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## Signs of revival

**Egypt is reasserting its regional and international role**

Ahmed Eleiba

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The MiG-35 deal with Russia, the resumption of military relations between Cairo and Washington, joint military manoeuvres with Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the UAE, agreement with Sudan over the deployment of a joint Egyptian-Sudanese border patrol and signs Egypt is

about to return to the African Union fold, all suggest a revival in the country's regional and international status.

Political and military experts view the MiG-35 fighter plane deal, discussed during the visit of a Russian military delegation to Egypt last week, as a significant development in relations between Cairo and Moscow.

"Egypt had been negotiating with Russia over purchasing MiG-29s. The MiG-29 is a very good plane but now we are speaking of a deal for MiG-35s, a shift from a very good to a superb plane," says Cairo University political science professor and expert in Asian affairs Nourhan Al-Sheikh.

Russia has broad strategic reasons for offering the plane to Egypt, says Al-Sheikh.

"As the world's second largest arms supplier, Russia is keen to build a market in the region. And in selling to Egypt Russia is selling to a state that has an important and long established army. Russia is supplying defence technologies to Egypt though offensive technologies, that MiGht alter the balances of power in the region, remain unavailable. But a deal of this sort constitutes a cornerstone in the fight against terrorism. If Egypt stabilises, this will have a positive impact on regional stability and that is something from which Russia will benefit."

Voice of Russia radio announced the arms deal would be completed by mid-2014, after the election of Egypt's next president. Vice-President of the broadcasting company Mikhail Viktorovich Riyabov — a military expert who was part of the Russian military advisory team during the 1973 October war — announced: "These deals will be put into effect in the near future. There is an agreement between Cairo and Moscow. However, the belief is that these deals should be carried out only when there is an elected administration in Egypt rather than an interim government. It is strongly believed in Russia that Field Marshal Abdel-Fattah Al-Sisi will be the person who will govern Egypt and that these deals will be implemented at the beginning of his term in office."

Riyabov, who spoke with Al-Ahram Weekly by phone from Moscow, added: "Cairo's shift toward enhancing its military relations with Russia is a 100 per cent move in the right direction. Russia is aware that Egypt is passing through critical circumstances, not only with regard to the repercussions from the overthrow of Muslim Brotherhood rule but also in terms of economic and social circumstances which require a qualitative shift in the approach to development. I believe Egypt needs a governing authority capable of engendering a development process that can weather the severe crises that MiGht loom. Not only did the Muslim Brotherhood regime fail to address Egypt's problems, it aggravated them. I believe that an administration with a military background, such as that of Field Marshal Al-Sisi, will be more effective in this regard."

The Egyptian-Russian arms deal is being financed by the Gulf. As such it is a form of multilateral cooperation, a manifestation of Egypt's integration into Gulf security arrangements.

"The Gulf countries felt threatened by the Five + 1 agreement between the West and Iran," says military expert General Talaat Muslim. "Gulf states began to feel that it would be a mistake to

depend too heavily on the US in international policy and that it was time to reconsider security arrangements. They realised that Egypt is a key regional player and that we face common challenges and threats, whether with respect to Iranian policy, terrorist organisations or even the role of the Muslim Brotherhood as a threat to regional security.”

But does this shift, which extends beyond financing an arms deal to joint defence manoeuvres in the Gulf and intelligence exchange, mean that a new regional security order is in the making?

According to Muslim it is too early to speak of a new regional security order. “There are indications of changes to regional security arrangements. It is necessary for the armed forces of each country to familiarise themselves with the theatres of operation. No one can predict what will happen in the region but we must take steps to ensure that we are not taken by surprise and that there is a high level of readiness across the board.”

Riyabov has a similar perspective. “Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, Bahrain and the other Gulf countries need an Egypt that is strong on all levels. If terrorism is a major issue now and a threat to the thrones in the Gulf, armies are the cornerstone in confronting this threat and the Egyptian army is the spearhead at the regional level.”

While stressing the importance of regional cooperation in the fight against terrorism Riyabov also notes that the phenomenon is a global concern and that Cairo and Moscow were cooperating on the issue. “Egypt is using Russian satellites to combat terrorism in Sinai,” he said. He contrasts this cooperation with “the anti-terrorism programme followed by the US administration in the region which is in reality a strategy to ensure that the Middle East does not stabilise”.

“Washington is not only using this strategy in the Middle East but in countries bordering Russia, including Ukraine. The reason is that after it emerged on top of an international monopolar order the US has failed in its management of the world. It is still relying on what they call “creative chaos” in this region to perpetuate instability and keep anyone from taking advantage of US weakness.”

That said it is impossible to ignore the fact that there has been a partial breakthrough in Egyptian-US relations. The delivery of Apache helicopters purchased by Egypt is one sign of the thaw. The delivery crowned two important visits by Egyptian officials to Washington, the first by the head of Egyptian General Intelligence and the second by Foreign Minister Nabil Fahmi. Observers agree the visits were “highly significant” in the framework of Egyptian attempts to restore ties with Washington to an appropriate level. Statements by the Foreign Ministry on the recent visit indicate that Washington is beginning to respond positively to developments in Egypt.

While many criticisms have been levelled at the insufficiency of the collective Arab defence system with respect to the Israeli threat, Israel is no longer perceived as the one enemy Arab states agree that they have in common. Other regional threats have emerged: they include transnational groups that operate across state boundaries and that appear to be much better armed than previously thought. In Sinai terrorist groups have employed heavy weaponry that includes anti-aircraft missiles. There is growing regional and international concern over extremist groups

that have taken control over large swathes of Libya. It is no longer surprising to hear Israel being described as “in the Arab trench” as far as its position towards Iran and growing terrorist threats is concerned. There is increasing talk of the need to coordinate with Tel Aviv over these issues.

It is an outlook Israel finds convenient, says political analyst and Israeli affairs expert Jackie Khouri.

“We need to bear in mind that since the Oslo accord Israel has been harping on the anti-terrorism theme. Recall the Sharm El-Sheikh conference in 1996 when Shimon Peres invited the US to an anti-terrorism conference following bombings in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem carried out by Hamas. That position remains unchanged. After the PLO left the armed resistance system Hamas and Hizbullah, as well as Islamic Jihad, remained. Israel brands these as terrorist groups and markets the idea that it is fighting organisations, not states. The position was strengthened after 11 September, when Al-Qaeda entered the scene. Israel wants to be in the circle of countries that regard themselves as threatened, such as Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, and opposed to countries that are regarded as sponsors of terrorism, such as Iran and Syria. However, events in Syria have complicated matters. Since the removal of chemical weapons there Israel has been speaking less about Syria. The question for Israel is not about whether or not Bashar Al-Assad remains; it is about Iran. The US wants to reach a diplomatic solution with Iran in spite of Israeli fears. Yet if the nuclear question is truly resolved then we return to square one which is that there is no existential danger to Israel.”

But would not an Arab security alliance worry Israel, which has consistently sought to promote Arab fragmentation?

Khouri, a Palestinian Israeli, responds: “Such an alliance would make Israel reassess its calculations. It MiGht come up with a new security bogeyman to use in order to continue to have a hand in the game in the region while ordering the ranks of Israeli society. We can expect something new in the near future and Egypt will be a main player in that something new.” (see Editorial p.16)