

Egypt's foreign policy: Challenges and prospects for correction

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Over the centuries, Egypt's foreign policy has been associated with geo-strategic factors that were dictated by geographical and historical realities, and has been characterized by relative stability. Geography has caused Egypt to rely almost entirely on the water of the Nile River which originates outside its territory and passes through several countries before reaching its southern border.

History informs us that most invaders arrived in Egypt via the north-eastern gate and often continued their advance in the direction of Palestine and the Levant to secure their occupation. The invaders who intended to occupy Palestine and the Levant usually continued their advance in the direction of Egypt to ensure their survival in the East, thus making Egypt, Palestine, and the Levant a single strategic cluster with a single linked destiny.

Strategic pillars of Egyptian foreign policy

These strategic factors impose on Egypt a foreign policy that is based on two pillars.

1. The first pillar aims at defending Egypt's life and survival, and working to ensure the continued flow of the Nile. Thus, it is necessary for Egypt closely to follow what is happening across its southern border, in the Nile Basin countries.
2. The second pillar aims at defending the security and independence of the country, and seeking to confront external threats. It therefore becomes a necessity for Egypt to follow events across its eastern border, in the Levant and Palestine.

It is natural, in such a context, that the Nile Basin region, on the one hand, and the Levant, on the other, form Egypt's connected and integrated vital area from the perspective of its foreign policy. Therefore, it is not surprising that its foreign policy has, over the years, been characterised by a high degree of consistency and stability, which has been clearly manifested through all the stages during which the country managed to win its independence or embark on a renaissance, despite the vicissitudes that the political system passed through or the nature of the ruling elite through its lengthy history.

A cursory glance at events in the region and current interactions is sufficient to conclude that Egypt's foreign policy has become unable to secure and protect its vital area, either on the southern or the north-eastern fronts. This suggests that there is a loophole somewhere in the process of policy-making that results in the policy no longer being consistent with Egypt's historical and geographical indicators.

It is true that the Nile is still flowing through Egypt's southern borders, and it is also true that there is no looming risk of an imminent foreign invasion through the north-eastern gate. However, any impartial observer can immediately observe that the risks and potential threats to Egypt, both from the Southern and North-eastern fronts, are growing steadily and rapidly, and that Egypt's ability to control the unfolding developments in these regions is diminishing steadily and rapidly too.

On the Southern front, Sudan, which forms one natural cluster with Egypt as the mouth of a river that originates outside of their territory, has become fragmented and is threatening to split into separate political entities. There is also tremendous pressure on Egypt by the Nile Basin countries to review the agreements regulating the river water distribution among them, because of these countries' naturally growing need for water. Pressure is also premised on the

growing Israeli influence that seeks to lay siege to Egypt and blackmail it in order to obtain more concessions and achieve strategic superiority in the Middle East conflict.

As far as the North-eastern front is concerned, Egypt seems to be in a precarious position there as well. Some 30 years after Egypt signed a peace treaty with Israel, there is still no peace, and the Palestinian national movement has become weakened and divided after the failed Oslo initiative to reach a just settlement for the Palestinian issue. The Gaza Strip, after Israel was forced to pull out of it, has fallen under the control of a political power considered by Egypt as antagonistic and as an extension of Egypt's opposition Muslim Brotherhood.

The peace treaty concluded between Egypt and Israel did not commit the latter to any good conduct towards other parties to the conflict, while imposing neutrality on Egypt. As a result, Egypt seems unable to control the interactions in the region, and even appears to be somewhat pro-Israel in the face of other Arab parties. This was particularly and starkly manifested during Israel's war on Lebanon in 2006 and in the Gaza Strip in 2008-2009.

If Egypt is unable to control the situation within its vital area, it is obvious that it will lose its influence within the wider circles of its foreign policy: within the spheres of the Arab, African, and Islamic countries. It is noteworthy that Egypt's ability to lead the Arab world, either on its own or in concert with Syria and Saudi Arabia, has been greatly reduced in recent times.

Under President Hosni Mubarak, the African continent has been neglected almost entirely in Egypt's foreign policy. There is, therefore, no longer any significant Egyptian influence on the continent compared to other emerging economies such as South Africa. Even its influence within the African Union is meagre compared to other Arab countries such as Libya and even Algeria – despite the latter's being occupied with internal conflicts.

The situation is similar within the Islamic world, where Egyptian influence has decreased compared to countries like Saudi Arabia, Iran or even Turkey. This decline has left a vacuum that is being filled by three competing non-Arab countries: Israel, Iran and Turkey. Such a situation seems unnatural and unacceptable, at least to the general populace, and is therefore not viable.

Hence, there is urgent need for a comprehensive review of Egypt's foreign policy, by diagnosing the nature of the defect that led to the decline in its role and status and by taking the necessary actions to correct the defect in a way that synchronises Egypt's foreign policy with its geo-strategic imperatives.

Policy orientations and disorder

To identify the nature of the disorder that occurred, it may be useful first to recall the major trends of Egypt's foreign policy, especially since World War II, in the context of which it was possible to achieve the required synchrony with its geo-strategic imperatives. Such an analysis must be conducted on the following basis:

1. The need to deal with the Zionist project as a major source of threat to the security of the entire Arab world;
2. The need to deal with the Palestinian issue as an Arab and Islamic issue which may not be disposed of on its own; and

3. The need to keep a distance from international blocs and to adopt a non-aligned policy as a pillar for the liberation of the will and the protection of national independence.

Based on these orientations, Egypt came up with important initiatives in the wake of World War II, including:

1. Establishment of the Arab League in 1945 and hosting its headquarters in Cairo;
2. Participation in the first Arab-Israeli war in 1948;
3. Planting the seeds of a non-aligned policy by refraining from voting on a resolution of war led by the United States on North Korea, and mandated by the Security Council in 1950;
4. Proposing a draft resolution, which was adopted by the Arab League Council in 1950, penalising and terminating its membership in the League of any Arab country that would sign a separate peace agreement with Israel; and
5. Formulation and adoption of the Mutual Defence Treaty and Arab economic cooperation.

This initiative has been, in one way or another, the principal driver of Egyptian foreign policy until the October War of 1973, despite the different nature of the systems, elite, and leaders that came to power in Egypt during that period. As soon as the October War was over, a dramatic change began to occur in Egypt's foreign policy.

President Anwar Sadat decided that the October War should be Egypt's last war, and he began the search for a peaceful settlement with Israel, using the mediation of the United States of America which, he believed, held the key to solutions to the conflict. His mistaken belief led him to travel to Jerusalem and deliver a speech in the Knesset in 1977.

Sadat's assumptions

President Sadat based the direction of his new foreign policy on a set of assumptions, including:

1. That Israel was psychologically ready for a settlement on the basis of a return to the 1967 borders and a just solution to the refugee issue;
2. That the United States wished to achieve such a settlement and, if necessary, exert pressure on Israel;
3. That if it was not possible to reach a comprehensive settlement in one process, the beginning of a settlement would be with the Egyptian track; and
4. That the Arab world would ultimately have no option but to join the settlement process – voluntarily or involuntarily.

Subsequent events have, however, proven all these assumptions incorrect. Egypt thus became saddled with:

1. An individual settlement with Israel, which was rejected by other Arab countries;
2. An estrangement between Egypt and the Arab world which extended for about 10 years, and the transferral of the Arab League headquarters to Tunisia;
3. Repression in Egyptian political life, to the extent that all the symbols of the Egyptian national movement were arrested in September 1981; and
4. The assassination, on the 6 October 1981, of President Sadat in one of the most exciting scenes of political violence in Egyptian history.

When it became clear, in the context of this series of events, that a gross imbalance had afflicted Egypt's foreign policy, there were attempts to correct it as President Hosni Mubarak took over the reigns of power. The attempted correction process took many forms, including:

- Bowing to public pressure by freezing the normalisation (with Israel) process and using the dispute over Taba as means of cooling down the peace process with Israel;
- Seeking to correct the unequal relationship with the Soviet Union and restoring some balance in its relationship with the rest of the international system; and
- Exploiting the Iran-Iraq war in order to reduce the tension in the relationship with the Arab world in preparation for the return of the Arab League headquarters to Cairo without Egypt having to repeal or suspend its treaty with Israel. This happened by the end of the 1980s.

The Egyptian "correctional" attempts did not reflect a coherent vision for a new foreign policy as much as it reflected a tactical skill in utilising certain regional and international reactions to evade urgent domestic and external pressures. It, therefore, quickly collapsed in the face of the first major crisis with Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. Egypt managed this crisis on the basis of seeking to gain tactical advantage out of it, and not on the basis of a strategic vision which sought to restore Egypt's lost leadership role in the Arab world. Egypt thus emerged out of the crisis with financial benefits, but it lost politically and strategically. This loss was clearly manifested when Israel succeeded in aborting the Madrid Conference.

Egypt returned to the weak and fractured Arab system, but without an active role. There was no role for Egypt where it could make a crucial contribution in concluding a comprehensive peace settlement. Nor was there a role for Egypt where it could lead the Arab world towards a new way of managing the conflict, combining political action and supporting the resistance. Egypt has, thus far, failed in making headway in carving out either of these roles for itself.

As a result of this failure, especially in the light of the success of the Lebanese resistance (led by Hezbollah) unconditionally to end the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon, Egypt's role has been minimised. This marginalisation is strengthened by the U.S. and Israel seeking to utilise Egypt to pressurise Arab parties to accept Israeli conditions for settlement. This seemed particularly evident in the period that followed Clinton's failure to reach a settlement for the Palestinian issue in 2000.

When the U.S. – led by the neo-conservatives – bared its teeth after the events of 11 September 2001, Egypt chose to play a safe game, thus facilitating the 2003 invasion and destruction of Iraq by the U.S. and its allies.

With the emergence of Mubarak's son, Gamal, on the Egyptian political scene, it is clear that the Egyptian leadership has become preoccupied with the issue of succession of power rather than with the restoration of its leadership role in the Arab world. This preoccupation explains the warming Egyptian-Israeli relations, the release of Israeli spy Azzam Azzam – before the completion of his sentence, the conclusion of the QIZ agreement with Israel, and the signing of a deal to provide Israel with natural gas at lower than international prices.

Surprisingly, the warming Egyptian-Israeli relations is not matched by moderation in Israel's behaviour but is accompanied, on the contrary, by maximum Israeli extremism. This has reached the extent of Israel fighting two major wars in two years: one against Lebanon in 2006 and the second against Gaza in 2008. Echoing the Israeli and American perspectives and propaganda, Egypt blamed the first on Hezbollah and the second on Hamas. A key element of this propaganda is the idea that Iran, Islamic fundamentalism, and terrorist organizations are the major sources of threats to security in the region, not the Palestinian cause or the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Egypt in the next phase

In the context of the above, it is apparent that, in the next stage, Egypt will face a series of challenges involving potential direct threats to its national security. The most important of these are:

1. Disintegration of a number of Arab countries, including Sudan, under the scourge of ethnic, tribal, and religious conflicts;
2. Complete collapse of the settlement process, particularly on the Palestinian track, and Israel's success in imposing a settlement on its terms which may include the imposition of large-scale resettlement of Palestinian refugees in the Sinai on the pretext of reconstruction and development; and
3. The growing power of Iran, Turkey and Israel to the extent that this power qualifies them to play regional roles competing for influence in the region.

The continuation of the current trajectory of Egypt's foreign policy will only lead to further serious and complex challenges, and unless its political leadership has the will to meet these challenges and extricate Egypt from the American sphere, its role, status and position will continue to deteriorate in the region and in the Arab world. When its leadership acquires this political will, the urgent need for change in Egypt's foreign policy will arise on the following basis:

1. Dealing with Israel as the main and first source of threat to Egypt's security and the security of the Arab world, thus forcing Egypt to mobilise all its energies and efforts to confront Israel with all available means, including support of the armed resistance, promoting the reunification of Palestinian national movement by helping to rebuild the Palestinian Liberation Organization to be more representative of the Palestinian people, and careful attention to the imperatives of the Palestinian struggle;

2. Restoring order in the Arab house on new foundations and seeking to build an Arab consensus on a formula of integration that would achieve mutual benefits for all Arab countries; and
3. Opening a new page of relations with Iran, beginning with an exchange of ambassadors; strengthening relations with Turkey; and paving the way for an Arab-Turkey-Iran dialogue, with the aim of finding a balanced regional solution to the problems of security in the region.

However, it will be difficult for Egypt to adopt these new directions in its foreign policy without a structural change in the current political system which is, currently, witnessing the beginning of a new kind of mobility expected to rise gradually over the next two years to reach its peak during the forthcoming presidential election to be held in October 2011, and preceded by important and sensitive legislative elections to be held at the end of 2010.

The results of these elections are what would determine the size of the change to be introduced to Egypt's foreign policy, and will, consequently, determine the extent of Egypt's ability as a state, a system and as a society to face the challenges of the coming era.

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