

**INSTITUTE FOR DIPLOMACY AND ECONOMY**



**The Rapprochement Between Turkey and Egypt:  
The Reasons and Possible Outcomes**

**by Mustafa Enes ESEN**

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## **The Rapprochement between Turkey and Egypt: The Reasons and Possible Outcomes**

President Erdoğan recently said on the rapprochement between Turkey and Egypt that “[i]t might not be at the highest level but it is just a notch under. And of course we wish to continue this process with Egypt in a much stronger manner. If the intelligence, diplomatic and political talks yield results, we might carry this process forward. Because the Egyptian people and the Turkish people can by no means be separated.”<sup>1</sup> After years of mutual enmity and hatred, why does Turkey try to make an overture towards Egypt? President Erdoğan had called President al-Sisi of Egypt a dictator on multiple occasions, asked the UN to take action against Egypt, allowed the Brotherhood to settle in Turkey and make it their new headquarters, and embraced the four-fingered 'Rabaa' salute, a direct reference to the mass killing of demonstrators who were protesting the military takeover of power from the elected government of President Morsi in the Rabaa al-Adawiya square in 2013 in Egypt, as one of the AKP's political symbols. A rapprochement with Egypt would definitely boost Turkey's position within the Arab countries and in the eastern Mediterranean but why it is taking place now? In this article, I will discuss the reasons for recent political developments between Turkey and Egypt and what we can expect from the rapprochement efforts.

### **What are the push factors for reconciliation?**

There are several factors that play a role in the rapprochement between Turkey and Egypt. Firstly, Turkey's desire to consolidate its gains in Libya probably constitutes the most important factor in its reconciliation efforts. Turkey started to put the boots on the ground in Libya in a massive scale in late 2019 upon a formal invitation from the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) based in Tripoli. Thousands of Turkish troops and Syrian fighters were deployed with advanced military equipment including armed drones. This military intervention not only turned the tide of war in Libya, but also put Haftar's future in Libya in danger. To stop the crumbling of the Benghazi-based Libyan National Army (LNA), President of Egypt al-Sisi declared that "some think they can trespass on the Sirte or Al-Jura frontline. This for us is a red line" and he threatened with a military intervention in Libya. The retreat of the LNA forces indeed stopped in Sirte. The GNA and LNA signed a ceasefire deal in October 2020 and a national unity government was established in March 2021.

President Erdoğan has high expectations from Libya after this heavy military intervention. He wants to get the lion's share in Libya's billions of dollars worth reconstruction efforts which will be a boon for Turkey's struggling construction

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<sup>1</sup> "(COVID-19 Vaccines) 'We might purchase 50 million more from China if we reach an agreement,'" December 3, 2021, <http://wt.iletisim.gov.tr/english/haberler/detay/covid-19-vaccines-we-might-purchase-50-million-more-from-china-if-we-reach-an-agreement/>

business. Arms exports to Libya are another lucrative business, such as the armed drones produced by President Erdogan's son-in-law. He also expects that the 2019 maritime demarcation accord in the eastern Mediterranean between Turkey and Libya can facilitate Turkey's efforts to exploit oil and gas in the region. This agreement that tremendously expands Turkey's maritime claims in the eastern Mediterranean to the detriment of Greece and Cyprus is highly criticized by the EU countries and Egypt.

In order to achieve these expectations, Turkey needs a stable and functioning government in Libya. And a viable unity government is only feasible only if Turkey and Egypt cooperate on this matter. Turkey is the main sponsor of the Tripoli Government, while Egypt is one of the Haftar's main backers since the very beginning. Egypt is also recognizing that Haftar cannot take by force and unite Libya under his rule given the fact that Turkey has forces on the ground thanks to a bilateral agreement with the internationally recognized GNA government. So, Egypt needed to adjust its policies in Libya and took some steps. To this end Egypt decided to reopen its diplomatic mission in Tripoli after six years. Then it firmly supported Libya's unity government established in 2021. Most importantly, Egypt "concluded that it needed to improve its relations with Turkey to safeguard its interests in Libya."<sup>2</sup>

Secondly, some analysts say that Turkey faced the harsh reality that "precious loneliness" is not actually precious. Turkey is paying a heavy price in terms of diplomacy and economy as it has antagonized all of its neighbors, in one way or another. The rapprochement with Egypt can help to break this vicious loneliness. As a result of Turkey's policies in the last decade, there are some blocs that emerge to counter Turkey's activities in the region. On the one hand, Egypt, Cyprus, Greece and the EU countries are acting together to counterbalance Turkey's maritime policy in the eastern Mediterranean, on the other hand Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are trying to reverse Turkey's influence in Syria and Libya. Besides Qatar, Turkey does have zero friends to compete against these alliances. For instance, Turkey's naval activities in the eastern Mediterranean and its maritime agreement with Libya ruffled some feathers. As a result, Turkey was left out from important regional initiatives to develop a sustainable regional gas market such as the East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF). Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, Palestine and even France are members of this organization while Turkey, the biggest energy importer in the eastern Mediterranean is conspicuously excluded from the forum. The rapprochement with Egypt can play an important role in reducing Turkey's isolation in the eastern Mediterranean.

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<sup>2</sup> "Turkish-Egyptian Reconciliation: The Prospects of Success and of Failure," Middle East Monitor, March 15, 2021, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20210315-turkish-egyptian-reconciliation-the-prospects-of-success-and-of-failure/>

Thirdly, Turkey and Qatar have mostly acted in tandem in the last decade in the Middle East, whether it concerned Iran, Syria, Libya or Egypt. Now, as Qatar has started to mend fences with Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt after the three-and-a-half-year blockade, Turkey might be following Qatar in terms of improving its relations in the Middle East. In other words, the rapprochement efforts between Turkey and Egypt might be extended to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in not-so-distant future. As one would recall, Saudi Arabia and its allies had issued an official list of 13 demands that Qatar had to meet after they put sanctions in 2017. They had asked Qatar to reduce ties with Iran, to close a Turkish military base in the country, to sever all ties with the Muslim Brotherhood, to shut down its broadcaster, Al Jazeera. In January 2021, however, Saudi Arabia and its allies lifted the sanctions they imposed on Qatar and restored their diplomatic relations with no conditions. Egypt had to follow the suit with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and restore its relations with Qatar. A similar course of action is also a possibility in the Turkish-Egyptian relations. The Egyptian authorities had lumped Turkey and Qatar together for their involvement in the Middle East and blamed them for supporting domestic terrorism in Egypt. Besides, the Egyptian authorities characterized Turkey and Qatar together as main troublemakers in the region. Now, the normalization of the ties with Qatar might have a positive effect on Turkey's position with Egypt. So, it might not be a coincidence that Turkey's overture to Egypt had followed Qatar's restoration of ties with Egypt.

Last but not least, another theory worth mentioning is that Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey are making a united front against the USA to have a better stance against the new US policy. After all, the Biden administration started to treat Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey as "pariah states" due to their flagrant human rights abuses. President Trump enjoyed friendly relations with the leaders of these states. He oddly called Sisi as his favorite dictator<sup>3</sup>, declared himself a 'big fan of Turkey's leader Erdoğan<sup>4</sup>, and congratulated Mohammed Bin Salman, the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, of doing "a spectacular job."<sup>5</sup> President Biden, on the other hand, in Steven A. Cook's words, "has sought to make the Saudi crown prince a pariah, let it be known that human rights will be central to U.S.-Egypt relations, and ignore Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan for his crimes..."<sup>6</sup> So, it is possible that these

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<sup>3</sup> Nancy A. Youssef Bender Vivian Salama and Michael C., "Trump, Awaiting Egyptian Counterpart at Summit, Called Out for 'My Favorite Dictator,'" *Wall Street Journal*, September 13, 2019, sec. World, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-awaiting-egyptian-counterpart-at-summit-called-out-for-my-favorite-dictator-11568403645>

<sup>4</sup> Kevin Liptak CNN, "Trump Declares Himself a 'big Fan' of Turkey's Strongman Leader Erdoğan," CNN, November 13, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/11/13/politics/donald-trump-recep-tayyip-erdogan-turkey-impeachment/index.html> 25.04.21 14:49 25.04.21 14:49

<sup>5</sup> David Herszenhorn, "Trump Praises Saudi Crown Prince, Ignores Questions on Khashoggi Killing," *POLITICO*, June 29, 2019, <https://politi.co/2NnY0se>

<sup>6</sup> Steven A. Cook, "Nobody Knows Why Syria Matters," *Foreign Policy* (blog), March 23, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/23/nobody-knows-why-syria-matters/>

Middle Eastern states put their differences aside and make their voices heard against the US government.

### **What can we expect?**

Depending on the success of the rapprochement efforts between the two countries, how can relations evolve? It is obvious that mistrust between Sisi and Erdogan will be never totally overcome after long years of animosity and mutual hatred. As a matter of fact, when we take into consideration the comments in the Egyptian media -many of them are affiliated with the Egyptian government- and reactions from the Egyptian officials, we see that Turkey is more eager than Egypt for reconciliation. Although there are no official conditions that Turkey must meet before Cairo agrees to "resume talks" with Ankara, the Egyptian media puts forward some demand lists.<sup>7</sup> These lists include withdrawal of Turkish army from Libya, Syria, Iraq, expelling the Brotherhood from Turkey, stopping the activities of the Brotherhood in Turkey, conditions for Egyptian-Turkish agreement in the eastern Mediterranean and so on. Some Egyptians even ask that President Erdoğan must present his apologies to al-Sisi. It is highly likely that talks between Turkey and Egypt would resume even if these demands were not met.

Furthermore, we do not know to what degree these demands overlap with the expectations of the Egyptian authorities, but we know that Egypt had to restore its relations with Qatar without any known conditions despite the fact that Egypt and three Gulf states had previously imposed several conditions to resume relations with Qatar. Similarly, Egypt will probably not impose conditions to resume talks with Turkey but it may ask Turkey to take some actions to officially restore the relations. To this end, Egypt's Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukri said about Turkey's attempts for rapprochement that "if real actions from Turkey show alignment with Egyptian principles and goals then the groundwork will be laid for relations to return to normal."<sup>8</sup>

Turkey, as a goodwill gesture to offer to Egypt, made a move about the Brotherhood. It has restricted the Brotherhood's political activities and broadcasts criticizing the Egyptian government. TV channels of the Brotherhood based in Istanbul — al-Sharq, Mekamleen and Watan — are already told to tone down their criticism of the Egyptian government.<sup>9</sup> It is, nevertheless, highly unlikely that Turkey will completely discard the Brotherhood and expel all its members from its territories. It is estimated that there are between 5000 and 7000 members of the Brotherhood living in Turkey, 3000 of whom received their Turkish naturalization papers.<sup>10</sup> The

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<sup>7</sup> "Egypt Editor Reveals 10 Conditions That Turkey Must Meet," Middle East Monitor, March 14, 2021, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20210314-egypt-editor-reveals-10-conditions-that-turkey-must-meet/>

<sup>8</sup> "Egypt Says Turkey Must Lay Ground for Normalising Ties with Actions," Reuters, March 14, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-egypt-turkey-idUKKBN2B60JC>

<sup>9</sup> Metin Gurcan, "Egypt-Turkey Rivalry Goes Deeper than Politics," Al Monitor: The Pulse of the Middle East, March 23, 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/03/egypt-turkey-rivalry-goes-deeper-politics>

<sup>10</sup> "كيف يفكر أردوغان.. هل تسلم تركيا الإخوان الهاربين في سبيل المصالحة مع مصر," Sada Elbalad, March 10, 2021, <https://www.elbalad.news/4732181>

Turkish government has always been in close political relationship with the Brotherhood in Tunisia, Libya, Syria, Egypt and so on. One of the main reasons why Turkey suffers from a disastrous relationship with Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia is related to Turkey's strong engagement with the Brotherhood. These Arab countries consider the Brotherhood as an actual threat to their political stability. Erdoğan would not want to throw away trump card it holds against them for a temporary benefit.

The cooperation on Libya is probably the most important issue in the talks between Turkey and Egypt. On the one hand Turkey needs to consolidate its gains in Libya, on the other hand Egypt wants to keep its strong historical relationship with Libya. Their role in the ceasefire that took place in October 2020 is undeniable. Both countries have had a positive attitude for a new government in Libya and are supporting Libya's unity government. Western diplomatic circles indicate that the consensus in Libya became possible thanks to compromises by both Ankara and Cairo.<sup>11</sup> If the rapprochement succeeds, it will definitely help the chances of survival and stability of the unity government in Libya.

While some analysts emphasizes that Turkey has to be included in the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum that is headquartered in Egypt, it is unlikely that Turkey will ever become a member of this organization. One of the founding members of this forum is Cyprus. Turkey does not recognize Cyprus as a sovereign country and will seriously consider a membership to this organization as legitimizing the sovereignty of Cyprus and its claims in the eastern Mediterranean. Besides, Cyprus will also veto or put severe conditions for Turkey's membership. It is therefore to be anticipated Turkey will continue to play an obstructive role towards this forum in the eastern Mediterranean.

Considering all of these, the Turkey-Egypt rapprochement will probably end up like the Turkish-Israeli relations that are stricken by deep distrust. In other words, Turkey may have good economic relations and some cooperation on security issues with Egypt, but the level of political activity will most likely remain limited. Therefore, one must not expect high level political dialogue and visits in the near future, even after ambassadors are exchanged.

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<sup>11</sup> Murat Yetkin, "Turkey-Egypt Ties: End to 'My Way or the Highway Policy?'" *Yetkin Report* (blog), March 17, 2021, <https://yetkinreport.com/en/2021/03/17/turkey-egypt-ties-end-to-my-way-or-the-highway-policy/>

## **Conclusion**

The rapprochement efforts between Turkey and Egypt are not just important for these two countries. They have also imminent consequences for Libya and the Brotherhood. An agreement between Turkey and Egypt would boost the chances of the viability of Libya's unity government. The backers of the opposite warring sides in Libya then can start to reap the fruits of their investments. On the other hand, the Egyptian Brotherhood will suffer from the loss of support in one of its last strongholds in the Middle East.

It is noteworthy that Turkey develops its relations with its neighbors from a military/intelligence perspective in the last years. Every so-called achievement of Turkey's foreign policy for the last 5 years is related to deployment of Turkish troops in foreign territories or naval activities, as this is the case in Libya. The chances are high that the rapprochement with Egypt is mainly an extension of Turkey's policy in Libya. Accordingly, it is not surprising that the talks with Egypt were initiated by the Turkish Intelligence. It is therefore to be expected that all the rapprochement efforts with Egypt will be primarily led by the Turkish Intelligence as Turkey's policy agenda setter in recent years. Turkish Foreign Ministry will probably have a secondary role in technicalities and public relations.

All of the theories about the rapprochement have some merits, and they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, the dominant factor seems to be Turkey's eagerness to start a rapprochement with Egypt lies in Libya. Turkey wants to consolidate its recent gains in Libya and to do so it definitely needs to reconcile with Egypt. As Egypt is not as enthusiastic as Turkey to normalize the relations, the negotiations will take some time. Moreover, Turkish military presence in Libya will continue to be a source of worry for Egypt. In any case, Turkey and Egypt can reach a *modus operandi* that is acceptable to both sides at the end of the talks.

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