

Opponent Review of Doctoral Dissertation

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Title: Egyptian foreign policy and the "Arab spring": A Case study of Egyptian policy before and after Arab Spring toward Turkey and Palestine. Praha, 2019. 132 pages. Dissertation thesis (PhD.). Charles University, Faculty of Social Sciences, Institute of Political Studies, Department of Political Science.

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Summary

The present dissertation is a narrative account of the Egyptian foreign policy during the years of revolutionary tumult by a close and informed observer. The thesis defines Egypt' foreign policy by Egypt's relations to its regional neighbours (Turkey, Israel and Palestine) and to the USA. The author defines briefly "the Arab Spring" (p.32-39) and describes main foreign policy issues (p. 39-50). On p. 51-77 he describes post-2011 Turkish foreign policy and relations with Egypt; on p. 78-101 Egypt's relations with Israel/Palestine and concludes on p. 102-118.

Aims and findings

The dissertation deals with a highly relevant issue: the impact of both the protest mobilisations and the Islamists' rule on the Middle East. The author chooses the so-called "Arab Spring" period in Egypt (January 2011 – June 2013) and Egypt's foreign policy. He asks four questions:

- whether the "Arab Spring" brought substantial changes to Egypt's foreign policy,
- how much evidence can be found for arguing that political Islamists forced their own foreign policy's agenda during the Arab Spring
- how important was public opinion for the formulation of Egyptian foreign policy
- what was the role of international and regional foreign policy factors

The author chose a narrative approach focussed on two main issues: relations to Turkey and to Israel/Palestine.

The work is structured on foreign relations (with Turkey and Israel/Palestine). The author lists a series of foreign policy issues facing primarily Muhammed Mursi during his tenure and provides ample context to each issue ranging from Mubarak's years to 2013. He deals at length with Erdogan's neo-Ottoman policies and on the continuation of Israel-Egypt peace treaty, but also with lesser known episodes such as Egypt-Ethiopia relations concerning Nile waters. The texts offers several interesting and relevant perspectives: The author embeds his reflections in the larger context of Egyptian foreign policy – usually within the decade preceding the Arabs spring and several times into the decade following 2011; he argues against the overestimation of foreign influence (especially that of the US) in the events during and after the Arab Spring; he also criticises the tendency to work with conspirational theories.

When it comes to the findings, there are unclear: he concludes that there were substantial changes in Egypt's foreign policy, but not concerning core issues; he did not define political Islamists' agenda but has focused on the failures of Mursi's policies; public opinion is given a credit for influencing foreign policy but without much proof or detail; concerning the international and regional relations the author concludes that immediate regional considerations topped any further concerns. Main conclusion would probably be that all Egypt's post-2011 governments, including the Islamist one, were too preoccupied with "domestic" policy and limited by economic and inner political restraints to be able to lead a clear and sustained foreign policy.

Any Islamist' government policy is of great relevance and interest as the examples of Islamist-led government are rare. So far there are no indications that ideology would take precedence over pragmatic policy considerations. This is possibly would be the author's conclusion as well.

Unfortunately, the texts slides over many interesting issues without treating them systematically and without attempting a sustained analysis. The author presents several potential arguments unsystematically, in an anecdotal way, rather than developing them into a general argument. The determinants of the research question are unprecise and main concepts remain under-defined so the work offers little in a way of academic argumentation and falls short of bringing a solid knowledge of Islamist politics.

Methodology

Formally, the framing encompasses two governments: one under the leadership of SCAF, another under the Muslim Brotherhood's FJP party and later, for most of the period, under Mohammed Mursi. The author speaks of three post-2011 regimes but does not specify in detail who was responsible for which period. He also casually shifts back and forth from SCAF to Mursi's rule. The work does not offer precise information and omits relevant issues: while there were three prime ministers during the period (or more, for we do not know the exact dates that circumscribe the "study period"), there was only one foreign minister.

The methodological section does not actually define the works' methodology. Apart learning about the author's preference for neoclassical realism the authors does not elaborate on his methodology used for answering his research questions and does not operationalise his research questions.

First, the usage of neoclassical realism is illustrative rather than analytical. If limited rationality, incomplete information are aspects of actor's behaviour the theory works with, it hardly can be used as an incentive to look for outright mistakes and "misreadings" of a situation by an concrete actor – which the author does several times, using examples of Mursi's "mistaken" policies to confirm the above principle and dismiss Mursi's moves as "mistakes" and "misreadings". On the other hand, it would be interesting to explain why Mursi's foreign policy has acted in ways that turned out to be ineffective, non-realist, inconsistent etc.: was there a strategy, a consistency or a lack of it; were the foreign policy actors under Mursi professionals, or did he act single-handedly; what was the decision making process?

Secondly, the work is well structured according to foreign policy issues but it nevertheless lacks a systematic and methodical approach. For example, if the author wants to study change and stability, he would need to define first what stability would mean in terms of crucial programmatic issues that determine long term Egypt's foreign interests (such as the Peace Treaty, Sinai, USA, energy, security, food supply, water etc.), then define the method of ascertaining foreign policy (what constitutes a

change?) and finally assess the various events. For example, it would have been useful to have the foreign policy doctrine of the Mubarak years defined, to have its bearers (such as Suleimani, or Amr). Then the work could see if a similar doctrine is de facto not being continued and analyse the evolution of concrete policies between 2011 and 2013. An interesting aspect of Mursi's foreign policy is the office of Mohamad Amr as a foreign minister. The author dismisses this as a "political mistake by the inexperienced Mursi's government" (p. 59) but does not analyse Mursi's move (lack of personnel, a sign of stability of foreign policy, difficulty in dealing with the entrenched state apparatus etc.).

Failing this, the work does not come to a clear conclusion. The author claims that "the Arab Spring's domestic, regional and international changes have resulted in a substantial change of Egyptian foreign policy regarding most issues especially toward Turkey and Palestine. The only two exceptions were maintaining peace with Israel and keeping the economic relation with Turkey. The three different Egyptian regimes' leaders during the Arab Spring considered these two issues to be of vital strategic importance. The systemic international and regional signals did not contradict this conviction." (p. 114) But are those two issues not the core of the Egyptian foreign policy? Egypt has certainly increased diplomatic contacts with its only ideological ally during 2011-2013 (the author lists two pages worth of various visits on p. 56-57) but does this constitute a major change? A major change would be for example to align domestic and foreign policy on that of Turkey, but this has not happened. In domestic policy, the author mentions quickly but does not elaborate on Mursi's dealing with the "deep state" the way Erdogan did; in foreign policy Egypt did not align with Turkey's positions either. Interestingly, when speaking about Egypt-Turkey relations, the author puts mostly Erdogan in the position of an actor, while disregarding Mursi and painting him passively. Unfortunately, we do not learn if this reflects a reality, or author's biographical relation with Turkey-

Concerning the second question, we do not know how the "impact of public opinion" on the formulation of foreign policy is to be judged: what constitutes an impact of public opinion? What criteria does the author use? In the conclusion, SCAF's reaction to demonstrations is mentioned but not explained. Given the anti-Israel and later anti-USA sentiment palpable in some public events, it is actually to be expected that a foreign policy open to public pressure would be more anti-Israel, anti-USA and also anti-Saudi that was the case. There are obviously several examples of Mr. Mursi's reaction to public expectations, but those were rarely followed by a policy. Can we really talk about a public impact? In fact, a public impact could be framed in terms of a democratisation: is there a case for a democratised, more accountable public policy?

Argumentation

In several places, the author presents personal opinion in place of an argument. When important issues are at stake this diminishes the author's claims. For example, it would be crucial to know whether M. Mursi was conducting foreign policy with the backing of state apparatus or whether he acted single-handedly because of an administrative boycott or the "remnants". Unfortunately, the text does not present any analysis, but just the authors' personal dismissal of this second possibility: "MB's supporters claim that other state institutions also conspired to restrain Mursi's government freedom of action both domestically and externally (Kirkpatrick, 2018 p. 222). I do not agree with that claim. I believe they are influenced by the Turkish model of (Deep State) scenario where the secular cadres of the public service would resist the political Islamist government. I do not believe Egypt had a parallel secular civil service. I also think that the top rank Egyptian civil servants, especially at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were willing to cooperate with the MB government" (p. 26).

In a similar way that is poor in arguments, the author ascribes motivations to political actors like Erdogan and Mursi without referring to programmatic speeches or strategic documents. The text brings arguments mostly concerning the regional political context and history of foreign relations. The case studies start well before 2011, understandably, but focus in detail on Turkey and Hamas/Salafis and on regional dynamics rather than on Egypt's government itself. The author seems to presume that narrating or describing, as he says in the introduction, the context is self-explanatory.

Further, the author delimitates his research period of the "Arab Spring" as between January 2011- and August 2013. The reason he gives is based on a decision: "For my research purposes, I decided that toppling the Muslim Brotherhood's president in mid-2013 could serve as the end date of the Arab Spring time period for this study. After that date, demonstrations and protests continued to be staged by the Brotherhood and other political Islamists for another year or more. However, they were no longer representative of all political and social groups in Egypt. The Military stood firmly with those who opposed the Brotherhood rule." (3.1.) Yet when engaging in case studies, the narration is rarely focused on the chosen period. The author devotes a lot of space to his general argument about Turkey's role in the Arab Spring, towards Libya and its domestic-induced shift; there is actually little information and analysis Egyptian-Turkish interaction during 2011-2013; most narration concerns years 2010 and several pages are focused in Turkey's role in the MENA after 2013 and in Libya – which is relevant for Turkey's changing role in the Muslim world but less so for the argument here. The author does not systematically ask the question of the effect of an ideological sympathy between MB and AKP, neither about the impact of Erdogans secularist stance that was still present in 2012. The Author mentions el-Erians reservation on behalf of AKP but does not ask if they reflected a wider stance in MB/FJP or were individual positions. Rather than developing his analysis, the author quotes at length N. Yesilyurt's text (p. 76)

Finally, the author admits having been a participant of his subject. When dealing with Muslim brotherhood, the author includes personal judgements without systematic explanations as to, eg., MS's aims and purposes: "The inexperienced Muslim Brotherhood's executives made fatal mistakes that did not serve their own policy's purposes" (28) and speaks of "many domestic mistakes" and fatal blunders" of MB (p. 69).

Formal standards

The work is clearly structured into chapters. Its major formal weakness consists is a systematically improper way of introducing references.

Quoted sentences are not properly referenced (Author, year, page) – even direct quotes are systematically lacking page references. Most references are located at the end of the paragraphs: without indicating what the author refers to (a theory or a concept; an established fact)– hence they appear as alibi or perfunctory quotations. Even striking claims lack precise references: "The Egyptian government was sometimes forced to look the other way while Hamas operatives were supervising a massive transportation of all kinds of goods via the tunnels from and to Sinai (Dentice, 2018)."; "Egypt welcomed the visit of thousands of Iranian tourists. Israel and Saudi Arabia were not happy with such Egyptian – Iranian rapprochement. Egyptian Salafists, who are proxies of the Saudis, obstructed any further steps of reconciliations. The US and most of the Egyptian public were in favour of closer Egyptian relations with Iran. However, regional powers such as Saudi Arabia, UAE and to a lesser extent Israel. (Byman, et al., 2016)" (p. 41)

In other paragraphs, there is just one instead of “many”: “Many believe the Arab Spring that began with ..”, “Several scholars believe that..” (without quoting them)

There are unclear sentences, e.g.: “Regional players exercised a more influential interventions than the week and confusing global interventions” (p.30); “Turkish PM Erdogan who happened to be in Cairo during Gaza war in November 2012 summoned his (younger brother) the Emir of Qatar to Cairo along with his asylum’s guest Khaled Meshaal, the leader of Hamas at that time to all gather in Cairo” (p. 41.)

There are striking non-referenced claims: “The United States Government started an early unofficial dialogue with the Muslim Brotherhood since they acquired 20% of the Parliament’s seats in 2005 elections” (p. 43). “There are some reports that those Hamas operatives even played a mysterious role in supporting the uprising in El Tahrir square in downtown Cairo” (p. 82)

Overall assessment

This work opens interesting and relevant issues and present an extensive overview of Egypt’s foreign policy issues between 2011-2013. The reading brings an informed perspective of a former EFP practitioner.

Yet the present way of dealing with changes of Egypt’s foreign policy is piece-meal, anecdotic and narrative rather than analytical. The text does not offer any systematic analysis and does bring out any clear conclusion about the topic. The text lacks an overview of current research and reflection of other works on the Arab spring or Egyptian foreign policy. The author does not position himself towards competing, or inspiring interpretation frames of the Arab Spring in Egypt that he would support or criticise or contribute to. The conclusion is rather trivial: “In retrospect, we can now determine with great confidence that the government leaders in Egypt under three different political regimes from 2011 to 2014 were responding more to their public demands, limited resources and strategic culture” (p. 44)

The text would benefit from a more systematic analysis of the actors; concentration on a smaller number of issues within a more formal a narrative frame about the changes in between 2011 and 2013 and with an explicit analytical focus. The text also fails to quote properly.

Summary and final evaluation

Considering the above critical remarks and the formal requirements, presented dissertation of A. SALAHELDIN fulfils the minimum demands on dissertations of a doctoral study programme: it sets a research questions, deals with them in a structured way and answers them formally.

As far as the presented dissertation fulfils the elementary criteria, **I recommend** it to be defended.

In Prague, July 5th

Zora Hesová