

Like a Raging Storm: The Egyptian Air Force as a Key Instrument in Advancing Egypt's Revised National Interests Following the Revolutionary Years

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Abstract

The events of the Arab Spring and Egypt's internal crises between 2011 and 2013 undermined Egypt's standing in the international arena and affected its internal stability. Since 2014, the country has faced complex strategic challenges that include social and economic crises, regional pressures, a decline in its role as a leader in the Arab world, the expansion of civil wars near its borders, and increasing domestic threats from terrorist organizations jeopardizing its stability. Consequently, Egypt's national interests have been adapted and transformed to ensure regime survival and to strengthen the country. This article examines how this reality is reflected in the Egyptian Air Force. To this end, it analyzes the three main areas in which the Air Force has operated over the past decade: participation in regional and international coalitions; counterterrorism operations; and force build-up with various objectives. It is argued that the Egyptian Air Force constitutes a central element within the armed forces for advancing these national interests. The primary conclusion is that the Egyptian Air Force today is not merely an aerial component within the military apparatus. Rather, it also serves as an instrument for projecting and consolidating Egypt's power both domestically and

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regionally. This case highlights a broader phenomenon observed in many countries in the 21st century, where air power functions not only as a military tool but also as a strategic instrument in advancing national policy. The study aims to highlight this phenomenon, addressing the intersection between the military, society, and regional and international interests.

Keywords: Egypt, Air force, National interests, Foreign policy, Diplomacy

Introduction

During the period from 2011 to 2013, following the Arab Spring, Egypt experienced a series of internal crises. These crises manifested in frequent changes of government and culminated in the military taking control of the state led by then-Minister of Defense Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who has served as president since July 2014. Throughout this period, due to Egypt's deteriorating domestic and international situation, the country was compelled to redefine parts of its national interests and pursue their advancement (Selim, 2022, p. 7).

One of the methods to trace changes in a state's interests on the international stage is through examining the roles fulfilled by its military (Arnold, 1994, pp. 4-6). This is particularly relevant in a country like Egypt, where the military also reflects the national priorities in the civil and social dimensions (Abul-Magd, 2013, pp. 1-6; Harb, 2003, pp. 284-290; Ottaway, 2022, pp. 4-5). This article examines this claim with a focus on the Egyptian Air Force, which, as argued here, constitutes a unique window into the security apparatus due to its status within Egypt's security and social system. Through the Air Force, it is possible to discern shifts in Egypt's national interests over the past decade.

To address the question of how Egypt's new interests are reflected in its Air Force, the literature on air power employed for purposes beyond warfare was reviewed. This review served as the basis for identifying the additional roles played by an aerial military force throughout history and into the twenty-first century. Simultaneously, changes in Egypt's objectives and interests following the upheavals that occurred in the country were examined, along with the military's use in managing these transformations during the subsequent decade (2014–2024). In addition to academic articles, statements from Egyptian senior officials and Air Force commanders over the past decade were analyzed, alongside declarations by national leaders, and reports in both Egyptian and international media and policy briefs. These sources facilitated the evaluation of Egypt's interests and its patterns of activity on internal, regional, and international levels, thereby

enabling an understanding of how the Air Force has been leveraged to address these evolving challenges.

The primary conclusion is that Egypt has two central interests: shaping and preserving regime stability, alongside rebuilding its regional and international standing. As a consequence, the tasks assigned to the Air Force have evolved. While maintaining its traditional missions, the Air Force concurrently engages in roles for which it was never originally intended, such as counterterrorism, policing, and fostering the country's foreign relations.

"Years of Turmoil" 2011-2013: Egypt Amidst the Upheaval

From the 1952 Officers' Revolution until 2011, Egypt was exclusively governed by a leadership closely connected to the military. Despite the dramatic changes the country underwent during this period—including the abrupt exit of a national leader, wars, and peace agreements—its policy remained largely consistent. This policy aimed mainly to preserve Egypt's leading position in the Arab world and the Middle East (Selim, 2022, pp. 9-10).

The events of the Arab Spring in 2011 represented a rupture in Egypt and throughout vast parts of the Arab world. As a result, Egypt descended into two years of political instability, which culminated in a military coup in July 2013 that placed Abdel Fattah el-Sisi at the head of the state (Ardıç, 2012, p. 9; Selim, 2022, p. 7).

The years of upheaval compelled Egypt to contend with new challenges, including managing opposition groups, both Islamic and otherwise, as well as ethnic minorities that had been repressed by the regime and exploited the internal instability to act against the state. At the same time, the Egyptian military was deployed to maintain public order and played an active and central role in suppressing protests and civil unrest (Frisch, 2013, pp. 192-195; Roll, 2016, p. 24). Concurrently, the disintegration of other states following the Arab Spring heightened the external threat to Egypt, necessitating the deployment of military force beyond its borders for the first time since 1977 (Selim, 2022, p. 20).

The Arab Spring events also led to a significant deterioration in Egypt's relations with the United States, which had previously been its main ally. Amid this, the United States curtailed Egypt's capacity to use force against its own population, recognized the elected government of the Muslim Brotherhood, and following the 2013 coup, suspended collaborations, arms supply agreements, and joint projects. Consequently, after approximately 45 years, Egypt found itself without a strategic ally and was compelled to seek alternatives. In the third decade of the twenty-first century, relations between the Americans and Egyptians improved; however, mutual suspicion persisted (Selim, 2022, pp. 17-19). The

Egyptian economy suffered from reduced growth, increased unemployment and inflation, and growing dependency on external actors. This crisis extended beyond the turbulent years and remains evident today (Kahn, 2014, pp. 3-7). The main outcome was a decline in Egypt's regional and international standing—from a leading nation to one grappling with instability and a severe economic crisis. This compelled the state to reformulate its national objectives—a process that has intensified since 2014.

Egypt's Interests between 2014 and 2024

The reality that emerged in Egypt following the turbulent years prompted an adjustment of its interests to align with its new circumstances. These revised interests are designed to address current challenges while simultaneously enabling Egypt to restore its status as a leading regional power. Four primary interests of this kind are identified.

Preservation of Regime Rule: The regime's fundamental interest is to maintain its hold on power amid internal challenges and struggles for international legitimacy. At the same time, it seeks to preserve Egypt's nature as an Arab-Muslim state governed by a non-Islamist regime. Consequently, the regime allocates substantial resources to consolidate and strengthen its grip on the country, primarily by suppressing dissent, particularly targeting the Muslim Brotherhood movement (Ottaway, 2022, p. 4).

Addressing the Threat to Internal Security: Since the fall of the previous regime, and especially following El-Sisi's rise to power, terrorist organizations have exploited the internal situation in Egypt and the armed forces' focus on regime protection to intensify their activities and undermine domestic security. These groups have included global jihad cells that emerged in Sinai and within Egypt itself, incursions by Islamic State (ISIS) operatives from Libya, and local factions of the Muslim Brotherhood turning to terrorism after their leadership was neutralized and activities suppressed. These factors posed unprecedented challenges to the Egyptian regime, forcing it to prioritize their containment (Ottaway, 2022, pp. 4–5; Selim, 2022, p. 20).

Strengthening Regional and International Standing: Since coming to power, the new regime has been focused on restoring Egypt's international status, which had declined to a secondary role compared to the Gulf States, led by Saudi Arabia. On the international stage, Egypt also lost its unique standing with the United States in favor of other regional actors. Additionally, Egypt's dependence on economic aid from global states has increased, without which it could not survive and would have devolved into an underdeveloped country (Stanicek, 2021, p. 2).

Preventing External Threats to Egypt: Throughout the years of turmoil, Egypt did not face new state-based threats, except for the civil war in Libya, which threatened to spill into Egypt—a topic discussed in this article. Conversely, several regional issues that have the potential to pose a threat to Egypt have not undergone any significant changes and therefore are not examined in depth in this study.

Israel continued to be regarded as the primary military reference threat to Egypt even after the years of turmoil, and Egypt still views it as the main potential threat. The exception to this was the collaboration in addressing the terrorism threat in Sinai (Neriah, 2015). Iran remains, from the Egyptian perspective, a competitor for regional hegemony (Ottaway, 2022, p. 3). Two additional cases impacting Egypt's national security underwent changes in 2024 that may influence future Egyptian foreign policy. Regarding the Renaissance Dam issue with Ethiopia, Egypt mainly persisted in diplomatic efforts alongside the continued threat of military force, as it had done prior to the government change in Ethiopia. In recent months, there may have been a shift in this policy: Egypt has begun forming a regional-African coalition aimed at increasing military pressure on Ethiopia to secure progress in the dam dispute (Qadri Ahmed, 2024). Regarding the civil war in Sudan, Egypt recently maintained a neutral stance, monitoring the developments in its southern neighbor amid concerns over possible spillover of the conflict into its territory. By late 2024, a policy change seems to have occurred wherein Egypt openly shifted its support to the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), currently without deploying military forces (Maher & Farid, 2025).

The Role of the Armed Forces and the Air Force in Advancing Political Interests

The primary traditional role of the armed forces in a modern state is to serve as an instrument for projecting power externally. Military forces exist to defend the state against potential enemies and adversaries, as well as serve as a coercive tool intended to advance the state's interests (Edmunds, 2006, p. 1060). At the same time, militaries undertake additional roles aligned with the state's interests and objectives in both domestic and international arenas, such as disaster response, counterterrorism, and policing (Flores-Macias & Zarkin, 2021, pp. 519–520). Armed forces also function as instruments of diplomacy and for developing relations among various actors on the international stage (Horsh-Segal, 2020, pp. 127–129; Drab, 2018, pp. 57–59). In some cases, militaries contribute to shaping societal identity (Whitt & Perazzo, 2018) and even serve as a major employer within the economies of certain countries (Daye, 2016).

Within the armed forces, air forces constitute a central component of military power and capability, derived from their perception as a significant deterrent force, technologically advanced, and possessing broad operational capacity against a wide range of challenges. The U.S. Air Force's definition of air power encapsulates this perspective: "the ability to project military power or influence through control and exploitation of the air domain." Accordingly, at least in Western states, air power is typically the first to be deployed against various actors, including in non-primarily military missions, due to its high availability, precise targeting capability, and operational versatility (Cohen, 1994, pp. 101–109; Kainikara, 2009; Pape, 2004, pp. 121–123). For great powers, air power serves as the cornerstone of power projection in the 21st century, while for other states it represents a key means to consolidate and strengthen the image of national power (Hunter, 2019, pp. 19–22; Shuad & Lowther, 2011; Suit, 1991, pp. 9–13).

Over the years, numerous examples have accumulated demonstrating the use of air power as a means to achieve states' strategic objectives, employing a wide range of tools and capabilities. For instance, the U.S. "airlift" to Berlin at the end of the 1940s was intended not only to break the Soviet blockade of the city but also to signal the West's willingness to resist unilateral Soviet actions at the onset of the Cold War (Office of the Historian, n.d.). Another example includes show-of-force patrols involving fighter jets and bombers designed not only to showcase military capability but also to deter potential adversaries. Illustratively, the joint patrols and training exercises conducted by the Israeli and Taiwanese air forces alongside the U.S. Air Force aim to deter Iran and China, respectively (Chang & Regan, 2024; Nissenbaum, 2023). Air forces also serve as instruments to advance diplomatic relations between states through operational cooperation and exercises with allies while maintaining deterrence against adversaries, all the while avoiding the actual use of force (Lowther, 2010). For example, the rapprochement between Israel and the Gulf states has been manifested in joint trainings and exercises, as well as discussions on advancing coordinated training programs. These efforts were not solely intended to enhance operational capability but also to strengthen Israel's political interests through its air force.

These examples illustrate that the use of air forces enables states in general, and great powers in particular, to advance their political interests vis-à-vis other actors without resorting to direct and large-scale military confrontation with those actors.

The Use of the Armed Forces and the Air Force to Achieve Egypt's Domestic and Foreign Objectives

Egypt's military is the largest among the Arab armies and constitutes a central pillar in Egypt's self-perception as a regional and international power (Kuimova, 2020, p. 2). Beyond its traditional role in defending against external enemies, the Egyptian military plays a key role in strengthening and projecting Egypt's status domestically and internationally. This is reflected in its cooperation with other armed forces, its acquisitions, training, and joint power deployments. The Egyptian armed forces also bear responsibility for regime preservation, civilian assistance, maintaining internal morale, and promoting the local economy through factories and companies they own, which supply numerous jobs (Sayigh, 2019, pp. 3-7). These factors confer a unique status to the military within both the ruling elite and the general Egyptian public, enabling it to intervene in domestic politics and in the daily management of the state (Harb, 2003, p. 270; Sayigh, 2019, pp. 80-81). Following years of upheaval, this involvement has intensified, with the military transforming from a supportive actor into the leading force directing the Egyptian economy through large-scale infrastructure projects and the strengthening of military industries. Nevertheless, these activities have had limited impact on defense procurement processes, which still rely heavily on foreign financial and technological aid (Joya, 2018, pp. 681-682; Ottaway, 2022; Sayigh, 2019, pp. 238-239).

Within the security forces, the Egyptian Air Force occupies a special place, as emphasized by the current commander of the Egyptian Air Force, Abd al-Gawwad, in October 2022. This perception stems from public esteem rooted in a historical legacy, the advanced and high-quality weaponry the Air Force operates, and its role as a central instrument in stabilizing Egypt's regional position vis-à-vis both adversaries and allies (Al-Ahram, 2022). Since 2014, the Egyptians have assigned additional tasks to their Air Force, reflecting an update of the country's interests (Al-Hayat Al-Youm, 2014; Youm Al-Sabah, 2019). While these missions were initially considered secondary, over time they became a more integral component of the Air Force's role (Asharq Al-Awsat, 2019).

Advancing Egyptian Interests through the Air Force: The New Core Layers

The shift in how the Egyptian leadership views contemporary and future challenges, along with Egypt's near-term aspirations, is reflected in three main spheres of Egyptian Air Force activity—each aimed at advancing national interests: participation in regional coalitions, counterterrorism operations, and the development of air power.

Participation in Regional Coalitions – Strengthening Egypt’s International Standing and Regional Role through the Air Force

Since 2014, the declared aim of Egyptian foreign policy has been the restoration of its status as a leading and influential actor in the Arab world, the Middle East, and North Africa. To this end, Egypt identified the necessity of establishing relevance within coalitions formed to address terrorism threats in the Middle East (Halawa, 2021, pp. 2-3, 6-7, 15-17).

For decades, until the rise of al-Sisi to power, Egypt almost entirely refrained from deploying its military and participating in military coalitions, opting instead to act through other diplomatic channels (Neriah, 2015). Egypt deliberately avoided the use of military force even in cases that posed threats to its national security, such as the rise to power of Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir in 1989, whose Islamist government threatened stability in southern Egypt. At that time, President Mubarak chose diplomatic processes. Egypt also refrained from participating in the U.S.-led coalition against Iraq in 2003. The only Egyptian military participation in a regional coalition in recent decades was during Operation Desert Storm in 1991, which came under intense American pressure and as part of a debt relief agreement (Associated Press, 2020; Neriah, 2015).

In contrast, over the last decade Egypt has participated in regional international coalitions. This involvement stemmed from a strategy to restore its regional and international standing and to reciprocate the support provided by Gulf states in the turbulent years (State Information Service, 2022; Trager, 2015). Al-Sisi addressed this issue in 2014, shortly after assuming office, stating that “Egypt views security in the Persian Gulf as an integral part of Egypt’s own security.” On multiple occasions, he emphasized the need for cooperation and the building of coalitions with these countries (el-Hamalawy, 2023).

Egypt’s participation focused on two main arenas: the ongoing civil war in Libya and the coalition against the Houthis. The primary instrument through which Egypt engaged in these coalitions was the Air Force. This allowed Egypt to play an influential role without committing ground forces, which were required for other missions (el-Hamalawy, 2023).

The War in Libya

Between 2014 and 2020, Libya was engulfed in its second civil war, marked by a struggle between two main factions: the House of Representatives, supported in part by Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, and the Government of National Accord, backed mainly by Turkey. Libya also became an active theater of terrorism against Egypt, serving as a base from which Islamic State operatives carried out attacks inside Egyptian territory; the most notable incident being the 2016

killing of Coptic Christians (Pedde, 2017, pp. 93-95). Egypt's involvement in the conflict was driven by several interests: preventing the spillover of Islamist terrorism into its borders, enhancing its regional standing through influence in Libyan affairs, curbing Turkish influence within Libya, increasing control over natural resources along the Egypt-Libya border, and weakening the Muslim Brotherhood in Libya (Polat, n.d., p. 3; Selim, 2022, pp. 20-21).

The Egyptian Air Force was the primary force involved in the conflict, launching strikes against Islamic State targets in eastern Libya. From the Egyptian perspective, these airstrikes were part of their broader counterterrorism campaign and efforts to secure the nation's borders (Al-Masry Al-Youm, 2022). Additionally, the Egyptian Air Force supported the military forces aligned with Libya's House of Representatives faction by transferring dozens of outdated fighter jets and transport helicopters to Libyan forces between 2014 and 2022, while also aiding in their training and capacity-building (Lake, n.d.). Beyond military aid, Egypt provided economic and political support as part of backing Libya's recognized government. This represents a significant shift for Egypt, which had previously adhered almost entirely to refraining from direct military assistance to other states (Arafa & Boduszyński, 2017).

Furthermore, and in contrast with its traditional approach, Egypt permitted the United Arab Emirates Air Force to utilize its bases in the western region of the country to launch operational activities in Libya. Moreover, the Egyptian and Emirati air forces collaborated on several occasions, conducting joint operations within the framework of the conflict (BBC News, 2020; Kingsley et al., 2014). The use of Egyptian airspace and infrastructure to conduct missions in another state, alongside joint air operations, underscores Egypt's efforts to enhance its regional relevance and strategic value to its partners.

The War in Yemen

In 2015, Saudi Arabia, alongside Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and other Arab states, established a coalition against the Houthis, who with Iranian support had seized control over northwestern Yemen (Robinson, 2023). Egypt joined the coalition at its inception, deploying units from its Air Force, Navy, and Special Forces to Saudi Arabia. Official statements from the Egyptian president indicated that the state acted primarily from a sense of regional commitment, emphasizing Egypt's self-perception as a leading actor in the area.

Throughout the war in Yemen, the Egyptian Air Force operated six F-16 fighter jets along with their air and ground crews (Al Masry Al Youm, 2022; Delalande, 2017; Reuters, 2015; Vredesactie, n.d.). Referring to the role of the Air Force, Al-Sisi stated: "Units of the Air Force operate to support the

regional coalition aimed at restoring stability to Yemen [...] [Egypt acts] out of its foundation of responsibility for collective Arab security in the Gulf and the Red Sea, making it essential for Egypt to bear this responsibility” (Ahram Online, 2015).

The deployment of Egyptian forces to Saudi Arabia, though limited in scope, stemmed from Egypt’s understanding that reclaiming a leadership role in the region requires dispatching military forces to conflicts and areas that do not pose a direct threat to Egypt. This outlook was expressed, for example, by the commander of the Egyptian Air Force in an October 2022 interview with Al-Ahram newspaper, where he emphasized Egypt’s commitment to combating terrorism both domestically and abroad, “as it did when participating in the coalition in Yemen” (Al-Ahram, 2022).

In contrast, Egypt, like other Arab states previously involved in fighting the Houthis, refrained from deploying its air force due to the closure of the Bab al-Mandab strait during the Iron Swords War (Gaza War) (Junyent, 2024). This non-engagement can be attributed to three main factors. First, Egypt had to balance conflicting interests: on one hand, the need to find a solution to the economic challenge posed by the Houthis’ impact on passage through the Suez Canal; on the other hand, Egyptians did not want to appear as direct supporters of Israel while it was engaged in an intense war against multiple Arab and Muslim states and organizations. Second, Egypt sought to avoid retaliatory Houthi attacks on its territory in response to Egyptian strikes. Third, other Arab countries—chief among them Saudi Arabia—strongly opposed an Arab attack against the Houthis in the context of the ongoing war with Israel (Maher & Farid, 2024, pp. 1-5; Schaer, 2023).

Egypt’s participation in military coalitions represents a fundamental shift from its policy prior to 2014, when it preferred to avoid deploying the military for purposes unrelated to the defense of the state or regime. The choice to utilize the Air Force, which is regarded as a strategic component of the state’s arsenal, offers insight into the change in Egypt’s foreign policy. This shift aims both to project power and to establish relationships with other regional actors, with the broader goal of strengthening and enhancing Egypt’s standing vis-à-vis neighboring states while projecting stability.

Counterterrorism in Sinai: Strengthening Internal Security and Demonstrating Commitment to the International Community through Air Operations

The Sinai Peninsula received very limited attention from the central Egyptian government and became a fertile ground for global jihadist organizations that

established themselves within the local Bedouin population. These groups were initially linked to al-Qaida and later shifted their allegiance to the ISIS organization, under which they were recognized as the “Sinai Province” (Kirkpatrick, 2014). This province’s activities focused on northern Sinai, primarily in the area between al-Arish and the border with the Gaza Strip. Until 2013, their operations centered on sabotaging gas pipelines between Egypt and Israel and attacking Egyptian border guard forces in Sinai (The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, 2022, pp. 1-2).

Since 2013, terrorist activities intensified due to the weakened control of the Egyptian authorities during the final phase of the Morsi government, coupled with terror organizations’ concerns about an increased military campaign against them following the July 2013 military coup. Key attacks during this period included, among others, the bombing of a Russian passenger plane, assaults on border guard units, the kidnapping of Egyptian security personnel, and the takeover of the city of Sheikh Zuweid. These successes, combined with fears of terrorism spilling from the Sinai Peninsula into mainland Egypt, alongside Israeli pressure to prevent Sinai-based terrorist organizations from becoming a threat to Israel, compelled the Egyptians to undertake an extensive and intensive campaign against them (Melman, 2018; Willson Center, 2019).

Alongside the escalation of terrorism in Sinai, an international coalition formed to combat ISIS and its affiliates. This culminated in Operation Inherent Resolve which commenced in 2014 in Syria and Iraq. The international community called on Egypt to intensify its efforts against terrorist groups in Sinai as part of this broader struggle. This was emphasized by then-U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry during a meeting with the Egyptian president: “Egypt is at the forefront globally in the fight against terrorism, especially regarding efforts to combat extremist groups in Sinai” (BBC, 2014a).

The recognition that terrorist organizations in Sinai posed a direct threat to Egypt itself, together with international and regional pressure to confront these groups, led the Egyptian authorities to declare a special “state of emergency” in Sinai in October 2014. Following this declaration, a series of military operations were continuously launched in North Sinai against the Sinai province organization (BBC, 2014b; McManus, 2020).

The Egyptian Air Force played a central role in these operations, with its involvement increasing as the campaigns expanded. In terms of military hardware, the Egyptians deployed all their operational capabilities designed for comprehensive combat in Sinai. At the same time, recognizing the need to adapt for counterterrorism warfare, they were equipped—with the assistance of the United Arab Emirates, the United States, and China—with dedicated aerial assets

suited for this type of conflict. Within a relatively short period, the Air Force had become a key force operator, while attempting, with only partial success, to adopt the operational patterns of Western air forces in combating terrorism.

The deployment of the Air Force in the counterterrorism campaign was intended to serve both Egypt's internal and external needs. Operationally, the Air Force was perceived as an effective instrument against terrorist organizations and as a deterrent element against actions within Egypt itself. Simultaneously, the state's promotion of its role in these operations was used to bolster public support for the government and to demonstrate its determination to ensure the security of Egyptian citizens, as emphasized by the Egyptian Air Force commander, Al-Gwwad, in an interview on the subject (Al-Masry Al-Youm, 2022). On the international stage, the Air Force's activity functioned as a token of Egypt's serious commitment to combating Islamic terrorism in the region.

Rearmament: Restoring power projection alongside rapprochement with various international and regional actors.

For many years, even before the turbulent era, the Egyptians declared a policy of diversifying their sources of weaponry. However, during Mubarak's rule, the vast majority of military procurement was from the United States. The Egyptian land forces are primarily based on American tanks and armored vehicles; similarly, the navy and most air force systems are predominantly American. Nevertheless, to meet specific needs, they acquired systems not produced by the Americans when required. For example, to address air defense needs for ground forces, the Egyptians procured mobile air defense systems from the Russians, who specialize in this category of armaments (Kuimova, 2020, p. 13).

Following the military coup in July 2013, the United States imposed an arms embargo on transfers to Egypt. This led to a halt in the supply of key systems, including F-16 fighter jets and Apache helicopters. Consequently, Egypt was forced to urgently seek alternatives. This necessity evolved into a procurement doctrine under which Egypt is to acquire advanced weaponry from diverse suppliers. The goal is to avoid reliance on a single provider and to be regarded as a potential client by global powers and regional actors interested in investing in Egypt. For instance, in an interview conducted in October 2022, the commander of the Egyptian Air Force stated: "As part of the strategy to diversify sources of armaments, Egypt has acquired Rafale and MiG-29 aircraft, considered to be among the most advanced fourth-generation fighters" (Al-Ahram, 2022). By inviting these actors to supply its military hardware and invest in infrastructure, Egypt positions itself as a regional military power operating advanced armaments, and as a country that is attractive for long-term investment (Al-Hayat Al-Youm,

2014; Kuimova, 2020, pp. 13-15; Ottaway, 2022, pp. 5-6). The procurement financing did not rely on local Egyptian budget sources but was instead secured through loans and foreign aid, as was also the case during the period of American assistance to Egypt (Al-Anani, 2022; Butter, 2020, pp. 16-17).

Egypt's air procurements are categorized into strategic acquisitions and "operational-tactical" acquisitions. The strategic procurements are intended not only to meet military demands but also to serve the country's strategic needs and objectives. These include projecting power both externally and internally, maintaining Egypt's regional and international standing, and protecting vital national interests. Typically, the procured weaponry is state-of-the-art and advanced, possessing unique capabilities that serve both offensive and defensive requirements. Such transactions usually receive extensive media coverage and enhance the country's stature. These procurement processes have also been acknowledged by Egyptian Air Force commanders in interviews conducted over the past decade, where they highlight the unprecedented force-building efforts of the Air Force in recent years (Al-Masry Al-Youm, 2022; Egypt Defense Portal, 2017).

An example of this category is the Rafale fighter jets, purchased for the first time in 2015 from France (France 24, 2015). These advanced combat aircraft represent cutting-edge global technology and have provided the Egyptian Air Force with capabilities it previously lacked. These include advanced air-to-air missiles, precision munitions, and long-range cruise missiles. The deal received wide coverage in Egyptian, French, and international media, which frequently portrayed Egypt as one of the leading countries operating advanced air weaponry, further enhancing the interests outlined earlier (Kuimova, 2020, p. 13). This was supported by the 2015 statement of the French Foreign Minister: "[The supply of the aircraft] is intended to strengthen Egypt, a central actor in maintaining stability in the region amid instability in Libya and the ISIS terrorist threat in the east" (France 24, 2015). A follow-up deal signed in 2021 also includes the assembly and production of these aircraft within Egypt, providing the country with advanced knowledge and technology (Defense Arabic, 2023). Additional examples include the acquisition of Russian MiG-29 fighter jets and Italian and American proposals to supply Egypt with Eurofighter Typhoon and F-15S aircraft, respectively (Kuimova, 2020, p. 13; O'Brien, 2022).

The second type of procurement is primarily aimed at the operational and tactical needs of the Egyptian Air Force, chiefly the fight against terrorism and the maintenance of Egypt's internal stability. Simultaneously, it enables the Air Force to play an active and significant role in regional coalitions. This aligns with Egypt's strategy over the past decade, which views collaborative

partnerships as a means to strengthen and restore Egypt's standing. Examples include purchasing Chinese WingLoong II attack drones and light attack aircraft such as the AT-208 and AC-208, which have been deployed in operations in Sinai and Libya (Defense Mirror, 2018; Egypt Papers, 2021; Lionel, 2018). These systems have proven to be crucial in the fight against terrorism and border security, as noted by Air Force Commander Younes in 2017 (Egypt Defense Portal, 2017). These acquisitions generally have not received broad media attention, primarily because they serve a specific and internal operational requirement.

The procurement process enables Egypt, at the strategic level, to renew its projection of power toward potential adversaries—both domestic and foreign—and to deter them from challenging the state. It also allows Egypt to broaden its circle of alliances on the one hand, while reducing its dependence on the United States on the other. Simultaneously, it permits Egypt to play an active role in regional military coalitions and serve as a significant actor within them. Tactical acquisitions allow the Air Force to make the necessary adjustments in response to specific quasi-military threats, thereby strengthening deterrence against these challenges.

Conclusions and Summary

The years of upheaval transformed Egypt from a leading Arab power into a fragmented state suffering from internal instability and a diminished regional and international standing. Frequent changes in government deepened economic and social disparities and caused a profound rupture in relations with the United States. Since July 2014, under the leadership of al-Sisi, Egypt has been attempting to stabilize its internal situation, rehabilitate its economy, and confront terrorist threats along its borders and within its territory.

One of the Egyptian regime's key instruments is the armed forces, which hold a special status and exert influence across multiple sectors of Egyptian society. Beyond their role as a fighting force, the Egyptian military operates military and civilian production facilities, manages national projects, and employs a significant number of citizens both directly and indirectly. The strength of the Egyptian armed forces, along with their centrality in daily life and their perception by the public as a national symbol, makes them a principal pillar of the Egyptian regime and a central means for advancing both domestic and foreign policy.

The Air Force is perceived as the most prestigious and highest quality branch, and thus has been assigned a special role in Egypt's rehabilitation processes. This article identifies three new roles that have been added to the Air Force, all designed to serve Egypt's contemporary national interests. First, it has taken a central role in counterterrorism operations in Sinai and in reducing

terrorism within Egypt itself—a task previously designated exclusively to internal security forces. The use of the Air Force’s extensive capabilities, alongside intensified public operations, has helped reinforce the perception that the Egyptian regime is dedicating significant resources to tackling this issue. Second, through operational cooperations, the Air Force serves as a tool for advancing closer relations with other regional and international actors. Egypt’s participation in regional and international counterterrorism coalitions has aided in improving its ties with Gulf countries and rebuilding its relationship with the United States, enabling Egypt’s return to the forefront of regional affairs. Third, the policy of diversifying weapons procurement sources and turning to additional suppliers has allowed Egypt to reduce its dependency on the United States and expand as well as deepen its circle of allies and supporters. Some of these countries also transfer knowledge for producing and assembling weaponry locally in Egypt, which creates employment opportunities and exposes Egypt to advanced technologies.

In conclusion, this article has presented the central role of the Egyptian Air Force in advancing Egypt’s contemporary national interests. Cases like Egypt’s occasionally occur on the international stage. State interests are redefined following significant changes triggered by political and social upheavals. Upheavals that caused damage to the country’s internal stability and international status. In response to these adverse conditions, Egypt needed to fundamentally alter the way it addresses its strategic challenges. The article demonstrates that the Egyptian regime chose the Air Force as the primary instrument to confront these challenges, granting it a central role in the country’s rehabilitation efforts, both internally and externally. The Egyptian Air Force serves as a critical case study for understanding the measures the Egyptian regime takes to realize its national interests and to evaluate the success of these endeavors. Therefore, an in-depth analysis of Egypt’s processes is incomplete without understanding the underlying transformations within the military as a whole, and the Air Force in particular.

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