

IDENTITY AND FOREIGN POLICY: THE CASE OF EGYPT

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Abstract

An analysis of foreign policy behavior requires much research to identify the roots. Policies contain goals and goals are shaped by national interests. National interests may be based on a set of personal values and identities which are associated with ideology, worldview, and material interests etc. Considering Egypt as a Middle Eastern country in which the personal is political in the absence of institutionalized foreign-policy understanding and there is no single identity at the individual level, this article tries to find out identities which have an important place in shaping the way Egypt's leaders think to decide foreign policy behaviors. Different identities have been constructed and employed in a way to serve to Egypt's either realist or idealist international orientation from Nasser to Sisi's era. This article finds out that while Nasser identified Egypt's foreign policy behavior with Arab nationalism and non-aligned orientation, Sadat and Mubarak's Western orientation and realist world-views primarily directed Egypt's foreign policy. This shows that the decrease in the Arab-Israeli conflict has paralleled the decline of Arab nationalism. After the revolution of 2011, Islamic identity came to the surface of Egyptian foreign policy but the deterioration of financial situation put an end for Morsi's administration to implement long-term foreign policies. At present, Egypt is under the military regime that is pursuing pragmatic goals because of deep economic problems. Therefore, frequent axis shifts are likely to be seen in Sisi's foreign policy.

Keywords: Identity, Foreign Policy, Egypt

Introduction

An analysis of foreign policy behavior requires much research to identify the roots. Policies contain goals and goals are shaped by national interests. National interests may be based on a set of personal values and identities which are associated with ideology, worldview,

and material interests. This article tries to find out identities which have an important place in shaping the way Egypt's leaders think to decide foreign policy behaviors.

In Egypt's foreign policy, there is no single identity at the individual level. Different identities, such as nationalist(Arab) and Islamic identity, have been constructed and employed in a way to serve to Egypt's either realist or idealist international orientation from Nasser to Sisi's era.

Nasser's Egypt (1956-1970)

Egypt gained its independence in 1922 but there was an ongoing British dominance over it. 1952 military coup by the Free Officers Movement was a local reaction to British Hegemony. After the rupture of British dominance, Nasser, a new leader of the Egyptian republic, preferred to manoeuvre and was close to neither west or east. In this respect, he did not joined the Baghdad Pact(1955) that was a direct challenge to Egypt's dominant position in the Arab world by serving western interests in the Middle East.

With the Suez crisis(1956), there emerged a power vacuum left by the decline of British and French power in the region. Taking the advantage that US did not get involved in the fighting and did not support the British-French alliance against Egypt, Nasser's Egypt could build its power base by playing the Soviets and Americans against each other. In response to this, Eisenhower Doctrine(1957) aimed at providing an alternative to the independent Arab regimes through isolating Nasser regime under, allegedly, the growing Soviet influence.

In 1961, Egypt decided its international orientation by firstly advocating the establishment of and then becoming a member of Non-Aligned Movement which is a middle way for the developing world between the western and eastern sides. This was an idealistic choice not a necessity because although non-aligned movement did not provide essential material benefits to Egypt, Nasser desired to keep Egypt's independence in this movement.

The identity embraced by Nasser to shape Egypt's foreign policy was the Arab Nationalism. Firstly, we need to analyze the roots of the pan-Arabist ideas in the Middle East. It can be traced back to late 19th century. Until 19th century, the Middle East was not open to Westphalian values. By the 19th century, Ottoman State opened its doors to new values by making many reforms . Starting from secret treaties during WW1 between external powers and local separatists from Ottoman State, Middle East countries entered the process of adoption of Westphalian international order values. Thus, nationalistic ideals took precedence over traditional Islamic vision of International order, pan-Islamism.

As for Egypt, Nasser is said to be first political leader of Arab Nationalism in Egypt because Wafd Party, which was the Egypt's main nationalist political party under the monarchy, failed “to depict Egypt's independence as a part of the Arab world's struggle and aspirations for freedom and unity”(Karawan, 2002, p. 157).

In order to flourish the Arab identity in the society, Nasser got help from the regional developments. Arab-Israeli conflict had an important impact on the rise of Arab Nationalism. Starting from the Suez Crisis of 1956, the Egyptian state machinery emphasized Arabism and intensified it by utilizing Palestinian problem. In addition, Nasser wanted to take advantage of historical and cultural affinity of Arabic speaking people. He aimed at the unification of Arab world. In 1958, a big political project was actualized under the name of United Arab Republic, although it lasted only three years.

However, the Six-Day War of 1967, Israel's air forces was able to destroy Egypt's military forces and expanded its territory to Sinai Peninsula, Golan Heights and West Bank. It was a psychological trauma for Arab community and created a huge disappointment. Thus, the leadership of Nasser and Arab Nationalism went into a serious decline.

So, it is my analysis that, Egypt's foreign policy identity during Nasser's era featured neither Western or Soviet ideals utterly but the ideal of independence. He pursued a non-aligned course. At the regional level, Egypt's foreign policy identity is under the domination of Arab

nationalism. Even, sometimes, Nasser's regional ambitions transcended its military capacity as in the case of 1967 Arab-Israeli war. As a result, it can be said that Nasser as a main decision-maker had utopian aspirations rather than realist goals.

Anwar Sadat (1970-1981)

In early 1970s, while there was an atmosphere of detente in the international area, unexpectedly, Egypt and Syria launched a war against Israel in 1973(Yom Kippur war) in an attempt to take back Sinai Peninsula lost in the war(1967). In support of both, Arab oil- producer countries, most notably Saudi Arabia, created an oil embargo in response to the involvement of the US on Israel's side and to a certain extent recovered Arab nationalism which was in decline after Nasser.

However, Arab nationalism would go into a decline once more with the Camp David agreements in 1978. The agreement, the output of President Carter's efforts, was welcomed by Sadat whose country was suffering economic burden due to the war. He also desired to take back Sinai Peninsula. Although, the agreement resulted in the US commitment to pay much-needed economic and military subsidies to Egypt and the withdrawal of Israel from Sinai Peninsula, it opened the door of isolation of Egypt from the Arab community by the reason of the fact that Egypt negotiated only the Sinai Peninsula but broke away from the Palestinian issue. Even, Dramatically, Egypt, as a contender to be the leader of the Arab world, was suspended from the 1978 Arab League until 1989. Here, it can be asserted that Sadat differs from Nasser in that he signed Camp David Accords by necessity not by choice, considering Egypt's military and economic shortages ahead of nationalist aspirations and independence.

Under Anwar Sadat, Egypt's national role in the region changed and became diplomacy. For the first time, he held official talks with Israeli officials in the history of Arab-Israeli conflict within the process of Camp David accords. Diplomatic solution became an instrument for the objective of the recapture of the Sinai Peninsula. In this respect, Sadat brought a realist identity to Egypt's foreign policy. Economic and political considerations got ahead of Arab

Nationalism. In this way, “since 1979, Egypt has been the second-largest recipient of US foreign assistance”(Boon & Huq, 2012, p. 265). While Arab Nationalism was losing its influence over the Egypt’s foreign policy identity, Islamism was on the rise.

In fact, pan-Islamism movements in Egypt can be traced back to the establishment of Muslim Brotherhood(MB) in 1928. In Nasser’s era, the MB was a critical of national secularism that allegedly causes Egypt to lose its Islamic identity because of the excessive Westernisation. In other words, the Brotherhood paid attention to “the priority, in global terms, of Islamic causes over the interests and policies of nation-state governments”(Mandaville, 2016, p. 173). This understanding of the MB paved the way for the banning of itself in Nasser’s period. However, the power vacuum emerged by the decline of Arab Nationalism following Camp David accords was filled by discourses on political Islam that fed by Iran revolution and Afghan mujahideen. In this respect, unlike Nasser, Sadat sought to figure himself as a “believer president”(Mandaville, 2016, p. 176) and rehabilitated the MB while keeping the ban on its political activities. Sadat’s tolerance towards the MB could be considered as a tactic to create an Islamic counterbalance to the Egyptian political left that was critical of the convergence with the west.

As for international orientation, Sadat’s announcement of the expulsion of Soviet Military advisors from Egypt in 1972 had given the sign of a change. Afterwards, the question of occupied territory led him, firstly, to realise the fact that “only America could force Israel to withdraw from the Sinai Peninsula”(Shama, 2014, p. 35) and then to sign the Camp David accords. We can easily argue that Sadat shifted his country’s geo-political orientation, to a certain extent, towards the West although it is still in the non-aligned movement.

It is my analysis that Sadat’s realist and pragmatist identities shaped Egypt’s foreign policy to strengthen Egypt and thus paved the way for its engagement with the western axis. This was accelerated by his ‘open door’ (infatih) policy to “encourage foreign direct investment in the country and to integrate Egypt into the emerging structures of a globalised economy”(Mandaville, 2016, p. 176).

Mubarak's Egypt (1981-2011)

After the assassination of Sadat, Egypt under Hosni Mubarak tried to restore Sadat's imbalances. He aimed at pursuing the balance of power policy, announcing that "Egypt was ready to deal without complexes with anyone who did not meddle in Egyptian affairs" (Hopwood, 1993, p. 184). While Mubarak emphasized that he would honor the Camp David Accords and keep its role of moderator between Israel and Arab side, he tried to restore diplomatic relations with Moscow and Arab countries (Karawan, 2002, p. 166). Mubarak administration requested the Russian assistance to several projects in 1984 and developed bilateral relations. The rapprochement with the Arab world seemed likely following the Iranian revolution and during the escalation of Iraq-Iran war. The Iranian revolution as a threat for the legitimacy and territorial integrity of the autocratic Arab countries, particularly neighboring Gulf states, had already brought to light the need for a search for common ground among the Arab states and accelerated the return of Egypt to Arab fold (Shama, 2014, p. 41). Also, Egypt's military aid to Iraq against Iran and its political support for the Arab side regarding the first Gulf war redefined its relations with the Gulf countries. In addition, the Damascus Declaration of 1991 following the Iraqi aggression on Kuwait centered Egypt on a planned Gulf security force. Although the GCC+2 plan was abandoned due to the lack of trust in the military forces or political intentions of each other's, even Egyptian presence in the Gulf, as a member of anti-Iraqi UN coalition, tied Egypt and the Gulf states more closely than they have been in the past.

Overall, Mubarak's Egypt sought realist ideals and kept its diplomatic bridge role in the region because he pursued the Arab Solidarity rather than radical Arabist aspirations under the necessity of the increasing integration of Egypt with the West and global capitalism.

However, starting from 2000, the second Palestinian intifada erupted and the peace process partially collapsed. This development made inroads on Egypt's peace efforts, which reduced Egypt's regional standing and its ability to control events in the Arab world. Also, after the events of 9/11, Egypt-US relations was put to a new test when George W. Bush administration considered the decline of Middle Eastern dictatorships as a remedy for the

terrorism threat. Likewise, NATO's active role in advocating democratization in the 2004 Istanbul summit raised Egypt's suspicions (Covarrubias & Lansford, 2007, p. 209). Thus, promoting democracy throughout the greater Middle East opened the door slightly for US abandonment of Mubarak. Indeed, as Obama urged Middle Eastern autocrats, many backed by the US government for decades, to embrace democratic reforms in his calling for a "new beginning" with the Islamic world, especially with the strategic Arab Middle East countries, at Cairo University in 2009, it was not surprise that the US abandoned Mubarak and accepted the Muslim Brotherhood as a political alternative.

Morsi's Egypt (2012-2013)

With the demise of Mubarak, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), which "had flooded into the vacuum created by the 'retreat' of the Egyptian state" (Mandaville, 2016, p. 176) from various sectors for liberalization reforms in Mubarak's era, came to surface politically. Morsi of the MB, the first democratically elected president of Egypt, targeted to base foreign policy on Islamic identities. His administration restored the relations with Iran by paying the first official visit to Tehran since the Iran revolution and with Hamas.

In this respect, Mohamed Morsi's Egypt was allegedly posing two threats to GCC except Qatar: the export of revolution (Arab Spring) and rapprochement with Iran. GCC countries was vulnerable to the revolutionist ideas due to their cultural, economic, religious, and political linkages with the MB. For religious and political linkages, we should call our minds the reality of the presence of a substantial part of Gulf population that had been influenced by many members of the Egyptian MB, who had migrated to the UAE and Saudi Arabia not to be subjected to the persecution of Nasser in the 1950s and 1960s (Sailer, 2016, p. 2). The Egyptian MB could have incited the ideologically closed part of the Gulf population to rise up against the Gulf monarchies. By the way, Shiite population of Gulf states was also under the revolutionist ideas promoted by Iran as in the case of Bahrain. As for economic linkages between the Gulf and Egypt, a cooperative system should be remembered that Egypt has provided labor forces and military personnel for the Gulf states in exchange for the economic

aids. Revolutionist ideas in Egypt could have encouraged the large Egyptian worker populations in the Gulf countries to take a stance against the existing regimes (Morris, 1993, p. 41).

Together with the concern for the export of revolutions, there was an anxiety that the Brotherhood's Egypt might pursue a rapprochement with Iran. Morsi was the first Egyptian president to pay an official visit to Tehran since the 1979 revolution. The claim that "the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamic Republic of Iran have some common ideology" (Pisecky & Grinberg, 2015, p. 16) put Gulf countries in a state of fear that Iran might achieve such a power in Egypt that threatens their interests.

Therefore, except Qatar, GCC states delayed the promised economic-aid packages for Egypt's economy (Farouk, 2014). Turkey and Qatar supported Morsi's Egypt and gave financial aids but could not fill the place of Kuwait, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia in the Egypt's economy. Seemingly, the delay of Gulf aids resulted in the collapse of financial situation of Egypt under Morsi, which caused the rise of the popular mobilization against him and finally a military coup.

So, to be truthful, we cannot specify the identity of his foreign policy clearly due to his only one-year presidential term under strict conditions (Ahmadian, 2014, p. 21).

Abdel Fattah el-Sisi (2014-...)

Following the coup, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has pursued a diversified foreign policy to increase Egypt's options and he tried to cope with pressures exerted by the Washington administration which was not supportive of the military coup and reluctant to promote the regional interests of Egypt. In this sense, although Egypt is not taking a stance against the US and some western powers, in order to increase and broaden Egypt's global options, he has become engaged in active diplomacy and paid official visits to China(Sisi: My 6th Visit to China Reflects Depth of Relations, 2019) and Moscow(Mutual Visits, 2017) many times to make more economic and military deals.

At the regional level, as for GCC-Egypt relations, the fall of Muslim Brotherhood in 2013 reactivated aid packages from the main Gulf States, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, to Egypt. The two sides tried to cultivate cooperation in a wide range of areas. However, some new regional developments may change the political environment of the two axes. For instance, King Salman bin Abdülaziz el-Suud, in the first years of his ruling, interestingly, ended the block against the Muslim Brotherhood. There were high level meetings with the Brotherhood affiliates such as Hamas leaders and Yusuf al-Qaradawi who is Egyptian scholar very close to the Muslim Brotherhood (Sailer, 2016, p. 3). This rapprochement with the MB was coincided with the new regional developments that turned Saudi's threat perception from the MB to Iran. The US's flawed attitudes in Syria serving Iranian interests and its final nuclear diplomacy with Iran in Vienna Deal(2015) forced the foreign policy of Saudi Arabia to prioritize the struggle with Iran's strengthened domination over the region. In addition, concerning the Syrian issue, nowadays, while Sisi's Egypt welcomes Russia's intervention in Syria, Saudi Arabia considers the Russian intervention as supporting Iran-backed Assad government. In other words, unlike Saudi Arabia, Egypt supports the leadership of Bashar al-Assad to reach a solution to the Syria conflict (Cafiero, 2019). As seen, there may always be some contingencies that make Egypt at odds with Gulf countries.

So, considering the deals that Egypt makes with Russia and China in reaction to the US and the possibility that Gulf states reduce their subsidies to Egypt, Egypt is likely to be in search of aids from different countries in the future.

To be clear, Egypt's foreign policy is now driven by Egypt's national interests totally. This is my analysis that Sisi's foreign policy pursues axial shifts from the old allies to new expected allies by necessity because he tries to prevent Egypt from becoming a failed state one way or another.

Conclusion

This study tries to analyze Egypt's foreign policy on the basis of individual leaders' identities, considering that their ideology, worldview, and material interests have enormous political latitude in the absence of institutionalized foreign-policy understanding.

It finds out that while Nasser identified Egypt's foreign policy behavior with Arab nationalism and non-aligned orientation, Sadat and Mubarak's relatively Western orientation and realist world-views primarily directed Egypt's foreign policy because the decrease in the Arab-Israeli conflict has paralleled the decline of Arab nationalism. After the revolution of 2011, Islamic identity came to the surface of Egyptian foreign policy but the deterioration of financial situation put an end for Morsi's administration to implement long-term foreign policies. At present, Egypt is under the military regime that is pursuing pragmatic goals because of deep economic problems. Therefore, frequent axis shifts are likely to be seen in Sisi's foreign policy.

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