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Egyptian Policy toward Iran and the Challenges of Transition from Break Up to Normalization

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Despite the news and calls of some Egyptian and Iranian personalities to restore relations between the two countries, no significant development has been noticed in Egypt-Iran ties for about four decades. Some observers expected that the Iranian nuclear deal in 2015 would enhance rapprochement between Cairo and Tehran, but so far, no changes have been made, nor do signs indicate a normalization of relations between the two countries.⁽¹⁾

Diplomatic ties between Egypt and Iran have been severed since the Iranian revolution in 1979, the Camp David Accords, and process of establishing peace between Egypt and Israel. These relations deteriorated primarily due to Egypt's hosting of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi – Iran's former monarch – despite the new Iranian leaders' demands that Egypt hands him over for trial. In addition, the Iranian leadership adopted a hard line against Cairo by naming one of Tehran's main streets after Khalid Islambouli, who assassinated President Sadat in 1981 – and hosting a number of Egyptian Islamic groups that escaped trial in Egypt and took refuge in Iran.⁽²⁾ Iran's practices also included inciting the Egyptian people against their regime and even hosting terrorist groups that, until recently, the Iranian media called Muslim Rebels.⁽³⁾

Egypt and Iran are two key powers in the region. They have similar populations, economic conditions, and geographies, as well as strategic locations and long histories. Usually, relations between countries with the same capabilities are complicated and based on rivalry and competition – sometimes confrontational instead of cooperative, especially if these countries are geographically close – due to security concerns and rivalry over regional leadership, as well as fears of geopolitical expansion at the expense of the other.⁽⁴⁾ These factors are a few of the reasons behind the two countries' strained relationship.

In addition to political and economic relations, other factors enhance relations between countries in terms of cooperation and coordination, including ties between political regimes, the nature of the ruling ideology, the type of international strategic alliances that hinder rapprochement between counties,⁽⁵⁾ the views of the political and intellectual currents, and the position of organizations inside each country and their impact on the decision-making process in those countries.⁽⁶⁾

This study discusses the motives for and obstacles to the fostering of Egypt-Iran relations in terms of normalizing or at least maintaining a minimum level of relations between the two countries. Despite Iran's desire to restore relations with Egypt in recent years. In addition, the study examines Egyptian foreign policy and ideological and strategic determinants impacting Egypt's decision with respect to the restoration of relations with Iran.

Egypt-Iran relations were – and will remain in the near future – governed by a number of determinants and limitations that hinder normalization of relations or severing ties – in case Iran does not take any negative move against Egypt or the GCC Countries. This state of oscillation (no breakup, no normalization) that will likely continue between Egypt and Iran is the result of a significant difference between the two countries' political doctrines as well as Egypt's internal affairs. Indeed, Egypt-Iran relations are most likely to remain the same as long as the Iranian regime continues its current practices and behaviors.

This study addresses three major aspects of Egypt's decision with respect to the restoration of relations with Iran: influential strategic determinants, the stance of Egypt's key players toward normalizing relations between both sides, and Egypt's political and strategic calculations concerning this issue.

Strategic determinants impacting Egypt's decision about relations with Iran.

Since 1979, many factors have hindered the normalization of Egypt-Iran relations. Some of these factors are internal and related to the profit and loss accounts and the risks involved in restoring these relations. Other factors are related to the international and regional balances related to this issue. One internal factor is the Egyptian regime's ideology, which differs from that of Iran, while international and regional factors include Egypt's relations with the United States and the GCC countries. In Iranian revolutionary literature, Iran antagonizes the United States and describes it as the Great Satan, while the Bush administration (2000-2008) included Iran in the axis of evil. Despite the change in the nature of relations between the two countries due to the Iranian nuclear deal of 2015, the United States' position is still impacting Egypt's decision concerning relations with Tehran. Strategically, Egypt's relations with the GCC countries take precedence over its relations with Iran;⁽⁷⁾ this applies to Egypt-US relations as well.

1. Motives of normalization and points of similarity: Many factors – including similarities and differences – could normalize Egypt-Iran relations. Geographically, both countries are large in size. Egypt is about 1,001,450 square kilometers, while Iran is one and a half times Egypt's size, at 1,648,195 square kilometers.⁽⁸⁾ Demographically, Egypt has ten million to fifteen million more people than Iran, with ninety million people. On the other hand, both countries differ in terms of human development. According to reports of human development for 2016, Iran was ranked sixty-ninth on the world's list, while Egypt was ranked 111. Iranian national production amounted to 1.289.9 trillion USD in 2015, while for the same year Egypt's totaled only 938 billion USD. The national production per capita in Iran was 16,395 USD, while in Egypt it was only 10,064 USD.⁽⁹⁾ Indeed, both Egypt and Iran are key powers in the Middle East; one is located in the center of the Arab world and the other is in the center of the Middle East and the Arabian Gulf. Historically, both countries have a long history and a unique national culture – the Pharaoh in Egypt and the Persian in Iran. Ideologically, both countries changed between the Sunni and Shiite sects. Initially, Iran was a Sunni country with only four Shiite cities, but after Ismael Safavi's succession to the Iranian throne, he imposed the Shiite sect on Iran as the official doctrine of the Safavi dynasty from 907-1501. Egypt, on the other hand, came under Shiite rule during the Fatimid

Caliphate arrived in 969 and disseminated the Shiite ideology on the Ismaeli doctrine after Egypt had long been a Sunni country on the Shafi'i and Maliki doctrines. During the fifth Caliph, the Mustansir era, the Shiite sect became prevalent in Egypt at the expense of the Sunni sect, which diminished in number except for members in a few villages. This situation continued until Salah ad-Din Ayyubi toppled the Fatimi dynasty in 1171 and restored the Sunni sect in Egypt after two centuries of Shiite rule. Militarily, armies in both countries are almost the same size. Both have been engaged in extended conflicts with other countries in the region – Egypt with Israel and Iran with Iraq. In addition, military institutions in both countries fluctuated between Western and Eastern arms and military doctrines. During President Abdunnasir's era, Egypt was influenced by Eastern military doctrines and bought Soviet arms, while Iran has maintained strong relations with the former Soviet Union and Russia since the 1979 revolution through today. During the Shah era, Iran had strong relations with NATO and bought Western arms. These relations might be restored if the nuclear deal between Iran and the West survives and if both sides restore strong relations similar to those between Egypt and the West during the era of President Sadat, leading to significant political change in both countries that might normalize relations between them.

Politically, both countries have fluctuated between the monarch and Republican systems, national and Islamic trends, affiliation to Western and Eastern blocs, and capitalism and Communism. Before the 1952 revolution, Egypt had a conservative monarchy system, but during the Abdunnasir era became a radical national republic inclined toward the Eastern camp. During the Sadat era, Egypt became a moderate national country inclined toward the Western camp, a system which continued during the Mubarak era. The revolutions of January 2011 and June 2013 did not lead to any changes in the ruling regime or outsider inclinations in Egypt.

Similarly, Iran was a Shahanshah (monarchy) until the revolution of 1979, though this system was punctured by a short period by Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh, who launched a national revolution and changed Iranian international trends. In 1953, the coup took place and the Shah dynasty continued until 1979. The theocratic government has continued since the 1979 revolution, while the Sunni government of political Islam lasted in Egypt for no longer than one year (June 2012 – June 2013). This reflects the nature of the religious institution and its power in both countries. In Iran, this institution was involved in the revolution and its leadership and established its legitimacy on the ashes of the Shah state. In Egypt, this institution – represented by Azhar Sharif – clashed with the Brotherhood regime and stood against it on June 30, 2013. It announced its support of the national state rooted in the life and patriotic nature of Egyptians.

2. Obstacles to normalization and points of difference: Similarities between Egypt and Iran are linked to statistical considerations related to geography, experience, national character, and sectarian changes, while some of these considerations are formalistic. On the other hand, two crucial points of difference exist in terms of determining the political line and directing the state's national capabilities. Revolutionary Iran seeks to extend its hegemony over Shiite entities throughout the world by using an ideological project that controls the state's politics and drives it toward outsider adventures in the neighborhood, region, and world. On the other hand, the current Egyptian project – after the experiences of national expansion (the Arab nation) during Nassir's era – is limited to the national framework inside Egypt's borders and does not aim to expand to neighboring countries. Indeed, these differences between the countries relate to the regime's trends and strategic doctrine.

Despite the similarities between the two countries' armies in terms of experience and military doctrine, the main difference lies in the structure of each army and its ideological and strategic doctrine. The Iranian armed forces are divided into an official army that goes back to the national state during the Shah era. Since the 1979 revolution, this institution has witnessed several changes that align it with the revolutionary regime. The Iranian military also has another official division – parallel to the official army – with an ideological character. This division was established in 1979 to defend the revolution and its external trends, represented primarily by the IRGC, including Basij forces (the General Mobilization Forces). The IRGC adopts a particular doctrine. One part relates to the principles of the revolution and its exportation outside the country. It also carries out military and non-military operations beyond the regular armies' duties. These operations might include sabotage, violence, espionage, assistance with coup movements and groups below the state's level, work as a disciplinary and oppression force in turbulent times, and service as a parallel to and a watchdog over the original regular army. For thirty years, the IRGC has developed and become the key military, political, and economic power in Iran. Recently, it has controlled not only military activities but also the country's political power centers.

On the other hand, throughout its history Egypt has never witnessed this situation – i.e., the establishment of an army parallel to the original one – and it is difficult to do so under the national state. It does not have a political doctrine for the state that overcomes the regime and diverts it from its main purpose. In addition, Egypt does not have duplicity in the ruling system in terms of appointing a theocratic leadership for the army that overwhelms the political leadership. Furthermore, the Egyptian army has no political tendencies that override the national trends of the national

state. The central political difference between Egypt and Iran involves the political doctrine of both countries, as represented by a sectarian Islamic totalitarian ideology in Iran, where clerics and Twelver Shiite scholars rule, and the central state's political ideology in Egypt, which revolves around the national project and entity and where the religious institution has no power over the state; Azhar clerics are only religious scholars with no political power or relation to the regime or the army.

The other point relates to foreign policy. Iran has a sectarian political ideology that supports its interference in the affairs of neighboring countries, while Egypt adopts a policy of noninterference in the affairs of other countries. This means Egypt is a national state while Iran is a sectarian ideological interventionist country. Iran's foreign policy is close to what Egypt's was during the era of President Abdunnasir, in addition to being a political doctrine that has adopted an expansionist project in neighboring countries. However, Egypt assumed its role in the Arab World under the umbrella of nationalism, while Iran is implementing its strategy in a foreign environment in the Arab world.

Egypt-Iran periods of rapprochement – similar to those during the monarchy and the eras of President Sadat in Egypt until 1979 and Shahinshah in Iran before 1952 – witnessed political regimes of the same nature in both countries, while periods of difference and division emerged during the era of Abdunnasir and his Arab national speech against the Shah's Persian national rule. Both sides stood against each other and differed in their relations with the two superpowers at that time – the United States and the former Soviet Union.⁽¹⁰⁾ Both countries maintained different positions toward the Baghdad Alliance, the Eisenhower Doctrine, and the crises of Jordan and Lebanon in 1958. Egypt also supported Mosaddegh for humiliating the Shah, the UAE in its conflict with Iran, and the preservation of the Gulf and Ahwaz as Arab territories,⁽¹¹⁾ while the Mubarak era witnessed the freezing of relations with Iran due to differences between the two political regimes. The Egyptian political situation made Iran neither an enemy nor a friend, and the same situation applies to Iran. Indeed, Egypt-Iran relations remain broken and revolve in two orbits – neither complete friendship nor absolute conflict. In general, the most important barriers and obstacles to the normalization of Egypt-Iran relations are as follows:

A. Iran's expansionist and divisional project

The Iranian regional expansionist project and its direct interference in the affairs of Arab countries like Lebanon, Bahrain, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, and indirectly in other countries, concerns Egypt. This expansionist project that aims to build the Iranian sphere of influence at the expense of the Arab world obstructs Egypt-Iran relations and enhances Egypt's conviction that its backbone – represented by the

Gulf – faces a critical situation.⁽¹²⁾ Egypt's concern increased after the unveiling of evidence regarding Iranian interference in Egypt. In 2004, Cairo accused Tehran of enlisting an Egyptian spy when Egypt's Attorney General said, "The spy was enlisted by the IRGC to plan for assassinating Egyptian personalities."⁽¹³⁾ Moreover, by the end of the Mubarak era, the Egyptian security forces arrested a Hezbollah leader in Sinai and accused him of planning to carry out assassinations and explosions in the center of Cairo.⁽¹⁴⁾ During and after the January 25th revolution, Egypt accused the IRGC and Hezbollah elements of threatening the social peace in Egypt and of being behind the storming of Egyptian prisons.⁽¹⁵⁾ In May 2011, Egypt expelled the third ambassador in the Iranian Interests Mission in Cairo as a persona non grata after accusing him of spying for Iran.

B. Iranian strategic trends and alliances

Iran has associations with alliances contrary to those of Egypt. The international relations of each are closer to the political and strategic doctrine that both countries cannot back out of without destroying the entire structure of their foreign policy. Based on that assumption, restoration of Egypt-Iran relations will most likely be costly for Egypt during severe international crises, and any change in its stable alliances map in the region would damage its foreign relations. Certainly, Egyptian calculations are related to the burdens and costs of Iran's radical policies and their negative consequences on Egypt-US relations and peace with Israel, which established to maintain the Egyptian stability over the past forty years

C. Iranian policy on the Palestinian question

In Iranian foreign policy, the Palestinian question is a central issue that guarantees grassroots sympathy in the Arab world. Initially, the Iranian revolution chanted slogans of freedom concentrating on Palestine, which gave Iran difficulty giving up this question because of its political benefits and the fact that it would be represent a departure from the initial principles of the Iranian revolution.⁽¹⁶⁾ Iran also hired and supported radical Palestinian movements against settlement and the Arab peace initiative. Since the era of President Sadat, Egypt has believed in a peaceful solution to the Palestinian question, while Iran has adopted a reluctant trend. As a result, Iranian policy toward the Palestinian question will remain influential with respect to Egypt's decision regarding the restoration of relations with Iran in the midst of Egypt's concerns about the political and ideological project of radical Iranian and terrorist group loyalists.

D. Ideological barriers and obstacles

Ideological and sectarian obstacles hinder the normalization of Egypt-Iran relations. Egyptian society, with its cultural heritage, collective psyche, and accumulated memory, does not incline toward religious and political Shiism. This point of view is enhanced by some observers who believe that, “Although [the] Fatimi state lasted for more than 200 years in Egypt, the Egyptian society remained Sunni and the Fatimi Shiism remained only within the religious and official institutions without touching the Egyptian identity and their social structure.” After the demise of the Fatimi state, the Egyptian religious organization was institutionalized in the image of the Azhar Mosque, which was assigned to defend the Sunni sect. Azhar feared of the political Shiism, bringing up the bitter Fatimi experience. In addition, other Azhar root fears exist with respect to the expansion of political Shiism and Safavi, which is being taught in the Azhar curricula from ancient Azhar scholars and the Sunni Kalamiah School in the doctrinal and philosophical section of the University of Azhar and the halls of its mosque.⁽¹⁷⁾ In addition, the scholastic ‘Hawzah’ in Qum – Informative and Fundamental – adopts a hard line against Sunnis and their holy places,⁽¹⁸⁾ not inkling toward a political approach in promoting calls for rapprochement and unity. As a result, a large gap exists between the two religious institutions – the Egyptian Sunni and the Iranian Shiite – that enjoy substantial independence in such cases. Both religious institutions influence the religious idiosyncrasies of people in their countries and restrain any political attempt to enhance or normalize relations between both sides.⁽¹⁹⁾ Indeed, differences have increased due to Iran’s adoption of a revolutionary ideology and the Welayat e-Faqih [Supreme Leadership] system, which do not believe in the building of mutual relations based on interests and respect between countries, thereby boosting the fears of traditional conservative religious institutions in Egypt.⁽²⁰⁾

3. Bilateral relations after the 2011 revolution in Egypt

The Egyptian revolution in January 2011 impacted Iran’s position toward Egypt. Iranian ambitions increased, with the goal of acquiring an ally in Cairo. During the Mubarak era, Egypt played a major role in hindering Iranian attempts to arm Hamas across Egyptian borders with the Gaza Strip, prohibited Iranian military ships from crossing the Suez Canal, and stood with Sunnis against Hezbollah in Lebanon. Hence, the overthrow of Mubarak paved the way for Tehran to restore relations with Cairo.⁽²¹⁾ The Egyptian revolution impacted the Iranian interior and motivated the Iranian official media to address the Egyptian people’s demands for democracy and a civil state, portraying the Arab revolutions as ‘Islamic’ revolutions inspired by the Iranian model. On the other hand, the Iranian opposition used these events to create a link

between the Egyptian protests and Mubarak's ignoring of public demands as well as the Iranian government's reaction to the Green Movement in 2009.⁽²²⁾

The revolution of January 2011 and the Brotherhood Movement rule (June 2012 – June 2013) were about to start a new stage in relations between the two countries. However, the consequences of these two events did not change the nature of the relations. Iran was the first to congratulate President Mohammed Morsi for winning the Egyptian presidential elections, as Iran's foreign minister at that time, Ali Akbar Salehi, said, "This is the last station of the Islamic Awakening."⁽²³⁾ Furthermore, the year of the Brotherhood Movement's rule in Egypt witnessed an unprecedented enhancement of bilateral relations between the two countries. The most important development was the visit of former Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi to Iran and the visit of Iran's former president Ahmadinejad to Egypt. Nevertheless, Morsi's regime ended up with the same Egyptian principles and could not change Egyptian regional policies on Iran. Indeed, the initial warm relations between Cairo and Tehran were merely talks, not actions.⁽²⁴⁾

In light of the above, it was not strange for the speaker of Egypt's Shura Council, Ahmed Fahmi, who belonged to the Brotherhood Movement, to assert his country's full support for the security of the GCC countries, saying this issue is a red line for Egypt and referring to the same principles the Mubarak regime adopted.⁽²⁵⁾ The Syrian crisis was one of the reasons for the widening gap between Egypt and Iran during the Morsi era. At that time, Egypt believed it could not let the Syrian revolution down ethically and ideologically,⁽²⁶⁾ while Iran believed that defending Damascus was the same thing as defending Tehran.⁽²⁷⁾ This Egyptian reluctance in the face of Iranian courtship – even during the ruling era of the Brotherhood Movement – shocked the Iranian press. This issue provoked the Iranian journalist Riza Ghobeishavi to write an article on the Asr Iran website titled "A one-sided love... what grace in begging Egypt?"⁽²⁸⁾

Abdullah Nefisi, who was close to the Egyptian Brotherhood rulers, said that during his visit to Cairo in March 2013, one of President Morsi's assistants told him that the Iranian foreign minister at that time, Ali Akbar Salehi, had arrived in Cairo on the same day and extended a generous offer to President Morsi by providing Egypt with thirty billion USD and about one thousand to two thousand industrial experts to restart the Egyptian factories that had stopped after the fall of President Mubarak. Salehi also promised to increase the number of Iranian tourists to Egypt to five million people, making up for Egyptian losses in this sector. Nufesi added that President Morsi asked Salehi, "What do you want for that offer?" Salehi responded, "We want to restore relations between our two countries (reopening embassies), open two newspapers under our supervision, and rehabilitation of all mosques and

tombs that were built during the Fatimi era and to be under our supervision.”⁽²⁹⁾ This reflects Iran’s ideological cover, which is essentially based on politics and interests that apply to Iran’s relations with all regimes and countries, including those that maintain the same ideology as Iran.

Remarkably, the Morsi and Brotherhood era in Egypt reflected what has been discussed before – that similarities between the political systems of both countries constitute the critical issue in the rapprochement or break up between the two countries and that the Brotherhood Movement era witnessed an ideological and political rapprochement despite the nations’ sectarian differences, which means the sectarian politicization of the Iranian regime and the Brotherhood Movement overrode their traditional sectarianism. Politically, the Sunni Brotherhood Movement approaches Shiites despite their sectarian ideological differences. The roots of this political and spiritual rapprochement between Iran and the Brotherhood Movement go back to the Iranian 1979 pre-revolution era. The Brotherhood Movement’s leader, Hassan Al-Banna, impressed Iran’s revolutionary leaders; his pictures still hang in some exhibitions and public conventions in Iran alongside Iranian scholars and revolutionary leaders. Traditionally, the Brotherhood Movement considered the Iranian revolution to be the ideal model for application in Egypt. The Brotherhood’s media stood by the Khomeini revolution and defended it against the Sadat-US media, as they claimed.⁽³⁰⁾ Consequently, Iran refused to classify the Brotherhood Movement as a terrorist organization.⁽³¹⁾

The stance of major Egyptian players in the decision to normalize relations with Iran

The restoration of relations with Iran seems to be one of the most complicated decisions for Cairo and differs from the decision to restore relations with any “typical” country. The principle of noninterference in the affairs of other countries is rooted in Egypt’s foreign policy and political doctrine, which is concerned not with the reality of pluralism in the Iranian national decision but, rather, about the elimination of any practices or behaviors beyond those considered official contact between countries. On the other hand, Iran’s political doctrine is based on the exportation of the revolution and interference in neighboring countries’ affairs.

If we examine the major Egyptian players concerning the restoration of relations with Iran, *we come up with the following:*

1. Institution of the presidency

President Mubarak had a particular view – dominated by the security issue – on relations with Iran. Mubarak established strong relations with the GCC countries away from the tension and crises that prevailed between both sides during President

Abdunnasir's era and at the end of the Sadat era. Mubarak was concerned more about the security of the GCC countries. In all cases, he handled this issue throughout his time in office; he expressed Egypt's commitment to the security of the Gulf, saying that this issue was a red line. Mubarak believed that Iran was damaging Arab national security in more than one way and on more than one occasion. In one of his interviews, he said, "Iran wants to control the GCC countries, but Egypt is standing against this project. Iran also wants to get to Egypt, using the freedom of press and speech, come, and play here. I felt the Iranians wanted to come to Egypt for one reason: to meet citizens from the Arab countries and establish cells against these countries; as a result, all Arab countries prohibit their people from coming to Egypt."⁽³²⁾ In another interview with the American BBS news, Mubarak said, "I say to Iran: do not interfere in the internal affairs of the other Arab countries." When asked if Egypt and Iran competed in terms of controlling the region, he said, "We do not compare ourselves with Iran. First of all, Iran is not an Arab country. They try to control certain places, but they will fail. We are capable of standing; we do not compete with anybody."⁽³³⁾ In a speech in April 2009, after the capture of a cell belonging to the Lebanese Hezbollah, Mubarak criticized the position that claimed resistance (in reference to Iran), saying, "Egypt – with its character and status – will not forgive anyone that touches the security of its lands, borders, and sovereignty." He added, "We do not offend anybody or interfere in the affairs of anybody, but we will not remain silent toward any hostility against us. We do not make our decisions based on the will of militias and groups that raise the slogans of resistance, but bring destruction to their people. We warn Iran from interference in the Arab affairs and we will not hesitate to take the necessary steps to protect the Egyptian national security in its relations with the Gulf and the Red Sea regions." Furthermore, Mubarak's position toward Iran was reflected in his view toward the Arab Shiites. In a statement that provoked wide reactions, Mubarak said, "Shiites are loyal to Iran, but not to their home countries."⁽³⁴⁾ This reflects Mubarak's awareness of Iranian interference in the internal affairs of the Arab countries and Iranian hostilities against Egyptian national security.

Except for the short-term change in the Egyptian institution of the presidency during the Brotherhood Movement and the era of President Morsi, the position toward Iran has not witnessed any changes. President Sisi has also adopted the same position toward Tehran. The Egyptian institution of the presidency expressed its position and made statements similar to those made during Mubarak's era, confirming the link between Egyptian national security and the security of the Gulf and Red Sea regions and calling for noninterference in other countries' affairs. President Sisi was franker when he confirmed Egypt's position toward its brothers

in the Gulf against Iran. In a speech he gave after heading the meeting of the higher council of the armed forces in April 2015, he said, “We will confront anybody who tries to touch our brothers as hard as we can.” The term “along the road” has become a title for the Egyptian doctrine with respect to the security of the Gulf and focuses in particular on Iranian threats to the Gulf. In general, the Egyptian presidency has adopted a position toward threats to the Gulf’s security without antagonizing Iran or saying that it is the offender.

2. Ministries of Defense and Foreign Affairs and organs of sovereignty.

By analyzing the positions of the sovereignty ministries and Egyptian national security agencies, it becomes clear that awareness exists of Iranian interference in the internal affairs of the Arab countries. This awareness increased in recent years after the unveiling of a number of interference attempts by Hezbollah elements who were captured in Qena district at the end of the Mubarak era. This case was well-known in 2009-2010 under the name “Hezbollah cell.” On April 28, 2010, the state’s Security Higher Court sentenced those charged in the case (two Lebanese, five Palestinians, one Sudanese, and eighteen Egyptians) to twenty-five years imprisonment and made many charges against them, such as contact with foreign authorities to carry out terrorist operations in Egypt – specifically, against ships crossing the Suez Canal, tourists, and tourist facilities. The individuals were also charged with joining prohibited terrorist groups, holding explosives, and counterfeiting official papers.⁽³⁵⁾

Until that time, in the Egyptian mentality, no link existed between Hezbollah and Iran. These cells were considered parts of the party’s moves and activities. Perhaps Egypt wished to keep the reality of Iranian interference confidential. However, a WikiLeaks document revealed Egyptian officials’ awareness of the reality of the relationship between Hezbollah, Hamas, and Iran’s activities. American letters in April 2009 revealed that the Egyptian internal minister, General Habib Aladli, was behind the breakdown of a Hezbollah cell in Sinai and the procedures to stop the flow of Iranian weapons from Sudan via Egypt to Gaza. The documents revealed that the Egyptian intelligence director at that time, General Omar Suleiman, said that Egypt had sent a clear message to Tehran – that if Iran interfered in Egyptian affairs, Egypt would interfere in Iranian affairs.⁽³⁶⁾ One document also revealed that during his meeting with the US ambassador in Cairo in 2008, General Suleiman said, “Egypt is affected by the Iranian interference in the Egyptian internal affairs, either through Al-Qaeda, the Lebanese Hezbollah, or the Muslim Brotherhood Movement.” The document added that Suleiman informed the US chief of staff that Iran had tried to enlist Bedouins to smuggle weapons to the Hamas movement in the Gaza Strip. Indeed, the aforementioned developments reflect the beginning of the

establishment of an Egyptian doctrine inside the Egyptian security agencies with respect to Iran's growing threat toward Egypt.

Furthermore, it is difficult for the Ministry of Defense to determine its position on Iran despite Egypt's support of Iraq during the Iraqi-Iranian war, which created unfriendliness for both sides. In the mentality of Egypt's military institution, one can differentiate between an Iran that threatens the security of the Gulf and an Iran that represents an Islamic country that, strategically, is one of the region's balancing powers. In some instances, the Egyptian position aligned with the Iranian one, such as in their stances on Syria after the 2011 revolution, with Egypt's main goal being to preserve a united Syria. In recent years, military relations between the two countries came into the picture in the form of two vital events. The first took place in February 2011, when two Iranian ships crossed the Suez Canal on their way to Syria, while the second took place in February 2012, when the Egyptian military council gave permission to some Iranian ships – also on their way to this country – to cross the Suez Canal, knowing that President Mubarak had previously refused the passage of Iranian ships through the Suez Canal. In his explanation regarding the passage, General Mohab Mamish, chief of the Suez Canal Commission said, "One of the Iranian ships was carrying Russian-made arms, going to Syria. Americans intercepted these ships and – alongside the Israelis – asked us to prevent them from crossing through the Suez Canal, but we firmly rejected their request, which angered the United States of America." Mamish justified Egypt's position, saying, "We cannot intercept or prevent any ships carrying arms from passage through the Canal whatever its nationality or destination is because we signed [the] Constantinople agreement that prohibits preventing any ship from passage and we respect our agreements."⁽³⁷⁾

Furthermore, two points of view maintained by the Egyptian political elite influence the position of Egypt's foreign ministry. The first adopts the state's official stance toward the security of the Gulf, but calls for room to benefit from any efforts to increase Egyptian diplomatic gains and to open diplomatic channels with Iran in a way that preserves strategic relations with the GCC countries. This issue opened the door to mutual meetings and visits at specific times between officials in both countries. Nevertheless, it did not lead to any noticeable developments, though it preserved a minimum level of communications in certain conditions. The second view, which is limited among Egypt's elite, is that calls for direct contact and openness with Tehran, for political recruitment in times of crises, broaden the state's strategic options or lessen the region's increasing sectarian conflicts. Supporters of this view believe that this position will not impact Egypt's support of the GCC countries. Despite these two points of view, Egypt's stance favoring relations with the GCC countries has not changed.

Sporadically, the Egyptian Foreign Ministry has made limited signals with respect to Egypt's willingness to enhance relations with Tehran, though these signals were ultimately ignored. In 2004, after attending the Islamic summit in Tehran, Egypt's foreign minister, Ahmed Maher, said Egypt had an initial agreement with Iran to restore relations between the two countries and that only some procedures intended to normalize these relations remained to be completed. However, thirteen years have passed without any remarkable developments in this issue. After the January 2011 revolution, the same point of view calling for the restoration of relations with Tehran and the achievement of a degree of balanced relations in Egypt's foreign and regional relations was renewed in the Egyptian Foreign Ministry, as expressed by Nabil Arabi, who assumed the office of foreign minister for three months (from March to May 2011). However, Arabi's step stalled and his limited period in office did not enable him to enhance the severed relations that had existed since 1991 (at the level of the Commission of Interests headed by an ambassador). In fact, the Egyptian foreign ministry preserved the same diplomatic language that prevailed during the Mubarak era. Every time the issue of Iran was discussed, minor and procedural aspects were handled rather than the issue's key factors.

In recent years, a new tendency, supported by some diplomats and experts, has emerged in the Egyptian Foreign Ministry, calling for talks with Tehran. In 2006 the Egyptian diplomat and thinker Mustafa Al Faki wrote an article entitled, "Egypt: Sunni People with Shiite Inclinations!" In this article, Al Faki asserted that Egypt was the country that had hosted and welcomed 'Aal Al Bait' (the Prophet's family) in the first Hijri century and added that Egypt was about to embrace Shiism today. Alfaqi also said that Egypt was the Sunni Muslim country in which the Honored Azhar – with its historical value and religious status – teaches 'Jafari' doctrine side by side with the Sunni doctrine in its four known branches. In fact, Egypt was the first Shiite country in history when Fatimid Caliphate arrived there from North Africa to establish the Islamic state that drew the face of life in Egypt and established its cultural traditions and values.⁽³⁸⁾

In the same context, Ahmed Maher, former foreign minister, called for the development of positive negotiations between the Arabs and Iran, saying it was not logical that the United States – Iran's primary enemy – held direct talks with Iran while the Arabs continued to antagonize Tehran. He added, "Iran is a regional country with the same power as Turkey and we have to benefit from this country," asserting that Tehran's mistakes should be fixed.⁽³⁹⁾ Maher denied the existence of an Egypt-Egypt problem concerning the restoration of relations with Tehran, asserting that the problem – in essence – is Iranian and referring to the fact that a psychological issue exists in Egypt concerning Tehran's celebration with the giant mural carrying

the picture of Khalid Islambouli, who assassinated President Sadat. Maher also said some security issues hindered the restoration of Egypt-Iran relations.⁽⁴⁰⁾

Nabil Fahmi, former foreign minister, also called for talks with Iran, but while he described Iran as an important country with legitimate rights, he asserted that it had scandalously adopted hostile and violent policies and interfered in the affairs of the Arab countries; he said that he supported talks between the Arabs and Iran based on goodwill by deeds rather than words.⁽⁴¹⁾

Nevertheless, the security issue still controls Egyptian politics and decisions with respect to Iran. While politics concentrates on political and economic gains by normalizing relations, taking into consideration vigilance toward legitimate security fears, the security issue concentrates only on the risks of possible Iranian penetration into Egyptian society through Shiism or terrorism. Hence, the Egyptian security agencies – not the foreign ministry – remain in control of the Iranian issue. The Egyptian security leadership believes that the enhancement of relations with Iran should slow down due to a lack of clear evidence indicating that Iran has ceased to support terrorism. On the other hand, the diplomatic leadership believes that Iran's support of Islamic fundamentalism is low, thereby opening the door to the restoration of relations between the two countries. Former Egyptian foreign ministers Amr Mousa and Nabil Arabi called for the enhancement of relations with Iran, but the Egyptian security agencies rejected these calls due to the belief that Iran supports Islamic fundamentalism.⁽⁴²⁾

3. Religious institution

The Egyptian religious institution has no influence on the country's foreign policy. However, with respect to relations with Iran, this institution's decision is of great importance from several perspectives. One major aspect of the limitations on Egypt's decision concerning Iran abides by the internal conditions and possible risks of enhancing relations with Iran, especially in light of the presence of an Iranian regime that aims to export the revolution and sectarian ideologies. This issue is related to the religious institution and national security. The religious institution – represented by Azhar Ashareef, the Ministry of Endowments, and the Fatwa Institution – is responsible for introducing the true religion in compliance with the four Sunni doctrines – Maleki, Hanafi, Shafi'i, and Hanbali. Essentially, the official religious institution is directly related to national status and security. As a result, when President Morsi expressed interest in restoring relations with Tehran, the religious institution was concerned about this issue, which clearly appeared in Azhar's position toward former Iranian president Ahmadinejad's visit to Egypt in February 2013. In a meeting between Azhar Sheikh (head) Ahmed Attayeb and

the president of Iran, Attayeb said, “Our big concern is the Shiite penetration to Egypt and Sunni doctrines. This is unacceptable and [we] do not want the people of Egypt to convert into the Shiite ideology.” He added, “Despite Azhar sees and hears the curses against the prophet’s companions, Madam Aisha (the prophet’s wife), and Imam Bukhari, we assure our self-control to avoid an unnecessary battle.”⁽⁴³⁾ The press conference that the Iranian president held inside Azhar after meeting Attayeb reflected a degree of unfriendliness toward Nejad inside this institution. However, this former Azhar position toward Nejad’s visit is most likely a reflection of a general Egyptian stance unlike the trends of the Brotherhood Movement and President Morsi toward Iran. The positions of the religious institution – which is parallel to the Official Institution like the Salafist currents in all their structures that played a significant role in drawing the attention of Egyptian security agencies to the hindrance of the formation of Shiite communities that the Salafists can target – drag the Egyptian government into sectarian polarization in contrast to its history and literature.⁽⁴⁴⁾ Egypt’s official and nonofficial religious institutions feared Shiite penetration under Iranian cover; as a result, during Ahmadinejad’s visit to Egypt, the Salafist current, alongside its political wing represented by the Annour party, praised Azhar’s position, which rejects the spread of Shiism in Egypt and condemns the oppression of Sunnis in Iran. The Annour party declared its reservations toward Ahmadinejad’s visit, asserting that talks with the Iranian president rely on five points: the immediate cessation of massacres of Sunnis in Syria and Ahwaz and the necessity of breaking down the Shiite armed militias that spread sedition and violence in the region, the discussion of Sunnis’ human rights in countries where Iran is interfering, the prevention of the spread of Shiism in Egypt with its deep history and geography, and the prevention of Iran’s attempts to promote Shiism and Shiite rebellions in the Arabian Gulf – Egypt’s strategic depth.⁽⁴⁵⁾

Despite the existence throughout Egypt of several groups and ‘Soufi’ movements, which carry the love of ‘Aal Al Bait,’ they differ from the Shiite sect while aligning with the Sunni sect, although they maintain some practices and rituals similar to those of Shiites in praising ‘Aal Al Bait.’ Nevertheless, this praise results from Sunni sources, not Shiite. In fact, they do not curse the prophet’s companions or make this practice one of the foundations of the sect, as do Shiites. Their love of ‘Aal Al Bait’ is devoid of any political tendencies or sectarianism. In addition, they do not practice ‘Tatbeer’ (hitting oneself) or other Shiite practices. Most likely, they confine themselves to the symbolic sanctities, muttering, and bodily and sentimental sways. These Soufist groups have been in Egypt for hundreds of years, but they have not caused internal divisions. They also have never followed outsider sects, sectarian affiliations, or any other country’s policies, which differs from Shiite tendencies in

the Arab countries. Essentially, these groups reveal their emotions toward Aal Al Bait in a manner different from that of Shiites.

4. The political elite and Egyptian public opinion

The issue of relations with Iran is not an internally contentious one. No clear position of Egyptian public opinion exists with respect to friendship or enmity toward Iran. However, Hezbollah's confrontation with Israel since 2000, Iranian support of the Palestinian Intifada (uprising), and the succession of Reformer Mohammed Khatami to the Iranian presidency helped change the Iranian image in Egypt. Nevertheless, in recent years this image re-deteriorated among Egyptians. The referendum conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2014 showed that eighty-three percent of Egyptians have different points of view on Iran.⁽⁴⁶⁾ Another referendum conducted by the American Zogby Research Institution, which announced its results in 2017, revealed that sixty-three percent of Egyptians opposed the establishment of a friendship between their country and Iran, while only thirty-five percent supported this view. Fifty-six percent of Egyptians also believed that Iran plays a negative role in Syria. In terms of Iranian policies since the succession of Hassan Rouhani to the Iranian presidency, sixty-five percent of Egyptians said that Iran does not play a positive role in Syria. This refers to the lack of an Egyptian internal position that enforces the Egyptian decision maker to enhance rapprochement with Iran. In general, signs reflect adverse reactions toward Egyptian personalities and delegates who visit Iran, especially those with Shiite inclinations. Shiism or a Shiite inclination is one of the charges used on Egyptian satellite channels against those personalities.

Indeed, a history exists of stances by Egyptian powers and institutions that reflect mistrust and the rejection of Iranian policies such as the well-known position of Azhar that denied the Iranian behaviors after the attacks on the Saudi consulate and embassy in Tehran in January 2016, during the Iranian campaign on Saudi Arabia to internationalize the Hajj (pilgrimage) administration. In response, the Senior Scholars Commission in Azhar Sharif condemned these attacks on the Saudi embassy and consulate in Tehran and the city of Mashhad. The commission also condemned Iranian statements against the Kingdom, saying that Islam prohibits the irritation of one's neighbors. The commission also insisted on the necessity of unity among the Muslim people and for respect of the orders of the Quran and the prophet's Sunna (teachings) by calling for brotherly relations, the denying of conflicts, and the declining of those conspiring against the Muslim unity so as not to fail and perish.⁽⁴⁷⁾ Azhar announced its rejection of all attempts among the regional powers – especially Iran – to internationalize the two holy mosques and politicize Hajj. The Senior Scholars Commission in Azhar said that attempts to internationalize Hajj were unacceptable and criticized the use of religion and sectarian division to

achieve political goals, asserting that this request opens another door to sedition – a door that must remain closed. It added that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is the only country that has the right to administer Hajj affairs without external interference.⁽⁴⁸⁾ On an Egyptian satellite channel in 2015, Azhar Sheikh (senior scholar) explained the remarkable differences between the Sunni and Shiite sects. He said that Sunnis, unlike Shiites, believe in the righteousness of all prophets' companions and denied the Shiite belief that the infallibility of Imams eliminates Prophecy. In response, the Iranian Farsi News agency attacked him, saying, "Azhar senior Imam's mobilization to confront the ideas of Aal Al Bait and Shiism in Egypt." It added, "Azhar Sheikh called the clerics in Egypt to stand against the Egyptian people's tendency and inclination toward Shiism. He also called [on] clerics to not visit Iran⁽⁴⁹⁾ and refused to participate in the 34th event of [the] Quran reciting competition in Iran that was finished on April 26, 2017 with [the] participation of eighty countries, excluding Egypt."

Despite the lack of desire among Egypt's community and institutions to restore relations with Iran, many indicators exist that Iranian influence and Shiite beliefs have been growing in Egypt in recent years. These include the building of media bases, the establishing of research centers, and the intensifying of the culture of Aal Al Bait loving.⁽⁵⁰⁾

First, after the 2006 summer war between Hezbollah and Israel and following Hezbollah's victories, the Egyptian press – partisan and independent – published materials supporting the Shiite sect and attacking the Prophet's companions and Sunni holy places.⁽⁵¹⁾ Iran founded some media proxies in Egypt⁽⁵²⁾ and enhanced its relations with live broadcasting companies that prepare and introduce television materials for satellite channels that do not have offices in Cairo.⁽⁵³⁾ Iran also sent on regular trips groups of Egyptian journalists who worked for several newspapers and satellite channels.⁽⁵⁴⁾ In addition, some members of Muslim groups in Egypt embraced Shiism while others established temples for prayer and Jum'a speeches following the Shiite sect rituals.⁽⁵⁵⁾ Second, the most dangerous sign of Iran's influence is the fact that a number of research centers have been employed to improve Iran's image and to issue studies and research that reinforces the perception of political Shiism and the restoration of Fatimi history in Egypt.⁽⁵⁶⁾ Third, Iran aims to enhance the culture of Aal Al Bait loving. Iranian policy seeks to find centers and pockets in Egypt to attract Egyptian people to the sectarian issue with continuous talks about the rights of minorities, such as the establishment of newspapers and parties, the licensing of institutions, the right to visit tombs, and the exploration of new tombs.⁽⁵⁷⁾ The rationale behind these activities is to make minorities a reality with rights and requests that might drag Egypt into sectarian problems.⁽⁵⁸⁾

The Shiite distribution map in Egypt shows that Shiites have spread in the Egyptian provinces despite their small numbers. In June 2017, a document was released about the Egyptian Shiites' strategy to unify and establish what they called the House of the Egyptian Shiites, as well as to find a way to confront their rival Salafist currents by approaching the secular and Nasiri currents, and to promote Shiism inside Egyptian society.⁽⁵⁹⁾ It can be said that a tendency exists to increase awareness among the limited Shiite segments with respect to their joint identity in Egypt. Some Egyptian Shiite personalities appear in public and announce their identities, which has raised fears to the extent that Rif'at Sa'eed, chief of the Advisory Council of the Egyptian Gathering Party (the Left), insisted on two prohibited issues for Shiites in Egypt: first, their loyalty should not be to Iran, financed and directed by Tehran, or pay the One Fifth for this country, and second, they should not turn from religion to politics, as this would represent intrusion into the Egyptian state's political affiliation.⁽⁶⁰⁾ Despite the rise of internal voices underestimating Iran's cultural and political influence on Egypt, in the case of enhanced relations, it seems that fears of the risks that Iranian Shiism poses are still prevalent. In addition, the practices of Iranian tourists at Shiite shrines and the tombs of Aal Al Bait and Jurists raise fears about the spread of these practices among Egyptians, which – if allowed – might damage Egyptian customs and traditions.

Political and strategic calculations on the Egyptian decision on Iran

Based on the aforementioned complex calculations, Egypt's decision with respect to restoring relations with Iran is strategic. The adoption of this decision requires multi-faceted calculations, not only economic ones. Other calculations are related to the risks in the Egyptian interior based on the statement of Egypt's former foreign minister (today the secretary general of the Arab League) Ahmed Abollgeidh, who, in his 2014 book, referenced several factors affecting the Egyptian decisionmaker with respect to Iran, including his personal calculations regarding Iranian decision-making and Iran's radical tendencies, especially its nuclear file, which, as he said, "Obliged us to not seem to have opened the door for Iranians concerning a crucial and complicated issue." He added, "President Mubarak's experience, over decades, referred to the decline of Iranians as a result of the conflict in their internal views with what they agree on with Egypt."

In compliance with Egypt's former foreign minister, Ahmed Abollgeidh admitted that "the determinant in the possibility of enhancing relations with Iran is the security issue and personal experience of the president and related Intelligence agencies. Indeed, the Egyptian security forces have always mistrusted the Iranian intentions and desires to penetrate Egypt in favor of the Iranian traditional revolutionary trends."⁽⁶¹⁾

Based on that assumption, one can refer to internal and regional calculations concerning the Egyptian decision on Iran.

Internally, more than one underlying factor exists, such as security risks resulting from Iranian policies. In retracing Iranian practices and behaviors in most countries with Shiite communities, we find an Iranian desire to play with the internal segments of these countries. In fact, the fear of Iranian expansion is one of the calculations of the Egyptian decision maker. Iranian policies seek to establish sectarian guardianship of Shiites in other countries so that they align with Iranian goals and policies “Great Iran” in their home countries. This would prevent most Shiites from differentiating between the sectarian Iran and the state of Iran, thereby enabling Tehran to establish sectarian cantons inside Shiites’ home countries and breaking into their national structure, which concerns the state’s organizations in Egypt. Despite the absence of a Shiite problem in Egypt, in light of the minor presence of this sect, fears exist regarding the cause of future problems, which is not taken into consideration. The problem is not confined to Iranian expansion, but also involves Shiite groups and personalities that might cause internal tension in Egypt. In fact, some signs of these tensions were represented by the assassination of the Shiite cleric Hassan Shahatah in 2013.

In addition, the regional role can also be taken into consideration. Iranian expansion in the Arab world diminishes Egypt’s role in this region. Iran’s tendency to expand Persian hegemony since the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 has played a major role in Iranian expansion in Iraq, Syria, almost half of Lebanon, and Gaza, with the possibility of an influential role in some Gulf states, which threatens Egypt’s role in the Egyptian vital sphere of interests.⁽⁶²⁾ Egypt maintains a central regional role with a moderate peaceful tendency that supports stability and the status quo, in contrast with Iran, which pursues a radical trend aimed at the region’s destabilization.

As for the regional calculations of Egypt’s decision on Iran, Egypt-Gulf relations are a top priority representing the strategic lifeline of Egypt. In normal conditions, the GCC countries are of great importance to Egypt. However, this importance has increased with the geopolitical changes in the region since 2011, after the uprisings in Egypt’s neighboring countries and the Syrian civil war, which is hard to stabilize even if it remains unified as one country. Hence, theories of Egyptian traditional national security that linked Egyptian national security with the northern frontier (Syria) and its strategic value as a gate for Egyptian national security were held back and compensated for by the added value of the GCC countries. This tendency is directed toward the creation of a new Egyptian national security theory based on the materializing of the Eastern frontier’s (Arabian Gulf) strategic value as an economic, political, and security supporter of Egypt and as a growing model of

Arabic development. On the other hand, Iran maintains a different foreign policy in the region. Its strategy is based on interference in the internal affairs of other countries and on dealing with sub-entities in these countries to extend its sectarian and divisional tendencies. This eliminates the principals and bases of the Arab system as well as its basic philosophy, and contradicts the Egyptian state's post-30th of June doctrine that is based on confronting terrorism and extremism. Essentially, this is a point of contradiction between Egypt and Iran that hinders the restoration of relations between the two countries.

In comparison to Egypt-Gulf relations, Egypt-Iran relations do not seem to be a zero-sum game. However, Egypt has not yet approached Iran, representing the domination of Egyptian internal considerations. Despite Egypt's internal views calling for enhanced economic relations with Tehran and the establishment of balance in Egypt's relations with the GCC countries, the basic point does not suggest that Egypt's role is to create a balance, but rather to partner with GCC countries that consider Iran the primary threat to their security. The latest developments and crisis with Qatar reveal that Gulf issues are gradually influencing Egypt's decision on Iran and that the new alliances resulting from this crisis will place more limitations on Cairo in terms of dealing freely with the Iranian file, especially with the rise of the Iranian militarization trend and the spread of the IRGC in the Arab countries, and the escalation of tension between Saudi Arabia and Iran. These developments might result in an operational status in the entire region and result in the establishment of two regional frontiers: one great frontier under the leadership of Saudi Arabia, including most of the Muslim world (mainly Sunnis) and comprising all the countries that participated in the Islamic-US summit in Riyadh in May 2017, and another (divided) frontier led by Iran and comprising Syria, parts of Iraq, and Iranian political and armed militias spread throughout the Arab and Muslim world. This bloc could restore relations with several parties in the Gulf in the event of the continuity of the exceptional crisis with Qatar. As a result, Egypt's decision about the restoration of relations with Iran will likely not happen due to Egypt's siding with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia against the Iranian threat, and the Saudi-Egypt stance against the threat of terrorism.

Some observers believe Egypt-Iran relations will have no negative impact on Egypt-GCC countries' relations, based on the assumption that the GCC countries themselves – especially the UAE (economically), the Sultanate of Oman (politically), and Qatar (economically and in terms of security) – maintain relations on many levels with Iran. They also advocate for the elimination of Egypt's phobia to prevent damaging Egypt-Saudi relations in the event of enhanced relations with Tehran and believe it is no longer appropriate to keep relations between the two countries at the

level of diplomatic commissions while the GCC countries themselves have not objected to Egypt's restoration of relations with Iran. Those observers also said that Egypt could be a diplomatic bridge between both banks of the Arabian Gulf so as to maintain regional stability. In fact, despite the absence of objections from GCC countries toward Egypt's restoration of Egypt-Iran relations, the GCC countries most likely consider Egypt to be their strategic supporter despite their economic, cultural, and political relations with Iran. These relations do not deny the existence of Gulf-Iran tension or the view of most Gulf States that consider Iran a threat to their national security. Essentially, the GCC countries' security and military doctrines regard Iran as the primary threat to the Gulf's security.

Based on that assumption, there are no means through which to weigh the most pressing factors on the Egyptian decision maker concerning the restoration of relations with Iran. However, in general, Egypt inclines toward the Gulf position. Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry was evident in his recent handling of this issue. He left the door open for the Iranians to change their foreign policy as a condition for enhancing relations between the two countries, saying, "The conditions are not yet suitable for positive talks that lead to positive consequences. However, this does not prevent holding successful negotiations in the future, but there is no room for dialogue between Egypt and Iran." He added, "Any movement in this direction will be in coordination with our brothers in the Gulf."⁽⁶³⁾ This supports the idea that Egypt's official point of view supports the Gulf stance, which means that whenever the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia supports Egypt's stance toward terrorist groups, Egypt inclines toward the Saudi position toward Iran.

During the era of current Egyptian President Sisi, Egypt-Iran relations will most likely not witness significant changes with respect to the constants of Egypt's diplomacy over the past thirty years – even during the temporary periods of agreement between Egypt and Iran on Syria. Egypt fears the rise of political Muslim groups in Syria in the event of a sudden power vacuum in this country.⁽⁶⁴⁾ President Sisi expressed these fears in the Arab summit in March 2015 when he said, "Egypt deals with the Syrian crisis from two perspectives: the first supports the ambitions of the Syrian people to build a civil democratic state and the second is to confront the terrorist groups and prevent the collapse of the Syrian state." On the other hand, while Egypt avoided talking about Iranian interference in Syria during the Arab summit in 2016, it brought up this issue forcefully during the 2017 summit. President Sisi condemned Iranian interferences in Syria, saying, "Some powers interfere in the Affairs of the Arab nation; politically, militarily, and security... we have to take decisive action to stop these interferences and convey a message that we will not allow any power to interfere in our affairs." He added, "All attempts for sectarian hegemony or expanding influence inside the Arab countries will be confronted by one unified and decisive Arab stance."

Conclusion

Egypt-Iran relations seem to be more complicated than GCC-Iran relations. In addition, Iran benefits more from its relations with Egypt than Egypt benefits from its relations with Iran. In fact, the restoration of Egypt-Iran relations is intended to put Egypt's political position into a neutral stance between Iran and the GCC countries; on the other hand, this stance would seem to be closer to Iran than to the Gulf States, or at least be considered as such by the Gulf States, which would damage Egypt's relations with GCC countries that believe Egypt should not maintain a neutral stance with GCC countries and should stand by them. However, it is difficult to calculate the economic and political benefits Egypt would gain from relations with Tehran in contrast to the economic relations between Iran and the UAE and Turkey, which were enhanced as a result of Western sanctions on Tehran. While these two countries were significant gates for exportation and importation from and to Iran, this formula is difficult to achieve in the case of Egypt. The geographic location of both Turkey and the UAE and their closeness to Iran is a motivating factor for the building and enhancement of relations. In addition, the types of exports and imports between Iran and the two countries must be studied. Likewise, the availability of Iranian communities in the UAE is a trade motive, and the closeness of Turkish markets to European markets represents a significant gateway for trade with Iran. Indeed, these factors are not available at the same level with Egypt, or are unavailable altogether.

As a result, the course of Egypt-Iran relations, despite the many political considerations that might motivate a rapprochement, will remain, in the near future, bound by the formula and determinants mentioned hereinbefore. Despite frequent announcements of the restoration of relations, the Egyptian decision maker will most likely find himself in the middle of complicated balances and calculations that postpone the development of relations. If the calculations of risks override the benefits, or if it is difficult to build economic and political relations away from cultural and sectarian relations, the Egyptian decision will remain bound by a change in Iranian internal and regional behaviors in a way that comforts the Gulf and provides significant benefits for Egypt without creating an obligation to build insecure relations. As a result, the Egyptian decision on Iran will most likely not be governed by the two scenarios of full rapprochement or complete break up.⁽⁶⁵⁾ On the contrary, they are governed by incomplete steps in the event of the continuity of the region's current conditions. Furthermore, if international resolutions on Iran take dramatic directions and lead to military confrontation, the Egyptian decision will face new complications that might put Egypt in an unpredicted and challenging situation.

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