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Egypt and Its Regional Environment: Challenging the Model of the Nation-state

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In my paper I will discuss the changes in Egypt's regional environment and the implications of these changes. I argue that the erosion of the nation-state model (either for the sake of trans-national model or sub-national model) is one of the major changes impacting Egypt's regional environment. I will illustrate my argument through studying a particular incidence that took place recently within the region and which reflects regional changes clearly.

Major Questions

Given the fact that the change is the only constant in world affairs, it seems hard to identify the changes happening within a regional environment. Moreover, while discussing changes in Egypt's regional environment one must start by defining what is considered to be the regional environment. In other words, we should ask the question: where are the boundaries of Egypt's regional environment? Should our discussion be restrictive to the Arab world, Africa, the Middle East, or even the greater Middle East?

Although geographical textbooks might offer an answer to the physical boundaries of Egypt's regional environment, presenting it as a fixed space, they will certainly lack the political and the historical narratives that shape our understanding of what constitutes a regional environment. Changes in the regional environment include changing the boundaries of this region in political terms. I will show Egypt's perception of its regional environment had changed.

Another major question that arises from any discussion on the changes of the regional is associated to the causes behind this change. In other words, what are the factors that necessitate change in the regional environment?

Moreover, debates on regional change sparkles investigations that question the nature of this change. It questions the characteristics and the features of these changes. Is it a change in the regional actors, or in the centre of power? Are the debated issues the same? And more importantly, are the regional actors responsive to these changes?

I will focus on the latter set of questions, being the first step in answering any questions that are related to the causes of change. That is to say, in order to understand the factors behind any change, one must study the change itself.

A Snapshot of the Regional Environment

In doing so, I will study a particular incidence, where the various changes in Egypt's regional environment are represented. I have chosen the recent crisis between the Egyptian state and the Lebanese Hezbollah which took place in April 2009, as it retains a strong explanatory power of regional changes and represents a moment where the regional actors were unable to respond to the changes in the regional environment.

On 8th of April 2009, Egypt's general prosecutor revealed that Egyptian security forces had captured a military cell that is directly affiliated with the Lebanese Hezbollah, which was planning to undertake terrorist operations in Egypt and to de-stabilise the Egyptian regime. The secretary general of Hezbollah, Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah confirmed that the major suspect of this cell is a member of the Lebanese Hezbollah, yet Nasrallah argued that the main role of the cell was to smuggle weapons to Palestinians in Gaza to support them in their struggle against the occupation and to resist the blockade on Gaza.

The issue resulted in a media confrontation between both sides which, as many analysts pointed, had been the worst between Egypt and any other Arab actor during Mubarak era. The contestation between narratives of state sovereignty and the protection of Palestinians and the Arab-Muslim Ummah were dominating the regional map, raising the dilemma of whether the Arab world can be properly defined as a state system, or just a system of political entities struggling for survival.

On the side of the Egyptian state, the emphasis was on the nation-state model, with the weight it gives to the sovereignty of the state over all the territory and the monopoly over legitimate use of force/violence. Consequently, the formation of a military cell in Egypt that is directly affiliated with Hezbollah is a flagrant violation of the Egyptian sovereignty.

At the same time, the Egyptian state do stress upon its role in supporting the Palestinian people and its refusal of any statements that underestimate its commitments towards the Arab and Muslim nations.

On the other side, the Lebanese Hezbollah insisted on the primacy of resisting the Israeli project in the region. It argued that it is its right, and even its duty, to provide all the support for the Palestinian resistance, being in an open front with the Israel. However, Hezbollah, literally meaning the party of God, also confirmed its status as a Lebanese political party besides being a resistance movement. Sayyid Nasrallah stressed upon the fact that Hezbollah will not conduct any operations that would ultimately undermine the security and the stability of the Lebanese state, even if it was in the interest of the Arab-Muslim nation-the Ummah, arguing that Hezbollah shouldn't be burdened with what it might not afford bearing.

What can this crisis tell us about the changes in the regional environment?

The first thing to note from the crisis between Egypt and Hezbollah is that it is not between two states, but is rather between the Egyptian state and a non-state actor (Hezbollah) that is functioning within a fragile state (it also gain its raison d'être from the presence of a fragile state in Lebanon).

It is certainly not a matter of chance that the most effective non-state actors in the region, namely Hezbollah and Hamas are functioning within fragile states that are getting weaker as a result of the deteriorating peace process.

The Egypt-Hezbollah incidence reflects a duality in the regional system, between the obligations of state and the demands of the Ummah (a trans-national community/nation). It certainly revealed the inability to balance between two different models: the nation state and the Ummah. It has shown that within the deteriorating condition of the peace process in the Middle East, the model of the Ummah is more appealing than the nation-state one.

Hezbollah, for instance, presented a formula that balances between the obligations/interests of the nation state and the demands/requirements of the Ummah, stressing that there is no contradiction between the national interests of Lebanon and these of the Ummah. Hezbollah's equation was confronted, however, with tough challenges. One challenge was represented in the Israeli attack on Lebanon in 2006 in response to Hezbollah's capturing of two Israeli soldiers. Hezbollah was accused of upholding its own interests in serving trans-national purpose at the expense of the Lebanese state. The challenge was repeated in 2008/09 with the war on Gaza, and Hezbollah had to refrain from interfering.

The challenge to the nation-state system in the region did not only take the shape of the trans-national Ummah model, but also took another shape: the sub-state model. Examples of these are profound in Iraq, Yemen (recent confrontations with KSA & spreading the destabilisation of the nation-state) and Sudan.

Between these two models that challenge the nation-state, stands the Egyptian model that is based on a representation of the regional system as one that is dominated by states. The Egyptian leadership embraces an equation that is based on the duplication between state's national interests and the demands of both trans-national and sub-national interests, where any of them can only be achieved at the expense of the other. Egypt had raised the slogan 'Egypt first' declaring the primacy of its own interests over any other regional interests. Egyptian leadership even argued that the Egyptian national interests should be defined in isolation from the regional environment, which might impose some constraints on the

sovereignty of the state. The Egyptian nation-state model, however, was confronted with serious criticisms that flared up as a result of Egypt's position from the war on Gaza 2008/09, the Palestinian re-conciliation talks, and the War on Lebanon 2006. The Egyptian formula lacked coherence and appeared hesitant, or even unable, to survive the regional environment.

Another regional change that the Egypt-Hezbollah incidence reveals is the change in the definition and the boundaries of Egypt's regional environment by expanding it to include Iran and Turkey and relatively exclude North Africa and the Gulf (with the exception of KSA). There was almost no/ or very brief comments on the crisis from North Africa and the GCC (except KSA). Egypt's regional environment is getting narrower, hindering Egypt from politically utilising new cards for manoeuvre.

Some analysts might also argue that the incidence is an occasion where the crack in the Arab world between 'moderate' camp and 'resistance' camp became evident. The incidence staged the main representative of the moderate camp (Egypt) in direct confrontation with the major representative of the resistance camp (Hezbollah), something that confirms the disparity between the various actors within the region.

By discussing the crisis between Egypt and Hezbollah I tried to shed the light on some of the changes of Egypt's regional environment. It can even be argued that this incidence had shown that the inability of Egypt, being the oldest state in the region, to offer a coherent equation that balances its nation-state's interest with the demands of its regional environment, as well as the deteriorations in the peace process, the regional environment will continue moving towards further instability.