

European Union and United States approaches towards Egypt: the trap of short-term realism

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Executive Summary

- > Since the overthrow of President Morsi by the military in 2013, domestic developments in Egypt have had a 'cancellation effect' on the transition process toward democracy initiated in 2011.
- > Increasingly used by the US as a strategic relay and by the EU as a watchman, Egypt heavily relies on Western economic aid and military support to sustain itself.
- > While in the US, Trump's approach falls in line with Obama's realism, the European Union is returning to a pre-Arab Spring accommodation of authoritarianism, revealing a pervasiveness of short-term realism among Western views on Egypt.
- > Renewed realist approaches in Washington and European capitals comfort Cairo, allowing Al-Sisi to 'shop' for support on both sides of the Atlantic.
- > By contrast, enhanced EU-US convergence towards greater attention for democracy and human rights would compel the regime to initiate social and societal reforms fostering long-term domestic stability.

As promoted by President Al-Sisi during his European tour in early November 2017, culminating in the conclusion of new arms sales contracts, Egypt has adopted a pragmatic approach to its regional order and world politics. This approach arguably allows it to concomitantly restore its regional leadership and its ties with Western partners.

By openly communicating about the risk posed by potential domestic instability for the Arab world as a whole – a risk that became most apparent with the recent terrorist attacks on a Sufi mosque in northern Sinai – Al-Sisi has been seeking to put pressure on and gain support from both the Gulf countries and the West, primarily the United States (US), the European Union (EU) and its member states. To attain his goal of preventing a new revolution, he has transformed Egypt into a 'military/security rentier' regime, which draws benefits from what others perceive as security-related imperatives in order to ensure the Egyptian military's status of a guardian of the country's stability, and hence the stability of the region. For their part, EU and US approaches towards Egypt have diverged. The two players have neutralized each other's efforts in terms of human rights and democracy promotion on the one hand and military strategic perspectives on the other hand, allowing Al-Sisi to 'shop' for support from Washington and European capitals. Indeed, the US has hesitated to respond to the regime's human rights infringements and has (reluctantly) renewed some of its military support. The EU member states, by contrast, have accommodated the Egyptian President's authoritarianism due to concerns regarding migration and terrorist threats. As a result, Al-Sisi has been able to portray himself as indispensable for the West.

Starting with a discussion of the US and EU's recent realist shifts *vis-à-vis* Cairo, this policy brief confronts short-term transatlantic relational approaches with the necessity of a less security-focussed and more pragmatic perspective in the longer term. It argues that a transatlantic consensus would be able to constrain the power of Al-Sisi in order to enhance democracy in the country and limit human rights abuses.

Egypt as a ‘geopolitical pivot’: America’s strategic relay, Europe’s watchman

Thanks to its leading role in Sunni Islam, Egypt possesses considerable soft power. In combination with its status as the premier demographic, military, intellectual and political power of the Arab world, the country uses its leverage to claim the role of a bridge-builder between the Arab region and the wider world. Yet, given its location at a geographical crossroad, Egypt has long been considered as a ‘geopolitical pivot’ (Brzezinski 1997), attracting the interests of bigger powers. With its own regional ambitions constrained by major demographic and economic difficulties, Cairo has thus been compelled to look for external support.

Since the second half of the 20th century, Egypt has progressively lost most of its political and institutional clout, growing more and more dependent on the US. From a power without influence, Egypt has developed into a power under influence. An indispensable ally which has become the second largest beneficiary of US military aid after Israel, Egypt turned into a strategic relay for the projection of US (military) power in the Middle East. Considering that the US desires to keep Egypt within its sphere of influence and avoid competition from, for instance, the EU, Egypt-US relations can be regarded as mutually interdependent.

The EU, in turn, has had difficulties in voicing dissent *vis-à-vis* the US, and has thus largely supported the American Egypt strategy. Nevertheless, the priority given in the 1990s to the establishment of a zone of peace and prosperity in its Southern neighbourhood has highlighted diverging views between the two sides of the Atlantic. Through the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), the EU promoted a partnership-based approach while setting aside domestic problems such as human rights violations and authoritarianism (Daguzan 2016). The fact that the co-presidency of the UfM was accorded to Mubarak’s Egypt in 2008 highlighted that the EU envisioned Egypt as a watchman on the Southern shores of the Mediterranean, not in the least to shield the EU from migratory pressures.

The paradox of reciprocally neutralizing transatlantic approaches

Brought into power by democratic elections after the 2011 uprising against the neo-patrimonial regime of President Mubarak, President Morsi and the Muslim

Brothers used their legitimacy as a pretext to refuse any form of political compromise with other forces, and were quickly removed from power again by the military. This interference of the military was legitimized by the increase of violence and the fear of a civil war between the Young Revolutionaries and the Muslim Brothers, with the former blaming the latter for stealing their revolution (Messiha & Teulon 2014). Hence, in light of the popular hostility to President Morsi and the Muslim Brothers, this overthrow was interpreted by experts not as a military coup, but as a new chapter of the Arab Spring (Kepel 2013). Arguably, developments since this overthrow have shown that it has been more of a counterrevolution and a final curtain call for the democratisation process.

The Arab Spring can to a certain extent be explained by the relative absence of the Mediterranean from Euro-Atlantic power dynamics in the late 2000s/early 2010s, weakening the authoritarian regimes domestically. To remedy the instability in the Middle East, the preservation of the West’s power has for a long time justified the accommodation of authoritarian regimes. Although democracy promotion has been a general objective of post-Cold War US foreign policy, the MENA region has been an exception, insofar as authoritarian regimes were eager to collaborate (Bouchet 2016). This tendency partially explains the absence of an institutionalized approach to democracy promotion between Europe and the US (Babayan & Risse 2017).

Following the initial abandonment of this MENA exception by the George W. Bush administration, President Obama made democratisation a key objective of his Middle East agenda as enounced in Cairo in 2009, in order to re-establish the Arab world’s trust in the US. After the Arab Spring, and considering that dialogue with political Islam could not be totally excluded, the Obama administration adopted a legalist approach, which proved to be rather tolerant with the Muslim Brothers, and pragmatically tried to accommodate the democratisation process in Egypt in order to preserve US interests. Nevertheless, this has not prevented the US response to abuses following Morsi’s overthrow by the military – which Washington did not qualify as a coup – from being equivocal.

This hesitancy was not specific to the US approach, but could also be detected in the EU’s reactions to the Arab Spring. Historically considering the stability and security provided by authoritarian regimes to be more important than democratic change, the EU and its

member states were compelled to deal with new actors after the Arab Spring. Paradoxically, the post-Arab Spring update of the EU's Mediterranean policy questioned the previous regional partnership-based approach by offering further differentiation, and was accompanied by a stricter conditionality than before *vis-à-vis* new democratic regimes. This demonstrated how difficult it is for Europeans to accept the novel character of these uprisings. It highlights the fear of what High Representative Catherine Ashton in 2011 referred to as 'surface democracy' in the long run (Ashton 2011). Such concerns appeared even more concrete after the victory of the Muslim Brothers in 2012, a potential factor of deterioration of the relationship with the West. This explains the Union's ambiguous reaction to Morsi's overthrow, which exhibited an indecisiveness between a value-based perspective and strategic constraints.

A progressive return to pre-Arab Spring transatlantic perspectives

The indulgence of the Obama administration *vis-à-vis* Morsi and the Muslim Brothers and its denunciations of human rights infringements led to an era of diplomatic cold, embodied in military aid cuts after the repression of pro-Morsi demonstrations in 2013. However, despite a renewal of anti-Americanism born out of the idea that the US was at the origins of the 2011 revolution, Al-Sisi's Egypt has not yet questioned the crucial importance of US support, on which its regional security and domestic stability depends. Moreover, even if it was willing to progressively withdraw from the MENA region, the US cannot abandon Egypt, given its geostrategic importance. Combining a liberal perspective on human rights with a realist position regarding geostrategic imperatives, Obama's Middle East policy happened to be less 'monolithic' than expected. It thus revealed a certain degree of transatlantic convergence.

Following Donald Trump's electoral victory in November 2016, the first Arab leader to welcome the new US President was Al-Sisi. He paid a visit to the White House in April 2017, expecting a reinforcement of the bilateral relationship between his country and the US (Bauchard 2017), which would take shape through in-depth political dialogue and a reinforcement of economic aid and military support. Even though this rapprochement culminated in Trump's announcement of his intention to visit Cairo and of the renewal of US

military support and the initiative to list the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist entity, the honeymoon was short. Indeed, there has been limited progress in the diplomatic relations between Washington and Cairo to date, mainly due to concerns regarding the lack of progress on the human rights record. The US decided in August 2017 to cut \$96 million in economic and military aid and to hold off an additional \$195 million to Egypt (Mohammed & Strobel 2017). Altogether, in spite of its will to break with Obama's heritage, Trump's Egypt policy rather falls in line with his predecessor's.

Even though it is trapped in a second-tier role due to US dominance, the EU must now develop a long-term strategic approach which respects its normative values if it wishes to sustain its influence in Egypt and the wider region in the long run. When it supervised the 2014 Egyptian presidential election, the EU seemed to want to give a democratic appearance to the military authoritarian regime (Da Vasconcelos 2014). It proved even more accommodating when it reactivated the Association Agreement in 2015, which had been suspended in 2011. The fear of political Islam might partly explain Europe's preference for stability in the short term. At the same time, the Union might also be motivated by a desire to ensure a renewed top-down stability in Egypt, which could allow the EU to preserve its geostrategic interests at the regional level.

As for now, Europe has put itself in a weaker position, held hostage by Al-Sisi, who knows that the EU and its member states need him in order to deal with terrorism and migration issues. As the EU is faced with the risk of losing ground in the region, more recent developments tend to indicate a return to a long-standing pre-Arab Spring accommodation of authoritarianism by building economic and political ties with Al-Sisi's regime at the expense of human rights and democracy. By acting in this way, the EU seems to neglect the main lesson from the Arab Spring: domestic stability without societal prosperity is not sustainable in the long run. To the stability-development nexus, Europe prefers the security-stability one. Such short-term realism appears as rather inefficient due to the lack of domestic political reforms in Egypt: the slow pace of institutional reforms fails to adequately respond to the need for urgent socio-economic progress (El-Shimy & Dworkin 2017). It may prove to be even more fragile in the long term, as contestation may arise from the Egyptian society as well as within the military due to increasing economic and

institutional weaknesses accentuated by the magnitude of repression and underlying societal divides.

Despite their apparent impotence, Europe and the US have considerable leverage over Egypt, especially given that Cairo does not have many other alternatives for external sponsorship. As Euro-Atlantic interests in the Mediterranean depend on constraints the EU and the US are commonly faced with (e.g. migration, terrorist threats, access to resources), it is necessary for the transatlantic partners to pragmatically agree on greater cooperation in order to create new incentives in favour of human rights and democracy in the long term.

Conclusion

A convergence of EU and US approaches would have deep implications for the future of Egypt and the broader regional order. Nevertheless, caution is needed when it comes to the substance of such a common view. Indeed, as long as its strategic projection towards the

MENA region prevails, and in a context of terrorist threats, the Trump administration is bound to fall back on a realist approach to Egypt and accommodate Al-Sisi's military rentier regime. Such a trend might soon be visible through the renewal of US military support, following a meeting of both Presidents on the side-lines of the UN General Assembly in September. With the EU being somewhat accommodating as well, this move might result in the transatlantic partners once again accepting the reality of the authoritarian *status quo* and turning their backs on the liberal values of democracy in the name of the realist imperative of stability.

Instead of passively acting as *de facto* sponsors of an authoritarian regime, the transatlantic partners would be well-advised to use their leverage over a country that has been considerably weakened in its region to avoid the trap of short-term realism and create new incentives to further support human rights and promote a democratic transition.

Further Reading

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