Egypt's Evolving Foreign Policy

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Brief Analysis

The foreign policy pursued by the Morsi regime put Egypt's national security interests in great danger and jeopardized regional stability. Now, the interim government is trying to repair the damage.

For U.S. national interests, Egypt means more than the Suez Canal, the peace process, and counterterrorism. Egypt's policies toward Syria, Sudan and Ethiopia, Libya and the broader Maghreb, Iran, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states carry significant weight as well. All these interests must be considered alongside Egypt's stability and its transition to democracy and economic growth. Egypt's foreign policy during the reign of the Muslim Brotherhood was disastrous and threatened the country's most vital national security interests.

For context, we must travel all the way back to the presidency of Anwar Sadat, when the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) began drifting away from its prominent role in shaping the nation's foreign policy. A milestone on this front occurred in 1977, when Ismail Fahmy resigned as foreign minister in protest over Sadat's peace initiative with Israel. The resignation of Fahmy's successor, Muhammad Ibrahim Kamel, ultimately forced Sadat to depend more on other branches of government, especially the security establishment, in addressing foreign policy issues. Later on, even the popular former foreign minister Amr Mousa was kept at a distance by President Hosni Mubarak on critical foreign policy decisions. A slight shift did occur toward the end of Mubarak's tenure, with Foreign Minister Ahmed Abul Gheit, who slowly increased cooperation with the security establishment.

However, the uprising of 2011 put a stop to the reemergence of the MFA as a main player in shaping Egyptian foreign policy on the most important portfolios. Immediately following the revolution, foreign affairs took a backseat to urgent domestic concerns. In one instance, in March 2011, former foreign minister and now Arab League secretary-general Nabil al-Araby did talk of normalizing relations with Iran, which had severed ties with Egypt in 1979, but such talk was quickly stilled.

Morsi's Foreign Policy

Under the Muslim Brotherhood regime, disastrous trends emerged in Egypt's foreign policy. While President Muhammad Morsi did not take any major steps that directly affected relations with the United States or Israel in the immediate term, he was planting the seeds for a drastic shift in the country's foreign policy orientation and operation. The Brotherhood's close cooperation with Hamas, especially on illegal smuggling tunnels into Gaza, would have had negative long-term consequences for both Egyptian national security and relations with Israel. Indeed, indications that Morsi was clearly prioritizing the organizational interests of the Muslim Brotherhood over those of the state, including through redefining national security priorities, sparked clashes with the state security apparatus and the state bureaucracy responsible for implementing foreign policy.

The MFA was disenfranchised entirely during the Morsi administration. Morsi's foreign minister, Mohamed Kamel Amr, was a pure puppet of the regime. According to many senior diplomats, he seemed to have accepted the trivial role played by his ministry. When, for example, Morsi took the unprecedented step of recalling Egypt's ambassadors from Rome and New York without cause or following obligatory institutional laws and procedures, alarm bells sounded. Yet despite the anger of senior diplomats, Amr did not question the move and carried out Morsi's demands without standing up for the established bylaws of state institutions. The Egyptian diplomats' ire was directed not only at Amr's passivity but also at the rising parallel organization headed by Morsi's foreign policy advisor Essam al-Haddad, who functioned as the de facto foreign minister.

The Brotherhood's exclusion of established state institutions and experienced policymakers resulted in a foreign policy that was impulsive, internally contradictory, and well-nigh incomprehensible. These failings were particularly evident in the Brotherhood's attempted rapprochement with Iran, which began with an August 2012 visit by Morsi to Tehran and was reciprocated by then president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's three-day visit to Egypt in February 2013. Late the next month, the first commercial flight in three decades traveled between Cairo and Tehran. The gesture backfired, however, as evidenced by strong criticism from the political establishment, leading to the suspension of the flights. On May 31, Morsi called for the flights to be resumed, with 132 Iranian tourists arriving in Aswan as part of a bilateral tourist agreement. This time, objections from the security apparatus were joined by street protests by Salafists.

Egypt's warming with Iran naturally did corresponding harm to its relations with other Gulf countries and Arab monarchies, with the exception of Qatar. Ties between Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) suffered a major blowback highlighted by the detention of some eleven Egyptian Brotherhood members accused of terrorist activities. The Saudi-Egyptian relationship deteriorated as well, with the Saudi ambassador being recalled more than once. Even the Jordanian king described Morsi as having "no depth" of understanding concerning the complex issues in the region.

In addition, during June 2013 alone, President Morsi effectively declared war on two countries. First, he severed relations with Syria and indicated a desire to send the Egyptian military and volunteer fighters to help the rebels overthrow Bashar al-Assad -- a stance that contradicted Morsi's views as expressed to Russian president Vladimir Putin at the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) meeting in South Africa a month earlier. More important, the stance violated Egypt's longstanding principle, dating to its costly involvement in Yemen's civil war decades earlier, never to intervene militarily against another Arab country. The second effective declaration of war came during a televised national security meeting chaired by Morsi, in which the possibility was raised of engaging in military strikes against or intelligence sabotage of the Ethiopian Renaissance Dam to resolve the threat of a water crisis. Again, with these two bluffs, the Muslim Brotherhood undermined Egypt's national security with a foreign policy that clashed with the country's established national interests.

Morsi alienated Egypt from the international community with other moves too, such as his stance against a military intervention after Islamist militants took control of several parts of Mali, a position that distanced Egypt from the

African Union; his recognition of Kosovo against the advice of the security apparatus; and the demand that convicted terrorist Sheikh Omar Abdul Rahman be released from his U.S. confinement. In addition, Morsi's outreach to Beijing and Moscow may have had longer-term negative effects on Egypt's strategic relationship with the United States, thus undermining Egypt's best interests.

Finally, Morsi made one of his worst moves in April 2013 when, during a visit to Sudan, he crossed a redline of the security and foreign policy establishment by indicating a willingness to cede the long-disputed Egyptian territory of Halaib and Shalatin to the Sudanese. Sedki Sobhi, chief of staff of the Egyptian army, subsequently visited Sudan to make clear that the Egyptian state was not negotiating the surrender of any piece of land. This incident demonstrated to the military that the Brotherhood was directly working against Egypt's national security interests.

Foreign Policy after the June 30 Revolution

In the aftermath of the June 30, 2013, revolution, Egypt has been rebuilding its strong ties with the GCC states, which have shown strong political and financial support to Egypt in the aftermath of Morsi's ouster, especially Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait. The new Egyptian leadership has also halted visits from Iranian tourists, opposed a military strike against Syria, and aggressively reached out to Africa to regain its seat in the African Union. Further, the Egyptians are determined to peacefully resolve their dispute with Ethiopia over the Nile waters, a point Foreign Minister Nabil Fahmy alluded to in his UN General Assembly speech when he announced the establishment of an Egyptian Agency Partnership for Development to enhance cooperation with African countries.

Egypt's foreign policy establishment has also made it a priority to explain the June 30 revolution and the transition to a democratically elected parliament and president -- including through intense public diplomacy efforts to counter the aggressive negative campaign by Brotherhood backers. Speaking at the UN, Fahmy sought to reassure listeners that the "road map includes a national agenda to build the institutions of a democratic state in a specific timeframe." He continued, "Egypt's foreign policy is now a reflection of the will of our people, and is formulated in line with our interests and national security, with no regard to any other consideration."

Conclusion

In bypassing the existing Egyptian bureaucracy and developing its own, the Muslim Brotherhood regime threatened the fundamentals of Egypt's foreign policy, undermining national security interests in the process. But Egypt withstood these attempts to reorient its foreign policy, and the post-June 30 revolution period has been defined by attempts to repair the damage.

From the standpoint of U.S.-Egypt relations, one measure of success will be the rebuilding of civilian ties between Washington and Cairo. The question remains whether civilian leaders can participate constructively in this rebuilding process, or whether they will step aside, leaving the heft of responsibility to the military, as they did after Sadat's peace initiative decades ago. Indeed, civilian efforts must rise to the level of what the military has achieved. Concurrently, as the preceding analysis hints, Egyptian policymakers will be quietly looking to show Washington that Egypt's foreign policy, and its value to the United States, encompasses much more than bilateral ties or Arab-Israeli issues. Rather, shared interests include a range of Arab, African, and even Iran-related concerns. And it is on these issues, along with others, that the United States and Egypt now have an opportunity to build a better framework for long-term cooperation.

Adel El-Adawy is a Next Generation Fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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