The Enduring Egypt-Iran Divide

by **Mehdi Khalaji (/experts/mehdi-khalaji)**

Dec 31, 2012

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Mehdi Khalaji (/experts/mehdi-khalaji)

Mehdi Khalaji, a Qom-trained Shiite theologian, is the Libitzky Family Fellow at The Washington Institute.

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Despite ideological affinities between the Muslim Brotherhood and Tehran, political disagreements make a rapprochement unlikely.

Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi may look besieged at home, but by brokering a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas in November, he enhanced his diplomatic stature mightily across the entire Middle East. Indeed, as 2012 comes to a close, Egypt's centrality to regional diplomacy has been restored. The big question for 2013 is whether Morsi will follow his achievement in Gaza by tackling another major diplomatic challenge: rebuilding relations with Iran after more than three decades of animosity.

Initially, the Muslim Brotherhood's ascent to power in the aftermath of the massive popular protests that toppled Morsi's predecessor, Hosni Mubarak, inspired hope of renewed diplomatic ties with Iran. But, despite shared ideological principles, significant political obstacles continue to inhibit bilateral cooperation.

Relations between the two countries collapsed in 1980, after Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini came to power in Iran's Islamic Revolution and severed ties in response to Egypt's formal recognition of Israel the previous year. Egypt's then-president, Anwar El Sadat, granted the exiled Shah of Iran permission to live in Egypt, and supported Iraq in its eight-year war with the Islamic Republic. The Shah was ultimately buried in a mosque in Cairo.

After Mubarak's ouster last year, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei welcomed the prospect of Islamist rule, with delegations from both countries exchanging visits. For Khamenei, the "Arab Spring" was in fact an "Islamic Awakening."

Islamists in Iran and Egypt have a strong ideological connection. They share anti-Israel sentiment, and support Hamas against the secular-nationalist Fatah in the Palestinians' internecine struggle. Committed to governance under Sharia (Islamic law), they both view Western culture as a threat.

Iran has made some efforts to establish stronger economic relations with Egypt's Islamist government and, in turn, cement a powerful anti-Israel front in the region. Iran's attempt to strike a deal to sell Egypt crude oil would also help

the Iranian government to cope with economic sanctions imposed by the United States and the European Union. But, although Iran's oil minister, Rostam Qassemi, said in October that negotiations were underway, Egypt's minister of petroleum and mineral resources, Osama Kamal, quickly disavowed any such deal.

Beyond economics, Khamenei has an emotional attachment to Egypt. A student of the Egyptian style of Koran recitation, he gathers Koran reciters from Egypt, as well as from other Islamic countries, in his home every Ramadan. More important, his outlook has been heavily influenced by the writings of Sayyid Qutb, the Egyptian theoretician of the Muslim Brotherhood. Prior to the revolution, Khamenei translated three of Qutb's books into Farsi.

Despite these ideological affinities, political disagreements make a rapprochement unlikely. The Muslim Brotherhood considers itself the bastion of modern political Islam, and believes that it should assume a leadership role for all Islamist groups and states. For his part, Khamenei describes himself as the "leader of the Islamic world," and calls Iran its "mother city" (Umm al Qora).

Moreover, the Sunni-Shia divide could pose a major challenge for Egypt-Iran relations. The Muslim Brotherhood is working to strengthen ties with Sunni allies, such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and even Turkey, rather than with Iran's Shia regime, which threatens Sunni regimes by exporting revolution and pitting Shia minorities against their governments.

In fact, since Mubarak's ouster, anti-Shia propaganda has gained traction in the Egyptian public sphere, with books alleging Shia corruption of Islam's true meaning filling the shelves of Cairo's bookstores. But this campaign largely reflects the growing influence of Egypt's Sunni allies -- particularly the Gulf monarchies, led by Saudi Arabia -- rather than a genuine threat from Egypt's small and quiescent Shia community.

In the Gulf States, Shia have led pro-democracy movements, challenging Sunni governments that have deprived them of their rights. But these governments attribute the protests to Iranian agitation, not to legitimate domestic grievances. For them, the conflict between Arabs and Iranians is fundamentally a Sunni-Shia struggle.

These countries then export their anti-Shia discourse to countries, like Egypt, that do not necessarily have a history of Sunni-Shia conflict. Indeed, many of Cairo's cultural landmarks, for example, were built under the Shia Fatimid Caliphate. And, before last year's revolution, Egypt was considered one of the most Shia-friendly Sunni countries in the Arab world. But the Muslim Brotherhood remains financially dependent on the Gulf monarchies, which are using Egypt as a platform for their anti-Shia, anti-Iran agenda.

The most urgent dispute between Iran and Egypt, however, relates to Syria. During its years in opposition, the Muslim Brotherhood considered Iran's Islamic Revolution an example of how a transnational Islamist government might assume power. But, in the face of a popular uprising in Syria, Iran has supported the brutal, repressive policies of President Bashar al-Assad's regime. As a result, Islamists in Egypt are beginning to view Iran as a status quo power, not an agent of revolutionary change.

Furthermore, the flow of military supplies from Iran, together with battlefield support for Assad's regime from Iran's Lebanese proxy, Hezbollah, reinforce the perception of a Sunni-Shia conflict in Syria. In this context, the collapse of Assad's regime would likely exacerbate tensions between Iran and Egypt -- especially given that Syria's Muslim Brotherhood, the leading opposition group, would likely play a strong, even dominant, role in a new Syrian order.

For now, Egypt's government is putting national interests ahead of pan-Islamist aspirations. Rather than inciting an escalation in fighting between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, Egypt worked with the US and other regional allies to broker a cease-fire. By contrast, Iran's military leaders boasted about their support for Hamas, offering no indication that they wanted the fighting to end.

Less than two years after Egypt's revolution, Morsi's government is struggling to address domestic challenges, including the proliferation of armed radical groups in Sinai. But, as regional tensions continue to rise, the chances of an Egypt-Iran detente are likely to deteriorate.

Mehdi Khalaji is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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