



EDITED BY STEFANO M. TORELLI

THE RETURN OF EGYPT INTERNAL CHALLENGES AND REGIONAL GAME

INTRODUCTION BY PAOLO MAGRI

ISPI

The Return of Egypt. Internal challenges and Regional Game

Edited by Stefano M. Torelli

ISPI

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Introduction

When Hosni Mubarak resigned his 30-year presidency, on February 11, 2011, Egypt seemed ready to seize the opportunity to enter a new era. After the revolutionary upheavals in Tunisia, the country was about to become the second theater of the so-called “Arab Spring”, thus contributing to spreading a sense of hope throughout the entire Middle East. Indeed, in those early stages Egypt went through a truly democratic process, despite all the troubles stemming from years of authoritarian ruling. For two years, Cairo was an important reference point in the Arab world for real policy change. Between 2011 and 2012, Egypt saw its first democratic parliamentary elections and, in June 2012, began an important experiment of political Islam government with the election of President Mohammed Morsi. At this stage, Egypt was still looking for a new identity, while popular opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood began to emerge. The Brotherhood, for its part, fully exploited its majoritarian mandate, seemingly ignoring the oppositions’ instances. Morsi paid a high price for this mistake when General al-Sisi deposed him in July 2013, an event that marked a real turning point in the country’s recent history. The army returned to power and put a grinding halt to the political change started in 2011. At the same time, Egypt relapsed into intense internal struggle, marked by the repressive measures of the new regime. This was justified by the threat of terrorism, as well as by a kind of “popular mandate” represented by the millions of Egyptians who had hoped for military intervention against the Brotherhood’s rule.

But what kind of Egypt has risen from the ashes of its post-Arab Spring turmoil? What stands out in the new course of Egypt's ruling by President al-Sisi, elected as successor to Morsi in 2014? From a strictly internal point of view, the role of the military in the political process is definitely a key issue. The resignation of Mubarak itself was guided by the army and even throughout Morsi's presidency the military continued to exert pressure on the political system. As a result, today's Egypt is characterized by the security-driven approach led by the army. The Muslim Brotherhood has been ruthlessly repressed and the movement has been banned and declared a terrorist organization. The other oppositions have been severely limited and Morsi has even been sentenced to death. However, if Egypt's internal affairs cast many shadows, from the regional and international perspective Cairo has made its comeback as a major regional actor. Egypt aims at nothing short of acting as head of the Middle Eastern world, especially for Sunni Arab countries, and this undoubtedly sends a message of change from Mubarak's era. The region's most solid and to some extent effective axis is indeed between Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Egypt's direct interventions in Libya – alongside the government of Tobruk – and in Yemen – in support of Saudi Arabia and against the Houthi rebels supported by Iran – highlight Cairo's efforts to shift the tide to its advantage. However, such new attitudes have paid their toll in terms of new regional fractures, as shown by the freezing of relations with two important countries like Qatar and Turkey.

Against this background, this report analyses the characteristics of the new Egypt, by addressing both the internal political evolution, and the regional and international impact of a rising Egypt. A final chapter is specially devoted to assess how and to what extent Europe and Italy can find new ways of collaboration with Cairo, despite some diverging interests, perceptions and values.

In the first chapter Marina Ottaway starts noting that al-Sisi's Egypt has first of all put the bulky figure of the state at the center of public life. The transition to a new era for post-uprising Egypt

is marked by the return of authoritarian practices, such as the leading role played by the military, the repression of organized dissent and the centralization of power and of religion itself. In this sense, there is a real risk that, over the next few years, the country will diverge from the reform path and opt for a strict conservatism safeguarding the very existence of the regime, which increasingly overlaps with the very idea of the state.

By the same token, the second chapter by Andrea Teti notes that internal opposition to the regime suffers from the same difficulties existing under President Mubarak. Opposition groups have no solid organization or funds, are not able to provide for a general mobilization in the country, and have problems in operating under the very restrictive conditions imposed by the Egyptian government. In this scenario, and with the Muslim Brotherhood ostracized, it is doubtful that the opposition will be able to deliver effective political action.

In this political context, in the third chapter, Zack Gold's focuses on an analysis of the security threat coming from the operations of jihadist groups, especially in the Sinai, which now constitutes the greatest source of concern for al-Sisi. Despite the President's iron fist approach, resulting in his war on terrorism, Egypt continues to suffer terrorist attacks, as a result of an increasing presence of the Islamic State (IS) in Egypt. In particular, Gold maintains that security-led approaches could turn out to be counterproductive, as the state's response should also focus on new social policies and inclusion practices.

However, when shining the spotlight on regional relations – as Cecilia Zecchinelli puts it in the fourth chapter – al-Sisi's Egypt has sought to rebuild its alliances. For a start, the center of Egyptian Middle East policy is currently the Gulf and especially Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The strengthening of this Sunni Arab axis is a sort of a new *fil-rouge* in the region, but it also raises new tensions, as shown by the deteriorated relations with Turkey and Qatar and the frozen relations with Iran after slight openings under Morsi. The new course of Egyptian regional policy has also led to renewed cooperation with Israel, especially

concerning the issues of security and control of the Sinai. Egypt's regional activism is shown very clearly by the military actions in Libya in direct support of General Haftar and by support for the Saudi operations in Yemen against the Houthi rebels. Finally, al-Sisi has been playing an important new role in Africa, where he has reached an agreement with Ethiopia and Sudan for the management of the Nile's waters, one of the strategic priorities for Cairo.

Even on the global level Egypt has partially revised its relations with major international actors. Charles Dunne in chapter five gives an interpretation of Egyptian international relations, debating whether or not one can speak of a new theater of confrontation between Russia and the United States. It goes without saying, Dunne writes, that with the rise of al-Sisi Egypt has partially turned away from Washington and returned to having very good relations with Russia, which had not occurred since the days of Nasser. Russia has carried out naval exercises with Egypt, has signed agreements for the sale of weapons to and for the installation of a nuclear power plant in Egypt and has a common interest in fighting terrorism. However, Egypt's relations with the US remain crucial and it is difficult that Egypt will become a front line between the two powers.

An even more difficult task, however, is to outline European – and specifically Italian – policies able to combine common interests with the need to promote the values that the EU has historically espoused. This is the topic of discussion of the last chapter, jointly written by H el ene Michou and Stefano Torelli, which identifies areas and issues of common interest between Europe and Egypt and their policy implications. The fight against terrorism, Mediterranean security, Libya's crisis and migration flows all constitute possible grounds of cooperation with Egypt. Indeed, the authors argue that Europe and Italy could initiate policies of regional integration in order to find solutions to common problems. At the same time, northern Mediterranean countries should push Cairo towards a process of internal reforms to ease current confrontations between the regime and oppositions.

Only in this way could common policies be built and, above all, Italy and Europe be able to regain credibility with southern Mediterranean partners.

Paolo Magri
ISPI Executive Vice President and Director

1. Al-Sisi's Egypt: The State Triumphant

Marina Ottaway

There is no such thing as a regime. There is something called an Egyptian state. The Egyptian people elect a president who is able to stabilize the country. Not a regime that keeps changing, that is unacceptable. An Egyptian state with its institutions, courts, with its police, its army, all of its different elements working together collaboratively for Egypt and not for one individual on top. And in case this individual leaves, his successor will continue to build on what he started¹.

The *coup d'état* of 3 July 2013 overthrew elected President Mohammed Morsi and reinstated the military in power more overtly than at any time since the days of President Gamal Abdel Nasser in the 1960s. The new regime is openly authoritarian, and all the more repressive because still insecure. But the change went further, turning on its head the concept of how government and people should relate to each other. The idea of democratic, representative government, long accepted in Egypt in theory even if regularly violated in practice, has been explicitly rejected by Egypt's new ruler, President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, as a luxury. Today there is no question in Egypt of citizens freely choosing a government, or accepting and rejecting a regime. The central element in Egypt is the state and the regime is the state.

In al-Sisi's Egypt, the state comes first and citizens a distant second. Citizens, with their egoistical self-interests and demands,

¹ Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, speaking at the opening of the new airport in Hurghada, Egypt, 17 December 2014.

are a hindrance to the greatness of the state unless they learn to sacrifice their interests and subordinate them to those of the state. During his presidential campaign, at a time when politicians all over the world are inclined to make extravagant promises, al-Sisi repeatedly warned that he could do nothing for Egyptians and that they needed to be patient, putting the need to rebuild the state ahead of their own concern. Even parliamentary elections were in his view a means of state building. Trying to reassure Egyptians upset by the repeated postponement of parliamentary elections, he explained that the polls would be held before the end of 2015 and that “the parliamentary election is simply to complete the institutions of the state”² not to give citizens a voice in the governing of the country. From politics to economics to security, the emphasis of the al-Sisi regime is on the aggrandizement of the state. And while he has never gone as far as Louis XIV and declared himself to be the state, he has come very close to it, as the quote that opens this paper shows.

The central element of the Egyptian state is the military. It protects the country, as militaries do everywhere, but it is also the central tool of its economic development. The Egyptian military has long been involved in business, with widely different estimates putting the share of the economy controlled by the military at anywhere between 5 and 40 per cent (the discrepancy is explained by the value attached to the land the military controls and to the fact that the role of the military in some businesses is not always overt). Theoretically committed to a market economy, the al-Sisi regime has been channeling to the military most of the investment funds Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait are pumping into the Egyptian economy. And those funds will be directed, according to present proposals, toward large-scale, grandiose projects meant to enhance Egypt’s profile as a modern country, rather than more modest undertakings that would provide employment for Egyptians. Plans announced at an international economic conference at Sharm el-Sheikh in March

² Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, speaking at an Educational Seminar organized by the Armed Forces, 31 March 2015.

2015 called for the building of a new capital city in the desert, complete with skyscrapers and parks, and an enlargement of the Suez Canal that aimed at transforming Egypt into an international transportation and industrial hub – work on the canal is already underway. But there was little in the plans to address the plight of ordinary Egyptians. Even investment in low and middle income housing, supported by United Arab Emirates (UAE) funds, was envisaged as a heroic undertaking managed by the military.

Erasing politics

Focus on state-building leaves very little space for politics in al-Sisi's Egypt. The game of politics – the jockeying over “who gets what, when and how” in Harold Lasswell's classic definition (1936), simply detracts from the real task at hand when it is the state that should get it all. After the coup, then General al-Sisi did not promise a return to democracy. In military fashion, he issued a road map for going forward. In an interview with a group of domestic and foreign editors and reporters shortly before he was elected president, al-Sisi made it clear that he considered democracy ‘a luxury’ to be rejected if Egypt wanted to get back on its feet, and that “the strategic goal is preserving the Egyptian state”³. Politics was clearly a distraction from that strategic goal.

The first stage of the road map was to replace the constitution adopted in December 2012 under the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood. The new constitution was written by a committee appointed by the non-elected transitional government on the basis of a concept of corporate representation. Members of the committee were chosen to represent various corporate groups – workers and professionals, religious organizations, women and youth, even the handicapped. Missing from the committee were

³ D. Gardner, “Sisi keeps policy vague and democracy off the agenda in Egypt”, *Financial Times*, 18 May 2014, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/d216eed4-de8a-11e3-b46b-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3ee6gBVtU>.

representatives of constituency-based organizations freely chosen by members.

The constitution itself was a democratic document until it came to the position of the military, and then it deviated. It put the military budget outside the jurisdiction of the parliament and gave the military sole authority over the appointment of the Defense Minister, eliminating any pretense of civilian oversight. The military thus became a completely autonomous center of power, beyond the supervision of the elected institutions and not subject to any form of checks and balances. The constitution guaranteed an impressive list of individual political, economic and social rights on paper, but left the military free to act as it wanted in practice.

The second stage of the road map, the election of General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi as President, further demonstrated the regime's desire for untrammelled control and its downplaying of the citizens' right to make free choices. General al-Sisi, the army chief of staff and leader of the coup, had been the real power in the government since the overthrow of President Mohammed Morsi, although nominally he was only the Minister of Defense. To nobody's surprise he became the virtually unchallenged candidate in the May 2014 presidential election.

More than an election, it was actually a plebiscite. Al-Sisi's only, *pro forma* competitor was Hamdeen Sabbahi, a vaguely Nasserist politician who had gained some popularity as one of five candidates in the 2012 presidential elections. The outcome of the vote was never in doubt, with al-Sisi having the resources of the state and control over the media on his side, and Sabbahi having hardly any assets. Indeed, rumors were rife in Egypt that Sabbahi had been forced to run by unspecified threats in order to give the election a *façade* of respectability.

With the outcome assured, al-Sisi ran a low key campaign, without presenting a real program and making few public appearances. His message was the antithesis of populism. He did not promise prosperity or democracy, but constantly repeated that citizens had to sacrifice their own interests to those of state.

Having won 96.1 per cent of the vote, he saw no reason to change his message after he became President.

Parliamentary elections, still not held at the time of this writing, were the third and last stage of the roadmap and a bigger challenge. It was a foregone conclusion that the Muslim Brotherhood would not be allowed to participate. It had a popular following, and neither the government nor other parties wanted it in the fray. The solution was radical: the Brotherhood was declared a terrorist organization, thousands of its members and supporters were imprisoned, and some 900 individuals with ties to the organization had their businesses expropriated⁴. Schools controlled by the Muslim Brotherhood or more indirectly affiliated with it were shut down or put under government control (over 150 such schools by mid-2015)⁵. Muslim Brotherhood charities were also closed down, with 380 forced out of business in February and March 2015 alone and more closures scheduled⁶.

But eliminating the Muslim Brotherhood from the competition was not enough for a regime that saw democracy as a luxury Egypt could not afford. Other political parties also had to be curbed, although they were no threat to the regime: they had accepted, even welcomed, the military coup; they had minimal organized support; they had repeatedly shown their inability to work together and form a lasting united front, despite many attempts; and they appeared unable to spread their message beyond the country's élite – most of the some 100 registered parties probably did not reach much beyond their founders' friends and family members. But they were independent voices and saw themselves as representing citizens and their demands, rather than being part of a centrally directed state-building effort.

⁴ "Egypt seizes assets of 16 more Brotherhood members", *Abram Online*, 9 March 2015, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/124791/Egypt/Politics-/Egypt-seizes-assets-of-more-Brotherhood-members.aspx>.

⁵ "Government takes over 104 Muslim Brotherhood schools", *Cairo Post*, 22 June 2015, <http://www.thecairopost.com/news/156704/news/156704>.

⁶ "With latest crackdown, state dissolves 380 NGOs in just 2 months", *Mada Masr*, 18 March 2015, <http://www.madamasr.com/news/latest-crackdown-state-dissolves-380-ngos-just-2-months>.

The new parliamentary election law sought to limit the role of all parties by allowing them to compete for only twenty percent of the seats, with the rest reserved for independent candidates. The system favored local notables and promised to lead, as in the past, to a compliant parliament populated by patronage-seeking individuals rather than by representatives of parties with visions and plans. The parties objected strongly to the new law, but their protests fell on deaf years.

Nevertheless, a number of prominent al-Sisi's supporters sought to curb even more the already limited role of independent political parties by launching new, regime aligned organizations. Those efforts failed – supporters of the regime were no better at working together than its adversaries. Al-Sisi still sought to limit pluralism. Meeting with party leaders on 26 May 2015, he exhorted them to form a common list of candidates, because "... the challenges the country is facing require you to join forces and compete in the elections as one force... if you really want a powerful parliament that can rise above narrow-minded partisan and personal interests and achieve supreme national interests, you should first mend fences and run as one bloc"⁷. Thirty-two political parties, mostly new and virtually unknown, announced a short time later that they would form a joint electoral list in compliance with al-Sisi's exhortation⁸.

Suppressing non-state actors

The al-Sisi regime had no choice but to accept the existence of political parties, even as it tried to limit the space in which they could operate. In the 21st century, even an authoritarian regime could no longer proclaim a single party state, as Nasser and

⁷ "Top News: Parliament Before End of 2015, Sisi Tells Political Party Heads", *Atlantic Council*, 28 May 2015, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/egyptsource/top-news-parliament-before-end-of-2015-sisi-tells-political-party-heads>.

⁸ "32 small political parties heed Sisi's call for unified electoral list", *Abram Online*, 1 June 2015, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/131657/Egypt/Politics/-small-political-parties-heed-Sisis-call-for-unifi.aspx>.

innumerable leaders of his time had done. Unregistered political movements and even organizations of civil society were easier to target.

The regime was extremely hostile to the youth movements that had sprung up before and after the January 2011 uprising as well as to human rights organizations. Independent civil society organizations that focused on service delivery and charity were tolerated, as long as they had no ties to the Muslim Brotherhood and they registered with the Ministry of Social Solidarity under new, restrictive regulations.

The April 6 Movement, the major catalyst of the 25 January 2011 demonstrations that eventually brought down President Hosni Mubarak, was a major target of government repression, with much of its leadership serving lengthy prison terms for participating in protests and more broadly for insisting on remaining an independent voice. As in the case of the Muslim Brotherhood, repression against April 6 Movement could be explained as a matter of political expediency and self-interest on the part of the regime – both movements had a proven capacity to mobilize people. But the al-Sisi regime also curbed the activities of the Tamarrod Movement, a youth organization formed in April 2013 to demand the removal of President Morsi. Tamarrod had actually served the military's interests well. Promptly infiltrated by the state security services, which provided funding, logistics, and even personnel, Tamarrod grew quickly into a well-organized, visible machine deployed through the country to collect signatures on an anti-Morsi petition⁹.

Tamarrod also served as a cover for the security services when they organized the 30 June demonstrations against President Morsi. Those demonstrations provided the military with an excuse to intervene in order to carry out “the will of the people”. But Tamarrod was not rewarded for its role in the demise of Morsi. Once in power, the new regime turned hostile to the organization

⁹ A. Alsharif, Y. Saleh, “Special Report: The real force behind Egypt’s ‘revolution of the state’”, *Reuters*, 10 October 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/10/10/us-egypt-interior-specialreport-idUSBRE99908D20131010>.

it had built, treating it like any other movement and denying it the opportunity to transform itself into a political party and run for elections. The regime no longer needed Tamarrod and Independent activity by any organization, no matter how friendly, was not part of its plans for building Egypt.

Human rights organizations other than the official Egyptian National Council for Human Rights have survived so far under the al-Sisi regime, but barely so. Their funding was threatened by a new antiterrorism law enacted in late 2014, which imposes a potential life sentence for the crime of intending to “harm the national interest”, “compromise national unity” or “breach security or public peace”, if an organization receives foreign financing. Denouncing human rights violations falls in those categories for the Egyptian government, and Egyptian human rights organizations depend on foreign support for survival. So far, the law has not been used against them. There have been no dramatic trials or closure of organizations, but harassment is a constant problem, particularly against those that dared testify in front of the Human Rights Council in Geneva in September 2014¹⁰.

Coopting labor unions

The January 2011 uprising was preceded by several years of mounting workers’ protests. Although the protests were largely apolitical, focusing instead on traditional labor issues of wages and working conditions, they contributed to the climate of discontent that led to uprising. The overthrow of Mubarak and the coming to power of the Muslim Brotherhood did not put an end to the manifestations of discontent, and neither did the military take-

¹⁰ *Egypt: Ongoing harassment and restrictions to freedom of association faced by several Egyptian human rights organizations, including the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), 18 June 2015; Egyptian Government Clamps Down on Rights Groups, Seeking their Eradication, Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, 4 May 2015.*

over¹¹. What changed, however, was the regime's response. Rather than tolerating the turmoil, as governments had done for a few years, the military enacted new restrictive laws that stifled the new independent labor unions and coopted the long-established Egyptian Trade Union Federation.

Some independent labor unions were formed in the period of revolutionary fervor before and after the 2011 uprising. Important as a sign of the new political activism, in reality they suffered from the same problem affecting all other organizations emerging at the time: they had the enthusiasm, but not the strong organization, and they failed to unite. In 2013, independent unions supported the efforts to recall President Morsi, but they did not welcome the military take-over. As a result, the regime looked at them with suspicion, refused to register new ones and accused them of receiving foreign funding. The hostility of the regime and the new climate of demobilization led them to wither although not to disappear completely. Some of their leaders even decided to align themselves with the new regime¹².

The officially recognized Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF), whose leaders have been aligned with the government of the day since the federation's inception in 1957, had no trouble falling in step with the al-Sisi regime. Although during 2014 and 2015 workers staged hundreds of strikes and protests, the federation itself did not authorize any of them. Instead it cooperated with the government in drafting a new labor law, even more restrictive than the 2003 it will replace when enacted.

Government efforts to curb labor protest increased noticeably in April and May 2015, without complaints from ETUF and in some cases with its full cooperation. Shortly before Labor Day 2015 (1 May), the federation issued a new "code of conduct" for Egyptian workers, calling for "no strikes, more production and

¹¹ *Labor protests in Egypt*, Brief report Q3 2014 with additional comparison with Q1 & Q2, El-Mahrousa Center for Socioeconomic Development.

¹² J. Charbel, "Whatever Happened to Egypt's Independent Unions?", *Mada Masr*, 15 May 2015, <http://www.madamasr.com/sections/politics/whatever-happened-egypts-independent-unions>.

work” and stating that “workers’ interests are achieved only through stability and social peace”¹³. The code of conduct was dedicated to President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who relentlessly called on Egyptians to work hard and sacrifice.

A day after the announcement of the new code of conduct, the High Administrative Court dealt another blow to labor activity by ruling that employees guilty of striking and “delaying the interests of the public” should be forced into retirement, even arguing that striking was against the teachings of Islam and the purpose of sharia law. Again, there was no protest from the union, although the ruling violated the 2014 constitution, which guarantees the right to strike. Union leaders were rewarded for their support of the regime on 23 May by a new decree that extended their terms – despite the fact that the constitution declares labor unions are independent of the government.

Appropriating religion

Al-Sisi’s battle for control and for the elimination of autonomous centers of power and institution independent of the state has inevitably extended to the realm of religion. The Egyptian state has formally regulated the religious establishment, controlling most mosques and paying the imams that lead the prayers and preach sermons, since 1961. Al-Sisi is trying to go beyond, trying to control not only the institutions but also religious interpretations.

The system of state control over the religious establishment had become somewhat lax at the end of the Mubarak presidency. Independent mosques and preachers had proliferated as a result – about half the mosques were independent of the state, many of them street mosques operating in public spaces during Friday

¹³ “Egypt Trade Union Federation calls for stability”, *Ahram Online*, 27 April 2015, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/128756/Egypt/Politics-/Egypt-Trade-Union-Federation-calls-for-stability.aspx>.

prayer. The uprising and the period of turmoil that followed had further shaken monolithic state control over religion.

Even the venerable, authoritative al-Azhar, the one-thousand-year-old institution that is part university (including modern faculties) and part center of Islamic scholarship was influenced by the general turmoil, with growing debates inside the university not only about doctrine – the faculty included Muslim Brothers and Salafis alongside mainstream clerics – but also about the university's role and its relation with government authority¹⁴.

Al-Sisi sought to re-establish order in the religious sphere as in all others, bringing it firmly back into the hands of the state. Preachers suspected of being Muslim Brotherhood sympathizers were quickly removed and most independent mosques closed. In September 2013, the Ministry of Religious Endowments decreed that only imams affiliated with al-Azhar could preach in the mosques, effectively banning some 50,000 preachers. In January 2014 a new decree ordered all imams to focus their sermons on the theme the Ministry of Religious Endowments assigned for that particular week.

A year later, the regime tightened its control even further. In February, the Ministry of Religious Endowments ordered that all mosques measuring less than 80 square meters should only operate as prayer rooms, with no sermons or collection of alms – a blow to independent mosques that are usually small. In March, the Ministry of Religious Endowments ordered that all remaining independent mosques (some 10,000 out of the 130,000 mosques in the country), be quickly brought under the Ministry's control. In the following weeks, new regulations were issued concerning the licensing of women preachers and the forced retirement of dissident preachers. The Ministry also decided to place all Islamic cultural institutes and preacher training centers under its direct control. In June, it ordered the removal of books, cassettes and CD's that preached radicalism from all mosque libraries (including the books of Muslim Brotherhood founder Hassan al-

¹⁴ N.J. Brown, *Post- Revolutionary Al-Azhar*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 2011, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/al_azhar.pdf.

Banna). It also ordered the immediate removal of all unlicensed preachers that still defied the earlier ban.

It was not the first time in Egyptian history that the government has sought to impose its control over religion – this seems to be a cyclical event. But al-Sisi sought to impose not only political control, but an interpretation of religion.

In a televised interview on 5 May 2014, al-Sisi declared that “religious discourse in the entire Islamic world has cost Islam its humanity. This requires us, and for that matter all leaders, to review their positions... we have frozen this [religious discourse]. It has been hundreds of years”¹⁵.

Then, in a speech at al-Azhar University on 1 January 2015, he threw the gauntlet to religious authorities: “I am addressing the religious clerics. We have to think hard about what we are facing... It is unconceivable that the thinking we hold most sacred should cause the entire *Umma* to be a source of anxiety, danger, killing and destruction for the rest of the world. Impossible! ... All this I am telling you, you cannot feel if you remain trapped within your mindset. You need to step outside of yourselves to be able to observe it and reflect on it from a more enlightened perspective... We are in need of a religious revolution... You, Imams, are responsible before Allah”¹⁶.

There are few indications of what a religious revolution means for al-Sisi beyond the rejection of violence and Jihad. Current efforts to revise history textbooks, eliminating references to wars and violence, confirm this aspect of his thinking. But there are also indications that the revolution will not be driven by openness and debate. On 17 April, reacting to a very public discussion on Islam triggered by a controversial television show, al-Sisi made it clear that the religious revolution he called for was to be carried out exclusively by “enlightened, respected scholars”, causing the

¹⁵ T. Perry, “Egypt’s Sisi turns Islam on the Islamists”, *Reuters*, 9 May 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/05/09/us-egypt-sisi-religion-idUSBREA480G820140509>.

¹⁶ R. Ibrahim, “Egypt’s Sisi: Islamic ‘Thinking’ Is ‘Antagonizing the Entire World’”, *Middle East Forum*, 1 January 2015, <http://www.meforum.org/4951/egypt-sisi-islamic-thinking-is-antagonizing>.

station that aired the show to pull it off the air. And the revolution in Islamic thinking will not promote social tolerance: the last few months have seen a clear attempt to impose on the society discipline and conformity not only on political issues but also on social ones. Citizens are penalized harshly for protesting, for 'insulting' government institutions, the military, or the reputation of Egypt. Dissenting ideas on any topics are frowned upon. And the government appears to be making particular efforts to unmask and entrap homosexuals. This is not the climate from which a tolerant interpretation of religion is likely to emerge. Al-Sisi's religious revolution is more likely to stress the relations between an individual and the state than between an individual and God.

Al-Sisi's call for a religious revolution could benefit al-Azhar, enhancing its role. Under Mubarak, for example, religious authorities gained much influence while backing the regime with fatwas that defended the legitimacy of its decisions¹⁷. But when Mubarak's predecessor, Anwar al-Sadat, sought to use Islam to combat Nasser's supporters and the continuing popularity of his political ideas he turned to the Muslim Brothers, not to al-Azhar. Al-Sisi is now relying on al-Azhar, but on his own terms. It is too early to tell at this point whether this will turn into a mutually beneficial relation between al-Azhar and the state or to a confrontation.

A totalitarian vision

President al-Sisi has a vision for Egypt, as he has repeated many times. In his speeches he downplays his personal ambition and stresses instead his commitment to saving and rebuilding Egypt. Statements about his lack of personal ambition should obviously not be taken at face value. His vision for Egypt should, because it guides his policies. And that vision is a totalitarian one, in which

¹⁷ B. Kodmani, "The Danger of Political Exclusion: Egypt's Islamist Problem," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 13 October 2005.

the state reigns supreme and the interests of individuals are subordinated to those of the state.

This does not mean that al-Sisi will be able to develop a truly totalitarian system – Egypt is too disorganized, its institutions too inefficient and its population, while not necessarily defiant, too undisciplined, for the vision to be implemented. While the regime has made it clear that the state (and its military) should control all aspects of life – politics, the economy, religion, culture, even private space – in the end it will probably only demonstrate the repressive capacity to stay in power but not the ability to create a new, all-encompassing system.

Even if the totalitarian vision will ultimately fail, it is already affecting Egypt deeply, precluding pragmatism and compromise in government policies. Al-Sisi is taking on all independent organizations at the same time. He views all Islamist groups as hard core terrorists, and does not even trust al-Azhar clerics to provide the right interpretation of Islam without his guidance. All organized groups are threats: the Muslim Brotherhood, which has a following and remains a real adversary in an open political system, but also youth groups whose power has never gone beyond bringing people out in the streets, and even that in declining numbers. Mubarak was willing for decades to allow Muslim Brothers to participate in politics within limits, confident that he would retain ultimate control, but al-Sisi is even unwilling to allow political space to tame, weak secular political parties because they might interfere with his vision of the centrality of the state.

Egypt no longer represents simply another example of authoritarianism regime, but it embodies a philosophy of the state that precludes pragmatism and gradual reform. One way or other, violently or peacefully, the door of reform will reopen in Egypt, as it eventually happens everywhere. But it is not the present regime that will reopen that door.

2. What People Want: Egypt's Domestic Challenges

Andrea Teti

When tanks and armoured personnel carriers rolled into the streets across Cairo, Alexandria and other major Egyptian cities on 28 January, to everyone's surprise they simply remained there, without taking sides in clashes between protesters and forces mustered by the Ministry of Interior. Positioning itself between demonstrators and the regime in this way symbolically captured the armed forces' attempt to use the uprising to renegotiate their position within the regime itself, in which the balance of power under Mubarak had slowly drifted towards the Ministry of Interior, and latterly towards Gamal Mubarak's 'business-friendly' élites. In part, the new executive announced on 30 January reflected this renegotiation, with army Field Marshal Muhammad Tantawi – who was also confirmed as Minister of Military Production, the head of the army's vast economic empire – appointed Deputy Prime Minister under Air Force General Ahmad Shafiq. Today, while this process of renegotiation and regime reconfiguration continues, Egypt's hallmark has become an extraordinary state of *de facto* direct military rule: parliament has been dissolved, a military figure elected with nearly 100 per cent of the turnout rules by fiat, and while the military expands its economic empire and attempts to secure its rule politically, there are no prospects in sight for elections, let alone for cornerstones of any transition towards democracy such as security sector reform. Sisi's attempted plebiscite in presidential elections – 96 per cent of the vote, but turnout unlikely to have exceeded 10 per cent –

reveals just how shaky the grip of Egypt's new rulers could be¹. The country is profoundly polarised and in deep economic difficulty, and although it has the significant support of social classes close to the old regime and of those who see the Brotherhood as an existential threat, the army-centred regime faces constant protest on several political fronts. The regime's inability to produce concrete answers beyond propaganda and security crackdowns is the result of a direct conflict between its economic and political interests and the country's². Alongside Egypt's position as a crucible of regional and international forces in the wake of the Arab uprisings, this combination of factors helps explain the tumultuous relationship with internal opposition groups.

Islamist Movements

In the days before the 25 January uprising, and indeed until the eve of what were going to be massive demonstrations on 28 Friday, all religious leaderships – the Azhar, the Brotherhood, Salafis, and the Coptic Church – decided to boycott demonstrations, ordering their followers to refrain from protesting. The Brotherhood even entered into cautious negotiations with Mubarak's wobbling regime. This fracture between institutional leaderships and 'revolutionary' groups traced a dividing line the effects of which are tangible still today: while civil society groups and labour movements would eventually split over whether or not to support the new military regime against Morsi's Brotherhood, their opposition to the Brotherhood itself is far clearer. This split arguably undermined the possibility of a broad 'revolutionary alliance' which might challenge military – or military-directed – rule.

¹ G. Gervasio, A. Teti, *Civic Activism and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution*, in G. Gervasio, L. Anceschi, and A. Teti (Eds), *Informal Geographies of Power in the Middle East*, London, Routledge, 2014, pp. 55-70.

² G. Gervasio, A. Teti, "The unbearable lightness of authoritarianism: lessons from the Arab uprisings", *Mediterranean Politics*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2011, pp. 321-327.

Muslim Brotherhood

Those who bring about revolutions rarely manage to seize power, and Egypt's 'revolutionaries' were no exception: the Brotherhood's wealth, its breadth and depth of its 'reach' nationwide compared to secular movements made it a virtual certainty that it would be the strongest political force in any post-uprising democratic political landscape. Unlike in Tunisia, the armed forces attempted for months to stall a democratic transition process, and were only forced to accede to elections after the increasing protests against military rule throughout the summer and autumn of 2011. While the Brotherhood ran in elections for the lower house of parliament – in which they won a near-majority – they initially committed to not running in presidential elections, not least in order to assuage fears both amongst secularists and in the military. Debates inside the Brotherhood concerning its political direction after the January 2011 uprising eventually lead to some more progressively-oriented members leaving or being expelled, prime among these Abdel Moneim Abul Futouh, who had gained a reputation for sympathy towards 'revolutionary' demands, having been involved from very early on in the anti-Mubarak protests against initial dictates from Brotherhood leaders. Partly because Abul Futouh's candidacy for the presidency was perceived as a threat, the Brotherhood decided to run, presenting first Khairat al-Shater, widely believed to be the power behind the throne of the Brotherhood, and then, when a previous conviction for fraud under Mubarak barred him from running, Mohammed Morsi. Morsi eventually won the elections by a very narrow margin against the very same Ahmad Shafiq Mubarak had appointed as his last Prime Minister, but the first round of the elections revealed just how fragmented Egypt's political landscape was at that point: Morsi (24.78%) won by a small margin against Shafiq (23.66%) both very narrowly beating the nationalist and social-democrat candidacy of Hamdeen Sabbahi (20.72%) and progressive Islamist Abul Futouh (17.47%). Fraught debates followed both within secularist 'revolutionaries' and amongst Islamists about which of the two winning candidates to support –

Morsi as an Islamist or as guarantee of some kind of post-Mubarak change, or Shafiq as the anti-Islamist who, however, epitomised continuity with the Mubarak era – but Morsi narrowly won (51.73 per cent against Shafiq’s 48.27 per cent). This double electoral victory, however precarious its presidency, may have given the Brotherhood a false sense of security.

What the Brotherhood’s strategy in power was still remains partly shrouded in mystery. While in power, it certainly sought to distance itself from other opposition groups, particularly so-called ‘revolutionaries’, appearing to pursue an agenda very similar to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) military government of 2011-2012 by cracking down on public demonstrations, attempting to limit the independence of ‘activist NGOs’, and doing so deploying a rhetoric of emergency, national unity, the risk of ‘chaos’, and the economic risks of opposition dissent. On the other hand, Morsi famously sidelined Muhammad Tantawi and his *dauphin*, Sami Enan, in what was presented as an attempt to bring the military under (their) civilian control.

The Brotherhood’s period in power was marked by increasing internal dissent. Instead of attempting to form broad alliances, the Brotherhood and Salafis ran roughshod over oppositions’ concerns in Parliament, and then again in the 100-strong committee tasked with re-writing the Constitution. Their willingness to focus on ‘Islamic’ issues and to make concessions to the military – e.g. in writing lack of civilian oversight over military budgets into the Constitution, or in continuing military trials of civilian protesters – worsened the divide between ‘revolutionaries’ and Islamists. Morsi’s willingness to push through the new constitution by granting himself exceptional – if temporary – powers further broadened the divide between Islamists and secularists. This vicious circle of majoritarian attitudes by Islamists in parliament and increasing protests by opposition groups escalated from November 2012 until it gave birth to the so-called Tamarrod (rebel) movement in June 2013. Tamarrod organised a nation-wide petition asking that Morsi be removed, and declared a national protest on 30 June 2013. With substantial support from across the

country, the demonstrations provided the armed forces with the opportunity to remove Morsi and replace him with Ahmed Mansour, chair of the constitutional court.

After Morsi's removal, the Muslim Brotherhood has undoubtedly borne the brunt of the post-uprising crackdown, not least because – despite the unprecedented wave of arrests since President Mohammed Morsi's removal which has seen roughly 40,000 politically-motivated arrests – it remains the largest and best-organised force in Egyptian politics aside from regime groups such as the army. But while the military has been the blunt instrument of the Brotherhood's repression, this is the result of its isolation at both a domestic and a regional level: internally, it alienated other opposition groups as has been described, but internationally it failed to secure the support of key regional actors, with support from Western governments lukewarm at best, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) set against both Brotherhood rule – let alone a transition to democracy –, and tentative support from Turkey and Qatar ending up damaging the Brotherhood by placing it at the centre of a regional struggle for influence.

Salafists

Before the 2011 uprising, salafists had espoused a quietist stance in relation to Egyptian politics, eschewing direct political engagement. The Tunisian revolution first but particularly the sheer size of protests in Egypt led to an internal debate about the possibility of engaging in Egyptian politics which eventually resulted in the establishment of a salafist alliance in the Nour (Light) Party. The extent of the salafists' electoral success in 2012 was the surprise of the only post-uprisings parliamentary polls thus far. At close to 27 per cent, they were by far the largest parliamentary block after the Brotherhood. Notoriously, salafist and Brotherhood MPs engaged in long parliamentary debates on religious issues and ran roughshod over oppositions both in that venue and in the committee tasked with drafting the constitution eventually pushed through parliament and approved in a popular

referendum in December 2012 (by 63.38%). It ought to be noted that salafists as much as the Brotherhood, while content to bring religious issues and rhetoric front and centre of political rhetoric, nonetheless had little trouble accepting the *de facto* compromise with the armed forces represented by the 2012 constitutions formal protection of the armed forces' privileges, as enshrined particularly in the constitutionally-mandated inscrutability of military budgets by civilian governments.

Since the crackdown on the Brotherhood, the Salafis have remained largely outside of the political fray and partly also due to the regime's tenacious repression of manifestations of religion in public life, few have moved to defend the Brotherhood. As within the Brotherhood, the debate within the Salafi Da'wa has also been intense – including about whether salafists should engage in politics at all – and while there is no evidence that support for Salafi movements has receded, the electoral alliance appears to have fragmented. For Salafis, aside from ideological reservations about engaging in politics *tout court*, there is also the question of whether such engagement would not lead to a similar impasse as marks the Brotherhood's position: the broad possibility of 'Islamising from below' at the price of systematic exclusion and persecution at any kind of political level. In the longer term, the real challenge for salafists will be precisely whether they will accept to become part of an updated version of the pre-2011 *modus vivendi* between 'deep state' and Brotherhood, in which social influence and a certain degree of economic access was granted to the Brotherhood in return for political quietism. While in the short term the military and other components of the Egyptian regime are unwilling to formally recognise the need for such an arrangement, their unwillingness to consider more equitable and inclusive economic policies means they will be forced, sooner or later, to rely on forces such as these to provide the basic welfare and educational services they are unwilling to concede the general population.

Civil Society

Second to the Muslim Brotherhood simply due to the sheer number of arrests of Brotherhood members, civil society activists have been no less intensely hit by repression. Indeed, given their less extensive support base and smaller size, it could be said that activist opposition groups have been proportionally harder hit, and no less violently than the Brotherhood. Under SCAF (Supreme Council of the Armed Forces) military rule there was an initial period of opening in which some amongst the more established activist groups were even invited to policy discussions, but over the summer and autumn of 2011 that space quickly and decisively closed. Since then, activists have been repressed to various degrees under military rule first, then during the Muslim Brotherhood's tenure in power, and even more intensely under post-Morsi *de facto* direct military rule. Today, they are isolated from other political forces, including a notable part of the labour movement, both official and independent.

The reasons for this crackdown are multiple: partly, the January uprising certainly galvanized activists, but more importantly it provided a spectacular reminder on the one hand of the appeal and reach which their message – built around democracy, accountability, economic and social justice – could have, and on the other therefore also a reminder of the fragility of the consensus the regime could count on, and just how quickly and easily it could be undermined.

The challenges facing activist civil society groups today are in many ways similar to those they faced before the uprising. First of all, these groups are for the most part urban-based groups with little nationwide reach (and rural-based groups have, conversely, little reach in urban areas). Secondly, they mostly focus on a narrow range of issues and are therefore only partly able to fulfil the function of broader interest aggregation. Thirdly, although some groups in particular have been making efforts to broaden participation and internal democracy in order to counter the perception that activists are – albeit well-meaning – drawn from a narrow élite of Egypt's middle and upper classes. Fourthly, all

such groups do not have an independent financial base. This undermines their ability to build a national network, let alone mobilise their members and supporters politically. It also makes them vulnerable to regime pressure of various kinds, not just on individual activists, but also to confiscation of assets, freezing bank accounts, and of course changing legislation to make it easier to outlaw either these organisations' activities or the manner in which they are pursued. The Brotherhood was (in)famously labelled a terrorist organisation by the Sisi regime, but that accusation has also – and equally absurdly – been levelled at activists. One of the most notorious amongst such instruments is stigmatizing these groups for receiving 'foreign funding': despite the glaring contradiction between the regime accusing civic activists of receiving such funding and the infinitely larger flow of money entering the regime's own coffers – the state and army notoriously receive roughly US\$ 3bn a year from the US alone, and similar amounts have flown in from the Gulf since 2011 – this accusation has been plastered across government-controlled media and its sympathetic private sector counterparts, putting activists on the back foot in the public eye. In reality, external funding of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Egypt is vanishingly small compared to the funding salafists or the Brotherhood can draw on, and the latter is in turn minuscule compared to the foreign funding the state can draw on in the shape of 'capacity-building' agreements with Western states in areas such as the judicial sector or public administration. Even such funding as does reach Egyptian CSOs needs to be placed in context, with significant portions of it going to regime-friendly organisations and many of the more progressive groups not applying for Western funding at all for political reasons (e.g. these governments' support for authoritarian regimes or their position on Palestine). Indeed, for all its use as xenophobic leverage by regime élites, the 'foreign funding' debate touches upon genuine issues, and has actually been going on in Egyptian civil society for a long time before the 2011 Egyptian uprising, revolving around the question of whether it is at all justifiable to draw on funds from foreign states,

particularly Western governments or organisations close to them. In addition, there is a keen sensitivity particularly among more progressive groups about the risks of being sucked into the 'democracy industry' and losing their focus on organisation and change in society to grant-writing and reporting, or are simply unwilling to take money from governments who are also prepared to support authoritarian regimes, or who are unwilling to challenge the status quo in the Palestinian/Israeli question. In any case, these groups receive precious little support from outside Egypt, leaving the democratic opposition overall thoroughly isolated at an international level.

While regime leverage on activist groups cannot be underestimated, it is also important to remember that they face significant challenges to the task of building a significant, unitary coalition. There have always been several lines of fracture running through the activist civil society sphere: setting aside the split between independent CSOs and government-affiliated or *façade* organisations, there have been ongoing debates internally to these groups concerning such matters as whether to work with their counterparts amongst co-opted and government-affiliated CSOs or indeed government itself (e.g. within women's rights organisation in relation to the Suzanne Mubarak foundation) or indeed with Islamist charities more or less closely linked to the Brotherhood and the Salafi Da'wa.

Just how important the *vexata quaestio* of relations with the Brotherhood in particular can be became apparent during the arc of the Brotherhood's ascent and then fall from power. During parliamentary elections of 2012 various 'secular' groups debated whether or not to enter into electoral alliances with the Brotherhood or the Salafis in order to maximise their parliamentary presence. Then, during the second round of presidential elections activists were faced with a choice between the Brotherhood representative and a stalwart of the old regime whose principal credential was that he was anti-Brotherhood. Having to choose the 'least-worst' between two forces inimical if not outright opposed to activist CSOs generated an often heated

debate and sometimes acrimonious split between those ‘revolutionaries’ who preferred to give the Brotherhood the benefit of the doubt or wanted any kind of change to a return to Mubarak, and those for whom the Brotherhood represented the worst of all possible outcomes, to which even Mubarak’s former ally was preferable. Then, under the Brotherhood’s rule in 2013, most activist groups came under precisely the kind of pressure the more optimistic amongst them had hoped to avoid. This strategic choice by the Brotherhood seems to have been motivated by an attempt to reach a settlement with the remnants of the Mubarak regime, but had the effect of further isolating the Brotherhood from potential allies. In particular, it contributed to a groundswell of anti-Brotherhood sentiment which culminated in the Tamarrod (rebel) movement, which allowed the military to simultaneously dethrone Morsi and ride a wave of popular support which made most people forget the chants against military rule as recently as 2011-12.

These are all limitations that the largest and most influential organisations were well aware of even before the uprising, but the political isolation from Egyptian public opinion as well as the physical, legal, and financial crackdown activists have been subjected to after Morsi’s dethronement have been unprecedented. Activists have been subjected to harassment by both the army and the Ministry of Interior. The government’s own figures set the number of arrests between the 2013 regime change and March 2015 at 16,000 people have been arrested and remain in detention. By comparison, the worst crackdowns against Brotherhood activists under the Mubarak period would be around 10,000. Local rights organisations, however, believe the number is closer to 40,000. In this context, the number of protesters and activists subjected to military trials has soared, as the regime sought not only to demobilise activists, but to use spectacular means to do so. In addition, the government has given itself a number of legal instruments to ‘legally’ curb any opposition, including legislation restricting the activity of NGOs and perhaps most notoriously restricting the right to protest and the stigmatization as ‘terrorist’

groups of several opposition groups, including the now-outlawed April 6 Movement. Activists are often charged with belonging to a banned group, calling for a general strike, or other similarly trumped-up charges; trials are equally often farcical. Death sentences have been handed down increasingly frequently, even in mass trials, and although these are often stayed, reversed or pardoned, the political signal they are intended to send is absolutely unambiguous.

In addition, the regime has used a variety of extra-legal tactics, including harassment of Western journalists and a series of assaults by police against lawyers, academics, and students and even more worryingly forced disappearances and even killing squads targeting activist leaders not already in jail for calling for a protest against the deterioration of socio-economic and political conditions over the past two years. These new trends in extra-legal repression are epitomised by the case of Islam Atito, an engineering student who was abducted from his classroom while taking an exam at Ain Shams University and was found dead the day after. Human Rights Monitor has registered 44 cases of enforced disappearances until May 2015, with 31 taking place in May alone. The National Council for Human Rights (NCHR) has also uncovered evidence of such abductees facing prosecution secretly. As a result, larger civil society groups which have the option to do so have either relocated part of their activities abroad, or been pushed to leave Egypt entirely. In December 2014, for example, after 20 years, the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS) announced that they will be moving most activities to Tunisia. Western groups have been far from exempt from such pressure, and while it is true that they have routinely been harassed at crucial political junctures such as elections, since 2011 the pressure has increased enormously, with systematic attempts to design the law – or twist it – so as to undermine these groups' work or even their presence in the country. The Egyptian Foreign Ministry, for example, has accused Human Rights Watch of supporting 'terrorism', "spreading lies to cause instability", and

of “clearly targeting the Egyptian people and their will to achieve their aspirations”.

While this box of tricks is certainly not unfamiliar to Egyptian activists, particularly during elections, the intensity with which they have been used, the way in which any dissent is treated as treason is stamped on, has few precedents in recent history.

Labour Movements

The workers’ movement proved a significant although underestimated force in the overall process of mobilisation in Egypt throughout the 2000s³. Labour activism certainly increased throughout the first decade of the century in the wake of economic ‘reforms’ which privatized state assets, reduced labour protection, and undermined unionization. These reforms, which were justified by both the regime and its Western allies as ideal tools not just for macroeconomic growth but for more equitable development, notoriously produced the former but not the latter. In fact, these changes – which effectively saw the transfer of state assets into private hands but not market liberalisation which was in the words of reformers the herald of political liberalisation and eventual democratization – polarised the distribution of income and wealth, effectively pushing the lower middle classes towards impoverishment. Unsurprisingly, therefore, these ‘reforms’ and their perverse effects produced more generalised convergence of agendas and interests in workers’ movements and parts of the middle classes, which was partly responsible for short-lived but politically significant experiences of organisational convergence such as the Kifaya! (enough!) movement, Shayfeenkum (we see you), and the April 6 Movement. The latter was formed in solidarity precisely with strikes called by independent workers’ organisations in Mahalla, an industrial centre in the Nile Delta region, on 6 April 2008. This strike, which took place two days before important local elections, epitomised the informal

³ G. Gervasio, A. Teti (2014).

cooperation between workers movements and some members of the Brotherhood, but also the inability of the regime to respond to socio-economic and political demands with anything but repression, and the effect this might have in mobilising opposition to the regime itself. All these movements are notable for the fact that they drew together liberal, leftist and worker organisations and individuals, and including some Islamists, in what was effectively an experiment in identifying a unified agenda in opposition to the regime and a *modus vivendi* amongst ideologically different forces: although sometimes short-lived, these experiences provided a bedrock upon which collaboration could be explored – if not always sustained – both during and after the January 2011 uprising.

In the events of the January 2011 uprising itself, however, while individual workers were certainly present from the very beginning, their representative organisations were slower to react. The pro-government Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF) predictably towed the regime line, just like religious institutions. However, while independent trade unions did conduct unity talks which culminated in the establishment on 31 January 2011, of the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU) which brought together a range of different workers' groups, spearheaded by the two largest and best-known groups, Kamal Abu Eita's Real Estate Tax Assessors (RETA) and Kamal Abbas' Centre for Trade Union Workers' Services (CTUWS). Unlike their religious counterparts, they did not officially oppose the protests from the start; however, independent workers' groups were nonetheless slow to join the fray officially, calling for a general strike only on 9 February, barely two days before Mubarak's fall from grace. While on the one hand the call for a general strike certainly helped to pile pressure onto the Mubarak regime, on the other hand it did come sixteen days into the eighteen-day protest. Finally, it has to be noted that once organisational unity was achieved and action officially called for, such unity did not last long. The new independent federation grew very rapidly since its establishment with hundreds and soon thousands of smaller unions being

established across the country, but soon fissures the two principal founding organisations fell out, with CTUWS withdrawing from EFITU. The differences were on the surface related to ‘foreign funding’, but also to basic strategic objectives for the labour movement, with RETA favouring focusing unionisation drives on the still large public sector, while the minority CTUWS-led current aimed to extend unionisation into the private sector and into Special Economic Zones, where workers have even fewer rights. In July 2013, barely ten days after the coup against Mohammed Morsi, Abu Eita accepted a position as Minister of Manpower in the government of Hazem al-Beblawi, which to many signified his willingness of at least part of the workers’ movement to be co-opted by the military-backed regime. The political differences between workers’ organisations also became apparent at various points in post-2011 history, such as during the run-up to the second round of the 2012 Presidential elections, or during the Tamarrod movement, the eventual coup against Mohammed Morsi, and during the crackdown against Islamists and pro-democracy opposition activists.

In a way, the ‘eighteen days’ of the January uprising epitomise the strengths and weaknesses of the independent labour movement: on the one hand the ability to organise often effective opposition against the regime, including forcibly resisting security forces, and the limits of both ‘neoliberal’ reforms and authoritarian regime power, but on the other hand the internal divisions (political, geographical, sectoral, etc.), and the difficulties in going beyond pay and conditions-based actions to full politicisation.

Finally, it should be noted that while civil society activists, workers’ groups, and religious groups were the most politically prominent during and after the uprising, other groups were crucial to its mass nature and political success: football ultras with experience fighting the security forces and teenagers from so-called informal neighbourhoods with nothing to lose provided fighting force and experience to back up those of workers and Islamists – civil society groups had little such skill – made the

organisation of a viable counter to police forces possible, and the participation of ordinary people en masse provided the sheer size that overwhelmed Interior Ministry forces.

Conclusion

It would be a mistake to equate the current fragmentation of the formal opposition and the regime's intense repression of dissent with a secure, hegemonic position in society. Not only is the al-Sisi regime still in the process of settling what its internal equilibria might be, but the consensus supporting the regime is far from being complete, unconditional, or irreversible. As has been said of Mubarak before the January 2011 uprising, the military and its (current) allies may be fierce, but depending on if and how the regime will deliver on people's expectation of a better future, this ferocity may be a sign of weakness or in the longer term even fragility, rather than strength⁴. After all, Mubarak's own regime produced what appeared to be a stunning electoral victory for the ruling party just weeks before the January uprising.

The January uprising's two best-known slogans epitomise the challenges facing the regime: *ash-sha'b yurid isqaat an-nizaam* (the people want the downfall of the regime) signified a rejection of the parasitic corruption and abuse of power which permeates ordinary life; *'aish, horreya, adala igtema'eya* (bread, freedom, social justice) indicates the demand for a more inclusive social, economic and political system to replace the oligarchic, authoritarian kleptocracy which has ruled Egypt. Sisi's regime has, to date, provided no substantive response to this challenge beyond xenophobic rhetoric, promises of mega-projects, and brutal repression. The regime's problem is that it is difficult to see how the interests of most of its components can accommodate popular expectations for growth, justice, and inclusion.

⁴ A. Teti, V. Matthies-Boon, G. Gervasio, "Sisiphus", *Middle East Research and Information Project*, 2014.

The opposition, for its part, faces much the same kinds of challenges it did before 2011: major Islamist groups aside, opposition groups have neither a national reach nor a solid independent base of funds or influence, and have failed to bring about nationwide mobilisation both before and since the January uprising. Whether the events of 2011 will end up being a memory which citizens and activists in future years will draw upon as a source of strength to contest the regime's failing or whether the ghost of division and defeat will haunt the opposition will depend much on the extent to which conservative and reactionary tendencies within opposition groups win out against economically, politically and religiously progressive forces capable of uniting in order to exploit regime fissures.

3. Adding the Security Ingredient: The Jihadi Threat in the Sinai Peninsula

Zack Gold

Egyptian security and counterterrorism are perhaps the most important factors in current and future European-Egyptian relations. Egypt today faces a number of internal security challenges that impact its stability – the maintenance of which is important to Europe both indirectly and directly.

Two years ago the Egyptian system rejected the presidency of Mohammed Morsi and what was viewed as rule by his Muslim Brotherhood movement. Following mass protests, the Egyptian armed forces – led by Defense Minister Abdel Fattah al-Sisi – removed Morsi from office on 3 July 2013.

Political violence occurred during Morsi's year in office – as did terrorism in North Sinai – but the extent of such attacks increased exponentially following Morsi's ouster. Two follow-on events from that summer also drove a rise in terrorism: the resumption of military operations in North Sinai at the end of July; and the 14 August breakup of Brotherhood-led sit-ins in Cairo.

The military's moves in the Sinai Peninsula followed a call from al-Sisi for public support against "terrorism and violence", primarily seen as a war on the Brotherhood and political Islam¹. In North Sinai, a back and forth of militant attacks and military strikes has continued since. Making matters worse, in November 2014 Sinai's most lethal jihadi organization – Ansar Bayt al-

¹ "Defense Minister al-Sisi calls on citizens to rally against 'terrorism'", *Abram Online*, 24 July 2013, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/77235.aspx>.

Maqdis (ABM) – pledged allegiance to the Syria-based Islamic State group.

In what is known as ‘mainland’ Egypt – west of the Suez Canal – terrorism has increased as well. In the summer of 2013, a number of supporters and sympathizers of the Brotherhood attacked security forces and the interests of Coptic Christians, who were viewed as collaborators in Morsi’s ouster. From the end of 2013 into 2014 there were also a number of mainland attacks by cells affiliated with Sinai-based jihadis.

Throughout 2014 to today there has been a negative development of mainland-based groups carrying out attacks around the nation: especially in and around Cairo. Unlike in Sinai, most of these terror attacks are not carried out by jihadis. Instead, there has been a rise in what could be called ‘revolutionary’ terrorist attacks – or, in some cases, anarchist attacks – targeting security forces and drivers of Egypt’s economy such as businesses and electricity infrastructure.

This chapter explores Egypt’s security challenges, specifically in the Sinai Peninsula. It begins with background on Sinai’s longstanding security problems and local grievances as well as a deeper discussion of terrorism in North Sinai from the removal of President Hosni Mubarak in 2011 until July 2013. The chapter then looks at the expansion of terrorism across Egypt following Morsi’s ouster, including the emergence of an Islamic State affiliate. Following an assessment of Egyptian military operations in North Sinai, the chapter concludes by laying out issues of common concern between Egypt and Europe: counterterrorism, maritime security, and Libyan stability.

Background

A decade-long insurgency

Various developments since the 2011 Egyptian uprising – all of which will be discussed below – have exacerbated problems in Sinai. However, understanding the current situation in the Sinai

Peninsula requires consideration of longstanding issues. Neither jihadi violence nor grievances against the state began with the fall of long-time Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

From 2004 to 2006 jihadis carried out attacks in the South Sinai tourist resort cities of Taba, Sharm el-Sheikh, and Dahab. These operations all took place over Egyptian national holiday weekends: simultaneously attacking Egypt's tourist economy and the secular nature of the state. The direct targets are different today, but goal is the same. Sinai-based jihadis seek to weaken the Egyptian state.

The attacks in the 2000s backfired, costing jihadis any sympathy from a tourist-dependent population: a lesson they should have learned from terrorist efforts in the 1990s. Greater than the popular backlash, however, was the reaction from the Egyptian police and security forces, which responded to the South Sinai attacks by hunting down the suspected perpetrators in North Sinai. With a broad definition of 'suspects', few families in North Sinai were untouched by arrests, harassment, and sentencing *in absentia*².

This heavy-handedness worked in the immediate term: by January 2011 North Sinai was quiet. However, it created long-term grievances against the state – and especially against the Ministry of Interior. Though quiet, the population angrily awaited a trigger to set off its vengeance. That spark was the January 2011 Egyptian uprising.

January 2011-June 2013

The uprising in January 2011 created a security vacuum throughout Egypt that the country is still trying to fill. Nowhere was this truer than in North Sinai. When the hated police forces melted away, well-armed Bedouin took revenge by sacking police infrastructure throughout the governorate³. Also during the

² N. Pelham, *Sinai: The Buffer Erodes*, Chatham House, September 2012. <http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/public/Research/Middle%20East/pr0912pelham.pdf>.

³“Sabry on Sinai”, *CairoScene*, 18 September 2013,

uprising, thousands of criminals fled prisons in the chaos. Some of the hardened jihadis that escaped or were released traveled to North Sinai and returned to their criminal ways⁴.

In February 2011, while Mubarak was still in power, the first of many attacks on the Egypt-Israel gas pipeline through Sinai occurred. In the 18 months that followed, the pipeline system – which transferred Egyptian gas to Israel, Jordan, and to military-run industrial areas in Sinai – was attacked over a dozen times. These attacks, it turned out, were the signature operations of a group calling itself Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (Supports of Jerusalem)⁵.

ABM was founded and has been led by Egyptians – both Bedouin and those that sought refuge in Sinai – with connections to international and Gaza-based jihadis, including those associated with al-Qa‘ida. The group is a collection of various Sinai-based jihadi organizations, cells, and individuals that have traded on multiple names over the years of Sinai’s insurgency. For example, one of the group’s founders Tawfiq Mohamed Freij – who was killed in March 2014 – is said to have been an associate of the deceased leaders of Tawhid wal Jihad, blamed for some of the South Sinai bombings of the 2000s⁶.

The foundational targets of ABM were Israel and the Egyptian-Israeli relationship. In addition to the pipeline bombings, ABM cells shot and fired rockets across the mutual border on a handful of occasions. In the worst cross-border incident, in August 2011, a jihadi cell attacked a civilian bus north of Eilat, Israel’s southern

<http://www.cairoscene.com/ViewArticle.aspx?Aid=1645>.

⁴ T. Perry, A. Macdonald (Eds.), “INSIGHT-In Sinai, militant Islam flourishes - quietly”, *Reuters*, 1 April 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/04/01/egypt-sinai-idUSL6E8EQ66S20120401>; and interview with a source close to the Egyptian military, 16 April 2013.

⁵ *Ansar Jerusalem Releases Video of Bombing Aribh-Ashkelon Pipeline*, SITE Intelligence Group, 24 July 2012, http://ent.siteintelgroup.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=10421.

⁶ http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/03/sinai-based_ansar_je.php.

port city. Eight Israelis were killed in a lengthy, multipronged attack⁷.

In addition to ABM, other jihadi groups announced their alleged presence in Sinai during the first two years of Egypt's transition: for example the short-lived "al-Qa'ida in the Sinai Peninsula"⁸. It is unclear if these groups ever really existed or if they folded into the ABM brand.

Finally, it is important to note the growth in conservative Islam in North Sinai – influenced by Gaza's Salafis and by the emergence of *sharia* courts. Recognizing this large population is important for understanding the rise in violence following the ouster of President Mohammed Morsi. For example, estimates of Salafiya Jihadiya – an activist religious group that supports jihad under certain circumstances – put the group's ranks at more than five times the size of ABM⁹.

Morsi's ouster and its aftermath

On 3 July 2013, the Egyptian military – under the leadership of Defense Minister Abdel Fattah al-Sisi – removed Morsi from the presidency. In the lead up to the protests precipitating his ouster, the ministries of interior and defense worked to seal the Gaza border with Sinai and to cut off the peninsula from the rest of Egypt¹⁰. The rationale for these moves was concern about Hamas

⁷ "Timeline / Eight hours of terror in southern Israel", *Haaretz*, 18 August 2011, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/timeline-eight-hours-of-terror-in-southern-israel-1.379344>.

⁸ M. Fahmy, "Egypt cracks down on terror cells in Sinai; bin Laden's doctor spotted", *CNN*, 16 August 2011, <http://www.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/africa/08/16/egypt.sinai/>; "Local sources say Bin Laden's doctor trains Sinai militants, security official denies", *al Arabiya*, 25 August 2011, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/08/25/163956.html>.

⁹ S. Nasralla, "Egyptian troops kill Sinai militant leader in gunbattle-army", *Reuters*, 9 December 2013, <http://www.trust.org/item/20131209154709-nfesi/>.

¹⁰ "Egyptian Interior Ministry to close routes from Sinai to mainland for 30 June", *Ahram Online*, 18 June 2013, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/74314.aspx>; United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs occupied Palestinian territory, "Protection of Civilians Weekly Report 2-8 July 2013",

or jihadi infiltration of the ‘mainland’ in support of Morsi – or to attack his opponents.

Morsi’s ouster turned the focus of Sinai’s Jihadis away from Israel toward the Egyptian state. In July and August 2013 attacks in Sinai – as they did throughout the country – targeted local Christians and security forces¹¹.

Although its actions were viewed as supportive of the ousted President and his Muslim Brotherhood organization, ABM – like all jihadi groups – was opposed to the Brotherhood’s involvement in the political process. However, as the police cracked down on the Brotherhood and its supporters, ABM took the opportunity to promote a longstanding jihadi argument against Brotherhood-linked groups: politics gets you nowhere.

Salafiya Jihadiya also hardened its view after the removal of Egypt’s first Islamist president. Although Morsi did not govern in a terribly Islamic manner, conservative Islamist groups saw more hope for a sharia-ruled state under the Brotherhood than under a secular leadership. Additionally, during Morsi’s rule these groups had more freedom of action than they had before: Morsi encouraged reconciliation with violent groups, called for jihad in Syria, and supported Salafiya Jihadiya-led protests outside the US embassy.

At the end of July 2013, the Egyptian military initiated its first post-Morsi military operation in North Sinai, discussed below. This ‘invasion’ of the peninsula was viewed by Salafiya Jihadiya as fulfilling a condition for ‘defensive Jihad’. In August Salafiya Jihadiya released a statement calling for attacks on Egypt’s military¹². The group itself has never claimed responsibility for an attack, although many attacks do go unclaimed.

http://www.ochaopt.org/documents/ocha_opt_protection_of_civilians_weekly_report_2013_07_12_english.pdf, pp. 4-5.

¹¹ M. Sabry, “Coptic Christmas in North Sinai marred by security concerns”, *Al Monitor*, 7 January 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/01/north-sinai-christmas-marred.html>; <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/08/19/world/meast/egypt-sinai-ambush/>.

¹² http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2013/08/sinai_jihadists_thre.php.

While conservatives served as a force-multiplier for attacks in the Sinai Peninsula, ABM went on the offensive west of the Suez Canal. In September 2013 it almost assassinated Interior Minister Mohamed Ibrahim with a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device (VBIED) targeting his motorcade in Cairo.

At the same time as ABM was striking in the heart of Egypt, another jihadi organization – similarly targeting security forces – began to operate in Cairo. Ajnad Misr (Soldiers of Egypt) used rudimentary improvised explosive devices (IEDs) to target police: often low-level forces manning police posts around the capital¹³.

Ajnad Misr's lack of sophistication garnered it little attention until 24 January 2014, when ABM detonated a VBIED outside the Cairo Security Directorate. In a statement, ABM claimed responsibility for the strike and a number of others in the capital throughout that day. Later, ABM issued a correction: some of the Cairo blasts had been the work of Ajnad Misr, which the second statement referred to as “our brothers”¹⁴.

From that day, it was clear that a link existed between ABM and Ajnad Misr. However, the extent of the ties was extremely sketchy. ABM's statement proved that the groups communicated with each other; but Ajnad Misr did not appear to be ABM's “Cairo cell”: the Cairo-based group's capabilities developed from scratch as opposed to building on the Sinai-based group's expertise. The US government believes that Ajnad Misr ‘splintered’ from ABM¹⁵.

In April 2015, Ajnad Misr's leader – Hammam Mohamed Attiyah – was killed in a police raid. The Ministry of Interior said

¹³ A. McGregor, “Egypt's Domestic Security Threat: Ajnad Misr and the ‘Retribution for Life’ Campaign”, *Terrorism Monitor*, vol. 12, no. 14, The Jamestown Foundation, 2014, http://www.jamestown.org/programs/tm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=42599&cHash=bc8968687db7aace07ffa008a03d5046#.VYp1qXqqkko.

¹⁴ T. Joscelyn, “State Department designates Egyptian jihadist group, ex-Gitmo detainee”, *The long War Journal*, 18 December 2014, http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2014/12/state_department_des_3.php.

¹⁵ “Terrorist Designations of Ajand Misr and Ibrahim al-Rubaysh”, *Media Note*, Office of the Spokesman, US Department of State, 18 December 2014, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2014/12/235386.htm>.

he was an ABM member prior to starting the Cairo-based organization¹⁶. Ajnad Misr confirmed that Attiyah had fought in Sinai before founding the group.

It appears Attiyah's formation of Ajnad Misr was a spawning from ABM – not a schism. The groups are not in any public feud. Even following ABM's formal affiliation with the Islamic State group, Attiyah said of ABM, "They are our greatest friends and our brothers. We know them best and worked with them well. There are organizational differences and sometimes we are not cooperating with them, but Allah should protect them"¹⁷.

It is also clear that as ABM moved into the orbit of the Syria-based Islamic State Ajnad Misr remained in the Qaeda-leaning camp. Indeed, Attiyah was eulogized in statements by al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula and al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb.¹⁸

One commonality between Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis and Ajnad Misr is that both have made efforts to recruit disgruntled Muslim Brotherhood youth and Islamist students generally. Ajnad Misr titled its anti-police terrorism campaign "Retribution is Life": justifying its attacks as 'revenge' for various alleged wrongs committed by the police against Islamist protestors and Muslim women. Meanwhile, ABM propaganda mocked the professed peacefulness of the Brotherhood and its leadership's failure to both hold onto power and to avenge its loss.

Some Islamist youth steered toward this jihadi siren song. For example, Egyptian officials point to the involvement of the son of a local Brotherhood leader in the December 2013 ABM attack on the Dakahliya Security Directorate¹⁹. However, despite their Islamist leanings, many more youth turned toward terrorism

¹⁶ "Egypt militant group confirms chief's killing", *Abram Online*, 9 April 2015, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/127315.aspx>.

¹⁷ Youtube Video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fu2ARpByEuu>.

¹⁸ T. Joscelyn, "Al Qaeda branches eulogize slain Egyptian jihadist", *The Long War Journal*, 13 April 2015, <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2015/04/al-qaeda-branches-eulogize-slain-egyptian-jihadist.php>.

¹⁹ "Egypt links Brotherhood, Hamas to Mansoura bombing", *Anadolu Agency*, 2 January 2014, <http://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/269881--egypt-links-brotherhood-hamas-to-mansoura-bombing>.

couched in a revolutionary – and sometimes anarchist – ideology²⁰.

In mainland Egypt today, then, the Egyptian state faces security challenges from these different philosophies. Although not coordinated, jihadi, Islamist, and revolutionary terrorist groups have similar targets. By different methods, all three target Egyptian security forces. Additionally, all three types of groups target various economic drivers of the Egyptian state.

In North Sinai, however, the biggest threat continues to come from the region's jihadis.

Islamic State affiliation

On 10 November 2014, Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis formally pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, which quickly accepted the Sinai-based group's entry into its so-called 'Caliphate'. To mark the move, ABM rebranded itself as Wilayat Sinai (the State of Sinai), a 'province' of the Islamic State.

The group, though, has been slow to drastically change its *modus operandi*. As Wilayat Sinai, the group's main target – Egyptian security forces – continues to be the same as ABM maintained since mid-2013. However, what has been clear is that while ABM presented itself as a defender of the local Sinai population, Wilayat Sinai has threatened, attacked, and killed locals at an increasing rate²¹.

Unlike the Islamic State, Wilayat Sinai does not control territory; but there have long been areas of Sinai in which ABM operated with near impunity²². In the spring of 2015, Wilayat Sinai militants attempted to expand that area of operation, and in doing

²⁰ M. Awad, S. Tadros, "Allah Versus KFC", *Foreign Policy*, 27 February 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/02/27/allah-versus-kfc-egypt-arab-spring-terrorism/>.

²¹ *Egypt Security Watch*, Monthly Briefing, January 2015, <http://timep.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/ESW-JanuaryBriefing.pdf>.

²² "Terrorist Safe Havens (Update to 7120 Report)", *Country Reports on Terrorism*, US Department of State, 2014, Chapter 5 <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2014/239412.htm>.

so they pushed up against the established tribal system in those areas²³. At times, statements from Wilayat Sinai – the media office of which is run out of Islamic State-controlled areas of Syria – suggest the group is conducting state-like actions: interdicting drug smuggling or handing out aid, for example. These media campaigns are more propaganda than actual fact, but they present the group’s operations as it aspires them to be.

One state-like function Wilayat Sinai does carry out is security – for itself. On the roads between the North Sinai cities of Sheikh Zuweid and Rafah, militants regularly set up checkpoints and inspect passing cars²⁴. The group uses these blockades to capture individuals it accuses of collaborating with either the Egyptian military or Israeli intelligence against Sinai’s jihadis. In one incident, Wilayat Sinai captured an Egyptian police officer: killing him in a video warning to Egypt’s security forces²⁵.

Islamic State leaders have called on the group’s Egyptian supporters to travel to Sinai and join the Jihad there against the Egyptian army²⁶. One concern is that the more Egyptians from the Nile Valley – or even foreign fighters that have trained elsewhere – travel to Sinai the more likely Wilayat Sinai is to take orders from Syria instead of acting on local interests. Soft targets like the South Sinai resort towns and the international forces stationed in North Sinai have rarely been attacked because local interests – mostly employment opportunities for local tribes – derive from their protection. However, militant cells beholden to an

²³ Z. Gold, “Sinai Tribes: Between the Egyptian State and the Islamic State”, *INSS*, 8 May 2015, <http://www.inss.org.il/index.aspx?id=4538&articleid=9533>.

²⁴ S. Frenkel, M. Atef, “Despite Ongoing Egyptian Military Campaign in Sinai, Militant Groups Gaining Ground”, *Buzzfeed*, 30 January 2015, <http://www.buzzfeed.com/sheerafrenkel/despite-ongoing-egyptian-military-campaign-in-sinai-militant>.

²⁵ B. Rohan, “Video shows killing of Egypt officer by Sinai extremists”, *Yahoo News*, 26 January 2015, <http://news.yahoo.com/video-shows-execution-egypt-officer-sinai-extremists-164028594.html>.

²⁶ J.M. Mohon, “ISIS leader in new audio message: Islam was never for a day the religion of peace”, *Business Insider*, 15 May 2015, <http://www.businessinsider.com/afp-is-leader-urges-muslims-to-move-to-caliphate-recording-2015-5>.

international terrorist group based in Syria are likely to be less concerned about their impact on the local community.

Although Sinai is relatively isolated, a major concern for Egypt is the linkage between IS-affiliated fighters in the peninsula and those operating in Libya. Egypt shares a 1115 kilometer border with its western neighbor, and the Libyan revolution released a number of arms into Egypt. From 2011, the insurgency in Sinai was fueled by the huge flow of advanced weaponry from raided Libyan storehouses. More recently, Cairo has been concerned that Egypt, Libyan, and foreign militants training in eastern Libya may launch attacks into Egypt. To defend against this possibility, the armed forces deployed some of its best-trained units to Egypt's western border region²⁷. Such a decision may impact its ability to operate effectively in Sinai to the east.

Egyptian military operations in Sinai

During the Mubarak years, security in North Sinai was the responsibility of the police and other Ministry of Interior forces. After the removal of Mubarak and the disappearance of the police, the Egyptian military had limited interest in doing what it viewed as the Interior Ministry's job.

Under the leadership of Mohammed Hussein Tantawi – Egypt's long-serving Defense Minister and the *de facto* head of state during the interim rule of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) – the armed forces only carried out one campaign in North Sinai: in the summer and fall of 2011. The SCAF launched Operation Eagle after the boldness of North Sinai's jihadis went too far. In July 2011, the same month al-Qa'ida in the Sinai Peninsula allegedly announce its foundation, a caravan of militants waving the black flag of Jihad paraded through the North Sinai capital of al-Arish.

²⁷ "V15 activists leave bottles outside Likud HQ", *The Times of Israel*, 29 January 2015, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/as-egypt-pulls-back-from-sinai-threat-to-israel-said-to-rise/>.

Operation Eagle was a massive show of military might, but this seemed to be the purpose itself. Egypt moved heavy weapons – including fighter jets and tanks – into the peninsula for the first time since signing the peace treaty with Israel. The efforts were successful in scaring jihadis out of Sinai’s main cities but made little attempt to directly engage with militants, most of which simply fled back into villages or the mountains.

Another bold militant move forced Tantawi from office a year later. In August 2012, Egyptian soldiers at a border outpost in Rafah were breaking their Ramadan fast when they came under attack: 16 were killed. The attack shocked Egypt, and then-President Morsi used it as a pretext to remove the Minister of Defense: replacing him with then-General al-Sisi.

Al-Sisi’s background in intelligence and his place in a younger generation of military leadership – one trained by the United States – gave him a different perspective on the importance of internal military operations. Additionally, the “Rafah massacre” – as it became known – provided Morsi and al-Sisi justification for expanding both the military campaign and counter-radicalization efforts in North Sinai.

Although Morsi technically oversaw the Egyptian military, it was al-Sisi’s rise to defense chief that changed the armed forces’ perspective on internal operations. From August 2012 to today – under the Morsi government, the post-Morsi interim government, and now the government of President al-Sisi – there has been a consistency in Sinai operations.

It was also under Morsi that Egypt began cracking down on the illegal tunnels between Sinai and Gaza. Despite Morsi’s affinity for Gaza’s governing Hamas organization – with roots in his Muslim Brotherhood movement – his office concurred with the Egyptian security assessment that the tunnels were a threat to Egyptian national security²⁸.

²⁸ P. Taylor, Y. Saleh, “Egypt flooded tunnels to cut Gaza arms flow: aide”, *Reuters*, 18 February 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/02/18/us-palestinians-tunnels-egypt-iduSBre91H0JA20130218>.

Since Morsi's ouster the Egyptian military has carried out successive campaigns in North Sinai from July 2013 onward. These operations varied in duration and intensity, but they more often than not followed a retaliatory pattern: a major jihadi escalation was followed by a massive armed forces deployment.

The Egyptian military has been generally successful in containing Sinai-based jihadi operations within a limited area of North Sinai. A combination of military operations in Sinai, border security efforts at the Suez Canal, and good police work in 'mainland' Egypt succeed in breaking ABM's capabilities outside the peninsula for most of 2014²⁹. However, between the North Sinai capital of al-Arish and the Gaza border terrorist and insurgent attacks continue unabated.

A major concern for the international community – both for reasons of human rights and for its impact on operational success – is the heavy-handedness with which the Egyptian military is carrying out operations in North Sinai. For the general population of the governorate, life has been completely interrupted³⁰. Although the government and military pay lip-service to the suffering of civilian population, Egyptian policy and military tactics increase local grievances.

On a policy level, North Sinai has been under various levels of curfew and state of emergency for years. Al-Sisi declared an official three-month "state of emergency" following an 24 October 2014, VBIED attack on a military post near Sheikh Zuweid. The state of emergency has been extended twice, although in April 2015 curfew hours were reduced slightly in al-Arish³¹.

Also after the 24 October attack, Egypt decided to implement a long-planned "buffer security zone" on Sinai's border with the

²⁹ "Two army officers killed in raid on terrorist hideout in Nile Delta", MENA and *Abram Online*, 19 March 2014, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/97028.aspx>.

³⁰ Z. Gold, *North Sinai Population Continues to Sacrifice for Egypt*, The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, 18 May 2015, <http://timep.org/commentary/north-sinai-population-continues-to-sacrifice-for-egypt/>.

³¹ "Sisi extends state of emergency in North Sinai", *Aswat Masriya*, 25 April 2015, <http://en.aswatmasriya.com/news/view.aspx?id=5611d9cf-2556-4512-8870-5209845f52ed>.

Gaza Strip. In the initial stage, the Egyptian military cleared thousands of residents from their homes, on days' notice, within 500 meters of the border³². Stage two – 500-1000 meters – followed soon after. In June 2015, residents living 1000-1500 meters from the border were alerted to expect to be moved from their homes during the implementation of phase three: to commence in July. By some estimates, the next stage will entail the destruction of 10,000 homes³³.

In addition to these policy decisions from Cairo, Egyptian military operations disrupt daily life in the governorate. Of course, the most obvious disruptions are for civilians caught in the cross-fire between the military and the militants: there have been a number of cases in which locals are killed by stray artillery. However, more broadly, for operational security the military often cuts area telephone and internet service during operations³⁴. Such interruptions, locals complain, affect everything from business communications to banking.

In January 2015 – following another coordinated attack – al-Sisi restructured the armed forces, creating a Unified Sinai Command to oversee the operations of the Second and Third Field Armies³⁵. From spring 2015, under the leadership of the Unified Command, the military is for the first attempting operations to isolate jihadi militants.

The military set up checkpoints separating al-Arish from the cities of Sheikh Zuweid and Rafah further to the east. This siege of northeastern Sinai halted the transit of supplies to the furthest reaches of Egyptian territory, and for a time locals complained of

³² Z. Gold, "The Egypt-Gaza Buffer Zone: More Harm than Good for Sinai Security", INSS, 20 November 2014, <http://www.inss.org.il/index.aspx?id=4538&articleid=8124>.

³³ "Egypt to evacuate 10,000 homes in Gaza buffer zone expansion", *Ma'An News*, 6 June 2015, <http://www.maannews.com/Content.aspx?ID=765794>.

³⁴ E. Hamed, "Egypt's media blackout on Sinai", *Al Monitor*, 7 April 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/04/suffering-sinai-media-silence-egypt.html>.

³⁵ "Sisi establishes unified command to fight terrorism in Sinai", *Aswat Masriya*, 31 January 2015, <http://en.aswatmasriya.com/news/view.aspx?id=f47afca6-2a23-48dc-9942-ad89225856bb>.

shortages³⁶. Then, in June, the military set up five checkpoints on roads between Sheikh Zuweid and Rafah to cut resupply and reinforcement routes among Wilayat Sinai cells³⁷.

In all of these efforts, the Egyptian government and military profess support for the civilian population and describe the importance of local – and especially Bedouin – cooperation. This rhetoric from Cairo is extremely important, but – as seen from examples above – it is not always translated into reality on the ground in North Sinai.

Issues of common interest with Italy and Europe

As the Egyptian government exerts efforts to protect and stabilize the country, Cairo shares a number of common security interests with Italy, and with Europe and the West more broadly. These include counterterrorism, containment of Libya's instability, and security in the Mediterranean Sea.

Terrorism in Egypt indirectly threatens Europe by threatening the stability of an allied nation. One problem that the West faces is that its view of what constitutes 'terrorism' is not shared by the Egyptian government. When European governments talk about terrorist groups in Egypt they typically mean jihadis. Cairo, of course, recognizes jihadis as a threat. However, in Egypt's fight against terrorism, groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, football fans, and activist groups are also the enemy. This discrepancy both affects relations between Egypt and the European states and also impacts the West's decisions on providing counterterrorism assistance to Egypt.

Another western concern is that Egypt's policies of political repression drive radicalization among those whose outlets for peaceful expression are limited. Related, Egyptian policy in both the Nile Valley and the Sinai Peninsula emphasizes the security angle to the detriment of addressing popular grievances. In Sinai,

³⁶ Twitter, <https://twitter.com/muhamedsabry/status/599540887098630145>.

³⁷ Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=671713939626258>.

the government and military need to show that they are on the side of the local population – in an effort both to protect the people and to separate civilians from the jihadis among them. In many instances, however, military actions and government policies further damage citizen-state relations.

A more direct threat for western nations than the impact of terrorism on Egyptian stability is the potential of terror attacks on international interests inside Egypt. The increase in political violence and terrorism in Cairo over the past year has raised concerns about the security of foreign embassies and their staffs. In December 2014 the UK and Canadian embassies briefly closed to the public because of concerns about Egypt's security posture³⁸. Since 2011, incidents of siege, attack, or breach of a number of diplomatic missions in Cairo – including the Israeli, Saudi, Syrian, and US embassies – have raised questions as to the level of protection provided by the Egyptian security forces.

Another concern of the international community is the safety of its citizens, especially tourists, in Egypt. A February 2014 ABM attack on a tour bus in Taba, South Sinai, which killed three South Koreans and their Egyptian driver, raised the possibility of more frequent attacks on foreigners. Most western countries placed a travel warning on South Sinai travel following that event. An attack on police near the pyramids and an attempted attack in Luxor, both in June 2015, renewed concerns that tourists are being targeted³⁹.

Perhaps no western interest is more exposed than the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO), the international force in Sinai to oversee observance of the Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty. The force's North Camp base is located south of Sheikh Zuweid, in one of the main areas of Wilayat Sinai operations; and the MFO patrols across the peninsula. On 9 June 2015, Wilayat Sinai for the

³⁸ "Canada closes Cairo embassy over security fears", *BBC*, 8 December 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-30377051>.

³⁹ D. Kirkpatrick, "Militants Hit Karnak Temple, in 2nd Recent Attack on Egyptian Tourist Sites", *The New York Times*, 10 June 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/11/world/middleeast/karnak-temple-luxor-egypt-attack.html?_r=0.

first time claimed an attack targeting the international force: firing mortar rounds at al-Gura airport, which is used by the MFO⁴⁰.

Finally, Europe is concerned about the threat of terrorism in the Suez Canal. This is a major worry for Egyptian authorities, too, given the importance of canal tolls for Egypt's budget.

Outside Egypt's borders, European states are concerned about the impact terrorist groups in Egypt have on maritime security in the Mediterranean Sea. For example, on 16 November 2014, militants hijacked an Egyptian guided missile craft. Fortunately, the stolen boat was not used to target international commercial or naval ships or to attack gas drilling infrastructure in the Eastern Mediterranean. However, the possibility of naval threats to both Egypt and Europe have resulted in high-level meetings and military exercises with Cyprus and Greece⁴¹.

Another mutual security concern for Egypt and Europe is stabilization of Libya and stemming the spread of Libya's internal conflicts outside of its borders. Ever since NATO intervention in Libya in 2011, Egypt has called on the West to 'fix' the problems caused by the ouster of Muhammad Qaddafi. In addition to the flow of Libyan weapons that have added fuel to the Sinai insurgency and Egypt's concern about the threat of militants in Libya attacking across the mutual border, in February of this year Egypt tragically witnessed the threat to its interests inside Libya with the release of a video by the Islamic State's local affiliate showing the brutal murder of 21 Egyptian citizens⁴².

Following that incident – and a brief Egyptian military intervention – Cairo has called on the West to intervene, again, in

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ "Cyprus, Greece and Egypt agree to step up 'terror' fight", *Yahoo News*, 29 April 2015, <http://news.yahoo.com/cyprus-greece-egypt-agree-step-terror-fight-174108195.html>; Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=665128380284814>; and "Greek Cyprus, Egypt conduct joint drill in Mediterranean", *Today's Zaman*, 25 May 2015, http://www.todayzaman.com/national_greek-cyprus-egypt-conduct-joint-drill-in-mediterranean_381714.html.

⁴² "Video shows beheading of Copts at IS hands; Egypt declares week of mourning", *Abram Online*, 15 February 2015, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/123128.aspx>.

Libya and to lift its arms embargo⁴³. Europe and the international community, however, are focused on the UN-led political dialogue. Given Italy's proximity to Libya – as well as its historic colonial ties – Rome has participated in tripartite meetings with Egypt and Algeria on ways to solve Libya's political crisis⁴⁴.

Conclusion

Two years after Egypt launched a self-declared “War on Terrorism”, the country continues to face a number of security threats. Indeed, it is concerning that these attacks have spread: both geographically and in their targets. In the past year, more civilians have been directly targeted by terrorism and recent attacks suggest tourists are now considered ‘legitimate’ targets by jihadi and other groups that have declared economic warfare on the state. Europe can help Egypt in its counterterrorism efforts, especially against IS-linked jihadis. However, European supporters of Egypt must also emphasize that there is more than just a security solution to Egypt's political violence – and that focusing on security-centric approaches is exacerbating terrorism in Egypt.

⁴³ “Egypt urges tough global ‘intervention’ against Libya militants”, *Yahoo News Maktoob*, 16 February 2015, <https://en-maktoob.news.yahoo.com/egypt-urges-tough-global-intervention-against-libya-militants-093214336.html>.

⁴⁴ “Egypt, Italy and Algeria to discuss Libya in Cairo”, *Abram Online*, 7 June 2015, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/132154.aspx>.

4. Egypt and the Middle East. A 'New' Regional Protagonist?

Cecilia Zecchinelli

Dissatisfied with Egypt's decline on the world stage, general-turned-president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi aspires to reclaim the status that his country had under Gamal Abdel Nasser half a century ago.

The activism of the new ruler in Cairo marks a significant change from the apathy in the international arena shown by long-time autocrat Hosni Mubarak before he was ousted following the 25 January Revolution in 2011. Both politically and militarily, al-Sisi is making every effort to live up to Egypt's long-established epithet: *Umm Al Dunya*, Mother of the World.

However, the era of Pan-Arabism led by the charismatic *raïs* passed in 1970 is long since over, and the current leader of the Arab world's most populous country must content himself with playing a supporting role, eclipsed by wealthier neighbours who have a strong say in his own agenda.

Al-Sisi's rapid and unexpected political ascent to power was already the result of solid ties and common interests shared with stronger foreign players, namely the conservative Sunni autocracies of the Gulf.

In 2013, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait staunchly backed his removal of then-President Mohammed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood, in the hope that their open political support and generous financial assistance, assessed to be over US\$ 30bn, would stamp out politicized Islam in the whole region, and indirectly secure their own regimes.

After the United States gave up its role as primary financial donor of Egypt and president Barack Obama downsized its

political and military action in the Middle East, the influence of the oil-rich Gulf monarchies on the country has emerged as the major element and it is bound to remain so, at least for the time being. Important economic and industrial deals with Europe, such as the US\$ 11bn agreement with Germany's Siemens, and a new form of military co-operation with Moscow, the first of its kind since Nasser, are tactical moves aimed at counterweighting the power of the Arab patrons.

However, al-Sisi's relationship with Riyadh was strained after Salman succeeded his half-brother Abdullah as king. The new leadership in Riyadh is more open to reconciliation with the Muslim Brothers and their international patrons and focuses on the Iranian threat, while the Egyptian President has opposite priorities.

A story apart is Qatar, which was the main backer of the former Islamic government of Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood and withdrew after their dramatic fall. While the Saudis sponsored a rapprochement between Doha and Cairo late last year, with measured success, relations with Ankara deteriorated significantly over the last two years and they are now at their low point. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan still views deposed Morsi as the only legally elected Egyptian president.

Permanent tension and anxiety still mark Cairo's relationships with Iran, after a temporary détente during Morsi's brief rule. Diplomatic ties with Israel have improved greatly and al-Sisi has admitted that he talks to Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's Prime Minister, 'a lot'. Mutual cooperation has never been so extensive, including security and intelligence.

Also importantly, Egypt has started to re-engage with Africa, after decades of ignoring the continent including, most recently, managing the risk of a war with Ethiopia over an enormous hydroelectric dam on the Nile. The agreement al-Sisi signed in March with Addis Adebba and Sudan for a peaceful sharing of the Nile's waters can be considered the best result he has achieved so far in international relations, at least in the region.

Conversely, Egypt's ambitious bid to place itself at the centre of the fight against 'terror' in the Middle East is a far more

hazardous, and controversial, matter. Beyond fighting militants in its own Sinai Peninsula, Cairo is involved in Libya's civil war where it has backed the somewhat secular eastern government, while helping Saudi Arabia defend its borders. However, the military alliance, as for diplomatic relations, is weakened by different views. While al-Sisi believes that extremism must be confronted region-wide, with no distinction between political Islamists and terrorists, and with no mercy, an increasingly urgent anti-Iranian initiative is becoming the main priority of the Saudis and to some extent of the other Arab autocracies.

The Gulf - A controversial 'special relationship'

A few hours after the coup of 3 July, in which General al-Sisi ousted president Mohammed Morsi, Saudi king Abdullah was the first head of state to send a message of congratulations to interim President Adly Mansour, the former Chief Justice accused by the Muslim Brotherhood of being a puppet in the hands of the military.

"I congratulate you on assuming the leadership of Egypt", wrote the ailing Arab monarch who died in January and was succeeded by his half-brother Salman. "We strongly shake hands with General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who managed to save Egypt at this critical moment from a tunnel so dark only God could comprehend its dimensions and repercussions", he added, confirming that the 59 year-old General was already the strongman of Egypt, ruling behind the scenes one year before he became president.

King Abdullah's message came as no surprise. As al-Sisi explained in a recent interview with Al Arabiya TV channel "ties between Riyadh and Cairo have a long tradition of stability and understanding, they go back to history: when Egypt was facing the

(Israeli) aggression of 1956, (Saudi) King Salman was among the fighters”¹.

What al-Sisi did not say is that Riyadh’s special ally is not Egypt, but the Egyptian military, which has been ruling the country since 1952 with the only brief parenthesis of Morsi’s presidency, and controls nearly half of its economy. The fall of Mubarak and the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood sent shivers down the spines of the Saudis and their allies in the Gulf. Far more at ease with al-Sisi, who served as the Egyptian government’s military attaché in Riyadh, they aligned themselves with the Egyptian general on day one to restore the old order along the Nile.

“The Saudis are nervous about any elected Islamist government in their world, and that’s what Morsi in Egypt represented. They have always claimed to speak for Sunni Islam, and when you have an elected Islamist government, some people inside Saudi Arabia may start to think, ‘Why can’t we have an elected government?’”, says F. Gregory Gause III².

According to Saudi political activist Mujtahid bin Hareth bin Hammaam³, Riyadh provided the Egyptian generals with a US\$ 1bn to stage the coup against Morsi and install interim leadership. Recently disclosed leaks claim that in early 2013 United Arab Emirates officials funnelled huge funds to Tamarrod, a “grassroots movement” that was apparently established by five young independent Cairo activists to gather popular support against Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood and to organize mass street protests⁴.

¹ Salman bin Abdul Aziz participated with the Egyptian forces against the Tripartite Aggression during the Suez crisis in 1956, at the age of 20. He fought in two battles against the Israelis and one battle against the British. The official bio of the Saudi king does not report these events.

² Professor of political science at the University of Vermont and a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Doha Center.

³ Nicknamed the “Julian Assange” of Saudi Arabia, Mujtahid bin Hareth bin Hammaam or @Mujtahidd is a tweeting star exposing the corruption of the royal family. Despite authorities’ criticism he has 1.8 million followers

⁴ Tamarrod (rebel) was an Egyptian movement founded to register opposition to President Morsi and force him to resign. On June 2012 it announced it collected 22

Moreover, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait announced within a week of the military's July 2013 takeover a US\$ 12bn rescue package that dwarfed direct military and economic grants from the United States (US\$ 1.5bn) and the European Union (US\$ 1.3bn) combined. Their efforts in Egypt stood out even by Gulf standards, and did not stop there.

By recent estimates the Egyptian military received more than US\$ 39.5bn in aid from the Gulf since 2013. The total included US\$ 25bn in cash and US\$ 14.5bn worth of petrol. Saudi Arabia alone contributed US\$ 22.5bn. More conservative assessments put the total at US\$ 32bn so far. The last bulk (US\$ 12bn) was pledged by the three Gulf monarchies in March at an international investment conference held in Sharm el-Sheikh. Al-Sisi made the summit the centrepiece of his economic program and it was attended by scores of heads of state, including Italy's Prime Minister Matteo Renzi.

The new contributions were vital for Egypt, as its balance sheet has come under renewed pressure this year. Its net foreign reserves fell to US\$ 15.5bn in February and rebounded to US\$ 20.5bn in April, after the Sharm el-Sheikh conference. Before the uprising in 2011 they stood at US\$ 36bn. Egypt's budget deficit had risen continuously since the January revolution due to the sharp drop in tourism and foreign investments⁵.

The Sharm el-Sheikh conference came at a delicate moment in the Saudi-Egyptian relations. In February an alleged audio recording of al-Sisi mocking the oil-rich Arab monarchies was leaked and became viral on the web. The alleged recording (which appears genuine and on which the president's office did not comment) dates from the time when al-Sisi was Egypt's Defense Minister just before running for president. In the audio he is heard

million signatures and a few days later Morsi was ousted by the military. The number of signatures was never verified and recent audio tapes secretly recorded in the offices of the deputy ministers to al-Sisi establish the movement as an arm of the military coup.

⁵ According to analyst David Hearst, editor of the *Middle East Eye*, Egypt received US\$ 39.5bn in cash, loans and petrol derivatives from the Gulf states in 2014. By the end of this year the figure will have risen probably to US\$ 50bn.

telling his office director to ask the Saudis, the Emirates and Kuwait to each deposit “10 (billion dollars) in the army’s account. They have money like rice”.

Apart from the “rice scandal”, political analysts have recently questioned if the close ties that existed between Cairo and Riyadh under the late King Abdullah would continue. Reportedly, al-Sisi visited Saudi Arabia for his first policy meeting with King Salman ahead of the Sharm el-Sheikh conference with some anxiety. The new Saudi monarch broke official protocol to meet him at the airport, a pointed mark of favour towards the Egyptian president.

However, behind the official *façade*, tensions started to emerge. The real change came in April when King Salman appointed his young and popular nephew, the country’s Interior Minister Mohammad bin Nayef, as the new crown Prince replacing Prince Muqrin. In another major shift, Salman replaced veteran Foreign Minister Saud Al Faisal with Adel El Jubeir, the first non-royal to hold the post. Both Muqrin and Al Faisal were considered link pins of Cairo’s relationship with Riyadh, while the new leadership is believed to have al-Sisi in lower esteem. Their views are different on many key issues: Riyadh’s new aggressive doctrine in foreign policy gives top priority to curbing Iran’s expansion and addressing security issues in the region, rather than crushing the Muslim Brotherhood which remains al-Sisi main obsession. For Riyadh political Islam is still a problem, but not the pre-eminent problem. Its new leaders are therefore more open to reconciliation with Qatar, Turkey and even the Brotherhood.

There are also disagreements between Cairo and Riyadh on Syria and Libya. On Syria, al-Sisi believes in a political solution and in the need to include Bashar al-Assad, Saudi Arabia does not. In Libya the opposite is true: Saudi wants a political solution while al-Sisi prefers (or at least preferred) a military approach. More contrasts arose with the Saudi-led action in Yemen, in which Egypt has a very marginal role, while both governments are increasingly unhappy with the ally’s foreign policies. Riyadh does

not approve the Egyptian steps toward stronger ties with Russia⁶. Cairo does not appreciate the apparent warming of ties between Riyadh and Ankara and Doha.

Qatar - “Sponsor of terror”

A strong backer of the Muslim Brotherhood in the region when the movement was still semi-illegal, Qatar came out as its main Arab sponsor after the election of President Morsi in defiance of the other Gulf monarchies as well as the Egyptian military.

The coup of July 2013 sparked a period of tense relations between Cairo and Doha, culminating in a diplomatic war marked by several heated battles. Egypt imprisoned three journalists working for the Qatari-owned satellite channel Al Jazeera and shut down its Egypt operations, accusing the broadcaster of serving as a mouthpiece for the ‘terrorists’. Qatar continued to welcome prominent Muslim Brotherhood members fleeing the Egyptian regime’s crackdown on the movement, which was declared an illegal terrorist organization at the end of 2013. In January 2014 Doha “expressed concerns” about the increasing number of deaths in Egyptian protests, provoking the recall of the Egyptian ambassador in Doha.

The feud flared up again during the Israeli offensive on Gaza in July 2014, after Qatar rejected a ceasefire initiative proposed by Cairo, which had the support of the UN Security Council and the Arab League. In August, Doha finally demanded Egypt return a deposit meant initially to be made into bonds, part of the much-needed financial help granted to Morsi in 2012. A month later, Egypt had returned US\$ 2bn to Qatar, claiming this was a “statement of independence against Qatari intervention and interference”.

⁶ Al-Sisi’s first visit to a non-Arab or African country since his swearing as president was in Russia, in August 2014. Putin promised to speed arms sales and the two leaders agreed on boosting military and technological cooperation.

A first diplomatic de-escalation process began in November through conciliatory moves of late Saudi King Abdullah and “the Riyadh Agreement”⁷. The Egyptian presidency welcomed the initiative, a move that was followed by a similar statement from Qatar, which had already extended an olive branch to al-Sisi closing Al Jazeera Mubashir Misr⁸ and forcing seven Brotherhood leaders to leave the country.

The relationship grew tense once again after an Arab League meeting in February 2015, when Doha objected to an article that would allow Egypt to bomb ISIS targets in Libya. The Egyptian government responded by calling Qatar “supportive of terrorism”. Qatar withdrew its ambassador to Cairo. However, this new crisis was short-lived. A month later, at the Arab League summit held in Sharm el-Sheikh, al-Sisi welcomed Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani at the airport, and the Qatari ambassador returned to Cairo. Egypt’s diplomatic representative is expected to return to Doha. The prior need of the regional Sunni powers to stand united against the Iranian threat forced the two countries to at least reach a “non aggression pact”.

Turkey - Frozen relations

While diplomatic relations with Qatar are gradually evolving through continuous ups and downs, Egypt and Turkey have been determined and irreconcilable enemies for the past two years. The tension between the two largest Muslim-majority countries in the Eastern Mediterranean dates back to the Ottoman Empire, of which Egypt was just a province until it gained semi-independence

⁷ With the Riyadh Agreement of November 2014, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain stated the return of their ambassadors to Doha and the beginning of normalization with Qatar. The three country had withdrawn their diplomats in March after alleging that Doha has been meddling in their internal affairs supporting the Muslim Brotherhood

⁸ Al Jazeera Mubashir Misr or Al Jazeera Live Egypt was a TV channel operated by Al Jazeera Media Network from 2011 to 2014 when it was closed. It broadcasted conference and other events live without editing or commentary

in 1867. Over the decades the Cairo-Ankara relationship has alternated between bitter hostility and cordial competition, never quite reaching warm.

Things got worse when Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan took power in 2003 and launched an aggressive pro-Middle East policy, abandoning a pro-Europe orientation in favour of focusing on Asia and Africa. Ankara interjected itself in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and built ties with various Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated parties in North Africa and in the Middle East, including Hamas in Gaza and the movement in Egypt, where, despite being officially banned, it continued to operate behind the scenes.

The January 25 Revolution was strongly supported by Turkey and when Erdoğan visited Cairo in September 2011 he was given a hero's welcome by swarming crowds. Beyond his religious message of a 'modern Islam', Egyptians were attracted by the economic success of Turkey where pro capita GDP is four times larger than in Egypt. Politically, they applauded his anti-Israel effort, comparing it favourably with the close partnership that Sadat, and later Mubarak, developed with the Jewish state since the Camp David Treaty in 1979.

After Morsi's election in June 2012, the two countries consolidated their alliance and discussed common initiatives in foreign policy as well as joint economic development plans. However, the collapse of the Muslim Brotherhood in Cairo came too soon to see any results. The return of the Egyptian military to power marked the end of that special relationship. The Turkish leader was the first to publicly denounce the July 3 military coup and to condemn Western powers for their silence. After the August 2013 Rabaa massacre⁹, Erdoğan asked the UN Security Council to impose sanctions on Egypt. Things deteriorated still further after Egypt's decision to launch an airstrike against ISIS

⁹ On 14 August 2013 Egyptian security forces raided two camps of peaceful supporters of Morsi in Cairo: one at Al Nahda Square and a larger one at Rabaa al-Adawiya Square. According to HRW a minimum of 817 people and more likely at least 1,000 were killed in Rabaa.

targets in Eastern Libya last February.

“With General al-Sisi in power, Turkey quickly became one of the country’s main adversaries in the Levant. And local and regional developments over the past two years suggest that their contentious relationship is unlikely to improve so long as Erdoğan and al-Sisi are in power”, write Soner Cagaptay and Marc Sievers of the Washington Institute¹⁰. Recent events seem to confirm their forecast. Despite Saudi King Salman’s attempts to cast a bridge between Egyptian and Turkish governments and build a Sunni front, Erdoğan continues slamming al-Sisi as “an illegal tyrant”. In a rally on 16 May, the day Morsi was sentenced to death, the Turkish leader declared: “To me the President of Egypt is still Morsi. I have consistently said at international platforms that I do not accept al-Sisi”.

Iran - Back to the past

After decades of wavering tensions, Cairo-Tehran diplomatic relations broke down in 1979 in the wake of two historic events: the Islamic Revolution in Iran and Egypt’s signing of the Camp David Accords with Israel. Newly proclaimed leader Ayatollah Khomeini denounced Egyptian president Anwar Sadat’s peace initiative, labelling it “treason against Islam” and called the Egyptian people to overthrow his government.

The Iranian leader was further aggravated when Sadat allowed his “dear brother” the Shah of Iran to live in Cairo after he was deposed by the Revolution. More contentious issues followed over the years, including Cairo’s support for Iraq in Iran’s eight-year conflict, the Islamic Republic’s hailing of Khaled Al Islambouli, the Sadat’s assassin, as a religious hero¹¹, and the close Egyptian

¹⁰ S. Cagaptay, M.J. Sievers, *Turkey and Egypt’s Great Game in the Middle East*, The Washington Institute, 8 March 2015.

¹¹ Khaled Al Islambouli was an Egyptian army officer who participated in the assassination of Sadat on 6 October 1981. He was executed. Iran named a street in Tehran after him but in 2001 it renamed the street “Intifada Avenue” to improve relations with Cairo.

relations with the United States and Israel which Tehran found unacceptable.

The January 25 Revolution marked a shift in their bilateral 'non-relations'. The ruling élite in Iran was elated when the Arab Spring increased the role of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt, and even more so when Morsi was elected President the following year. Isolated as it was during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency and weakened by sanctions, the Islamic Republic believed it would finally get the opportunity to establish a strong relationship with a major country in the region based on some of its Islamist values.

Egypt's Islamic president, however, turned out to be more reticent and the much talked-about honeymoon between him and Tehran was exaggerated. Morsi's enemies accused him of joining forces with Iran's controversial leader to discredit him in the eyes of the international community. Many western media believed in the Iranian propaganda that claimed a new, strong alliance had been finally established with Cairo after its "Islamic awakening"¹².

Also the 'historic' first visit of an Egyptian President to Iran since the Islamic revolution was overstated. Morsi attended the 2012 Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) summit only for a few hours and because Egypt had held the NAM presidency for three years and had to pass it onto Iran. "Declining the invitation would have been a strong anti-Iran statement – stronger than Morsi was willing to make at a time. He wanted to keep his options open", says Dina Esfandiary of the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London. Importantly, at the summit Morsi stated loud and clear that Bashar Al Assad had to be removed from power, while Iran confirmed that it was supplying the Syrian regime with political, military and technical assistance¹³. The diplomatic accident showed how fragile the new 'alliance' was even if it is true that a bilateral rapprochement took place after the revolution and during Morsi's brief ruling for the first time in over 30 years.

¹² T.L. Friedman, "Morsi's Wrong Turn", *The New York Times*, 28 August 2012.

¹³ C. Zecchinelli, "Assad è un traditore. Affondo dell'Egitto", *Corriere della Sera*, 31 August 2012.

When the army ousted Morsi from power, Tehran criticized the move, calling it a ‘coup’ and drawing a hostile response from Cairo. Political analysts were expecting al-Sisi to freeze bilateral relations again, as with Turkey, but the new *rais* maintained a sort of soft rapprochement with the Islamic Republic. After the first negative reaction, “Tehran has avoided clashing with Egyptian principles. It has dealt very carefully with the Muslim Brotherhood dossier and refused to be a safe haven, akin to Ankara and Doha. However, tension soon returned with the crisis in Yemen, where Iran supports the Houthis”, says Mohammed Mohsen Abu Nour, a researcher in international and Iranian affairs.

On the other hand the emergence of the Islamic State as a common enemy could draw them nearer again. Their complex relation however is strongly influenced by Egypt’s international interests and alliances. Cairo is trying not to displease the major world powers, especially the United States after its *détente* with Iran, and Russia. At the same time the Egyptian government must deal with the open hostility between Tehran and the Gulf states.

Israel - The new frenemies

Over 100 countries attended the Sharm el-Sheikh conference in March to discuss the pharaonic projects included in “Egypt of the future”, al-Sisi’s new development plan. Only four nations were officially declared “non gratae”, Turkey, Iran, Syria, and Israel. The Jewish media protested against Cairo’s decision, but the Israeli political leadership was not surprised, knowing well that diplomacy and financial needs forced al-Sisi to act so. At a summit dominated by the powerful Gulf monarchies, Israel could not be invited. In the meantime, relations between Egypt and the Jewish state have never been so good.

The fall of Mubarak, a long time ally *de facto*, in 2011 was a blow to Israel. Relations went rapidly souring. In March 2012 Egypt blamed its neighbour for starting hostilities that led to violence in Gaza. In June newly elected President Morsi withdrew

the Egyptian ambassador from Tel Aviv in protest over operation Pillar of Defense in the Strip. Rumours circulated that the new Islamic *raïs* would no longer consider binding the 33-year-old peace treaty and that he would turn to Iran in one way or another.

But the new Egyptian government played an intricate balancing act to avoid alienating its allies, especially the United States. It maintained an ambiguous stance *via-à-vis* Israel. To Iran's dismay the Camp David Treaty was upheld while security and intelligence cooperation was increased as a result of the surge of violence in the Sinai. Only gas supplies to Israel, regulated by a 20-year contract, were halted after a string of bombings disrupted the pipeline's flow.

When the Egyptian army returned to power in 2013, Israel discovered that the new President was friendlier than even Mubarak. Within a few days, al-Sisi created a buffer zone along the Gaza border, which the Jewish leaders have been asking in vain for 15 years. The new regime in Cairo ordered the inhabitants to leave the historic city of Rafah and destroyed all the houses to create a 5 kilometres neutral area. Then al-Sisi helped the Israelis in completing the siege over Gaza. During Israel's war in the Strip in 2014 the Egypt sealed its side of the border and outlawed Hamas, the Palestinian Islamist movement close to the Brotherhood.

In exchange, Israel allowed the Egyptian army to move in Zone B and Zone A in Sinai, which was prohibited according to Camp David Treaty and never happened before. Egypt, which is facing one of its worst energy crunches in years, has also signed in June a seven-year deal to import natural gas from Israel's newly developed offshore field Tamar.

Bilateral cooperation in security and intelligence developed and diplomatic ties improved greatly. Al-Sisi has admitted that he talks to Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's Prime Minister, "a lot"¹⁴. A further step forward was taken in June when Egypt appointed its first Ambassador to Israel since 2012.

¹⁴ L. Weymouth, "Interview with General al-Sisi", *The Washington Post*, 12 March 2015.

Recent events, including the decision of Egyptian courts to reverse a verdict that declared Hamas as a terrorist organization, and the temporary opening of the Rafah crossing between Egypt and Gaza, do not mark a new strategy for Egypt at its eastern borders. They are just a result of the new regional policy of Saudi Arabia, which cannot be ignored by the Egyptian leadership.

Africa – A new start

In 2013 North-East Africa seemed headed for a bloody “water war” between its two most important countries. Ethiopia’s parliament ratified a controversial agreement to replace colonial-era treaties that gave Egypt 87 per cent of the Nile’s flow and the power to veto upstream projects. At once president Morsi vowed to protect Egypt’s water security at all costs. “All options are open, if Egypt is the Nile’s gift, then the Nile is a gift to Egypt”, he said. Leading politicians on TV suggested that Cairo should prepare airstrikes and send Special Forces to bomb the multibillion-dollar dam Ethiopians were building¹⁵. Addis Abeba was not impressed, tension was high but the conflict remained a war of words, ignored by the world. Then entered al-Sisi.

In March the General-turned-President signed a preliminary deal with Ethiopia and Sudan on sharing the Nile water, lowering tensions after decades of tensed or hostile relations between Cairo and its southern neighbours. If Morsi went close to a war, Mubarak withdrew completely from the continent when he was almost assassinated in Ethiopia in 1995¹⁶. For the next 16 years he never attended African summits, Cairo’s relations with the continent were limited to occasional quarrels over water, and

¹⁵ On 26 June 1995 Al Gama’a Al Islamiya and the Egyptian Islamic Jihad staged a carefully planned attempt on the life of Mubarak in Addis Abeba. The president escaped unharmed and retaliated with a ruthless crackdown on GI members and their families in Egypt. Only Egyptians participated in the operation.

¹⁶ The Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam is a gravity dam on the Blue Nile in Ethiopia near the border with Sudan, currently under construction. At 6,000 MW, it will be the largest hydroelectric power plant in Africa when completed.

Egypt's trade on Africa collapsed to less than 3 per cent of its total.

Admittedly, al-Sisi's debut in Africa's political arena was not smooth as the African Union suspended Egypt for almost a year in 2013, a punishment for his overthrow of Morsi. When readmitted, al-Sisi made up for lost time. He attended African summits and engaged with other leader, he welcomed 10 African heads of state at the Libya and signed in June along with 25 African countries an agreement to form the continent's largest free trade area (FTA), in *There is a lot of room for improvement*, says Leila Mokaddem of the African Development Bank, who believes foreign trade with the continent and investments are bound to grow in Egypt.

Libya and Yemen - Military actions

Significantly, Egypt's main military effort outside its border is in Africa. Three years after the ouster of Muhammad Qaddafi, Egypt's neighbour Libya has been among the countries suffering deeper political division and increased violence, as two rival coalitions of militias are fighting for control over the country and its huge resources. In the absence of any effective central government, a many-sided proxy war has erupted as rival Muslim states support different militias while jihadist groups like the Islamic State and al-Qa'ida try to expand their operations. Cairo has grown increasingly impatient at the chaos at its western border and deeply concerned about the flood of extremists and weapons crossing into its territory. More importantly, al-Sisi has watched with growing apprehension as a coalition of moderate Islamists, extremists and regional militias took control of the Libyan capital, Tripoli. Together with the United Arab Emirates, Egypt has covertly backed a rival coalition based in Tobruk and recognized by the international community, coalesced around Libyan General Khalifa Haftar.

Following the decapitation of 21 Coptic Egyptian workers in Libya, in February Cairo responded with airstrikes against Islamic State positions around Derna. Six Egyptian F-16 jets bombed

training camps and weapons and ammunitions caches, destroying them. It was the first time Egypt confirmed launching military attacks in Libya and after this mission many expected al-Sisi to escalate his battle against Islamic militants also in Libya. The Arab League officially supported Egypt's airstrikes with the only exception of Qatar that recalled its ambassador in Cairo for 'consultations'.

However, the Egyptian President refrained from further solo operations, acknowledging the vulnerability of his country to potential counterattacks by Islamist forces both in Libya, where a large number of Egyptians is still working, and in Egypt through the long and porous desert border.

He called for a United Nations resolution mandating an international coalition to intervene in Libya. When his request fell on deaf ears he decided to back a political solution between Libya Dawn in Tripoli and the "Tobruk government" within the framework of UN-sponsored peace talks.

As political crisis worsened in Yemen, the theatre of an apparent Sunni-Shia proxy war, al-Sisi planned to put forward his notion of a joint Arab military force at the Arab Summit held in Sharm el-Sheikh at the end of March. However, the Saudis launched airstrikes against the Houthi movement¹⁷ just two days before the conference. "Egypt was informed of the attack a few hours before it started. Saudi Arabia doesn't want Egypt as a partner, even as a second-rate one. It doesn't want an Arab front", Mustafa El Labbad, director of the Cairo Al Sharq Centre for Regional and Strategic Studies said.

Riyadh sought to take a leading role in Yemen by proceeding at the head of a hastily convened alliance in which Egypt was just another participant.

Moreover, Egypt's public opinion, its media and its army were all hostile to see Egyptian involvement in a new war in Yemen as

¹⁷ Ansar Allah, known as Houthis, are a Shi'ite Zaidi group operating in Yemen. In 2014-15 they succeeded in taking over the Yemeni government and the control of its capital Sana'a. They also occupied a large part of the country and tried to conquer Aden, marching on Aden.

the conflict led by Nasser in support of the young republican regime in the 60s cost the lives of 26,000 Egyptian soldiers. It came as no surprise that Cairo refused to send out its troops and contented itself with the deployment of four ships on the Bab El Mandeb strait, which is already closely patrolled by American and French marines. Cairo's aerial contribution is unclear and most probably inexistent.

Conclusion

Restoring order in Egypt was a relatively easy job for President al-Sisi, with several thousand dissidents, both secular and Islamist, been jailed and at least a thousand killed. Becoming an internationally acclaimed leader has proved to be a much harder task if not a mission impossible. His ambition to emulate Gamal Abdel Nasser and re-establish Egypt's historical role as the leading regional power collided with the reality of today's Middle East. After at least three decades of stagnation, since the Arab Spring the whole region is in turmoil. More aggressive and wealthier states, especially Saudi Arabia and Iran, are dominating both the diplomatic and the military arenas. These two players are fighting among themselves for supremacy, involving their proxies in a tangle of alliances and enmities extremely confusing and often changing.

Al-Sisi was caught off guard when Riyadh abandoned their common obsession with Islamists and the Muslim Brotherhood. The new King Salman has refocused Iran rather than Islamism as the chief threat, does not appreciate al-Sisi's attempts to lead military and diplomatic initiatives and allegedly doubts about his stabilization strategy at home. The relationship between Egypt and Saudi Arabia, however, is bound to survive in a way or another and Riyadh is expected to continue financing the poorer ally. But the Egyptian *rais* has lost the unconditional support and the place of honour he held with late king Abdullah. Egypt's role has been further downsized.

As a reaction, al-Sisi has expanded Egypt's diplomacy both on several regional and international platforms. Relations improved or were re-launched with Israel, Africa, Russia, Europe, and even the United States. He tried to lead military and diplomatic initiatives to address regional crisis. But this international crusade had mixed results and did not change the reality. Egypt remains in desperate economic conditions, dependent on foreign aids and weakened by unstable neighbours. The unlimited support the Egyptian people have offered to their sixth president might start to fade if no results are delivered. The "historic inauguration" of the second Suez Canal, scheduled for August one year since the works started, would not be enough to build confidence nor to outstrip the fame of Nasser. Even the hero of Pan-Arabism followed Egypt's millennia-old tradition of building big with the Aswan High Dam on the Nile.

5. Cairo Between Washington and Moscow: A New Theatre for Global Confrontation?

Charles W. Dunne

There have been many recent signs of improving Egypt-Russia relations, including visits exchanged between the leaders of the two countries, talk of arms deals, and possible counterterrorism cooperation. The two countries clearly see a redefinition of their bilateral relationship as a means to counter the United States in the region. Egypt wishes to express its dissatisfaction with restrictions on delivery of weapons from the United States – an arms relationship that has now been fully restored – and criticism of its repression of human rights. Russia, for its part, views expansion of its relationship with Egypt as a means of adding to US diplomatic woes in the Middle East and perhaps drawing attention from other crises, such as Ukraine and Syria, where the United States also has an interest in countering Russian ambitions. There are ample geopolitical reasons for Russia and Egypt to strengthen bilateral ties, and an historical basis on which to do so.

Nevertheless, the way forward is unclear. Egypt needs to remain within the general orbit of the West for a variety of reasons, and Moscow's real priorities lie elsewhere. Therefore, while new Egypt-Russia overtures are vexing from a western policy perspective, they may not amount to much. Russia has limited means both on the military and economic front to support Egypt, and Moscow's strategy and interests in the region often collide. Egypt cannot afford to finance any potential arms

purchases from Russia on its own, and the willingness of its supporters in the Persian Gulf States to do so is in doubt.

Thus, it is unlikely that Egypt will become a significant new theater of confrontation between Russia and the United States. The US, to be sure, faces certain policy questions generated by this issue, including Russia's possible influence on Egyptian military cooperation with the United States, and a shared authoritarian agenda that reinforces the pushback against the Arab Spring and like movements in other countries. In addition, Egypt's changing relationship with Russia may give it additional leverage as it deals with the United States on a wide range of issues.

The possibility for serious confrontation over Egypt, however, remains remote.

Introduction

A military exercise in the Mediterranean Sea, entitled "The Bridge of Friendship-2015" kicked off on June of that year, marking the first joint Russian naval exercise with Egypt since the late President Anwar Sadat ended the exclusive military relationship with the Soviet Union by expelling Russian military advisers from the country in 1972. The exercise involved more than ten warships and support vessels from the two countries, as well as Egyptian F-16 aircraft. The ostensible purpose was to coordinate efforts to protect sea lanes. What it lacked in sophistication and allies compared to the biennial Bright Star exercise – organized by the US and Egypt with participation of numerous regional and European powers, and last held in 2010 – did have an important political purpose: to demonstrate that Russia and Egypt have options in the Middle East that do not necessarily include the United States.

Egypt has looked to diversify its international sponsors for several years since the revolution that overthrew Hosni Mubarak in 2011, and policy tension between the US and Egypt has been growing ever since. Human rights concerns have been a major

catalyst¹. In 2013, following the coup against the first freely elected Egyptian President, Mohammed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party, the army violently put down protests against the new military regime, notably in Rabaa Square, that killed over 1,000 people. According to an Egyptian rights group, at least 2,600 people have been killed in confrontations with the security force since Morsi's overthrow². More than 40,000 Muslim Brotherhood supporters, secular activists, and others remain in prison without charges after a major sweep-up of political opponents.

A determined campaign against civil society was also launched. Most notably, 43 international civil society workers were convicted of felonies in June 2013 due to their work on human rights and democracy in an infamous "foreign funding case"³.

Human rights abuses mounting

Other trends are even more disturbing. Extra-judicial killings and disappearances have increased sharply, many of them aimed at the Muslim Brotherhood and alleged sympathizers (who, at this point, have largely been crushed politically). But these incidents have also targeted secular activists involved with the now-banned April 6 Movement, which helped ignite the uprisings against the Mubarak regime, and unaffiliated human rights activists. As many

¹ Freedom House, in its annual review *Freedom in the World*, documented the decline in civil and political liberties in Egypt, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2014/egypt#.VYB2r0YzAgQ>.

² The number of deaths in street protests since the 2013 coup far exceeds those in the revolt against Mubarak. See also http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/05/31/egypt-killingmorsi_n_74806http://fride.org/download/PB201_Russia_in_the_Middle_East.pdf20.html.

³ This author was convicted in absentia in the case for his work at Freedom House as the Director of Middle East and North Africa programs.

as 91 persons have been ‘disappeared’⁴ in a tactic reminiscent of Argentina in the 1970s.

Legal prosecution concerning freedom of speech and freedom of association are accelerating. In the absence of an elected parliament, the choosing of which has remained in legal limbo, has permitted the government essentially to rule by decree. It is now considering a draconian new law that would tighten restrictions on activities by civil society organizations. Another law limiting the rights of political protesters and other public gatherings went into effect in November 2013; the so-called Protest Law banned public assemblies of more than 10 people without police approval, and allowed authorities the right to block gatherings without prior notice, especially those vaguely deemed a threat to “public order”⁵. In addition, media outlets have been censored, bloggers and others with opinions rejected by the government have been arrested and jailed, and employees of international media (in particular Al Jazeera) thrown into prison. Laws against insulting the president, the judiciary, and the military have been strictly enforced. The window for popular political discourse and critical news dissemination has, effectively, been closed.

By many accounts, this is the worst period of repression and human rights abuses in Egypt’s modern history. It has contributed to instability in the country by catalyzing terrorist organizations to counterattack against security forces and the tourism industry, a major generator of the economy. Two Islamic extremists were killed in June 2015 in an abortive attack on the Temple of Luxor. Hundreds of Egyptian security forces, mainly police, have also

⁴ Disappearances are real and disturbing, and represent a major development in Egypt’s assault on human rights; this was not an important feature of Mubarak’s rule. For reference, look at http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/in-egypt-activists-document-a-surge-of-forced-disappearances/2015/06/12/75274570-0dff-11e5-a0fe-dccfea4653ee_story.html.

⁵ “Egypt: Deeply Restrictive New Assembly Law Will Enable Further Crackdown, Stifle Electoral Campaigning”, *Human Rights Watch*, 26 November 2013, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/11/26/egypt-deeply-restrictive-new-assembly-law>.

been killed over the last two years, including dozens in a series of coordinated attacks in Sinai claimed by the Islamic State in July 2015. The June 2015 assassination of the Egypt's top prosecutor, Hisham Barakat, with a remotely-detonated car bomb marks a worrisome escalation in the sophistication of terrorist attacks.

While as-Sisi clamps down on human rights in order to project an image of stability and effective anti-terror efforts in the country, the reality is anything but.

Joint authoritarian blueprint

Sisi's playbook is similar to Russia's for repressing dissent and cutting off avenues for political change. As in Egypt, Russia has persecuted civil society and other 'undesirable' organizations⁶. Disappearance and assassination of investigating journalists helped to intimidate both media and activists. Government regulation of online media and social networks has contributed to stifling political discussion and dissent. Legal cases against those perceived as regime opponents have burgeoned, and an anti-protest law has restricted the ability of Russians to freely assemble, resulting in arrests and prosecutions.

In addition, both governments – while, indeed facing real threats – have used counterterrorism efforts to pressure political opponents. In Russia, anti-terrorism crackdowns have been used by the authorities to build support for the state. In Egypt, human rights crackdowns in the name of fighting extremism have been similarly used to delegitimize political opponents and boost the reputation of both the military and al-Sisi.

In short, the two governments are kindred spirits. Neither truly believe in the rule of law; both believe in using the law to intimidate and to remove those opposed to the power of the state. Both wish to defeat Islamist opponents (which has resulted in the loss of many lives, in Chechnya, Sinai, and elsewhere). Both have

⁶ Human Rights Watch has detailed many of these abuses. See <http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2014/country-chapters/russia>.

cracked down on freedom of expression on the Web and in print, jailing or intimidating those who would criticize the government. Both have also put pressure on international aid organizations; in Russia's case, terminating the presence of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which had worked with civil society on human rights issues. In Egypt, the aforementioned effort to crack down on both local and international civil society, and to prohibit funds from foreign governments going to civil and political rights organizations, moved in tandem with Moscow's developing restrictions. Both countries have put in a major effort to sever ties between international organizations and domestic civil society not only financially, but politically.

Confluence of interests?

All this has led to, at least theoretically, an important synergy between Russia and Egypt. The two countries evidently see a confluence of interests that suggest political, economic and military opportunities that are too important to be ignored. In addition, both countries have a contentious relationship with the United States and are interested in exploring the potential for cooperation, intended to distance themselves from the US and perhaps to reshape regional politics and pressure US foreign policy in ways that might pay diplomatic benefits in various areas. For its part, Egypt has felt that pressure on human rights, delays on military aid deliveries related to this issue, and perceived US support for the former Morsi government, constituted an abrogation of the basic diplomatic and financial understanding between the two countries. Russia evidently sees an opportunity to irritate Washington and perhaps seize a tactical advantage in a vital region.

Old ties. New foundation?

The two countries have a long history of military and economic cooperation on which to build the basis for a renewed relationship. After Nasser's ascension to power, economic relations burgeoned. The Soviet Union crucially provided significant support in the form of technical and financial assistance to build the Aswan Dam in the 1960s, which transformed Egypt's agricultural outlook by disrupting the annual Nile flood and thereby providing steady water flows year-round. (It also caused significant environmental and archaeological damage).

Moscow also provided training and weapons systems to Egypt, which helped build its military into a regional power. Importantly, it transformed the Egyptian operational philosophy by informing the tactical outlook and personal affinities of many of Egypt's general staff, who were schooled in Soviet military academies. The results can be seen today in an Egyptian army that, despite decades of close military ties with United States, focuses on armor-heavy, politically driven, static tactics, on display most notably in the first Persian Gulf War of 1991, where no troop movement occurred absent the decision of President Mubarak⁷.

Current advances in the Russia-Egypt relationship

There is clearly an historical as well as a contemporary geopolitical basis on which to explore a new relationship between Russia and Egypt. Whether the apparent confluence of tactical interests today will be given meaning through trade deals, arms sales and strong security and counterterrorism cooperation remains to be seen. But both countries are willing to explore this.

Sign of potential new cooperation between the two countries abound. During President Vladimir Putin's visit to Egypt in

⁷ The US training and arms relationship with Egypt since the late 1980s has not effectively overturned this dynamic, although inroads have been made with some of the younger generation of officers.

February 2015, he and al-Sisi posited a deal on deal on building a nuclear power plant in Egypt. They discussed the importance of furthering military relations, including an arms deal which, first bruited about in 2014, reportedly included advanced S-300 anti-aircraft missiles, MiG fighter jets, and Kornet antitank weapons (the deal has not been concluded or financed)⁸.

The two leaders also agreed they must come together to fight terrorism, which, al-Sisi noted, involves an ideological fight – language intended to signify continuation of the campaign to delegitimize Islamist opposition to the Egyptian government, and presumably to Russia as well as the Gulf states, which have been bankrolling the Egyptian government. This approach is essentially designed to justify continued efforts to crush the Muslim Brotherhood and its offshoots throughout the Middle East.

In public remarks, al-Sisi also stressed the importance of enhancing “strategic relations” between the two countries. The nature of these relations were not identified, except to the extent that further talks were recommended. Putin confined his remarks on the subject to unspecified cooperation on Syria and progress toward a “peaceful solution” in that conflict.

Thus, despite the apparent warmth, there remains a great degree of ambiguity in the new Egyptian-Russian relationship, and it is not clear whether it extends beyond the personal relationship of the two presidents or will advance to stronger bilateral ties.

A highly publicized botching of the Russian national anthem by an Egyptian military orchestra during the Putin visit is an ironic, though emblematic, symbol of the difficulties in forging a new strategic relationship after several decades⁹.

⁸ An analysis of the proposed arms deal and its possible fallout, as it was originally discussed in 2014, was authored by David Schenker and Eric Trager of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. “Egypt’s Arms Deal with Russia: Potential Strategic Costs”, 4 March 2014, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/egypts-arms-deal-with-russia-potential-strategic-costs>.

⁹ A video link can be found here: <http://yhoo.it/1Bss0AI>.

New Cold War in the Middle East – or a remembrance of things past?

It is unlikely that that the flirtation between Russia and Egypt marks a new zone of confrontation between Russia and the United States regionally or globally. Strategic and financial limitations will sharply restrict any such development, and US relationships with the Persian Gulf States are likely to come into play to preserve the international order that has reigned for the last 40 years.

Russia has numerous liabilities in its alleged bid to supplant the United States for supremacy in Egypt. For one thing, its strategy is not well thought out and often runs afoul not only of the interests of US allies (principally Saudi Arabia and Qatar) but, occasionally, its own interests. As Mark Katz of George Mason University put it:

Putin perceives Russia as having several important geopolitical interests in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa): countering Western influence; containing Sunni jihadist forces; reversing the drop in petroleum prices; and expanding Russian exports to the region. Successfully pursuing these Russian interests in the Middle East, though, is difficult since they often conflict, Russia has limited means, and different MENA actors – including Moscow-friendly regimes – sometimes thwart Russian ambitions¹⁰.

Russia has few resources to devote to a campaign for winning the allegiance of Egypt. Unlike the United States, it demands full payment for delivery of weapons systems, a key tool in Moscow's foreign relations, which Egypt is ill-positioned to provide.

While Russia has important geopolitical interests in the MENA, it has limited resources with which to pursue them. And Putin is unwilling to use some resources; for example, he has been unwilling to deploy the Russian military in support of MENA

¹⁰ M.N. Katz, "Conflicting aims, limited means: Russia in the Middle East", FRIDE, Middle East and North Africa-Policy Brief no. 201, May 2015, p. 7, http://fride.org/download/PB201_Russia_in_the_Middle_East.pdf.

allies (Saddam Hussein in 2003, Qaddafi in 2011, or Assad since 2011). Nor does this seem likely to change even after the sharp deterioration of relations between Russia and the West over Ukraine. Indeed, Putin's pursuit of forceful policies in Ukraine makes it less likely that he could engage Russian forces anywhere in the MENA simultaneously. Like the Soviet Union, Putin's Russia can (and does) provide arms to its allies in the MENA. Unlike the Soviet Union – which essentially gave weapons away – Putin has insisted that clients actually pay for them. It does not seem that Russian arms sales to states that also receive Western arms gives Moscow much influence in them, despite some contrary perceptions in the West¹¹.

Such self-constraining policies provide clear limits to the level Russia's influence in Egypt can attain. In fact, Moscow's influence throughout the region, including with key allies such as Syria, is restricted. Partly this is a result of the factors described above. It is also a result of Russia's complicated geopolitical circumstances, in which policies intended to thwart the United States often run afoul of countries with which Russia wishes to maintain good relations or simply doesn't have the resources to enact. Russia's bid to enhance relations with Egypt thus appear to be more a political show intended to irritate the United States in the contentious arena of the Middle East than a genuine bid to break and reconstruct, in its favor, a decades-old political order that was set by the Camp David treaty, to which Egypt, Israel and the United States all remain firmly committed. Additionally, the United States is a far more useful ally in Egypt's campaign against the growing domestic terrorist threat. In short, a strategic realignment involving Russia does not appear to be a geopolitical possibility or priority for Moscow – or, for that matter, Cairo either.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

US dilemmas

Nevertheless, this new dynamic pose challenges for the United States. For one thing, the developing relationship between al-Sisi and Putin is a warning sign for Arab liberals who wish to see more modern societies with democratic and progressive systems that respect the right of peoples to choose their leaders and voice their opinions without fear of the government, a direction that the United States supports.

On the political-military front, the burgeoning relationship presents some potential policy difficulties for the United States. First, for example, it calls into question whether the United States can fully count on the Egyptian government to furnish reliable access to the Suez Canal and Egyptian airspace should another major conflict arise in the Middle East, especially one that might conflict with Russian interests, as for example in a conflict with Iran, with which Russia has an arms supply relationship. Second, does the apparent malleability of Egypt's great power allegiances affect its global role, such as providing military support in campaigns that might run counter to Russian allies – as it did in the Gulf war against Iraq in 1991. Finally, to what extent might Russia influence Egypt's policy choices, whether intervention in Libya, political choices on Syria, friendliness toward western investments, and of course domestic human rights? All these will have an impact on US decision making and could also influence Europe's outlook on foreign policy toward Egypt as well.

What then should the US and Europe do?

Public political discourse, especially in the United States, frequently questions whether foreign powers have any influence over the actions of Egypt's government and whether it should exercise it if so. The answers to the question is, fundamentally, yes.

United States assistance, amounting to US\$ 1.5bn per year, mainly in Foreign Military Financing (grants to purchase weapons

systems, logistics and training), is a significant part of Egypt's foreign assistance and is irreplaceable when calculated in terms of Egyptian military needs. Egypt remains dependent on major US weapons systems for reasons of international prestige, particularly among its Arab neighbors, and specific military requirements, mainly in its war on terrorism within its own borders. As a result of the need for US arms, Egypt is also integrated into the logistics and training chains of the American military. None of this easily replaced by Russian weapons systems (which, as noted above, must be fully financed by the purchasing country or international benefactors, and the acquisition of which would cause problems of interoperability with existing systems and require extensive and expensive retraining).

As Harvard University professor H.A. Hellyer told *The Guardian*, “the main issue with arms deals with Russia is that this is primarily an American-built military and to change that would take substantial amounts of time and investment. If you're sitting in the Egyptian military, you want the best – which means you want US arms, not Russian. And for all their huffing and puffing, the Egyptian establishment wants to be a part of the western axis”¹².

In addition, Egypt is sensitive to public criticism of its human rights policies, and has worked hard in Washington and international fora to counter it, not least because the perception of an environment hostile to civic and political liberties, with its linkage to instability, can affect the climate for foreign investment and the tourism industry.

All this bestows significant influence on the US government and military, which can and should use its voice to push back against the steady authoritarian escalation in the country. Preventing Egypt from a deeper slide into repression and instability, as well as entering into a closer relationship with a

¹² “Vladimir Putin's Egypt visit sends message to US”, *The Guardian*, 9 February 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/09/vladimir-putin-egypt-visit-message-us-russia>.

problematic power such as Russia, is strongly in US and European interests.

With this mind, the following policy recommendations should be applied.

- **First**, the United States must initiate a conversation with Cairo about where it wants to be counted in the international order. Does al-Sisi primarily identify with Putin's Russia, and its repressive impulses, or does it continue to see its core interests lying primarily with the United States and the West? This is a conversation that has not yet taken place, in part because the United States does not want to disturb the bilateral relationship by challenging basic verities as understood since the 1970s. It is, however, exactly the type of conversation that needs to happen. One focus should be the arms-deal discussions that Russia and Egypt have been undergoing, and what major arms purchases from Russia might mean for the US military relationship with Cairo.
- **Second**, the United States needs to review its security and economic relationship with Egypt, given the drift in bilateral ties and the apparent wandering of Cairo's political allegiances. Whether the United States needs to continue placing US\$ 1.5bn per year into security assistance and economic aid to ensure the stability of the relationship is very much an open question. The package, including its political dimensions, should be reviewed carefully to ensure that they serve both US interests and the interest of the Egyptian people in steady but stable political reform.
- **Third**, the United States and the European Union must come together to harmonize policies on the approach to Egypt, specifically on civic and political rights. After the verdict on the "foreign funding" case involving international NGOs in 2013, the European Parliament was much stronger in condemning the outcome than was the US Government. US and EU leaders should have a frank conversation about joint goals in moving the country toward positive political change, then enact practical diplomatic policies to move toward that

goal. Such an approach would help to check Russian ambitions in the region.

- **Fourth**, the United States should discuss with its Persian Gulf allies how they see Egypt integrated into the regional order. Much has changed since the overthrow of Mubarak in 2011, and certain Gulf countries have financed and supported al-Sisi's Egypt in an apparent attempt to remake it into a client state. The United States must review with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, among others, the dimensions of what appear to be emerging political arrangements in the region to ensure that joint political-military interests are protected. This would necessarily include a frank discussion of Egypt's relations with Russia, the intensification of which would ultimately run counter to Gulf interests.
- **Finally**, the United States should review its broader relationship with Russia, which, as in Europe, remains tense and difficult. Russian sponsorship of Syria's Assad is a point of tactical conflict; Moscow's willingness to sell advanced S-300 anti-aircraft missiles to Iran is another. Egypt is a factor in this strategic game. The United States, as it is doing in Ukraine, should explore cooperation with Europe to prevent Russia from outflanking western powers who are concentrating for the most part on Russia's threats to their own continent. Greater US and allied involvement in Syria would be one way to confuse Russia's strategic intentions in the region; engaging Egypt on human rights issues, and holding them accountable, would be another.

Conclusion

Russia is playing a strategic game with the United States and Europe on a variety of fronts, including the Middle East. Egypt has emerged as a pawn in this attempt. While there are real interests that Cairo and Moscow share, several of which run counter to US policy preferences, this is unlikely to involve a genuine geopolitical struggle between the United States and

Russia for diplomatic and military alliance with Egypt. It is, nonetheless, a development that has forced new uncertainties into US policy toward the Middle East. Addressing these uncertainties will require some US-European agreement on how to engage Egypt on its human rights issues and the broader questions of the instability Cairo's policies currently promote.

A more pragmatic and forceful approach to Egypt by western powers, coupled with energetic efforts to parry Russian ambitions in the Middle East (particularly in Syria), would reinforce the current political/diplomatic order in the region, in which Egypt continues to play a part.

6. Common Interests and Different Visions: Policy Implications for EU and Italy

Hélène Michou, Stefano M. Torelli

The last chapter of this report is aimed at analyzing the current relationship between Egypt and the EU and at identifying issues of common interest which could present opportunities for strategic collaboration. The last few years since the 2011 uprisings have entrenched a broad disconnect between Egypt's "status quoist" policies and Europe's apparent support for processes of democratic transition. Whilst both share concerns regarding security in the Mediterranean region, spillover from neighbouring conflicts, and promoting economic ties, Europe continues to face accusations of incoherence between its pledges and its practices.

How, then, to reconcile a European policy in the Mediterranean able to involve Egypt as a reliable partner and, at the same time, to ensure the promotion of essential European values in the field of civil and political rights? Where and how can the EU act to incorporate Egypt into a process of regional integration and cooperation on issues of shared importance? How can the EU deal with its loss of leverage in Egypt and in the region as a whole? Will heads of member states continue to look the other way as private sector bilateral deals are signed with a military regime systematically targeting the rights of Egyptian citizens? For European policy makers these issues raise further questions related to broader foreign policy strategy, commitment to deeper democracy, and the kind of relationship we want to maintain with Egypt.

Far from providing definitive answers to these policy matters, the first part of the chapter tackles these issues through an analysis of the extent to which both Egypt and the EU are foregoing legitimacy at home and on the international stage in the pursuit of bilateral interests. Mutual concerns regarding extremism, the crisis in Libya, economic cooperation and immigration are placed against the incumbent normative framework for bilateral relations, the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP). We look at the re-think currently surrounding this approach and ask whether a more honest acceptance of crises on all sides shouldn't merit a bolder return to the drawing board. The second part of the chapter looks at bilateral relations between Italy and Egypt. Indeed, Rome has in some ways a 'special' relationship with Cairo. Italy is the first commercial partner of Egypt among European countries and Prime Minister Matteo Renzi is always keen to stress the importance of the relationship with Egypt. At the end of each part, the chapter offers some policy recommendations for Europe and specifically for Italy.

EU and Egypt: towards a long-run policy?

There is a two-way backsliding happening with regard to Europe's relationship with Egypt. As strongman Abdel Fattah al-Sisi is welcomed open-armed in European capitals, as regional leaders flock to Cairo, and as foreign investments resume, observers could be forgiven for thinking that Egypt is 'back to normal'. Problems arise however when this return to 'normal' is a policy of domestic repression dressed up as promotion of national stability. As Egypt comes full circle back to authoritarianism, Europe is also treading the wheel of past practices – reliance on strongmen due to a lack of political strength and strategic vision to support alternatives.

The main problem in defining a strategic approach towards Egypt and other countries of the southern Neighbourhood is that Europe's policy-makers have yet to engage in a bold, collective re-think on how to deal with rupture and crisis in the region. The ENP as it stands is more for the partners we would like than for

the neighbours we have. Whilst the ongoing revision of the ENP commissioned by Juncker goes some way towards addressing this disjuncture, it will need to be complemented by member state bilateral support and the political will to address sensitive issues such as migration flows.

This exercise is crucial to push back against the return to business as usual approach with Egypt, and equally to defining where interests converge. At stake is not only the management of pressing issues such as regional security threats and migration flows, but more importantly longer-term issues such as regional development and Europe's credibility as a promoter of normative values at home and abroad.

Fighting terrorism: a convenient smokescreen

The principal selling point of Egyptian strongman Abdel Fattah al-Sisi to sponsors in Washington – and to a certain extent in European capitals – is that only he and his military-backed regime can end the threat from Islamic extremists and prevent his country of 90 million people from becoming a failed state. He has only to point to neighbouring Libya or nearby Yemen to drive his message home. But almost two years since the former general's bloody coup against a democratically elected government, the facts are undeniable: Egypt is becoming steadily more violent and unstable¹.

Al-Sisi and his cabinet, governing by decree in the absence of an elected parliament, have overseen two years of near total impunity for security force abuses and issued a raft of laws that have severely curtailed civil rights, limited political space, and effectively erased important gains of the 2011 uprising that ousted Mubarak. Much of this has been carried out under the banner of fighting Islamist extremism and terrorism, two terms employed almost interchangeably by the regime.

¹ "Egypt: Year of Abuses Under al-Sisi", *Human Rights Watch*, 8 June 2015, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2015/06/08/egypt-year-abuses-under-al-sisi>.

For its part, the international community seems to be having trouble grasping that it has seen this dynamic play out many times before: a repressive regime breeds more violence. It is buying into a security narrative promoted by the very autocrats that it is struggling to deal with in other parts of the region. Although support for Egypt's struggle to contain incidents of extremist violence in the Sinai Peninsula is legitimate, accepting the regime's labelling of all dissidents as terrorists is not. Daesh jihadis and Muslim Brotherhood sympathisers are tarred with the same brush; given that Daesh is now among the top security concerns for nearly all main stakeholders, Cairo is able to "free-ride on the momentum of cooperation among major regional players" to promote its anti-Islamist security discourse². Similarly, cutting down on weapons smuggling does not justify the flattening of entire neighbourhoods or the eviction of vulnerable families to create a buffer zone with Gaza. Finally, the EU should recognize that the Egyptian state narrative of the war against terrorism is little more than a smokescreen for domestic repression, primarily aimed at the Muslim Brotherhood (declared a terrorist organization in December 2013) and its charitable affiliations, from NGOs to medical centres³. Along with biased media coverage, this fuels the damaging polarization within Egyptian society and moves the country increasingly away from any attempt at reconciliation, whether political or social.

Libya: Egypt is as much part of the problem as an eventual solution

The on-going conflict in Libya has been pitched by the Egyptian regime as part of its domestic battle against Islamist extremism. Whilst Egypt's border with Libya, over 1000 km long, is a

² K. Kausch, "Egypt: inside-out", *Geopolitics and Democracy in the Middle East*, FRIDE, July 2015, http://fride.org/download/Geopolitics_and_Democracy_in_the_Middle_East.pdf.

³ "Egypt: Terrorist Tag Politically Driven", *Human Rights Watch*, 28 December 2013, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/12/28/egypt-terrorist-tag-politically-driven>.

challenge in terms of controlling flows of migrants and weapons and working with Egypt will be necessary to move towards a solution in the messy civil conflict, this does not mean that Europe should necessarily settle on Egyptian-driven proposals for resolving matters. And whilst shared disquiet of the rise of the Islamic State and its encroaching regional footprint will require broad cooperation, it should not equate to unequivocal support for Egypt's regional strategy.

Regional dynamics favour a continuation of the war. Together with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt has conducted various air strikes in Libya and has provided arms to the Libyan National Army. To date Egypt has also engaged in diplomatic offensives at the UN to secure a mandate to intervene in the civil war and has lobbied hard for the arms embargo to be lifted on Libya (both these measures would merely allow al-Sisi's regime to legally continue its current policy of arms deliveries to Tobruk and air raids targeting Khaftar's forces). Egypt's strategy has failed to gain diplomatic footholds in the international community (unless of course we count al-Sisi accepting an offer from Moscow to share imagery from Russian satellites to help monitor the Libyan border).

For now the UN Special Representative (UNSR), Bernardino León, is holding out hope that another round of talks will lead to a power-sharing deal of sorts. Nine months of negotiations have seen León and UNSMIL (United Nations Support Mission in Libya) come up with five different draft agreements, none of which have been palatable to the warring factions engaged in a zero sum game⁴.

Whilst exiting this zero-sum dynamic will be key to longer-term stability, the complexity of achieving this, given the track record of negotiations so far and the regional context, should not be underestimated. Apart from France and Italy briefly wavering

⁴ For more on the main sticking points of various proposals to date, see M. Toaldo, "Can León achieve a limited agreement in Libya?", *Middle East Eye*, 5 July 2015, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/can-leon-achieve-limited-agreement-libya-493147980>.

in March 2015, member states have stood firm behind UNSR León's UN-led mediation efforts as the only solution to Libya's problems. Yet he also acknowledges that "without the right regional policy and local policy it will not be possible to help Libyans get out of this"⁵. Joint European and American push-back against interventionist strategies is a sign that whilst the international community is supporting a framework it is doing so in a void of regional policy.

Economic cooperation: arms up!

The international community has unfortunately made clear to al-Sisi that we are prepared to pay mere lip service to human rights as the flow of aid, arms deals and business agreements resumes. Like any strongman looking to shore up a shaky domestic hold with international approval, al-Sisi understands the resonance in Washington and Brussels of claiming to be on the right side of the struggle against jihadist terrorism – especially when these same actors are at a loss as to how to contain the spread of Daesh/Islamic State.

President Obama placed a tombstone on his lofty aspirations for the Arab Spring in March 2015 by restoring Egypt to its position as second largest recipient of foreign military financing (behind Israel) to the tune of US\$ 1.3bn, alongside the release of of specific military items and equipment withheld since October 2013 including a dozen F-16 fighter jets, replacement kits for 125 Abrams tanks, and 20 Harpoon missiles⁶.

As for the partial embargo on arms sales which the EU imposed on post-coup, post-Rabaa Egypt following the bloody August of 2013, the lack of precise conditions left member states free to resume controversial contracts and sales practically at their

⁵ Bernardino León, speaking at the 2015 US - Islamic World Forum, Qatar, 9 June 2015.

⁶ For more see T. Cofmann Wittes, "The politics of restoring Egypt's military aid", *The Washington Post*, 2 April 2015.

choosing. The UK for instance did not wait long, until November of that same year to be precise, before reviewing its export licenses to Egypt and lifting almost 30 items from suspension. Earlier this year oil company BP signed a deal to invest US\$ 12bn in Egypt. Al-Sisi's upcoming visit to the UK will undoubtedly see the further signing of lucrative deals in defence and economic cooperation⁷.

France signed, amongst others, a "military cooperation contract" in November 2014 and concluded the € 5.2bn deal in April 2015. President Hollande has failed to justify exactly how 24 Rafale fighter jets, air-to-air missiles and a naval frigate will contribute to the remaining vestiges of Egypt's democratic transition. In order to afford this deal, cash-strapped Egypt was offered a € 500mn down payment by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, whilst French banks loaned the remainder.

Not to be left out, Spain's right-wing government also invited al-Sisi on an official state visit to Madrid in early May 2015 and the following week announced the signing of a MoU in military cooperation. The Spanish government had previously suspended the concession of new licenses for arms sales to Egypt, but opted to not revoke current ones (worth € 50mn in 2012). Finally, in the face of stiff opposition another formal invitation was extended to Sisi by Germany's Chancellor Merkel⁸. During his visit to Berlin in June 2015 al-Sisi signed several energy agreements with multinational Siemens for a total of € 8bn⁹.

Given the resumption of many contracts and the signing of others, it is arguably too late to recommend member states to insist that the nature and extent of bilateral relations with Egypt going

⁷ In a show of spectacularly poor timing, British Prime Minister David Cameron invited al-Sisi on an official visit to the UK the day after former President Morsi's death sentence was announced by a Cairo court.

⁸ Joint Letter to Chancellor Angela Merkel Re: President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's Visit to Berlin, 1 June 2015, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2015/06/01/joint-letter-chancellor-angela-merkel-re-president-abdel-fattah-al-sisis-visit>.

⁹ For more see "Siemens signs 8 billion euro power deal with Egypt", *Reuters*, 3 June 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/06/03/siemens-egypt-power-idUSL5N0YP41Z20150603>.

forward should depend on the authorities taking concrete measures to end systematic violations of Egypt's obligations under international law as well as its own constitution of 2014. It may not be too late, however, to convey that longer-term deeper investment by public and private sectors should be pegged to tangible improvements in respect for due process and the opening of political space.

Migration: beyond the numbers

This year has seen the Mediterranean's worst year to date in terms of migrant deaths during attempted crossings. True to the fortress Europe mentality which is increasingly limiting the terms of the debate in Brussels, European leaders agreed in April 2015 to triple the funding for the bloc's search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean in a bid to curb the soaring number of migrants making the crossing to European shores. The new naval operation announced thereafter by EU foreign affairs chief Federica Mogherini, EUNAVFOR (European Union Naval Force) Med, will target the "business model" of smugglers and those who "benefit from the misery of migrants"¹⁰. The extent to which the identification, capture and disposal of vessels will be effective and what exactly is meant by targeting 'enabling assets' remains to be seen, as does a coherent proposal for dealing with migration at its source. Critics claim that the EU is simply throwing money at the problem rather than addressing root causes and working with regional actors to dismantle the networks of smugglers.

The other controversial policy proposal on the table is the quota system as part of the so-called European Agenda on Migration. In a domestic context where strong anti-immigration sentiment has helped fuel the rise of nationalist and often populist political movements in several member states, spreading the

¹⁰ For more information see Council of the EU, Press release, 22 June 2015, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2015/06/22-fac-naval-operation/>.

burden of crisis amongst countries has faced stiff opposition from the likes of Britain and Hungary. Paris and Berlin for their part want to “Europeanise” the registration and deportation of migrants, handing the powers to EU agencies. Within Europe further tensions are mounting between Italy on the one hand and France and Austria – which have closed their borders to stop migrants moving north – on the other. Questions of internal security controls, refugee registration, and freedom of movement also pose challenges to northern and southern member states seeking to reach a compromise.

The initial mandatory quota system proposed by the European Commission has since been shelved in the face of this opposition; a voluntary system will apply instead for 40,000 asylum seekers who will be relocated from Greece and Italy over the coming two years. At the time of writing the Commission was expected to reach a deal with member states by August regarding the specific distribution of these migrants (plus the resettlement of a further 20,000 refugees from outside the EU) based on criteria of population size, GDP, unemployment rate, and previous efforts made at resettling refugees¹¹.

Although both the quota system and the naval exercise represent an attempt at fresh thinking by policy-makers in Brussels, fortress Europe alone will not stem the flow of migrants seeking a better life on the other side of the Mediterranean. EU cooperation in economic projects in migrant home and transit countries can contribute to curbing the root causes, as can investment in key sectors at the source of migration flows, namely job creation, access to education, healthcare, and agriculture.

In terms of immigration, Egypt is host to limited flows of migrant workers, but rising numbers of refugees and asylum seekers. In addition to some 70,000 Palestinian refugees whose

¹¹ For the specific criteria contained in the distribution key that the Commission will use to establish a member state’s capacity to absorb and integrate refugees, see Annex - European schemes for relocation and resettlement, A European Agenda on Migration, 13 May 2015, http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/background-information/docs/communication_on_the_european_agenda_on_migration_en.pdf.

families arrived in the wake of the 1948 war, tens of thousands of refugees from Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia, as well as Iraq, Syria and Libya are now stranded in Egypt. Whereas Egypt has achieved high levels of institutionalization in its emigration policies, the institutional framework regulating its immigration apparatus remains frail¹². Temporary flows towards Arab countries have traditionally exceeded permanent flows to the US and Europe. Cooperation with Egypt regarding flows of refugees, human trafficking and other transnational crimes is key to the EU's relationship with this strategic nexus between the turbulent Middle East, Northern and Sub-Saharan Africa routes.

Taking a step back: Europe's foreign policy review

The on-going ENP review should be seen in the context of a broader review of the EU's foreign policy and its instruments. Many of the boats that have been missed over the past couple of years by the EU with regards to Egypt were not just ENP choices but rather, bigger foreign policy choices. This re-think is in large part a didactic exercise for the EU to begin accepting the reality that Europe is surrounded by long-term crises on all sides, and how to go about moulding new policies from this starting point¹³.

Europe finds itself understandably confused about how best to promote the objectives enshrined in the Lisbon Treaty. Instead of a ring of stable, prosperous democratic states following almost a decade of association agreements, special partnerships, and promotion of deeper democracy, Europe is surrounded by an arc of instability, civil conflicts, and sectarian violence. Somewhere a recalculation is called for. Namely, geographic proximity as a conditioning factor for a closer relationship is no longer necessarily the case. Nor should Europe take for granted that

¹² For more information see MPC Migration Profile: Egypt, Migration Policy Centre, European University Institute, June 2013, http://www.migrationpolicycentre.eu/docs/migration_profiles/Egypt.pdf.

¹³ N. Winney, S. Dennison, *Europe's Neighbourhood Crisis as the new normal*, ECFR Policy Memo, 23 June 2015, http://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/europes_neighbourhood_crisis_as_the_new_normal.

neighbouring states seek closer integration with the EU. The neighbourhood is increasingly crowded with actors who have equally if not more interesting offers for countries such as Egypt.

In this regard the Consultation paper released by the Commission and EU foreign affairs chief goes someway to an honest self-examination following 10 years of implementation of the policy, asking pertinent questions regarding the future direction of the ENP¹⁴. Amongst other issues, it considers whether a single framework should continue to cover both the east and south; whether the current geographical scope should be maintained or broadened, whether AAs (Association Agreements) and DCFTAs (Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements) are the right objective for all, and how we can boost empowerment of the younger generation economically, politically and socially.

An issue of interest that does not seem to feature in consultations to date is that of “conceptual confusion”¹⁵. How deep is European commitment to democratisation? How deep is our belief in the transformative power of our toolkit to achieve it? How far are we prepared to go in chastising other countries following democratic setbacks such as military coups? Are our attitudes to security as consistent as the US? The EU is often accused of being afraid to articulate its strategic priorities, and of being Janus-faced when it comes to rhetorical commitments to values contradicted by support for the undemocratic practices of authoritarian regimes. This disjuncture is accentuated by member state bilateral policies that prioritize cooperation in areas of security, economy and energy, preferring to focus on business opportunities rather than long-term stability. It could be argued that the ENP allows member states to pursue their bilateral business dealings whilst hiding comfortably behind the values-based ENP.

Policy makers claim the mood and moment is ripe in Brussels for ambitious re-thinking. Yet this may not be the case in member

¹⁴ Joint Consultation Paper, *Towards a new European Neighbourhood Policy*, 4 March 2015, <http://ec.europa.eu/enlargement/neighbourhood/consultation/consultation.pdf>.

¹⁵ N. Witney, S. Dennison (2015).

state capitals. A key challenge any revised ENP will face lies in getting buy-in from EU states for fundamental changes to the approach to the neighbourhood, as the immigration quota issue under discussion at the time of writing demonstrates. Grouping issues into baskets of thematic co-operation (for instance energy, migration, human trafficking etc.) with initiatives to be based on substance rather than geography is one of the options under discussion in the review and could be key to securing the buy-in of member states as well as the support of regional actors. That said, given how crowded the neighbourhood is getting in terms of other parties, Europe will have to consider the trade-offs it is prepared to make or politically willing to accept as an actor of secondary influence.

Policy recommendations for the EU: divergences and convergences

- The Egyptian government headed by President al-Sisi presides over the gravest human rights crisis in Egypt in decades. The EU must decide how it wishes to frame its dealings with Egypt post-roadmap. To date it has intentionally or otherwise endorsed the key stages of this so-called roadmap, without demonstrating sufficient concern for the context in which these procedures took place. Brussels and member states should stop overlooking Egyptian government abuses, including the lack of accountability for killings of protesters by security forces, mass detentions, military trials of civilians, hundreds of death sentences, and the forced eviction of thousands of families in the Sinai Peninsula. There has been no attempt on behalf of the Egyptian authorities at transitional justice or at conducting impartial investigations into excesses of power committed by law enforcement bodies during the key period of Egypt's problematic transition.
- The EU has various channels through which to engage the Egyptian authorities alongside efforts to support civil society initiatives. Both in public statements and closed-door bilaterals,

policy makers should be more vocal in condemning military trials for civilians¹⁶. European Union officials and member state representatives should make clear that the nature and extent of economic and political relations with Egypt going forward will depend on the Egyptian authorities taking prompt and concrete measures to put an end to government policies that systematically violate Egypt's obligations under international human rights law as well as the Egyptian Constitution of 2014. Whilst the constitution contains language that appears to protect free expression, peaceful assembly, and association, the actions of branches of state security and the judiciary have yet to demonstrate respect for these clauses, let alone submit to independent monitoring mechanisms.

- The question remains if al-Sisi is able and willing to slow domestic polarization by taking steps towards a more inclusive political contract, or whether terms such as 'reconciliation' and 'compromise', will remain dirty words in Egypt's politics. The al-Sisi regime must make a critical calculation as to how it will deal with the Brotherhood. It can either open the social and political arena, allowing for greater participation, or it can continue to increase repression, limit political space and inadvertently fuel potential violent outbreaks. As the Tunisian Minister of Education said in June 2015 at the US and Islam Global Forum in Doha, "after dangerous polarization we learnt to recognize each other and how to consider the other as Tunisian as me". Drafting a new social contract takes time; willingness to listen to diverse voices of civil society is key and the Egyptian regime is going the wrong way about winning the support of civil society actors.
- With every member state that welcomes al-Sisi with open arms, it becomes more difficult for the EU to retain its credibility as a norms and values actor in the region. Just as the US's resumption of military aid in the name of "national

¹⁶ For this and other suggested actions, see European Parliament resolution on the situation in Egypt, January 2015, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+MOTION+B8-2015-0026+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN>.

security” has damaged its claims that human rights were a priority concern for the United States, so the EU looks rather sheepish condemning the death penalty when a key member state extends an official invitations to al-Sisi the day after Morsi’s sentence is announced. Similarly, “supporting the Egyptian people in their struggle for a democratic inclusive transition” – a frequent sentence in communiqués – rings false when placed alongside a lack of concrete action to help secure the release of human rights defenders, civil society activists, and journalists.

- Whilst the EU continues to express concern at ongoing restrictions of fundamental democratic rights, notably the freedom of expression, association, assembly, political pluralism and the rule of law in Egypt, these statements are not often backed up by actions. The ban on arms sales imposed in August 2013 should be revisited with a view to extending it, given the behaviour of Egyptian security forces in the repression of peaceful protests. For their part member states should adhere to the global arms trade treaty approved at the UN General Assembly in April 2013 designed to ensure that states stop transferring arms to countries where it is likely they will be used for human rights abuses.
- With regards to the ongoing review of the ENP, prioritizing baskets of issues over countries per se because of geographic location would allow funds to be re-allocated from countries that have backtracked or remained at a standstill on rule of law and issues of due process such as Egypt. It would also be a subtle way of applying the less for less principle, which Europe seemingly can’t quite find the courage to do. The EU should consider applying the term ‘strategic side-lining’ in its revised ENP. This is not to say that many of the projects supported by the ENP are out of date or of questionable value; support for civil society and economic development lay the groundwork for future collaborations with critically engaged actors and should be maintained. Finally, an honest re-think may involve accepting that whilst we see compromise, tolerance and

cooperation as beneficial values for all, those who play the zero sum game in the region play by different rules: winning, exclusion, and holding on to power. “In ways we have largely forgotten about in Europe, nationalism and religion have reasserted themselves as some of the most powerful determinants of human behaviour” in the region¹⁷.

Italy towards Egypt: a ‘special relationship’ in the Mediterranean

In the broader framework of Mediterranean relations, the relationship between Italy and Egypt constitutes an important axis. Indeed, if Italy is trying to carve out a role in the Mediterranean, Egypt is seeking to regain central player status in the Middle East. In this context, bilateral cooperation might carry greater weight than it did just a few years ago. However, many of al-Sisi’s policies and positions since his seizure of power in July 2013 have clashed with Italian interests. On the basis of such considerations, the Italian government faces a difficult dilemma. On the one hand, it has to confront the need for good relations with one of the most important countries for the balance and stability of the whole of North Africa and the Near East. On the other, as a member state of a continent whose foreign policy is based on a normative framework, Italy should seek the channels through which to influence Egypt’s authoritarian practices, both in terms of domestic and regional policies.

In this regard, opportunities for positive aspects of cooperation and relations with Egypt entail mainly economic opportunities. Within the EU, Italy is the largest commercial partner of Egypt and ranks as the world’s first partner for Egyptian exports¹⁸. The Italian presence in Egypt does not only concern large national companies, such as energy and infrastructure companies, but also small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The latter notably

¹⁷ N. Witney, S. Dennison (2015).

¹⁸ Istat, 2014.

provide important models for the Egyptian business world, which appears able to benefit in terms of development. Italy's government attaches particular importance to bilateral relations with Cairo. Since 2014, Prime Minister Matteo Renzi and al-Sisi have had three meetings centered almost entirely on business opportunities and private sector cooperation. In March 2015 at Egypt's much trumpeted Sharm el-Sheikh international economic conference, Renzi was the only European head of government to personally participate.

Regarding security cooperation, relations have also been very intense, as seen by the visits of the highest representatives of Italian security forces to Egypt, especially to tackle the thorny issue of instability in Libya and the risk of spillover¹⁹. Support for a country as important as Egypt should represent a cornerstone of Italian policies in the Mediterranean, especially those aimed at involving southern partners to find effective regional solutions for the socio-economic crisis and broader instability across borders. Nonetheless, Italian cooperation should not unconditionally support the 'Sisi way' of resolving issues, and must instead push a long-term vision for sustainable political reform in Egypt. In this regard certain socio-political dynamics triggered by al-Sisi's government are not compatible with Italian long-term goals for a stable and secure Mediterranean: namely the security-driven approach that al-Sisi has adopted in his so-called roadmap, the exclusion of the Muslim Brotherhood and practically all opposition from the political process, the polarization of positions between the military and members of political Islam, the alignment with policies of Gulf monarchies (especially Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates), and the expansion of his fight against terrorism to Libya and the region.

Therefore, the priority for Italy is to help keep Egypt on what remains of its tracks of political transition and to avoid further regional destabilization which endanger Italian bilateral economic

¹⁹ See also "Libia, missione del governo italiano al Cairo: Minniti da al-Sisi", *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 19 February 2015.

interests. With this goal in mind, Rome should try to pursue certain objectives.

Policy recommendations for Italy: avoiding radicalization and improving economic support

- From the political point of view, and in line with other European players, Italy should pressure Egypt to abandon its ongoing exclusionary policies, in order to begin moving towards a more inclusive political process before the parliamentary elections. Tolerance and room for the participation of other stakeholders in Egypt is essential to preventing future waves of instability. Whilst inclusion of the Muslim Brotherhood in political dialogue is arguably too hasty, Egypt should be urged to re-examine certain laws aimed at entrenching the status quo. In particular, law 107/2013, which regulates public protests, gives security forces the right to suppress demonstrations of dissent and forbids gatherings of people in public places without prior authorization from the government²⁰.
- The potential radicalization of certain offshoots from Islamist movements will bring to bear on Egypt's internal security, as shown by the rise of jihadist groups, now mainly present in the Sinai Peninsula. It is important that Italy and its European partners avoid parroting the Egyptian narrative that all opposition is terrorism. Italy has a strong national presence on Egyptian territory: companies, diplomats and Italian tourists, especially on the coasts of the Red Sea²¹. Any joint policy against terrorism – identified as a threat to be eradicated both

²⁰ A full English translation of the law text could be found on <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/87375.aspx>.

²¹ At times of harsh conflict between jihadist groups and the Mubarak regime, tourist resorts on the Red Sea and the Egyptian archaeological sites were targets of numerous terrorist attacks causing dozens of victims among tourists of foreign nationality.

for Italy and for Egypt – must distinguish between jihadist cells and the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood, at the risk of encouraging the radicalization of disenfranchised elements. Moreover, in the Sinai Peninsula, the local population should be directly involved and their socio-economic grievances should be addressed.

- When it comes to security in the Mediterranean, alongside the fight against jihadi terrorism, an overarching Italian priority is the stabilization of Libya and the resolution of the current political stalemate. Doubtlessly Egypt is among the regional actors that will have to be involved in reaching a final deal in Libya's crisis. At the same time, however, it cannot be denied that Italy and Egypt have different interests and, consequently, different positions on the course of action needed to reach this deal. Cairo aims to extend its domestic repression of all elements related to political Islam, without distinguishing between jihadist forces and those affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood (as is the case – for the time being at least – of a part of the Tripoli-based government). For its part Italy has backed the UN-led process of political dialogue between the warring factions. Between these two positions there is potential room for Italy to carve out a role for itself bringing Egypt into the fold of international negotiations.
- At the regional level, Italian efforts should be directed at mending the differences between prominent actors in the Near East. The rift between Turkey and Egypt, for example, is one of the factors underlying Libya's stalemate²². Among European member states, Italy is historically one of the closest partners of Turkey and it has always expressed a position in favor of Turkey's accession to the EU. Rome has the capacity in terms of diplomacy to mediate a rapprochement between Turkey and Egypt. Such a step would be desirable, as it could help to solve some regional crises, first of all the one in Libya.

²² Indeed, it is widely recognized that Ankara is currently supporting the self-proclaimed government in Tripoli, while Egypt is a strong supporter of the Tobruk government and of the forces of General Haftar.

- The energy sector represents US\$ 1bn of Egyptian exports to Italy²³ and is potentially one of the most important for the development of Egypt. However, it suffers from severe structural and security problems. As a result of terrorist activities in the Sinai, the main eastward pipeline (Arab Gas Pipeline) is currently threatened, while constant attacks against infrastructure have undermined national export capacity²⁴. In addition to helping contain ad hoc attacks, Italy can play an important role in further developing Egypt's energy sector and in improving its efficiency. In particular, ENI (the largest foreign company in the Egyptian energy sector) has signed agreements with the Egyptian government to conduct operations in Sinai, the Nile Delta, the Gulf of Suez and the Mediterranean for a total value of US\$ 5bn over the next five years²⁵. Italian government support for the activities of national energy companies in Egypt should ideally be pegged to concrete political and economic reforms of the Egyptian authorities aimed at opening up their markets, attracting FDI (Foreign Direct Investment), and supporting domestic SMEs.
- Regarding the thorny issue of immigration, in recent months, the EU and Italy have repeatedly called for a solution to the Mediterranean crossings that directly involve southern partners. Egypt is an active partner in the Khartoum process, launched in Rome in 2014²⁶. This initiative could provide the

²³ Istat, 2014.

²⁴ See for example "Islamic State blows up natural gas pipeline in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula", *Jihad Watch*, 1 June 2015, <http://www.jihadwatch.org/2015/06/islamic-state-blows-up-natural-gas-pipeline-in-egypts-sinai-peninsula>.

²⁵ "Eni signs heads of agreement with Egypt worth US\$ 5bn over four-five years", *Reuters*, 14 March 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/03/14/us-egypt-economy-investment-eni-idUSKBN0MA0B920150314>.

²⁶ The process, also known as "EU-Horn of Africa Migration Route Initiative", was launched in Rome on 28 November 2014. The main goal of the initiative is to develop cooperation at bilateral and regional level between countries of origin, transit and destination to tackle irregular migration and criminal networks, as could be seen in the Declaration of the Ministerial Conference of the Khartoum Process. The full text of the declaration could be found on http://www.esten.it/mae/approfondimenti/2014/20141128_political_declaration.pdf. The first Steering Committee Meeting of the EU-Horn of African Initiative, attended by the

framework for implement new migration policies by directly involving the southern countries. Egypt is one such transit countries for refugees fleeing Syria who then continue to Libya before sailing northbound towards Italian coasts. Involving Egypt in any political solution to migration flows will be crucial, though European partners should keep in mind the regime's security-narrative as a smokescreen for domestic repression when defining the parameters of any such deal.

- Indeed, the proposal to set up refugee camps in countries of the southern Mediterranean should be accompanied by assurances that refugees will be guaranteed full rights within these structures. Such guarantees could only come about with a change in current Egyptian policy and with stricter independent oversight of the security services. Reports of ill-treatment and abuse of migrants by traffickers, especially in the Sinai, are common²⁷. These violations often occur with the complicity of Egyptian officials, which in turn reminds us that security sector reform and tackling corruption remain prominent issues in Egyptian domestic reforms.
- Finally, the issue of immigration is also linked to that of internal security in Egypt itself. If the political and security context remains unstable in the medium-long term it is possible that this can lead to new migration flows from Egypt. To avoid such a scenario, Italy and other EU member states must refrain from a continuation of their 'back to normal' policies with the Egyptian regime and must push for a shift towards a more inclusive political process.

International Organization for Migration (IOM), was held right in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, on May 2015 with the participation of five African countries (Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, South Sudan and Sudan), and five EU member states (France, Germany, Italy, Malta and the UK).

²⁷ "I Wanted to Lie Down and Die. Trafficking and Torture of Eritreans in Sudan and Egypt", *Human Rights Watch*, February 2014, <http://www.hrw.org/report/2014/02/11/i-wanted-lie-down-and-die/trafficking-and-torture-eritreans-sudan-and-egypt>.

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