



# PERSPECTIVES

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## Sisi's Egypt Has the Upper Hand Over Erdoğan's Turkey

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The foreign policy of Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, a combination of imperialism and Muslim Brotherhood sentiment, was most visible in his moves against Abdel Fattah Sisi's Egypt. Ankara is beginning to recognize its folly. Will the new US administration learn from its mistake?

The ascendance of non-Arab states and the decline of Arabic-speaking states over the past few decades has become a common theme in political commentary and academic analysis. This is especially true with regard to Egypt, the most populous Arabic-speaking country in the Middle East.

Comparisons between Egypt's trajectory and that of Iran and Turkey placed the former in a negative light, and not only in political terms. Economic historians note how in the post-WWII era, the Turkish economy grew by a respectable 2%+ per capita per year compared to Egypt's 1%. They point out that despite the countries' similar population and geographical size, Turkish exports dwarf those of Egypt by nearly two to one (\$168 million in 2018 compared to Egypt's \$88 million). Moreover, most Turkish exports are industrial while Egyptian exports are heavily weighted toward natural resources and agriculture.

In comparison to both Turkey and Iran, Egypt's scientific output, measured in terms of articles in leading scientific journals and the number of citations they engender among scientific peers in other countries, has been appalling. Turkey far outpaced Egypt in the final decade of the last century, thanks in part to the emergence of leading private Turkish universities that enjoyed the patronage of major commercial companies. In the past decade and a half, it

was the turn of Iranian universities, which closed the scientific gap between Turkey and Iran and outpaced Egypt by a large margin.

Egypt's cultural hegemony in the Arabic-speaking world, so striking in the 1950s and 1960s, faced increasing competition from Iraq and Syria during the next two decades. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, that hegemony has been throttled by Turkish TV serials and movies—particularly notable as Turkish entertainment products are dubbed from a language not understood by the vast majority of the Arab-speaking world.

A good illustrator of Egypt's declining cultural fortunes is the Panorama website, the leading media venue among Israel's Arab population. The site provides links to an abundance of Turkish and Syrian-Lebanese serials and only a minority of Egyptian-produced fare—a far cry from the days when the same public, as well as much of the Jewish population in Israel who came from Arabic-speaking countries, was glued to Egyptian films on Friday afternoons.

Turkey's ascendancy over Egypt on all these fronts soared during Erdoğan's rule. In the first decade of AKP rule, Turkey became the darling of foreign investment, was one of the fastest growing economies in the world, and emerged as a tourism heavyweight (fifth in the world) with over 30 million tourists, or five times the number of visitors to Egypt. It also became an international aviation hub with both Turkish Airlines and Istanbul airport ranking among the top 20 in the world in their respective categories.

There was little to hold back Erdoğan, who combines imperialist ambitions with Islamist beliefs, from exhibiting his enmity to Sisi's Egypt at every turn. He gave refuge to Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood members after the 2013 counter-coup/revolution in which Sisi deposed Muhammad Morsi and decimated MB ranks; harangued against Sisi's purportedly lawless coup against a democratically elected president; described Sisi as a gangster; and most recently intervened with massive military aid in support of the Tripoli government in Libya's west. Egypt backs the opposing Benghazi-based government in the east and its military arm, the Libyan National Army of Khalifa Haftar, close to Egypt's 1,000-km border with Libya.

Yet the tide seems to be turning in favor of Egypt. Sisi's more modest policy of focusing on his country's internal problems over foreign adventures is bearing fruit. The more imperially ambitious foreign relations of Erdoğan, who in his first years in power promised a foreign policy with zero problems with the neighbors, are now at odds with almost everyone outside Turkey. This is despite the considerable resource gap in favor of Turkey, including its membership in NATO.

The turning of the tide is best expressed in Ankara-initiated moves to reach an accommodation with Egypt. Erdoğan's first move was to send a clear message to the domestic media to stop denouncing Egypt and its leader. Ankara shut down Arabic language media sites operated by Egyptian MB members who took refuge in Turkey and threatened deportation for those who do not abide by these directives.

Turkey's new bent is clearly based on its realization that favoring the MB, or privileging Qatar and its rabid anti-Egyptian stance, is backing the wrong horse. It is wiser to recognize and live with Egypt, which is firmly ruled by one of the veteran deep state structures in the region and situated in an important geostrategic setting.

Hamas in Gaza contributed much to the Turkish learning curve. After Sisi became president, Hamas and Turkey harbored illusions that Hamas would be able to bypass Egypt by relying on Turkish and Qatari support. These illusions were dispelled as Egypt compelled Hamas officials to submit to often humiliating treatment, including requiring them to meet their Fatah foes in Cairo. There is simply no way Turkey can replace Egypt's clout in Palestinian affairs.

There's only one question left: what the new US administration will learn from all this. Will it be trapped in lawfare against Sisi's regime compared to a Turkish regime whose record on human rights is no better, or will it recognize the importance of Sisi and his firm grip on Egypt's helm?

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