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Middle East Brief

Post-Revolution Egyptian Foreign Policy

Abdel Monem Said Aly

In *The Philosophy of the Revolution*, Gamal Abdel Nasser defined the three “circles” that Egypt’s foreign policy needed to address: the Arab, the African, and the Islamic countries.¹ In reality, however, since the early 1970s, whether under the presidencies of Sadat or Mubarak, Egypt’s foreign policy has given primary attention to the U.S., Europe, and the Arab Gulf states. Institutionally, the most important decisions regarding this policy were made in the office of the presidency; but in planning and implementing these decisions, Egypt’s military, its General Intelligence Directorate, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have played important roles.

In the wake of the January 25, 2011 revolution, Egypt’s general public began to exert greater influence in foreign policy making. And after Mohamed Morsi was elected president on June 24, 2012, the Muslim Brotherhood and its political arm—the Justice and Freedom Party—joined the ranks of institutions playing a role in this process. In that context, Essam Hadad, President Morsi’s foreign policy adviser and a prominent member of the Muslim Brotherhood, became especially influential.

Another dramatic shift occurred a year later, when on June 30, 2013, Morsi and his associates were toppled, leading the following year to the election of Field Marshall Abdel Fattah el-Sisi as Egypt’s sixth president. This development seems to have ended the revolutionary period in contemporary Egyptian history. This Brief aims to examine Egypt’s foreign and national security policies in what might be termed the “post-revolutionary era.” It first briefly discusses the constraints on Morsi’s foreign policy, it then moves on to Egypt’s foreign policy challenges and lastly identifies six possible foreign policy directions Egypt may take under the presidency of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi.

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Two additional introductory notes may be in order. First, the gradual prioritizing of domestic issues over foreign policy in Egypt began as early as some fifteen years ago—that is, about two-thirds through Mubarak’s three-decade presidency—as his aging began to take its toll on the functioning of his foreign policy. The only exception to this demotion was issues and developments related to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Not surprisingly, even during the past three tumultuous years, it was repeatedly asserted that one of the revolution’s main objectives was to restore Egypt’s regional role.

Finally, while it may well be too early to evaluate Sisi’s foreign policy, one change can already be seen: a far higher degree of congruence between Egypt’s foreign and domestic policies.² Thus, even as Sisi has given Egypt’s internal development top priority, he has been working to create a favorable external environment for this agenda by putting emphasis on maintaining Egypt’s peace with Israel and by strengthening his country’s ties with the Gulf Arab states.

Morsi’s Foreign Policy

Mohamed Morsi was the first civilian president and the first freely elected president in Egypt’s history. Yet, he did not use the considerable latitude usually afforded by the presidency to enhance the country’s regional or international standing. Three factors constrained his foreign policy and limited Egypt’s role, further weakening its position in the region and in the world at large. The first was the primacy of domestic politics over foreign policy. As Egypt was experiencing a deep security crisis, a growing economic crisis, and an ever-escalating political and constitutional impasse, alongside a profound turning point in its identity and conception of its history as it attempted to deal with its past, Morsi was at the same time facing a significant decline in domestic support. Consequently, despite his extensive travel to foreign capitals, he had very limited room for playing a productive role in foreign affairs.

A second constraint on Morsi’s foreign policy resulted from his affiliation with and dependency on the Muslim Brotherhood—an association that impelled him to act domestically in alliance with a wide range of Salafist organizations and jihadist groups. Thus, not only did he release from prison a large number of members of *Al-Gama’a al-Islamiya* and *al-Jihad*, but during the 2012 October War celebrations he praised the assassins of President Sadat, such as Tarek al-Zumor and Assem Abdel Maged.³ More broadly, Morsi found it difficult to reconcile the ideology of political Islam with the pragmatism required for the effective conduct of foreign policy.

A final constraint was that during his short term as president, Morsi failed to dominate the basic tools of foreign policymaking. The Army maintained its independence; the intelligence organs opposed the Muslim Brotherhood’s pursuit of hegemony; and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs bureaucracy stealthily resisted the efforts of Egypt’s new rulers to penetrate its ranks.

Egypt’s New Foreign Policy Challenges

Since the January 2011 revolution, the Egyptian state has faced a number of challenges—whose effects were compounded by the ascendance to power of the Muslim Brotherhood and its Islamic allies, along with President Morsi’s blind

obedience to instructions issued by the Brotherhood's Guidance Bureau. Some of these challenges have been:

A regional environment consisting of failed states

Since 2011, Egypt's geo-strategic environment has deteriorated as the country has become surrounded by dysfunctional states: Libya, Sudan, and the entire Arab Mashriq, comprising Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine. This has dramatically increased Egypt's vulnerability and exposure to the massive smuggling of advanced weapons into its territory from almost every possible direction. Compounding Egypt's difficulties, Sudan downgraded its partnership with Egypt regarding important Nile-related issues while also attempting to exploit Egypt's weakness by demanding that the Shalateen and Halayeb—areas in Egypt's southeastern corner whose Egyptian sovereignty is disputed by Sudan—be reopened. And Libya, compensating for its own vulnerabilities, pressured Egypt to surrender Libyan political refugees and limited the employment of Egyptian workers in Libya.

Egypt's alliance with Hamas complicated Egypt's situation regardless of whether or not Hamas or others in Gaza engaged Israel in actual fighting. Indeed, the Hamas government in Gaza compromised Egypt's sovereignty in the Sinai Peninsula, whether by smuggling weapons through tunnels or by providing direct access to a variety of terrorist groups.

These challenges were compounded by hyper-changes in the rest of the Mashriq area that further diminished Egypt's capacity to play a significant regional role. As a result, Egypt's significance in the region sank to a level far below that in the later years of the Mubarak presidency, which was already being criticized for the diminishment of Egypt's traditional regional role.

The weakening of the Egypt-Gulf alliance

Formed during the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, the Egyptian-Arab Gulf alliance—one of the major pillars of Egypt's foreign policy over the past four decades—reached its lowest point during the Morsi presidency. The relations between Egypt and the Gulf states had been, in effect, an extension of Egypt's strategic alliance with the U.S. and the West, binding countries with a moderate political agenda that resisted radical regimes like Iran (after 1979) and Iraq (after 1990).

Other factors contributing to the priority previously accorded these relations were the combined effect of the estimated three million Egyptian expatriates in the Gulf region, the passage of Gulf oil through the Suez Canal and the Summed pipeline,⁴ and Arab Gulf investments in Egypt. Indeed, it was the robust Egypt-Gulf relations that allowed Egypt to weather the negative Arab reaction to

its signing of the 1979 peace treaty with Israel, and that enabled Egypt and the Gulf states to unite behind a single strategy for liberating Kuwait in 1991, to form a coalition against the hegemonic tendencies of Iran in the Gulf and beyond, and to help manage the Arab-Israeli peace process in the 1990s.

These robust relations began to deteriorate in the aftermath of the January 2011 revolution, however, and even more so after the Muslim Brotherhood's rise to power in June 2012. Based as they were on a common platform of moderation and support for the status quo, they were bound to suffer from the religious-revolutionary politics of the Brotherhood. President Morsi's excessive obedience to the Brotherhood's Guidance Bureau, his alliance with radical groups, and his treatment of former president Hosni Mubarak, who was seen by the Gulf states as a staunch ally, all created apprehension and mistrust that weakened the alliance.

A sharp decline in the West's trust in Egypt

In the early 1970s, President Anwar Sadat shifted Egypt's primary international alliance from the Soviet Union and the socialist bloc to the U.S. and its Western allies. Military, security, and economic relations, with the U.S. and with EU members as well as with Japan, Australia, and Canada, thereupon became closer. After a short period of enthusiasm vis-à-vis the Arab Spring, however, these countries began to doubt Egypt's capacity to function as a stabilizing factor in the region, and their confidence further deteriorated after the Muslim Brotherhood came to power. Egypt's standing was thus demoted, in the words of President Barak Obama, from that of a "strategic ally" to "neither an ally nor an enemy."⁵

Although the U.S. and the EU assumed that the Muslim Brotherhood would continue to move Egypt toward greater democratization and would abide by the peace treaty with Israel, a strong element of mistrust gradually entered the relationship. Morsi's plan to visit the U.S. never materialized during his year in office, reflecting the weakening of U.S.-Egypt relations and the lower priority accorded them by the United States.

The decline in Egypt's standing in the Third World

For decades, Egypt's foreign policy succeeded in securing the country an important status within the Third World. Its different associations within various Arab, African, and Islamic circles enabled it to mobilize support for Egyptian and Arab causes in international forums such as the Non-Aligned Movement, the Islamic Conference, and the African Union. All this collapsed in the aftermath of the January 2011 revolution and the Muslim Brotherhood's subsequent advent to power. Egypt's image as a nationalist, civic, and moderate state was soon

replaced by a perception that it had become an unstable and religiously oriented polity. Egypt was increasingly viewed as providing a safe haven to radical and even terrorist groups—a perception that did not endear it to a variety of countries suffering from the destabilizing effects of political Islam. As a consequence, Egypt's status was transformed from a country to be respected to one that should be feared.

The failure to join BRICS

In an attempt to improve its international standing, Egypt attempted in 2012-13 to join the coalition of powers—Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS)—that seek to work outside what they regard as the Western-dominated international system. Through his visits to these countries during his short tenure, Morsi attempted to persuade these countries to accept Egypt among their ranks. His efforts failed miserably, not only because of Egypt's weak economic performance but also owing to the essential character of the country's new political regime. The dominance of the Muslim Brotherhood over Egyptian politics did not endear it to countries—Russia being the best example—that felt threatened by different varieties of Islamic fundamentalism.

The Ethiopian challenge to Egypt's water rights in the Nile

Traditionally, Egypt's national security concept has located the sources of threats it faced in the north, from where the Greeks, the Romans, the French, and the British had invaded; the northeast, from where the Crusaders, the Mongols, the Turks, and the Israelis attacked; and the south, where the sources of the Nile—Egypt's water lifeline—are located: the Ethiopian heights and the central African Nile Basin states.⁶ The threats brewing in this last area were largely neglected by Egyptian policy planners over the past few decades, allowing the Nile Basin states to build a coalition that threatened to undermine Egyptian interests through a new accord that would replace previous agreements signed with Egypt in 1902, 1929, and 1959.

Although Egypt's disagreements with the Nile Basin states did not begin with the January 2011 revolution and Morsi's later advent to power, these developments further complicated Egypt's relations with these countries. Thus, Ethiopia felt it could move ahead with construction of the Nahdha Dam on the Blue Nile, potentially diminishing the amount of water available to Egypt and its ability to generate electricity from the Aswan Dam. Ethiopia's move in turn encouraged other Nile Basin states to explore the possibilities of other projects on the Nile without seeking Egypt's consent. Egypt's nightmare of water deprivation thus came closer than ever before to becoming reality.

The fragility of Egypt's new alliances

To compensate for the aforementioned weakening of Egypt's international and regional standing, President Morsi attempted to build a new coalition composed of Egypt, Qatar, and Turkey. But Turkey's entanglement in Syria and the protests in Istanbul's Taksim Square in June 2013 have made Ankara too vulnerable and fragile to be a solid regional and international partner. Such a coalition would have been fragile in any case, given Qatar's small size and Turkey's diversified and often conflicting interests in Europe, Central Asia, and the Middle East.

Endangering the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty

Although President Morsi made every effort to keep the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty intact, and his government helped to end the 2012 Israel-Hamas military conflict, many Israelis worried about the long-term implications of the relationship between the Muslim Brotherhood and its subsidiary in Gaza. Israel's uneasiness was compounded by the continued functioning of the Gaza-Sinai tunnels and the movement of thousands of Egyptian and international Islamist terrorists across the border into the Sinai. The more frequent attacks on Egyptian security personnel in the Sinai Peninsula further increased apprehension about a crisis in the making in Egyptian-Israeli relations.

Loss of the trust of the international community

The cumulative effect of the aforementioned trajectories, coupled with the deterioration of domestic politics in Egypt, made the international community doubtful of Egypt's ability to meet its international obligations. The most glaring expression of this lack of confidence was Egypt's failure to sign an agreement with the IMF to grant it a \$4.8 billion loan. The mistrust of Egypt's ability to manage the challenges it faced has led to a sharp decline in tourism and foreign investments.

Sisi's Foreign Policy

Speculating about Egypt's foreign policy only six months into the Sisi presidency is a risky undertaking.⁷ As Egypt's new polity is still in the making, with considerable resistance from the Muslim Brotherhood and their Salafist and jihadist allies, any assertions regarding Egypt's policy should be regarded as tentative and preliminary. Within this limitation, at least six new or revised directions in the country's foreign policy can be identified:

Increasing and broadening Egypt's global options

Egypt has a long history of dealing with the changing configuration of the international system in a way that enhances its own interests. Wisely utilizing its geopolitical and strategic assets helped it weather the storms of the

Cold War period, for example: Egypt's policies of "positive neutrality" and "non-alignment" enhanced its position in international organizations. And when the Cold War came to an end and the international system became unipolar—led by the United States—Egypt was already prepared, having made the strategic shift mentioned above under Sadat (who acted to strengthen Egypt's alliance with the U.S. and the West by making peace with Israel in 1979) and by joining the coalition during the first Gulf war in 1991.

In the post-revolutionary era, Egypt's perception of the international system seems more complex and nuanced than at any previous period. Although the end of the Cold War placed the U.S. at the top of a unipolar system, the combined effect of America's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the 2008–9 global economic and financial crisis weakened its position in the global system—a development further exacerbated by the Obama administration's repeatedly declared reluctance to use military force. Coupled with much more assertive Russian policies in Georgia, Ukraine, and Syria as well as in international affairs more broadly, these developments, while not restoring bipolarity, have ended what now seems to have been a relatively brief "unipolar moment."

As a result, Egypt's foreign policy has now begun to pay more attention to Russia as well as to the other members of BRICS. Sisi has already visited Moscow twice, once as defense minister and again after he became president. In these visits he concluded a wide range of agreements, including a \$3.5 billion framework agreement for arms supplies. This, however, should not be interpreted as ignoring the other focuses of Egypt's foreign policy—the United States and the European Union. Indeed, Sisi is counting on a diversified foreign policy to increase Egypt's options and to deal with pressures exerted by Washington and other Western capitals regarding its domestic affairs.⁸ More recently, the rise of ISIL in Syria and Iraq has brought Egypt and the West closer again as the U.S. labored to build an international and regional coalition to launch a war against the common terrorist enemy. Egypt agreed to join the alliance, provided that it would not focus solely on ISIL but would counter other terrorist organizations in the region as well.

Rebuilding the Egyptian-GCC coalition

The speed and efficiency of the financial and political assistance provided to Egypt by Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the aftermath of the Muslim Brotherhood's overthrow, followed by that of Kuwait and Bahrain, has made Egypt's relations with these countries once again a top priority. While the U.S. and the EU continued to question the nature of the change in Cairo, and debated whether to depict it as a revolution or a military coup, Arab Gulf

states were quick to provide direct economic assistance totaling some \$20 billion for 2013–4,⁹ and are considering the establishment of a Free Trade Zone with Egypt.¹⁰ And in addition to helping meet Egyptian developmental needs, these countries also did their best to alter the mindset of the U.S. and the EU with regard to the changes in Egypt.

As Egyptian-Gulf relations were being restored to their pre-January 2011 levels, the two sides endeavored to cooperate in a wide range of areas. They coordinated their diplomatic activities in the Arab League and other international and regional forums, and they began to cooperate both in dealing with the Muslim Brotherhood and its much more radical associates, and in countering crises in Libya, Syria, and Iraq. Cementing this relationship will now be Egypt's top priority and has become a fairly high priority for the Gulf countries as well.¹¹

Repairing Egypt's image in the international arena

The third priority of Sisi's foreign policy is to change how Egypt is regarded by the world: not as a religiously oriented revolutionary country, but as a civic, democratizing, and reforming polity. This perceptual change is essential if the massive decline in Egypt's fortunes over the past three years is to be arrested. An important first step in this direction is for Egypt to conclude an agreement with the IMF—which would be viewed as a vote of confidence in Egypt's capabilities and as amounting to a "clean bill of health" that would attract foreign investors and tourists to the country.

An important element of this attempt at image repair is the changes in the public discourse that Sisi has introduced. Over the past six decades, the public conversation in Egypt has centered on two themes: the management of poverty and the management of external, regional, and international relations. Fears and insecurities have guided and motivated Egypt's political conversation as well as its political behavior, both internally and externally. To this public discourse, Sisi has contributed three new ideas: first, that the business of Egyptian politics is the management of the country's human and material wealth, not just its poverty; second, that instead of adopting an isolationist stance, Egypt should actively seek a stable and peaceful regional environment that rests on a more robust Egyptian-Gulf alliance and that includes the creation of a "regional security system." And third, that Egypt should end its obsessive dwelling on its past and should instead fix its sights on the future. For this, very hard work will be required, and the expansion of Egypt's developmental horizons will be essential.¹²

Another important dimension of this effort at image repair involves changing the prevailing perception of Egypt as an economic "basket case" and gaining appreciation for the

fact that Egypt's economy has already begun to improve. This is reflected in the return of the Egyptian stock market to its pre-January 2011 levels: In May 23, 2014, the stock market's EGX 30 index went up to 8,728 points, the highest since August 2008.¹³ It is also manifested in the reduction of the budget deficit to 10 percent,¹⁴ in the increase in the country's foreign currency reserves from \$13 billion in 2013 to \$17 billion in 2014, and in two stimulus packages that resulted both in the resumption of work on infrastructure projects, and in increased industrial productivity.¹⁵ According to conservative estimates, Egypt's growth rate will reach 2.7 percent (a less conservative estimate expects this figure to be as high as 3.5 percent) in fiscal year 2013/2014 and 4.2 percent in 2014/2015,¹⁶ up from 1.9 percent in 2012/2013.¹⁷

This renewed growth is associated with a package of courageous economic reform decrees initiated by interim President Adly Mansour before Sisi's coming into office. These involved the long sought-after introduction of a capital gains tax; amending the Investment Law; prohibiting third parties from challenging government contracts in court; and a reduction of subsidies on energy products.¹⁸ Soon after assuming office, Sisi added a project to dramatically enhance the capacity of the Suez Canal for international trade; the North Coast project, to increase Mediterranean tourism; a 3 million feddans land reclamation project; and other infrastructure projects to stimulate the economy.

Tackling the Nile

For Egypt, the prospect of Ethiopia's building the Nahdha Dam on the Blue Nile presents a clear and present danger. Egypt's foreign policy apparatus, unable to wait until its state institutions are rebuilt, was instructed to garner support for Egypt's position and for the steps that would need to be taken to protect its national interests. Sisi's approach to the problem has been characterized by firmness and flexibility wrapped in a soft-spoken, Sadat-like strategy. His first visit abroad as president this year to attend the African Summit in Equatorial Guinea, signaled his foreign policy priorities. On a subsequent occasion, he scored his first substantive achievement when he returned Egypt to the ranks of the African Union Summitry and reached a seven-point agreement with Ethiopia's prime minister, Hailemariam Desalegn, to form a Bilateral Joint Commission to resolve the dispute.¹⁹ Thereafter a series of meetings took place between the two sides, and conciliatory statements were made. Hisam Al Moghazi, the Egyptian minister of irrigation, stated that Sisi was prepared to visit Ethiopia as many times as it would take to reach an agreement that would avoid a reduction in Egypt's share of Nile water.²⁰ In response, Ethiopia's foreign minister, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, promised that Nahdha Dam would not be used for irrigation.²¹

Liberating Sinai

As the Egyptian army is already fully engaged in military operations to liberate the Sinai Peninsula from the presence of terrorists of various kinds, the country's foreign policy establishment will seek support for this effort in different regional and international forums. A major theme within this effort will be Egypt's engagement with the emerging international and regional coalition to fight ISIL.

Stabilizing an unstable region

As Egypt itself is still recuperating from its revolutionary upheavals, its ability to play an active role in stabilizing other turbulent countries, like Libya, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, is limited. In the short term, then, Egypt will confine itself to working together with Arab Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, as well as with the Arab League to help manage the catastrophic situations in these countries.

Yet even under existing constraints, Egypt can play a more meaningful role in her "near abroad"—the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This was apparent in July and August of this year, when under Sisi, Egypt helped Israel and Hamas end their fifty-one-day war. In contrast to similar efforts during the Mubarak and Morsi presidencies, however, Egypt now found itself in competition in this realm with both Turkey and Qatar. Unfortunately, while Israel accepted Egypt's ceasefire proposal on July 14, Hamas rejected it, resulting in further bloodshed and destruction in Gaza. Egypt's initiative was finally adopted on August 27, after Egypt secured negotiations between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority on the specifics of dealing with the crossing points between Gaza and both Egypt and Israel.

While Egypt-Hamas relations were warm during the Morsi presidency—not surprisingly, given that Hamas was launched as the Palestinian branch of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood—those relations cooled considerably after Morsi's removal, as evidence mounted of Hamas' interference in Egypt's domestic affairs. But as the 2014 Gaza War escalated, Hamas had no alternative but to ask for Egypt's help, particularly as the Gulf states signaled strongly that Cairo was the only address for negotiations.

Egypt's ultimate success in the mediation also resulted from the growing understanding between Israel and Egypt. At the same time as Sisi continued to adhere to his predecessors' commitments to respect the peace treaty with Israel and to seek a two-state solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, he added two new dimensions to Egyptian-Israeli relations: a proposal to establish a regional security system that would guarantee the security of the borders of all the region's states; and a public acknowledgment that the depth of Egypt's peace with Israel had increased

considerably, opening up the possibility of further understandings based on common interests. As an example of the latter, Sisi took note of Israel's acceptance of increased Egyptian military deployments in the Sinai (in excess of the limits stipulated in the Security Protocol of the 1979 Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty) in response to the threat of terrorism in the Sinai Peninsula.²² Another sign of potentially much closer Egyptian-Israeli ties is the serious consideration given in Cairo to purchasing natural gas from Israel.²³ Sisi also used the opportunity of the Gaza Reconstruction Conference, held in Cairo in mid-October, to call upon both the government and the people of Israel to accept the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative.²⁴ He also made it clear that though the Initiative should constitute the framework for peace, agreement would still need to be reached between Israel and the Palestinian National Authority.²⁵

Concluding Remarks

The aforementioned six priorities are likely to dominate Egypt's foreign policy agenda in the short term while the country is rebuilding its institutions and overcoming the effects of the upheavals experienced during the recent three-year revolutionary period. And while Egypt's long-term priorities in this regard are more difficult to ascertain, two points can be stressed with considerable confidence. First, continuity in Egyptian foreign policy will be a function of the restoration of the institutions that play a central role in its formation: the army, the intelligence community, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. And in contrast to the pre-January 2011 era, these will now be increasingly influenced by Egyptian media and public opinion.

And second, the primary focus of Egypt's foreign policy will be consolidating the alliance with the Arab Gulf states, which are the key to furthering Egypt's national interests in a variety of areas: not only meeting the country's developmental needs, but also rebuilding its relations with the West and even with Africa.

Endnotes

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- See Mohamed Abdel Aati, "145 Projects for the 'Partners for Development' Conference in February 2015," *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, August 31, 2014 [in Arabic].
- 12 It should be noted that none of these ideas are completely new to Egypt's developmental thinking; indeed, the author has contributed to such thought through articles published in *Al-Masry Al-Youm* newspaper: "The Investment in the Time of Revolution," March 2, 2013; "Some Like It Barren," May 19, 2013; "Getting Out of the Historical Failure," May 26, 2013; "Hard Wear and Soft Wear," June 2, 2013; "Only Three Files and Nothing More," July 7, 2013; "Egypt's Wealth and Poverty," September 15, 2013; "Rich and Poor," April 5, 2014; "From the River to the Sea," May 8, 2014 [in Arabic].
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