

A potential rapprochement between the two key Middle Eastern States?

✘ A historic visit to Cairo: On Tuesday, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad became the first Iranian head of state to visit Egypt since the 1979 Islamic revolution. Ahmadinejad received a warm welcome at the airport but the cordial reception masked the tensions that still exist between two of the most important powers in the Middle East, despite some improvements in diplomatic relations since the election of the Islamist president Morsi in Egypt.

The subject of Syria dominated the talks; however, the world was most concerned by what sort of bilateral relations might emerge after this meeting and what that would mean for the region. In fact, there is little room for improvement. Formally, Iran and Egypt have diplomatic relations. Iran broke off ties in 1979 after President Sadat signed the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel; presumably, Ahmadinejad expected Morsi to do the same, but the Treaty is too entrenched in Egyptian politics for it to falter on ideological grounds. The United States offers Cairo over a billion dollars in aid every year and the deal would be compromised should Egypt's president threaten to repeal it. Certainly, since the Muslim Brotherhood (the 'Islamists') have taken power in Egypt, Iran had sent clear signs of a desire to strengthen ties but Cairo but showed restraint so far. Apart from the Peace Treaty, the two countries differ strongly on Syria. While Tehran supports the government of President Bashar al-Assad, Cairo has openly called for his resignation and supports the Syrian opposition, which has ties to the Muslim Brotherhood.

Ahmadinejad, who received an 'unpleasant' welcome to the Egyptian capital after a Syrian pro-opposition protester

launched a shoe in his general direction, arrived in a country in turmoil; Egypt has not found peace yet: Protests against police brutality continued throughout the week; there were violent clashes and riots in various cities. The Culture minister resigned. The United States and the Arab Gulf States, including Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which invested heavily in Egypt under Mubarak, are very concerned about any sign of Egypt and Iran becoming closer. The Gulf States have an 'ideological' problem with Iran's Shiite influenced political structure and faith and want to see Iran weakened. Iran, for its part needs more allies in the region. It is diplomatically weaker as a result of the war in Syria and more isolation for Hezbollah in Lebanon. This geopolitical tension is bound to help maintain high oil and, by extension, commodity prices. The tensions are increasingly being driven by a nascent secular opposition movement, a 'paradigm shift' in the making: indeed, whereas, the opposition in the past 30-40 years in Egypt has had an Islamist character; barely a year after Islamist governments have swept the region from Egypt to Tunisia (with some pressure on Morocco as well), the population's grievances and economic problems have only exacerbated. The 'Arab Spring' is not over; it will be a long process marked by more turmoil before a true stability is established.

Then there are the deep divisions between Sunni and Shiite communities in the Middle East that are contributing to tensions in Syria, of course as well as Lebanon, Bahrain, Iraq and Yemen. The divisions have a religious veneer but they are also tied to political and economic interests. Morsi is caught in this cauldron trying to play both sides, perhaps even attempting to pursue a non-ideological and "pragmatic" foreign policy dictated by economic concerns. Morsi has visited Saudi Arabia, China and Iran, trying to play all sides against each other. China was a signal to the United States and an attempt to force a more 'US independent' policy; however, Egypt has little to offer China apart from cheaper access to the Suez

Canal. Iran could offer Egypt oil, but it is facing tremendous internal challenges: numerous internal problems, a grave economic crisis, a debatable Constitution, issues related to security and public order, respect for human rights and freedom of the press and expression.

The following is a clip from a recent interview on CTV Newschannel on this topic: