

# Policy Brief

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## The geopolitics of Egypt: Strengths, Opportunities, Constraints and Vulnerabilities

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### Summary

Geographically, Egypt is located at the crossroads of several areas that are sometimes homogeneous and other times contradictory. These areas offer Egypt multiple opportunities to position itself in the region and in the world. However, the country is forced to manage its neighborhood's contradictions. Historically, Egypt has inherited a past leadership that it is unable to maintain in absence of adequate leverage capacity. Its current resources and problems handicap its dream of regaining its former glory. But above all, and before dreaming of greatness, Egypt must fill the gap left by the turmoil of the Arab Spring between the different factions of its people.

Asia, Africa, the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, the Middle East, and the Nile Basin are all geographic entities in which Egypt is either part of or is on the periphery of. This geographic position makes Egypt a crossroads between two continents and several geopolitical regions.

In terms of bodies of water, it is surrounded by the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, for which it ensures the junction through the Suez Canal. This connection links the two seas and is also the path that joins the Indian and Atlantic oceans. The giant Nile River also traverses the country, carrying water and alluvium, building links and relationships, and ensuring encounters between civilizations.

The Egyptian territory has only partially endured the throes of historic fragmentation. The country's borders have hardly changed throughout history. From the Pharaonic dynasties to the present, Egypt is substantially defined within the same borders. Sometimes independently as a state, and other times as a subject of an external power as

a province, Egypt still has one territory and its name has never changed.

It is one of those places where history and geography have always joined forces and have continuously cohabited so that the geographical area has appropriated its history.

Map 1: Egypt in its geographical environment



Source: Google Maps

This multitude of areas, positions, and positioning is an advantage and an opportunity for Egypt just as much as it is a handicap and difficulty. The advantage is that the country can take advantage of this multiple belonging in order to diversify its relations and establish itself as a meeting point. The handicap is that Egypt's neighborhood has so many contradictions and differences of interest that an alliance with one can be interpreted as hostility towards another. The challenge for Egypt is to balance its policy between the various partners and geopolitical areas that surround it. With several countries in North Africa, Egypt shares the difficulty of reconciling their African Arabism. It shares with those of the eastern shore of the Mediterranean the difficulty of reconciling their Arabism with their Mediterranean identity. Does its accession to the economic and commercial area of East and Southern Africa secure its membership to the North African area? Where should it undertake its leadership ambitions? In the Arab world, North Africa, the Mediterranean, the Middle East, or in the Nile Basin?

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Egypt is torn between its multiple identities: between swathes of its identity that it derives from its geographical position, and its identity markers that it derives from its socio-economic-political history. This tension is amplified by neighborhood turbulence. The geopolitical forces that give Egypt its geographical position and its historical experience fundamentally contain clear vulnerabilities.

## I. Strengths

The development of Arab nationalism in the fifties and sixties, embodied by what was known as "Nasserism," gave Egypt a leading position in the Arab world. The defeat of the Arab armies in the war of sixty-seven, and normalization with Israel in the late seventies, gradually divested Egypt from this role, from which it only maintains the symbolic function as the General Secretary of the Arab League and the headquarters for that organization.

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Today, Egypt does not seem to have been able to keep the means of influence that it previously had on the Arab world because of the differences in the Arab world

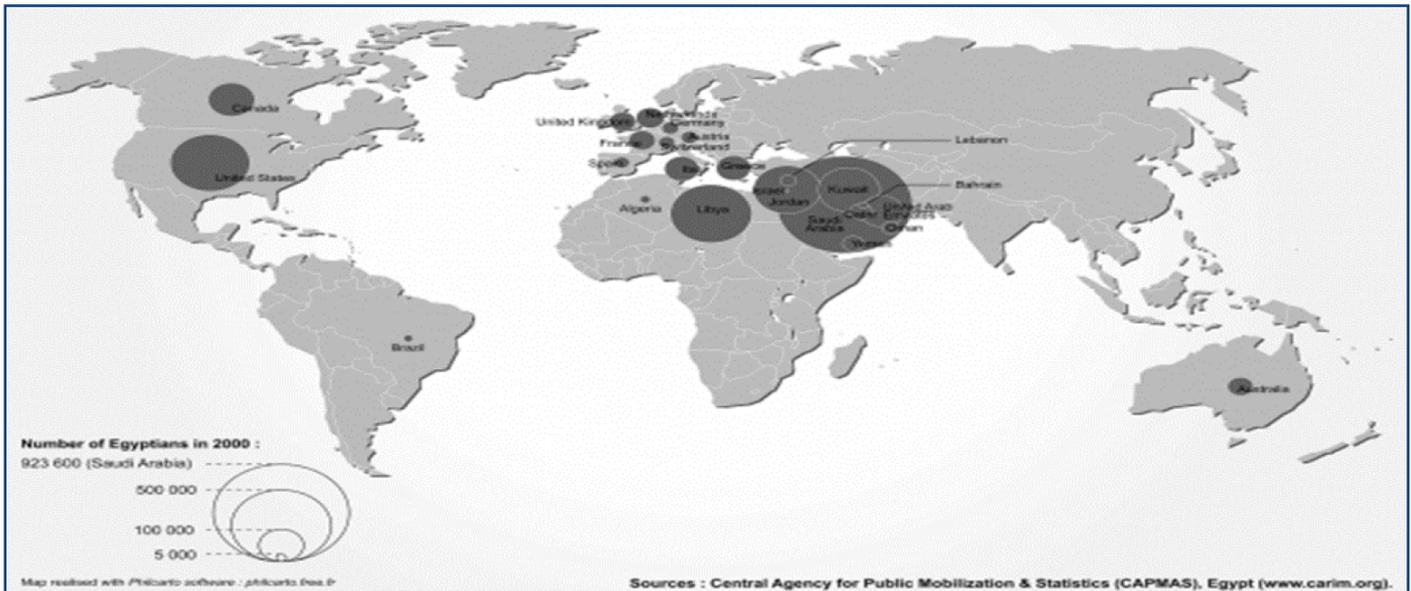
that make it increasingly susceptible to geopolitical fragmentation, which is due to changes in the world order and the emergence of new Arab powers in the Maghreb and the Gulf. Egypt, however, holds several geopolitical cards that, played rationally, can be major assets:

- Along with Jordan, Egypt is the only official gateway in the dialogue between Palestinians and Israelis, and therefore a key channel in any solution to this latent conflict. Egypt is trying to maintain control over the Palestinian issue and is facing competition from other countries in the region, including Turkey and Qatar. This challenge was clear during the last Israeli war against the Gaza Strip.

Relations were not optimal between Egypt and Hamas, which President Sisi accuses of destabilizing the Sinai and supporting the Muslim Brotherhood. In this conflict, Turkey and Qatar saw the opportunity to eliminate Egypt from the peace talks, accusing it of aligning alongside Israel against Hamas. Egypt finally emerged as an indispensable interlocutor in the diplomatic marathon that led to the cease-fire.

- Egypt remains the largest demographic power in the Arab world. No other country in the region exceeds half of the Egyptian population. A significant number of Egyptians has migrated worldwide. They represent three million people between the Gulf and North America. Yet many researchers are reluctant to talk about the Egyptian diaspora. They agree to recognize that if this population meets certain criteria required for the formation of a diaspora (dispersion, maintenance of strong ties to the homeland, and the remittance of savings), it does not meet other criteria such as the awareness of group unity, collective memory (strongly related to time and space), and a powerful organizational system.
- Egypt has also kept its military supremacy in the region. It remains the first army in the Arab world and all joint defense plans in this area cannot forgo this army's contribution. With 438,000 men, an average annual budget of USD 5,450 million, 4624 tanks, 370 combat aircraft, four submarines, and eight frigates, the Egyptian army continues to be sought in all Arab defense projects. The coalition established by Saudi Arabia for intervention in Yemen, the plans for joint Arab forces, or the plans for Muslim coalition forces, also initiated by Saudi Arabia, show the importance that the initiators of these projects give to Egypt because of its military capabilities. Saudi Arabia, which now aspires to the Arab leadership awards, despite some differences,

Map 2: Egyptians abroad



Source: Central Agency for Public Mobilization & Statistics (CAPMAS), Egypt

a great interest in rapprochement with Egypt<sup>1</sup> as evidenced by the recent visit by the Saudi King in Cairo. In global politics, the Egyptian army is a strategic balance factor in the region, especially vis-à-vis conventional regional military powers such as Israel or Turkey, and new regional military powers such as Iran or Ethiopia.

Via the Suez Canal, Egypt is the obligatory channel between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean, and onto the Atlantic. International trade in general, and specifically the transport of Gulf oil largely depend on it. Ensuring safe passage to the Suez Canal, Egypt provides an important place in world trade. Aware of this asset and despite its financial difficulties, Egypt did not hesitate to invest in expanding the canal.

## II. Vulnerabilities

### 1. Managing contradictions

To maintain balance in its neighborhood relations, Egypt is obliged to invest in reconciling contradictory policies:

(1). The two Mistral (amphibious assault carriers) built for Russia, eventually renamed "Gamal Abdel Nasser" and "Anwar Al Sadat," to be sold in Egypt, were paid for by Saudi Arabia according to confirmed reports. An article in the "Figaro" dated May 6, 2016 noted that "King Salman of Saudi Arabia wants to build a fleet worthy of his name in Egypt, which could be a regional force, in the Red Sea and the Mediterranean." According to the same source, the origin of Saudi funds to finance the mistral would have been confirmed by a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the French National Assembly.

- In its relations with Saudi Arabia, Egypt must manage its own tendency to encourage the Bashar al-Assad regime, who is fighting the Muslim Brotherhood ideology, and hostility that Saudi Arabia brings to this regime because of its ties to Shiite Iran;

- Egypt is still obliged by the Camp David Accords it signed with Israel, while sharing with the Arab and Muslim world the aversion developing towards the latter on the Palestinian issue;

- On the same issue, Egypt has to manage the sense of Arab solidarity with the Gaza Strip, despite it being managed by Hamas whose ideology is aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood, which are opponents, if not enemies of the Egyptian regime.

### 2. The challenge of the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring revolutions did impact Egypt's geopolitics, especially since there were two movements towards power in the Egyptian case: one that benefited the Muslim Brotherhood, and the other that had been serving them. The country ended up divided, exhausted

and devoid of some of its key resources, foreign investment and tourism. In addition, the country has been plagued by a wave of terrorist attacks that requires it to spend efforts and capital in the fight against terrorism, resources that the country badly needs to revive its socio-economic sector.

« It remains the first army in the Arab world and all joint defense plans in this area cannot forgo this army's contribution »

### 3. The difficulty with the option as an area for positioning

Very linked to Gulf countries by convergences in economic and geopolitical interests, Egypt is nevertheless not considered a country belonging to that integration space. Egypt is a gateway to the Maghreb, but it is not Maghreb, assuming that this institutional area revives from its lethargy. Thus, Egypt cannot claim to belong. North Africa is a geopolitical framework that can logically contain Egypt, but this has no political existence known to date. One of Egypt's vulnerabilities is perhaps this multiplicity of potential areas for integration, to which it all belongs, without exclusively belonging to one of them. Its most natural framework would be the Nile basin, a region that Egypt has been struggling to integrate and be involved in.

## III. An opportunity: the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI)<sup>2</sup>

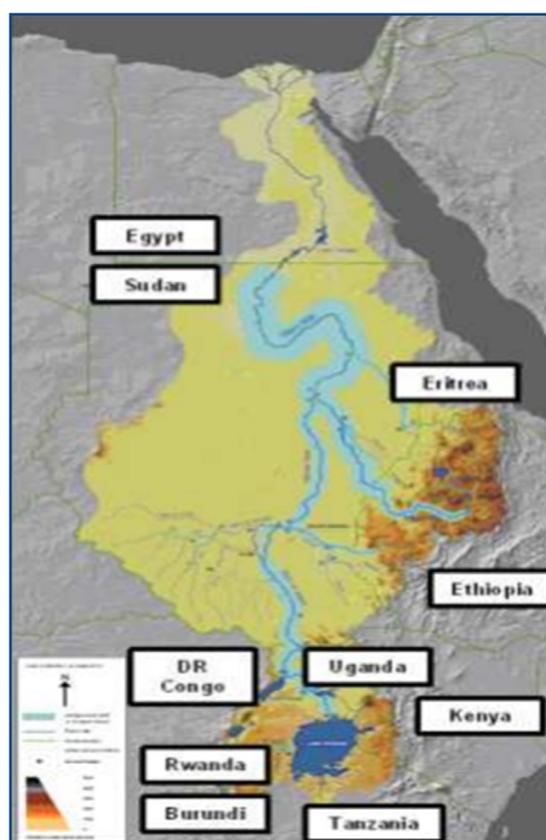
Egypt considers its "historical rights" over the Nile are guaranteed by both treaties from 1929 and 1959, thus granting it and Sudan the rights to 87% of the total flow of the Nile River, and a right to veto any upriver project.

These agreements, however, contested by most of the other Nile basin countries, including Ethiopia, which concluded a separate treaty in 2010 allowing it to develop projects on the river without having to seek the approval of Cairo. Egypt then expressed its displeasure by withdrawing from the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI), which includes ten states bordering the river, before rejoining NBI in February 2015.

« The challenge for Egypt is to transform these factors of uncertainty into productive catalysts for cooperation »

On Monday, March 23, 2015 in Khartoum, the Egyptian President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, and his Sudanese counterpart Omar al-Beshir, along with the Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn, presided over the signing of an agreement on sharing the Nile waters. This agreement ends years of tension between the Basin countries and could perhaps open a window of opportunity on forming an integration that goes beyond concern for the watershed. The way seems open to an integration structure corresponding to the Nile Basin, in which Egypt would finally find an area for sustainable positioning.

Map 3: Countries involved in the Nile Basin Initiative



Source : L'initiative du Bassin du Nil, Agence Française de Développement, <http://www.afd.fr/webdav/shared/PORTAILS/PAYS/ETHIOPIE/fen%C3%AAtre%20IBN.pdf>

(2). The initiative launched in 1999, was originally conceived as a tool for sharing scientific information among the ten states bordering the Nile. It now brings together governments of the following countries : Burundi, Egypt, Eritrea (observer), Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). See Map 3.

(3). « Rivalités égyptiennes » [http://eau.procheorient.free.fr/contexte\\_1024/egypte\\_1024.htm](http://eau.procheorient.free.fr/contexte_1024/egypte_1024.htm)

## Conclusion:

Egypt today reflects the uncertainties in a world in search of a new order:

- Horizontally, Egypt is caught between a fragmented Middle East and Arab-Muslim West that is also fragmented;
- Vertically, Egypt is shared between the Mediterranean and Africa, materialized especially by the Nile Basin;
- Diagonally, Egypt is rocked between emerging and traditional poles without finding a positioning base.

The challenge for Egypt is to transform these factors of uncertainty into productive catalysts for cooperation with its many neighborhoods, and capitalize on their contradictions by positioning itself as a joint venture that moderates the contrasts.

For this, Egypt is called to clean up its internal situation by reconciling the various factions of its people and by bridging the gap between them caused by the torments of the Arab Spring.

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Abdelhak Bassou is Senior Fellow at OCP Policy Center. He occupied several offices within the Directorate General of the Moroccan National Security where he was Borders' Division Chief from 1978 to 1993. He was the former Director of the Royal Institute of Police in 1998. He also served as the Chief of Regional Security (Errachidia 1999-2003, Sidi Kacem 2003-2005) and was also Head of the Central General Intelligence from 2006 to 2009.

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The views expressed in this publication are the views of the author.



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