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# **The MENA Foreign Policy of Egypt under Sisi**

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*The rise of chief General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in power signaled some major strategic shifts in Egyptian foreign affairs. The main goals which dictate the current government's foreign policy are domestic stability and regime survival. These targets are best served by Sisi's anti-Islamist and pro-status quo approach in an era of growing anti-terrorism concerns across the region. In general, Sisi wants to portray his regime to the world and his people as a safe, moderate and reliable island of stability in the midst of turmoil.*

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The current Egyptian regime was quick in switching its financial patronage from the USA to the Gulf and building stronger ties with Russia and China when the West questioned its legitimacy and democratic commitment. Egyptian military forces returned to Yemen after five decades in order to support their Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) allies and protect maritime traffic in the Red Sea. However, establishing alliances with different actors putting forward competing agendas in a turbulent region is a difficult and risky task at hand. The Russian and Saudi Arabian clash of viewpoints on the Syrian war explains the limited, and only vocal, intervention of Egypt to this major regional issue so far. The current chaos in Libya and the spread of Islamists in Egypt's near abroad could be described as Sisi's worst nightmare. The Egyptian backing of the internationally recognized Tobruk government is a natural consequence of Sisi's choice to support the pre-"Arab Spring" status quo and fight political Islam which is represented by the Tripoli government. Moreover, the relations between Cairo and Jerusalem have been very close ever since the rise of the chief General in power in contrast with the Muslim Brotherhood era, and in line with the post-Sadat Egyptian stance. The Egyptian government played a successful mediating role during the 2014 Israel-Gaza war even though it had severed its relations with Hamas.

## YEMEN

Egypt supports militarily the intervention of the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen for a number of reasons explained by its domestic and regional environment. Sisi had to face a wave of criticism from Western capitals concerning his undemocratic practices when he overthrew Mohamed Morsi amid mass protests against the latter's rule. The Egyptian economy was in bad shape and the USA temporarily froze their aid program. Over 40% of the population lived below the poverty line (2\$/day), inflation was on the rise and unemployment had increased up to 13% (youth 33%, women 24%). However, the anti-Brotherhood GCC kingdoms, acting as a *deus ex machina*, offered substantial financial assistance to the new government. In exchange, the Egyptian President promised to help his GCC allies resist Iran's hegemonic aspirations and called for the creation of a joint Arab force to defend the Gulf and fight Islamic extremism. Although Sisi's war against the Iran-backed Houthi militia brought back bad memories of the Egyptian invasion in 1962 - often called the "Egyptian Vietnam" - it was a necessary measure in order to remove the maritime security threat in the Red Sea and to guarantee the Suez Canal's traffic.<sup>1</sup> Sisi saw the war in Yemen as an additional opportunity to advertise his "war on terror" domestically and to present, internationally, his state as a bulwark against extremism in the Middle East. Furthermore, the controversial American blessing of the operation played a role in warming up the damaged relations between Cairo and Washington.<sup>2</sup>

## SYRIA

Yemen might have been a one way road for the chief General but the Syrian case is a much more complicated one and demands more delicate handling. The Muslim Brotherhood held Egypt in tight embrace with Turkey and Qatar over their pro-Sunni and anti-Assad fury. That has been replaced by a more balanced approach under Sisi. Much to the delight of President Assad, Egypt now wishes that the Syrian state and army do not collapse in fear of the negative impact to regional stability and security.<sup>3</sup> Actually, Sisi is more concerned with Sunni extremism in the region, which also spreads like a cancer in the Sinai, than with the Shi'a Axis (Iran, Syria, Hezbollah). Thus, the Egyptian position on the issue calls for a political solution to the Syrian conflict including the Ba'athist regime. That is very close to the demands of the Russians who have been very supportive to Sisi's ascent to power from the beginning. In return, the Egyptians backed President Putin's decision to bomb positions of anti-regime rebels in

Syria. However, the Egyptian choice to include Assad in Syria's power game, even though it is just vocal one, has alarmed other parties. Nonetheless, Sisi does not bother with the Turkish and Qatari hostile attitude against his regime and its Syria policy since they have already been staunch supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups in the region. Saudi Arabia though could prove to be a headache for Egypt on Syria. Major powers of the GCC, such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the UAE, provided political and financial backing to the Egyptian government and they would wish to influence its important choices on the international chessboard. The chief General followed their lead in Yemen but the Syrian conflict touches on his crusade against political Islam and terrorism. After all, in Sisi's dream of a joint Arab force, the primary target would be the Islamists in Egypt's neighborhood.<sup>4</sup>

## **LIBYA**

Targeting Islamists was also the case with neighboring Libya where the Egyptian President strongly supports the elected and internationally recognized government exiled in Tobruk against its Islamist opposition in Tripoli. After the Western-backed uprising in 2011, Libya descended into chaos and increasingly became a major security threat for Egypt due to their 1,115 km shared border. Qatar, Turkey and Sudan support the Islamist forces in a similar situation to what transpires in Syria. In contrast, Egypt and the UAE assist the official government. Cairo is believed to have provided clandestine support to Khalifa Haftar, a Gaddafi-era General, who was appointed Commander of the Libyan armed forces by the exiled government. In addition, Egypt allowed UAE aircrafts to use its airports to conduct strikes against Islamist militia in Libya without notifying Washington on the matter.<sup>5</sup> When the Libyan branch of the Islamic State abducted and later beheaded 21 Egyptian Copts, the Egyptian and Libyan air forces responded with airstrikes inside Libya within hours. It was an opportunity for Sisi to get directly involved in the neighboring country and send a message of national unity to Egypt's significant Christian community which mainly favors him. This time, the USA silently agreed and the Arab League, with the exception of Qatar, openly supported.<sup>6</sup> Sisi failed though to internationalize and further push his Libyan agenda, since his call for military action in Libya by the US-led coalition against the Islamic State, and a request to the UN to lift the arms embargo on the Libyan national military, fell on deaf ears.

## **ISRAEL-PALESTINE**

The Egyptian President has been active in trying to revive his country's mediatory role in another thorn in the region, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. On the one hand, Sisi has been closely cooperating with Israel on security issues, and on the other, he has isolated Hamas in favor of the Palestinian Authority. The chief General has been calling for the establishment of an independent Palestinian state in which he even proposed to send Egyptian troops to provide stability and security until trust was built.<sup>7</sup> In addition, he extended a hand of friendship to Israel by asking for further agreements based on common interests and proposing the establishment of a regional security system which would guarantee border security for all the neighboring states. In return, the Israelis allowed the increase of Egyptian military deployments in the Sinai Peninsula to fight against the "Sinai Province" (formerly Ansar Bait al-Maqdis), an offshoot of the Islamic State.

Sisi shares Washington's and Jerusalem's view of Hamas as a terrorist organization, and a dangerous cousin of the Muslim Brotherhood. Thus, the current regime undertook an aggressive operation to shut down the underground tunnels from Sinai to Gaza along with a widespread anti-Hamas media campaign which castigates the Islamist group for meddling in Egypt's domestic affairs during the Morsi era and maintaining links with the terrorists operating in the Sinai. Sisi's controversial decision to link Hamas with an international Islamist conspiracy against Egypt, and tighten the blockade

of Gaza while increasing the politico economic pressure on the group, could either force them to be more cooperative with the PA towards a solution, or backfire against Egypt's intermediary role.<sup>8</sup> After all, during the 2014 Israel-Gaza conflict, Sisi had to outmaneuver Turkey and Qatar, which coveted Egypt's position as a negotiator between the Palestinians and the Israelis, before managing to broker a fragile and indefinite ceasefire.<sup>9</sup>

Egypt under President Sisi appears to be much more active in the international arena compared to the last years of the Mubarak era while promoting different policies and alliances than those pursued by Morsi. The bilateral relations with the USA have not returned to full normalcy but the Americans recognize the importance of Egypt for the region and appear increasingly willing to overlook certain undemocratic practices or human rights' abuses in exchange for stability and closer cooperation with the regime. After Sisi exchanged multiple visits with the Russian President, giving the impression that Egypt is ready to pursue a more independent and multilateral foreign policy, the US resumed their military aid and adopted a much more balanced tone towards the Egyptian government.<sup>10</sup> Although the Egyptian and American views seem to converge on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as well as the war in Yemen, Cairo did not hesitate to publicly support the Russians on the Syrian issue and push its own agenda in Libya.

After a short break, during the Muslim Brotherhood rule, the Egyptian-GCC relations became even warmer than before, with the exception of Qatar, and the rich kingdoms gave the kiss of life to Egypt's battered economy. However, the latest Egyptian stance on Syria might complicate their alliance. Turkey and Qatar, even after the Saudi-led efforts to reconcile Cairo and Doha, remain the harshest critics against President Sisi since they actively promote the rise of political Islam in the region. The Egyptian President presents himself as a defender of his country and the region against religious extremism. It remains to be seen whether that narrative will prove to be sufficient, in the long term, to grant him popularity and support from his people and abroad.

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