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Analytical article

The Impact of the Rise of the Far Right in Europe on the Middle East and Egypt

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European powers have been facing several successive challenges in recent years, including primarily the growing populist rhetoric, the emergence of nationalist currents, and the rise of the far right to power as a reaction to the failure of European policies based on democracy, protection of rights, and freedoms in containing successive crises, which came against the backdrop of waves of immigration and asylum that have increased dramatically since 2015.

While some European powers, mainly Germany, endeavored to adopt a more pragmatic

policy on the asylum and immigration issues in line with their interests, they had to backtrack given the criticism they faced at home and abroad, which reinforced the rise of the far right forces, particularly in Italy, that adopted a political discourse that was securitized in consistency with their orientations of these far right forces. These forces managed to attract supporters, who either believe in their ideology, have no alternative political forces that represent their interests, or lack trust in governments that failed to fulfill their commitments given the growing pressure they are coming under due to crises.

Examples of the Rise of the Far Right

“Forces of the far right” is controversial term that can’t be clearly identified, yet these forces are generally characterized by adopting a securitized political rhetoric, promoting the idea that the Western communities are being replaced or threatened by other groups in the society that have a different culture and are being seen as a threat to the identity of the native community. In many respects, this fosters a culture of the rejection of the other, which reflects mainly on dealing with immigrants and refugees.

These nationalist currents are also characterized by a nationalist tendency that rejects diversity, integration, and cultural pluralism, which was manifested in the growth of “Islamophobia” in conjunction with the rise of the far right in Europe, a situation that raises fears of the Muslim communities in Europe, especially during the electoral entitlements. These forces mobilize proponents by declaring more hardline policies towards immigrants as well as Muslim communities, which enables them to promote their political

popularity. Below, we shed light on the most prominent European countries where nationalist currents have been on the rise in recent years.

- **In Norway**, the Progress Party stood as a representative of the far right in the two electoral experiences Norway witnessed in the period from 2013 to 2020. The Progress Party joined the government in alliance with the Conservatives, who broke the political taboo by allying with the far right. In the 2021 elections, the Progress Party lost about 3.5 percent of its electoral vote, to become the fourth largest political party in the country, down from the third rank. While the party is a populist one, it is less extreme than its right-wing parties’ counterparts in European countries, such as the Alternative for Germany and the National Rally party in France. Perhaps this could be attributed to its economic roots. It is primarily a liberal party rejectionist of bureaucracy and is based mainly on combating immigration.

- **Similarly**, in the United Kingdom, the UK Independence Party, which supported the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union (EU), managed in the 2015 parliamentary elections to become the third political force in the Parliament after it attained 13 percent of the total votes, despite securing only one seat under the electoral majority act. However, the party couldn’t continue to influence British political life where the Conservative Party managed to attract supporters of the UK Independence Party by supporting the post-Brexit agenda, which was implemented in 2019 after former Prime Minister Boris Johnson took office.
- **In Denmark**, the Danish right-wing People’s Party, an anti-immigration and anti-European integration policies party managed during the 2015 parliamentary elections to get 21.1 percent of the total votes, which made it the third largest bloc in Parliament. Moreover, the People’s Party managed to participate in the

formation of a minority government with the Liberal Party. Despite its hardline approach, it lost the 2019 elections after receiving 8.7 percent of the total votes, against the leftist forces which won the majority of seats in Parliament.

- **Austria's far-right**, led by Norbert Hofer, the candidate of the right-wing nationalist Freedom Party, who criticizes the EU, has inciting tendencies towards Muslims and asylum seekers, and is based on the principle of "Austria First", managed to qualify for the second round of the presidential elections that were held in May 2016, after winning in the first round of the elections held in April 2016, obtaining 36 percent of the total votes. Back then, he was, though, narrowly defeated by former Green Party leader Alexander van der Bellen, causing his party to become the third largest party in the Austrian Parliament.

Notably, the second round of elections came about a month before the vote on the United Kingdom EU membership

referendum, which raised fears in European capitals of a repeated scenario, especially in Austria. Perhaps this was reflected in Bellen's warning to voters of the rise of nationalist leader Hofer to take Vienna to a similar path as that of the United Kingdom. The results of the first round of elections were unexpected. For the first time since the World War II, the traditional parties that controlled power, e.g. the right-wing People's Party or the Social Democratic Party, failed to make it to the run-off, which reflected the decline in the popularity of these parties and their inability to develop political programs compatible with the voter needs. Additionally, the Austrians have increasing fears of the repercussions of asylum and migration waves which increased at this time.

- **In the Netherlands**, the popularity of the right-wing Freedom Party led by Geert Wilders has steadily increased since its founding in 2006, which enabled it to become the second political force in the country after the 2017 general election. In the 2021 elections, it became the third political force in Parliament. In mobilizing its electoral base, the Party

adopted anti-immigrant, anti-Islam, and anti-EU tendencies by rejecting the European integration policies and calling for withdrawing from the EU.

- **In Hungary**, the right-wing Fidesz party led by Viktor Orban achieved a two-thirds majority in the parliamentary elections held in April 2022, which gave rise to the re-election of Orban as President of Hungary, who headed the government since the 2010 parliamentary elections. Hungary is one of the countries with the strictest policies on asylum and illegal immigration laws, let alone its rejection of European institutionalization. In effect, Hungary is the only European country that didn't impose sanctions against Russia as part of the sanctions package imposed by the EU on Russia in the wake of the Russo-Ukrainian war. Noteworthy, in Hungary, there is the Better Hungary Movement, a far-right party in Hungary that introduces itself as being a Christian national conservative party, which is the third most powerful party in the Hungarian Parliament.

■ **Relatedly**, it can be argued that the rise of the far right and linked groups can be primarily attributed to the economic, political, and security crises that countries are facing rather than having political programs that can be implemented. This was evident in the two rounds of the French presidential elections held in April 2022, in which French President Emmanuel Macron managed to win a second presidential term after making progress in the second round. Macron received about 58.5 percent of the vote against Marine Le Pen, leader of the National Rally party, who got 41 percent of the vote, making him the first French president to win a second term in two decades.

Despite that, the elections revealed the divisions and dissatisfaction among the different groups of society, amply manifested in the voter turnout. For example, nearly 74 percent of businessmen and holders of graduate degrees voted in favor of Macron. Meanwhile, Le Pen gained the largest share of votes of the working class who wanted

to avoid Macron's policies that affected their purchasing power, amounting to about 58 percent of the votes. Divisions were also reflected in the results of the legislative elections held in June of the same year, where Marine Le Pen made considerable progress, winning more than 80 seats, up from only 8 seats in the 2017 elections.

■ **In Germany**, the migration and asylum policies pursued by German Chancellor Angela Merkel have reinforced the rise of the far-right forces, with the Alternative for Germany party managing to become the third largest party in the 2017 elections, after securing about 13 percent of the vote, which was then considered a paradigm shift because the party started its political career just four years before this election, where it gained 90 seats in the German Federal Parliament, for the first time since World War II being an extremist party. Despite this, it failed to retain its political standing as the containment policy adopted by the German state on migration and asylum contributed to

its decline in the 2021 elections, gaining 10.3 percent of the total vote. Additionally, the party faces a number of internal challenges. It has also lost part of its popularity, particularly with the National Domestic intelligence placing the party under police surveillance for its violation of the democratic system.

■ **Sweden** has also witnessed the advance of far-right forces, with the Swedish Democratic Party becoming the second largest political party in the country, after it managed in the last elections held in September 2022, to achieve a substantial progress of more than 20 percent, up from 17.5 percent in the 2018 elections and 5.7 percent in the 2010 elections. The conservative alliance, of which the Swedish Democratic Party is a part and which comprises 4 parties, led by the leader of the Conservative Party, Ulf Kristersson, managed to win 176 seats in Parliament out of 349 seats, against 173 seats for the Left Alliance, which

prompted Magdalena Andersson, Swedish Prime Minister and leader of the Social Democratic Party, to resign.

- **Italy** presents the latest instance of the rise of far right forces, where the Brothers of Italy, led by Giorgia Meloni, won 26 percent of the vote in the elections held on 25 September. This is a record victory as the party received only 4 percent of the vote in the 2018 elections. These results are an unprecedented event since 1945, where this party, which has roots in neo-fascism, will have the opportunity to rule the country for the first time since 1945.

The right-wing coalition, which comprises Meloni, Silvio Berlusconi, and Matteo Salvini won the majority of votes, i.e. 42.9 percent, which secures its control over the Parliament. As such, they would have obtained “the highest share of votes ever recorded by far right parties in the history of Western Europe since 1945 to date, according to the Italian Center for Electoral Studies.

In this vein, the League Party, led by Matteo Salvini, won 8.8 percent of the total votes, down from 17 percent in the 2018 elections. On the other hand, the Forza Italia party, led by Silvio Berlusconi gained only 8.1 percent of the votes, down from 14 percent in the 2018 elections. **As such, Italy is experiencing a substantial rise of the far right primarily driven by the escalation of the illegal immigration crisis. However, the rise of the “Brothers of Italy” to power proves that the situation will go beyond that.**

In short, the populist forces endeavored to take the lead on the political scene in Europe, capitalizing on voter dissatisfaction with government policies that are often dominated by center-left and center-right that are based on Western centrist values in their internal and external orientations. In addition, the regional and international developments in the EU, including primarily the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the EU, the growing nationalist and isolationist calls rejectionist of European integration policies, amid the unprecedented increases in the number of illegal immigrants, the European non-consensus over

this crisis, and the growing terrorist attacks on some European capitals, such as Paris, have all played a major role in stimulating the extremist nationalist forces to mobilize supporters, by adopting a more hawkish or assertive political rhetoric towards migration, asylum, and Muslims in particular, a situation that raised concerns and questions about the future of European integration.

What Has Led to the Rise of the Far Right?

The rise of the far right forces in several European countries –of which the rise of the Brothers of Italy is the most recent development– isn’t the product of the moment. Nevertheless, with elections projected to be held in several European countries over the next two years, Italy will not likely be the last case. At large, several reasons lay behind the rise of the far right in Europe, on the economic, political, and cultural dimensions, among others, including primarily:

- **Neoliberal Policies Failure:** The global financial crisis that hit the world in 2008 gave rise to austerity policies and the

gradual abandonment of welfare policies pursued by most European countries. This gave rise to an agenda hostile to the policies of the EU aimed at reducing the budget deficit and pursuing a nationalist agenda of a protectionist character, which elevates investment goals in national industries and provides support to citizens, regardless of the impact of this on the general budget.

- **Exacerbation of the Refugee and Illegal Migration Crises:** The refugee and illegal migration crisis culminated in tandem with the 2015 waves of Syrian migrants, amounting to over one million migrants. This refugee wave coincided with debilitating economies due to the austerity policies, which raised fears and concerns of many Europeans, particularly those in impoverished regions in Europe. Coincidentally, the countries most affected by austerity policies, such as Italy and Greece, were the most vulnerable to refugee waves. This

crisis was associated with the upsurge of terrorist attacks by extremist Islamic organizations such as the Islamic State, which further entrenched hostility to immigrants, most of whom are of Islamic origins, and contributed to the rise of Islamophobia.

- **Sense of Cultural Threat:** The neoliberal policies and the exacerbation of the refugee crisis reinforced a sense of cultural threat. The austerity policies have affected the less fortunate, who also had a lower chance of education and faced waves of migrants, who are more lenient with labor policies and brought about competition for the few opportunities available, let alone their access to the subsidies paid from the taxes of those citizens. Add to this the sense of threat due to the prevalent perception that Christian values of Europe are being threatened due to the increase in the number of Muslims on the one hand and the policies adopted by the EU on the

other that support the gay communities and abortion and many values that contradict the traditional conservative Christian values. Combined, all these intertwined reasons contributed to the rise of the far right, which advocates a social conservative agenda and is based on xenophobia.

- **The Russo-Ukrainian War:** The war came to exacerbate the fragile conditions Europe was already experiencing, due to the economic repercussions left by Covid-19, which imposed on European countries a big bill to support families and businesses. No sooner had the European countries started to restore growth than the Russian war came to exacerbate these conditions, which left the continent suffering complex and intertwined problems, as the high energy bill exacerbated inflation, which contributed to the escalation of protests over prices, in turn deepening European economic problems.

Premises of the Far Right Forces

The rise of the far right in European countries raised questions about their foreign orientations and their potential impact on the Middle East in general and Egypt in particular. To answer this question, we need to understand the nature of these forces and how they deal with the challenges and threats they face, which can be detailed as follows:

- The far right forces focus mainly on internal issues rather than involving themselves in external crises. They don't even have a clear foreign policy agenda which makes it difficult to infer its future directions, albeit certain exceptions.
- This inward-looking and prioritizing of internal issues can be mainly attributed to the fact that they rely on the nationalist and protectionist approach that supports isolationism, skepticism about international institutions, and the unwillingness to commit to transnational policies.

- When it comes to priority issues, issues of migration and asylum are projected to come at the forefront of their areas of interest, where strict policies could be pursued. Further, issues that have security and national dimensions, aligning with the national interests of their countries, have also gained interest of these forces, against a decline in issues related to rights and freedoms.
- As such, the rise of the far right in the Middle Eastern countries and Egypt will be relatively subject to internal challenges rather than having advance directives that will be adopted.

Repercussions of the Rise of the Far Right on the Middle East and Egypt

- There could be joint cooperation between European and Middle Eastern countries on the vital files that have security dimensions such as illegal immigration, combating terrorism, and organized crime. This could be particularly true

with Egypt, which has a pioneering experience based on a comprehensive approach to address these files and it is a trusted partner in the European countries.

- While **climate change issues** do not come at the top of the agenda of the far right forces, they are likely to gain importance in the coming phase, given the growing pressure of European public opinion to reconsider climate-related policies, especially with the increasing repercussions of climate change on European capitals. In this vein, Egypt should capitalize on its hosting of COP27 in November in Sharm El-Sheikh to strengthen its partnerships with these forces.
- In connection with the orientations of the far right forces on climate change, the next stage will likely see a resurgence of interest in **investment in traditional energy sources, reliance on nuclear energy, expansion in the use of fuel, and an increase in upstream oil and gas investments through companies such**

the Italian company Eni, which could increase the potential of European countries entering into partnerships with East Mediterranean countries in the field of transportation and upstream oil. Additionally, this orientation is consistent with that of Egypt, which, besides launching the East Mediterranean Gas Forum, seeks to promote partnerships in the field of renewable and conventional energy, which creates a common space that could be built on to cement ties.

- As for **the economic aspect and development relations**, there will be likely focus on the security dimensions of cooperative relations rather than development partnerships, as well as an emphasis on supporting the private sector, which may be reflected differently on countries of the region and Egypt, depending on the volume of cooperation and partnership with countries where the far right controls power.

- As for Europe's interaction with the issues and crises facing the Middle East, it will be linked to the national interests of European countries where the far right rise to power. Most likely, these countries will support achieving political stability in countries that are suffering from crises such as Syria, Iraq, and Libya as a way to limit the flows of illegal immigration and increased asylum applications. Perhaps this was reflected in statements of Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade Peter Szijjarto in January 2022 during his visit to New York, noting: "Instability or wartime situations obviously trigger waves of migration," adding that "migrants tended to choose Europe as their destination." Despite this, it is not clear whether European countries will be directly involved in these crises, and most likely they will deal selectively with these crises, meaning no clear strategy was developed in advance according to which action will be taken.

- The position of the far right forces on the **Palestinian cause** can be concluded by having a look at the way they deal with Israel. According to several reports, the far right forces have divergent positions on Israel, with some rejecting Israel's dealings with the Palestinians, and others supporting Israel's security. As such, it is likely that the support for Israel will increase in the coming period, particularly with the rise of the far right, which may negatively affect the course of negotiations towards a settlement of the Palestinian cause. In this vein, reference could be made to Hungary's view on Israel, manifested in statements of the Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade in January 2022, before the UN Security Council session on the situation in the Middle East, saying: "Israel is the strategic ally of Hungary. Hungary will always defend Israel's right to defend itself", calling on the international community to make it clear that it stands on Israel's side and

admits that that country is exposed to grave threats of terror, and that terrorist organisations and terrorists should be called by their name. As for the far right in Italy, Matteo Salvini, the leader of the League party, pledged –before the vote on the legislative elections on 25 September 2022– to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, declaring to Israel Hayom: “I am fully committed to the people of Israel and I intend to keep my word.”, which may reflect negatively on the Palestinian cause.

- As for the **far right’s position on Turkey**, Ankara will likely be of a considerable significance and will end having cooperative relations with European countries controlled by far right governments, especially NATO member states such as Hungary, which built consensus with Turkey over several issues of common interest, especially with regard to energy and illegal immigration. Perhaps this was manifested in the meeting of Hungarian

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán with the President of the Turkish Parliament end of September, in which they had talks on the Russo-Ukrainian war, Ukraine’s role in energy security, and illegal immigration. Therefore, the relations between the two sides will likely continue to take the same path over the coming period. As for the new Italian right government, it is expected to cooperate with Turkey on illegal immigration to protect its borders against migrant flows, especially with its proposal for imposing a naval blockade as a mechanism to confront illegal immigration flowing across the Mediterranean.

- When speaking about **Egypt’s relations with the far right forces**, emphasis could be placed on **Hungary**, being considered the prominent example of the far right’s monopoly of power, as opposed to other European governments where the far right forces were part of the ruling coalition or major forces in the opposition, rather than having monopoly of

power. As such, Italy will be the next example of the far right forces to rise to power.

- Under Orbán, Hungary’s agenda focused on specific issues, including primarily combating cross-border terrorism and illegal immigration. For that, Hungary has supported peaceful solutions to political crises, especially those that may give rise to the export of illegal immigrants. It also thought strengthening security cooperation that would enable addressing cross-border terrorism and illegal immigration from the Middle East.
- Both Egypt and Hungary stress the need to respect human rights without violating the conservative values based on respect for religious premises. They also share the view that supporting political human rights cannot be divorced from economic rights, which was evident in statements of President Al-Sisi at the Visegrad Group summit 2021, in which he underscored the need to support development as a way to improve human rights.

As such, the relationship between the two countries extended beyond the bilateral aspect to the Visegrad Group, in which Hungary is a leading member. Since President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi took office, Egypt participated twice in the Visegrad Group's annual summit in 2017 and 2021, at the invitation of Hungary, to become the first Arab and Middle Eastern country to be invited to this gathering that comprises Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland. Egypt has succeeded in drawing significant international resolutions from Visegrad Group, supporting Egypt's approach to internal politics, particularly with respect to the political transition after the June 30 revolution, the fight against violence, and terrorism.

Countries of the Visegrad Group represent a large and promising market for Egypt. Combined, these countries have a total population of about 64 million people and a gross domestic product \$8.1 trillion, let alone the expertise they have in various fields such as railways, agriculture, irrigation, water treatment, nuclear energy, and military industries, which Egypt can capitalize on in implementing



the ongoing national projects in Egypt or increasing Egyptian exports to the markets of those countries.

In the Visegrad Group summit in Budapest, Egypt proposed the establishment of an industrial zone for the Visegrad Group countries as well as a joint investment fund, a step that Egypt shouldn't retreat from, particularly with the Hungarian leadership headed by Victor Orban starting a new presidential term. As for Italy, we find that Matteo Salvini, the leader of the far-right League party, has stressed the significance of Egypt in maintaining stability in the region.

In short, despite the dramatic rise of the far right forces in some European countries, it is too early to

assess their experience in power. Additionally, their declared political programs are focused on internal priorities rather than external ones, albeit their position on the Russo-Ukrainian war, intended to deny any connection between them and Russia, which have built consensus and cooperation over years.

Relatedly, it can be argued that the repercussions of the rise of the far right in Egypt will come in the context of their orientations towards the region as well as their internal priorities. As such, it may be beneficial for Egypt to start creating a common space for cooperation with these forces, especially with Egypt having experience in combating extremism and radical ideologies, which could be a potential area for cooperation.