

THE MIDDLE EAST ACCORDING TO EGYPT

Egypt Faces Challenges and Opportunities as the Government Charts
a New Regional Role for the Arab World's Most Populous Nation

By Mohamed Kamal

The statements of President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi and his foreign minister Sameh Shoukry have often reflected a pessimistic view of the Middle East and North Africa. To them, the region is rife with chaos, instability, bloody conflicts, and protracted crises, and its countries face existential threats. In an interview with the Saudi newspaper *Okaz* in October 2014, El-Sisi blamed this state of affairs in the region on what he called “creative chaos” resulting from “certain parties” attempting to fragment and rearrange the region, and unaware of the gravity of the consequences of their actions. In El-Sisi’s view, these parties mistakenly thought that the establishment of a new regional system would give them the opportunity to play a leading role in the region. The result was civil wars, sectarian conflicts, lost potential with people in the region paying the price. Today we have no regional system.

Given the obvious chaos in the region and its protracted conflicts, Egypt’s approach to regional crises has been one of caution, advocating political settlements while avoiding any military involvement that could drag the country into conflict. For example, in 2015, Egypt participated in Operation Decisive Storm—a military intervention by a coalition of Sunni Muslim countries, including the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, Morocco, Sudan, Jordan, and Pakistan against Houthi factions in Yemen. However, Egypt announced that its participation in the operation was limited only to air and naval forces—stressing the absence of land forces—with the main goal of safeguarding free navigation through the Red Sea and Bab Al-Mandab Strait.

Egypt also used its air force in limited and surgical operations against terrorist groups in Libya. For example, in May 2017, Egyptian fighter jets launched strikes targeting camps in the Libyan city of Derna, where, Cairo had

▷ Foreign ministers
of Egypt and
the United Arab
Emirates at a press
conference in Cairo,
July 5, 2017. *Khaled
Elfiqi/Reuters*



determined, militants who killed dozens of Coptic Christians traveling to a monastery in southern Egypt were trained.

The State Is the Solution

According to Egyptian officials, collapsed and weak states have contributed to regional chaos. Therefore, the only possible way out of the crises in the Middle East is through the restoration of the state and its institutions. El-Sisi has emphasized this state-centric solution for several regional conflicts, particularly what he described as attempts at division and fragmentation for ethnic or sectarian reasons. For example, a resolution to the crisis in Syria should, above all, aim to preserve the unity of the Syrian state, and to maintain its institutions.

Likewise, there is no solution in Libya except in the framework of a political settlement, which restores the state's institutions, and confronts attempts to fragment the state and turn the country into a hotbed of tribal conflicts. Egypt has also announced its support for efforts to achieve unity in Yemen, protect its territorial integrity, and restore its legitimate government. "Any reform," the Egyptian president asserted, "must pass inevitably through the nation-state, and cannot be built on its demise."

Egypt also expressed deep concerns about the possible secession of Kurdish-held parts of northern Iraq in the wake of the referendum on independence which took place on September 25, 2017. The Egyptian foreign ministry urged all parties to exercise self-restraint and steer clear of unilateral measures that could complicate the situation, destabilize Iraq, and encourage a climate of chaos and tension in the region.

Moreover, in Egypt's view, national armies are key players in preserving the state. In an interview with *Asharq Al-Awsat* newspaper in November 2017, El-Sisi summed up his position by emphasizing his rejection of armed militias that plunge disintegrated nations into endless wars. On the other hand, he reiterated his support for both the Syrian and Libyan national armies in an interview with the Portuguese channel, RTP. When asked if he would send Egyptian peacekeepers to Syria under a peace deal, he replied that it is better that the national army take responsibility and that his priority is to support the national army of Syria. Consequently, Egypt sees no place for non-state actors such as militias or terrorist groups in the resolution of regional conflicts. El-Sisi called for the dismantling of these groups rather than integrating them in the state.

A Partner, not a Leader

In a major departure from its decades-long rhetoric about regional leadership, Shoukry announced before a meeting of the Foreign Relations Committee of the Egyptian

Parliament on May 5, 2016, that “Egypt is not seeking leadership (*riadah*), and we do not want to be a leader of anyone.... We want to be partners, in a way that preserves common interests.”

Egypt gave priority to forging a partnership with the Arab Gulf countries, notably Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. El-Sisi stressed that the security of the Arab Gulf is an integral part of Egypt’s security, and threats to Gulf security would be a red line for Egypt. He also described the relationship with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates as “deep and strategic,” and serving the interests of the three countries and Arab national security as a whole.

This trilateral partnership has been active on several regional issues such as Libya, Yemen, and the Palestinian reconciliation. Egypt has also joined Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain in boycotting Qatar. The four states accused Qatari authorities of supporting and financing terrorism, harboring extremists, spreading hatred, and interfering in the internal affairs of other countries.

In this context, Egypt and Saudi Arabia have forged closer ties since the ouster of former president Mohammed Morsi in July 2013. On several occasions, El-Sisi has asserted that Saudi Arabia and Egypt are the two wings of Arab national security.

The military and strategic cooperation between the two countries reached unprecedented levels in the era of King Salman Al-Saud and El-Sisi. During the Saudi monarch’s visit to Egypt in 2016, both countries signed several agreements, including the settlement of a maritime border dispute over the islands of Tiran and Sanafir, and the building of a bridge that would link the two countries across the Red Sea. In March 2018, Saudi Arabia and Egypt extended their economic cooperation by agreeing to develop a business zone that would span the border between the two countries. A \$10 billion investment fund would be set up to develop the zone, with Egypt providing a long-term lease on the land in the south of the Sinai region where part of the project would be built.

Military cooperation has also intensified between the two countries. On March 26, 2015, Saudi Arabia announced the launch of a military alliance with the participation of Egypt, Gulf, Arab, and Islamic countries to support Yemeni President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi against Houthi militias. Egypt also joined the Islamic military alliance established by Riyadh to counter terrorism. In February 2016, Egypt joined Saudi Arabia in a massive military exercise which included troops from 20 nations, dubbed North Thunder, and took place in northeastern Saudi Arabia. In March 2018, the Egyptian Armed Forces participated in Gulf Shield-1 joint drills, also taking place in Saudi Arabia.

At the bilateral level, military forces from both nations participated in several joint exercises, involving the army, navy and air force. For example, Egyptian Armed Forces

also participated in the joint military exercises Tabouk-3 in western Saudi Arabia. The navy from both countries participated in Morgan-14 and Morgan-15 in the Red Sea in 2013 and 2015; and in 2017, the Egyptian and Saudi air forces participated in Faisal-2017, hosted by Egypt, which marked the eleventh edition of the joint air force training between the two countries.

Counter-terrorism as a Regional Priority

Countering terrorism has become a foreign policy priority for Egypt. El-Sisi declared that it was impossible to envisage a future for a regional order without a definitive and comprehensive confrontation with terrorism. He linked the rise of terrorist organizations to the disintegration and instability of state institutions in the Arab region, and what he described as the systematic attempts to drag the region into a “destructive vacuum.” He also stressed the importance of resolving the Palestinian issue via a just, comprehensive, and final settlement based on the two-state framework. El-Sisi believes that settling the Palestinian issue will eliminate a major pretext used by terrorists to justify their crimes.

In his speech before the Islamic American Summit in Riyadh, El-Sisi called for a holistic approach to counter terrorism that encompasses political, ideological, and developmental aspects. He offered four elements to end terrorist activity in the Middle East and North Africa. First, states and militaries must confront all terrorist organizations without discrimination, instead of limiting confrontation to one or two organizations, as all terrorist organizations are interconnected through ideology and funding, as well as military, security, and information sharing. Second, a comprehensive confrontation with terrorism must address all dimensions of this phenomenon, including funding, arming, as well as political and ideological support. The third element of battling terror is the termination of the terrorist organizations’ ability to recruit new fighters at both the ideological and intellectual levels, with special emphasis on renewing religious discourse. Finally, states must fill the vacuum where terrorism grows. This requires exerting every effort to restore and reinforce the unity, independence, and efficiency of state institutions in the Arab region.

In this vein, Egypt has accused regional powers of supporting and financing terrorist organizations, called for the establishment of a joint Arab military force to combat terrorism, and taken its war on terrorism to neighboring Libya with airstrikes on targets in 2015 and 2017.

El-Sisi continues to believe that military force is an important tool in combating terrorism. In the aftermath of the terror attack at Al-Rawda mosque in North Sinai in November 2017, which claimed the lives of 305 civilians, he ordered the Egyptian military to use “brute force” against terrorists. He also believes that the war on

terrorism should have a regional military dimension, a priority that has become more urgent as the region faces the threat of terrorism. Arab leaders agreed to the principle of a joint Arab military force during a summit meeting in Sharm El-Sheikh in March 2015. However, the force has failed to materialize due to disagreements on the size, leadership, and goals which would make up this kind of joint military structure.

Outside Help Is Welcome

Though Egypt has frequently rejected all instances of interference in the internal affairs of the region's countries, it has welcomed outside help in resolving regional conflicts. Egypt believes that leaving conflicts to regional powers alone will further complicate rather than solve them. In an interview with CNBC in November 2017, El-Sisi accepted that outside powers such as the United States and Russia will be active in developing diplomatic initiatives in the region. El-Sisi emphasized that when there is no dialogue or understanding between regional and outside powers, the result is a loss of stability in the Middle East.

For example, while Egypt criticized Turkish and Iranian involvement in Syria, El-Sisi's government called for a joint Russian–American effort to resolve the crisis, and backed the negotiations sponsored by the United Nations in Geneva. Egypt also supported the Russian initiative to establish de-escalation zones in Syria and on July 31, 2017, Cairo hosted negotiations between representatives of the Russian Defense Ministry and moderate Syrian opposition. An agreement related to a third de-escalation zone in Syria, north of the city of Homs, was reached at the Cairo meeting. Egypt also attended the second round of the Astana talks on Syria, sponsored by Russia on January 23, 2017, and brokered a ceasefire agreement on Eastern Ghouta between Al-Ghad opposition movement and the Syrian government. The signing of the agreement came after three days of negotiations in the presence of the Syrian opposition, the Syrian government, and the Russian Defense Ministry.

Following the election of Donald Trump as president, Egypt welcomed renewed American interest in the region. El-Sisi believed that the United States has regained its weight and role in preserving the security of the region, and expressed his appreciation for what he described as the insightful vision of Trump, who has proposed since assuming office a robust antiterrorism policy.

After Egypt successfully concluded a ceasefire agreement between the Syrian government and the Al-Ghad opposition movement, Al-Ghad Chairperson Ahmed Jarba held a press conference in Cairo, in which he cited the reasons for choosing Egypt as mediator. The first was that Egypt had not been involved in any conflict with the Syrian parties, nor had it backed any armed Syrian faction. Secondly, Egypt has good relations with Russia, a co-sponsor of the ceasefire. And third, Egypt's role was

confined to only being a mediator. The previous statement illustrates how Egypt has been able to become a regional player once more. Egypt's conviction that there should be no military solutions to the ongoing conflicts in the region and Egypt's advocacy of political settlements based on the preservation of state unity and territorial integrity as well as its relationship with key parties of regional conflicts have provided opportunities for Egypt to reactivate its regional role.

In addition to its mediation in the Syrian crisis, Egypt has played a key role in attempts to find a diplomatic resolution to the conflict in Libya. Cairo hosted several meetings that were attended by representatives from Libya's numerous factions to discuss the details of a political settlement to the conflict. In August 2016, and to emphasize the importance of the Libyan question to Egypt, El-Sisi appointed General Mahmoud Hegazy, then the armed forces chief of staff, to be the head of the Egyptian Committee on Libya.

Egypt continued to support General Khalifa Haftar and his Libyan National Army (LNA), but it also reached out to Libya's Presidency Council (PC) leader, Fayez Al-Sarraj, and mediated between the two adversaries during their visit to Cairo in February 2017. Egypt also proposed an initiative to unite the Libyan army, which won the praise of many factions in Libya. Moreover, Egypt worked with Tunisia and Algeria in an attempt to reach an accord among all Libyan parties.

Egypt also renewed its efforts to achieve a Palestinian reconciliation between the rival factions Hamas and Fatah. On October 12, 2017, the two factions signed a reconciliation deal in Cairo brokered by Egypt. The El-Sisi administration also helped in easing tensions between Lebanon and Saudi Arabia, and facilitating the return of Prime Minister Saad Hariri to Beirut after he announced his resignation from Saudi Arabia on November 4, 2017.

Challenges of a Regional Role

With these successes, Egypt's regional role has also faced several challenges. The first is domestic preoccupations. Egypt continues to be confronted with significant domestic challenges, including a rapidly increasing population, an economy still in the process of a slow rebound, and the continuation of the security challenges in the Sinai Peninsula and Western Desert. The Egyptian leadership's priorities and preoccupation over these domestic challenges have constrained the willingness and ability of Egypt to pursue an ambitious regional role.

Another constraint relates to disagreement on some regional issues between Egypt and its Arab partners, notably Saudi Arabia. For example, while Saudi Arabia demanded the departure of Bashar Al-Assad of Syria as a precondition for resolving the Syrian crisis, Egypt considered the Syrian president part of the solution, and was

in favor of him remaining in power for fear that his removal might hasten the collapse of the state and turn Syria into a hotbed for terrorist activity. Saudi Arabia criticized Egypt for supporting a Russian proposal for a truce in Syria at the UN in October 10, 2016. Saudi Ambassador to the United Nations Abdullah Al-Mouallimi described Egypt's support for the Russian draft resolution as "painful," and Saudi Arabia punished Egypt by temporarily halting its supply of oil to the country.

Cairo has also taken a different line on Iran. Unlike Saudi Arabia, Egypt does not consider Iran the primary threat in the region. Egypt criticized Iran's interference in Arab internal affairs and pledged support for Saudi Arabia. El-Sisi, however, stressed the importance of de-escalation. He was against military strikes on Iran or the Tehran-backed Lebanese group Hezbollah, adding that there was enough turmoil in the Middle East. Egypt was also less skeptical than Saudi Arabia of the P5+1 nuclear deal with Iran, and expressed hope that the deal would offer a new opportunity to creating a nuclear weapons-free zone in the Middle East. Another point of contention was the Egyptian proposal to establish a joint Arab military force, over which Saudi Arabia had reservations. Ultimately the proposal was shelved due to disagreement over the size of the force, its leadership, and goals.

However, several indicators have recently shown that the gap of disagreement between Egypt and Saudi Arabia has been bridged. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman recently described the Muslim Brotherhood group as an incubator for terrorists. Also, the crown prince said Egypt was a part of what he described as an alliance of moderate states that included Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Oman. This alliance stands against what Salman calls the "axis of evil," consisting of Iran, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Sunni terror groups.

Egypt Charts Troubled Waters

Egypt's regional role has been influenced by its view of the Middle East as a chaotic region. El-Sisi's government gives great import to security measures and the integrity of states across the Middle East and North Africa. Essentially, the administration is opposed to radical Islamist terrorist networks as these institutions inherently seek to destroy the nation state. To these ends Egypt has put emphasis on political settlement of regional crises aimed at restoring the state and its institutions. Egypt has also worked in partnership with the Gulf Arab countries.

El-Sisi has put Egypt on a new path in that it is now a champion of state security and antiterrorist activities across the Middle East and North Africa region. This will likely be the trajectory of Egyptian policy in the Middle East for many years to come.