



## Egypt's regional role and the securitization of popular demand

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*Egypt has been in constant upheaval, especially in the past years, following Sisi's rise to power. Popular struggle is becoming more and more penalized, while a series of human rights violations and growing public discontent towards the government have been observed. Popular demand seems overshadowed by a security and counter-terrorism agenda. This article will focus on the securitization strategy and examine Egypt's current foreign policy priorities, its role in regional power struggles and whether new coalitions challenge the interests of traditional allies.*

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Socioeconomic inequalities, rampant state violence and police brutality, violence against women, elite rule and elimination of political opponents are only a few of the social, political and economic issues at stake in Egypt. During the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings, the people of Egypt rose up to demand better work opportunities, less unemployment and corruption, more transparency, socioeconomic benefits and a regime, free of nepotism, clientelism and dependence on foreign interests and external financial aid. Despite the promises of former military and intelligence man and current President, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, for the restart of the economy and the enhancement of quality of life, statistics showcase that no such systemic reforms were particularly successful. In fact, unemployment in Egypt is on a rise, reaching almost 11% during 2020, with more than thirty million people living below the poverty line, according to World Bank. Meanwhile, corruption seems lower than in previous decades, being at the 33rd place worldwide, according to Trading Economics Corruption Index, while at the same time, data about the country is becoming less and less available.<sup>1</sup>

The legitimization of the emergency measures of the authoritarian regime was supposed to be balanced out through the President's promises for more job opportunities, improved public services and security.<sup>2</sup> The mass and vivid demonstrations by members of all aspects of society, from labor workers, to feminist organizations and students, showcase that dissatisfaction among the people for the Sisi government and the hegemony of the ruling elite and military networks has been rapidly growing, amidst the pandemic, especially. Anti-government protests against corruption, violations of human rights and political freedoms and a rapidly growing grassroots feminist movement are becoming more and more embedded in the social and political life of the majority of Egyptians. At the same time, abductions, mass arrests, torture, illicit imprisonments, extrajudicial killings, uninvestigated disappearances, mass death sentences and a growing number of political prisoners (allegedly more than 60.000), combined with uncontrollably violent police brutality, are all aspects that are making the people's demand struggle in Egypt dangerous.<sup>3</sup> It is argued that this aforementioned state oppression is part of or is being justified by a broader narrative of the securitization of politics in Egypt. The focus of the government is on the tackling of the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and the regional activity of various Islamic cells. For instance, one of the priorities of the Sisi government since its rise to power in 2014, was the eradication of jihadi IS-affiliated groups in the Sinai Peninsula, through intelligence cooperation with Israel and local tribes. Various initiatives, such as the unofficial tribal confederation of the Sinai Tribes Union, are being trained to counter-terrorism techniques, while they participate in special operations, provide intelligence to the military and scout for possible terrorists. Property and agricultural fields have been gravely damaged from military operations in the peninsula, which are yet to be compensated for, while Bedouin tribes have been victims of terrorist attacks in the Sinai at numerous times.<sup>4</sup>

Counterinsurgency and anti-terrorism policies are depicted as necessary and part of a greater security plan for the country as a whole, protecting its national integrity and safeguarding the people from terrorist attacks. The numerous deathly attacks against various Coptic churches during the past years are one of the most characteristic examples of extremist activity in Egypt, whereas, the Christian population in the Sinai region is the most common target of the Islamic State. The dominant narrative is that a domestic and regional war on terror is what will bring true prosperity for the people of the country, while the military is the most competent actor for handling such issues. This securitization discourse, embellished with amendments to protest rights, the definition of terrorism and penal law legislations, has paved the way for a broader understanding of what is deemed a threat to security and who may be considered a terrorist.<sup>5</sup> Stemming from the need to criminalize and ostracize the Egyptian chapter of the Muslim Brotherhood, it allowed for the demonization and criminalization of political activity in general. In other words, any and all political opponents and human rights defenders may be silenced, when being referred to as terrorists. For instance, in 2017 two human rights activists fighting for justice for disappeared persons, Ibrahim Metwally and Ahmad Amasha, were themselves abducted, tortured and led to trial, with the accusation of threatening national security. Moreover, with a heavy emphasis on counterterrorism, the Egyptian government is rumored to be using alleged terrorists as scapegoats to

mislead the public away from the structural deeply rooted economic, political and societal disparities in the country while at the same time legitimising the unprecedented levels of state violence. For instance, postgraduate student Ahmed Samir Santawy has been sentenced to four years in prison with the accusation of being a member of a terrorist organization, without any investigation or evidence, barring posts on social media, where he accuses the Egyptian state of a series of human rights violations.<sup>6</sup>

The dominance of the military in Egyptian affairs is not only supported through security-based policies and the occupation of crucial government posts by military men, but also through its growing prevalence in the economic sphere. A vast number of enterprises with interests in the infrastructure industry are owned by the military and are reaping benefits both from the promotion of large-scale projects, such as port expansions and Suez Canal corridor development projects, but also from tax related initiatives. Also, as poverty is growing and food scarcity is more and more prominent, the military is rushing to answer the demand through controlling certain agricultural production networks, rendering their cheap food products way more competitive than others.<sup>7</sup>

When it comes to Sisi's foreign policy strategy, what is being pointed out is a relative shift from a consistently subservient regional role of Egypt to US interests during the Mubarak era. In other words, the current government is largely focused on reestablishing Egyptian policy autonomy, one based on national interest, while advocating for state sovereignty and security in the broader region of North Africa and the Middle East.<sup>8</sup> The focus seems now to be on reestablishing a balanced set of alliances within a broader spectrum of regional actors. It is one of Egypt's priorities to tackle the rising clout of Turkey and Qatar. This is characteristically showcased in the most recent Libya crisis, wherein Egypt, along with Saudi Arabia and the UAE supported the Haftar led LNA, while Turkey and Qatar supported the UN-recognized Sarraj government. Relations with Saudi Arabia and its other Gulf allies, have been consistently important for Egypt during the past decades, mainly due to the tens of billions of dollars in foreign aid and strategic trade agreements of crude oil and butane. The United Arab Emirates are one of Egypt's closest allies, especially when it comes to economic relations, as the country's petroleum and electronic products exports have exceeded 3 billion dollars in 2019. Egypt's well equipped and advanced military and intelligence are of strategic importance for Saudi Arabia and its quest for minimizing Iran's influence. In fact, relations with Saudi Arabia were at their nadir before Sisi's rise to power, during the Morsi governance and the Kingdom's discontent with a Muslim Brotherhood government. However, following Sisi's coup the alliance was merely reestablished.<sup>9</sup> In 2017, the transfer of two Red Sea islands, Tiran and Sanafir, from Egypt to Saudi Arabia, allegedly as compensation for the great financial support of the latter to the Sisi government, sparked great unrest amongst the Egyptian people, accusing the President of betraying the country's territorial sovereignty.<sup>10</sup>

Lately, Saudi-Egyptian relations are tense due to Egypt's decision to refrain from a direct military engagement in the Saudi-led coalition against the Irani-backed Houthis in the Yemeni civil war. Moreover, Egypt turned to Iraq for oil supply, while supporting the latter's territorial sovereignty, threatened by the Islamic State and the Kurdish struggle for autonomy. Evidently, counter-terrorism is also a great aspect of Egypt's regional multilateral strategy. Furthermore, the divergence from US foreign policy priorities led Egypt to enhance its partnerships with Russia and China, in terms of arms deals and economic agreements. Egypt also supported Russia's intervention in Syria against the Islamic State, sparking Saudi Arabia's discontent. Both the strategy in Yemen and in Syria are considered to be Egyptian attempts to showcase the country's growing focus on the protection of its own national interests, and willing to deviate from the Saudi led coalition, if deemed necessary. It is also evident that Egypt is more concerned in hindering Turkey's interests in the Mediterranean, rather than participating in an alliance against Iran, especially after Biden's appointment to office, who is believed to follow a more moderate approach towards Iran than his predecessor. However, the recent rapprochement with the US, as Biden approved a 2.5 billion dollars arms sale to Egypt, effectively prioritizing arms trade deals over mass human rights violations. Meanwhile, tensions with Turkey are growing, both because of its longstanding support for Muslim Brotherhood members and rivalry for gas reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean. The recent Ankara talks between the two countries, however, indicate that an

improvement of their ties may be possible. At the same time, Egypt's relations with Israel remain active and stable, based on bilateral cooperation on counter-terrorism regional initiatives, particularly in the Sinai.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, the complex and enduring issue of the Nile Basin multilateral water management with Ethiopia and Sudan and the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam is threatening Egypt's primacy in the region's water resources, while an uneven and too quick filling up of the dam from Ethiopia's side could pose issues for Egypt's agricultural capability in the future. In other words, the annual flooding of the Nile during the akhet period is vital for Egyptian soil and food production. According to Egypt, it is believed that the dam will jeopardize the regularity of the flooding, leading to food scarcity and further unemployment rates, in an already deeply constrained economy. Nonetheless, cooperation and active diplomacy between the actors involved in the exploitation of the hydra-infrastructure in the Nile is slowly and steadily advancing. Even if a fast filling of the dam would "revive" Ethiopia, it is in Egypt's concerns to extend the time frame of the dam process for several years, so that no desertification or water and food scarcity arise as additional domestic issues.<sup>12</sup>

In conclusion, Egypt seems caught in between domestic and regional turmoil. Popular upheaval against the government and its authoritarian policies is growing, while the latter's focus remains on the securitization of the structural socioeconomic issues and on the devotion to a counterterrorism military-based strategy, rather than on the disengagement of the country from external financial aid. Meanwhile, Egypt's multifaceted foreign policy is showcasing Sisi's intentions to broaden the country's regional and international alliances beyond US foreign policy, focusing on restraining Turkey's ambitions, while at the same time maintaining necessary ties with Saudi Arabia and developing new ones with the United Arab Emirates.

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