

Turkish-Egyptian Relations: Nowhere to Go but Up

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Egypt and Turkey, both staunch US allies, have found themselves locked in a war of words—and worse—for nearly four years since the overthrow of President Mohammed Morsi by then-Defense Minister Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi. The cool relationship and enmity threaten to complicate the Trump Administration’s Middle East strategy as it tries to organize an anti-ISIL front, takes a harder line on Iran, and is talking up new efforts toward Arab-Israeli peacemaking. Despite the advent of a new US leadership determined to put its own stamp on the region, however, Turkey and Egypt appear as far from reconciliation as ever.

Neither side has spared the other. Last July, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan accused President Sisi of being a “putschist” who led a coup “against Mohammed Morsi—the president elected by the people”—just as the coup plotters in Turkey attempted to do against him. He further doubted how could anyone “respect Sisi when he has killed thousands of his own people? This man has nothing to do with democracy.”

From its side, the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a response the next day attacking Erdoğan for “continuing to confuse matters and lose the compass of sound judgement—something that reflects through the tough times he is passing through.” For the Trump Administration, this particular problem has come with minimal costs so far. But getting the two countries on the same page may become more of a priority at some point, if only to minimize political static from this quarter as the

United States pursues a complicated regional agenda.

Roots of the Conflict

The current tensions began in the aftermath of the “Arab Spring” revolts that brought about political upheaval throughout the region and the downfall of Hosni Mubarak, Egypt’s long-serving president. Erdoğan welcomed the development, becoming one of Egypt’s leading international supporters, particularly after Mohammed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) was elected president in 2012. Erdoğan and his Justice and Development (or AK) party had a natural ideological affinity with the Muslim Brotherhood, both in terms of their shared views on the role of Islam in politics and from having come to power in democratic elections. Erdoğan seemed to view this as a validation of his own rise and the coming future of Middle East politics, in which Turkey might emerge as the leader of post-Arab Spring states under the banner of Islamism. Turkey pledged \$2 billion in loans; Egypt promised \$8 billion in investment opportunities for Turkish business. The two countries explored other avenues of expanding relations, including joint naval exercises. Erdoğan’s triumphant visit to Cairo in 2011, during which he attempted to seize the mantle of Sunni Arab leadership and pro-Palestinian international activism, proved the high-water mark of his popularity and influence in Egypt.

Erdoğan's message, and the adulation with which he was received by overwhelmingly pro-Brotherhood crowds, was arguably deeply unsettling for the Egyptian military and its allies among the crony capitalists and "deep state" security apparatchiks, who feared the loss of power, control, and money to the populist Morsi and his FJP.

Morsi—and Turkish-Egyptian Relations—Come Crashing Down

Eventually the Morsi government's well-established record of misrule, characterized by creeping authoritarianism and an inability to deliver much-needed economic improvements, eroded the president's base of support and led to rising tensions with the military. The eventual overthrow of the Morsi government by Defense Minister Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi in early July 2013, ostensibly in response to the massive anti-Morsi protests organized by the "Tamarod" movement, provoked harsh denunciations from Ankara and a sharp downturn in bilateral relations.

The killing of over 1,500 largely unarmed protesters by the Egyptian security forces during the chaos that followed especially provoked Turkey's anger. The most notorious of these were two August 14, 2013 assaults on pro-Morsi protest camps at Rab'a al-Adawiya Square in Cairo's Nasr City and at al-Nahda square in Giza, which killed over 1,000 Egyptians, mostly Brotherhood supporters. These attacks, termed "crimes against humanity" by Human Rights Watch, provoked

outrage and revulsion in Turkey (and indeed around the world). Erdoğan lashed out at the Egyptian military and its supporters, saying that "either Bashar [al-Asad of Syria] or Sisi, there is no difference between them ... State terrorism is currently underway in Egypt." Morsi and his supporters took to flashing the four-fingered "rab'a" sign associated with the protests as a public display of solidarity with the Muslim Brotherhood and the slain demonstrators. Egypt ejected the Turkish ambassador and withdrew its own from Ankara.

Turkey's public criticism of the coup was soon backed by practical action to support the Muslim Brotherhood in exile. Erdoğan offered asylum to hundreds—if not thousands—of members of the Muslim Brotherhood and their families who were forced to flee the country in the Egyptian military's ensuing roundup of Brotherhood members. (Tens of thousands of political prisoners remain without charge in Egyptian jails and prisons. Morsi and 102 others, including many Muslim Brotherhood leaders, were sentenced to death in 2015.) Ankara permits a number of different Muslim Brotherhood outlets to broadcast freely from Turkey, and has rebuffed efforts by Cairo and its supporters in the Gulf to rein them in. The Turkish government has rejected a campaign by Egypt and other states to brand the Brotherhood as a terrorist organization.

The Failed Turkish Coup

A coup attempt against Erdoğan in 2016 allowed Egypt to return the favor. The effort to

overthrow the Turkish president, despite its almost immediate failure, was hailed by the state-controlled Egyptian media and greeted with glee by the government. The Egyptian reaction stemmed not only from Cairo's contempt for Erdoğan but from the need to reinforce the government's legitimacy by portraying the Turkish military's attempted overthrow of the authoritarian Erdoğan as the highest expression of the will of the people, just as Cairo portrayed el-Sisi's overthrow of Morsi. Egypt helped block a UN Security Council statement that would have called for all parties to "respect" Turkey's democratically elected government, on the suspect (and high self-serving) grounds that the Council could not determine whether a government was democratically elected or not. On his Facebook page, el-Sisi accused the Erdoğan government of exporting terrorism and insisted that Turkey's military "is the only guardian and protector of the main principles of the Turkish State." (The comments were later taken down.)

The Fallout from the Feud

The growing enmity between the two governments has played out on the diplomatic and economic stages, and the problems seem to have fallen disproportionately on Turkey. Morsi's fall dashed Turkey's hope for a closer regional partnership between Ankara and Cairo, with Turkey as the senior partner. In addition, its outreach to the Arab world and hope for playing a stronger role in effecting Arab-Israeli peace (based in part on the belief that Turkey's strong relations with Hamas

could help strengthen its role as broker) were likewise disappointed.

Disputes have flared up with some regularity. Turkey lashed out at Egypt for allegedly cooperating with Israel in the Gaza war of 2014 and blocking humanitarian aid to the Palestinians during the conflict; Egypt and Turkey presented rival peace plans; and the Egyptians felt Turkey was trying to use Gaza to undermine them. Egypt and Turkey backed dueling parties in Libya's internal struggle, with Egypt and the United Arab Emirates backing Gen. Khalifa Haftar in his battle against Islamist militias, which Turkey reportedly supported. The two countries became embroiled in a dispute and a subsequent multilateral diplomatic scramble over natural gas production and export in the eastern Mediterranean, which at one point involved the dispatch of Turkish naval forces to guard Turkey's exploration projects in the area. Overall bilateral economic ties have suffered as well. Turkey's investments in Egypt were frozen, many Turkish factories there closed, and the Egyptian Chamber of Commerce called for the government to review economic pacts with Ankara, including the two countries' free-trade agreement.

The increasingly bitter war of words between the two countries following the Turkish coup attempt also short-circuited signals from Ankara in the summer of 2016 suggesting it was finally ready to seek improved relations with Egypt.

The Egypt-Turkey spat has cost Ankara in terms of its relationship with the GCC states, too. Ankara's steadfast support for the Brotherhood after the military coup and subsequent crackdown by the Cairo government helped alienate Turkey from Saudi Arabia and other key Gulf states, most of whom shared Cairo's view that the Muslim Brotherhood was a terrorist group and a threat to established regimes. Erdoğan's attempts to achieve reconciliation with the Gulf in 2015 came to little, and Saudi Arabia lost interest in mediating between Cairo and Ankara given the continued war of words between the two. Turkey wound up more isolated than ever in the region.

Over the course of last year, the GCC-Turkey dynamic has shifted somewhat as the new Saudi leadership under King Salman has begun to prioritize containment of the Iranian threat and the defeat of ISIL over regional grudge matches and certain former political concerns, displaying, for example, some signs of easing its stance on the Muslim Brotherhood. Riyadh views Ankara, for all its past transgressions against Saudi sensibilities, as an important element in its efforts to counter Iran and ISIL politically and diplomatically, and to shape the nascent Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMAFT), of which both Egypt and Turkey are members, into a credible military force. Erdoğan traveled to Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Qatar in February 2017 for a visit largely focused on security issues. Nevertheless, this has not betokened any major new Saudi

efforts to broker a rapprochement between Turkey and Egypt.

Prospects for Improvement

One bright spot is the apparent interest on the part of the Turkish and Egyptian governments in improving economic relations. The visit of a senior Turkish business delegation to Cairo in January 2017 for the Egyptian-Turkish Business Forum was the first high-level visit since June 2013. The exchange was seen by participants as a vital step in restoring not just trade and investment ties, which were considerable, but in advancing the overall relationship.

At the moment, however, little possibility for improvement appears to exist while Erdoğan and Sisi remain at the helm, given their visceral dislike of each other and the conditions that each has insisted on for improving relations. Turkey is not likely to recognize the legitimacy of Sisi's government; in fact, it continues to consider Morsi the legitimate president. The Turks have demanded new presidential elections and the release of political prisoners as the price of doing business. Egypt remains firm that Ankara must abandon its support for the Muslim Brotherhood and acknowledge that the military takeover constitutes a legitimate expression of the will of the people. Even as conditions for gradual warming in the economic relationship take shape, conditions for improvements in political ties are not likely to advance.

Implications for the United States

So far, the estrangement between these two major American allies has had little cost for the Trump Administration and its emerging Middle East agenda. But as the United States seeks broader and more effective regional efforts to combat ISIL and contain Iran, the ongoing tensions between Cairo and Ankara are unhelpful, at the very least. As in Libya and the eastern Mediterranean, Egyptian-Turkish differences could arise at inopportune times and complicate, for example, efforts to develop effective regional security structures or crisis coordination, efforts to which Egypt and Turkey could prove vital (indeed, both militaries rank among the region's ten most powerful).

The US Administration has established some early goodwill between the United States and the governments of Egypt and Turkey through President Trump's words of praise for both leaders and their authoritarian styles, as well as his own willingness to ignore their human rights records in favor of gaining close cooperation in the struggle against terrorism. This alone may not be enough to push Erdoğan and Sisi to mend their differences, but it may provide a useful entry point should the Trump Administration decide it is worthwhile to try to push a reconciliation. A successful effort here might provide the Trump Administration with a small "win" in a region that is painfully short of them right now. Current

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