

Putin And The Mideast's Middleman. Egypt's Strategic Game

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The Russian President's visit last week to Egypt signified that both countries are eager to restore the closeness of their former Nasser-era ties. The deepening partnership between the two has the possibility to qualitatively transform the region, with the '[Arab Yugoslavia](#)' serving as a conduit for advancing Russian interests at the expense of the two main powers over the region, the US and Saudi Arabia. On a larger scale, this means that Egypt has become the [third springboard](#) for projecting Russian foreign policy in the Mideast, with all of the resultant multipolar aftereffects for the previously unipolar-dominated region.

Washington's Worry

Al-Sisi is playing a very strategic game in balancing his relations between Washington and Moscow, with the aim that closer ties with the latter will lead to a better arrangement with the former. The world is arguably in the throes of a 'New Cold War', just this time, instead of being between capitalism and communism, it's being played out between unipolarity and multipolarity. The US used to hold the cards in Cairo under Mubarak, but after betraying their old and aging ally in the interests of guiding an inevitable leadership transition, they ended up on the wrong side of history when their Muslim Brotherhood proxy was overthrown by al-Sisi.

Understandably, the current president harbors no illusions about the US' treacherous nature, yet he also knows that it's not wise (nor possible) to completely break ties with the country, especially when he's being [patronized by the pro-US Gulf States](#). Under these conditions and in the context of the unfolding 'New Cold War', al-Sisi has sought to engage in a more pragmatic and balanced relationship with all major regional and global players, hoping that this policy can reap the greatest dividends for his country. This makes Egypt but [one of many pivotal countries](#) currently engaging in multipolar policies, placing it among the likes of Vietnam, India, and Turkey, for example.



Egypt Russia talk.

That being said, no matter how fair and balanced al-Sisi's policies become, the US will always remain worried that Egypt is 'drifting away' from its orbit, as any movement closer to the multipolar world is a relative defeat for the unipolar one. The purpose of such an Egyptian policy pivot is to heighten the country's importance in regional affairs and return it its former leadership position, which had been largely abandoned shortly after Nasser's passing as a result of the submissive 'alliance' with the US and Israel. *A strong Egypt safe from American domination is one that cannot be fully controlled by Washington, and which*

in turn becomes a regional 'loose cannon' that could obstruct America's regional 'management'.


With the Egyptian eagle now spreading its multipolar wings, it has come to realize that full dependency on any one patron places it in a position of extreme vulnerability, ergo the country's delicate political recalibration towards the Gulf Kingdoms and Russia and away from the US. Per the Eurasian vector, Moscow has a calculated interest in seeing a strong, multipolar Egypt restore order and stability to the Mideast and act as a buffer against unipolar designs (either directly or via proxy), which helps explain the current and close confluence of strategic interests between the two states. As for the Gulf orientation, Egypt is in a [unique position](#) to bring together Saudi Arabia and Russia and assist in the resolution of the Syrian and Oil War crises that have crippled bilateral relations, which if successful, would be yet another strategic setback for American policy in the Mideast.

Settling Russia's Disputes With The Saudis

While strategy and theory were spoken about earlier, now it's time to look into the specifics of how al-Sisi can act as the Mideast's true middleman. Saudi Arabia and Russia have absolutely divergent stances on the Syrian Crisis and the oil price war, and the only country capable of helping to bridge the divide is Egypt, which has been courted by them both in the past year and a half. Let's take a look at the details:

The War On Syria:

Russia supports the popular and democratically elected government of President Bashar Assad, while Saudi Arabia is rabid about supporting regime change at all costs (including a terrorist takeover). *Egypt, despite being the recipient of billions of dollars of Gulf largesse, actually opposes the Saudis' policies there, largely due to the aforementioned fact that al-Sisi is opposed to terrorism (which includes the Qatar-sponsored Muslim Brotherhood, to say nothing of ISIL).* His independent views pose no threat to the Saudis since they're not backed by any military action against their interests (such as arms shipments to the Syrian Arab Army), hence why they haven't disowned him and cut off the purse strings. Not only that, but Egypt is reemerging as such a pivotal state in regional affairs that it's not likely the Saudis would jeopardize their relations with it simply over al-Sisi's stance on Syria, with or without weapons shipments to the government there. Even if they wanted to, the only real lever of influence they could pull is to support terrorist groups in Egypt, but al-Sisi has been categorically wiping them out since he came to power, which thereby mitigates the overall impact of this destabilizing option. Of course, the Saudis and associated Gulf proxies could stop funding the country, but then al-Sisi would simply move even closer to Russia and the BRICS countries (just like Greece has [threatened to do](#) if the EU cuts it off) in an effort to replace the lost investment, which would represent a larger strategic loss for Riyadh than allowing Cairo to practice an independent Syrian policy.

In such a position, the Saudis are forced to acquiesce to al-Sisi's recent moves to [consolidate the Syrian 'opposition'](#). While on the surface such a move seems to support the Saudi's strategy, in reality, something very different is taking shape that can actually sabotage it and pave the way for peace in Syria.  *Russia and Egypt are in fact engaged in [complementary diplomacy](#) in bringing together the two factions of the Syrian 'opposition' with the end intention of lessening Western and Gulf control over them and hopefully facilitating a reasonable accommodation with Damascus.* Moscow is assembling the non-terrorist anti-government opposition (NTAGO) per its recent [Inter-Syrian Dialogue](#), while

Cairo is gathering all the others. Putin and al-Sisi have asserted their joint [opposition to terrorism](#) and their will to [peacefully resolve the Syrian Crisis](#), so it's clear that both countries are coordinating their policies on these two burning topics.

That being said, Egypt can thus act as a bridge in bringing together Saudi Arabia's proxies (if not directly co-opting them as much as possible) and the legitimate government in Damascus, while Russia does the same on the NTAGO side of things. It could perhaps even come to pass that if both 'opposition' factions can be consolidated via Cairo and Moscow's diplomacy, then they can find a way to actually merge into a semi-unified entity that would be more pliable (and reasonable) towards reaching a peaceful settlement to end the country's crisis. *The more successful that Egypt is in diluting Saudi control over its proxies, filtering out the radical elements, and moderating/taming the remaining representatives, the more likely this scenario becomes, although it is certainly quite difficult to achieve and still a long time away.* Nonetheless, if al-Sisi can pull this off, he can skyrocket his country's role in the Mideast, assert his true multipolar independence from Saudi Arabia, and still continue to interact with all of the major players in the region, albeit on a more respected ground.

The Oil War:

Unlike the War on Syria, where Egypt has some crafty diplomatic cards that it can play, when it comes to the [Oil War](#), no such advantages are held by Cairo. Instead, its position in resolving the War on Syria (which is to Saudi Arabia's detriment) is enough to earn Riyadh's attention, which in turn can be redirected towards speaking with Russia behind closed doors. In order to do that, however, Saudi Arabia needs to have a motivation, which it currently lacks. Once more, this is where Egypt's new Syrian stance can come in, since it meshes perfectly with what Russia is doing (and is the opposite of Saudi Arabia's approach) and could thus serve as reason enough to bring the two sides together. If Russian and Saudi diplomats begin discussing their disputes over each other's preferred methods for conflict resolution in Syria, then the Russian side can take the initiative to also speak on the oil issue. Although it's unlikely that Saudi Arabia would alter the contentious energy course that it's embarked on, it's always better to have some avenues for dialogue (no matter how vague and possibly premature) than to not have the opportunity at all, which is exactly the void that Egypt could fill in this situation.

It must be said that the Syrian issue is only a means for bringing Russia and Saudi Arabia together to discuss the Oil War, and it is not to infer in any way whatsoever that Russia would ever sacrifice Syria for the sake of higher energy prices (as the New York Times [falsely alleged](#) was possible). *Not only has Russia [categorically denied](#) that this would ever happen, but it would be completely counterproductive to all of Russia's multipolar inroads that it's made in the Mideast over the past decade, to say nothing of betraying it's only time-tested ally.* No matter that, the corrupt Saudi political establishment (which knows no moral, ethical, or principled boundaries) may still think that such a deal is possible, hence why they may want to speak directly with Russia using Egypt as a dialogue channel in facilitating their wishes. This is precisely the scenario that Russia is looking for, namely that its stance on Syria (which is unfettering and solid) is used as 'bait' to lure the self-interested Saudis into reaching out to them and using Egypt as an enabling vehicle.

It's not important that such talks will probably result in no progress at all – instead, the key points are that Russia has established an indirect dialogue channel with the Saudis, and namely, that it's using Egypt to do this. Cairo's importance to Riyadh would thus be even more elevated, with the (failed) secret Russian-Saudi talks serving its own interests more so

than the other two players'. But taken another way, everything makes sense, since Egypt's 'reward' for working with Russia on Syria (despite the existing commonality of interests to do so) would be for Russia to find a way to make Egypt more independent from Saudi Arabia, and simultaneously, more important to it. This would present a win-win situation for Russian-Egyptian relations and deepen their emerging strategic partnership. Remember, power and influence projection in this case only works in one direction, that of Russia against Saudi Arabia vis-à-vis Egypt, as it is not at all foreseeable that Saudi Arabia would be able to use Egypt to pressure Russia in the same way. Such a reality only underscores the natural and complementary nature of Russian-Egyptian ties in pursuing a more multipolar order in the Mideast.

Springboards To Reverse The 'Arab Spring'

Russia's expanded relations with Egypt amount to the country becoming Moscow's third springboard of regional influence, alongside Syria and Iran, with all four players intent on reversing the chaos brought about by the 'Arab Spring' Color Revolutions. While the role of Syria and Iran in bringing about this shared regional vision has been expostulated upon in an [earlier article](#), this section will look specifically at Egypt's piece in the larger puzzle.



Signing of bilateral documents after Egypt Russia talks.

Russia and Egypt signed a [slew of bilateral agreements](#) during Putin's visit, including most importantly a Free Trade Agreement with the Eurasian Union and plans for Russia to build a nuclear power plant in the country. The strategic nature of these agreements is of pivotal significance, since it symbolizes that relations are deeper than meet the eye and that strong diplomatic activity was ongoing prior to the meeting that helped bring such major deals to fruition. Therefore, one can take it that Russian-Egyptian ties have been steadily advancing away from the intrusive eyes of the public, making one wonder what other levels of political calibration are currently ongoing.

To conjecture a bit, one can speculate that these likely entail Syria (as mentioned above), and perhaps even al-Sisi's new [War on Terror](#) against ISIL in Libya, as it's unlikely that strikes were a spur-of-the-moment emotional reaction. What is more probable is that Egypt had been contemplating such moves for some time (as they were already earlier suspected of having carried out [secret strikes](#) there [last year](#)), and that al-Sisi notified Putin of his moves during the latter's visit last week. After all, understanding that there is more to Russian-Egyptian relations than both sides publicly let on, and examining their joint anti-terror statements, it's logical to conclude that such an interaction took place. Should it have, then it would demonstrate the deep level of trust that both sides have in the other, which would further their cooperative efforts in Syria. Also, Putin supports legal anti-terror campaigns that are coordinated with the host state, and with the official Libyan government having [requested international support](#) in the past, al-Sisi's legal War on ISIL stands in stark contrast to the illegal one that the US and its buddies are waging in Syria against the will and outside the coordination of Damascus. Russia thus supports an empowered Egypt that is confident enough to assert its security interests outside its borders (and in a legal fashion), which makes it both a stronger multipolar player and a more capable contender for regional leadership, thereby satisfying both partner's strategic interests in helping to restore order to the chaotic post-'Arab Spring' Middle East.

Concluding Thoughts

Russian-Egyptian ties are on the cusp of returning to their close and coordinated Nasser-era level, albeit the primary difference is that Cairo is also seeking to simultaneously emulate this model with other players in the multipolar world. Even so, this symbolizes a tectonic shift in Mideast geopolitics, since the most populous Arab nation and one-time regional leader is once more rising to the occasion to chart an independent course separate from the US' interests. There are still many more complicated and convoluted moves to be made before this ambitious goal is reached, but it's indisputable that Egypt under President al-Sisi is intent on restoring his country's lost pride and regional role, and that Russia is actively assisting with its geopolitical rebirth. *This presents enormous opportunities for Russia as it seeks to usher in the transition to global multipolarity, and Egypt is the right partner that it needs in order to fulfill this vision for the Mideast.*

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