Iran’s prospects for normalizing relations with Egypt

Iran is making no secret of its satisfaction with the election of Mohammed Mursi, the candidate of the political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, an organization that was banned in the not-too-distant past. They are saying in Tehran that Islam was victorious in the Middle East’s leading Arab country, and hopes are high that it will lead to improved relations with Cairo that may significantly transform the region’s political and military landscape.

Iran’s Shiite leaders see opportunities in this victory by a political-religious organization, even though it is based on radical Sunni ideology — primarily for joining forces with Egypt to weaken the US position in the Arab world and increase pressure on Israel, which is vital to Iran’s military security. Iranian political analysts and experts are scrutinizing the outcome of the Arab uprisings and revolutions, assessing how they affect the geopolitics of the Middle East and trying to predict the extent and nature of their impact on Iranian interests in the region.

Speaking through Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, Iran’s Deputy Foreign Minister for Arab and African Affairs, Tehran called Mursi’s victory a “red line” that meant “the American government’s greatest defeat in the region” on the one hand, and “major changes in Egypt’s relations with Israel” in the near future on the other. According to forecasts by Iranian diplomats, Egypt is abandoning what the Iranians saw as its previous pro-Israeli position on Palestine because any Islamic government “cannot allow itself to neglect the rights of the Palestinians.” Tehran sees President Mursi’s statement that Egypt is “with the Palestinian people until all their legitimate rights are met” and his promise to “work for inter-Palestinian reconciliation in order for the Palestinian people to speak with one voice for the return of their lands and statehood” as a direct indication that Cairo is essentially abandoning the commitments made by the previous regime at Camp David in 1979.

Iran is happy with those prospects, of course, and its leaders intend to step up diplomatic efforts to establish partnership relations with Egypt’s new leadership in order to alter the situation in the region in its favor. However, Egypt remains the only country in the Arab world with which Iran does not have full diplomatic relations. Iran’s political and religious leaders also attempted in contacts with Egypt’s former leaders to improve relations with the Arab world’s leading nation. In August 2010, for example, Ayatollah Khamenei’s adviser, Ali Akbar Nateg Nouri, visited Cairo to obtain Hosni Mubarak’s agreement on restoring diplomatic relations.

Recall that Iran had broken off diplomatic relations with Egypt over Cairo’s participation in the Camp David talks with Israel and the granting of asylum to the Shah of Iran, who was overthrown by the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Ever since, the prospect of normalizing relations between Iran and Egypt has been rejected by Washington and Tel Aviv and by the Arab Gulf monarchies, especially Saudi Arabia. It would seem that the removal from the political arena of Mubarak, a long-standing opponent of Islamic Iran’s regional aspirations, would make it easier to restore normal relations between Tehran and Cairo; however, Iran’s Foreign Ministry was unable to solve that problem during the transitional rule of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces. The United States continued intervening in Egypt’s internal affairs and foreign policy issues, successfully blocking the Iranians’ hasty attempts to take advantage of Mubarak’s fall.
Now that a member of a political-religious organization has been elected Egypt’s head of state, Iranian political analysts believe that new opportunities for restoring diplomatic relations with Cairo are emerging. Mahmoud Vaezi, vice-president of the Center for Strategic Research, for example, predicts that the situation will soon change for the better, but he is very cautious in his assessments concerning the nature and level of possible bilateral cooperation. He believes that “the degree of closeness between the two countries” will depend on many factors. In and of itself, the fact that the representative of the Party of Freedom and Justice, an Islamist party and one of the largest in post-revolutionary Egypt, won the presidential election does not mean that political forces with a religious ideology close to Tehran’s have achieved a clear-cut victory.

Iran’s expert community rightly points out that the main struggle for power in Egypt is now unfolding not among the political forces that Mursi represents and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, but rather among the Islamist forces themselves, specifically between the fundamentalists of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafis of the Nour Party. According to many Iranian political analysts, the Salafis, who have a great deal of influence on the country’s Muslim community and are influenced by Saudi Arabia, will pose the most serious obstacle to the establishment of ties with Egypt. The Salafis have always been very hostile to the Islamic regime, as well as to the traditional Egyptian clergy, and generally to all Muslim sects that do not exhibit their high degree of extremism.

According to some Iranian experts, Mursi’s victory in the presidential election represents just the beginning of his political struggle. The Salafis will work to achieve their goals, attempt to play a leading role in public administration and act to exacerbate the crisis of power. There is no denying that they include moderate forces that have formed political parties and participate in the elections. But considering their ideology and strong financial support from Saudi Arabia, these forecasts are not unjustified.

Indeed, the Salafist movement rallied noticeably in the countries of the Arab Spring. In Tunisia, we saw armed uprisings and riots provoked by these religious groups. The radicals in Libya hold strong positions. Their role was quite apparent in the events in Yemen, which has always been a base for extremists closely affiliated with al-Qaeda. Today, Salafi leaders who fought with the Taliban for years in Afghanistan for years have entered the political stage. They had close ties to al-Qaeda leaders, and in Mubarak’s Egypt they were imprisoned and considered particularly dangerous terrorists. In short, Iran is taking the threat that the Salafis will gain strength in Egypt very seriously, noting that Egypt’s security forces, police and army currently are in no position to resist the political expansion of the Salafis.

In writing about the forces that won the elections, a number of publications point to the weakness of the Muslim Brotherhood’s political positions despite Mursi’s election as president. For example, Mohammad Farazmand, Iran’s former ambassador to Bahrain, believes that “Egypt’s Revolution is in its transitional period.” Other than their hard-won election victory, the Islamic forces have been unable to create a framework for fundamental change. According to him, “the old structures still remain untouched,” and the assessments of many experts regarding an Islamic victory in Egypt remain unduly optimistic and premature.

Even given the win by a representative of Islamic forces in the presidential election, Iranian political analysts are disinclined to ignore US influence on political processes in Egypt. It is also seen as a direct factor preventing the normalization of Iranian-Egyptian relations. Perhaps the expert community’s most common conclusion is that the Americans are striving to prevent future events in Egypt from taking an anti-American turn. Therefore, people in Iran believe they are paying attention to all the major political players: They are supporting the Muslim Brotherhood and their involvement in government; they are continuing their political and financial support of the army; and they are carefully monitoring developments in Tahrir Square in order to keep the situation under control.

At the same time, the Iranians believe that the Egyptian army wants to maintain good relations with the United States, and “the games of the Military Council and the Americans are not yet over.” This suggests that Mursi’s 2% margin in the presidential election over his rival, Ahmad Shafiq, could well be an American initiative coordinated with Egypt’s military leaders. Thus, the Muslim Brotherhood was shown that it lacks the unconditional advantage and that its position is weak, whereas its supporters, who make up about half the voters, were reassured. However, the formation of a government, the restoration of parliamentary activities and the adoption of a constitution are yet to come. Mursi’s opponents in the power struggle are quite strong, and Iran’s expert community believes Egypt’s domestic political situation could undergo radical change. That is apparently why they are in no rush to make optimistic forecasts about the prospects for normalizing relations with Cairo in the near future, even though the statement that Iran is prepared to resume full relations with Egypt “in one day” remains in force.
This article was written expressly for New Eastern Outlook.