



Indian Council  
of World Affairs



# TEN YEARS OF TURKIYE-EGYPT RELATIONS

Confrontation to Reconciliation

**DR. ARSHAD**







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**Ten Years of Turkiye-Egypt Relations**  
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## ABSTRACT



The paper examines Turkiye-Egypt relations in the context of the changing Arab World politics since the Arab Spring in 2011.

The Arab Spring was the watershed moment for the Arab World's politics in which the Arab states, Tunisia, Libya, Syria, and Egypt either collapsed or descended into civil war. In this context, Turkiye became one of the most critical external actors in the region due to the success of the Turkish Model of Democracy, which mixed with Islamic values and economic growth. Turkiye's relations with Arab governments, particularly Egypt, became problematic during the Arab Spring. After the removal of President Hosni Mubarak, Turkiye aspired to increase its influence in the political transition of Egypt by supporting the Muslim Brotherhood, which threatened the longevity of the ruling government in Egypt. The paper scrutinises the changing dynamics of Egypt and Turkiye relations since the Arab Spring, which witnessed the ideological convergence to confrontation and reconciliation due to domestic and regional factors.

*Keywords: Turkiye, Egypt, Arab Spring, Fatah al-Sisi, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Arab World, AKP, Muslim Brotherhood, Confrontation, Reconciliation, Exploratory Talks*





## INTRODUCTION



In the modern history of the Arab World, Turkiye, and Egypt are two prominent regional players striving to achieve their geopolitical, economic, and strategic interests. Also, as part of the erstwhile Ottoman Empire, Turkiye and Egypt shared a common Islamic heritage and traditions. The two countries have multiple identities: Egypt has Arab, African, and Islamic identities, while Turkiye encompasses Turk, European, and Islamic identities.

Turkiye and Egypt aspired to follow different ideological approaches, while Egypt espoused the ideas of Arab nationalism and anti-colonialism. Turkiye played a proactive role in modernizing itself on European lines intended to break with its Islamic and Ottoman past. Nevertheless, Turkiye holistically changed its policy from Europe to the Arab World in 2002 when AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*)<sup>1</sup> came to power.

The Turkish Model of Democracy with Islamic values and an improved economy instilled confidence in Ankara to expand its influence in the Arab World. Particularly, Egypt became the central focal point for Turkiye to increase its influence in the region because of the former's regional stature, historical legacy, and strong relations with other Arab countries. Therefore, Turkiye and Egypt expanded their economic and strategic cooperation until 2011.

Arab Spring changed Turkiye's relations with Egypt. In 2011, Turkiye extended financial and political support to Muslim Brotherhood (MBH). The relationship between the Egyptian

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1 It is the ruling party of Turkiye and follows conservative democracy. Its English acronym is Justice and Development Party.

military establishment and Turkiye became difficult and complex, but they moved on diplomatic and political fronts. President Hosni Mubarak resigned after ruling for three decades, which resulted in the MBH's political arm, Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) member Mohammed Morsi coming to power. After that, the relationship between Turkiye and MBH-led Egypt progressed in political, economic, and strategic cooperation. The two countries witnessed high-level visits by Recep Teyyip Erdogan and Mohammed Morsi. They also made ideological and geo-strategic convergence in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea, Libya, Syria, and the Gulf region, resulting in the 'Turkiye-Qatar-Egypt' pro-change axis in the Arab World. The newborn axis did not survive after President Morsi was removed from power in 2013. Turkiye condemned the removal of Morsi and called it a coup. Egypt's military gained support from Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates (UAE) for thwarting the rise of the Brotherhood in the region.

The deterioration of the bilateral relations between Egypt and Turkiye transformed into a regional confrontation after General Fatah al-Sisi became the President of Egypt in 2014. President Al-Sisi supported the anti-Turkish forces (President Bashar al-Assad and Aguila Saleh's Eastern Libya Faction) in Syria and Libya and pioneered the founding of the Eastern Mediterranean Energy Forum (EMEF) with Greece and Cyprus, which excluded Turkiye's membership. President Al-Sisi's revitalization of Egypt's regional policy threatened President Erdogan's regional ambitions, which he had started harboring during the Arab Uprising.

Against this backdrop, the paper's primary objective is to examine how the MBH ideology has been a factor in the deterioration of



the bilateral relations between the two countries and study the changing dynamics of the relations since 2020. It will also examine the implications of the changing security dynamics in the Eastern Mediterranean (EM) region, particularly in the Libyan political crisis, the Syrian conflict, and the Gulf countries. Besides, it will look into the prospects of their relationship.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT (1925-2010)



Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1922, Britain supported the Khadive<sup>2</sup> monarchy to rule Egypt as its ‘Protectorate.’<sup>3</sup> At the same time, from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire, the Turkish republic emerged under the leadership of military officer Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. The newly established Turkish state looked West towards Europe and the Aegean, and not East towards Egypt and the Arab World.<sup>4</sup> However, Egypt and Turkiye established their diplomatic relations in 1925 and upgraded their relations to an ambassadorial level in 1948. During this time, Egypt was a monarchy that paid attention to the Islamic practices in Egyptian politics. Ataturk transformed Turkiye from an Islamic state to a secular state. Therefore, Turkiye and Egypt followed different ideological approaches to establish themselves as a modern nation-state.

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2 It was an autonomous tributary state of the Ottoman Empire which was established by Albanian origin military commander Mohammed Ali.

3 During Britain’s protectorate rule on Egypt, the British had the decisive power to control the domestic and international policies of the Khadive monarchy.

4 Soner Cagaptay & Marc Sievers. “Turkey and Egypt’s Great Game in the Middle East”, *Washington Institute*, March 8, 2015, <https://bit.ly/3kQn3AK>(Accessed: October 19, 2022)

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Nasser sided with the Soviet Union in the Cold War and became one of the founding members of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the de-colonization struggle in the Global South. At the same time, Mustafa Kamal Atatürk implemented policies to modernize Türkiye on European values such as liberal democracy, secularism, and a market-based economy fostered by its external ties with the Western powers, including North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).

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In 1952, the Free Officers Movement<sup>5</sup> in Egypt toppled the Egyptian Monarchy of the last King Farouk of the Khadive dynasty. Gamal Abdel Nasser became the first President of Egypt who strengthened the military's role in 1956. Nasser sided with the Soviet Union in the Cold War and became one of the founding members of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM)<sup>6</sup> and the de-colonization struggle in the Global South. At the same time, Mustafa Kamal Atatürk implemented policies to modernize Türkiye on European values such as liberal democracy, secularism, and a market-based economy fostered by its external ties with the Western powers, including North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO).<sup>7</sup> As a result, the divergence of ideological approaches deepened the chasm between Cairo and Ankara. When Süleyman Demirel of the Justice Party became Prime Minister in 1965, he further intensified the

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5 The Free Officers were a group of revolutionary Egyptian nationalist officers in the Egyptian Armed Forces founded in 1949.

6 The Non-Aligned Movement is a forum of 120 countries that are not formally aligned with or against any major power bloc, founded in 1961.

7 It is an inter-governmental alliance with the aim of 'collective security' between 28 European and 2 North American states.



engagement with NATO that created differences between Türkiye and Nasser's Egypt.

The leadership change in Egypt increased the prospects of bilateral relations with Türkiye. Anwar Sadat became the President of Egypt in 1970. President Sadat started improving political and economic relations with President Cevdet Sunay. Sadat's *Infitah*<sup>8</sup> policy in 1974 partially liberalized the political system which allowed different political parties, including Muslim Brotherhood (MBH) to participate in the domestic politics. Besides, Sadat signed the Camp David Accords<sup>9</sup> with Israel in 1978. The increasing bilateral relations between Egypt and Israel isolated Sadat in the Arab World. However, under Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit and President Fahri Korutürk in 1980, Türkiye did not cut off diplomatic relations with Egypt because Türkiye had close relations with Israel.

Türkiye and Egypt's bilateral relations faced a downturn after the assassination of President Sadat by the Islamic Jihad movement's members in 1981. In the same year, Hosni Mubarak became the new President of Egypt. Mubarak targeted the Islamists and considered them a threat to his rule. In Türkiye, Prime Minister Turgut Özal launched the "Turkish-Islamic Synthesis"<sup>10</sup> ideology that promoted the idea of Islam and Turkish Nationalism to achieve a powerful position in the Arab World. The two countries also had exposed to competition in the Eastern Mediterranean region. For instance, Türkiye was disappointed that Egypt did not support it on the Cyprus issue.

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8 It is Anwar Sadat's policy of "opening the door" to private investment in Egypt in the years following the 1973 October War with Israel.

9 It led to the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel.

10 It synthesized of technological westernization and cultural Turkism and Islamism.

The cooling period started in 1996 when the Islamist government, under PM Necmettin Erbakan<sup>11</sup> ignored the European Union (EU) and put relations with the Islamic World at the top of its agenda. The same year, in July, Mubarak paid a one-day visit to Türkiye. During the meeting, Erbakan told Mubarak that the “Egyptian Brotherhood, elements of which had been engaged in a long, violent struggle against the regime, was not so bad as they were made out to be and that Cairo should reconcile itself with the Brotherhood.”<sup>12</sup> Erbakan’s shift to Islamic World did not get the support from the ‘secular’ and ‘republican’ Kemalist military that toppled him in 1997.

However, the Kemalist military could not prevent the spread of Islamic ideology in Türkiye. The result was that Justice and Development Party or *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (AKP) came to power in 2002. The Islamists under the AKP changed the discourse of their politics from extremist to more liberal, moderate, and market-oriented to fit the modern Turkish state. Türkiye’s regime since then espoused the idea of *İttihad I-Islam* (Unity of Islam) to strengthen its military, economic, and political power in domestic and international politics. The AKP leadership had understood that Türkiye’s shift toward the Arab World was conditioned upon its engagement with Egypt due to the following factors: first, Egypt was the epicenter of MBH activities; second, it had played a historical role in leading the Arab region; and third, it had strong

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11 PM Erbakan launched a foreign policy called the Developing Eight (Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan and Turkey) as a way to promote closer cooperation among the pre-dominantly Muslim countries.

12 Brent E. Sasley. “Turkish Leaders and Foreign Policy Decision Making: Lobbying for European Union Membership”, *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.48, No.4, (2012), p.559.



relations with Gulf countries. Therefore, it was natural for Turkiye to engage with Egypt during its shift toward the Arab World.

Turkiye envisioned a two-pronged strategy toward Egypt. First, Turkiye's ruling establishment expanded economic partnerships, including the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) signed in 2005.<sup>13</sup> Second, Turkiye's ruling establishment also wanted to use its model of 'Islamic democracy' as an instrument to expand its influence in Egypt. However, the AKP-led Turkish state faced problems expanding its ideological influence because it had to deal with the secular military in Egypt. Since AKP secured its second term in office in 2007, these two strategies became part of Turkiye's overall foreign policy in the Arab World, facilitated by Ankara's 'Zero Problems'<sup>14</sup> and 'Strategic Depth'<sup>15</sup>. The architect of these approaches was the AKP ideologue Ahmet Davutoglu. Davutoglu stated, "Those countries that were once part of the Ottoman Empire should now become an integral part of the Turkish 'Expanded Zone of Influence.'"<sup>16</sup> The two initiatives gave momentum to Ankara's outreach in the immediate regions, motivated by 'moral idealism', economic interest, cultural affinity, and enhanced security.

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13 FTA came into force in 2007 and remained functional for twelve years despite the tumultuous political relationship between both countries. It resulted in a near tripling of total trade volume between the two countries between 2007 and 2020, from \$4.2 billion to \$11.14 billion despite political tensions between Egypt and Turkey.

14 The policy aimed to eliminate or reduce the problems with Turkey's neighbors to ensure mutual peace, security, and prosperity.

15 The central thesis of this doctrine is that strategic depth is predicated on geographical and historical depth. Consequently, Turkey, due to its historical legacy of the Ottoman Empire, possesses great geographical depth. The geographical depth places Turkey at the center of many geopolitical areas of influence.

16 Ahmet Davutoğlu. *Alternative Paradigms: the Impact of Islamic and Western Weltanschauungs on Political Theory* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1993), p. 5.

Davutoglu predicted that “Egypt, Turkiye, and Iran would dominate the political space of the Arab world.”<sup>17</sup>

As a result, in 2008, Turkish Army Chief General Yasar Byyukanit visited Egypt and signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with his Egyptian counterpart General Osama Askar to boost military cooperation. The Turkish delegations made 64 military and non-military visits to Egypt, while 29 Egyptians visited Turkiye from 2003 to 2009. These included reciprocal visits by both President Abdullah Gul and President Mubarak.<sup>18</sup> Turkiye’s outreach also coincided with changing domestic politics in Egypt, wherein the Brotherhood was increasingly becoming more visible in the political space, particularly after President Mubarak’s policy of slow democratisation of Egypt, termed as ‘democracy in doses.’

In 2010, the Arab Spring led to the collapse of President Zine El Abedine Ben Ali’s regime in Tunisia, which became the triggering point of political upheaval in Egypt, Libya, and other Arab countries. Turkiye emerged as one of the most critical external actors in the region because of the success of the Turkish model of democracy and robust economic growth.

## TURKIYE’S ROLE IN EGYPTIAN ARAB SPRING IN 2011



During the Arab Spring in Egypt in 2011, Turkiye became the first state to support the protestors against the military-led ruling

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Embassy of Turkey in Cairo, Republic of Turkiye. <http://cairo.emb.mfa.gov.tr/Mission> (Accessed: June 12, 2022).



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establishment. Overtly, Turkiye supported the protestors to shore up democracy, human rights, and free and fair elections. However, covertly, it preferred to transform the political sphere in the region in line with the Turkish model of democracy, which meant the domination of Turkiye in the region's political, geostrategic, and economic spheres. During the protests in Egypt, President Erdogan made a statement in Parliament that "Turkiye will stop the tyrants and calling the killer the killer is breaking taboos."<sup>19</sup>

At the beginning of the protest, the non-Islamic revolutionary movements of youth, trade unions, and civil society organizations demanded the removal of Mubarak. Brotherhood leaders did not officially support the protest due to the Egyptian regime's long record of suppressing its activists. Many of its activists individually participated in the protest against Mubarak. Brotherhood's spokesman Rashad al-Bayoumi stated in the media that the "Muslim Brotherhood is keeping a low profile and does not want the revolt to be seen as an Islamic revolution."<sup>20</sup> It was only after Mubarak's resignation that Muslim Brotherhood (MBH) supported the protest.

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19 The full text of Erdogan's speech can be found at AKP Parti, <https://www.akparti.org.tr> (Accessed July 19, 2022)/

20 "Muslim Brothers say no Islamic revolution in Egypt," The Economic Times, February 5, 2011, <https://bit.ly/3NbKH4r> (Accessed: September 12, 2022).

With the removal of Mubarak, Brotherhood did not ally with the secular and liberal revolutionary movements; instead, it focused on constitutional and institutional channels to come to power. The MBH had its long-cherished goal of capturing state power through popular elections, almost similar to how the AKP of Türkiye rose to power to challenge and, later, dismantle the “deep state” in the country.<sup>21</sup> However, the abrupt unfolding of political spheres and new areas of rights and freedom without no checks and balances created major tests which the Brotherhood had never faced before.<sup>22</sup> In this context, the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF)<sup>23</sup>, headed by Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi, assumed the state’s control on February 10, 2011. SCAF looked for allies that could not challenge military supremacy. The marriage of convenience, therefore, appealed to the Brotherhood, but this alliance marginalized other political forces, notably the secular, liberals, and leftists which had spearheaded the protest against the regime.

Under the SCAF’s supervision, the Brotherhood increased its grip on Egypt; Türkiye took several initiatives to increase its presence in Egypt. On March 3, 2011, President Abdullah Gul became the first foreign leader to visit the country. The following month, a group of 50 Egyptians under the banner of the “youth of the revolution”

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21 Emad El-Din Shahin. “The Egyptian Revolution: The Power of Mass Mobilization and the Spirit of Tahrir Square,” in Ricardo Laremont (ed.) *Revolution, Revolt, and Reform in North Africa: The Arab Spring and Beyond* (London & New York: Routledge, 2013) p. 64.

22 Housam Darwish. “Survival, Triumph and Fall: The Political Transformation of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt,” in Khoo Boo Teik, Vedi R Hadiz, Yoshihiro Nakinishi (ed.) *Between Dissent and Power: The Transformation of Islamic Politics in the Middle East and Asia* (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p.125.

23 It is a statutory body of senior military officers in Egypt.



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visited Turkiye at Gul's invitation. It was worth noting that they were undertaking a study of the "Turkish model of democracy". Besides, Turkiye extended US\$2 billion as a loan to Egypt to address its economic challenges. The *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkiye* noted that Egypt and Turkiye signed the High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council in 2011 to improve their regional strategic cooperation. One of the major initiatives under the strategic cooperation was that the two countries conducted military exercises in Turkish territorial waters in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The increasing geopolitical bonhomie between Ankara and Cairo failed to hide the ideological difference that came to the surface when Prime Minister Erdogan visited Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya on September 15, 2011, and was hailed as the 'savior of Islam' by the protestors. Speaking on a popular Oprah-style talk show on Egypt's Dream TV, Erdogan said: "Do not be wary of secularism. I hope there will be a secular state in Egypt." He further stated that "secularism does not mean that people are secular. For example, I

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am not secular, but I am the Prime Minister of a secular state.”<sup>24</sup> The Egyptian Islamists did not accept Erdogan’s statement. According to Essam El Erian, Vice President of the newly formed Freedom and Justice Party of MBH in April 2011, “Mr. Erdogan’s use of the term ‘secular’ runs counters to Egyptian Islamists’ conception of Islamic-minded governance.”<sup>25</sup> The Brotherhood did not ignore its agenda of establishing Islamic rule in Egypt.

The Brotherhood knew that capturing political power was the precondition to implementing the Sharia rule in Egypt. Its members were apprehensive about participating openly in the elections because SCAF supervised the political transition. One of its members, Monim Abul Fotuh, advised MBH against contesting the election. Therefore, the Brotherhood did not contest the election; instead, it created the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) as its political arm to contest the election. Besides, the FJP kept the issue of Sharia rule at the backburner during the first democratic elections of the Parliament and President in 2012. FJP won the majority of seats in the Parliament, and its candidate Mohammed Morsi successfully won the presidential election. During his speech at Cairo University on June 30, 2012, Morsi said that “today we can establish Sharia law because our nation will acquire well-being only with Islam and Sharia. The Muslim Brothers and the Freedom and Justice Party will be the conductors of these goals.”<sup>26</sup>

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24 “Islamists Criticize Turkish Premier’s ‘Secular’ Remarks,” *The Wall Street Journal*, September 15, 2011, <https://on.wsj.com/3W4CyTG> (Accessed: September 12, 2022).

25 “Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood criticizes Erdogan’s call for a secular state,” *AlArabiya*, September 14, 2011,, <https://bit.ly/3FiuKra> (Accessed: September 12, 2022).

26 “Watch the video of President Mohammed Morsi Speech at *Cairo University*,” Cairo University, June 30, 2012, <https://cu.edu.eg/Cairo-University-News-339.html> (Accessed: July 18, 2022).

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Since the arrival of the MBH government in Egypt, Turkiye had found great opportunities to expand its influence in Cairo to meet its geopolitical interests.

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After capturing the legislative and executive powers, Brotherhood members at the Constituent Assembly supported the fusion of religion with politics. The MBH leader, Sobhi Saleh, a member of the 2012 Constituent Assembly which was charged with drafting the new Egyptian constitution, had argued that the “Islamic character of Egypt was preserved in the 1923 Constitution through Article 2.”<sup>27</sup> Article 2 was produced without any change in the founding document of the FJP, which emphasised its commitment to the official relationship between Islam and the state.<sup>28</sup> The Egyptian Islamists backed the constitution that was centered on the Sharia law.

Since the arrival of the MBH government in Egypt, Turkiye had found great opportunities to expand its influence in Cairo to meet its geopolitical interests. AKP provided training on policing and party politics to Brotherhood leaders and activists. Tariq Ramadan, an Islamic scholar and the grandson of the founder of the MBH, Hassan al-Banna, stated that “democratic Turkiye is the template for Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood.”<sup>29</sup> Therefore, Turkiye’s focus on Egypt centred on the notion of an ‘Ankara-Cairo axis of democracy’.

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27 “Sobhi Saleh: Article 2 in Current Constitution Not Written by Islamists, but Liberals”, *Ikhwaneeb*, November 1, 2012, <https://bit.ly/3TH5Zte> (Accessed: September 12, 2022).

28 “The Founding Statement of the Freedom and Justice Party”, *Ikhwaneeb*, June 1, 2011, <https://bit.ly/3D2FDus> (Accessed: September 12, 2022).

29 Baskan Birol and Taspinar Omer. *The Nation or the Ummah: Islamism and Turkish Foreign Policy*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 2021), p. 89.

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As a result, after the Arab Spring, Ankara shifted from 'cooperative' roles to 'competitive' roles to counter the roles of other aspiring actors in the region.

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From the theoretical perspective, Turkiye, an established 'middle power,' wanted to strengthen its role in the Arab World by changing its attitude and behaviour as an aspiring regional power. In this sense, the ruling establishment of Turkiye desired to seek a 'role' and 'status' in the region vis-a-vis other states, including Egypt. President Erdogan emphasised these interests to expand the material supremacy and military power of the Turkish state. As a result, after the Arab Spring, Ankara shifted from 'cooperative' roles to 'competitive' roles to counter the roles of other aspiring actors in the region.<sup>30</sup> To do this, Turkiye formulated a foreign policy that followed an active engagement in the former Ottoman geography and advocacy of Muslim interests. The following section will discuss Morsi and Erdogan Partnership.

## TURKIYE-EGYPT EMERGING IDEOLOGICAL CONVERGENCE UNDER MORSI AND ERDOGAN



It is crucial to understand that Erdogan wanted to use Brotherhood as a 'Trojan Horse' to consolidate his regional standing due to its widespread reach in the Arab World. The Brotherhood established branches in Arab countries from North Africa to the Gulf

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30 Tayyar Ari & Omar Munassar. "Two stages of Turkey's Quest for a regional power status in the Middle East: An integrated role-status seeking approach," *Akademik Bakis*, Vol. 14, Issue 27 (winter 2020), pp.3–6.



region. AKP considered the success of Brotherhood-led FJP as the arrival of a new model of Islamic democratic governance in Egypt. In this context, Erdogan envisioned that the Brotherhood rule would create prospects of a Turkish-Egyptian entente to enhance Ankara's strategic role in the Arab World. Upon Morsi's assumption of the President's position, Cairo and Ankara signed the three-year "Ro-Ro" agreement<sup>31</sup> in March 2012. During Morsi's rule, the two countries signed more than three-dozen cooperation agreements ranging from trade to energy, technology to banking.<sup>32</sup>

Morsi's primary concern was promoting Egypt's role as a leading player under the ideology of MBH.<sup>33</sup> Morsi wanted to create a new Egypt that would be able to reclaim its past glory through the implementation of Sharia and the *Brotherhoodisation*<sup>34</sup> of the state and its institutions at the domestic levels. Therefore, Morsi initiated this process by appointing Brotherhood members to Egyptian institutions like ministries, administration, and the business sector.

At the regional level, Morsi wanted to establish relations with the neighboring countries favoring MBH ideology. Resultantly, Qatar and Iran,<sup>35</sup> which otherwise shared indifferent ties with Egypt,

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31 The agreement allowed Turkish containers to be shipped to the markets in the Arab Gulf via the port of Damietta on Egypt's northern coast.

32 "RO-RO agreement not to be renewed," *Daily News Egypt*, October 7, 2014, <https://bit.ly/3NgyyLv> (Accessed: September 29, 2022).

33 Mohamed Morsi. "If I am elected Egypt's President, I will serve our revolution," *The Guardian*, June 14, 2012, <https://bit.ly/3FfsUaz> (Accessed: July 18, 2022).

34 The term explains the appointment of the Brotherhood members in the government institutions and ministries to consolidate the domination of the MBH.

35 Morsi opened the gates of Cairo for Iranian regime which security and an administrative team to aid Morsi running the state. Morsi took their advice and tried to imitate them by taking over the judiciary, security and media.

became staunch allies of President Morsi. In addition, Morsi took the initiative to resolve the Syrian and Libyan conflicts that threatened the political stability of President Bashar al-Assad's regime. Meanwhile, in Libya, Morsi desired the establishment of a Brotherhood-dominated regime in the post-Gaddafi era by formulation of the 'Islamic Quartet' that would include Egypt, Turkiye, and Saudi Arabia.<sup>36</sup>

Morsi and Erdogan supported the Brotherhood-led Syrian National Council (SNC) that opposed President Bashar al-Assad's rule in Syria. They launched the Mediterranean strategy in which the two countries held a week-long joint naval drill called "Sea of Friendship." The two leaders also supported Islamist dominated Government of National Unity (GNU) in Libya. Besides, Turkiye and Egypt also allied with Qatar, which resulted in the security partnership between Cairo, Ankara, and Doha.

Ankara and Cairo were successful in expanding their regional partnership. However, the Islamist-dominated constitutional assembly in Egypt had prepared the constitutional draft, ignoring the state's "secular" or "civil" appeal by including Sharia Law. Despite the rejection of the incorporation of Sharia in the constitution by the Secular and Liberal sections, President Morsi issued the constitutional decree on November 22, 2012, which helped MBH to sign the constitution. The resentment of the Secular and Liberal sections was compounded due to the failure of Morsi's economic policy. The cash reserves dried up, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) decreased, and unemployment and

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36 Badawi Tamer & Osama al-Sayyad. "Mismatched Expectations: Iran and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood after the Arab Uprisings," *Carnegie*, March 2019, p. 57.



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Morsi could not apply the Turkish model of democracy including its economic policy in which AKP accepted the 'Secular' polity and 'Liberal' economic characters of the Kemalist state.

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inflation skyrocketed. FJP under Morsi could not apply the Turkish model of democracy including its economic policy in which AKP accepted the 'Secular' polity and 'Liberal' economic characters of the Kemalist state.

Consequently, secular and liberal oppositions, including National Salvation Front (NSF), April 6th Youth Movement, and Coptic Christian Church, spearheaded the protest under the banner of the "Tamarod" (rebel) group, comprising mainly young pro-democracy activists against Morsi for enforcing an 'Islamist' agenda in the country. Fearing the rule of theocracy, some appealed to the military led by General Fatah Al-Sisi, who duly ordered the arrest of Morsi and undermined the emerging geo-political and ideological partnership between Cairo and Ankara. The return of the military-led regime in Egypt started purging the Brotherhood members.

Following the overthrow of President Morsi's regime, the Brotherhood lost control over the state's power. Turkiye's political influence in Egypt declined as the military's control over the state increased. Despite the initial differences with Morsi, Erdogan termed the coup a "disruption to democratic transition and called the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF)'s control over Egypt illegitimate."<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, the coup against President Morsi

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37 Joel Gulhane. "Egypt dismisses Erdogan remarks," *Daily News Egypt*, February 15, 2014, <https://bit.ly/3sBTzGY> (Accessed: July 1, 2022).

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Following the overthrow of President Morsi's regime, the Brotherhood lost control over the state's power. Turkiye's political influence in Egypt declined as the military's control over the state increased.

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had two regional implications: First, the coup vindicated the counter-revolutionary forces in Egypt and the rest of the Arab World. Second, Egypt became the centre of the backlash against the Brotherhood and its plan to establish 'Islamist' regimes in the region. As a result, Turkiye openly criticised the military's takeover of Egypt, further damaging its relations with the military establishment. Consequently, after the control of the military over the Egyptian state, the two countries' bilateral relations turned into a confrontation.

## TURKIYE AND EGYPT'S BILATERAL RELATIONS UNDER FATAH AL-SISI AND ERDOGAN RULE



Since Turkiye denounced the military's takeover of Egypt, General Fatah Al-Sisi, who served as Minister of Defence (2012–13) and later became deputy Prime Minister (PM) (July 2013–May 2014), did not consider Turkiye, a regional partner. Therefore, on November 23, 2013, Egypt snapped its diplomatic ties with Turkiye and withdrew its ambassador.<sup>38</sup> Many saw Turkiye as a foreign supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood that desired an Islamist takeover of Egypt. The *Turkish Economic and Social Studies*

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38 "PM Erdogan says he won't back down from stance that led to row with Egypt", *Hurriyet Daily News*, November 23, 2013, <https://bit.ly/3W4Y8aj> (Accessed: July 12, 2022).



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The confrontation that started between Türkiye and Egypt turned into personal animosity. During his United Nations General Assembly (69th UNGA Session) address on September 24, 2014, Erdogan called “Al-Sisi an illegitimate tyrant because of his policy of suppressing the Brotherhood members.”

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*Foundation* (TESEV)<sup>39</sup> study that had recorded more than 80% popularity ratings for Türkiye in Egypt in 2011 and 2012 indicated an approval rating of just 38% in 2013.<sup>40</sup> After Al-Sisi became the President of Egypt on June 8, 2014, he focused on the nationalist sentiment and a nostalgic view of his country’s historical influence in the Arab World. He sought to rebuild Egypt’s role and image despite his lack of economic and financial capabilities.

The confrontation that started between Türkiye and Egypt turned into personal animosity. During his *United Nations General Assembly* (69<sup>th</sup> UNGA Session) address on September 24, 2014, Erdogan called “Al-Sisi an illegitimate tyrant because of his policy of suppressing the Brotherhood members.”<sup>41</sup> The decline of the relations between the two countries resulted in the suspension of the bilateral agreement, including the Transport Ministry of Egypt did not renew the “Ro-Ro” agreement. Egypt did not allow Türkiye to use Egyptian ports to transport its products.<sup>42</sup> At the

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39 Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation is a think tank based in Istanbul.

40 “Turkey and Egypt: Misconceptions and Missed Opportunities,” *The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy*, May 02, 2014, <https://bit.ly/3TIEwap> (Accessed: September 19, 2022).

41 “Erdogan slams Sisi as ‘tyrant’ over Cairo Policy”, *AlArabiya*, July 14, 2014, <https://bit.ly/3Dcv4Ft> (Accessed: July 22, 2022).

42 Azzurra Meringolo. “From Morsi to Al-Sisi: Foreign Policy at the Service of Domestic Policy”, *Istituto Affari Internazionali*, No.8, (March 2015), <https://bit.ly/3L1r5Ru>(Accessed: July 18, 2022).

same time, the Turkish government canceled two naval military drills with Egypt. Levent Gumrukcu, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesman, Turkiye, told the media, “Turkiye conveyed to Egypt its decision to cancel invitations to participate in the joint naval military exercise.”<sup>43</sup> Turkiye also ensured that Egypt should not get membership of NATO.

The conflict between Al-Sisi and Erdogan also intensified in Gaza in 2014 on the issue of humanitarian aid. Egypt accused Hamas of conspiring to threaten its national security by supporting terrorist attacks in the Sinai Peninsula, which resulted in Egyptian authorities’ decision to block the humanitarian aid to Gaza. Turkiye, under Erdogan, made close relations with Hamas and accused Egypt of blocking humanitarian aid to Gaza.

At the domestic level, Cairo portrayed the Brotherhood as a terrorist threat, frequently allied to radical and violent *Jihadi-Takfiri (extremism)* tendencies. As a result, by 2015, Al-Sisi ensured that the *de-Brotherhoodisation* of Egypt’s politics and society should become the most crucial goal of his policy. Therefore, Cairo expelled most leaders who remained exiled and marginalised in their respective nations (Turkiye and Qatar). Samer Shehata, a prominent Arab World Analyst, argued, “Political Islam in Egypt has suffered a tremendous blow and its biggest setback since it emerged as a formidable ideology and political movement in the early 20th century.”<sup>44</sup>

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43 “Turkey blocks Egypt from joining NATO naval exercise,” *Atlantic Council*, August 16, 2013, <https://bit.ly/3sDQlg> (Accessed: September 18, 2022).

44 Samer S. Shehata. “The Military vs. the Islamists,” *Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars*, November 4, 2013, <https://bit.ly/3kQetSC> (Accessed: April 12, 2022).

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As a result, by 2015, Al-Sisi ensured that the de-Brotherhoodisation of Egypt's politics and society should become the most crucial goal of his policy.

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At the UNGA 70th Session, President Al-Sisi denounced Islamic extremists for negating a religion that stands for tolerance, justice, and mercy. He said, "Those claiming to have a monopoly in interpreting Islam are merely propagating their prejudiced interpretation of the religion. He further stated that the extremists exploited the legitimate aspirations of the Libyans and Syrians to create chaos and anarchy in these countries.<sup>45</sup> Speaking at a meeting with journalists from international media outlets, President Erdogan said: "just as we have not let the murder of your colleague, the late Jamal Khashoggi, be forgotten, we will by no means allow the tragedy of President Mohammed Morsi to be forgotten, either. We will work in order for the issue to be brought to light, using all the means within the international law to the end."<sup>46</sup> Besides, President Erdogan, at the 71st Session of the UNGA, blamed the 'tyranny' and 'authoritarian' nature of the Arab World's regimes for the prevailing crisis in Syria, Libya, and Yemen.<sup>47</sup> The War of Words between Erdogan and Al-Sisi reduced the prospects to the lowest level of reforming the relations between the two countries.

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45 "From General Assembly podium, Egypt calls for proactive UN strategy against extremism," *United Nations*, September 25, 2015, <https://bit.ly/3EYzqA> (Accessed: October 19, 2022).

46 "We will by no means allow the tragedy of President Mohammed Morsi to be forgotten," *Presidency of the Republic of Turkey*, June 20, 2016, <https://bit.ly/3Xhw7NA> (Accessed: November 11, 2022).

47 "General Assembly of the United Nations: Turkey," *United Nations*, September 20, 2016, <https://bit.ly/3my7dv0> (Accessed: October 22, 2022)

After dislodging the Brotherhood members from the Egyptian political space, Al-Sisi devised a strategy of allying with Arab rulers to contain Turkiye's influence in the region. Al-Sisi made close partnerships with Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates (UAE) in the Gulf region and Cyprus and Greece in the Eastern Mediterranean region. Al-Sisi considered that Turkiye's role in the region became a source of turmoil and conflict. Therefore, it was essential for Arab governments to either curtail or eliminate Turkiye's influence in the region. At the 71st UNGA Session, President Al-Sisi focused on the security and stability of the Arab World by connecting the culture, history, and connectivity of the people with the state, while President Erdogan focused on the values of Islam and democracy, issue of human rights and freedom of the people.<sup>48</sup>

Interestingly, the deterioration of the two countries political relations did not damage economic relations. According to the *UN Comtrade database*, the trade volume tripled between 2007 and 2022, from \$4.42 billion to \$11.14 billion.<sup>49</sup> The political crisis that soured the two countries' relations post-2013 between Cairo and Ankara did not affect the FTA 2005, indicating that the two countries could separate business from politics.<sup>50</sup> The trade relations improved between the two countries for three reasons:

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- 48 "Statement by H.E. President of the Arab Republic of Egypt Abdel Fattah El Sisi at the 71st session," *Egypt: State Information of Service*, September 22, 2016, <https://bit.ly/3Omb3Bo> (Accessed: November 18, 2022).
- 49 "UN Comtrade Database," <https://comtrade.un.org/data> (Accessed: September 30, 2022).
- 50 Khil al-Anani. "Egypt-Turkey Relations: Challenges and Future Prospects", *Arab Center Washington DC*, October 18, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3Dz1uv9> (Accessed: July 18, 2022).



1. Turkiye preserved the FTA because it consistently ran a trade surplus with Egypt.
2. Egypt's trade position relatively improved after 2013. Egypt's trade deficit declined, but the structure of Egyptian trade also changed through the sustained growth in manufactured goods.
3. The relations between Cairo and Ankara showed vital signs of intra-industry trade or the exchange of products from the same industrial sector.

The intra-industry trade showed that the two countries produced and traded manufactured goods instead of raw materials. More producers, workers, investors, consumers, and distributors were involved in the economic relationship, which raised the direct and indirect costs of disrupting their interactions.<sup>51</sup> The economic relations improved. However, it did not prevent the deterioration of political relations.

The MBH and political Islam suffered a setback but did not result in the diffusion of confrontation between Ankara and Cairo; instead, the rivalry between the two countries now culminated in a regional confrontation. Egypt wanted to counter the Brotherhood inside the country and in the region, while Turkiye desired to strengthen the Brotherhood. Besides, the two countries wanted to protect their geostrategic interests. As a result, the bilateral conflict turned into a regional confrontation between Turkiye and Egypt.

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51 Amr Adly. "How Egypt and Turkey Trade Amid Tensions", *Carnegie*, October 19, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3su4UZV> (Accessed: July 18, 2022).

## TURKIYE AND EGYPT'S CONFRONTATION IN THE REGION



The absence of the regional security architecture in the Arab region prompted Egypt and Turkiye to craft responsive and reactive foreign policies. As a result, Turkiye behaved like a 'reactive' actor that sought to reclaim its historical legacy and balance the threats coming from the region's changing political dynamics to make its place in the international system. At the same time, Egypt was conscious of its declining role in the region. It desired to establish itself as a 'strong state.'<sup>52</sup> At the 74th UNGA that opened on September 19, 2019, Erdogan delivered a speech targeting Fatah Al-Sisi while raising the issue of the jailed former President Mohammed Morsi. He stated, "Mohamed Morsi, Egypt's first democratically elected president, who died in a courtroom under suspicious circumstances, has become the symbol of the serious need for justice and fairness in the region."<sup>53</sup> He attacked President Al-Sisi on September 24 at UNGA, stating, "The United Nations had done nothing but watch events unspool in Egypt, and the person committing a coup was legitimized. If that was a legitimate path

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The absence of the regional security architecture in the Arab region prompted Egypt and Turkiye to craft responsive and reactive foreign policies.

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52 Reem Abou-el-Fadl. *Foreign Policy as Nation Making: Turkey and Egypt in the Cold War* (India: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 4.

53 "Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Address to the 74th Session of the UNGA," *Presidency of the Republic of Turkey*, September 24, 2019, <https://bit.ly/3XkSbaa> (Accessed: October 25, 2022).





to power, why did the United Nations exist at all?”<sup>54</sup> The Egyptian Mission to the UN directed a solid response to allegations related to Morsi’s death made by Turkish President Erdogan. The mission disapproved of Erdogan’s allegations against Al-Sisi and described Erdogan’s rule as oppressive and authoritarian.<sup>55</sup>

The rising confrontational attitude further increased the division between Erdogan and Al-Sisi. Ankara’s foreign policy witnessed a new momentum due to the growing regional dynamics, including Russia’s influence in Syria and US reluctance to play a proactive role in the region. Accordingly, the AKP rebuilt the foreign policy framework in three ways:

1. The shift in foreign policy doctrine from the “moral idealism” of the Davutoglu doctrine to what Tayyar Ari refers to as an “idealist realism and smart power,” known as the Erdogan doctrine.
2. The smooth shift of the axis from the West to Russia in the Arab World.
3. The shift in foreign policy orientation towards the region from cooperative to competitive ones.

All these new political imperatives invoked Turkish Cold War foreign policy, described by Fredrico Donelli as “a more securitized foreign policy in which the hard power regained supremacy on

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54 “General Debate: General Assembly of the United Nations,” *United Nations*, <https://bit.ly/3V1KkMt> (Accessed: October 28, 2022).

55 “An Official letter from Egypt to the United Nations to respond to Erdogan’s lies about Morsi,” *Al-Watan*, September 25, 2019, <https://bit.ly/3gbj0K> (Accessed: October 19, 2022).

soft power.”<sup>56</sup> Turkish military involvement in Syria, Libya, and the Mediterranean Sea and its increasing influence in the Gulf region revealed a robust indication of these changes in its foreign security policy.<sup>57</sup> The following section will discuss this.

## **1 *Turkiye and Egypt in the Syrian Conflict***

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Historically, Egypt maintained friendly relations with Syria. The military establishment in Egypt supported the stability of the Syrian military establishment because the instability of Syria, a neighbouring state, would generate a domino effect that might inspire the Islamists and terrorists elements to destabilise Cairo. Later, Egypt and Syria also opened diplomatic consulates to strengthen their relations. Turkiye and Syria’s bilateral relations had faced problems on several occasions, such as the boundary dispute related to Hatay province in 1939, water disputes resulting from the construction of the Southeastern Anatolia Project in 1989<sup>58</sup> and Syria’s support to Abdullah Ocalan, who founded Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK).<sup>59</sup> The bilateral relations improved in 2007 when Syria became an essential component of Turkiye’s

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56 Federico Donelli. “Back to the Hardest: The U-Turn of Turkish Foreign Policy,” *Political Reflection Magazine*, No. 19 (2019), pp.11–15.

57 Ari & Munassar. “Two stages of Turkey’s Quest for a regional power status in the Middle East”, p.10.

58 Syria demanded that more water to be released from the project, while Turkey denied the request stating the reason to form the dam reservoirs.

59 It is a militant guerilla movement which is based in the mountainous Kurdish majority regions of Southeastern Turkey and north Iraq. It was founded in 1978.



“zero problems with neighbours”<sup>60</sup> policy and its opening to the Arab World.<sup>61</sup>

Nevertheless, Turkiye and Syria’s bilateral relations turned into a confrontation in July 2011 when the Arab Spring resulted in popular dissent that demanded the removal of President Bashar al-Assad. After holding off for a few months hoping for a compromise, Turkiye sided with the popular uprising and openly backed the removal of Assad. Besides, Turkiye withdrew its Ambassador and other embassy staff from Damascus in 2012 following the deterioration of relations with Syria. Erdogan allowed the Syrian National Council<sup>62</sup> (SNC), the offshoot of MBH and closely linked with the parent Egyptian counterpart Brotherhood, to hold meetings in Turkiye. The violence between President Assad and the SNC descended Syria into a decade-long Civil War. It also resulted in Turkiye and Egypt closely aligning their geo-political interests in Syria. During his rule, President Morsi extended his support to the SNC in toppling the Assad regime due to this organizational affinity.

In this context, there was a sense of ideological convergence on sectarian lines between Egypt and Turkiye against Assad’s regime. President Morsi invoked the holy war in Syria and cut diplomatic ties with the Syrian government. On November 12, 2012, the SNC joined the broader National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and

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60 The named given to this policy suggested that it would eradicate all the problems that Turkey was trying to overcome in its neighbourhood.

61 Kemal Kirisci. “The Future of Turkish Policy toward the Middle East,” in Barry Rubin, Kemal Kirisci (eds.) *Turkey in World Politics: An Emerging Multiregional Power* (United Kingdom: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001), p. 96.

62 It is also called Syrian National Transitional Council or the National Council of Syria, based in Istanbul. It was formed in 2011.

Opposition Forces, founded in Qatar.<sup>63</sup> Turkiye and Egypt's actions coincided with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United States (US), and the EU's move to impose sanctions on Syria at the United Nations (UN).<sup>64</sup> On the contrary, Russia supported Assad's regime to strengthen its economic, military, and diplomatic interests in the Arab World. The collapse of Morsi's regime broke the coordination between Turkiye and Egypt. Therefore, the interests of Turkiye came into conflict with post-Morsi Egypt.

When Al-Sisi came to office in 2014, Egypt was involved in the Syrian conflict and began to monitor the situation and study its allies' position, especially with the growing role of Turkiye. Besides, Al-Sisi had to maintain the support of his closest allies, such as Saudi Arabia, which is the arch-enemy of the Iran-backed Assad regime.<sup>65</sup> On November 2016, Al-Sisi spoke at the UNGA. While delivering his speech, Al-Sisi stated that "our priority is to support national armies in Libya and Syria."<sup>66</sup> Al-Sisi also played a critical role in pursuing Saudi Arabia to bring Syria back into the Arab League. In March 2022, during the meeting with Muhammed

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On November 2016, Al-Sisi spoke at the UNGA. While delivering his speech, Al-Sisi stated that "our priority is to support national armies in Libya and Syria."

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63 Claire Bernish. "Declassified CIA Doc Reveals Plan to Destroy Syria for Oil Pipeline, Predicts Current Crisis", *The Free Thought Project*, April 11, 2017, <https://bit.ly/3YnExH>(Accessed: April 12, 2022).

64 "Guide to the Syrian Opposition," *BBC News*, October 17, 2013, <https://bbc.in/410KwTG>(Accessed: May 13, 2022).

65 Abdulrahman al-Rashed. "Sisi's policy towards Syria", *Al-Arabiya*, May 20, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3gIM3aX> (Accessed: September 18, 2022).

66 "Is Egypt Considering military intervention in Syria," *Al-Monitor*, December 7, 2016, <https://bit.ly/3Twak2l> (Accessed: July 18, 2022).



Bin Salman, Al-Sisi stressed the importance of reaching a political solution to the crisis in Syria in order to fulfill the aspirations of the Syrian people and preserve Syria's unity and territorial integrity.<sup>67</sup> On September 20, 2022, Erdogan made a statement at the 77th session of the UNGA in which, he reiterated the “permanent solution for Syria based on the Security Council Resolution 2254, in line with the legitimate expectations of the Syrians.”<sup>68</sup> The Foreign Minister of Egypt at the UNGA, Sameh Shoukry noted that, primarily among the threats to global security, is the attempt to undermine the nation-state by interfering in its internal affairs and disrespecting the particularities of different societies.”<sup>69</sup> The statement was a covert attack on Turkiye's involvement in Syria.

## **2 Political Deadlock in Libya**

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The Libya civil war in 2011 carried severe security implications beyond Libyan borders. The United Nations recognised the Islamist-dominated Government of National Unity (GNU). Turkiye and Qatar supported the GNU. The GNU, headed by Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh, is in Western Libya. It fought against warlord Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) and Speaker Aguila Saleh's House of Representatives (HoRs), located in Eastern Libya, aided by Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Egypt and

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67 “Egyptian lawmaker calls for closer Syria ties,” *Al-Monitor*, April 8, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3gIN9U7> (Accessed: July 18, 2022).

68 “Address to the 77th Session of the United Nations General Assembly by President of the Republic of Turkey, H.E. Recep Tayyip Erdogan,” *United Nations*, September 20, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3YwnGx3> (Accessed: November 18, 2022).

69 “Egypt: H.E. Mr. Sameh Hassan Shoukry Selim, Minister for Foreign Affairs,” *United Nations*, September 24, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3Zso80D> (Accessed: November 18, 2022).

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Egypt and Turkiye wanted to see a stable and united Libya. However, the two countries differed over who should lead this oil-rich African nation.

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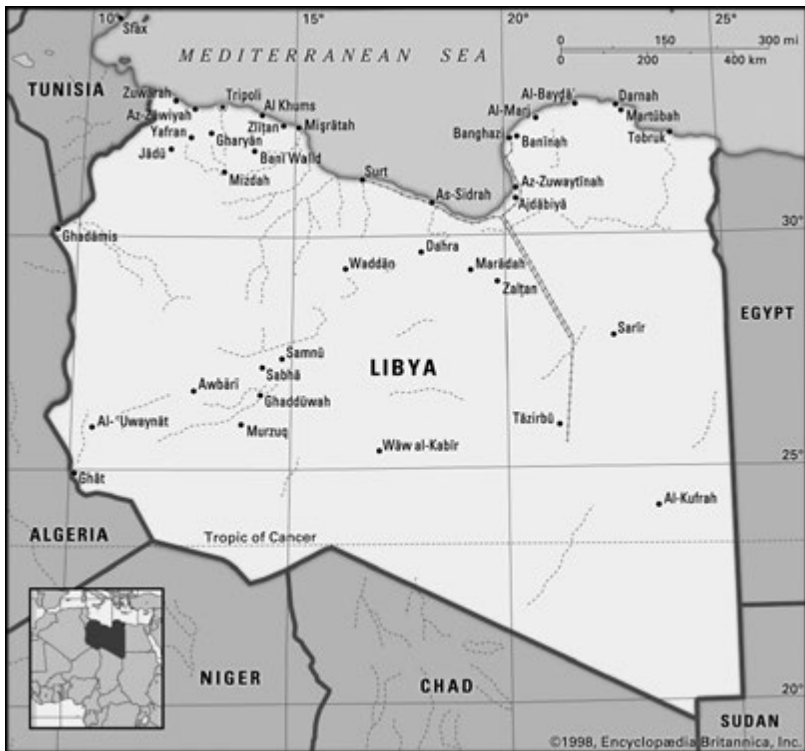
Turkiye wanted to see a stable and united Libya. However, the two countries differed over who should lead this oil-rich African nation. In this context, Libya held Parliamentary elections in 2018 in which it failed to establish political stability due to the political differences between GNU and LNA. The result was that the protracted civil war between GNU and LNA further deepened the political division in the country.

Turkiye successfully made massive economic and geo-political gains in Libya by signing the GNU-Turkiye Maritime deal in November 2019. Cairo did not accept the deal, claiming it would infringe on Egypt, Cyprus, and Greece's economic rights in the oil-rich Eastern Mediterranean Sea. The maritime deal resulted from Turkiye's positive response to support the GNU through military aid. As a result, on January 2, 2020, the Turkish Parliament approved the mandate to send Turkish forces to Libya to support GNU. On the same date, President Al-Sisi held a meeting of Egypt's National Security Council. Al-Sisi denounced the Turkish decision and warned that "any Turkish military intervention in Libya would negatively affect the stability of the region, and Turkiye will bear it with full responsibility for the consequences."<sup>70</sup>

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70 "The Egyptian initiative to solve the Libyan crisis", *State Information Service of Egypt*, <https://bit.ly/3yibsOg>(Accessed on April 22, 2022).

On January 19, Erdogan and Al-Sisi attended the Berlin Summit hosted by Chancellor Angela Merkel to support the UN’s efforts to implement the ceasefire and start the political process in Libya. Before leaving for the Summit, Erdogan made a statement at the Ataturk International Airport that the “lasting solution in Libya can be reached through political dialogue in which Turkiye has become the key player.”<sup>71</sup> With the growing Ankara’s role in Libya, Egypt had to increase its presence in Libya by actively participating in global



71 “Turkey has become the key to peace in Libya with its efforts on the ground and in diplomacy,” *Presidency of the Republic of Turkey*, January 19, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3KWDnuy> (Accessed: September 11, 2022)

and regional efforts to stabilise it. On June 6, 2020, Egypt issued the “Cairo Declaration” that emphasised the Libyan authorities’ unity, integrity, independence, and respect for the UNSC Resolution 600, in which all external forces must withdraw from Libya.

The Libya political process came on track when Türkiye supported GNU to halt Haftar’s campaign in Tripoli, which resulted in the ceasefire in Libya on August 2020. The ceasefire resulted in Türkiye failing to maintain its gains in Libya. The doors for negotiation between GNU and LNA were opened under the Egyptian leadership. Egypt became the platform for negotiation that Türkiye found relevant for the following reasons. First, Türkiye failed to access the oil fields in Sirte and Al-Jufra after Russia’s intervention. Second, the GNU was unsustainable due to its emerging negotiations with LNA. Third, sidelining Haftar as a party in the negotiation process was crucial for Türkiye. Also, Ankara wanted to exclude UAE from the negotiation table. Fourth, breaking the ice with Egypt in Libya might pull it away from Greece, which is Türkiye’s chief adversary in the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>72</sup>

Egypt changed its position in Libya when Speaker Aguila Saleh and Fathi Bashagha failed to win the race for the post of President. Therefore, Cairo nudged closer to the GNU, thus capitalising on improving its relations with Türkiye.<sup>73</sup> The *State Information Service of Egypt* reported that, on October 21, 2021, Egypt’s Foreign Minister (FM) Sameh Shoukry addressed an international

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72 “Why is Turkey acquiescing to Egypt’s role in Libya?”, *Al-Monitor*, September 17, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3zvcEhZ> (Accessed: October 18, 2022).

73 “Egypt nudges closer to new Libyan government at the expense of allies in eastern region”, *The Arab Weekly*, March 26, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3SDYj9l> (Accessed: July 18, 2022).



conference in Tripoli organised by GNU leaders. Shoukry called for a comprehensive national vision on security and economic and political issues that could be achieved by withdrawing foreign mercenaries and soldiers. In addition, the Paris Conference on Libya was held on November 11, 2021. President Al-Sisi participated in the conference and shed light on the stability and security of the country to conduct the election peacefully.<sup>74</sup>

The political situation in Libya remained futile until Turkiye could accept the withdrawal of the thousands of Turkish-sponsored Syrian mercenaries, maintaining a lasting military presence due to the Turkish-Libyan Maritime Deal. The political situation is entirely unacceptable for the Egyptian government, which will not retreat from the condition that the Turkish forces and affiliated mercenaries should leave the country. Egypt fears that Ankara's military patronage of Tripoli and its long-standing support to the MBH could create an Islamic-oriented government in Tripoli. Nevertheless, for Egypt, an agreement with Turkiye could preserve Egypt's military, political, and economic role in Cyrenaica—the eastern coastal region of Libya where the LNA is based, and present the opportunity to strengthen economic ties with Libya.<sup>75</sup>

The two rival governments in Libya, supported by external actors such as Turkiye and Egypt, externalise the conflict. Egypt and Greece affirmed that the GNU's authority had expired. Therefore, it is not authorised to sign any international agreements and

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74 "President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi's speech at Paris Conference on Libya", *State Information Service of Egypt*, <https://bit.ly/3D8MtP> (Accessed: July 12, 2022).

75 "Egypt recalibrated its strategy in Libya because of Turkey," *Atlantic Council*, June 1, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3SxuAzr> (Accessed: July 18, 2022).

MoUs. The two countries took this stance after GNU and Turkiye signed several preliminary economic agreements in 2022 in the hydrocarbon and oil sectors. The deal is an extension of the Maritime Border Agreement of 2019 that angered the northern and southern Mediterranean nations.<sup>76</sup> The tension further escalated when the GNU authority rejected the Egypt-Greece position on the maritime deal. At the UNGA 77th Session in 2022, Turkiye endorsed the UN's role in promoting political stability in Libya through democratic elections.<sup>77</sup> However, it did not mention the withdrawal of the external forces from Libya. The prospects of the return of political stability in Libya under the function of the parliamentary democracy remained bleak.

### 3 *Eastern Mediterranean region*

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The Eastern Mediterranean (EM) region is the hotbed of regional rivalry because of its critical geostrategic location and its rich resources of oil and gas. Cyprus, a Greek-majority island, has been at odds with Turkiye since the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire in 1922. The relations between Turkiye and Cyprus remained fraught with the suspicion that led to the 1974 war, which resulted in Turkiye's control over one-third of the island.<sup>78</sup> Egypt was part of the Ottoman Empire. It did not have animosity with Greece

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76 "Ankara, Tripoli sign maritime hydrocarbons deal", *Ahram*, October 3, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3ZrE6Z8>(Accessed: July 18, 2022).

77 "Address to the 77<sup>th</sup> Session of the United Nations General Assembly by President of the Republic of Turkey, H.E. Recep Tayyip Erdogan," *United Nations: UN Web TV*, September 20, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3STQcHW>(Accessed: August 19, 2022)

78 "The Cyprus Question", *Ministry of External Affairs: Republic of Cyprus*, <https://bit.ly/41NYjtF>(Accessed: July 1, 2022).



and Cyprus. The discovery of hydrocarbon resources catalysed cooperation between Egypt, Israel, Greece, and Cyprus. However, these countries did not make Turkiye part of the cooperation that became the source of tension between Turkiye, the Republic of Cyprus, Egypt, and Greece.

Besides, Turkiye wanted to control the energy resources and establish its hegemony in the region, which became a thorny issue with the European Union (EU) and the United States (US). The EU had significant interests in upholding the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Cyprus, Greece, and other union members to strengthen the Europe's security. Under the President Joe Biden administration, the US followed a pragmatic foreign policy towards the escalating crisis between Turkiye and its neighbors in the EM region. The US considered that energy resources should become the source of cooperation, development, and progress but not conflict. Also, the US sought to restore strong relations with European allies and push back on rival powers Russia and China.<sup>79</sup>

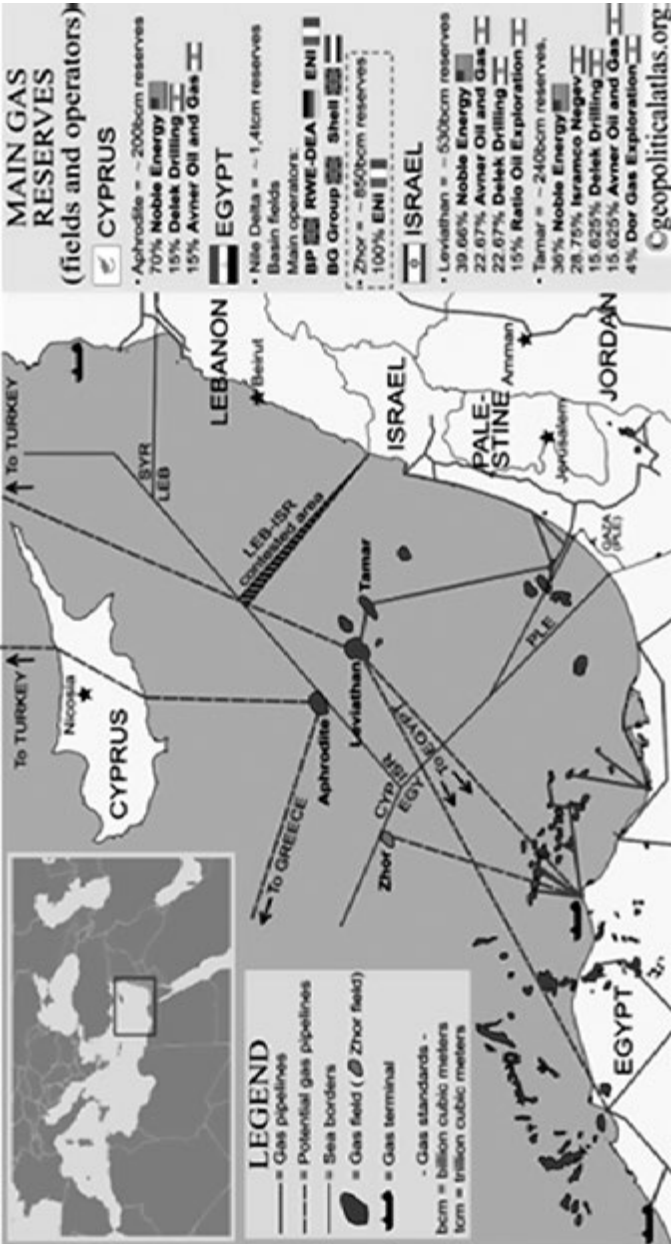
President Fatah Al-Sisi supported greater energy cooperation with Greece and Cyprus in this context. In 2015, the largest ever offshore natural gas field in the EM, the Zohra project, was discovered in Egypt's territorial waters. On September 19, 2018, Egypt signed an agreement with Cyprus to connect its Aphrodite gas field to Cairo's liquefaction plants for re-exploration.<sup>80</sup>

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79 "The Biden Administration and the Mediterranean: Interests and Policies in Search of an Overall Strategy," *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2021*, <https://bit.ly/3vBoFAL> (Accessed: November 17, 2022).

80 "Egypt... A regional center in Eastern Mediterranean," *State Information Service of Egypt*, February 22, 2018, <https://bit.ly/3f3Chjd> (Accessed: May 17, 2022).

# MAIN GAS FIELDS IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN SEA



Source: geopoliticalatlas.org



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Owing to Egypt's initiative, the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGM) was formed in January 2019 by Cyprus, Israel, Greece, Jordan, Palestinian Authority, and Italy, its founding members.

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Owing to Egypt's initiative, the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGM) was formed in January 2019 by Cyprus, Israel, Greece, Jordan, Palestinian Authority, and Italy, its founding members. The forum did not invite Ankara to become its member. Moreover, the forum deliberately ignored Türkiye and its critical presence in the region, which might challenge the forum's existence.<sup>81</sup> In reaction to the formation of the forum, Türkiye signed an agreement with the GNU of Libya in November 2019 to establish the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the Mediterranean Sea, which meant claiming rights to the sea bed's resources. Ankara could take the gas exploration initiatives over 200 miles of the Eastern Libyan coastline. Cyprus claimed that Türkiye would be able to intervene in its territorial waters.<sup>82</sup>

By mid-2020, the escalation of conflict between Türkiye and the Egypt-Cyprus-Greece coalition was about something other than gas per se. The waters where Greece and Türkiye deployed naval forces were far from any known deposits of hydrocarbons. The conflict fuelled clashes over sovereignty, access to natural resources, and strategic concerns. Also, Egypt, Greece, and Cyprus signed a deal to link power grids on October 19, 2021. Their alliance

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81 Al-Anani Khalil. "Egypt-Turkey strained relations: Implications for regional security", *Arab Center Washington DC*, March 18, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3swnzup> (Accessed: June 19, 2022).

82 Valeria Talbot, Galip Dalay, Ian Lesser & Kadri Tastan. "Turkey and the West in the Eastern Mediterranean." *Turkey and the West: Keep the Flame Burning*. German Marshall Fund of the United States, 2020. <https://bit.ly/3yhxy9>(Accessed: August 19, 2022). p. 16.

was to prevent Ankara from emerging as a regional hegemon in the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>83</sup>

Turkiye's policy in the EM escalated tensions with the regional players, including Egypt, and became a thorny issue with the EU and US interests in the region. The emerging coalition of the Mediterranean countries, including Egypt, treated Turkiye as a 'Mediterranean Pariah'. Resultantly, Ankara faced isolation in the EM region due to the rise of cooperation between Cyprus, Egypt, and Greece. At the latest 77th UNGA session, President Erdogan stated, "we want all the issues in the Aegean Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean to be resolved within the framework of good neighbourly relations and in conformity with international law." Without taking names, Erdogan further stated that, "those who pursue a show of force in the region, despite their political and military levels that are in no way on a par with our country, make themselves look nonsensical."<sup>84</sup> This statement of Erdogan proved that the EM region had become the hotbed of geo-political rivalry that has far-reaching geo-political consequences for Europe and the Arab World.

#### 4 *Politics of Alliance in the Gulf region*

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During the Egyptian Spring, Turkiye and Qatar were sympathetic to MBH, whereas Saudi Arabia and the UAE supported the Mubarak

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83 "Egypt, Greece and Cyprus sign deal to link power grid", *The National News*, October 19, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3zhdM8W> (Accessed: May 19, 2022).

84 "Address to the 77th Session of the United Nations General Assembly by President of the Republic of Turkey, H.E. Recep Tayyip Erdogan," *United Nations: UN Web TV*, September 20, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3Yvfp2S>(Accessed: August 19, 2022)

regime. The rift between Turkiye and the two Gulf countries became a significant problem for Erdogan. The fall of the MBH regime and the formation of a new government under General Al-Sisi resulted in UAE, especially Abu Dhabi, taking a keener interest in the region. In this manner, the regime change in Egypt created a conflagration between Ankara and Cairo, backed by the Gulf Arab counties. One avenue where this rift was quite prominent was in the UN, where the UAE spearheaded a successful campaign to block Turkiye's bid to join the non-permanent United Nations Security Council (UNSC) seat for the 2015-16 term.<sup>85</sup> The outcome led to the emergence of the two ideological groups. On the one hand, there was the Cairo-Riyadh-Abu Dhabi axis that came as a counterweight to the Ankara-Doha axis, resulting in the following events:

#### *a) Attempted Coup in Turkiye in July 2016*

On July 15, 2016, a fraction of the army led by General Akin Ozturk, sympathetic to Kemalist ideology, announced that it seized power to protect democracy from autocratic President Erdogan, who was taking the nation away from the principles of Kemalism.<sup>86</sup> The attempt failed because public opinion was sympathetic towards Erdogan and his AKP administration. Post the failed bid, the government accused Fethullah Gulen, an influential and reclusive

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85 Thomas W. Lippman. "Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey: Three regional powers on the battleground of Islam", in David Dumke and Gonul Tol (eds.), *Aspiring Powers, Regional Rivals: Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the New Middle East*, (N.p.: Independently Published, 2022), p.74.

86 "Turkey's coup attempt: What you need to know," *BBC News* July 17, 2016, <https://bbc.in/3yilEFi>(Accessed: April 19, 2022.).

US-based Muslim cleric, of being the mastermind behind the coup.<sup>87</sup> Media reports claimed that UAE funded the coup attempt. A leaked email from UAE Ambassador Yousef al-Otaiba to the pro-Israel think tank, *Foundation for Defence of Democracies*, created another controversy regarding the coup. Ambassador Otaiba, in the email, stated that the “Gulf nation could have played a more significant role in last summer’s failed coup than initially anticipated.”<sup>88</sup> The media’s allegation of the involvement of UAE in the domestic affairs of Turkiye further increased the animosity between Turkiye and Gulf countries.

The pro-regime Egyptian media celebrated the coup against Erdogan, who had earlier refused to recognise the legitimacy of Al-Sisi and allowed the members of MBH to turn Turkiye into a base of operations. In an interview with Qatar-based *Al-Jazeera*, Erdogan “hinted at the possibility of Al-Sisi’s involvement in the plot and made an analogy between the attempt to overthrow him and the Egyptian general’s role in the removal of his predecessor Morsi, who, like Erdogan, was democratically elected.”<sup>89</sup>

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. One of the editorials of Egypt’s prominent newspaper, *Al-Ahram*, argued that the “Egyptian army’s overthrow of the MBH was

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87 “Fethullah Gulen denies hand in Turkey coup attempt”, *The Hindu*, July 16, 2016, <https://bit.ly/3DygGZq> (Accessed: May 18, 2022).

88 “Hackers leak emails from UAE ambassadors to US”, *Aljazeera*, June 4, 2017, <https://bit.ly/3f50Vje> (Accessed: July 1, 2022).

89 “Erdogan will do everything for stability of Turkey”, *Aljazeera*, July 21, 2016, <https://bit.ly/3sxZGfE> (Accessed: May 18, 2022).



a revolution designed to rescue the nation from the rule of a movement that wreaked havoc on society.”<sup>90</sup>

After foiling the coup, Erdogan purged his opponents, including those his administration thought unsympathetic towards the AKP. On the contrary, the supporters of Brotherhood felt that Erdogan’s struggle in Turkiye was connected to their struggle in Egypt. It led to a media counterattack by the Egyptian regime against those described as ‘traitors’. It was partly against this backdrop that Egypt, a non-permanent member of the UNSC, insisted on blocking an American proposal that sought to condemn the Turkish coup, which called on all sides to respect the democratically elected government of Turkiye. Consequently, the relationship between Egypt and Turkiye was further strained because of the two countries’ narratives and counter-narratives in the region.

### *b) The blockade of Qatar in June 2017*

The fall of Mubarak, including other military leaders in the Arab World, created a belief among the elites of Qatar that the Arab Spring heralded a resurgence of populist political Islam in the region. In Egypt, like Turkiye, Qatar supported the Brotherhood because of its opportunism, political expediency, and pragmatic

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The fall of Mubarak, including other military leaders in the Arab World, created a belief among the elites of Qatar that the Arab Spring heralded a resurgence of populist political Islam in the region.

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90 “Not a coup, but popular revolution: Egypt’s Sabbahi”, *Ahram Online*, August 24, 2013, <https://bit.ly/3W71xpp> (Accessed: May 18, 2022).

desire to inflate its role and status in the region.<sup>91</sup> In addition, Qatar condemned Egypt when the latter declared the Brotherhood a terrorist organisation in December 2013. Therefore, Qatar's Islamist agenda created tension with the Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and UAE. Qatar supported the global Boycott Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movements against Israel that caused significant concern for UAE diplomats in Washington. After the dislodging of Brotherhood from Egypt, Qatar became the safe haven for its members who escaped from Egypt.

Saudis and Emiratis feared that Qatar and Turkiye's 'Muslim Brotherhood axis' could embolden Islamist groups in the Gulf region. Consequently, Saudi Arabia degraded its relations with Qatar in March 2014. Following the isolation of Doha, Turkiye deepened the military cooperation by forming the High-Level Strategic Council with Qatar in 2014.<sup>92</sup> The growing military cooperation between Turkiye and Qatar was countered by the formation of the Arab Quartet in June 2017 by the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt. The group severed diplomatic ties with Qatar and put a total embargo on all sorts of traffic to and from Qatar.<sup>93</sup> Besides the economic blockade, Egypt accused it of sponsoring terrorism. Turkiye established the Khalid bin Walid military base in Qatar

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91 "Al-'Atiyya li-l-Hayât: lâ nad'am al-Ikhwân (Al-'Atiyya to al-Hayat: we do not support the Muslim Brotherhood)," *Al-Hayat*, February 19, 2015, <https://bit.ly/3F2UuH9> (Accessed: May 24, 2022).

92 Sima Shine & Gallia Lindenstrauss. "Closer Iran-Turkey Ties: Regional Implications and Significance for Israel," *Institute for National Security Studies*, No. 974, (September 2017), <https://bit.ly/3Jg2lnp> (Accessed: April 23, 2022). P2

93 Birol Baskan. "Turkey between Qatar and Saudi Arabia: Changing Regional and Bilateral Relations." *International Relations*, vol. 16, no. 62 (2019), pp. 85–99. <https://bit.ly/3Jkxh67> (Accessed: August 19, 2022) p. 97.



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These emerging geostrategic groupings on ideological lines further threatened the region's security environment.

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in 2019, stationed by 5000 Turkish soldiers.<sup>94</sup> Ankara and Doha opened the Joined Command Headquarters at the military base. These emerging geostrategic groupings on ideological lines further threatened the region's security environment.

After years of conflicting relationships, Mohammad Bin Salman (MBS) signed the Al-Ula Declaration in Saudi Arabia on January 6, 2021, restoring the Gulf countries' ties with Qatar on the condition that Doha will not promote and support the Brotherhood in the region. However, the relationship between Turkiye and Egypt did not improve after the removal of the blockade of Qatar.

### *c) Assassination of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in October 2018*

Turkiye and Saudi Arabia's relations became tense after the murder of *Washington Post* columnist Jamal Khashoggi who was critical of the Crown Prince of the Saudi kingdom. Turkish officials reported having video and audio proof of Saudi agents who detained,

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The Erdogan government's involvement in the Khashoggi case further increased the bonding between the MBS, Al-Sisi and UAE Sheikh Mohammad Bin Zayed al-Nahyan in their visceral opposition to Erdogan and his support to the Islamists.

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94 "Turkey completes construction of new military post in Qatar, Erdogan says", *Daily Sabah*, November 25, 2019, <https://bit.ly/3SznkCZ> (Accessed: June 1, 2022).

murdered, and dismembered Khashoggi. As a result, Türkiye announced taking control of the criminal investigation in the Khashoggi murder case. The Egyptian media played safe regarding the Khashoggi murder. The media outlets and talk shows on private television channels slowly started to refer to the crisis by adopting the official Saudi line: Neither the king nor his son, Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS), was involved in Khashoggi's disappearance, and the entire saga was a conspiracy carried out by Türkiye and Qatar.<sup>95</sup> The Erdogan government's involvement in the Khashoggi case further increased the bonding between the MBS, Al-Sisi and UAE Sheikh Mohammad Bin Zayed al-Nahyan in their visceral opposition to Erdogan and his support to the Islamists.<sup>96</sup>

The Saudi Court also began the trial for the Khashoggi murder in January 2019. The verdict said the killing was not premeditated. In early July 2020, an Istanbul court put 20 Saudis on trial in absentia, including two who were close to the Crown Prince. In April 2022, a court in Türkiye ordered the transfer of the trial to Saudi Arabia. The decision coincided with efforts by Erdogan to improve his country's relationship with Saudi Arabia and the rest of the other countries in the region.<sup>97</sup>

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95 "Foreign Ministry Statement: Egypt appreciates the results of the investigations of the Saudi Attorney General," *Youm 7*, December 23, 2018, <https://bit.ly/3L5Nihl>(Accessed: April 12, 2022).

96 Soner Cagaptay. *Erdogan's Empire: Turkey and the Politics of the Middle East*, (United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), p. 180.

97 "Turkey transfers Khashoggi murder trial to Saudi Arabia," *New York Times*, April 7, 2022, <https://nyti.ms/3L0PSVS> (Accessed: June 12, 2022).



## RE-BUCKLING IN THE REGION

Since 2020, rival countries in the region have attempted to normalise their relations. The US sponsored the Abraham Accords<sup>98</sup>, which opened diplomatic and political channels for Arab countries to normalize their relations with Israel. The emerging normalisation eased the tensions between the regional foes to take collective measures to revive the regional economy in the post-Covid 19 world order.<sup>99</sup>

Notably, Turkiye faced severe economic challenges and political isolation in the region that required desperate measures to escape the economic crisis and political isolation. The following reasons pushed Turkiye to pursue the rapprochement with Egypt to utilise the Eastern Mediterranean region's energy resources and petrodollar-rich Gulf countries:

1. Erdogan's authoritarian interest rate policy declined the value of the Turkish Lira, skyrocketed the inflation, increased the cost of borrowing, and loan defaults.<sup>100</sup>
2. In 2020, at the height of the global pandemic, International Monetary Fund (IMF) projected that Turkiye's economy would shrink by five percent amidst a worldwide recession of three percent.

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98 The Abraham Accords are a series of joint normalization statements initially between Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain, effective since September 15, 2020.

99 "Turkey transfers Khashoggi murder trial to Saudi Arabia," *New York Times*, April 7, 2022, <https://nyti.ms/3L0PSVS> (Accessed: June 12, 2022).

100 Borzou Daragahi. "Erdogan is failing Economics", *Foreign Policy*, May 28, 2018, <https://bit.ly/3N91zJ1> (Accessed: June 12, 2022).

3. Turkiye had to change its foreign policy because it moved away from “Zero problems towards neighbours” to finding “precious loneliness.”<sup>101</sup>
4. The increasing isolation of Turkiye forced it to augment its presence in the region where it had been facing a backlash for a decade.
5. The Qatar-GCC deal opened diplomatic contacts between Turkiye and Gulf countries.

Erdogan started taking initiatives to repair the ties with Egypt. In this context, the emerging rapprochement between Turkiye and Egypt was essential to re-establish the Turkish geopolitical, economic, and security links broken due to its support to the Brotherhood, sending military to Syria and Libya.<sup>102</sup> The next section of the paper examines Turkiye’s initiatives to recalibrate the processes and strategies to revive its bilateral relationship with Egypt.

## THE EMERGENCE OF RECONCILIATION BETWEEN TURKIYE AND EGYPT



Turkiye’s aspirations to become the leader of the Muslim World, its support for the Brotherhood and other Islamist groups, and its domestic-fuelled foreign policy move alienated it in the region. The country also notably lost a chance at EU membership.

101 “Turkey’s foreign policy of ‘precious loneliness’, *Financial Times*, November 16, 2015, <https://on.ft.com/3STmbYI>(Accessed: April 22, 2022).

102 Nuri Yesilyurt & Shaimaa Magued. “Prospects and Implications of Turkish-Egyptian Reconciliation,” *India Quarterly*, vol. 78, no. 3. (September 2022), p. 6.



Western countries, including the US, questioned Turkiye's NATO membership after purchasing Russian S-400 missile systems in 2017. For Arab countries, 2020 was an excellent year for normalising relationships with Israel through the Abraham Accord. Also, Egypt, Cyprus, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority turned the EMGF into a regional, intergovernmental organization with headquarters in Cairo. Turkiye was noticeably absent from these changing regional political dynamics.<sup>103</sup>

Against this backdrop, the news in media outlets appeared in October 2020 that Turkish and Egyptian intelligence delegations held meetings to streamline their relations in the Eastern Mediterranean, which set a flurry of speculations about the possibility of cooperation between the two countries. The Turkish government seemed more eager to promote this speculation because of its quest to normalise its relations with Egypt. Erdogan announced the beginning of the intelligence contacts with Egypt. Erdogan's advisor Ibrahim Kalin, and Foreign Minister (FM) Mevlut Cavusoglu made statements in the media about the possibility of reviving their relations. Cavusoglu described Egypt as the "Spine" of every development in the region. Kalin stated, "Turkiye is ready to take steps to normalise relations with Egypt if Al-Sisi is ready to stop its repressive policies against opponents."<sup>104</sup> The statements showed that Turkiye's ruling establishment still supported the Brotherhood in Egypt.

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103 Karel Valansi. "Turkey has flipped the script on its regional isolation: But will it amount to real change?", *Atlantic Council*, October 12, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3FdgH6q> (Accessed: May 22, 2022).

104 "Turkey, Azerbaijan share special relations: official", *Andalou Agency*, December 14, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3SBMM1c> (Accessed: June 18, 2022).

From Cairo's perspective, normalisation of relations with Ankara was necessary to regain its lost prestige in the region. First, Türkiye and Egypt could jointly utilise their positions to create regional security architecture. Second, Egypt and Türkiye had robust counter-terrorism capabilities, including sizable forces, intelligence, law enforcement, and diplomatic endeavours. Third, Egypt is one of Türkiye's largest trading partners in Africa. Overall, Egypt can also strengthen its relations with Türkiye to use the two countries' political and economic influence to build and develop more efficient and reliable structures through agreements and consensus that can positively affect the Arab World.

On March 12, 2021, FM Cavusoglu announced that Türkiye established contact with Egypt at foreign ministry levels. Also, the Turkish Parliament unanimously approved a motion to establish a Parliamentary Friendship Group with Egypt on April 21, 2021. These announcements paved the way for the first *exploratory talks* in early May that touched upon issues of bilateral and regional importance, most notably regarding Libya, Syria, Eastern Mediterranean, and Gulf countries. President Erdogan announced the start of a new phase in relations with Egypt, stressing that the talks “would continue, develop and expand.”<sup>105</sup>

Many experts agreed that positive cooperation between Türkiye and Egypt, especially on economic and military affairs, was crucial for keeping the balance of power in the region. The two countries were figuring out a reliable future path through the

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105 “Egypt-Turkey set for second round of exploratory talks”, *TRT World*, August 31, 2021 <https://bit.ly/3TW64c7> (Accessed: May 12, 2022).





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The delegation had ministry and security officials. The next day, Turkiye and Egypt held their first round of Turkish-Egyptian Exploratory Talks within the Framework of Regional Crises.

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*exploratory talks* for sustainable long-term cooperation, which was essential for the security and stability of the Arab World and Eastern Mediterranean. It was not only the regional issues that were the critical points for the exploratory talks. It was also the bilateral issue related to Egypt's demand for the extradition of the exiled Brotherhood leaders and activists from Turkiye. Egyptian authorities accused the Brotherhood members of being involved in anti-state activities. Egypt's claim seemed correct when the senior Turkish officials quoted in the media that, from 2019 to 2020, "some 30000 Egyptians were living in Turkiye who had a connection to the Brotherhood."<sup>106</sup>

Turkiye became a safe haven for MBH members that remained the bone of contention between Al-Sisi and Erdogan. Also, the Egyptian authorities requested Turkiye to make a decisive exit of Turkiye-backed fighters from neighbouring Libya. Libya was another critical issue, as Ankara's involvement in the Libyan conflict in support of the un-recognised Government of National Unity (GNU) in Tripoli raised concerns for Cairo over its national security. These conditions were the primary determinants for future cooperation in economic and security issues with Turkiye.

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106 Ayyash Abdelrahman, "The Turkish Future of Egypt's Brotherhood", The Century Foundation, August 17, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3TSzwzG> (Accessed: May 24, 2022 ).

A Turkish delegation headed by Deputy Foreign Minister Sedat Onal arrived in Egypt on May 4, 2021. The delegation had ministry and security officials. The next day, Türkiye and Egypt held their first round of *Turkish-Egyptian Exploratory Talks within the Framework of Regional Crises*. Media outlets reported that Cairo asked Ankara “to stop interfering in the domestic affairs of Arab States, particularly Libya and Syria, to halt its media campaign against Egypt, and stop granting Turkish nationality to Egyptians living in Türkiye.”<sup>107</sup>

After two weeks, *Associated Press* reported that Turkish authorities asked three Istanbul-based Egyptian opposition TV channels to soften their critical political coverage of the Egypt government as Türkiye sought to repair frayed ties with Cairo. Ayman Nour, the exiled Egyptian political figure and head of *El Sharq TV*, confirmed the shutting down of TV channels during an *Al Jazeera* interview. Besides, Turkish authorities also shut down MBH-linked *Mekameleen* and *Watan* channels. Egyptian Information Minister Osama Heikal welcomed the move, characterising it as a ‘starting point’ to resolve disagreements that had arisen with Ankara in the past few years.<sup>108</sup> However, Türkiye did not close down all TV channels linked with MBH. Besides, the issue of exiled Brotherhood members’ extradition to Egypt was still pending because most leaders had now legalised their residency in Türkiye.

Therefore, Cairo demanded that Türkiye cut off all the Brotherhood-affiliated TV channels based in Türkiye. For instance, TV channels

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107 Altunisik B Meliha. “Turkey and Egypt: The Challenges of normalisation,” *ISPI*, March 30, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3gls7EW> (Accessed: May 19, 2022).

108 Hassanein Haisham. “Egypt-Turkey Rapprochement is constraining the Muslim Brotherhood,” *Washington Institute*, March 30, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3f2KFPX> (Accessed: June 12, 2022).

such as *Rabea TV*, *Rassd News Network*, *Al Araby TV*, *Sasa Post*, and *Noon Post* were still functioning in Turkiye. The relations also did not improve because one of the Brotherhood's activists Yasser Al-Umda, based in Ankara, posted a video message calling on the Egyptian people to take to the streets against Al-Sisi's administration.<sup>109</sup> The reason was that the current position of Ankara failed to formulate a clear policy regarding the MBH activists living in Turkiye. Turkish authorities did not take a concerted approach to deal with the issues of MBH activists in Turkiye. Besides, a senior Turkish official confirmed to *Middle East Eye* that Turkiye had not expelled members of the MBH from the country. Turkiye asked MBH members to tone down their criticism of Egypt's regime, but a senior MBH member stated that there is no visible pressure on the Ikhwan members now.<sup>110</sup>

On the Libya issue, during the talk, Turkiye was eager to hold a tripartite meeting with Egyptian and Libyan officials to agree on disputed issues in Libya, including the presence of foreign fighters. Turkiye agreed that all foreign mercenaries in Libya needed to leave the country. However, Ankara mentioned the Military Memorandum of Understanding (Maritime Deal) that it signed with GNU authority on November 27, 2019, which allowed Turkiye to station its troops in Libya.<sup>111</sup> Consequently, two days of high-level talks at normalising relations between Turkiye and Egypt ended

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109 "Turkish regime asks a Brotherhood activist to leave his lands," *Arab Observer*, March 17, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3THzGKS> (Accessed: May 13, 2022).

110 "Turkey has not expelled any Hamas or Muslim Brotherhood members, sources say," *Middle East Eye*, May 10, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3sxxgMdr> (Accessed: July 13, 2022).

111 "Egypt, Turkey say they held in-depth talks on bilateral, regional issues in Cairo," *AlArabiya*, May 6, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3TXy1At> (Accessed: April 11, 2022).

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The second round of Turkish-Egyptian Exploratory Talks within the Framework of Regional Crises was held in Ankara on September 7, 2021.

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without a breakthrough but were praised by the two regional heavyweights in a joint statement as “frank and in-depth.”<sup>112</sup>

Following the next level of exploratory talks, Egyptian FM Shoukry listed some conditions for restoring normal relations with Türkiye. First, Ankara must respect and recognise state sovereignty. It should not interfere in internal affairs and nor should it sponsor any extremist groups or ideology that is opposing the state. Second, in case the first condition is met, it will raise the communication to the political level leading to exploratory consultations with Egypt to achieve stability in the region. Third, Egypt expected Türkiye to modify the course of its foreign policies so that it would not intersect with Egypt’s interests, especially regarding its national security. Fourth, there will be other exploratory rounds of talks that will lead to normalisation once we are assured that the Egyptian interests are fully taken into account.<sup>113</sup>

The second round of *Turkish-Egyptian Exploratory Talks within the Framework of Regional Crises* was held in Ankara on September 7, 2021. Deputy Foreign Minister Hamdi Loza led the Egyptian delegation to Ankara. Türkiye cited an ‘increased momentum’ in normalisation efforts in its ties with Egypt. Türkiye’s *Ministry*

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112 “Egypt, Turkey conclude ‘frank and in-depth’ talks in Cairo”, *Al-Monitor*, May 6, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3fbCYGX> (Accessed: April 26, 2022).

113 “Egypt sets conditions for full normalization with Turkey”, *Al-Monitor*, May 26, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3zclj5H> (Accessed: April 24, 2022).



of *Foreign Affairs* announced Turkiye and Egypt's counter parts joint statement highlighting the "parties aimed to advance and normalise relations based on mutual benefit."<sup>114</sup> Turkiye seemed to be taking initiatives to improve its relations with Egypt on several issues. For instance, the Turkish authorities held out the possibility of striking a maritime deal with Egypt in the EM, similar to the one with the Tripoli government in late 2019. Turkiye's 2019 deal with the Tripoli government renewed tensions with neighbouring Greece and Cyprus over energy exploration in the region.<sup>115</sup> Therefore, Egypt, which is part of the EMGF, did not want to spoil its relations with Greece and Cyprus by signing the maritime deal with Turkiye. Following the second round of exploratory talks, the Egyptian FM Shoukry gave an interview the local MBC Egypt channel and mentioned that the two sides "agreed to continue these consultations confirming their desire to progress in areas under discussion and the need for further steps to facilitate normalisation of their relations. The progress would depend on how both countries adhere to bilateral relations rules."<sup>116</sup> The exploratory talks showed what seemed to be the bilateral issue between Cairo and Ankara have had regional underpinnings due to the two countries' geopolitical and military aspirations to protect their 'national interests'.

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114 "Joint Statement on the Second Round of Exploratory Consultations between Turkey and Egypt," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Turkey*, No: 300, September 8, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3TXyIK5> (Accessed: April 23, 2022).

115 "Turkey, Egypt hold 2nd round of political talks in Ankara," *Daily Sabah*, September 7, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3TEgpKa> (Accessed: April 25, 2022).

116 El-Khazen Ibrahim. "Egypt cites progress in relations with Turkey," *Andalou Agency*, October 2, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3zF5iiH> (Accessed: April 19, 2022).

As a result, the exploratory talks did not normalise the relations between the two countries. For example, after delivering a speech at Türkiye's Grand National Assembly, Erdogan expressed his readiness to exchange ambassadors with Egypt on a specific timetable as part of a more comprehensive plan.<sup>117</sup> President Al-Sisi, did not take any initiative to show his desire for sending an ambassador to Türkiye. In Ali al Hafni's words, who is an Egyptian diplomat, "Türkiye needed to take additional confidence-building measures before a full normalisation."<sup>118</sup> Egypt could not establish trust with Türkiye due to the lack of 'confidence building' measures that could have averted confrontation through the mutual trust and goodwill of the two countries. Egypt and Türkiye held two talks at the deputy ministers' level that failed to secure a meeting at the Foreign Ministers level. And a potential meeting between Turkish and Egyptian presidents seemed much more challenging due to the disagreements over the bilateral and regional issues.

When preparing the third exploratory talks, FM Cavusoglu announced that "Egypt and Türkiye have been taking steps to improve ties, and ambassadors will be mutually appointed when the time is right."<sup>119</sup> However, Egypt did not comment on Cavusoglu's remarks about a possible normalisation of relations because there is a great deal of distrust in Cairo about Turkish

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117 "Erdogan says Turkey will move to improve ties with Egypt, Israel," *Al-Monitor*, November 29, 2021, <https://bit.ly/3sz0mzH> (Accessed: May 13, 2022).

118 "Can Ankara-Riyadh rapprochement help improve Turkey-Egypt ties?," *Al-Monitor*, May 7, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3D4wS3c> (Accessed: May 25, 2022).

119 "Turkey, Egypt to appoint ambassadors at right time: FM Cavusoglu", *Daily Sabah*, April 7, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3sxtwRu> (Accessed: May 19, 2022).



intentions. Therefore, Turkiye's initiative to normalise relations with Egypt progressed slowly.

With the ongoing initiative with Egypt not increasing the normalisation process, Ankara launched another initiative to repair ties through the "five-pronged diplomatic drive", focused on UAE, Armenia, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Israel. Of the five, Erdogan visited the UAE in mid-February 2022, mending a decade of strained ties and securing funding for Turkiye's battered economy. On March 9, Israeli President Isaac Herzog came to Turkiye. Herzog discussed how the two countries could cooperate through bilateral or multilateral cooperation to create alternative energy sources for European markets. President Erdogan made his visit to Saudi Arabia on April 28, 2022. All these efforts failed to signal Egypt to start the talks at the Presidential level.

However, Turkiye's Treasury and Finance Minister Nureddin Nebati visited Egypt on June 3, 2022, to attend the meeting of the Islamic Development Bank. The trip marked the first ministerial-level visit to Egypt in nine years. Although the trip was not within the framework of bilateral ministerial visits, it was an important step in improving economic relations between Egypt and Turkiye. Later, Foreign Minister Shoukry participated in Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) meeting in Turkiye.

On the other side of the political spectrum, defence ministers of Egypt, Cyprus, and Greece held a meeting in Cairo on June 20, 2022 to expand cooperation in the Arab and Mediterranean regions to confront challenges and threats. Informally, the meeting gave teeth to the EMGF that aimed to protect the security and energy

resources of the littoral states against Türkiye. Also, Libya has become the bone of contention between Cairo and Ankara to hold another talk to reconcile the bilateral relations. Libya has derailed the ‘reconciliation’ process on several counts. Egypt did not accept the Türkiye-Libya Maritime Deal. Foreign Minister Sameh Shakoury while talking to the Al-Arabiya TV on October 28, 2022 stated that the, “course of talks with Türkiye has not been resumed because there have been no changes in the framework of practices by Ankara.”<sup>120</sup> Türkiye’s Foreign Minister countered Shakoury’s statement by stating that Egypt was using Ankara’s energy exploration deal with Libya’s UN-recognised GNU as a reason to slow down the fragile normalisation process between the two countries.<sup>121</sup> As a result, the reconciliation process between Cairo and Ankara faced an impasse that can be removed only with the resolution of Libya’s political deadlock.

At the end of 2022, a significant diplomatic development showcased the possibility of the normalisation of the bilateral relations between Türkiye and Egypt. The Turkish and Egyptian presidents shared an enthusiastic handshake on the sidelines of the opening ceremony of the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar.<sup>122</sup> The media claimed that the handshake between the two presidents would start the beginning of the normalisation of bilateral relations. Turkish and Egyptian governments spokesmen Ibrahim Kalin and Bassam Rady also said

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120 “Egyptians Foreign Minister: The Course of talks with Turkey has stopped due to the lack of change in its practices,” *RT*, October 28, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3hTZF3F> (Accessed: November 18, 2022).

121 “Turkey blames Egypt for halting normalisation over Libya energy deal,” *Middle East Eye*, November 2, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3UUVHqc> (Accessed: November 18, 2022).

122 “Sisi, Erdogan meet, pledge new era of Egypt-Turkey Relations,” *Al-Monitor*, November 22, 2022, <https://bit.ly/3lAPa7j> (Accessed: February 14, 2023).





the “handshake would be the beginning of the development of bilateral relations between the two sides.”<sup>123</sup>

## CONCLUSION



In the last decade, the Arab World witnessed many developments that aimed to transform the region’s geopolitical, security, and economic development. For instance, the establishment of the EMGF, the normalisation of Qatar’s relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and the signing of the Abraham Accords between Israel, UAE, and Bahrain facilitated the Arab states to normalize relations with Tel Aviv. Politically, Turkiye remained aloof from these developments because it supported Islamist movements and governments. Besides, Ankara understood that Brotherhood was now a ‘losing horse’ that could no longer become a means to establish its supremacy in the region. Economically, at the domestic level, the Covid-19 pandemic battered the Turkish economy. Erdogan’s unilateral policy of devaluing the Lira failed to revive the economy. As a result, Turkiye started reviving its relations with Arab governments, including Egypt.

The normalisation of Turkiye and Egypt could benefit the two countries by giving them access to modern, less conventional markets and hence more significant interaction with the world economy. Because of the rapid social and economic changes, Turkiye can pursue more outlets in the energy market to meet its rising energy demand. They can move natural gas from Egypt

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123 “Turkish presidential spokesman says normalisation between Turkey, Egypt to accelerate: Anadolu”, *Ahram Online*, January 4, 2023, <https://bit.ly/3xi1w6G> (Accessed: February 14, 2023).

to Turkiye through Syria and Jordan. This project will lead to diversifying Turkish fuel needs and improving Egypt as a transport point in the future. Also, the normalisation of the relations will help to expand regional diplomatic cooperation through their respect for each other's sovereignty and regular interactions between the two governments.

Since 2021, Cairo and Ankara have been working on reviving their bilateral relations and resumption of diplomatic engagement. The exploratory talks set a *modus Vivendi* for Ankara, but it failed to deliver on Egypt's following demands: first, return the exiled Brotherhood members from Turkiye; second, Ankara's military involvement in Syria and Libya; third, its unilateral geopolitical strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean (EM) region. Besides, Turkiye increased its involvement in the Horn of Africa and Ethiopia, a country with which Egypt has had a conflict since it started building the Grand Ethiopia Renaissance Dam (GERD) over the Nile waters, further increasing anxieties in Cairo. Turkiye's efforts to turn into a fresh leaf with its former Arab rivals are fraught with its U-turns and unilateral concessions. Egypt seemed to be the reluctant party because of the grave mistrust it had with Turkiye. Therefore, the complete normalisation of the two countries' relations is far-fetched.

Also, it is worth questioning whether Ankara is sincere or if its conciliatory actions are a new tactic to break the alliance created by the EMGF members. Therefore, it is unrealistic to expect Cairo to fundamentally change its alliance-making policy in the EM in Ankara's favour because of its growing energy and security relations with Greece and Cyprus. Another major hurdle is the ideological



differences between the two regimes. Turkiye, under AKP, supported the Islamists due to its affinity with Islamist ideology. President Al-Sisi's governance approach is oriented toward the 'strong Egypt,' supported by the military. Therefore, it is difficult to ponder how much Turkiye can compromise to normalise its relations with Egypt.

Though the two sides showed interest in a political arrangement in Libya, it is still being determined what confidence-building measures they will take to secure their interests. It is less likely that President Erdogan would allow the withdrawal of the Turkish military from Libya and Syria. In September 2021, Egypt chaired the Arab League's Arab Ministerial Committee on Turkish interference in the affairs of Arab countries, especially in Iraq, Libya, and Syria. The committee accused Turkiye of its 'illegal' involvement in the domestic affairs of Syria and Libya, threatening Arab countries' national security.

The current rapprochement, which might lead to a resumption of diplomatic relations, thus came as a surprise but is limited in scope because the main obstacles to a close partnership between Erdogan and Al-Sisi are differences in the ideological foundations of their regimes. These current shifts in foreign policy aimed to increase the two presidents' room for manoeuvre. Their regimes are under pressure due to regional, international, and domestic

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Egypt's Foreign Minister visited Turkiye on February 27, 2023, marking the first in a decade of strained ties between the two countries.

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development. The US and the EU should support the normalisation attempts because they can contribute to de-escalation in the region. Nevertheless, the regimes' current weaknesses in foreign policy and the economy provided an opportunity to call for political change in other areas.

The third round of the Exploratory Talks is yet to be announced. Following the earthquake in Turkiye that killed more than 45000 people, Egypt provided humanitarian assistance to recover the country from the national crisis. Egypt's Foreign Minister visited Turkiye on February 27, 2023, marking the first in a decade of strained ties between the two countries. Nevertheless, the success of the ongoing dialogue and reconciliation meetings between Turkiye and Egypt depends on two factors. First is resolving the bilateral issues through building the bridge of friendship and reconciliation. Second is how they navigate their ideological differences and meet their aspirations in Libya, Syria, the EM region, and their relationship with Gulf countries. It is essential to understand that the Arab World is a mosaic of ideological battles and geostrategic conflicts in which countries establish bilateral and multilateral partnerships to maximise their national interests.



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