

Egypt and Assad: Calculations, Pragmatism, and Morality

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Jul 25, 2018

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Brief Analysis

For the past seven years, Egypt, guided by domestic considerations and deterred by the presence of U.S., Iranian, Turkish, Russian, and other European forces, has largely kept clear of the conflict in Syria. Nonetheless, there are signs that Cairo, motivated by animosity towards Islamist groups and by fear that the fall of the Syrian government would enable such groups to rise to power, might actually be seeking to expand its role in Syria. Partially as a reaction to the Muslim Brotherhood regime's attempts to undermine the Egyptian government, Cairo now actively supports Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. Unfortunately, this support of Assad is not only immoral, but also strategically unwise.

In June 2013, not long before the end of his short term as Egypt's president, Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood declared jihad on Assad's regime in Syria. In practical terms, Morsi announced a plan to send volunteer fighters to Syria and attempted to convince Saudi, Iranian, and Turkish officials to participate in mutual dialogue. However, despite his efforts, Morsi failed to convince the international community to take his statements and suggestions seriously.

After the Egyptian Armed Forces removed Morsi from power and assumed control over the Egyptian government in July 2013, Cairo's stance on the emerging Syrian crisis changed radically. Following the coup, Cairo expressed its support for Syrian government institutions and called for a political solution that would exclude terrorist organizations while allowing moderate opposition groups to participate in negotiations. Cairo also openly supported Russia's military intervention, whose purpose is to bolster Assad's regime against rebel forces.

Nevertheless, it was not until recently that Egypt became an important player in Syria. Last July, for example, Egypt oversaw negotiations between rebel militias and the regime. Cairo succeeded in securing a ceasefire agreement in Eastern Ghouta and the northern neighborhoods of Homs, which are located in the "de-escalation zones" agreed upon in May 2017 by Russia, Turkey, and Iran. Furthermore, it appears that the international community welcomes Egypt's involvement in the continuing crisis: Early last month, Egyptian President Abdelfattah al-Sisi hosted UN Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura, who had just been to Iran and was headed to Moscow and Brussels. The purpose of De Mistura's visit was to engage Cairo in efforts to promote negotiations in Syria and usher in the beginning of a political process there.

Given this context, it is important to note that while the scope of Egypt's involvement in Syria has changed, its stance

concerning the regime has not. Fearing the potential growth and strengthening of Islamist groups in Syria and their potential impact on Egypt's domestic insurgency concerns, Cairo has aligned itself with the Syrian government because it presents itself as the only alternative to these groups.

However, despite Cairo's concerns regarding Islamist militias, Egypt's decision to openly support the Syrian government is unjustifiable on both pragmatic and moral grounds. Indeed, from a moral standpoint, Cairo should not ally itself with a regime that has committed well-documented crimes against its own people, from firing at unarmed demonstrators to launching chemical attacks on women, children, and civilians.

Furthermore, Cairo's support of Assad could actually jeopardize Egyptian interests by alienating the Gulf States, which are among Egypt's most important allies and whose governments aspire to undermine the Syrian government because of its ties to Iran. Tensions between Egypt and the Gulf states over the Syrian crisis became evident in October 2016, when Egypt voted in favor of a draft resolution on Syria submitted to the UN Security Council by Russia. Egypt's decision to vote for the Russian draft resolution angered Saudi Arabia, whose representative to the United Nations depicted the Egyptian vote as "painful." In response to the vote, Riyadh halted cheap oil shipments to Egypt, forcing Cairo to purchase oil at market prices from other vendors. This move was a serious economic blow to Egypt, which is suffering from an unprecedented budget deficit that has grown steadily since 2011. In this manner, Cairo's support of Assad is risking Egypt's relationship with the governments who had helped the Egyptian Armed Forces oust the Muslim Brotherhood and whose support contributed significantly to stability in Egypt.

Thus, it is necessary for Egypt to adopt a more pragmatic approach by keeping channels of communication open with all sides. When making decisions, Cairo should take the Iranian threat to the region into consideration and support the efforts of the Gulf and the United States to limit Iranian influence. Meanwhile, the threat of terrorist organizations rising to power in Syria—Egypt's main concern—can be and in fact has been contained through the international campaign against the Islamic State. For Egypt, concern over terrorism should not unduly influence foreign policy towards Syria: there are other outlets and other allies for domestic peace. ❖

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