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TAKING STOCK OF THE MIDDLE EAST IN 2015

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Egypt in the Region

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It wasn't long ago that someone sitting down to relax at the end of the day almost anywhere in the Middle East might turn on a radio to hear an Egyptian singer, turn on the TV to watch an Egyptian soap opera, or catch a film with an Egyptian cinema star. For decades in the last century, too, many Arabs looked to Egypt for political leadership within the region.

But by late 2013, a prominent commentator on Gulf affairs asserted that major cities in the Gulf (in particular Dubai, Abu

Dhabi, and Doha) had overtaken the likes of Cairo and Beirut as the symbolic centers of the Arab world.¹ Vigorous debate ensued, and many felt that a city such as Cairo—and a country such as Egypt—could hardly be supplanted.²

Since 2011 events have left Egypt's health and future trajectory uncertain. Yet many have continued to argue that Egypt is a bellwether for the Middle East as a whole. When protests jumped in January 2011 from Tunis to Cairo, the region's and the world's attention quickly shifted east as

1. Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi, "Thriving Gulf Cities Emerge as New Centers of Arab World," *Al Monitor*, October 8, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/10/abu-dhabi-dubai-doha-arab-centers.html>.

2. See "Hel ihtallat mudun al-Khalij makanat al-mudun al-arabiyya al-'ariqa?" [Have the cities of the Gulf taken the place of the old Arab cities?], *BBC Arabic*, October 9, 2013, http://www.bbc.co.uk/arabic/interactivity/2013/10/131009_comments_new_arabcities_, esp. the comments section; Michael Collins Dunn, "The Debate Over Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi's Article on Gulf Cities," Middle East Institute, October 15, 2013, <http://mideasti.blogspot.ae/2013/10/the-debate-over-sultan-sooud-al.html>; and Al Qassemi's own round-up of the debate, "Responses to Gulf Cities as new Arab Centres of Culture & Commerce article," *Felix Arabia* (blog), October 15, 2013, <http://sultanalqassemi.blogspot.com/2013/10/responses-to-gulf-cities-as-new-arab.html>.

well. Judging from the media coverage, it almost seemed that Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali's overthrow had been merely the dress rehearsal for the uprising against Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. As one Bahraini activist stated that February, "[Egypt is] either the sick man of the Arab world, or it could be the healthy man that could take us to new heights."³

Yet the reversal of the historical pattern is striking. Today, rather than Egypt taking a leading role in the region, other powers in the region have been taking a leading role in Egypt. For some, Egypt's trajectory epitomizes the failure of the "Arab Spring" to translate into sustained, democratic, inclusive political processes and institutions. For others—most importantly Saudi Arabia (a former rival to Egypt) and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—Egypt has become ground zero in the effort to sideline politically ambitious Islamist groups and a central arena in the struggle against violent jihadi-salafi organizations. The overthrow of Mubarak in Egypt introduced uncertainty into the region's politics that Gulf states found troubling. They feared that forces opposed to them could come to power in Egypt and that a successful democracy in Egypt might inspire further demands for democratization elsewhere.

It is unclear whether the Gulf states have a specific positive agenda for Egypt's future. But they do appear to think that economic recovery and growth with-

out political liberalization can serve as a basis for future stability there and elsewhere in the region. And they have shown their willingness to step in to prevent short-term economic failure. They also appear to see Egypt as a focal point for strengthening a renewal of "apolitical Islam" in the region, both through traditional religious institutions such as Al Azhar and through the personality of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. From their perspective, it is necessary to reimpose security and stability across the Middle East and promote a version of Islam defined primarily by its political quietism, or at least its rejection of political opposition to sitting rulers. The Gulf states believe this effort must succeed in Egypt if it is to succeed anywhere.

Those at the helm in Egypt, in turn, have sought to wield their country's symbolic power to secure their own stability. Unlike throughout much of the twentieth century, however, the threat and promise Egypt hold out today rest on its vulnerability rather than its power. Instead of procuring aid and assistance by suggesting that Egypt might strengthen alternative alliances or interfere abroad, today Egypt procures aid and assistance by highlighting its internal woes. The message it projects is that Egypt is fighting terrorism and potential economic disaster, and those who care about Egypt's future—and by extension that of the Middle East as a whole—should help it win those fights on its terms.

3. Borzou Daraghi, "Change in Egypt could restore its centrality to Arab world," *Los Angeles Times*, February 4, 2011, <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/feb/04/world/la-fg-egypt-arab-world-20110204>.

EGYPTIAN STRATEGY AND REGIONAL POWER IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Throughout its modern history, Egypt's rulers have faced a common strategic challenge: calibrating how much autonomy to give up to secure external resources needed for domestic political and economic purposes. European states used usurious lending backed by military might in the nineteenth century to dominate Egypt. Egyptian rulers since then have been wary of coming too much under another power's thumb. Even as it resisted such domination, however, Egypt in the twentieth

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century remained a prize for outsiders. Egyptian leaders—in particular Gamal Abdel Nasser—used that status as leverage to seek aid from all corners.

During the Cold War, the United States tried to woo Egypt, but with little success. U.S. foreign assistance in the 1950s and 1960s, mostly food aid, was predicated on hopes that this would induce the Egyptians to reject Soviet overtures.⁴ But the United States would not supply Nasser with something essential to his domestic positioning: weapons. So he looked elsewhere, signing a \$250 million arms deal in 1955 with Czechoslovakia. That drove a rift between Egypt and the United States and kicked off a series of events⁵ that culminated in Nasser's decision to nationalize the Suez Canal. U.S. aid fluctuated at modest levels in the years that followed.⁶ For a long time, there was little incentive for the United States to try to strengthen its ties with Egypt, and it seemed unlikely that Nasser would find advantage in siding too closely with either the United States or the Soviet Bloc.

The Soviet Union tried harder than the United States to woo Egypt and bring the country into its orbit, but it found Nasser hard to get. The USSR was far more generous to Nasser than the United States ever was, both in the amount of aid granted and the terms on which it was given.⁷ The Soviets began providing military aid to

4. Jeremy Sharp, "U.S. Foreign Assistance to the Middle East: Historical Background, Recent Trends, and FY2011 Request," Congressional Research Service, June 15, 2010, 22, <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL32260.pdf>.

5. In particular, the United States withdrew its offer of credit to help fund construction of the Aswan High Dam in 1956.

6. U.S. aid dropped from \$33.3 million in 1956 to \$1 million in 1957. By 1962 it had reached a pre-1967 high of \$200.5 million. After the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, the United States cut all aid to Egypt, though some small loans re-materialized by 1972. Jeremy Sharp, "Egypt: Background and U.S. Relations," Congressional Research Service, June 5, 2014, 16, <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33003.pdf>.

7. According to Waterbury, Egyptian official 'Aziz Sidqi claimed it was favorable terms for aid that drew Egypt closer to the Soviets rather than "socialist affinity." John Waterbury, *The Egypt of Nasser and Sadat: The Political Economy of Two Regimes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 397.

Egypt in 1955 through the Czech arms deal. Despite tensions, the relationship grew: in January 1958 the USSR gave Egypt a \$158 million loan and \$100 million in aid for the Aswan Dam—more than it had ever granted a non-aligned state.⁸ By 1975, estimates suggest that “the total flow of socialist economic and military resources to Egypt” over the preceding 20 years came to \$6.8 billion, largely financed by Egyptian debt.⁹

While Nasser sought aid from competing global powers, he remained focused on building Egypt's strength within the region. That meant dealing with two strategic foes: Israel and the conservative Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia and Jordan (considered enemies of Arab unity).¹⁰ Nasser championed Egypt as the protector and savior of the beleaguered Palestinian people, and he fought two wars against Israel in 1956 and 1967. When the latter ended in a crushing defeat, it was the beginning of the end of his political career.¹¹

Nasser's rivalry with the Arab monarchies was, in contrast, both a cold war and a proxy war. Nasser stood as the beacon for revolutionary Arab nationalism, socialism, and republicanism: three trends that were anathema to the region's remaining monarchs.¹² For much of the 1960s, Egypt and Saudi Arabia also waged a proxy war in North Yemen, whose leader, Imam al-Badr, was overthrown by republicans in a 1962 coup. By the end of the conflict, Egypt had more than 70,000 troops in Yemen, or nearly half its total army.¹³ For Nasser, coming to the Yemeni republicans' aid was in large part a way of demonstrating to a domestic audience the power of his person and ideology. It also demonstrated to the world what Egypt could accomplish. Major domestic development and infrastructure projects—the Aswan Dam being the archetypal undertaking—further underscored the argument for Egyptian greatness and achievement.

Until near the end of Sadat's time in power, this basic pattern held: Egypt stood against Israel and the monarchs and was not aligned with either the United States or Soviet Union.¹⁴

8. Galia Golan, *Soviet Policies in the Middle East From World War II to Gorbachev* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 54.

9. Waterbury, *The Egypt of Nasser and Sadat*, 398.

10. Anthony Nutting, *Nasser* (New York: EP Dutton & Co., Inc., 1972), 320.

11. *Ibid.*, 425–451.

12. In part due to this rivalry, in the 1950s and 1960s, Saudi Arabia took in and harbored intellectual refugees from Egypt after Nasser's crack down on the Muslim Brotherhood. Ironically, given recent developments discussed below, it was in large part Saudi Arabia's hospitality that made possible the survival, renewal, and flourishing of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. For a detailed discussion of this period and the Brotherhood's integration into Saudi state and society, see Stéphane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: The Politics of Religious Dissent in Contemporary Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

13. Nutting, *Nasser*, 322. Nutting's more detailed chapter on Egypt's involvement in the war is titled, appropriately, “Nasser's Vietnam.”

14. Relations with the Soviet Union deteriorated through the 1970s, however; Sadat famously expelled 20,000 Soviet military advisers in 1972, supposedly for withholding military equipment. In 1981, Sadat also expelled Russian diplomats and more than 1,000 Soviet technical advisers, alleging Soviet involvement in inciting sectarian violence between Muslims and Christians. Louise Lief, “Sadat blames Soviet diplomats in Egypt for instigating unrest,” *Christian Science Monitor*, September 17, 1981, <http://www.csmonitor.com/1981/0917/091750.html>.

At the end of the 1970s, Sadat shifted Egypt decisively toward a positive relationship with the United States and away from confrontation with Israel by signing the Camp David Accords. The deal guaranteed Egypt a steady flow of aid and a strategic bond with the United States. Jihadists assassinated Sadat before he could build on the shift he had initiated, but his successor, Mubarak, embraced Egypt's new orientation.

Doing so made Egypt's foreign policy simple compared with what had come before. Egypt grew increasingly close with the United States, the Soviet Union collapsed, and relations between Egypt and Saudi Arabia thawed. Mubarak's trans-

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actions were straightforward. He would align with the United States or Saudi Arabia on the issues of greatest concern to them, and they would help promote domestic stability, security, and development in Egypt. Egypt's efforts to get outsiders

to support its domestic politics were thus based not on threats of Egyptian action around the region, but on promises of Egyptian political support. But this approach also meant that the government could no longer effectively appeal to national pride or ideology to bolster its legitimacy. Especially as Mubarak's days in power neared their end, he commanded little to none of the popular respect, admiration, or reverence that Nasser or even Sadat had. Egypt's symbolic status at the heart of the Arab world held up thanks to its large population, cultural productivity, and relatively free press.¹⁵ But foreign policy in Egypt had become a liability to those in power rather than an asset.

AFTER 2011: THE GULF IN EGYPT

On January 25, 2011, demonstrations around Cairo and in other Egyptian cities organized as part of a "Day of Rage"—and set to coincide with the country's Police Day to draw attention to state brutality—ended with the occupation of Tahrir Square. By February 11, Mubarak had stepped down and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) assumed power. Not long after, Egypt moved toward holding elections for an assembly that would form a committee to write a new constitution.

Leaders and publics across the region looked to events in Egypt as a harbinger of what might happen elsewhere. Power structures across the region seemed as

15. However, especially in the 2000s, others began to chip away at this status. For example, the runaway success of Al Jazeera, based in Qatar, and other channels in the Gulf, Turkey, and Syria challenged Egypt's centrality in Arab television and news media.

though they might collapse. Those who rose up in 2011 and many outside the region saw this as a good thing: the opportunity to reset Middle Eastern politics and put them on a path toward representative government, guarantees for civil liberties and human rights, and inclusive, sustainable economic development. Leaders in the Gulf and in some other parts of the region saw a nightmare unfolding, and not only in terms of potential popular protests and challenges to their rule in the near term.

The perceived U.S. abandonment of Egypt—or at least of its ally Mubarak—unnerved leaders in the Gulf. In part this was because Washington’s actions called into question the reliability of the leaders’ own security guarantees from the United States. But it was also because they had come to rely on the United States and assume that it would guarantee Egypt’s stability. That assumption was no longer valid. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, and other regional actors had had little need to devote resources to Egypt when they believed the United States could (and

would) keep Mubarak in power. Without needing to invest much, they would benefit from the Mubarak regime’s ability to hold in check the potential threats Egypt could pose to their own security—primarily by exporting political or ideological opposition to Gulf monarchs’ rule. The pre-2011 status quo in Egypt was not bad

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from a Gulf perspective. It would have been nice if Egypt experienced better economic growth and development, but it was not essential. Accompanying this reality was a tacit mutual acceptance among regional leaders against interference in one another’s domestic political affairs. That was one reason why

the Arab League, before 2011, had never condemned the domestic human rights abuses of an Arab leader.¹⁶

The events of 2011 removed Mubarak as a stop-gap and threatened to introduce an unpredictable leadership structure in Egypt. The unleashing of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and its apparent organizational strength—even before elections brought the group legislative

16. In a major departure from past practice, in 2011 the Arab League condemned both Libya and Syria for human rights violations before expelling the Syrian government under Bashar al-Assad from the league. In contrast, the Arab League throughout its history has primarily served as a forum for countries to pay lip service to unity while protecting their own sovereignty and security. See Michael Barnett and Etel Solingen, “Designed to fail or failure of design? The origins and legacy of the Arab League,” in *Crafting Cooperation: Regional International Institutions in Comparative Perspective*, Amitav Acharya and Alastair Iain Johnston, eds., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 180–220; Charles Tripp, “Regional Organizations in the Arab Middle East,” in *Regionalism in World Politics*, Louise Fawcett and Andrew Hurrell, eds., 283–309 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

and executive power—raised the possibility that political movements and ideas questioning other rulers’ legitimacy and control would gain institutional strength. Islamist theories and modes of governance might soon sweep across the region. This new potential future was terrifying both to Gulf leaders and to secular elites with tepid views toward democracy across the region. Egypt was the epicenter of this potential earthquake.

The Muslim Brotherhood capitalized on the opportunity. The Freedom and Justice Party’s victory in parliamentary elections in 2012 and Mohammed Morsi’s presidential victory in 2013 stunned and disturbed Gulf elites. The general manager of *Al Arabiya*, for example, wrote an op-ed shortly after Morsi was sworn in wondering whether the new president could be trusted to fight terrorism and not interfere in the affairs of his neighbors.¹⁷ Morsi himself felt it necessary to assuage Gulf leaders by pledging in his inaugural speech that he would not seek to “export revolution.”¹⁸ A strong U.S. presence in Egypt had not threatened Gulf leaders; an absent United States and the rise of alternative forces in Egypt did.

Since then, Gulf states have been at odds with the United States and with one another over how to act toward Egypt. Qatar embraced the opportunity to become the patron of Islamists in Egypt and elsewhere around the region. Saudi Arabia and the UAE took the opposite view, though at first they cautiously sought ways to work with the Morsi government while undermining the Brotherhood elsewhere. They sought to root out Brotherhood activists and activities within their own borders,¹⁹ and they later responded with glee when the Brotherhood in turn was overthrown in Egypt in July 2013. According to stories told by officials in Riyadh, then-General Sisi visited King Abdullah in Saudi Arabia to seek his blessing just days before ousting Morsi. Whether or not this is true, the fact that the claim is made with pride in Saudi Arabia indicates the feeling toward Egypt.

After Sisi ousted Morsi, Saudi Arabia and the UAE poured support into Egypt, both financial and political, although the rate of new aid announcements and disbursements has been slower than many in Egypt hoped.²⁰ The UAE has given a \$1 billion grant and a \$2 billion interest-free loan to the Egyptian Central Bank while

17. Abdul Rahman al-Rashed, “What will Morsi do?” *Al Arabiya*, July 2, 2012, <http://english.alarabiya.net/views/2012/07/02/223925.html>.

18. Ellen Knickmeyer, “Egyptian Leader’s Visit Sends Signal to Saudis,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 11, 2012, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303644004577520911170661298>.

19. For a more detailed discussion, see Jon B. Alterman and William McCants, “Saudi Arabia: Islamists Rising and Falling,” in Jon B. Alterman, ed., *Religious Radicalism after the Arab Uprisings* (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2014), 144–175.

20. Enas Hamad, “As Gulf aid dries up, Egypt struggles,” *Al Monitor*, December 30, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/12/egypt-economic-woes-continue-unfilled-promises-support.html>.

allocating around \$8 billion for energy and development programs.²¹ The latter include projects in healthcare, transportation, education, energy, housing, and food security; technical assistance to develop new economic plans; and political support as Egypt courts additional donors and investors. Saudi Arabia initially offered Egypt \$1 billion in cash, a \$2 billion loan, and \$2 billion in fuel products;²² it also sent Egypt \$3 billion worth of refined oil products from April to September 2014 alone.²³ Politically, Gulf governments have defended Sisi against his detractors internationally, supporting Egyptian assertions that the 2013 events were a “second revolution,” that human rights in Egypt are well in hand,²⁴ and that what Egypt needs most right now from the international community is solidarity in the face of terrorist threats. The Gulf governments also have led efforts to persuade other donors and investors to make the same bet on Egypt that they have. In March 2015, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are partnering with Egypt to host a major conference on the economic future of Egypt, bringing together wealthy investors, companies,

and government officials from all over the world. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait also announced they would collectively deposit a further \$10 billion in Egypt’s Central Bank before the conference.²⁶ But it is unclear how sustainable Gulf financial commitments to Egypt will be, particularly given the recent decline in oil prices. While GCC economies face no immediate dire threats from lower prices, reduced revenues could reduce their willingness to dole out bail-out funds to the Egyptian government.

For now, their efforts rest on the premise that Egypt can have an economic renaissance without liberalizing politically. Gulf governments are not interested in political liberalism in Egypt. Political liberalism brought them the Muslim Brotherhood. Their bet, instead, is that a strong Egyptian state that holds groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood in check and stamps out terrorism by any means necessary will create the necessary environment for economic growth. That, in turn, will ensure its future political stability. In the short term, they seem to aim narrowly at

21. UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *The United Arab Emirates Foreign Assistance Program to the Arab Republic of Egypt: An Overview*, 2014.

22. “Saudi Arabia pledges \$5 billion in aid to Egypt,” *CBS News*, July 9, 2013, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/saudi-arabia-pledges-5-billion-in-aid-to-egypt/>.

23. “Saudi Arabia sent Egypt \$3 billion worth of oil since April,” *Reuters*, September 25, 2014, <http://af.reuters.com/article/egyptNews/idAFL6N0RQ1EU20140925>.

24. In January, however, prominent Emirati commentator Abdulkhaleq Abdulla made waves in Egypt when he asserted that stability and repression in Egypt need not go hand in hand, and that the UAE government did not support the return of a “police state” in Egypt. See “Tabayun fi tafsir taghridat al-akadimi al-Imirati Abdulkhaleq Abdulla hawl al-’awda’ fi Masr” [Varying interpretations of the Tweets of Emirati academic Abdulkhaleq Abdulla about the situation in Egypt], *CNN Arabic*, January 9, 2015, <http://arabic.cnn.com/middleeast/2015/01/08/ayman-nour-egypt-uae-abdulkhaleq-abdullah>.

25. “Egypt to host major economic conference in March,” *Associated Press*, November 22, 2014, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/business/economy/2014/11/22/Egypt-to-host-major-economic-conference-in-March.html>.

26. “Gulf states to deposit \$10 bln in Egypt before conference,” *Reuters*, February 4, 2015, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2015/02/04/egypt-gulf-investment-idUKL6N0VE2RU20150204>.

preventing Egypt from falling off an economic cliff, which could precipitate a political crisis that would bring down Egypt's new political order.

It is with respect to the future of political Islamism that the Gulf states may have more specific agendas for Egypt in mind. Gulf leaders now identify the Muslim Brotherhood, Iran, and radical jihadi groups such as the Islamic State group (ISG) as the core threats to their security. Confronting the former has become a center-

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piece of their approach to the rest of the Middle East. The UAE and Saudi Arabia have declared the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization and prosecuted some individuals believed to be affiliated with the Brotherhood, while others have been intimidated into silence.²⁷ Even if the Brotherhood does not actually represent the existential threat

that Gulf states portray, it serves both Egypt and the Gulf as a convenient scapegoat and bogeyman against which they can rally national sentiment and justify security measures.

As they have done at home, Saudi Arabia and the UAE may seek to promote in Egypt a model of apolitical Islamism that promotes piety, observance, and conservative social mores (more strictly in the case of Saudi Arabia's Wahhabi tradition) while supporting existing state structures and eschewing political activism. Such a model would not be new to Egypt: for decades, Egypt's largely apolitical salafists organized and preached throughout the country, sometimes with the encouragement of the state, as a counter-balance to the Muslim Brotherhood. Many of Egypt's salafists embraced politics following the overthrow of Mubarak, forming new political parties and participating in elections. But since the overthrow of Morsi, they have fragmented. Some support the Muslim Brotherhood as it faces persecution, others (the Nour Party) continue to embrace politics, while still others have returned to the kind of apolitical social activism and religious focus that kept them in good stead with prior Egyptian governments over the decades. Many suspect that Saudi Arabia supports Egypt's apolitical salafists financially, although with how much money and through what channels remain unclear (and Saudi officials have denied allegations about aid to Egyptian salafi groups).²⁸

27. Alterman and McCants, "Saudi Arabia."

28. See for example Randa Abul Azm, "Saudi envoy to Egypt denies Kingdom offered salafis billions," *Al Arabiya*, August 1, 2011, <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/08/01/160331.html>.

The UAE, in contrast, is less enamored of salafists. The Emiratis are not Wahhabi, and their institutional Islam emphasizes values of stability and relative tolerance of diversity and pluralism (so long as it is not politically threatening). In this variety of Islam, good Muslims are pious, but not preachy. They observe their faith, but they do not demand that its strictest rules and regulations be enforced by law. Non-Muslim expatriates who live in the UAE are expected to respect generally conservative social norms, but may practice their own religions. Reportedly, Morocco—

President Sisi seems the perfect portrait of apolitical faith in power.

with UAE support—is beginning to work with both Tunisia and Egypt on mosque reform and imam training projects designed to boost a version of “moderate Islam” that can more readily compete with salafi and jihadi ideologies.²⁹ The UAE also established a new institution in 2014, the Muslim Council of Elders, to support efforts to “extinguish the fires that sweep across the region and ad-

dress the evils of sectarianism and violence plaguing the Muslim world.³⁰

In this light, President Sisi is an important ally on not only a political front, but an ideological one. He seems the perfect portrait of apolitical faith in power. He is widely regarded as pious. When he was first raised to the position of head of the SCAF under Morsi, many speculated that it was because he held conservative religious

views that the Brotherhood appreciated.³¹ But he does not cite his faith as the justification for his mode of governance. Sisi has supported new efforts

to reform and revitalize Azhar as a counterweight to both Muslim Brotherhood and salafi ideologies. At the beginning of 2015, he spoke both at Azhar³² and at one of Egypt’s largest Christian churches during a mass for Coptic Christmas³³ to deliver dual messages of religious moderation and harmony. He chided Azhar scholars to modernize their thinking and find ways to combat the world’s image of Muslims as

29. Morocco has been implementing efforts to promote moderate Maliki Islam as a counterweight to salafi radicalism for more than a decade and appears now to be interested in exporting its model to other countries in the region.

30. Samir Salama, “Muslim Council of Elders set up in Abu Dhabi,” *Gulf News*, July 20, 2014, <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/uae/government/muslim-council-of-elders-set-up-in-abu-dhabi-1.1361897>.

31. In Egypt, many even referred to him as “the Brotherhood’s man” inside SCAF, while others scoffed at this suggestion, seeing Sisi as a paragon of “moderate” Islam in contrast to the Brotherhood. See Ahmed Fouad, “Bil-tawarikh: rihlat al-Sisi min ragul al-Ikhwan fi 2012 hata ‘aduw al-Gama’a fi 2013” [In dates: Sisi’s journey from “the Brotherhood’s man” in 2012 to “enemy of the Brotherhood” in 2013], *Al Shorouk*, December 31, 2013, <http://www.shorouknews.com/news/view.aspx?cdate=31122013&id=d81fbb74-3922-40d6-85ed-2ccf33343544>; Yasser Rizq, “The General Sisi I Know,” trans. Tyler Huffman, *Al Monitor*, July 28, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2013/07/sisi-egypt-morsi-ouster.html>.

32. “Sisi at the celebration of the Prophet’s *mawlid*: There are holy religious texts that antagonize the whole world...we need a religious revolution,” [Arabic], YouTube, uploaded January 1, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8igW9aM4Jzg&feature=youtu.be>.

33. “On video...Sisi: It was necessary that I attend the Christmas mass...and we will build the country together,” [Arabic], YouTube, uploaded January 6, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8YidlelQjwk>.

violent and extreme. He assured Christians that Egyptians were one people (some in Egypt and abroad criticized these performances as disingenuous efforts to burnish his image). Some foreign observers taken with these efforts hailed Sisi as a potential “Muslim Martin Luther.”³⁴

Whether Sisi can actually effect Islamic reform from his current position (and given his military rather than scholastic background) is questionable. But for those opposed to the Muslim Brotherhood and its sociopolitical goals, he is the new standard-bearer for a contrasting vision of how to combine religion and politics. In the coming years, there may be some competition between Saudi Arabia and the UAE in Egypt with respect to the particular varieties of Islam they support, rhetorically and financially. But both are likely to get behind any version that preaches the dangers of political Islam and the destructiveness of rebellion.

EGYPT’S AGENDA: DIVERSIFY SUPPORT FOR DOMESTIC STABILITY

As the Gulf states look toward Egypt to secure their stability, Egypt itself has taken steps to establish its own foreign policy priorities and demonstrate its will to act within its neighborhood. To be sure, for the moment domestic security and stability remain paramount. Quelling ongoing protests by Muslim Brotherhood members, disappointed revolutionaries, and others while combating rising jihadi violence in the Sinai Peninsula and Libya come first. Egypt has had very limited involvement with the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, and it has had little to do with its Gulf patrons’ regional confrontation with Iran through proxy wars and battles from Lebanon to Yemen.

But the drive for security at home has had a ripple effect on relations with other nations in the region. Egypt’s suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood has driven a rift in its relations with Turkey and Qatar, although the latter has recently pursued a rapprochement with Egypt as part of a reconciliation among the Gulf Cooperation Council states.³⁵ The quest for domestic security has also affected Egypt’s relationships with Libya and Ethiopia.

Egypt’s airstrikes on groups reportedly affiliated with the ISG (which beheaded 21 Egyptian Copts in a gruesome video released in February 2015) represented the culmination of more than a year of escalating Egyptian opposition to militancy

34. See for example Robert Spencer, “Egypt’s Sisi calls for ‘modern, comprehensive understanding of the religion of Islam,’” *Jihadwatch.org*, January 28, 2014, <http://www.jihadwatch.org/2014/01/sisi-calls-for-modern-comprehensive-understanding-of-the-religion-of-islam>.

35. “Egypt and Qatar take steps toward reconciliation: Saudi,” *Ahram Online*, December 20, 2014, <http://english.ahram.org/NewsContent/1/64/118452/Egypt/Politics-/Egypt-and-Qatar-take-steps-towards-reconciliation-.aspx>.

emanating from Libya. Egyptian officials repeatedly remind international observers of the threat that Libya's civil war and jihadi-salafi groups pose to Egypt's land and people. In July 2014, 21 Egyptian soldiers were killed in an attack on a border checkpoint with Libya.³⁶ Militants in Tripoli have also attacked the Egyptian and UAE embassies.³⁷ Weapons from Libya reportedly travel through Egypt to the Sinai, helping to arm militant groups there. Instability in Libya also means that the estimated hundreds of thousands of Egyptians who work in Libya face economic distress, dislocation, and violence.³⁸ The Egyptians murdered in the February video had been captured in early January,³⁹ and dozens of other Egyptians have been held hostage or killed by militant groups over the past few years.⁴⁰ In response, before it began openly attacking purported ISG militants in parts of Libya, Egypt had reportedly been providing assistance to Libyan General Khalifa Hefthar's Operation Dignity movement in coordination

with the UAE for months. In February, in addition to dropping bombs on Libya, Sisi called on countries in the region to create a joint Arab military force to contain the threat from the ISG and said that the UAE and Jordan had already volunteered to aid Egypt in Libya.⁴¹

Negotiations over the Renaissance Dam project in Ethiopia have also become a top Egyptian foreign policy priority. Under the Morsi government, Egyptian rhetoric toward Ethiopia aggravated relations between the two countries, particularly after a meeting was broadcast showing cabinet officials vowing they would attack Ethiopia if the dam project went forward.⁴² Since Sisi took over, Egypt has participated in multiple multilateral dialogue sessions about the dam, and high-profile diplomatic visits have taken place between Egypt and Ethiopia. President Sisi visited Addis Ababa in January 2015 to smooth relations (though his trip was cut short by a major attack in the Sinai). At the begin-

36. "Egypt vows to punish attackers in border checkpoint assault," Agence France-Presse, July 20, 2014, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/07/20/Egypt-vows-to-punish-attackers-in-border-checkpoint-assault-.html>.

37. "Embassies of Egypt and UAE attacked in Libya," *Al Jazeera*, November 13, 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/11/embassies-egypt-uae-attacked-libya-201411137319239874.html>.

38. There is no reliable count of how many Egyptians are in Libya. Before 2011, the International Organization for Migration estimated that between 330,000 and 1.5 million Egyptians were working in Libya. Some have since left, but other Egyptians seeking work have continued to travel to Libya even amid instability there. After the beheading video was released in February 2015, Egyptian government officials estimated that between 500,000 and 800,000 Egyptians were in Libya. "Ministry: 800,000 Egyptian workers in Libya," *Egypt Independent*, February 25, 2015, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/ministry-800000-egyptian-workers-libya>.

39. "Isis claims abduction of 21 Christians in Libya," Agence France-Presse, January 12, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/12/isis-abducts-christians-libya-egypt>.

40. See for example Ahmad Mustafa, "Egyptians reluctant to leave Libya," *Al Monitor*, September 15, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2014/09/egyptians-libya-border-security.html>; "Update: Attempting to flee Libya, 17 Egyptians killed while at Tunisian border," *MadaMasr*, July 31, 2014, <http://www.madamasr.com/news/update-attempting-flee-libya-17-egyptians-killed-while-waiting-tunisian-border>.

41. "Egypt's El Sisi calls for joint Arab military force," *National*, February 23, 2015, <http://www.thenational.ae/world/middle-east/egypts-el-sisi-calls-for-joint-arab-military-force>.

42. Liam Stack, "With Cameras Rolling, Egyptian Politicians Threaten Ethiopia Over Dam," *New York Times*, June 6, 2013, <http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/06/06/with-cameras-rolling-egyptian-politicians-threaten-ethiopia-over-dam/>.

ning of March, the countries involved in debate over the dam—Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan—reportedly reached a preliminary new agreement over how to manage use of the Nile’s water.⁴³ While Egyptian officials continue to express concerns about what the dam will mean for Egypt’s water security, they seem committed to addressing the challenge through quiet diplomacy rather than bombast.

The United States has a different strategic view from the Gulf states of what it will require to set Egypt on a stable, sustainable path. But Washington has neither the political will nor leverage to press its point.

The future of Egypt’s relationships with global powers—the United States, China, Russia, and the European Union—is less certain. Sisi made his first official visit to China in late 2014. His goal is to strengthen Sino-Egyptian ties into a “strategic partnership” that aims to raise significant Chinese investment in Egypt and allow Egypt

to purchase Chinese arms.⁴⁴ Sisi has also pursued warmer ties with Russia. Egypt concluded a deal with Russia in 2014 to purchase \$3.5 billion in weaponry;⁴⁵ earlier discussions of the deal indicated it would be funded by Saudi Arabia and the UAE.⁴⁶ In addition, in February Egypt concluded a \$5.9 billion arms deal with France to buy 24 Rafale fighter jets.⁴⁷ Egypt’s relationships with the EU and with individual European countries have followed roughly the same trajectory as its relationship with the United States. The Europeans have condemned human rights abuses in Egypt and pressured it to create a genuinely open, liberal democracy. But they have not significantly cut their aid to Egypt, which, unlike U.S. aid, is concentrated more in

43. Campbell MacDiarmid, “Hydro diplomacy on the Nile,” *Al Jazeera*, March 10, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/03/hydro-diplomacy-nile-150309092540029.html>.

44. “China, Egypt elevate bilateral relationship to comprehensive strategic partnership,” Xinhua, December 23, 2014, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-12/23/c_133874597.htm.

45. “Russia, Egypt seal preliminary arms deal worth \$3.5 billion: agency,” Reuters, September 21, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/09/17/us-russia-egypt-arms-idUSKBN0HC19T20140917>.

46. Maggie Michael, “Egypt military chief heads to Moscow in rare visit,” Associated Press, February 12, 2014, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/drive-shooting-egypt-kills-3-policemen>.

47. “Egypt, France to sign €5.2 billion deal for Rafale Jets,” *France24*, February 16, 2015, <http://www.france24.com/en/20150216-france-egypt-sign-deal-sale-rafale-fighter-jets/>.

economic and social development programs than military assistance.⁴⁸

The United States faces a dilemma in formulating its policy toward Egypt. It has a different strategic view from the Gulf states of what it will require to set Egypt on a stable, sustainable path. But Washington has neither the political will nor leverage to press its point. The United States continues to stress that Egypt needs to be on a path to democracy. Washington implies that economic resurgence in Egypt will be difficult without political liberalization—or at least a more benign application of autocratic rule against liberal dissidents than Sisi

Tantalizingly for Egypt, the current situation offers it the prospect of keeping the goods it gets from the United States while being less reliant on it overall.

currently demonstrates. Economic success will be hard under any circumstances for a country of 90 million people with few comparative advantages. Egypt has a large youth population with skills mismatched to the labor market, an environment that hinders entrepreneurship, a dysfunctional educational system, and a corrupt public

sector dominated by the very institution, the military, which the president seeks to protect and empower. It is not a recipe for turning Egypt into a new South Korea or even Vietnam. While the Gulf states' theory is that Egypt can grow its way to stability, the United States and others remain doubtful that Egypt can weather the inevitable economic challenges it will face under a political system that remains repressive in the face

of even non-violent dissent and criticism. But they cannot or will not do much about that for now.

At the moment, Egypt's relationship with the United States is an ambivalent one on both sides: coordination and cooperation continue, but tensions are high and

rhetoric often sharp. For Egypt, this ambivalence serves domestic purposes in the current environment. Maligning and blaming the United States for current or past problems in Egypt plays to long-standing anti-U.S. sentiment in Egypt and to deeper currents of resentment, anxiety, and paranoia. Fear of foreign domination that threatens

48. In August 2013, the EU outlined concrete steps that it would take in response to continued state violence in Egypt, announcing that EU members would "suspend export licenses to Egypt of any equipment which might be used in internal repression," "review their security assistance with Egypt," and assess the continued provision of non-security aid as events developed. Yet no immediate aid cuts were announced at that time. The EU had already cut direct budget assistance to Egypt, most EU aid was not security-related, and aid provision had already slowed greatly in 2013. As Sisi consolidated his control in 2014, the EU made increasingly strident criticisms of his government while continuing to slowly release non-security aid to the country. France also concluded a 1 billion euro deal to sell four naval frigates to Egypt in July 2014. Council of the European Union: Press Release, August 21, 2013, http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/138603.pdf; Justyna Pawlak and John O'Donnell, "EU shies away from cutting aid for Egypt," Reuters, August 21, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/08/21/us-egypt-protests-eu-idUSBRE97K0WE20130821>; "News: Egypt," *EU Neighbourhood Info Centre*, http://www.enpi-info.eu/list_type_med.php?&country=2&search=1&id_type=1; "France secures 1 billion euro navy deal in Egypt," Reuters, July 19, 2014, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/07/19/France-secures-1-billion-euro-navy-deal-in-Egypt.html>.

to weaken, undermine, or split the Egyptian state has been a common feature of public rhetoric in Egypt for much of its modern history. Feeling aggrieved at the machinations of foreign powers helps rally people together in defense of Egypt. The public has no trouble believing rumors that Hillary Clinton admitted the United States helped create the Islamic State group (ISG) or that former Ambassador Anne Patterson schemed to help keep the Muslim Brotherhood in power by bringing fighters into Egypt from Gaza.⁴⁹

But maintaining a somewhat positive relationship with the United States also serves the Egyptian government's purposes: it can continue to receive \$1.3 billion in aid, intelligence assistance, military training, trade, and investment in exchange for allowing the U.S. military overflight authorization and priority passage through the Suez Canal while keeping the peace with Israel. The latter task involves efforts to combat Hamas and jihadi-salafi militancy in Gaza and the Sinai, efforts which are also in the Egyptian government's interest for its domestic security. Tantalizingly for Egypt, the current situation offers it the prospect of keeping the goods it gets from the United States while being less reliant on it overall because Egypt can now also turn to the Gulf, to Russia, to France, and to China to try to balance its U.S. relationship. Egypt is still using its foreign policy to support its domestic politics and security—but its support network is more diverse than it was before 2011.

A NEW ROLE FOR EGYPT?

That support network is split, however, between those with a desire to see Egypt “succeed” by establishing a genuinely democratic political system and sustainable economic path and those who think the economic success might be achieved without democracy. The Gulf's economic salvage operation represents the latter approach. Their efforts may keep Egypt's economy from imploding, but economic largesse cannot mend or strengthen state-society relations that the events of the past few years and continued authoritarian repression have deeply damaged.

Considering Egypt's future, then, it is important to ask not only what will happen if these efforts are not enough and Egypt does “fail,” but also what will happen if Egypt muddles through. That is, what can we expect to see if Gulf and other aid keeps Egypt afloat, but not so much that it can transform itself into a country less dependent on outside support? Will Egypt then remain focused on internal stability and politics, avoiding involvement in regional issues except where the challenges directly concern Egypt's stability and security, as in Libya? Or will Sisi—or whoever follows him—grow more assertive and seek to articulate a new version of Egyptian regional leadership? That leadership could be relatively indepen-

49. Robert Mackey, “Borne by Facebook, Conspiracy Theory That U.S. Created ISIS Spreads Across Middle East,” *New York Times*, August 26, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/27/world/middleeast/isis-conspiracy-theories-include-a-purported-american-plot.html?_r=0; Ursula Lindsey, “The Tall Tales of Cairo,” *New York Times*, August 29, 2013, <http://latitude.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/08/29/the-tall-tales-of-cairo/>.

dent, but it is more likely to align with the approaches of Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

In the coming years we might see all three countries working together to propagate and uphold their vision of apolitical but pious Islamic societies, banded together by the narrative that only they can hold back a jihadi deluge. After decades of Egypt as first the revolutionary beacon of the Middle East and then as the U.S.-aligned lame duck of the Middle East, we may be moving to a new configuration, one in which Egypt is a partner with the Gulf in a new regional order that embraces controlled economic liberalization, autocratic political order, apolitical Islamic conservatism, and an ambivalent relationship with the United States. The United States and others will need to decide what kind of relationship they want to have, not just with each country individually, but with this new regional political framework. ■

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