

Fostering Egypt-Türkiye Rapprochement through Sustainable Cooperation: A Strategic Policy Approach

Pınar Akpınar & Dalia Ziada*

September 2023

Abstract

A diplomatic breakthrough in the complex relationship between Egypt and Türkiye is in the making as senior officials from both countries carefully push the long-delayed rapprochement process to the finish line. This policy brief analyzes the rapprochement process, explores areas of persistent conflicts and potential cooperation, and offers applicable recommendations for Turkish and Egyptian policymakers on how to create sustainable positive relations. It examines the tough questions of resolving bilateral and regional disputes and addressing sharp discrepancies in ideologies, distorted public perceptions, and contradicting regional policies. By transforming these obstacles into areas of synchronized teamwork, Egypt-Türkiye relations could be elevated to the next level of sustainable cooperation. This policy brief highlights the benefits of cooperation and proposes policy recommendations for both the official and unofficial tracks. For the official track, it suggests institutionalizing bilateral relations, exploring areas of regional cooperation, and engaging the militaries of the two countries. For the unofficial track, it delves into potential areas of economic collaboration, social and cultural activism, and effective public communication. Successful cooperation between Egypt and Türkiye would address geopolitical dilemmas and yield bilateral and regional benefits.

A. Introduction

Egypt and Türkiye, two influential riparian countries in the Eastern Mediterranean, have a centuries-long history of complex relations that encompass episodes of cooperation and conflict. The most recent episode of tension between them began in 2013 when Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan publicly protested the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood regime from power in Egypt and accused the then-Minister of Defense, Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, of leading a coup d'état against the former President Mohamed Morsi. In response, the new Egyptian government condemned Erdoğan's intervention in domestic affairs. After a few weeks of exchanging outrageous media statements, the two countries withdrew their ambassadors to start a mutual diplomatic boycott that lasted a decade.

From 2013 to 2021, the conflict was magnified by the ideological differences between the two leaders and their divergent visions on regional issues, ranging from the Arab Quartet boycott of Qatar,¹ the civil war in Libya and

* Dr. Pınar Akpınar is Assistant Professor at the Gulf Studies Program of the College of Arts and Sciences at Qatar University; Dalia Ziada is an award-winning Egyptian writer and Director of the MEEM Center for Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean Studies. Both are members of Diplomedes - The Council for Mediterranean Diplomacy.

1 ["Arab states issue ultimatum to Qatar: close Jazeera, curb ties with Iran," Reuters](#), June 23, 2017.



Syria, and the maritime border conflicts in the Eastern Mediterranean. In May 2023, after Erdoğan's victory in Türkiye's general elections, the rapprochement process between Cairo and Ankara took on a faster pace leading to the eventual upgrading of diplomatic missions in both capitals to the ambassadorial level.

This policy brief provides practical steps for policymakers to capitalize on the current diplomatic breakthrough, despite persisting disparities in public perceptions and state ideologies. It examines the regional context and the bilateral dynamics of the recent Turkish-Egyptian dispute, analyzes the ongoing rapprochement process, and explores the potential for future sustainable collaboration between the two states. Based on this analysis, concrete policy recommendations are presented to ensure that the rapprochement process will progress beyond diplomatic gestures into positive and tangible peace.

B. Türkiye-Egypt Relations in Context

The historical and cultural connections between Türkiye and Egypt can be traced back to the Ottoman Empire's presence in Africa, which started with the Mamluk Dynasty's conquest of Egypt in 1517. While diplomatic relations between the two countries fluctuated throughout history, economic and social relations have remained resilient. Under Muhammad Ali Pasha (1805-1849), thousands of Egyptian civilian and military students received their education and training in Istanbul, and hence they imported many features of Turkish culture and way of life to Egypt, including the military culture and ideology.² Following the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923, Türkiye's first embassy in Africa was opened in Cairo in 1925, underpinning Egypt's central role in its policy in the continent.³ Economically, Egypt stands out as Türkiye's largest trade partner in Africa.⁴

Nevertheless, following the fall of the monarchy and the establishment of the Egyptian Republic in 1952, Egypt and Türkiye grew apart. Former Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser attempted (1954-1970) to detach Egypt from its Turkish cultural context in his quest to market the Arabism ideology that represented the foundation of his rule.⁵ Since then, the relationship between Egypt and Türkiye mostly remained stable, without conflict but also without cooperation.

Following the Arab Spring revolutions in 2011 and the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood to power in Egypt (2012-2013), relations between Cairo and Ankara dramatically improved. The Muslim Brotherhood leaders marketed their organization as the Egyptian duplicate of Türkiye's Justice and Development (AK) Party. In 2012, Egyptian and Turkish naval forces conducted joint exercises in the Mediterranean for the first time.⁶ Yet, after the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood in 2013, the two countries came to loggerheads, leading to strained diplomatic ties.

Despite the strides taken in the rapprochement process in 2022 and 2023, the ideological gap between the two parties remains wide, mainly because it is tied to the public image of their respective presidents. While El-Sisi's

2 Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu and Humphrey Davies, "The Turks in Egypt and Their Cultural Legacy," *American University in Cairo Press*, 2012.

3 Numan Hazar, *Küreselleşme Sürecinde Afrika ve Türkiye-Afrika İlişkileri* (Ankara: USAK Yayınları, 2011).

4 "Invest in: Sustainable Future Together: Turkey-Africa," *DEİK*.

5 Michael B. Bishku, "Nasser and Egypt's Role in the Arab World," *Journal of Third World Studies* 5(2), 1988, pp. 45-54.

6 "Egypt and Turkey hold joint naval exercise," *Reuters*, October 8, 2012.



image is mostly based on his role in removing the Muslim Brotherhood from power in 2013 and restoring military supremacy over the civilian state, Erdoğan's legacy is significantly based on his image as the leader of an incumbent conservative party that has challenged decades-long military tutelage and sustained power for two decades. The failed coup d'état in Türkiye in 2016 further intensified his discontent towards military-led regimes.

Egypt and Türkiye also adopted deviating positions vis-à-vis key regional issues, such as the ongoing conflict in Libya. Türkiye supports the United Nations-recognized Government of National Unity (GNU) in Tripoli, while Egypt backs the Libyan National Army (LNA) led by warlord Khalifa Haftar in Benghazi. For Egypt, the LNA protects Egypt's western borders from the leakage of terrorists and smugglers of weapons and drugs.⁷ For Türkiye, better relations with the GNU means gaining leverage in the Eastern Mediterranean.⁸

Conflicts over maritime delimitations and hydro-energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean have been another area of disagreement. Following Türkiye's military intervention in Libya in 2019, Egypt signed maritime agreements with Greece, Cyprus and Israel, and co-founded the East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) in 2020.⁹ Türkiye is almost the only country in the Eastern Mediterranean region that is not represented in the forum and its membership seems unlikely in the near future, mostly due to Cyprus' objection.

C. The Rapprochement Process

In the past decade, Türkiye's foreign policy has undergone a significant securitization process, driven by the failed coup attempt and escalating tensions in its geographic milieu. However, the political and economic crises inside Türkiye and its regional isolation due to multiple disputes with neighboring countries have prompted a more restrained approach, leading to rapprochement with Egypt, Israel, Arab Gulf countries, the European Union, and even Armenia. Türkiye's positive role in the Ukraine war, notably the grain deal it facilitated, the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan and its subsequent impact on the security perceptions of the United Arab Emirates¹⁰ and Saudi Arabia¹¹ paved the way for these rapprochements.

The rapprochement process between Egypt and Türkiye started in May 2021, with limited talks on intelligence and diplomacy that took place in both Cairo and Ankara. The preliminary discussions between the deputy foreign ministers in May 2021 and towards the end of 2022 primarily focused on ensuring that neither of the two states or militaries would trespass on the national security and geo-economic territories of each other.¹² Despite initial optimism, no tangible progress was achieved, and the slow pace of talks resulted in a loss of momentum.

7 Mona Farag, "Egyptian National Security and the Perils of Egyptian-Libyan Border Management: Military Strength versus International Assistance," *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 13(1), March 2000, pp. 23-45.

8 Read the [MoU](#) signed by Turkish government and Libya's GNA.

9 "East Mediterranean Gas Forum launched," *Oil Review Middle East*, September 25, 2020.

10 "Turkey, UAE ratify \$40 billion trade deal after Erdogan's victory," *Al-Monitor*, May 31, 2023.

11 "Erdogan meets Saudi leaders in first visit since Khashoggi murder," *Al Jazeera*, April 28, 2022.

12 Read the [official statement](#) concluding Egypt-Turkey first exploratory talks in May 2021.

A key turning point in the rapprochement process was the first-ever meeting between Erdoğan and El-Sisi in Doha in November 2022, facilitated by football diplomacy led by Qatar during the FIFA World Cup.¹³ The historic encounter was made possible due to economic pressures of the war in Ukraine, the earthquake in Türkiye and Syria, the rising trend of reconciliations in the Middle East, and the behind-the-scenes efforts of Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

In February and March 2023, the Egyptian and Turkish Ministers of Foreign Affairs exchanged official visits and promised to accelerate the rapprochement process as soon as the general elections in Türkiye concluded. Moreover, while Egypt extended humanitarian aid to Türkiye following the earthquake, the Turkish authorities facilitated the entry of Egyptian military-affiliated humanitarian aid workers into northern Syria.¹⁴ In April, the Egyptian authorities allowed Turkish citizens to enter the country by enabling them to obtain a visa upon arrival.¹⁵ This effort has massively contributed to a surge in the number of Turkish tourists visiting Egypt, which is expected to peak at more than one million by the end of 2023.¹⁶

In the wake of the 2023 presidential elections in Türkiye, the Egyptian President and Foreign Minister were among the first regional leaders to congratulate their Turkish counterparts. One month later, the two countries exchanged ambassadors after 10 years of running limited diplomatic missions.¹⁷ The fact that Erdoğan moved his resilient associate, Hakan Fidan, from the locus of Intelligence Chief to the position of Foreign Minister, in June 2023, demonstrated commitment to strategic diplomatic endeavors in pursuit of Türkiye's regional and international goals. Fidan has been a leading actor, although behind-the-scenes, in all of Türkiye's recent rapprochement initiatives in the region, inter alia, with Egypt.¹⁸ During his first meeting with the Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi in Ankara, in early July, Fidan highlighted the importance of restoring ties between Türkiye and Egypt.¹⁹

On the flip side, the domestic political and economic challenges have also motivated the Egyptian leadership to seek better relations with Ankara. In June 2024, Egypt's President will run his own presidential race, which is expected to be impacted by the persistent economic crisis and the brewing political turmoil in trade unions. These challenges have considerably contributed to the deterioration of El-Sisi's popularity, even among his loyal constituency; namely, women and Coptic Christians. The government's difficulty in handling the current economic crisis is making citizens wonder if El-Sisi is capable of running state affairs as well as his ability to preserve state security. One strategy for El-Sisi to compensate or refresh his citizen approval rate is by attracting swinging voters among the religiously pious electoral base, who perceive him as an enemy of Islam because of his role in toppling the Muslim Brotherhood regime in 2013. Improving personal relations with Erdoğan, a prominent politician with a conservative background, could help El-Sisi improve his perception among the newly-targeted voter groups. On another level, cooperation with the militarily and diplomatically powerful Türkiye could help Egypt restore its role as the "big sister" of Arab countries and be able once again to influence regional occurrences.

13 İsmail Numan Telci, "Katar'da Türkiye-Mısır Diplomasisi," *ORSAM*, November 22, 2022 [Turkish].

14 "The First Relief Team to Reach the stricken Jandris in Syria is Egyptian," *Sky News Arabia*, February 8, 2023 [Arabic].

15 "Turkish citizens to be able to enter Egypt by obtaining visa on arrival," *Yeni Şafak*, April 16, 2023.

16 Watch Turkish Ambassador's interview with *Al-Arabiya TV* on July 6, 2023.

17 "Egypt, Turkey appoint ambassadors to upgrade diplomatic relations," *Reuters*, July 4, 2023.

18 In a [televised interview](#) with RT Arabic on June 20, 2023, the Turkish Ambassador in Cairo said that "Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan has played a key role in facilitating Egypt-Turkey rapprochement to bring it to this point."

19 The [statements by Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan](#) on Egypt-Türkiye relations on Habertürk, July 4, 2023 [Turkish language; starting at 13:30].

D. Future Prospects

The establishment of sustainable cooperation between Türkiye and Egypt relies on their ability of Erdoğan and El-Sisi to shift their focus to common needs and strategic interests instead of prioritizing their political ideologies. The following policy recommendations spell out a path to enhancing Türkiye-Egypt collaboration on both the official and non-official tracks.

1. The official track

On the official track, all eyes are set towards an anticipated meeting between El-Sisi and Erdoğan, which would be a significant milestone in Egypt-Türkiye relations. The mutual upgrade of diplomatic missions to ambassadorial level, in July 2023, was an important step in that direction.

A) Institutionalizing bilateral relations - Involving more state institutions in Türkiye-Egypt talks would diversify official dialogue channels and prevent relations from being confined to the ideological preferences of the two leaders. Diplomatic, economic and military policymakers on both sides need to engage in frequent meetings to develop collaborative projects. Identifying common ground could narrow the gap of trust between the two states and lead to sustainable cooperation generating tangible benefits over time.

B) Exploring areas of regional cooperation - Exploring collaborations between Türkiye, Egypt and regional countries like Israel and Gulf countries may enhance regional ties. For instance, the coordination between Türkiye and Egypt on facilitating intra-Palestinian talks is a positive development. The two countries can also cooperate in advancing the development of the Gaza Marine natural gas field, and in promoting a resolution to the Nile River dispute.

Libya could be another regional issue where Egyptian and Turkish policymakers may find common ground for cooperation. Given the leverage they both have on Libyan politicians, Türkiye and Egypt may find ways to enhance Libya's security and stability through facilitating a political solution, advancing elections, and mediating talks between the conflicting factions. Italy's initiative to open an economic corridor to Libya presents an opportunity for a trilateral collaboration mechanism between Egypt, Türkiye and Italy, in support of Libya's integrity and reconstruction, while addressing migration and economic concerns. The recent financial cooperation between Libya and Türkiye, whereby the Central Bank of Libya has deposited 8 billion USD in the Central Bank of the Republic of Türkiye to assist the Turkish Lira without any interest, demonstrates the potential of this collaboration.

In the Eastern Mediterranean, Egypt could adopt a policy similar to that of Israel that allows it to keep its agreements with Greece and Cyprus while exploring new opportunities for maritime cooperation with Türkiye.²⁰ Admitting Türkiye to the EMGF seems unattainable in the near future, but Egypt and Türkiye could explore different means of energy cooperation that involves private sector investments in infrastructure and renewable energy projects.

20 Samuel Helfont, "Turkish-Egyptian Maritime Negotiations: Hype or Substance?," *The Institute for National Security Studies*, INSS Insight 1447, March 22, 2021.



The two neighbors have already been capitalizing on their geographic proximity by shipping cargos of liquefied natural gas from Egypt to Türkiye, to be used for local consumption and transported to Europe through the extensive pipeline structure of the latter.²¹ On another level, the EMGF could expand its scope of work by setting a new mechanism to regulate cooperation between member countries on renewable energies, in which Türkiye could be a member. Meanwhile, Egypt, Israel and Türkiye may create a geo-economic triangle that would attract massive investments from energy-deprived Europe.²²

C) Engaging the militaries - There is great potential for Türkiye and Egypt to collaborate in the defense industry since they host two of the most powerful militaries in the Middle East (in terms of manpower and capabilities) and share similar security threats. As such, they could collaborate on the following areas:

Technology transfer - Both countries are keen to modernize their armament capabilities and enhance their defense industries. Holding joint research initiatives on the latest military technology trends may serve these goals while fostering a bond of solidarity between them.

Skill sharing - Periodic joint military exercises between the armed forces of Türkiye and Egypt would increase interoperability leading to a more robust response to regional challenges. Egypt would benefit greatly from the Turkish military's NATO experience, while Türkiye would benefit from Egypt's refurbished naval capabilities and naval bases on the southern shores of the Mediterranean.

Intelligence sharing - As both countries face similar security threats, sharing vital intelligence can help them preempt, prepare for, and respond to emerging crises more effectively, such as combating terrorism and dealing with tensions in neighboring countries.

2. The unofficial track

On the unofficial track, private businesses, civil society organizations, academic institutions, and the media can significantly boost official efforts to improve bilateral ties.

A) Economic collaboration - Economic cooperation could be an ideal starting point for improved relations between Cairo and Ankara. Despite the diplomatic impasse, the trade between the two countries has been steadily growing. Over the past 26 years, Türkiye's exports to Egypt have experienced an average annual growth rate of 11.3 percent, rising from 291 million USD in 1995 to 4.65 billion USD in 2021.²³ The year 2023 has marked an unprecedented increase of 32.6 percent in the volume of trade between the two countries.²⁴

Food security and sustainable agriculture and agroecology are overlooked fields of potential cooperation between Türkiye and Egypt. Both countries are major providers of agricultural products to Europe and the Middle East. The

21 "Turkish, Egyptian FMs talk about post-earthquake situation," *Daily Sabah*, February 25, 2023.

22 "Egypt: East Med Can Meet Europe's Gas Needs if Investments Made," *Voice of America*, October 15, 2022.

23 Relevant statistics at [the database](#) of the Observatory of Economic Complexity.

24 More details on the trade volume between Türkiye and Egypt at [the database](#) of the Trading Economics website.

war in Ukraine and climate change have caused them to suffer but also offered opportunities to enhance food supplies for themselves and their neighbors. The Black Sea Grain Initiative, which Türkiye has been managing since 2022, is one example.

Textile is another important sector for Türkiye-Egypt economic relations. The four biggest textile companies in Egypt are Turkish. Moreover, Turkish textile companies often choose Egypt as a production base for their trade with the United States. This is due to the more extensive benefits offered by the Qualifying Industrial Zones (QIZ) Protocol between Egypt and the United States, compared to the Free Trade Agreement between Türkiye and the United States.²⁵

Tourism, which has always been an area of competition between the two riparian Mediterranean countries, has now turned into an area for cooperation. The influx of Turkish tourists into Egypt due to the new visa regulation compensated for the absence of Russian and Eastern European tourists due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Cooperation on sustainable tourism projects with the inclusion of locals, especially women, could also be socially and economically profitable for both countries.

The two countries could also collaborate in renewable energies. Egypt has shown notable progress in embracing renewable energies, including by establishing the Benban Solar Park, the fourth-largest solar park in the world. Renewable energies is a field in which Türkiye and Egypt could work together, since many Turkish companies are nowadays undergoing processes of sustainability transformation and must align with their stakeholders accordingly as part of the European Union's Green Deal. This offers another opportunity for collaboration between Türkiye and Egypt, in jointly seeking to benefit from European Union grants, establishing business-to-business forums, and training the agricultural sector on climate change, especially on agroecology and sustainable production methods.

B) Social and cultural activities - Activities to facilitate people-to-people interactions could also be promoted by both countries, including cultural and religious events, academic exchanges, and the establishment of joint forums. Independent academic collaboration could be utilized to engage various sectors of society in a way that may foster a broader sense of ownership of the rapprochement.

C) Effective public communication - The rapprochement should be effectively marketed to the citizens of both countries to mobilize their support, avoid a top-down approach, and ensure the sustainability of cooperation. Public opinion could be influenced to the better via media campaigns, statements by political leaders, and influential figures – e.g. from civil society, academia, art and business – highlighting the benefits of improved bilateral relations. Such outreach efforts can emphasize the value of enhanced economic cooperation, increased trade and investment opportunities, cultural exchanges, tourism, and increased regional stability. Meanwhile, social media platforms could be utilized to further advance the rapprochement process and encourage broader dialogue between respective citizens.

25 Pinar Akpınar, Nienke van Heukelingen, Oğuz N. Babüroğlu and Fatin R. Durukan, "A New Formula for Collaboration: Turkey, the EU & North Africa," *Clingendael Institute*, 2022.



E. Conclusion

Egypt and Türkiye are opening a new chapter in their long and complex relationship, which could help resolve regional geopolitical issues, and bring myriad bilateral benefits because of enhanced diplomatic, security and economic cooperation. Until recently, rapprochement was slowed down due to gaps between the Egyptian and Turkish political ideologies, which had domestic and regional implications. However, the diplomatic breakthrough of 2023 enables the two countries, to build on their successful economic cooperation, revive military collaboration, and focus on future projects that support bilateral and regional well-being. This can help ensure a successful and sustainable rapprochement process, which will enable Türkiye-Egypt to flourish.



For further information, questions and feedback:
www.diplomeds.org, info@diplomeds.org

Address

Korte Lijnbaanssteeg 1-4192, 1012SL, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

All rights reserved. Copyright © 2023 by Diplomeds - The Council for Mediterranean Diplomacy