



The Council for Mediterranean Diplomacy

Egypt Should Prepare for Better Relations with Turkey

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A. The Context

In the last two years, Turkish President Erdoğan has tried to mend relations with Arab countries, with which he harbored hostility because of his support of the Muslim Brotherhood and political Islam. Among the rest, Erdoğan made efforts to reconcile with Saudi Arabia and the UAE so that the two countries would help Turkey recover from its economic crisis.

In the lead up to the May 2023 Turkish elections, and following the earthquakes in Turkey, Erdoğan has also stepped-up efforts for rapprochement with Egypt. Normalization with Egypt would deprive Erdoğan's political opposition of the ability to keep on claiming that his sympathy with the Muslim Brotherhood prevailed over Turkey's strategic interests in the region.

Despite the deterioration of political relations between Egypt and Turkey since 2013, the two countries' trade and economic relations have grown. However, this did not help speed up rapprochement. The normalization process between Turkey and Egypt, advanced at a slower pace than Turkey's ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Contrary to Erdoğan's aspirations, Egypt preferred to slow down normalization due to differences on key bilateral and regional issues. Egyptian officials wanted to see Turkey take concrete actions, before they were willing to complete this normalization process.

After two exploratory meetings at the level of deputy foreign ministers, the countries' heads of state met in Doha, in November 2022, on the sidelines of the opening of the FIFA World Cup. They agreed to upgrade consultations to the foreign ministers level, to generate momentum for rapprochement and to resolve outstanding issues. This led to a visit by Egypt's foreign minister to Turkey at the end of February 2023, followed by a reciprocal visit by his Turkish counterpart to Cairo in March 2023. Egypt's foreign minister made another visit to Turkey in April 2023, during Ramadan, in which positive messages on bilateral relations were voiced.

The progress towards rapprochement raises several bilateral and regional issues for Egyptian decisionmakers to consider and to examine their repercussions on Egyptian interests. To assist in this process, below are recommendations on how Egypt could maximize benefits from the expected improvement in relations with Turkey, which is likely to continue regardless of the outcome of the Turkish elections.

B. Regional Issues

The global strategic system is transitioning from US unipolar hegemony to multipolar competition. Therefore, the major regional powers, including Turkey, will have more influence on a variety of regional issues. Turkey has invested economically and militarily in various

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conflict areas near Egypt – especially Libya, Ethiopia and Syria – which grants it influence in those areas.

1. Libya

The US and many European countries are now readjusting their policies towards Libya, which used to give Turkey a mandate to balance the Russian presence there (as well as in Syria). The West is gradually moving to encourage a political compromise between the two governments in Libya, which would enable a central government to control the country's oil and natural gas resources. The relative importance of these resources has tremendously increased due to the war in Ukraine and Libya's geographic proximity to European markets.

It is therefore not surprising that both the US and the UN have recently presented initiatives to help warring Libyan parties overcome their differences. Egypt should not only reject or ignore these initiatives. Rather, it should present amendments to make them acceptable to Egypt and advance its interests. Egypt can reach an understanding with Turkey about a common position in this regard.

Russia's transfer of thousands of Wagner mercenaries from Libya to Ukraine, and its need to make additional such transfers, increases the likelihood of reaching an Egypt-Turkey-Russia agreement for pulling out all mercenary forces from Libya. Afterwards, approximately one thousand Turkish troops and a similar number of Russian ones would remain on Libyan soil. Egypt should leave dealing with these foreign troops to the new Libyan government that will be formed if a consensual political solution is reached.

Both Egypt and Turkey will not abandon their Libyan allies, nor their fair share in the Libyan wealth and their relative weight in forming the new government there. Egypt will maintain its non-recognition of the agreements concluded by the Al-Sarraj and Al-Dibaba governments with Turkey regarding the maritime borders or Turkey's exploitation of Libyan oil and natural gas fields. Egypt can, however, reach an understanding with Turkey that facilitates reaching a political solution that enables the Libyan parties to form a new government, while simultaneously taking into account the interests of Egypt, Turkey, the West, and Russia.

2. Ethiopia and the Renaissance Dam

Turkey is the second largest investor in Ethiopia next to China, and more than 200 Turkish companies operate there. Turkey is also providing military aid to the Ethiopian government, to help it win the civil war. Turkey has offered to mediate between Sudan and Ethiopia to resolve border disputes between the two countries. Turkey is likely to be willing and able, along with other countries called upon by Egypt, to persuade the Ethiopian government to accept a compromise with Egypt on the issue of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. This will be an important Turkish contribution to the advancement of Egyptian interests.

3. Eastern Mediterranean

Egypt can leverage its Eastern Mediterranean alliance with Greece and Cyprus to formulate a process that enables Turkey to obtain a share of contested natural gas findings in the waters separating it from Greece and Cyprus. It is not advised for Egypt to go into legal polemics over Eastern Mediterranean agreements that have been in place for more than a hundred years, nor is there a foreseeable resolution in sight of the Cyprus conflict.

However, one can aspire to replicate the model of the Lebanese-Israeli maritime border deal, which divided offshore natural gas fields between two rivals. It was reached via US mediation,

and with the support of French and Italian gas companies as well as the State of Qatar, without Israel and Lebanon having diplomatic relations, mutual recognition or direct negotiations.

Also in the Eastern Mediterranean, normalizing relations with Turkey while further developing cooperation with the al-Assad government could open the door for Egypt to participate in the Astana process, towards a peaceful settlement of the conflict in Syria, solving the refugee problem, and setting in place international security guarantees in northern Syria.

C. Bilateral Egypt-Turkey Relations

1. On the bilateral level, it is possible to **revive previous agreements**, such as Turkey's line of credit agreement worth \$1 billion, with a small interest rate (Libor) which was concluded in 2013. Egypt did not benefit from the agreement in financing Turkish exports and projects, given that it was signed before the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood's rule. Agreements are ready from previous years for Turkish investments in Egypt in the fields of solid waste recycling and private contractors to solve the problem of urban slums. Likewise, Erdoğan and el-Sisi reached an agreement in May 2013 (when el-Sisi served as defense minister) to open a similar Turkish line of credit worth \$200 million to finance Turkish arms sales to Egypt and joint military production projects between the two countries. This agreement has also been frozen since that date and can now be considered for resumption.

2. The Egyptian textile industry can benefit from the **experience of Turkish businessmen**, who export hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of their products to American and African markets. A partnership between Egyptian and Turkish counterparts can help solve problems faced by Egyptian public sector textile factories.

3. Turkish manufacturers in Egypt use Egyptian natural gas and cheap labor, and sell their products to the large Egyptian market as well as to foreign markets to which Egypt enjoys easy access and in which it benefits from customs tariff exemptions. These opportunities **attract more Turkish investments in Egypt**. At the same time, the value of Egypt's liquefied natural gas exports to Turkey has increased to more than \$2 billion over the last couple of years. Egypt could determine its priorities and assess economic feasibility of either using natural gas to encourage foreign industrial investment or exporting it to foreign markets.

4. In 2011, the Arab Gas Pipeline, which starts in Egypt and passes through Jordan (with branches connecting it to Israel) to Syria, fell about a hundred kilometers short of Turkish territory. This pipeline is currently intended to export natural gas from Egypt to Lebanon, and may possibly operate at a later stage also in the opposite direction. These developments should encourage a long-term process of **connecting the Arab Gas Pipeline to the Turkish network**, which is also likely to receive large quantities of Russian natural gas during the next few years.

5. For security reasons, Egypt has decided in 2014 to stop the **sea line of transport by roll-on roll-off (RORO) trucks** between Turkish and Egyptian Mediterranean ports. These trucks were transporting Turkish and European goods to the Arabian Gulf via Egypt following closure of the land route through Syria due to the civil war there. Turkey transferred that sea line to the Israeli port of Haifa, so that trucks could set off from it across Jordan to the Gulf. If competent Egyptian authorities find it economically feasible to resume the operation of this line through Egypt's ports and roads, the trucks coming from Turkey could be used for shipping Egyptian exports to both Middle Eastern and European markets.

6. Increased cultural cooperation between Egypt and Turkey will create important opportunities for **marketing Egyptian literary and artistic production to the large Turkish market**. Turkey, which has a population of 85 million, produces a total of 88,000 book titles

per year, while Egypt produces 22,000 titles annually and the rest of the Arabs produces 18,000. In other words, 300 million Arabs read less than half the number of books read by 85 million Turks every year. This requires a more active effort of literary and artistic translation from Arabic into Turkish. Egyptian literature, films and TV series can enjoy a wide Turkish audience, in the same manner that Turkish series and films are enjoyed in the Arab world.

7. There is a significant number of Turks who are interested in sending their children to learn Arabic and Islamic theology at Al-Azhar University and other Egyptian universities. However, the number of Turkish students actually attending these institutions has diminished in the past two decades due to the deterioration of the quality of education in those public universities, the inclusion of some outdated religious ideas in the teaching syllabi, and the lack of clean and healthy public university dorms that meet international standards. Solving these problems, in the context of better bilateral relations, can **make Egyptian universities more attractive and competitive for the Turkish audience**. Recently, some Gulf countries have surpassed Egypt in the number of patents produced on their territory by students and professors, most of whom are foreigners. Enhanced cooperation with Turkey in the field of education could therefore provide Egypt with significant economic, touristic and scientific returns.

The reinvigorating of Egypt-Turkey relations requires all Egyptian state agencies and research centers to adopt a comprehensive approach towards an integrated strategy that suggests Egyptian initiatives and ideas, on both the bilateral and regional levels. To fulfill the potential presented by the progress in the rapprochement process, Egypt should invest pro-actively in preparing for better relations with Turkey.