



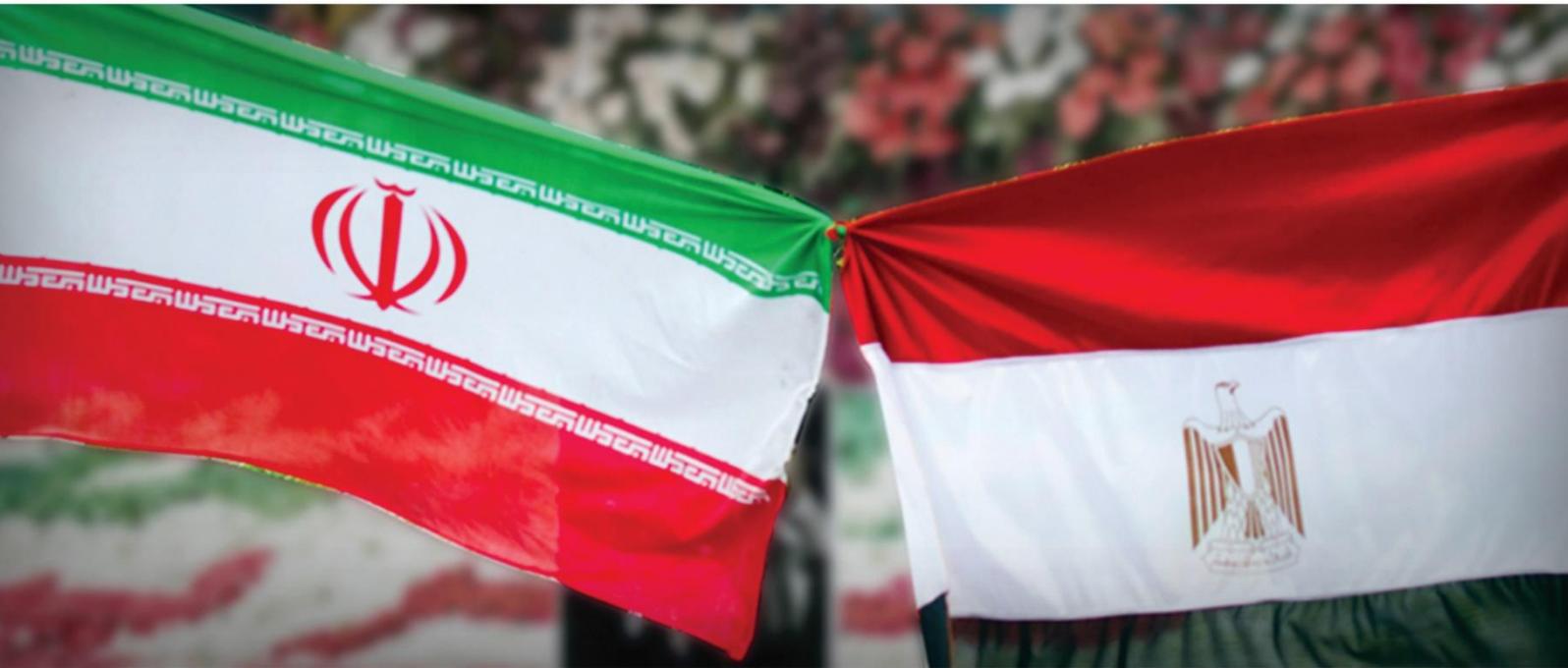
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The ambiguous relationship between Iran and Egypt is an apparent manifestation of the clashing or complicated relations between the Sunnis and Shiites in general, the Arabs and Persians in particular. This relationship has gone through many transformations, most of which in a negative direction, since the victory of the Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1979. At the time, the new rulers announced severing the "strategic" relations established by Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi with "Israel" and categorically rejected the Camp David Accords that were signed with Tel Aviv by the late Egyptian President Anwar Sadat.

After the fall of the regime of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in early 2011, the relationship between Iran and Egypt entered a new stage, but it has never reached the level of normal relations, whether under late President Mohamed Morsi, who came from the Muslim Brotherhood, or under Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who came from the military institution.

Iran and MB: Stations and Positions

Both Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) see benefits in cultivating ties between them despite falling on opposite sides of the Middle East's Sunni-Shiite divide. For Iran, outreach to the Brotherhood, particularly the movement's Egyptian branch, is a low-cost investment in a group that could help Tehran widen its influence in the region. For the Brotherhood, it is useful to have connections with Iran - a regional power that shares a similar, though not identical, ideology on the role of Islam in politics and society - to serve as political leverage with other important actors in the Middle East. While Iran is eager to develop a deeper relationship to support its regional agenda, the Muslim Brotherhood remains hesitant to move beyond friendly contacts. This is due to the organization's overriding priorities, notably its unwillingness to alienate the Sunni Arab world.

While the two parties ((Iran and the MB)) have had informal contacts since the founding of Iran's Islamic Republic in 1979, the relationship entered a new phase as the Muslim Brotherhood rose to power in Egypt after the 2011 uprising.

When the Brotherhood's candidate, Mohamed Morsi, was elected Egypt's president in 2012, official contacts between Cairo and Tehran increased. But Morsi, forced to heed the views of Egypt's military establishment and traditional allies, proved unwilling to reestablish formal diplomatic ties, which had been severed in 1979, during his first and only year in office. Instead, the new Egyptian administration undertook a more piecemeal approach toward warming relations with Iran.

Despite the coup d'état that removed the Brotherhood from power in 2013, Tehran continues to reach out to its members and views the group as a potential ally in advancing its regional goals. Meanwhile, the MB retains its pragmatism, engaging in informal contacts with Iran that will not sabotage outreach efforts to other influential regional actors. However, the Brotherhood's current weakness and the negative image of Iran among many Sunni Arabs represent obstacles to heightened cooperation.

Iran sees the Brotherhood as a bridge for improving relations with the Sunni Muslim world. Given the movement's broad reach and contacts, it could be a persuasive advocate for the Iranian-led "axis of resistance" against U.S. influence in the region, and importantly, a mediator with fellow Sunni Islamist groups hostile toward Tehran¹.

The Muslim Brotherhood see that a relationship with Iran serves to underpin the movement's self-appointed leadership role in promoting Islamic unity worldwide. It also considers it practical to maintain good relations with Iran, given its status as a regional power. Even the prospect of improved Brotherhood-Iranian ties could serve as a bargaining chip to extract concessions from regional powers opposed to Tehran, such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

However, compared to the Iranians, the Brotherhood has displayed less eagerness to increase cooperation due to its wariness over Iran's international isolation and generally unfavorable image among Sunni Muslims. Instead, the Brotherhood has engaged in contacts with Iran when expedient to serve the group's overall interests, as witnessed after the movement's political ascent in Egypt².

¹ Mismatched Expectations: Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood After the Arab Uprisings, Tamer Badawi, Osama Al-Sayyad, Carnegie Middle East Center website, March 28, 2019.

² Ibid.

Upon Morsi's election as president in June 2012, the new administration improved Egypt's ties with Iran to emphasize the Brotherhood's vision of a new and independent foreign policy. Morsi's decision to include Tehran in his first major diplomatic initiative - brokering a solution to the Syrian conflict - signaled that Egypt under the Brotherhood was willing to pursue a course at odds with the traditional isolation of Iran. The Morsi government proposed setting up a working group composed of Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran to discuss ways to halt the violence in Syria. While the diplomatic initiative never materialized, it demonstrated that the Brotherhood viewed Iran as an influential regional player that merited a seat at the table alongside Egypt's traditional pro-U.S. allies.

In August 2012, Morsi handed over the presidency of the Non-Aligned Movement to Iranian officials in Tehran, becoming the first Egyptian president to visit Iran in over thirty years. Then-Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad later reciprocated by attending an Islamic summit in Cairo in February 2013. Iran also attempted to strengthen ties through proposed deals to boost Egypt's lagging economy. These offers included a package to promote Egyptian tourism to Iranians, provide oil shipments, and implement various trade agreements³.

In July 2017, Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) engaged in the most high-profile public meeting between the two parties since Morsi's removal in Egypt. Ayatollah Mohsen Araki, an adviser to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, met with Ibrahim Munir, the MB deputy leader, on the sidelines of a meeting of the Islamic Unity Forum. This encounter provoked a heavy backlash from the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, which criticized Munir for his participation in the event and characterized the move as "a betrayal of the blood of the martyrs caused by Iranian militias." So while the talks between senior officials could be a positive signal for the future direction of the relationship, Iran's intervention in Syria remains an obstacle to better mutual ties.(4)

In the same context, the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs offered condolences for the death of former Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi, who died during in courtroom, while Mujtaba Amani, the former head of the Iranian Interests Section in Egypt, considered that Saudi Arabia and the United States "stabbed Morsi in the back."

³ Ibid.

Also, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Abbas Mousavi said in a statement, "While respecting the views of the great and aware Egyptian people, Iran offers condolences on the death of Dr. Mohamed Morsi to the Egyptian people, his family and loved ones, asking Allah Almighty to bless him with his vast mercy and to inspire his relatives patience and solace, and more success for the Egyptian people," he said, noting that Morsi was "the first democratically elected civilian president in Egypt," according to the official Iranian news agency (IRNA)⁴.

This position was considered, according to observers, as an expression of Iran's dissatisfaction with the development of events in Egypt in favor of tightening the army's grip on the reins of power and excluding the Muslim Brotherhood. Consequently, Iranian efforts to restore or improve relations with Egypt declined, in return for the increasing Saudi and American influence there.

Iran and Egypt in the era of Sisi

During the era of General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who was defense minister during the era of the late President Mohamed Morsi, things did not progress much between Egypt and Iran, as the obstacles - obstacles with complicated political and religious dimensions, as mentioned above - to improving the relationship between the two sides were similar to what happened during the era of the Muslim Brotherhood in power.

Before coming to power, Sisi talked about the security of the Arab Gulf region, noting that "Egypt's security is not separated from the security of the Gulf," stressing that the risks are receding, but the security challenges are great.

Al-Sisi also said: "We tell our brothers in the Gulf that we'll 'arrive straight away'," in reference to the Egyptian army's readiness to move to repel any "aggression" against the Gulf states, adding: "We have an army that does not forget those who stood with Egypt."

⁴ Iran offers condolences on the death of Mohamed Morsi with respect to Egyptians.. Amani: Saudi Arabia and America stabbed him in the back, CNN Arabic, June 18, 2019.

About Iran, Sisi said: "We have the ability to protect our Arab national security. Iran understands that the relationship with Egypt passes through the Arab Gulf. The Gulf countries are our people, and it is important for us to make sure they live in peace. All we seek from Iran is a fair relationship."

Al-Sisi also stressed that Egypt cannot accept anyone harming Gulf regional security, saying, "It is our right to secure our interests, just as Iran has the right to worry about its interests."⁵

In the same context, Sisi said, in an interview with France 24 in 2017, "Our relationship with Iran has been severed for nearly 40 years, and we are seeking to reduce the existing tension and ensure the security of our brothers in the Gulf," stressing that Egypt backs the Gulf countries in maintaining their security and stability," adding that Egypt is part of the Arab national security, including the security and stability of the Gulf countries," stressing that the Egyptian government supports any measures that may guarantee the stability of the Gulf states⁶.

Later, Sisi affirmed his country's support for allies in the Arab Gulf, calling on Iran to stop interfering in the affairs of other countries⁷.

Sisi also accused the pro-Iranian militias in Syria, Yemen and Lebanon of fueling the conflict in the Arab region, stressing the importance of maintaining stability in the Middle East, away from conflicts and military solutions⁸.

On the other hand, the Iranian Foreign Ministry criticized the army's overthrow of President Mohamed Morsi, in an early reaction to the events in Egypt, which led to Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's assumption of power in 2014⁹.

"Every spring is followed by a hot summer and a cold winter, where they must be tolerated; and the Islamists and revolutionaries should not imagine that everything is over, but this issue is a continuous movement," Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Abbas Araghchi said in statements to the official

⁵ Al-Sisi to Iran: Our relationship with you passes through the Gulf states, Al-Arabiya TV website, May 21, 2014.

⁶ Iranian media highlights Sisi's statements about relations with Tehran, Israa Ahmed Fouad, Youm7 website, October 24, 2017.

⁷ Al-Sisi: Iran must stop interfering in the affairs of other countries, Lebanese Forces website, November 8, 2017.

⁸ Iran's militias in Syria, Yemen and Lebanon are fueling the region, Al-Ain News Agency website, July 31, 2019.

⁹ Iran criticizes the overthrow of Morsi, and Egypt refuses to interfere in its affairs, BBC Arabic website, July 7, 2013.

IRNA news agency, adding, "We consider it inappropriate for the army to intervene in politics and topple a democratically elected President."

Araki explained that Egypt faces two main dilemmas; first, the people's demands that must be fulfilled; second, President Morsi's inability to run the country, especially with respect to the foreign affairs.

Araghchi expressed his hope that the developments that Egypt was going through would have a positive impact on the "Islamic awakening", adding that his country was closely watching how the Egyptian developments would affect the Syrian arena.

For his part, Egyptian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Badr Abdel-Aty said that interference in Egyptian affairs, as indicated by Iranian statements, is unacceptable, stressing Egypt's firm stance on rejection of interference in the internal affairs of other countries.

Badr Abdel-Aty stressed that, "What Egypt is witnessing is political movement and developments, a product of the people's will that has been clearly expressed by citizens since June 30, which emerged in a road map announced by the Egyptian armed forces on July 3, supported by the people."

It is noteworthy that the relations between Egypt and Iran were severed after the Egyptian-Israeli peace agreements signed by the late Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in 1979.

However, Iran welcomed Egypt's January Revolution in 2011, which forced former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to step down. Iran then described this revolution as an "Islamic revolution", and the two countries announced restoration of relations thereafter.

Iran and promotion of Shiism among Egyptians

Returning to Morsi's era and the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood in 2013, especially the accusations that some Egyptian made against Iran with respect to promoting Shiism among the Sunni people of Egypt, to achieve sectarian and political goals, the Chargé d'Affairs of the Iranian Embassy to Egypt Mujtaba Amani affirmed in exclusive statements to Al-Gumhuriya, a government-owned newspaper, that "Iran has not got any ambitions to achieve by developing relations with Egypt, and it only seeks to achieve the mutual interests of the two countries and peoples on the grounds that Shiite Iran shall be a supporter of the Sunni Egypt, and the Sunni Egypt be a supporter of Shiite Iran.

Mujtaba also denied the "rumors" about Iran's efforts to establish six thousand Shiite Husseinias in Egypt in exchange for supporting the Egyptian economy, explaining that "To Iran, Egypt's standing is greater than all the stalkers."

Some reports had claimed the existence of an Egyptian-Iranian deal under which Iran would provide 30 billion dollars to Egypt and restart a thousand suspended factories, in exchange for handing over Fatimid mosques to Iranian administration and building thousands of new Husseinias in Egypt.

Amani pointed out that "Zionism is working to divert the conflict between Sunnis and Shiites to harming the interests of the region," adding, "Those groups that organize demonstrations do not have enough information about Iran, which will not seek or work to spread Shiism in Egypt."

The Iranian Chargé d'Affairs also denied "any storming of his home in Cairo," accusing unknown groups of cooperating with elements of the Syrian opposition for orchestrating such demonstrations to disrupt Cairo and Tehran's efforts to build strategic relations that respect all regional countries against the common Zionist enemy.

He explained that "Iran is always under attack whenever it tries to help Islamic countries, and that it only wants the good for Egypt and all the countries of the Islamic world."

He also said: "Unfortunately, I think that the foreign scheme is playing with the minds of the demonstrators, who are originally good groups, and that the majority of the Egyptian people welcome rapprochement between the two countries," noting that there is a fatwa by Imam Khomeini not to offend the Sunnis and the Prophet's Companions¹⁰.

At that stage, after Egypt opened the door to Iranian tourists, a discussion arose in the Egyptian street about this. While some saw that this step would constitute an entry point for spreading Shiism and exporting the Iranian revolution to the Sunni country, others downplayed these fears, highlighting the country's economic returns. Following the arrival of the first Iranian group of about 30 tourists,

¹⁰ Iranian Chargé d'Affairs to Egypt: Shiite Iran is a support to Sunni Egypt, Al-Nashra website, April 7, 2013.

to the governorates of Luxor and Aswan in southern Egypt in April 2013, views varied between welcoming and totally rejecting reception of Iranians in Egypt.

A statement was issued by the Salafi Al-Asala Party denouncing and rejecting the arrival of the Iranian tourist group to Aswan. The party described the tourism cooperation agreement with Iran as “a curtain to cover Iran's racist regional Safavid project to spread Shiism in the region.”

On the other hand, Adel Eleiwa, a member of the Shura Council of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, said in a statement to DW Arabic that Egypt should welcome all people from all over the world; “We need hard currency. Egypt will benefit from reviving tourism, which brings great income to the country.” Regarding the fears of Iranian tourism, Eleiwa said: “There is Israeli tourism in Egypt, so how can there not be Iranian tourism?” Eleiwa added: “Talking about the spread of Shiism in Egypt is incredible. Al-Azhar is present, and Egypt adheres to its religion and belief.”

For his part, the Minister of Tourism at the time, Hisham Zaazou, denied, in press statements, the existence of any threat to the country in light of allowing Iranian tourism. He stressed that Iranians would not be allowed to visit religious sites in Egypt¹¹.

Anyway, the accusations against Iran of trying to promote Shiism among the people of Egypt did not change during the era of Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi as well. But this fact never prevented attempts to bring the two countries and the two peoples together. The Iranian website “Asr Ma” revealed what it called “behind the scenes and details of the visit of a delegation of Egyptian Shiite leaders to Iran.”

The site said that the Egyptian delegation provided an explanation of the situation of Shiites in Egypt, socially, economically, and politically, and demanded that the Iranian government reopen its embassy in Cairo. The Iranian website added, “The delegation included Dr. Ahmed Rasim Al-Nafis, Sayed Taher Al-Hashemi, and Imad Kandil, all of whom are supporters of the Sisi regime in Egypt. Members of the delegation believed that the return of Egyptian-Iranian relations would constitute a fundamental change in the Islamic world.” confirming that “The Egyptian Shiite delegation told the Iranian side

¹¹ Iranian tourism to Egypt... between reviving tourism and fears of Shiism, DW Arabic, June 4, 2013.

that Sisi's policies do not bear any hostility to the Shiites, unlike the extremist Wahhabi currents that seek promotion of extremism.”

The Iranian website stated that Abbas Al-Kaabi, a member of the Iranian Leadership Council of Experts, praised the role of the Shiites of Egypt, and valued their stance on political developments in Egypt, demanding that they remain close to the current (Sisi) regime in their country. Al-Kaabi stressed that restoration of Iranian-Egyptian relations would contribute to opening new political horizons in the region, as he put it.

Dr. Ahmed Rasim al-Nafis told Al-Masry Al-Youm, an Egyptian newspaper, that: “The Egyptian Shiite leaders traveled to Iran to attend an international religious conference that is held every 4 years in Tehran for Shiites around the world, and not for a political purpose.” He added, “The discussions that took place with Al-Kaabi on the sidelines of the conference dealt with Iranian-Egyptian relations, where we hoped to unite the Islamic nation to face risks, in addition to benefiting economically from cooperation between the two sides.” He continued, “What was published about our demand to reopen the Iranian embassy in Egypt was incorrect, because we are not officials in the Egyptian Foreign Ministry to make such demand, especially that the Iranian embassy is present and active.”

Regarding Sisi, Al-Nafis said that the Egyptian Shiite leaders there expressed their respect for him (Sisi) and his quest to renew the moderate religious discourse far from extremism, and that they stressed that all Sisi's statements and speeches never addressed sectarian discrimination, but rather he was speaking to all Egyptians.

Al-Nafis criticized what he described as “the allegations of some extremist anti-Shiite movements in Egypt, that the Shiite visits to Iran posed a threat to national security,” stressing that he would file a lawsuit against the leaders of these movements¹².

In the same context, according to the semi-official Iranian “Tasnim” news agency, the Iranian religious authority, Nasser Makarim Shirazi, warned the Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar of the danger of what he described as a “media and propaganda war”, that may lead to “falling into the trap of the

¹² An Egyptian Shiite delegation demands Iran to restore relations: “Al-Sisi does not antagonize us,” Osama Al-Mahdi, Al-Masry Al-Youm website, August 25, 2015.

enemies of Islam” (15). This came in a message to Al-Azhar’s Grand Sheikh that he posted on his website, against the backdrop of Al-Azhar’s announcement of a cultural competition on the topic: “Propagation of Shiism in the Sunni Society: Causes, Risks, and How to Confront It”¹³.

Iran and Egypt's relationship with Israel

One of the main motives for the Iranians’ enthusiasm for restoring relations with Egypt, in the aftermath of the downfall of Hosni Mubarak, was the sudden positions announced by the elected president, Mohamed Morsi, shortly after he assumed power, about the possibility of reconsidering the Camp David Accords, which Iran had strongly rejected, and considering restoration of his country’s relations with Iran, where Morsi called for restoring normal relations with Iran, and reviewing peace agreements with Israel, in statements he gave during an interview with the Iranian Fars News Agency, where Morsi said: “We must restore normal relations with Iran on the basis of the common interests of the two countries and develop areas of political coordination and economic cooperation, because this will achieve strategic balance in the region, which has been within my platform.”

For his part, Sabah Zangana, a former Iranian Foreign Ministry adviser, considered Mohamed Morsi’s victory in Egyptian presidency a watershed moment in the course of diplomatic relations between Cairo and Tehran, severed since 1980 in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution, in protest from Iran on signing of the Camp David Accords with Israel in 1979.

In addition, Morsi said that Egypt’s policy with Israel “will be on an equal footing, because Egypt is no less than Israel,” adding that Egypt would look into the peace agreement with Israel through the Egyptian institutions and government, stressing that he would not make unilateral decisions in this regard, saying, “We will look into all the agreements, Camp David Accords and others, that were signed between Egypt and Israel, in order to achieve the interests of Egypt and Palestine first.”¹⁴

¹³ An Iranian religious authority warns Al-Azhar against “falling into the trap of the enemies of Islam” after a competition on the “Shiite tide,” CNN Arabic, December 30, 2015.

¹⁴ Morsi calls for restoring relations with Iran and reviewing the peace agreement with Israel, Al-Hurra TV website, June 25, 2012.

But Iran's hopes of establishing special relations with Egypt evaporated after the coup against Morsi and the access of Sisi to power, who not only protected the Camp David Accords with "Israel", but also he worked to boost public and secret relations with it, as admitted by Israeli circles.

The NRG Israeli news website reported that relations between Tel Aviv and Cairo reached a historical level to the point of an alliance under the regime of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi.

The Israeli website said that cooperation relations between the two countries "are improving, reaching their climax in more than one field, to the point of alliance between them, although the Egyptian people are still very cold towards Israel," adding that Egyptian-Israeli relations under Sisi's rule witnessed successive developments, compared to the situation during the time of President Mohamed Morsi, when relations with Israel was strained.

This was demonstrated by recent evidence, most notably the historic visit of Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry to Israel, the return of the Egyptian ambassador to Israel, and the reopening of the Israeli embassy in Cairo, which was closed for four years. Moreover, for the first time, Egypt voted in favor of Israel in a United Nations committee.

The website added that the two countries have been cooperating militarily in the ongoing war against IS militants in Sinai, including Israeli combat planes attacking targets in the heart of the Sinai Peninsula. Tel Aviv also allowed Cairo to increase the number of its military forces in Sinai, contrary to what was stipulated in the Camp David Accords signed between them; In addition to coordinating their efforts against Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

The Israeli website also indicated that while Israel launched several wars against Hamas in Gaza, Egypt overthrew the Muslim Brotherhood - which it described as Hamas' parent organization - which ruled Egypt (for one year) before Sisi's coup. Egypt's cooperation with Israel was also demonstrated by its purchase of large quantities of Israeli gas. The Israeli website concluded by stating that the current Egyptian attitude even reached the point of thwarting the Palestinian Authority's efforts aimed at isolating Israel in the international arena¹⁵.

¹⁵ Israeli website: Tel Aviv's relations with Cairo have reached the point of alliance, Al Jazeera Net website, 23/11/2016.

Conclusion

Despite all serious attempts that have been made to restore relations between the two major countries, Egypt and Iran, since the fall of the Hosni Mubarak regime in 2011, unfortunately these attempts have only partially succeeded, for well-known political, economic and sectarian reasons. Not to mention the declared or hidden American and Israeli influence in thwarting such attempts, because any Egyptian-Iranian rapprochement will negatively reflect on the close ties between Egypt and both the United States and Israel, at various levels.

While the political obstacles to restoring the full relationship between Egypt and Iran during the Morsi and Sisi eras are similar, the prospects for the development of this “cold” relationship so far remain likely in the event that the political visions or interests of both parties change, which may overshadow any inhibiting religious factors; as such factors are still highly influential, especially to the Egyptian regime, which takes into account sectarian and national sensitivities, as well as the huge sums offered to it during the past years by some Gulf countries to keep Egypt away from Iran as much as possible.