

Re-evaluating Iran-Egypt Relations: A Look at the Evolving Geopolitical Context

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ABSTRACT Egypt under President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi appears committed to avoid falling into the contentious Sunni-Shia divide by reconfiguring its security considerations based on the recognition of new circumstances that prioritize stability above sectarian and ethnic identity concerns. While Egypt is unlikely to fundamentally alter its foreign policy anytime soon, largely due to its economic dependency on rich Arab countries of the Persian Gulf, its recalibration of relations with Iran has assumed a new level of importance. The growing threat of violent extremism to destabilize the regional order and state-system is undermining old political alliances. This paper provides a systematic attempt to examine the prospects of Egypt's foreign policy changes and their regional implications, particularly for its economic dependency on Saudi Arabia.

Introduction

The Arab spring, which initially obscured the prominence of religious and ethnic cleavages, has continually underscored sectarian tensions in a region already overrun with many political difficulties. The post-Arab Spring political dynamic, in various countries and contexts, has seen an unprecedented increase in sectarian tensions in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Evolving sectarian tensions and identity politics in the MENA region have given rise to renewed threat and opportunity perceptions, prompting a shifting geopolitical context and the configuration of new security considerations.¹ Iran-Egypt relations have thus far managed to escape these sectarian tensions, as Egyptian leaders in the post-Arab uprisings have prioritized the region's stability over entangling Egypt in proxy wars that often signify broader political rivalries in the MENA region.

While Saudi Arabia, which has been the key financial mainstay of the Egyptian regime in the aftermath of the July 3, 2013 popular coup, anticipates further

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The growing threat of violent extremism to the regional order and state-system is undermining the exclusiveness of more familiar and traditional political alliances

Egyptian cooperation in confronting Iranian proxies in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, Egypt's approach to these countries has been to underscore the importance of domestic and regional stability. Egyptian leaders, for example, have made it abundantly clear that any attempt to disrupt the Syrian state could risk bringing to power a radical Islamic group –an eventuality that Cairo deems politically objectionable.² Increasingly, as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) expands its domain of control and quasi-authoritarian rule into new territories within Iraq and Syria,³ as well as attacking Shiite mosques and government-affiliated organs and institutions, Egyptian officials find themselves undeniably on the side of the groups, organizations, countries, and alliances that are fighting ISIS.

The central aim of this paper is to demonstrate that Egypt under President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi appears committed to avoid falling into the obvious Sunni-Shia schism by reconfiguring its security concerns based on the recognition of new circumstances that foster stability and economics above all sectarian and ethnic identity concerns. While Egypt is unlikely to fundamentally alter its foreign policy conduct, in large part due to its economic dependency on the rich Arab countries of the Persian Gulf, its calculation of relations with Iran has assumed a new level of significance. This paper provides a systematic attempt to examine the evolving prospects for foreign policy innovation and its implications given that Egypt's economic dependency on Saudi Arabia, for better or worse, is likely to endure. Yet at the same time, it is worth noting that the growing threat of violent extremism to the regional order and state-system is undermining the exclusiveness of more familiar and traditional political alliances. The age of terrorism may yet expand the terrain for new possibilities and a greater unity among different actors in tackling the pressing problems and challenges facing the region at large. It is within this context that we examine Iran-Egypt relations in the near future.

Recent History

Following the 2011 Arab uprisings, relations between Egypt and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf changed drastically, as more specialized attention was given to developments inside Egypt and their ramifications for the MENA region. But events took a turn for the worse after Egypt's popular army coup in 2013,



which overthrew the democratically elected President Mohammed Morsi and his Muslim Brotherhood government. Both Qatar and Turkey had supported the Muslim Brotherhood's rise to power in Egypt, and both also condemned Sisi's popular military coup. Qatar, which had provided aid to the Morsi government, did not provide aid to the Sisi government. Saudi Arabia seized the opportunity to assert its regional dominance and filled the void of Qatari aid by offering generous assistance to Egypt. Thus, Saudi Arabia also played a mediating role between Egypt and Turkey, as Ankara continued to oppose the Sisi regime while accommodating the Qatari regional approach.⁴ The Saudi mediating effort came to a standstill, and the longstanding differences between the two countries over Syria became noticeably obvious when Egypt voted in favor of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution 12545 on October 8, 2016 by Russian draft proposal. On the same day, France submitted a proposal to the UNSC to establish a no-fly zone over Aleppo to protect civilians. Russia vetoed this proposal, and subsequently submitted its own proposal that all the "terrorists" and their organizations be destroyed in Aleppo before a ceasefire could begin. Egypt supported both resolutions.⁵

During the Mubarak (Egypt) and early Ahmadinejad (Iran) administrations, rapprochement between Egypt and Iran would have seemed inconceivable. However, after the destabilizing fallout of the Arab Spring Revolutions, rapprochement became an increasingly likely possibility, as the Syrian crisis and poor economic conditions in Egypt revealed certain significant overlaps in the political agendas of the Egyptian and Iranian governments. It is thus critical

An Arab League emergency meeting of foreign ministers, discussing Iran's intervention in regional issues, on January 10, 2016.

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The 1979 Iranian Revolution, however, changed the face of relations between Cairo and Tehran for nearly four decades

to illustrate the potential for reconciliation between the government in Egypt under President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and the Iranian government. The new direction of foreign policy in the Middle East due to the Arab uprisings, and the mutual Egyptian-Iranian inclination to suppress Muslim Brotherhood influence has helped push the notion of this reconciliation forward.

Nevertheless, President Donald J. Trump's victory and the resurgence of populism in the West might hinder complete rapprochement between both countries, as the West and Saudi Arabia may now offer Sisi a much more strategic and needed partnership, in the form of an economic, political, and defense package, than Iran can offer. Regardless of future Western intervention, Tehran and Cairo have taken significant steps on the path to rapprochement over the past five years, and their common agenda allows them to continue exploring the beginnings of a partnership, or at least a united front against Islamic extremism in the region.

Egypt's apparently shared interests with the Syrian government to contain and defeat violent extremist movements could potentially provide grounds for improved relations with Iran. In this regard, radical extremist, Sunni, and Wahhabi-Salafi violence, destabilization, and terrorism pose as great a threat to Egypt as they do to Iran. Muhammad Said al-Idris, head of Arab and regional studies at the Cairo-based Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, underscores the importance of Iran-Egypt relations by noting that, "If Egypt wants to be active in the heart of the Middle East as a returning regional power, then collaborating with Iran needs to be on its agenda. This collaboration should not be limited only to Iran and Egypt, but it should include issues such as regional security as well."⁶ A united front against extremism would mutually benefit both countries and serve as a starting point for a potential reconciliation.

In the sections that follow, a brief history of Egyptian-Iranian relations will be outlined, and the pivotal events leading to the reestablishment of communication between Tehran and Cairo will be analyzed. Finally, we will turn our attention to the benefits of a partnership between Egypt and Iran, while also examining the potential roadblocks that could deter such a rapprochement.

The Evolving Egyptian-Iranian Relations

Prior to the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Egypt and Iran maintained cordial relations. After the 1973 war, Anwar Sadat, then president of Egypt, formed closer

relations with the United States and reduced the influence of Arab Nationalism in governmental policies. Sadat also established peace with Israel through the Camp David Accords of 1978. The Shah of Iran, an ally of the United States, looked favorably upon these reforms. Thus, Egypt's improved relations with the United States brought about improved relations with Iran as well.⁷

The 1979 Iranian Revolution, however, changed the face of relations between Cairo and Tehran for nearly four decades. Iran's animosity toward the United States began when the Iranian Revolution brought Ayatollah Khomeini to power and deposed the Shah. Similar to the United States, Egypt terminated many diplomatic ties with Iran in 1980 after the Islamic Revolution.⁸ Accordingly, Khomeini condemned the Camp David Accords and criticized Egypt's peace with Israel, as Iran remained faithful to the Palestinian cause. Heightening the antagonism between the two countries, Egypt harbored the Shah despite Iran's demands for his return for trial and probable execution.⁹ In the matter of a year, the revolution created the conditions for a complete change in not only Egyptian, but also American foreign policy toward Iran.

The shift in foreign policy escalated to an alliance against Iran in the Iraq-Iran war. After Sadat's assassination, Hosni Mubarak's administration continued Sadat's support for Iraq during the Iraq-Iran war. Many alliances during the Iran-Iraq war were strategically developed in hopes of gaining geo-political dominance in the region after the war. In fact, Saddam Hussein saw an opportunity for a territorial dispute and feared that the oppressed Shia population in Iraq would adopt the revolutionary spirit of Iran, a concern which led him to attack Iran during their period of revolutionary chaos in 1980.¹⁰ Khomeini refused to end the war in 1982, which prolonged the conflict and continued to deepen the rift between Egypt and Iran –making rapprochement seem all the more distant.

Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997) adopted a more pragmatic approach in his foreign policy toward the region with the aim of ending Iran's isolation. His domestic economic liberalization –that is, opening the state-dominated economy to domestic and foreign private sector investment– signaled a new foreign policy approach as well. Through behind-the-scenes and subtle diplomacy, he resumed diplomatic relations with Egypt, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia. He supported the U.S.-led coalition to oust Iraq from Kuwait, while effectively helping to win freedom for the American hostages held by its Lebanese allies.¹¹

Relations between Cairo and Tehran improved during the Khatami administration (1997-2005), as more open dialogue between the two countries developed. Under the Khatami administration, the need to establish a united front against terrorism greatly helped push the dialogue further, as violent extrem-

ism became a growing threat in the region. In 2001, for instance, President Mubarak met Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi, in the highest-level meeting between Iranian and Egyptian officials since the 1979 Revolution. The first meeting between the two countries' heads of state took place on the sidelines of the UN technology summit in Geneva in December 2003. By June 2006, Ali Larijani became the highest-ranking Iranian official to visit Egypt since the disruption of diplomatic relations between Iran and Egypt. Subsequently, in January 2008, Gholam-Ali Haddad-Adel, the speaker of Iran's Majlis, visited Egypt and held talks with President Mubarak. In May 2008, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad offered to restore ties with Egypt, noting that Iran was ready to open an embassy in Cairo if Egypt agreed to reciprocate by doing the same in Tehran.¹² No major diplomatic breakthrough, however, transpired as such. Egypt's opposition to the Iran nuclear program and the observance of U.S. sanctions on Iran hindered progress in the relationship between the two governments. Mubarak's apprehension surrounding Iran's nuclear program positioned him on the same side as Saudi Arabia and Israel in this regard, echoing similar fears and concerns held by the United States.

The years of the presidency of Hassan Rouhani (2013-present) have been characterized by continuing conciliatory gestures toward seeking normalization of ties with Egypt. Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia's influence in Egypt has hindered normalization between Egypt and Iran, while being crucial to the Egyptian economy. Saudi Arabia is considered one of Iran's most significant regional rivals. A regional struggle for power has engrossed the Iranian and Saudi governments for years. Karim Sadjadpour, a senior fellow in the Middle East Program of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace claimed, "The Saudi-Iranian conflict is a geopolitical proxy war cloaked in [an] ethnic (Arab-Persian) and sectarian (Sunni-Shia) dispute." Regional competition and the persistence of long-term sectarian divisions led the Saudis to spend billions of dollars in Syria against the Assad regime, in Lebanon against Hezbollah, in Iraq against Khomeini, and in Yemen against the Iranian-allied Houthi Movement. Riyadh expects Egypt to support their efforts against Iran in these struggles, as the Saudis pump great amounts of money into the Egyptian economy.¹³

The Iranian supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and current President Rouhani hoped that the Egyptian revolution of 2011 would result in an administration with less dependence on and ties to Riyadh. Although the election of the Muslim Brotherhood candidate Mohamed Morsi increased Egypt's sectarian ties and foreign policy connections with the Saudi government, he nonetheless actively attempted to improve relations with Iran. Ahmadinejad visited Morsi and became the first Iranian president since the 1979 revolution to visit Cairo, with the hope of improving relations between Cairo and Tehran.¹⁴ During their meeting,

Iranian foreign minister, Ali Akbar Salehi, told the state-run Islamic Republic News Agency, “We are ready to further strengthen ties.”¹⁵ Similarly, Morsi’s historical visit to Tehran for the 2012 non-alignment movement summit was viewed by many observers as breaking the thaw in the three-decade political stalemate between the two countries. Morsi and Ahmadinejad placed stepping-stones on the path to reconciliation between Egypt and Iran, and this process only accelerated and improved under President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Sisi’s foreign policy and tactical shift toward Iran surprised not only the foreign policy establishment in Tehran, but also Egypt’s closest allies.



Riyadh expected its welfare-dependent ally, Egypt, to join their efforts against Assad, but Sisi surprised the Saudis and much of the Arab World with his response

With such a tenacious history over the last thirty-seven years, rapprochement between Iran and Egypt did not seem likely. However, the Arab uprisings shook up much of the status quo of foreign policy in and toward the Middle East. Apart from the lingering Syrian crisis and completion of a nuclear deal with major world powers (P5+1), several other factors have contributed to a new opening in diplomatic ties between the two countries. The popular military coup that put Sisi in power also ousted the Muslim Brotherhood candidate, Morsi. Since the popular coup, Sisi has worked to rid Egypt of whatever Muslim Brotherhood influence. Ironically, the Muslim Brotherhood’s roots lie in Turkey, the Gaza Strip, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf countries, which act as allies and major suppliers of aid to Egypt. The conflict of interest between Cairo and Riyadh over the Muslim Brotherhood pushed Egypt toward Iran, which also works to curb the spread of the Muslim Brotherhood, although it actively supports its Gaza Strip-based affiliate Hamas.¹⁶ This, along with the need to fight regional extremism, is one of the main factors that have pushed both countries closer to rapprochement.

Factors Pushing Egypt toward Rapprochement with Iran

Some of the crises that emerged as a consequence of the Arab uprisings have also led to a reevaluation of alliances in Cairo. The Syrian crisis became a true test of allies in the region. Iran supports the Assad regime for a variety of reasons. First, Syria allied with Iran in the Iraq-Iran war, as both countries shared a disdain for Saddam Hussein’s regime from the beginning of the conflict. Iran and Syria’s mutual fear of the United States and Israel brought the two Shia governments closer together as well. Tehran has a personal stake in the continuation of Shia rule in Syria because the country acts as a thoroughfare for the Hezbollah group in Lebanon, which remains a crucial organization in Iran’s

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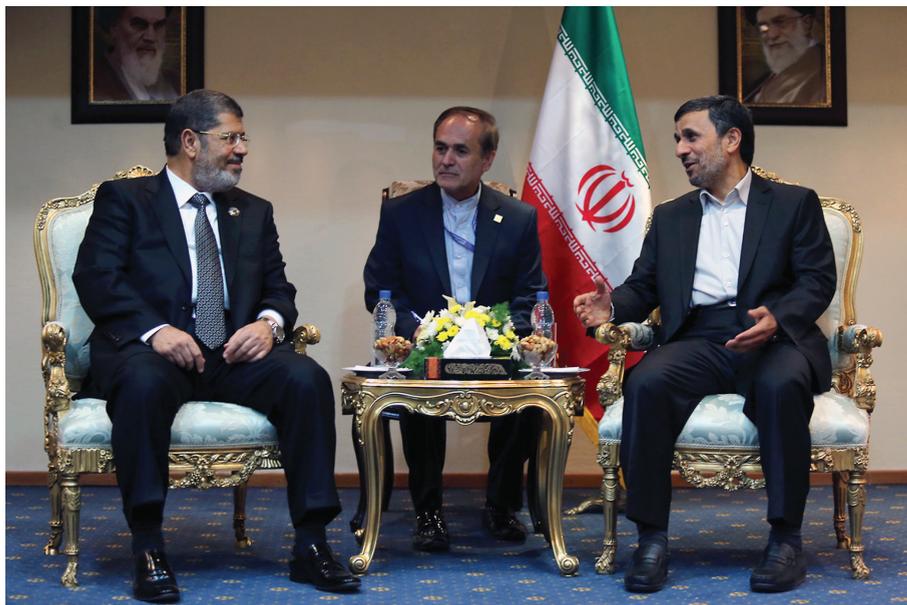
efforts to establish regional authority and asymmetrical balancing.¹⁷ Iran also fears that the fall of Assad would lead to a Sunni sectarian regime under Muslim Brotherhood governance, which would tip the scales of geo-political dominance. There can be no doubt that Iran's support for the survival of the Assad regime has proven crucial.¹⁸ To counteract Iran's efforts and support their Sunni counterparts, Saudi Arabia spent tens of billions of dollars to fund the Syrian rebels against Assad.¹⁹ Riyadh expected its welfare-dependent ally, Egypt, to join their efforts

against Assad, but Sisi surprised the Saudis and much of the Arab World with his response.

Sisi refused to aid Saudi Arabia's efforts against Assad. Just like Iran, Egypt fears that the fall of Assad will give rise to an empowered Muslim Brotherhood leadership position. Any resurgence of the Muslim Brotherhood in or near Egypt poses a direct threat to the current regime. President Sisi has been working to stifle his opposition and their political and religious ideologies. Therefore, he also has a pernicious interest in keeping Assad in power. On September 23, 2016, Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry met with Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif to discuss Egypt's position on Syria. Per the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Ahram*, Shoukry claimed, "The coalition fighting in Syria may want to change the regime in the country, but that is not Egypt's position." Thus, Sisi's position on Syria aligns closely with Iran's position. To appease Riyadh, Shoukry added, "The differences [between Cairo and Riyadh] do not mean we have a problem. It's just a difference in point of view."²⁰ Despite this last statement, the Saudi government became angered by Egypt's position and took reactionary measures in response.

In retaliation, Saudi Arabia's oil company Aramco cut off crucial oil shipments to Egypt indefinitely, effectively halting the \$23 billion oil deal between Cairo and Riyadh.²¹ However, cutting oil shipments produced an opposite reaction to what Aramco initially intended, when Egypt turned to Iran for oil. Egypt's Petroleum Minister, Tarek El-Molla, visited Iran on November 7, 2016, to strike an oil deal.²² Turning to Iran for oil sent the strong message that the Saudi government could not interfere in Egypt's internal affairs, even if the Egyptian economy was in shambles. Spiting and provoking the Saudi government by experimenting with foreign policy toward Iran is an unprecedented step for the Egyptian government, but this move could be better understood by looking through the scope of the geo-political power struggle in the region.

Indeed, the divide between the Saudis and Egyptians is much larger than the Syrian conflict, a factor which also helps promote the potential of reconcili-



Then Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad meets with his Egyptian counterpart Mohamed Morsi on the sidelines of the Non-Aligned Movement summit in Tehran on August 30, 2012.

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HAMID FOROUTAN

ation between Tehran and Cairo. Instead of rallying behind Saudi Arabia in its rivalry with Iran, Sisi has taken a foreign policy approach aimed at safeguarding his regime, expanding its freedom of movement, and diversifying its sources of foreign assistance –even if such goals may contradict the Saudis’ interests and those of other Arab countries of the Persian Gulf. In short, Egypt seems to be participating in a foreign policy vision predicated on the notion of counter-balancing local and international powers. As such, Egypt will seek to build simultaneous relations with rival global and regional powers, hoping to buttress its regime survival and political maneuverability in an ever-more fragmented region.²³ A partnership with Iran fits very well into this foreign policy vision.

Other factors have also brought the Egyptian and Iranian governments closer together. The United States indirectly played a role in pushing Egypt and Iran toward reconciliation. The Obama Administration, hesitant about aiding a popular military coup, cut off the much-needed \$1.3 billion in aid and F-16 fighter jets to Egypt after Sisi’s popular seizure of power. Consequently, the Egyptian government struck a \$5.4 billion weapons deal with France and signed a preliminary \$3.5 billion weapons deal with Russia.²⁴ After the Sisi Administration solidified its leadership, Obama reconsidered his decision and continued the \$1.3 billion in military aid ostensibly to fight terrorism.²⁵ Nevertheless, the two year gap in United States financial aid indirectly pushed Iran and Egypt closer together by forcing the Egyptians to seek a Russian alternative to its security needs.

The United States continued to indirectly facilitate the reconciliation between Cairo and Tehran through the Iran nuclear deal. The United States' reestablishment of constructive communication with Iran made it easier for Egypt to do the same. Egypt, an ally of the United States, followed the sanctions that were imposed on Iran prior to the nuclear agreement. Although the Obama administration would not penalize Egypt for reestablishing ties with Iran after the conclusion of the nuclear deal, King Salman bin Abdulaziz may choose to sanction or threaten Egypt from pursuing further relations with Iran. This is not to say that Egypt has been fully engaged or committed to seeing the nuclear deal passed, but rather that lifting the sanctions reduced barriers to Egyptian and Iranian rapprochement.

Much to Saudi Arabia's dismay, the Sisi Administration brought Egypt and Iran closer to diplomatic engagement than they had been in years. Sisi indicated three clear goals for Egypt. First, he toils to keep the Muslim Brotherhood's threat of resurgence out of Egypt. Second, the Sisi Administration has a focus on revitalizing its failing economy and achieving political bargaining power. Third, he strives to keep violent extremism outside of the Sinai region and the country at large. Due to the regional power struggle between Riyadh and Tehran, the Iranian government also strives to eliminate the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood, since the group mainly resides in the Gulf countries. In addition, an allied Iran and Egypt can give both countries bargaining power with foreign governments. In negotiations, Egypt can act as a mediator for Iran, and Iran can act as a mediator for Egypt. More importantly, Iran also seeks a united front against extremism in the region. Thus, Iran clearly benefits from having a large and influential ally in the Arab World, and Cairo and Tehran's common agenda can continue to push them closer together.

It is worth noting that Egypt prioritizes combating the Islamic State, but it mainly focuses on defeating the group's affiliates in the Sinai Peninsula and Libyan territory. With regard to Syria, however, the Sisi Administration essentially supported the Russian intervention on the side of the Assad regime, anticipating that this was the most effective route to not only defeat the extremists, but also deter a post-Assad Syria where the Muslim Brotherhood in that country could play a significant role on the region at large.²⁶ Thus, certain overlaps in vision between the Egyptian and Iranian governments become quite evident.

The Benefits of Reconciliation between Egypt and Iran

Reconciliation between Egypt and Iran would have mutual benefits for both countries. Egypt would gain bargaining power and a safeguard against Saudi

interference in Egyptian internal affairs and domestic politics. Meanwhile, Iran would also gain leverage in negotiations with foreign powers. Egypt is the largest and one of the most influential Arab countries, and many major world powers have a stake in Egypt. One prominent analyst explains, “Iran has been trying to involve itself in Arab problems so as to gain influence that will serve it in its struggle *vis-a-vis* the West.”²⁷ Involving Iran in Egyptian politics means involving Iran in the heart of politics in the Arab World, which has significant implications for foreign policy with major powers, including the United States and Russia. Therefore, rapprochement mutually benefits Iran and Egypt, but adds new obstacles for major powers and more room for competition.



Trump would likely ensure that Egypt remain in America’s sphere of influence rather than Iran’s

Working with Iran, Egypt would obtain a new platform to contest the spread of the political and religious appeal of the Muslim Brotherhood. Working with Egypt, Iran would obtain an advantage and leverage in their ongoing “geopolitical proxy war” with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Countries. While rapprochement between Egypt and Iran has mutual benefits for both countries, the rapprochement may not be in the best interest for global politics; in general, as many important and profitable alliances would consequently break down, should tensions boil over. At the moment, Egyptian politics is driven by economic interest due to its fractured economy, and a Saudi-Egyptian partnership financially benefits Egypt much more than an Iranian-Egyptian partnership would.²⁸ Thus, the path to rapprochement faces many roadblocks ahead.

Setbacks to Rapprochement

While there are mutual benefits to rapprochement for Iran and Egypt, the obstacles may outweigh the benefits. Due to the extremely poor state of the Egyptian economy, financial enterprise and economic benefit drive most policy decisions. As one observer notes, Egypt is a country with its hands tied behind its back. Thus, President Sisi must follow the economic interests of his country. The Saudis provided Egypt \$5 billion when Morsi was deposed, pledged \$4 billion in March 2015, and made \$25 billion in agreements in April of this year.²⁹ So long as the Saudis can provide more lucrative aid than the Iranians, Egypt will make efforts to align with the Saudi government. Sisi’s involvement with Iran could be considered a way of merely sending a message to King Salman not to meddle in too pronounced a fashion with Egypt’s internal affairs. However, that does not undermine the significant strides Egypt and Iran have made toward the normalization of relations.

The Saudi Arabian King Selman bin Abdulaziz, U.S. President Donald Trump and Egyptian President Sisi, put their hands on the world globe during the inauguration of the Global Center for Combating Extremism in Riyadh, May 22, 2017.

AA PHOTO / BANDAR ALGALOU



In addition, President Donald J. Trump has demonstrated a predisposition to isolate Iran. Therefore, Trump would likely ensure that Egypt remain in America's sphere of influence rather than Iran's. Due to Egypt's significant role in the Arab world, Trump has taken a special interest in it, especially with regard to fighting extremism and ISIS. Trump spoke with Sisi during the Egyptian President's visit to New York for the United Nations meeting. The President-elect relayed to Sisi his strong support for Egypt's war on terrorism, and how under his administration, the United States will be a loyal friend, rather than just an ally, which Egypt can trust in the coming years.³⁰

Obama-Sisi relations were distant and strained due to Obama's apprehension regarding Sisi's rise to power; however, Trump-Sisi relations are looking optimistic based on their constructive discourse and Trump's indifference to Sisi's popular military coup. In fact, Trump's first congratulatory phone call as president-elect came from Sisi.³¹ Not all in Egypt are optimistic about Trump's victory, but Sisi believes he and Trump have similar opinions on many issues, such as the Muslim Brotherhood. Egypt will not form diplomatic ties with Iran at the expense of a partnership with the American government. While America's contributions to the Egyptian economy are not as great as Saudi Arabia's contributions, a reliable and enduring partnership with the United States is a valuable asset defensively and economically. Thus, Sisi may prioritize stronger ties with the United States and Saudi Arabia over similar ties with Iran, which obstructs complete rapprochement between the two coun-

tries. Given the current circumstances, a formal alliance between Iran and Egypt is unrealistic at best, especially at a time of Sunni-Shiite division that is particularly manifested in the Arab-Iranian divide within the region, and given the Trump administration's intention

to maintain strong ties with Egypt in order to establish a coalition aimed at fighting ISIS and isolating Iran.

In Tehran's view, a more active Egypt would mean a more balanced Middle East and a more balanced Arab political order

Conclusion

Despite Egypt and Iran's history of alienation over the past four decades, both countries have shown signs of potential rapprochement in the past five years. Egypt and Iran have not yet achieved full reconciliation, but they have come closer than they had in the recent past. At least both governments can now sporadically resume talks to establish diplomatic relations to intimidate other powers and increase their bargaining power and leverage. The 2011 Arab uprisings unleashed a chain of new developments throughout the region, while also giving Iran and Egypt certain overlapping agendas, such as fighting against resurgent terrorism and establishing new parameters for regional cooperation. The Rouhani administration tends to take a positive view of Egypt's potential role in the Middle East. From Tehran's perspective, according to one analyst, a more independent and active Egypt that can rival the Saudis' influence in the region is a welcome development. Historically, Egypt's assertive role in the region has been resisted by Saudi Arabia. Thus, in Tehran's view, a more active Egypt would mean a more balanced Middle East and a more balanced Arab political order.³²

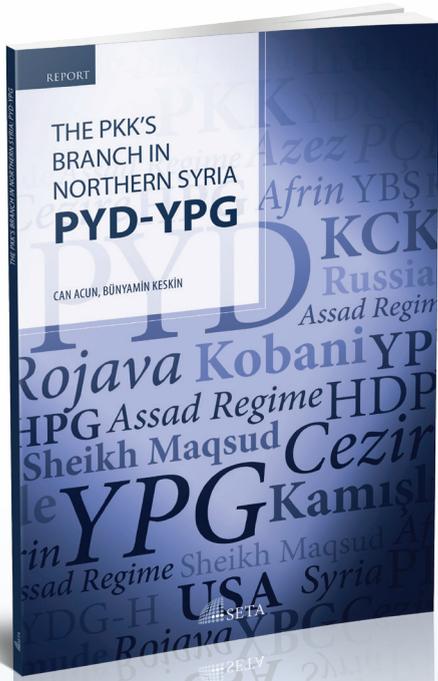
Due to the dire economic situation in Egypt, however, it is unlikely, at least for the foreseeable future, that Egypt and Iran will completely normalize relations. Normalization of Egyptian-Iranian relations would mean the end of essential Saudi aid and American assurance to Egypt. While President Sisi's shift toward Iran and initial hardline position toward Syria helped both countries come closer to rapprochement, these shifts served more as warnings to Saudi intervention than harbingers of drastic policy changes. Egyptian foreign minister Shoukry has taken a step back from his hardline position on Syria in order to make amends with Riyadh in recent days. His government prefers Assad in power, but claims to support the will of the Syrian people in achieving a diplomatic solution.³³ Shoukry did not completely reverse his stance; rather, he lightened his rhetoric out of respect for his Saudi counterparts. So long as the economic situation in Egypt remains strained, Sisi will continue to pur-

sue the most profitable alliances for Egypt. Thus far, Saudi aid to Egypt and Trump's promise of friendship remain unsurpassable. Egypt and Iran's path to rapprochement appears long and complicated; the Egyptian and Iranian governments have made considerable improvements on their path to normalizing relations and communication, yet full rapprochement does not seem to be realistic at the present time. ■

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The PKK's Branch in Northern Syria PYD-YPG

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The PYD, conducting activities as the PKK's Syrian branch, contemplated exploiting the Syrian revolution which broke out in 2011 for its own ends and has since acted together with the Assad regime on the basis of their common interests. The PYD formed a military-wing owing to its military engagement with the regime and the support provided by the PKK. Therefore, the PYD has presented itself as a useful actor in the U.S. fight against DAESH by taking advantage of DAESH's presence in Syria; and has exerted efforts to connect the cantons under its control.

This report entitled "The PKK's Branch in Northern Syria: PYD-YPG" aims to answer basic questions about the PYD and is one of the leading reports originally penned in Turkish.



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EU-Turkey Refugee Agreement: Too Big to Fail

Lesley Dudden, Kadir Üstün

The migrant crisis that has stemmed from the ongoing strife in the MENA region is one of the most devastating and consequential crises of modern times. Its impact has been felt across continents, in countries such as Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, along with European Union member states and the United States. In addition to unprecedented regional humanitarian challenges, the crisis shook Europe to its core by challenging its political institutions and humanitarian values. The rise of populism and Islamophobia in the West in general is closely associated with the migrant crisis that has pushed the capacity of countries to their limits.



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