Turkey Normalizes its Ties with Egypt

Turkey, committed to creating a new balance of power in the Mediterranean, has in the past month continued its efforts to normalize relations with Egypt, which have deteriorated sharply since the overthrow of President Mohamed Morsi in the summer of 2013, following which the sides recalled their ambassadors.

Of course, the restoration of bilateral relations will not be easy, because of the remaining differences between the countries. One must not forget that each of these countries wants to gain control of the Arab world, with Turkey trying to promote the concept of “political Islam,” which Egypt and other authoritarian Arab states see as a direct existential threat to their regimes. In addition, both Cairo and Ankara are disputing a significant piece of water area in the eastern Mediterranean, under which there are probably large gas deposits.

In March this year, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu announced the resumption of contacts between Ankara and Cairo at the diplomatic level, admitting that their full establishment will take time. As part of its attempts to normalize relations with Cairo, Turkey decided on April 30 to lift its veto of Egypt’s partnership with NATO in 2020. The Turkish Foreign Ministry noted that in this way Ankara paved the way for Egypt to develop a partnership with NATO in the framework of the Mediterranean Dialogue.

Steps to normalize relations between the two countries intensified especially after the submission of a tender for a
license by Egypt in area No. 18 in Turkey’s continental shelf. The operation was approved by the United Nations. Commenting on the issue, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu announced that an agreement on the demarcation of borders in the Mediterranean Sea with Egypt was being developed and that Turkey was ready to sign it in case of further favorable development of bilateral relations.

Despite the fact that Cairo has already concluded similar agreements with Turkey’s regional rival Athens, Ankara’s demonstrated readiness for a new demarcation deal will certainly further reshape the political and economic blocs in the region. As for Cairo itself, Egyptian foreign ministry and intelligence officials clearly prefer a maritime deal with Turkey to Greece, since it gives Cairo much more maritime territory. At one time, President Al-Sisi’s administration negotiated the deal with Athens primarily to secure some political gains while not closing the door on Turkey, especially after the improvement of the Emirati-Israeli agreements that hurt Egypt’s political, economic and strategic interests.

Therefore, it is not surprising that Ankara’s stated position on the development of an agreement on the demarcation of borders in the Mediterranean Sea with Egypt and the Turkish foreign minister’s admission that it is necessary to change Ankara and Cairo’s previous different views on a number of conflicts and phenomena in the Middle East and North Africa region have had a corresponding effect. In particular, a number of analysts have expressed confidence that the Turkish leadership is thus trying to bring discord between Egypt and the conditionally anti-Turkish bloc of countries united around the East Mediterranean Gas Pipeline (EastMed) project, represented by Greece, Cyprus, the United Arab Emirates and Israel. For Greece, for example, it is very important how a possible agreement on an exclusive economic zone between Egypt and Turkey will affect the Kastelorizo complex and the Turkish-Greek dialogue.

Given this situation, the Greek party has already begun to show its fear that Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi will act in line with his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and retreat from the demonstratively anti-Turkish line that he has been trying to pursue so far. Athens recalls how in the fall of 2020, speaking at an Arab League event, Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry stressed the need for a “united and firm Arab policy” against the actions taken by Turkey in Libya, Syria and Iraq.

To discuss with the Egyptian leadership the restoration of full relations and the measures needed to restore relations between Egypt and Turkey, political consultations between the two countries chaired by Deputy Turkish Foreign Minister Sedat Onal and Egyptian Deputy Foreign Minister Hamdi Sanad Loza were held in Cairo on May 5-6, 2021. During these meetings, according to the Turkish Foreign Ministry, they discussed “all issues of concern to Cairo” and confirmed the need to further restore full-fledged bilateral relations. Politically, Turkey is interested in ensuring that Egypt is not held hostage by other states, mainly the UAE and Greece, which want to use it as a shield in defending their interests against Turkey. In this sense, Ankara helps itself by opening up to Egypt, and the same can be said of Cairo.

Therefore, Turkey, based on common interests in the Eastern Mediterranean and Libya, demonstrates its willingness to rapprochement with Egypt on the fact that cooperation with Turkey is in the interests of Cairo. As an additional argument, in particular, it is noted that in the pre-coronavirus period, despite the conflicting relations, Ankara was economically very beneficial to Cairo, increasing bilateral trade, investment and gas imports. Back then their economic relationship proved immune to political fluctuations, surpassing the $5 billion threshold in 2018. Moreover, stability in Libya could also raise this cooperation to an unprecedented level if Turkey and Egypt work together to rebuild the country.

Amidst this activity, there is certainly no point today in discussing the transformation of Egypt and Turkey from enemies into partners. More likely, they will become rivals, and this rivalry will take place in a more or less civilized manner, with clear red lines that will not allow relations to escalate into indirect hostilities (for example, in Libya). Of course, the transformation of bilateral relations will not happen immediately, and both Cairo and Ankara understand this. “To do this, we need to hold consistent meetings, define a roadmap and act on that basis,” Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu said the other day.

But what matters is that the process has started.

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