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## A Nation State with Multiple Identities: Egypt in the Middle East Transition\*

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### Abstract

Transition in the Middle East has been one of the most visible characteristics of the East Asian countries since the end of the Cold War. Having been the most penetrated region of the world, the international and the regional orders have always been closely, although mostly asymmetrically related. Thus, the transition in the international arena has been deeply impacting the regional scene, which, along the development from the Cold War through the unipolar moment of the United States to the post-hegemonic/post-US, has resulted in a relatively more independent regional order in the making. The new Middle East is still in transition, with the US having become one, among several external actors, old regional powers returning and new ones emerging. However, this transition changes not only the actors shaping the new regional order, but also some of the underlying concepts thereof, e. g. that of the regional power. Egypt has been considered a regional power, however, due to the deep financial and economic crisis that it has been undergoing, as well as the increasing role that GCC states play in Egypt, this status has been increasingly questioned. The present paper aims at analysing the ways in which the interplay between internal, regional and external developments and the re-identification of the Egyptian state (and society) contributed to and changed its “classical” regional power status. The hypothesis of the paper is that due to the many layers of its identity, Egypt has the capability to appear in different dimensions and take on a leading role in spite of its economic and financial difficulties and its exposure to GCC influence. The research questions are as follows: 1) What elements constitute the Egyptian identity, 2) How are they reflected in the country’s foreign policy? And 3) How do these relate to the perception of Egypt as a regional power?

**Keywords:** Arabic, Egypt, Foreign Policy, Identity, Islamic, Pharaonic, Social Character

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## 1. Introduction: Nation-States/Territorial States and Regional Powers in the Middle East

It has become a widely held notion that one of the most significant interventions in the life and political realities of the Middle East (as probably elsewhere in the world, too) was the imposition of the concept of the *nation-state* in a region, where the traditional organizational patterns of community life had been the tribes, the city-states and the empires (Csicsmann, 2023). The development of nations in the European sense, and consequently of nation-states, has mostly been problematic, but the territorial state concept, as put forward by the Treaty of Westphalia, refers to the states thus established with delineated borders, which have become internationally recognized.

Interestingly, borders have proved to be one of the most significant challenges in the new Middle Eastern political geography. The borders, typically drawn up by foreign/European powers, either by their colonial or by their mandatory power role, broke up and divided historical and traditional communities. This has been most frequently mentioned regarding the splitting of the Arab umma (which has very rarely belonged to the same political unit through history). However, equally problematic was the fact that even though following the proclamation of Israel and the first Arab-Israeli war (1948-1949) Israel's borders have been acknowledged by many (and has not been by others), the territories occupied by Israel in 1967 did not change Israel's borders as acknowledged in 1949. There is only one border "established" by regional powers, which lies between (Ottoman) Turkey and (Safavid Persia) Iran by the Treaty of Qasr-e Shirin/Zohab in 1639, although the exact demarcation of the border took place in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

This pattern of imposed borders has definitely added to the lack of a *national* identity, since traditional relations and allegiances were cut, while the newly drawn up states have demanded the loyalty of their citizens. The prompt shift from a *subject* to a *citizen* necessitated and initiated the progress of developing an affiliation to the modern state, where passport, education, healthcare, military service, pension, etc. appeared as the new bonds between state and citizens.

Thus, by the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the identity of the Middle Eastern states - with statehood non-questioned - has become a composite of three main elements: the ethnic, the religious and the territorial state-related. Within the Arab states, the ethnic element could shift between the local (Egyptian, Lebanese, Syrian, etc) and the Arab (all-Arab, pan-Arab) according to time and place; yet by now, all Arab states have developed some indigenous identity claiming the loyalty of their citizens.

### **1.1. Egypt as a (Historical) Regional Power in the Middle East**

Egypt, ever since the most ancient times, has been and has remained a regional power in the Middle East regardless of its foreign, domestic or security policy or economic situation. Practically destined to such a regional role by its size, population, ancient statehood and civilization, as well as its leading role in the emerging Arab nationalism and politics throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Egypt's geostrategic position - the River Nile connecting it to sub-Saharan Africa, the Mediterranean and the Red Sea as well as the Sinai Peninsula - has exposed it to several waves of military campaigns and public movements, resulting in several different ethnic, religious and civilizational influences, while it has also led

successful military campaigns and has expanded its empire throughout the region. These have been reflected in and shaped the character of the Egyptian state and society, which, by turning the conquerors and the conquered into “Egyptian”, has come to display a certain permanency and homogeneity. In spite of the imposition of the nation-state/territorial state by the Europeans and the delineation of the borders of the modern Egyptian state, this complex of its identity has allowed Egypt to turn to and use different elements of its identity in different ages and situations (Goldschmidt Jr., 2004).

Egypt, with its ancient past and indigenous development, is one among the Middle Eastern states (together with Iran and Turkey) that could be termed a *nation-state* in the European sense. The main identity elements of the Egyptian state (and of the society) are deeply rooted and manyfold: it is Egyptian, Arab, Muslim/Islamic and African, whereas in certain issues, the country even has a kind of global identification. All of these elements have historical backgrounds and bear a relevance to the regional power status (Selim, 2020). They may shift from time to time and from one context to another context, and they may also clash with each other, as e. g. the (ancient) Egyptian belongs to the *jahiliyya* from the Islamic perspective, but they may also connect and be reinterpreted depending on the situation. Thus, together they may put forward severe choices, as in the history of modern Egypt, when Egypt had to decide between national vs pan-Arabic, Islam vs pan-Ottoman and Islam vs pan-Islam, but their combination, e.g. Egyptian *and* Arabic, Egyptian *and* Islamic, Egyptian *and* African may provide influence and even power.

## 2. The Layers of Identity in the Egyptian State and Society

### 2.1. The Egyptian Identity

The basis of the Egyptian – *fara<sup>c</sup>uni* – identity is the ancient statehood and regional power status, built on sea trade and littoral urban civilization on the one hand, and the land-based agriculture connected by the River Nile on the other, which was also the key to survival, since agriculture depended on the river and its flood. This sense of awareness of the ancient statehood has an impact to this day as it is continuously re-established by tourism and its relatively significant share in the country's GDP (Economics, 2023), and by the seasonal work for many (Statista, 2023). Although most of the tourism industry is connected to ancient pharaonic Egypt, and much less to the later, albeit also historical periods, the glorious past of the pharaohs has resurfaced as a symbol in politics - sometimes positively, sometimes negatively - and the currently ongoing reformulation of the Egyptian identity. Both late presidents, Anwar Sadat (in office: 1970-1981) and Hosni Mubarak (in office: 1981-2011) were portrayed as pharaohs, while the narrative of *neo-pharaonism* has appeared related to the Sisi government (2013-).

Yet, at the same time, the other element, the deep and strong attachment of the Egyptian *fellah* to the land has been strengthened by the concept of the territorial state and the delineated borders. Arable land is still key to Egypt's survival and has become the most important threat to the rapidly increasing population (some 106 million in 2023). This dual meaning of land/territory was clearly manifest in the public discontent when in 2016 President Abdel-Fattah Sisi signed an agreement with Saudi Arabia over the maritime borders between the two states, thus letting the islands of Tiran and Sanafir in the Red Sea to Saudi Arabia (BBC, 2017).

However, the recall of the ancient Egyptian (glorious) past by the Sisi government – in addition to various projects such as the new museums, the removal of the pharaohs to their new places, etc. attracting tourism and an effort at invigorating the Egyptian economy - seems to be a new tool of furthering the order and re-establishing/re-strengthening state authority following the two revolutions (2011, 2013). By relying on the support of the society, presenting strength and order, building a *new Egypt, a modern civilian state* (Sisi, 2022), initiating significant developmental projects (the widening of the Suez Canal, the building of the new administrative capital, etc.) *neo-pharaonism* has come to emphasize the traditional-historical regional power status. It should be noted that although the initial public support may have subdued by now, the narrative has echoed in different layers of the society, and resulted in a new sense of self-identification and support even among the educated youth (The CEO of an Egyptian NGO, Personal Communication, October 2023).

## 2. 2. The Arab Character

Due to its proximity to the Arab Peninsula, Egypt was reached by the Arab conquest relatively early, already in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. The Coptic population became Arabicized (and Islamicized) by the 10<sup>th</sup> century, and the population today is fully Arabic-speaking. Although following the Arab conquest, Egypt came under the rule of dynasties of Turkish origin (the Mamluk, the Ottoman), the Arab character resisted the Turkish, thus it was the rulers coming from the outside who were dissolved, while the *Arabness* of the population did not change. This Arab character, however, has closely intertwined with the local Egyptian, and thus was significantly different from the “classical” desert Arab identity.

Yet, the use of the Arabic language, the Arabic-written shared culture and the common glorious past (of the Arab conquest and the following Arab dynasties and empires, the Omayyad and the Abbasid), resulted in an identity, which the European invasion/colonization recognized as *national*. Paradoxically, when following the first world war Arab “nation-states” were established, this - to this day existing - Arab sense of belonging-together came under attack by breaking down the Arab populated territories of Ottoman Turkey into 21 Arab states and the Palestinians (without reaching an independent statehood to this day).

Although the Arab character has resurfaced following the second world war in the League of Arab States (Arab League), Arab nationalism, the political expression of the Arabs belonging together came to the fore following the regime-change by the Egyptian Free Officers in 1952. The Egyptian President Gamal Abdel-Nasser became the leading politician and the symbol of Arab nationalism, in spite of the fact that other Arab national/nationalist parties, especially the Baath Parties of Syria and Iraq, or, as a late-comer the Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi, were also competing for the leadership of the Arab world (or the Arab *umma*).

However, Arab nationalist efforts aiming at the unification of all Arab states failed at two levels. On the one hand, the United Arab Republic, established by the unification of Egypt and Syria, presented as a starting point and an eventual model, broke up after three years (1958-1961). On the other, the defeat and the loss of territories of the Arab states by Israel first in the 1948-1949, then in the 1967 wars, signalled the end of Arab nationalism as a political ideology and of Egypt’s leading political role among the Arab countries.

Though the Arab sense of belonging together has remained in the political rhetoric (Arab homeland, Arab unity, and even Arab citizen) and in the League of Arab States, there have been very few issues over which Arab opinion has been unified, namely, the fate of the Palestinians and the question of the Israeli nuclear potential. But it was exactly in these issues that Arab frustration has become complete, as no result could be achieved in either.

Egypt's position among the Arab states, in any capacity, however, was terminated by the isolation as a result of the 1979 peace treaty concluded with Israel. Although after ten years, Egypt was received back to the Arab fold (regarding Iraq's war in Kuwait), Egypt has not regained its leading position, in spite of the fact that the seat of the Arab League removed from Cairo due to the isolation, was returned. The reason, however, was not solely due to Egypt's position, but due to the global and regional changes, which, in the last decade can be characterized by *gulfization*, i.e. the increased role of the Arab states of the Persian Gulf. Nevertheless, with its more than one hundred million population, approximately 20-25% of the world Arab population, strategic position and assets, and the still unchallenged leading role in the Arab stand on the Israeli nuclear capability, Egypt is still an important regional actor. While the other issue of an all-Arab consensus, the Palestinian case, seems to have been taken over by Saudi Arabia with the 2003 Saudi-Arab peace plan, the very fact that Egypt successfully negotiated the termination of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in 2021, and has been actively engaged in the mediation of the current Israeli-Hamas war, albeit sharing mediation with Qatar, again boosted Egypt's perception as a regional power.



### 2. 3. The Islamic Character

Islam, as a religion and a civilization, has been among the natural components of the Egyptian identity, in which 8-10% Coptic Christians are also living. The peaceful co-existence of the different religious communities has been a domestic security priority for all Egyptian governments.<sup>1</sup> This co-existence was well presented in the cooperation of Muslims and Christians in the course of the Egyptian Arab Spring, but this was also displayed by the presence of the Grand Sheikh of al-Azhar and the Coptic Pope side by side during the speech on July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2013 by Abdel-Fattah Sisi.

The most important actors presenting Egypt's Islamic character are the Azhar Mosque (and University) and its Grand Sheikh in close coordination with (although not controlled by) the state on the one hand, and the Muslim Brotherhood, which represents popular religiosity and sometimes even an opposition to official political authority on the other. Although the Azhar often publishes positions different from those of the official discourse, its support to the state is vitally important and contributes to the state's legitimacy.

The Muslim Brotherhood was launched in Egypt in 1928 (Laub, 2019), and the fact that movements under the same name and with similar ideology appeared in many other states - thus contributing to the emergence of a "global" Muslim Brotherhood umbrella - proves that the problem of how to coordinate/harmonize the Islam adjusted to the empire circumstances with the European (western) style state and modernization, was general. The fact that the Muslim Brotherhood emerged as a kind of popular Islamic

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1. The 2008 Egyptian comedy-drama *Hassan wa Marcus* starring Adel Emam and Omar Sharif was a clear reflection and raised a huge public outcry.

movement and did not organize into a political party, made it ever more difficult for the modern state to relate to it, while the Brotherhood became its most serious challenger. Consequently, to measure or even to estimate the support that the Muslim Brotherhood had in the society was an impossible task. The challenge was ever graver, as in many cases the Muslim Brotherhood seemed an organized force outside the state hierarchy, which seemed to offer an alternative for the public. As a result - over time - several different “methodologies” of the treatment of the movement arose, from a total ban to the imprisonment, or even execution, of its leaders, through letting the Brotherhood’s representatives running in national parliamentary elections as independent candidates. There have also been countries where the Muslim Brotherhood - organized into a political party - could not only participate in national elections, but could even get into the Parliament (e.g. the Islamic Action Front in Jordan in 1993). Nevertheless, the Arab Spring (2011) seemed to signal a new beginning, when—not only in Egypt, but in other Arab countries as well—the Muslim Brotherhood local organizations were accepted into the official political scene. The development was noted by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who saw an *Islamic awakening* sweeping through the region (Khamenei.ir, 2011).

The development in Egypt, the fact that Muslim Brotherhood not only won the most number of votes in the elections (43%), and that their presidential candidate, Mohamed Mursi became the President in 2012 - initiated a historically profound change, especially when acknowledged by the outside (western) world through the visit of the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

Nevertheless, while the Islamic character became increasingly emphasized in the Egyptian foreign policy, President Mursi,

especially favoured Egyptian relations to Muslim countries, the Muslim Brotherhood, with no governing experience, increasingly lost public support. The priority of the Islamic character of the Egyptian identity in foreign policy proved relatively short-lived as the “second revolution” terminated the governance of the Muslim Brotherhood and discredited the organization in the eyes of the public for the indefinite future. The party of the Brotherhood was banned, and its leaders, including Mohamed Mursi, were imprisoned with legal cases filed against them. Although the presence of Islam and religiosity within the Egyptian society cannot be questioned, their return as legally accepted political actors in the foreseeable future cannot be expected.

This does not mean, however, that the Islamic character would altogether be erased from the Egyptian state’s policies, either domestic or foreign policy. On the domestic scene, the program of the *new Egypt* launched by President Sisi, a devout Muslim himself, introduced the *renewal of religious discourse* to prevent radical interpretations of Islam (Egypt Today, 2023). However, by now it has become increasingly clear that the interpretation of the state is often colliding with that of the Azhar, with the so-called *Azhar documents*<sup>1</sup> offering a much more moderate position than the state, which has come to increasingly demand a submission to its will.

At the international level, Egypt has been a member in the Organization of the Islamic Conference/Organization of Islamic Cooperation since 1969 (its membership was suspended from May 1979 to March 1984 due to the peace treaty with Israel). Notably,

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1. Al-Azhar Documents/Wasa’iq al-Azhar, <https://www.azhar.eg/en/Islam/Worship/details2/PID/12191/evl/0/CategoryID/3071/CategoryName/Al-Azhar-Documents>

the Declaration of Human Rights in Islam was published in Cairo in 1990, and the 12<sup>th</sup> summit of the OIC took place in Cairo in 2013 as well. Egypt has also been rather active within the OIC over issues such as the western spread of Islamophobia as well as the fight against terrorism and radicalism, and promoted and supported “the important role played by Al-Azhar and the Al-Azhar Observatory for Combating Extremism in refuting terrorist and extremist discourse and promoting moderate thought that is consistent with the true religion” (The Egyptian Gazette, 2023).

#### **2. 4. Egypt’s African Identity**

Egypt, ever since most ancient times not only has been connected to, but has also been exposed to sub-Saharan Africa. Following decolonization and the establishment of the new independent states, Egypt has become a leading power on the continent, and has played a role in the Organization of the African Unity (a founding member, hosting the second summit in 1964, etc.). Moreover, the African Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Treaty, the so-called Pelindaba Treaty (IAEA, n.d.) was opened for signature in Cairo in 1996. Although the seat of the African Union established in 2002 is in Addis Abeba, Ethiopia, it seemed that Africa could be the environment where Egypt - following the break-down of the Arab world (Marsai & Rózsa, 2022) - can stand up as a regional power. This African role may be limited by the controversy over the Nile between Egypt and Ethiopia, but among the other Nile-basin states as well. Consequently, in the past few years, Egypt has actively pursued gaining support for its position among the African Union members, especially since 2019, when Egypt was holding the presidency of the AU. As such, it also represented the continent and its states at global levels such as the UN General Assembly, the Munich Security Conference, the G7 summit in France,

the G20 Osaka Summit, the Tokyo International Conference on African Development, the Russia-Africa summit and the UK-Africa summit (Soliman, 2022).

Another aspect of the African connection, which has gained renewed attention in Europe since 2015, is migration. Egypt is a source and a destination, as well as a transit country. This is nothing new from an Egyptian perspective, since ever since ancient times, Egypt has been an important migration route, and according to official estimations, today there are some eight million refugees - primarily from Sudan and East Africa - living in Egypt. Because of the historical connection, the Sudanese make up a specific group, with several generations already grown up in Egypt. Their exact number is unknown, but according to estimations, approximately 2-3 million people have migrated to Egypt, although due to the recent events in Sudan, these figures have most certainly increased (Personal Communications at the Refuge Egypt and the UNHCR, Cairo, October 2023).

## **2. 5. The Global Element in Egyptian Identity: From the NAM to the Global South?**

Egypt has been an active actor in various global movements: in the bipolar Cold War order, Egypt (and personally President Gamal Abdel-Nasser) was a founding member of the *Non-Aligned Movement* (NAM), advocating non-interference from the global superpowers and staying out of their conflicts.

Although following the end of the Cold War, many questioned the *raison d'être* of the NAM, new challenges seem to justify the maintenance of the movement and Egypt is still an active member,

in spite of the fact that the NAM discourse has been taken over by the *Global South*, where many concerns are the same, yet new challenges (climate change, the COVID-19 epidemic, supply chains, etc) demand new answers. Within this newly found format, old-new partners are re-establishing their cooperation, such as e. g. Egypt and India (both original founding members of the NAM), yet again with the political will of staying out of the global powers' conflicts.

Egypt has been involved in other newly emerging multilateral and/or regional cooperation formats as well: Egypt joined the BRICS starting January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024 (together with Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Iran from the Middle East, as well as Ethiopia from Africa), and became a dialogue partner in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in September 2022 (together with Saudi Arabia and Qatar) (The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, 2017).

In addition to the above mentioned global fora, where Egypt represented the African continent, Egypt took on organizing globally relevant conferences as the COP27 in November 2022 in Sharm el-Sheikh, where it could stand up as “a leading voice for the Global South” on the one hand, and could position itself as “a bridge-builder between the Global South and North”, on the other (Soliman, 2022).

### **3. Post-2013 Egypt as the New Model of a Civilizational State<sup>1</sup>**

Egypt was one of the Arab countries where the so-called Arab spring (2011) resulted in - so it seemed then - water-shed political

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1. Tüske, 2024

changes as President Hosni Mubarak was removed from office following the continuous and unrelenting public demonstrations. Although in the *pro forma* democratic process that prepared for and carried out elections, the Muslim Brotherhood won both the presidency and the highest number of mandates in the Parliament, it soon turned out that neither President Mohamed Mursi, nor the Muslim Brotherhood-dominated government had (enough) practice in governing, and soon, within a year from Mursi's taking on the office, million-strong demonstrations started again. Thus, in 2013 Mohamed Mursi was ousted from office, the Muslim Brotherhood was abolished, and Mursi's position - after the due preparations for elections - were taken over former-General Abdel-Fattah Sisi. While many in the international media were referring to a *military coup*, most Egyptians have ever since been referring to *two revolutions*, both the democratic expression of the will of the people. This series of events, however, clearly reflected the necessity to re-build the state's authority, both domestically and externally. By promising to build a *new Egypt/republic* President Abdel-Fattah Sisi called into play all the elements of the Egyptian identity.

The Sisi administration, based on the initial wide public support, in its first efforts aimed at improving the economy and addressed the individual citizens and the business community in Egypt and abroad. The campaign slogan *tahiyya masr* and the grand projects of building a second track to the Suez Canal, as well as the new capital, tried to mobilize the society by referring to the Egyptian identity. The national - Egyptian in the modern sense - element was invoked in the *National Dialogue (al-hiwar al-watani)* launched in 2022 (Ahrām Online, 2022), and tried to re-mobilize the society behind the political aims and achievements of the government.

The renewal of religious discourse (*tajdid al-khitab al-dini*) (2015) and the program of the *Egyptian Family House/Home* (*bayt al-a'ila al-masri*) aimed at coordination between the state and Azhar, and between the majority Muslim and minority Coptic Christian communities, respectively. While the first created a dialogue between the state and the main religious authority, the second seemed a civilian undertaking, yet with the benevolent support of the state (Tüske, 2024).

In order to mobilize external support - both by states and the private sector - to the *new Egypt*, in March 2015, the Egyptian Economic Development Conference was organized in Sharm el-Sheikh with approximately 1700 potential investors. The economic aspect of *gulfization* was manifest here as well: following the Arab Spring and through this conference the Arab states of the Persian Gulf (primarily Saudi Arabia and the UAE, but also Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain and Qatar) between 2011 and 2019 supported Egypt with 92 billion USD (Middle East Monitor, 2019). Although their support has been continuous to this day, its conditions have become stricter and Gulf Arab investors have started to appear in (“to buy themselves into”) Egyptian economic businesses, which used to be under the control of the state or the army. This coincides with the basic condition of the new 3 billion USD loan with the International Monetary Fund, which is the limitation of the role of the state and the army in the economy (CNN, 2023).

In spite of the increased role of the Arab Gulf states both in the region and in Egypt, and the set-back of Egyptian presence in regional affairs due to the “two revolutions”, Egypt still has assets and challenges, which claim its regional participation, and which ensure to it a regional power role. In addition to its role in any conflict in the Gaza Strip, the cooperation on the gas fields in the



Eastern Mediterranean and the already referred to Nile controversy can be mentioned.

The recently discovered gas fields in the Eastern Mediterranean, some of which belong to Egyptian sovereignty and control, have increased Egyptian visibility as one of the founding states of the EastMed Gas Forum. In spite of the fact that the jointly planned project of an under-the-sea gas pipeline connecting the Eastern Mediterranean to Europe has faced many obstacles (Bowlus, 2020), the gas fields have not only contributed to the Egyptian economy (Al-Jazeera, 2023), but also raised Egypt's international standing and slowly returning regional power status.

The tensions between Egypt and Ethiopia over water-sharing of the Blue Nile may seem a bilateral, or rather, by including in-between Sudan, a trilateral issue; yet, since the Blue Nile constitutes part of the much bigger Nile catchment area, altogether eleven states are affected. While the Nile Basin Initiative by the World Bank in 1999 established an all-inclusive basin-wide institution for consultation and cooperation, it was the Ethiopian project of the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) started in 2011 on the Blue Nile, which resulted in a sometimes close-to-war-like situation. For Egypt, the Nile is the basis of the survival of its 106 million people; for Ethiopia the dam provides electricity in a country where approximately 50% of the 110 million inhabitants still go without electricity (Rózsa, 2022). After the initial threatening to use military force to bomb down the dam, negotiations started, both within the African Union and on the global level, with US mediation. Although no final settlement has been reached, the issue itself provided Egypt with a wider regional theatre to move and brought back, even if partially, its perception as a regional power.

### 3. 1. Case Study: Egypt as a Mediator in the War in Gaza<sup>1</sup>

Egypt has a dual responsibility towards the Gaza Strip: after the proclamation of the new state of Israel in 1948 and the consequent first Arab-Israeli war (1948-1949), the Gaza Strip remained under Egyptian control until the second Arab-Israeli war (1967), when Israel occupied it (with the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt, the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Trans-Jordan, and the Golan Heights from Syria). While Israel withdrew both its military and the Jewish settlers from the territory in 2005, it has maintained the control of the Gaza Strip borders on land and sea, as well as in the air.

The Gaza Strip, one of the most densely populated territories in the world<sup>2</sup>, has three border crossings, out of which one, Rafah, opens to Egypt and is controlled by the Egyptian state (OCHA, 2023). Egypt is often criticized, especially in the course of the current war in the Gaza Strip, of keeping the Rafah crossing closed, thus preventing Gazan Palestinians from fleeing the Israeli military operation in response to the October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023 Hamas attack on Israel and the Hamas rocket launches against Israeli territory since. Yet, it has also been Egypt, which has made the limited evacuation of foreign passport holders and some critically injured Palestinians, as well as the entrance of humanitarian assistance possible.

But Egypt's relations with the Hamas, which has governed the Gaza Strip since 2007, are manifold and complicated. Besides the

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1. Fahmy, 2020

2. The Gaza Strip is 41 km long, 6-12 km wide, with a population of some 2.2-2.3 million Palestinians, most of whom are refugees from the 1948-1949 and/or the 1967 wars, or their children and grandchildren.

memories of the already mentioned Egyptian control over the territory (1948-1967), Hamas, by belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood-family, poses a certain ideological challenge to the Sisi government, which banned the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, imprisoned many of its members, including Mohamed Mursi himself. Yet, the direct neighbourhood and the eventual possibility of Egyptian territory being used in Hamas operations against Israel, including the frequently mentioned tunnels under the border used for smuggling of arms or any goods for civilian life (Al-Kassab, 2023), are common concerns for both Egypt and Israel. The potential cooperation between the Hamas or other armed Palestinian groups in the Gaza Strip and the adjacent Egyptian territory of the northern Sinai Peninsula has added to the perceived grave threats to Egyptian domestic security, and have resulted in a relatively strong intelligence cooperation between Egypt and Israel.

Yet, 2021 seemed to initiate changes: on the one hand, Egypt started to improve relations with Qatar, Turkey and the Hamas (El-Masry, 2021); and on the other, Egypt stepped up successfully as a mediator in the May 2021 Gaza conflict. While the two are related, both are also results of global and regional developments: the end of the Trump presidency in the United States signalled a new phase in the US *exit strategy* from the Middle East (Csicsmann, 2022), which induced a wave of normalization efforts. The re-acceptance of Qatar into the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council's fold ended the isolation to which Egypt had also signed up under Saudi influence. At the summit of Arab Foreign Ministers in Doha, Qatar in June 2021 - in itself a signal of the end to the political blockade of Qatar - the Arab states expressed their joint support for Egypt and Sudan in their controversy with Ethiopia over the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (Al-Jazeera, 2021).

While Egypt did play a mediating role between Israel and the Hamas even during the Mubarak era, the already mentioned banning of the Muslim Brotherhood and the link to the Hamas made Egyptian-Hamas relations rather tense. In fact, a change started to set in with the new Hamas document in 2017, which beside the elimination of the clause to destroy Israel, stopped referring to “any official and organisational link with the Muslim Brotherhood” (Al-Jazeera, 2023). These developments opened the way for Egypt to engage with the Hamas, and even to take on a role in the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip after May 2021.

In the present war in Gaza many have tried to mediate, yet, physically Egypt is best positioned by being the only state neighbouring both Israel and the Gaza Strip. The historical legacy and the military capability are further enhancing Egypt’s stance, as well as previous Egyptian mediations. Egypt presents its current mediation as in cooperation with or complementary to the mediation activities of Qatar, and has provided the scene to the first international summit in Cairo (the Summit for Peace), where the aim was to secure international approval for ending the conflict and ensuring the flow of humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip (BBC, 2023). At the joint Arab-Islamic summit organized in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia in November 2023, the Egyptian role in providing humanitarian aid to Gaza was strongly supported. Mediation and humanitarian aid are especially important as these are legitimate elements in international relations, and provide a credible basis to the Egyptian (and Jordanian) rejection to the eventual expulsion of the Palestinians from the Gaza Strip and the “policies of collective punishment” against the Palestinians of Gaza (Ahram Online, 2023).

The fact that Egypt dares reject the idea of accepting the

eventually fleeing Gazan Palestinians and stands firmly against the Palestinian expulsion from the Gaza Strip, and even cancelled the meeting with visiting US President Joe Biden (with Jordanian King Abdallah) clearly reflects Egypt's real role and seems to bring back Egypt as a firm leader among the Arab states. The same principles were voiced in an event organized in the Cairo Stadium (*Long Live Egypt-Palestine*), where Sisi confirmed: "We strongly oppose the relocation of Palestinians to Egypt or Jordan". With that, the Sisi government identified itself with the most prevalent public opinion both in Egypt and in the region, giving a further boost to its image of a responsible regional power.

#### **4. Conclusion: Egypt, the Re-emerging Regional Power?**

In the transition of the Middle Eastern regional order, Egypt still has many assets of a regional power status, such as its size, population, geostrategic position and environment, historical past and ancient statehood, etc., in spite of the fact that the Arab Spring events domestically, and the regional developments termed *gulfization*, as well as the loosening of all-Arab relations, have temporarily turned Egypt inside and away from taking a real role in regional affairs, and exposed it in many aspects to the political and economic inclinations of other regional actors.

The *new Egypt/republic* built by President Abdel-Fattah Sisi not only relied on the manifold aspects of Egypt's identity, but by re-identifying and adjusting these to the changing global and regional order, pointed towards the re-building of Egypt's regional power status. *Neo-pharaonism* - reference to the symbols of Egyptian past power and cultural superiority - has become manifest not only in the new constructions and development projects, but in the political

discourse as well. Humanitarian aid, the rejection of the expulsion of Palestinians and the mediation role over the war in Gaza - in a way all in close relation with geographical proximity - regained Arab sympathy and support. The *renewal of religious discourse* between the state and the Azhar, as well as between Muslims and Christians, presents a commitment to Islam and seems, in a way, an echo to the Dialogue of Civilizations launched within the UN by Iranian President Mohammad Khatami. Africa's representation on several international organizations, as well as African soft and hard security issues (water, migration, climate change, etc) can be considered as a continuous Egyptian policy, yet reacting to the newly emerging challenges. All these provide not only constraints, but also opportunities for Egypt to re-identify itself and come back to the regional political and security scene as an actor to reckon with (Albedwawi, 2022).

It is yet to be seen how the *new Egypt/republic* of President Sisi will further strengthen and if Egypt can succeed in its mediation over the war in Gaza. However, by standing up as a legitimate actor to be reckoned with in the most serious conflict in the Middle East in transition, Egypt has yet again positioned itself as a responsible regional actor.

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