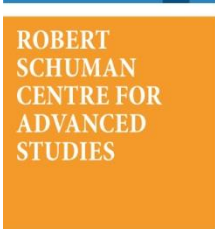




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Of Cats and Lions: Egypt and Regional Security  
Governance in the Middle East

Marco Pinfari



European University Institute  
**Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies**  
Global Governance Programme

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the Middle East**

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## **Abstract**

The paper assesses the role of Egypt as a regional security provider since its readmission into the Middle Eastern system in the 1990s. It introduces the main security threats in the region as perceived by both regional and extra-regional actors and it discusses the five main sources of power and status of contemporary Egypt, before addressing in detail its contribution to regional security. The paper argues that, despite its “leadership identity”, Egypt at best contributes as a power sharer in some areas of regional security but is largely unable (and arguably unwilling) to act as single security provider.

## **Keywords**

Egypt, Middle East, regional governance, pivot states, Arab League





In May 2013 a senior official of the Muslim Brotherhood, Abdul Moati Zaki Ibrahim, was asked to comment on the substantial investment and aid package that Qatar had promised to Egypt, totaling approximately \$8 billion. “If the big powers aren’t working, why shouldn’t the little power fill [the gap]?”, Ibrahim suggested, and continued: “There’s an old saying: Someone asks a cat, ‘Why are you behaving like a lion?’ And the cat says, ‘because the lion is behaving like a cat’” (Gulfnews 2013).

This anecdote is illustrative of the complexity of power relations in the contemporary Middle East. While Egypt had once held a position of almost unrivalled hegemony in the region, at least since the 1970s the increasingly obtrusive presence of the United States and the rise of a variety of contenders – including Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran and Turkey – resulted in the emergence of a multipolar regional system in which no single regional actor has the ability (and, possibly, the true willingness) to act as regional hegemon or provider of regional security. Egypt’s declining influence on Arab politics has been partially reversed since the 1990s but its role remains at best that of a power sharer in some areas of regional security governance – including arms control talks and the management of some key regional conflicts – and as a free rider in other important aspects, especially assurance, protection from non-military threats and, most apparently, in launching military operations (as, recently, in the case of Libya). The presence in the region of the oldest working regional organization, the League of Arab States (commonly known as the Arab League), does not affect substantially this picture, in which the responsibility of regional security governance appears to be primarily delegated to extra-regional powers – especially the United States – and international or extra-regional organizations like the United Nations and NATO.

## **1. Perceptions of main security risks and threats in the region**

The recent wave of revolutions and political unrest known as the “Arab Spring” has been only the last wave of international crises to involve the Middle East and the Arab world since the end of World War II, and which attracted substantial attention both from international actors and from regional ones.

Between January 2010 and July 2013, 40% of United Nations Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR) dealt directly or indirectly with the Middle East and the Arab World. 44% of these dealt with two major regional crises – the conflicts in Somalia and Sudan. In this period the UNSC also approved fifteen resolutions focusing on the Arab Spring and its impact on countries such as Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen; eight resolutions on Iraq, seven on Libya and its civil war, and four on the Western Sahara issue. Another set of UNSC resolutions (thirteen overall) focused on nuclear proliferation and international terrorism – two thematic issues with clear links to the region because, respectively, of the nuclear ambitions of Iran and the strong presence of al-Qaeda in Yemen and other countries in the region.

The agenda of regional actors is similar to that of the UN’s, but with some notable differences. The Final Declaration of the 2013 Arab League Summit held in Doha (Qatar) included references to the crises in Sudan and Somalia, but the most pressing issues attracting the attention of Arab leaders were the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the Syrian civil war – two crises on which the UN notoriously struggles to reach the consensus needed for issuing UNSCRs (Arab League 2013). The summit also dealt with Libya’s post-war reconstruction and the domestic politics of Lebanon and Yemen. It also expressed support for the United Arab Emirates in their maritime border disputes with Iran, and it briefly reiterated its support to combating terrorism, to the creation of a joint Arab market, to the institutional reform of the League itself and to the promotion of the rights of women in the Arab world.

One first important conclusion from this overview is that, while international and regional actors broadly concur in identifying the conflicts in Sudan, Somalia and possibly Syria – and, in the recent past, the conflicts in Iraq and Libya – as major sources of instability for the region, their vision differs substantively when it comes to assess the relevance of other crises, especially crises based on clashes

between right claims such as those in Israel-Palestine and with Iran. The ongoing Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories continue to feature high on the agenda of regional actors but has been paid increasingly less attention by international actors at least since the beginning of the Arab Spring, if not since the failure of the 2003 Road Map and of the Arab Peace Initiative. On the other hand, most regional actors frame Iran's nuclear ambitions as part of a broader assessment of the role of nuclear weapons in the regions and regularly link it to Israel's "opaque" proliferation – an approach that is very different from that of the Western world, that instead focuses predominantly on Iran's legal obligations under the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Egypt's agenda broadly corresponds with the agenda set by the Arab League, which it contributes to shape thanks to its dominant role in the institution. Egypt has traditionally been one of the leading actors in the Arab-Israeli conflict and in the negotiations for the creation of a Middle Eastern "Nuclear Weapon Free Zone" (NWFZ); it also has a close yet complex relation with Sudan (which it once controlled in "condominium" with Britain) and has substantial historical ties with other countries such as Syria, Yemen and Lebanon.

Assessing the directions of Egypt's regional foreign policy, however, is particularly difficult for at least two reasons. On the one hand, as we will mention below, Egypt's peculiar geographical location positions it at the crossroads of different "regions" in which it has the ambition – and, often, the need – to play a role. For instance, as a part of the Nile basin and as the main beneficiary of Nile waters according to the 1929 and 1959 agreements, Egypt's fate is also tied to the politics of sub-Saharan Africa and the decisions of upstream countries (especially Ethiopia) that can impact on "water security" downstream (cf. Swain 1997; Rahman 2013).

Also, after more than thirty years of largely consistent foreign policy under Hosni Mubarak, Egypt underwent three radical regime changes in less than three years which, while not resulting in radical overhauls of its foreign policy, impacted on the priority given to some issues on Egypt's agenda. This was particularly the case of its relations with the Gulf countries, Sudan, Iran and Syria, which changed (at times dramatically) depending on the orientations of the leadership in power.

## 2. Sources of power

Egypt's status as a pivotal state is far from obvious. In terms of military capabilities, the Egyptian armed forces trail behind Iran, Turkey and possibly Israel for the total number of infantry forces (active and on reserve) and behind Israel, Turkey and Syria for armored vehicles. Even on purely numerical grounds, Egypt's air force is smaller than that of Israel and Turkey, and its navy is smaller than Iran's. Economically, Egypt's GDP is the fourth largest in the Middle East (behind Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran) and the eleventh out of sixteen countries in per capita terms. Consequently, the Middle Eastern system is normally described one of the few "multipolar" regional security complexes in the current international system (Frazier and Stewart-Ingersoll 2010: 738). Some authors (cf. Lustick 1997) have also argued that the peculiar political and economic trajectory of the modern Middle East makes the region unfit both for allowing the emergence of any single "great power" (and for generating effective regional integration).

Yet Egypt maintains a strong "leadership identity" (Landau 2006: 90) and a claim of having a "pioneering and leading role" in the region, in the words of former President Hosni Mubarak (Cantori 1993: 335). Still others see it as "the core state of the Arab world" (Palmer 2007: 44) or as the "lynchpin" of the Middle East (Black 2011).

Such claim rests on at least five main grounds. It is based, first, on Egypt's recent history as a dominant power in the Arab world, making it *the* "erstwhile regional hegemon" (Cantori 1993: 336) and arguably the last country to have held such an undisputed position before the evolution of the Middle East into a full-fledged multipolar regional system. During the presidency of Gamal Abd el-Nasser (1954-1970) and, partly, during that of Anwar el-Sadat (1970-1981), Egypt was able to act as

the dominant power in the region and was widely perceived as such. Even if its leadership was not unchallenged (Zacher 1979: 167-192), Nasser's Egypt was able to promote itself as the spearhead of the pan-Arab movement and as the paladin of Arab anti-colonial revolts, being prepared either to intervene militarily in ongoing conflicts (such as Yemen) or to provide support for rebel movements from Algeria to Oman. Egypt's position gradually eroded in the 1970s, mostly as a consequence of Sadat's explicit attempt to refocus Egypt's resources on its own economic development, and was dealt a fatal blow with the Camp David agreement, that resulted in Egypt being expelled from the Arab League and being treated as a diplomatic "pariah" (Hunter 1981: 49) by other Arab states until the late 1980s.

Secondly, its leading role in the pan-Arab movement endowed Egypt with a continuing source of institutional power in the Arab world through its dominant position in the Arab League. Since its foundation in 1945, with the exception of the decade that followed the Camp David treaty, the League has been based in Cairo and all its secretary-generals have been Egyptian. Indeed, the Egyptian Foreign Minister in charge at the time of the election of the new secretary-general is often the natural candidate for the position. The League is typically described as ineffective in managing regional security threats (Cf. Lindholm Schulz and Schulz 2005; Barnett and Solingen 2007); however, its annual summits and its routine and emergency meetings in Cairo provide important forums for the elaboration of a shared Arab agenda on the threats facing the region, and therefore position Egypt as a key actor in this process.

Thirdly, with possibly 90 million citizens Egypt remains is the most populous Arab country, and its capital Cairo is by far the largest city in the region. Even if population growth has arguably had a negative effect on Egypt's economic development (Hillal Dessouki 2008: 172), the keenness of Cairenes to flood the streets and squares in the defining moments of Egypt's history is proverbial and serves as a stark reminder of the power of numbers in the region. Most recently, the claim that 33 million people took to the streets to ask for Morsi's resignation, although factually incorrect, had nevertheless a substantial symbolic value considering that the entire population of a country like Syria, that monopolized international headlines since the beginning of the civil war, hardly exceeds 22 million.

Fourthly, the end of pan-Arabism did not affect another "hard" ground for Egypt to claim a prominent role in the region – geography. Its location at the heart of the Arab world, at the crossroads between the Arabian peninsula, the Arab Maghreb and the *Ahl esh-Sham* countries, but also across the Africa-Asia boundary and one of the most strategically-sensitive waterways in the world – the Suez canal – naturally affected its foreign policy and its vocation as a leading power within both the Arab and the African systems. Also, the main reason for Egypt's decline as pan-Arab hegemon proved to be one of Egypt's main sources of geopolitical power since the 1980s: the Camp David agreement between Israel and Egypt soon became one of the main features of the regional balance of power and reinforced what UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon described as Egypt's "key role" in the Arab-Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian peace processes (UN News Centre 2011).

Finally, despite its decline as a military and economic power, Egypt (and especially its capital Cairo) still maintains a substantial degree of cultural influence throughout the Arab and Muslim world. At least until the recent challenges from oil-rich Gulf capitals, Egypt's vibrant and diverse cultural scene has had few rivals in the region. For instance, Cairo was home to the only Arab Nobel Prize for Literature – Naguib Mahfouz – and to the oldest and most prolific film industry in the Arab world (cf. Dajani 1980), which attracted actors and singers from all other Arab countries and helped establish Egyptian Arabic as arguably "the most widely understood" dialect in the region (Abdulla 2007: 8). Today Egypt's cultural or ideological power is primarily associated with the role of the Al-Azhar University and its Grand Sheikh as the leading religious authorities among Sunni Muslims, whose number exceeds 1.3 billion worldwide (Pew Research Center 2009).

### 3. Security governance policies

It is undoubtable that most of the security dilemmas faced by Middle Eastern and Arab states are deeply intertwined; furthermore, the Middle East provides some of the purest example of regionalized conflicts, as in the case of the ongoing civil war in Syria. However, the multipolar nature of the regional security complex and the absence of effective multilateral cooperation frameworks (at least outside of the Gulf sub-region) have created formidable obstacles to the development of coherent regional security policies. At least since the demise of pan-Arabism and Nasser's regional hegemony, what we witness in the region is a series of initiatives motivated by (transient or persistent) policy interests of individual states which may eventually contribute to the management of specific threats to regional or sub-regional security, but rarely amount to forms of regional security governance.

Against this background, the role played by Egypt is probably best described as that of a country that, although more active than many others, does not provide a *qualitatively* superior contribution to regional security management, but rather one that is more pervasive – or *quantitatively* more substantive – than the contribution of many other actors in the region. That is, Egypt's role is not the role expected from a regional hegemon but rather that of a country with a variety of policy interests across different theatres in the region and which occasionally, but not systematically, also lead Egypt to play a substantive role in managing specific regional security issues. In this context, one can suggest that since the 1970s Egypt tends to employ its credentials as a key or pivotal state in the region (as discussed above) not for acting as a regional security provider, but rather for facilitating the pursuit of Egypt's own strategic interests.

Egypt's contribution to regional security management is somehow significant in the areas of "prevention" and "compellence", especially due to its leadership in some multilateral negotiations (such as those on the establishment of a Middle East Nuclear Weapon Free Zone) and its military contribution to various UN missions in Africa. However, Egypt's role in "assurance" and "protection" is at best marginal; indeed, in these areas Egypt *receives* more help and support than it provides to other regional or extra-regional actors, even if this condition is mostly dependent on its current domestic unrest.

#### 3.1 Assurance

Egypt's contribution to "assurance" initiatives (both within and outside the Middle East) is minimal, with the partial exception of its contribution of police and civilian experts to UN missions. In this regard, by July 2013 Egypt was providing 504 police and civilian personnel to 9 UN peacekeeping missions, 85% of which were concentrated in two missions – UNAMID (Darfur) and MONUSCO (Democratic Republic of Congo - DRC). This presence, however, cannot be fully positioned within the category of "assurance" for a variety of reasons, including the fact that certainly the DRC – and possibly Darfur – hardly qualify as "post-conflict environments"; for instance, in late 2013 MONUSCO deployed "attack helicopters" in its operations in North Kivu (UN News Centre 2013). Also, the duties of police units in these missions are not substantively different from those of military contingent troops; in South Darfur on 29 December 2013 a UNAMID "police patrol team" was attacked by an unidentified group during a routine patrol, and the two "police advisors" that died in the event (UNAMID 2013) are identified in the official press release simply as "peacekeepers".

In relation to other areas of "assurance", Egypt appears to be a net recipient of such initiatives. Egypt does not participate in noticeable numbers in any mission abroad aimed at enhancing rule of law or improving border control elsewhere, while at least two such missions – EUBAM Rafah and, partially, EUBAM Libya – operate at its borders, suggesting that, in the eyes of the international community, Egypt's *own* border security and rule of law is in need of support. At the political level, the authoritarian history of contemporary Egypt implied that the country played no role in promoting effective democratic procedures elsewhere; indeed, the Mubarak regime repeatedly refused any type of external assistance for election monitoring on the grounds that only states "without confidence in

their own institutions” invite foreign observers, and that such presence breaches a country’s “national sovereignty” (Dunne and Hamzawy 2010). This scenario partly changed with the 2011 revolution, after which the transitional authorities have indeed accepted foreign monitoring, but the rapid involution of Egypt’s transition resulted in the country not having the time and opportunity to directly support electoral processes abroad.

### **3.2 Prevention**

Egypt’s role in “prevention” is more significant. Especially since its readmission in the regional order in the 1990s, Egypt had the ambition of playing a “leadership” role (Landau 2006: 121) in regional arms control talks, and it has historically been seen as a crucial actor in the management of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Yet, especially in recent years (and months), Egypt has also been by far a net recipient of foreign aid, suggesting that both international institutions and other regional and international partners are heavily involved in preventing domestic instability in the country itself.

Regional arms control talks in the Middle East began in earnest in 1991 under the framework of the so-called “working group on arms control and regional security” (ACRS). Egypt’s role in ACRS has been described as instrumental in re-establishing its regional leadership by “serving the Arab interest”, while at the same time safeguarding Egypt’s relative power position vis-à-vis Israel and other regional powers. Egypt’s strategy in these talks and in other related forums – such as NPT Review Conferences and their preparatory committees – focused on highlighting Israel’s “opaque” proliferation as a source of instability for the region and, especially since 1992, in building support for the creation of a NWFZ in the Middle East as the solution to the security dilemmas of the region.

Egypt’s leadership role in the field of arms control, however, did not go unchallenged. Another regional power – Iran – was in fact the first to suggest the creation of a NWFZ in the region back in 1974 and, especially after its “return” to the nuclear club in the late 1990s, has gained a central position in these talks. Also, differences exist among Arab countries as to the relative weight to be given to Israel’s and Iran’s nuclear bids, with Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia – while officially following Egypt’s lead in these negotiations – being traditionally been more wary than Egypt of Iran’s nuclear ambitions and ready to take alternative measures should Iran eventually develop nuclear military capabilities. Nevertheless, Egypt tried repeatedly to maintain a central position and moral high ground in these processes, for instance by walking out in the second session of the Preparatory Committee for the 2015 NPT Review Conference in Geneva on 29 April 2013 out of the refusal of the committee to table a discussion on the establishment of a NWFZ in the Middle East (Egypt MFA 2013).

Egypt’s role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is also normally seen as particularly relevant. Egypt’s continuing support for the Camp David framework – and its underlying principle of “land for peace” – could be seen as having a stabilizing effect on the region. More recently, Egypt also played a particularly important role as a mediator during the short conflict in Gaza in November 2012 (operation “Pillar of Defense”). The then Egyptian president Mohammed Morsi mediated (at some stages personally) between Israel and Hamas in close cooperation with US envoys. His contribution proved instrumental in reaching an agreed ceasefire on 21 November 2012, and Egypt’s role in this negotiation was described as “pivotal” by international media (cf. Kinninmont 2012). Again, however, the true reasons of Morsi’s interventions are unclear; while his move did contribute to the management of a regional crisis, his intervention can also be seen *ex post* as an attempt to boost his personal image ahead of decisions that would prove to be unpopular both domestically and internationally, such as his third constitutional decree issued the day after the ceasefire and which put him temporarily above judicial supervision.

Senior Egyptian officials have even claimed that Egypt is able to exercise a veto power over multilateral talks held on the Israel-Palestinian issue. In 1992, for instance, the then Egyptian Foreign Minister (and later Secretary General of the Arab League) Amr Musa declared that “if Egypt had said

that it would not take part in the [Madrid process] multilaterals, no Arab State would have participated” (Landau 2006: 122-3). The extent to which Egypt is truly able to enjoy such influence, however, remains open to question, and the increased centrality of Gulf countries in the conflict – especially since the 2002 Saudi-led “Arab Peace Initiative” – seems to be at odds with Musa’s suggestion. Yet Egypt continues to be recognized by the Palestinian leadership as the key actor in negotiations both with Israel and between Fatah and Hamas, and Fatah’s spokesman Ahmed Assaf recently reaffirmed the view of his movement that “no one can substitute Egypt’s regional position” in this regard (Al-Ahram 2013).

However, in relation to other areas of “prevention”, and especially development aid, Egypt is clearly on the recipient side. Egypt does have a series of development aid programs, directed almost exclusively towards Sub-Saharan Africa and coordinated by an agency of the Foreign Ministry named “Egyptian Fund for Technical Cooperation in Africa” (EFTCA), created in 1980. EFTCA’s activities – as described in a Wikileaks (2010) cable – are framed by Egypt’s Foreign Ministry as “one of Egypt’s most important tools for diplomacy in the region” and focus primarily on Nile Basin countries, in line with Egypt’s policy priorities. However, its budget in 2010 (the last year of sustained economic growth before the 2011 revolution) was only \$27 million, up from \$17 million in 2008 (ibid.). This figure pales in front of the approximately \$12 billion pledged by Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Kuwait as loans or donations to Egypt (primarily of oil and gas products) in the second half of 2013 alone (Daily News Egypt 2013).

The interpretation of Egypt’s current aid position can be twofold. On the one hand, it is clear that, not just since the 2011 revolution but also throughout Mubarak’s rule, Egypt has been unable to use aid as a foreign policy tool to any significant degree. This consideration alone significantly impinges on Egypt’s ambition to great power status. On the other, however, the keenness of its regional neighbors to provide substantial aid to Egypt in phases of domestic unrest also suggests that these regional actors, including potential or actual regional hegemony like Saudi Arabia, are aware that sustained instability in Egypt can have deep repercussions throughout the Middle East. This, in turn, suggests that at least some of the credentials for regional power status that we discussed above – especially Egypt’s demographic and cultural weight within the region – still cast a long shadow over regional relations.

### **3.3 Protection**

Egypt’s contribution to the management of regional security threats through the paths of “protection” has, again, been marginal. On the one hand, the perspectives of regional actors on themes that are normally the object of “protection” initiatives – most notably terrorism – is very different from that of the United States and other world powers. External interventions in the internal affairs of Arab states that are officially designed to pursue the “war on terror”, ranging from the 2003 war on Iraq to the more recent drone strikes in Yemen, have been met at best with silent approval by some regional actors (typically Gulf monarchies) and, at worst, with severe criticism. Egypt’s official reaction to 9/11 and to the following events was described as “low key” (Essam El-Din 2001) even if it is known that the Mubarak regime later became deeply implicated in the practice of “extraordinary rendition” (cf. Satterthwaite 2007: 1340-4).

Egypt’s position on terrorism has also been greatly affected by the domestic concerns and ideological orientations of its leadership. The Muslim Brotherhood, when in power, was in severe disagreement with the United States on whether organizations like Hamas deserved to be treated as terrorist groups. After the recent *coup d’état* of July 2013, however, Egypt’s new political elite has found it politically advantageous to adopt the language of the “war on terror” and of US military interventions (for instance by branding one of its military operations in the Sinai, somehow ironically, “operation Desert Storm” – cf. Lappin 2013) and frame many Islamist groups and, in general, the political opposition to the new regime as terrorist. Understanding these dynamics would require a

much more detailed analysis of the role of Islamist movements in the region and of the internal dynamics in Egypt's regime and in the state security apparatus than what can be provided here. However, for the purposes of this analysis, suffice it to say that in no circumstance Egypt has taken the lead or assumed a substantial role in the management of regional threats associated with the "war on terror".

A similar conclusion can be reached in relation to other aspects of regional "protection", such as multilateral regional initiatives in the fields of health and crime. For instance, an "Arab Health Emergency Committee" exists within the Arab League but Egypt appears not to play a leading role in its activities; what is arguably its key initiative in recent years – a multilateral meeting for containing the spread of the swine flu, in 2009 – was held in Riyadh (Egypt State Information Service 2009). Nor is Egypt's leadership apparent in regional initiatives focused on fighting international crime. The 2010-2015 "Regional Programme on Drug Control, Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice for the Arab State" is jointly managed by the Arab League from Cairo and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) but it is unclear whether Egypt contributes in any way to this UN-driven initiative. Another substantial crime-related initiative jointly managed by the Arab League and the UNODC, the "Arab Initiative to Build Capacities to Combat Human Trafficking in the Arab Countries", is funded by Qatar.

### **3.4 Compellence**

Lastly, Egypt's role in compellence is, again, mixed. On the one hand, its overall contribution to UN-led multilateral operations is a significant one, thanks specifically to its substantial military contributions to UNAMID and MONUSCO that alone involve 2068 Egyptian troops. Indeed, in July 2013 Egypt was the ten biggest contributor of military and police personnel to UN Operations across the world; in the Middle East, only Jordan provides more personnel than Egypt, which nevertheless remains the main Arab contributor to key missions in the Arab neighborhood such as UNAMID (UN 2013). Also, it is notable that none of the other key actors in the Middle Eastern multipolar system – such as Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey – provides substantive contributions to UN missions; the closest rival of Egypt, Turkey, provides less than a fifth of Egypt's troops (455 vs. 2749 units).

However, the reasons of Egypt's significant presence in UN missions are varied and, especially in relation to UNAMID, have more to do with the ongoing struggle for hegemony over Sudan rather than with the ambition to contribute to the management of a regional security threat. Indeed, the personnel of UNAMID alone exceeds 10,000 units and other countries with hegemonic ambitions in the sub-region, most notably Ethiopia, provide twice as many units as Egypt (2591 vs. 1333).

Moreover, in recent years Egypt played no role in unilateral military interventions outside the framework of UN's peacekeeping operations. At least since the end of the Cold War, the United States has also been by far the dominant actor in the provision of regional security through compellence, once the use of force was required to deal with a regional or regionalized conflict. Examples of such role include the collective security effort around the 1990-1 Gulf war, the recent "humanitarian intervention" in Libya and the ongoing crisis in Syria. Indeed, since the 1980s the Egyptian army has been extremely reluctant to use its military force outside Egypt's borders. Particularly revealing, in this sense, is the strong opposition faced by Mohammed Morsi when he stepped up his support to the Syrian anti-Assad opposition in mid-June 2013, in a move that could have precluded to providing military support to the fight against Assad. This prospect was met with substantial criticism by most of Egypt's old guard and, especially, by the army, that issued a communiqué stating that its role is limited to protecting Egypt's borders. This incident is now widely seen as the tipping point of Morsi's relations with the armed forces that would lead to the military coup only two weeks later.

#### **4. Assessment and conclusion**

In conclusion, while Egypt's foreign policy has traditionally been one of the most active and ambitious in the Middle East, a substantial gap exists between Egypt's claim to "regional leadership" and its actual role as a regional security provider, which appears to be rather limited. At least since its re-admission to the regional stage after the end of the Cold War, Egypt has certainly not played the role of single, dominant "protector" of the region but has rather shared the burden of managing security threats in the areas of "prevention" and "compellence", and acted essentially as a free rider (or net recipient of aid and support) in the areas of "assurance" and "protection", and other areas within the broader categories of prevention and compellence such as economic aid and military interventions. Such free riding is particularly clear in relation to the current crisis in Syria, in which the Arab League has taken sides explicitly against the Assad regime and yet is unable to agree not just on organizing, but also on supporting a military intervention.

However, it is important to note that Egypt's complex political transition since the 2011 revolution prevents any observer from drawing solid inferences on where the country will stand once a new and stable political system (whether authoritarian or democratic) will be in place. So far, the transitional process that began with the 25<sup>th</sup> January 2011 revolution has resulted in three regime changes that heavily impacted on Egypt's foreign policy priorities, especially in establishing the stance vis-à-vis key regional issues such as the conflicts in Israel-Palestine, Syria and Sudan, and severely weakened its economy. The eventual emergence of a strong, democratic Egypt may substantially increase its stature in the regional and international order, even if this outcome appears as increasingly unlikely. Until then, the circumstances of Morsi's removal and its ongoing economic crisis continue to project the image of a middle power – of a "cat" that hopes to be again (or, at least, to be treated as) a "lion".



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