

# Sisi's Domesticated Foreign Policy

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Articles & Testimony

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**Much to his Gulf allies' chagrin, Egypt's president has not toed their anti-Iranian line in the region, instead following his own pattern of supporting state actors against non-state actors.**

**W**hen then-Defense Minister Abdel Fatah al-Sisi responded to mass protests in July 2013 by ousting the country's first elected president, Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi, Cairo's Gulf allies rushed to keep Egypt afloat economically. Within months, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait sent approximately **\$7 billion** (<https://english.alarabiya.net/en/business/economy/2013/09/29/Egypt-received-7bn-of-Gulf-aid-says-central-bank-.html>) in aid, and they pledged an additional **\$12 billion** (<http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-egypt-economy-investment-idUKKBN0M91XQ20150313>) in aid after Sisi won the barely contested May 2014 presidential elections. These Gulf states' support reflected their concerns about the Muslim Brotherhood, which they viewed as a threat given the Brotherhood's **explicitly hegemonic aims** (<https://hudson.org/research/9820-khairat-al-shater-on-the-nahda-project-complete-translation->), and they also feared that Egypt's economic collapse would have devastating consequences on a region that was rapidly unraveling.

Yet beyond these immediate concerns, the Gulf allies saw their generosity towards Egypt as an investment in their own long-term security. They believed that a strong Egypt, which possesses the Arab world's largest army, would help them counter Iran's expanding influence in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. Indeed, Sisi appeared to promise that Egypt would play this role when he **told** (<https://english.alarabiya.net/en/business/economy/2013/09/29/Egypt-received-7bn-of-Gulf-aid-says-central-bank-.html>) King Salman in March 2015 that the security of the Gulf is a "red line" and an "integral part of Egyptian national security," and he also **agreed** (<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/03/sisi-arab-nations-create-joint-military-force-150329103508213.html>) shortly thereafter to Egypt's participation in a joint Arab military force.

Four years after Morsi's overthrow, the Gulf aid has satisfied its first two objectives. Cairo's crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood has divided the organization and neutralized it politically, at least for the time being. And while Egypt is still **struggling economically** (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/egypt/2017-01-24/stuck-sisi>), it has nonetheless muddled through despite dwindling foreign direct investment and tourism revenues. But much to its allies' chagrin, Egypt hasn't become the anchor of a broader Sunni Arab alliance against Iran. Instead, Sisi has charted his own course -- one that sometimes aligns with the Gulf allies' interests and at other times contradicts them, but which always follows the same pattern: Sisi supports state actors whenever they are in conflict with non-state ones.

Sisi's foreign policy outlook is, as The Century Foundation's Michael Hanna has noted, **an extension of his domestic one** (<http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/08/13/the-sisi-doctrine/>). At home, Sisi sees himself as a strongman combatting those who seek chaos, foremost among them the Muslim Brotherhood. According to the **Egyptian government's narrative** (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/WeberCraig2015WEB.pdf>), Sisi "saved" Egypt from the Brotherhood, which seeks the collapse of the Egyptian government and the establishment of an Islamist theocracy. In turn, Egyptian officials routinely argue that a strong (meaning repressive) state is necessary for preventing the Brotherhood's return and the upheaval that might follow. Sisi fleshed this out in his September 2016 address at the United Nations General Assembly, when he **defined terrorism** ([https://gadebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/71/71\\_EG\\_en.pdf](https://gadebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/71/71_EG_en.pdf)) not as violence against civilian populations by non-state actors, but as "a threat to the entity of the state." To bolster Sisi at home, Egypt's pro-government media routinely highlights the violence in Libya, Yemen, and Syria as examples of what might happen if the Islamists are allowed to challenge the Egyptian state.

Due to his strong preference for state actors over non-state ones, Sisi has diverged sharply with his Gulf allies regarding the Syrian conflict. The Gulf states have tended to see the Syrian conflict in terms of their broader concerns regarding Iran's expanding regional influence, and they have strongly supported the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad's Iranian-backed regime. The Saudi government and **Kuwaiti individuals** ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/kuwait-top-ally-on-syria-is-also-the-leading-funder-of-extremist-rebels/2014/04/25/10142b9a-ca48-11e3-a75e-463587891b57\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.3b83a99076ae](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/kuwait-top-ally-on-syria-is-also-the-leading-funder-of-extremist-rebels/2014/04/25/10142b9a-ca48-11e3-a75e-463587891b57_story.html?utm_term=.3b83a99076ae)) have generously backed various Sunni Islamist rebel groups, some of which are tied to al-Qaeda or cooperate with al-Qaeda offshoots, while the UAE has **contributed** (<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RS21852.pdf>) to multi-country funds for arming approved rebel groups and is actively fighting ISIS in Syria as part of the U.S.-led coalition.

Sisi, however, is less concerned about Iran's regional influence than he is about the fallout if Sunni Islamist groups gain the upper hand, since, from Sisi's standpoint, these rebels often look similar to the Islamists that he is fighting at home, and he has increasingly **shown his preference** (<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2017-02-12/egypt-picks-sides-syrian-war>) for Assad. Egypt explicitly declared its disagreement with its Gulf allies at the United Nations meeting in September, when Egypt's foreign minister met his Iranian counterpart on the sidelines and then **told** (<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/News/17411/19/Iranian-Egyptian-meeting.aspx>) the press that, "The Coalition fighting in Syria may want to change the regime in the country, but that is not Egypt's position." Then in October, Cairo supported a Russian UN Security Council resolution that Saudi Arabia strongly opposed, and a few days later it hosted the Syrian intelligence chief for talks that, according to Syria's news agency, concluded with an agreement to "strengthen coordination in the fight against terrorism." **Egyptian-Saudi ties have been frigid ever since** (<http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2016/10/18/a-familiar-pattern-in-egypts-spat-with-saudi-arabia/>) (and Cairo's delay in completing the transfer of two Red Sea islands, Sanafir and Tiran, to Riyadh has only made things worse).

At other times, Sisi's preference for state actors has kept him aligned with his Gulf allies. When Iranian-backed Houthi rebels seized Sanaa in September 2014, Egypt supported the government of Yemeni President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi, and it joined the Saudi- and Emirati-led coalition by **dispatching** (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/egypts-yemen-campaign>) its navy to protect Bab al-Mandab in March 2015. While Sisi has continued to support Hadi politically, including by **meeting** (<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/244200/Egypt/Politics-/Sisi-reiterates-Egypt%E2%80%99s-support-for-Yemens-governm.aspx>) him on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in September, Yemen has increasingly become a point of friction between Cairo and its allies in recent months, and Sisi has resisted Saudi entreaties to send more troops. To some extent, this reflects the legacy of Egypt's costly involvement in Yemen from 1962-1966, and Sisi's desire to avoid getting more deeply involved in another Yemeni quagmire. But it's also a consequence of the Houthis' success: the Houthis continue to control much of the country, including the capital, while Hadi remains in exile. This has blurred the distinction between state and non-state actors in Yemen, leaving Sisi without a horse to bet on aggressively.

Sisi initially faced a similar conundrum in Libya, where the breakdown of the state following longtime dictator Muammar Qaddafi's overthrow in 2011 unleashed a civil war among multiple militias. Without a clear state actor to support, Egypt instead focused on countering Islamist militias. Egypt reportedly **cooperated** ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/egypt-and-uae-strike-islamist-militias-in-libya/2014/08/25/8685ef04-2c98-11e4-be9e-60cc44c01e7f\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.a63883349d2e](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/egypt-and-uae-strike-islamist-militias-in-libya/2014/08/25/8685ef04-2c98-11e4-be9e-60cc44c01e7f_story.html?utm_term=.a63883349d2e)) with the UAE to launch a series of airstrikes in August 2014, and it **launched** (<http://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-libya-egypt-idUSKBN0LJ10D20150216>) another round against ISIS targets in Libya after the group beheaded 21 Egyptian Christians in February 2015.

Yet Gen. Khalifa Hiftar's successes on the ground against the Islamists, as well as his appointment by the House of Representatives to lead the Libyan National Army (LNA) in March 2015, catalyzed a shift in Egypt's policy. While Cairo officially supported the United Nations-led negotiations that produced a **teetering** (<http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21710606-latest-peace-accord-has-merely-reconfigured-conflict-not-solved-it>) peace deal (<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/12/libya-rival-parliaments-sign-backed-deal-151217131709056.html>) in December 2015, Sisi now **supports** (<http://www.thenational.ae/world/middle-east/general-khalifa-haftar-seizes-key-libyan-oil-ports>) Hiftar despite the LNA's **continued clashes** (<http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/09/khalifa-haftar-forces-seizes-oil-port-brega-libya-160914061306594.html>) with forces loyal to the UN-backed government in Tripoli. In this vein, Egypt **advocates** (<http://www.thenational.ae/world/middle-east/egypts-sisi-warns-west-against-military-intervention-in-libya>) lifting the arms embargo on Libyan groups so that it can arm the LNA, and Egyptian intelligence and military officials have **hosted** (<http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/256436/Egypt/Politics-/Libyan-army-commander-Haftar-arrives-in-Cairo-for-.aspx>) Hiftar on many occasions. Sisi seemingly views Hiftar as an analogue to himself -- a military man battling Islamists, some of whom are backed by Qatar, which also backs the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. As Sisi **explained** (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/01/egypt-libya-violation-arms-embargo-hifter.html>) in April 2016, "Egypt supports the LNA, represented by Hiftar, because it believes that it is the best way to get rid of terrorism and help Libya recover."

For the most part, Sisi's foreign policy outlook has come at a price. As a result of his preference for Assad and unwillingness to get more involved in Yemen, Riyadh announced in October that it would withhold the oil aid that King Salman had promised during his April 2016 visit to Cairo, and the UAE appears to be playing wait-and-see on future investments in Egypt. But in a certain sense, Sisi's unilateralism is merely a consequence of his regime's nationalist bent. "We appreciate [the Gulf's] political and moral support even more than financial support," a senior

Egyptian official told me in December. "But for our Gulf brothers and sisters, protecting Egypt after [Morsi's overthrow] was about protecting themselves [from the Brotherhood]...We respect the sovereignty of Saudi Arabia and the UAE. They can contact whomever. But they should preserve the right for us."

Sisi, in other words, will follow an "Egypt first" playbook, and Cairo expects everyone else to do the same. Still, if oil-rich Gulf states believe that they can't face the region's challenges alone, then it's unclear why a resource-poor country with severe structural and security challenges believes that it can.

*Eric Trager is the Esther K. Wagner Fellow at The Washington Institute and author of [Arab Fall: How the Muslim Brotherhood Won and Lost Egypt in 891 Days](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/arab-fall-how-the-muslim-brotherhood-won-and-lost-egypt-in-891-days) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/arab-fall-how-the-muslim-brotherhood-won-and-lost-egypt-in-891-days>). ❖*

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