



Egypt's Influence in the Arab World Today

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In 2015, Egypt officialized the purchase from France of 24 French Rafales and two projection and command ships. 6 billion, it seems to be striving to maintain a leading position in the Arab world; but is it really succeeding and does it have the means to influence the Arab world today? Is it, in the wake of the popular revolts that successively overthrew two regimes, capable of asserting itself as a modern power?

In 2011, the Arab revolt movements initiated in Tunisia in response to the abuses of the Ben Ali government will spread to other neighbouring countries (Algeria, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen, Syria...). The following year, no longer able to face popular pressure, Hosni Mubarak, who had been at the head of Egypt for 30 years, resigned. Suddenly, the country seemed to be ready for a change that would open the way to more democracy, more individual liberties and economic renewal. But the ambitions of the demonstrators quickly faded as the army seized the violent powers that were supposed to prepare for the democratic transition. The only viable political force, the Muslim Brotherhood Party came to power legally and for the first time in the legislative and then presidential elections. It is, however, a totalitarian party, repressed under Nasser, which demands the Islamisation of political life and the application of the Sharia. Its candidate, Mohamed Morsi, then ruled Egypt. But after only a few months, this new government was overthrown by a military coup in July 2013. Abdel Fattah al-Sissi, former Minister of the Armed Forces, pledged to turn the country around within two years.

Today, while Egypt is still and undeniably a great Arab regional, cultural and military power, with political power restored to it, it is also a country that has been able to rebuild its economy. However, it remains riddled with demographic, economic and security

weaknesses such that it is dependent on external, American and Arab financial infusions.

As it has demonstrated in the past, Egypt has forged itself a place of choice in the Arab world. But the various difficulties it is currently experiencing and which it does not seem to be able to overcome are still too numerous to give the few advances it has made a chance.

Because of its location between the Maghreb and Machreck, between the Mediterranean and the African continent, Egypt enjoys a privileged geographical situation. As far as the Arab world is concerned, it is, so to speak, at the crossroads between two very different worlds that history united during the Ottoman period. It was precisely during this same period that Egypt asserted itself as a great nation and as an example for the Arab provinces subject to the Sublime Gate of Constantinople.

Even while under Ottoman rule, the country soon attracted European covetousness. Bonaparte's expedition from 1798 to 1801 was experienced as a real shock by this Ottoman province, a shock linked to the technological and cultural progress of France. This European penetration was also and above all at the origin of the intellectual renaissance, the Nahda, which was to extend progressively during the 19th century to the various Arab provinces. Authors such as Rifa'a al-Tahtawi or, in a more contemporary era, Naguib Mahfouz, the only Arab writer to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, contributed to the image of Egypt as a source of knowledge. The advance it has made in the field of science is moreover consecrated by the opening of the University of Cairo in 1908. During this period of renewal, it was probably the army that benefited most from the modernization efforts. Mehmet Ali (1769-1849), a soldier of Albanian origin who climbed up the hierarchy and skillfully seized power in 1805, inaugurated important reforms, notably by introducing conscription. From then on, his army seized many territories, restored order in the name of the Ottoman Sultan and, above all, gave Egypt greater autonomy. In the course of time and in spite of the protectorate established by Great Britain in 1882, the country was emancipated from the Ottoman or colonial yoke and obtained the beginnings of independence in 1922. This military heritage is still very present today, the Egyptian army being the most important force on the African continent. With 500,000 men for a population of 85 million, it also relies on the Ministry of Military Production or the Arab Industrialization Organization, which gives it an economic power of the first order. However, describing the Egyptian army cannot be done without mentioning its dependence on external funding.

In the first place, American aid has been in place since the Camp David agreements in 1978 and has been virtually uninterrupted since then. It has been estimated at 1.3 billion dollars for 2013, i.e. nearly a third of its budget and would cover 80% of its equipment expenditure. Dependence on the United States took on a different face when Cairo made the choice in 1991 to join the American coalition against Iraq. While this strategy enabled it to wipe out Sadat's military debt to the Americans (about seven billion dollars), it revealed above all a lack of solidarity between Arab countries. Moreover, Egypt's economy now depends very much on the will of the Gulf States. While the uprisings of 2012 and 2014 were built against the backdrop of an economic crisis, the government of former President Mohamed Morsi had to cope with fuel shortages and power outages. In an unprecedented move, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates generously provided \$8 billion in financial assistance to Egypt immediately after Abdel Fattah al-Sissi's seizure of power. Thus, for the new government, economic recovery is as crucial as the fight against terrorism; these are the two key objectives of the current policy. In this context, the year 2015 ended with a rather positive economic balance sheet. Indeed, despite a struggling

extractive industry due to the fall in hydrocarbon prices, other sectors, including manufacturing, tourism and construction, have stimulated the local economy. In this respect, the first months of 2016 look very promising for the local economy; China has signed agreements with Egypt for a total investment of \$15 billion in electricity, transport and infrastructure. To this should be added the growing share of revenues from the Suez Canal. Abdel Fattah al-Sissi has gambled on its extension to double the capacity of maritime passage and increase its current revenues from five to 13.2 billion dollars by 2023. If the amount of the forecasts can lead to discussions, this undertaking led by the President is already proving to be a success. Firstly, because the project was finalised in one year as he had announced, but above all because the President succeeded in directly involving the Egyptian people, who contributed 80% of the funding. In doing so, he achieved an important goal: that of uniting the Egyptian people around his projects and policies.

At least, that is what one might expect from an initial approach. The truth is quite different, however, because even if the power in place seems to have been restored, Egyptian society today remains highly divided and the territory is difficult to control.

Since the first two popular movements defeated the regimes of H. Mubarak and then of M. Morsi, the current military government of al-Sissi, aware of the risk of a new popular discontent, has sought the support of its population by various means, even if it means stifling the first attempts at protest. In the aftermath of Mr Morsi's fall, the interim President announced a road map for elections and the drafting of a new constitution. The new constitution was adopted by referendum in 2014 after being prepared by a "committee of 50" made up of selected personalities including only five women. Once elected, President al-Sissi gave himself two years to redress the situation in the country, which had been ravaged by four years of political instability. From a political point of view, it can be said that the democratic process is progressing thanks to the holding of presidential and legislative elections. However, these measures mask the reality of a highly contested system that favours support for al-Sissi while avoiding a repetition of the electoral phenomenon that brought the Muslim Brotherhood to power. The experience of the deposed President Mubarak and the accession to power of the democratically elected Muslim Brotherhood was most likely sufficient to al-Sissi to decide to reduce the freedoms offered by the polls and to conduct campaigns to reduce support for former President Mubarak. Morsi. Thus, from September 2013, the Muslim Brotherhood were arrested by the thousands and their assets seized. By decree, they become a terrorist organisation in December 2013, which Saudi Arabia will also do a few months later. From then on, the climate quickly degenerated and an atmosphere of mutual suspicion set in. In the spring of 2014, the courts sentenced hundreds of Morsi's supporters to death, including Badie, head of the brotherhood. Magistrate Nagy Shehata symbolises the current trend towards expeditious and pro-Sissi justice. At the head of the Extraordinary Court to judge cases of terrorism, he displays a real zeal for collective sentences, whether death or life sentences, and without taking individual rights into account. In 2014, in collective trials, he sentenced 183 people to death and 230 to life imprisonment. This violent repression is tearing the country apart. Rather than quelling the rebellion, it is fuelling revolt and can even tip the most hesitant towards extremism. This is probably one of the major strengths of the activist groups that regularly operate in Cairo and the Sinai "buffer zone". Moreover, the terrorist threat can no longer be reduced to a pro-Sissi versus pro-Morsi relationship; it is now a multi-faceted threat that regularly shakes the country despite a repressive and indiscriminate increase in security. In Cairo, new small groups have emerged, fuelled by hatred against the ruling power. "Popular Resistance", 'Molotov' and 'Ajnad Masr' were born out of the radicalisation of the younger generations in the face

of repression. And they constitute a recruitment of choice for the most radical groups advocating global jihadism in Syria or the Sinai. Cut off from the rest of Egypt, the Sinai region remains an area under a state of emergency, unlike the rest of the country. It is now home to the "Sinai Province" group, which pledged allegiance to EI in November 2014 and has increased its strike capabilities while moving closer to groups active in Syria, Iraq or Libya.

The population of Sinai is being hunted down and separated from the rest of Egypt, destabilising the country and depriving it of some of its human skills. This is exacerbated by the fact that Egypt has been suffering for several years from the departure abroad of part of its skilled population. Today, the total number of Egyptian emigrants, which is difficult to quantify because many of them are in an illegal situation, is estimated at between three and seven million. These emigrants work mainly in the Gulf, in neighbouring Libya, but also in Europe and North America. This phenomenon highlights the inability of this country to provide for the basic needs of its population and to unite it around a national economic dynamic that would put it at the forefront of the region. On the other hand, it increases its dependence on foreign countries that provide employment and income.

In the end, Egypt does not seem to have grasped the opportunity for a real challenge that would enable it in the short term to breathe new life into the entire region. To do so, it should start by rethinking, if not definitively reversing, what roots it in past values and prevents it from renewing itself. The disproportionate power of the army and the weight of religion are two factors that hinder its development. Thus, the strengthening of military capabilities contributes first of all to the strengthening of the power in place. But perhaps the Egyptians themselves have been unable to conceive of their future other than by military force since the revolution of 1952 and the rise to power of the free officers.

Perhaps they are equally unable to shake off the religion that divides the country so much and threatens its territorial integrity. Moreover, the new constitution devotes its full place to religion rather than limiting it. Article 2 states that "Islam is the religion of the State and Arabic is the official language..." and that "... the principles of Islamic Shari'a are the main source of legislation...". This new constitution also offers good prospects for the University of al-Azhar, which is now "...the main reference point for religious matters and the world...(Art.7)".

Finally, is it possible that today's Egypt will soon become more democratic? Everything seems to indicate that not, because the current president plays an essential role for the stability and future of the country. Like his historical predecessors, Abdel Fattah al-Sissi is seeking to make his action long-lasting by relying on monumental projects. And, like them, he has succeeded in establishing his authority with an international, mainly Arab, audience. Even if it means confirming or increasing Egypt's dependence.

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