

<sup>5</sup> Annette Weber, Red Sea: Connector and Divider Disruption Waves from the Arabian Gulf to the Horn of Africa, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, November 2017, [link](#)

The UAE, which still pretends to be an ally of Egypt, is carrying out several maneuvers in Sudan, with the aim of wooing the military leaders with ambitious partnership projects (in Port Sudan and promises of huge investments) in exchange for improving its image and enhancing its roles in Libya, Chad and other regional files. Abu Dhabi is also coordinating between the civilian component in the government of Sudan and Ethiopia, Egypt's main rival in the Nile Basin and the Horn of Africa. These attempts are still very successful, as the UAE views foreign policy as an economic, investment and financial project in the first place that can move all other files around it. No matter how short-sighted this vision may be, its early success in changing the regime in Egypt in 2013 in cooperation with its regional partners represents a successful experience that can be reproducible in the Libyan, Sudanese, and even Tunisian and Algerian cases, with a capability to turn the internal balance upside down on more than one front in the region.

In recent years, the UAE has been trying to impose drastic changes in the Horn of Africa, progressing in full swing, whether by building more military bases on the Yemeni islands recently, or in East Africa. The UAE's support for Somaliland and transforming it into an important trade corridor for landlocked Ethiopia cannot be overlooked, as Dubai Ports (DP) World is developing the port of Berbera in Somaliland and working on expanding it, hoping that it will become a major gateway for trade for Ethiopia, especially after the entry of the Ethiopian government as a 19% partner in the project, supplying land and railway lines with both Djibouti and Eritrea. These ports and roads have boosted Ethiopia's desire to form naval forces and create naval bases in Somaliland and Djibouti.

In May 2016, Dubai Ports (DP) World signed an agreement to operate and develop the Berbera port in Somaliland for a period of 30 years. Then, in March 2018, Ethiopia secured its presence in the port through a special deal with Dubai Ports, in which the former was granted a 19% stake in the port. Addis Ababa began investing \$80 million in a 500-mile road linking the port and the border city of Togochale<sup>6</sup>. Then the deal was completed by the announcement by Dubai Ports of signing an agreement to invest one billion dollars in logistical projects to link Ethiopia with these countries, less than a week after Mohammad bin Zayed met Sisi in Cairo, during which a partial agreement was put forward for the second filling as a settlement to the crisis. So we are before strategic changes made

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<sup>6</sup> Al-Alam TV, 'Does the Ethiopian Navy float on the back of the Emirates?', 5 June 2021, [link](#)

by the Emirates, some of which are harmful to Egyptian interests, without Egypt being able to address them independently, or even by taking advantage of its strategic alliance with the Emirates to ask for including Cairo as a partner in these projects or informing it of their details. At the same time, some may talk about strategic changes in Egypt's policy and plans to encircle and besiege Ethiopia, against the truth.

As for the relationship with the United States, since Trump launched the so-called "deal of the century", there has been recognition of the Emirati-Israeli leadership of the region. However, the isolation of Egypt further continued during the Biden era, where the cost of the grave human rights situation in Egypt doubled, despite the numerous opportunities presented by the opposition in light of COVID-19 to release political detainees. Instead, this file turned into a disturbing and straining file with respect to Cairo's relations with Washington.

The huge arms deals, whether those concluded with France, Germany or Russia, cannot be viewed as an attempt to ensure independence from American pressures as much as they come in response to the blackmail of those powers in various files. Since 2013, the Egyptian regime has been subject to US sanctions or threats to impose sanctions more than once, which made Sisi's receipt of a call from the White House or reception of the US Secretary of State five months after assuming power, to be described as a state of success that is worthy of celebration, as a reminder of Egypt's strategic value.

However, despite the importance of these arms deals, they are still subject to internal controversy about priorities and the actual use of these weapons in protecting the nation's strategic goals, where not all these deals can be passed against the backdrop of the deterioration of real spending on the most priority sectors, such as education and health. There are many logical comparisons between the lavish spending on armament and the spending of other countries, such as Turkey and Iran, on the same item, but it is used to double the capacity of their military industrialization and provide their armies with significant proportions of their needs of weapons. Despite the foreign military activity of Iran and Turkey, they do not spend equivalent of the money that the Sisi regime spends on the army. Their armies have not once hesitated to carry out strikes against any of their national security threats in the vital field of either of them, unlike what many Egyptian military analysts and experts usually

do whenever there is talk about the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam or even about an effective military intervention in Libya.

## Conclusion

Foreign policy is a matter that is too deep to be analyzed with tools of political discourse and propaganda rhetoric that contain oversimplifications. Attempts to withdraw discourse analysis on other tools are detrimental to any attempt to understand this policy: and in the Egyptian case it appears to be greatly misleading.

In any discussion of policies that may be less dependent, the Egyptian elites must ask serious questions about: Under what conditions can foreign policies be built as different from the policies of regimes that people had revolted against, or policies that are less dependent and more protective for any revolutionary or reform wave for the benefit of Egyptians? And questions about how to get rid of the structural dependency stemming from a chronic Egyptian need to mobilize resources, or at least to find alternatives that may be less costly.