

TURKIYE EGYPT TIES: ENDING A DECADE OF STALEMATE

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Turkiye-Egypt ties date back to 1925, which have been marked by a history of cooperation as well as confrontation which saw an all-time low in 2013, when diplomatic relations were severed due to Turkiye's public denunciation of the ousting of former President Mohamed Morsi by the then Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The Turkish Prime Minister's statements about the coup d'état in Egypt against the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood, catalyzed a sequence of inflammatory media exchanges. These exchanges culminated in the mutual recall of diplomatic envoys, thus commencing a protracted ten-year period of diplomatic estrangement. Diplomatic ties were restored in 2023 and both countries began their journey to mend ties on multiple levels.

Turkiye has adopted a conscious approach to revisit and mend ties with the region – in the hope of going back to a time where it had 'zero problems' with neighbors. In this regard, Turkiye has been gradually working on improving ties with countries like the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt as well. Ankara's diplomatic pivot coincides with a weak economy and also apprehensions about a weakening position in the region. Cordial relations in the region can have several benefits, including those of having investments from prosperous states like Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

For their part, Turkiye and Egypt have been working on mending their fractured ties and a manifestation of this was the recent visit of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to Egypt on February

14, 2024, after a hiatus of 10 years with the last visit taking place in 2012. Between 2013 and 2021, the bilateral tensions accentuated due to opposing perspectives of the two countries concerning regional matters, prominently manifested by their stances on events such as the Arab Quartet's boycott of Qatar and the civil conflicts in Libya and Syria. Moreover, the Abraham Accords are also a factor as they could potentially downgrade Egypt's regional role and therefore, it became imperative for Cairo to move towards improving ties with Ankara. The Al Ula Agreement in 2021, leading to normalization of ties, which came as a breakthrough after the Gulf Cooperation Council's (GCC) ending of dispute with Qatar has also been an added factor.¹

Economic pressures have also been a pushing factor in the mending of ties between the two countries. Egypt's economic woes as well as Ankara's strained relations with powers in the Middle East including Saudi Arabia, were a key factor, acting as a catalyst for improving its economic interactions. Another aspect to be seen is the focus towards common interests aimed at strengthening regional connections through strategic partnerships with Gulf States. For example, the possible collaboration between Turkiye and Egypt in facilitating intra-Palestinian dialogue, alongside the prospect of initiating negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, could possibly hold some value.²

Since 2020 to 2022, Turkiye has shifted its focus notably towards pursuing opportunities in trade, commerce, investment, and defence agreements rather than focusing on specific causes, as it did during the Arab Spring era. In this broader context, Turkiye's relationship has considerably improved with Saudi Arabia, and particularly with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in recent years.³ Despite Cairo lacking the financial resources possessed by Saudi Arabia and UAE, Egypt's geographical position stands out as a significant factor rendering the country valuable for Ankara. Turkiye perceives Egypt as a gateway to the broader African continent. Consequently, as Ankara endeavors to showcase itself more prominently in the Sahel region and other parts of Africa, fostering improved relations with Cairo is deemed pivotal for expanding influence and advancing interests across the continent.

There is significant untapped economic potential for Turkiye and Egypt to engage in collaborative endeavors within the defence domain, including technology transfer, expertise exchange, and intelligence cooperation. Egypt stands to derive substantial advantages from Turkiye's expertise as a

1 Ali Bakir, Egypt-Turkey normalization: Ankara's perspective, Atlantic Council, April 12, 2023

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/egypt-turkey-normalization-ankaras-perspective/>

2 Pinar Akpınar, Dalia Ziada, Putting Egypt-Turkey relations on a sustainable footing, Middle East Institute, August 29, 2023, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/putting-egypt-turkey-relations-sustainable-footing>

3 Giorgio Cafiero, Why Egypt and Turkey are ending a decade of tension, The New Arab, February 22, 2024, <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/why-egypt-and-turkey-are-ending-decade-tension>

NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) member, whereas Turkiye would accrue benefits from Egypt's advanced naval capacities and military upgradation.

Regarding the economy and industry, Egypt and Turkiye have numerous shared interests that can bolster strategic cooperation. Notably, Egypt holds a prominent status as Turkiye's foremost trade partner within Africa. Trade between the two nations has experienced substantial expansion, nearing an annual volume of nearly \$10 billion.⁴ Both leaderships have articulated strong commitments to further augment bilateral trade, setting sights on achieving figures ranging between \$15 to \$20 billion. The potential for flourishing Egyptian-Turkish relations hinges on nurturing economic collaboration and adopting a constructive approach. Similarly, the defence and military sectors contribute significantly to cooperation between the two countries, evident in their mutual arms agreements and collaborative military production endeavors. Egypt's interests in Turkish drones and other military equipment is also a factor.

In the regional context, President Erdogan's visit to Cairo held significance primarily due to the ongoing Israeli conflict with Gaza. Turkiye exhibits sensitivity towards the plight of Palestinians in Gaza, and thus, domestic sentiments concerning the Palestinian issue naturally influence Turkiye's foreign policy towards Israel's actions in Gaza. Against the backdrop of the prevailing conflict, policymakers in Ankara recognize the imperative of improving relations with Cairo. Egypt wields distinctive forms of influence over Gaza, stemming from historical ties, its status as the sole Arab nation sharing a land border with Gaza, the diplomatic relationships maintained by the Sisi government with both Israel and Hamas, and Egypt's traditional role of leadership within the broader Arab sphere. Turkiye has been sending humanitarian aid to Gaza since October 7, 2023, and has closely collaborated with Egyptian authorities in this regard.⁵ Both countries strongly advocate a ceasefire and are also proponents of a two-state solution.⁶ Improvement in the relationship between Ankara and Cairo can also be viewed within the broader geopolitical landscape. The waning influence of Washington in the Middle East, coupled with the global trend towards multipolarity, necessitates a reevaluation of foreign policies by nations such as Turkiye and Egypt within their respective regional spheres.

⁴ Dr. Mohamed Eldoh, Erdogan in Egypt: Strategic Implications for Turkey and Egypt, Geopolitical Monitor, February 16, 2024, <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/erdogan-in-egypt-strategic-implications-for-turkey-and-egypt/>

⁵ Turkiye to work with Egypt against forced displacement of Palestinians, February, 2024 <https://www.trtworld.com/turkiye/turkiye-to-work-with-egypt-against-forced-displacement-of-palestinians-17007685>

⁶ Murat Yesiltas, Türkiye-Egypt normalization: Historic milestone in bilateral ties, SETA, February 14, 2024, <https://www.setav.org/en/turkiye-egypt-normalization-historic-milestone-in-bilateral-ties/>

The rapprochement between Ankara and Cairo is much needed and can chart a pathway towards greater stability in the region. With the ongoing war in Gaza, it becomes imperative for Turkiye to mend ties with countries in the region, and especially with those like Egypt, which can play a role in the Gazan crises. As they navigate economic, military, and geopolitical challenges, the renewed focus on shared interests and strategic collaboration marks a promising way forward. The improvement of ties is also likely to enhance the regional role of both the countries. Economic interests also hold sway, as improved relations can have a potentially positive impact on trade and investments. Similarly, an agreement on the delimitation of borders in the Eastern Mediterranean and Libya could also open new doors between the two states. Against the backdrop of shifting global influences and regional conflicts, the rekindling of Ankara-Cairo ties not only entails important implications for bilateral relations but also reflects broader trends in the evolving landscape of the Middle East. This upswing in ties is also a harbinger of positivity for the region, as the entire region is affected by the war in Gaza.