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Egypt and Iran: Will the Two Walk Together?

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Until Mubarak's ouster, Egypt, which viewed the Islamic Revolution as a threat to its regime, was a central link in the axis of anti-Iran Arab nations. The more than 30 years following the Khomeini revolution were marked by hostility between Egypt and Iran and the lack of diplomatic relations between them. Sadat's Egypt was willing to grant asylum to the deposed shah, and the Islamic Republic of Iran honored Sadat's assassin by naming a Tehran street after him. After Mubarak's fall, various political elements in "the new Egypt" explained that the hostility with Iran was unnatural, and testified rather to the propensity of the Mubarak regime to subordinate Egyptian interests to United States and Israeli interests. Consequently, they argued, it is now incumbent on Egypt to renew relations with Iran and maintain close ties with it. The fact that Egypt allowed Iranian military vessels to pass through the Suez Canal en route to the Mediterranean seemed to be a practical expression of this change in the Egyptian approach to Iran. Iran, of course, welcomed these developments, and since then there have been attempts, mainly at the behest of Iran, to renew bilateral relations. These efforts, however, have come to naught – and apparently, this result is intentional.

When the Arab Spring began, Iran saw an opportunity to change the balance of power in the Middle East and improve its own standing. It eyed the fall of Mubarak, one of its greatest enemies, as a major opportunity to do so. Iran was one of the first countries to congratulate Mohamed Morsi on his victory in the Egyptian presidential elections. "This is the final stage of the Islamic awakening," commented Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi in response to the announcement by the central voting committee in Cairo, adding: "The revolutionary movement of the Egyptian people has led to a new era and change in the entire Middle East." Fars, the official Iranian news agency, even claimed that Morsi said in an interview that he is interested in good relations with Iran in order "to create a balance of power in the region." The comment was subsequently denied by a Morsi spokesperson.

The question, then, is: Will the tendency to pursue policies contrary to that of Mubarak's regime, in addition to the potential ideological proximity between the Muslim

Brotherhood and the Islamic regime in Tehran, generate a change in Egypt's position in the titanic struggle between the axis of Iran and its proxies and the Sunni Arab nations, especially the Gulf states, that see Iran as a threat? This struggle demands that nations that in the past tried to maintain neutral policies take sides; Qatar, for example, which tried to maneuver between the camps, recently came out clearly against Iran.

Ideologically, too, the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt does not necessarily ensure a honeymoon in relations with Iran, if only because there is no unanimity of opinion in the organization about the proper ideological stance to take towards Iran. Some senior leaders view Iran in a positive light as a leader of the resistance. Others contend that as a Sunni organization, the Brotherhood is obligated to maintain the Sunni tradition of looking negatively on the Shiite current. Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, viewed by many as the supreme religious and ideological authority of the Muslim Brotherhood, represents this stance. On many occasions, he has voiced concern over the danger of "exporting the Islamic revolution" and the "Shiitization" of the Sunni population in Arab countries. Thus it is likely that Egyptian-Iranian relations in the Morsi era will be dictated by some key considerations: the new regime's view of Egypt's national interests, including its regional standing; the balance of power between the elected presidency and the parliament, on the one hand, and the military, on the other; and the need to preserve relations with major regional and global actors.

A central component in Egypt's identity is its view of itself as the pivotal Arab nation and the leader of the Arab world. In his article in *The Guardian* (June 15, 2012), Morsi roundly criticized Egypt's disappearance from the global stage, claiming this created a dangerous vacuum and undermined regional stability: "Egypt's destiny is to lead. If I am elected...I will make sure that Egypt fulfils its destiny." This sentiment pits Egyptian interests against Iran, which would like to expand its influence in the Arab parts of the Middle East. For the same reason, Egypt is also not enthusiastic about Turkey's rising influence, even though Turkey's Islamic model perhaps approximates Egyptian preferences more closely.

It is unclear how the struggle between Morsi and the Supreme Military Council will develop and whether the President's authority will enable him to change Egypt's security and foreign policy in any essential way. The Council has not changed its security and foreign affairs approach, so it seems that Iran and its proxies are still viewed as opponents to Egypt's national interests. Therefore, in practice Egypt continues its former policy vis-à-vis Iran, including efforts to stop arms smuggling to the Gaza Strip, most of which come from Iran, even if Israel is not satisfied with the level of effectiveness. A Muslim Brotherhood government will presumably reverse Egypt's current attitude towards Hamas, which is linked ideologically to the movement, but this does not necessarily mean a change in attitude towards Iran.

Morsi understands the Saudi concern about Egypt and Iran drawing closer to one another and will not want to harm the important relations with the richest Arab country, particularly while the Egyptian economy is mired in crisis. Everyday needs in Egypt will likely outweigh ideology, and indeed, Morsi's first state visit is expected to be to Saudi Arabia, a clear indication of the camp with which Egypt is aligning itself. Despite the (hesitant) congratulations from King Abdullah to the president-elect, Saudi Arabia is not especially happy with the Muslim Brotherhood's victory. Precisely because of the ideological proximity between the two Islamic movements – the Wahhabi school of thought and the Muslim Brotherhood – there is a sense of competition and tension expressed in mutual attacks. The leaders of the Saudi regime have reservations about the Brotherhood (e.g., they have not allowed the Muslim Brotherhood to establish a branch in the kingdom) and have made a point of making public declarations against them, especially after the 9/11 attacks in the United States (because of American criticism that the kingdom nurtures extremists).

It is also doubtful whether Egypt is prepared to pay the price of thawing relations with Iran, not only vis-à-vis the Gulf states but also the United States and the West in general, all of which would view such a move negatively. Iran and Egypt might renew diplomatic relations, if only to distinguish the current Egyptian regime from that of Mubarak, and as part of a new Egyptian, post-revolutionary foreign policy to maintain correct relations with all its neighbors. Nonetheless, it is unlikely that Egypt will pursue warm relations with Iran. Such a move is liable to isolate Egypt in the Arab world and globally, damage its primary status in the region and its interests in the Gulf, and deny it critical financial assistance. It is more reasonable to assume that Egypt will understand, as Turkey did after the Arab Spring began, that it must take a side, and that the side that is more natural to it is the side of those who oppose and compete with Iran.

Israel has a twofold interest: Operationally, it would like Egypt to act in the Sinai Peninsula to foil the smuggling of arms to the Gaza Strip, and strategically it would like Egypt to continue to serve as major partner in the Arab axis opposed to Iran. Israel does not have the capability of affecting Egyptian decisions, but the relationship to be formed between Israel and the new Egypt might become a factor in Egypt's decision regarding Iran.

