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Egypt 2017: Foreign political crisis

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This report deals with the most important foreign affairs conflicts of the Egyptian regime during 2017, looking at each conflict from two views. The first is a discussion of the most important stages that the foreign affairs conflicts passed through from the beginning of 2017 until the end of the year. The second is a discussion of the dimensions, complexity and general analysis of the conflict and its short-term effect.

First: The Regeni Case and development of Italy-Egypt Relations

Two years have passed since the murder of the Italian researcher Giulio Regeni in Cairo, when his body was found on February 3, 2016 with signs of torture, which caused political crisis between the Egyptian regime and Italy. The failure of the Egyptian authorities to cooperate in the investigation of Regeni's murder ended with Italy summoning its ambassador. Despite the repercussions of this incident, the path of diplomatic relations between the two sides has remained intact throughout 2017. In the beginning of 2017, various statements issued by the Italian minister of foreign affairs attempted to find ways to seek the truth around the death of Regeni. In February 2017, suspicions and doubts returned once more around the involvement of Egyptian security services in the torture and murder of Regeni. A video posted by the Egyptian regime, shows a conversation between Regeni and the head of the Street Vendor Union in Egypt. This video did not represent clear answers about the truth of Regeni's murder; instead it raised further allegations and increased the severity of criticism from Italian press against the Egyptian regime.

In early March a noticeable change was observed in Italy's tone about the Egyptian authorities and the line of investigations in the Regeni case, through several

statements from the Italian public prosecutor and Minister of Foreign Affairs, on more than one occasion, that there was cooperation from the Egyptian authorities on the Regeni case file. Finally, positive statements from the Italian side were announced in mid-August by the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Angelano Alfano, stating that after more than one year, the summoned Italian ambassador would return to Cairo. One of the recent developments in the Regeni case took place in mid-September, when the Italian ambassador returned to his duties in Cairo in coincidence with the Egyptian ambassador's assumption of his duties in Rome.

Following the return of the official diplomatic relations between the two sides, Italy changed its approach and narrative from accusing the Egyptian security apparatus to accusing the Egyptian opposition abroad of torturing and murdering Regeni instead. That was demonstrated through an official request made by Italy in October to British authorities to allow Italy to interrogate Regeni's supervisor, Dr. Maha Adel Rahman, at the University of Cambridge.

Despite the announcements made by Italian officials during 2017 that fluctuated between demands to the Egyptian authorities to speed up the investigation and reveal the mystery behind the murder of Regeni, and on the other hand praising the Egyptian regime over conduct of investigations, Italy began to soften its stance towards the Regeni case, and sought to use the case to pressure the Egyptian regime on the Libyan conflict front to impose the Italian vision and point of view in solving the conflict. Also, Italy was seeking economic gains by expanding deals and investments for the benefits of Italian companies located in Egypt. Most probably, this approach was the one in which the Egyptian regime best responded to. In return, the Italian side was able to resolve their official diplomatic relations with the Egyptian regime while redirecting Regeni's case to a different point of view by accusing the Egyptian opposition.

Second: Sudan and Egypt crisis relations

The Year 2017 witnessed noticeable tension in relations between Sudan and Egypt which spread across multiple files; Sudan's position with Ethiopia regarding the Al-Nahda dam, driven by the gains that could return from the dam and Sudan's attempt for an agreement with Ethiopia to deliver electricity power from Al-Nahda dam to Khartoum, the main factor in the escalation of other files, including:

1- Halayeb and Shalateen:

Since the year 2017, the severity of Sudan's tone has increased with regards to the Shalateen and Halayeb case. The Sudanese official's statements repeated that the Halayeb Triangle is actually Sudanese land. In February 2017, the most prominent statement was made by the Sudanese President Omar Al-Basheer that Halayeb is Sudanese land. By the end of March, the technical committee defined demarcation of Sudan's border, creating a road map for the area, which would help remove the Egyptians in a diplomatic way. In mid-April, the Sudanese Minister of Defence stated that his troops were subjected to provocations and military harassment from the Egyptians side in the Hala'ib triangle, and that his troops are demonstrating self-control.

In response, the Egyptian regime escalated its position. In July, the Egyptian Prime Minister announced decisions of establishing multiple governmental facilities in Hala'ib and Shalateen Triangle area. Following that decision, Egyptian authorities carried out an arrest campaign for 120 Sudanese citizens in the region. Following the Egyptian escalation, Sudan objected in mid-July to the Security Council against the actions of the Egyptian authorities. By the end of 2017 there was more than one statement made by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ibrahim Ghandour, confirming that Halayeb and Shalateen are Sudanese land. According to remarks of the official spokesman of the

ministry of foreign affairs, the Egyptian regime refused to solve the issue through international arbitration.

2-Egypt's support to South Sudan

Since the beginning of 2017, several developments have highlighted the positive relations between the Egyptian regime and South Sudan. Sudan considers this situation a discord by Egypt practiced under the strained relations between the two countries. The Prime Minister of South Sudan, Salva Kiir, had a meeting with Sisi in January. In the end of February, Al-Bashir accused the Egyptian government of providing weapons and ammunition to the ruling government of the state of South Sudan. In mid-June, the Egyptian regime was operating an airlift of food aid to South Sudan. The Egyptian regime's aid was not only limited to humanitarian assistance, but it included reconciliation between the two conflicting parties in South Sudan. In mid-November the Egyptian regime signed the Cairo declaration for the unification of Sudan's People's Liberation Movement.

3-Egypt's support to Darfur Rebels

The Darfur region worsened the existing conflict between the Egyptians and the Sudanese. In May, Al-Basheer accused the Egyptian regime of supporting the rebels in the Darfur region. He stated that the Sudanese authorities seized Egyptian vehicles and weapons during their battles in the region. But the Egyptian spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs denied the accusation, along with statements made by Sisi at end of May, confirming non-interference or conspiring against Sudan.

These volatile and tense relations, fluctuating between accusations in more than one case to positive statements issued from both sides, are because of the Egyptians failure to reach a satisfactory solution regarding the Al-Nahda Dam and as such the Egyptians

sought to maintain pressure on Sudan. The year 2017 witnessed developments in the relationship between Egypt and South Sudan and increased military support for the active rebels in the Darfur Region. On the other hand, Sudan continued incremental escalations in the Hala'ib and Shalateen matter. It appears that due to multiple crisis between the Egyptian and Sudanese sides, the relations will remain at the same level of tension but could witness increased tensions depending on the Al-Nahda dam developments and the increasing relations between Turkey and Sudan including the presence of Turkey in Suwakin island.

4-Renaissance Dam and Egyptian-Ethiopian relations

From the beginning of 2017, it seemed clear that the direction of the Egyptian regime was to maintain balanced statements towards Ethiopia with regards to the Renaissance Dam project. In April, the Egyptian Foreign Minister said that the relations between Egypt and Ethiopia are within the framework of building and establishing a strong relationship between the two sides, further confirmed by Sisi during a meeting with the Ethiopian Minister in Cairo. At the same time, technical differences continued while studies were prepared by French consulting companies, "BRL" and "Artilia", mandated to determine the negative impact of Al-Nahda dam on the downstream countries Egypt and Sudan and to provide an impartial preliminary report on rules of how to fill the reservoir that belongs to Al-Nahda dam. This situation experienced multiple obstacles during 2017 until the deadline of the report for the French companies in September.

By the beginning of September, the Egyptian regime showed concerns around the failure in the technical implementation of Al-Nahda dam, shared through statements made by the Egyptian Minister of Foreign Affairs. These disagreements and differences lasted until the end of November between the three parties - Egypt, Ethiopia, and

Sudan - around the assessment report presented by the French companies studying the negative effects of Al-Nahda dam on the downstream countries. When the technical track reached a standstill the relations between the two sides, Egypt and Ethiopia, witnessed severe tension and accusations. One important accusation made by the Ethiopian president is the Egyptian Regime's support of the armed opposition in his country. Another statement by the Minister of Foreign Affairs announced that the delay in the agreement will not result in any halt in the construction work of the dam, not even for a minute. In return Sameh Shokri stated in December the importance of time to complete the Al-Nahda dam studies.

After the delay of the technical track, the Egyptian regime sought to reach an agreement with Ethiopia regarding storing water in Al-Nahda dam without waiting for the finalization of the technical track, by placing pressure on the Ethiopian government primarily by way of its support of armed oppositions in Ethiopia. On the other hand, the Ethiopian party continued its delays to in the technical track of the situation, with an objective to prolong the negotiation time. In the meantime, the construction work to build Al Nahda dam continued without any hesitation. The severity of tension between Egypt and Ethiopia sides were very apparent by the end of 2017 and carrying into 2018. With the absence of political solutions, the Egyptian regime has been driven to find more intrusive solutions for the crisis.

5- The Gulf crisis and Qatar-Egypt relations

The year 2017 witnessed a turning point in the path of relations between Egypt and Qatar. Since the July 3rd coup, the relations between the two sides experienced tensions sometimes and calmness other times. In June 2017, intense transformation occurred in the relations between the two sides.

Diplomatic relations with Qatar was severed including imposition of penalties through closure of airspace and seaports of the four countries Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Al-Bahrain for all of Qatar's means of transportation. This was a siege by the four countries against Qatar. This crisis continued to escalate. The blockade imposed a 10 day timeline for Qatar to implement a set of conditions that included 13 items in order to lift the embargo on Qatar. Later on in July after a meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of these four states in Cairo, the conditions decreased to 6 items.

The continuation of strained relations between Egypt and Qatar witnessed a raging conflict in October 2017 in the competition for the position of Director General of UNESCO. Neither side was successful; instead it was given to the French candidate. Egypt and the quartet could not impose their political will and force Qatar to implement the imposed conditions in order to lift the embargo and allow relations to return to normal. In the meanwhile Qatar was able, through the partnership and agreement with regional and international forces, to back up its position allowing Qatar to not respond to the imposed conditions from the quartet. In the Gulf crisis, the role of the Egyptian regime is marginalized compared to the Saudi Arabia and Emirati role, but it would not be expected that Egypt take a different approach from the Saudis and Emiratis in their relations with Qatar. This indicates a continuation of the Gulf crisis, and the failure to reach a near term solution.

6-Saudi Arabia and Egyptian relations ... Fragile agreements

The escalation of relations between Egypt and Saudi Arabia was the dominate feature Egypt's foreign relations crisis in 2017. Relations between the two sides included tension, escalation, media crossfire, and in other cases consensus and understanding. The beginning of 2017 witnessed continuous crisis between Egypt and Saudi Arabia. In

October 2016, after Saudi Arabia suspended fuel shipments to Egypt, the Egyptian regime voted at the security council on a Russian proposed resolution regarding Syria that Saudi Arabia did not support. In mid-January the tension between the two sides escalated after a judicial ruling denied the Egypt government appeal on the invalidity of both Tearan and Sanafesr Island, under which the sovereignty of the two islands was transferred to Saudi Arabia.

The easing of the crisis between the two parties began in late March, when Sisi met with King Salman on the sidelines of the Arab summit. The crisis ended in late April after Sisi's visit to Al-Riyadh, his meeting with King Salman and Sisi's participation in the Islamic Summit in Riyadh resulting in the Egyptian and Saudi Arabia relations normalizing.

The relations between Egypt and Saudi Arabia started to improve after the announcements by Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Emirates and Al-Bahrain in July to boycott Qatar. This was followed by intense meetings between Foreign ministers of the four countries to coordinate the continuation of the blockade of Qatar. The Gulf crisis' impact on the relationship between the Egyptian and Saudi Arabia did not extend to other foreign relation files in the region. This was apparent after the resignation of the Lebanese Prime Minister, Sad Al-Hariri, in November 2017 and the escalation of Saudi Arabia's approach towards Iran and Hezbollah, which the Egyptian regime denounced. Sisi stated his refusal of military intervention against Iran and Hezbollah. After his statement a diplomatic source in the Arab league revealed that Cairo had stopped a Saudi Arabia decision to suspend Lebanon's membership in the league if it did not agree to a resolution condemning Hezbollah.

The election of Donald Trump as the president of the United States is a key factor in the return of Egyptian –Saudi Arabia relations. Donald Trump aimed to form a strong alliance among his allies in the region in order to implement his vision of the Middle

East Region. The relationship between Egypt and Saudi Arabia remains unstable because of disagreements between the Egyptian vision and the Saudi Arabia vision of some regional issues, and will continue to intensify as the Saudi Arabia and Iran crisis continues, as well as the ongoing fighting between Saudi Arabia and Al-Houthi in Yemen.

7-Egyptian-Turkish relations Signs of convergence

The year 2017 witnessed continued tension and the breakdown of official relations between Egypt and Turkey. In late April, Egypt condemned the Turkish air bombardment targeting the Jabal Sinjar region in North Iraq. The Gulf crisis further impacted the relations between Turkey and Egypt, especially after the rapid Turkish intervention to support Qatar by executing a joint defence agreement between Turkey and Qatar including a military base in Qatar.

The fifth summit between Egypt, Greece, and Cyprus happened in late November which aimed to establish an “Eastern Mediterranean” alliance to tighten the grip on Turkey and reduce its influence in the Middle East.

Late 2017 witnessed a state of calmness and a tempered tone between Egypt and Turkey. The Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shukri repeated positive comments towards the Turkish side. He stated in mid-October that “he had no objections in meeting President Erdogan as long as Turkish administration establishes a positive role.”

After Shokri returned from Turkey at the end of December, he announced that Egypt hopes to return relations with Turkey, insisting that Egypt is open to it, and he has a committed desire to overcome any tension.

On the other hand, in late November Turkey declared mourning in solidarity with victims of the terrorist attack targeting the Al-Rawdah mosque in Sinai.

It seems that the Egyptian regime is aware of the extent of confusion that the Saudi Arabia policy is causing after Mohammad ibn Salman's takeover of the administration of the Kingdom. This explains the Egyptian Regime's interest to seek relations with other regional powers with a balanced policy such as the attempt to pursue rapprochement with Turkey through repeated statements made by Sameh Shukri, especially since both Egypt and Turkey have strong ties with Russia, the most prominent actor in the region in the recent years.