

## From Morsi to Al-Sisi: Foreign Policy at the Service of Domestic Policy

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According to David Armstrong, a revolutionary regime is such above as regards other countries, because it fights for "fundamental changes" in the principles on which relations between States are based.<sup>1</sup> Contrarily to the expectations of those who hold that revolutions bring the countries involved to subvert even their own foreign policy, possibly exporting the climate of revolt, and in support of the thesis of those who hold the Egyptian revolution to be an unfinished revolution, post-Mubarak Egypt has kept a foreign policy which is in line with its tradition. That policy is, however, so heavily influenced by the tumultuous and polarised internal political climate that it can be considered to be submissive to, and at the service of, internal policy, unable to structure itself around the one true objective which it is called upon to achieve: keeping the country alive also focusing on



Cairo, 22 July 2014: Secretary Kerry, Egyptian Foreign Minister Shoukry Discuss Gaza Cease-Fire with Egyptian President al-Sisi.  
Photo: Flickr/U.S. Department of State.

<sup>1</sup> David Armstrong, *Revolution and World Order. The Revolutionary State in International Society*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1993, p. 3. Other than Armstrong, other authors focus on the relationship between revolution and foreign policy. In *Revolution and War* (Cornell University Press, 1996), Stephen Walt explains how revolutions produce unforeseen changes in balances of power that lead, in turn, to wrong perceptions of the new regime, and therefore to a situation of conflict. In *Revolution and World Politics* (MacMillan, 1999), Stephen Fred Halliday argues, instead, that revolutionary regimes tend to want to bring the values of their own revolution to neighbouring peoples.

terrorism as a regional curse which only Egypt can truly address. Showing itself to be unable to outline a strategic vision over the long term, Egypt takes positions on the individual international dossiers without following a programmatic line, and its foreign policy therefore shows itself to be ineffective.

Above all during a phase, such as the current one, in which the transition seems, more or less as a matter of necessity, to be giving way to a phase of fragile ordering, analysing Egyptian international strategies is a challenge that has to take account of the various dynamics that might be encountered by a country which is trying, with a greater or lesser degree of success, to stabilise itself around the figure of President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, the former general who has not yet outlined his foreign policy. Bearing this limitation in mind, the following analysis does not claim to cover all the international dossiers in which post-Mubarak Egypt finds itself involved. Rather, it aims at shedding light on the issues which show aspects of continuity and change, in order then to treat the more thorny dossiers which Al-Sisi has to deal with, and which will determine future Egyptian performance in the international context and the consequences which might derive therefrom.

## 1. The Islamist Age of Continuity: Iran and the Gaza Strip the Only Novelties

The thread of continuity which characterises Egyptian foreign policy is clearly visible from a look at the brief Islamist parenthesis. This was a period in which Egypt's international stance was influenced not only by the political inexperience of the Muslim Brotherhood party, but also by all the obstacles, many of which were inherited from the Mubarak era, with which Morsi had to contend.<sup>2</sup>

Cairo accepted existing international norms and agreements, reinforcing, more than modifying, diplomatic ties with regional actors. Foreign policy priorities<sup>3</sup> were not the subject of revolution. Egypt drew closer, for example, to the sphere of influence of the US, Israel and the Gulf monarchies, altering only partly its approach in the international context.

Viewed in such a light, Morsi's Egypt continued on the foreign policy path trodden by the preceding regime, preserving existing diplomatic ties. This approach was clear from the very beginning of the Morsi presidency, when the head of State in office reaffirmed his adhesion to the Camp David agreement,

<sup>2</sup> Giorgio Musso, "Troubled Waters: Egypt's African Policy from the Islamists to the Military", in Andrea Dessì (ed.), "Africa and the Mediterranean. Evolving Security Dynamics after the Arab Uprisings", in *Mediterranean Papers*, No. 25 (February 2014), p. 24-34, <http://www.iai.it/en/node/1631>.

<sup>3</sup> The 2012 electoral platform of the Muslim Brotherhood party identified three foreign policy objectives: (1) a progressive distancing of Egypt from the sphere of influence of foreign countries, while maintaining and complying with existing international treaties; (2) an "open door" approach to all States; (3) opposition to any form of excessive foreign interference in the country's domestic affairs.

without contesting its legitimacy, notwithstanding the pressure coming from certain fringes of the Brotherhood.

Even if continuity dominated, the Morsi presidency was marked by two significant novelties: an opening towards Iran, and an improvement in relations with Hamas, which led to the swift success of November 2012 in the mediations in the Israel-Palestine crisis. Notwithstanding the risks which an alliance with Tehran might have posed to relations with the US and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Morsi showed himself to be determined to embark upon a new course with Iran, which was crowned by the visit of the Egyptian president to the Iranian capital on the occasion of the summit of the non-aligned countries. The visit in August 2012 was the first by an Egyptian president to Iran since 1979.<sup>4</sup> This visit was reciprocated by one made to Cairo by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on 5 February 2013. Nevertheless, this political novelty proved to be an experience of limited duration. Perhaps because Iran did not really believe in it, or perhaps because the Egyptian military did not take a favourable view of the hand extended towards Iran, Morsi's successors abandoned the path of rapprochement. Morsi's activism towards Iran therefore appeared as the historical, and essential, anti-American element which Egypt uses, in matters of foreign, as much as an internal, policy, as a weapon of political combat in order to consolidate society and mobilise it in support of the regime in an attempt to defend the regime from external criticism, which is perceived as an attack and a threat. This approach was used also to counterbalance the adhesion to, and respect for the balance of, Camp David, a policy to which Morsi had bound himself in the Israel-Palestine context.

Notwithstanding the ideological affinities and the tie with Hamas, the Egyptian president never supported the Palestinian Islamist group openly, probably in order not to sour relations with the US and Israel. Despite an initial relaxation over the control of the Rafah crossing, with the increase in the attacks in the Sinai, Morsi made a U-turn, becoming harsher and continuing the fight against the underground tunnels through which the black market directed at the Gaza Strip passes.<sup>5</sup> Egypt's role in this context became clear in November 2012, when Morsi showed himself an active, quick and influential mediator of the truce between Hamas and Israel in the wake of operation "Pillar of Defence."<sup>6</sup> After seven days of clashes, Morsi presented himself as the guarantor of the agreement which put an end to the conflict, confirming the negotiating role of Egypt in one of the most significant Middle-Eastern dossiers.<sup>7</sup> Even if Cairo's position, seen as more favourable to Hamas' demands, certainly carried influence, the Egyptian negotiating success must be set in context, bearing in mind that, at the time, rather than intervening in the Strip, Israel wanted to send a strong signal to Hamas, which had flexed its muscles by launching rockets as far as Tel-Aviv. The fact that Israel was not ready for a war certainly, therefore, helped in the achievement of a truce.<sup>8</sup>

4 Dina Esfandiary, "Iran and Egypt: a complicated tango?", in *EUISS Opinions*, 18 October 2012, <http://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/detail/article/iran-and-egypt-a-complicated-tango>.

5 Ayyam Mohammed Yaghi, "Hamas' Relations with Egypt Change with Morsi's Leadership", in *Al-Monitor*, 10 September 2012, <http://almon.co/2hj>.

6 "Egypt and Morsy Proved Pivotal in Gaza Cease Fire Talks", in *CNN*, 22 November 2012, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/11/20/world/meast/egypt-gaza-morsy>.

7 The measures foreseen by the truce should have entered into force 24 hours after signature of the cease-fire, but never did so. This complicated the Egyptian mediation in 2014, since Hamas was sceptical towards Israel's promises.

8 Liad Porat, "The Muslim Brotherhood and Egypt-Israel Peace", in *Mideast Security and Policy Studies*, No. 102 (January 2014), <http://besacenter.org/?p=5998>.

## 2. US and the Gulf: Evergreen Allies

Once back in power, first with the presidency of Adly Al-Mansour and then with that of Al-Sisi, the military used foreign policy<sup>9</sup> both as an instrument to obtain something directly (in terms of economic assistance), and as a shop-window in which to display themselves in order to highlight the value (and thereby the price) of a stable Egypt in the region. By displaying itself as a strategic pawn for the entire Arab world and for those States which are, to a greater or lesser degree, influenced by the dynamics which unfold in this area, Egypt showed itself to be the stabilising piece in the region, for which, precisely because of its role as such, everything, even if it might be an abuse, is permitted. By doing so, Morsi's successors took advantage of on-going events on the international scene to justify the fight against the Egyptian Islamists, placing it in the context of the global war on terrorism and the self-proclaimed "Islamic State." If Morsi is remembered by many as the president who, in June 2013, invoked holy war in Syria, Al-Sisi has thus presented himself as the first spokesman of a moderate Islam, a Martin Luther in Arab dress.<sup>10</sup>

In this context, Egypt has above all sought to use foreign policy to guarantee the financial coverage necessary to ward off collapse. In such a light, it has fostered *in primis* relations with its main benefactors, Saudi Arabia and the US, the two financial lungs to which the country's survival is attached.

Albeit with the significant exception of Qatar, taken together, the Gulf countries are the ones who have kept the Egyptian economy alive, and continue to do so, *de facto* preventing the country's collapse.<sup>11</sup> As long ago as August 2013, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the UAE promised to send 12 million dollars. Saudi Arabia continues to be the most generous towards Morsi's successors, *inter alia* thanks to the strategic relationship enjoyed by the two countries, above all in the military field. After having perceived the fall of Mubarak as a threat, Saudi Arabia sought not to ruin its relationship with Egypt, above all with its army,<sup>12</sup> given that Riyadh's is much smaller in size.<sup>13</sup> The generosity of these countries does not come, however, for free. There is a political price which Egypt is ready to pay, allowing itself to be moved, for example, as a pawn by these States on the international chess-board. In such a light, one can understand why Al-Sisi, concerned as a matter of priority to keep his country alive, has preferred not to provoke the generous

9 Since the birth of Republican Egypt, the army has been, and continues to be, one of the main actors in Egyptian foreign policy, together with, in descending order and with clearly inferior influence, the president of the Republic and the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

10 Paola Caridi, "Consensus-building in Al-Sisi's Egypt", in *Insight Egypt*, No. 7 (February 2015), <http://www.iai.it/en/node/3938>.

11 Yasmine Farouk, "More than Money: Post-Mubarak Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf", in *GRC Gulf Papers*, April 2014, <http://goo.gl/3yIL5j>.

12 Four months after the fall of the regime, the two armies carried out joint military exercises. Such exercises had continued during the Islamist period, and became even more intense after Morsi left the scene, when Saudi Arabia increased its support for the Egyptian army.

13 Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Gulf Military Balance, Volume I: The Conventional and Asymmetric Dimensions*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2014, p. 39-40, <http://shar.es/1Wxg9G>.

Gulf royal families, abandoning the path of rapprochement with Iran undertaken by Morsi. Furthermore, if, on the one hand, Cairo combats the political Islam of the Muslim Brotherhood, hunting Islamists, on the other it tolerates more extremist Salafist movements, which have their roots in Riyadh.

If the relationship with the Gulf countries has remained more or less the same, the new Saudi King Salman<sup>14</sup> and Crown Prince Muhammad bin Zayid seem now to play a more assertive role, running the Egyptian file for the GCC not necessarily in the same way as their predecessors.

Waiting to see the evolution of this relationship, that with the US, although remaining strong, has witnessed highs and lows. After Morsi's deposition, Washington was cold towards Cairo. The policy followed by President Barack Obama has, however, been chequered.<sup>15</sup> If the European threats to suspend the package of 5 billion dollars allocated in November 2012<sup>16</sup> have remained as such,<sup>17</sup> the American ones have, on the other hand, materialised. The White House delayed the delivery of four F-16 fighter planes,<sup>18</sup> and later announced that it did not want to participate in the annual Bight Star military exercises, which were already programmed. If such an attitude has been interpreted as an attempt by the US to promote democracy, the delivery of Apaches in the winter of 2014 exposed the failure of that attempt.<sup>19</sup> The negotiations for the creation of the coalition of the willing against the self-proclaimed "Islamic State" have once again brought out the role of Egypt in regional stability and the fight against terrorism. Despite the arguments which arose *inter alia* over the management of the Libyan crisis, relations with the US have not suffered setbacks.

The future of this relationship will now be influenced by internal developments in the US. Even if the US Congress has approved the budget allowing the State Department to start sending military aid to Egypt again, and its new composition after the mid-term elections seems more sensitive to Al-Sisi's

14 This dossier might see further developments in the light of Salman's succession to King Abdullah. See Khaled Dawoud, "Death of Saudi King Ends Hope for Egypt-Qatar Rapprochement", in *EgyptSource*, 9 February 2015, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/egyptsource/death-of-saudi-king-ends-hope-for-egypt-qatar-rapprochement>.

15 Ryan Lizza, "The Consequentialist. How the Arab Spring remade Obama", in *The New Yorker*, 2 May 2011, <http://www.newyorker.com/?p=1482611>; Azzurra Meringolo, "La rivolta egiziana e lo slalom dell'amministrazione Obama", in Maria Eleonora Guasconi (ed.), *Declino europeo e rivolte mediterranee*, Torino, Giappichelli, 2012, p. 89-102; Sergio Fabbrini, "Obama's wavering: Us foreign policy on the Egyptian crisis, 2011-13", in *Contemporary Arab Affairs*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (2015), p. 65-80.

16 On the policies followed by the EU, see Fady Salah, "The rationale behind European Efforts in Egypt", in *EgyptSource*, 17 October 2013, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/egyptsource/the-rationale-behind-european-union-efforts-in-egypt>.

17 On 21 August 2013, however, the EU blocked the export of weapons to Cairo. See Council of the European Union, *3256th Council meeting Foreign Affairs (13086/13)*, Brussels, 21 August 2013, [http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/138603.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/138603.pdf).

18 On 9 October 2013, the White House blocked the sending of some assistance to Egypt: the supply of M1-Abrams tanks, F-16 aircraft, Harpoon missiles and Apache helicopters was frozen, while financing to the amount of 260 million dollars was blocked. However, it was economic support funds, and not funds foreseen by the entry concerning military financing, including financing for counter-terrorism measures for Gaza and the Sinai, which were affected.

19 Azzurra Meringolo, "Grazie al Califfo, in Egitto arrivano gli Apache", in *AffarInternazionali*, 26 October 2014, <http://www.affarinternazionali.it/articolo.asp?ID=2852>.

security concerns, one will need to follow the race for the White House. Should a Republican candidate be victorious, affinities with the current Egyptian leadership, starting from the relationship with Israel and ending with the anti-terrorism measures, would be sure to increase. Even if several US senators are concerned by the issue of respect for human rights, sympathy for security demands would tend to prevail. A different scenario could, on the other hand, emerge, should the Democrat candidate win, above all if this were Hilary Clinton. Accused of having entertained relations with the Brotherhood, the former first lady does indeed enjoy a terrible reputation in both Egyptian political circles and the Egyptian streets. The latest wave of anti-Americanism, which swept the country in 2013, focussed on her, as well as on the then ambassador, Anne Patterson.<sup>20</sup>

### 3. Qatar and Turkey Turn Their Backs

Continuity aside, the “new” Egyptian diplomacy has to reckon with certain States which, having bet on the Muslim Brotherhood, have shown themselves particularly hostile to the military’s return.

The region’s *libero*, Qatar, has not aligned itself to the Gulf countries’ approach. After Morsi’s deposition, Doha withdrew 2 billion of the 3 billion dollars which it had deposited with the Bank of Egypt in 2011 to be converted progressively into State bonds. The nub of the conflict is the support which Qatar had guaranteed to political Islam, riding the wave of the revolts of 2011 and distancing itself from the positions of its neighbours, *in primis* Saudi Arabia and the UAE.<sup>21</sup> Whereas these States applauded Morsi’s deposition, Qatar was accused of having used its satellite broadcaster to discredit the “coup-mongering and retrogressive Egyptian military.” This is why the conflict with Doha focussed above all on its broadcaster, to the point of involving three *Al-Jazeera* journalists, the so-called “Marriott cell,”<sup>22</sup> who were condemned to between 7 and 10 years’ imprisonment on charges of spreading false information and supporting terrorist organisations. The Saudis also intervened in order to curb Qatar, truly baring their fangs. Having withdrawn their ambassador from Qatar, they announced the closure of *Al-Jazeera*’s Riyadh offices, and in March 2014 outlawed the Muslim Brotherhood. Supported by the UAE and Bahrain, the royal families came to a reckoning with Doha, forcing it in April 2014 to sign an agreement

20 If one passes from politics to an analysis of the reaction on the streets, there is a clear difference between the events of winter 2011 and those of summer 2013. In the first phase of the revolution, the US was de facto an absent character from the street demonstrations, whereas in 2013 they were clearly called upon by both sides in the political confrontation. In 2011, images of President Obama did not appear, nor were the stars and stripes burned, as instead often occurred in 2013. Initially, the US was criticised by those who had demanded that Morsi leave the scene, who accused the Obama leadership of “supporting a dictatorial regime under the control of a terrorist group”. In the course of a few weeks, however, the group supporting Morsi also criticised the White House, accusing Obama not only of not demanding the release of the deposed president, but also of continuing to subsidise “a regime which had overturned the popular will”.

21 For such an analysis of relations between Egypt and the Gulf countries, see Azzurra Meringolo, “Le monarchie del Golfo e il Cairo. Prove di restaurazione a guida saudita”, in *Aspeniaonline*, 26 January 2015, <http://www.aspeninstitute.it/aspeniaonline/node/4261>.

22 Arrested in December 2013 on charges of supporting the Muslim Brotherhood, two journalists were released in February 2015.

by which Qatar committed itself, at least formally, to change its position: it would stop labelling the intervention of the Egyptian military as a coup, and it would stop supporting the Brotherhood. It is in such a manner that the Saudis have approached the Egyptian dossier, forcing Cairo and Doha to sign the Riyadh agreement.<sup>23</sup> In such a way, the breach which, since March 2014, had split the GCC was patched up,<sup>24</sup> laying bare the regional intra-Sunni war.<sup>25</sup>

On the other hand, the breach with Turkey is still deep. The diplomatic crisis which, in November 2014, led to the repatriation of the Egyptian ambassador to Ankara was the tip of the iceberg of a relationship which, over the 16 preceding months, passed from heaven to hell. At the end of 2012, the volume of trade between Egypt and Turkey was equal to 5.2 billion dollars. Ankara's investments in Cairo were reckoned at 1.9 billion dollars, and the aim was to reach 5 billion dollars.<sup>26</sup> Over time, however, the halo<sup>27</sup> around Erdoğan and Turkish model began to slip. In Egypt, the change of guard did the rest, and the "new" regime did not tolerate the various displays of solidarity which Erdoğan reserved for the Muslim Brotherhood, continuing to describe what had happened in July 2013 as a military coup. Turkey was, later, the first to lend its own antennae to the Egyptian Brotherhood, whose media had been censored in the homeland. Launched on 19 December 2013, the channel *Rabaa* was only the first megaphone used by what remains of the Brotherhood.<sup>28</sup> In 2014, the relationship with Ankara further deteriorated after the criticisms made of Egypt by the Turkish President Erdoğan on the occasion of the United Nations General Assembly.<sup>29</sup> This pushed Cairo to reject the renewal of the navigation agreement with Turkey signed in March 2012 by the Islamist leadership.<sup>30</sup>

23 Qatar was thus asked to silence the irritating Al-Jazeera microphones, and to expel the supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood who had taken refuge on the peninsular. According to sources circulated before the GCC summit of last December, the Saudis requested Egypt to release the "Marriott cell" journalists and to put a stop to the defamatory campaign against the family of the emir of Qatar.

24 The signature of the Riyadh agreement must not, however, mislead. In reality, Qatar has asked only around 10 members of the Muslim Brotherhood to leave the country. According to certain indiscretions, even the closure of Al-Jazeera Mubashira Misr was a provisional move, given that the network was thinking of launching a new channel that, replacing the discredited satellite broadcaster, would continue to adjust its tone on the basis of the development of the regional narrative. Further evidence of the limits of the Riyadh agreement is provided by the reaction of Hamas, the Palestinian Islamist group supported by Doha, which offers hospitality to its leadership. After a week of press silence, Hamas, which coincidentally is also patching up its relationship with Iran, came out with a positive statement on the signature of the Riyadh agreement. Not seeming greatly worried by the prospect of extradition, the Palestinian Islamists, who, at the beginning of January, denied the news of the eviction of the head of Hamas' political office, Khaled Meshaal, from Doha, hope that this development will help to rebuild the much more complicated relationship with the "new" Cairo.

25 Azzurra Meringolo, "Medio Oriente. La guerra intra-sunnita", in *Mentepolitica*, 15 May 2014, <http://www.mentepolitica.it/articolo/medio-oriente-la-guerra-fredda-intra-sunnita/50>.

26 Azzurra Meringolo, Emanuela Pergolizzi, "Egitto e Turchia ai ferri corti", in *AffarInternazionali*, 2 December 2013, <http://www.affarinternazionali.it/articolo.asp?ID=247>.

27 During his first visit to Egypt after the fall of Mubarak, Erdoğan had been treated as a pop star, not only by the Islamists, but also by the liberal forces, who looked to Turkish history for inspiration for the creation of a democratic regime.

28 The channel takes its name from Rabaa al-Adawya Square, where the Brotherhood retreated to assert Morsi's sovereignty.

29 "Turkey hits back at Egypt amid diplomatic row", in *Ahram Online*, 1 October 2014, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/112133.aspx>.

30 On 26 October 2014, Cairo announced that, as from April 2015, it would not renew the agreement allowing Ankara to

The relationship with the African continent, over which Egypt continues to assert its leadership, is also complex, even if in another way. Following Morsi's deposition, the African Union expelled Egypt,<sup>31</sup> which was then readmitted on 17 June 2014. The North African dossiers which continue to keep Egyptian diplomats busy are Libya (treated in the next section) and the dispute with Ethiopia over the Nile dam,<sup>32</sup> which also involves the other countries through which the river flows, above all Sudan.<sup>33</sup> This explains the particular strengthening of the relationship between Al-Sisi and the Sudanese President Omar Bashir.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, even if Cairo continues to describe itself as an African country and as at the centre of Africa, in its deeds it does not appear really to take account of this region. It is enough to recall that in the various dossiers concerning the widening of the Suez Canal, Africa is not even mentioned once.

## 4. Libya and Gaza, the Thorns in Al-Sisi's Side

Diplomacy aside, there are two foreign policy dossiers which are of principal concern to Al-Sisi's Egypt, threatening its internal security: the Gaza Strip and Libya. The former front inevitably involves Cairo in internal Palestinian goings-on. During his very electoral campaign, Al-Sisi found himself caught up in the process of intra-Palestinian reconciliation which resulted, in June 2014, in the formation of a national unity government. Differently from the attitude adopted during the Mubarak era, through the involvement of the powerful head of the security services, Omar Suleiman, Egypt did not act by means of its own figures: it was involved, it exercised pressure, but it did not mandate its own men to

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use Egyptian ports for the transport of its own products, an agreement which had become necessary to Turkey after the closure by Syria of all means of passage of Turkish exports.

31 The policy of the African Union is to suspend any Member State which undergoes an "unconstitutional" change of government.

32 The controversy over the distribution of the water of the Nile (around 90 million m<sup>3</sup> per year) was already tackled by Egypt, Sudan and Great Britain in 1929. The agreement signed that year assigned 48 million m<sup>3</sup> to Cairo, while 4m<sup>3</sup> went to Khartoum. After Sudanese independence, and while Egypt was searching for funds to build the great Aswan dam, the second after that finished in 1902 by the British, this agreement needed to be revised. In 1959, Egypt and Sudan agreed to divide equally between themselves the 10 billion m<sup>3</sup> which flowed into Lake Nasser. Thereafter, 55.5 billion m<sup>3</sup> per year, two thirds of the amount brought to Aswan, belonged to Egypt, and the remaining third, i.e. 18.5 billion m<sup>3</sup>, to Sudan. With this agreement, the two countries de facto excluded Ethiopia from the negotiations, which at once asserted its right to a resource which originates in its territory. In 2011, Addis Ababa announced plans to build its own dam able to produce more than 6000 MW of energy for itself and its neighbours, including the newborn South Sudan. When it is completed, the dam will be the biggest hydroelectric generator in Africa, and will create the largest artificial lake in Ethiopia, with a capacity of 63 billion m<sup>3</sup>. The issue was discussed most recently on 26 August 2014 at Khartoum. Despite its good intentions, the conference did not tackle the issues key for the resolution of the dispute. For a more exhaustive report on the conference, see Walaa Hussein, "Ethiopia excludes three dams from Khartoum talks with Egypt", in *Al-Monitor*, 29 August 2014, <http://almon.co/26sx>. Furthermore, Egypt has not yet dealt with the issue of water scarcity, a problem with which it will have to come to terms given that, according to forecasts, there will be none left by 2024.

33 The sovereignty claims made by both countries over the Hala'ib triangle, a border region contested by the parties, have been added to the issue of the Nile dam.

34 On 19 October 2014, on the occasion of the visit of the Sudanese president to Cairo, Al-Sisi and Bashir elevated the joint Egypt-Sudan committee from ministerial to presidential level. See "Bashir's visit elevates Egypt-Sudan committee to presidential level", in *Aswat Masriya*, 19 October 2014, <http://en.aswatmasriya.com/news/view.aspx?id=195841d5-fa44-4f20-a066-02cc648bb805>.

manage directly the negotiating table.<sup>35</sup> What kept Egypt busy were, above all, the events which took place within the Gaza Strip in July 2014 during the Israeli operation “Protective Edge.” Egyptian political strategy in the post-Morsi period has been particularly harsh as regards Hamas,<sup>36</sup> with the intention, in the final analysis, of rendering it politically weak and malleable over Gaza by taking advantage of its internal divisions.<sup>37</sup> Egypt put itself forward as the mediator, unwilling but eventually effective, between Israel and Hamas. For the Egyptians, two main objectives were concealed behind the achievement of the ceasefire: maintenance of the role of regional negotiator, pushing back the aspirations of Turkey and Qatar in this direction;<sup>38</sup> and weakening Hamas by delaying the truce,<sup>39</sup> which was not achieved in the record times of 2012. After a first failed attempt and 50 days of war, at the end of August Cairo managed to bring Hamas and Israel to the negotiating table, confirming itself as the unique, irreplaceable regional peacemaker.<sup>40</sup>

Over recent months, the principal concern has been the situation on the border with Libya. With Al-Sisi rise to power, Egypt became a supporter of the main opponent of the Libyan Islamists, the former general Khalifa Haftar. The logistical support given to Libya soon became obvious,<sup>41</sup> and in January 2014 there were reports of the presence of various elements of the Cairo secret services in Cyrenaica.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, Cairo financed and organised Libyan army exercises to fight terrorist groups and to avoid, amongst

35 A central figure in the process of inter-Palestinian reconciliation was, once again, Moussa Abu Marzouq, who had already been at the head of the negotiations over the case of the Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit, as well as the release of Palestinian prisoners by the Israelis. Not only was Marzouq not arrested, but he was given permission by the Egyptian authorities to go to Gaza to negotiate. See Paola Caridi, “La riconciliazione palestinese che fa comodo al Cairo”, in *ISPI Commentary*, 27 maggio 2014, <http://www.ispionline.it/it/node/10517>.

36 Hamas found itself suffering the consequences of internal Egyptian politics and the conflict between the regime and the Brotherhood. Connection with the Palestinian Islamist movement was, furthermore, one of the heads of accusation against the leadership of the Brotherhood in the proceedings against them, including the proceedings against the deposed president Morsi.

37 Michael Wahid Hanna, “The Sisi Doctrine”, in *Foreign Policy*, 13 August 2014, <http://wp.me/p4Os1y-1tGd>.

38 There were in fact two parallel mediation proposals: on the one hand, that headed by Egypt and supported by the Arab League, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Israel, the US and the Palestinian National Authority; on the other, that led by Qatar and supported by Turkey. The overlap between the two proposals, however, complicated the Middle-Eastern diplomatic scene, with Cairo and Jerusalem ready to accuse Doha and Ankara of having sabotaged the Egyptian initiative for a regional lifting operation.

39 During the negotiations, Egypt refused to make concessions to Hamas, convinced that the Palestinian movement would be weakened by the Israeli offensive, and seeming almost to want to bring to an end for the Jewish State the battle against political Islam which had begun in its own home after Morsi’s deposition. Hamas refused a first proposal for a truce mediated by Egypt, accusing the negotiators of not having been involved in the drafting of the agreement. It then demanded not only the cessation of the Israeli incursions, but also the ending of the embargo which had been in force since 2007.

40 The Israeli-Palestinian conflict confirms itself as the field on which it is possible to win a battle in the war for regional supremacy.

41 In 2014, the Egyptian and Libyan Prime Ministers intensified their common efforts against the Islamic rebels in both countries. See Karim Mezran, “Egypt and Libya: a fatal embrace?”, in *Atlantic Council*, 9 October 2014, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/egypt-and-libya-a-fatal-embrace>.

42 Mattia Toaldo, “Libia, le tappe della crisi IS. Slalom italiano sull’intervento”, in *Reset-Dialogues on Civilizations*, 20 February 2015, <http://www.reset.it/?p=19541>.

other things, infiltrations by them into Egyptian territory.<sup>43</sup> Such a clear alignment in support of one side in the conflict provoked arguments not only with the US, but also with Italy, a country to which the White House seems to have delegated the Libyan dossier, and with which Cairo has sought, in vain, to create a triangle. Egypt has managed, however, to collaborate with other countries. Following a series of incidents in the border area which culminated in the tragic attack on the checkpoint at Farafra,<sup>44</sup> Cairo organised, together with the UAE, a series of aerial attacks against the Islamic militia at Tripoli.<sup>45</sup> In the face of accusations by the US, however, Egypt denied having had a role in the raids.

The option of armed intervention has also emerged in the debate over Libya, and materialised on 16 February 2015, after the video of the cutting of the throats of 21 Egyptian Copts by the forces of the self-proclaimed "Islamic State." Cairo's reaction was hard. Egypt carried out repeated aerial raids in collaboration with the Air Force of the Tobruk government, before intervening by land.<sup>46</sup> After having, in vain, sought military action from the United Nations Security Council, Cairo requested the cancellation of the embargo on the supply of weapons to any Libyan subject in order to allow the Tobruk authorities to arm themselves further.<sup>47</sup> However, this proposal also remained as such.

Even if the video of the 21 Egyptian Copts being tried provided Al-Sisi with a *casus belli* for the armed intervention in Cyrenaica, it now remains to be seen how far his Libyan campaign will stretch. On the international scene, Al-Sisi's activism could give the Egyptian President an even more central role in the international fight against the "caliphate," helping him to set himself up as the Arab Martin Luther fighting religious fanaticism. Nevertheless, his brand of Islam is not really reformist and it has to be considered as a reassertion of tradition.

On the domestic scene, by avenging Egyptian blood, Al-Sisi could earn consensus at a crucial moment in his mandate when his political agenda is at risk of being stalled by the ever more widespread accusations of human rights violations. Such political opportunities are, however, accompanied by challenges. Egypt does not seem able, by itself, to solve the Libyan puzzle, avoiding the collapse of Qaddafi's former homeland. Al-Sisi's interventionism seems an overstretching which is destined to fail. In such a case, the repercussions along the Nile and within the military ranks, which have by no means

43 On 8 October 2014, Cairo announced its intention to train Libyan forces to fight terrorism and to protect the common border. See "Egypt, Libya announce deeper security cooperation to 'fight terrorism'", in *Reuters*, 8 October 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/10/08/us-egypt-libya-security-idUSKCN0HX1J020141008>.

44 In an attack on 19 July 2014 on this checkpoint, situated in the Farafra oasis, more than 20 Egyptian soldiers were killed.

45 "UAE carried out Tripoli air strikes: U.S. officials", in *Reuters*, 25 August 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKBN0GP1VJ20140825>. Washington stated that it had not been informed of the raids. See David D. Kirkpatrick, Eric Schmitt, "Arab Nations Strike in Libya, Surprising U.S.", in *The New York Times*, 25 August 2014, <http://nyti.ms/1ANQ5yR>.

46 For such an analysis of Egyptian interventionism, see Azzurra Meringolo, "Guerra per procura egiziana in Libia", in *AffarInternazionali*, 26 February 2015, <http://www.affarinternazionali.it/articolo.asp?ID=2975>.

47 This despite the fact that a United Nations embargo against the supply of arms to any Libyan subject is in force. A European regulation specifies that the Libyan government is included amongst such subjects. See EEAS, *Sanctions policy. Restrictive measures in force*, [http://eeas.europa.eu/cfsp/sanctions/index\\_en.htm](http://eeas.europa.eu/cfsp/sanctions/index_en.htm).

been united over these operations,<sup>48</sup> would not be few.

## Conclusions

Notwithstanding the multiplication of the comparisons between Al-Sisi and President Gamal Abdel Nasser, one does not find in current Egyptian foreign policy the values and ideology which influenced Egypt's international approach in the 1960s, when it was brought close to the Soviet orbit. This position was reversed by the *infitah* of President Anwar Al-Sadat, who transferred Cairo to the US sphere of influence, where Egypt remained for the entire Mubarak and post-revolutionary period. Does Al-Sisi now want to change history for the third time, putting Egypt back beneath the protective Russian wing? Even if the local and international press have given a great deal of relevance to the new interest taken by Russia in the Egyptian scene (beyond military agreements worth 3 billion dollars, Russian president Vladimir Putin has promised Al-Sisi to build a nuclear plant and to strengthen economic relations as regards weapons<sup>49</sup> and tourism), Egypt continues to be militarily dependant on US assistance, which is the more durable. For this reason, it is difficult to imagine that the president is thinking of a drastic repositioning of Egypt. The relationship with the Kremlin seems rather to serve temporary needs, being the element of anti-Americanism with which no Egyptian president has so far gone without.

Even if Al-Sisi has done nothing to revitalise Egypt's role on the foreign policy front, constantly subordinating it to issues of domestic policy, the former general cannot isolate himself from international dynamics, at least as long as Cairo is not able to provide autonomously for its own survival. Understanding the importance of the Egyptian backstop, above all after the laborious negotiating success over the Gaza Strip, the international powers also consider a stable Egypt, able to preserve the regional balance, to be essential. They do not, therefore, intend to isolate it. On the contrary, the old times, when the international powers closed their eyes to Egypt's democratic performance in order to guarantee regional stability, seem to have returned.

Other than raising moral questions, this approach also risks being counterproductive, sustaining typically national battles, such as that against terrorism, which are then presented as global ones. This is why the real challenge is Libya. Already fighting a war by proxy against the Islamist factions, Al-Sisi has to disentangle himself from among the security threats coming from the more problematic borders. Knowing the precarious state of the Egyptian finances, the social unease of the population, and the military dependence on the US, certain sectors of the army might not support the Libyan operation. Should Al-Sisi desire to flex his muscles, the Libyan thicket would be the most suitable environment.

<sup>48</sup> Michael Wahid Hanna, "The Sisi Doctrine", cit.

<sup>49</sup> As long ago as February 2014, Russia and Egypt reached an agreement of a value of 3 billion dollars in this sector.

## About Insight Egypt

The series is part of a two-year research project on Egypt, started in 2013, which aims at monitoring the uncertain transition taking place in the North African country. Following closely the evolution of events, the series explores the transformations of the socio-economic and political institutional, as well as energy policy and foreign policy of the country, including its relations with Italy and Europe.

A specific attention is devoted to the actors of the transition: opposition movements, youth groups, the judiciary, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, the Muslim Brotherhood and other social actors such as trade unions and business associations.

Possible scenarios of the political, economic and social evolution in Egypt are also prepared and discussed.

The project will be realized by a multidisciplinary research team of the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), which has developed over the years a solid experience on Egypt.

## The author

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