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# SPECIFIC FEATURES OF FOREIGN POLICY IN ARAB-MUSLIM STATES: EGYPT AS A CASE STUDY

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### Abstract

This article examines the specific features of foreign policy in Arab-Muslim states through the case of the Arab Republic of Egypt. The central argument is that Egyptian foreign policy cannot be explained through a single theoretical lens, whether realism, constructivism, religious identity, or regime-security approaches. Rather, it represents a complex interaction between national security, regime stability, historical self-perception, Arab and Islamic identity, geopolitical position, economic vulnerability, and relations with regional and global powers. Egypt is selected as a case study because it occupies a unique position at the intersection of several geopolitical and civilizational spaces: the Arab world, Africa, the Islamic world, the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, and the wider international system. Its control over the Suez Canal, dependence on the Nile, demographic weight, military-political tradition, and historical claim to regional leadership make Egypt one of the most analytically significant cases for studying Arab-Muslim foreign policy. The article argues that Egypt's external behavior demonstrates a hybrid model of foreign policy: it combines realist pragmatism, regime-security calculations, Arab-Islamic legitimacy, historical identity, and multi-vector diplomacy. At the same time, Egypt should not be treated as a universal model for all Arab-Muslim states, since its historical experience and geopolitical resources give it a distinct foreign policy profile.

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**Keywords:** Egypt, foreign policy, Arab-Muslim states, Middle East, Arab identity, Islamic factor, regime security, Suez Canal, Nile, multi-vector diplomacy.

### Introduction

The foreign policy of Arab-Muslim states remains one of the most complex subjects in the study of contemporary international relations. These states are located at the intersection of multiple political, cultural, religious, and geopolitical spaces. Their external behavior is shaped not only by the distribution of power in the regional system, but also by domestic political structures, regime-security concerns, historical memory, religious legitimacy, economic dependence, and the influence of external great powers. For this reason, the foreign policy of Arab-Muslim states cannot be reduced either to religious identity or to conventional calculations of national interest alone.[1]

Egypt provides a particularly important case for understanding this complexity. It is one of the oldest state formations in the Middle East, the most populous Arab country, an African and Mediterranean state, a Muslim-majority society, a central actor in Arab diplomacy, and a state controlling one of the world's most important maritime routes — the Suez Canal. Its foreign policy has historically combined several dimensions: Arab leadership, African engagement, Islamic legitimacy, relations with great powers, protection of Nile water interests, and the pursuit of domestic stability through external partnerships.[2]

The analytical value of the Egyptian case lies in the fact that it reveals both the general patterns and the internal diversity of Arab-Muslim foreign policy. On the one hand, Egypt reflects a number of features common to many Arab-Muslim states: the central role of executive authority, the influence of the military and security establishment, the importance of regime survival, the symbolic use of Arab and Islamic identity, and the need to balance between external powers.[3] On the other hand, Egypt has its own specific trajectory shaped by the legacy of

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Nasserism, the Camp David framework, the strategic relationship with the United States, the peace treaty with Israel, the dependence on the Nile, and the country's long-standing claim to a special role in the Arab world.

The relevance of the Egyptian case has increased significantly since the Arab uprisings of 2011. The fall of Hosni Mubarak, the brief presidency of Mohamed Morsi, and the political transformation of 2013 altered the domestic and regional context in which Egyptian foreign policy operates. Under President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, Egypt has sought to restore internal stability, reassert its regional role, diversify its external partnerships, and present itself as a responsible state committed to regional security and diplomatic mediation.[4] However, this attempt has unfolded in a highly unstable environment marked by the conflict in Libya, tensions in Sudan, the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam dispute, the security situation in Sinai, maritime insecurity in the Red Sea, and the growing competition among the United States, Russia, China, Turkey, Iran, Israel, and the Gulf monarchies.

The aim of this article is to identify the main determinants and specific features of Egyptian foreign policy as a case of Arab-Muslim foreign policy. The article addresses three main questions. First, which theoretical approaches are most useful for explaining the foreign policy of Arab-Muslim states? Second, what structural and domestic factors shape Egypt's foreign policy behavior? Third, how does the Egyptian case reflect both broader patterns of Arab-Muslim foreign policy and Egypt's own national specificity?

The article proceeds from the assumption that Egypt is not a "typical" Arab-Muslim state in a simplified sense. Rather, it is an analytically useful case through which several broader characteristics of Arab-Muslim foreign policy can be examined. These characteristics include the interaction between state interests and regime interests, the importance of historical and religious legitimacy, the centralization of decision-making, the role of the military, and the use of multi-

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vector diplomacy as a means of preserving autonomy in a changing regional and global order.

### 1. Literature Review and Analytical Framework

The study of Egyptian foreign policy requires a multidisciplinary approach that brings together international relations theory, Middle Eastern studies, foreign policy analysis, and area-specific scholarship on Arab-Muslim political systems. Classical realism is useful because the Middle East remains a region of high insecurity, interstate rivalries, military conflicts, external intervention, and weak regional institutionalization. From this perspective, Egypt's foreign policy can be understood as a continuous effort to preserve sovereignty, protect borders, maintain the security of the Suez Canal and the Sinai Peninsula, defend its interests in the Nile Basin, and avoid strategic marginalization in the regional balance of power.

However, realism alone is insufficient. Raymond Hinnebusch's concept of "complex realism" is particularly relevant for the analysis of Middle Eastern foreign policies because it combines realist assumptions about insecurity and power with attention to regime survival, domestic politics, transnational identities, and global hierarchy.[5] In the Middle East, foreign policy is not always the expression of a unified national interest. In many cases, it also reflects the interests of ruling elites, the vulnerability of state institutions, the need for external resources, and the search for domestic and regional legitimacy.

The works of Hinnebusch and Shama are important for understanding Egypt as a pivotal Arab power. Egypt's foreign policy has historically been shaped by the tension between leadership aspirations and structural constraints. Its geographical position and historical legacy have encouraged Egyptian elites to view the country as a natural leader of the Arab world, but economic limitations, dependence on external assistance, domestic pressures, and regional competition have repeatedly restricted this ambition.[6] Nael Shama's study of Egyptian

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foreign policy from Mubarak to Morsi is particularly useful because it draws attention to the relationship between regime security and national interest, showing that foreign policy may serve not only external objectives, but also the internal consolidation of power.[7]

Another important contribution is made by Gamal M. Selim, who analyzes Egyptian foreign policy after the 2011 revolution through the dynamics of continuity and change.[8] This approach is useful because it avoids two extremes: the assumption that the 2011 revolution radically transformed Egypt's foreign policy, and the opposite assumption that nothing changed. In reality, the post-2011 period revealed both continuity and adaptation. The strategic relationship with the United States, the peace treaty with Israel, the importance of Gulf financial support, and the priority of national security remained central. At the same time, Egypt attempted to diversify its partnerships, restore regional influence, and redefine its role in a more fragmented Middle East.

Russian scholarship also provides an important analytical basis for this study. A. V. Demchenko's work on the internal factors of foreign policy formation in Arab states is useful for understanding the political mechanisms that influence decision-making in Arab political systems. Demchenko emphasizes the role of the head of state, the military, bureaucratic elites, the political system, and the Islamic factor in shaping Arab foreign policy behavior.[9] This perspective is directly relevant to Egypt, where presidential authority, the military-security apparatus, and elite consensus have historically played a decisive role in defining foreign policy priorities.

A. A. Poida's study of the historical determinants of Egypt's foreign policy is particularly valuable for explaining the long-term influence of geography, historical development, colonial experience, the Suez Canal, and the Nile water question.[10] These factors are not temporary variables; they form the structural environment within which different Egyptian governments operate. Regardless of ideological orientation, Egyptian leaders have had to respond to the same basic

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imperatives: the protection of strategic routes, the management of relations with major powers, the preservation of access to Nile waters, and the maintenance of Egypt's status in the Arab and African arenas.

The role of leadership in Egyptian foreign policy is examined in the work of I. E. Ibragimov, who analyzes how Egyptian leaders have contributed to the formation of the country's foreign policy identity.[11] This is important because Egyptian foreign policy has often been personalized through the strategic visions of individual presidents. Nasser associated Egypt with Arab nationalism and anti-colonial leadership; Sadat reoriented the country toward peace with Israel and partnership with the United States; Mubarak institutionalized a cautious status quo; Morsi attempted to introduce a more explicitly Islamist dimension; and el-Sisi has emphasized state sovereignty, stability, counterterrorism, and diversified partnerships.

Contemporary Russian analyses, especially the work of N. Yu. Surkov, are useful for examining Egypt's relations with great powers after the Arab Spring. Surkov's discussion of the so-called "Sisi doctrine" helps explain Egypt's attempt to maintain the strategic relationship with Washington while simultaneously developing relations with Moscow and Beijing.[12] This is not a simple anti-Western turn, but rather a strategy of hedging and diversification. Egypt seeks alternative sources of arms, investment, technology, diplomatic support, and infrastructure cooperation without fully abandoning its long-standing ties with the United States and Europe.

Uzbek scholarship also contributes directly to the topic. Sh. A. Yovkochev and G. Sh. Kadyrova examine the foundations and principles of Egypt's modern foreign policy in 2013–2020. Their work is important because it identifies several core determinants of Egyptian foreign policy: the Islamic factor, geographical position, historical experience, colonial legacy, relations with the United States, the Soviet Union/Russia, Britain and France, the Suez Canal, and the Nile water issue.[13] Their interpretation of Egypt's foreign policy through different

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“circles” of national interest — Arab, African, Islamic, Asian, European, and international — is especially useful for understanding Egypt as a multi-vector actor.

Based on these sources, this article uses a synthetic analytical framework. It combines four perspectives. The first is realist, focusing on security, borders, military power, strategic routes, and regional balance. The second is regime-security-oriented, emphasizing the connection between foreign policy and domestic political survival. The third is constructivist, examining Arab, Islamic, African, and civilizational identity as sources of legitimacy and symbolic power. The fourth is geopolitical-economic, focusing on the Suez Canal, the Nile, external assistance, investment, energy, tourism, and economic vulnerability.

This framework allows us to analyze Egypt’s foreign policy not as a purely ideological or purely pragmatic phenomenon, but as a hybrid process. Egyptian foreign policy is shaped by material interests, but it is expressed through identity-based language. It is driven by security concerns, but also by the need for regime legitimacy. It seeks autonomy, but remains constrained by economic dependence and external partnerships. It claims regional leadership, but operates in a Middle East where Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Turkey, Iran, Israel, and external great powers all compete for influence.

### **2. Egypt as a Foreign Policy Actor: Geopolitics, Identity and Strategic Constraints**

Egypt’s foreign policy is shaped by a set of long-term determinants that make the country one of the most important actors in the Arab-Muslim world. These determinants include its geographical position, control over the Suez Canal, dependence on the Nile, location between Africa and Asia, historical experience of statehood, Arab and Islamic identity, and the central role of the presidency and the military-security establishment. Unlike some Middle Eastern states whose foreign policy has been defined mainly by energy resources or revolutionary

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ideology, Egypt's external behavior has been determined by the interaction between geography, history, security, and identity.[14]

The first and most visible determinant is geography. Egypt occupies a strategic position connecting North Africa, the Middle East, the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, and the wider Indian Ocean route. The Suez Canal gives Egypt a special role in global trade and maritime communication. It is not merely an economic asset, but also a geopolitical instrument that increases Egypt's significance for major powers and international markets. According to UNCTAD, the Suez Canal handled approximately 12–15 percent of global trade in 2023.[15] For Egypt, therefore, the security of the Suez Canal is inseparable from national security, economic stability, and diplomatic relevance.

The second determinant is the Nile. Egypt's historical development, agricultural system, demographic growth, and national identity have been deeply connected with the Nile Valley. The Nile is not simply a natural resource; it is a foundational element of Egyptian statehood. This makes water security one of the most sensitive issues in Egyptian foreign policy. The dispute over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam has demonstrated that Egypt's African policy cannot be reduced to symbolic participation in African institutions. When the question concerns Nile water, Africa becomes a vital strategic direction. In this respect, Egypt's foreign policy is not only Arab-oriented or Middle Eastern; it is also structurally African.[16]

The third determinant is the Sinai Peninsula. Sinai has historically functioned as both a bridge and a buffer between Egypt and the Levant. Its occupation by Israel after the 1967 war, its return after the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, and the continuing security challenges in North Sinai have made this territory central to Egyptian strategic thinking. The peace treaty with Israel reduced the risk of conventional war on Egypt's eastern front, but it did not eliminate the political sensitivity of Egyptian-Israeli relations.

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The fourth determinant is historical identity. Egypt's elites have often perceived the country as a natural leader of the Arab world. This perception rests on several foundations: Egypt's demographic weight, its cultural influence in the twentieth-century Arab world, the legacy of Nasserism, the centrality of Cairo in Arab diplomacy, and the headquarters of the Arab League. However, this claim to leadership has never been uncontested. Saudi Arabia possesses religious legitimacy and financial resources; the United Arab Emirates has developed an activist regional policy; Qatar has used media and diplomacy to expand its influence; Turkey and Iran represent competing non-Arab regional projects. As a result, Egypt's regional leadership has become more selective and pragmatic than ideological.

The fifth determinant is the Islamic factor. Islam matters in Egyptian foreign policy, but it should not be understood as a single determining variable. In the Egyptian case, Islam functions simultaneously as a source of legitimacy, a component of national identity, a diplomatic language, and a political constraint. The Constitution of Egypt defines Islam as the religion of the state and the principles of Islamic Sharia as the main source of legislation.[17] However, Egyptian foreign policy is not guided by a single religious doctrine. Islamic identity influences legitimacy and discourse, while strategic decisions are filtered through national security, regime stability, and economic interests.

The sixth determinant is the structure of political power. Egyptian foreign policy has historically been highly centralized. The president, the military-security establishment, the foreign ministry, and a relatively narrow circle of bureaucratic and strategic elites have played the decisive role in shaping external priorities. This pattern reflects a broader feature of many Arab political systems, where foreign policy is closely connected with regime security and elite consensus.[18] Public opinion may influence the symbolic language of foreign policy during regional crises, but it rarely determines the final direction of state policy.

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From this perspective, Egypt's foreign policy demonstrates a hybrid model typical of several Arab-Muslim states. It is realist in its concern with security, borders, military power, and regional balance. It is regime-centered because external policy often serves domestic stability and the consolidation of political authority. It is constructivist in the sense that Arab, Islamic, African, and civilizational identities shape legitimacy and diplomatic discourse. It is also geo-economic because the Suez Canal, external assistance, investment, tourism, energy cooperation, and international financial institutions are central to Egypt's external strategy.

### **3. Historical Evolution of Egyptian Foreign Policy: From Nasserism to Strategic Balance**

The contemporary foreign policy of Egypt cannot be understood without reference to its post-1952 historical evolution. Each major period of Egypt's republican history produced a different foreign policy orientation, yet none of these periods fully escaped the structural constraints discussed above. The language, alliances, and ideological justification of Egyptian diplomacy changed from Nasser to el-Sisi, but several core imperatives remained constant: the preservation of state sovereignty, the protection of strategic territory, the management of relations with great powers, the search for regional status, and the need to reconcile domestic legitimacy with external commitments.

The 1952 revolution marked a turning point in the foreign policy of modern Egypt. The Free Officers' movement sought to end the monarchy, reduce foreign influence, and build a sovereign republican state. Under Gamal Abdel Nasser, Egypt's foreign policy acquired a strongly ideological character. It was shaped by Arab nationalism, anti-colonialism, non-alignment, and the aspiration to transform Egypt into the political center of the Arab world. Nasser's foreign policy was not only a response to external pressures; it was also a project of identity construction. Egypt was presented as the vanguard of Arab liberation, the

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voice of the Global South, and a state capable of challenging Western domination in the Middle East.

The nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956 became the symbolic peak of this policy. On July 26, 1956, Nasser announced the nationalization of the Suez Canal Company, which had previously been controlled by British and French interests.[19] This decision transformed a question of economic sovereignty into a broader anti-colonial struggle and strengthened Nasser's status across the Arab world. However, Nasserism also revealed the limits of ideological foreign policy. Egypt's claim to Arab leadership exceeded its material capabilities. The failure of the United Arab Republic with Syria, the costs of regional activism, and the defeat in the 1967 Six-Day War demonstrated the gap between revolutionary rhetoric and strategic capacity.

Anwar Sadat inherited a weakened state, occupied territory, and a political system still shaped by Nasserist institutions. His foreign policy gradually moved away from ideological pan-Arabism toward strategic pragmatism. The October War of 1973 was central to this transformation. Although it did not produce a complete military victory, it restored Egypt's bargaining position and opened the way for diplomacy. Sadat's most important foreign policy decision was the move toward peace with Israel. The Camp David Accords of September 1978 established the framework for the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty concluded in March 1979.[20] From a realist perspective, this process allowed Egypt to recover Sinai, reduce the danger of direct war with Israel, secure American support, and redirect state resources toward domestic priorities. From an Arab identity perspective, however, the same decision produced a serious legitimacy problem, since many Arab states regarded Egypt's separate peace with Israel as a violation of Arab solidarity.

This episode is crucial for understanding the foreign policy of Arab-Muslim states. It shows that Arab and Islamic solidarity can influence the legitimacy and costs of foreign policy decisions, but it does not always determine state behavior.

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When core national interests are at stake, pragmatic calculations may prevail over collective ideological commitments. Sadat's policy demonstrated that Egyptian foreign policy could sacrifice regional popularity in order to achieve territorial recovery and strategic realignment.

Hosni Mubarak's foreign policy was less dramatic than that of Nasser or Sadat, but it was highly consequential. Mubarak institutionalized a cautious and stability-oriented diplomacy. The main pillars of his policy were the preservation of the peace treaty with Israel, strategic partnership with the United States, gradual reintegration into the Arab world, mediation diplomacy, and close relations with the Gulf monarchies. Egypt did not try to revive Nasserist revolutionary leadership, but it maintained itself as an indispensable intermediary and a state of controlled regional relevance.

The 2011 revolution created expectations that Egyptian foreign policy might undergo a major transformation. The fall of Mubarak opened political space for new actors, including the Muslim Brotherhood, youth movements, revolutionary forces, and public opinion. The presidency of Mohamed Morsi represented the most significant attempt to introduce a different tone into Egyptian foreign policy. However, the scope of change remained limited. The peace treaty with Israel was not abandoned, strategic ties with the United States continued, economic dependence persisted, and relations with Gulf actors remained essential.[21]

The political transformation of 2013 and the rise of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi marked the return of a strongly state-centered and security-oriented foreign policy. The new leadership presented itself as the defender of the Egyptian state against internal fragmentation, the politicization of religion, terrorism, and regional disorder. This domestic narrative shaped Egypt's external behavior. Under el-Sisi, foreign policy became closely linked to the language of sovereignty, stability, counterterrorism, and the restoration of state authority.

One of the central features of el-Sisi's foreign policy has been strategic diversification. Egypt has preserved its relationship with the United States, but it

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has also expanded cooperation with Russia, China, the European Union, and Gulf states. This does not mean that Egypt has abandoned its traditional partnerships. Rather, it reflects a hedging strategy: Cairo seeks to avoid excessive dependence on any single external actor while maximizing access to military, financial, diplomatic, technological, and investment resources.[22]

The historical evolution of Egyptian foreign policy therefore reveals a pattern of continuity beneath visible political change. Nasser, Sadat, Mubarak, Morsi, and el-Sisi used different ideological languages and pursued different alliances, but all operated within the same structural environment. Egypt had to protect the Nile, secure the Suez Canal, manage relations with Israel, interact with great powers, respond to domestic legitimacy needs, and preserve its role in the Arab world.

#### 4. Main Directions of Egypt's Contemporary Foreign Policy

The contemporary foreign policy of Egypt is best understood through the logic of strategic balance. This concept does not imply neutrality or passive equidistance from all actors. Rather, it reflects Egypt's attempt to preserve room for maneuver in a fragmented regional and global environment. In December 2025, the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a white paper on "Strategic Balance in Egyptian Foreign Policy," presenting strategic balance as a guiding principle of Egyptian diplomacy over the previous decade.[23] This concept helps explain Cairo's effort to maintain traditional partnerships while expanding cooperation with Russia, China, the Gulf monarchies, African states, the European Union, and emerging non-Western platforms.

The United States remains one of Egypt's most important external partners. Since the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty of 1979, Washington has viewed Egypt as a key pillar of regional stability, Arab-Israeli diplomacy, counterterrorism, and security cooperation in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Red Sea. For Egypt, the relationship with the United States provides military assistance, diplomatic access, international legitimacy, and a channel of influence in Washington's



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Middle East policy. According to the Congressional Research Service, Egypt has long remained one of the major recipients of U.S. military assistance, and this assistance has been closely linked to the strategic framework created after the 1979 peace treaty.[24] At the same time, this partnership has always been asymmetrical: Egypt benefits from American support, but this support also reflects Egypt's dependence on an external great power.

Relations with Israel remain one of the most sensitive dimensions of Egyptian foreign policy. The Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty removed the threat of large-scale conventional war between the two countries and enabled Egypt to recover the Sinai Peninsula. From the perspective of state interests, this was one of the most important achievements of Egyptian diplomacy in the twentieth century. Yet from the perspective of Arab public opinion, the treaty created a lasting legitimacy dilemma. This contradiction explains the specific nature of Egyptian-Israeli relations, often described as a "cold peace": formal diplomatic relations and security coordination coexist with limited societal normalization.

In this context, the Palestinian question can be mentioned as a limited but important element of Egypt's regional diplomacy. Egypt traditionally supports a political settlement based on the two-state principle, but its practical approach is shaped primarily by border security, the stability of Sinai, relations with Israel and the United States, and the need to avoid uncontrolled regional escalation.[25] The Gulf monarchies, especially Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, became particularly important for Egypt after 2013. Their support for the new Egyptian leadership was driven by several shared concerns: opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood, fear of revolutionary instability, preference for strong state institutions, and interest in maintaining a conservative regional order. Gulf financial assistance and investment helped Egypt manage economic pressure and consolidate the post-2013 political order. However, Egypt's relations with the Gulf should not be reduced to dependence. Cairo has benefited from Gulf support, but it has also tried to preserve autonomy in regional conflicts. Its position on



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regional escalation, Syria, Yemen, and Libya has often reflected its own security calculations rather than automatic alignment with Gulf preferences.

The revival of Egyptian-Russian relations under el-Sisi is one of the most visible examples of Egypt's multi-vector diplomacy. The relationship draws on historical memory from the Nasser period, when the Soviet Union played a major role in Egypt's military and development projects. In the contemporary period, cooperation with Russia has developed in several areas, including defense contacts, nuclear energy, tourism, grain trade, and regional diplomacy. For Egypt, relations with Russia serve several purposes: they provide alternative channels of military and technological cooperation, strengthen Egypt's bargaining position with Western partners, and signal that Cairo is not exclusively dependent on Washington.[26] At the same time, Egypt's relationship with Russia has limits. Cairo cannot afford a full strategic break with the United States or Europe. Therefore, Egypt's Russian direction should be understood not as an anti-Western shift, but as part of a broader strategy of diversification.

China has become increasingly important in Egypt's foreign policy, primarily through economic, infrastructural, technological, and investment cooperation. Unlike the United States, China does not play the same role in Egypt's military-security architecture. Its importance lies mainly in development-oriented diplomacy. Chinese involvement in infrastructure, industrial zones, telecommunications, and the New Administrative Capital reflects Egypt's search for external resources and development partners. Egypt's accession to BRICS from January 2024 is also part of this diversification.[27] Membership in BRICS does not automatically transform Egypt's foreign policy orientation, but it has symbolic and practical significance: it strengthens Egypt's image as a state connected to the Global South and may provide additional channels for financial and economic cooperation.

The European Union is another major direction in Egypt's contemporary foreign policy. The EU views Egypt as a key partner in the Southern Mediterranean,

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especially in relation to regional stability, migration management, energy cooperation, counterterrorism, trade, and the security of maritime routes. Egypt, in turn, sees Europe as a source of investment, financial assistance, technology, market access, and diplomatic recognition. On March 17, 2024, Egypt and the European Union agreed to elevate their relations to the level of a Strategic and Comprehensive Partnership.[28] This partnership reflects overlapping interests: stability in the Middle East and the Mediterranean, migration management, energy cooperation, and support for Egypt's economic resilience.

Egypt's African policy has gained renewed importance because of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam dispute. The Nile is central to Egypt's survival, and any perceived threat to its water security is treated as a matter of national security. The GERD issue has forced Egypt to strengthen its African diplomacy, intensify engagement with Nile Basin states, and seek regional and international mediation. This dimension is especially important because it challenges the assumption that Egypt's foreign policy is mainly Arab-centered. Egypt is indeed a major Arab state, but its national security is also deeply African.

Libya and Sudan represent additional directions of Egypt's contemporary security policy. Libya is a major concern on Egypt's western border. State collapse, armed groups, foreign intervention, and the circulation of weapons have made Libya a direct security challenge. Egypt's policy toward Libya has been shaped by the need to prevent the spread of instability, limit the influence of hostile Islamist forces, and secure its western frontier. Sudan is another critical direction. Instability in Sudan affects Egypt through border security, migration, Red Sea geopolitics, and Nile water politics. These cases demonstrate that Egypt's foreign policy is strongly shaped by the security of its immediate neighborhood.

The Red Sea and the Suez Canal have become central to Egypt's contemporary foreign policy because they connect national income, global trade, and regional security. The Suez Canal is one of Egypt's most important sources of foreign currency and one of the main reasons Egypt remains strategically relevant for

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global powers. Disruptions in the Red Sea since late 2023 have shown that maritime security is not an abstract issue for Cairo; it directly affects state revenue, trade flows, and economic stability. According to the IMF, Suez Canal trade dropped by 50 percent in the first two months of 2024 compared with the previous year.[29] For Egypt, therefore, maritime security is both a foreign policy priority and an economic necessity.

The main directions of Egypt's contemporary foreign policy reveal a common logic: the search for strategic balance under conditions of constraint. Egypt maintains its partnership with the United States but diversifies toward Russia and China. It cooperates with Israel on security while preserving its Arab diplomatic legitimacy. It depends on Gulf investment but avoids full subordination to Gulf agendas. It strengthens relations with the European Union while rejecting excessive political conditionality. It claims Arab leadership but increasingly recognizes the importance of Africa, the Nile Basin, and the Red Sea. It seeks autonomy, but remains economically vulnerable.

### **5. The Arab and Islamic Identity Factor in Egypt's Foreign Policy**

The role of Arab and Islamic identity in Egypt's foreign policy should be analyzed carefully. It would be misleading to describe Egyptian foreign policy as purely secular and interest-based. It would be equally misleading to interpret it as primarily religious or ideological. Egypt's external behavior is shaped by a combination of pragmatic state interests and identity-based narratives. Arab and Islamic references matter because they provide legitimacy, define symbolic obligations, and shape the language through which foreign policy is explained to domestic and regional audiences. However, they do not automatically determine policy outcomes.

Egypt's Arab identity has historically been one of the central elements of its foreign policy. During the Nasser period, Arab nationalism became the ideological foundation of Egypt's regional role. Cairo presented itself as the

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political and cultural center of the Arab world and sought to lead anti-colonial and pan-Arab movements. Although the power of pan-Arabism declined after the 1967 defeat and the subsequent shift toward peace with Israel, Arab identity did not disappear from Egyptian diplomacy. It continued to shape Egypt's involvement in Arab institutions, relations with the Gulf monarchies, and the country's claim to regional leadership.

In contemporary Egyptian foreign policy, Arab identity is no longer revolutionary in the Nasserist sense. It has become more pragmatic and state-centered. Egypt does not seek to unite the Arab world under a single ideological project. Instead, it uses Arab diplomacy to preserve its relevance, participate in regional mediation, and maintain working relations with different Arab actors. This transformation reflects a broader shift in the Arab regional system: ideological pan-Arabism has weakened, while state interests, regime security, economic resources, and flexible coalitions have become more important.

The Islamic factor is more complex. Islam is part of Egypt's constitutional, cultural, and social identity, and institutions such as al-Azhar give Egypt a special place in the Sunni Muslim world. However, Egyptian foreign policy has rarely been guided by a single Islamic doctrine. Different leaders have used Islamic references in different ways. Nasser promoted a state-controlled and anti-colonial version of religious legitimacy. Sadat gave Islam a more visible place in political discourse while pursuing peace with Israel. Mubarak maintained a cautious state-centered religious policy. Morsi attempted to introduce a stronger Islamist tone, but his foreign policy remained constrained by state institutions, economic dependence, and strategic commitments. El-Sisi has emphasized a state-controlled discourse of religious moderation, counter-extremism, and a critical stance toward the politicization of Islam and movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood.

This historical variation shows that Islam in Egyptian foreign policy is not fixed. It is interpreted through state institutions, leadership priorities, domestic political



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conflicts, and regional circumstances. In this sense, Islam functions as a flexible resource of legitimacy. Egyptian governments use Islamic language to promote moderation, justify the struggle against extremism, and strengthen the state's claim to religious authority. At the same time, the state seeks to maintain control over the official religious discourse and limit the political influence of non-state Islamist movements.

The same logic applies to Egypt's position on Islamist political movements. Under el-Sisi, the Egyptian state has constructed a distinction between Islam as a religious and civilizational identity and Islamism as a political challenge to state authority. This distinction is central to Egypt's domestic and foreign policy. It allows Cairo to present itself as a Muslim-majority state committed to religious moderation while opposing Islamist political movements that challenge the state's authority. This position has also influenced Egypt's relations with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Turkey.

Egypt's conflict with the Muslim Brotherhood after 2013 affected its regional alignments. Cairo moved closer to states that shared its concerns about the regional role of Islamist movements, particularly the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, while relations with Turkey and Qatar became strained for several years. This demonstrates that Islamic identity does not automatically produce solidarity among Muslim states. On the contrary, different interpretations of Islam and different attitudes toward its political role can become sources of disagreement within the Arab-Muslim world.

This point is essential for the article's broader argument. Arab-Muslim states do not act as a single ideological bloc. Their foreign policies are shaped by different regime types, national interests, historical experiences, economic resources, and security priorities. Islam may create a common symbolic vocabulary, but it does not eliminate competition among Muslim-majority states. Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates all refer in different ways to



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Islamic or civilizational legitimacy, yet their regional strategies often diverge sharply.

Therefore, Arab and Islamic identity in Egypt's foreign policy should be understood through three functions. First, it performs a legitimizing function: it helps the state justify its positions on regional stability and religious moderation. Second, it performs a constraining function: it limits the degree to which Egypt can openly distance itself from Arab and Muslim causes without political cost. Third, it performs an instrumental function: it allows the Egyptian state to strengthen its soft power, maintain influence over official religious discourse, and present itself as a center of moderate Sunni Islam.

### Conclusion

The case of Egypt demonstrates that the foreign policy of Arab-Muslim states cannot be adequately explained through a single theoretical paradigm. Egyptian foreign policy is not purely realist, although security, territory, military power, and regional balance are central to its logic. It is not purely constructivist, although Arab and Islamic identities remain important sources of legitimacy and symbolic authority. It is not reducible to regime security, although the survival and consolidation of political authority have repeatedly shaped external choices. Nor can it be explained only through economic dependence, although external financing, investment, tourism, Suez Canal revenues, and relations with international financial institutions strongly affect Egypt's diplomatic behavior. Rather, Egypt's foreign policy is best understood as a hybrid and multi-layered process in which strategic constraints, identity narratives, regime interests, and economic and geo-economic vulnerabilities interact..

The analysis has shown that Egypt is an analytically useful case for studying broader patterns of Arab-Muslim foreign policy, but it should not be treated as a universal model for all Arab-Muslim states. Egypt possesses a specific historical and geopolitical profile: it is the most populous Arab country, a major African

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state, a Mediterranean actor, a Muslim-majority society, a central participant in Arab diplomacy, and a state controlling the Suez Canal. Its foreign policy is also shaped by the Nile, the Sinai Peninsula, the Arab-Israeli conflict, relations with the United States, and the search for regional relevance in a Middle East increasingly influenced by Gulf monarchies, Turkey, Iran, Israel, and external great powers.

One of the main findings of the article is that Egyptian foreign policy has been characterized by continuity beneath political change. Nasser, Sadat, Mubarak, Morsi, and el-Sisi represented different ideological languages and different diplomatic orientations. Nasser associated Egypt with Arab nationalism, anti-colonialism, and non-alignment. Sadat moved Egypt's foreign policy away from revolutionary pan-Arabism toward a more pragmatic and state-centered diplomatic course. Mubarak, in turn, consolidated a cautious model of foreign policy based on stability, continuity, and regional mediation. Morsi's presidency introduced a more visible Islamist-oriented discourse, but it remained constrained by state institutions, economic dependence, and existing strategic commitments. El-Sisi has emphasized sovereignty, stability, counterterrorism, a critical stance toward Islamist political movements, and diversified partnerships. Despite these differences, all Egyptian leaders operated within the same broad structural environment: the need to protect the Nile, secure the Suez Canal, manage sensitive regional security commitments, preserve ties with great powers, maintain domestic stability, and defend Egypt's claim to regional significance.

The Egyptian case also confirms the importance of regime security in the foreign policy of Arab-Muslim states. Foreign policy is not only a response to external threats; it is also a mechanism of internal consolidation. External partnerships provide financial resources, military support, diplomatic recognition, and political legitimacy. This has been especially visible after 2013, when Egypt's relations with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, the United States, Russia, China, and the European Union became closely connected with the stabilization

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of the domestic political order and the consolidation of the post-Morsi state. However, regime-security logic does not fully replace national interest. In many cases, the two overlap: border security, the struggle against terrorism, the protection of Nile water resources, and the maintenance of state stability are simultaneously matters of state security, regime stability, and national survival. Another key conclusion concerns the role of Arab and Islamic identity. The article has argued that Arab and Islamic identity should not be understood as direct determinants of Egyptian foreign policy. They do not automatically dictate state behavior. Instead, they operate as sources of legitimacy, diplomatic language, and political constraint. Egypt's references to Arab solidarity, its use of Islamic moderation, and its reliance on institutions such as al-Azhar show that identity remains important.

The concept of multi-vector diplomacy is particularly useful for understanding Egypt's contemporary external behavior. Egypt does not seek to replace one patron with another. Rather, it attempts to preserve strategic flexibility by maintaining relations with several centers of power at the same time. The United States remains essential for military and diplomatic reasons; Russia provides opportunities in defense, energy, and symbolic strategic diversification; China offers investment, infrastructure, and Global South connectivity; the European Union is important for economic cooperation, migration, energy, and Mediterranean security; Gulf monarchies provide financial and political support; African states matter because of the Nile and continental diplomacy. This multi-vector approach reflects both ambition and vulnerability. It allows Egypt to increase its bargaining capacity, but it also reveals the limits of its autonomy.

Therefore, the main conclusion of this article is that Egypt's foreign policy represents a controlled form of multi-vector diplomacy. It is "controlled" because Egypt's foreign policy is shaped by centralized state institutions, presidential leadership, key security bodies, and a relatively narrow circle of strategic decision-makers. It is "multi-vector" because Egypt operates simultaneously in

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Arab, African, Islamic, Mediterranean, Western, Russian, Chinese, and Global South directions. This model is not simply a diplomatic choice; it is a response to Egypt's position as a major but constrained regional power. Egypt has considerable assets — geography, population, army, diplomatic tradition, cultural influence, and historical status — but it also faces serious limitations: economic vulnerability, external dependence, water insecurity, regional instability, and competition from wealthier or more activist regional actors.

The broader theoretical implication is that the foreign policy of Arab-Muslim states should be studied through an integrated analytical framework. Realism explains security concerns and the importance of power. Constructivism helps to understand identity, legitimacy, and symbolic obligations. Foreign policy analysis reveals the role of leadership, institutions, and decision-making processes. Approaches focused on regime stability explain the connection between external behavior and domestic political stability. Geo-economic analysis highlights the role of resources, infrastructure, trade routes, and external financing. Egypt's case shows that these approaches should not be used separately, but in combination.

In this sense, Egypt is not merely an object of regional politics; it is an active but constrained actor seeking to preserve autonomy in a changing international order. Its foreign policy reveals the central dilemma of many Arab-Muslim states in the twenty-first century: how to combine sovereignty with dependence, identity with pragmatism, regional ambition with limited resources, and domestic stability with external adaptation. The Egyptian case therefore enriches the study of Arab-Muslim foreign policy by showing that external behavior in this group of states is produced not by one dominant factor, but by the continuous interaction of history, geography, identity, security, regime interests, and global power shifts.

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