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Understanding Egypt's Limited Involvement in the Campaign Against Iran

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Brief Analysis

After U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's last visit to the Middle East, Cairo has attempted to appear aligned with Gulf States' efforts against the Iranian regime, at least rhetorically. Egypt's participation in the Warsaw summit against Iran—which Pompeo had publicly announced in Cairo one month earlier—was perhaps intended to emphasize that Egypt is not opposed to the regional and international tide against Iran. However, Egypt's apparent reluctance to becoming deeply involved was highlighted by the Polish Foreign Minister Jacek Czaputowicz's announcement that Egypt was likely to send a [vice-minister](#) in contrast to the participation of ministers from most other participating Arab states. This is just one of several signals that suggest a relative ambivalence in Cairo over the current international campaign against Iran.

Indeed, regarding practical measures, Cairo is far from playing an influential role in this campaign. On the contrary, Cairo has actually begun to take steps to draw closer to the country seen by many Arab leaders as the foremost threat in the region. Just days before the Warsaw Conference, Cairo officially participated—perhaps for the first time—in the celebrations of the Office of the Iranian Interests Section in Cairo on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the Iranian revolution. The Egyptian Foreign Affairs Ministry sent the deputy foreign ministry for Asian Affairs, Ambassador Khalid Tharwat, to participate in the celebrations of the Iranian revolution, in a step that increased speculation about the future of relations between the two countries.

The state of Egyptian-Iranian relations has fluctuated greatly over the years; initially, relations between Egypt and the Shah's government were quite warm, peaking after the marriage of King Farouk's sister to the then-Crown Prince Muhammad Reza Pahlavi in 1939. However, the Iranian Revolution shifted the nature of these ties dramatically: at a time when there was some hesitance from the international community towards the new regime in Tehran, Egypt was one of the first countries to show open hostility towards the Iranian Revolution. Then-President Anwar Sadat fiercely attacked the Iranian revolution, with Cairo offering the deposed Iranian Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi and his family refuge and protection. Even with the death of the Shah in 1980, he was laid to rest in Cairo with an

impressive military funeral in which Sadat and a number of world leaders participated.

The Islamic Republic responded in kind, especially after Egypt signed the Camp David Accords with Israel. After Sadat's assassination, for example, the municipality of Tehran renamed one of its major streets in honor of Khalid Islambouli, the terrorist who had been implicated in the assassination. For the past several decades, diplomatic relations had been nearly entirely cut off between the two countries, limited to Interests Section offices located in the capitals of the two countries.

The Muslim Brotherhood's rise to power in Egypt after the 2011 revolution shifted this dynamic once again, leading to a historic rapprochement between the two countries. In August 2012, the Iranian capital welcomed Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi—the first time a sitting Egyptian president had traveled to Iran since the 1980s. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad soon reciprocated with a visit to Egypt. In spite of the deep ideological differences between the two parties, they represented two sides of the same coin of Islamic extremism. Unsurprisingly, Iran attacked the new regime in Egypt after Morsi's ouster, presenting it as an extension of the Sadat and Mubarak regimes.

Yet the new Cairene government's response to these attacks was muted. Egypt limited itself to statements condemning intervention in its affairs during this period, and has since done comparatively little by way of combating Iranian influence. Iranian media has since also invoked language advocating for the normalization of ties between the two countries.

Egypt's tone towards Iran is particularly surprising given the Gulf's increasingly intense rhetoric against the Islamic Republic. Paradoxically, it seems that the Gulf States' deep concern over the Muslim Brotherhood—in particular its relationship with Iran—has given the current Egyptian regime some leeway in its approach to Iran. The Muslim Brotherhood regime in Cairo was a source of deep concern for the Gulf regimes, all the more so after the historic visit of former President Morsi to Tehran. Thus, the Gulf capitals put the full weight of their economic and political force behind the ouster of the Muslim Brotherhood regime on June 30, 2013 to realign Egypt with the Gulf and reestablish the geopolitical balance between Iran and the Gulf.

Due to this dynamic, the current Egyptian government knows that its position as a Gulf ally is relatively secure, as this arrangement represents strategic depth for the Gulf as a whole. The Gulf without Egypt and its military appears more vulnerable, especially given U.S. plans to reduce its involvement in the region. Consequently, Egypt has been relatively cautious in involving itself in Gulf initiatives without clear strategic benefit to Egypt. In particular, Egypt's participation in the Coalition to Support Legitimacy in Yemen, led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, was essentially symbolic. Egypt refused to send ground forces to participate in Saudi military operations against the Houthis in Yemen, limiting itself instead to providing military advisers to help coordinate coalition operations.

Thus, though combating Iran is one of the Gulf States' top priorities, officials seem to have accepted Egypt's lackluster involvement in these efforts. For Cairo, this arrangement seems to be the best of both worlds: while remaining a Gulf ally, Egypt is able to preserve an attitude towards Iran's actions in the region that reflects some of Cairo and Tehran's shared strategic interests. The two states have similar perspectives on major regional issues such as support for Syria's Bashar al-Assad and the need to subject the Israeli nuclear program to international oversight.

The position of the two countries on the Syrian issue is notably aligned—even at the expense of Egypt's Gulf allies. Cairo openly supports Assad, Tehran's traditional ally. And against expectations, Egypt voted in the Security Council in favor of the Russian decision on Syria in October 2016—supported by Iran and opposed by Saudi Arabia—a decision that infuriated Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, Egypt has not been pushed towards a significantly more bellicose position by its Gulf allies, and continues to limit itself to activities like its participation in the Warsaw

Conference. Based on these and other indicators, it seems that Egypt and Iran have no intention of seriously clashing in the near future.

Cairo's perceived hierarchy of needs explains this inaction. Cairo's priorities since Abdul Fattah al-Sisi took power have consistently centered around countering the danger of radical Islamism, both in Egypt and abroad. Cairo's support of Assad in his war against extremist Islamist groups is an outgrowth of this concern. Cairo is likewise currently fighting a fierce regional battle with Turkey and Qatar, who support the Muslim Brotherhood in the region. Relative to these challenges, countering the Iranian threat is a lower priority for Egypt. The Muslim Brotherhood, with support from Ankara and Doha, is seen as an existential threat; Iran is not. ❖



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