

THE CARAVAN

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EGYPT: PAST AND PRESENT KEYSTONE OF THE ARAB- ISLAMIC WORLD



EGYPT'S ROLE IN THE GREATER MIDDLE EAST

Egypt has always found itself in the crosshairs of history, balancing precariously between its glorious past as the arbiter of all things Arab and its own increasingly unwieldy and imploding societal demands. It struggles to stay afloat, to find its way out of an impossible demographic dilemma and the contending forces of authoritarianism and the specter of militant Islam. As Fouad Ajami wrote more than twenty years ago “A fissure has opened, right in the heart of Egypt’s traditionally stoic and reliable middle class. A wing of this class has defected to theocratic politics. The rest are disaffected and demoralized. There is no resolution in sight for this dilemma.”

As a new administration devises its strategy towards the Middle East, the predicament of the Arabic speaking world’s largest country cannot be ignored. The essays assembled here take on the pivotal challenges facing Egypt – the future of Islamism in the land that gave the phenomenon its birth, the country’s attempt to balance the United States by pivoting towards Russia, the troubles of the American Egyptian relationship, the emerging Egyptian regional policy, and the country’s relationship with its neighbor to the east, Israel, with whom it has fought four wars and established a cold peace.

With a population of over 90 million and a legacy that continues to influence trends in the Arab world – for better or worse, it is a nation that demands the attention of those shaping American foreign policy. The analysis provided in this collection offers some compelling reasons as to why this is so.

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U.S.-EGYPT STRATEGIC RELATIONS, FROM OBAMA TO TRUMP: WHAT WENT WRONG AND WHAT MIGHT BE POSSIBLE

by Robert Satloff

It all started so well. On a trip designed to symbolize a “new beginning” in America’s relations with “the Muslim world” after the terrorism-focused anxiety of the George W. Bush years, President Barack Obama scheduled visits in June 2009 to Cairo and Riyadh, capitals of America’s two leading Arab allies. And to underscore the message, the White House pointedly excluded a stop in America’s lone democratic ally in the region, Israel, which the previous president had visited (twice!) the previous year. Eight years after Saudis and Egyptians wreaked havoc on September 11, the leaders of those countries had reason to believe the fresh face in the White House was keen to rebuild America’s traditional partnerships in the Middle East.

But the seminal speech that President Obama delivered in Cairo dashed those hopes. Delivered not to parliament, like speeches he would give in Ottawa and London, but to a by-invitation-only gathering at Cairo University, the president of the United States uttered not a single word toward the president of Egypt – not a word of thanks for his hospitality, not a word of gratitude for Egypt’s quarter-century fulfillment of peace with Israel, not a word of appreciation for the 36,000-man Egyptian force sent to assist America in the war to liberate Kuwait 18 years

earlier. Instead, after insisting that Egyptian authorities admit a Muslim Brotherhood delegation into the campus auditorium to attend the speech, the president spoke over the heads of Egypt’s ruling elite in order to, as he said, “eradicate years of mistrust.”

This was a new tack for an American president. Since Richard Nixon, previous chief executives had embraced strategic partnerships with Egypt’s military-backed leaders, a policy which helped stabilize the eastern Mediterranean under a U.S.-led umbrella of peace and security. In the aftermath of 9/11, Bush was the first president to focus seriously on internal political change, supporting Egypt’s small coterie of liberal democratic activists (real and faux) with direct funding and even White House protection. But while that shift was an affront to the powers-that-be, it was not a threat, given how marginal they were in Cairo’s political firmament.

Whether he knew it or not, Obama’s “new beginning” outreach to Muslims – not as Egyptians, Tunisians or people with some other nationality but as adherents to a trans-national religion – was fundamentally different and profoundly threatening. While the president scaled back Bush-era democracy-promotion efforts to avoid

the charge of endorsing a strategy of regime change, to the always-paranoid (sometimes justifiably so) political leadership in Cairo he seemed to lend America's stamp of approval to the Islamist project that, for decades, offered itself -- sometimes violently, sometimes not -- as the alternative to the military-led nationalists.

Just eighteen months after Obama lit the fuse with his Cairo speech, the holder of the nationalist flame -- President Hosni Mubarak -- was forced from power. After three decades in power, the final years of which saw him grow increasingly isolated, mercurial and dictatorial, Mubarak's fall was largely of his own making. And, it is important to note, at the critical moments in late January/early February 2011 when the Obama administration watched its longtime Egyptian partner being pushed from office, the assumption of key White House officials was that the reins of power would be inherited by people like him: military men with similarly pro-west worldviews -- only a bit younger. (Of course, with the rise and then fall of the Muslim Brotherhood, history took a detour, but that is a different story.) Still, in considering the various factors that led to the demise of America's longest serving Arab ally, Obama's role in kicking down the strategic pillars undergirding the U.S.-Egypt partnership and offering instead a religion-focused vision for U.S. engagement with the world should not be overlooked.

To a certain extent, the fact that America was willing to see chaos and instability in Egypt as an acceptable step on the road to what it viewed as a more just political future reflected Egypt's diminished role in Obama administration strategy toward the broader Middle East.

- At a moment when the Palestinian-Israeli peace process was dominated by Washington's row with Jerusalem over settlement construction -- a clash which allowed for a paltry two weeks of direct negotiations over the entire eight years of President Obama's two terms -- there was little room for Egypt's traditional role as a bridge between Arabs and Israel.
- At a moment when the President opted to refrain from employing any American power to advance U.S. interests in Syria, there was little room there for Egypt's traditional role as Arab legitimizer of American force-projection in the region.
- At a moment when the White House tired from even its limited policy of "leading from behind" in Libya, there was little room for U.S. policy to acknowledge Egyptian equities in the pivotal country to its west.

- And at a moment when the Administration was focused on an Iran nuclear deal whose "benefits" included a regional rebalancing between Tehran and the region's Sunni Arab states, envisioning a process in which -- in the President's words -- they would "share" power and influence, there was little room to prioritize the interests of Washington's most significant Arab military partner.

The result of this was decay of the U.S.-Egypt strategic partnership. This was symbolized by the freeze placed on much of America's military aid to Egypt in October 2013, about three months after millions of Egyptians went to the streets calling on the army to remove Islamist president Mohammed Morsi, which it promptly did.

Eighteen months later, in late March 2015, the Obama administration lifted the military aid suspension and the flow of high-profile sophisticated weapons resumed. But that decision was accompanied by new conditions as to the financing and content of weapons purchases and it came painfully slowly, almost a year after Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, the leader of the 2013 military takeover, won election in the country's May 2014 presidential vote. And while they met on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, el-Sisi never visited Washington while Obama was in the White House.

To be sure, Egyptian leaders of the post-Muslim Brotherhood era bear their share of responsibility for the decline in the relationship with Washington. They traffic in the most bizarre anti-American conspiracy theories, direct military aid toward pet projects that often have no connection to the real threats and challenges facing the country, and are shockingly and brutally heavy-handed against critics of all varieties, Islamist and non-Islamist alike. Despite this, on regional political issues, they often displayed surprising good sense -- showing real backbone in withstanding Saudi blackmail to dispatch troops to join the Yemen quagmire, taking firm measures to end the subterranean flow of weapons to Gaza and building an unprecedented partnership with Israel against common enemies. In cold-blooded fashion, without donning blinders to the eccentricities and outrages one can find in Cairo without looking too hard, an administration with a different set of priorities might have found a way to take advantage of the real opportunities presented by a Sisi-led Egypt.

That sort of cooperation without illusions -- on Libya, Sinai, and Arab-Israeli peace, for example -- is what the Trump administration may find on offer with Egypt today. For its

part, Washington should expect to provide Egypt's military leaders the political embrace that Obama was always reluctant to offer, but also requests from Egyptians that it would compensate them in the currency that matters most – U.S. regional leadership that would lead to a resumption of Saudi and other Gulf assistance to help Cairo weather crushing economic problems. Even with this sort of cold bargain, frictions will persist, especially if Egypt maintains such tight strictures on political life that, by comparison, make the Mubarak era seem like Egypt's Jeffersonian

moment. But, to borrow a phrase from another era, it would at least be a "new beginning."



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SISI'S DOMESTICATED FOREIGN POLICY

by Eric Trager

When then-Defense Minister Abdel Fatah el-Sisi responded to mass protests in July 2013 by ousting the country's first elected president, Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi, Cairo's Gulf allies rushed to keep Egypt afloat economically. Within months, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait sent approximately \$7 billion in aid, and they pledged an additional \$12 billion in aid after Sisi won the barely contested May 2014 presidential elections. These Gulf states' support reflected their concerns about the Muslim Brotherhood, which they viewed as a threat given the Brotherhood's explicitly hegemonic aims, and they also feared that Egypt's economic collapse would have devastating consequences on a region that was rapidly unraveling.

Yet beyond these immediate concerns, the Gulf allies saw their generosity towards Egypt as an investment in their own long-term security. They believed that a strong Egypt, which possesses the Arab world's largest army, would help them counter Iran's expanding influence in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. Indeed, Sisi appeared to promise that Egypt would play this role when he told King Salman in March 2015 that the security of the Gulf is a "red line" and an "integral part of Egyptian national security," and he also agreed shortly thereafter to Egypt's participation in a joint Arab military force.

Four years after Morsi's overthrow, the Gulf aid has satisfied its first two objectives. Cairo's crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood has divided the organization

and neutralized it politically, at least for the time being. And while Egypt is still struggling economically, it has nonetheless muddled through despite dwindling foreign direct investment and tourism revenues. But much to its allies' chagrin, Egypt hasn't become the anchor of a broader Sunni Arab alliance against Iran. Instead, Sisi has charted his own course – one that sometimes aligns with the Gulf allies' interests and at other times contradicts them, but which always follows the same pattern: Sisi supports state actors whenever they are in conflict with non-state ones.

Sisi's foreign policy outlook is, as The Century Foundation's Michael Hanna has noted, an extension of his domestic one. At home, Sisi sees himself as a strongman combatting those who seek chaos, foremost among them the Muslim Brotherhood. According to the Egyptian government's narrative, Sisi "saved" Egypt from the Brotherhood, which seeks the collapse of the Egyptian government and the establishment of an Islamist theocracy. In turn, Egyptian officials routinely argue that a strong (meaning repressive) state is necessary for preventing the Brotherhood's return and the upheaval that might follow. Sisi fleshed this out in his September 2016 address at the United Nations General Assembly, when he defined terrorism not as violence against civilian populations by non-state actors, but as "a threat to the entity of the state." To bolster Sisi at home, Egypt's pro-government media routinely highlights the violence in Libya, Yemen, and Syria as examples of what might happen if the Islamists

are allowed to challenge the Egyptian state.

Due to his strong preference for state actors over non-state ones, Sisi has diverged sharply with his Gulf allies regarding the Syrian conflict. The Gulf states have tended to see the Syrian conflict in terms of their broader concerns regarding Iran's expanding regional influence, and they have strongly supported the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad's Iranian-backed regime. The Saudi government and Kuwaiti individuals have generously backed various Sunni Islamist rebel groups, some of which are tied to al-Qaeda or cooperate with al-Qaeda offshoots, while the UAE has contributed to multi-country funds for arming approved rebel groups and is actively fighting ISIS in Syria as part of the U.S.-led coalition.

Sisi, however, is less concerned about Iran's regional influence than he is about the fallout if Sunni Islamist groups gain the upper hand, since, from Sisi's standpoint, these rebels often look similar to the Islamists that he is fighting at home, and he has increasingly shown his preference for Assad. Egypt explicitly declared its disagreement with its Gulf allies at the United Nations meeting in September, when Egypt's foreign minister met his Iranian counterpart on the sidelines and then told the press that, "The Coalition fighting in Syria may want to change the regime in the country, but that is not Egypt's position." Then in October, Cairo supported a Russian UN Security Council resolution that Saudi Arabia strongly opposed, and a few days later it hosted the Syrian intelligence chief for talks that, according to Syria's news agency, concluded with an agreement to "strengthen coordination in the fight against terrorism." Egyptian-Saudi ties have been frigid ever since (and Cairo's delay in completing the transfer of two Red Sea islands, Sanafir and Tiran, to Riyadh have only made things worse).

At other times, Sisi's preference for state actors has kept him aligned with his Gulf allies. When Iranian-backed Houthi rebels seized Sanaa in September 2014, Egypt supported the government of Yemeni President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, and it joined the Saudi- and Emirati-led coalition by dispatching its navy to protect Bab al-Mandab in March 2015. While Sisi has continued to support Hadi politically, including by meeting him on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in September, Yemen has increasingly become a point of friction between Cairo and its allies in recent months, and Sisi has resisted Saudi entreaties to send more troops. To some extent, this reflects the legacy of Egypt's costly

involvement in Yemen from 1962-1966, and Sisi's desire to avoid getting more deeply involved in another Yemeni quagmire. But it's also a consequence of the Houthis' success: the Houthis continue to control much of the country, including the capital, while Hadi remains in exile. This has blurred the distinction between state and non-state actors in Yemen, leaving Sisi without a horse to bet on aggressively.

Sisi initially faced a similar conundrum in Libya, where the breakdown of the state following longtime dictator Muammar Qaddafi's overthrow in 2011 unleashed a civil war among multiple militias. Without a clear state actor to support, Egypt instead focused on countering Islamist militias. Egypt reportedly cooperated with the UAE to launch a series of airstrikes in August 2014, and it launched another round against ISIS targets in Libya after the group beheaded 21 Egyptian Christians in February 2015.

Yet Gen. Khalifa Hiftar's successes on the ground against the Islamists, as well as his appointment by the House of Representatives to lead the Libyan National Army (LNA) in March 2015, catalyzed a shift in Egypt's policy. While Cairo officially supported the United Nations-led negotiations that produced a (teetering) peace deal in December 2015, Sisi now supports Hiftar despite the LNA's continued clashes with forces loyal to the UN-backed government in Tripoli. In this vein, Egypt advocates lifting the arms embargo on Libyan groups so that it can arm the LNA, and Egyptian intelligence and military officials have hosted Hiftar on many occasions. Sisi seemingly views Hiftar as an analogue to himself – a military man battling Islamists, some of whom are backed by Qatar, which also backs the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. As Sisi explained in April 2016, "Egypt supports the LNA, represented by Hiftar, because it believes that it is the best way to get rid of terrorism and help Libya recover."

For the most part, Sisi's foreign policy outlook has come at a price. As a result of his preference for Assad and unwillingness to get more involved in Yemen, Riyadh announced in October that it would withhold the oil aid that King Salman had promised during his April 2016 visit to Cairo, and the UAE appears to be playing wait-and-see on future investments in Egypt. But in a certain sense, Sisi's unilateralism is merely a consequence of his regime's nationalist bent. "We appreciate [the Gulf's] political and moral support even more than financial support," a senior Egyptian official told me in December. "But for our Gulf brothers and sisters, protecting Egypt

after [Morsi's overthrow] was about protecting themselves [from the Brotherhood]. ... We respect the sovereignty of Saudi Arabia and the UAE. They can contact whomever. But they should preserve the right for us."

Sisi, in other words, will follow an "Egypt first" playbook, and Cairo expects everyone else to do the same. Still, if oil-rich Gulf states believe that they can't face the region's challenges alone, then it's unclear why a resource-poor country with severe structural and security challenges believes that it can.



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THE UNITED STATES AND THE FUTURE OF EGYPTIAN-RUSSIAN RELATIONS

by Michael Wahid Hanna

As U.S.-Egypt relations have come under significant strain in the post-Mubarak era, Egypt has sought to rebalance its international relations and has begun hedging through an assiduous focus on ties with Russia. For the United States, this hedging behavior should be cause for moderate concern and vigilance but not alarm. This rebalancing is symptomatic of Egypt's authoritarian resurgence. However, without major course corrections on the political, economic, and social fronts, Egypt will likely remain disposed to deepening ties with Russia but also ineffective as a useful American ally. A stable, pluralistic, militarily capable and prosperous Egypt could be a central pillar of U.S. regional security strategy. But the continuation of the Sisi regime's current policy course, regardless of Egypt's ties to Russia, will only ensure Egypt's continued negative trajectory and deepen the trends that render it an unreliable partner for the United States.

Following the 2011 uprising, successive Egyptian governments signaled that they would seek to diversify their international relationships, limiting dependency on the United States and staking out an independent post-Mubarak posture. In the first instance, this stance was largely rhetorical. In keeping with the ethos of the uprising, that rhetoric focused on the restoration of Egyptian dignity primarily in the realm of domestic politics, but also as it pertained to diplomacy and international relations.

This initial impulse was furthered by the conspiratorial leanings of the Egyptian security establishment, which held deep-seated convictions about the role of the United States in fomenting instability in Egypt. This anti-Americanism has only grown in recent years, becoming a persistent irritant and widening the gulf between the two countries' strategic worldviews.

With the ascension of the Muslim Brotherhood and the election of Mohamed Morsi, the theme of foreign policy independence continued with the Islamist group holding deep suspicions of the United States as well as having limited experience with the intricacies of diplomacy. While the Muslim Brotherhood was still keen to engage with the United States as a means of establishing their international legitimacy, the truncated and ill-fated Morsi presidency was marked by domestic dysfunction that furthered Egypt's years-long diminishment in regional and international affairs.

It is since the 2013 coup and the increasing strains with the United States, however, that Egypt has systematically sought to deepen ties with Russia. This has been partly driven by Egypt's deteriorating relationship with the United States and its desire to visibly hedge relations while suggesting both an air of independence and alternative sources of support. It has also been driven by Egypt's relative isolation, particularly as Egypt's strongest post-coup relationships, with Saudi Arabia and

the United Arab Emirates, have suffered in recent years. Further, while the initially critical European approach to Egypt in the immediate aftermath of the coup has fragmented and softened, Egypt's relationship with perhaps its strongest southern European partner, Italy, has come under severe strain in the wake of the 2016 murder of the Italian graduate student Giulio Regeni, which appears to be linked to organs of the Egyptian state. In this turbulent setting and amidst the notable cooling of relations with the United States, outreach to Russia and a deepening of ties represented one of the few avenues for enthusiastic diplomatic engagement. The Sisi regime has also sought to seize upon nostalgia for previous eras, and the rekindling of bilateral ties has been pushed forward by a romanticized memory of relations with Russia during the Nasser era.

Beyond the motivations for deepening bilateral ties, Egypt and Russia also share increasingly convergent views on key regional issues. This convergence on issues of state sovereignty, territorial integrity of regional states, indifference to purely sectarian framings of regional conflict, and rigid anti-militancy has lent an ease to Egyptian-Russian interactions and has allowed for diplomatic cooperation. This confluence has been boosted by Russia's increasingly stark positions on militant non-state actors. Although Russia has traditionally taken nuanced diplomatic positions on Islamist and militant groups in the region, such as Hamas, it has adopted an increasingly hardline position on many such groups as they have become major players in the Arab world's civil wars and have threatened regime change, particularly in Syria. It is notable that despite the huge outlays of post-coup economic assistance provided to Egypt by the Gulf states, the Sisi regime has taken a consistently Russia-friendly position on Syria despite the clear tensions this has created with the Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia. Russia's increasingly adversarial relations with the United States have also accelerated the tightening of relations between Cairo and Moscow, as undercurrents of suspicion and resentment continue to define Egypt's interactions with the United States. Lastly, relations with Russia are wholly independent of Egypt's political trajectory, and the criticisms on human rights and democracy that shape U.S.-Egypt relations are absent from their bilateral relationship. In this sense, the relationship represents a logical outcome of Egypt's authoritarian relapse and fits easily with Egypt's domestic and regional priorities.

The most visible manifestations of the relationship remain the unabashed diplomatic support that Egypt

now receives from Putin and the visible cultivation of alternative anchors for its international and regional policy. This has been evident in the ways in which Egyptian diplomacy has sought to support Russia's approach to Syria, and there are signals that cooperation may deepen on Libya, where Egypt and Russia share a similar outlook predicated on skepticism of the United Nations-brokered Libyan Political Agreement and support for General Khalifa Haftar, the military leader who controls much of eastern Libya. On the military front, Egypt has reengaged with Russia for the purchase of arms, with Egypt signing a \$3.5 billion package of agreements with Moscow in 2014, and engaging in joint military exercises with Russia in June 2015 and October 2016. Finally, reports indicate that Egypt and Russia have entered an agreement for the long-term financing and operation of a nuclear power plant to be constructed by the Russian state-owned firm Rosatom in Dabaa, a site on the Mediterranean coast.

While this flurry of activity represents an observable and qualitative shift, the Egyptian relationship with Russia remains fairly shallow and limited in practice. Economic relations have improved in recent years, with an increase in trade, but Russian direct investment in Egypt remains very low and business links remain very modest. Similarly, people-to-people links are quite limited save for the once-thriving Russian tourism in Egypt. That linkage was damaged in the wake of the October 2015 crash of a Russian Metrojet flight from Sinai in what was believed to be a terrorist attack and the subsequent suspension of all flights from Russia to Egypt as a result of concerns over Egyptian security procedures.

In contrast to the preceding years of U.S.-Egypt tension, Egypt has warmly embraced the election of Donald Trump, with Sisi being the first world leader to call and congratulate Trump following his unexpected electoral victory. The Sisi regime now holds great hope and expectation about the future of the bilateral relationship with the United States and has begun laying out an ambitious list of requests for the new administration. Expectations on the Egyptian side are such that the Trump administration will actually need to temper runaway expectations as Egypt prepares for Sisi's anticipated visit to Washington.

For its part, the Trump administration has latched on to Egypt and its strongman ruler as a potential anchor for its inchoate Middle East policy. This attraction is an outgrowth of several factors, including Egypt's unreserved embrace of Trump, a reflexive antipathy to

the Obama administration's approaches and policies, an expressed affinity for authoritarian leadership, a rigid and un-nuanced view of Islamism, and an admiration for Sisi's frank calls for the reform of Islam. But this optimism is misguided on its own terms and also fails to contend with the current realities of the bilateral relationship.

In many ways, the U.S.-Egypt relationship is a vestige of an earlier era. Egypt's strategic realignment toward Washington in the 1970s was a coup for American diplomacy and a boost to U.S. regional policy during the Cold War. With the conclusion of the U.S.-brokered Egypt-Israel peace treaty in 1979, the stage was set for a deepening security relationship and accelerating military ties and assistance. The relationship was on full display in the 1990s as Egypt participated in the U.S.-led multinational effort to liberate Kuwait following Iraq's August 1990 invasion, took a lead role in the revitalized Arab-Israeli peace process, and deepened counter-terrorism cooperation with the United States at a time when transnational jihadism had become a higher priority. The United States has also come to rely on Egypt as a facilitator for its ability to project power in the region and beyond, with military planners relying on overflight of Egyptian airspace and preferred Suez Canal fast track access.

But Egypt is no longer a vital part of U.S. regional policy and is diminished in its ability to impact the politics and security trends of the Arab world. Egypt's relationship with Israel stands on its own terms and is dependent on American intercession. Similarly, Egypt pursues its counter-terrorism policies out of sheer self-interest. Egypt is most relevant in a negative sense, in that the United States and other interested governments are most concerned about the ramifications of state breakdown in Egypt. Egypt's ability to stabilize and normalize its domestic political, economic, and security situation, let alone reemerge as a major regional player, remains dependent on major reforms that the autocratic Sisi regime is uninterested in undertaking. Further, U.S. assistance and aid has been wholly ineffectual in coaxing positive Egyptian policy shifts.

The initial positive signals from the Trump administration suggest that the United States is no longer interested or concerned about the prospects for political reform or improvement of Egypt's dismal human rights situation. A continuation of Egypt's current authoritarian course guarantees that some version of the sub-optimal status quo will endure for years to come. Even when framed in transactional terms, it is unclear what the United States

will derive from improved relations with Egypt beyond a tangible softening of atmospherics.

Based on Trump's campaign pronouncements and early posture toward Egypt, it would appear that the country represents an additional area of potential U.S.-Russian cooperation or alignment. To the extent this is attempted based on the current rhetorical approach to Egypt, it will fail to effectively cope with the chronic crises facing the country, as the Trump administration's stance appears to be an uncritical embrace of the Sisi regime, its current repressive policies, and ineffective security strategies.

Ironically, if the Trump administration continues to view Russian involvement in the region as a potentially positive phenomenon, it will undermine the logic of Egypt's hedging strategy, which is predicated on continued tensions between the United States and Russia. In the unlikely event that Egypt does undertake major necessary corrections and reforms, it would represent a fundamental shift in governing and strategic outlook that would also undercut the motivations for the hedging opportunities offered by Russia. While the United States should be open to such a possibility, it remains highly unlikely. Egypt is much more a problem to be managed than an asset to be relied upon.

Assuming a continuation of present trends, the United States will have to remain vigilant about the scope of Egypt-Russian relations. Most important in this regard, though, is the enduring fact that no one country, including Russia, is in a position to supplant the role of the United States in Egypt. This is particularly true with respect to the military-to-military relationship, where the United States remains Egypt's primary weapons supplier. That relationship is based upon the unique nature of the U.S. aid relationship with Egypt whereby the United States finances Egypt's purchase of U.S.-manufactured military equipment and services. While that cooperation and assistance has proven incapable of serving as leverage for political ends, it does insure continued high level engagement and training.

The United States should keep close tabs on shifts that could undermine longer-term U.S. interests, such as the unlikely possibility of Russian basing rights in Egypt. Russian press reports in October 2016 suggested that Russia was looking to re-establish its Cold War-era naval base in Sidi Barrani on Egypt's Mediterranean coast. Those press reports were swiftly rejected and denied by the Egyptians, and foreign basing rights are likely a red line not only for the United States but for Egypt as

well. The United States should be wary of any efforts to privilege counterterrorism cooperation with Russia in Egypt, particularly in the Sinai Peninsula, which could have a negative impact on tactics. It would also represent a troubling rebuff at a time when the United States itself is seeking to deepen counterterrorism cooperation and is still struggling in its efforts to strengthen end-use monitoring for equipment transferred to Egypt. Lastly, the United States should pay close attention to efforts by Russia to leverage Egyptian support in diplomatic undertakings that are actively hostile to U.S. interests. Friendly and close relations with the United States should not entail diplomatic subservience, and healthy

relations should be capable of withstanding divergences of interests and policies. However, honest disagreement is distinct from hostility and sabotage, which remain animating rationales for Russian diplomacy.



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THE FUTURE OF EGYPTIAN ISLAMISM

by Mokhtar Awad

The thousands of Egyptian mourners greeting the body of Omar Abdel Rahman, the “Blind Sheikh,” alarmed many of their countrymen who had hoped the elderly Jihadist cleric had become irrelevant. Abdel Rahman’s funeral sent a signal that although Islamists may be a numerical minority—and are for the time being politically defeated—their ideas still very much resonate with a sizeable cross section of this country of 90 million. The central mission of Salafi groups and the Muslim Brotherhood to Islamize Egypt and undo any hint of Westernization or liberalism has largely been successful, but the rise of Islamism did not occur in a vacuum. To the movement’s supporters this “Islamist Project” effectively became their Islam, thus giving the movement unparalleled resiliency. Islamism to some of them is a righteous political project that resists Western conceptions of state and politics. For others, there is simply no viable political alternative because nothing can challenge Islam. For these reasons, among others, Islamism will continue to have a future in Muslim societies still struggling with the fundamental challenge of reconciling their religion with modernity and their societies with liberalism.

One of the central Islamist actors has, of course, been the Muslim Brotherhood, but the future of the movement is more uncertain now than at any time since its founder Hassan al-Banna was assassinated six decades ago. Then, the group was reeling from internal disputes, a leadership crisis, and eventual near extinction in Nasser’s jails. Its central ideologue at the time, Sayyid Qutb, produced what remains the movement’s only true intellectual works as he attempted to re-interpret the

Quran and came to the radical conclusion that Islam was effectively not being practiced in its correct form and that a vanguard must bring it back.

Fortunately for Egypt, the natural conclusion of Qutb’s writings, the ideas of Takfir (declaring other Muslims apostates) and violence, failed to resonate with most Brothers. However, in the process it helped give birth to militant breakaway factions and eventually Salafi Jihadism. What the Brotherhood did however inherit from Qutb was arguably a suspicion of the wider society and its capacity to achieve the awaited Islamist deliverance. The Brotherhood therefore had to remain a hierarchically rigid vanguard, with a careful acculturation and vetting process, to protect itself from the outside world and maintain purity. The group thus believed that popular revolution was unreliable as a method of change. At the same time it continued to believe that violence is legitimate, though counterproductive in a country like Egypt with a strong central state. This conclusion was perhaps helped in large part by a *deus ex machina* in the form of President Sadat releasing the Brothers from prison in the 1970s to form a tactical alliance of sorts, and even paying them reparations.

In this new period, a “second founding” of the Brotherhood took place. It was characterized by an intense focus on spreading the organization through infiltration of civil society and professional unions. The group continued to espouse regressive and fundamentalist views despite its renunciation of violence and growing acceptance of normal politics. If reforms did occur, they were limited

to only a few within the senior leadership and a limited number of activists. The movement's body was growing, but was intellectually stagnant. The ideological orientation of the Brotherhood never evolved to reconcile basic liberal principles and democracy with their inherently theocratic project. Perhaps there was no need, as leaders couldn't envision ever reaching the "implementation phase" that al-Banna envisioned - first for taking over Egypt and then "mastery of the world."

This dissonance understandably created dissent within the movement. Some members split into two remarkably different factions, although both were motivated in large part by one particular grievance: the Brotherhood's rigidity. Both would-be Islamist radicals and pro-democracy Islamists saw themselves as reformers of the movement. However, scholarship on the Muslim Brotherhood has often been confused due to the mistaken assumption that the intellectual products of independent Islamist thinkers who perhaps favored democracy or some semblance of pluralism reflected real growth inside the Brotherhood itself. So, too, is it a mistake to view violent Islamists as representative of normal Brotherhood activism.

The reality is that the Brotherhood had long been stuck in its past, holding on to the fundamentalist views of al-Banna who dreamed of domination and the extremism of Qutb, while at the same time attempting to pass itself off as a modern conservative Muslim movement. The other aspect of the unchanging nature of the movement, which is key to the organization, is the strict hierarchy and blind obedience the Brotherhood fostered from the beginning. This was an advantage in making inroads into civil society and politics, but it did not serve the Brotherhood well in dealing with the shocks of either the January 2011 revolution or the July 2013 coup. Some internal critics charged that there was not sufficient division between politics and proselytization, between bureaucrats and intellectuals, and no qualified individuals to take up arms to defend the movement's gains. Thus, the thinking went, it was no wonder the movement buckled under pressure when its leaders had to handle all challenges at once.

The events of the revolution and the coup impacted Salafism as much as the Brotherhood. Salafism in Egypt is very different from the Muslim Brotherhood as it lacks any central leadership or one dominant school of thought. A Salafi simply belonged to an overall movement with competing strands of activism and influential Sheikhs. Salafis may have been successful in previous decades as they worked to proselytize and build mosques, but no one looked to them for political guidance, as they

were not expected to have much to say. In fact, for one major school of thought, the Madkhalis, or so-called quietists, normal politics in Egypt was off limits and so was overthrowing the leader. Not surprisingly, dissidents broke away from the Salafi movement over the decades as they grew impatient with the pace of change and what they viewed as compromises. This too, of-course, helped in giving birth to Salafi Jihadism. And in Egypt there was also a new strand of activist Salafis in the aftermath of the revolution: Revolutionary Salafism.

As Egypt was rocked by revolution, questions of politics and strategy came to the fore. Revolutionary Salafis, inspired by the writings of a little-known radical cleric by the name of Rifai Surour, began to articulate a vision of Salafism that attempted to reconcile popular revolution with their strict Islamism by promoting that the role of a Salafi vanguard should be focused on inciting the population to mobilize in revolution as much as on violent jihad. This was motivated in some part too by reality. The traditional Salafi jihadi methodology of groups like Al-Qaeda or the Islamic State cannot flourish in largely cohesive societies with a strong central government and little or no ungoverned space like Egypt. Thus, for them, revolution became a euphemism for Jihad to help reach a wider audience.

This central idea of a revolutionary Sunni Islamism is perhaps the best rival to the post-Islamism theory for hypothesizing the future direction of Islamism, and specifically in Egypt. In the aftermath of the July 2013 coup, many Brotherhood activists found the opportunity and means to finally challenge the old guard of the organization whom they blamed for simply being incapable of guiding the Brotherhood and the Islamist movement in the modern world in a time of crisis. Some of them have engaged and do engage in violence, while the rest see it as perfectly legitimate. Today, the Muslim Brotherhood is split among the old guard and a new leadership, many of them from the historical leadership, but now subscribing to this "revolutionary" direction. They see themselves as the "third founding" of the Muslim Brotherhood, one that is finally capable of carrying out the "implementation phase" that al-Banna envisioned.

Different ideas on how exactly this can be done are currently being debated among Brothers, ex-Brothers and other Islamist intellectuals who wish to serve the Islamist Project. Some envision a future wherein the traditional Muslim Brotherhood and its leadership occupy a "guiding" role for society and the organization, while other more nimble bodies divide among themselves the different

roles needed for implementing their vision. In other words, something akin to the relationship between Hamas and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, and Hamas itself with the Qassam brigades. Some Islamists would act as the proselytizers, while others would serve as politicians who engage the outside world and eventually govern, and most importantly, others would play the role of a “revolutionary” body that engages in a righteous jihad of liberation across the Muslim World, since they believe that “borders are dust” and that the modern Arab governments are essentially an occupying force.

One Islamist advocate for such changes described it in terms of soccer, with the traditional organizations as the goalkeepers and midfielders that lacked talented strikers who can finally score a goal by any means necessary and win the match for the team. In this righteous campaign, these new Brothers have willing allies in Revolutionary Salafis and other Salafi activists who have their own project for the entire Ummah to incite change and finally deliver Islamic governance. There are some striking parallels with the emergence of revolutionary Shiism and the eventual form of government in Iran, down to the Revolutionary Guard.

Will such an attempt at revolutionizing Sunni Islamism succeed? Perhaps, perhaps not. More seemingly hopeless ideas have flourished before. If Islamism and

its incarnations have taught us one thing, it is to never underestimate their resilience and ability to attract followers in a marketplace of ideas in which they have no serious competition. This new manifestation of political Islam, which sees itself as going back to its roots while recalibrating strategies to confront their modern challenges, may prove attractive for many. Perhaps for some it may ultimately take a direction that is not violent and simply break away from traditional Islamist movements by coming to accept the modern nation state, democracy, and basic liberal ideas as ordinary conservative Muslims. However, these “revolutionary” changes, if they do occur, will of course not stay inside Egypt, as they are already being debated across the Middle East region between Brothers and Salafis. Even if they do fail, there is always the prospect that a large swath of radicalized “revolutionary” Islamist activists may become pre-disposed to joining existing Salafi jihadi movements or cooperate with them, if or when their new project fails.



Mokhtar Awad

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EGYPT'S ROLE IN THE MIDDLE EAST: THE VIEW FROM JERUSALEM

by Itamar Rabinovich

During the past sixty years, Israel's relationship with Egypt completed a full cycle. In the late 1950's in the aftermath of two wars with Egypt and Gamal Abdel Nasser leading the revolutionary pan Arab camp, it was Israel's most formidable and implacable Arab enemy. Israel's founding father, David Ben Gurion, saw no hope of breaking the wall of Arab hostility led by Egypt and decided to leap frog over it by formulating and implementing a policy known as "the alliance with the periphery." Turkey, the Shah's Iran, and Ethiopia shared Israel's hostility to both Nasser's Egypt and his Soviet patrons and these countries with American encouragement and partial participation collaborated and coordinated against their common foes. Sixty years later, the Middle Eastern regional arena is very different. Iran is ruled by the Ayatollahs and is a revisionist power, Turkey under Erdogan marches to its own drum and Ethiopia is not a player in Middle Eastern regional politics. More importantly, Israel and Egypt have been at peace since 1979 and in recent years have built a close cooperative relationship. This is not an isolated development but part of a broader rapprochement between Israel and a group of pragmatic Sunni Arab states. These states, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, other Gulf countries and Morocco are primarily concerned with Iran and with jihadi Islam and regard Israel as a partner rather than an enemy. Their collaboration with Israel is still constrained by the lingering Palestinian-Israeli conflict and by popular and Islamist opposition to Israel and is carried out covertly rather than

openly. These new developments and relationships are an important dimension of Middle Eastern politics as the Trump Administration is formulating its policy toward the region.

The turning point in Israel's relationship with Egypt occurred in 1977 when Menachem Begin and Anwar Sadat transformed the post 1973 war diplomacy into a fully-fledged peace negotiation. A peace treaty was signed in March 1979. Israel and Egypt ceased to be enemies and this relationship with Egypt became a corner stone of Israel's national security. But peace between the two countries remained frosty. The failure to implement the Palestinian part of the peace treaty, a lingering sense of rivalry over regional hegemony and Islamist and post Nasserite popular hostility in Egypt, led Sadat's successor, Hosni Mubarak, to limit the relationship with Israel and keep it in a "cold" state. This did not change even as Israel and the PLO signed the Oslo Accords in 1993. Egypt and Mubarak did facilitate the new Israeli-Palestinian relationship, but they refused to allow a full normalization of the Egyptian-Israeli relationship. In fact, as Israel and the PLO made peace, Egyptian fears of Israeli hegemony in the region were exacerbated. One major irritant in the relationship was Egyptian opposition to Israel's policy of nuclear ambiguity. When Hamas took over the Gaza Strip, built an arsenal of rockets with Iranian help and launched a cycle of violence with

Israel, Egypt's cooperation with Israel in blocking the smuggling of weapons from the Sinai remained limited. Mubarak and his regime were not fond of Hamas, the Palestinian branch of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, but their willingness to block the smuggling through these underground tunnels was limited by political calculus and inefficiency.

Unhappy as Israel was with Mubarak's policy of cold peace, it was alarmed by his fall in 2011, one of the major events of The Arab Spring. Israel worried about the state and future of the peaceful relationship with Egypt particularly when Muhammad Morsi, a leader of The Muslim Brotherhood, was elected president. The movement and Morsi specifically had been opposed to and critical of the peace treaty with Israel. Morsi refrained from direct contact with Israel and preferred it be conducted through the military, but he was careful not to undermine the peace treaty during his short tenure. Israel, in any event, was relieved when he was replaced by General Sisi.

Israel's relationship with Sisi's Egypt has been shaped by several forces at work, beginning with the jihadist challenge in the Sinai Peninsula. After decades of neglect by the government in Cairo, the penetration of Bedouin society in the Sinai by radical jihadist elements has led to a radicalization of the Bedouin population and pitted it against the regime. The regime's effort to crush the opposition has so far met with only partial success. The jihadists in the Sinai have launched several attacks against Israel but the brunt of their campaign is directed at the Egyptian army. The regime is also hard pressed to deal with Islamist opposition in Egypt proper, in addition to the jihadist opposition in the Sinai. Israel has been lending the Egyptian army significant support. It is motivated by its interest in the regime's success and survival, by obvious reluctance to see jihadist entrenchment on its Southern border and by its awareness of the collaboration of Hamas and more radical groups in the Gaza Strip with the Sinai jihadists. This collaboration as well as the need to respond to Israel's assistance in the Sinai have led Sisi's regime to act more forcefully and effectively against the tunnels used by the smuggling industry from the Sinai into the Gaza Strip (and occasionally in the other direction). Recently a fresh dialogue was started between Egypt and Hamas but so far it has not seriously affected the status quo.

Egypt and Israel have shared the view that Iran's quest for regional hegemony and its support of revisionist

elements in the region are the most significant threat to their respective national security interests. An even more important role in drawing them closer was common criticism of the Obama Administration's policies in the Middle East. Netanyahu and Obama disagreed and fought over the Palestinian issue and over the nuclear deal with Iran. Sisi resented the fact that Obama and his administration viewed Morsi as a democratically elected ruler and Sisi's coming to power as illegitimate. Sisi and many of his military colleagues suspected that Obama viewed the Muslim Brotherhood as a positive force, resented his treatment of Mubarak and suspected that he was seeking a *modus vivendi* with Iran in the region. Some of these sentiments were shared by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states.

As has been mentioned above, Egypt and its Sunni partners are willing to collaborate with Israel discreetly, but not publicly, as long as there is no significant progress in Israeli-Palestinian relations. Many Israelis, right wingers in particular, tend to argue that the path to a resolution or at least amelioration of the Israeli-Palestinian issues lies through a regional approach. According to this view, Israel would begin by negotiating with the Sunni Arab states. These states, so the argument goes, are more flexible than the Palestinians and can bring additional assets into the negotiations. What the advocates of this approach in Israel sometimes forget is that the regional approach is not an escape route from the concessions that any progress with the Palestinians will require. Indeed, it has recently been revealed that in 2016 a summit was held in Aqaba, Jordan attended by the US (through Secretary of State Kerry), Israel, Jordan and Egypt. But when the chips were down it turned out that Netanyahu was not willing to take the necessary steps. When Netanyahu met with President Trump in February 2017 much was said about a new regional approach to the Palestinian issue, but it was not quite clear what both leaders meant when they used that term.

Middle Eastern diplomacy is now on hold, waiting for the Trump Administration to decide on its own Middle East policy. One major issue concerns Washington's relationship with Moscow. Will the Trump Administration seek a grand bargain with Russia, and if so, what would it mean for the Middle East? The Syrian crisis, if not the pivotal issue in the region, would be a major component in such a deal. Would Russia be willing to remove its support from Bashar al-Assad? Not likely. If Trump agrees to a deal predicated on Assad staying in power, what impact would it have on Washington's relationship with its traditional allies? And how could Trump's current enmity

toward Iran be reconciled with Moscow's partnership with Teheran?

More broadly, the US needs to decide whether it wants to return fully to the Middle East by being willing to allocate resources, engage troops and rebuild the camp of its friends and allies. Currently, some of them are dubious of Washington's good will and stamina and others are pursuing different paths. Turkey, a major regional power, is a member of NATO but does not quite conduct itself as a fully-fledged ally. Can a new US policy rebuild a pragmatic camp built of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, other Gulf states, Turkey and Israel? If it decides to do so, Egypt

will have to play an important role in that bloc. From Jerusalem's perspective the construction of such a bloc and Egypt's role in it would be seen as very desirable developments.



Itamar Rabinovich

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SAUDI ARABIA AND EGYPT: AN UNEASY RELATIONSHIP

by Bernard Haykel

Any observer of the relationship between Egypt and Saudi Arabia over the last few months will have noticed considerable tensions. This is unexpected since Riyadh had strongly backed President Sisi's government after the 2013 military coup, offering tens of billions of dollars in aid and fuel supplies, and Cairo in return had pledged its full diplomatic, political and military support for the kingdom. Egypt even agreed to return control of two Red Sea islands (Tiran and Sanafir) to Saudi Arabia. This deal was to be the first step in a much larger plan that would link the two countries by a bridge spanning the Straits of Tiran, and lead to the economic development on both shores. An entrepôt city, similar to Dubai in scale, is planned to be built on the Saudi side and this would transform northwestern Saudi Arabia and the Sinai. It was expected that the fate of both nations would become intimately entwined, along with their electric grids and ever increasing flows of investments and people. It was also assumed that they would coordinate their regional policies, especially taking into account Saudi Arabia's geopolitical rivalry with Iran.

The relationship, however, has soured, and quite rapidly since June 2016. Egypt's courts have repeatedly, and on appeal, refused to approve the Red Sea islands hand-over, despite President Sisi's promise that this agreement would be implemented. The hyper-nationalist mood that has gripped Egypt since the coming to power

of President Sisi appears to have made it impossible to relinquish control over any land, even though the islands in question are uninhabited and are, in fact, sovereign Saudi territory. In response to the legal decision on the islands, the Saudis have either cancelled or put on hold financial aid agreements and preferential oil shipments. The rift can also be seen in other areas. Riyadh and Cairo have very different assessments of the Syrian war and, more generally, of Iran's influence in the region. Saudi Arabia is adamant that President Assad must go whereas Cairo seems to prefer that he stays in power, favoring a military authoritarian regime in Syria over the rule of Islamists who would undoubtedly take over if Assad is toppled. Last October, Egypt even voted in favor of a Russian-backed UN Security Council resolution on Syria, which the Saudis had opposed. Indications that Egypt was not fully supportive of Saudi Arabia could be already seen in spring 2015 when, for example, Cairo offered tepid support for Riyadh's war in Yemen against the Iranian-backed Houthi militia and refused to mobilize its army for this effort. Saudi Arabia sees the war in Yemen as part of its larger struggle against Iran's spreading influence in the Arab world, whereas Egypt appears genuinely ambivalent about Iran's expansionist policies. A token of this view was on display in November 2016 when Egypt's oil minister visited Tehran to obtain an oil deal that would make up for the losses in Saudi fuel aid. What explains this deteriorating state of affairs?

An important explanation for the tensions in relations between Riyadh and Cairo is structural: Egypt has been in steep political and economic decline for decades whereas Saudi Arabia is an ascending regional power led by a dynamic young leadership and forward leaning policies. Such divergent trajectories are bound to generate friction, as Egypt makes an uncomfortable accommodation to its reduced size while Saudi Arabia discovers the limits of its newfound power and regional role after decades of being relatively passive.

Since 1967 Egypt's power and influence in Arab politics has been waning. Whereas Cairo was once the undisputed leader of the Arab world it is today facing dire economic straits, is politically sclerotic and has been reduced to a condition of dependence on foreign aid and support. The peace agreement with Israel created a habit, especially among Egypt's military establishment, of expecting foreign aid for the country's compliant behavior. This culture of dependency has been extended to include aid from the Gulf states, and particularly from Saudi Arabia. A leaked recording of President Sisi from February 2015, in which he discusses obtaining tens of billions of dollars from the Gulf states, is revealing of this attitude and expectation in Cairo.

In the last few years, Saudi Arabia has become a more important player in the region and is perhaps today the most significant Arab country and the major Sunni Muslim power. The kingdom has realized from President Obama's policies—the indifference about President Mubarak's ouster, the keenness on the Iran nuclear deal and Obama's refusal to intervene against Assad in Syria—that a blanket US protection for the regime can no longer be assumed. And given the increasing power and influence that Iran deploys in the region, Riyadh has decided to build-up its armed forces in such a way as to be able to defend the country. This represents a break with past policy: the Saudi armed forces were deliberately not up to par because from the 1950s the leadership in Riyadh had worried about a military coup, but this view has now changed.

There are a number of ways to capture the reversal of roles between Egypt and Saudi Arabia: the kingdom's GDP is at least twice that of Egypt's with less than a third of the population, and the Saudi per capita GDP is nearly eight times larger. Egypt is highly dependent on outside aid whereas Riyadh is a major donor to Egypt, and to other countries. Saudi Arabia's air force is far superior in terms of equipment, materiel and training than that of any other Arab country, and its armed forces are rapidly

being built up into a serious force. The kingdom today is the second largest weapons importer in the world after India with a military budget that dwarfs any of its neighbors. But there are less obvious ways of measuring the difference. For example, Riyadh's annual book fair is by a significant margin the largest and most important in the Arab world and many Arab publishers would fold were it not for purchases of the Saudi market. Another way is to notice the difference in the frequency and duration of US presidents' visits to each country. Both presidents George W. Bush and Barrack Obama have traveled more often to, and spent significantly more time in, Riyadh than Cairo.

Egypt has simply become a less important player. The reasons for its decline are complex, but certainly one can argue this is in good part self-inflicted because of decades of bad economic policies and poor governance. And while Egyptian leaders still tout past glories, the country's importance today has more to do with the terrible consequences of its economic and possible political failure, given its enormous population size and its strategic geographical location. It is keeping Egypt from failing that occupies the attention of policy makers in Riyadh, but also in Washington DC, Europe and Jerusalem. Maintaining stability in Egypt is paramount and the US, the Gulf countries and the IMF have contributed financially to keep the country afloat. But no country has done more of late to prop up Egypt financially, and especially after the 2013 coup, than Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies, the UAE and Kuwait.

The quid pro quo for this support was assumed to be Egypt's backing of Riyadh's regional political agenda, which includes coordinating policy on Syria, Iran and Yemen. The Saudis even expected Egypt to lend military support for their engagements against Iran's proxies, such as the Houthis in Yemen. But this was not forthcoming, especially since Egyptian forces were tackling an Islamist insurgency in the Sinai and had already learned a hard lesson from a debilitating war waged in Yemen in the 1960s. There is a unifying element between Cairo and Riyadh, namely fierce opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood, but this does not constitute sufficient ground for a strong alliance. Saudi Arabia wants Egypt to follow its lead in return for financial compensation. The Saudi leadership even included Egypt in the domestic economic reform agenda by agreeing to the Straits of Tiran bridge and the islands' and coastal development project, but clearly all this has not delivered a strong alliance. As a result, there are increasingly louder voices in Riyadh arguing for discontinuing financial support

for Egypt, seeing the country as a black hole that will drain Saudi coffers and never become economically viable. These critics favor having Egypt's difficulties and fate shouldered by the US, the EU and Israel, as these are the countries that would be most directly affected by a collapse of the Egyptian economy. Should such views prevail, then the US will be confronted with a crisis and financial burdens. It is therefore important for Washington to try to involve itself more actively in the region, to help coordinate between Cairo and Riyadh and to foster a stronger and more durable alliance between them. The time has come for America's regional allies to play a greater role in maintaining regional security and in supporting the economic development of the Middle

East. The Saudis appear to be willing to do just that, while the Egyptians must find a way to participate in this effort and stop their habit of expecting endless aid so as not to become spoilers and a burden on the world.

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DOES EGYPT STILL MATTER?

by Samuel Tadros

For a man who has challenged almost all conventional wisdom in U.S. foreign policy, President Trump's first phone call to his Egyptian counterpart after taking office could have been copied from any of his predecessors since the late 70's. Stressing the importance of the strategic partnership between the two countries, he affirmed his commitment to deepening a relationship "which has helped both countries overcome challenges in the region for decades."

From the moment that Secretary Kissinger and President Sadat began the process of moving Egypt away from the Soviet Union, into the American camp, and forging a peace treaty with Israel, Washington believed that what was at stake was more than one country's trajectory. Kissinger once dismissed the words of Nasser's alter ego, Mohamed Hassanein Heikal "Egypt is not merely a state on the banks of the Nile, but an embodiment of an idea, a tide, a historical movement," as frivolous talk replying that he could not negotiate with an idea. In truth, however, the basic premise, that Egypt was not merely a country, but rather the leader of the Arabic speaking world, has been a cornerstone of U.S. Middle East policy for the past five decades.

Washington could be forgiven the assumption. Geography had placed Egypt at the center of the Arabic speaking world and demography had ensured its dominance, but it was history that spoke to the country's centrality. Breaking away from the Ottoman yoke and ruled by an ambitious

Albanian officer, Egypt had been the first country in the region to begin the process of modernization. Khedive Ismail's dream of turning Cairo into the Paris on the Nile soon attracted tens of thousands of Levantines escaping religious and political repression, and it was in Cairo that the Arab Renaissance would unfold in its newspapers and cultural salons. Egypt may have been a late comer to the cause of Arab nationalism, but it was Cairo's leadership, as Fouad Ajami wrote, "that gave Arab nationalism the concrete reality it came to possess." From modernity, Arab nationalism to Islamism, the grand ideas of the Arabic speaking peoples had to be born or pass through Cairo, before they were to take hold of the region.

But Egypt's centrality to the world of the Arabs went well beyond politics and history. When Arabs read, they read the works of the Egyptian literary giants Tawfik El Hakim, Taha Hussein and Naguib Mahfouz, when they watched movies they saw themselves in Faten Hamama, Rushdi Abaza and Soad Hosny and when they listened, it was to the voices of Om Kalthoum, Mohamed Abdel Wahab and Abdel Halim Hafez. Egyptian hegemony was such, that to succeed, Arabic speaking actors and musicians had to perform the pilgrimage to Cairo if they hoped to be something more than a local curiosity. What happened in Cairo did not stay in Cairo, so went the popular saying.

If Egypt had led the Arabic speaking peoples in their liberal experiment, and then led them again in pursuit of national independence and dreams of Arab glory, could

the country not lead them then to peace with Israel and into the American regional order? American statesmen had tried in the past to court Egypt and failed. In Sadat, they had finally been able to find a willing partner.

But signs were, however, already abounding that the American bet on Egypt was misplaced. As Mike Doran has noted in *Ike's Gamble*, late in his presidency, Eisenhower had recognized that the very premise of Arab nationalism and Egypt's leadership were belied by the intra-Arab competition which was often fiercer than the one with Israel. Egyptian dominance had been met with resistance, first from Iraq, both under the monarchy and Abdel Karim Qasim, and later by Saudi Arabia. The 1960's were not the story of Egyptian supremacy but rather of an Arab Cold War pitting a conservative monarchical regime against revolutionary forces. In that war, Egypt had lost. Following 1967 and in the Khartoum Summit, famous for its three no's to peace, recognition or negotiations with Israel, Nasser had also given a yes. Humiliated by his military defeat and with Egypt increasingly at the brink of economic meltdown, Nasser had waived the white flag to Saudi Arabia's King Faisal.

Sadat would only double down on the surrender. With the country crumbling under the pressure of its demographic weight and economic troubles, Egypt could not afford the luxury of Arab leadership. Isolated from the Arab world after his peace treaty with Israel, Sadat entertained filling the policing role vacated by the Shah of Iran. In the now forgotten Safari Club, he had committed his country to far away conflicts in Zaire and Somalia, and following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, he fancied a role in arming the Mujahedeen. But if Egypt's dreams of glory abroad had turned into tragedy under Nasser, its second try had been a farce. The story was not simply that of Egypt's slow decline, but also that of the rise of the rest. Oil had permanently changed the balance of power in the region, and with the post-independence Arab states each crumbling under their own predicament, Egypt mattered less and less. As early as 1982, Fouad Ajami had prophesied "Arabs would now read less and less of themselves into Egypt. The era of Egyptian primacy in Arab politics is of the past ... the young men and women forged by Beirut's long ordeal could not recognize themselves in the order of Cairo."

For Washington the strategic partnership with Egypt has been filled with continued disappointments. Reagan during the Achille Lauro hijacking, Clinton with Egypt's pushback against Shimon Peres' plans for economic

cooperation between Arab states and Israel and Mubarak encouraging Arafat not to offer concessions in Camp David II, each president had come to agonize over Washington's problematic partner. Nor were Egypt's regional policies the sole source of tensions with Washington. George W. Bush grew frustrated with Mubarak's refusal to reform, and Obama was exasperated with Egypt's failure to live up to his expectations regarding democratization to the extent that an administration source declared "if you want to put Obama in a bad mood, tell him he has to go to a Situation Room meeting about Egypt." Only George H.W. Bush escaped the frustration when Mubarak, due to his anger at Saddam Hussein's lies and need of Gulf financial support, gave the United States the necessary Arab cover for the Desert Storm operation sending his military to take part in Kuwait's liberation.

Does Egypt today still matter? Some in Washington have been arguing otherwise. True, rights of passage through the Suez Canal are helpful and so are flights over Egyptian airspace, but the United States can survive without both. Egypt's control of the Arab League is no longer as strong as in the past and in all cases the Arab League is irrelevant anyway. Maintaining the peace treaty with Israel is in Egypt's own interests and not dependent on U.S. support. Al Azhar holds no sway over the world's Muslim population, and Egypt's cultural decline leaves it with limited soft power capabilities over Arabic speaking peoples. From Syria to Yemen and even in neighboring Libya, Egypt has lost its ability to impact its surroundings. Even regional allies are growing frustrated with Egypt and its president. Those in the Gulf dreaming of Egypt becoming a counterbalance to Iran are realizing the futility of their investments. In all cases Egypt is increasingly deteriorating under the weight of its own troubles and Washington has no ability to change that.

Is it time then for the United States to abandon Egypt? The answer is a resounding no. It is precisely because of Egypt's movement towards the regional abyss that the United States needs to reinvest in the American-Egyptian relationship. Egypt is no longer a regional player but rather a playing field where local, regional and international powers are in competition over the country's future. The country may no longer be a contestant for regional hegemony, but it is today the primary contested prize in a struggle over the region's future. If the Westphalian order is to be defended in the Middle East amidst state collapse and the rise of Caliphate revivalist movements, this defense has to start with the most natural of the Arabic speaking states. With ninety two million people,

a state collapse in Egypt would lead to a refugee crisis of historical proportions. No one wants a Somalia on the Nile, a Libya on Israel's borders, or a Syria in control of the Suez Canal, the United States least of all.

But if this scenario is to be averted, the United States needs to adjust its policies accordingly. The United States should no longer base its policy on an Egypt that no longer exists. U.S. interests in Egypt are no longer maintaining the peace treaty or passage in the Suez Canal, but rather strengthening state institutions to make sure a regime collapse does not lead to a state collapse. Instead of focusing on military cooperation, the United States needs to develop a new partnership with Egypt that addresses the growing terrorist threat in the country, the collapse of the rule of law, the failed economic policies, the educational vacuum, and the growing sectarian hatreds that threatens the fate of the Middle East's largest Christian community.

In 1982, while describing Egypt's diminishing role in the Middle East, Fouad Ajami, who had fallen in love with the land of the Pharaohs wrote "Of Egypt's performance – sometimes a desperate trapeze act – other Arabs have been and remain fixated, applauding at times, full of derision at other times." Thirty years later, and despite its continued decline, he would repeat the same sentiment "Egypt may have lost the luster of old, but this Arab Time shall be judged by what eventually happens there." This native son of the land has to concur.



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THE CARAVAN

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