

Turkey-Egypt normalization: Historic milestone in bilateral ties



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OPINION

Turkey and Egypt stand at a pivotal historical moment in the evolution of their bilateral relations. Following 12 years marked by rivalry and conflict, the visit of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to Egypt has the potential to open a new chapter in Ankara-Cairo relations. This visit offers both nations the opportunity to forge a novel model of cooperative relations on numerous contentious issues. More importantly, it could herald the onset of strategic cooperation in the realms of defense and security, areas in which such collaboration was previously nonexistent. Before the joint news conference in Cairo, the two leaders signed the Joint Statement on the Restructuring of High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council Meetings, signifying both countries' readiness to recalibrate their relations.

Relations between Turkey and Egypt have been among the most significant influences on developments in the Middle East over the last decade. Both countries possess the potential and capacity to lead the region. However, the past decade has been dominated by confrontational rivalry between them. They have consistently found themselves at odds over issues such as Libya, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Muslim Brotherhood, each supporting rival factions in Libya and attempting to form counterbalancing coalitions against one another.

Nevertheless, as new challenges have emerged in the Middle East, North Africa, and the Horn of Africa, threatening both countries and rekindling common interests, both have opted to set aside their decade-long rivalry in favor of opening a new chapter in their relations. To facilitate the recent rapprochement, both sides have chosen to separate areas of disagreement, allowing time to gradually find solutions.

The reasons behind the normalization differ for each country. For Egypt, emerging regional conflict dynamics, Ethiopia's new policy direction, the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and the economic crisis represent increasing threats. Beyond economic concerns, Egypt faces significant geopolitical risks, including ongoing attacks in Gaza and Israel's plans to relocate Gazans to the Sinai Peninsula. This poses a major threat to both the Palestinian cause and Egypt's national security. Other significant concerns for Egypt include threats to its water security from Ethiopia's Renaissance Dam on the Nile River, internal conflicts in Sudan, and the absence of a stable order in Libya.

Turkey, while grappling with its economic challenges, is endeavoring to reduce its current account deficit and enhance its foreign currency reserves through policy shifts. It seeks to re-

solve political issues with regional countries and boost their economic welfare through the opportunities presented by normalization. Specifically, export-oriented growth and development form a key part of its economic strategy. Geopolitically, Turkey aims to prevent the formation of an anti-Turkish alliance in the Eastern Mediterranean and secure a share of the region's energy resources. Like Egypt, Turkey is disturbed by the instability in its near abroad, the Ukraine-Russia war, and Israel's attacks on Gaza. Consequently, in addition to shared interests, the unique problems, regional developments, and common challenges facing both countries necessitate collaboration.

Common agenda

An analysis of the foreign policies of Egypt and Turkey reveals significant overlaps. Egyptian foreign policy places great importance on the Eastern Mediterranean, Arab geography, and Africa. Similarly, the core parameters of Turkey's foreign policy have evolved, from a unilateralist approach to a paradigm that balances Eastern and Western interests, including those in the Islamic world, the Middle East, and Africa. This convergence provides a foundation for cooperation between the two countries through positive diplomacy.

In Africa, both countries could collaborate on resolving the water dispute between Egypt and Ethiopia over the Renaissance Dam. Additionally, they can jointly work toward ending the civil conflict in Sudan and ensuring the country's political stability. The Libyan issue, in particular, has been a major point of contention in North Africa. However, with relative peace achieved, there is potential for Turkey and Egypt to collaborate closely on Libyan politics. Economic interests also play a crucial role in the relations of both



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countries with Africa, with Turkish and Egyptian investments on the continent amounting to significant figures.

In the context of the Eastern Mediterranean, the determination of maritime jurisdictions and borders, as well as the exploitation of energy resources, are critical issues. Despite past tensions, a cooperative approach could stabilize the region and enhance opportunities for joint energy ventures. Despite tensions, Egypt has taken a cautious approach to certain issues, keeping avenues for dialogue open.

One of the primary areas for potential common policy between Turkey and Egypt is the Palestinian issue. Both nations are advocating for an immediate cease-fire in Gaza and support a two-state solution, emphasizing the importance of improved bilateral relations. In fact, the cease-fire in Gaza and the pursuit of a two-state solution were prominent topics in the discussions between Turkish President Erdogan and Egyptian President el-Sissi.

The economic dimension stands as another common agenda between the two countries. Despite political tensions over the past decade, economic and trade exchanges have persisted without interruption. The normalization of relations since 2020 has further bolstered these economic ties. In 2022, trade between the two nations saw a 14% increase, Turkish investments in Egypt surged by 30.3%, and Egyptian exports to Turkey grew by 32.3%. Moreover, Turkish investments in Egypt have continued at a steady pace, with Turkish firms making substantial contributions totaling \$2.5 billion (TL 76.87 billion) across 790 companies in diverse sectors. These financial engagements mark a strategic pivot toward enhancing bilateral trade and economic cooperation, with both nations committed to significantly elevating trade volumes in the forthcoming years.

Cooperative security agenda

In the Middle East, characterized by weakening state sovereignty, an arms race among the regional countries, and expanding proxy wars, establishing a stable security architecture is critically important for both Turkey and Egypt. One area of potential security cooperation is military collaboration, especially in the defense industry. Both countries are significant players in the Middle East's defense industry, with Egypt seeking to benefit from Turkey's advancements in military technology. The diversification of weapon sources is a key strategy for Egypt, and its interest in Turkish drones could enhance defense cooperation between the two nations. The drone agreement between Turkey and Egypt is anticipated to catalyze broader cooperation that extends well beyond defense, promising to enhance mutual economic and strategic

interests. This collaboration is poised to foster a comprehensive partnership, facilitating advancements in various sectors and reinforcing the bilateral ties between the two countries.

In conclusion, President Erdogan's visit to Egypt represents a historic milestone in the evolution of bilateral relations between the two nations. This visit lays the foundational principle for an approach centered on cooperation in areas of mutual agreement, while strategically deferring areas of contention to future discussions. Consequently, Erdogan's visit to Cairo signals the potential for significant advancements in previously contentious issues. However, the capacity of the two countries to implement a cooperative security strategy appears to be closely linked to the trajectory of regional developments.

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Displaced Palestinians talk to Egyptian soldiers at the border fence between Gaza and Egypt, on February 16, 2024, in Rafah, the southern Gaza Strip, amid the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinian resistance group, Hamas. Nearly 1.5 million displaced Palestinians are trapped in Rafah — more than half of Gaza's population.

MOHAMMED ABED/AFP

During their meeting, Erdogan and Sisi signed a number of agreements and held a joint press conference where they focused on expanding trade and military relations and discussed the current situation in Gaza, among other regional issues.

Prior to the visit, Erdogan expressed a desire to "turn a new page" in relations with Egypt, emphasizing their shared history and cultural ties that date back over a millennium. The two leaders agreed to work toward increasing bilateral trade to \$15 billion and to cooperate on investments in the defense sector.

After Sisi, then Egypt's defense minister, toppled Islamist President Mohamed Morsi, a Turkish ally and member of the Muslim Brotherhood, in 2013, Erdogan said he would never talk to anyone like Sisi.

However, Ankara has been trying to repair its broken relations with Sisi since 2020.

The first signs of a thaw came in May 2021, when a Turkish delegation visited Egypt to discuss a possible normalization.

In November 2022, Erdogan and Sisi shook hands in Qatar, which the Egyptian presidency heralded as a new beginning in their relations.

After Turkey was hit by two devastating earthquakes in February 2023, the two heads of state spoke on the phone.

The normalization of relations was crowned by the mutual appointment of ambassadors from both countries in July.

Mayor of Istanbul Ekrem İmamoğlu from the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) has criticized President Erdogan's meeting with Sisi, describing it as a political U-turn typical of the Turkish political landscape.

"We are used to U-turns, but we will not even give a chance to those who behave like this against our country," İmamoğlu said, underlin-

ing his commitment to a consistent stance in political dealings.

This remark comes against the backdrop of Erdogan's previous campaign rhetoric, in which he compared İmamoğlu to Sisi in order to sway public opinion ahead of the 2019 local elections, which the current mayor won against Binali Yıldırım, the candidate of Erdogan's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP).

President Erdogan's use of the Rabia sign at a rally in Samsun, immediately after his meeting with the Egyptian president, is a striking contradiction that has not gone unnoticed. This gesture, symbolizing solidarity with the Muslim Brotherhood and rejection of Sisi's seizure of power through a military coup, contrasts with his recent diplomatic engagement with Sisi and underscores a mixture of political pragmatism and ideological signaling.



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