

The Future of Egyptian Foreign Policy – To what extent will Egypt's foreign policy change under President Morsi?

Stefanie Felsberger

Since the success of the Muslim Brotherhood at the ballot box in the first free parliamentary elections there has been much speculation and fear about how Egyptian foreign policy could change with a government dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood. Egypt as the most populous Arabic country is situated not only at the border of Israel but also strategically at the heart of what is referred to as the Arab world; changes in Egyptian policy will therefore affect the regional as well as the international level.

Some policy experts speculated that Egypt would be gradually turned into an Islamic state – without specifying what the adjective “Islamic” would entail – and, subsequently, that Egyptian foreign policy would be dominated by religious considerations and the Brotherhood's adversarial position towards Israel. So after the Muslim Brotherhood's candidate Muhammad Morsi had won the Egyptian Presidential elections in May 2012 some analysts saw their fears come true.

The question is now how an Egyptian foreign policy might look like under President Morsi. Since the President has been in power for over one hundred days we can not only analyse how he has responded to several crises such as the attack at the Rafah border crossing and on the US embassy in Cairo but also draw some conclusions from his first strategic steps on the international stage. Furthermore, it is important to ask to what extent the President is able to reshape Egypt's foreign policy.

In order to answer the question about the future direction of Egyptian foreign policy,

this article seeks to analyse which constraints and geopolitical considerations shape Egyptian foreign policy and subsequently limit President Morsi's latitude. Firstly, attention shall be drawn to international (restraints) and, secondly, regional limitations. Finally, the domestic factors which constrain the new President's room for manoeuvre shall be presented.

The International Players: United States, Europe and China

The one international actor which has probably exerted most influence on the course and direction of Egyptian foreign policy is the United States. Since President Sadat signed the Camp David Accords in 1978 – thus being the first Arabic country to normalize relations with Israel – Egyptian foreign policy has gradually aligned itself with US strategic interest in the region and has since been representing one of the most reliable pillars of American Middle East policy. Egypt does not only serve as a guarantor of Israel's security on its Western border but also ensures safe transfer through the Suez Channel which is one of the world's most important trade routes. In return, the United States provides Egypt with extensive economic aid and military assistance. In the period of 1977 to 2007 Egypt received \$62 billion dollars – which amounts to an average of \$2.1 billion every year. In addition, Egypt receives sophisticated military equipment. The close relationship with the United States did not hold anything but advantages for Egypt but instead forced the country to take some positions which tarnished Egypt's reputation in the region. For example, after Egypt had signed the Camp David Accords the country was

expelled from the Arab League and all other Arab countries stopped their diplomatic relations with Egypt. A more recent example may be taken in Egypt's tacit and active support of Israel's blockade of the Gaza strip which angered not only the Egyptian population but also other supporters of the Palestinian cause.

Contrary to US belief, Egyptians did not perceive the US to be on the “right side of history” during the protest movement. In their view, the US discarded their support for Mubarak when it became unsustainable and subsequently opted for a “negotiated transition” under the auspices of the military. Even though there was cause for hope with the election of Barack Obama in 2008, Arab citizens were well aware that the change was rather in rhetoric than in substance. Moreover, the US' cautious support for the democratic demonstrators in Tunisia while sustaining authoritarian dictatorships in the Gulf region did nothing to change Arab citizens' sentiment towards the US.

Much of the same can be said about the European Union. While the single member states of the EU were mostly unable to respond accurately and timely to the Arab Awakening – France even offered the Tunisian regime help to stop the emerging protest movement – the European level tried to fill the void. Generally speaking, the interests of the European countries in Egypt and the wider Middle East and North African region (MENA) do only differ slightly. The EU is predominantly interested in stable relations with the region, in preventing migration to the European Union in high numbers, ensuring the supply of gas and oil as well as in keeping

radical elements at bay. To ensure this, the European countries have supported the authoritarian regimes in the region for several decades. This is also the case for Egypt. Before the Arab Awakening, EU relations between Europe and the southern neighbours were dominated by the so called European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) which basically aims at establishing a circle of stable and peaceful countries around the European Union to ensure the aforementioned interests. Consequently, also the response to the Arab Awakening came within this framework: The EU is applying the principle “more for more” which essentially states that instead of the superficial conditionality of the past – European support for opening the economy and political liberation – European money would now depend on genuine democratic reforms. In the case of Egypt, this adds up to the pledges of substantial amounts of economic aid over the next years and further money for support programmes for job creation and youth employment. Egypt is a crucial actor in the region for the EU as the country is the 6th largest supplier of gas to the European Union, and vice versa, the EU is Egypt’s biggest trading partner. So it is in their mutual interest to maintain good relations. Nevertheless, the EU is approaching the Arab world with the wrong assumption which is that the Mediterranean countries have any intention of applying not only democratic reforms but also embedding the complete European way of politics. This is due to a perception of the Mediterranean countries as nothing but a region in Europe’s periphery and not as a distinct part of the Arab world. For Egypt, which is attempting to reassume its role as leading nation of the Arab region, there is little incentive to be treated as inferior partner in an unequal relationship.

Moreover, there are other international and regional players vying for political and economic influence in Egypt and the wider region. One example would be China which is inherently focused on the economic aspects of its relationship with Egypt

and does not attach any conditionality. Egypt has everything to gain by diversifying its international partners beyond the traditional close relationship with the West. China not only has much to offer in terms of economic benefits, but also yields significant leverage in the higher Nile states where plans for dams are potentially damaging to Egypt’s agriculture due to the country’s reliance on Nile irrigation.

On the regional level, two matters are of concern. Firstly, the situation on Egypt’s eastern border with its relations to the Palestinians and Israel and, secondly, the regional power struggle between Saudi-Arabia, Turkey and the Gulf states on one side and Syria, Iran and Hezbollah on the other.

The Relation with Israel and the Regional Power Struggle

The relationship between Egypt and Israel has always been a crucial determinant in the latter’s security approach to the region. Since Egypt’s peace deal and re-alliance with the US, Israel could rely on Egypt to uphold the provisions of the Camp David Accords and more – be it the limited number of troops deployable to Sinai, the support for the blockade of Gaza since the election of Hamas or the supply of cheap gas to Israel below market prices – despite the widespread unpopularity of those policies among the Egyptian population. Mubarak considered those sentiments to be irrelevant – even though signs displayed during the demonstrations in the winter of 2011 criticized the Egyptian alliance with Israel.

The newly elected President Morsi will definitely not act along the same line. For one Morsi himself is not and does not want to be seen as Israeli ally. Furthermore, the Muslim Brotherhood has very close relations to Hamas which developed out of the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. So what can definitely be expected of the new Egyptian government will much more anti-Israel rhetoric

and also much more criticism. Nevertheless, it has to be stressed that despite the rhetoric the Egyptian government does not want or plan to repeal the peace treaty with Israel – not at least because there are already enough challenging issues on the governments agenda without adding the threat of a hostile state on its borders. Regardless we cannot expect everything to proceed as it did in the past. A good example is the blockade of Gaza which had been upheld by the Mubarak regime but after his deposal Egypt opened the Rafah border crossing. It is especially the Palestinians in Gaza who had high hopes for support from a Morsi Presidency but so far not too much has changed but in tone.

Another issue which is directly related to Israel is the situation in Sinai. Until July 2012, there have been fifteen attacks on the pipelines delivering gas to Israel, as well as on the Rafah border crossing. Yet it cannot be determined whether this is due to extremists and militants in Sinai crossing over from Gaza or because local Bedouins see the situation as their chance to make their demands heard by violent means. What can be said with certainty is that the security vacuum in Sinai since the removal of Mubarak is being filled by non-state elements. Under Mubarak the Bedouins have long been neglected and were only regarded as a security problem. There are indicators that this policy will not change as Morsi’s reaction to the last attack on the Rafah crossing with several casualties in August was to deploy troops with heavy weaponry. However, this could have also been nothing more than an opportunity to show the President’s decisiveness and determination as well as an excuse to use the incident as pretext to significantly undermine the military’s influence on Egyptian politics. Thus, it remains to be seen how the new government will approach the situation in Sinai.

The other important issue concerns the regional conflict between the Sunni and Shi’a alliances over influence and power and how Egypt’s position in this power

struggle affects and limits its foreign policy choices.

As one of the countries in the region which deposed its authoritarian leader, Egypt has a very strong commitment to the struggle of the Syrian people against their regime. Unfortunately, what has started as emancipatory movement of Syrian citizens has been turned into a regional struggle for influence of which Syria is the focal point. On one hand there is what can be called a Sunni alliance of states – including Egypt, Turkey, the Gulf States such as Qatar and Kuwait, as well as Saudi Arabia – which support the movement against the Syrian President. On the other hand there is a so called Shi'a alliance of Iran, Syria and Hizbullah. All those players have their distinct interests which do not necessarily correlate. So while Saudi Arabia sees the situation as opportunity to weaken not only the Syrian regime but also its long-standing Iranian ally, it does not wish for a democratic outcome of the Syrian conflict – since this would only embolden its own citizens in their aspirations for political emancipation. Egypt on the other hand is committed to a more pluralistic solution of the conflict – the same as Turkey which is also worried about the Kurdish minority in northern Syria.

Moreover, here are some tensions between those countries which have undergone (or currently are in the process of) a transition and those who have not. For example the relationship between Egypt and the Saudi Kingdom has experienced some strains in the recent past. Egypt is dependent on economic investment from Saudi Arabia and Morsi's first visit abroad was a pilgrimage to Mecca which already indicates the centrality of Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, there have been several crises concerning the Egyptian expats living and working in Saudi Arabia. After an Egyptian human rights lawyer had been detained in the kingdom, demonstrations took place in front of the Saudi embassy in Cairo which led the Saudi government to threaten the removal of

the representation. This was avoided by a feverish effort of the Egyptian authorities who were afraid of losing the extensive aid provided by Saudi Arabia. This aid consists of financial support in the amount of \$500 Million and a deposit at the Egyptian National Bank of one Billion Dollars. In addition Saudi Arabia supplied Egypt with butane gas to assist the Egyptian government in solving the recent crisis surrounding the shortage of gas. Although both governments are keen to continue the good relationship between the two countries, this might be complicated by the antagonistic history of the Saudi royal family and the Muslim Brotherhood. While the former extended their financial and political support to the Brotherhood, this changed when the Brothers voiced their criticism of the Saudi family allowing foreign troops on their soil and supporting the US led coalition after Iraq's invasion in Kuwait. Afterwards all Saudi funds went to Salafi organisations instead of the Brotherhood. So Morsi will always be wary of Saudi interests in defining the Egyptian position.

But this does not mean that Saudi Arabia – or any other regional actor such as Israel - dictates the Egyptian position. Iran is a good example. While Saudi Arabia's position towards Iran is more adversarial, Egypt seeks to forge its own position. In the past, relations between Iran and Egypt have been sour since the Camp David Agreement and there have been no official diplomatic ties. Nevertheless, relations were in general less tense because there are no Sunni-Shi'a divisions within the Egyptian society which could be exploited by Iran. This has slightly changed after the Arab Awakening which Iran claims to be an "Islamic Awakening" similar to its own Islamic Revolution. Iran also tried to test its relations right after Mubarak had been overthrown by sending two warships through the Suez Canal. While they were let through as a sign of goodwill, the Egyptian authorities were not too content of being used by Iran trying to prove that it was on good relations with Egypt and

ultimately that the country is not fully isolated in the region.

Egypt though is not willing to provide this favour and uses its relations with Iran as leverage to further its influence in the region as mediator. This tension can also be observed in Morsi's visit to the Non-Alignment Movement summit in Iran in August 2012. While Iran was showing off the visit of the Egyptian President who had travelled to Iran despite strong pressure from Israel and the US to abstain from the meeting, Morsi used the visit to assert a strong Egyptian position. A second objective associated with the visit was to prove that Morsi could defy both the Israeli and American pressure and that Egypt would take its own decisions. On the other side by strongly supporting the Syrian rebels against the Assad regime in his speech, Morsi also wanted to stress that Egypt would not be used by Iran.

Egypt: Domestic Challenges

On the domestic level it is tempting to assume that President Morsi now commands unchecked power over policy as he managed to put the army in line but in fact there are several factors which constrain his decisions. While the military may be weakened the army still comes with significant influence over foreign and defence policy. Moreover, the judicial branch and the entire bureaucracy are still replete with Mubarak's appointees. Also the fact that most decisions will be closely followed by a watchful public eye must be taken into account. Finally, perhaps the biggest constraint on Morsi's foreign policy decisions is the difficult task of the transition itself. The country does not only face dire economic challenges, but are also shortages in gas and water supply, unresolved issues concerning a constitution and the ongoing struggle between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis over who has the most authoritative voice in matters concerning Islam. Faced with all these problems Morsi's aim is to carve out a new foreign policy which does not

put old alliances in danger and at the same time furthers Egypt's own national interest.

Conclusion

So what can be expected of Egyptian foreign policy? Even though the population's resentment towards the US and its policies in the Middle East will be very well taken into account by President Morsi, the close relation between the Egyptian Armed Forces and the US army limits the Presidents room for manoeuvre. While more criticism of the United States can be expected, the US can still rely on the Egyptian government to firstly uphold the Camp David Accords and secondly to proceed with the opening of the Egyptian economy which started under President Sadat.

Nevertheless, it has to be noted that some changes are to be expected for several reasons. Above all the Egyptian government will be very cautious to avoid being seen as the Americans' loyal proxy – an allegation widely used in the region to delegitimize political actors. Moreover, the close relationship with the US has been detrimental to Egypt's standing in the region as leading Arab nation – a fact which the Egyptian government is keen to rectify. Also the fact that China's influence in the Middle East is rising due to the economic opportunities resulting from close relations should cause the US not to take its influence for granted. Future relations between the US and Egypt will probably be more marked by a giving and taking, not the taking of the past. Furthermore, Egypt wants to reassert its leading role in the region and seeks to use its strategic position as bridge with regard to the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians as well as to the regional power struggle between the Sunni and Shi'a alliances. Finally, Morsi needs to take the domestic situation into account: on one side there is the army as staunch ally of the US influencing policy and on the other side the internal economic problems present immense constraints for any possible change in foreign policy.

So the focus on the numerous constraints is not to suggest that there will be no changes in Egyptian foreign policy but that those changes might actually be more in line with Egypt's own national interest.

Stefanie Felsberger is a Research Fellow at the AIES

© Austria Institut für Europa- und Sicherheitspolitik, 2012

Alle Rechte vorbehalten.

Nachdruck oder vergleichbare Verwendungen von Arbeiten des Austria Instituts für Europa- und Sicherheitspolitik (AIES) sind auch in Auszügen nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung gestattet. Die im AIES-Fokus veröffentlichten Beiträge geben ausschließlich die Meinung der jeweiligen Autorinnen und Autoren wieder.

Schlossgasse 6
A-2344 Maria Enzersdorf
Tel. +43 (0)2236 411 96
Fax. +43 (0)2236 411 96-9
E-Mail: office@aies.at
www.aies.at

Layout: EGENCY Medienbüro Patrick Meyer