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## THE ROLE OF EGYPT IN THE CONTEXT OF SYRIA'S RETURN TO THE "ARAB FAMILY" (2013-2023)

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*In 2023, Syria restored its membership in the League of Arab States and returned to the Arab fold. The internal political crisis that started in 2011 and then the long-lasting conflict completely undermined Syria's place and status in the Arab World. Moreover, several Arab countries took an openly hostile stance towards Syria, supporting various extremist groups fighting against Syrian government forces. It was possible to break through the barrier of negation formed around Syria in inter-Arab relations in Egypt because of the position of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who came to power in 2013. The Egyptian president began to support not only Syrian President Bashar Al Assad on several issues but also launched active mediation in the Arab World for the restoration of official Damascus's political rehabilitation. As a positive effect of the efforts of the Egyptian president in mediating with the leaders of a number of Arab countries, in 2023, Syria was able to regain its membership in the League of Arab States. This is a big advance for the official Damascus, which aims to create a qualitatively new environment of political relations in inter-Arab relations with the full involvement of Syria.*

**Keywords:** Egypt, Syrian Crisis, Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, League Of Arab States, "Arab Family", Egyptian-Syrian Relations

### **Introduction**

Multilayered relations between Arab countries are essential for enduring and lasting stability in the Middle East. In this regard, Egyptian-Syrian relations and the dynamics of their development are key and extremely vital.

Egyptian-Syrian relations have traditionally played a key role not only in the peaceful settlement of the Palestinian issue and the Arab-Israeli

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confrontation but also, to some extent, in determining the formation of the security architecture of the Arab World, trying to overcome various problems in inter-Arab relations<sup>2</sup>.

In different periods of the modern history of the Arab countries, the relations between the two countries have gone through periods of hurdles and close cooperation. Regular and stable Egyptian-Syrian ties are indeed essential for transforming the Arab World and region. We can consider them as a two-layered political reality. In some cases, both countries outwardly show intolerance towards each other while maintaining contact and even cooperating on various issues. It is clear that the main focus of the confrontation between the two countries, at least until the Syrian crisis, was the fierce competition for leadership in the Arab World. In order to understand the content of the foundations of Egyptian-Syrian relations, it is necessary to refer to some realities of the recent past. At the same time, it is worth mentioning that the political competition between these two heavyweights in the Arab World often negatively impacts bilateral relations, thus polarizing inter-Arab relations.

### ***Methodology***

This research utilizes a qualitative approach, combining historical analysis, case study methodology, and document analysis to examine Egypt's role in Syria's restoration of its membership in the League of Arab States (LAS) in 2023. The study focuses on the diplomatic efforts of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and Egypt's mediation within the Arab political arena to promote the rehabilitation of Syria's status.

1. Historical Analysis: The research draws upon the political and diplomatic history of Syria's relations with Arab countries from 2011 onwards, providing context for understanding how the internal conflict in Syria impacted its relations with neighboring Arab states. The analysis tracks

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<sup>2</sup> Van de Gronden J., Egyptian-Syrian Relations after the Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel: Alliance, Union, rivalry?, November 14, 2022, <https://omerjournal.com/2022/11/14/egyptian-syrian-relations-after-the-declaration-of-establishment-of-the-state-of-israel-alliance-union-rivalry/> (дата обращения 15.06.2024).

key milestones in the Syrian crisis, Arab reactions, and the resulting shifts in regional diplomacy.

2. Case Study of Egyptian Mediation: The article conducts an in-depth examination of Egypt's mediation efforts, focusing specifically on the role of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi from 2013 to 2023. It explores Egypt's policies and its diplomatic strategy, highlighting the steps taken to support Syria and to influence other Arab countries to adopt a more conciliatory stance.

3. Document Analysis: Primary and secondary sources, including official statements from Arab League meetings, speeches by Egyptian and Syrian officials, and diplomatic correspondences, are analyzed. Reports from international organizations, news outlets, and research institutions are also included to trace the narrative and timeline of Syria's reinstatement in the LAS.

4. Interviews and Secondary Sources: Although direct interviews with policymakers were not conducted, the research includes a review of interviews, speeches, and statements made by key political figures in the media and official reports. Furthermore, academic articles, books, and research papers related to the Syrian crisis and Egypt's foreign policy have been integrated to support the analysis.

5. Theoretical Framework: The research is framed within the context of international relations theories, particularly Realism, which explains the strategic motivations behind Egypt's mediation efforts. This approach helps in understanding how Egypt leveraged its geopolitical position to facilitate Syria's return to the LAS as a part of broader Arab political dynamics. This methodological framework ensures a comprehensive analysis of how Egypt's diplomacy influenced the reconciliation process between Syria and the broader Arab world, leading to Syria's eventual restoration of its membership in the League of Arab States.

### ***From cooperation to confrontation***

A period of Egyptian-Syrian rapprochement and close cooperation may be considered, perhaps the period from 1952 to 1967, when the strategic partnership between the two countries was a dominant force in the Arab World and, in some cases, also in the macro-region. The logical reflection of

the Egyptian-Syrian rapprochement led to the formation of the United Arab Republic, which was led by the participation of two states in 1958. The unification of the two states had grown into an influential factor not only in inter-Arab relations but also in international relations. Moreover, Cairo and Damascus took a robust and united position on various regional issues. A period of deterioration of Egyptian-Syrian relations began in 1967 with the Arab-Israeli war and, in particular, in 1973 with the "Yom Kippur or Doomsday" wars. Like any political-military cooperation, the Egyptian-Syrian alliance also had its so-called "red line," which was the issue of reconciliation with Israel<sup>3</sup>.

The crisis in Egyptian-Syrian relations began in 1978 and even more deteriorated in 1979 after the signing of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, as a result of which Egypt found itself in "political isolation" in the Arab World for a long time. The Egyptian-Syrian political conflict mainly revolved around the creation of a peace agenda between Israel and the Arabs, for which the official Damascus had an exclusively radical rejectionist position. Moreover, in the Arab World, Syria began to lead the political process of "isolating" Egypt, which lasted with some interruptions from 1979 to 1989. A new phase of the Egyptian-Syrian "rapprochement" and restoration of the influence and image of official Cairo in the Arab World began with the proposal of a new concept of Arab policy by Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. Mubarak launched step-by-step diversification of Egypt's foreign policy, in parallel reshaping the main patterns of Anwar Sadat's policy in the Arab World. Within the framework of Mubarak's Arab policy, Cairo's position on the Israeli "Peace for Galilee" military operation in 1982 was vital in the context of settling relations with Syria. Aiming to demonstrate Egypt's determination to support the Arabs, Mubarak not only condemned Israeli military operations in southern Lebanon but also threatened to freeze Egyptian-Israeli relations, questioning the need for an Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty. Aiming to demonstrate Egypt's steadfast support for the Arabs, Mubarak not

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<sup>3</sup> Մանրամասն տես՝ Rabinovich I., Israel's 1973 October War: A 50-year Perspective, October 3, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/israels-1973-october-war-a-50-year-perspective/> (дата обращения 19.05.2024).

only condemned Israeli military operations in southern Lebanon but also threatened to freeze Egyptian-Israeli relations, questioning the need for an Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty. Mubarak's stance on the Iraq-Iran war was no less important impetus for strengthening the positions of official Cairo in the Arab World. Mubarak's position was accepted with great enthusiasm by the Gulf Arab states and, in particular, by Saudi Arabia, which in turn conducted the so-called "Egyptian lobbying" in Syria.

In the late 1980s, Egypt managed to break through its "isolation" in the Arab World and was back in the "Arab fold," but relations with Syria were still far from fully restored.

A new period of tension in Egyptian-Syrian relations began in 2012, in the wake of the "Arab Spring". The elected president of Egypt, Mohammed Morsi, not only politically supported the process against Syrian President Bashar Assad but also personally demanded Assad's resignation. The newly elected president of Egypt, Mohammed Morsi, was trying to establish qualitatively new relations with Qatar, which was already known for its anti-Syrian stance. Egypt, under the leadership of Morsi, sought to secure new investments from the Gulf States to boost Egypt's economy<sup>4</sup>.

In June 2013, the Syrian embassy in Cairo was closed, and Mohammed Morsi issued a call to declare a no-fly zone over Syria's airspace<sup>5</sup>. It is important to note that in 2011, Syria's membership in the League of Arab States was suspended<sup>6</sup>. In August, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) suspended Syria's membership as well, citing President Assad's violent suppression of a 17-month uprising<sup>7</sup>. The move followed reports of further

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<sup>4</sup> Egypt crisis: Fall of Morsi Challenges Qatar's New Emir, July 5, 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-23185441> (дата обращения 25.05.2024).

<sup>5</sup> Egypt Cuts Diplomatic Ties with Syria, June 16, 2013, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2013/6/16/egypt-cuts-diplomatic-ties-with-syria> (дата обращения 15.08.2024).

<sup>6</sup> Batty D., Shenker. J., November 12, 2011, Syria Suspended from Arab League. The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/nov/12/syria-suspended-arab-league> (дата обращения 06.05.2024).

<sup>7</sup> Alsharif Asme, Organisation of Islamic Cooperation suspends Syria, August 16, 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/organisation-of-islamic-cooperation-suspends-syria-idUSBRE87E19F/> (дата обращения 27.05.2024).

civilian deaths in regime raids. In the Arab World, Syria found itself in "isolation," like Egypt, several years ago.

### ***Abdel Fattah Sisi and Syria's political restart in the Arab World***

In 2013, the restoration of Egyptian-Syrian relations was initiated by Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who came to power because of a coup d'état in Egypt on July 3. The Syrian direction of Egypt's Arab policy becomes one of the priorities. According to al-Sisi's decision on July 7, 2013, the Syrian consulate reopened in Cairo<sup>8</sup>.

The relationship between the two countries was essentially started. In that sense, the Syrian direction of al-Sisi's regional policy gradually began to be institutionalized<sup>9</sup>. In the Syrian issue, the Egyptian president began to influence the position of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates towards Syria<sup>10</sup>.

In 2014, during his first visit to the USA, Sisi emphasized in an interview with the media that Syria is Egypt's strategic partner and, at the same time, called for respect for Syria's territorial integrity<sup>11</sup>.

2016 was significant in activating the process of rapprochement in Egyptian-Syrian relations. In Cairo, President Sisi met with the head of the Syrian National Security Service, Ali Mamlouk, during which a number of issues related to the security of the two countries were discussed<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Egypt and Syria to Keep Consulate Relations: FM Spokesperson, July 7, 2013, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/75951/Egypt/Politics-/Egypt-and-Syria-to-keep-consulate-relations-FM-spo.aspx> (дата обращения 15.05.2024).

<sup>9</sup> Egypt's Sisi Expresses Support for Syria's Military, November 23, 2016, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/11/23/egypts-sisi-expresses-support-for-syrias-military> (дата обращения 08.05.2024).

<sup>10</sup> What Drove Syria Back into the Arab Fold?, <https://mepc.org/essays/what-drove-syria-back-arab-fold/> (дата обращения 15.05.2024).

<sup>11</sup> Saab H., Egyptian-Syrian Relations 2012-2021, November 26, 2021, <https://www.me-policy.org/2021/11/26/situation-of-the-egyptian-syrian-relations-2012-2021/> (дата обращения 01.05.2024).

<sup>12</sup> Syria Intelligence Chief Ali Mamlouk Makes Rare Visit to Cairo, December 24, 2018, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20181224-syria-intelligence-chief-ali-mamlouk-makes-rare-visit-to-cairo/> (дата обращения 15.05.2024).

At the end of 2016, Syrian President Bashar Al Assad stated that Egyptian-Syrian relations are positive and that Egypt's involvement in overcoming the Syrian crisis is evidenced by the fact that in August 2017, Al-Sisi managed to significantly contribute to the signing of a cease-fire in the Syrian Eastern Ghouta and the northern countryside of Homs<sup>13</sup>.

Egypt's efforts to establish regular relations with Syria were significant. In March 2019, Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shukri announced that Egypt has no preconditions for restoring Syria's membership in the League of Arab States. Since 2019, within the framework of inter-Arab meetings, Egypt has consistently voiced and supported the need to restore Syria's membership in the League of Arab States. Assisting Syria in returning to the "Arab family," al-Sisi at the same time raised the relations between official Cairo and Damascus to a qualitatively new level. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi made significant efforts to return Syria to the "Arab family."

On May 7, 2023, at the meeting of foreign ministers of the League of Arab States in Cairo, Syria restored its frozen membership in that important Arab organization. Already on May 19, at the LAS summit held in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Bashar Assad announced that Syria has turned its eyes to the future, which should be based on inter-Arab solidarity.

### **Conclusion**

To summarize the role of Egypt in restoring Syria's membership in the League of Arab States, we consider it necessary to highlight the following: Recently, in the Middle East, inter-Arab relations have seen a foreign policy push towards general de-escalation. For many Arab countries, Bashar Assad is an influential and decisive political leader. Al-Sisi's policy of improving Egyptian-Syrian relations manifests Egypt's attempt to increase and expand its authority. Ahead of restoring Syria's membership in the LAS in 2018, Syria restored diplomatic relations with the United Arab Emirates. 2019-

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<sup>13</sup> Maher Mohamed, Egypt and Assad: Calculations, Pragmatism and Morality, July 25, 2018, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/egypt-and-assad-calculations-pragmatism-and-morality> (дата обращения 14.06.2024).

2020: Bahrain and Oman reopened their embassies in Damascus. By agreeing to reinstate Syria's membership in the League of Arab States, a number of Arab countries sought to limit Iranian influence in Syria. In that sense, this was, first of all, a favor to Saudi Arabia. In recent years, in contrast to the close Turkish-Qatari cooperation, Egyptian-Saudi relations have intensified, gaining a strategic nature. And in this regard, both countries had a similar position regarding Syria. Official Cairo has not taken upon itself the mission of convincing the Saudis in this matter. It is also important for Saudi Arabia to not allow the country's "Shiitization" by supporting the Syrian influence in Lebanon. In fact, the restoration of Syria's membership in the League of Arab States was a great success for the official Damascus, as it first legitimized Bashar Al Assad's role as the leader of Syria. The process of restoring Syria's membership in the League of Nations further raised and strengthened the authority and reputation of Egyptian President al-Sisi in the Middle East.

Sisi's position regarding Syria was also emphasized. The Egyptian president was trying to showcase to both the Arab leaders and the international community that Syria's de facto isolation could be broken through the efforts of Cairo itself, and therefore, Egypt is once again a factor in the region. After brilliantly playing the "Syrian scenario" of increasing Egypt's role in the Arab World, Sisi also activated Egypt's African and Islamic policies.

**ԵԳԻՊՏՈՍԻ ԴԵՐԱԿԱՏԱՐՈՒԹՅՈՒՆԸ ՍԻՐԻԱՅԻ «ԱՐԱՐԱԿԱՆ ԸՆՏԱՆԻՔ»  
ՎԵՐԱԴԱՐՁԻ ԳՈՐԾԸՆԹԱՑՈՒՄ (2013-2023 թթ.)**

Գոռ Գևորգյան<sup>14</sup>

2023 թ. Սիրիան կարողացավ վերականգնել իր անդամակցությունը Արաբական պետությունների լիգայում և վերադառնալ «արաբական ընտանիք»: 2011 թ. Սիրիայում սկսված ներքաղաքական ճգնաժամը, որը վերաճեց պատերազմի,

<sup>14</sup> Գոռ Գևորգյանը ԵՊՀ արաբագիտության ամբիոնի դոցենտ է, ՀՀ ԳԱԱ արևելագիտության ինստիտուտի ավագ գիտաշխատող, պ.գ.թ., էլ. փոստ՝ gorgevorgyan1976@gmail.com, ORCID 0009-0006-2093-5016:



խարխլեց արաբական աշխարհում պաշտոնական Դամասկոսի հեղինակությունը և դիրքերը: Ավելին, արաբական մի շարք պետություններ բացահայտ թշնամական դիրքորոշում ստանձնեցին Սիրիայի նկատմամբ՝ սիրիական կառավարական ուժերի դեմ կռվող տարբեր ծայրահեղական խմբավորումներին:

Արաբական աշխարհում Սիրիայի խարխլված դիրքերը վերականգնելու հարցում մեծ էր Եգիպտոսի նախագահ Աբդել Ֆաթթահ ալ Սիսիի դիվանագիտական գործունեությունը: Նախագահ ալ Սիսին սկսեց ոչ միայն բացահայտորեն աջակցել Սիրիայի ղեկավար Բաշար ալ-Ասադին մի շարք առանցքային հարցերում, այլև ակտիվորեն միջնորդում էր՝ արաբական աշխարհում և միջազգային տարբեր հարթակներում՝ պաշտոնական Դամասկոսի քաղաքական դիրքերի և դերակատարության վերականգնման համար:

Սիրիային՝ նախագահ ալ Սիսիի ցուցաբերած աջակցության արդյունքում, պաշտոնական Դամասկոսը 2023 թ. կարողացավ վերականգնել իր անդամակցությունն Արաբական պետությունների լիգայում: Բաշար Ասադի համար ԱՊԼ-ում Սիրիայի անդամակցության վերականգնման հանգամանքը կարելի է բեկումնային համարել, քանի որ սիրիական արտաքին քաղաքական օրակարգի առանցքում՝ տարածաշրջանային և միջարաբական հարաբերությունների նոր իրողությունների պայմաններում, Սիրիայի՝ որակապես նոր կերպարի ստեղծման և դիրքերի վերահաստատման նպատակներն են:

**Բանալի բառեր՝** Եգիպտոս, սիրիական ճգնաժամ, Աբդել Ֆաթթահ ալ-Սիսի, Արաբական պետությունների լիգա, «արաբական ընդանիք», եգիպտական սիրիական հարաբերություններ

## РОЛЬ ЕГИПТА В КОНТЕКСТЕ ПРОЦЕССА ВОЗВРАЩЕНИЯ СИРИИ В «АРАБСКУЮ СЕМЬЮ» (2013-2023 ГГ.)

Гор Геворгян<sup>15</sup>

*В 2023 г. Сирия смогла восстановить свое членство в Лиге арабских государств и вернуться в так называемое «арабское лоно». Внутривосточный кризис, начавшийся в 2011 г., а затем переросший в войну, подорвали место и статус официального Дамаска в арабском мире. Более того, ряд*

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арабских государств заняли откровенно враждебную позицию по отношению к Сирии, поддерживая различные экстремистские группировки, воюющие против сирийских правительственных войск. Процесс восстановления места и роли Сирии в арабском мире удалось во многом благодаря позиции президента Египта Абдель Фаттах ас-Сиси, пришедшего к власти еще в 2013 г.

Президент ас-Сиси стал не только открыто поддерживать лидера Сирии Башара Асада по ряду ключевых вопросов, но и начал активное посредничество в арабском мире для политической реабилитации официального Дамаска в международных отношениях. В результате поддержки Сирии президентом ас Сиси, в 2023 г. Сирия сумела разморозить свое членство в Лиге арабских государств. Для официального Дамаска, это можно считать прорывом, так как в центре сирийской внешнеполитической повестки дня лежит цель создания качественно нового имиджа Сирии в контексте новых реалий региональных и межарабских отношений.

**Ключевые слова:** Египет, сирийский кризис, Абдель Фаттах ас Сиси, Лига арабских государств, «арабская семья», египетско-сирийские отношения

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