



By: *Tomorrow's Affairs Staff*

Turkey and Egypt: a new beginning after Erdogan and Sisi's handshake



After eight years of all-out cooling and another year of diplomatic efforts to get Turkish-Egyptian relations back on track, a hearty handshake and enthusiastic messages for the future finally took place. The leaders of Turkey and Egypt, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, shook hands for the first time just before the opening ceremony of the World Cup in Doha on November 20.

While the Egyptian presidency has hailed what it calls a new beginning in ties with Turkey, Erdogan described his meeting with el-Sisi as the first step to launch a new path in relations.

“We said that a process can begin,” Erdogan said. “A step has been taken here to start such a process, and we had talks. It is my hope that we want to move the process that started with our ministers to a good point later, hopefully to high-level meetings.”

The unity of the Turkish nation and the Egyptian people has been very important to Turkey in the past, Erdogan said, adding: “Why not again? Why not start again? We have sent a signal.”

Relations between Cairo and Ankara turned frosty in 2013 after el-Sisi deposed president Mohamed Morsi and outlawed his Muslim Brotherhood party. Turkey has served as a refuge for opposition activists from Egypt for years, further stoking tensions between the two regional powers.

Turkey and Egypt held their first diplomatic talks in eight years last year. Also last year, Erdogan’s government demanded that popular Egyptian talk show hosts living in exile tone down their criticism of Egypt’s leader in an apparent attempt to appease Cairo.

This month, according to human rights groups, Turkish security forces briefly detained an exiled Egyptian dissident, as authorities in Egypt cracked down on activists during calls for protests at the COP27 climate summit.

But long-standing disagreements over the countries’ opposing roles in war-scarred Libya

have impeded efforts to achieve a full rapprochement until now.

While diplomatic relations between Cairo and Ankara have often been thorny, economic ties have continued unabated. The volume of trade has nearly tripled from 2007 to 2020, according to the Carnegie Middle East Center.

The role of Qatar

It was no coincidence that Qatar Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani was pictured grinning in the background when presidents Erdogan and Sisi shook hands for the first time.

Several sources aware of what happened at the meeting told the Middle East Eye that Doha had been trying to broker a brief meeting between the two former foes since summer. One Turkish source said Erdogan was not initially very sympathetic to the idea of shaking hands with someone he previously called a “murderer” and a “dictator”. Erdogan’s animosity for Sisi had been a response to the 2013 Egyptian military coup, which overthrew the country’s democratically elected government and bloodily cracked down on any critics.

“Qatar wanted all problems between the two countries to be resolved, and the emir wanted this handshake to happen during the World Cup,” the source said.

Despite year-long reconciliation talks between Turkey and Egypt, relations are still fraught over a set of issues: from competing interests in Libya to the presence of the Muslim Brotherhood leaders in Turkey. Yet Turkish officials believe what Cairo has really sought was a handshake with Erdogan, which would signal complete acknowledgement of Sisi as the legitimate president of Egypt.

There are several theories that explain the Qatari motivation for such a reconciliation.

Ali Bakir, a non-resident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council, says “the handshake initiative” by the Qataris had no political

motives. "It was more rooted in sports diplomacy," he told MEE. "The Qataris wanted to show that sports can be a great tool to promote peace, stability and prosperity to all nations including those locked in conflict."

Bakir added that Doha originally planned to undertake other similar initiatives such as arranging another handshake between the king of Morocco and the president of Algeria, bitter rivals that currently have no diplomatic relations. But the absence of King Mohammed VI prevented it from happening, according to Bakir.

Qatar also has a political interest in bringing the two countries together. Since the blockade on Qatar ended in January 2021, Doha has been building its own ties with Egypt, stepping up its game in recent months by injecting \$3bn into Egypt's central bank and having Sisi visit the Qatari capital.

Cairo also wants to diversify its portfolio of Gulf creditors, without which it cannot survive economically. Some Ankara insiders say that in recent months there have been tensions within the bloc that previously targeted Qatar, with the Saudis and Egyptians on one side and the UAE on the other.

Bakir believes Turkish-Egyptian rapprochement will in turn strengthen Qatari-Saudi relations, and it may unintentionally push the UAE to further deepen its recently thawed ties with Turkey.

There is another issue that Qatar wants to benefit from: Libya.

"Qatar has an interest to ensure that ties are mended across the region with a particular emphasis on Libya," says Andreas Krieg of King's College London. "Qatar is trying to get the external patrons in Libya aligned to prepare the ground for a more lasting political deal."

Since 2019, when eastern Libyan forces unsuccessfully attacked the internationally recognised government in Tripoli, Turkey has been locked in competition with the UAE and

Egypt, who supported the assault.

Earlier this month, Cairo protested against the Turkish government's recently signed hydrocarbon exploration deal with the Libyan Government of National Unity, and said Tripoli lacked authority on the matter because its mandate has expired.

According to Krieg, Qatar is now trusted by both Turkey and Egypt, despite the animosity of recent years, and that trust ultimately led to the Sisi-Erdogan handshake.