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Turkish-Egyptian Relations after Erdoğan's Sacrifice of the Muslim Brotherhood

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Mar 25, 2021

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Brief Analysis

Turkey is making overtures for rapprochement with Egypt. How will Sisi respond?

In a surprising development, Turkey-based media channels opposed to the Egyptian regime announced the suspension of all political programs attacking President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi and his regime, based on directives from the Turkish government. Supporters of the Egyptian regime met the news with happiness and approval, counting it as a **victory** for Sisi. Yet the Egyptian regime itself refrained from showing enthusiasm towards this paradigm shift, contenting itself with a remark by Minister of Information Osama Heikal in which the minister said the move represented a “good gesture from Turkey.” Meanwhile, Egyptian Islamists residing in Turkey were struck by concerns that President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan could be contemplating handing them over to Cairo. Looking ahead, despite the importance of Erdoğan’s gesture, any response from Sisi is still unclear.

Background of the Egyptian-Turkish Crisis:

The tension between Erdoğan and Sisi dates back to the latter’s assumption of the presidency after the Egyptian army ousted President Mohamed Morsi, who belonged to the Muslim Brotherhood, following massive popular demonstrations in 2013. Erdoğan, who has an Islamist background, refused to recognize the legitimacy of the Sisi regime and described Sisi in a television appearance as an illegal tyrant. Not satisfied with television attacks, Turkey submitted an official request to the UN Security Council to impose sanctions on Sisi as a war criminal. Cairo responded by exerting pressure against Turkey’s candidacy for a seat on the Security Council. Ultimately, [Egypt](#)

expelled the Turkish ambassador in Cairo and withdrew its own ambassador in Ankara.

In time, the rift between the two presidents has developed from an ideological dispute to a conflict of interests and a contest of diverging visions for the region. Differences beginning with the Syrian crisis extended to the Libyan war and the demarcation of maritime borders in the Mediterranean Sea.

During this period, Erdoğan's biggest weapon has been his embrace of the anti-Sisi Islamist elements residing in Turkey, allowing them to broadcast television stations and news sites, including those that made the Egyptian president and his regime a prime target.

The escalating rhetoric between the two countries reached its peak in June, 2020, when Sisi hinted at a military intervention in Libya's civil war to support local forces in confronting Turkey-backed groups operating in the west of the country, stating clearly that the Libyan city of Sirte and inland Jufra airbase constituted a "red line" for Egypt.

Turkey's New Flirtation with Cairo:

However, despite the fridity between the two capitals, their bilateral economic relations have remained strong. Both sides have committed themselves to maintaining their 15 year-old bilateral free trade agreement, with a Turkish business leader claiming in 2019 that the two countries' trade volume reached \$5.2 billion. This economic relationship indicates that hope was never lost for reconciliation between the Egypt and Turkey. And now, regarding Libya, a transitional government publicly supported by both Egypt and Turkey is finally in place in Tripoli, allowing for some relaxation on that major point of tension.

Likewise, as early as last September, Ankara began to direct warmer messages towards Cairo, showing signals of a desire for rapprochement. Erdoğan made a statement saying, "There is no objection to holding intelligence talks with Egypt," though claiming that "[Egypt's] agreement with Greece on the demarcation of maritime borders saddened us." Then came a statement along the same lines by Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, saying, "if conditions allow it, Turkey and Egypt may negotiate on the demarcation of borders in the eastern Mediterranean."

On March 8, İbrahim Kalın—the spokesman for the Turkish presidency—went beyond the point of gas exploration to speak clearly about Turkey's interests with Cairo, suggesting that "A new page can be turned in our relationship with Egypt as well as other Gulf countries to help regional peace and stability."

Turkish interest in warming its relationship with Cairo became even clearer on March 18, when Turkey decided to force the Egyptian opposition stations broadcasting from its territory to cease any attack on the Egyptian regime and its president, thereby shifting the original ideological point of conflict between the two states. Turkey's decision mirrors the earlier willingness of Qatar, its ally, to adjust its own rhetoric on Egypt in exchange for a resumption of diplomatic ties between Doha and Cairo. In Egypt, commentators saw Turkey's restriction on Egyptian opposition channels as a major step, presented as a token of good intentions and a leap towards setting aside differences with the Sisi regime.

Why Sacrifice the Muslim Brotherhood Now?

There are several explanations for Erdoğan's decision to silence anti-Sisi channels as a gesture of goodwill to the Egyptian regime. The narrative officially adopted by Turkey is that this move came in reaction to Cairo's exclusion of Turkey's continental shelf area, which Turkey claims to own, from Egypt's contract with gas exploration companies in its exclusive economic zone in the Mediterranean. Turkey has characterized the exclusion of the continental shelf as an Egyptian attempt to thaw its Turkish relations.

This explanation might help Erdoğan save face, but it is a flawed explanation. While the maritime border demarcation agreement between Egypt and Greece did not include the continental shelf area, the two sides settled on signing a partial agreement of their own, leaving the disputed area with Turkey for later rounds of negotiation. Accordingly, Egypt's decision on the continental shelf is within the scope of its October 2020 agreement with Greece.

The second explanation is that Erdoğan is attempting a maritime border demarcation agreement with Egypt in the same vein as the one signed with the Libyan Government of National Accord in November 2019, thereby strengthening Turkey's position vis-à-vis Cyprus and Greece. Such a deal would secure a place for Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum launched by Egypt that includes Jordan, Palestine, Israel, Greece, Cyprus, and Italy. As a forum designed to coordinate between gas-producing and gas-importing countries in the Mediterranean, Turkey's absence is conspicuous. Yet this motivation does not help to explain why the rapprochement is happening now, especially given the strength of Turkey's recent messaging on the subject.

In contrast, concern over the change of the U.S. administration explains the timing of these overtures. Erdoğan is already under pressure from Europe, and the new Biden administration has not yet sought to move against Turkey in response to the Russian S-400 missile deal or Turkey's opposition to international coalition support for the Syrian Democratic Forces to fight terrorism. Moreover, Democrats have demonstrated their displeasure with the repression that Erdoğan is practicing against civil society in his country.

Biden's arrival, coinciding with European pressures, Turkey's tanking economy, and the deterioration of Turkey's relations with key Arab capitals all suggest that Erdoğan is looking for new allies. It appears his first choice was to sacrifice the Muslim Brotherhood to pursue appeasement with Cairo and Riyadh—also heavily opposed to the Muslim Brotherhood—in the hopes of securing new friends in the region.

On the one hand, Erdoğan may be hoping to build an undeclared alliance with Mohammed bin Salman and Sisi on the back of their recent rapprochement with Qatar; all three leaders face the same accusations from the Biden team of suppressing their opponents and degrading civil society. Moreover, Turkey could then coordinate with Egypt on the issues of Libya and eastern Mediterranean gas, where a transitional government and recent deals have brought the two countries further from conflict.

Despite Turkey's repeated messages of readiness to compromise with Egypt, however, and despite the latest decision to prevent Sisi's opponents abroad from attacking or insulting him, thereby relieving Sisi of an issue he has long bemoaned, Cairo has so far responded to Turkey's desire for rapprochement with indifference. With the exception of the Egyptian Minister of Information's comment on Turkey's good gesture regarding the anti-Sisi channels, the Egyptian media did not feature any mention of Erdogan at all after the Turkish initiative, positive or negative. In the coming weeks, it will be important to watch whether Sisi accepts the gift and reconciles, or else demonstrates that Erdoğan's overtures have been for nothing. ❖



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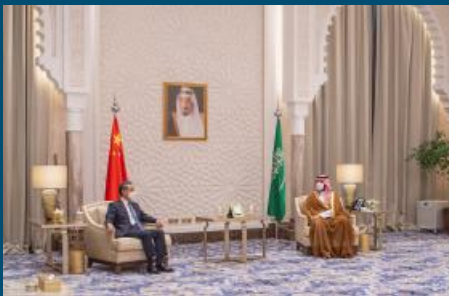
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