Are Egypt and Turkey on the Path to Reconciliation?

In recent years, relations between Egypt and Turkey have been complicated on several fronts. There has been no relationship between Cairo and Ankara since 2013 (i.e., when the Egyptian coup d’état took place).

Much of the foreign policy conflict between the countries is due to the fact that Turkey is actively seeking to take control of the Arab world, in which Egypt sees itself as one of its leaders. As for the internal political conflict related to the events of 2011, when Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak was overthrown, and pro-Turkish Islamists from the Muslim Brotherhood (banned in Russia) came to power, still, in 2013, the military staged a coup, blocked the way for the Ikhwan to power in Egypt, and succeeded in appointing Saudi Arabia-oriented Abdel Fattah el-Sisi as president, while imprisoning/condemning pro-Turkish politicians. Ankara wasn’t too happy about it.

Turkey’s active efforts in recent years to take control of neighboring Libya and turn it into a breeding ground for Islamism, as well as Ankara’s support for extremist militias not only from the Gaza Strip but also on Egyptian territory in the Sinai Peninsula, also create serious grounds for mutual conflict.

In addition to the above, the territorial claims must not be overlooked: Cairo and Ankara are disputing a large water area in the eastern Mediterranean, which probably hides large gas deposits.

Finally, ideological conflict: Turkey is trying to promote the concept of “political Islam.” At the same time, the Egyptians and other authoritarian Arab states see this as a direct, existential threat to their regimes.
Nevertheless, Turkey, aiming for a new balance of power in the Mediterranean, has made efforts in recent months to normalize its relations with Egypt by resuming contact between the two countries at a diplomatic level. Political consultations between the two countries were held in Cairo on May 5-6, 2021, to discuss with the Egyptian leadership the restoration of full-fledged relations and the measures required to restore relations between the two countries.

At the same time, Turkey rejected Egypt’s request to extradite the leaders of the Ikhwan movement (banned in Russia). Cairo considers the Ikhwan as terrorists, while Turkey emphasizes that it will continue to oppose the classification of the Ikhwan as a terrorist organization. In addition, Turkey cannot hand over the wanted leaders of the movement, most of whom live in the country legally.

Commenting on the resumption of contacts between Ankara and Cairo, Arab media noted that during the talks, the Egyptians made demands for the complete withdrawal of Turks from Libya and for promises from Ankara not to interfere again in Libyan affairs in exchange for coordination of Egyptian-Turkish efforts to support political authority in Libya. In addition, there was a discussion of potential cooperation between the two countries in the field of gas: Egypt has no objection to Turkey joining the Eastern Mediterranean Forum, but for its part puts certain conditions for this, such as full coordination between the gas fields exploration and the mechanisms of liquefaction, gas utilization, and selling prices between all countries. So far, there has been no movement on any of these issues, including allowance for progress in bilateral relations.

It didn’t help that the third parties participated in the reconciliation between Turkey and Cairo. In particular, Libya’s new Prime Minister Abdel Hamid Dbeibeh, considered to be almost the Erdogan’s protege, visited Cairo and took an active part in discussing issues of concern to the Egyptians.

A severe slowdown of the process of rapprochement between the two countries, and even another wave of cooling in relations, occurred in mid-June after an Egyptian court upheld death sentences for 12 leaders of the Ikhwan movement (banned in Russia), including former ministers in the government elected before the military coup. Among them are former Minister of Youth and Sports Osama Yassin, Professor Abdul Rahman Al-Bar, Safwat Hegazi, and Mohamed Al-Beltagy, secretary-general of the Freedom and Justice Party. Yasin Aktay, an advisor to the Turkish president, strongly criticized Cairo in this regard and stated that “it is inconceivable to rule on mass executions against hundreds of people, no matter how convincing the allegations.” He also noted that “Egypt’s continued imposition of death sentences at a time when it desperately needs support because of the Ethiopian Ennahda dam problem indicates a lack of political reason and that Cairo’s short-sighted steps will lead to drought and famine among the population, which will eventually end in a social explosion. As a Muslim country, Egypt should not be one of those places where human life becomes so cheap.”

As a result, Egypt decided not to raise the level of its diplomatic representation in Turkey for the time being, despite continuing negotiations aimed at restoring relations.

According to Al-Arabiya TV, Cairo’s restrained stance toward Ankara certainly reflects several Egyptian grievances. In particular, the refusal to provide Cairo with information about the “Egyptian militants” who were in Syria has recently returned to Turkey. Also, the Turkish authorities refused to sign documents promising an unconditional withdrawal from Libya. Another stumbling block is Turkish support for the Ikhwans, whom Egypt calls “radical extremists,” accusing Ankara of smuggling them into Libya and neighboring countries. However, the most essential and pivotal issue in the negotiations with Turkey remains the Libyan issue. The Egyptian authorities insist on the withdrawal of Turkish troops from Libya. All of these issues certainly hinder the process of resuming bilateral relations.

Speaking of the steps Ankara and Cairo are taking toward reconciliation, it should be made clear that the author is not talking about Egypt and Turkey turning from enemies into partners. Instead, they will become rivals. This rivalry will unfold in a more or less civilized manner, with clear red lines and stoppers that will not allow relations to degenerate into indirect hostilities, such as in Libya. Of course, this transformation will not happen immediately because mutual ties were severed many years ago. Therefore it is impossible to establish relations in one day as if nothing had happened. This requires consistent meetings, a roadmap, and action based on that.

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