

# IS RE-CALIBRATION FEASIBLE IN TURKEY-EGYPT RELATIONS? LIMITS AND POSSIBILITIES

*The ideological dimension of the bilateral Turkey-Egypt ties constitutes a particular focal point in terms of predicaments, which could be quite tricky to overcome. Yet, it seems that the geopolitical necessities tighten the noose for Turkey to feel obliged in fixing the strained relations with the Sisi administration. It is also evident that the first step towards a compromise is expected to be taken by Ankara. Within this context and providing a brief background, this piece aims to lay out specific policy contexts to discuss the possibility and limits of recalibration between Turkey and Egypt based on a 2016 visit to Cairo in which numerous interviews with the political and academic elite were conducted.*

Osman Bahadır Dinçer\*, Büşra Nur Özgüler-Aktele\*\*  
& Mehmet Hecan\*\*\*



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\*Dr. Osman Bahadır Dinçer is a Senior Researcher at Bonn International Center for Conversion (BICC).

\*\*Büşra Nur Özgüler-Aktele is a graduate research assistant, instructor and Doctoral Candidate at Georgia State University's Department of Political Science.

\*\*\*Mehmet Hecan is a Doctoral Candidate at the Department of Political Science at Boston University.

**T**hose who closely follow Turkish foreign policy developments would recall that the beginning of summer 2016 was a busy time for Turkish diplomacy, particularly with countries with which Turkey has had strained relations. 27 June for instance, was a historic day as Turkey and Israel announced that they had reached an agreement to restore diplomatic relations six years after the *Mavi Marmara* flotilla incident. The same day, President Erdoğan sent a letter to President Putin, in an effort to restore relations, expressing his deep regret for the shooting down of the Russian warplane by a Turkish F-16. These two developments clearly indicated Turkey's renewed interest in reinvigorating a foreign policy constrained by uneasy relations with its once allies. It was an attempt to bring back the "zero-problem" policy, which has been an absolute lost cause for a long while. Given this demonstrated enthusiasm back then, the following question was: Who would be the next? One country was at the top of the list: another nation that has perceived Turkey as a "meddlesome country" - Egypt. Indeed, the possibility that diplomatic initiatives could be expanded in a way that includes Egypt was also endorsed by then Prime Minister Yıldırım's statement that "relations with Egypt could be normalized",<sup>1</sup> which was welcomed by the Egyptian side, too.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, nothing has been materialized so far in fixing the relations between Ankara and Cairo. Having fallen into the throes of 'crisis fatigue' as it has been trying to survive within the chaotic environment, particularly of the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean, Turkey has been now facing geopolitical realities the likes of which it has never encountered.

The possibility of recalibration in Turkey-Egypt relations, again, makes the headlines after five thorny years. It looks like that the geopolitical necessities tighten the noose for Turkey to feel obliged in fixing the strained relations with the Sisi administration. By all means, it will not help Turkey to break the vicious circle of 'precious loneliness' to a full extent but may ease the tensions to some degree. Besides, it is also evident that the first step towards a compromise is expected to be taken by Ankara, and if there are any concessions to be made in this effort, it is supposed to be on the Turkish side.

### ***Potential Restoration?***

A solution is desired. Notwithstanding, after eight years of severe deterioration of relations down an ever-descending slope, it is not at all easy to restore Turkey-Egyptian relations and bring about the old heydays of solidarity. In this regard, the ideological dimension of the bilateral Turkey-Egypt ties constitutes a particular

<sup>1</sup> "Turkey voices readiness for normalization with Egypt", *Hürriyet Daily News*, 28 June 2016, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-voices-readiness-for-normalization-with-egypt-101033>

<sup>2</sup> "Mısır, Başbakan Yıldırım'ın açıklamalarını memnuniyetle karşıladı," *TRT Haber*, 28 June 2016, <http://www.trthaber.com/haber/dunya/misir-basbakan-yildirim-in-aciklamalarini-memnuniyetle-karsiladi-258768.html>

focal point in terms of predicaments, which could be quite tricky to overcome. Nevertheless, the Middle East is increasingly marked by shared regional challenges, such that both sides are at least aware that they need each other's support rather than sapping each other's strengths. At this point, there have been certain expectations from both sides. Within this context and providing a brief background, we aim to lay out specific policy contexts to discuss the possibility and limits of recalibration between Turkey and Egypt. The analysis here reflects the authors' thoughts based on a 2016 visit to Cairo in which numerous interviews with the political and academic elite were conducted between 30 May and 6 June.<sup>3</sup> In this respect, this analysis is also a reflection of two countries' stranded relations that have been frozen in the same dynamics for a long time.

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### ***From Partnership to Disengagement***

Once firm regional partners as the two main actors in the region, Turkey and Egypt have been in a severe crisis suffering from lack of trust for the past several years and in particular since the ouster of Egypt's first democratically elected president Morsi following a *coup d'état* on 3 July 2013. At that time, Turkey was one of the few countries with a solid opposing reaction, clearly refusing to recognize the new military regime. That was a consistent strategy from a normative point of view. However, this was later followed by the exchange of high-pitched reciprocal Turkish and Egyptian statements accusing the other side of toppling a democratically elected leader in one case and interfering in another country's domestic affairs in the other.<sup>4</sup> As a result, bilateral relations ultimately collapsed near the end of 2013; the status of diplomatic relations was reduced to the level of *charge d'affaires*, with almost no bilateral engagement since then.

This process caused a sort of *emotional disengagement* in the full sense of the phrase. In a process in which there has been no other alternative backchannel on hand. Moreover, it has been possible to be labelled as an agent of Turkey in contemporary

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<sup>3</sup> Abdel Monem Said Aly, Amr Musa, Amr Shobaky, Bahgat Korany, Laila el-Baradei, Muhammed Abdel Kader, Mustafa el-Labbad, Nabil Fahmy, Nadia Mostafa, Tariq al-Bishri are among the interviewees.

<sup>4</sup> Osman Bahadır Dincer & Mehmet Yegin, "It is Time for Turkey to Fix its relations with Egypt", *GMF Analysis*, 13 February 2015, <https://www.gmfus.org/publications/it-time-turkey-fix-its-relations-egypt>

Egypt if one is somehow in touch with Turks or asks for reconciliation with Turkey. Similarly, one could be portrayed as anti-AKP in Turkey if they criticize the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) or ask for reconciliation with the Sisi administration in Egypt. This is how low bilateral relations since 2013 could be caricatured. Both political and diplomatic relations and societal ties have so far been severely damaged, and the risk of absolute disengagement is not still improbable (or out of context / not eliminated).

### ***Regional Requirements vs Sapping Each Other's Strengths***

Beyond the exchange of formal accusations, the much-deteriorated Turkish-Egyptian relations have been characterized by many practical situations, particularly in regional politics. These two actors have sapped each other's power by adopting opposite poles in various regional challenges, such as Syria, Palestine, and Libya. To cut to the chase, Turkey and Egypt have been playing a zero-sum game, even though the opposite – i.e., collaboration - is required if regional countries are to tackle the accumulating challenges. At a time when the importance of inter-state relations is greater than ever, considering common challenges like civil conflicts spinning out of control; the proliferation of irregular armed groups and non-state actors, the refugee problem, economic interests in the Eastern Mediterranean, and the continuation of impaired relations has not been a luxury these countries (notably Turkey) can afford.

Beyond regional challenges that must be addressed jointly, the respective country contexts also matter, particularly in regional foreign policy. For instance, the shrinking space for maneuvering in Turkish foreign policy, especially in the framework of the Arab 'uprisings' repercussions and regional realpolitik, makes moves for re-calibration necessary on Turkey's part. On the other hand, Egypt also understands that it has to proliferate its foreign policy relations as its dependency on the Gulf – which have been experiencing a malfunctioning oil economy - is no longer promising for the foreseeable future. Thus, in deference to substantial regional problems and restricted maneuvering spaces in foreign policies, it is not reasonable that these two actors in the region are currently not on speaking terms. Furthermore, the partnership between Turkey and Egypt could not be compensated by alternative alliances. As Abdel Monem Said Aly underscores, "We cannot afford the costs of the hostilities".<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, it is tremendously challenging to be glib in projecting a bright future for Turkey-Egypt relations given the ideological components of the stranded state of affairs.

### ***Ideology Matters: Political Islam***

The particular characteristics of the disrupted Turkish-Egyptian relations are that they have an ideological dimension. During the period between 2011-2013, the

<sup>5</sup> Authors' interview, 2 June 2016, Cairo.

overreliance on political Islam as a unifying ideology hailed by the Morsi government and a majoritarian understanding of democracy led Turkey to exclude complex dynamics in Egyptian politics, which in turn decreased the support that liberal, nationalist and leftist political streams render to Turkey and the two countries bilateral relations. When ideology matters, it is not easy to employ rational diplomatic approaches in repairing bilateral relations.

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Preceding Turkey-Egypt relations had been governed much more by pragmatism with a lack of chemistry between the Mubarak regime and the AKP rule, at least in ideological terms. Ideological proximity is an unprecedented driving force when things do go right. During the Morsi term, Turkish-Egyptian bilateral relations exhibited an exceptional dynamism in favorable terms which had not previously been witnessed before. Yet, the AKP’s ruling elite had a misconception that Islamist peers would smoothly succeed and remain in power as they had done in Turkey. Thus, when the *coup d’état* took place, the end of MB rule served as a harbinger for the end of the good relations between Turkey and Egypt since the impact of ideological shifts on bilateral relations was devastating in the moment of crisis.

In the ensuing period, the Rabia sign, which became a popular symbol in protests against the military coup in Egypt among sympathizers of the MB worldwide, also became the motto of the Turkish government’s die-hard stance in the Egyptian case. The Turkish ruling elite heightened their tone of criticism in a path-dependent manner to mobilize the domestic audience and counter-criticism at home. However, as the situation of the MB deteriorated inside Egypt (i.e. brutal crackdown on the two camps of MB advocates in al-Nahda Square and Rabaa al-Adawiya Square and the ensuing declaration of the MB as a terrorist organization – which in itself was an attempt to remove it from all spheres of life in Egypt), the same also occurred within Turkey-Egypt relations. In one sense, the fate of political Islam in Egypt became the fate of Turkish-Egypt relations.

### ***From Strategic Silence to Constructive Steps***

A continuous pervading lack of trust between the parties has been evident throughout the eight years since the fall of the MB. On account of this, steps must first be taken to

rebuild this trust. The fissures have been deepening since 2013 due to the lack of communication. In the beginning, it may have been the right thing to do to maintain a strategic silence, as it prevented further deterioration of the botched relations. However, it is now an impediment to improving relations. While trying to keep their strategic silence on certain sensitive issues, this should be accompanied by bolder steps. Moves to be taken have to be tuned in line with reciprocal expectations. At this point, if there is still a common denominator for both sides, it is the need to break this vicious cycle and engage in qualified self-critique rather than full denial.

### *Egypt's Expectations*

First and foremost, the Egyptian side explicitly expects recognition from the Turkish side. This was first demonstrated by Egyptian foreign ministry officials stating that “it must be clear that recognizing the legitimacy of the Egyptian people’s will, represented in the June 30 revolution, is the starting point for improved relations with Turkey.”<sup>6</sup> It is a matter of question whether it is appropriate to label June 30<sup>th</sup> as a revolution or see it cross-societal mobilization against the MB and to its unilateral policies in certain cases, but this is at least what the official Egyptian position is. Additionally, our interviews suggest that though it seems very unlikely if, one day, the regime and MB will sit at the same table willing to make a compromise, Egypt will carry this out by itself and not with any external interference, since the MB issue is considered an internal affair. It has been observed that “MB anxiety” is one of the basic parameters outlining the Egyptian regime’s viewpoint. Seeing it as a part of their internal affairs, the Egyptian regime does not welcome Turkey’s statements of support for the MB and objects to any attempt on behalf of the Turkish side to give the MB a special place in terms of conditions improving the bilateral relations.

Egypt has also repeatedly asked that Turkey prevent the MB’s political activities (i.e. allowing them to hold a quasi-parliament in Istanbul) and media activities against the regime in Egypt broadcasting from Istanbul.<sup>7</sup> Data collected from our interviews suggest that Turkey could initiate the deal by terminating the MB’s political and media activities in Turkey. Indeed, Egyptians emphasize that they are not much interested in MB members’ presence in Turkey as their continued political activities. Concurrently, while Turkey could retain its moral stance on the MB, terminating political support to the organization may positively respond to the Egyptian side. It seems that Turkey has already started to take some concrete steps in this regard. However, Turkey should show more accentuated effort to eliminate the expression/

<sup>6</sup>For the statement by foreign ministry spokesperson Ahmed Abu Zeid see: “Egypt demands that Turkey recognize 2013 ‘revolution’ to rekindle ties” *Middle East Eye*, 29 June 2016, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/egypt-demands-recognition-2013-revolution-reconciliation-turkey-1349162919>

<sup>7</sup>Shaimaa Magued, “The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood’s transnational advocacy in Turkey: a new means of political participation”, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 45:3, (2018) pp. 480-497.

perception which has been repeatedly voiced by many for so long that “Qatar is funding and Turkey is hosting the MB.”

Almost everyone in Egypt is aware that first, the MB cannot be wiped out despite their history of oppression and intimidation, and that, second, nearly a decade-long crisis cannot go on forever. In this type of crisis environment, the MB’s presence will eventually be accepted, as it has happened multiple times before. Yet, due to concerns respecting foreign intervention, Turkey’s attitude has been leading to adverse reactions. Even if there could be an inner reconciliation, this makes the process more difficult and slower. In this respect, Turkey may contribute to the normalization of the MB in the political and social sphere by politically distancing itself from the MB. The perception that the MB is an organization supported by foreigners against the will of the Egyptian people is one aspect that prevents the normalization of the MB as a domestic social and political component in Egypt. This fact increases in importance when we consider that the Egyptian regime utilizes the fear of foreign powers to consolidate its power on the one hand and delegitimize the MB on the other. Here it should also be noted that, in one of the cases filed against the MB, the organization members are accused of conducting espionage on behalf of foreign powers, at least on paper.

It is worth noting that Egyptian elites emphasize that Egypt did not try or want to hurt Turkey, despite Turkey’s insistence on supporting the MB and allowing them to continue activities in Turkey. They remark that Egypt could have raised the PKK and Armenian issues in return for Turkey’s standing behind MB, but they chose not to. They lend credence to this claim that the Ambassador of Egypt in Armenia did not participate in the commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the so-called “Armenian genocide” in 2015, pointing out that even countries holding good relations with Turkey attended. Some assert that this attitude held by Egypt up until the present is itself an indicator that Egypt is willing to reconcile and rebuild relations, whereas some others, such as Amr Mousa, hold that Egypt will never put this card on the table considering the two countries’ long historical ties.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, it does not matter whether these issues constitute a gesture of goodwill or a threat. Either way, they should be taken seriously, and the enactment of these ideas should be prevented by pursuing necessary policies related to Turkey’s relations with the MB.

### *Turkey’s Expectations*

As indicated, any attempt by Turkey to include the MB in bilateral relations could be self-defeating. In this regard, it may be more beneficial for Turkey not to mention

<sup>8</sup> Authors’ interview, 3 June 2016, Cairo.

matters related to the MB in official reports and speeches. However, even though Turkey should not emphasize bilateral relations with the MB, the Egyptian administration should be conscious that the MB has also evolved into a delicate issue in Turkish domestic politics. It is a helpful note that in the aftermath of the *coup d'état*, the interim Prime Minister in Egypt, Hazem Beblawi, stated, “We have to explain what is going on here to Turkey.”<sup>9</sup> This statement is illuminating in that it demonstrates the intricate way Turkey-Egypt relations have evolved since 2011 to be well beyond the conventional modality of bilateral relations. In this regard, any attempt by Egypt to loosen the pressure on the MB would have positively impacted Turkey-Egypt bilateral relations. Hereby, there could have been a greater chance for Egypt to settle its MB issue in its natural course and without foreign pressure. However, the Egyptian administration should not forget that any constructive undertaking will still serve as a political gesture towards Turkey. In addition, such a move would also contribute to Egypt’s standing in the international arena, considering that the regime’s handling of the MB affairs has attracted criticism from many international players, such as the US, the EU and numerous international human rights organizations.

The other expectation of Turkey from the Egyptian side is that it will do its best to stop the hate campaign against Turkey in the media – which is mainly under the control of the regime - because this undermines the grounds for trust between the two countries. It should not be taken lightly that early opposition against Turkey following the *coup d'état* has turned into a general hatred campaign aimed at the country. At this point, a Turkish diplomat’s observation that Egyptians attribute any bad things in the country to Turkey is quite illuminating. Nevertheless, there are still beliefs to the extent that ‘Turkey wants to destabilize Egypt’, or ‘Turkey prepares to launch another revolution in Egypt through the MB.’<sup>10</sup> Such views are often delivered through media in the lacunae of diplomatic communications. This situation displays the slippery ground upon which the dynamics of existing bilateral relations currently rest.

### ***An Alternative Remedy: The Second-track***

Bolder steps to be taken in line with reciprocal expectations generally coalesce around the MB. Considering the highly ideological dimension of the issue, restoring relations may take time. If conflicting ideologies characterize a path dependency, then taking political U-turns is perceived as complex and costly. Thus, while parties work on bolder steps, they should not ignore the practicality of Track II diplomacy

<sup>9</sup> Cansu Camlibel, Dismayed Egypt ambassador is still hopeful of Turkish ties, *Hürriyet Daily News*, 22 July 2013, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/dismayed-egypt-ambassador-is-still-hopeful-of-turkish-ties-51149>

<sup>10</sup> Authors’ observation in Cairo.

as a means through which preparatory steps could be taken to improve prospective bilateral relations. Opening dialogue channels via the second track and increasing the number of stakeholders would undoubtedly assist in minimizing the fragility of the relations by serving to institutionalization means which would provide swift and reasonable ways for recovery. Trust-building is a definite necessity and possible through elites in the existing state of affairs. Additionally, considering that one consequence of the Arab Spring movement is that the youth have become an important political actor in Egypt, where almost half of the population is under the age 24, new communication channels with young people could be opened. Alternative channels could present alternative perspectives offsetting the pejorative stance of the state-controlled or influenced media.

It has been too late, and indeed many things would never be recovered, but it is apparent that Turkey-Egypt relations need some initiatives if they are to be rekindled. Since ideological fissures regarding the MB are of critical importance, it is evident that responsibilities fall upon both sides' political leaders, not only in improving Turkey-Egypt relations but also in facilitating the normalization of political and social life in Egypt. While Egypt needs dialogue concerning internal affairs, Turkey should not deprive itself of its dialogue regarding the existing sensitivities in Egypt. This can be achieved by first changing its policies and overcoming the perception that Turkey is taking aside. However, if the political landscape is not yet ready, the parties should at least allow second track channels to operate. Either way, the actors need to understand that this is not a stalemate between two rivals. The two countries should take measures to prevent the further systematic deterioration of bilateral relations between the two nations, taking into account cultural, economic, and societal aspects as well as regional considerations.