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Egypt Prepares for a Potential Biden Victory

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The upcoming United States presidential elections have aroused anxiety in Egypt. The main concern, as shown by statements in the establishment media, is the policy that former Vice President Joe Biden will pursue if he is elected. Biden has already hinted that he intends to put greater emphasis on democracy and human rights in Egypt. He is described in Cairo as someone who may well appoint people sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood to key positions in his administration, and as likely to return to the nuclear agreement with Iran. Despite the preference for Donald Trump, Cairo is refraining from taking an official position that could be interpreted as support for either of the candidates. Inter alia, it realizes that both Egypt and the US will have an interest in limiting the tension between them and maintaining proper bilateral relations in the event Biden is elected. Israel has an interest in the continuation of strategic relations between Cairo and Washington under any future administration.

On November 3, 2020, United States voters will choose between incumbent President Donald Trump and Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden. In addition to the impact on America's future, the election results will also affect the Middle East in general, and Egypt in particular. If a new president takes office, the warmer relations between Cairo and Washington enjoyed under Trump may be in question. During Trump's term, the leaders of the two countries enjoyed good relations, and military and economic cooperation between them was upgraded.

Egypt is not intervening in the elections, but the mood in the media is clearly slanted in favor of the incumbent. While Trump is described as free of illusions about the Muslim Brotherhood, Biden is portrayed as someone who will continue the policy of President Barack Obama, and liable once again to seek reconciliation with the radical Islamist and Iranian axes, at the expense of the pragmatic regional axis. A website close to the Egyptian regime recently warned that Biden "will give the Islamists in the Middle East a 'second [Arab] Spring.'"

The good relations between Egypt and the United States are expected to continue if Trump is reelected. If Biden is elected, however, relations are liable to return to the

chilled atmosphere that prevailed during Obama's term. Obama never invited Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi to visit the White House, and his administration initially regarded the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood in July 2013 as a military coup against a legitimately elected government. The administration froze \$260 million in military aid for nearly two years, and suspended joint military exercises with Egypt in an attempt to pressure Cairo to restore the democratic processes that dissolved under el-Sisi's regime. If Biden is elected, senior figures under Obama will presumably assume key positions in the new administration, including some who took a strong stance against Egypt.

In case Biden emerges victorious, a number of issues will likely affect relations between Egypt and his administration. The greatest potential friction concerns human rights. Although Biden has rarely commented on the Middle East, or Egypt in particular, in an article published in *Foreign Policy* in January 2020 that presented his political doctrine, Biden promised to adopt a policy based on protection of human rights and promotion of democracy. In contrast to Trump, who exerted little pressure on Egypt and other allies in human rights matters, Biden declared that he would not cooperate with regimes that do not respect Western norms. While Trump enjoyed warm relations with authoritarian rulers, among them Vladimir Putin and Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and was recorded referring to el-Sisi with the dubious title of "my favorite dictator," last July Biden condemned the arrest of human rights activists in Egypt, and warned that after the elections, there would be "no more blank checks for Trump's 'favorite dictator.'"

If Biden acts on these statements, Egypt and the United States are liable to find themselves on a collision course. Biden's statements reflect a frequently held view within the Democratic Party. Recently articles written at the Brookings Institute argued that relations with Egypt do not serve US interests, and that the conduct of the el-Sisi regime was increasing instability in Egypt and in the region. Brookings recommended conditioning the \$1.3 billion annual military aid that the United States has granted Egypt since it signed the peace treaty with Israel on reforms, or converting it to civilian purposes. Last August, 40 members of Congress, most of them Democrats, called on Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to link defense and bilateral relations to an improvement in the human rights situation in Egypt. In October, another 56 Democratic lawmakers sent President el-Sisi a letter demanding the release of political prisoners.

Another matter liable to cool relations between the United States and Egypt is a possible change in American policy toward Iran. As Vice President, Biden consistently supported the nuclear agreement with Iran, and he has committed to renew it if Iran resumes fulfillment of its conditions. Furthermore, it cannot be ruled out that a Biden administration will adopt a softer policy towards Iran's overall conduct in the Middle

East. Egypt is less worried about the Iranian nuclear program than are allies in the Gulf, but it also regards Iran as a threat to regional stability and order, and fears a scenario of Iran allying with members of the Islamist axis – Turkey, Qatar, and the Muslim Brotherhood.

How Egypt Will Act toward a Biden Administration

Biden's lead in the public opinion polls has increased the pressure in Cairo and accelerated preparations for his possible election. Based on past experience and the media discourse on the matter, Egypt will likely approach a Biden administration along several avenues.

First, it will exert regional pressure on the United States not to strengthen political Islam and Iran. Egypt and its allies in the pragmatic Arab axis, first and foremost Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, will attempt to leverage their combined regional weight in order to convince Washington not to return to what they regard as the Obama administration's past mistakes.

Second, Egypt will enhance its images as an asset to the United States. Regime spokesmen have long trumpeted the message that Washington needs Cairo no less than Cairo needs Washington, because Egypt contributes to American interests in the Middle East in a range of matters, including the preservation of peace and regional stability, mediation between enemies (e.g., in Libya and the Israeli-Palestinian theater), and the war on terror. For example, in response to criticism of Egypt last month in the US House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee, Saeed Okasha, a researcher at the Egyptian Center for Strategic Studies (ECSS), said, "Egypt, under el-Sisi, is a cornerstone of the international fight against terrorism."

Third, Egypt may threaten closer relations with competing world powers, headed by China and Russia. Under the el-Sisi government, Egypt regards diversification as a fundamental principle in foreign policy. After the Obama administration turned its back on Egypt, Cairo decided against exclusive dependence on US support, and instead carefully solicited support from other quarters. This stance played a decisive role in the 2018 decision to purchase Su-35 warplanes from Russia despite strong opposition from Washington. In addition, relations between Egypt and China improved during el-Sisi's term, with Egypt recognizing China as a rising global power. The two countries are cooperating closely in economics and investments, and recently agreed that the Chinese vaccine against Covid-19 would be manufactured in Egypt and distributed from there throughout Africa.

If Biden is elected, Cairo will likely step up its policy of diversifying its support by appealing to Moscow and Beijing, in an attempt to benefit from the best of all possible worlds, and to make it clear to Washington that the United States cannot take Egypt for granted. At the same time, even under a US administration less friendly than that of Trump, Egypt will almost certainly be loath to jeopardize its strategic relations with the United States, which Egypt still needs as its main ally in a variety of matters, including the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam crisis, the civil war in Libya, direct military and financial aid, support for aid and loans from financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, development of the natural gas market, and trade.

Fourth are measures by Egypt to reduce US pressure on human rights issues, including conciliatory gestures to Washington, combined with public relations efforts aimed at improving Egypt's negative image. Egypt's Supreme Standing Committee on Human Rights debated in October a primary draft of the first National Strategy for Human Rights. Egypt has also been active in this context in recent years in the international theater, including in the UN. Egypt is attempting to promote an alternative concept to human rights that stresses religious tolerance and economic and social rights, such as livelihood, food, health, education, and personal security. Cairo insists that in these areas, significant steps in the right direction are underway in Egypt, but that the country is not ready, and not necessarily interested in, adopting Western-style liberal democracy.

Implications for Israel

Biden's possible election will provide both opportunities and risks to Israel's relations with-Egypt. Turbulence in its relations with the United States is likely to lead Egypt to ask for Israel's help in the belief that the way to Washington runs through Jerusalem. This indeed occurred during the Obama administration, when Israel and the Israeli lobby in Washington worked on Cairo's behalf. This scenario assumes that Israel will have enough influence on an administration headed by Biden, despite the growing clout of the Democratic Party's progressive wing.

On the other hand, Israel's situation will worsen in the event of a serious rift between Egypt and the United States. Israel has an interest in the continuation of the longstanding strategic relations between Cairo and Washington. If needed, Israel may be able to assist Egypt persuade the United States that closer Egyptian relations with Russia and China are not necessarily at the expense of ties with the United States. Israel can also help convince Washington to ensure that its efforts to promote democracy and human rights in Egypt do not strengthen the Muslim Brotherhood.

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