



MARMARA ÜNİVERSİTESİ MARMARA UNIVERSITY  
ULUSLARARASI İLİŞKİLER RESEARCH CENTER FOR  
ARAŞTIRMA ve UYGULAMA MERKEZİ INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

# MURCIR Analiz

## The importance of improving relations between Türkiye, Egypt and Syria

*“Therefore, improving the relationship between Türkiye, Syria, and Egypt is necessary for their mutual benefit. Such improvement will bring greater economic, cultural, and even political gains to all parties. Consequently, this will help the three nations enhance their ability to confront international chaos, regional conflicts, and domestic challenges.”*

### Shaza Al-Mufti

Seen as a turning point, Egypt's President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi made his first presidential visit to Türkiye on 4 September 2024. This visit comes after years of strained relations and marks the beginning of a new era in diplomatic, economic, and military ties between the two regional powers. This visit also came after the “historical” visit of Türkiye's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to Cairo on 14 February 2024.

For years, the relationship between Egypt, Syria and Türkiye has been complex, particularly after 2011. However, the recent developments in relations between the three countries refer to the new regional thinking in the post-Arab uprising. The time of ideological rivalries seems to stay in the past; now, pragmatism, mutual benefits and economic interests appear to be the guiding drivers.

As a neighbouring country by land and sea, the relationship with Türkiye is one of Syria's and Egypt's most important bilateral relationships, and the three countries share close economic ties, a common historical era, as well as strong people-to-people and cultural exchanges.

Therefore, we should continue having dialogues and cooperate on matters of common interest and aim to build a "constructive and stable relationship."

### Is it possible to rebuild a cultural and societal bridge between the Syrian, Egyptian and Turkish peoples?

Certainly, this bridge can be rebuilt due to the close and strong convergence between the three peoples. This convergence can be observed in many prominent aspects such as:

1- The religious convergence based on the teachings of Islam and its values.

2- The cultural convergence, as we notice millions of cases of intermarriage relations between many Turkish, Syrian, and Egyptian families. Also, we can easily notice the convergence in customs, traditional foods, oriental music, and dances.

3- The linguistic convergence, as we can notice many common linguistic vocabularies among the three peoples.

4- The geographical proximity, as Syria and Türkiye share a land border of approximately 911 kilometres. Egypt and Türkiye also share the most important sea lanes on the Mediterranean (Suez Canal - Bosphorus Strait). In addition, the three countries also share the Mediterranean's culture as well as its rich heritage.

### **What are the reasons for the warm relations between Egypt and Türkiye and their importance to both countries?**

Egyptian-Turkish relations have recently witnessed a tangible rapprochement considering the political will of both countries' leaders.

As tensions have eased, bilateral trade has rebounded. Türkiye's exports to Egypt surged to \$4.5 billion in 2021, marking a 43 percent increase from the previous year, and to \$4.5 billion in 2022. Egypt's exports to Türkiye grew from \$2 billion in 2018 to a ten-year high of \$2.6 billion in 2021, reaching a record \$3.7 billion in 2022.

Several common factors bring Egypt and Türkiye closer together. Primarily, they **share significant economic interests**, encouraging them to improve ties. The top leaders of both countries reaffirmed, during the recent two summits in February and September 2024, their determination to advance cooperation in every area, including energy, defence, industry, health and environment. A High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council meeting was also held where the two leaders oversaw the signing of 17 agreements across various sectors, including education, infrastructure, aviation, transportation, health, and energy.

Türkiye has been pursuing to become a European energy hub by importing liquefied natural gas (LNG) from Egypt and restarting freight shipping between the Turkish port of Mersin and Alexandria in Egypt. Cairo and Ankara aim to increase the trade volume from \$10 billion to \$15 billion within the next 5 years.

The shifting geopolitical scene in the Middle East region seems to be another critical factor driving Türkiye and Egypt to recalibrate their relationship and find areas of cooperation. **Shared concerns and interests are evident in various regional conflicts**, including those in Gaza, Libya, Sudan, and the Horn of Africa. Both Ankara and Cairo recognize that cooperation, rather than rivalry, is in their best interests. For example, in the Horn of Africa, Egypt and Türkiye share concerns over Ethiopia's port deal with Somaliland, and there is potential for them to work together to bring stability and peace to the region. Also, we can notice the mutual benefits of exploring the rich gas fields of the Eastern Mediterranean region.

In addition, some observers think that the US-Greek military rapprochement urged Ankara to strengthen its regional alliances, including that with Egypt. The Biden administration has strengthened its military and strategic cooperation with Greece in recent years, which, from the Turkish point of view, could cause an imbalance in its strategic balance with Greece. Furthermore, Ankara seems to be keen to strengthen its cooperation with Cairo as a mechanism to avoid the attempt of “containment” done by a few countries trying to prevent it from benefiting from the huge natural gas discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean. Perhaps the most important of these countries are France, Greece, Israel and Cyprus. Moreover, Ankara also seems to have a determination to demarcate the maritime borders with Egypt in a peaceful manner, so that it can work on producing natural gas from the offshore fields in the Eastern Mediterranean region. This will also likely be a push for Türkiye’s membership in the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Organization, which was established in January 2019, to promote regional cooperation in producing and trading natural gas.

In other words, natural gas is one of the main factors motivating Türkiye's rapprochement with Egypt, especially since Türkiye suffers from a lack of energy sources and relies significantly on Russia, Iran and Azerbaijan to meet its energy needs. In this context, Cairo represents a strategic priority for Türkiye in the energy sector, as Egyptian exports of liquefied natural gas (LNG) to Türkiye reached about \$722.67 million by the end of 2023.

As for Egypt, there are many motives for improving relations with Türkiye. For example, Cairo wants to work with Ankara to resolve the conflict in Libya, the issue of gas exploration rights in the Eastern Mediterranean and the civil war in Sudan. Egypt also seeks Türkiye’s cooperation to maintain the unity of Somalia, in reference to Somaliland’s secessionist aims. Türkiye has an important base in Somalia, while Egypt announced a deal recently to send arms to Somalia to counter Ethiopia’s influence in the Horn of Africa. Furthermore, Cairo wants to attract the Turkish investments to Egypt as well as the military cooperation. In addition, there are joint defence projects between Cairo and Ankara, including a project to produce live ammunition as well as drone manufacturing. Egypt also is seeking, by organizing joint research initiatives on military technology and joint military exercises, to benefit from Türkiye's experience as a member of NATO, while Türkiye will also benefit from the distinguished naval capabilities of the Egyptian army.

### **How can the Turkish-Egyptian rapprochement contribute to the return of good relations between Syria and Türkiye?**

Despite the good intentions of Türkiye and Syria to restore relations to what they were before 2011, and despite starting the Turkish-Syrian political rapprochement by the Russian mediation in 2022, the progress in the normalization process between Ankara and Damascus has waned and weakened after Damascus insisted on its demand of the Turkish complete withdrawal from the occupied Syrian territories as well as seizing Ankara’s support to the Syrian opposition. In return, Türkiye insisted that these demands from the Syrian side are not possible in the current situation. Ankara believes that its presence on the Syrian territory is necessary to maintain Turkish national security.

In such a situation, Egypt, with its political and diplomatic capabilities, can bring the views of Ankara and Damascus closer, especially since Cairo succeeded in mediating between Damascus and Ankara during the tensions that arose in 1998 due to Damascus' support for the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). At that time, Egypt's mediation role resulted in the Adana Agreement.

In addition, Egypt can also play a constructive role in solving the Syrian-Turkish dispute because of its regional influence and its close relations with Damascus and the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, which resulted recently in Syria's return to the Arab League.

### **How can public diplomacy improve relations between the three countries?**

Public diplomacy, which is carried out by business communities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), various media outlets and social media, can play a major role in achieving rapprochement between the three countries by the following:

- 1.Organizing periodic meetings between thought leaders and think tanks as well as between university students to exchange knowledge and ideas on sensitive issues, such as the Syrian refugees, and to propose solutions to such issues.
- 2.Networking the businessmen of the three countries to find out the trade and investment opportunities that achieve mutual benefits.
- 3.Establishing media platforms by the civil society organizations, in Arabic and Turkish languages, aiming at highlighting the successful youth models in the three countries as well as combating the racist and hatred discourse.
- 4.Supporting artistic activities and joint concerts that highlight the commonalities among and between the three societies as well as the positive aspects in each society to share with others.

“Therefore, improving the relationship between Türkiye, Syria, and Egypt is necessary for their mutual benefit. Such improvement will bring greater economic, cultural, and even political gains to all parties. Consequently, this will help the three nations enhance their ability to confront international chaos, regional conflicts, and domestic challenges.”

### About the Author



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\*The views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the editorial policy or position of MURCIR.

