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Egypt's ruling Islamists eye stronger ties with post-election Iran



Egypt, under Muslim Brotherhood rule, and Tehran are becoming increasingly close, and their relationship will be maintained following Iran's presidential elections on Friday, according to experts.

"Relations with Egypt are of interest to all candidates running for elections in Iran," Mohamed Nagi, a political expert at the al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, told Al Arabiya English.

"Egypt wouldn't prefer a certain candidate in these elections," he said, because "it knows that Iran's foreign affairs are determined by its supreme leader."

The Muslim Brotherhood "is closer to Tehran than any other Islamist group, and closer ideologically than any other Islamist current," Ali Akbar Velayati, adviser to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and former foreign minister, said earlier this year.

"What matters to Egypt is the winning of a candidate who'd preserve good ties with Islamic states," Badr el-Shafei, political science professor at Cairo University, told Al Arabiya English.

"Egypt looks forward to a candidate who'd refuse the spread of Shiite Islam in the country," he added.

Ties between Tehran and Cairo have strengthened since Mohamed Mursi became Egypt's president in 2012. His visit to Iran in Aug. 2012 was the first by an Egyptian leader in more than three decades.

It was followed by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's visit to Cairo in Feb. 2013 to attend a conference of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.

Iran as an alternative

Iran can be Egypt's "last alternative" if it fails to receive International Monetary Fund loans and financial aid from Gulf countries, said Nagi.

"Implying stronger ties with Iran aims to send a message to the United States and Gulf countries that Egypt has an alternative, but Iran remains as Egypt's last resort," he added.

"Since the United States and some Gulf countries are still willing to [provide] support, Egypt will remain reluctant to move forward," Nagi said.

Iran's economy is in its worst state for decades, having to deal with international sanctions, and supporting the Syrian regime militarily and financially, he added.

These factors "will make it hard for Iran to prioritize supporting Egypt economically," Nagi said.

Reviving tourism

Boosting the struggling economy by reviving tourism ties with Iran remains a challenge for the Muslim Brotherhood, which is facing opposition to the move from ultraconservative Islamists.

A tourism agreement signed earlier this year was never welcomed by Salafists, who have a strong presence and influence on mainstream Egyptians.

In April, more than 50 Iranian tourists visited the ancient city of Luxor. The trip was billed as the first official tourism visit to Egypt since diplomatic relations were frozen when Egypt made peace with Israel in 1979.

Egyptian Prime Minister Hesham Qandil said Iranian tourists would mainly come to visit religious shrines.

However, Egyptian Tourism Minister Hisham Zaazou later said all tourism trips from Iran were being suspended until the second half of June, in order to "evaluate the experience," Ahram Online reported.

"The Muslim Brotherhood, which... Mursi hails from, pursues an open-door policy towards Iran, unlike Salafists, who have stricter views concerning bilateral relations with Tehran," said Nagi.

"Salafists fear the spread of Shiite doctrine in Egypt," he said, adding that they also "criticized the rapprochement between both countries recently."

If Egypt wants to expand economic relations with Iran, "it has to know that there has to be something in return," said Nagi. "Tourism will be one thing, but this will put the Brotherhood in a problem with

Timing

Strengthening ties with Iran as the situation worsens in Syria looks unreasonable, said Nagi.

“Diplomatic ties with Iran should be maintained of course, but the problem we’re facing here is the timing,” he said, referring to Tehran’s support for the Syrian regime. “However, bilateral relations between both countries are still at square one.”

Shafei says Egypt “can play a role in influencing Iran’s position on the Syrian crisis.”