

SECURITY FACTOR IN THE MIDDLE EAST IN RUSSIAN-EGYPTIAN RELATIONS (2014-2018)



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SECURITY FACTOR IN THE MIDDLE EAST IN RUSSIAN-EGYPTIAN RELATIONS (2014-2018)¹

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Elena M.Savicheva is a Professor in Theory and History of International Relations Department at Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University, Moscow). She got her Ph.D. in History. She is a lecturer with extensive experience and excellent teaching skills. Her students are young people from all over the world as students from about 140 countries study at RUDN University. Elena's research interests span International Relations, Foreign Policy and Diplomacy, Conflicts and Security, Middle East Studies. She is an author of more than 100 scientific works in Russia and abroad. Much of her work has been on the Arab states. She is a participant in international conferences and seminars. In March 2019 she was a participant in International Studies Association (ISA) 60th Convention in Toronto.

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In recent years Russia's policy in the Middle East has intensified, which is reflected in its direct participation in the resolution of regional conflicts,² its willingness to take part in reform programs and large-scale economic projects in the countries of the region. The Russian military operation in Syria has seriously increased Russia's influence in the region.³

Russia and Egypt are close partners both in bilateral relations and in the international arena. In particular, this concerns their cooperation on the issue of regional security in the Middle East. They cooperate in the fight against international terrorism, and this cooperation has multilayered nature, ranging from coordination between intelligence agencies, personnel training, technology transfer, to a joint effort in stabilizing the situation in the Middle East and North Africa.

Since his coming to power, Egyptian president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has paid 4 visits to Russia. In his turn, during this period Russian leader Vladimir Putin has visited Egypt twice. They have met many times during major international forums. It is Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov (Special Representative of the Russian President for the Middle East), Director of the Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation Sergei Naryshkin who have also paid visits to Egypt. The very frequency of the meetings between the leaders of the two countries characterizes the level of relations between Moscow and Cairo – the level of integrated strategic partnership.

The legal framework of bilateral cooperation is based on the signed agreements, including the Treaty between the Russian Federation and the Arab Republic of Egypt on comprehensive partnership and strategic cooperation, signed by the presidents,⁴ as well as the Memorandum of understanding between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Arab Republic of Egypt on strategic political consultations, etc.

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Major Milestones in Bilateral Relations

In the 76 years since the establishment of diplomatic relations between Moscow and Cairo, there have been ups and downs, periods of close friendship and discord.⁵ Undoubtedly, there have been more positive moments than negative ones. With the assistance of the USSR, in Egypt there were built 97 large industrial facilities. These include the Aswan dam, the Helwan metallurgical plant, the aluminum plant in Nag Hammadi, as well as the antibiotics and pharmaceuticals plant in Abu Zaabal. Most facilities built with the USSR assistance still play an important role in the Egyptian economy.⁶

Moscow has repeatedly extended a helping hand to Egypt in difficult times for its statehood. Suffice it to recall the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli wars. The period of cooling in the bilateral relations, quite a serious one, up to the expulsion of the Soviet ambassador and hundreds of specialists from Cairo in 1972, occurred during the presidency of Anwar Sadat, who bet on the United States. It was under President Mubarak, that there began the process of restoring the bilateral ties.⁷

As for the period of the Arab spring, Egypt went through a difficult time of trials.⁸ Had the

Islamists stayed in power in the country, Egypt could have shared the same destiny as Syria did. The destabilization of the largest Arab country, which controls the strategically important Suez Canal, would deal a serious blow to the world economy and regional security.⁹

New Level of Interaction

With the current president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's coming to power, Egyptian-Russian relations gained momentum to strengthening, as the new president was impressed by Moscow's well-balanced, cautious and consistent position during the events of early 2011 in Cairo, by president Vladimir Putin's uncompromising struggle with the terrorist threat and his efforts to restore the national economy.¹⁰ It stands to reason that Russia became the first non-Arab country which el-Sisi visited in August 2014.

Egypt is going through difficult times. Amid the rapid population growth (annually the number increases by 2.2 % that is over 2 million

people), economic and environmental problems severed; there is acute shortage of drinking water and water for agricultural needs.

Due to its physical and geographical conditions, the country is unable to meet the food needs of 101.5 million of its citizens on its own. Due to the inflation rate, life for ordinary Egyptians is becoming increasingly expensive.

Egypt has a large public debt. Despite all the efforts of the government, it continues to grow. Today it amounts to 11964 ¹¹ dollars per capita.

The country has a high unemployment rate, especially among young people, who make up the majority of the country's population. There is a high unemployment rate among people with higher education. 87% of them cannot find a decent job or a job in their field. To solve the unemployment problem, Egypt needs to create about 700 thousand new jobs.

There continue the activities of extremist and terrorist organizations, not only in the Sinai, but also in other regions of the country, in



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cluding the capital. There still occur attacks on Christians (most of them are the Copts), who make up about 10% of the country's population.

There is turmoil along the state border of Egypt. In the western part it is Libya, where there is taking place a fierce struggle between various factions; in the southern part it is volatile Sudan, whereas in the east it is the Gaza Strip with its numerous problems.

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science-based industries, in particular, in nuclear power. The construction of a number of facilities, on which there have already been reached agreements, will enable creating tens of thousands of new jobs as well as using the potential of Egyptian young people with higher education.

For Russia, deepening the cooperation with Egypt is also beneficial. It is the largest country in the Arab world, playing an important role in the Islamic world, and the second largest in the African continent. Important international maritime, land and air routes go through Egypt's territory. This is a large market for Russian agricultural and high-tech products, exports of goods and services. Finally, cooperation with Egypt is important for Russia in solving the problems of the Middle East region.

In recent years, the volume of Russian-Egyptian trade has increased by 62% and has amounted to 6.7 billion dollars; from January to August 2018 it increased by another 28%, - Vladimir Putin said at a press conference.¹²

Large-Scale Russian-Egyptian Cooperation Projects

Moscow and Cairo are implementing large-scale joint projects. In particular, during the visit in October 2018, an agreement was signed on the creation of a new industrial and logistics zone in the Suez Canal area, in which Russia intends to invest 7 billion dollars. There will work instrument-making, woodworking and pharmaceutical enterprises there. The products manufactured in this zone are aimed not only at the Egyptian market, but also at the Middle East and African ones. For Egypt, this is primarily external financial investments. For Russia, it is facilitated tax and customs regimes, as well as simplified access of goods to other countries of the region.



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Another important project is the construction by Russia of Egypt's first nuclear power plant "Ad-Dabaa". It began in 2015, when the two countries signed an intergovernmental agreement on the construction of this facility. In the course of President Vladimir Putin's visit to Cairo in December 2017, there were signed acts on the entry into force of the relevant contracts.

The new power plant will consist of four 1200 MW power units. Egypt hopes that the launch of the first unit of the nuclear power plant will take place in 2024. There will operate Russian nuclear reactors of "3+" generation, which meet the highest safety standards.¹³

In addition, the next step is an agreement on a free trade zone between the Eurasian Economic Community (EAEC) and Egypt. For the time being, the parties are just preparing to start negotiations on this issue.¹⁴

Cooperation is also being developed in the military sphere. In Egypt there are conducted tactical maneuvers of airborne troops which have already become traditional. Thus, in the "Defenders of friendship – 2018" maneuvers, there were involved more than 400 servicemen of both countries, several airfields, more than 15 helicopters and aircraft for various purposes, as well as 10 units of military equipment on parachute systems. The Egyptian side seeks to develop cooperation with enterprises of the Russian rocket and space industry.



Good prospects for Russian-Egyptian foreign economic cooperation can be seen in the development of oil and gas fields in Egypt, in military-technical cooperation, the construction of energy facilities, including cooperation in the peaceful use of nuclear power.

Both countries have similar, though not identical views on the Middle East problems, including the role of the Islamist radical organizations and movements. In both countries the Muslim Brotherhood is recognized as a terrorist organization. Hence, the largely common vision of the ways to resolve the various crises which continue to rage in the Middle East and North Africa.

First and foremost, it refers to the conflict in Syria.¹⁵ Back in November 2016, Egyptian president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi expressed support for the brotherly country in the fight against terrorism. The Russian leadership appreciates Cairo's well-balanced position in the conflict in Syria and its assistance in building contacts with a part of the Syrian opposition. Moscow and Cairo have the same opinion concerning the fact that there is no alternative to the settlement of the Syrian crisis by political means.

Another crisis, in which Moscow and Cairo are coordinating their actions, is the Libyan one. After the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi in

2011, this country was in a state of dual power. Tripoli is ruled by the Government of National Accord which largely consists of Islamists. At the same time, it has little control even over the capital - there occasionally break out armed clashes between various groups. It is largely thanks to the support of a number of Western countries that the Cabinet of Ministers is able to stay afloat.

The other centre of power is in the east, in Tobruk. There is parliament, backed by the armed forces, headed by Khalifa Haftar. The latter is assisted by Egypt as well as some other countries of the region. Russia also maintains contacts with this political force, as evidenced by the Libyan military leader's significant visit to the Russian aircraft-carrying cruiser Admiral Kuznetsov in January 2017. The official position of the Russian party is as follows: Russia and Egypt will continue to jointly seek ways to overcome the internal political split in Libya, to restore its sovereignty and territorial integrity that is very important for the regional security.

Finally, Cairo plays an important role in the Middle East settlement. Egypt is doing no less important work to unite the Palestinian ranks and to reconcile Fatah and Hamas. After all, as many experts admit, without this it will be impossible to achieve peace between Palestine and Israel.

Both Russia and Egypt are interested in establishing stability in the region, non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, as well as turning the Middle East into a zone free of weapons of mass destruction.

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Energy security is one of the foreign policy priorities of both Russia and Egypt. The world economic crises, political, ethno-confessional and territorial disputes threatening energy security, to a large extent, strengthened cooperation between the two countries, based on the common interest in the stability of the oil market and world economy.

The goal of Russia's energy diplomacy is to create an energy security system based on the balance of interests of producer countries, consumer countries and transit countries. The conceptual foundations of the Russian energy policy were formed in early 2000s. An important document is the "Energy Strategy of Russia for the period until 2030" adopted in 2009.¹⁶ The report examines the main stages in the formation and development of Russia's energy diplomacy in the context of global processes in the world energy policy.

The Russian Federation cooperates with the countries and integration structures of the Middle East region in the oil and gas sectors, as it has common interests with them. Russia's export potential in nuclear energy can become a trump card in the implementation of Russia's foreign policy strategy in the region.¹⁷

Conclusion

At the same time, Egypt has had quite stable relations with the United States. Egypt accounts for almost a third of the US investment in Africa; it amounts to more than 20 billion dollars. Egypt is the most important recipient of the US investments in the African continent and the second one - in the Middle East.

Some Russian experts believe that Egypt does not bet on Moscow, but it plays the "Russian card". They say that Cairo is strengthening the relations with Russia to balance the one-sided bias toward the US that prevailed after the Camp David accords. Such a trend, namely, obtaining opportunistic benefits from interaction with the leading global and regional players, often having opposite positions on topical international problems, is often observed among the leaders of the Middle East countries.

The issue of the extent and time frame of the above projects implementation depends on the political will and readiness of Egypt to develop them. Russia, for its part, is ready to implement them, adequately assessing Egypt's role in the Arab world, the Middle East region and the African continent.

Endnotes

- 1 The article was prepared within the framework of the scientific project of Russian Foundation for Basic Research — Chinese Academy of Social Sciences № 17-27-21002 “Russian and Chinese assistance to Asian and African countries: comparative analysis and coordination prospects”.
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- 12 “Zayavleniya V.V. Putina dlya pressy po zavershenii rossijsko-egipetskih peregovorov”. (17.10.2018.) [“V.V. Putin’s Statement for the Press at the Conclusion of the Russian-Egyptian Negotiations” 10.17.2018.], Official site of the President of the Russian Federation, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/50184>

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