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Egypt's security position in the multipolar world order

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1.Introduction

The Republic of Egypt is a truly interesting country. Located at the crossroads of the Old World, the birthplace of civilizations and the “Gift of the Nile”, it has seen people and empires come and go. The Nile, carried its gifts downstream and made the Valley fertile. Its civilizations, at the dawn of history, achieved feats at which latter generations could only marvel upon. When its societies ceased to function properly, they were conquered by others, and thus begun a series of conquests upon conquests, and we finally arrive at the modern time.

As it happened throughout history so frequently, Egypt faces multiple challenges today. There is conflict on all sides around it, as we live in turbulent times, and security issues challenge the resolve of its population, and the wisdom of their leaders. Libya and Sudan are torn in a civil war, which threatens with an immigration crisis, Ethiopia is attempting to strangle Egypt with its water projects, Israel and Palestine are waging a war infamous for its civilian death toll and regional proxies are enacting the will of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The only opportunity, which could be called a major stroke of good luck is the discovery of the Zohr field in the Mediterranean Sea adjacent to Egypt.

In this work I shall analyze the major security questions concerning Egypt, and also the opportunities presented by its unique location, large population, and capabilities in certain fields. As Egypt lies next to some of the World’s busiest traffic routes, a geopolitical analysis of the maritime regions in Egypt’s proximity is also necessary to understand these issues.

The research paper consists of an introduction, three main chapters, and an ending. In the first chapter, I introduce the Republic of Egypt, share some information about its geography, population, economy and military. In the second part, I research the armed conflicts in the territory or in the neighborhood of Egypt, as they present a classic security risk of spillover or escalation. I also analyze the water conflict between Ethiopia and Egypt, because in my opinion, this matter is a life-or-death situation for the desert country. In the third chapter, I start analyzing Egypt’s opportunities at sea, namely the Mediterranean and the Red Sea. I also research the relationship with NATO and the interesting flow of events at two of the world’s most important maritime shipping routes.

Egypt holds great potential, but there is also great risk looming over the ancient country. It has to navigate the treacherous sea of geopolitics very carefully, but has to know when to act decisively. Opportunity is out there, but Egypt has to recognize the right time and place.

2. An introduction to the Gift of the Nile

Egypt lies on the Southern side of the Eastern Mediterranean. To the West, it shares an 1115km long border with Libya. To the South lies Sudan, which mostly follows the 22. latitude for 1273 kilometers. The two countries have a border dispute over the Halayb-triangle, which hasn't been resolved yet. To the East Egypt has 1250 kilometers of Red Sea coastline, shares a border with Israel for 266 kilometers, and 11 kilometers with Gaza. The Mediterranean coastline in the North is 955 kilometers long.

The surface area of Egypt is 1001 450 km². It is mostly on the African continent, but the Suez-Canal, which separates Africa from Asia, runs through the country. On the Asian side of the Canal lies the Sinai Peninsula.

The biggest river flowing through Egypt is the Nile, and the biggest lake in the country is an artificial lake called Lake Nasser, north of the Aswan dam. The major cities in Egypt are Aswan, Cairo, Alexandria, Luxor, Suez, Port Said and Damietta.

Egypt's population of 117, 237, 900 ¹ is mostly Sunni Arab. It has a sizeable minority of roughly 10 million Christian Copts, and a population of Palestinians and Bedouins on the Sinai Peninsula, who don't identify themselves as Egyptian.

In 2024, Egypt spends 2,6% of its GDP on the military (\$4.88 billion), which has 438,500 active personnel. The Egyptian Armed Force underwent great development programmes in the past ten years, especially the air force and the navy, and after the instability of the Arab Spring, seems to have regained some of its stability.² As the desert country wants to establish itself in the region, it must have a sizeable military to protect its interests.

Egypt's GDP per capita in 2023 was US\$ 3,512.6³ in 2023. Most of its economy relies on agriculture, industry, tourism and the Suez Canal. The recent years of drought and instability in the region have affected the agriculture, tourism and Suez Canal revenues negatively. The instability is scaring the foreign investors away, as well as the tourists, and this effect can be felt in the economy.

¹ *Egypt population (live)* (no date) Worldometer. Available at: <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/egypt-population/> (Accessed: 18 November 2024).

² Chapter Six: *Middle East and North Africa: Regional trends in 2023* 328; *Regional defence policy and economics* 330; Arms procurements and deliveries 341; Armed forces data section 342. (2024). The Military Balance, 124(1), 328–395. <https://doi.org/10.1080/04597222.2024.2298594>

³ *Overview* (no date) World Bank. Available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/egypt/overview> (Accessed: 18 November 2024).

3. Egypt's neighbourhood: A geopolitical analysis

3.1 Sudan, Ethiopia

When talking about Egypt, one cannot overlook the Nile. Since ancient times, the river has been a vital resource in the desert country. The water and the silt it carried has made Egypt one of the most fertile agricultural regions in the Mediterranean and thus enabled it to become a rich and formidable regional power for millennia and enabling its population to create one of the most advanced societies at the time.

The river flows through eleven countries, and Egypt owns 16000 kilometres of it. Many of its major cities can be found along the Nile and most of its arable land-which is around 3,5% (34220km²). Given that a large chunk of the Egyptian economy consists of agriculture, and that 99% of its population lives along the river⁴, we can safely say that aside from an armed conflict, nothing threatens Egypt's existence more than an upstream deciding to stop, or reduce the water flow. Egypt has to maintain good relations with most upstream states, or at least has to have the ability to bend their wills to its own.

In the past, multiple treaties have been signed in order to regulate Nile water distribution. Up until recently, a document signed in 1929 has granted Egypt and Sudan the rights to 87% of the water flow, and water projects of upstream states could



1.picture: The Nile.

⁴ Besenyő János, Miletics Péter (2014) *Egyiptom: Országismertető*. Székesfehérvár: MH Összhaderőnemi Parancsnokság Tudományos Tanács. 26-28

be vetoed by them.⁵ Other riparian states have agreed on the unfairness of the terms and signed a Nile treaty in 2010, in Uganda, which allowed upstream countries to develop water projects and redistribute water without asking Egypt.⁶ Egypt subsequently left the Nile Water Initiative and only rejoined after its ruling regime has changed two times. Following the events of 2011 and 2013, Egypt has lost some of its regional influence and independence. Facing internal tensions and economic challenges, it became increasingly dependent on foreign aid. President Abdel Fattah as-Sisi and his regime could only hold onto power if they allied themselves with powerful state actors. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are both interested in a stable Egypt as it lies in close proximity to them, and provides an entry into Africa. Both of these countries have supported the government with capital, development projects and investments, in exchange for Nile water and compliance in foreign policy. From 2013 to 2016, around 30\$ billion was received by Egypt from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE . Around 100\$ billion went through other means, like fuel aid. In 2024, As Gulf countries rely heavily on food import, they seek to establish good connections with countries who are in close proximity to them, possess large agricultural capacities, and their government is not an ideological enemy. Ethiopia lives up to these standards. It has vast territories of arable lands, its climate is well-suited for food crops, has 11 large lakes and 12 major river basins. Its government is grateful for the foreign investments and the country seems to be stable. The owner of the largest gold mine in the country, Sheikh Mohammad Hussein al-Moudi is of Saudi descent. As the 63rd richest man in the world he spent 88\$ million supporting many Ethiopian business ventures, mainly livestock and agriculture, as well as the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD).

As Ethiopia wishes to satisfy the market, irrigation and water policy suddenly matter a lot. The Blue Nile, which is responsible for much of the water in the Nile during certain times of the year, flows through Ethiopia. The hill country has started the megaproject in order to allocate some of the water to irrigation and other projects necessary for agriculture.

On March 23, 2015, the UAE has managed to convince Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia into signing the Declaration of Principles⁷ (DoP), which is a treaty which changes the dynamics of water politics for the three countries in favor of Ethiopia. The declaration does not contain mutually accepted enforcement mechanisms and does not recognize the treaty brokered by Great Britain

⁵ Abdelhak Bassou *The Geopolitics of Egypt: Strengths, Opportunities, Constraints and vulnerabilities* OCP Policy Center

⁶ Besenyő János, Miletics Péter (2014) *Egyiptom: Országismertető*. Székesfehérvár: MH Összhaderőnemi Parancsnokság Tudományos Tanács. 26-28

⁷ Housam Darwisheh (2024) *Geopolitics of Transboundary Water Relations in the Eastern Nile Basin*. Institute of developing Economies

in 1929. It has stripped Egypt and Sudan of its veto rights considering upstream water projects and the filling of Egypt's water reservoir in lake Nasser is threatened, as the declaration does not have a clear stance on how the GERD will function in drought years.⁸ The disagreements over the water resources cannot be taken to international court as the declaration states that any problems should be solved between the heads of the three states. In 2021 Egypt even tried to present the problem to the UN Security Council, but it refused to become involved in it, saying that the African Union is more than capable of resolving the situation-an opinion, which has been voiced by Ethiopia for a long time⁹. Sudan is not a reliable ally in this matter, as the treaty is more beneficial for it than the previous agreements.

As the situation unfolds, Cairo is caught in a bad place. On one hand, President Sisi and the ruling regime are very much dependent on their Gulf patrons in order to preserve stability in their country, but the interests of said patrons demand that they support Ethiopia's interests over this matter. Egypt cannot rival Ethiopia's agricultural input and in fact it is heavily reliant on food import (over 50% of its food supply is imported, Egypt was the biggest grain importer in the world in 2013)¹⁰. With the construction of the GERD, the water flow could be reduced by 20%, and its working capacity by 40%.¹¹ As Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have managed to establish considerable influence over Ethiopia, a knife is being held to Egypt's vital artery and the power of the Gulf states over the desert country increases even more.

The Morsi government has presented this issue as one of the biggest problems concerning Egypt, and has threatened the use of military force several times, in order to divert attention from its other problems, but the success of such methods is highly questionable. Egypt's borders are quite unstable as it is, and an external conflict could only worsen the situation. Ethiopia has a formidable military of its own, and the geographical distance makes an operation a logistical nightmare. Cairo is in the process of developing a very effective military force, and the purchase of several UAV's and drones could make an operation plausible, but even so success is not granted.

Soft power and diplomacy could present an easier way of protecting interests. During the Morsi era, Egypt has tried to separate Ethiopia from its neighbours and other riparian states, for

⁸Amer Jabret Ibrahim, Abbas Saadoun Refaat: *The Future of Egyptian Foreign Policy Directions Towards Africa*.

⁹ Housam Darwisheh (2024) *Geopolitics of Transboundary Water Relations in the Eastern Nile Basin*. Institute of developing Economies

¹⁰ Besenyő János, Miletics Péter (2014) *Egyiptom: Országismertető*. Székesfehérvár: MH Összfelderőnemi Parancsnokság Tudományos Tanács. (216)

¹¹ Ibid, 205

example by supporting the ash-Shabaab terrorist organization in Somalia. But, with the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the new government had to approach things differently. The possible deployment of peacekeeping troops in Somalia could change the situation in favor of Egypt, but right now its options are limited and the looming threat of water shortage lies heavily on the desert country.

3.2 Libya

The case of Libya is a unique one. Since the Arab Spring, the country has been plagued by many militant actors with opposing interests and ideologies, and these armed groups receive support from various regional and global powers. After 2011, the Gaddafi regime which has brought stability ceased to exist. The democratically elected government, which was supported by NATO and the international coalition has failed to contain the various armed groups inside the country and events soon got out of hand. By 2014 the General National Council has split, and the country was plunged into full-fledged civil war. In the East, the Libyan National Army led by Field Marshal Halifa Haftar emerged, supported by Egypt, Russia and France. In the West, the military wing of the Muslim Brotherhood in Libya, the Libyan Revolutionaries Operation Room supported the GNC (later transformed into the GNA). The opposing sides couldn't reach an agreement and suddenly a third actor emerged: ISIS.

Without a stable central government, the radical islamists managed to establish their presence in Derna, Benghazi, and Sirte. They launched attacks, started executing people and threatened to plunge Libya further into chaos¹².

Egypt has played a major role in the conflict, especially after 2014. With the fall of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Abdel Fattah as-Sisi's government perceives the MB in other countries as the biggest threat to the survival of the country. This comes as no surprise, as terrorist attacks started happening in the country right after the military takeover. As Haftar's forces are opposing their direct enemies, fervent Egyptian support for the LNA and the Tobruk power centre is clear. Egypt maintained an active diplomatic presence in Libya, promoting dialogue and taking part in bilateral, regional and international negotiations. One of the panels for dialogue became the Egyptian Libya Commission (2016), and President Sisi has stated plans for the stabilization of the country which was revealed at the African Union Summit of November 2016. In December, the first Cairo Declaration was signed, which contained parts and

¹² Ritter Noémi: (2021) '*Egyiptom Szerepe a Líbiai Polgárháborúban*', *Nemzet és Biztonság*, 13(4), (4–18) doi:10.32576/nb.2020.4.2.

modifications of a previous peace treaty (brokered by the UN). The country's diplomatic skills proved to be inadequate in negotiating a lasting peace, however, when the LNA started to act in contrast to Egypt's wishes. Neither side seemed too eager to give concessions, and not even the UAE stepping in could solve the problem.

Besides Egypt's use of soft power tools, it also chose to intervene with its military. Supporting Haftar's Operation Dignity, they fought ISIS and other radical militant organizations. After ISIS captured and beheaded 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians, the Egyptian Armed Force stepped up the intensity of its involvement, and the incident convinced it to use the Air Force in order to conduct airstrikes on Islamic State militants.

Thanks to foreign support, both sides managed to beat back the islamists in the country. Haftar, backed by Russia and France as well as Egypt, did not partake in the seizing of Sirte, but took control over the oil fields north of the city. As it gained funds, the LNA grew and managed to establish control over Benghazi and Derna by 2017. Haftar started acting independently, and sometimes refused to take part in peace negotiations, thus prolonging the conflict. With him controlling most of the oil fields in Libya, Haftar's ambitions grew. He saw an opportunity to capture Tripoli and attempted to do so in April 4th, 2019. By December 2019, the GNA was desperate, and called for the intervention of another country: Türkiye. By January 2020, Turkish boots on the ground were deployed and the LNA was beaten back to the Sirte-Jufra line. The GNA and Turkish troops were preparing to capture the city, Egypt intervened. On June 20th, the Egyptian Parliament has voted that a military intervention abroad is allowed, and the green light was given by the Libyan House of Representatives, and also the tribal leaders of the Eastern Libya region. On the same day, large scale military exercises were held in the western desert, and President Sisi has visited the region and stated, that if GNA and Turkish troops step over the Sirte-Jufra line, Egypt is going to deploy its military to Libya. This worked, as neither Russia, nor Türkiye wished to escalate the conflict¹³.

Since 2020, there is a ceasefire agreement between the warring sides. Egypt has been supporting Haftar, even though him and the LNA have proved to be problematic and unpredictable allies, but their secular views align a lot better with the Sisi government's perspective than those of the GNA or the LROR. The Kireneika region is very important to Cairo, as many oil fields lie here which could be exploited. There is also the problem of Egypt and Libya sharing an 12000

¹³ Ritter Noémi: (2021) '*Egyiptom Szerepe a Líbiai Polgárháborúban*', *Nemzet és Biztonság*, 13(4), (4–18) doi:10.32576/nb.2020.4.2.

kilometer long border, which is mostly desert and guarding it is incredibly challenging. A stable Kireneika would mean less radical Islamist elements crossing into Egypt, or lessening the possibility of any kind of smuggling, arms trade activity. Egypt has used many methods for stabilizing the region, and one of those is befriending the local tribes, tribal leaders, thus securing another important ally for Cairo.

3.3. The Sinai Peninsula

The Sinai Peninsula, East of Egypt's Nile Valley and Delta region heartlands, is a turbulent region containing many challenges and opportunities for Egypt. Historically, it has been the only land route connecting Asia to Africa, and as such, acted as a place for intercontinental trade and migration. The region's recent history explains why Egypt has difficulties in the peninsula but also offers insight to the opportunities presented by it.

First and foremost, one must mention the Suez Canal, one of the most important maritime trade routes in the Middle East and the world. Control of the Suez Canal offers Egypt considerable leverage over other countries in the region, but it also obliges the desert country to ensure its functionality and safety, as any logistical hiccups could mean the loss of considerable income provided by the canal, which is a very important asset of Cairo. The safety of the Suez Canal shapes the foreign diplomacy of the country in the Red Sea and the Mediterranean.

Furthermore, Egypt's economy relies heavily on tourism and the Southern part of the peninsula has seen heavy investments in the tourism industry. Again, instability on the Red Sea and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait impacts this negatively.

Since 2011, Northern Sinai has seen widespread instability and militant activity. The cause of this can be traced back to 1967, when in the Six Day War, Israel has occupied the peninsula and held it until 1982. The Camp David Accords peace treaty, signed in 1978(?), has only allowed limited Egyptian military presence on the Sinai, and divided it into three regions, of which the easternmost part of the peninsula, bordered by Israel, could hold lightly armed border guard and military units, while also establishing a UN-led observation force (Multinational Force and Observers) in one of the others.¹⁴ During the occupation, the local Bedouin population was allowed to move freely and intermingle with the population of other territories controlled by Israel. Also, many Palestinians from the Gaza Strip chose to relocate to Northern

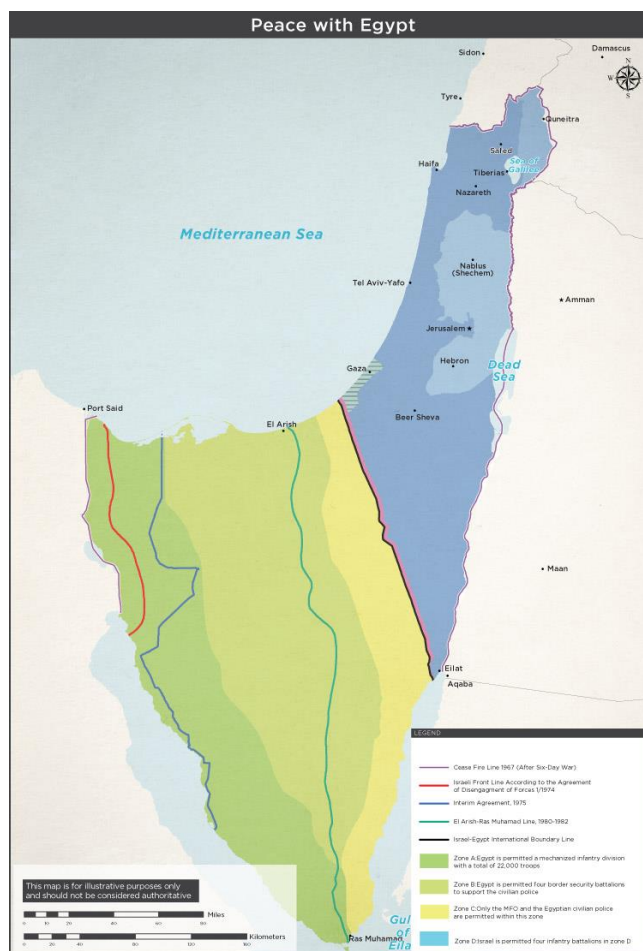
¹⁴ Majorosi Ádám (2019) *Terrorellenes műveletek a Sínai-félszigeten*, *Anti-Terrorist Operations in the Sinai Peninsula*. 12. évfolyam 4. szám 81–99. • DOI: 10.32563/hsz.2019.4.7

Sinai in order to escape hostilities, but many of them maintained connections with their place of origin. This has led to the population of Sinai having established familial and business ties with groups outside of Egypt. When Egypt finally took control again, it has found that the locals saw Nile Valley and Delta officials, workers as an alien, colonizing power which overlooked their interests, needs and identities, while treating them as third-class citizens who are untrustworthy, backwards, and susceptible to foreign influence.

The Bedouins are a hard to control people. Traditionally nomadic, owing their livelihood to raising livestock instead of agriculture and shaped by hundreds of years of hard living and inter-tribal conflict have their own customary laws and their primary identity is owed to their tribe instead of a centralized government. They are vastly different from the other peoples of Egypt and dealing with them requires patience, understanding and the ability to forge various alliances. Cairo has repeatedly sent Nile Valley and Delta officials to rule the region, who did not possess the willingness, or capability to hear the complaints of the Bedouins¹⁵. The military is also quite unpopular among the locals, because in response of the Bedouin unrest, Cairo responded with tightened military control over the region.

¹⁵ Angela Joya, Evrim Gormus (2015) State Power and Radicalization in Egypt's Sinai

The economic problems in the peninsula also add to the dissatisfaction of the peoples of Sinai. Since 1982, many investments and economic projects were initiated by the Cairo government, but most of these economic developments benefited investors from other parts of the country or foreign businesses. The southern part of the peninsula has seen a rise in the tourism industry, and its oil resources were getting extracted, but the Bedouins didn't get much of the revenue. Their lands were repeatedly seized by Cairo, as it sees the Sinai as a state owned land, and resold to foreign investors. The Northern part of Sinai, which is more densely populated than the South, with around 500000 inhabitants compared to the 150000 people living in the Southern part, did not see an economic development. The best resources and economic opportunities are controlled by non-locals, and a good example for this is that the olive oil production is managed by facilities owned by the Egyptian Armed Force¹⁶. Many of the Bedouins lack basic services, like running water, quality healthcare, education, transportation and infrastructure. They also cannot serve in the military, police, or other government workplaces, thus stripping them of traditionally stable and respected income opportunities¹⁷.



The Sinai Peninsula

The problems presented by the economic challenges in the region have driven many of the locals to turn to alternative means of economic gain. These alternative means of economic gain consists mostly of arms trade, human trafficking and other kinds of smuggling activities, mainly through the Israeli border, but also to the Gaza strip. They have found their aforementioned

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Mohamed Saad (2024) *Localization of the counterinsurgency in Sinai: A case study on integrating local population into counterinsurgency combat operations in Sinai* Digest of Middle East Studies. DOI:10.1111/dome.12320 (114-116)

close family and business ties very useful in this matter, and this activity has provided them with the opportunity to arm themselves.

In 2011, after the Hosni Mubarak regime has fallen, and Cairo called back many of its troops from the region to maintain stability in its heartlands, the Bedouins saw the power vacuum left by them and seized the opportunity to revolt against the central government. Violent riots broke out in major urban centers, with several police stations getting attacked in Al-Arish, Sheikh Zuweid, Rafah, and Al-Quseima. In the chaos of the power transition, in many places, the police and military left their bases, checkpoints, and weapons deposits, and the rebels looted this equipment. The smuggling activity mentioned above provided the tribes with even more military equipment- as the government was collapsing in Lybia, some of the weapons stockpiled by a 40-year-old dictatorial regime found their way to Sinai.¹⁸

Multiple factions emerged, some Jihadis, and others aiming to achieve quick material gains from the unusual situation. It is important to note, that the Sinai Peninsula, traditionally, is Sufi. Until recent years, Salafism was not prominent in the region, and only the disenfranchisement of the local population in state power could enable fundamentalism in the peninsula as it offers an alternative to state government and claims to contain all the answers necessary for a functioning society. A more pragmatic approach to the matter is, that by allowing Salafi ideology to spread, an organization could count on the support of external actors with similar views-like ISIS, or Al-Qaeda.

Many Bedouin tribes jumped on the opportunity to harvest quick economic gain in a short amount of time, and many of them had to act before Jihadists seized them-otherwise they could lose power and influence, and be forced to cooperate with the radical Islamists. Many of them used the threat of terrorist organizations against the government; an excellent tool for blackmail. Quoting one tribal leader: „If you dont deal with us, you get Al-Qaeda.”¹⁹

The best-known and most dangerous insurgency, which emerged in the region was Ansar Bayt al-Maqdasi, later known as the Sinai Province of the Islamic State.

At first, during the Morsi era, the insurgents mostly attacked Israeli targets. They either launched rockets from Egyptian territory to Israel or crossed the border and attacked various targets, and even the pipeline leading from Israel to Egypt was hit multiple times. As rebel

¹⁸Mohamed Saad (2024) *Localization of the counterinsurgency in Sinai: A case study on integrating local population into counterinsurgency combat operations in Sinai* Digest of Middle East Studies. DOI: 10.1111/dome.12320 (117-118)

¹⁹ Angela Joya, Evrim Gormus: State Power and Radicalization in Egypt's Sinai (2015)

activity flourished in the region, they started stepping up the scale of their operations, and the attempted theft of an armored military vehicle and the subsequent death of 16 Egyptian soldiers finally jerked Egypt into major action. It launched Operation Eagle 2, which claimed to have killed multiple Jihadis and arrested many more. The deployment of armored personnel carriers and heavily armored equipment did not stop the insurgents, who maintained guerilla warfare relying on mobility, knowledge of the terrain, and support of the local population. The local population, not surprisingly, hated the government forces, mistrusting them and refusing to provide help. The government forces, in turn, utilized mass arrests, indiscriminate artillery and air strikes, torture, kidnapping, and executions without proper trial, acting inconsiderately towards local customs and community leaders. As many tribal communities had familial ties with insurgents, forcing them to cooperate proved to be extremely difficult.²⁰

After 2013, with the ousting of the Muslim Brotherhood from power, Jihadist insurgencies like Ansar Bayt al-Maqdasi started attacking government security personnel and other state institutions. Abdel Fattah as-Sisi's regime only responded with the tightening of military control over the region hoping to break the will of the population. In 2014, Ansar Bayt al-Maqdasi announced its allegiance to ISIS and took up the name Wilayat Sinai (Sinai Province). As they viewed Sisi's government as an infidel organization, Jihad was rightfully waged against it, and during the 2013-2014 era, more than 300 attacks were conducted in the peninsula against Egyptian forces.²¹ On 2015, July 1st, ISIS forces briefly managed to capture the town of Sheikh Zuweid- but they were quickly chased out of the city²². The tactic of coordinating multiple attacks in a short period of time, capturing strongholds and settlements, and then digging in proved to be very effective in Iraq and Syria, and even Libya to an extent, but one has to note that all of these states were torn in a civil war, and it cannot stand for long against a unified central government.

The Islamic State also employed urban terrorism as a tactic. It blew up cars, attacked government buildings, threatened, kidnapped, and killed military and government officials, and did the same to collaborators with the Sisi regime-even women, which is very much looked down upon in Bedouin tribal society. Their biggest attack, which resulted in the death of 300

²⁰Mohamed Saad (2024) *Localization of the counterinsurgency in Sinai: A case study on integrating local population into counterinsurgency combat operations in Sinai* Digest of Middle East Studies. DOI: 10.1111/dome.12320 (117-118)

²¹ Angela Joya, Evrim Gormus: State Power and Radicalization in Egypt's Sinai (2015)

²² Insurgency in Sinai: Challenges and Prospects Jun 10, 2022 Khalil Al-Anani

people, amongst them 27 children, was conducted against the Rawd Mosque in 2018, in the city of Bir al-Abd.²³

The military, at first, refused to recruit local militias against ISIS. The Sisi government conducted Operation Martyr's Right in response to the 2015 attack on Sheikh Zuweid, consisting of 514 smaller operations in total and claiming to have killed 3163 insurgents. In 2018, in response to the Bir al-Abd attack, Operation Sinai was launched- all throughout Egypt. 88 battalions were deployed, the navy and the air force were involved and the situation became very serious.²⁴

Since 2017, Bedouin tribes were finally allowed to form militias and join in the fight against the radical Islamists. As ISIS gradually started acting more and more violently against the civilian population, the Bedouin communities decided that even the government is better than the Salafis who tried to enforce strict Shariya law and killed many people in brutal fashion.

After the limited success of repeated military operations, the Sisi government seemed to admit that popularity among the locals is necessary to wage a successful counter-insurgency operation. It tried to approach tribal leaders, sheikhs, imams, and heads of local communities in order to establish better ties with them. Having their voices heard, and some of their needs met, many of them chose to collaborate with Cairo. Militias were armed by the government and sent out to fight ISIS. With knowledge of the surrounding geography and having the support of the local population, the militias waged war on the Islamists with considerable success. The army still didn't trust them fully, as Bedouins still were not allowed into its ranks, but at least it provided arms for them and attempted to satisfy their demands. One of the clear advantages of the collaboration was the decrease in collateral damage from artillery shellings and airstrikes.²⁵ Another key advantage was the fact, that with the improvement of the status of the Bedouin communities, the number of grievances against Cairo lessened, and the flow of recruits to insurgencies dropped. The familial ties in many cases prevented direct conflict between collaborating militias and insurgents, but dialogue was easier to establish, and not once did these connections bring about the surrender of rebels.

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Mohamed Saad (2024) *Localization of the counterinsurgency in Sinai: A case study on integrating local population into counterinsurgency combat operations in Sinai* Digest of Middle East Studies. DOI:10.1111/dome.12320 (117-118)

Even though militant activity was curbed considerably, it couldn't be fully eradicated from the peninsula. Three major attacks happened in 2022, and two occurred in 2023, but these incidents are way less frequent than they used to be. Since 2021, many Eastern Sinai (where insurgents were most active) inhabitants were allowed to go back to their former homes²⁶. On January 25th, 2023, President Sisi announced the end of terrorism in Sinai.²⁷ Though this statement can be called into question, the peninsula did see considerable security improvements, and the future seems a bit brighter.

As for the Bedouins, it seems to be a considerable power shift in the region. A net of 30 tribes, all collaborating with the government, came into existence, called the Sinai Tribes Union. On May 1st, 2024, the organization officially declared itself as the Sinai Union of Arab Tribes, with Abdel Fattah as-Sisi as the honorary chairman, but its real leader is Ibrahim al-Arjani, a member of the Tarabin tribe.²⁸ Allied to Cairo, actively partaking in security (and other) decisions, possessing freshly armed and experienced manpower, the local communities seem to have benefited from the conflict, even though they had to endure great suffering and the resolution of the conflict seems far away. They are still involved in the illegal arms trade and human trafficking to, and from Israel and Gaza, and it is said that they control some of the humanitarian aid to Gaza and can be cut off, or used to blackmail the peoples on the other side of the border. If Cairo attempts to reestablish heavy-handed military control or mistreats them in other ways, they can always choose to revolt again, although this option will be avoided unless absolutely necessary.

3.4 Israel, Gaza

Right on the border of the Sinai Peninsula lies Israel and the Gaza Strip. The young country has proven to be a formidable opponent in the Arab-Israeli wars, inflicting military defeat on Egypt in several conflicts, most notably the Six-Day War (1967) and the Yom Kippur War (1974).²⁹ With the occupation and the subsequent Camp David Accords, Israel ensured a large, demilitarized buffer zone between itself, and Egypt, which could have come in handy in case of another conflict, as it provided much-needed strategic depth for the state. Until the 21st

²⁶ Ibid, 117-118

²⁷ Mohamed Saad (2024) *Localization of the counterinsurgency in Sinai: A case study on integrating local population into counterinsurgency combat operations in Sinai* Digest of Middle East Studies. DOI: 10.1111/dome.12320 (116)

²⁸ Mansour, T. (2024) A state within a State? inside Egypt's Union of Arab tribes, The New Arab. Available at: <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/state-within-state-inside-egypts-union-arab-tribes> (Accessed: 17 November 2024).

²⁹ Arab-israeli wars (2024) Encyclopædia Britannica. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/event/Arab-Israeli-wars> (Accessed: 17 November 2024).

century, only one division of the Egyptian Armed Force was allowed to station East of the Suez Canal, and close to Israel only border guard units were allowed to perform their duty. In the Israeli side, only four infantry battalions were allowed within the 3-kilometer proximity of the border.³⁰ It also ensured the safety of the port of Aqaba, the only outlet to the Red Sea for Israel.

During the Sisi era, some parts of the Camp David Accords were renegotiated between the two states, as militant activity in the Sinai endangered Israeli population, too. Many Israeli citizens were kidnapped and held for ransom by militants in the Sinai, and, especially in the first few years of the insurgencies, many Jihadists shot rockets into Israel from Egypt or crossed the border, and attacked their targets only to disappear back into the Sinai desert. One particularly hazardous diplomatic incident occurred in 2011 when in pursuit of Jihadist insurgents, Israeli Defense Forces got into a firefight with the Egyptian border guard personnel and killed eight of them. The following uproar culminated in a mob sacking the Israeli Embassy in Cairo, with its staff having to be rescued by the Egyptian special forces.³¹

The insurgencies and the militant activity in the Gaza Strip are heavily intertwined. One must not forget the sizeable Palestinian population living in the Northern Sinai. Both Cairo and Tel-Aviv are aware of the extensive tunnel network under the Rafah border crossing, but finding and destroying them is hard work and requires dedication, resources, and reliable information sources. Smuggling activity to and from the Gaza Strip is a way for the locals to arm themselves, exchange information, and acquire necessary supplies.

After ISIS announced its presence in the peninsula, security cooperation became a necessity for both countries, as neither of them wanted an independent actor between themselves, who acted with extreme aggression and actively wanted to destroy both of their respective governments. Israel chose to provide intelligence on possible militant targets and operations, as well as conducting more than a hundred airstrikes in the 2015-2019 period.³²

As for Egypt, it accepted the help provided by Israel. It too, knew of the connection between the insurgents and the Palestinians, and targeted tunnels, smuggling routes, attempting to cut off the supplies to Hamas. In 2015, it even established a buffer zone between itself and the Gaza

³⁰ Camp David Accords (17. 09. 1978) | Ministry of Foreign Affairs - gov.il. Available at: <https://www.gov.il/en/Departments/General/camp-david-accords> (Accessed: 17 November 2024).

³¹ Aaron T. Walter. "The Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights: Their Political, Geographic, and Security Value, and Cruciality to Israeli Security". Scripta Judaica Cracoviensia 17:15-26. <https://www.cceol.com/search/article-detail?id=891442>

³² Aaron T. Walter. "The Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights: Their Political, Geographic, and Security Value, and Cruciality to Israeli Security". Scripta Judaica Cracoviensia 17:15-26. <https://www.cceol.com/search/article-detail?id=891442>

Strip, which proved to be harmful enough for Hamas to sit down and negotiate. It agreed to cut official ties with the Muslim Brotherhood-the greatest foe to the Sisi government. After both of them made concessions, unofficial ties were established and joint control over the flow of goods to the Gaza Strip was exercised. Through Rafah, the Salah ad-Din border crossing was opened. In August 2023, 37% of all goods were transported through this border crossing, which, notably, was not subject to the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism (signed by the Palestinian Authority, Israel, and the UN).³³ This meant that products could travel more freely, and this would explain why Israel wishes to reestablish the Philadelphi Corridor, a 14-kilometer-wide security zone between Gaza and Egypt, guarded by no other than Israel.

The situation between Cairo and Tel-Aviv is unique. On one hand, they cooperate in fighting Islamic radicalism, but on the other hand, both of them have security concerns towards each other. The events of October 7th and the subsequent Israeli invasion of the Gaza Strip have affected their bilateral relations negatively. Sympathy towards the Palestinians surged, riots broke out, and in Alexandria, a policeman shot and killed two Israeli tourists. Tel-Aviv responded by telling its citizens to leave Egypt, thus causing an economic loss to the country, and it stopped the flow of gas from the Tamar field to Egypt. Only in November 2023 did gas exports to Egypt begin to rise again. A copy of the Camp David Accords was torn up in the Egyptian parliament and an intelligence official had claimed that they warned Israel of an upcoming event prior to October 7th, but it was in vain. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and his cabinet, insulted by the claim, responded by saying it was a lie. Bezalel Smotrich Finance Minister even accused Cairo of bearing responsibility for the attack. Subsequently, the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Egyptian Senate called for ending, or at least pausing, the security cooperation with Tel-Aviv.³⁴

One large security concern for Egypt is the question of the refugees. Reportedly, Netanyahu has attempted to convince more than one European leader into pressuring Egypt to accept refugees. There also has been a leak concerning the Israeli Ministry of Intelligence planning to expel the population of the Gaza Strip to the Sinai Peninsula. Egypt has repeatedly stated that it refuses to accept any refugees and that a population „exchange” is not plausible. The refugees could number up to one million, or even more, and a population of this size would be hard on

³³ Roll, S. (2024). Ice age for the 'cold peace' between Egypt and Israel: how the Gaza war is affecting bilateral relations. (SWP Comment, 10/2024). Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik -SWP- Deutsches Institut für Internationale Politik und Sicherheit. <https://doi.org/10.18449/2024C10>

³⁴ Roll, S. (2024). *Ice age for the 'cold peace' between Egypt and Israel: how the Gaza war is affecting bilateral relations*. (SWP Comment, 10/2024). Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik -SWP- Deutsches Institut für Internationale Politik und Sicherheit. <https://doi.org/10.18449/2024C10>

the already struggling Egyptian economy, as housing, transportation, water and food supplies would have to be provided. There is also a risk of resurgence in militant operations on the peninsula, as many of the refugees could be radicalized, possess weapons and experience fighting guerilla-style warfare, and connections with other Jihadists. A large, ideologically motivated, armed, and experienced wave of immigrants would be a nightmare for Egypt, especially considering how hard it fought to curb the insurgent activity in the Sinai for the past ten years. The refugees could also come into conflict with the locals over resources like water and land, which would contribute to the destabilization the peninsula.³⁵ One must not forget the outside forces influencing internal conflict, and one such important actor is Iran. The Shi'ite country has connections to Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood, and allowing Palestinians into Egypt would inevitably mean inviting Iranian influence to a certain extent. As Egypt is not on the best of terms with the republic, this outcome is not ideal.

Despite their recent differences, Cairo and Tel-Aviv are trying to preserve good relations. The gas trade has commenced, and Egypt acts as the most important mediator in the Israel-Gaza conflict. As a traditional Arab-Israeli mediator, Cairo was a key part in negotiating a humanitarian truce between the warring sides on October 22, 2023. On the same day, it initiated the Cairo Peace Summit, bringing together 31 countries. It also played an important role in one of the biggest deals of the conflict, in November 2023, where 50 Israeli hostages were exchanged for 150 Palestinian prisoners and a four-day ceasefire was negotiated³⁶. This role brings prestige and a certain amount of leverage to Cairo over other countries in the region.

For Israel, good relations with its neighbour are incredibly important. Not only for the benefit of an experienced mediator, who brokers the hostage and truce negotiations, but also for one predictable actor in the region who is not threatening to target the nation with rocket and UAV strikes, or even a ground offensive. Stability on the Southwestern border allows Israel to allocate its limited military personnel to operations in Lebanon and Gaza, or to defend against a possible attack from Syria. Egypt has a large, well-equipped conventional military, conflict with the desert country could be too much for Tel-Aviv.

As for Egypt, it doesn't need another enemy on its borders. It has more than enough problems on its Western and Southern borders, and can't afford to spread its military too thin on all fronts.

³⁵ THE FUTURE OF THE SINAI PENINSULA: SECURITY CHALLENGES AND REGIONAL DYNAMICS- ABBAS SIBAI, STG POLICY PAPERS POLICY BRIEF

³⁶ Yuki Adayachi (2024) *COMPETITION VS. COOPERATION IN MULTILATERAL MEDIATION: EXPLORING THE TRANSITION IN EGYPT AND QATAR'S MEDIATION TACTICS IN THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT* <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/382453227>

A conflict with Ethiopia would demand all of its attention, and Lybia is still unstable, and neither is Sudan. Protecting the Suez Canal and promoting security on the Red Sea is a great concern for Cairo, as Houthi militiant activity harms the Egyptian economy.

4. Egypt on the Mediterranean, and the Red Sea

4.1 The Mediterranean

On Egypt's Northern front lies the Eastern Mediterranean Basin. This maritime region is a geopolitical crossroad between North Africa, the Middle East/Asia, and Southern Europe. Libya, Egypt, Palestine/Gaza, Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Türkiye, Cyprus, Greece, and to some extent even Italy, have direct access to it and are considered geopolitical actors in the region. The United States of America, and Russia, and the European Union are the most active „global” actors in the basin. As one of the most important shipping routes leading to the Eastern part of the world, and containing precious energy resources, it comes as no surprise, then, that the Eastern Mediterranean is a very turbulent region ripe with tensions, but also a place of mutual interests and cooperation.

Since ancient times, the Eastern Mediterranean has been a region plagued by conflict. On its coasts, empires warred for centuries, on its waters, pirates and corsairs navigated with impunity. In the 21st century, piracy is eradicated from the basin, although wars are still being waged on its coast. Still, there is reason for conflict over the control of the sea. Although shipping routes could prove to be more important on the long run, recently discovered large natural gas and oil reserves can cause considerable diplomatic tensions between countries. A US Geological Survey suggests, that more than 1.8 billion barrels of crude oil, and around 223 trillion cubic feet (tcf) of natural gas could be extracted from under the Levant Basin.³⁷

In 2009, a discovery was made, roughly 80 kilometers away from the Israeli coast, by a US drilling corporation named Noble Energy. It discovered the Tamar field, which, at the time, held around 10 trillion tcf of natural gas. Later on, the Leviathan (double the size of Tamar) the Tanin and Karish fields were discovered.³⁸ Israel, whose energy sector prior to the discoveries was quite vulnerable, has found that it can sell 40% of its newfound energy resource and still be able to cover its energy needs for the next 30 years.

³⁷ Goldthau, A.C., Richert, J. and Stetter, S. (2020) 'Leviathan awakens: Gas finds, energy governance, and the emergence of the Eastern Mediterranean as a geopolitical region', *Review of Policy Research*, 41(2), pp. 310–328. doi:10.1111/ropr.12387.

³⁸ Geopolitics and Energy Developments in the Eastern Mediterranean

Soon after multiple discoveries were made. The Republic of Cyprus has discovered a smaller gas field called Aphrodite, containing 5-8 tcf.³⁹ In 2015, an Italian company named Eni, has discovered a reserve containing more than 30 tcf of natural gas off the coast of Egypt, making the desert country the owner of the largest gas field in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The discoveries undoubtedly made a lot of state officials happy. All of them knew, that energy is one of the most valuable commodities a nation can have, which can rebuild economies and ensure independence from other energy-rich countries. Given Europe's straining relations with Russia- one of the top players in the energy market- the Eastern Mediterranean states could rightfully hope that a great opportunity was given to them. With the EU wishing to diversify its energy import networks, the region offered a close and cheap alternative to satisfy its needs.

Problems started to arise, as some countries in the region were not willing to accept the established Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs), because the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) never agreed upon them (despite it not being recognized by most of the world), and claiming that the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea states, that states in the region are entitled to hydrocarbon resources based on the legal infrastructure.⁴⁰

The Republic of Cyprus (which is widely recognized and accepted by the international community) was the first one to clarify where its Exclusive Economic Zone lay, with none other than Egypt in 2003. Multiple agreements followed between Cyprus, Greece, Israel and Egypt, all agreeing on enhanced cooperation, and gas transportation. This resulted in the birth of the idea of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Pipeline, which is supported by the EU. The Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum was also established, with the notable absence of Türkiye.

The reason for these treaties is Türkiye's geopolitical aspirations. The country has been working to become a transit country for energy, through which gas and oil flows from Iran, Iraq, Russia and Azerbaijan to Europe. It has spent a considerable amount of resources on energy infrastructure, and with the discovery of the Levante Basin gas fields, it saw an opportunity to secure its position as the local energy hub. But, the other states in the region chose to force Türkiye out of the region by cooperating and separating the nation from its potential allies. The only real partner of Türkiye in the Eastern Mediterranean was the Libyan GNA (Government

³⁹ Goldthau, A.C., Richert, J. and Stetter, S. (2020) 'Leviathan awakens: Gas finds, energy governance, and the emergence of the Eastern Mediterranean as a geopolitical region', *Review of Policy Research*, 41(2), pp. 310–328. doi:10.1111/ropr.12387.

⁴⁰ BARUN, İ.K. and KAZANCI, B.A. (2024) 'Reflections of the egypt-TÜRKİYE alliance on the Energy Struggle and possible developments', *Uluslararası İktisadi ve İdari İncelemeler Dergisi*, (42), pp. 111–122. doi:10.18092/ulikidince.1343591.!!

of National Accord), whom it supported in the Lybian civil war, and now chose to make a deal with it on EEZs, which, not surprisingly, favored their interests over everyone else's. It was declared illegal by Egypt. The upcoming (repeatedly delayed) elections could decide which side would benefit from Lybia's EEZ policy.

Besides Türkiye, Cairo had aspirations of becoming a local energy hub. Historically, it has the most experience in dealing with energy, as the first gas fields on its soil were discovered under the Nile in the 1960s. Their extraction began in the 1980s, and by 2004 they could liquify natural gas. As this tedious process requires expensive equipment and expertise, not all countries can do it. Liquifying natural gas is the best method for transportation, and so if a country possesses the necessary infrastructure and expertise for it, it has great potential in its hands. Egypt not only experienced in dealing with gas, but it also has the infrastructure, and a very big natural gas field on its doorstep- an opportunity to become the regional gas hub. Egypt has the SAGAS LNG Complex operating in the port city of Damietta, which could transport up to 6.75 billion cubic meters of gas, and a large LNG terminal in Idku, to which Israeli gas is coming, either to serve Cairo's domestic market of 47 billion cubic meters, or even better, to get liquified and sent to export markets. Egypt has a similar deal with Cyprus, signed in 2020, and it has discussed laying pipelines in order to get access to Cypriot gas resources. Cyprus and Israel agreed to sell, because purchasing, building, and manufacturing machines to extract the smaller gas reserves is simply not cost effective.⁴¹ Gas fields were also discovered off the coast of the Gaza Strip, but they couldn't be extracted, as Gazans are being blockaded by the Israelis. The Palestinian Investment Fund and the Egyptian Gas Holdings have signed a conflict statiting this would promote building gas infrastructure, but with the outbreak of the 2023-2024 conflict, the project has been sidelined.

With relations already strained with Türkiye, only in recent times did the two start to establish in diplomatic connection with each other. The 2013 coup d'état was a major turning point for Türkiye and Egypt, as Ankara supported the Morsi government and the Muslim Brotherhood. As diplomatic relations worsened, Cairo started demanding, that Türkiye hand over MB

⁴¹ Goldthau, A.C., Richert, J. and Stetter, S. (2020) 'Leviathan awakens: Gas finds, energy governance, and the emergence of the Eastern Mediterranean as a geopolitical region', *Review of Policy Research*, 41(2), pp. 310–328. doi:10.1111/ropr.12387.

members living in Türkiye. Ankara repeatedly rejected the demands, and there was considerable tension between the two.⁴²

Türkiye sees that it cannot step over Cairo. In 2020, it started to approach Egypt on lower diplomatic levels, and small-scale cooperation has begun. In the past 4 years, relations have gradually improved between the two. In September 2023, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Abdel Fattah el-Sisi met in order to improve the relationship between their nations and discuss energy questions.⁴³ Although the relationship between the two states is not without problems, cooperation could bring great benefits to both of them. An Ankara-Cairo axis would combine the strongest local economies and militaries in the region, and the control of commerce from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea, and the Red Sea would offer such geopolitical leverage over others in the region that such an alliance could become truly formidable.

The United States of America knows this. It also knows that one cannot really control the Eastern Mediterranean Basin without Türkiye, Israel, and Egypt. To this end, it helped NATO establish the Mediterranean Dialogue in 1995 and promoted the design of an ITPP (Individually Tailored Partnership Plan)⁴⁴. As Türkiye, even if its relationship is not the best with NATO, is still a member, and Israel is dependent on the US for security, Egypt could cause the most trouble for the Alliance.

In order to maintain a friendly tone with other actors in the region, in 2022 NATO organized a multinational naval military exercise called Exercise Phoenix Express in Tunis. Many NATO and non-NATO states participated, like Algeria, Belgium, Greece, Italy, Libya, Malta, Mauritania, Morocco, Spain, Tunisia, the United Kingdom, the USA, and Egypt. Such exercises aim to promote European border security activities, and to establish better connections inbetween partaking nations.⁴⁵

⁴² BARUN, İ.K. and KAZANCI, B.A. (2024) 'Reflections of the Egypt-TÜRKİYE alliance on the Energy Struggle and possible developments', *Uluslararası İktisadi ve İdari İncelemeler Dergisi*, (42), pp. 111–122. doi:10.18092/ulikidince.1343591.!!

⁴³ Turkey's Erdoğan, Egypt's Sisi discuss energy cooperation at G20 Summit | Reuters (2023) Reuters. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/turkeys-erdogan-egypts-sisi-discuss-energy-cooperation-g20-summit-turkish-2023-09-10/> (Accessed: 18 November 2024).

⁴⁴ Nato (2023) Chair of the NATO Military Committee visits Egypt, NATO. Available at: https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_218702.htm?selectedLocale=en (Accessed: 18 November 2024).

⁴⁵ Prentice, M., Bosna, U. and Yul, K. (no date) *Mediterranean security: Italian, United States, NATO, and North African national interests from a geopolitical perspective*, *Scholars Crossing*. Available at: https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/hsgconference/2024/foreign_policy/2/ (Accessed: 17 November 2024).

4.2 The Red Sea

As far as trade goes, few routes are more important than the Suez Canal and the Bab al-Mandab Strait. Over the Suez Canal, up to 12% of all global trade is transported. This also includes 30% of all container transit. Their close proximity to the Persian Gulf is also worth mentioning, because most of the world's oil trade is conducted from there. The Red Sea connects Asia and the Indian Ocean with Europe and the Atlantic Ocean, and the Middle East with the Horn of Africa. The region may have even bigger strategical value, than the Eastern Mediterranean.

Given the region's importance, it comes as no surprise that international power struggles are constantly fought here. For Russia, China, Iran, Türkiye (in part), Qatar, and many others, controlling the chokepoints means breaking the US dominance on the Mediterranean and hindering its global power projection ability. For the US, and the majority of NATO, these very geographic points are necessary to effectively counter Chinese naval operations on the Indian and Pacific Oceans. An incredible amount of military bases are constructed in the region. Djibouti houses Chinese (built in 2008), Japanese (2009), Italian (2013), American and UK permanent military bases. In its ports, Russian navy ships are present. There are several other countries in the region, that are willing to accept foreign military influence, like Somalia, Kenya, Ethiopia, Eritrea, or Sudan.⁴⁶

All of this military presence is necessary for the involved nations, as the Red Sea is a battleground for global hegemony. If one superpower diverts its attention elsewhere, others are more than willing to take its place. The region is also plagued by famine, religious fanaticism, poverty, civil wars and terrorism.

In such an environment, NATO and the US needs a well-equipped, capable, and trustworthy ally in the region. The United States has an agreement with Egypt, in which if announced 48 days prior, allows American military forces to cross the Suez Canal. This is a very unique and privileged position, as other states usually have to wait 60 days before they are allowed to cross. As an American ally, Egypt has been tasked recently to lead Combined Task Force 153 (CTF 153) on the Red Sea. CTF 153 is part of a large naval force, called Combined Maritime Force, which is responsible for guarding the West Asia waterways, with its main base of operations in

⁴⁶ Estifanos Balew Liyew (2024) Geopolitics of the Red Sea: Implications of foreign military bases expansion to the Horn of Africa security, *African Security Review*, 33:3, 294-306, DOI:10.1080/10246029.2024.2340015

Yemen. CTF 153 is the Red Sea element of the multinational coalition.⁴⁷ With the Irani-backed Houthis attacking ships at the Bab al-Mandab Strait, Egypt's direct economic interests are being threatened, and so Cairo has a very clear cut interest in the matter.

Egypt has been planning to build up its naval capacity, and in the past few years it managed to do just that. America, in fact, welcomed and even encouraged the Arab country in this project, because it felt that it couldn't rely on anyone in the Eastern Mediterranean, or in the Red Sea. Egypt purchased multiple weapons systems, vessels and equipment from 2014 to 2022, like the German MEKO A-200EN frigates, Spanish Discorbeta corvettes, US Knox frigates, Mistral amphibious helicopter carriers or French-made Godwind cruisers. This, and multiple other purchases and developments in technical expertise, led to the Egyptian navy becoming a force to be reckoned with.

NATO forces on the Red Sea are tasked with protecting the trade routes and ensuring the safety of civilain vessels. In October 2023, Houthi militant activity has grown considerably in the region, and they started attacking passing ships with rockets, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), drones, unmanned surface vessels (USVs) and even unmanned undersurface vessels (UUVs), many of them provided by Iran. On November 19th, 2023 they even managed to board an Israeli vessel, using a helicopter⁴⁸.

The forces of the Alliance managed to repulse some of the attacks, but not all of them. As the Houthis usually attack from land surface, or use small boats, defeating them on the sea is not possible. A land operation, on the other hand, would require extensive preparation, large amounts of ground troops and international support. Egypt has learned this the hard way, when they chose to intervene in the Yemeni civil war of 1962-1967.⁴⁹ For now, maritime operations will have to do in the region. In an attempt to decrease the amount of economic damage to its Suez Canal revenues (which represents around 2% of Egypt's GDP, \$9.4 billion), Egypt has asked Houthis to target only Israeli ships.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Why is Egypt's navy commanding a NATO-led coalition in the Red Sea? (2023) thecradle.co. Available at: <https://thecradle.co/articles-id/1552> (Accessed: 18 November 2024).

⁴⁸ Conte, A. and Vázquez, G. (2024) Naval Interoperability and NATO's Naval Presence: Lessons from the Red Sea, Center for International Maritime Security. Available at: <https://cimsec.org/reassessing-naval-interoperability-and-natos-naval-presence-lessons-from-the-red-sea/> (Accessed: 18 November 2024).

⁴⁹ Percze, M. (2024) The Role of Saudi Arabia and Egypt in the Yemeni Civil Wars. Available at: <https://jceas.bdi.uni-obuda.hu/index.php/jceas/article/view/163/306>

⁵⁰ Elmas, D.S. (2024) Egypt asks Houthis to attack only Israeli ships - report, Globes. Available at: <https://en.globes.co.il/en/article-egypt-asks-houthis-to-attack-only-israeli-ships-report-1001468870> (Accessed: 18 November 2024).

5. Conclusion

Egypt will face great hardship in the future. The struggling economy is not easily revived, and the neighbours are not going to get suddenly altruistic. The MENA region always has been a turbulent territory, and things are going to escalate even further. Opportunities can arise, but they have to be seized quickly. Attempts at diversification should be conducted, because being dependent on one superpower could mean disaster. Egypt is already in a precarious position with its water security, which has been manipulated from behind the scenes by the Gulf states. If Egypt can solve its economic crisis, and its water dependence, it can become a strong power in the region. The situation in Lybia is still undecided, because the country cannot seem to be able to conduct a decisive national vote. Until the status quo is present in Lybia, Egypt can only influence parts of it. The initiative to become a regional gas hub seems to be working out well, as well as the development of the military. The Israel/Gaza situation is an extremely dividing topic, as Egypt is the grey zone of being a neutral negotiator, but its population feels deep hatred towards the Jewish state for the plight of the Palestinians and the wars of the past. The Sinai Insurgency is not fully settled, problems are still present and the new political entity could prove to be difficult to deal with. The initiative on the Red Sea and the protection of the Suez Canal is a very important question not just from an Egyptian, but also a global perspective. Fighting the Houthis, and the Iranian influence is a struggle, which cannot be overlooked.

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