


# “The potential of Egypt’s soft power post Arab Spring”

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## The potential of Egypt's soft power post Arab Spring

### Abstract

After being called 'Hollywood of the East', Egypt's soft power has witnessed a decline from the start of the years 2000s; due to 9/11/2001 and its aftermath, until it reached its lowest point since the Arab Spring in 2011. The deterioration hit its media sector, arts industry, sports and diplomacy. However, since 2014 a revival for one of its soft power capabilities happened. Its diplomacy. Diplomacy is on the rise and has some potential to restore Egypt's status as 'an active' regional player. To illustrate that Egypt is now a temporary Security Council member in the United Nations for two years. This status earned after a lot of recommendation from Arab, African and Islamic blocks in the Security Council. To win this seat it required a lot of diplomatic efforts and lobbying which were successful at the end after being absent from non-permanent membership in UNSC since 1997. The first signs of decline in its diplomatic power started in 2006. This was due to USA's neglect for Egypt and putting a lot of pressure on it from Bush junior's Administration to comply with US values and interests in the region. This has been accentuated in the Bush Doctrine and was a natural outcome of September 11 attacks in 2001. The argument in here is that despite the decline in Egyptian status on all levels, and its soft power among them, due to turmoil resulting from the Arab Spring yet Egypt still has potential for revival and gaining a leading role due to its soft power. This study will be based on qualitative analysis to prove the argument. A diplomat and an academic have been interviewed to further illustrate the ideas expressed in this article. There are a number of issues that show success in Egypt's diplomacy to prove this argument since 2014.

**Keywords:** Arab Spring, diplomacy, Egypt, soft power.

**JEL Classification:** F51, F59.

### Introduction

**Defining soft power.** The father of this term; soft power is Joseph Nye professor of International relations. He defined it as, "the ability to affect other's behavior by coercion, inducement or attraction" (2007, p. 163). He further elaborated that for states their main source of soft power lies in their foreign policy, culture and political values (Nye in world politics, 2004b, 2007, p. 164). The aim of resorting to soft power is not to use force or get involved in aggressive action between two parties, but to "achieve desired outcomes through attraction rather than coercion" as Janice Martin said (2007, p. 98). She further elaborated on defining attraction as, "it is constructed through communicative exchange (2007, p. 99). With that she uses the Habermasian definition of attraction. Martin added that soft power is deeply rooted in communication (2007, p. 100). Another definition for soft power given by David Ellwood is that it is one of the foreign policy tools used by states to "define themselves as global leaders" and one could add or regional one too (2014). For Ellwood the use of soft power is to gain achievements and advantages in international relations. These definitions boost the classification of Diplomacy as one of the soft powers used by states and non-state actors to gain their interest. And since diplomacy's

main focus "was and is" on communication as Jurgen Kleiner said as well as it is the language of foreign policy then it will be tackled in this piece (2010, p. 1).

### 1. Egypt's soft power

The rise of Egypt's status as a leader on the regional stage to a great extent is owed to its soft power. With a history renowned of an ancient civilization that dates to seven thousand years, Egypt gained both enemies and friends. Those enemies, such as the French and the British, aimed at occupying it several times until they finally withdrew in 1952 with the independence from the British occupation that lasted for 72 years. Then by 1956 another aggression on Egypt happened with the Tripartite aggression from two old occupying forces; these were the French and the British and the new rising enemy at that point in time on the stage; Israel. This aggression ended up with a political victory to Egypt and its leader Gamal Abd El Nasser (Nasser). Since then the late 1950s and early 1960s marked the peak of Egypt's soft power which lead it to become a vivid "regional" leader.

Speeches given by Nasser were heard across the region and many of them were very influential to the extent that as, Mr. Graeme Bannerman from the Middle East Institute once described them in a personal interview as, "Nasser would give a speech in Cairo and rally a riot in Beirut's streets against the US" (2016). This showed the pervasiveness of Egypt on the rest of its neighbors. It was also due to Egypt's soft power and Charisma of late President Nasser that

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facilitated the chance for unity between Egypt & Syria in 1958, although it was short lived until 1962. Then another attempt for unity happened with Yemen but was soon dissolved due to 1967 defeat.

Egypt's Cairo became known as "Hollywood of the East", any Arab actor, singer or artist who wishes to gain popularity, regardless to their nationality, would come to Egypt and join its cinema and in no time she/he becomes a super star in the Arab world. This has been a feature not just since the 1950s but has been ongoing since late 1930s and 1940s and arguably until today with a lesser degree. The reason for Cairo being so attractive for new actors and artists, is that Egypt is relatively a cheap country to live in, so they can afford living in it until they reach the level of popularity they need to be recognized back at their homes. Nevertheless, Egypt is well known to be a melting pot and people who move in easily accommodate and feel at home. Moreover, Egypt is highly dense in population, therefore gaining popularity among this big nation helps in becoming widespread famous in the Arab world. This has turned to be true with countless famous people in many fields so far.

This is regarding one segment which is the arts and media sector. This has helped in Egyptians' popularity themselves. The Egyptian dialect is easily & widely understood among its Arab neighbors who although share same language but are of different dialects.

There is another area which Egypt proved its leadership in via soft power. This is sport. Although Egyptian sport is of a variety, yet it is most famous for its Football team. Though internationally this team has not been so successful but regionally it has earned its reputation as the "pharaohs' team". The Egyptian football team has been named by the *Guardian* as the, "the best team Africa has produced" despite the fact they hardly got represented in the World's cup (Wilson, 2010). It has been able to win the African cup for seven times but the most outstanding victory came after winning the African cup successively three times in a row in 2006, 2008 & 2010. This has built a strong reputation for the Egyptian team around Africa.

Since 2010 Egyptian football team was not able to gain any accomplishments. The reason for this is the political turmoil the country has been through since January 2011. More importantly, the massacre of Port Said Stadium in Feb 2012, which resulted in the death of seventy two ultras fans. This incident has marked the end of football legacy on local level; the Egyptian league. As well as it had its impact on the team's regional status in African cup and even

on joining the world's cup. The Egyptian league was withheld since 2012 and when it was resumed by 2013 matches were played without the attendance of fans in the stadiums. There have been many attempts by Egyptian football fans; ultras to try to watch the games live and by force against the police/security forces' will but that was met in an antagonistic way from the police side.

## 2. The decline in Egypt's soft power

9/11/2001 did not just influence the US negatively but it spread its shock waves into the Middle East. The US foreign policy under Bush administration became very hawkish even on its long term allies in the region. Egypt was one of them. The US has put a lot of pressure on its Middle Eastern allies post 9/11 to apply certain things that present US values, among a few were democracy, economic reforms and promotion of human rights. Egypt, which had a slow pattern in implementing these policies, was blacklisted by the US. As Vincent put it, he said this resulted in isolation of Egypt from "2002 until 2006" and as a result, "Egyptian diplomacy disappeared from the region and was left with defensive reactive stance" (Vincent, 2007 in 2011). An alternative to Egypt's role in Diplomacy found and replaced it by Turkey. Thus, this marked the loss of Egypt's soft power represented in diplomacy and US's attempt in isolating it. This rise of new regional powers was at the disadvantage for Egypt's status regionally and globally. It is worth mentioning that the US heavily relied on Egyptian diplomacy whenever the Palestinians & Israelis were brought together to the negotiating table. This is not just due to geographical location and neighboring border's impact but also as a result in the US trust in Egypt's diplomacy. With the Bush administration in power this topic of Peace process got neglected and so was Egypt's role (Vincent, 2011). This status of weak diplomacy continued even after 2006 that Vincent talked about from my own point of view due to the Mubarak's regime being over concerned about the inheritance project. This meant bringing Gamal Mubarak (his son) to power after him. This marked a priority for Mubarak and he marketed it in the US yet they never gave him a clear approval on it.

## 3. The potential for reawakening and rise

"Foreign policy is fundamentally a means of navigating amidst constrains as well as defining an independent path for a given state" (Vincent, 2011). A state's strength or weakness can be judged via its foreign policy decisions. If a state is taking an active role and represented in many international and regional organizations this shows its activism. Also,

when a state is viewed as acting independently in serving its own interests in the region and globally rather than complying with commands which serve the interests of super powers again this is a sign for its strength and awakening. This is now vivid post 2013 with Egypt's diplomatic efforts.

On describing Egyptian diplomacy Ambassador Dr. Mahmoud Karem, former Egyptian Ambassador to Belgium and NATO said in a personal interview, "Egyptian diplomacy is a school that proved itself and survived. During the past period it was subject to war because it represented the Egyptian state not the ruling regime. Even during the toughest times under the Muslim Brother's rule, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) remained strong to fight that" (Jan. 2016). Ambassador Karem further elaborated that the success or failure of Egypt's foreign policy decisions depend upon the recommendations that Ministry of Foreign Affairs gives to the president. It is worth mentioning that the Ministry of foreign Affairs is part of the executive institution, it's true that the president is the sponsor & decision maker of foreign policy, but the Ministry of foreign affairs has a big role in "alerting the president of the dangers, challenges surrounding the state and putting alternatives and plan for movement on the international affairs. The ministry helps in brain storming solutions to the problems" (Jan. 2016). Thus, since 2013 there has been cooperation between the president and ministry of foreign affairs which allowed Egyptian diplomacy to re-sparkle again and reinforce its role on the scene and gain these fruits. This has come after Egyptian diplomacy lived in a period of "toxic" atmosphere between 2012 and 2013.

#### **4. Fruitful diplomatic efforts**

As one of the signs for a fruitful diplomatic efforts is Egypt's reconciliation with its African neighbors. Although Egypt's membership in the African Union got suspended due to the overthrow of the Muslim Brother's regimes in June 30<sup>th</sup> 2013. Yet Egypt was able to be readmitted in a short while and to regain its African neighbors' trust. It is worth mentioning that it is in the African Union's Charter for membership to be a "democratically elected government" and the June 30<sup>th</sup> uprising was viewed as an overthrow of an "elected government", so its' membership got suspended (Al Akhbar, 2014). Later on the watch guards of the African Union have decided that the 2014 Egyptian presidential elections took place they resulted in an "elected" government brining in President Abd El Fattah El Sisi to office. Thus, it was evident the unfreezing of Egypt's membership back to the African Union.

Another sign for Egyptian diplomatic efforts' success is Egypt winning the non-permanent seat membership in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) for one year from 2016 till 2017. Egypt was deprived of this seat since 1997 which marked its weakness regionally and globally. Yet, with this change at this point in time this is a symbol that Egypt is representing the African and Arab blocks in the UNSC in 2016. As Sameh Shoukry the Egyptian Minister for Foreign Affairs emphasized, "This seat would guarantee the presence of Arab representation in the Security Council" (El Fekki, 2015).

Furthermore, due to its Diplomacy Egypt is perceived as playing a good role in its fight on terror and its advice has been well received by its neighbors and allies although it fell on deaf ears for a long time. Much of these accomplishments are owed to its diplomatic efforts. Egypt has proposed "an anti-terror joint force" with its Arab neighbors to fight terrorism in one of the meetings in the Arab League. This has been welcomed by states as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Jordan and Emirates and Secretary General of Arab League (AL) Mr. Nabil Al Araby (Bryon, 2015). Bryon has described this return for Egypt as a sign of more stability internally and a "reliable ally in the global war on terror" (2015). This shows the reflection of Egyptian internal stability on regional stabilization and security. This credibility of Egypt's fight on terror has been praised and welcomed not only by its Arab Allies but also globally. The US administration stressed the importance of Egypt's role in the war on terror especially ISIS currently, the US Secretary of State John Kerry said, "Egypt is an intellectual and cultural capital of the Muslim world" (Bryon, 2015).

#### **Conclusion**

Egypt's soft power has been known for its creativity. It is still influential. It has gone through a period of decline but still has potentials. The reasons for decline owed to domestic and external pressures. During the period of Muslim Brother's rule Egypt's soft power faced the obstacle of "religious extremism which forbade everything" (Karem, 2016). Diplomacy was no exception. The US has also played a role, as an external influence, in neglecting Egypt's importance to the region and worked on motivating other countries to rise on the regional players' stage. The Egyptian diplomatic efforts are now seen as better off than five years ago. It has helped improve Egypt's image abroad. This had its impact on straightening the negotiating power of Egypt. The proof is seen in the Arab and African support and change in attitude towards Egypt. In addition to Egypt's altering approach to its regional neighbors. Egypt is trying now to act as a role model to be imitated in other African

countries as well as Arab ones. Hence, diplomacy is a successful tool of resembling Egypt's soft power that rejects to be defeated post Arab Spring of 2011.

Egypt is playing an active role in peace keeping. This has been vivid in its keenness to join international and regional organizations that aim at promoting peace and security around the globe. It has been described as an important and active contributor in peacekeeping forces in the UN. To further illustrate, "Egypt has contributed to 37 UN missions with over 30,000 peacekeepers deployed in 24 countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Europe. Egypt has consistently been among the top contributors to peacekeeping operations around the world. It currently provides 2,000 military and police personal who serve under the UN flag in 9 missions.... Egypt has lost 28 of its peacekeepers while serving the cause of peace" (Egypt & Peacekeeping: Cairo Center for Conflict Resolution and Peacekeeping in Africa (CCCPA), 2014). Egypt's role is not only confined to peacekeeping but it is also related to peacebuilding, protection of civilians, emphasizing the role of regional and sub-regional organizations just to name a few (Egypt & Peacekeeping: CCCPA, 2014). This also adds more weight to the diplomatic power of Egypt because both roles are interconnected; diplomacy and peacekeeping. It is due to Egypt's diplomatic efforts to join these international and regional organizations that it was able to gain such a reputation with its peacekeeping forces. Thus, increasing the potential for Egypt's soft power post Arab Spring.

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Last but not least is the trust a regional organization feels toward Egypt's diplomatic capability. This regional organization is the Arab League. Egypt does not only host the headquarters of the Arab League in Cairo but also many of the Secretary Generals came from Egypt almost six out of them. This also reflects the hegemonic power Egypt has over its Arab neighbors. Despite the differences Arabs might experience with Egypt yet still Arabs have confidence in Egypt's diplomatic efforts'. Even though Egypt expelled from the Arab League post the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty in 1979 and the headquarters moved to Tunisia but soon in the 1980s a reconciliation made and the organization returned to Cairo restoring relations normally. Also, since the outbreak of Arab Spring in 2011 there were doubts that the Secretary General will be Egyptian as a replication to the weak state Egypt has reached but soon this turned to be a misperception. Twice consecutively post Arab Spring Secretary Generals were Egyptians H.E. Mr. Nabil Al Araby took office from 2011 till 2016 and currently H.E. Mr. Ahmed Abu El Gheit has recently stepped into office as off July 2016. Therefore, this shows Arabs' reliance on Egypt's diplomats who represent its soft power that still has potentials up to date post Arab Spring.

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**Interviews**

1. H.E. Ambassador Dr. Mahmoud Karem in personal interview at the British University in Egypt on 30<sup>th</sup> of January 2016.
2. Mr. Graeme Bannerman from Middle East Institute personal interview in Cairo on 30<sup>th</sup> of March 2016.