



Burying the Hatchet but with the Handle Sticking Out The Egyptian-Turkish Rapprochement – and its Questions¹

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Abstract:

Since 2013, the relations between the two biggest conventional military powers of the Middle East became very hostile. The Egyptian-Turkish tensions affected not just the bilateral dimension, but Libya, the Eastern Mediterranean, and other regions too. Moreover, in 2020, there were signs of possible direct military conflict between Ankara and Cairo.

This did not happen and the rapprochement slowly but steady developed: in 2022, the leaders of the two countries met with each other and shook hands. Yet before this paper was finalised, however, there were still plenty of questions hanging over a possible Egyptian-Turkish rapprochement. There is no doubt that normalisation has started between Ankara and Cairo in recent years, but its outcome remains uncertain.

In summary: this paper strives to present the recent history of Egyptian-Turkish relations since the outbreak of the so-called Arab Spring, the main points of the regional “cold war” between Ankara and Cairo, and in the end, the remaining pitfalls of rapprochement.

Keywords:

Egypt, East Mediterranean, Libya, Muslim Brotherhood, Turkey

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Introduction

“We said that a process can begin. A step has been taken here to start such a process, and we had the talks. It is my hope that we want to move the process that started with our ministers to a good point later, hopefully to the high-level meetings” – the words by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan came as a big surprise in the country and the region alike when he personally greeted the Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in Qatar on November 20, 2022 (Al-Jazeera, 2022). During the opening ceremony of the World Cup in Doha, they sent a strong message because they not just welcomed each other with warm words but in front of Qatar’s Emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Tani, and also shook hands. Although the meeting lasted only few minutes, it signalled willingness on behalf of both leaders to bridge the nine-year rift between Egypt and Turkey. The surprise of the handshake comes from the fact that in the past Erdoğan many times underlined that he would “never talk to someone like him”, by which the Turkish Prime Minister was essentially referring to the Egyptian President. (Al-Jazeera, 2019).

The reason behind such former rejection is that in 2013 Ankara lost one of his important allies – the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood – in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and since then the Egyptian-Turkish tension grew year by year. The media and political leadership of both countries constantly berated each other, while their economic, geopolitical and military interests many times collided in the Mediterranean. Moreover, in 2020, quite a few regional and international media channels raised a question about a possible direct military confrontation – horrible dictu even a war – between Egypt and Turkey in Libya (Iddon, 2020; Hayna, 2020). This did not happen. On the contrary: since the end of 2020, there were more and more signs of a possible rapprochement. When this paper was written, however, a state of fully restored relations has not been achieved. Why has it not happened? For that matter, how did the Egyptian-Turkish “cold war” begin? What was Ankara’s reaction to Egyptian events in 2013? Where have both countries indirectly clashed in MENA? How and why has the rapprochement started? What are the remaining challenges and obstacles which are slowing down the process?

The goal of this paper is to give answers to all questions. First of all, it was important to devote the entire first three sections to the recent history of Egyptian-Turkish relations. This was necessary because it is only through the more descriptive account of historical precedents that we may understand why Ankara reacted in such a hostile way to the post-2013 Egyptian regime – and *vice versa*. Also, the third section will concentrate on the “geopolitical aspects” of the Egyptian-Turkish “cold war”, especially on Libya and the undersea gas fields in the East Mediterranean. The next two parts examine not just the rapprochement, but also try to highlight the different factors behind it. The final part of the study is intended to give an answer to the main hypothesis: can the reconciliation campaign lead back to fruitful Egyptian-Turkish



relations? Or, due the remaining differences, was the whole process doomed from the beginning?

“The Golden Years”

The so-called “Arab Spring” meant a *tabula rasa* in the turbulent Egyptian–Turkish history, which, in the past, was not free from devastating wars and great-power rivalries, either. When the protests were still ongoing in Egypt, the Turkish Prime Minister (from 2014 President) Recep Tayyip Erdoğan – first among the non-Arab leaders – called on Hosni Mubarak to step down (Éva, 2016). Because the Egyptian President did not resign and the possibility of a civil war still was growing day by day, Erdoğan even announced Ankara’s willingness to join an international humanitarian intervention and offered assistance. Even when the revolution against Moammer Gadhafi started in neighbouring Libya, Turkey evacuated not just its own citizens, but the Egyptians too (Salaheldin, 2019).

After Mubarak left his office, Abdullah Gül became the first foreign head of state who met with the new Egyptian leadership, the Egyptian Supreme Council of the Armed Forces. In Autumn 2011, Erdoğan – with six ministers and approximately 200 businessmen – visited Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia. The Turkish delegation received a warm welcome in every country. *“The freedom message spreading from Tahrir Square has become a light of hope for all the oppressed through Tripoli, Damascus, and Sanaa”* – the Turkish Prime Minister said to the audience at the Cairo Opera House (Karadeniz, Saleh, 2011). For Arab Islamists, Turkey became a model where the Turkish Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi/AKP) could win many elections and ensure a rising standard of living. A week later Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu spoke about the “Axis of Democracy”, which meant a forming alliance between Ankara and Cairo (Fouad, 2011).

After the 2012 Egyptian elections, the visions of Egyptian-Turkish cooperation started to come to life. The first democratic votes in the Arab country’s history were won by Freedom and Justice (Hizb al-Hurriyyah wa-l-‘Adalah/FJP), the local political branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. The new President of Egypt, Mohamed Morsi, belonged to the greatest admirers of the AKP. He considered Erdoğan as a “mentor” and called Turkey a model to follow. During his trip in Turkey, Morsi was treated as a hero and spoke at the AKP political conference. Erdoğan repaid the visit in November 2012, when the Turkish Prime Minister made his second trip in year in post-Arab Spring Egypt. They signed 27 cooperation agreements in many fields, including the establishment of a high-level strategic council. The two countries’ bilateral relations reached a historical peak. Turkey lent \$2 billion to Egypt and bilateral trade jumped to \$5 billion in two years. By 2013, more than two hundred Turkish companies operated in Egypt with more than \$2billion total investment (Bradley, 2012).

Even on the political level, they shared various goals and had a joint interest in the MENA. The Egyptian leadership sought to oust the army from politics, just as the Turkish had done in the first years of the 21st century. Egypt – along with Turkey – began to support various Islamist organisations and militant groups across the region, especially in Libya and Syria. Ankara and Cairo worked closely together in achieving a ceasefire in Gaza in November 2012 (the Israeli operation *Pillar of Defence* was halted); meanwhile, Egypt started to downsize its relations with Israel. Moreover, they started to cooperate with Iran too: the leaders of the three countries met in early 2013 in Cairo at the Organization of Islamic Cooperation's (OIC) summit and earmarked the new dawn of "Islamic Democracies" in the MENA.

"The End of the Honeymoon"

In June 2013, the *Tamarod* (rebellion) movement organised an anti-government campaign in Egypt. The growing economic and social problems, Cairo's foreign policy towards Iran, Turkey and growing involvement in Syria and Libya, the new "Islamic Constitution" and policy – these things all led to new countrywide protests. In the end, the Egyptian military under the command of then-Minister of Defence Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi toppled President Morsi, arrested the members of the government and the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood while waging bloody warfare in the streets on FJP-supporters. Most of the MENA-countries, the United States, Russia, the European Union, and the United Nations remained silent and sooner or later they all recognised the new leadership.

But Turkey – and Qatar – was not among them, because both interpreted the Egyptian events as a coup d'état. Erdoğan described the clashes in August 2013 with the word "massacre" and demanded that those who are responsible for death of more than six hundred people must be brought to justice (Reuters Staff, 2013). Moreover, he called for international UN sanctions and interventions against Egypt. Following the Prime Minister's statement, Cairo gave the Turkish ambassador to Egypt 48 hours' time to leave the country. As a response, Ankara also declared the Egyptian ambassador a *persona non grata* – so diplomatic relations were downgraded to the level of *charge d'affaires* (BBC, 2013). All previous military cooperation and joint drills were suspended, and the Turks vetoed any participation by Egypt in NATO's partnerships. The fall of Morsi meant for Erdoğan not only a loss of his main allies in MENA, but *"also watching his own model of government, the Islamic democracy on which the West had poured such flattery only two years earlier, being dismantled and discredited"* (Smith, 2019).

After Fattah al-Sisi won the election and became Egypt's new president in 2014, the relations turned much more hostile. The new Egyptian leadership banned the Brotherhood, froze its assets, jailed many of its members – for example Morsi himself – and started a regionwide propaganda war against their supporters. Meanwhile, Turkey



– with Great Britain and Qatar – became a safe haven for the Egyptian emigrants. They established the Egyptian Revolutionary Council in Istanbul as an anti-regime platform and the city hosted two conferences of the “global” Brotherhood (Altunışık, 2019). Turkey not only welcomed the escaped activists, MB-members and government officials, but gave them the opportunity to openly criticise the Egyptian regime in television and in the social media too. But when it came to the propaganda-war and “diplomatic retaliations”, Egypt did not lag behind either. The Arab country’s press regularly attacked Erdoğan, the AKP’s rule, Turkey’s intervention in Syria, and the measures of the authorities against minorities – for example, against Kurds. The Egyptian police detained 29 people on suspicion of spying for Turkey. In 2015, Cairo lobbied against Turkey and prevented the country from becoming a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council. Cairo did not renew the truck roll-on/roll-off (ro-ro) transportation agreement³, which coordinated shipping between the Turkish ports of Mersin and İskenderun and the Egyptian ports of Alexandria, Damietta, and Port Said (Mogielnicki, 2019).

When the members of the Turkish Army tried to seize power on 15 July 2016, the Egyptian military and political leadership did not condemn the coup at all. Unlike in most other countries, the political and military leadership – confidently or openly – supported the plotting Turkish military officers and in the Arab media they described the events not as coup but rather a “revolution”. On 17 July, Egypt vetoed a UN Security Council statement condemning the attempted coup in Turkey. After the Turkish authorities classified Fethullah Gülen’s movements as a terrorist organisation – despite the fact that Gülen himself condemned the military action – and arrested thousands of their activists, Egypt started to welcome the persecuted Turks. Even the Arab country’s parliament members sent a request to the government in 2016 to grant asylum for Gülen – like former President Anwar Sadat did to Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi after the Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1979. Although this did not happen, the Turkish press later always reported of Gülen’s and other leading members’ “possible refuge seeking” in Egypt (Hürriyet Daily News, 2019).

In parallel, neither of the two countries’ leaders has missed an opportunity to put the other one in an awkward situation. At the Munich Security Conference in 2019, al-Sisi suddenly recognised the Armenian Genocide, enraging the Turkish delegation. In the same year, Erdoğan rejected an offer to join a dinner with President Donald Trump upon seeing the Egyptian President sitting at the table – he rather stormed out of the room theatrically (Middle East Monitor 2019). Also in 2019, Mohamed Morsi died in prison: the Turkish leader paid a tribute, called Morsi a martyr, and blamed the Egyptian regime for his death (The New Arab, 2019).

³ In 2012, Turkey and Egypt signed an additional deal of free transportation of Turkish vehicles to Egypt by sea. This permitted Turkish trading companies to access Gulf markets via Egyptian territory so they could avoid the dangerous overland trade routes through Iraq and Syria.

The “Cold War” Warms Up

Libya was the first hotspot in the Egyptian-Turkish geopolitical rivalry. During the short time of Morsi’s presidency, both countries treated the post-Gaddafi Libyan leadership as an ally of “Axis of (Islam) Democracy”, commonly supporting the local Islamist parties and organisations. After 2013, Cairo radically changed its attitude and tone towards Tripoli. The growing instability in the North African country meant a security threat for the post-2013 Egyptian leadership. Some of the deflected Muslim Brotherhood members joined the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord’s (GNA) and its predecessor’s militant groups. As the chaos grew bigger and bigger in Libya, its “spillover effect” worried the Egyptian government, because they thought the escaped Egyptian Islamists will carry out attacks from the Libyan territories. That is why the Egyptian Air Force – with the help of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – carried out air strikes against the militias in Tripoli in 2014 (Reuters Staff, 2014). Also, this military action sent a clear message: Cairo stands by general Khalifa Haftar, the commander of the Libyan National Army (LNA), who started the Second Libyan Civil War in the same year. The Egyptians were not alone, because France, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE also supported the Tobruk-based secularist House of Representatives (HoR). Egyptian involvement got more intensive when the Libyan branch of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) kidnapped twenty-one Coptic Christians near Sirte and beheaded them. Cairo sent its Air Force (again) to bomb the terrorist groups while Fattah al-Sisi took an active part in organising another international campaign in the South Mediterranean. Although the latter failed, it does not mean that Egypt had given up on Libya.

Behind Cairo’s strong commitment lay some economic and geopolitical reasons too. In 2016, Haftar took control of the regional energy infrastructure so he could easily finance the Egyptian, Emirati, and Russian weapons and foreign mercenaries from oil export. Furthermore, some Egyptian companies saw opportunities in Libya’s reconstruction and oil production (Cousins, 2017). Last but not least, there were one million Egyptian workers employed in the Libyan energy sector. Moreover, Cairo did not send just ammunition and weapons, but even with the help of the Egyptian special forces the LNA took cities like Derna. Despite the strong Egyptian – and Emirati and Saudi – pressure, however, Haftar did not sit down to the negotiating table but rather started a whole new military campaign against the GNA in 2019. His goal was to capture Tripoli and overthrow the government. In the beginning, the LNA advanced well, but few weeks later the siege was lifted. Moreover, Haftar’s forces suffered heavy losses, started to retreat, and the GNA forces retook the lost territories.

This surprising turn of events was due to Turkey’s role. Since the beginning, Ankara supported the Tripoli-based government like the United Nations, most EU-members and Qatar did. In the first years, this meant only diplomatic, economic, and slight military help – the Turkish units mostly gave advice, trained the militias, and assisted in the handling of drones and combat vehicles. But later Erdoğan decided to act



more seriously. The first sign of a more intensive Turkish role was the signing of a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with GNA on 27 November 2019, which determined a new maritime delimitation between the two countries. From the Turkish perspective, this agreement legalised Turkey's searching, drilling and exploration for natural gas near Libya's maritime borders. Even more, the MoU led to the evasion of sanctions, such as an arms embargo on Libya, the UN Security Council Resolution 1970 (Stanicek, 2020). Ankara sent more than 2 000 Syrian mercenaries and high-tech weaponry (for example *Bayraktar TB-2* drones, warships etc.) to help Tripoli's efforts.

The collapse of LNA and advance of the GNA fully surprised Egypt: Haftar's failure could end the influence of Tobruk's Arab (Egypt, United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia) and international (France and Russia) allies in the country. That is why in the summer of 2020 Egypt started to mobilise its forces, and the number of soldiers drastically increased along the border. "Libya's Sirte and Al-Jufra are considered the red line for Egyptian national security" – said al-Sisi on June 2020 while he was visiting the biggest military airbase in West Egypt (Morsy, 2020). A few days later, a conference was organised in the capital of Egypt, where Haftar's ally tribesmen participated and asked Egyptian President to intervene in Libya. Meanwhile, the war rhetoric also appeared and spread in Egypt's society. Slogans such as "Egypt and Libya, one people, one fate," circulated in media. At the end of July, the members of the Egyptian parliament unanimously accepted that the national security interest should be defended on the strategic western front against the work of armed criminal militias and foreign terrorist elements. So, it is not surprising that many people thought that the *Hasm* (Firmness) military exercise was only a prelude to a second Egyptian-Libyan War (the first one broke out in 1977) and a possible direct clash with Turkish soldiers. The order to attack was not given, but this did not automatically lead to the end of hostilities between Ankara and Cairo.

In parallel with Libya, the gas fields of the East Mediterranean were also a conflict of interest. The core of the problems (unsolved maritime borderlines, economic zones etc.) may be traced back to the Mid-20th century, but after the overthrow of Morsi, they reached a whole new level. In 2013, Egypt's Foreign Ministry warned Turkey to avoid drilling for natural gas west of Cyprus. A few weeks later Nicosia signed a maritime boundary delimitation agreement with Cairo to examine the optimal use of promising natural gas prospects. The other goal was to weaken the Turkish position in the region – that is why Ankara still does not recognise the Republic of Cyprus's claims to an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) further than 20 kilometres beyond its territorial waters (Maher and Tsukerman, 2019). In November 2014, Cairo held a tripartite summit with Cyprus and Greece to demarcate the new maritime borders in the Mediterranean. In 2015, Cairo discovered a vast gas deposit: the Levant Basin, in the waters of Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, Israel, Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey which contains circa 122.4 trillion cubic feet of recoverable gas. Since then, foreign energy companies such as British Petrol, Deutsche Erdoel AG, Ente Nazionali Idrocarburi (ENI), Russian Rosneft, and Emirati

Mubadala, have exposed six other large fields near Egypt – the richest is Zohr Field, where lie estimated 850 billion cubic metres of gas. As Egyptian gas production was stepped up, President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi claimed in 2019 that the Arab country had achieved natural gas self-sufficiency and could become a regional hub of trade and the main distributor of liquefied natural gas (Melcangi, 2020).

But Turkey meant a serious obstacle for the Egyptian leadership in reaching their economic dreams. To neutralise the Turkish claims in the East Mediterranean and isolate Ankara in the region, Cairo has worked not only with Cyprus and Greece, but with other players (Israel, Italy, and Jordan) too. Their goal was to create a new multilateral framework and to promote a new regional pattern for economic cooperation, informal dialogue, and political interdependence to overcome the existing fault lines in the wider Mediterranean. The Egyptian attempts proved to be fruitful: they founded the East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) in 2019. The members of the so-called “OPEC of Mediterranean gas” are Cyprus, Egypt, France, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority⁴, while the EU and the United States remain its permanent observers. As the Egyptian diplomacy described, the EMGF is an international organisation that respects its member states’ rights to resource extraction, declares common war against “illegal drillings and mining” by other countries (e.g., Turkey), and strengthens energy cooperation (for instance, by building gas pipelines) among its members. Naturally, the formation of the EMGF angered Erdoğan. From the Turkish perspective these undersea resources would have been a cure for their economic problems. Until the beginning of the 2020s, Turkey remained almost entirely dependent on gas imports from Russia (53 per cent), Iran (17 per cent), and Azerbaijan (14 per cent), but as the economic problems grew in the country, it became a priority to reduce the dependence on foreign energetic resources (Mogielnicki, 2019). To counterbalance the EMGF, Ankara asserted the right of Northern Cyprus to explore and extract the undersea resources and sent warships to defend the Turkish drilling vessels. Secondly, in a *quid pro quo*, Turkey signed the formerly mentioned memorandum of understanding with the Tripoli-based Libyan government in 2019 – however, the regional countries successfully prevented to register this agreement in the United Nations Treaty Collection. In Summer 2020, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu called the Greek-Egyptian bilateral agreement, which was similar to the Cyprus-Egypt agreement from 2013, “null and void” and promised to defend the rights of Turkey and Turkish Cypriots (Stanicek, 2020). Soon after the announcement, warships showed up in Greek waters and the Turkish exploration continued, which evoked a harsh reaction even from the EU.

The Egyptian–Turkish “cold war” did not end here because there were some other “minor” cases where their geopolitical interests clashed too. Ankara supported the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) project, and Turkey is now one of the three

⁴ Later the PA vetoed against UAE, who was also a founding member. The reason behind this was the Emirati-Israeli normalisation and peace treaty.

largest foreign investors in Ethiopia – by 2021, it invested \$2.5 billion in that country. Besides, if any other regional country (e.g., Algeria or Tunisia) got involved in a debate with Egypt, the Turkish diplomacy often lined up behind it. Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir cooperated closely with Turkey. In 2017, Khartoum signed a four-billion-dollar project, which allowed Turkey to restore the old Ottoman port on the strategic island of Suakin in the Red Sea. Due to its proximity to the Egyptian coastline, Cairo – and Riyadh – saw the island as a Turkish bridgehead. That is why they supported the new Sudanese leadership after Bashir was deposed in April 2019 – and not surprisingly, the Suakin project was suspended (Maher and Tsukerman 2019). On the other hand, Cairo has consistently sided with those countries whose territories or citizens had been attacked by the Turkish military: for example, with Iraq or Syrian Kurds. Also, during the Morsi government, Qatar was an important partner for Egypt, but after 2013, relations hit rock bottom. Egypt withdrew its ambassador from the country and took part in the blockade against Doha in June 2017. Egypt-Air suspended its flights to and from Qatar, Qatar-flagged ships were banned from ports, and remaining Qatar nationals and companies were expelled from the country. Despite all efforts, though, the Arab states could not cripple the country because Iran and Turkey helped Doha to survive the blockade. Erdoğan called the isolation of Qatar an “inhumane and step against Islamic values”. He could even strengthen his position in the Persian Gulf: Ankara provided not only food and medical supplies, but Turkish soldiers too, so in the end they opened a Turkish military base in Qatar (Altunişik, 2019).

Step by Step

Despite the very intensive rivalry in almost all dimensions, not everyone wanted to widen the gap between Egypt and Turkey – some aimed at reducing the tensions. For example, Turkish President Abdullah Gül, congratulated al-Sisi on his winning the presidential elections in 2014. Moreover, Turkish charge d'affaires to Cairo Alper Bosuter took part in the inauguration ceremony of al-Sisi, which, according to some experts, could be described as the de facto recognition of the regime (Éva, 2016). Later Turkey's former Prime Minister, Binali Yıldırım pointed out that “*normalization with Egypt is still possible*” (Al-Anani, 2020). The Egyptian diplomacy agreed with his statement, but only on one condition: Ankara should recognise the legitimacy of former President Mohamed Morsi's removal from power. But the Turkish plot in July 2016 reversed all these attempts. In parallel, the worsening situations in Libya, in the Persian Gulf and in the Eastern and Southern part of the Mediterranean Sea also ruled out any possible reconciliation.

A radical turn occurred in 2020. The Egyptian and Turkish intelligence officers and chieftains started to exchange messages through intermediaries and also in person. The Turkish authorities asked Egyptian opposition television channels operating in their country and the intellectuals close to the Muslim Brotherhood to moderate their

criticism of Egypt's government and stop attacks on al-Sisi. Also, the Turkish diplomacy lifted its veto against Egypt's partnership activities with NATO. By 2021, more and more members of the Turkish government had taken a stand for beginning rapprochement and sending a diplomatic mission to Egypt. "As friends, we strive to restore our historical unity with the Egyptian people" – said Erdoğan, after Sedat Öñals, Turkey's deputy foreign minister had an official trip to Egypt (Soliman, 2021). During the two-day visit, which started on 5 May 2021, the parties did not only agree to continue with normalisation but also spoke about "sensitive" subjects such as the Mediterranean natural gas fields or the fate of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Rapprochement continued slowly but steadily. In August 2021, Turkey asked the Egyptian diplomacy for another round of talks, during which they discussed bilateral and regional (East Mediterranean, Libya, Syria etc.) issues. A few weeks later, a delegation led by Egypt's Deputy Foreign Minister for African Affairs Hamdi Sanad Loza went to Ankara and raised the issue of the next steps of normalisation (Al-Anani, 2020). The Turkish side approved some of the Egyptian requests: in 2022, the MB-affiliated, anti-Sisi satellite channel (*Mekameleen*) closed its studio and stopped broadcasting. Furthermore, some of the famous opponents of the Egyptian leadership, like Moataz Matar and Mohamed Nasser, left Turkey. In August 2022, Erdoğan called for improving ties with Egypt and stressed that he considered the Egyptian people "brothers" with whom Turkey must reconcile. He also expressed his hope of building strong relations at the highest diplomatic level (Al-Anani, 2022). Meanwhile, the Egyptian media became less critical to Erdoğan and Turkey's foreign policy alike.

The Catalysts behind Rapprochement

Many factors could be mentioned which led to the Egyptian–Turkish rapprochement. First of all, the geopolitical rivalry reached the ultimate limit. After the Gulf Cooperation Council summit in al-Ula in 2021, Saudi Arabia and UAE started to give up the blockade against Qatar – Cairo also followed them and slowly normalised its relations with Doha. Ankara was left out of the events in Sudan after the coup in 2019 and did not challenge the position of the other Arab states in the country. Moreover, the Turkish developed a distance from their former pro-Ethiopia stance and showed neutrality in the GERD-project. But the most significant of all was Libya. As a possible direct Egyptian-Turkish military clash loomed on the horizon, both leaderships ordered a retreat. Cairo was disappointed with Haftar. At the same time Ankara considered the Libyan intervention economically and militarily unsustainable because Turkey started a new military offensive in Syria and increased its military support to Azerbaijan, which a few weeks later started the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War. The Egyptian and Turkish diplomacy put hard pressure on their allies – Ankara on GNA, Cairo on Haftar – to continue the peace talks. Between 6 and 10 September 2020, with the blessing of the king, the Moroccan government hosted the "Libyan Dialogue" conference in Bouznika, bringing



surprising and breakthrough results. They agreed on oil production and selling, unifying the GNA's and the house of representatives' ministries, and reducing foreign influence. The "Bouznika Agreement" was an important political achievement for a long time and the country's leaders did not want to be those who destroy the peace process, which could continue in the following months (Hatim, 2020). On 24 October, the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum – with the members of GNA and HoR – was formed, while the LNA and Tripoli-led army signed a permanent ceasefire. From the Egyptian and Turkish perspective, this consisted the withdrawal of all foreign mercenaries and military forces within 90 days, finishing all military training and suspending heavy arms import to Libya.

The changes in Turkish foreign policy also contributed to the reconciliation. By 2020, the Turkish "Zero-Problems Policy" – which was adopted when the AKP came to power – led to "Zero-Friends Policy" in the MENA, especially with two Persian Gulf monarchies. The Turkish press accused the UAE with financing the Turkish plotters in 2016 (Paksoy, 2017). Despite the fact, that Saudi Arabia and Turkey stand on the same side in Syria, in many other cases they were enemies, like in Libya and Qatar. The killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi inside the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul in 2018 increased tensions between the two countries. But during 2020, Ankara started a diplomatic campaign to restore relations with them. In Autumn 2021, Erdoğan went to UAE. Next year he repeated his trip to the Persian Gulf country and signed an agreement of a \$10 billion Turkish investment (Egeresi, 2022b). In April 2022, Erdoğan visited Saudi Arabia and three months later Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman met with the Turkish President in Ankara.

Last but not least, the economic factors also should be mentioned. According to the writer of this study, this dimension played the key role in the Egyptian-Turkish rapprochement. Of course, the strife had some negative consequences on bilateral trade and foreign direct investments (FDI). For example, the Egyptian side did not renew the ro-ro agreement or Turkish authorities opened anti-dumping investigations against Egyptian goods like cotton and polystyrene (Mogielnicki, 2019). But despite all these economic measures, Egyptian-Turkish trade decreased only slightly to a total of \$4.5 billion in 2016, down just 10% from the 2013 peak. More ironically, bilateral trade indicators were better in 2017 than during the Morsi-era: it returned to around \$5.33 billion in 2018 and Turkish import set a new record when it exceeded \$3 billion (Mogielnicki, 2019). By 2020, Turkey became Egypt's third-largest importer. The strife did not affect the investments seriously either. According to officials, the volume of Turkish investments was an estimated \$2 billion in Egypt, which meant 540 Turkish companies were registered in the Arab country – especially in the special economic zones near the Suez Canal and in the Egyptian manufacturing sector (Adly, 2021). The indicators, however, were not so good in the other direction, because Egyptian investments reached only \$4 million. But what truly surprised the analyst and experts was that they started to collaborate in the energy sector too. Egypt had become a key

supplier of liquified natural gas to Turkey by 2021 – 7.2 million mt/year. Furthermore, Turkish Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu said that Turkey and Egypt's normalisation efforts are crucial for developments in the Eastern Mediterranean, and that the two countries should collaborate in order to achieve their interests (Al-Anani, 2022).

Economic and health (COVID-19) problems also confirmed the intention to reduce tensions. Due to the slowdown in global trade, Egypt's revenues from the Suez Canal had been falling with transit fees having been reduced by 35–75% for some ships, depending on their type and destination. As all international flights were suspended, tourism has suffered most since the COVID-19 pandemic broke out. Despite the government's USD 6.1 billion rescue package, Egypt's unemployment rate and inflation both rose, while exchange reserves and state subsidies decreased. The latter severely hit the poor and the members of the lower class, who had become highly dependent on subventions. The proportion of those who live under or around the poverty line had already increased significantly in Egypt: according to World Bank estimates, 60% of Egypt's population had been either poor or in the vulnerable category since 2019. In parallel, Turkey has not fared any better. Since mid-2013, the Turkish lira (TRY) has lost two thirds of its value, and when Donald Trump imposed sanctions against Turkey, the economy slid into recession in early 2019. Unemployment remained above 10 per cent. Public debt was around 32.1 per cent of the GDP. And all these pointers worsened when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the country. Thanks to measures Turkey's GDP grew 1,8% and the deficit reached “only” 40% in 2020. But despite all the government's efforts Ankara could not stop the devolution of TRY and inflation (Egeresi, 2022a).

Conclusion – The Possible Pitfalls

The meeting between Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in November 2022 signalled that both leaders are obliged to restore the former good – or at least less confrontational – relations. In the face of the Russian-Ukraine War, neither Ankara nor Cairo wants to give up their neutral/balancing position. If this happens, they can break their relations with Kyiv and Moscow alike. Because the geopolitical stakes are so high and most of the MENA countries want to stay out of the European conflict, this pushes them to solve the problems among them to prevent a possible “spillover effect” of the Russo-Ukrainian War. For example, mere days after the Russian invasion started, Israeli President Isaac Herzog made a surprise visit to Turkey to finish 14 years of tension between the two states (Egeresi, 2022b). Also, Erdoğan travelled to Saudi Arabia and UAE, while the peace process in Libya and Syria reached a new level. Even from the economic perspective, it became necessary for Ankara and Cairo to strengthen their trade and investment to counterbalance the negative effects of the energy crisis, food shortages (Egypt and Turkey heavily rely on grain and wheat imports from Russia and Ukraine), inflation (Turkey's reached 85% at end 2022) and devaluation.



Despite the fact that circumstances are pressing them, the rapprochement moves slowly. There are still mines on the road which could jeopardise the positive outcome of the diplomatic campaign. These pitfalls are not primarily political or ideological. As Turkey stopped to be a “safe haven” for the Egyptian Islamist opposition, the anti-Sisi media and Muslim Brotherhood pose a smaller threat for the Arab country. In parallel, the Egyptian media changed its tone towards Erdoğan and AKP, the number of official verbal attacks was reduced significantly, which also facilitates the process.

The solution lies elsewhere: in the geopolitical dimension. Despite the fact, that Qatar and Sudan no longer mean obstacles in Egyptian-Turkish normalisation, Libya and the East Mediterranean gas fields still count as a source of tension. Although the Libyan ceasefire, conciliation, and the country’s upcoming elections have the blessing from Ankara and Cairo alike, this does not mean that they will turn their back on their Libyan partners. Indeed, Khalifa Haftar may have failed to achieve victory, but for Egypt – Saudi Arabia and UAE too – the LNA and Tobruk-based House of Representatives has remained a key ally. Meanwhile Ankara supports Abdul-Hamid Dbeibah, the head of the Government of National Unity in Tripoli, who rejected any transfer power until the elections are held – but this was postponed several times (Al-Anani, 2022). Closely linked with Libya, the competition for natural gas in the East Mediterranean remains a source of serious tensions too. Egypt and Turkey still have not demarcated their maritime borders. It is also unrealistic to expect that Cairo fundamentally changes its foreign and security policy in Ankara’s favour. The EMGF is simply too important for the Egyptian leadership, and they did not want to weaken the Cypriot–Egyptian–Greek–Israeli “alliance”. In parallel, Turkey will not give up its partners either: in October 2022, it signed a new agreement with Dbeibah’s government, which allows Libyan and Turkish companies to carry out joint explorations in the Eastern Mediterranean. The Egyptian – with the Cypriot and the Greek – diplomacy strongly criticised the step and refused to continue the talks with Turkish partners. Later Ankara not only defended the pact but even accused Cairo that it is doing the same and Egypt with Greece endangers Turkey’s interests (The Arab Weekly, 2022).

There is no doubt that in recent years normalisation has started, which both parties take seriously. Indeed, there are grounds for optimism that one of the main sources of tension in the Mediterranean may disappear in the near future. But some steps are still missing that could really herald the beginning of a new era in the Egyptian-Turkish relations. For example, in April 2022, Çavuşoğlu assured the parties that the mutual re-appointment of ambassadors is a “question of months”. When this study was written, however, Salih Mutlu Sen, Turkey’s former representative to the OIC, could still not take his post – and there was no information about the fate of Egypt’s ambassador either (Soylu, 2022). The Erdoğan-al-Sissi handshake in Qatar meant a promising step in resolving the mutual distrust but until no other real steps follow the Egyptian-Turkish normalisation it remains rather a tactical *détente* than a stabilising force of the Middle East and North Africa region.

Conflict of Interest

The authors hereby declare that no competing financial interest exists for this manuscript.

Notes on Contributor

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