

DIPLOMACY AT SERVICE: EGYPT AND THE GULF ARAB STATES SECURITY

Fehmida Abdul Sattar*

Abstract: *Egypt has always been an active player in the Middle Eastern affairs due to its strategic location, its Arab culture, its proximity with important Gulf and Arab States and its traditional involvement in the oldest Middle Eastern conflict i.e. Palestine issue. After Free Officer's coup of 1952, Egypt followed free foreign policy as per its national interests and idiosyncrasies of its leadership. Nasser and his pan-Arab ideas were very popular in Arab republics. However, Sadat's decision of joining US bloc gained Egypt some level of affinity with the Arab monarchs. With the rise of Mubarak in power, Egypt completely fell into the Gulf alliance. Changing Middle Eastern politics especially increasing influence of Iranian threat enhanced Mubarak's Egypt value in the eyes of the Gulf Arab States. Short-termed Morsi government tended to generalize and liberalize Egyptian external relations but his efforts were thwarted by the Gulf leaders with the regime change and return of the dictatorial rule. Current government under Al Sisi, is more inclined towards Gulf security than preserving Egyptian integrity. The Gulf Arab countries have granted billions of dollars to Mubarak and Al Sisi governments. In return these governments have assured the donor states for their complete allegiance to their security.*

Key words: Egypt, Gulf Arab States, Nasser, regional security complex, Al Sisi, Iran, Yemen Civil War, Arab Uprising, Syrian Conflict, Israel.

Historical Background

The post-World War II era witnessed a noticeable gap between the Arab republics and

* Fehmida Abdul Sattar is a doctoral candidate in International Relations Department at Karachi University, Pakistan

the Arab monarchies due to their nationalist ideologies, their state structure, their political inclusiveness and their alliances at regional level. Arab republics were ruled by those leaders who came in power through revolutionary nationalist movements. After coming in power they established their control by suppressing dissents, controlling media, violating civil rights and adopting conflict-based foreign policies. Thus they became less inclusive politically. The state-controlled policies followed by economic hardships and suppression resulted in a counter-revolution throwing the existing administration. The Arab monarchs after grabbing power didn't suppress revolutionaries rather understood the primary cause behind the appeal of revolutionaries and took measures accordingly¹. They presented themselves as state and maintained separation between state and nation. Their foreign policies were based on cooperation. Oil riches helped them to form commercial cooperative ties with the Western countries. Hence Arab monarchies were inclined towards the Western coalition.

Relations with Arab countries have always been of high significance for Egyptian elites as well as for its people throughout its modern history since the Free Officers coup in 1952. Egyptian president Gamal Nasser aspired to unify the Arab republics under the idea of Pan-Arabism². His concept of Arab unification was also appreciated by the Arab masses in general who admired him as an Arab hero. His struggle for Arab unification and development was evident through short-lived merger of Egypt and Syria in 1958 forming United Arab Republic. This United Arab Republic also assimilated another Arab state North Yemen into a loose confederation following the Yemen civil war³. Egyptian elite with political concerns and masses with religious enthusiasm participated in all three Arab-Israel wars to protect the rights of Arab population of Palestine and Arab domination in the region. Egypt-Arab relations were not based on financial interactions. Rather Egypt financed in the Arab-Israel Wars voluntarily⁴. In fact Arab-Egypt relations were bound in a regional security complex and with the perception of common threats that not simply included Israel but former colonial powers and global powers like America and USSR, which were bracing to exert their

¹ Robert S. Snyder, Robert. "The Arab Uprising and the Persistence of Monarchy," *International Affairs*, Vol. 91, (5 September 2015).

² "Arab Unity: Nasser's revolution", *Aljazeera*, 20 June 2008.
<https://www.aljazeera.com/focus/arabunity/2008/02/200852517252821627.html>. Accessed on 22 January 2020.

³ "Egypt and Syria were once joined," *New York Times*, 18 April 1971.
<https://www.nytimes.com/1971/04/18/archives/egypt-and-syria-were-once-joined-merger-achieved-by-nasser-lived.html>. Accessed on 25 January 2020.

⁴ George W. Gawrych, "The Albatross of Decisive Victory: War and Policy Between Egypt and Israel in the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli Wars (*Contributions in Military Studies*)", (California: Praeger, 2000).

influence in the Middle East during the Cold War. Though Nasser's pan Arabism could not prevail in the entire Arab World but it did gain respect in Arab republics. Arab kingdoms were wary of Nasser's anti-monarchical views thus stayed away from his Arab politics. Nasser's inclination towards USSR prevented US-backed Saudi and Gulf monarchs from getting closer to form a comprehensive regional Arab alliance with Egypt until his death changed scenario to a large extent⁵.

Though Sadat regime exhibited disregard for the Arab affairs after the third Arab-Israel War in 1973 followed by the peace accord with Israel. Nonetheless common Egyptians always perceived kinship with Arabs as organic. President Sadat didn't engage Egypt in Arab issues and pulled Egypt out of regional security complexes. He shook hands with previously conceived enemies and directly went in US bloc rejecting traditional norms of Egypt's foreign policy paradigm⁶. The principles upon which the idol of pan-Arabism stood in Nasser era were distorted. The Arab world reacted against these policies quite fiercely. Especially when Egypt signed Camp David Accords, it was thrown out of the Arab League.

When Egypt began to shape its foreign relations under financial needs and interactions, the petrodollar Arab states also started perceiving Egypt not as a possible regional ally but a client. Post-Nasser Egypt provided some opportunities for Arab monarchs to build closer ties with Egypt for the first time for their regional interests. Sadat's strategy of joining the US bloc created some degree of commonality between the Gulf countries and Egypt. This US factor helped in building trust between Egypt and the Gulf countries in Mubarak era. Thus Egypt shifted from the union of Arab republics to the Arab monarchs bringing a major shift in its foreign policy dynamics.

The Gulf countries needed highly educated Egyptian workers for their newly developed economies in 1960s and 1970s, which made these Gulf Arab states dependent upon Egypt. However thanks to the riches of oil especially after the third Arab Israel War, the youth of the Gulf States acquired professional education mostly from foreign universities and learnt skill and expertise in different economic fields, bridging gap between abundant natural resources and human labours in their respective countries. In the beginning this phenomenon created difficult situation for Hosni Mubarak to regain a leading role for Egypt in the Middle East. However president Hosni Mubarak was ambitious in his plans for attaining prominent

⁵Joseph Mann. "King Faisal and the Challenge of Nasser's Revolutionary Ideology". *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 48, No. 05, (2012).

⁶ Marvin G. Weinbaum. "Egypt's "Infitah" and the Politics of US Economic Assistance." *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (1985): 206-222.

position in the Arab politics. Within a decade, he was successful in his plan due to some changes in the Middle Eastern politics. Iranian revolution frightened Arab monarchs for the export of Iranian revolution to their countries⁷. Iran-Iraq war provided Arab countries a chance to forget their differences and get united against Iran.

Egypt in the Gulf War

Egypt not only supported Gulf States' interests in Iran-Iraq war but also supported Kuwait-Saudi stance against Iraqi president Saddam Hussain in the first Gulf war without any ostensible reason other than inflow of dollars, Riyal, Dirham and Dinar⁸. About 20 billion US dollars worth debt was forgiven by America, the Gulf States and the European Union and similar amount was rescheduled for coming years. Egypt was readmitted in the Arab League in 1989.⁹ Egypt didn't have any direct threat either from Iran or Saddam's Iraq but yet to show its allegiance to the Gulf States (excluding Iraq) and to secure financial support from these countries, Egypt jumped into their conflict as a party. Economic vulnerabilities and political illegitimacy forced Mubarak to be always on Saudi, UAE, Kuwait and Bahrain side. If America was a global financier for Egypt, these countries acted as regional financiers and supporters for Mubarak's autocratic regime. Egypt was once again brought into regional security complex where its external policies were shaped by its economic insecurity and the political insecurity of Mubarak regime. The Gulf countries including Saudi Arabia also adopted anti Muslim Brotherhood policy in support of Mubarak¹⁰.

Egypt Gulf ties in post 9/11

After 9/11 Egypt was completely involved into the implicit Gulf alliance due to important regional conflicts. After the invasion of Iraq in 2003, Egyptian role was brought into prominence as Iraq, which was a buffer zone between Gulf States and Iran, had fallen into Iranian influence. This change in regional setting on the one hand alarmed the Gulf

⁷ Mustafa Fetouri. "An Arab perspective on Iran's Islamic Revolution at 40." *Middle East Monitor*, 14 February 2019. <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20190214-an-arab-perspective-on-irans-islamic-revolution-at-40/>

⁸ "A survey of Egypt: The IMF Model pupil", *The Economist*, 18 March 1999. https://www.economist.com/node/319594/print?story_id=319594. Accessed on 16 January 2020.

⁹ Alan Cowell. "Arab League Headquarter to return to Cairo." *New York Times*, 12 March 1990. <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/03/12/world/arab-league-headquarters-to-return-to-cairo.html#>. Accessed on 26 January 2020.

¹⁰ Stéphane Lacroix. "Saudi Arabia's Muslim Brotherhood Predicament". *The Washington Post*, 20 March 2014. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/03/20/saudi-arabias-muslim-brotherhood-predicament/>. Accessed on 20 January 2020.

States of the increasing influence of Iran. On the other hand it enabled Egypt to act as a frontline state in the security of the Arab Gulf States due to its proximity with Saudi Arabia. This unspoken commitment increased the value of President Mubarak and Egyptian military in the eyes of the Gulf States. In 2006, Iran-backed Hezbollah's victory over Israel further alarmed these states of Iranian growing power in the region. Hezbollah's suspicious victory over Israel seems to have turned Arab perspective of viewing Israel as the biggest enemy of Arabs in the Middle Eastern region.

The Arab Spring and the fall of Mubarak

The popular uprising of 2011 not only brought a great deal of transformation within Egyptian domestic politics but it also affected its foreign relations with traditional partners and foes. The fall of Mubarak not only trembled the US officials for the protection of American interests in the region but it also endangered perceived subservience of Egypt for the policies of the Arab Gulf countries excluding Qatar. Saudi officials not only sided Mubarak in his critical times but they also clashed with US officials for their unwillingness to support Mubarak.¹¹ The Gulf monarchs not only condemned the calls for protests against Mubarak but UAE foreign minister Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan met Mubarak two days before his fall to express solidarity with his regime. For the members of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the survival of Mubarak was crucial as he was a trust worthy ally to maintain regional security balance against Iran. It was a great political change that forced Saudi and UAE governments to rethink their security strategies and partnership with Egypt. The GCC countries were now more dependent on the US and were adamant to strengthen the US power in the region. They needed the US support more than ever to secure their power within their countries against the waves of uprising and outside their country for maintaining regional balance of power. The Iranian-backed uprising in Bahrain further frustrated the Gulf governments that felt desperate to reverse the tides of awakening through military intervention if not timely supported by America¹².

The Mubarak departure, the emergence of Muslim Brotherhood(MB) in power in Egypt and US response to popular uprising in different Arab states foretold a possible shrinking role of US in the region which enabled the Gulf States to take bold steps for their

¹¹Shadi Hamid. "Old Friends, New Neighborhood: The United States, the GCC, and their Responses to the Arab Spring". IstitutoAffariInternazionali, (2014) Page: 30-36.

¹² "Insecurity complex: Gulf States fear being encircled by Iran and abandoned by America". *The Economist*, 21 June 2018.

regional security by themselves through mutual cooperation. They imposed no-fly zone in Libya, provided 20 billion US dollar aid package to the governments of Bahrain and Oman where uprisings were about to topple monarchs and supported Syrian rebels against Syrian president Bashar el Assad. The prospect of the success of popular awakening in Jordan and Morocco were diminished through Saudi-Kuwait aid packages¹³. Strong popular uprising in a highly populated country like Egypt and the delayed response of the Gulf States to the Egyptian uprising brought an Islamists government in power under Mohammad Morsi in Egypt.

The Gulf dealing with Morsi's Egypt

During Morsi's time, the Gulf Arab States maintained cold relations with Egypt except Qatar that not only warmly welcomed the MB government but also provided financial support of two billion US dollars for economic stability. Qatar always had cordial ties with Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and its offshoot Hamas in Palestine. Although Morsi preferred Saudi Arabia for his first visit as a president and Saudi Arabia offered one billion US dollar in aid to Egypt yet there was a lack of warmth in relations between the two countries. In fact when Morsi launched his quartet project of managing Syrian conflict through a group of Egypt, Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia, Saudi Arabia was reluctant rather unwilling to pursue the project and attended only two meetings of Quartet. When the Gulf States couldn't protect Mubarak from losing power, they made sure not to let democratically government in Egypt to thrive. After Mubarak, they withheld their aid packages to Egypt, which implied that their money is not without services.

Morsi government was facing terrible economic and constitutional crisis backed by mutual coordination of Egyptian military and opposition groups that jeopardized Morsi's grip on power. International Monetary Fund (IMF) stipulated its aid package with subsidy cut in food and fuel items that Morsi government could not comply. The political chaos and economic disorder was exploited by local political parties, media, Supreme Constitutional Court and Egyptian military, which were backed by the Gulf States to overthrow the democratically elected president. Saudi and UAE governments planned the coup of 2013 that

¹³MdMudassirQuamar. "Managing the Arab Spring: The Saudi Way". *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, (17 July 2014), Page No. 141–163.

was carried out by the then defence minister Abdel Fattah Al Sisi¹⁴. The UAE government bribed local Egyptian media to broadcast over-exaggerated chaotic situation. Politicians were funded to ignite the flame against the MB government. The belated scheme to save Egyptian diplomacy for their subservience was the joint venture of Saudi Arabia and UAE that brought Al Sisi in power.

Some commentators argue that it was not politico-economic crisis that helped overthrow the Morsi rule but the regional players with compliance of Egyptian military had pre-planned that they will not let democracy to flourish in Egypt. The reasons were obvious. Democratic government would not have blindly complied with irrational and self-destructive policies of the Gulf countries. Egypt would have earned much privilege by building close ties with Turkey to delineate regional order. Egypt would have stabilized its economy through just and proper utilization of its highly potential natural resources and its geographical location that would have ended Egyptian financial dependency over regional and global powers. Through political prudence, economic stability and sensible diplomacy Egypt would have surpassed the Gulf States in potency over regional and international issues. Morsi government didn't feel bound under same regional and international security complexes with the Gulf States and America as existed in Mubarak period. Morsi government hinted this change of policy behaviour by visiting Iran, China and Russia despite having difference of opinion over Syrian conflict. China, Russia and Turkey pledged to provide aid packages to Egyptian government to diversify the old sources of funds to Egypt. The change of policy would have disrupted the traditional partnership or pattern of relations at regional and global level.

The overthrow of Morsi government was not possible without the support of internal forces especially Egyptian military that issued a statement of Egypt's allegiance to the Gulf States just after two months of Mubarak's departure. Though Mubarak's fall was a big shock for the Gulf States yet Saudi Arabia continued to have joint military exercises during interim period as well as under MB government¹⁵ that indicated that there was tacit bonding between the two military, which was not affected by the change or unseating of regimes. Media also played its vicious role against Morsi. After the fall of Mubarak, Arab media overstated the

¹⁴ Abdul Hamid Qutb. "AymanNour: Saudi planned the coup in Egypt, UAE carried it out". *Middle East Monitor*, August 23, 2018. <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20180823-ayman-nour-saudi-planned-the-coup-in-egypt-uae-carried-it-out/>. Accessed 26 January 2020.

¹⁵ Yasmine Farouk "More than money, post Mubarak Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf", *Gulf Research Center* (2014). Page No. 1-21

possible closeness between Egypt and Iran that hurried Gulf efforts of toppling Morsi government.

Warm Egypt-Gulf ties under Al Sisi

After the ousting of democratically elected president Morsi, the three Arab countries (Saudi Arabia, UAE and Kuwait) were the first in row to congratulate the new interim government. Al Sisi proved to be unconditionally and unnecessarily submissive to the directives of the Gulf States than any other previous Egyptian autocrat. UAE and Saudi Arabia not only planned the overthrow of democratically elected government and brought Al Sisi in power but they also strengthened his position by immediately providing \$8 billion worth of aid in a mix of cash, deposits to Egyptian Central Bank and oil products¹⁶. Beside this Egypt has received more than 20 billion US dollars of aid from different Gulf countries mainly UAE, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait since Al Sisi assumed power. Saudi Arabia and UAE also financed a 2 billion US dollars Egyptian-Russian arms deal to strengthen Egyptian military¹⁷.

These payments are not without services. Egyptian military is the biggest military force in the Arab world where as the Gulf States have small-sized armies that cannot fight a prolonged full-fledged war. The Gulf States want to mobilize and utilize Egyptian military for maintaining their regional security order. Al Sisi on several occasions reiterated that Egypt would immediately mobilize its forces if any Arab country is directly threatened¹⁸.

Khashoggi's killing and Egypt's stance

On 2 October 2018, Saudi consulate in Istanbul was alleged to have been involved in the killing of a Washington-based Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi under the command of King Salman. On his murder, instead of expressing condolence to the deceased family, Egyptian President Al Sisi held the view that we must trust the wisdom and bravery of king Salman and media is not playing a positive role in reporting this case.

¹⁶ "Saudi Arabia and UAE prop up Egypt regime with offer of \$8bn". *Financial Times*, 10 July 2013. <https://www.ft.com/content/7e066bdc-e8a2-11e2-8e9e-00144feabdc0> Accessed on 17 January 2020.

¹⁷ "Intrigue Deepens over Egypt-Russia Arms Deals," *Defense News*, 24 November 2013. www.defensenews.com/article/20131124/DEFREG01/311240009/Intrigue-Deepens-Over-Egypt-Russia-Arms-Deals Accessed on 27 January 2020.

¹⁸ "Egypt's Sisi says army will defend Gulf Arabs in case of direct threat". *Reuters*, 6 November 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-gulf-sisi/egypts-sisi-says-army-will-defend-gulf-arabs-in-case-of-direct-threat-newspaper-idUSKCN1NB1HI> Accessed on 28 January 2020.

In 2018, Egypt hosted joint military exercises in which eight Arab countries participated. In November 2019, UAE and Egypt jointly carried out a month long military drills under the title of Night Eagles.¹⁹

Complete submission of Egyptian diplomacy to the very security of the Gulf monarchs since Mubarak times highly affected its foreign policy pattern. It no more follows an independent foreign policy on regional issues as it pursued in Nasser era. Nasser though followed unstable strategies on regional and domestic issues yet his policies were, to a large extent, free of external pressure. Egypt played a crucial role in the Middle Eastern affairs. Instead of following directives it used to define regional policy standpoints. Mubarak's strategies have cornered Egypt to the Gulf region and its security. Egypt is playing a role of a client state despite having geo-political significance. These strategies have subsided the credibility of Egypt's state sovereignty. Furthermore, it neutralized the support of Egypt to the Palestinians cause at state level and defused the hostility of Egypt against its archenemy, Israel. At regional level Palestinians are left isolated in their struggle for a Palestinian state. Linking Egypt's security to the security of the Gulf States and the concentration of the Gulf States against the Iranian rising influence has abandoned Egypt to devote its services against Iran, which never directly threatened the national security of Egypt. Moreover, this phenomenon forced Egyptian administration to neglect internal politico-economic disorder and changing scenario in the proximity of Egyptian territory especially Syria and Libya.

Qatar-Saudi Crisis and Egypt

Qatar-Saudi crisis that culminated in the severing of the diplomatic ties between Qatar on one side and the group of Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt and Bahrain on the other side in June 2017 actually started when latter countries were alleged to have been involved in launching counter-coup attempt against the emir of Qatar Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani in 1996. Though the coup attempt was foiled but the Gulf countries continued to propagate against the country in one way or the other. The same year launching of Doha-based Al Jazeera network added to the flame, which was highly criticized for its independent reporting against Mubarak and other leaders of the Gulf States. Qatar government also gave asylum to Muslim Brotherhood affiliated cleric Yusuf Al Qardawi whose party in Egypt was victim of Mubarak atrocities. After Mubarak fall, when MB came in power, Qatar was the country that not only welcomed

¹⁹Hasnain Tayea. "Warm Reception of Sisi in UAE Proves Egypt's Leading Place: AlObeidi". *Sada Elbalad English*, November 14, 2019. <https://see.news/warm-reception-of-sisi-in-uae-proves-egypts-leading-place-al-obeidi/> Accessed on 27 January 2020.

its government but supported Egyptian ailing economy through aid package of worth two billion US dollars. Qatar remains to be the only Arab country, which actively supports Palestinians people through state-sponsored aid.

With the rise of Justice and Development party (AKP) in power and the pursuit of strategic depth doctrine in its foreign policy, Turkey began to strengthen its ties with regional countries. Subsequent economic growth due to new doctrine and similar stance over regional issues including Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Palestinians conflict, Syrian crisis and Iranian nuclear crisis brought Qatar and Turkey closer.

Unlike other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, Qatar maintained cordial relations with Iran due to combined gas field in the Persian Gulf and Qatar's willingness to resolve Iranian nuclear crisis through dialogue between the Western powers and Iran with the mutual efforts of Turkey and Qatar. Qatar never openly criticised Iran except on the eve of assault over Saudi embassy in Tehran when it called back its ambassador. Despite having differences over several regional conflicts and crisis Qatar refrained from developing hostile views against Iran in an attempt to pursue independent foreign policy. Qatar's standing of not accounting Iran as the sole adversary of GCC countries in the region made it sceptical in the eyes of Gulf Arab countries. Appeasing Gulf Arab countries on one side and wishing to maintain cordial relations with Iran and Islamists in the region on the other side created difficult position for Qatar in the region.

Alongside Al Jazeera reporting, Qatar was highly criticised for its outright support to the Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood after the Gulf-sponsored coup carried out by the then Egyptian defence minister Al Sisi against Morsi government in 2013. The support to the Palestinians and Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Qatar's unwillingness to condemn Iran as an outright foe (especially over Iranians interference in Syria and Bahrain) is accounted as supporting terrorism.

The irony of the issue is that despite the fact that Egyptian factor was one of the prominent issues due to which Qatar was accused of supporting terrorism but Egypt never dared to challenge Qatar unless Saudi Arabia decisively took action against Qatar. Egypt simply followed the suit but didn't take initiative via-a-vis Qatar. This precedent highlights the very nature of Egyptian state as a client state that follows the directions but does not set the pattern.

Yemen conflict and Egypt

The focus of Egyptian regime in supporting the GCC monarchs remained to be a significant component of Egyptian foreign policy under Al Sisi. This assumption is true in case of Yemen conflict. Egypt engaged itself into the conflict as an ally of Saudi Arabia. Just like the Syrian conflict got intensified and exacerbated due to foreign interventions, Yemen faced the same situation following its popular awakening. Foreign meddling to either suppress or succeed the waves of popular awakening worsened Yemen issue and transformed it from an internal crisis to an international conflict.

With the rise of Mubarak in power, Egypt shifted from one regional security complex to another. Egypt deviated from its traditional partnership on Yemen conflict, supporting Saudi and other Gulf monarchs against Iranian-backed Houthi rebels²⁰. Though current Yemen war is the reflection of broader level of rivalry between Iran and the Gulf Arab countries, Egyptian role is of immense significance and throws weight to the side it supports. Increasing Iranian interference on Eastern (Yemen) and Western (Bahrain) side of Arabian Peninsula and extension of Houthi attacks into Gulf states has increased importance of Egypt for the Gulf states due to its unconditional commitment to the Gulf Arab security. UAE is well aware of this notion therefore Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Zayed Al Nahyan visited Egypt on 22 May 2019 following 12 May 2019 attack on four cargo vessels off the UAE coast and 14 May 2019 attack on two oil pumping stations in Saudi Arabia by the Houthi rebels. This visit aimed at getting assurance from Egyptian authorities of Egyptian support in such tense condition between Iran and the Gulf states, which President Al Sisi affirmed.²¹

The Syria Conflict and Egypt

The Syrian conflict is the test case to judge Egypt's complete subservience to the dictates of the Gulf monarchs. Being an Arab republic Syria enjoyed special relations with Egypt during Nasser period. In fact the two republics merged for three and half years from February 1958 till September 1961 forming United Arab Republic. Both the states

²⁰“Into Egypt's role in the Yemeni crisis”. *Egypt Today*, 13 August 2018.

<https://www.egypttoday.com/Article/2/55920/Into-Egypt's-role-in-the-Yemeni-crisis> accessed on 1 February 2020.

²¹ Ahmad Gomaa. “What does the UAE expect from Egypt?”. *Al-Monitor*, 22 May 2019.

<https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/05/egypt-saudi-arabia-uae-bin-zayed-visit-iran-tension-sisi.html#ixzz6CE7NBTMn> accessed on 22 January 2020.

cooperatively fought against Israel in all Arab-Israel Wars. These relations turned tense after president Sadat visited Jerusalem in 1977 followed by Camp David Accords. However diplomatic ties were restored between the two countries after many years when Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak and Syrian president Hafez el Assad met in Damascus in 1990.

Syrian support to Iran in Iran-Iraq war and its meddling in Lebanon deteriorated its relations with the Arab World. As a part of his rapprochement strategy to unify Arab countries, Mubarak drew closer to Syria, which desperately needed coordination with any Arab country to end Syrian isolation in the Arab world²². Iraqi invasion over Kuwait provided Syria a chance to mend its ties with the Arab Gulf countries when it supported the US-led coalition against Iraq. Egypt-Syria bilateral ties strengthened further when Mubarak offered and attempted mediation between Turkey and Syria over their dispute on the Kurdish issue and Tigris-Euphrates water²³.

Arab Spring not only unseated Mubarak but also drove Syria into a politico-military quagmire. New political administration in Egypt under Morsi criticized Syrian president for neglecting popular demand, supported protestors and cut off diplomatic ties with Syria.²⁴ Dictatorial regimes in both the countries reinforced each other whereas democratic government in Egypt found no rationality to side with the Syrian dictator.

As Al Sisi unconditionally supported the Gulf Arab States, he sided with the Syrian opposition following Gulf monarch's policy of countering Iranian influence in Syria. Despite the fact that both the regimes shared commonality i.e. they suppressed popular demand of democratic governance in their respective countries, Al Sisi chose to oppose the Syrian government. His decision of supporting opposition groups was due to the fact that US-allied Gulf monarchs were the regional backers and financiers of the rebel groups fighting against Assad. As these countries indicated shift in their plan for the Syrian War, Egypt immediately followed their strategy.

The Gulf Arab countries began to show their support for Syrian president by resuming diplomatic mission, reopening of border crossing and issuing statements in favour of Syrian Armed forces against Turkish military operation in Northern Syrian border. UAE reopened

²²Caryle Murphy. "Mubarak, Assad seal new bond". *The Washington Post*, May 3, 1990.

²³Douglas Jehl. "Mubarak Visits Syria in Effort To Defuse Crisis With Turkey". *The New York Times*, 5 October 1998.

²⁴"Morsi Cuts Egypt's Syria Ties, Backs No-fly Zone", *Voice of America*, 15 June 2013.

its embassy in December 2018²⁵. Jordan reopened the border crossing between Syria and Jordan on 15 October 2018. Bahrain government also confirmed that Syrian diplomatic mission is operating in Manama²⁶. The Syrian embassy was never closed down in Kuwait since the day one.

Egypt not only hinted its support for Bashar el Assad but also called for the reinstatement of the Arab League membership for Syria. The Gulf countries manifested shift of their strategy vis-à-vis Syrian regime due to increasing Turkish influence and presence in the Syrian War. This change of policy is aimed at curtailing the increasing influence of Turkey in the region and to ensure Arab clout in the Syrian conflict against Turkey. Hence Egypt utterly supported Syrian Armed Forces against the Turkish military operation i.e. “Operation peace spring” in Northern Syrian border²⁷. The rapprochement between the Gulf countries and the Syrian regime is not simply to expand Arab clout in the war but to exhaust Turkish military power by supporting Syrian Armed Forces. The US and its Gulf allies wish Turkey to drain all its energies in this war so that it could not sustain its status as a regional power by 2023 when the treaty of Lausanne is going to expire.

Conclusion

The Egypt-Gulf Arab States relations are not simply enclosed in economic-security framework. Gulf states interference in Egyptian politics indicates another dimension of their efforts to sustain Egyptian subservience to their regional policies. Amidst protests during the uprising against Mubarak, the protestors were using sarcastic slogans against Saudi and Gulf governments.

Egypt's geo-political significance and its economic development are highly hindered by its alliance with the Gulf States and its commitment to their security and domination. In face of Gulf-Iran rivalry, Egypt should play a role of mediator and focus on its security and economic development. The political instability and economic vulnerability of Egypt have led USA, the Gulf States and Iran to exploit Egypt's position and undermine its strategic importance in the region. Egypt's active support to Palestinian cause in past kept Palestinian issue on top of regional security agenda and restricted Israel from construction of its illegal

²⁵ “UAE reopens Damascus embassy after seven years”. *Aljazeera*, 28 December 2018.

²⁶ “Kuwait expects more Arab countries to reopen embassies in Damascus”. *Reuters*, 1 January 2019.

²⁷ George Mikhail. “Egypt boosts ties with Syria”, *Al Monitor*, 14 November 2019. <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/11/egypt-parliament-host-syria-ambassador-to-restore-relations.html> Accessed on 6 February 2020.

settlements. Syrian, Libyan and Yemen conflicts and Iranian-Gulf interference into these conflicts have eclipsed the Palestinian conflict in the region. Moreover, the Egypt-Gulf security paradigm has highly undermined the very security of the Palestinians.