



# TURKEYSCOPE

INSIGHTS ON TURKISH AFFAIRS

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## **Turkey and Egypt: Time for Normalization? Not Quite Yet**

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Since the rise of Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in 2002/2003, his espousing of a pan-Islamist ideology has significantly altered regional dynamics in the Middle East. By the beginning of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's term in office in 2013, bilateral relations between Cairo and Ankara had considerably deteriorated. Both Egypt and Turkey, as culturally and politically influential players, have shaped and re-shaped the entire Middle East by virtue of their oppositional foreign policies. In fact, throughout contemporary history, the bilateral relations between Egypt and Turkey have oscillated between quite friendly and extremely strained periods.

Despite the fact that Egyptian–Turkish bilateral relations are built on strong historical, religious and cultural values, competition between the two influential regional players has often been the case. For example, while Egypt was part of the Ottoman Empire, the Governor of Egypt, Muhammad Ali (Kavalalı Mehmet Ali Paşa) carved out the country's autonomy since 1805, and by 1831 he even managed to wage war against the Ottoman Sultan, Mahmud II. Thus, resistance, independence, and rivalry have often characterized Turkish-Egyptian relations.

### **Nasser versus Menderes, in the 1950s and 1960s**

Relations have been quite tense on many occasions in the history of both countries, including during the Nasser era in Egypt in the 1950s and 1960s. While Turkish Prime Minister Adnan Menderes toyed with promoting Islamic rhetoric despite the secularist foundations of the Turkish Republic;<sup>1</sup> by contrast, Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser and his colleagues were inspired by the secular republicanism of Turkey's earlier decades.<sup>2</sup>

Egypt's Free Officers were emulating Turkey's Mustafa Kemal Atatürk of 1923, at a time when Turkey's Menderes was undoing key attributes of Atatürk's republic.<sup>3</sup> Atatürk had laid Turkey's secular foundation and its non-expansionist posture in the Middle East, preferring to orient the country towards Europe, while maintaining a militarily strong Turkish Republic.<sup>4</sup> Menderes was determined to take down both pillars. In terms of regional foreign policy, Menderes clashed with Nasser early on due to Turkey's regionally hyperactive foreign policy in the Middle East, on behalf of his Western allies.<sup>5</sup>

Turkey's Menderes threatened Nasser's sphere of influence, and eventually Nasser became a threat to Menderes as he rose in regional popularity between 1954 and 1960.<sup>6</sup> In fact, Egypt and Turkey were on a collision course by 1955, when Turkey spearheaded the Baghdad Pact along with Iraq, Pakistan, and the old imperial power of Britain.<sup>7</sup>

The clash between Nasser's visions and Menderes' actions played out in ways that foiled the Baghdad Pact, as well as any such pacts with Western countries. But Nasser's refusal to join the pact, framed him as a potential communist threat in the eyes of Menderes and Britain. Eventually, the Baghdad Pact failed to recruit the support of a sufficient number of Arab countries.<sup>8</sup> In response, a year later in 1956, Menderes supported the tripartite aggression of Britain, France, and Israel following Nasser's move to nationalize Egypt's Suez Canal. That position during the Suez Crisis sealed the enmity between Nasser and Menderes. The 1950s, accordingly, was a time of antagonistic rivalry between Nasser of Egypt and Menderes of Turkey and their opposed foreign policies in the Middle East.

By 1957, there was a direct standoff in Syria, between Menderes and Nasser over Menderes' attempt to revive Ottoman legacies in the Middle East, which stood in contrast to Nasser's embrace of ideology of pan-Arab nationalism. Ultimately, by 1960, young Turkish military colonels moved to renew Atatürkist ideals and ousted Menderes, who was tried for treason and hanged in 1961. As Morgens Pelt noted, "Among the chief accusations raised against Menderes was that he had infringed on Turkey's constitution by undermining the principles of the founder of modern Turkey, Kemal Atatürk, and had exploited religion for political purposes."<sup>9</sup> During the 1960s, Turkey, similar to Egypt, was exploring some degree of state planning, military role in the economy, and leftist, socially-progressive policies. The two countries enjoyed warmer relations during that decade, due to their similar policy directions.

### **Sadat, Mubarak and a Statist, Militarized Turkey (1971-2002)**

Relations between Turkey and Egypt remained good from the mid-1970s until the early 2000s. Both Turkey and Egypt converged on similar policies: a strong military with a

defensive posture and non-intervention in the region. Under different Turkish governments between 1971 and until the rise of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002, relations between Turkey and Egypt under Sadat and Mubarak were mutually respectful. In fact, there was a relatively high-level of military and security cooperation throughout 1980s and 1990s.

Ironically, after a decade of leftist policies in the 1960s, both Turkey and Egypt converged, simultaneously on their respective Egyptian-Islamic and “Turkish-Islamic Synthesis.” Erkan Akın and Ömer Karasapan note, “The aim was not to establish an Islamic state based on religious law, but to shape individuals who are immune to appeals from the left and also do not threaten the secular basis of the republic.”<sup>10</sup> This policy of synthesizing Islam with historic/civilizational roots in both countries, however, coincided with the gradual bottom-up Islamization of society against what remained of a once staunchly secularist state. This bottom-up Islamization ushered in the rise of the AKP in Turkey and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Erdoğan’s rise to power in Turkey was to become an eventual threat to what remained of Egypt’s secular republicanism, just as it has been to Turkey’s own.

### **Turkey’s Expansionist, Pan-Islamism versus Egypt’s Defensive, Statism (2005-)**

For nearly two decades, Turkey and Egypt formed divergent alliances in the Arab Gulf region, in the Mediterranean, into the Horn of Africa, and in Europe, along with the changing US administrations from George W. Bush, to Barak Obama and Donald Trump. Now both governments are strategizing on how to form their relations with the Joe Biden administration. Turkey and Egypt’s divergent visions divided the region into their two respective camps.

At the critical juncture of the Arab uprisings of 2011 that led to ousting the long-tenured Zine El Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, Turkey became increasingly active in propping Islamist governments in its image all over the region. Turkey’s regional allies became the Islamists of Hamas in Gaza, Al Shabab militants in Somalia, Ennahda in Tunisia, and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, along with similar factions in Libya, Syria, and anywhere else Erdoğan can establish ties. Relations between Turkey and Egypt have deteriorated considerably since 2013, during the period following the overthrow of the Turkey-backed Islamist Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi, following mass anti-government protests that took place between 30 June and 3 July that year. Threat perceptions and Egypt’s national security were at the heart of ousting the Muslim Brotherhood from power. Just like the standoff between Menderes and Nasser, Syria, again, was a contested issue for Erdoğan and the Egyptian military.

On June 15, 2013, Mohamad Morsi, still president at the time, attended a rally packed with hardline fellow Islamists calling for holy war in Syria.<sup>11</sup> A Reuters report stated in its headline: “Morsi role at Syria rally seen as tipping point for Egypt army.”<sup>12</sup> That rally was the ultimate pre-cursor to the mass protests of June 30 and the subsequent military intervention on July 3.<sup>13</sup> Morsi sat while Islamists rallied for “Opening the door for Jihad in Syria,” uttering this *jihad* word verbatim.<sup>14</sup> Morsi vowed to field and “commit the Egyptian youth, the Egyptian people and the Egyptian army” to the cause.<sup>15</sup> Sending civilians to Syria to train in carrying arms and the art of war, thereafter returning to Egypt alarmed many Egyptian journalists and public intellectuals, who took to Twitter or commented to international media.<sup>16</sup> Some of those experts warned: “It is clear that Morsi aims to appease the jihadists in Egypt, hoping they would support him against the expected mass protests called for by the opposition on June 30 at the anniversary of his election.”<sup>17</sup>

The Muslim Brotherhood’s policy direction toward Syria was in line with Erdoğan’s pan-Islamist vision.<sup>18</sup> This policy of recruiting mercenary jihadists from Egypt, however, clashed with Egypt’s national interests. Turkey’s and Qatar’s role in the logistics and finances of recruiting those mercenary jihadis has been well documented.<sup>19</sup> The Egyptian army ultimately foiled these attempts at militia formation and Egypt’s youth were spared this mercenary role. Instead, such mercenary jihadis were disproportionately recruited from the increasingly Islamized Tunisia, which fielded more than 7000 mercenaries out of 25,000 ISIS terrorist militants.<sup>20</sup> On November 23, 2013, the Egyptian government expelled the Turkish ambassador in Cairo after a months-long diplomatic crisis.

What was at stake? Egypt’s secular, statist, and militaristically-defensive comeback since 2013 under Egyptian President Sisi is a diametrically opposed vision to that of Turkey’s pan-Islamist, transnationally-expansionist, and militant project under President Erdoğan. Like the Nasser versus Menderes antagonism—albeit minus Nasser’s pan-Arab nationalist ideology—Sisi stands in direct opposition to Erdoğan’s regionally penetrative foreign policies.

### **Current Geopolitical Repercussions**

Over the past decade and a half, Turkey attempted to revive a classical, civilizational model<sup>21</sup> of the Ottoman Empire’s legacy, reinforced by political Islam.<sup>22</sup> By allying with Qatar and the Muslim Brotherhood, Ankara has openly promoted its Pan-Islamic vision, constructing mosques<sup>23</sup> around the world and supporting mercenary jihadi fighters<sup>24</sup>—in Syria, Libya, the Horn of Africa, as well as in the Sahel region of West Africa.<sup>25</sup>

In response, a regional fault line of power competition in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East, and North Africa has emerged. Two alliance networks accentuated this rivalry: first, the Turkey-Qatar pan-Islamist alliance; and second, the Egypt, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain, statist militarized-secularizing pact (also known as the Arab Quartet).<sup>26</sup> The Arab Quartet increasingly converged on shared interests with Israel, as the Abraham Accords came to prove. The Arab Quartet and Israel also share mutual interests with Greece, Cyprus, and France, as opposed to those of Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean region.<sup>27</sup> In fact, Turkey's pan-Islamism, its affiliation and support with the Muslim Brotherhood's regionally transnational project, and the use of Qatar's Al-Jazeera to promote this particular viewpoint were the crux of the conflict of the Arab Quartet with Qatar and their boycott of Qatar that started in June 2017 and lasted until January of this year. Many Muslim Brotherhood members left Egypt and made their way to Qatar, where they were regular guests on Al-Jazeera subsidiary channel called "Al-Jazeera Mubasher Misr" (Live From Egypt). This channel was still on air before being stopped by the Qatari government, for its utter unprofessionalism, compared to the rest of Al-Jazeera subsidiaries, especially the more reputable Al-Jazeera English.<sup>28</sup>

Another group of Islamist exiles took root in Turkey, and started several new satellite channels there, such as Al Sharq and Mekameleen. According to Basil El-Dabh, "They parlayed their exile into the revival of Egyptian Islamist media, which has allowed voices, even those projecting hatred (...) to be given a platform overseas."<sup>29</sup>

As Egypt drew the line concerning any involvement of its youth in Syria, Egypt also drew red lines in June 2020 at Sirte and Jufrah in Libya to prevent Turkish ambitions from taking over the neighboring country. Egyptian President Sisi said, while inspecting the Egyptian army units in the Western Military Region, "We stand today in front of a defining phase." He said Egypt has the right to defend itself after receiving "direct threats" from "terrorist militias and mercenaries" supported by foreign countries, in a clear reference to some Turkey-backed armed groups.<sup>30</sup> The tribes of Libya called on Sisi to intervene in the event of a Turkish attack on Sirte. Sisi stated that "the readiness of the Egyptian forces to fight has become a necessity," stressing that "Egypt is keen to reach a comprehensive settlement in Libya." Sisi's clear statement, "If some people think that they can cross the Sirte-Jufra frontline, this is a red line for us,"<sup>31</sup> was enough deterrence for Turkey. Indeed, that line was never crossed.

Furthermore, in their attempt to counter Turkey's encroachments, Egypt and Greece also signed an agreement<sup>32</sup> that defines their maritime borders and exclusive economic zones—cancelling Turkey's attempt to set a similar deal with Libya earlier in

2020.<sup>33</sup> Israeli Mossad Chief Yossi Cohen agreed with his counterparts from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates that, “Iranian power is fragile, but the real threat is from Turkey.”<sup>34</sup> These diverging alliances are the product of Turkey’s and Egypt’s exact opposite ideological rivalry and their long-term strategic visions for the region.

Within Mediterranean politics, joint sea-air military exercises such as the MEDUSA2020 took place in December 2020 in Alexandria, Egypt following a tripartite alliance among Egypt, Greece, and Cyprus that has existed since 2014.<sup>35</sup> It was significant that Emirates and France participated in the military exercise. This highlights the convergence of interests among the five countries united against Turkey’s expansionist schemes in the Eastern Mediterranean region as well as the Middle East at large. Turkey’s “Blue Homeland” doctrine, for instance, threatens Greece and Cyprus directly, due to its emphasis on having a military presence in the East Med region in particular, to protect its planned natural gas exploration projects in disputed maritime locations.<sup>36</sup>

Even more significantly, with time, President Erdoğan’s pan-Islamist ideology<sup>37</sup> and his support for the Muslim Brotherhood globally have increasingly become an imminent threat to France—an important European Mediterranean NATO member. In response, President Emmanuel Macron became adamant about guarding the French Republic against external pan-Islamist schemes. He bluntly named the transnational networks ideologically emanating from Turkey, and financially supported from within Qatar. Thus, it was significant that France and UAE participated in the MEDUSA 2020 as they join Egypt, Greece, and Cyprus in their alignment against Turkey.

### **Conclusion and Future Scenarios:**

Egypt has succeeded in forming a strong buffer against Erdoğan’s ambitions in Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean, whether by drawing red lines or by forming alliances to counter his moves. This is so much so that by October 2020, the Egyptian media started speaking of Turkish attempts to cater to Egypt.<sup>38</sup> Turkish presidential spokesman Ibrahim Kalin said, “Egypt is one of the important countries in the region and the Arab world, and if a platform is formed to move together on the issues of Libya, Palestine, the Eastern Mediterranean and other issues, Turkey cannot but look positively at that and make a positive contribution.”<sup>39</sup> Kalin expressed Ankara’s desire to restore relations with Egypt. “We call on Cairo for dialogue instead of ignoring us,” he said during an interview.<sup>40</sup> Repeated statements in this vein followed. “If Egypt shows the will to move with a positive agenda on regional issues, Turkey is ready to respond to that,” he added.<sup>41</sup>

Ankara's call for a rapprochement with Cairo was preceded by earlier attempts. In September 2020, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu had already sought a rapprochement with Egypt by saying during an interview, "Egypt has not at any time violated the continental shelf of Turkey in its agreement with Greece and Cyprus regarding Maritime jurisdiction areas." He continued, "Egypt respected our rights in this regard, and therefore I do not want to underestimate its right under the pretext that the political relations between us are not very good."<sup>42</sup>

Where do we go from here? Four scenarios are possible and were delineated in detail in *The Global Futures Report* out of the US Air Force Warfighting Integration Capabilities.<sup>43</sup> First, the Business as Usual Scenario: Is the status quo of rivalry and competition continuing? That is a possibility. Second, the Modified Status Quo Scenario: Would there ever be a new convergence on Islamic synthesis and integration of Muslim Brotherhood? That is unlikely for Egypt to accept, despite potential pressure from the Democrats in the Biden administration. Third, the Collapse Scenario: Would there be an actual regime change in Turkey itself and the collapse of pan-Islamism in its two forms, with a Sunni pole spearheaded by Turkey, or a Shi'a pole led by Iran? That is also a possible scenario as both regimes have been in power for a relatively long time. But how soon is it? Finally, would there be a completely Transformative Scenario where Egypt and Turkey retrieve some of their shared interests and values that characterized earlier decades? That is only possible if the expansionist pan-Islamist project stops with Erdoğan and does not continue with future Turkish governments. So, to answer the question regarding Turkey and Egypt's normalization, perhaps eventually the pendulum will bring these two countries towards a rapprochement. But we might not be there quite yet.

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## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> Anwar Sadat, *In search of identity: An autobiography* (1st ed.), (New York: Harper & Row, 1978) 12, 16, 25.

<sup>3</sup> Marwa Maziad, *Middle East Militaries: In and Out of Politics and Economies Due to External Threat Perceptions – A Dynamic Regional Order Approach to Civil–military Relations. Comparative Cases of Turkey, Egypt, and Israel*, (PhD Dissertation, University of Washington, Seattle, 2019) 34, 114-115.

<sup>4</sup> Morgens Pelt, *Military Intervention and a Crisis of Democracy in Turkey: The Menderes Era and its Demise*, (London; New York, NY: I.B. Tauris, 2014) 1.

<sup>5</sup> Reem Abou-El-Fadl, *Foreign Policy as Nation Making: Turkey and Egypt in the Cold War*, (Cambridge, United Kingdom; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 2019) 3-5; Sadat, *In search of identity*, 126-129, 136-139; Maziad, *Middle East Militaries*.

<sup>6</sup> Sadat, *In Search of Identity*, 126-129; Abou-El-Fadl, *Foreign Policy*, 3-4; Pelt, *Military Intervention and a Crisis*, 250.

<sup>7</sup> Maziad, *Middle East Militaries*, 115.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Pelt, *Military Intervention and a Crisis*, 2.

<sup>10</sup> Erkan Akin and Ömer Karasapan, “[The Turkish-Islamic Synthesis](#),” *Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP)* (Iss. 153, July/August 1988).

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<sup>16</sup> I. El-Hodeiby, “[Egypt: Nothing Was Inevitable](#),” *Ahram Online*, September 13, 2013.

<sup>17</sup> *Sky News Arabia*, [Arabic] “[Jadal Hawal Mubarakat Morsi “al-Jihad” fi Syria](#).” [Controversy around Morsi’s blessings for “jihad” in Syria] June 16, 2013.

<sup>18</sup> Behlül Özkan, “Turkey, Davutoğlu and the Idea of Pan-Islamism,” *Survival*, Vol. 56, No. 4, 2014, 119-140.

<sup>19</sup> Marwa Maziad, “The Turkish Burden: The Cost of The Turkey-Qatar Alliance and Hard Power Projection into Qatar’s Foreign” in D. Khatib and Marwa Maziad (eds.), *The Arab Gulf states and the west: Perceptions and realities - opportunities and perils* (UCLA Center for Middle East Development, CMED) (New York, NY: Routledge, 2019) 105-132; D. A. Weinberg, “Qatar’s Muslim Brothers: A Failing Regional Strategy” in J. Schanzer, D. Gartenstein-Ross, T. Joscelyn, R. C. Gerech, D. A. Weinberg, T. Badran, M. Dubowitz, E. Ottolenghi, and C. D. May, (eds.) *Allies, Adversaries & Enemies: America’s Increasingly Complex Alliances*, [Foundation for Defense of Democracies](#), May 1, 2014; D. A. Weinberg, “Qatar and Terror Finance,” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, December, 2014.

<sup>20</sup> Maziad, “The Turkish Burden,” 121.

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<sup>22</sup> *The Economist*, “[Turkey’s strongman, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, takes to the world stage](#),” September 10, 2020.

<sup>23</sup> Gonul Tol, “[Turkey’s Bid for Religious Leadership](#),” *Foreign Affairs*, January 10, 2019.

<sup>24</sup> Maziad, “The Turkish Burden,” 125.

<sup>25</sup> Marwa Maziad and Jake Sotiriadis, “[Turkey’s Dangerous New Exports: Pan-Islamist, Neo Ottoman Visions and Regional Instability](#),” *Middle East Institute*, April 21, 2020.

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- <sup>42</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>43</sup> Maziad, “The Future of Geopolitical Competition,” 32-35.