

Questions About Egypt's Syria Policy

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Marc J. Sievers, a career member of the senior foreign service with the rank of minister-counselor, was the Diplomat-in-Residence at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy in 2014-15. Mr. Sievers is the first person to be appointed to this one-year position, which is a collaborative program with the U.S. Department of State.



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Even if Cairo wanted to normalize relations with the Assad regime, its need to stay on good terms with Saudi Arabia and the UAE would seriously constrain how far it could go in that direction.

Media reports from Egypt provided conflicting information about the December 17, 2014 visit of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's nephew, Emad al-Assad, and a small Syrian delegation to Cairo. Emad is an official at the Arab Academy for Science, Technology, and Maritime Transport in Latakia, and most Egyptian media reported that he visited Cairo at the invitation of the Egyptian navy, but some outlets suggested that it was vaguely connected to Egypt's position on a diplomatic solution to Syria's bloody civil war. The English-language *Daily News Egypt* even linked the visit to the December 16 meeting between President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi and a Russian deputy prime minister.

Even if Emad's arrival in Cairo was simply a technical visit that did not involve official meetings, it stands out as the first publicized visit to Egypt by a Syrian regime figure since the beginning of the Syrian uprising. Therefore, it will be seen in the region as a testing of the diplomatic waters toward a normalization of relations between Cairo and Damascus. Nonetheless, even if Sisi's government is inclined to move in this direction, there are a number of reasons to believe that Egypt's maneuverability is constrained.

It is important to recognize that the Egyptian military has strong historic ties to its Syrian counterpart. Senior Egyptian officers acknowledge that the military does not use the designation "First Field Army" in its order of battle because they still regard the Syrian army as the First Field Army, a legacy of the unity agreement between Egypt and Syria that collapsed in 1963. Despite the deep tensions between Syrian and Egyptian officers during the period of the United Arab Republic, ties of battlefield loyalty were strengthened by the jointly planned and coordinated Egyptian-Syrian attack on Israeli forces in the Sinai Peninsula and Golan Heights in October 1973.

In addition to this historical legacy, senior Egyptian generals for several years have expressed concern about the regional implications of Syria's agony. This is not to say that they like the Assad regime; during the rule of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces in 2011-2012, Egyptian generals repeatedly contrasted the behavior of the Egyptian military in dealing with protestors to that of the Syrian and Libyan armies. However, they consistently cautioned U.S. diplomats and military officers that the collapse of the Syrian state or a victory by jihadist elements are outcomes that must be avoided at all costs. Sisi's support for the international campaign against the Islamic State is based on this perception.

During his one-year presidency, Muhammad Morsi's signature diplomatic initiative was an effort to launch a regional dialogue on Syria that was to group Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey. Morsi's advisors made clear on more than one occasion that this initiative was intended to restore Egypt's traditional position as a regional power center and diplomatic mediator. The initiative went nowhere, as the Saudis rejected working with Iran and were more than a little suspicious of Morsi's intentions as well. Morsi then sought to make Cairo the center of the mainstream Syrian opposition and, for a time, welcomed Syrian refugees to reside in Egypt.

After the military intervened to overthrow Morsi in July 2013, however, one of the first shifts in policy by the interim government was to downgrade the profile of the Syrian opposition and restrict the movements of Syrians in Egypt. The association in Egyptian minds of the mainstream Syrian opposition with Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood ensured that Egypt would not continue to support the opposition and may have led to some discreet contacts with the Assad regime. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs supported the idea of a diplomatic settlement without defining Assad's potential role in Syria's future.

Despite the Egyptian military's traditional ties to Syria and their aversion to the Syrian opposition, Sisi's Egypt remains unlikely to get too close to the Assad regime, primarily due to the Egyptian leadership's close connections to and dependence on support from the Arab Gulf states. Even if Egypt wanted to normalize ties to the Syrian regime, their need to stay on good terms with the Saudis and Emiratis in particular is likely to continue to impose serious constraints on how far they can go.

Marc Sievers is the Diplomat-in-Residence at The Washington Institute and former U.S. deputy chief of mission and charge d'affaires in Cairo. The views in this article are his own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Department of State or the U.S. government. This item was originally published on the [Fikra Forum website \(http://fikraforum.org/?p=6241\)](http://fikraforum.org/?p=6241). ❖

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