BESA PERSPECTIVES
THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Morsi's Egypt and Ahmadinejad's Iran: Much Ado Over Next to Nothing

by Prof. Hillel Frisch

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 196, February 10, 2013

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi's hosting last week of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad signals a potential improvement in ties between Egypt and Iran. It also sends a strong message to the US that Morsi's Egypt is different than Mubarak's Egypt. Morsi's move, however, will backfire, as it endangers Cairo's receiving much-needed economic aid from the US and Gulf states. Ultimately he needs the US and Gulf countries more than they need him.

Mohamed Morsi, Egypt's first elected president, is learning the hard way about how difficult it is to implement personal convictions as head of state. Domestically he was surprised by the resistance put up by the national opposition to his attempts to politically Islamize Egypt. In foreign affairs, his attempts to improve relations with Iran by personally inviting Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the Organization of the Islamic Conference, which the Iranians would have in any event attended, will run against stiff opposition that no red carpet, fanfare, and ceremonies at Cairo airport can possibly hide.

For Morsi, improving relations with Iran is above all an attempt to send a message to both domestic and foreign audiences that Egypt under Morsi is not the client state of the United States as purportedly (and mistakenly) Mubarak's Egypt's was perceived to be. The message is especially important after Morsi delivered to the West on Gaza what Mubarak refused to do between 2001, when the first Qassams hit Israel, and his downfall a decade later – to press Hamas to impose a complete ceasefire free of the trickle of missiles that characterized previous "lulls" between Israel and Hamas under Egyptian brokerage.

Unfortunately for the Egyptian president, his efforts will only boomerang not only to conflicting state interests, but due to rising sectarianism amongst the overwhelmingly Sunni Egyptian public as well.

A news item released by Egypt's central bank a day before the February 5, 2013 visit by Ahmadinejad – that Egyptian foreign currency reserves dropped by 9 percent in the last month to $13 billion, down from $32 billion before Mubarak's downfall – offers a good backdrop to Morsi's hopes to improve relations with Iran. Egypt's economy, suffering from the wear and tear of domestic contention since the revolution, is in clear need of economic aid. This money can come only from two sources: the United States and Europe (via the IMF, which they control, and directly through the economic aid they dispense) or the Gulf states.

Both sources have been weary to dispense economic aid to Egypt in the recent past despite Saudi and UAE commitments of $7 billion of aid in 2011, and will be wearier all the more should Morsi even formally renew relations with Iran, let alone improve them. Morsi will also have to face the repercussions such a move might have on the one million Egyptians who work in the Gulf states and send back the vast part of their earnings to their families in Egypt, including Morsi's son, who is a physician in Saudi Arabia.

For the Gulf states, even more so than for the United States, any kind of Egyptian-Iranian entente would be regarded as one more move in a deteriorating regional security situation that began with the loss of Iraq to the Iranian-backed Shiites in 2004, Iran's progress towards possessing a nuclear weapon since then, and the repercussions of revolution in the "Arab Spring" which is worrisomely being played out in Bahrain.

On the domestic scene, while there are many Egyptians who desire improved ties with Iran, there are also many opposed to such an improvement on sectarian and doctrinal grounds, some of which is related to the prestige afforded to Egypt's perception as the Sunni Muslim world's preeminent state. This sentiment can only be attributed to the fact that Egypt hosts the Islamic world's foremost religious institution, al-Azhar University. But this is also an institution that is weary of Shiite doctrine – of Iranian clerics and politicians who deride Sunni Islam – and that fears what they perceive as Iranian attempts to "Shiize" Egypt's Sunni population.

Common to both the al-Azhar elites and a wide swath of Egypt's politically-minded public, including many Salafis, is the sense of rage against Iranian and Hizballah support of both the Assad regime in Syria and the al-Maliki regime in Iraq. In both countries, non-Sunni regimes are perceived as

suppressing their Sunni populations. Elsewhere in the Arab world, for example in countries such as Bahrain and Yemen, Iran is perceived as supporting movements that destabilize these Sunni-ruled states.

Historical memory also influences popular negative Egyptian perceptions of Iran. In the mid-tenth century, Shiite revolutionaries clandestinely took over Egypt, out of which emerged the Fatimid dynasty that ruled Egypt for over a century. It was the only Shiite dynasty to ever rule in the area. There is a latent fear that this might happen again with the support of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

All of these pitfalls, known obviously to Morsi as well, beg the question why he chose to snub the noses of the United States and the Gulf rulers at this point in time. Greeting Ahmadinejad at the airport may be due to Morsi's pragmatic side. He might be playing the Iranian card in the hope of a hefty payoff from the Gulf states to keep Egypt on their side.

Morsi's Egypt, unfortunately, might be too weak to bluff its potential donors. Egypt, as a state bereft of rich oil and gas fields, has nowhere to turn but to the United States and Gulf countries, no matter how loyal Morsi remains to his Muslim Brotherhood convictions.

Prof. Hillel Frisch is a professor of political studies and Middle East studies at Bar-Ilan University, and a senior research associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies.

BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity
of the Greg Rosshandler Family