



## Changing Contours of Egypt's Foreign Policy in the Aftermath of Uprising

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### **Introduction:**

The foreign policy of a country can be broadly defined as an extension of the domestic policy and it is designed tactically to advance multiple interests of a nation. The persuasion of foreign policy is also aimed at protecting and maximizing the global and regional interests of the country. It is not merely an endeavour to reinforce the national interest', but also to guard against those factors which could challenge the said interests of a country ranging from political to strategic to economic to security. The formulation of foreign policy requires mapping out means to protect one's interests, both in the short and long term.

The eruption of mass protests on January 25, 2011 in Egypt, and the subsequent departure of President Mubarak in February 2011 ushered in an upheaval, both internally and externally, paving the way for a new politics embarked upon redefining the trajectory of country's internal and external policies. This paper aims to measure and assess the magnitude of changes, and dynamics involved in the foreign policy of Egypt over the span of last six years under three different regimes which have ruled Egypt.

Historically, the foreign policy of Egypt has been determined by the ruling elites because both the regime and the state have behaved interchangeably. There has been a deep sense of

ambiguity when it comes to distinguish the nation's and the regime's interests, and very often the interest of the regime overrides the national interest. To quote a distinguished scholar of the Arab world, Mohammed Ayooob, "it is often difficult to disentangle issues of state security from those of regime security in the third world".<sup>2</sup>

While dealing with the issue of foreign policy contours of Egypt over the past five years, one should bear in mind that a nation that has gone through a revolution is most likely to have a longing for radical change in its foreign policy foundation and orientation as well. But what one has observed in the case of Egypt, unlike post Islamic revolution of Iran in 1979, the revolutionary drive of the Egyptian masses in its early days was very much inwardly, barring a few instances of global and regional rhetorics when occasional chanting, "Mubarak Go to Tel Aviv",<sup>3</sup> was heard. Egypt, under the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF), as a 15-month interim government, preferred accommodation over confrontation and convergence over divergence. But unlike the SCAF, foreign policy under Islamist President Morsi (June 2012 – June 2013) witnessed fusion of rhetoric and pragmatism. The rhetoric was more guided by the Muslim Brotherhood's (MBH) ideological commitment and its entity as a political opposition.

After the ouster of President Morsi in July 2013, Egypt under Abdel Fattah el-Sisi saw the return of an old narrative more robustly which may be termed as the reintroduction of Mubarakism in the realm of foreign policy. The foreign policy under El-Sisi is oriented more towards bolstering the legitimacy of the regime, alleviating the economic pressure at home and making external alignment to counter growing internal security threat.

### **Evolving Foreign Policy of Egypt: A Background:**

Egypt did not have a full-fledged foreign policy until the Free Office Revolt of 1952 which seated Colonel Nasser in power. The removal of the King Farrukh after the revolt provided an opportunity for the new regime to follow its own independent foreign policy. Under Colonel Nasser, the call for fighting imperialist forces, support for the cause of Palestine and other freedom movement across Asia and Africa, Arab unity under the rubric of pan-Arabism and disassociation with the global encampment topped the foreign policy agenda of Egypt.<sup>4</sup> Egypt was one of the founding members of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) to exercise neutrality between twin camps of communist and capitalist which were affecting the politics of newly independent nations.

Nasser's foreign policy was primarily aimed at bolstering his own image and perpetuating his autocratic regime in the name of combating Islamic radicalism and anti-revolutionary forces. The revolutionary ideologies of Nasser threatened the monarchical regimes of the Gulf nations which pitted its Islamist ideology to counter the Arabism and socialism of Nasser. Both camps were involved in a proxy war in Yemen in the 1960s supporting the two rival forces, and ironically, today, five decades later, both have found a common enemy in the Houthis of Yemen.

The charisma of Nasser eroded after the crushing defeat of Egypt in the Six-Day War of June 1967, and hence the advent of President Sadat witnessed an absolute departure from the past. President Sadat allied with the Islamist forces to undo Nasser's past. He pursued foreign policy defined in the nationalist perspective. He forged close ties with the US because of persisting strategic and economic coercions. What was the most startling part of his foreign policy was his surprise visit to Israel which later led to the signing of the treaty of peace (Camp David) in 1979. President Sadat preferred economic priority in pursuit of his foreign policy, and as a result he was able to ensure the annual military aid of US\$ 1.3 billion from the United States in exchange for his Egypt's peace agreement with Israel. No doubt President Sadat had to pay a heavy price for reaching out to Israel when in October 1981 he was assassinated on the eve of victory anniversary by a radical Islamist.

The successor of President Sadat, Hosni Mubarak ruled for three decades and could not reverse the foreign policy foundation of his predecessor. The most notable achievement in the early days of Mubarak was to bring back the country into the Arab fold, after its long boycott, when the Arab League office again returned to Cairo in 1990. The deep-rooted nature of U.S.-Egypt-Israel ties had left no enough room for Mubarak to manoeuvre. The dependence on the US economic and military aid, growing need of internal security and regional strategic calculus did not allow Mubarak to veer much away from what had been fixed by President Sadat. His foreign policy had almost become status quoist, and the erosion of traditional regional role of Egypt was explicit in its strategic not-so-loud opposition to the aggressive Israel's policy in the land of Palestine. The constant reliance on the US economic and military aid and loans<sup>5</sup>, need of debt relief from the IMF, the GCC and other Western countries dragged Egypt into the umbrella of Gulf-U.S-Israel created security architecture, and very soon Egypt became the part of the US-named axis of moderates: Jordan, Saud Arabia and Egypt.<sup>6</sup>

### **Egyptian Foreign Policy under SCAF and Morsi: An Era of Continuity and Change:**

The most pertinent question that struck many after the ouster of Mubarak was the future of Camp David (CD) and Egypt's ties with the US. When the 19-member SCAF took over the reign of power under the erstwhile Army Chief, Tantavi, the biggest challenge was to maintain its relationship with the neighboring countries, and particularly with Israel. The SCAF took no time in declaring its commitment to CD and Egypt-Israel peace treaty. It also assured that no change would take place vis-à-vis the global norms and treaties. In concurrence with the pre-revolutionary foreign policy, the SCAF called for closer cooperation with Israel in order to keep its economic and political privileges intact and protect the national security. Similarly, the state of Israel responded cordially to the gesture of SCAF, and for the first time, since the treaty signed in 1979, Israel allowed the deployment of Egyptian troops in Zone C of the Sinai Peninsula which so far had remained a demilitarized zone under the Camp David agreement.

Some changes were observed in Egypt's relation with Iran, and merely ten days after the exit of Mubarak, two Iranian ships were allowed, for the first time since 1979 to enter into the Mediterranean Sea through the Suez Canal. Egypt's Foreign Minister, Nabil Al-Arabi (March – June 2011) stated in an interview with the *Washington Post* that rapprochement with Iran was part of his policy, and asserted that Iran is not an enemy.<sup>7</sup> In June 2011, 50-member Egyptian delegation consisting of academics, religious figures, social activists and media persons visited Tehran to pave the way for restoration of full diplomatic ties between the two countries. The Egyptian foreign minister and his Iranian counterpart announced their readiness to expand diplomatic relations between the two countries<sup>8</sup>, and both met on May 25, 2011 in Bali on the sidelines of the OIC summit.

It was not only towards Iran that Egypt was making new gesture. It was also redefining its policy towards the cause of Palestine. Mr. Nabil Al-Arabi welcomed a Hamas delegation in March 2011 in his foreign office, and discussed the issue of opening the Rafah tunnel between Sinai and the Gaza Strip. Both sides also discussed the prospect of reconciliation between Fatah of West Bank and Hamas in Gaza. In May 2011, a deal was brokered between the two, under the auspices of Egypt, and it also opened the border of Rafah after a gap of four years what Nabil Arabi had then called a disgusting matter.<sup>9</sup>

But all these preliminary gestures came to a halt when Mr. Nabil became the Secretary General of the Arab League. His departure was followed by a raid by Israeli forces in Sinai Peninsula leading to expulsion of envoys from both the countries in August 2011.

The SCAF took no time to correct the policy pursued by Nabil. The military still had traditional views of Iran, and after the departure of Nabil, the SCAF rebuffed any future ties with Iran, and one analyst said, "I do not see Egypt's relation with Iran moving forward as long as the military is in charge of it".<sup>10</sup> Military in Egypt never lost sight of Iran's proximity to Hamas, Hezbollah and other activism determined by ideological underpinning in its foreign policy.<sup>11</sup> What seemed under the SCAF was the continuity of foreign policy of Mubarak's era, and no marked changes were noticed, except during a short stint of Nabil Arabi. Nothing of the sort was seen what Egyptian Prime Minister Essam Sharaf had once claimed, "Our glorious revolution took place so that Egyptians could regain their dignity at home and abroad and what was tolerated in pre- revolution era will not be tolerated in post-revolution".<sup>12</sup>

The foreign policy under the SCAF narrowly focused on its relationship with Israel and the US, and was more engrossed in managing the smooth political transition.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the SCAF was well convinced that uprising was internally driven, and hence it had no difficulty in continuation of Mubarak's era foreign policy.

President Morsi had come to power in June 2012 on anti-Mubarak plank, and had condemned Mubarak for making Egypt subservient to the diktat of Israel. The Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), the political wing of the MBH, had always criticized Mubarak for exporting gas at below market rate to the occupiers of Palestine and Jerusalem.<sup>14</sup>

The FJP sought a pivotal role for Egypt in the regional affairs, and its manifesto outlined five major affiliated-circles of Egypt's foreign policy: Egypt's close affiliates; Egypt-US; Egypt-Europe; Egypt-Asia; and rest of the world.<sup>15</sup> Islamist's foreign policy was aimed to cater to the demands of the army, secularists and the Islamist forces. In addition, there were a few deterrents also in the ideological fulfilment of the foreign policy of President Morsi like economic dependency on external powers, domestic security concerns, compulsion of strategic integration with Israel, and finally the Salafist, the FJP's political ally, which later deterred Morsi from forging close ties with Iran.<sup>16</sup>

President Morsi pursued an active foreign policy, and he made ten foreign visits and attended six international summits in the span of one year. The first sea change was seen in Morsi's new posturing towards Iran.

President Morsi became the first Egyptian head of state to visit Iran in last three decades as he visited Iran in August 2012 to attend the NAM summit. The visit was reciprocated by Iran's erstwhile President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in February 2013 to attend the summit of OIC. In March 2013, the first flight between the two nations was resumed in 34 years. An agreement to promote tourism was also signed between them. Iran found in the FJP a potential and strategic ally against Saudi Arabia, Israel and the U.S. On the other hand, the new regime in Cairo viewed that Iran might be a bargaining chip against the GCC, the US and Israel in the region.

On the part of Iran, the spiritual leader of Iran Ali Khamenei had already termed the uprising in Egypt an Islamic awakening, and called for a foundation of an Islamic culture in the region.<sup>17</sup> Iran's erstwhile Foreign Minister called Egypt a heavy weight in the region, and asserted that Iran is ready for strategic ties with it.<sup>18</sup> While his deputy in his visit to Egypt had described the relation between two countries unique adding that the key to restoring full diplomatic ties lay in the hands of Egypt.<sup>19</sup>

But the Islamist regime failed to forge full diplomatic relations because the Salafist Al-Nour party which showed no eagerness or hurry for diplomatic opening with the then *Shiite* Iran. It was asserted on their part that closer ties with Iran would jeopardize economic aid from Saudi Arabia and its allies in the GCC.<sup>20</sup> The Salafist's resistance was more explicit when, under an agreement on tourism, Iranians were barred from visiting the 'Cairo mosque'.<sup>21</sup>

Morsi, as the first Islamic elected President of Egypt choose Mecca, a holy city for Muslims across the world, as his first destination in July 2012. He showed his first sign of involvement in the regional affairs and proposed a quartet on Syria consisting Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt. In Saudi Arabia, he spoke on Syria, but remained silent on the issue of Bahrain, seemingly was a move not to antagonize the GCC nations.

Morsi also tried to woo the GCC monarchs by assuring them that Egypt had no intention of exporting the revolution to the Gulf region like Iran had done in the past. In the 67<sup>th</sup> Annual

UN meet in September 2012, he reinforced his commitment to the existing political order in the region.<sup>22</sup> The GCC nations had seen in the FJP a new addition to the already existing anti-Saudi tripartite of Iran– Hamas– Hezbollah. It must be mentioned here that in his last days, Morsi was accused of spying for Hamas, Iran and Hezbollah, and was sentenced to death for treason.

But Morsi failed to allay the fears of the GCC monarchs, particularly Saudi Arabia and in a pre-emptive political assertion Saudi Arabia called back its Ambassador from Cairo in July 2012, and Prince Nayef, erstwhile interior minister, stated that all problems in the region were coming from direction of the MBH<sup>23</sup>, and both Saudi Arabia and the UAE were in consortium in containing the rise of the MBH.

While Saudi Arabia had all mistrust against the Islamist government of the FJP, Qatar had poured US\$ 8 billion in exchequer of Morsi's government, and had promised 18 billion additional investments over the period of five years. It also offered a favorable gas deal to overcome the power shortage in the country.

Unlike Saudi Arabia and other GCC nations, and like Iran, the FJP rule was embraced by Turkey's Islamic-oriented Justice and Development Party (AKP). The erstwhile Turkish Prime Minister and current President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan was the first to visit Egypt after the uprising. Turkey saw the new Islamist regime of Morsi as strategic and potential partner in growing its influence in the region. On the other hand, Morsi was looking for an Islamic alliance, independent of Saudi Arabia, in transforming to counter pro-Saudi Salafists. Mr. Morsi also viewed that the consortium of MBH and AKP could support Hamas in Palestine bolstering the image of new regime in Egypt.

How the FJP disavowed its ideological underpinning and pursued pragmatism was well reflected in its policy towards Israel. President Morsi took no time in abandonment of rhetoric, and soon it became obvious that the past anti-Israel slogan was merely a cry of an opposition party. The party, which had earlier called Israel an usurper, preferred the politics of accommodation and convergence. The FJP merely talked of revisiting the CD, and that seemed to please the Salafist hardliners. President Morsi had viewed that any dig in the CD might antagonize the Egyptian army and could lead to the situation of 1967. Moreover, the IMF, WB and the US might stop the flow of much-needed economic and military aid.

Morsi sent his Prime Minister Hesham Qandil to Israel in November 2012 to hold direct talks with the government to mediate a ceasefire amidst Operation Pillar of Defense in Gaza.<sup>24</sup> Finally, he was able to bring about the ceasefire deal in November 2012. Towards Israel, Morsi's policy seemed to be guided by pragmatism, and the Islamic ideology was set aside.

Towards Hamas too, the new regime could not keep its ideological commitment. The deterrent before the regime in reaching out directly to Hamas could be explained in the light of army's deep-rooted hostility towards Hamas. Not only that Morsi failed to do much to lift the siege of Gaza, but there was a tactical co-operation between Israel and Egypt in counter-terror operation, and Morsi too ordered frequent closure of Rafah border. Hamas's overture towards new Egypt was met with disappointment, and its new overture was because of its anxiety over the prospect of change in the power dynamics affecting the Iran-Hamas ties.

Egypt's relationship with the US was ambiguous under President Morsi. Throughout the campaign, the FJP was silent on the US, perhaps to give an image of a moderate Islamist party. The MBH and the US administration were in touch before the election, and the MBH had sent a delegation to the US after the ouster of Mubarak. The US had a few concerns under the rule of Morsi like its stance on minority, relationship with Hamas, security ties with Israel and ideological politics within and outside the country. Morsi's regime played an important role in the resolution of the US's NGO crisis. On the other hand, the US too showed all positive gestures, and perhaps had no luxury of boycotting Egypt of the MBH like Gaza of Hamas.<sup>25</sup> Not much eagerness was seen within the Islamist party to redefine its policy towards the US as it was more embroiled in the domestic and regional issues.

Morsi's short stint resonated with balancing act, maintenance of traditional alliance and enunciation of some new initiatives like his reach-out to China and willingness to join the BRICS, and all were meant to improve the economic lot of the nation.

### **Advent of El-Sisi and Return of the Old Narrative:**

No sooner had Morsi become the President of Egypt than an array of political and ideological differences among the secularists, the Islamists and the army started crippling the function of state. No attempts to resolve the crisis succeeded, and finally on July 3, 2013, Morsi was removed

from the power and sent to jail, and the first elected government in the history of Egypt did not last for more than a year. Mr. Adly Mansour, head of the Constitutional Court, was named an interim president on July 3, 2013, while El-Sisi was named as deputy prime minister while retaining his defence portfolio. Mr. Mansour remained president until El-Sisi was elected president on June 8, 2014.

The one-year tenure of Adly Mansour was more focused on restoring the law and order in the country than taking any ground-breaking initiative. Whatever was done in the realm of foreign policy was to mend the image of the country, and explain the aims of the June 30 revolution. The erstwhile Foreign Minister, Mr. Nabil Fahmy said, “The Ministry of Foreign Affairs is giving top priority to explaining the goals of the June 30 revolution”.<sup>26</sup>

During the era of President Mansour, the level of trust eroded between Egypt and the US and it was reflected when the U.S delivered only ten Apache helicopters to Egypt as a mark of protest against the ouster of Morsi. In order to clarify the stance of the interim government, Egypt’s Foreign Minister, Mr. Fahmy visited the US in April 2014 and addressed members of the strategic community. In one of his remarks Fahmy said, “Egyptian people revolted twice for a democratic system”.<sup>27</sup> The visit of Fahmy faced a lot of protests on the streets, and slogan like ‘Morsi was elected and El-Sisi is rejected’ was heard.<sup>28</sup> Adly Mansour’s tenure witnessed an intense global diplomacy with the aim of diversifying the folios of economic and strategic relationship. This era laid the foundation of a new beginning of relationship with its old ally, Russia, and sought to nurture and leverage it further. In sum, one-year stint, between the departure of Morsi and arrival of El-Sisi, gestured some new beginnings in foreign policy, and tried to pursue a multi-dimensional approach but not affecting the old gambit.

When El-Sisi came to power in June 2014, he enjoyed an unrestrained authority in the absence of legislative bodies. The decision making became very centralized, and in most cases, the decisions are not being made, but taken in all realms of policies.

One of the basic grievances against the regime of Morsi was a complete disrespect for the legacy of Egyptian foreign policy traditions. His sudden embrace of Iran, Turkey and explicit sectarian support to the rebel forces in Syria was not endorsed by the army, a traditional architect

of Egypt's foreign policy. His seemingly ideological consortium with Hamas in Palestine raised eyebrows of the secularists in the country. The primary task of the regime of President El-Sisi had now become to undo the decisions of his predecessor.

The advent of El-Sisi was welcomed by both Saudi Arabia and the regime of Assad in Syria. Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Jordan felt strategic relief because their monarchs were constantly alarmed by the bitter memory of the Islamic revolution in Iran, and its export to the GCC. One of the UAE's news agencies lauded the armed forces in Egypt for being strong shield and protector of the people, while the erstwhile Saudi king Abdullah eulogized military of Egypt for saving Egypt from dark tunnel.<sup>29</sup>

While Qatar lamented the ouster of the Islamist regime, and stated that the new regime should have been given more time to prove its credentials, Turkey too became the biggest critic of the army and the then Prime Minister Erdogan denounced the ouster of Morsi saying, "No matter where or against whom, coups are damaging and inhuman, and directed against the people, the national will and democracy".<sup>30</sup>

In pursuit of his foreign policy, El-Sisi accorded top priority to the army, commenting that "Army is the pillar and backbone of the state. It is a beautiful and respected institution and nothing called oversight over the military and criticism of the army hurts the interest of the country".<sup>31</sup> President El-Sisi opted for an active foreign policy in the region, and found good strategic allies in Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Saudi Arabia sought to counter the post-uprising trio of Turkey-Qatar-Hamas with the help of Egypt, and likewise looked towards Egypt for diplomatic and military assistance in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Lebanon. On his part, El-Sisi termed the security of the Gulf to be part of Egypt's security, and stated that his regime would defend the GCC and take care of the Arab security.<sup>32</sup> The foreign policy of Egypt under El-Sisi was primarily determined by three domestic and regional factors, namely Islamic ideology, geostrategic concerns and economic well-being.

The ideological factors determining the foreign policy of Egypt were driven by the regime's anti-Islamist war, both internally and externally. The army regime banned the MBH in September 2013, and later in December, the MBH was declared a terrorist organization. Most of its leaders were either sentenced to life imprisonment or awarded death penalty. The regime

launched a regional and global campaign against the Islamist with full support of the UAE and Saudi Arabia. In his war against the Islamist, El-Sisi seemingly also sought survival and legitimacy of his regime which had come to power after removing an elected government of Morsi what many called the second revolution. The securitization of the political opposition in the name of war against the MBH and Hamas was a ploy to delay the democracy at home, and to garner the support of the GCC nations which was itself threatened by the rise of Islamists.

His ideological war against radical forces dragged him across the border when Egypt's warplanes bombed the hub of the ISIS in Libya after 21 Coptic Egyptian workers were slain by them. Egypt's open support to Colonel Haftar to bolster his fight in Libya can also be seen as an extension of ideological pursuit in the foreign policy of Egypt.

The worsening relationship of Egypt with Turkey can also be explained in the light of Egypt's ideological foreign policy. Egypt under El-Sisi became a bulwark against Turkey's pro-Islamist foreign policy in the region, and embarked upon pursuing a regional policy devoid of Islamic contents. Anti-MBH policy and distance from Hamas on the part of El-Sisi could be owed to Egypt's economic reliance on the GCC from where Egypt receives around US\$ 7-9 billion as remittance annually.<sup>33</sup>

The geostrategic factors determining El-Sisi's foreign policy seem to be driven by the urge of Egypt for new alliances to combat the Islamist at home. The most important ally in the region Egypt found was the GCC nations, particularly Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait. The defeat of Mubarak, who was a bulwark against the Islamists, was a vital loss for the GCC nations, but once again Saudi Arabia and others had found the same ally in El-Sisi who could be on guard against the Islamists. Mubarakism once again came as a defining feature of Egypt's foreign policy in the region, and Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait poured billions into the exchequer of Egypt. El-Sisi took no time in joining the orbit of Saudi Arabia which had felt deceived and had lost trust in the US's policy in the region after Mubarak was abandoned by it.<sup>34</sup> Saudi Arabia looked towards Egypt to counter the growing influence of Iran, and El-Sisi was the best resistance against the Iran-Hezbollah-Hamas in the region.

Egypt stood guard against Turkey which sought greater influence in the region. Turkey was one of the vehement critics of the army coup and the erstwhile president of Turkey had urged

the UNSC to discuss the killing at *Rabaa Al-Adawiya* in Cairo in August 2013 following the ouster of President Morsi<sup>35</sup>. Turkey had two primary objectives in its condemnation of the coup: to posture its pro-Islamite stance, and to show its anti-army stance because Turkey itself had fought the battle against the army.<sup>36</sup> In November 2013, Egypt not only expelled Turkey's ambassador, but President El-Sisi also allied with anti-Turkey forces in its neighbor, and hosted Greek prime minister and Cyprus president. They discussed the exploration of gas which is disputed by Turkey, and they also called Turkey to respect the sovereignty of Cyprus over its exclusive economic zone (EEZ)<sup>37</sup> Growing ties between Israel and Turkey have further estranged the relationship between the two. The recent Israel-Turkey rapprochement will no longer allow Egypt to have a port in Gaza, or anchor its electricity generating vessels off the port. Last but not the least, Egypt was the only country in the UNSC to oppose the resolution calling for condemning the attempted July coup in Turkey and most interestingly, Egypt objected to the phrase 'democratically-elected government' of Turkey.<sup>38</sup>

As far as Syria is concerned, Egypt had never opted sectarian approach in its foreign policy. The era of Morsi was a deviation from the past when he showed solidarity with Sunni rebel forces, and allowed the Syrian refugees to enter Egypt.

Contrarily, El-Sisi showed no enthusiasm towards Syrian rebel forces because of their possible linkage with Syrian MBH. His approach to the crisis in Syria was based on assumption that departure of Assad would lead to the domination of the jihadists in Syria that would be catastrophic for the whole region. But El-Sisi could not exert an open-hearted approach to Assad because of his close ties with the GCC nations which are bent upon removing him.

The close ties between Israel and Egypt are the most explicit sign of geostrategic primacy in today's foreign policy of Egypt. Both sides have come closer in their fight against terror and sharing of intelligence on the border. The proximity between the two countries finally paved the way for the Egypt's Foreign Minister, Sameh Shoukry to visit Israel on July 10, 2016, and it was the first visit in a decade. The meeting between the two counterparts took place in Jerusalem, instead of, as hitherto, in Tel Aviv, and the photo shoot of the minister along with Herzl, the founder of Zionist movement, is a sign of strategic and political reconciliation between Israel and Egypt. Not only this, Egypt's foreign minister also watched the 2016 Euro final with the Israeli PM in Jerusalem, self-claimed capital town of Israel, which, as reported by a semi-official newspaper *Al-*

*Ahram*, recognizes the *Jewishness* of Jerusalem at the cost of Al-Quds. In a statement, Egyptian foreign minister said that the visit was made to bring Palestinian authority and Israel on the negotiating table.<sup>39</sup> Agian 'Al-Ahram', claimed that due to historical responsibility of Egypt, the country is required to play a role in resolving the Palestinian crisis.<sup>40</sup>

The visit of foreign minister to Israel came immediately after a comprehensive tour of Israel's Prime Minister, Netanyahu to Nile basin nations like Ethiopia and Sudan (Ethiopia is building a dam on the Nile River affecting the water supply for Egyptians) which some commentators have viewed as Egypt's effort to seek the assistance of Israel in resolution of bilateral water issue. The high-level delegation of the Coptic church of Egypt has paid four visits to Israel in recent past,<sup>41</sup> and reportedly it took place at the behest of the Egyptian security services. Israel not only backed the removal of Morsi, but also campaigned in the European capital to garner support for the new regime of El-Sisi.

The enhanced co-operation between the two countries can be seen as Egypt's efforts not to let others usurp its regional role in the resolution of the Palestinian crisis. Recently, President El-Sisi rejected the Palestinian request to convene an Arab League meet to discuss the Israeli settlement issue, and set the date to present the issue before the UNSC.<sup>42</sup> The government also canceled the visit of a Hamas delegation from Gaza on the pretext that Hamas was not doing much to improve the security in Sinai. President Abbas of Palestine has rejected El-Sisi's call for unconditional talk between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, while France has called for referring the Palestine issue to the UN. Palestine's tense relationship with the Arab neighbours, in all likelihood, would benefit Israel.

Moreover, it would always be easy for Israel to negotiate with Egypt rather than the West which has apparently hardened its stance on Israel. The embrace between Egypt and Israel is likely to reduce the international pressure on Israel to go for peace talk even for the name sake.

After the failure of the Quartet peace talks and the recent French initiative and growing disenchantment with the US initiatives, Egypt feel that it could fill the vacuum, and also fulfill the dictum that 'keep your friend close and your enemy closer'.

Besides this, improving Israel–Turkey ties after the freeze of five years may have also forced Egypt for deepening ties with Israel, and Egypt cannot afford to cede any strategic incentive to Turkey, an aspirant power in the region.<sup>43</sup> Moreover the presence of the ISIS, and other terror outfits in Sinai have created a new level of strategic relations between the two countries.

Finally, the war on terrorism, rise of the ISIS, growing role of Iran in the region, and the need of new regional security architecture entail a deep coordination between the two countries. The growing ties between Israel and Egypt are not confined to Cairo or Tel Aviv, but one of the Salafist leaders, Nida Bakkar, also met the former Israeli foreign minister at Harvard in the U.S.<sup>44</sup>

The declining economic graph of Egypt because of the political instability is equally decisive in shaping the foreign policy of Egypt and making new alliance. After taking over the presidency, Mr. El-Sisi had announced that he would bring democracy only when the national GDP is US\$ 5 billion, and had also promised of doubling the GDP in two years which required an impossible annual growth of 50%.<sup>45</sup> Today, the youth unemployment rate is around 40%, and the budget and the current account deficits stand at 12% and 7%, respectively.<sup>46</sup> What have further added to the woes of the national economy are the declining oil prices and the resultant fall in remittances. The Suez Canal, one of the greatest trade arteries of the world, lies at the bottom half of the World Bank's ease-of-doing-business index. Much-needed loans, donations and FDI for economic survival could be sought only by forging close alliances with the GCC nations and other western countries.

Immediately after the removal of Morsi, three GCC nations (Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait) pledged around US\$ 20 billion in aid to help the transition in Egypt. Further in Sharm el-Sheikh Economic Conference of March 2015, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait pledged the investments of US\$ 4 billion each in addition to US\$ 500 million by Oman. Saudi Arabia pledged an additional aid of US\$ 8 billion in 2015 and both set up an additional joint investment fund worth US\$ 8 billion.<sup>47</sup> In 2016, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait again provided US\$ 3 billion and US\$ 4 billion in assistance, respectively, apart from US\$ 1.5 billion loan by Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development. According to a report published by 'The Economist', these three nations alone have offered the total aid of worth US\$ 25 billion in cash that has been spent to balance the budget deficit alone.<sup>48</sup> The level of Saudi economic assistance can be gauged by the fact that when

the erstwhile Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia, Mr. Saud Faisal warned that Saudi Arabia cannot support Egypt forever.<sup>49</sup>

In exchange for GCC's economic assistance, Egypt has extended all military and diplomatic support to the Saudi-led war in Yemen, and also was among the first few nations to join the Islamic Military Alliance created at the behest of Saudi Arabia. Perhaps, Egypt has no choice but to join the coalition because it is Saudi Arabia along with Kuwait and the UAE which have been bankrolling Egypt after the coup. President El-Sisi once said that one of the GCC nations is giving him US\$ 900 million monthly, and that cannot go on forever. The total amount of loans exceed to 20 billion. Economic reforms and liberalization have been used as a pretext to pursue the dictatorship.

The latest commitment of US\$ 12 billion loan by IMF, and the three-phased loan of US\$ 1.5 billion by African Development Bank<sup>50</sup> prove that pressing economic needs are key determinants in Egypt's foreign policy. Egypt continues to receive the aid of US\$ 2 billion annually from the US since the signing of the Camp David in 1979, and the major portion of the aid goes to the military.<sup>51</sup> Egypt also received billions of dollars in loan from the WB for the sake of micro-economic progress and development

Egypt's global relationship under El-Sisi witnessed some changes. The US cancelled the biannual military exercise and held back the delivery of some weapons like Apache helicopters. On the other hand, Egypt's ties with Russia have strengthened. President El-Sisi visited Russia in 2013 before he became President. He paid another visit in 2015 and signed a US\$ 3.5 billion arms deal and sought cooperation in the Egyptian nuclear program.<sup>52</sup> Egypt extended all support to Russia in the inquiry of shooting down of its plane in Sinai in November 2015. Both nations have convergence on many of the regional issues like war against ISIS and the future of Assad's regime.

### **Conclusion:**

In the light of the above narrative, one can conclude that Egyptian foreign policy under three different regimes over the last five years has gone through different phases of changes. Under the SCAF, the foreign policy saw the continuation of the Mubarak's era where the army primarily focused on preserving its traditional economic interests, and made no deviation from the past.

Some momentary changes occurred vis-à-vis Iran, but it was not at the behest of the army, and was immediately corrected after the advent of El-Sisi to power. During 15 months of its tenure, the SCAF was more engaged in managing the internal political process of the country. Likewise, Morsi's regime tried to fulfill some ideological commitments by reaching out to Iran, Turkey and

Hamas, but failed to make any major imprint on Egypt's foreign policy. His anti-Israel rhetoric was completely absent during his stint of one year, and towards the U.S, his regime could not influence the U.S's traditional stance on Israel. He tried to restore the regional role of Egypt but existing scenario did not allow him much space to maneuver. During one year of his tenure, President Morsi subordinated the ideological objective to economic and security imperatives of the country. He failed to forge close ties with Libya or Ethiopia, and showed no assertion vis-à-vis other regional issues as his foreign policy was more determined by existing immediate necessities and moreover pragmatism overrode the much-lauded political ideology of MBH.

The foreign policy of El-Sisi seems to be primarily aimed at reversing the policy pursued by Morsi. The warmth and enthusiasm in relationship between Egypt and Iran, and Turkey and Hamas was immediately diminished after the removal of Morsi. It is combination of economic, geostrategic and ideological factors which shaped his foreign policy, and more importantly, country's economic situation further deepened the ties of Egypt with the GCC nations. Three factors are likely to continue to shape the foreign policy under the rule of El-Sisi, and perhaps the existing domestic and regional security scenario and his ideological war would further delay the democracy in Egypt. El-Sisi's apparent overture towards Russia would not harm its ties with the US because it is the biggest source of economic and military aid. Egypt's economic and geostrategic alliance with the GCC and Israel would be the hallmark of its foreign policy in near future. The expansion of the ISIS and growing involvement of Turkey in the regional crisis would further strengthen the Egypt-Israel-GCC alliance.

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Disclaimer: Views expressed are of authors and do not reflect the views of the Council.*

### **Endnotes:**

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