



The Council for Mediterranean Diplomacy

Regional Issues are Key to the Future of Turkey's Normalization with Egypt

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A. The Context

Turkey-Egypt relations have become part of the "era of normalization" that characterizes regional politics in the Middle East and North Africa. The relations between the two countries had hit rock bottom after the removal of Mohammed Morsi from power in Egypt. The AKP government, and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan specifically, was the ardent critic of the government of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. These developments led to the downgrading of diplomatic relations and rivalry in regional politics.

The most prominent examples of the latter are the Libyan conflict and the competition in the Eastern Mediterranean. While in Libya, the two sides supported different actors at war with each other, in the Eastern Mediterranean, Egypt became one of the main actors that cooperated to isolate Ankara. Despite the conflictual political relations, however, economic ties between Turkey and Egypt continued to develop and were mostly decoupled from political tensions during the previous decade. The total trade volume increased by 60 percent between 2007 and 2022, expanding from 4.4 billion USD to 7.1 billion USD. Egypt recently also became a critical liquefied natural gas (LNG) exporter to Turkey.

B. The Emergence of a Normalization Process

The two countries shifted their positions about three years ago to start a slow but steady normalization process. The impetus for this shift came from the emerging regional context – in which regional countries were trying to readjust their positions – and from specific interests of Ankara and Cairo. For Turkey, there was a general desire to end its isolation in the region. Specifically, normalization with Egypt could open up possibilities of finding mutually advantageous positions in the Eastern Mediterranean, which is seen as a sovereignty issue in Ankara and thus high up on its security agenda. Turkey argued that the maritime delimitation agreement signed with the Libyan National Government in November 2019 was more advantageous for Egypt. Thus, later, when it became clear that Egypt considered Turkey's maritime claims in its delimitation agreement with Greece signed in August 2020, Ankara perceived this as a goodwill gesture.

On the other hand, there were several reasons for Egypt to seek better relations with Turkey. For one, normalization with Turkey provided Egypt with the opportunity to end Turkey's support for the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. In addition, Cairo must have considered changing Arab dynamics and Turkey's normalization, especially with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Israel,

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in the context of its concerns about marginalization after the Abraham Accords. Also of impact was the shifting context in Libya with the failure of the forces of General Khalifa Haftar (supported by Egypt) to topple the United Nations (UN)-recognized government in Tripoli (supported by Turkey, both politically and militarily). Therefore, Libya's new turn of events also allowed Turkey and Egypt to normalize. Both Cairo and Ankara focused on their shared interest in unity and stability in Libya, and began to support the UN negotiations launched in late 2020 to form a new unity government.

As a result, the two countries have embarked on a path to normalization. There have been two rounds of "exploratory talks" between diplomats at the deputy foreign minister level, first in Cairo in May, then in Ankara in September 2021. The two sides announced that they agreed to continue the diplomatic process and that bilateral relations should be improved. It was reported that Cairo asked Ankara to stop granting Turkish nationality to Egyptians living in Turkey and allowing Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood members to continue freely broadcasting from Turkey. These meetings resulted in Turkey's first warning and then closing of Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated media outlets. Ankara's request for Egyptian media to tone down its criticism of Turkey and President Erdoğan has also been accepted.

C. Normalization Picks Up Pace

A significant step forward was the November 2022 meeting between Presidents Erdoğan and el-Sisi at the FIFA World Cup in Qatar. It dismantled a major hurdle, and despite not being an exclusively bilateral meeting, it reflected that the leaders could meet and talk, and do so in public. This positive indication provided the sides with mutual legitimacy, which paved the way for additional meetings between officials.

Recently, earthquake diplomacy has also created positive momentum. Following the earthquake in Turkey in February 2023, Egypt sent Turkey a significant amount of humanitarian aid, which has gained visibility in Turkey. Also, the visit by Egypt's Foreign Minister to Turkey after the earthquake was positively regarded. The meeting was cordial, and both ministers spoke about the importance of making progress in bilateral ties and restarting the exploratory talks. All these developments contributed to a better Egyptian image in Turkey and paved the way for reciprocal visits by the two foreign ministers in the following weeks. In March 2023, Turkey's Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu held talks with his Egyptian counterpart Shoukry in Cairo, and a reciprocal meeting between the two was held in Ankara in April 2023.

Among the normalization of Turkey's relations in the Middle East, normalizing with Egypt is complex, and the process had its ups and downs. Following the leaders' handshake, earthquake diplomacy, and positive messaging voiced during subsequent foreign ministers' meetings, further talks and progress become likely, even though a breakthrough may only be possible following the May 2023 Turkish election.

D. Regional Considerations and Opportunities

Libya is still the major regional issue impacting Turkey-Egypt relations. It is a big challenge for both countries but also entails opportunities. Both countries share an interest in ensuring Libya's unity and stability – although there are differences in specific actions each country is taking – and they need to find more areas of common interest towards achieving this goal. Libya will likely remain important to Turkish interests no matter who wins the upcoming election. It is a long-term issue related to Turkey's presence in the Mediterranean. It is primarily a sovereignty issue, not a

natural gas one, relating to Turkey's wish to go beyond its narrow Mediterranean coast. It has intermingled with protracted conflicts such as the Cyprus and Aegean disputes between Turkey and Greece. Actual normalization between Egypt and Turkey requires a solution for Libya.

Another regional issue is Turkey's increasing presence in the Horn of Africa and its growing involvement in Ethiopia, a country with which Egypt has a conflict over the Nile waters. Yet, like the Libya case, Turkey's close relations with Ethiopia may also present opportunities for further normalization between Turkey and Egypt, should Turkey play a positive role in this conflict. Overall, geopolitical factors limit the pace of normalization and can, in turn, be used for further normalization depending on how the two countries approach them and whether they can identify common interests.

Natural gas can be an issue for cooperation between Turkey and Egypt, also on the regional level. Turkey-Greece ties were traditionally handled within the UN and European Union (EU) context. But, in recent years, they have also become entangled with competition among Middle Eastern countries. The involvement of the UAE and Saudi Arabia in the Eastern Mediterranean made things more complicated for Turkey-Greece relations. The normalization of Turkey's ties with Gulf states as well as with Egypt will have a positive impact on Turkey-Greece relations and may thus enable Turkey's inclusion in region-wide cooperation schemes related to natural gas. This is a significant motivation for Turkey's regional normalization processes. In any case, Turkey-Egypt ties should not be linked anymore to Turkey-Greece ties.

Initially, the deterioration of Turkey-Egypt relations stemmed from bilateral issues, but it was subsequently negatively impacted by regional ones. The normalization process already managed to resolve most bilateral differences, yet the regional context remains challenging. Nevertheless, regional issues also entail opportunities for furthering normalization, and it is up to the leadership in both Turkey and Egypt to decide whether or not to pursue them.