

HAZEM KANDIL

*Interview*

SISI'S EGYPT

A. THE NEW REGIME

*In the spring of 2011, you gave us a memorable interview on the situation soon after the fall of Mubarak. Since then, you've published three books on different aspects of Egyptian society and history.<sup>1</sup> Sisi has now been in power, de facto and de jure, for over three years. How far has his record in office conformed to or confounded your expectations at the point when Morsi was overthrown?*

**T**HE REGIME IS still in a state of formation. It remains fluid and we do not know yet how it will consolidate itself. There are two main issues here. One is the political institutionalization of the Sisi regime. Since Nasser's time, Egyptian presidents have always relied upon a single party that organizes state control over trade unions, universities and the media, while also managing a vast patronage network in the bureaucracy, the legal system and the Egyptian countryside. This party had different names, from Nasser to Mubarak, but the President usually sat at its apex and governed through it. One of the consequences of the 2011 revolt has been the release of the old-regime political network from that institutional setting: the ruling party has been dissolved, and the old network has discovered a way to function without necessarily working together in a formal institutional setting. This makes them less identifiable as the source of all evils in the Egyptian political system, and also gives them greater flexibility. As a result, when the moment came for them to contemplate joining together in a single party once more, they chose not to do so. Rather, they have been operating in politics—and especially in the Egyptian parliament—through a

number of smaller parties or as independents, and in the ambit of various electoral coalitions.

Sisi, on the other hand, has also broken with the pattern established since the days of Nasser, by deciding to work through the presidency alone. Nasser attempted to do this at the very beginning of his reign, boosting the role of the presidency and making it an institution in its own right, but he changed course from 1962 onwards. Sisi has said that he will not form a ruling party or be the head of a party. He believes in the idea of a presidency that will direct a cabinet of technocrats implementing his will, with directions flowing from the top; that cabinet and its executive decisions should be approved by his allies and supporters in Parliament, but not in a systematic way. Over the past three years, there has been constant tension between these two wings. Sisi attempted to reform the civil service and shrink the bureaucracy, which would reduce the power of the old-regime network within that structure; he did this by presidential decree, awaiting the approval of the new Parliament once it had been elected and had started to exercise its legislative powers. But Parliament then set about trying to stall the civil-service reform, first by rejecting it outright, then by unpicking it. There have been a number of cases, in terms of both political changes and economic policy, where it is obvious that control has been decentred, and things do not flow as smoothly as they did before. It remains to be seen what this decentring of political power will lead to. A number of people believe that it will enable them to secure greater concessions—especially if we recall that many of those in the old-regime networks are businessmen, often with regional and international alliances; they think they can be a kind of aspirant bourgeois oligarchy, working separately from the head of state, while securing concessions from Sisi over time. Another view is that Sisi will consolidate power and realize, as Nasser did, that he needs to have institutional control over the political organs if he is to govern without any kind of obstruction (a better term than opposition, I believe).

In addition to this, the second question that has to be resolved is the security aspect. At the beginning of the revolt, my analysis was that the military had been marginalized in many ways during the period leading

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<sup>1</sup> Hazem Kandil, 'Revolt in Egypt', NLR 68, March–April 2011; *Soldiers, Spies and Statesmen: Egypt's Road to Revolt*, London and New York 2012; *Inside the Brotherhood*, Cambridge 2015; *The Power Triangle: Military, Security and Politics in Regime Change*, Oxford 2016.

up to 2011, but especially in terms of its role in domestic repression. Since the war of 1967, military police and intelligence had no longer been responsible for dealing with Egyptian dissidents and maintaining control on the home front; it was State Security, the Interior Ministry and the civilian intelligence services that played the major role there. After 2011, the military began to increase its role in this field, and attempted to rein in State Security; there were a few skirmishes in the first two or three months of the revolt. However, the fact that they found it very difficult to stabilize the situation to their liking led to a tactical alliance between military and security institutions, which remains in place today. For the first time since the 1960s, there has been a decentring of repression in Egypt. When people are locked up or disappear altogether, rumours abound: was this person taken to Military Intelligence or State Security? Was it the military police or the central-security riot police that were responsible? Once again, as Nasser had realized after 1967, it is quite difficult to manage things when you have two different kinds of institutions carrying out the same function of domestic repression without much coordination between them. Security becomes a much blunter instrument than is required for regimes that want to create a more stable mode of authoritarian rule. These two questions—how political power and state repression are going to be organized—remain open. This is a fluid situation which cannot last for very long.

*Does it follow from this that, in comparison with the Sadat and Mubarak regimes, and indeed with much of Nasser's time in power, the Egyptian Army now occupies a far more central and much less contested role in the system of power?*

There is no question that the military has returned in force to the heart of the regime, in ways that are causing all kinds of tension. In the presidency, of course, Sisi has surrounded himself with former military men, just as Nasser did; these men left their Army posts very recently, and still have close ties with the military. In security, as we have seen, the Army has resumed its old role in domestic surveillance and repression, while in the economic field, after years of privatization and economic restructuring under the old regime, we now have a hybrid economy in which major state-run projects are largely controlled and coordinated by the military. There is still a very strong private sector in the hands of the neoliberal capitalist class that grew up under Sadat and Mubarak. So while the military is returning to these three areas—politics, security

and the economy—in contrast to the situation in the 1950s, there are already powerful established interests that are not simply going to abandon these fields and hand them over to the military.

*In your new book, you suggest that the security apparatus was by this time intervening in political life in a much more direct manner than before, involving itself in parliamentary management, as a kind of monitor.<sup>2</sup> Is it correct to say that while the police have now lost some of their power in relation to the military, they have in fact gained in relation to the political system?*

In the parliamentary elections, we saw again this competition between the presidency, now very close to the Army, and the security services. The President, on the one hand, gave his blessing to an electoral list with the kitsch name, ‘In Egypt’s Love’. He assigned leadership of this conglomerate to a former general, who has since been replaced by another former general. Its purpose was to organize the supporters of the President, an eclectic mixture of independent parliamentarians, former opposition leaders, intellectuals, journalists, and some people who had been close to the old-regime networks and were looking for a new master to serve. On the other hand, within the offices of State Security and Intelligence, other electoral zones have been organized to make sure that some of the important old-regime figures were voted back in. Many of the businessmen, bureaucrats and politicians who served under Mubarak—some even going back as far as Sadat—were returned to Parliament. The security apparatus is much closer to the old-regime networks—they have developed and evolved together over the space of three decades—than to the presidency and its heterogeneous assemblage of supporters. The people who coalesced in the ‘Egypt’s Love’ list have not worked together for very long, so all kinds of haphazard statements come out, and all manner of squabbles erupt into public view. The old-regime networks operate in a far more cohesive and systematic fashion.

*Sisi now appears to have accumulated more power than his predecessors Sadat or Mubarak. What explains such a rapid ascent?*

Whenever people talk about Sisi, they always mention his background in Military Intelligence, but I think this is misplaced, because he was not

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<sup>2</sup> *The Power Triangle*, pp. 348–9.

a career officer in this section. He was trained within the infantry and rose through it, becoming very close to Mubarak's long-time Defence Minister and Commander-in-Chief, Mohamed Hussein Tantawi. Well before the fall of Mubarak, Sisi was seen as Tantawi's protégé and right-hand man. People referred to him as Tantawi's surrogate son. That was how he came to be the head of Military Intelligence in January 2010, only one year before the revolt, an appointment designed to smooth his passage into the Defence Ministry when Tantawi retired. Within the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) that controlled Egypt after Mubarak was ousted, Tantawi and Sisi held a lot of sway. It's sometimes thought that after Morsi became President in the summer of 2012, he conducted a great reshuffle of military appointments; in fact, most of the senior officers ended up in jobs they would eventually have occupied under Mubarak. Sisi was the least surprising of them. He represented, above all, institutional continuity with the Mubarak regime.

*Did the responsibilities of Military Intelligence include domestic surveillance, or was it geared solely towards keeping tabs on foreign armies?*

No, it was directed towards intelligence-gathering on armies outside Egypt, but it was also an important way to build alliances with foreign governments. One of the keys to Sisi's career was his posting at one stage as military attaché to Saudi Arabia. Officers in Military Intelligence play an important role in forging links within other states over questions like weapons procurement and strategic coordination—that includes the US and the Gulf monarchies, of course.

*Does that mean there is no established hierarchy of positions in the Egyptian military? Normally, the Chief of Staff would be the most important figure in the Army, while the head of Military Intelligence would be quite marginal. There was no sense among Egypt's officer corps that Sisi was an upstart who had jumped the queue?*

In an authoritarian regime, where visibility to the President and proximity to affairs of state is very important in advancing your career, becoming head of Military Intelligence moves you very close to political power, because you end up briefing the President on so many matters. Usually the individual who takes that route is making their way towards a higher position. Under Mubarak, this was Omar Suleiman, who was the czar of

Military Intelligence before moving across to civilian intelligence as he became more involved in relationships with Israel and the US, playing a crucial part in the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations, renditions, counter-terrorism and so on. He was the figure whom Mubarak picked as his Vice-President after the uprising began in 2011. So by placing Sisi in Military Intelligence, Tantawi probably expected he would be more likely to inherit the Defence Minister role than other officers.

*Still, to become Defence Minister, Sisi had first to be hastily promoted in rank to Lieutenant-General, and then, to become President, levitated to Field Marshal without ever having known a day of combat experience—did that raise no eyebrows?*

There is a story about Nasser's contemporary, General Amer, who was, I believe, the first Egyptian to receive the rank of Field Marshal. He had served very briefly and in a very minor role in the war against Israel in 1948. When Montgomery came back to Egypt to celebrate the battle of El Alamein, he is said to have been introduced to 'Field Marshal Amer', only to ask, 'Which field?' In the case of Sisi, the joke would be even more cutting. The title was, of course, designed to boost his symbolic status in the armed forces, in the risky move of becoming President of Egypt. I do not think his reluctance to do so was entirely feigned, since there was a real calculation to be made here. After the decision was taken to oust Morsi, would it be better to put in place a pliable civilian president—someone like Amr Moussa, who had been Mubarak's foreign minister—leaving the Army as the power behind the throne, as in the erstwhile Turkish model? Under that arrangement, the smart move would be to remain in the military, because that would be the real bastion of power. There was a risk for Sisi in occupying the presidency because he would no longer be part of the Armed Forces. For sociologically speaking, as I've argued, once you move to another institution, you become part of that institution, and your primary concern becomes how to make your new institution successful. Of course, Sisi still maintains strong relations with the military. But he now has to think about how to strengthen his own hand and bolster his support among the Egyptian population, in ways that do not always suit the military very well. For example, the Army has probably been made to carry more of an economic burden than it would wish for, to further Sisi's political objectives.

*What of other current ornaments of the regime? Defence Minister Sobhy—how did he get there?*

He was made Chief of Staff under Morsi, but very little is known about his record there. Anecdotally, he has been described as a very tough disciplinarian, someone respected and feared within the armed forces, in many ways Sisi's equal. When the Military Council met for several hours over the decision that Sisi should resign from the Army and stand for President, Sobhy was moved up to the Defence Ministry as a counterpart. Nowadays he says nothing in public that would contradict Sisi's policies or statements, but hearsay would have it that he occupies a position of power within the Army as strong as Sisi's in the political system. So the relationship between Sobhy and Sisi is not at all like that of Tantawi with Mubarak. It's more like the relationship that Abu Ghazala had with Mubarak, which is that of two power players with overlapping yet independent bases of support. Sobhy is not perceived as an obedient tool of Sisi's, and it's sometimes wondered whether he is entirely happy with what Sisi is doing. While he makes many public appearances, most of those are briefings of fellow officers, or inspections of military projects; he doesn't try to reach out to the Egyptian people.

*The Chief of Staff, Mahmoud Hegazy, is related to Sisi—his daughter is married to Sisi's son. Does he owe his elevation to that?*

Hegazy took Sisi's place as the head of Military Intelligence in the same Morsi reshuffle that promoted Sisi to Defence Minister and Sobhy to Chief of Staff in August 2012. He then became Chief of Staff when Sobhy moved into the Defence Ministry and Sisi left to run for President, in the spring of 2014. This was perhaps a personal guarantee for Sisi, making it easier for him to move on—since, formally speaking, the Chief of Staff has more direct control over the field armies than the Defence Minister, so would be the key figure in the event of a coup. But in practice, the Defence Minister has ever since Nasser's day always had more sway over the armed forces. It's not like the situation in the US, where the Chief of Staff is the formal head of the Army, while the Secretary of Defence represents the President. In Egypt, the Defence Minister remains the pre-eminent figure in the armed forces. The Chief of Staff is still a very important position, but it's number two.

*The current Minister of the Interior, Magdy Abdel Ghaffar, comes from the innermost core of the secret police—is that new?*

No, the notorious Habib el-Adly, who was Interior Minister for fourteen years under Mubarak, was from the same Special Investigations apparatus (renamed State Security in the 1970s and National Security after 2011). After Mubarak's fall, there was an attempt to weaken the role of State Security in domestic repression, the military hoping that its own intelligence service would now play a more significant role in maintaining control. Morsi appointed Mohamed Ibrahim as Interior Minister, a figure who came from one of the very minor branches of the police, the prison wardens. There was an irony there, of course, in the Muslim Brothers selecting somebody who knew them as prisoners at close quarters, to fill that position. The move was seen as an attempt to pick someone from the periphery of the security system, who had not gone through the networks at the centre of it, though his subsequent actions proved how little difference this made. But certainly his replacement by Ghaffar, a long-standing State Security officer, is a signal of the continuing influence of the security system within the regime. Ghaffar is a much more powerful figure. Unlike his two predecessors, he is a man of few words and rarely appears in public. He is cast in the mould of Omar Suleiman, a sphinx-type figure—whenever he makes any statements, they are carefully prepared, very short and to the point. But he is far more ruthless than any of his predecessors.

*How many of the current batch of provincial governors have been recruited directly from the Army?*

Previously there were at least as many former police commanders serving as governors as there were Army veterans. In the last round of appointments, the balance may have tilted slightly towards the military. The number of former generals in such positions is often taken as evidence of the Army's great political reach, but this is misleading. Those who get these jobs, whether they come from the Army or the security forces or other fields, like university administration, see them as perks acquired towards the end of a career. Once you become a governor, however, you are no longer an officer or a policeman, you occupy a political role, and start to think of yourself as a political figure. Your next thought becomes: if I succeed in the job, might I get a safe seat in Parliament, or could I become a minister? Will I be appointed as an adviser of some kind to the



President, or become his special envoy in the future? Also, governors have to grapple with all kinds of technical and practical questions, and often call on the military for help with infrastructural challenges. There was a governor of Alexandria who came from an Army background but had gained a certain popularity in his new role. When he pressured the Army to be more helpful in dealing with floods that strained the sewage system, tensions arose. This led to all kinds of problems, because the military had other priorities, and saw him as a would-be politician who was trying to bolster his own position.

## B. THE PRESIDENT

*How would you describe Sisi's style and search for popularity in power?*

Sisi's image changed very quickly after he became President, from a figure who was seen by many as silent and wise, holding his cards quite close to his chest, into a personality relying mostly on rhetoric, with little to offer beyond it. So popular feelings towards Sisi have thus moved from an early belief that here was someone with very concrete plans to reshape government and solve the country's problems, if only he was given a chance, to a perception of him as a necessary evil holding the state together, lest it unravels under the weight of its various power struggles and foreign conspiracies. In short, Sisi's image has changed from that of a man of destiny with all the right answers, to that of a very small dyke against a potentially devastating flood that might overflow the state. Against the background of what is happening in Arab countries, people worry that the state could fall apart.

*What accounts for this deterioration in his standing?*

Sisi improvises most of his speeches, and in trying to simplify matters to reach the ordinary citizen, often ends up with incredibly vapid platitudes that invariably invite ridicule. None of his predecessors were like that. Nasser and Sadat had a very good command of the Arabic language, which Sisi does not. They also usually had pretty clear policies that their rhetoric was meant to serve, which allowed people to understand which way the wind was blowing. Mubarak didn't have the same grasp of Arabic, something that matters a lot to Egyptians. He usually stuck to written statements, and would very rarely go off-script; when he did, it

would be to deliver some kind of informal quip or joke, then go straight back to the text. Sisi, on the other hand, seems to float on random gusts of rhetoric reflecting his mood or whims at any given moment, rather than indicating any significant change of policy, or paving the way for something new. Opening an electric power station in the south of the country, for example, he suddenly began complaining that Egypt had always enjoyed a very cold peace with Israel, called for a warmer peace, and hoped that the Israeli authorities would relay his message to its citizens. It looked as if this was going to be the announcement of some kind of diplomatic initiative or campaign to change Egypt's relationship with Israel. But nothing came out of it—it just vanished into thin air, leaving observers bewildered.

Another example led to a small diplomatic fiasco soon afterwards. Sisi was in Sharm El Sheikh, meeting with young people, and not even on-stage, but he demanded the microphone and lectured Egyptians on how to be more patient and less greedy, then swore—invoking the divine name—that for ten years he had only had water in his refrigerator. Then he added, 'Although I come from a very rich family'—which everyone knows he doesn't, and Sisi often makes much of. Now if somebody said that they only had water in their fridge for a month, they would merely be lying, but if they say they only had water in there for ten years, what kind of fantasizing is that? Shortly afterwards, at a meeting of the Islamic Conference in Tunisia, the head of the Saudi delegation, referring to the Tunisian President Essebsi, misspoke and said 'Sisi' instead. Whereupon he joked to Essebsi: 'This was a grave mistake, Mr President, because surely you have more in your fridge than water.' The Egyptian Foreign Ministry demanded an apology, and Saudi Arabia replaced the head of its delegation to that particular meeting, with the result that Sisi has become an object not just of domestic, but regional and international mockery. You couldn't imagine Nasser, Sadat or Mubarak in such a silly situation. So very quickly, between 2013 and 2016, Sisi has gone from appearing to be a serious leader, a man with solutions to the country's problems, to becoming a source of amusement.

*Has this flakiness affected the presentation of actual policies?*

Yes, also leading to ridicule on the economic front. Thus in one speech he told listeners that people speak on the phone a lot, and asked every

Egyptian to donate a pound to the country's development fund each day instead of topping up their phone account, proffering some calculations on the hoof, while he was delivering the speech, of what a mighty sum that would amount to. On another occasion, he proposed that banks seize what he called 'loose change' from bigger transactions and use it for a development fund, with another wild impromptu calculation that this would save the country millions of pounds. Not only were these flights of fancy ridiculous, but they led some to think that Sisi had decided not to accept a loan from the IMF, that he was unwilling to remove petrol subsidies or float the national currency—in other words that he was preparing, like Nasser, to create some kind of self-sufficient national economy. A few weeks later, he accepted the loan, floated the currency and scrapped the subsidies. So his rhetoric is now seen as completely divorced from policy statements, and has become a source of popular amusement. That said, many are still clutching at him as the last straw against the probability of chaos engulfing the state—as they did, in one way or another, with Nasser and Sadat and Mubarak before him. Egyptians have been asking themselves the question, 'Who else?', for a very long time.

*How does the record of repression under Sisi compare with that of his predecessors?*

The intensity of repression is in a number of ways very reminiscent of the pattern under Nasser. To begin with, there is the institutional duplication of the bodies responsible: both civilian and Military Intelligence, State Security and the police, as was the case under Nasser. Secondly, there is the thoroughness of repression, especially directed against the Muslim Brotherhood—the idea of eradicating an entire movement is the same under Sisi. Of course, the major difference is that Nasser was trying to construct an alternative that would engage the passion of ordinary people and channel Egyptian patriotism. In those days, even people on the receiving end of his repression often felt strongly committed to Nasser's project; the Communists who were imprisoned under his regime remained lifelong Nasserites, both while they were in his jails and after they were released, under Sadat. This is an asset Sisi's regime does not possess. The only feelings which he can appeal to are fear and insecurity—the idea that if you look at Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya, state collapse is a real possibility. Under Nasser, the message was always: look

at the kind of state that we're trying to build. Under Sisi, it has been reduced to saying 'we have to preserve whatever remains of the state, to avert complete disaster'. So he harps a lot on the strings of foreign conspiracy, social disorder and so on.

The repression of Sadat and Mubarak was quite different, as both leaders wanted to present themselves as tolerant of a limited form of democracy. Sadat did allow a certain opposition from leftists, liberals and Islamists. He would get very angry when it got out of control, but for much of the time he sought to co-opt and manipulate rather than repress them directly, only turning against them all towards the end of his regime, in the final years of his life. Mubarak played a subtler game: he believed in safety valves, in controlling rather than stifling politics altogether. He would allow protests within universities, after 2003 in particular, and also outside the campuses if they were on foreign-policy issues. There was a protest in Tahrir Square against the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, and later there were demonstrations in downtown Cairo against the Israeli attack on Lebanon in 2006. On the other hand, he would clamp down harshly on anything like the youth movement of 6 April 2008 that tried to link up with factory workers. But he did allow a number of private media channels, talk shows and newspapers, and a certain measure of controlled criticism. Civil society became a proxy for political activism for those seeking change under Mubarak, when all kinds of groups sprang up. Even if they were sometimes closed down or lost their funding, it was possible for them to exist.

The lesson that the regime learnt in 2011—not confined to Sisi as President—was that Mubarak had been wrong to think that he could manage opposition and control dissent in this fashion. Rather, it was necessary to close down all forms of opposition, whether in civil society, the media, the universities or anywhere else. So in contrast to the situation under Sadat or Mubarak, there are no longer any safety valves. And the forms of repression are not only far more intense than under Sadat or Mubarak, but in effect probably much harsher than under Nasser, because the regime offers no positive vision for people to engage with.

*In quantitative terms, overseas estimates suggest that there are now about 40,000 people in Egyptian jails. Would the figures have been comparable under Nasser?*

Yes, but you can never be sure of the exact number because of the lack of transparency. There have rarely been any executions, under either of these regimes. Many people have received death sentences, but few of these will be carried out. Usually they are commuted to life imprisonment. There are also many people in exile in various places, and you can't get your sentence commuted *in absentia*.

*Few formal executions, but the largest massacre in modern Egyptian history, with the slaughter in putting down the Morsi regime. What of torture?*

Torture has been systematic in the treatment of detainees in Egypt since the time of Nasser. There has been a shift over the years, however. Under Nasser, it was usually limited to political dissidents, it wasn't applied to citizens involved in criminal cases. But from the last days of Sadat, and certainly under Mubarak, the regular police have also been brutalizing citizens rounded up for even trivial criminal offences. Torture is becoming more and more the *modus operandi* of the whole security system—even if he wanted to, I don't think the President now has much ability to control it, short of carrying out a complete overhaul of the security apparatus. In the US, the White House and its advisers could discuss the interrogating techniques to be employed, and a record was kept of what was being done in Bagram or Guantánamo and by whom, with some capacity to allow or disallow it. In Egypt, on the other hand, torture has been part of the political culture for so long and has become so diffuse that I doubt it can be rooted out via formal presidential directives; it requires a radical change of policy.

*Is the scale of disappearances under Sisi an innovation?*

They occurred under Nasser, too. There was an expression for it, people would say that somebody had 'gone beyond the sun', meaning that no one knew what had happened to them, what they might have been accused of, whether they were being held in an official prison or not. When the regime was done with them, they would be dropped off on a dark street corner—with instructions not to speak about where they had been, or they would be in trouble. So this is not something entirely new.

*If the police had gone too far in torturing a prisoner and killed them, wouldn't it be convenient to act as if they had simply disappeared?*

That makes sense, though I'm not aware of such cases. People might hope that their friend or relative who has disappeared would be alive in prison somewhere, and keep that hope for ten or twenty years.

### C. THE ECONOMY

*In the economic field, there was no sharp neoliberal turn at the beginning of Sisi's rule; he even increased some public subsidies. But the conditions attached to the IMF loan this autumn include the full neoliberal package: privatization of industries, cuts to subsidies, a currency float, a balanced budget and so on. The IMF says, 'We will give you the money, but only in tranches, provided you actually implement all of this.' Does Sisi's acceptance of this programme indicate a kind of desperation, a sense that the regime had no other choice because the economic situation was so dire?*

The institutions of the old regime have learnt differing economic lessons from the 2011 revolt. The presidency—that is to say, Sisi himself and his entourage of technocrats and henchmen—believes that Mubarak's fall was partly caused by his neoliberal restructuring of the economy, which alienated a large section of the middle classes and risked turning the lower classes into a powder keg that could explode at any time. For them, the way to prevent another uprising was to roll back the restructuring and privatizations and return to a position where the state—meaning the presidency—has direct control over the economy. The old-regime network, on the other hand, drew the opposite conclusion. For them, 2011 disrupted a successful process; the trickle-down economics of neoliberalism had been improving things, and if only Gamal Mubarak had succeeded his father, in a few years many people would have seen that. Interestingly, when you speak to members of the Egyptian middle class, people argue on both sides of this question: some will say that things were working better under Mubarak, if only we had been a bit more patient, while others will contend that we were heading towards an abyss.

Sisi's problem was finding the money to implement his initial economic line. If he had reflected on the experience of Nasser, he would have seen how much weaker his own position was. Nasser could nationalize many of the assets of the Egyptian landowners and bourgeoisie, not to speak of those of foreigners, because much of the wealth of the upper class

was in land, which was immobile and could be confiscated. And with the Cold War in the background, he could also rely on the Soviet Union to finance some of his projects. Sisi has none of these advantages. The assets of Egypt's businessmen in today's global financial capitalism are much more elusive and transferable. There is no Cold War rivalry that would allow him to play off one great power against the other. He went to Russia and China and tried to solicit investment from those countries, but not much was forthcoming. He soon realized that the only way to draw upon the assets of the private sector would be to persuade them to cooperate. So Sisi's first phase in power was marked by a series of attempts to shame businessmen into patriotic donations, or blackmail them with threats to revoke their permits or deprive them of access to government contracts, combined with pleas along the lines of: 'You have gained so much, which destabilized the regime. It's time to give something back.' He wanted them to invest in a fund called Long Live Egypt, which was to be run by the public banks. But the contributions from businessmen were peanuts, and Sisi grew increasingly frustrated. The fund still exists, but it hasn't garnered much money.

Sisi also tried to appeal directly to small and medium businesses, and citizens who had some savings. One way of doing this, he thought, was through public subscriptions to fund projects like the expansion of the Suez Canal. But he soon discovered that these people were not as generous with their cash as they might be with their patriotic sentiments. So he had to offer them the highest rate of return available on the market—a very expensive way of raising money. If finance could not be obtained from inside Egypt, or from international powers like Russia or China, the next port of call would have to be Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies. But since the price of oil on the world market has collapsed, these countries no longer have as much cash to spare as they did before; Saudi Arabia, which is now facing the prospect of a budgetary deficit, is even thinking of raising visa charges for the pilgrimage to Mecca. They also have other external commitments. The Gulf States are much more interested in playing a military role than they were in the time of Nasser. Saudi Arabia is leading the war in Yemen, instead of financing war by proxy as it did under Nasser, and is spending a lot of money to obtain high-tech weapons from the US and the UK. Qatar is participating in the wars in Syria and Libya, with air strikes and so on. These countries want to use their remaining oil revenues to project their own power in the region. Egypt is getting some cash, but it's not coming as thick

and fast as Sisi hoped. So the money required to finance any large-scale projects in the country remains in the hands of the Mubarak-era business elite. Egypt receives very little foreign investment, and whatever capital does come in usually takes the form of partnerships with these businessmen—Mubarak used to take them on his travels to the US and Europe, to strike deals there. Foreign investors aren't keen on Sisi's offer of partnerships with the Egyptian military. They want to deal with the private sector. Sisi's agreement with the IMF and acceptance of their conditions comes after a series of failures in his bid to re-establish state control over the economy.

*Sisi now faces an acute economic crisis—shortages of basic commodities like sugar and rice, very high inflation, ongoing and impending cuts to subsidies on essentials. How is this being perceived in Egypt?*

The old-regime network believe that once Sisi gives up any attempt to roll back Mubarak's neoliberal restructuring, they can go back to business as usual and everything will fall into place: the Cabinet will once more take its cue from the market, rather than from technocrats under the President's direction; foreign investment will resume; the currency will be stabilized. For them, Sisi's acceptance of the IMF loan is a welcome surrender that will allow things to return to normal in the near future. But for those who believe it was this very restructuring that helped bring Mubarak down, Sisi's new approach risks driving the country towards the disaster of a much more radical and violent revolt. Under Mubarak, there were at least all these safety valves: some kind of influence and presence of opposition parties, the Muslim Brotherhood, civil society and the media. Tahrir Square was largely a rebellion of the middle class—workers and peasants weren't the driving force behind it. But now the much more thorough repression of dissent in the middle class, and of course its disillusionment with the revolution and everything that accompanied it, means that a second revolt would likely take the form of a rising of the lower classes, of the kind widely dreaded for a very long time—one focused on social justice and the distribution of wealth, rather than political democracy and dignity.

This is where the military comes in. If Sisi recognizes that the IMF loan has only alleviated the problem in the short term, by injecting a limited amount of foreign capital into the economy which will be absorbed within three or four years, and picks up on warning signs of a breakdown



in the social order, what is he going to do? Some think that he would then use the Army to establish a much tighter control over the economy, including the confiscation of private assets, money held in bank accounts and so on. There have been a number of smaller episodes indicating that something like this is not impossible. The price of sugar has increased in recent months, as it disappeared from the market. The Army then raided warehouses and discovered that merchants were hoarding stocks of it, which they confiscated. They also, however, raided factories, including Edita, one of Egypt's largest food processors, which was new, seizing enough sugar to last Egyptians for three months. When there was a shortage of milk formula for babies at the end of the summer, the Army again intervened directly, securing supplies of the formula somewhere and issuing it directly to needy mothers. Similar things have happened with gas cylinders. So this is one possible scenario if the crisis is seen to have spread to the whole economy.

*In addition to the loss of revenue from falling oil prices, Egypt has presumably taken a considerable hit from the decline in tourism since 2011.*

Yes. Traditionally, there have been three main sources of foreign currency for Egypt: the Suez Canal, oil and gas production, and tourism. All three have gone down considerably. Mubarak had a project under wraps for the Canal to be transformed into an industrial hub, where ships would come with unfinished products to be assembled in factories and then re-exported. The scheme was modelled to some extent on Dubai. When Morsi came to power, he wanted to pursue this and sought assistance from Qatar, causing an uproar because of the implications for sovereignty over the Canal. Under Sisi, the Canal was broadened at its narrowest point—where only one-way traffic was possible, obliging ships to wait for several hours to pass—and a small side canal was built. Critics argued that it was by no means clear that ships would be willing to pay higher tariffs to avoid the queues, at a time when traffic in the Canal was anyway decreasing with the recession in global trade and fall in oil prices. The real gains would come from creating the manufacturing and financial-services hub envisaged in the scheme, not from this costly expansion. But Sisi thought of it as a grand national project, recalling the time of Nasser, that would fire people's imaginations, and insisted it be completed within a year, instead of three as originally planned, so all of the earth-moving equipment hired with foreign currency had to be doubled. That soaked up a large part of Egypt's foreign-currency

reserves. Sisi's hype in fact harked back to Khedive Isma'il, who had commissioned Verdi's *Aida* to celebrate the original opening—he put on another performance of the opera, trumpeting the slogan, 'Egypt is being happy'. The media were bombarded with talk about the great benefits that would accrue to the Egyptian economy, with impressive-looking graphs bandied about on television.

For Sisi doesn't just want control of the economy, he also wants to get Egyptians emotionally invested in great (albeit resource-wasting) projects. So he also restarted a scheme that had been abandoned by Mubarak, to create a new Nile Delta, this time in the south, towards Sudan, with a whole new community moving to live there. There was a lot of rhetoric about this project, but nothing happened. Then there is the project of a new capital city. Mubarak had thought of moving government ministries to a new administrative centre with few residents, as a response to the appalling traffic congestion in Cairo. Sisi is going ahead with this plan, but branding it as a new capital in a grander sense, to be located just on the outskirts of Cairo, even though the city expands very quickly. The final big project is intended to substantially increase Egypt's agricultural output by cultivating a huge area of the Western Desert, close to Libya, drawing on underground water—although if the water has been there all along, why wasn't it used by Sadat, or Nasser, or indeed Muhammed Ali, for that matter? Sisi is surrounded by yes-men, who all agree that it's a great idea to build greenhouses in the middle of the desert. The larger picture is of Sisi using whatever funds are available for these mega-projects in the hope of creating sustainable employment at a time when people are really struggling to obtain essential goods.

*Are private businesses being dragooned into supporting these schemes?*

Sisi puts the Army's own companies in charge, they then subcontract the work to private firms. This forces the private sector to help him, because the game of allocating contracts has become very important as a source of power: 'If you start giving me trouble, you're not going to get a piece of this new project.' It has also been used to fragment the private sector, dividing a particular job between three or four big firms and ten or twenty small ones, so that everybody gets a slice. I should add here that many people do praise the military companies for being hard

task-masters, getting things done in time and making sure the work observes certain standards of efficiency and quality.

*If, as you say, the business class remains cautious, and hasn't rallied with any great enthusiasm to these projects of the regime, what is the attitude of the Egyptian middle class, insofar as one can generalize about such a heterogeneous layer?*

The middle class was suffering under Mubarak. Proponents of the success story of Egyptian neoliberalism claim that while there may have been some pain, upward mobility in that class was a real possibility, with more private-sector companies and more opportunities to move up the ladder. This may have been true for the upper-middle class, bankers, lawyers and so on, but it was not so for teachers or civil servants who had no such routes to betterment and were stuck where they were. Nasser's middle class was largely state-nurtured, in the schools, the universities and the government bureaucracy. These people have been squeezed, and now more than ever because of rising prices. Everyone suffers, of course, but the government keeps a close watch on basic commodities that are important for the lower classes—sugar, bread, rice, petrol, gas—and will intervene to hold their costs down. The upper-middle class, on the other hand, can cut back quite heavily on luxury goods without touching anything that is essential in their consumption. But for those in between, there are so many things that they have become used to which the government doesn't keep tabs on, but which affect their everyday life, and whose prices are soaring—soap, shampoo, radios, not to mention taxi fares. On the other hand, when you speak to people from the middle class, what they often seem above all to be concerned about is the stability of the state. People lower down the social ladder have alternative structures of support in the black economy, or the administration of justice and arbitration of conflict by local strongmen in popular neighbourhoods. As a result, they're not as dependent on the state and its infrastructure as the middle class. If that should come tumbling down, middle-class people believe that they will find life impossible. If you speak to them of revolution, of removing the President or subverting the regime in any way, the first image that comes into their mind is the chaos in Syria, Libya or Yemen. How long will that remain their uppermost concern—simply being able to go to work and come back home safely? How long will they be able to identify

themselves as belonging to a middle class at all? These are questions that are going to be posed.

*In its propaganda, the regime doesn't just invoke the spectre of conflict in neighbouring countries, it also plays up the domestic war on terror. How seriously is this taken by ordinary people—do they really think there is a threat from terrorists prowling the streets?*

On the one hand, the regime says that terrorist attacks, insurgencies in Sinai and the Western Desert, are so serious a danger that it must be Egypt's number one priority to crush them, and we can't allow any political disagreements to rock the boat until we have done so. But in the same breath, it encourages foreign tourists and businessmen to come to Egypt, insisting that everything is under control. This doublethink is mirrored in popular attitudes. People will say that we can't have any demonstrations because terrorism is such a serious problem and the country might fall apart, but then they will ask why tourists aren't coming from Russia or Britain—isn't terrorism a problem everywhere?

*Initially Sisi appeared to enjoy very high levels of middle-class support, judging by all sorts of indicators. You think that has now faded?*

Yes. If you compare Sisi to Erdoğan, for example, who was the head of a party that assembled a real social bloc behind a clear platform—economic, cultural, geopolitical—he never had that kind of consistent support. He doesn't have a specific group of people whose interests he caters to. What he does have is a lot of people who are scared that without him things would be worse.

*Would it be right to think that after staging some quite significant strikes in the last years under Mubarak, the Egyptian working class—that is, workers employed in the formal sector—has gone quiet under the new regime?*

It has been harshly repressed. Broadly speaking, there were two kinds of strike under Mubarak. Some took place in the private sector, when Mubarak's last Cabinet of businessmen would intervene to come up with a settlement more or less acceptable to employers, workers and trade unions alike, while others involved white-collar workers such as teachers, when the government would raise their wages or renegotiate their contracts. These were allowed. Those which were not, and attracted

severe repression, affected the old Nasserite industrial projects, the big factories like Mahalla. Sisi, on the other hand, made it clear at the outset that no strikes would be tolerated at this time of crisis for Egypt, when conspiracies were everywhere, and the state was on the edge of collapse. So strikes are much more harshly and uniformly repressed than they were under Mubarak, and those that do occur are not very widely reported. Before, the government would want to show its willingness to intervene and broker a compromise; now there are just rumours of a stoppage here or there. People who have their ears closer to the ground may have more accurate data on strike rates, but they have certainly been less frequent than under Mubarak.

*How tight is current censorship of print, broadcast and social media?*

Very tight indeed. Most influential media presenters, journalists and social activists have been chased into exile, or at least the comfort of their own homes. Those who have not been taken off the air now steer away from serious political commentary in favour of celebrity gossip. The same is true of print media. You still have two important independent newspapers, but they are harassed and intimidated. The owner of *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, for example, was detained for having an unlicensed weapon; he was released within 48 hours, but a clear message had been sent. These papers still try to provide some kind of independent coverage, but it's much more subdued than before. Legislation has now been passed to bring social media under the surveillance of the state-security agencies. This was always the reality, of course, but now it's enshrined in a law that makes people accountable for expressing anything held 'subversive' in these forums. The situation has completely changed from Mubarak's time, when so long as certain red lines were not crossed, people could basically say what they liked.

*Presumably the regime doesn't yet have the resources to monitor social media to the extent that, say, the Chinese state does?*

Perhaps not, but what matters is not so much how comprehensive surveillance has become, but rather the message it transmits, which makes people censor themselves out of fear. The tweets that attract the attention of the authorities probably circulate very rapidly, so that a state-security officer would come to hear about them without much effort. I don't think they're especially worried about networks forming under the radar; they

want to send a message to activists and celebrities—people they have under surveillance anyway—not to be as outspoken as they were before; and that, of course, is working.

#### D. FOREIGN RELATIONS

*The Economist has famously described Sisi as the most pro-Israeli ruler in Egyptian history. Would you assent to that judgement?*

Sisi is very inconsistent in his foreign policies in general, but especially when it comes to Israel. On the one hand, Israel has allowed the Egyptian Army a greater presence in Sinai, where Sadat's peace deal had largely barred it, in order to combat the insurgency there. That has involved closer coordination between the two states than before. The relationship between Israel and the Saudis has also grown dramatically in the last few years, with the first big Saudi delegation visiting Israel (billed at home as a delegation from civil society). The Saudi regime is Sisi's main regional ally, so there is a kind of triangular relationship there. He has also essentially severed relations with Hamas in Gaza, after accusing it of playing a sinister part in the events of 2011. These are all relations and policies inherited from Mubarak, but they have been accentuated under Sisi. On the other hand, there has been no outright change of policy as such. Mubarak flew to Israel for Rabin's funeral, and when Peres died, people were looking to see if Sisi would attend his funeral, but he didn't. He hasn't changed the Egyptian security doctrine, which holds that Sinai is important because of the 'threat from the east'. Israel and Turkey have had troubled relations in recent years, and Sisi was hoping to take advantage of that, but then Erdoğan settled his dispute with the Israelis. The lesson seemed to be that Israel must have cared more about Turkey than about Egypt, because otherwise it wouldn't have been open to Erdoğan's overtures, at a time when Sisi was trying to isolate and marginalize Turkey.

There are many other inconsistencies in Sisi's foreign policy, if it can be called that. He presents Russia as his greatest international ally, and Saudi Arabia as his most important regional backer, but Moscow and Riyadh are engaged in a cold war in the Middle East over the Syrian conflict and other questions. In the UN Security Council, the Saudis presented one motion denouncing Assad, the Russians another essentially

backing him, and Egypt ended up supporting both! This led to a confrontation with the Saudis, who suspended oil shipments to Egypt for a few months. In the same fashion, Sisi is trying to be very close to Russia and very close to the US at the same time. He now has great hopes that Trump's victory will take care of this, since Trump is supposed to be close to Putin, and has commented that the Egyptian military saved the country from falling under Islamist rule. But in that case, the whole idea of balancing against the US would go away, because if you have a good friend in Trump, why would you need Russia or China to balance against Washington? What emerges from all this is that Sisi really has no concrete set of policies at all, whether economic or geopolitical. He just emits platitudes about Egypt's independence, the role of the Army, patriotism and so on, and follows them in whimsical directions. One could try to rationalize some of Sisi's policies, but it would be futile to try and impose any coherent rationality on his path of rule, because he doesn't have one yet.

*On the other hand, Sisi has been welcomed with open arms by every major European leader. Renzi, in particular, rushed to Cairo to embrace him, Hollande arriving somewhat later. Merkel and Cameron were scarcely less warm. While Washington was keeping its distance, he was fêted in Rome, Paris, Berlin and London. Is this regarded as a great success for Sisi at home?*

The relationship with Italy was very important for Sisi; Italian companies have been in Egypt negotiating deals, especially concerning the new gas field that's been discovered in the Mediterranean. He considered Renzi a personal friend. But none of these relationships has really prospered. Renzi was put on the spot by the murder of the Italian student activist, Giulio Regeni, which caused an uproar in Italy. According to the Italian authorities, the Egyptian government did not fully cooperate in the joint investigation of his killing, brushing it aside as an individual case, an unfortunate accident of some kind, for which Egypt could not be held responsible. Unsurprisingly, the prospect of a great economic partnership between Egypt and Italy was put on hold. With France, there was the EgyptAir flight from Paris which crashed in the Aegean, Egypt immediately claiming there had been a security breach at the French end, when the evidence to date suggests a technical failure in the plane, rather than an act of terrorism. That caused a lot of tension with France. Then the Egyptian Foreign Minister, Sameh Shoukry, complained that Britain was not encouraging its tourists to visit Egypt, despite all the

efforts that the Egyptian authorities had made to comply with airport security procedures, implying there was something malicious about their attitude, while a Member of Parliament very close to Sisi claimed that the British Embassy in Cairo had ceased to be a regular diplomatic mission, instead becoming a nest of conspiracy and subversion.

*You could add the debacle of Sisi's joint press conference with Merkel in Berlin, when they had to scuttle quickly from the room when a protestor from the floor shouted against torture in Egypt.*

Yes, that was another memorable incident, among so many.

### E. THE BROTHERHOOD

*Looking at the various oppositions to the regime, how have the Muslim Brothers responded to the overthrow of Morsi and the pitiless repression of their movement since? A central theme of your remarkable ethnography, *Inside the Brotherhood*, is the religious determinism of the Ikhwan—the belief that since God is on our side, we can wait. Victory is bound to come, as we can see from our growing numbers and economic success; political success cannot fail to follow. You show the blindness to which this mind-set led and the disaster that overtook it.<sup>3</sup> In many ways your description recalls the outlook of Puritan militants in mid-seventeenth-century England, filled with a confidence that they were fighting God's cause that made them a tremendous battlefield force, but collapsing with the doubly demoralizing blow of the Restoration, which came not just as a political defeat they never expected, but as a sign that God didn't really want them to win after all. Providence had deserted them, and the tradition never recovered. The Brothers were not revolutionaries, but do they risk a similar fate? How have they reacted to their quick and dizzying success of 2012, followed by the utter debacle of 2013?*

The English Puritans were much more messianic, believing that their victory would be the last big push towards the end of time, ushering in a Kingdom of Heaven on earth. So for them, the restoration of business as usual was crushing. The Muslim Brotherhood's version of religious determinism has not been like this. It involves a cyclical conception of history. It's in the nature of things for people's faith to weaken and

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<sup>3</sup> *Inside the Brotherhood*, pp. 85–8, 99–103.



become corrupt again; and, when this happens, the believing few must come together and spearhead another righteous movement. So the fate of the virtuous is to rise and fall. When you talk to the Brotherhood, they take great pride in the fact that they've always been repressed, and they always come back.

The second difference, of course, is that the Puritans were not so organized: they had their preachers and lay scholars of religion, but at best they formed a network that was nothing like as formalized a structure as the Ikhwan, with its careful recruitment, surveillance, training and hierarchy—indoctrination, climbing the ranks, and so on. The Muslim Brotherhood is essentially an ideological organization, which came together not in the course of a civil war like the English Puritans and their New Model Army, but under a very stable regime during the inter-war period, in King Fuad's time. That has given them a much greater power of resistance. When defeat befell the Puritans, each of them was left to their own devices in trying to make sense of it, whereas when a setback hits the Brothers, the upper echelons of the organization quickly find an explanation which they make sure trickles down to the ordinary members. Of course, not everyone will be convinced by these official justifications, but because there is an organized way to interpret events and disseminate this interpretation, there is much greater resilience.

*If that's a general feature of the Brotherhood, what particular explanation has its leadership offered of the fiasco of Morsi's presidency?*

The reason why the Brotherhood didn't *completely* collapse is this. They had always made it very clear that their coming to power should crown the conversion of a great many Egyptians to their moral community—there might still be opposition from minorities here and there, from a few hardened secularists and anti-Muslim intellectuals, but such opposition would be relatively insignificant. So most of the work of the Brothers was community-focused, to convert people to their world-view. That remained their position at the beginning of the revolt in 2011, and in the weeks and months leading up to it. We don't want to be part of this, we're waiting for the right moment, and this is not it. So instead of placing their faith in the protestors, whom they reluctantly allowed their members to join on the third day of the 2011 revolt, Brotherhood leaders negotiated with the regime. In infamous talks between Morsi and Omar Suleiman, an informal deal was reached: you promise to

withdraw your members from Tahrir Square, and we allow you to form a political party. For the Brothers, this was the right moment to penetrate society more deeply, not to take down Mubarak. But then Mubarak was overthrown anyway, and first parliamentary and then presidential elections were scheduled.

Still the Brotherhood made it very clear to their members: this is not the right time for us to come to power. Therefore we are not going to aim for a plurality in Parliament, nor are we going to field a presidential candidate. We're going to be the minor partner in any arrangement, while we continue to build on our communal networks, to penetrate society ever more thoroughly. Then they suddenly changed their minds, and decided they were going to dominate Parliament and run for the presidency. So when things subsequently went south for them, it was very easy for many people in the organization to say: it's clear this was not the right time, we moved prematurely. Some of our leaders were tempted, or tricked. They're good people, but in their enthusiasm they got ahead of themselves. In the kindness of their hearts, they led us astray.

*Why then did the leadership of the Brotherhood suddenly change its mind and go for all-out power?*

A critical event was the referendum the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) organized in March 2011, just a month after Mubarak stepped down, on an essentially meaningless issue, whether to modify the Constitution or to call a convention to produce a new one. The liberal and left opposition, without exception, insisted that the country needed an entirely new constitution. The Brotherhood and the Salafists went all-out to keep the existing constitution—originating under Sadat—with a few amendments. The result was irrelevant, because the military scrapped the old constitution anyway. But the Brothers managed to persuade over 70 per cent of the voters, so it became clear to the military that they had far more sway on the street than the secular revolutionaries who had brought down Mubarak, yet seemed incapable of much organization once they had done so. For SCAF, the priority was to bring the street under control, so it decided to start working with the Brotherhood to stabilize the country. Relations between the two suddenly became quite cosy. This was the moment when the Brotherhood put its bets on the military and the security institutions, believing that with these it

could marginalize and place under a shadow all these liberals and leftists, in a division of power in which the military and security systems have the upper hand, while the Brothers would continue to build up their strength and extend their hold in society even more impressively. Meanwhile, they went along with every important military decision, including many aimed at them, while pocketing victory in the parliamentary elections of November 2011 and January 2012.

Once the presidential election came up in 2012, there were three types of candidates. Two came with support from the revolutionary camp: Hamdeen Sabahi, a secular Nasserite, and Aboul Futuh, a breakaway former Brother. Two were from the old regime: Ahmed Shafiq, a former Air Force commander and Prime Minister under Mubarak, and Amr Moussa, Mubarak's former Foreign Minister. The military didn't want anyone from either of these camps, so they were left with the Brotherhood in the middle. They had been working with the Ikhwan for a year in a partnership for which they set the rules. But they saw it as a dangerous partnership, and took measures to ensure that it wouldn't rebound on them. First, they excluded the Brother's effective leader, Khairat el-Shater, from running for the presidency, on the ludicrous pretext that he was still charged with escaping from prison under Mubarak, but actually because they feared him as a shrewd and cunning leader. In his place the Brothers had to deliver someone less ruthless, who proved to be the suitably incompetent Morsi. Second, the SCAF suddenly dissolved Parliament on the eve of the presidential elections, reckoning that if we're going to give the top job to the Brotherhood, we don't want them to control the Legislature as well. Third, they created a new National Security Council dominated by officers, with great sway in deciding all national issues, rather like the National Security Council in Turkey of old. The Brotherhood agreed to all these precautions taken against them.

In the event, Morsi won the election by a tiny margin over Shafiq. It's worth noting subsequent evidence of how worried the military were at the prospect of a return of the old regime. For when Morsi was ousted in 2013, in an uprising in which Mubarak-era networks played a huge part, the cry went up that Shafiq should now be installed as the rightful president, since he had actually *won* the election—the courts would show Morsi had never been president in the first place. Shafiq was by

then in exile in the Emirates. Not only did the military decline to make him president, *ex post facto*, but he remained in exile in fear of imprisonment should he return. Likewise Moussa, who had done sterling service for the military in helping to rewrite the Constitution, and thought he was in line for a key post, but was completely marginalized.

*The military didn't take long to dispose of Morsi. How would you describe the conglomerate that toppled him?*

From the start the liberal and leftist forces that made the revolution tried to explain to the Brotherhood: if you work with us, together—with your organization and our enthusiasm and legitimacy—we have a chance of finally undoing this repressive order. The Brotherhood first snubbed them, and then patronized them, preferring to work with the military and the security, both of which were repressing the revolutionaries. So an incredible rearrangement of forces ensued. The old-regime network in the political system, with its staying power in the bureaucracy, the judiciary, the media and so much else, took up with the revolutionaries, whom the Brothers had discarded, and used their legitimacy to launch an all-out attack on Morsi, while the Brotherhood, until the very last moment, believed the military and the security would not abandon them. Famously, in his last more or less dignified speech, Morsi rejected any idea that the Army could turn against him—don't dream of that, he said, these are men of gold, I know them, and they are loyal. The Brotherhood dug its own grave by throwing in its lot with those who held power against those who seemed powerless, not thinking that power would be turned against them.

*Has there been no questioning within its ranks since then?*

The organization, despite massive repression, is still intact, and its official narrative is that their mistake was that they were not confident or revolutionary enough. But two groups have left it. A small minority has done so in disillusion, denouncing its leaders as charlatans—God was never on their side. These are a scattering of repentant voices, heard in the media and employed by the regime to expose the Brotherhood. Another group has taken the militant route: the leadership gave up too early: this *is* the moment of divine empowerment, but it's going to be violent, requiring a civil war separating the people of God from the people

of Satan. But I think the great majority of the Brotherhood have accepted the official message: ‘We were wrong; we should have partnered with the revolutionaries, but the military tricked us into various mistakes that we shouldn’t have made.’ Their message to the people at large is: ‘Accept us back and you’ll find us the same people you knew under Mubarak and under Sadat: your friendly neighbours, your good teachers and your upright prayer leaders.’ This message will gain greater acceptance the more unpopular the regime becomes.

*A corollary question: how Egyptian-specific is the passive religious determinism you describe in your book on the Brotherhood— Hamas doesn’t seem to conform to it, still less the Syrian Brotherhood that rose against the elder Assad in 1982?*

This outlook is very Egyptocentric, but that doesn’t make it irrelevant to other countries. Once any ideology or theory travels, of course, it changes; but something of it remains. In the case of the Brotherhood, what this means is that the ideology has remained as close to its roots, and the organization as faithful to the ideology, as possible. But in other contexts, it shifted. In Egypt, the cradle of the doctrine was around Ismailia, a very Westernized part of the country that was a hub of British and French influence: it was driven by the sense that Egypt was moving away from the values of a traditional community, becoming too Westernized and modernized. In the Gulf, in Kuwait, or even in Jordan—places where the monarchy, traditional society, tribal balance, religious belief were all intact—it could not acquire the same social-transformative impetus. The idea that we all risk becoming aliens, foreigners in our own land, and need to rectify that, didn’t work there. On the other hand, in countries like Tunisia or Syria, where there was absolutely no regime tolerance extended to Islamists and they were removed from the scene very early on, they could not delude themselves into believing they were gradually winning over society, that it would just take time. Their only chance of advance lay in coming to power at the top, if necessary in alliance with other forces.

Sudan would be yet another case: a much more traditional society than Egypt, a strong Sufi element to it—comparable to the strong Salafi element in the Gulf. So there Islamists could only seize power with a coup, as Turabi and Bashir did. Then there is the case of Hamas.

Originally, it was the Muslim Brotherhood in Palestine, with a very similar pitch to the Brotherhood in Egypt: ‘We lost Jerusalem, we lost our land, because we moved away from our faith, and we need to work gradually, over the long run, to recover them.’ That’s why Israel bore down much less hard on them than on Fatah, even helping them at the latter’s expense. But then the Intifada exploded in ’87, and they suddenly realized that you cannot really continue your social project under a military occupation, and if you lose your standing in violent resistance, you will be marginalized. So Hamas emerges as the armed wing of the Brotherhood in Palestine.

It’s necessary to look comparatively at this range of experiences, but also to remember two things. The first is the importance of studying the Egyptian case, since the Brotherhood was formed in Egypt, the largest Muslim country with such a movement, and the roots of its ideology lie in Egypt. The second is the common conviction of every Islamist that if you create a society of good Muslims, divine blessings will follow. In time that can become more a matter of personal faith than everyday politics. Had the Brotherhood stayed in power for some time in Egypt, and had to deal with the practicalities of government, my guess is that this is what would have happened. But since they didn’t, they remain as close as possible to their original ideology, because they’ve never really been tested in government, as other Islamist movements have.

*The implication of what you’re saying is that the Brotherhood has not actually been destroyed in Egypt—it remains, latently, still a significant force?*

Yes. Also, of course, its contingent of exiles in Qatar, in Turkey, in the US, in London, in other European capitals, remain an important reserve—because remember, under Nasser, something similar happened: those who escaped his repression found their way to Saudi Arabia, to Kuwait, some of them to the US, and they came back in the seventies. So this time, too, there are leaders who managed to get away, as well as the leaders who are in jail, which gives them a certain legitimacy amongst the younger generation. If they weren’t in prison, they would have been taken more to task by ordinary members, but since they are in chains, the common attitude is: ‘Can’t you see how much they’re suffering? We can’t add to their burdens.’ So, as under Nasser, mass imprisonment helps freeze rather than destroy the movement.

Of course one cannot predict the future, but if the past provides any clue it is that Brothers only prosper when they make themselves serviceable to the regime in some way. King Farouk, Egypt's last monarch, needed them to bolster his religious credentials and undermine liberals and constitutionalists, and then banned them. Nasser used them to carry out his coup and undercut liberals and monarchists, and then sent them to prison. Sadat released them to help him destroy leftists and Nasserists, before turning against them. Mubarak allowed them to operate once more to promote his image as the last best hope for a secular Egypt against a Brotherhood takeover, before rooting them out of Parliament and imprisoning their leaders. And finally, SCAF used them against both the revolutionaries and the old regime before discarding them. What this all means is that if the Brothers manage to fight their way back to the political arena against the will of the new ruler, it would certainly be a first in their eight-decade history. They will most likely return when Sisi or one of his successors finds some use for them.

*In using the term Islamism, what do you encompass by it? Looked at in one way, could it be said that it divides into two wings that could roughly be compared to those in the socialist movement of the early twentieth century? That is, the ideology of the Brotherhood resembling a religious version of the attentiste, Kautskyan perspective: socialism is certain to come, and we have to organize diligently for it, but not actually make a revolution ourselves—history will do that for us. The outlook of breakaways from the Brotherhood consensus like Qutb or Zawahiri looking, on the other hand, more like the voluntarist tradition of Lenin or Luxemburg: history is moving in our direction, but that doesn't absolve us from taking bold, imaginative action to bring our desired society about. The analogy is, of course, only a formal one. But would you say the two kinds of Muslim movement are so different that it's altogether misleading?*

Well, in writing of religious determinism, I was of course thinking of the socialist conception of history. Let me first say that there is a qualitative difference between what I call respectively Islamism and militant jihadism, and explain where it lies. The basic idea of Islamism is that Muslims have been led astray from what it means to be Muslim by Western modernity and everything that comes with it. God has removed his divine blessing from us, as a warning sign that there is something wrong. The solution is to return to Islam, which has become a stranger

in the land; for this is a moment of rebirth, a time like that of the Prophet when he started to preach his message. So you may be secretive; you can't say everything outright to everyone, because they're not ready for the message. Therefore a stance of condescension is required, indeed a lot of deception, since you're dealing with people who have been led astray, but are unaware of their plight. They need to be brought back to the faith gradually, but once they are there, there is no need for violence to discipline them. When you ask a Brother, are you going to force women to wear the veil, they all say no—when we bring people back to religion, they comply with these obligations of their own accord. Militant jihadists, on the other hand, not only hold to a more radical, literalist interpretation of Islam, but for them there is no sense of Islam being reborn. It is already there: the point is to observe it. If you are a Muslim, you have already undertaken to follow its injunctions, and if you do not, you should be punished. Women should be forced to wear the veil, alcohol must be outlawed, banks cannot practice usury. There can be no discussion of such questions. They are contractual obligations which if disobeyed must be enforced.

Now it's true that, within the Brotherhood, Sayyid Qutb did argue for the need of a vanguard to carry out bold and spectacular action to shock people out of their lethargy and return them to religion, rather than a more long-term perspective of conversion. In my book I also show that there were moments when the founder of the Brotherhood, Hassan al-Banna himself said: give me a well-equipped vanguard and I'll lead you anywhere. Equally, Qutb could at times, even in his late writings in prison, say the task was essentially one of persuasion. What really came to divide Islamism from militant jihadism, however, was the influence of Saudi Wahabism. You can see its impact in the career of Ayman al-Zawahiri who joined the Brotherhood as a youth and knew Qutb personally, before going on to write a book completely debunking the Brothers, and joining bin Laden in Al Qaeda. If you want to see the tension between the two movements today, you have only to look at Gaza, where Hamas's greatest problem is not Fatah, but the local jihadist formations, whose videos explain that the number one enemy of the faithful is Hamas, then Fatah, then Israel, then the US, in that order. Why? Because Hamas are pretending to be Muslims, and their example only leads to a perpetual postponement of the fight against the enemies of Islam. So the two are very different things. Of course, the



word Islamism has escaped into the public realm, where its usages can't be controlled. But, in my estimation, Islamism is one thing, and jihadi militancy another.

## F. OPPOSITIONS

*Jihadism does now have some roots in Egypt too, in organizing Bedouin resistance to the existing order in Sinai. How serious a problem is this for the Sisi regime?*

Sinai is sparsely populated by Bedouin, who for two reasons have always lived in semi-autonomous conditions. One is the general weakness of the infrastructure of the state, whose reach doesn't really extend much beyond the Nile Valley in any direction, east or west. So policing and regulation of the peninsula have always been quite lax. But also, of course, Israel occupied Sinai for the better part of two decades, and returned it to Egypt only on the condition that it was demilitarized, barring the Egyptian Army from any free movement across it, and so creating an ungoverned space for the Bedouin. Interactions between the state and the Bedouin have in any case always been rudimentary and harsh. There's no right hand and left hand of the state in Sinai—not enough roads, schools or clinics, essentially just police, purportedly arresting drugs or arms dealers or whatever. So this has always been a very antagonistic relationship. The state was also extremely short-sighted in channelling what resources it was willing to put into the peninsula towards the empty southern part of Sinai, to create luxurious resorts for tourists, rather than into the heart of the peninsula where the Bedouin live, to help integrate them into modern Egypt. So there was a very serious, long-standing set of problems in Sinai well before the current insurgency. But since 2011 these have been greatly compounded by the switch to a full-scale military campaign, deploying helicopters, missiles, tanks, armoured vehicles, special forces and the like, which has caused even greater alienation of the local population. The upshot is an extremely explosive situation. With American military aid and Israeli border control, the insurgency may be crushed. But any improvement in ordinary conditions of life there, which would require constructive investment? That seems much less probable, considering the current economic situation.

*Historically, students were often a force of rebellion in modern Egypt, as they were too in 2011. How do things stand with them today, as a potential source of opposition to the regime?*

Firstly, the universities have become much more tightly controlled than before. In the early days of the revolution, the first, short-lived post-Mubarak government led by Essam Sharaf allowed for elections of faculty heads, college deans and university presidents. One of the first things Sisi did was to reverse this. Today that means the primary function of all presidents, deans and chairs is to keep students under control. Secondly, the Muslim Brotherhood, which was always the largest force in the student body, has been essentially snuffed out. Thirdly, the blanket repression outside the universities has chilled resistance within them. Before Sisi, there was a range of active organizations and intellectual figures in civil society that formed centres of reference for students, with quite a bit of coordination between them, which made students feel that student politics were part of national politics. Closing down all venues of public opposition—the nominal parties that are permitted have never been more irrelevant—has left students feeling they're trapped in a bubble, cut off from the world, closely controlled, without allies inside or outside the campus. So student politics are much more impoverished than before.

*The central argument of your latest book, *The Power Triangle*, is that modern authoritarian regimes typically rest on three distinct apparatuses of power, the armed forces, the security apparatus and the political system, and that there is always competition for precedence between these three. In your ensuing comparative survey of Turkey, Iran and Egypt, you locate each country at a different point of this 'power triangle': a predominance of the military, up to the arrival of the AKP, in Turkey; of the court as the nerve-centre of the monarchical political system in Iran, up to the fall of the Shah, and of the security complex in Egypt, after the fall of the monarchy there. You end the book, however, with a remark that nuances this overall taxonomy, by remarking that Sisi's regime could evolve in two different directions: either a presidential populism with military predominance, as under Nasser, or a continuation of what you categorize as the police dictatorships of Sadat and Mubarak.<sup>4</sup> Does this leave an ambiguity in your final judgement? For a presidential populism*

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<sup>4</sup> *The Power Triangle*, p. 350.

*with military predominance seems to be just what you've been describing as the character of the present regime, in which the Army has conspicuously increased its power relative to the security and administrative systems. Would this mean that in your view Egypt is moving, or has moved, out of the ranks of police dictatorships, into those of a praetorian cast?*

The crucial point here is that this is still a system in a state of flux. I think there is no doubt that Egypt remains in the grip of a security-dominated regime, in the sense that domestic security is the driving logic of the state. Everything else is superseded by security. The new thing is that many citizens, for the first time since Nasser's day, have come to accept that we are living in an age of regional disasters, state collapse and global conspiracies. So the idea of the overriding security logic has acquired some social legitimacy. The problem is how the different institutions are analytically lined up in enforcing it. There the first question becomes: who is responsible for domestic repression? Nasser discovered in 1967 that the coexistence of two separate, powerful apparatuses of repression is destabilizing. Today such a duality has returned, and I don't think it can last long. Which of them is to prevail needs to be settled. But it cannot be settled as it was when Nasser came to power, because the security institution of the monarchy was still quite small, so the military could just take over its functions and reshape it to serve the new regime. Now the security complex is large, and used to overreaching. At the same time, the military is keenly aware of what happened to its position when it signed off its security role. So today, two security institutions are locking horns, with no clear way out of this.

Moreover, the political system required by the regime is quite unsettled. What is it going to look like? Different kinds of politics work better with different kinds of repression. A populist dictatorship along Nasser's lines would be more conducive to military repression, whereas an oligarchic authoritarianism in which old-regime networks succeed in making Sisi the figurehead of a system in which they call the shots would tip the balance of repression towards the security complex, with which they developed a close relationship over decades. The final uncertain element lies in the armed forces themselves, which are being pulled in different directions. Are the military entirely happy at becoming so predominant? There are reasons to doubt it. The Army understands Sisi is trying to create a kind of populist dictatorship, and this will demand a lot from them.

In particular, it will require them to deliver economically—not merely to *benefit* economically, but to deliver as well—with very limited resources, to an overwhelmingly poor population.

This could put a huge burden on them, and make them a target of popular anger if they fail or refuse to do so. Inevitably, they will be asking themselves: can we, or do we really want to do that? Or should we maintain our independence, and tell Sisi that he will have to sink or swim on his own? At the same time, they realize that, if he wants to create a populist dictatorship, he will depend on them for domestic repression, and though they don't want to be marginalized again, as they were under Sadat and Mubarak, how much appetite do they really have for this? I don't think the military are too excited about going in any one of these directions. So, for all these reasons, I would conclude by saying that Egypt is still manifestly and overwhelmingly a security state, but the institutional line-up of powers within the regime has yet to be settled. Most, if not all, of the possible scenarios are negative, but they are not the same. We need to be able to distinguish them. The Egyptian question cannot be reduced to whether the 2011 revolution has failed or not. We must understand how the regime has changed and is changing.

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