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## Egypt's Foreign Policy under Mohamed Morsi

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*Mohamed Morsi as a new leader of Egypt will certainly add new dimensions too, but whether he will initiate a radical shift or not is not yet clear in foreign policy.*

# Egypt's Foreign Policy under Mohamed Morsi

Muhammed Mursi Döneminde Mısır Dış Politikası

Mehmet ÖZKAN

## Özet

*Devrim sonrasında Mısır'da nelerin değişeceği hususunda en çok üzerine düşünülen ve bazıları tarafından da 'korkulan' dönüşüm dış politika konusundaydı. Peki devrim sonrası Mısır dış politikasında neler değişti? Mısır dış politikası nereye gidiyor? Bu makale Mısır dış politikasının tarihten beri gerek coğrafi konumu gerekse ülke çıkarları açısından hep üçayak üzerinde yürüyebildiği müddetçe güçlü ve etkili olduğundan yola çıkarak Mursi döneminin dış politikasını incelemektedir. Buna göre ne zamanki bu üçlü saç ayağından bazıları ihmal edilmiş, Mısır hem stratejik konumunu hem de etkisini kaybetmiştir. Bu üçlü saç ayağı (Afrika, Avrupa/Batı ve Ortadoğu) aynı zamanda Mısır kimliğini ve 'etki alanını' oluşturan en temel öğe olagelmıştır. Mursi temel olarak bu üçlü saç ayağını yeniden oluşturmak için adımlar atmaya çalışmaktadır fakat Mısır'dan kısa bir sürede ciddi bir dış politika aktivizmi beklemek de doğru değildir. Mısır için en temel önceliğin iç politikada dengeleri oturtmak olduğu göz önüne alındığında Mısır'a haksızlık da etmemek gerekir.*

While the leadership in Egypt capitalized the first one in their favor, in the 1980s, the second period could be considered as a missed one. Now Egypt is entering a third period with the deep social-political restructuring of the Arab world after the popular revolutions.

### Abstract

*One of the fundamental issues and the source of 'fear' for many in the West after the revolution in Egypt was a possible radical change in the foreign policy area. But what has changed in the foreign policy of Egypt after the revolution? This article explains the foreign policy of Egypt under Morsi by arguing that Egyptian foreign policy has always faced the historical problem of creating a coherent balance in its triple identity. Egyptian foreign policy has always been strong, sustainable and beneficial for the country whenever it is based on triple identity (Arab, African and European/West) and its articulation in a coherent way. Whenever this balance is out of consideration in foreign policy-making, Egypt has lost its influence and strategic position in the region and beyond. Morsi is basically trying to link this triple identity in his foreign policy. However, one should not misjudge President Morsi and have over-expectations from him as the domestic political transformation requires more attention.*

**Keywords:** Mohamed Morsi, Egypt's Foreign Policy, Africa, the Middle East, and the West

### Introduction

As Egyptians are celebrating the second anniversary of the popular revolution, many still doubt about the direction and the future of the country. Domestic political turmoil, protests and opposition to the decisions of President Mohamed Morsi are everyday issues both in domestic and international media. However, the reconstruction of the country is taking place almost

in every field, including foreign policy. Indeed, one of the fundamental issues and the source of 'fear' for many in the west after the revolution in Egypt was a possible radical change in the foreign policy area. Apparently this did not happen so far. But what has changed in the foreign policy of Egypt after the revolution? Although there is not yet a clear answer whether Egypt is returning to its influential position in the region as it was in the past, the time has come for an evaluation of Cairo's foreign policy inclination since the revolution. Where is the Egyptian foreign policy heading? What are the regional and global implications? Can we talk about a 'new' or 'revolutionary' foreign policy as a natural result of the revolution?

### Legacy

In order to contextualize better the direction of current Egyptian foreign policy, a background to developments and the legacy of Hosni Mobarek is essential. Indeed, one can talk about three moments in the modern history of Egypt when Cairo has had a chance to shape the developments deeply in the region. First one was the period of the 1950s and the 1960s; and the second one was the time after the Iranian revolution. While the leadership in Egypt capitalized the first one in their favor, in the 1980s, the second period could be considered as a missed one. Now Egypt is entering a third period with the deep social-political restructuring of the Arab world after the popular revolutions. As always happened in each period, expectations from Egypt is huge and only time will tell about the destiny of this opportunity?

A general overview of the first period would indicate that Cairo was the mover-and-shaker of the region in the 1950s and 1960s. This was accounted for by several reasons. Most important one, among others, was intellectual/discursive and policy leadership on the key issues that were overall dominated by Egyptian leaders in the region. Cairo championed the pan-Arabism and had even a short-lived integration with Syria under the name of the United Arab Republic between 1958 and 1961. Cairo had also used the Arab League, initiated and headquartered by Egypt for long time, actively as a forum to discuss the Middle Eastern issues. Cairo was the main capital for the consultation and policy formulation trips for foreign and regional leaders during this time. Egyptian President Gamal Abdul-Nasser was regarded as the natural leader of the Arab world both at the public and the government levels in the region. This position both for Nasser and Egypt started to stray away gradually after the 1967 War and such process escalated in the mid-1970s when the then-President Anwar Sadat visited Israel and subsequently signed a peace treaty in 1978.<sup>1</sup>

While this was to be, regional dynamics began to change again – the second period – in favor of Egypt politically and strategically after 1980s onward. In the Middle East, after the Iranian Revolution in 1979, to some extent Iran was excluded from regional politics creating a power vacuum that could have been filled by Egypt. And two major powers, Iran and Iraq, were at war with each other for eight years between 1980 and 1988, creating another vacuum to be filled. Iraq had always wanted to be the champion of Arab leadership and in that sense Iraq was the main competitor of Egypt. In the 1980s, virtually regional dynamics changed positively for Egypt; there was no influential rival to Cairo in the Middle East. At the same time, although Cairo was also excluded due to its peace agreement with Israel, thanks to the Iranian Revolution, Cairo's returning to both inter-Arab and the Middle Eastern political system did not take long, since it was re-admitted to organizations such as the OIC in 1984.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, at the end of the 1980s, both international and regional

dynamics changed again completely once more in favor of Cairo: Iraq invaded Kuwait, and it followed by an American-led intervention to protect Kuwait. Iraq was no longer powerful to claim Arab leadership as the main rival of Egypt in the Middle East. Similarly, the ending of the Cold War in 1989 opened a wide arena where Cairo could play a determining role at least in regional affairs. There were peace efforts to put an end the conflict between Israel and Palestine in early 1990s. In other words, there was an arena within which Cairo's influence could be felt benignly, if not strongly. But it did not happen. Instead, both Egypt's influence and credibility in the region declined and many started to see Egypt as the 'agent' of the West, especially the US.<sup>3</sup>

In short, during this period, it is fair to argue that Egyptian politicians and diplomats joined most of the key meetings related to the Middle East, however their influence in comparison to the size, population and resources of their country were limited, even non-existent. With the revolution in 2011, the third period has started. Egypt again is becoming the center of attraction and both regional and global players look at Cairo for different expectations.

### **Challenges**

This new period is not without challenges. One of the biggest, and maybe the most important, challenge in Egypt's foreign policy is directly related to its historical heritage and identity. Foreign policy is an extension of existing identities in the society and it can only be viable as long as it corresponds to them. Indicating this, Egyptian foreign policy has always faced the historical problem of creating a coherent balance in its triple identity of Arab, African and European, through the Mediterranean. Since the time of Muhammad Ali Pasha, this has been an intellectual, as well as a political, challenge. In the early period of the twentieth century, gaining independence was the main concern, and the independence movement and anti-colonial discourse, coupled with Islam, was an important element in the Egyptians' understanding of the world. This was more prominent in Egypt's ap-



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proach to the Palestinian issue, especially in the 1930s.

After Gamal Abdel Nasser came to power, this triple balance changed to in favor of pan-Arabism over other identities, although there was an African connection through the Non-Alignment Movement and the anti-colonial discourse. However, this was nothing more than a populist discourse that produced almost nothing sustainable in concrete terms in terms of foreign policy. During Anwar Sadat's time, this shift started to focus more on the Western identity, slowly leaving the pan-Arabism and African elements, especially after the Camp David agreement. After the assassination of Sadat, new president Hosni Mubarak continued the same logic and African and Arab dimensions became less visible in making of foreign policy, except some occasional crisis forced the Egyptian leadership to take a position,

such as *Intifada*, Oslo peace process etc. Even in many of these cases, Egypt is considered as a follower of the international concern rather than producing an original foreign policy perspective. Therefore, the Western dimension in foreign policy had been a dominant and single-handed approach of the Mubarak's presidency.

In 2011, after the revolution, it was clear that this one-sided approach is not only sustainable but also dangerous for the vital interest of Egypt in the region and beyond. Indeed, Egypt, by virtue of its location and history, does not have the luxury of choosing one over the others, as doing so has proven to be disastrous. Ongoing debates on sharing Nile water with various African countries (especially Ethiopia) should be considered as the direct result of neglecting the African dimension in previous years. Similarly, Egypt's relatively small influence on Palestinian

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and inter-Arab issues is a direct result of neglecting the Arab dimension.

The question is whether and if Egypt can reconcile its triple identity in its foreign policy. It is still not clear. However, there are signs that it wants to do so. After the revolution at the beginning of 2011 the foreign ministry initially gained ground in shaping foreign policy at the expense of the intelligence service, which has had the upper hand in the foreign relations in the past. Nabil al-Arabi, a popular figure from the foreign policy establishment, was appointed as foreign minister as a sign of this. Nabil al-Arabi's openings to Africa and direct engagement with Ethiopia should be seen as much a part of this desire to reconcile the triple identity although they are direct results of the urgent situation of the Nile basin. His efforts to reach reconciliation between the two Palestinian groups, Hamas and Fatah; a strong intention to open diplomatic ties with Iran and having frank talks with the Gulf partners, especially Saudi Arabia, may also be interpreted as efforts to normalize Egypt's Arab and Middle Eastern identity in foreign politics. Going beyond the traditional approach, he initiated the rapprochement with Iran and a limited opening of the Gaza border. When al-Arabi left to become secretary-general of the Arab League in July 2011, however, the Foreign Ministry's domination and visionary face disappeared.<sup>4</sup>

His successor, the career diplomat Mohamed Kamel Amr, is not attributed any foreign policy ambitions of his own, nor did any substantive impulses come from the military leadership. However, when Mohamed Morsi elected as president, foreign policy has become again an impor-

tant topic on the state agenda. President Morsi himself does not make foreign policy alone as foreign policy decisions are apparently made in close consultation with leading figures within the movement and its Freedom and Justice Party (FJP). This is better reflected in the appointment of Essam el-Haddad as Presidential Assistant for Foreign Relations and International Cooperation. El-Haddad, a member of the Brotherhood's Guidance Office, has been considered by many as the group's "foreign minister" due to his extensive network of contacts to Western actors. Whoever is contributing to the foreign policy-making, observing the developments, Morsi as Egyptian President and the FJP as the ruling party want to continue the path that al-Arabi wanted to take.

The second biggest challenge for Egypt's foreign policy is to regain confidence in region and beyond. From a theoretical perspective, Egypt's Palestinian-Israeli policy has been an influential element on defining its regional standing and possible role since the 1930s. It can be argued that Cairo's policy toward Palestine is not only very critical for the conflict itself, but also Cairo's overall influence in regional affairs. Whenever Cairo takes a leading role on the key regional issue, its influence has also increased on other regional issues. Whenever, Cairo took a more narrowed approach, its credibility and influence is highly damaged. Egypt is viewed as the natural Arab leader in the region, and therefore expectations are high. Egypt, due to its weight and history, cannot afford to be sidelined from any issue, especially the Palestinian one, in the area, because it affects Egypt anyway. Therefore, if Egypt wants to play a leading role in the region

and regain the confidence again, it should start re-formulating a new discourse on the Palestinian-Israeli issue in its foreign policy. This could be very important not only for finding a possible peace for the decades-old conflict, but also for Egypt's international standing.

Many argue that when the government and leader change, a state's identity and national interest will change accordingly.<sup>5</sup> This new definition might be similar to the past practices, but a new shape will gradually take hold. Historically, each president of Egypt has added different dimension to already existing foreign policy tenets, some being very radical in shift, some preserving the existing status quo. Mohamed Morsi as a new leader of Egypt will certainly add new dimensions too, but whether he will initiate a radical shift or not is not yet clear in foreign policy. What is clear is that for Egypt to come back to the Middle East and regain its confidence and influence, a discursive/identity change in foreign policy is required.

Third biggest challenge is charting a foreign policy that goes very much in line with the domestic needs and urgencies. Democratic consolidation in domestic politics and economic development are the key themes in that sense. While the domestic consolidation of democracy is likely to take time, as the opposition is trying to find every single mistake to use for questioning the legitimacy of President Morsi; economic developments are of particular importance for the new Egypt. After all, now that President Morsi, to some extent, has managed to consolidate his power, the Egyptian people realize that he has no excuses for poor performance. Egypt faces both macro-economic and distributional challenges. With regard to the former, his position is strengthened by the work of the Central Bank in sustaining a stable economy over the past year and a half, but weakened by the fact that US\$21 billion left the country due to capital flight, loss of tourism revenue, and corrupt money seeking havens elsewhere. In fact, Foreign Direct Investment rates are close to zero, while tourism has ground to a halt and prices have been slashed in an attempt to attract business.<sup>6</sup> Given these tight

constraints, it was estimated that the Morsi government needs time but act quickly to put things in order. Otherwise it will face a social crisis with all of its attendant dangers. Economic issues in Egypt have also a domestic dimension to consider. There are many capable economists in Egypt, but not all are willing to cooperate with the new government. Bringing them to the service of the country and creating an atmosphere that a developed Egypt is for everybody's interest is also part of the challenge in the near future.

### **What President Morsi is doing?**

What the former foreign minister Nabil al-Arabi tried to change in terms of 'ideational' and 'structural' levels at Egyptian foreign policy had been interrupted due to his sudden move to the Arab League. Morsi after being elected as president is not as ambitious and eager for a radical transformation of foreign policy as al-Arabi but he is trying to follow the same path in a more gradual way. However, economic priorities and the efforts to reposition Egypt in regional and global politics for now have been the hallmarks of Egypt's foreign policy. President Morsi's trip to China, accompanied by seven ministers and an 80-man trade delegation;<sup>7</sup> and his attendance to annual meeting of the Non-Alignment Movement in Tehran, in simple terms, could be seen as a new interest to develop relations, to re-locate Egypt in global economic transformation and to seek cooperation in a serious ways with the most neglected regions after Nasser in foreign relations.

As discussed in the earlier section, Egyptian foreign policy has always been strong, sustainable and beneficial for the country whenever it is based on triple identity and its articulation in a coherent way. Whenever this balance is out of consideration in foreign policy-making, Egypt has lost its influence and strategic position in the region and beyond. The balance of this triple identity has defined the scope of Cairo's foreign policy and the 'sphere of influence'. Looked from this perspective, it is possible to argue that President Morsi has been taking steps to establish this triple links and connections. Perhaps, this ex-

plains why his first trips were not to the United States or Europe, but to Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia, China and Iran. When he participated in the African Union summit in Addis Ababa, President Morsi underlined Africa's outstanding importance for Cairo. Although the urgency and pressure on the Nile River are very much persistent on Egypt, Morsi has been the first Egyptian head of state since 1995 to participate in a meeting of the African Union.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, his visits to Sudan and Ethiopia do not only show his interest in developing African dimension in foreign policy, but also it is an indication of the recognition of Africa by Egypt as more than football and possibly as a strategic partner.<sup>9</sup>

The fact that President Morsi comes from an Islamic background, people wondered more about his relations with the West (and the US). So far, he seems to prefer a rational and mutual interest based relations with the West, instead of an emotionally driven foreign policy, with a special reference that Egypt is not a 'passive' actor in this relation, rather it is one of the 'active' ones. His trip to the US for the UN General Assembly, his interaction with the EU officials in Brussels and his visits to Italy and Germany seem to have been intended to pave the way for a rational and mutually constructive relationship. However, as of now there is still an ongoing debate about the scope and the nature of 'political' relations with the West, with the western support to Egypt's economy being the main issue in the minds of the both sides.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps, the most assertive aspect of Cairo's foreign policy could be seen in its moves toward the Middle East. For example, President Morsi during his visit to Riyadh evoked the close ties between Egypt and Saudi Arabia, as the two largest Arab nations. He continued to build up for a possible normalization of diplomatic ties with Iran. Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad returned President Morsi's visit to Cairo by participating in the high level meeting of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. Cairo started a peace initiative to resolve the Syria conflict, involving Iran alongside Turkey and Egypt. The tripartite initiative is likely to be ineffective as

along as Syria's Bashar Assad did not go, however, it may contribute to restructuring period after he steps down or any other middle ground has been found toward a lasting solution. This initiative may evolve into an organ where Egypt shows its influence in regional affairs and also a platform where the three key states of the Middle East discuss the regional issues for consultation.

Despite all this activism in the region, one also should note that the Middle East has been the weakest link in Egyptian foreign policy until the Israeli attack on Gaza in November 2012. Cairo has been surprisingly silent on Gaza and other developments in Palestine. When Israel attacked on Gaza in November 2012, Egypt did not have any chance but to respond to the developments. Egypt called its ambassador back to Cairo for consultation and the Arab League sent a delegation to Gaza led by Secretary-general Nabil al-Arabi. President Morsi during all this process has been very active in finding a truce between Israel and Hamas. This latest Gaza attack forced Egypt for the first time in last decades to take a seriously strong pro-Palestinian position and asserted itself as an independent actor in the region.

After all these considerations, perhaps the most fundamental question is how accurate and reasonable it would be to expect a serious foreign policy change in Egypt in a short time. If one considers the fact that the main priority is to organize the domestic politics of Egypt, one should not misjudge President Morsi and create over-expectations from him. Indeed, re-designing the civil-military-bureaucratic relations, reforming the local governments to produce efficiency, and most importantly to make serious structural changes to pave the way for economic developments are the issues to strengthen or weaken the Egypt's foreign policy in near future. From this point of view, the distinction between domestic politics and foreign policy is not very significant in today's world. For Egypt, the key issue is to organize both in a supportive manner and act accordingly. Although we need time to see what Egypt can do in this process and assess the implications of its foreign policy actions, it is fair to

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say that Cairo under President Morsi is eager to be more influential in its region and beyond.

**Conclusion: What does the future look like?**

Revolutions in the Arab world and Egypt opened new horizons and challenges in terms of foreign policy, while opening up new opportunities both in the region and beyond. For the first time, a civilian president is elected and the process for democratization has gained momentum in Egypt. The future of the country has been debated not only by a few elite but larger segments of the society. Although domestic issues have always been considered as the most important, foreign policy seems to have been inserted in the debate at critical times.

One can observe two observations that are seemingly contradictory at societal level in post-revolutionary Egypt. One the one hand, there is growing patriotism in Egypt; national pride is increasing, albeit sometimes in a chauvinistic way. On the other hand, there is a growing fear, sometimes paranoia, that perhaps they will not succeed, or, if they do succeed, that they will get something they were not looking for. This mood between optimism, high expectations and disappointment is the most widespread among Egyptians. Whether the fear or the optimism will win will become clear in time, but what is clear is that they are in a deep struggle at every level: economic, social, political and psychological. This is also valid in the making of foreign policy. However, it is clear that Egypt will continue to be a

trend-setter for the region as a whole in terms of foreign policy, despite different trajectories of transition countries and heightened diversity within the Arab world following the uprisings. It is in Egypt where both the aspirations and the contradictions of Arab reform are most evident. But as long as Egypt remains rocked with instability, it will not be possible for the country to play a major regional role.

Despite these huge challenges, President Morsi is on the right track in terms of consolidating the triple identity and paving the way for charting a new discourse. Perhaps, as a sign of this, his assertive foreign policy is extremely popular across the broader population. However, time has come for an accelerated effort to re-formulate a long-term and coherent standing on foreign policy issues. Such an outcome will show Cairo's seriousness and feed its credibility as well as being an important milestone in building trust. As democratic construction, change and revolutions are being discussed in the Middle East, the role and the contribution of regional states come to the fore again. In that sense, bringing Egypt's intellectual contribution back to the Middle East is more than necessity. It is simply because, without Egypt, Arabs can have neither war nor peace with regional or international rivals. Without Egypt's involvement and encouragement in Africa, creating the United Nations of Africa is just a dream. Similarly, as long as there is no active Egyptian involvement in African issues and politics, North Africa never will be an essential part of Africa in intellectual, political and economic

terms. It is time for Egypt to discover that there are more opportunities in Africa than football, there are more opportunities in Arab politics than the Palestinian burden, and there are more benefits in a healthy engagement with the Western countries than American aid. Beyond all of

this, it is certain that there will be more dignity, respect, benefit and influence (and sometimes burden, too) in foreign relations once Egyptians understand that they are much more important for regional and global politics than they think.

## DİPNOTLAR

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