

EGYPT'S FOREIGN POLICY: POST-WESTERN AND PAN-ISLAMIC

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Big ships change course slowly but surely and sometimes unnoticeably. The foreign relations agendas of the majority of the parties that won seats in the Egyptian lower house of parliament are indicative of the new course that the country might be taking in the international arena in the longer term. While the EU and the US are preoccupied with Egypt's attitude towards them, Israel and Iran, other countries are entering the competition for privileged relations with the transforming Egypt. The new Egyptian foreign policy will not favour the West.

Before the polling stations closed in Egypt, the Foreign Minister Mohamed Kamel Amr had left the country on 9th January for a tour of the Nile basin countries: Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan and South Sudan¹ as evidence of the real and changing priorities in the country's foreign policy. By comparing the views on Egyptian foreign policy of seven political blocs (more than fifteen political parties) that made their way to Majlis ash-Shaab – the lower house in the Egyptian parliament – and have together taken an overwhelming majority (officially at least 398 seats out of 498²), one can come to the following conclusions:

Nile basin countries will have the priority in Egyptian foreign relations, at least regionally

The new Egyptian foreign policy aims at significantly improving relations with those countries, sensing mutual benefits in closer regional integration. The process is already underway as Egypt's exports to Nile basin countries rose by almost a quarter in 2010. This particular region was also part of the political agendas of very different political parties: the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), An-Nour, Wasat, Free Egyptians Party, Social Democratic Party, etc. At the same time, these relations pose a challenge as they revolve around long-standing interests and disputes in the Nile river waters; i.e. both Egypt and Sudan oppose an Ethiopian plan to build a dam on the Nile that could reduce the volume of water flow.

Egypt will work to restore its leading role in the Arab and Islamic world

That theme resounded throughout the political spectrum: from the FJP, An-Nour, Wafd to Tagammu and Egypt Freedom Party. Part of the strategy would be to lead the efforts to establish an indepen-

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1. <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/en/node/591746>.

2. According to current official results, <http://www.elections2011.eg> and http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/3331/egyptian-elections-preliminary-results_updated-.

dent Palestinian state. Most of the parties see the unresolved "Palestinian problem" as an important security concern for the country. At the same time only one of the parties (Al-Asala) calls for an outright abrogation of the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel. Most of them, however, would like to see it revised and then put to a referendum. Revisions could include remilitarization of the Sinai Peninsula or applying conditionality related to Israel's return of occupied territories.

Specifically, the Egyptian leadership's role also entails working with Turkey and Iran. Even though the two are mentioned side by side in political programmes there is an important difference in the strength and quality of these relations. Iran has just come in from the cold in Egypt. Bilateral relations were re-established but there is a limit to the friendliness between Cairo and Tehran: it is because of both the rivalry that may develop in the near future and the American assistance that Egypt, or certainly the Egyptian army, could not do without for the time being. Moreover, the new regional triangle includes Turkey, with which Egypt is developing a strategic partnership. In September 2011, Egypt and Turkey agreed to establish a supreme council for strategic cooperation and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (together with six ministers and more than 200 businessmen and other officials) received a hero's welcome in Cairo.³ Owing to the Free Trade Agreement in force since 2007 Turkey increased its trade with Egypt almost three times. In December both countries held joint naval exercises.

Other Muslim countries were also quick to strengthen ties with Egypt. Qatari politics have paid off in Cairo as Qatar is still one of the few Persian Gulf countries that have in fact granted Egypt financial help as promised beforehand – \$500 million with the rest pending after the presidential elections. Other countries with a significant Muslim minority such as India seem to be favoured by Egypt: the new Foreign Minister of Egypt made his first overseas visit in May 2011 to India.

The interest in relations with the West (US and EU) is in comparative decline

Many of these parties did not mention Europe in their agendas at all or tersely said that they intended to "support economic cooperation" with the EU (Al-Ghad al-Thawra). The European Union and member states will find it hard to offer support that is more willingly accepted than other states' support. Firstly, the EU simply cannot offer more than the Gulf countries in terms of sheer volume of assistance and, secondly, European financial aid does not come unconditionally. Other donors do not have similar normative and qualitative expectations, making their offers more inviting. Another angle of the West's power and influence declining in Egypt is the waning attractiveness of the

3. <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2093090,00.html>.

"Western alternative". The Western economic development model – liberal market economy, capitalism, the Washington consensus – is no longer appealing with the financial and economic crises in full swing in Europe and the US. And neither is the European political model – with the European societies becoming more and more rightist and xenophobic (even Islamophobic).⁴ Moreover, Egyptian parties have made it clear in their political agendas that they will not accept any interference in the country's internal affairs – a sensitivity that has shown in the debate about the international monitoring missions to Egypt. Some parties, for example Al-Wafd, were against it.

Anti-American sentiment still reverberates in many parties' agendas. There is no similar resentment against European countries

The FJP's two available programmes (the general one and the electoral one) vary slightly in the foreign relations section. The latter is less direct but the former, older programme explicitly rejects a US-dominated world and policies popularly associated with Washington: "It is necessary to build an international order that is characterized by justice and balance, to end the monopolization of knowledge and its exclusion from some nations, which damages individual rights. There is no choice but to end the policies of imposing neo-liberalism in the name of free market and democracy, and interventionism in the name of human rights protection, because that is one of the most vivid expressions of political, economic and cultural hegemony."⁵ At the other end of the political spectrum, a socialist party, Tagammu, similarly rejects "US imperialism"⁶ and its wars in the Muslim world. Some parties – Wafd or Wasat – simply call for greater parity and balance in relations with the US.

Contacts with the US and American affiliations have become a liability for major candidates and parties. Ayman Nour, for instance, imprisoned 2005-2009, whose release had been advocated by the US, was considered "too close" to the United States. His party, Al-Ghad ath-Thawra, as part of the Democratic Alliance with FJP, surprisingly did not even meet the threshold.

It needs to be said that European states are not mentioned in similarly derogatory terms even if they are rarely referred to at all. The notions of common market, however, associated with the EU, can be found in some of the agendas; for example, Wafd is advocating a common Arab market.

The society's disillusionment with American and European policies of supporting the former regime is seen all too vividly in the agendas of political parties. Therefore, the new course of Egyptian

4. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/nov/06/far-right-rise-europe-report>.

5. http://www.facebook.com/FJPparty.Official?sk=app_7146470109 الصفحة الرسمية برنامج الحزب - حزب الحرية والعدالة

6. <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/33/104/26697/Elections-/Political-Parties/The-National-Progressive-Unionist-Tagammu.aspx>.

foreign policy is unsurprising and at this point unavoidable. Apart from Turkey, Qatar and India, there are other countries such as China or even Sudan that will compete for contracts with Egypt. What the EU might find comforting is that its reputation had not been entirely tarnished: Egyptian NGOs and other civil society institutions still favour contacts with Europe and the volume of EU trade with Egypt is still the largest. While the EU ponders the best way to conduct its official policy with Egypt it might be a good idea to closely follow the social and economic bottom-up European-Egyptian relations until Brussels is finally able to rethink the two most pressing issues: access to European markets and immigration policy.

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