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**Egypt and Turkey following the Failed Coup: The Interrupted Thaw**  
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The stream of reports on the attempted – and failed – military coup in Turkey sent Egypt from euphoria to great embarrassment within a matter of hours. On the evening of July 15, 2016, the Egyptian media outlets affiliated with the regime were quick to celebrate the removal of the Turkish president, who had refused to recognize the legitimacy of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and allowed the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood to turn Turkey into a base of operations. Not long, thereafter, however, the Egyptian jubilation over the fall of Recep Tayyip Erdogan turned to sorrow. Moreover, it froze, at least temporarily, the recent attempts at a thaw in relations between the two countries, at a time that it seemed that a breakthrough was perhaps approaching.

On the day of the coup itself, on the sidelines of the G20 summit in China, the first ministerial meeting in years took place between the Turkish Labor and Social Security minister and his Egyptian counterpart. The two ministers declared their countries' desire to promote diplomatic and economic cooperation and extricate their relations from the crisis prevailing since President Muhammad Morsi's ouster in July 2013. This meeting was the culmination of positive messages between the two sides over the course of weeks, and was interpreted as an additional expression of the reset of Turkey's foreign policy, which included an attempt to open a new page in relations with regional adversaries, following normalization of Turkey's relations with Israel and with Russia.

The events in Turkey have rocked the boat and propelled the bilateral relations backward. In an interview with *al-Jazeera*, Erdogan even hinted at the possibility of el-Sisi's involvement in the plot, and made an analogy between the attempt to overthrow him and the Egyptian President's ouster of his predecessor Morsi, who like Erdogan was democratically elected. As in a number of previous public events, in his first significant speech after the coup Erdogan used the hand motion of lifting four fingers, which is considered a sign of his continued support for the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, even if his words only related to the events in Turkey. Egypt's Ministry of Foreign Affairs dismissed the Turkish accusations, pointing at Erdogan's inability to distinguish between a popular revolution supported by 30 million civilians and a military coup.

### **The Turkish Coup from an Internal Egyptian Perspective**

The attempted coup was a significant issue not only for bilateral relations, but also served as a platform for incisive internal debate in Egypt surrounding the political changes the country has experienced in the past few years. The developments in Turkey have presented Egyptian public opinion with a challenging mirror image that has touched some of the most sensitive nerves in Egypt in the el-Sisi era. This in turn became fertile ground for analogies between the countries on a number of aspects, including the tension between the military establishment and political echelon; the legitimacy of overthrowing a democratically elected government; ways of coping with Islamist movements; and the interactions between rulers and opposition.

The central question that arose in Egypt once the failure of the coup became clear is the disparity between the Egyptian army's success in deposing Morsi and the failure of its Turkish counterpart against Erdogan. The prevailing answer points to the nature of the ties between the nation and the military in Egypt. Some claim that the Egyptian army, unlike the Turkish army, represents the will of the people, enjoys the people's vote of confidence, and acts "in unison" with the people. Therefore, three years ago it was faced with a completely different starting point than the point at which the Turkish army recently found itself. An *al-Ahram* editorial argued that the Egyptian army's overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood was not a "military coup" by a handful of conspirators, but was, rather, a revolution designed "to rescue the nation from the rule of a movement that wreaked havoc on society." According to the Egyptian establishment, the move led by the army against the Muslim Brotherhood regime was a popular revolution, and therefore democratic. Although it is preferable to change the government via the ballot box, under extreme circumstances and subject to broad public consensus, the army is entitled – and even expected – to stray from the democratic rules of the game, including if this involves action without electoral legitimacy. Muhammad Amin, chairman of the board of directors of the daily *al-Masry al-Youm*, compared the victory of Erdogan and Morsi in elections in Turkey and Egypt to a driver's license, saying, "It is not reasonable that a person would take a truck, drive like [the terrorist truck driver] in Nice, and continue to drive just because he has a license."

Egypt's establishment press ridiculed the democratic veneer donned by Erdogan and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood when they complained that their overthrow by military force distorts the will of voters. The claim that Islamist movements have a habit of exploiting the democratic process in order to get into power and then turn their backs on it, reverberated in several articles. It is partly against this backdrop that Egypt, which serves as a non-permanent member of the Security Council, insisted on blocking an American proposal that sought to condemn the Turkish coup and called on all sides in the

country to respect “the democratically elected government of Turkey.” Ezzat Ibrahim, managing editor at *al-Ahram*, maintained that overthrowing Islamist movements cannot be considered a blow to democracy, since the democratic process serves as a tool for them to pave the way for “a new kind of dictatorship.” The acts of suppression carried out by Erdogan against his opponents were seen both as evidence of his autocratic rule and as a warning for what could happen in Egypt if the Muslim Brotherhood succeeds in rising to power again.

However, not all in Egypt concurred with the establishment line. Supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood felt that Erdogan’s struggle in Turkey is directly connected to their struggle in Egypt, and many stood behind the Turkish President on the evening of the coup and made symbolic acts of solidarity, such as replacing their Facebook profile photo with his photo. This gesture, which was also an implicit protest against President el-Sisi, led to a media counterattack by the Egyptian regime against those described as “traitors” who identify with a foreign leader who is hostile to their country and undermines their own recognized government, and who are interested in furthering the project of the Islamic caliphate at the expense of the Egyptian nation state.

In addition, a number of journalists with a liberal orientation claimed that Egypt must put aside personal emotions regarding the Turkish President, respect the Turkish people’s opposition to the military coup, and adopt democratic principles as a guiding basis in developing their stance on Turkey. Some hinted that Egypt could be jealous of the strength demonstrated by Turkish democracy against the threat. Muhammad Kamal wrote in *al-Masry al-Youm* that “real parties are the basis of political life in all countries and the real support in times of crisis.” Former member of the Egyptian Parliament Mustafa al-Naggar, who participated in the January 25, 2011 revolution, emphasized that the masses of Turks taking to the streets should not be interpreted as personal support for Erdogan, but rather as an expression of collective desire for the continuation of democratic life, which has granted Turkey a variety of economic and social achievements.

### **Conclusion**

A resolution to the crisis in Egypt-Turkey relations, which recently seemed a viable possibility, is no longer visible on the horizon, at least for the near future. The failed coup attempt sharpened the divides hampering relations between the countries that likewise lie at the basis of the wider schism between the authoritarian Arab regimes and the Islamist project. The coarse atmosphere that has developed between the countries following the mutual slandering is an additional obstacle on the road toward restored relations, and strengthens each side’s stubborn adherence to its previous stance. From Erdogan’s perspective, the failed coup significantly strengthens his principled stance that what happened in Egypt cannot be considered legitimate, and that all those who do not call it a

military coup are hypocrites – criticism generally targeted at the West. More than a rationalist position, this stance also has emotional aspects, partly in light of the results of previous military coups in Turkey. Resentment is growing among representatives of the Justice and Development Party regarding Western leaders and media not expressing sufficient empathy for what Turkey endured during the failed coup attempt. This disappointment could lead to continued criticism of the el-Sisi regime.

Even though in the short term Erdogan will presumably prefer to stabilize his regime at home rather than address the relations with Egypt, in the medium and long term renewed attempts at rapprochement can be expected between the sides. Primary stumbling blocks to reconciliation from Egypt's perspective are Turkey's unwillingness to recognize the legitimacy of the el-Sisi regime and the lack of a Turkish response to Egypt's demand to restrict the political and media activities of the Muslim Brotherhood in Turkey. On Turkey's part, Erdogan has mentioned the release of Morsi and other senior members of the Muslim Brotherhood as conditions for improving relations, as well as reassessment of the political status of the movement in Egypt.

For several months, Saudi Arabia has attempted to mediate between Egypt and Turkey, find wording that would allow them to accept one another, and together promote shared strategic, economic, and security interests. The influence of Saudi Arabia behind the scenes was evident in Egypt's measured response to Turkey's signing of the normalization agreement with Israel. While Israel and Turkey have declared their intention to prevent the failed coup attempt from delaying implementation of their normalization agreement, Israel must also take into account the growing tension between Egypt and Turkey. This is significant, particularly in light of the importance that Israel places on nurturing the strategic partnership with Egypt vis-à-vis the Gaza Strip and Sinai, alongside the expected increase in Turkish activity in the Gaza Strip following the normalization agreement.

