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HOW STABLE IS EGYPT?

INTRODUCTION:

Europe is betting on Egypt's role to support peace and stability and fight against terrorism. This should be a winning bet as Egypt is the center of stability in the troubled Middle East. But the people in the region ardently need a **comeback** of Europe. I will address these two considerations and make the case that the two, Egypt and Europe will have to be working closer together, if we really want to have a stable Middle East and restore peace and stability in the region. Unlike the U.S., Europe has had always more of a consistent and less ups and downs in its policy towards the Middle East. The revival of the role of Europe in the region is all the more important to balance the U.S. and Russia.

My intervention will focus on:

First: A brief account on the **origin of destabilization** in the region. Many perceive the Arab Spring as being at the origin. I will argue that extremism was crawling into the region long before the Arab Spring made its appearance.

Second: I will then make the case **why it is vital for Egypt and Europe to stick together** if we are sincere

about restoring stability and peace to the region. There is ample room for the two to cooperate. However, for such a cooperation to bear fruit, two conditions must be fulfilled.

- i. The **stability** of Egypt at the domestic level and regaining its weight regionally;
- ii. The **readiness and willingness** of Europe to revive its role, which can no longer be considered optional. Europe will have to exert more effort and get more involved to be able to safeguard itself and its people from the growing refugee problem and the expansion of terrorism.

FIRST: ORIGINS OF DESTABILIZATION:

Many would like to perceive the chaos in the region as an issue emanating from the Arab Spring. In my view the destabilization factors in the region date way before. **I would not be exaggerating if I trace this back to the Reagan administration and its flirting with the Taliban insurgence to fight against the Soviets in Afghanistan.** The Reagan propaganda was also successful in mobilizing Muslims. Egyptians, Tunisians, Syrians, Algerians, Saudis who ran to rescue their brothers in faith and vanquish the Soviet Union. **This was the beginning of the end.**

Adding to Reagan's awkward policy are other no less dominant phenomena in the region:

- a. **The long-dated alliance between the Wahhabi movement¹ and the Saudi Kingdom**, each guaranteeing the space of the other without interference.

- b. **The evolution of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood movement into a political Islamist group** desiring to govern and a keen longing for political power. Suffice to say here that this movement has found today its safe haven in **Turkey**, which has embraced it and exploit it to serve its interests.

- c. **The Wahhabis and the MBs are at the foundation of the rise and spread of extreme Islamists**, considered unfortunately by many as jihadists (which for Muslims has rather a positive connotation, fighting to restore the power of God and the spread of Islam). **These jihadists market themselves for the highest bid to countries in the region.** They are used by outside regional powers as a political tool to fight legitimate governments, e.g. the

¹ The majority of mainstream Sunni and Shia Muslims worldwide strongly disagree with the interpretation of Wahhabism and consider it extremist. The terms *Wahhabi* and *Salafi* are often used interchangeably. Al-Azhar University, regularly denounce Wahhabism, as it has been accused of being "a source of global terrorism", inspiring the ideology of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), yet Al Azhar doesn't shy away from embracing the salafists.

Egyptian government and create turmoil and chaos in countries like Syria, Libya and Yemen.

d. **The 9/11 heinous attack on the U.S. sounded the alarm for the unstoppable surge of these jihadists.**

The subsequent U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq did not deter them, on the contrary it rendered them more aggressive and unrelenting in their war against civilization.

e. The Muslim Brotherhood, which were at some point supported by the West under the pretext of being democratically elected, have a dark history of violence brutality, and ties to Islamic extremist and terrorist groups.² In fact during the protests against the MBs regime, Morsi, the then president, did not shy away from contacting Ayman Al-Zawahri, the current leader of El Qaeda, inciting him to come to his rescue and allowed extremists to have their safe haven in Sinai. Until this day, terrorist attacks in Sinai continue to claim innocent lives and hindering Egypt's tourism industry. **No country is immune to Islamic extremism.** No wonder that the Trump administration is considering to designate the Brotherhood as a terrorist organization.

²<http://9bri.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/Report-on-the-History-of-the-Muslim-Brotherhood1.pdf> "History of the Muslim Brotherhood"

There is dire need for Egypt and Europe to work together not only in counterterrorism but, as said, their cooperation should cover a range of conflicts in the region. Many of our views coincide. But more Europe will need a stable Egypt, and the latter will need a more engaged and involved Europe.

WHY EGYPT'S STABILITY IS KEY TO THE REGION:

Addressing the stability of Egypt, it is true that Egypt has lost much of its weight after 2011 for multiple **internal and external reasons**. An uprising fatigue coupled with confusion and incoherence in its domestic situation and a near economic collapse had brought Egypt to the verge of a failed state. Egypt had to reassess its situation seriously. In addition the changing regional power equilibrium tilting towards more aggressive emerging regional powers, e.g. Iran and Turkey have weakened Egypt even further.

However, Egypt has quickly restored its strength and has placed itself on an assured trajectory for recovery, domestically as well as regaining its regional weight. Egypt has successfully shunned itself from the **spillovers** of the so-called Arab Spring syndrome and managed to safeguard itself against disintegration and civil war.

Moreover, Egypt has recently sealed a loan deal with the IMF following 4 years of negotiations. **I will not dwell long on this loan, suffice to say that we continue to watch its impact very cautiously.** No one is more expert than Egypt and Greece regarding the implications of these IMF facility loans on the stability of the economy. Your latest demonstrations attest to that. **Yet, it seems the political will is there to continue with the reforms and the government so far is sticking to its word.**

In its fight against insurgence and terrorism, Egypt was even **more vocal** and determined. At a time when everyone thought that Egypt's weight had collapsed after 2011, it stood firm against the Obama administration as well as many of the European countries for their **unduly** support of political Islam. Egypt did not shy away or retreat from its fight against Islamic extremism, when the name of the game was **inclusiveness**. There should be no doubt that Egypt is and will always remain a staunch ally in the war on terrorism.

Egypt is fighting three different types of Islamic extremists, the Salafi Jihadists affiliated with the Islamic State, Al Qaeda, and violent Islamists affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. We are fighting them on two different fronts. **The ISIS** extremists in northern Sinai and the so-called jihadists on its western borders with Libya. **To the laymen in Egypt, they are all the same,**

pure terrorists. They all share common origins, ideology, agenda, and common methods of violence and intimidation.

WHAT DO WE EXPECT FROM EUROPE?

Europe's history with its own Muslim population is not flawless. These were never really **integrated** in the European social fabric. However, the blame is not to be placed solely on the Europeans, as these workers themselves were reluctant to integrate and preferred to replicate their lives in their homelands in isolated ghettos in Europe. They created "**parallel societies.**" In search for their identity and falling between rejection of the Western societies and being outcast in their countries of origin, the second generation young Muslims are ripe for recruitment to carry out the Jihadist missions in Europe. Unlike their parents, they refuse to submit and succumb to their adopted societies. Terrorist attacks in much of Europe's cities were mostly by native Muslims and exacerbating the vicious circle we all find ourselves in today.³

It is important that Europe deals with this issue. Following Trump's trajectory and voting more conservative might not be the best. This will lead to more radicalization on both parts. **Hate begets hate.**

³ Stephen Zunes (2017) Europe's Refugee Crisis, Terrorism, and Islamophobia, Peace Review, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10402659.2017.1272275>

It is high time for Europe to revert back to its former role as the conscience of the rule of law and international legitimacy. Europe should get back to its more balanced approach against the U.S. blind support for Israel. A generation ago, in 1980, long before the U.S. spoke of the two-state solution, the EU issued the Venice Declaration, calling for self-determination and demanding a Palestinian state alongside the Israeli state, with security guarantees for both. Europe is well-known for its legalistic approach to many of the conflicts in the Middle East, notably the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

TOWARDS A MORE STABLE REGION:

A. THE PALESTINIAN-ISRAELI CONFLICT:

Today more than ever before Egypt and Europe need to secure the legal basis of the peace process to make sure that its foundation is not undermined under assumed pretexts of realism. To legalize that any permanent solution will have to be established within the parameters long agreed upon internationally. For example, the illegality of settlements; the two-state solution, territory, June 4th, 1967-ending Israeli occupation), Jerusalem....etc. With the uncertainties surrounding the Trump administration, there is a legitimate interest on the part of

Egypt and Europe to legalize the foundation and principles for a durable solution.

Europe should support the Arab states to pursue necessary legal action to confront the illegal Israeli action taken on territories occupied in 1967, including the illegal construction of settlements.

The way things develop in the region may not augur well to the Arab-Israeli conflict. It seems there are no real chances for success of the two-state solution under the current Israeli government. It seems also that with the last press conference between Trump and Netanyahu, the former has broken away from what we call the foundation of the peace process. Originally I thought that the new administration will resist the temptation of moving the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and that all was only campaign trail talk. But with Trump's unwavering support for Netanyahu, moving the embassy to Jerusalem no longer seems a foregone conclusion.

In this context, we certainly need Europe's support and we need Europe to revert back to its long forgotten vocal voice and traditional positions standing by justice and fairness. Europe should also reiterate its well-known **opinionated** stance on illegal Israeli settlement construction on occupied Palestinian territories

and should join Egypt and other Arab countries in having a **sensible** talk with the Trump administration.

Yet in a recent article in the Foreign Policy Journal by Richard Falk, although he made the case quite convincing for the Palestinian Authority to resort to the International Criminal Court (ICC), he concluded that the PA will not take advantage of the ICC option anytime soon. Not only will the U.S. oppose every attempt by the PA to rely on international law or the UN to advance its national struggle, but it will sanction the PA harshly if such a move is undertaken by terminating financial assistance to the PA. The Trump administration may even go further, including the closing of the PLO offices in Washington, threats to put the PLO and Fatah back on the U.S. list of terrorist organizations. No doubt the Palestinian Authority take such threats seriously.

So we are back to square one. And, we still have to find a trajectory out of the logjam. The Arab-Israeli conflict remains the central Arab issue. If this conflict will remain unresolved, the region will not be freed from terrorism, even if – hypothetically for arguments sake – all other problems are solved.

There is certainly need to resume the dialogue between the Palestinians and the Israelis. And, here Egypt has no equal in the region with years of hands on and direct involvement in the

conflict. Egypt was the first in the region to recognize Israel and today Egypt enjoys the trust of the Israelis and Palestinians alike. Egypt and Israel continues to cooperate successfully in Sinai to counter terrorism and to fight Daesh. Because of the continued strong relations with the Palestinians, Egypt has been mandated to speak on their behalf. Egypt is expected to brief the U.S. administration on the Palestinian legitimate rights and make clear that biased statements are hardly useful, **if the administration is sincerely keen on working diligently on a lasting and comprehensive solution** to help establish peaceful coexistence in the region. Though Egypt is a staunch supporter of the Palestinians and their right to have their own state, it is the country, best positioned, having a working relation with Israel to be a **facilitator** between the two parties. **The Palestinians as the last colonized people in the world are entitled to self-determination.**

As a guarantor and supporter in the aftermath arrangements that will be reached by the two parties, Egypt and Europe should be working together, as this should be of great value. The Palestinians will need capacity-building in many areas. Those are roles that Egypt and Europe are best placed to carry out.

But Egypt has also a considerable leverage with the new leadership in Hamas. The 22 year imprisoned in Israeli jail, Yehia

Sinwar has taken over from Ismail Haniya and has to make a tough decision. Either opting for the Iran camp to strengthen the military power of Hamas, or heeding to the sufferings and misery of the people in the Gaza strip and opt for **reconciliation with Egypt**. If Hamas sides with conciliation, this means another winning card and the indispensable Egyptian role in the region.

B. THE LIBYAN CONUNDRUM:

In all cases the situation in Libya is critical to the interests of Egypt that has recently developed its take on the matter. From handling its western border and combating the radical militant groups to the promotion of a possible political deal among Libyan players, upon the basis of the **Moroccan agreement**. Egypt is also keen to maintain the territorial integrity of Libya.

Egypt has made the stabilizing of Libya one of the major priority of its foreign policy. Egypt's officials have been working on different fronts to advance a political solution. Hosting several meetings for the neighboring countries, Tunisia and Algeria, Egypt managed to unify positions of all three countries to form a convincing front. Second, Cairo hosted many meetings to bring together Libyan politicians, parliamentarians and intellectuals from the east and the west of the country.

Assuming a mediator role between conflicting Libyan parties, Egypt has recently met with both sides, Fayez el Sarraj, the head of the Government of National Accord (GNA) and Khalifa Haftar,

the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces to work out a political solution but has yet to make substantial progress. Egypt has brokered a roadmap with these two factions to resolve some outstanding issues in the Libyan Political Agreement. **This roadmap should eventually lead to reconciliation and elections by February 2018.**

C. THE SYRIAN CRISIS:

From the very beginning regarding the Syrian crisis, Egypt unlike other countries refrained from intervening in Syria's domestic affairs. It always stood for diplomacy, mediation, and the integrity of the Syrian borders. Egypt is well placed to play a positive role in the management of the crisis in Syria. Syria is particularly crucial when it comes to defining the identity of the entire Middle East and whether **it would be a predominantly Arab region** that allows for the fair integration of other ethnicities or whether it would be a **predominantly Middle Eastern sphere to which Arabs would be party.**

For Syria's territorial unity to be maintained a fair political agreement would have to be reached, not just under an international umbrella but also with direct Arab input, because "clearly there are other players in and out of the region who would be working in the pursuit of other options for the future of Syria. The European and American, concern on Syria is related to the containment of the refugees' crisis. But obviously, the issue of

Syrian refugees is also of concern to some of the countries of the region, including Arab countries. Arab countries should avoid a situation where the future of Syria is essentially handled by Russian-American and Turkish-Iranian talks.

D. FIGHTING ISIS:

Sending troops to fight terrorism beyond its borders is not a foregone conclusion. Egypt is a strong believer in multilateral diplomacy and consensus building. As an active member of the Security Council a forthright consensual resolution to mobilize regional and international support in the fight against ISIS in Iraq and Syria – though bordering the impossible – may be considered under UN auspices.

Also, Egypt can play a key role in countering the extremist narrative through the centrality of al-Azhar University within the wider Muslim world. A wave of religious rethinking and reformation will be a root solution to eliminate radical extremist thoughts.

CONCLUSION:

The events in Libya and Syria threatens security in the Mediterranean, which impose considerable challenges for European security. The refugee crisis that inundated Europe is accompanied by the fear of refugee Diasporas becoming

incubators for violence and extremism.⁴ Criminals and human traffickers stand on the borders ready to take advantage of the state of chaos that resulted from the collapse of the old order. **Therefore, seeking and maintaining stability in the Middle East is crucial for European security.** The change that the Middle East is witnessing is both a challenge and an opportunity for Europe. It is an opportunity to work jointly with the Middle East in the interest of all.

Europe should come with policies and moves of its own and become once again engaged in the conflict and help with pragmatic solutions. In spite of the many problems facing the EU, the Middle East region remains the priority of the EU's foreign policy interest.

A strong, stable and prosperous Egypt is an essential element of a stable, peaceful and prosperous region. Egyptian, European and U.S. cooperation is key in addressing the region's political, economic and security challenges.

⁴ Krishnadev Kalamur, Are Immigrants Prone to Crime and Terrorism?, the atlantic, JUN 15, 2016. <https://www.theatlantic.com/news/archive/2016/06/immigrants-and-crime/486884/>