

Transcript

00:00:02 Speaker 1

Okay, everyone, why don't we get started?

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So I am absolutely delighted to be able to introduce my friend and colleague, May Daluis.

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May is Associate Professor of International Relations in the Middle East at Birmingham.

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And if I was to characterize, with the notable exception of my colleague, Louise Fawcett, who's also in the room, the field of IR of the Middle East

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is often the last refuge for people who do not work on international relations.

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Far from it.

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And May is really an exception to that.

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She actually does real foreign policy analysis.

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Her book, Threats and Alliances in the Middle East, Saudi and Syrian Policies in the Turbid Region, is really one of the few really, really quality foreign policy analysis pieces that we have.

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May's published in lots of top political science and IR journals, she's really one of the leading voices in our field.

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and I'm really delighted to be able to introduce her.

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She's going to speak to Egypt's Role, Identity and Foreign Policy, a River of Denial.

00:01:02 Speaker 1

Thanks, mate.

00:01:04 Speaker 2

Thank you, Neil, very much for having me, and thank you for the hospitality and the great introduction.

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It's a pleasure to be here today and present this paper, which is, let's say, my first academic work on Egypt, which is also something that I was

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surprising myself by doing after several years of working on IR.

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But as an Egyptian, I felt not very well placed to see Egypt from an unbiased way.

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But recently, I found myself increasingly puzzled by some of the foreign policy decisions or non-decisions taken by Egypt in the last few years.

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And this is where this paper came from.

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And I collaborated with

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my friend and colleague, Professor Julie Carbo at St.

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Andrews University.

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And we both kind of developed this project together.

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And it's going to be more or less an IR foreign policy, but also an Egypt-focused paper.

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So the puzzle really started in the last few years when more

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statements came from Sisi, but also from statesmen in Egypt, really talking about the need for Egypt to come back to its rightful place in the region, that it is about time for Egypt to reclaim its leadership, its regional leadership, either in Africa or in the Middle East.

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And in that statement, it was somewhat an implicit acknowledgement that Egypt's role has been declining the last few years, and it has been suffering some of weakness, but also status that it's not as, let's say, acknowledged by regional actors as it used to be.

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But things became even more complicated in the last few years, with several civil wars kind of being on the frontiers of Egypt, Libya since 2011, but also Sudan in 2023, the issue of the Grand Renaissance Dam and the conflict with Ethiopia also becoming a very hot topic, kind of like presenting a concrete threat to some of the interests that Egypt has in Africa.

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the Gaza war that started in 2023, and also the role of the Houthis in the Red Sea, which more or less threatened the Suez Canal and the main kind of source of income for Egypt from external revenues.

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With all of these kind of crises, it seemed that Egypt was suffering a lot of issues on all of its borders, all of its sides.

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And one would have expected from a regional power to be able to balance these kind of threats, to take assertive foreign policies, or at least to take actions to try and resolve some of these issues.

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What happened instead is that Egypt's policies towards all of these crises seemed more or less stagnating in the sense that it was unable to lead an effective policy to solve any of these issues or rather protect any of its interests on its borders.

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Some called it underbalancing or some lack of vision or it's merely focusing on reactions rather than taking action and initiative.

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But so far it seemed that Egyptian foreign policy is in crisis.

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What did the literature say about this?

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Not much.

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Most of the literature that focused on Egyptian foreign policy, it was really before 2011.

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And there was somewhat a dryness on that research because most of the scholars who used to study Egypt after 1979 and the big shift in its foreign policy in

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the peace treaty, shifting alliances between the Soviet Union to the US, most of the scholars kind of looked at Egypt as something that is without drama.

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There are no new events to study.

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Egyptian foreign policy is just more or less the same, and it's about the status quo, and it's about maintaining the positions.

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So there hasn't been many studies looking at the different kind of positions that Egypt took.

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But also the very few studies that emerged afterwards were looking at the Egyptian foreign policy from the lens of how Egypt is trying to balance its economic pressures at the domestic level and also for the regime to be able to survive and how these domestic factors are more or less leading to certain repetitive dynamics in its foreign policy.

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Which added also to the problem of the study of Egyptian foreign policy is

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After 2013, the crackdown on scholars has also contributed to this dryness of research on Egypt.

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And recently, some scholars started really talking about Egypt's decline, what has caused this decline, how to understand this decline.

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And to an extent, there are a couple of publications that are either forthcoming, like Nehel Shama's book,

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or just a very few random pieces here and there talking about Egyptian decline in the region.

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But really, what does this decline mean?

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And how to contextualize this decline in, let's say, the wider phenomenon of what happens when great or regional powers lose some of their influence.

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How does this decline go about and what are these intricate details?

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And why in some of these instances, as they are declining, they are actually stagnating in some of their foreign policy decisions or they're not actually taking any decisions and rather seeing events unfold around them.

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So the argument that we've developed here, and I'm going to talk a little bit about what the argument is, but then I'm going to go

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through how we make or how we kind of made-up this argument.

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But so far, we talk about Egypt's position from 2 lenses, from the role and the identity.

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We have to distinguish these two concepts in our understanding of Egyptian foreign policy.

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Based the role,

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which is associated with Egypt behavior, its policies, but also there is the identity, there is the narrative, there is how statesmen identify with Egypt and its place and position in the region.

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And somehow the stagnation in Egyptian foreign policy is really caused by this mismatch between what we call the leadership role and the identity of this leadership role.

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And somehow this mismatch is creating some sort of incongruence, some sort of dissonance, that in a way we see the role changing, but the leadership is really unable to comprehend and recognize this change, and they're still maintaining more or less the same identity.

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So in the paper here, we use

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Egypt as a case study to show how powers in decline in general, they have these two kind of dynamics, the identity and the role.

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And somehow these concepts are having a very strong relationship.

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And it's about this kind of relationship that we can understand their foreign policy and how they deal with certain situations

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especially when either the role or the identity is changing.

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And then I will showcase how this works in the case of Egypt, especially in the two cases, the GERD, the Grand Renaissance Dam, and the Gaza War, and how Egypt's policies towards these two issues more or less show this kind of stagnation and also the mismatch between its role and identity.

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So a little bit about the theory and where we come from.

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We relied on role theory and foreign policy analysis, but at the same time, when we looked at role theory, we realized that there is also a gap in what we're trying to do.

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So roles are usually these kind of repertoires of behavior inferred from other expectation and one's own conceptions.

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And these are selected by the party, but also are recognized and somewhat implicitly accepted by others.

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And somehow these roles are not really existing in a void.

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So actors usually would have a certain role, like a stabilizer, mediator, great power, middle power,

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but also they would hold a certain identity.

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Sometimes the identity, it's about how they define themselves.

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It could be associated with the role, or it could be also other types of identity that would intersect with the role.

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So identities are more this set of ideas and images about what a country is and what it should be.

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Or it's rather the answer to the question, who am I?

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So scholars, when they looked at these two concepts, often they associate the role and the identity.

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They always say that these two are co-constituted or one can actually lead to the development of the other.

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So in some cases, some roles might lead to certain identities developing in a certain direction.

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In other cases, it's about the identity that might cause the role to actually evolve and change and be built around certain identities.

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And you can take examples from around the world, even the UK here, looking, for example, at Brexit, how the Brexit came about after a certain change in identity, and also led to change in policies and change in role.

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But most of the literature that looked at this and they said, there is this kind of relationship between role and identity, they didn't really dissociate these two concepts.

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They didn't really tell us what happens if these two are not really in alignment.

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What happens if one is changing but the other is not changing?

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And that's where we saw here how Egypt, as a case study,

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can actually make a contribution to that existing theory, telling us about how role and identity they interact, but also how they are two distinct concepts.

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And by distinguishing them, we can actually identify some of the interactions.

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So this 4 by 4 table is more or less summarizing all the options of identity change and role change.

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So in some cases, identity might change and role might change as well.

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And examples like the post-colonial state, after independence, the newly established state in the Global South, in the Middle East or in Africa, they had to change their identity, but they also had to acquire new roles in the international system.

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The other

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possibility is that identity is stable, but the role is changing.

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And that is the case of Egypt.

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We have an identity that has been stable, but at the same time, the role has changed and the identity didn't really catch up.

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There is some sort of a lag.

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There is a cognitive lag between the identity and the role.

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Another option is having an identity change and role stability.

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And here as well, there would be some situation of a role strain where the identity has changed in the country, but at the same time, the role is very much the same.

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Some example has been also found in the literature, like post-Brexit UK, or even nowadays, the US under Trump, where the identity, there is a domestic change of what the US is about, what it represents,

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but the foreign policy, the role, is more or less stable.

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But this is creating a lot of internal debate and contestation in the US around these kind of issues.

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And then the majority of the cases, or let's say the normal kind of situation, is where the identity is stable and the role as well is stable.

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And somewhat by dissociating these kind of two concepts, we kind of tease a little bit of some of these dynamics.

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And in these cases, we often find the leaders at the very center of the match or the mismatch.

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So they may recognize the change in either role or identity and try to realign them.

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And sometimes they can be successful, and in other times they may be unsuccessful.

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So in the cases of Egypt, for example, it's a case where the identity is stable.

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Like it recognizes itself as a leading power, but the role is changing.

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So going back to the very first statement by Sisi, it's the promise to return Egypt back to its role.

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It's like an attempt, a constant attempt by the statesman, by leadership to actually

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realign the role and the identity.

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Or the other way round, when the role is stable and the identity is changing, they will try to reaffirm certain aspects of the role, trying to change it to align with the identity change.

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But somewhat, this kind of table tells us that we have to look at this separately.

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So we use the case of Egypt here as an illustrative cases for theory development, and we compare how Egypt behaved towards these two issues.

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And these two issues have been selected because Egypt has been claiming leadership in two areas, in Africa, especially in East Africa, and in the Middle East, particularly the Arab-Israeli conflict or the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

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Somewhat, the limitation of this is that sometimes it's very hard empirically to dissociate the role from the identity.

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And in many of the statements and the discourses, sometimes it's just not very clear whether this is a role statement or whether this is an identity statement.

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But somehow we decided that we will look at actions, behavior, policies to characterize role, and then we look at construction projections of how the Egyptian regime sees the state, how the associated elites are more or less understanding the place of Egypt regionally and internationally.

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So I'm going to present a little bit about this legacy of both the role and the identity in Egypt before I move to the case study.

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So Egypt has more or less seen a shift in 1952.

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Before 1952.

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its regional role has been very much focused on independence from British colonialism and the Palestinian question.

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But it did not really have larger regional aspirations, maybe during the 19th century under Muhammad Ali, but after the late 19th century, early 20th century, its foreign policy has been very much limited to these two particular issues.

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But after the revolution, Egypt kind of like changed its role from this isolation to regional leadership, especially under Nasser, where one of the, let's say, aspirations for him is how Egypt can lead the revolution across the region, how it can inspire other independence movement, but also how Egypt can become the leader of the Arab world and also in Africa.

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And Nasser always presented, and it's a very famous quote, of how the role of leadership was a vacant role, and he was always in search of a hero, and how Egypt came to fill that particular role.

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But this was more or less like in the 1950s until 1967, where it became very clear that there was

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critical juncture that Egypt cannot maintain this leadership role for various reasons, but especially after several military defeats, the failure of the Yemen War, and also the 1967 defeat against Israel, Egypt really started to looking more inward rather than outward.

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And after the death of Nassif, Sadat followed him at the beginning, trying to follow in his footsteps,

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but eventually said, Egypt has to focus on its own interests.

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And it became clear somehow that this vision for leading the Arab world and Africa is more or less taking a second step priority.

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And Mubarak, another figure that really tried maintaining the status quo, kind of managed to find the balance

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in the sense that we're not interested, Egypt is not interested in being too influential outside of its borders, but at the same time, he was very keen to maintain a certain status for Egypt in diplomatic affairs, in the Arab-Israeli conflict, and also

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to an extent in some African issues. Although after the assassination attempt against him in Ethiopia, he started really neglecting the Africa kind of element in Egyptian leadership. After 2011, things really changed. It was a window of opportunity for many other regional actors to try and change and sort of contest Egyptian leadership role. And somehow it became

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more or less the moment where everyone started recognizing that Egypt shouldn't be longer the leading country in the region, that there could be other kind of regional poles that we could consider, like the Gulf, for example. But this is very briefly, somewhat the legacy of this declining role.

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On the identity side, Egypt has been always known as this country that had various elements of identity from Arab, Egyptian nationalism, African, Pan-Africanism, Islamic identity, sometimes Mediterranean, Coptic, Pharaonic, and it's been always kind of acknowledged to have these multiple elements being triggered and activated depending on the situation and depending

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on who Egypt is interacting with. Nevertheless, and even though we can see that Egypt under Nasser was pan-Arab, under Sadat, it was kind of a little bit pan-Arab, a little bit pan-Islamic, but mostly Egyptian nationalism, then also under Mubarak trying to take different elements, and regardless what element was predominant in Egyptian kind of definition of itself,

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Egyptian leaders, but also the elites, always considered that Egypt was the natural leader of the Arab world and Africa. It was more or less a country that it was destined to lead, and it was destined to be followed. And wherever Egypt is going to go, others will follow. And I mean, just to give you a couple of quotations and examples from Gamel Hamdan, who's a very famous geographer,

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talking about Arabs without Egypt is like Hamlet without the prince, or even Sadat when the peace treaty was concluded and all the Arabs kind of isolated Egypt, sanctioned it, and was kicked out of the Arab League. And whenever Sadat was asked, especially by the US statesman, one of his quotations and responses, he said basically the Arabs will eventually follow what Egypt did.

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The Jordanians will follow our footsteps, so will the Syrians. Things in the Arab world happen the way Egypt decides. And that kind of gives you a little bit of an idea about how statesmen and elites actually view Egypt and its position in the region and how this element of leadership identity is very much ingrained in the various elements of Egypt's identity.

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How did that work out in the two cases? The Nile basin. Here, Egypt's decline has been evident, but somewhat Egypt managed to maintain a hegemonic role in the issue of the Nile until 2011. And this hegemonic role was related to one part about the knowledge, about how to control the water Nile, about how to

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kind of build scientific knowledge about the different aspects of the Nile, which many of the countries of the basin did not really have access to, especially under colonialism. But also several treaties were concluded in 1929, the most famous between Egypt at the time, Great Britain and Sudan under colonialism, giving Egypt the largest share of the water miles.

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And somewhat, this kind of hegemonic position changed. And Ethiopia, since the 1980s, had this project of building the Grand Renaissance Dam, but somewhat said that was very firm about it, that we're not going to allow this, we're going to veto it. And also Egypt had a veto against any kind of dam to be built in the Basin countries.

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But Mubarak as well managed to block the project diplomatically at the international level. 2011, the revolution happened. A void of power in Egypt and Ethiopia announced that they will be building the dam. And since then, it has been more or less a case of Ethiopia really trying to

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shift the balance of power. It's a country that's rising and somewhat the balance of power is shifting and Egypt is no longer having this hegemonic role. And somewhat Egyptian leadership kind of believed that they would be able to dissuade Ethiopia, that they had the confidence that they could be reclaiming leadership in Africa.

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And with this kind of view, they did not really negotiate with Ethiopia. They dismissed many of the requests. They even did not really allow for any serious compromise. But instead, all of the statements about this, that Egypt will not relinquish its historical rights in the waters of the Nile. And this kind of developed as well to some threats that

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Nobody's going to be able to touch Egypt's waters. We are not going to allow Egypt to touch a drop of water, and all of these statements from the leadership and also from the elites. And somehow this reflected this kind of mismatch. On the one hand, it's very clear that Egypt's role has changed. The countries around Egypt, especially in the Nile basin, do not really recognize

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this kind of leadership. The expectations of the role changed, but at the same time, Egyptian leadership did not really recognize this, and they remained adamant that they would be able to dissuade Ethiopia, they would be able to stop the project, they would be able to leverage the different diplomatic channels in order to do this. Even in a very famous kind of ministerial

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meeting where one of the ministers, Faiza Abu Naga, who is the minister of the International Corporation, she was the only one who was very much cautioning the other ministers and the council of ministers that we should actually negotiate with Ethiopia and we should reach a compromise.

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But ironically, she was more or less, the whole council voted unanimously against her suggestion and said, no, we don't have to give up anything and we will be able to stop this. But it is more or less an example of how Egypt, because of this mismatch, really

stagnated in developing any effective foreign policy toward the GERD issue. The second case study is the Gaza War.

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And here, Egypt is a case that had a very central role in the Palestinian issue and the Palestinian question since the early 20th century. And it was considered part of its top priorities, either at the policy level or even at the identity level. And even then, when we look at

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Egypt and its role in this particular issue, but also especially on the Gaza trip, Egypt was a hegemonic actor. It was for a very long time, even at administering the Gaza strip, any negotiation on Gaza, Egypt had to be the only actor. Even any kind of discussions related to the borders, the Rafah borders, Egypt had to be on board.

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And somehow this has changed after 2011. Several wars in Gaza, 2012, 14, 19, 21, until the recent war, Egypt was more or less kind of standing really quiet, unable to play an effective role, to either stop the war or even leverage any kind of resolution. And somewhat,

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We've seen other actors becoming even more involved in the question. Turkey, Doha, the UAE even at some point. And we've seen other actors being more influential in mediating, but also being kind of holding some of the cards when it came to the Gaza issue. And also, somewhat, Egypt was not really able to

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conduct a foreign policy that was more based on initiative. It was always seeing things unfold and trying to contain the situation, wait until the problem is resolved, or somewhat just trying to recourse to the very same tools it had for a very long time. At the very same time, the identity of leadership did not really change.

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Looking at how Egypt approached the whole problem, how leadership in Egypt and the elite, we're kind of always talking about the Gaza war is a complete mismatch to its foreign policy, that Egypt is the leading country in Gaza. Egypt is the most important country. Egypt is the only country that is able to solve this problem.

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And all of this, you can find it in the state media, you can find it in statements. And it's been more or less sort of a reflection of how the elites are seeing Egypt's role in the whole crisis. But also, somewhat, even when the ceasefire was agreed, it was kind of more or less represented as an Egyptian victory, regardless of how long this took,

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It took over 2 years for this to be achieved. Egypt did not really have, let's say, that sense of initiative. But at the same time, the way it was presented to the public, that Egypt is the winning party in this. And somehow, this also created a lot of debate domestically. Many of the elites, especially those associated with the regime, came up with certain, let's say,

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concepts, strategy, or the strategic dormancy that some of the elites kind of tried to put forward, that it's actually in the interest of Egypt not to take actions, but try and play diplomatically, try and just try to protect its interests, because now it doesn't have the capabilities, but eventually it can start building up its

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its capabilities and reclaiming its leadership role. And in response to this, was by one of the, let's say, thinkers who have very strong association with the state institutions. Many of the elites, even the opposition, their response, no, Egypt is actually a leadership role and it should assume the role and it should play this role. And there is no way of protecting Egypt's interest by having this

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dormancy kind of position. And you can really see here how the elites, even those who are recognizing that there is a decline, they only see this decline as something temporary, as something that is only for a few years, but we're going to be very able to jump back and very quickly if we take the right measures. So here to conclude,

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these two kind of cases, it's more or less, we can say that Egypt foreign policy has been an understudied topic, even though it's very present in the debates, it's present in the cultural outputs, but nevertheless, the study of its foreign policy has been very much unexplored. Part of it, because it's very, let's say, it's

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It's like a black box. We don't really know how it works. We don't really know the different moving parts. But somewhat, there are still elements that we can see and we

can study from Egyptian foreign policy. Also, the case has very, let's say, interesting theoretical contributions to make. There are always great powers declining.

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There are always regional powers declining, and even though we know that they're declining, we don't really know the dynamics of this decline. And how they decline and how they engage their foreign policy as they are declining is also an interesting phenomenon. And somewhat this relationship between role and identity and how to look at this mismatch and the lag that happens between the two when a power is declining

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can actually give us an idea about why the foreign policy of these declining powers, they stagnate, they seem ineffective, and sometimes they're just unable to kind of lead an initiative on certain issues. Finally, somehow the case of Egypt is not really a unique case. There are many cases around the world that exhibit the same kind of dynamics. The UK is one example.

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but also the US is another example, and many other historical examples that we could look at. Thank you very much. I'm going to stop here, and I look forward to your questions and comments.