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## Egypt:

# There and back again



# The Egyptian Military State

Charitini Petrodaskalaki

*The Egyptian Armed Forces are considered among the most powerful in the world, in a country where the modern state is closely associated with the military establishment. Over the last three decades, the military has managed to dominate almost all sectors of economy. The success of the military elite to maintain and expand its powers since the 2011 uprising, and to secure all its political and economic interests since the 2013 coup, makes it hard to differentiate between the state, the military and the economy. However, if the country's economy continues to deteriorate, it may constitute a great threat for both the regime and the primacy of the military.*

According to the Global Firepower Index, Egypt's military is ranked as the 12th most powerful worldwide, in a list of 126 countries with the most powerful militaries in the world for 2016. Albeit having a small budget (US\$4.4 billion), the Egyptian army accounts for 1,270,000 active personnel and 4,624 tanks.<sup>1</sup> In addition, military service is compulsory for men between ages 18 and 30, for a period between 12 and 26 months, according to their level of education, plus nine years in the reserves.<sup>2</sup> However, due to the high number of conscripts, the level of training is not very high, resulting in poor performance, including the troops that are sent to Sinai.

Egypt's army is not only strong in military terms, but it also holds an important role in the country's political history. This is especially true since the "Free Officers" movement in 1952, when a group of army officers overthrew the monarchy and seized power. This event paved the way for a new role for the military as a key player for the industrialization and economic modernization within the Pan-Arab nationalist context.<sup>3</sup> The Egyptian military gradually became the main industrial owner and supplier of public services in the country. In addition, all of Egypt's rulers till the elections of 2012 came from a military background (Gamal Abdel Nasser, Anwar Sadat, Hosni Mubarak and Mohamed Hussein Tantawi). Therefore, the military has been politically very closely associated with the state, making it hard at times to distinguish between the army and the regime.

Since the Mubarak era, the military elite enjoyed wide financial and industrial privileges in return for their loyalty to the regime. This dates back to the 1980s, when the fiscal crisis led the government to cut its defense budget, leading the armed forces to find other sources of revenue.<sup>4</sup> The officers were allowed to convert segments of the defense industry in order to target the civilian consumerist market and create new businesses. The growing economic involvement of the Egyptian mil-



itary led to its owning business enterprises in almost every sector and produces an extremely wide area of services and goods. During the same period, ex-generals were appointed in key service sectors of the state's administrative apparatus, such as public transportation, water and sewerage systems, and more. In the last three decades, the Egyptian military has heavily invested in businesses in order to survive as an organization, as it had to rely on this revenue to run military hospitals, schools, retirement schemes etc. The services provided by the Egyptian military are offered at a cheaper rate compared to the private sector services, making it the country's preferred service provider. Moreover, evidence suggests that a number of conscripts are used as laborers in army-run factories, thus making it possible to cut down the cost of production by not paying them full wages.<sup>5</sup> It is noteworthy that, as the military's budget is kept secret, the revenue from these enterprises is going without state oversight.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the turmoil, the Egyptian military managed to solidify its position as a main actor and decision maker in the political transformation that began in 2011. As the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), a small body of top officers that convenes only in times of war or emergency, assumed power and convinced Mubarak to step down, the military progressively not only preserved the previous system, but also expanded its dominance over it. As the generals were in the hands of the government, there was also no fundamental reshuffling of staff within important state institutions, especially in the security sector, using the existing state structures and personnel.<sup>7</sup> However, during this period, the military was considered essential in the restoration of order, and as the arbiter of Egypt's economic and political system. As a result of the 2011 Constitutional Declaration, the military established a de facto control over the constitutional process; instead of drafting a new constitution, the SCARF put on a referendum on March 2011 nine amended articles, followed by a declaration where the military leadership was the ultimate decision maker and manager of the transition process.<sup>8</sup>

The Muslim Brotherhood's elected president, Mohammed Morsi, maintained the privileged status of the army in the bureaucracy, by hiring ex-officers as ministers, governors and as other top administrators. However, in August 2012, the balance of power was shaken when, following an incident in northern Sinai, Morsi dismissed/fired several high-ranking officers, among them the country's intelligence chief Murad Mawafi, and soon after declared a reshuffling of the army leadership. This direct interference in the military's traditional sphere of control seriously damaged the power sharing arrangement between the generals and the Brotherhood.<sup>9</sup> What is more, for many military commanders, the fact that a civilian, and more specifically an "ikhwan", became the "supreme commander of the armed forces" after being ruled for so many years by military officers was unacceptable to them.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, the military managed to make its semi-autonomous status official under the new constitution, issued in December 2012, by securing the military budget, allowing officers to appoint the Minister of Defense, and making the president unable to declare war or send troops abroad without the approval of the National Defense Council.<sup>11</sup>

When Morsi was ousted in a coup half a year later, a military-backed interim government took control, with the head of the Supreme Constitutional Court Adly Mansour as interim president, before the election of former defense minister General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi as president in May 2014. The military's intentions of institutional autonomy became clearer soon after



the coup. The constitution of 2014, drafted by a committee led by Mansour, gave even more power to the military than the previous constitutions, in terms of “national security” – a broad and undefined term –, budget and military justice. In addition, for at least two terms, the minister of Defense should be appointed with SCAF’s approval, proving the unwillingness of the officers to subordinate to the will of a political leader.<sup>12</sup>

Immediately after the coup of 2013, the military quickly began to concentrate all economic power under its control. Especially under Sisi, the state’s support for the military economic interests has increased; the crucial positions such as the Min-



ister of transportation, the chairman of the national Telecommunication Holding Company, and the chairman of Maritime and Land Transport Holding Company, were all occupied by other ex-generals. The policy of giving public contracts to the military or military-controlled companies was manifested in the new Canal project, inaugurated in 2014. The President has also issued a law to exempt 574 military premises from real estate tax, including supermarkets, hotels, resorts and movie theatres, in addition to another law that allowed the Ministry of Defense to set up private security firms.<sup>13</sup> More recently, he gave the military the license required to form a pharmaceutical company, to deal with the country’s drug shortage.<sup>14</sup>

In conclusion, the differentiation between the state, the military and the economy is hard. Currently, the military is politically and economically invested in the system. Yet there are limits to the future success of the cooperation between the armed forces and the regime. First of all, this kind of economic system is hardly managing to survive. Egypt is already facing serious economic problems, despite the small reflation in the beginning of 2017. And as the president is sided with the military elite’s economic interests, it is unlikely that he will deliver an economic progress that will benefit the lowest strata of the population. In addition, the return of widespread domestic unrest is a great concern for the military elite, being unable to disassociate themselves from state violence. This situation is fragile both for the regime and the military’s economy. Aiming to subside public anger, the government uses external financial aid, mainly from the Gulf countries in order to fund state projects.<sup>15</sup> Finally, the poor performance of the Egyptian forces in the Sinai, the accusations of deploying conscripts in unpaid labor in-



stead of training, and the neglect of maintenance of the military equipment are all signs that the Egyptian Armed Forces are favoring their economic footing over the maximization of their capacity, thus ultimately failing as the protector of the state.

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# A cultural tug-of-war: Internet culture and the Egyptian surveillance apparatus

Ihab Shabana

*Egypt's cultural activity during the years following the revolution has been on growing surveillance. Nevertheless, dissent, whether loud or subdued, is also blooming. Borrowing Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital, we will try to seek how internet culture operates in Egypt and how cultural hegemony appears in many disguises.*

Egypt could, historically, be considered the cultural center of the modern Arab world. Inasmuch its geographical position, its historical and intellectual significance, its numbers but also its institutional progress, Egypt has long been striving to somehow “lead” the Arab world, even though sometimes, it has astonishingly failed. Mubarak’s and his predecessors’ state, could also be labeled as a hybrid state. Hybrid, as long as it had the essence and characteristics of a brutal dictatorship, while at the same time it (occasionally) allowed space and freedom for expressing a variety of political views, that could (and it indeed did) affect the regime. Nevertheless, this space was biased to express an orthodox Islamic morality, which fought and contained more controversial and progressive ideas coming from a part of the society that created what we shall call an influential cultural capital. The Egyptian cultural identities, bearing a long historical background, will be analyzed within the context of a broader political struggle for democratic reforms.

Given this historical inheritance, Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, an ambitious hegemonic military and political figure, could not miss the opportunity to establish an even more rigid and sophisticated continuity in the state’s traditions. Obviously, several laws, helped Sisi to grip more steadily the power needed to lead Egypt as a “stable” state in a turbulent region. The NGOs and social organizations law but also the judicial appointments law, cultivate the President’s omnipotence that is, unsurprisingly, praised by a wide spectrum of the Egyptian society. In addition, the state of emergency declared in late April, gives a shadowy picture of the Egyptian current situation that is also affecting the freedom of speech in mass media, including the internet.



The protracted anti-terrorism struggle in Egypt, has provided the government with the opportunity to monitor almost every aspect of internet activity in the country. The “war” against terrorism, includes a wide variety of punishable deeds, such as supporting terrorism, inciting debauchery, insulting Islam or offending public morals.<sup>1</sup> We should here add the anti-assembly law that gives the security forces the chance to arrest anybody calling for a public gathering without prior permission by the authorities. This painstakingly internet surveillance comes as a response to the relative freedom that the Egyptians enjoyed during the past years and that was used as a tool to organize demonstrations and activities and, of course, spread the word about them.

However, mass media and internet culture in Egypt, despite censorship, have been a growing platform of dissent. For the sake of our argument, let us assume that this platform is a form of a cultural capital, in the way Pierre Bourdieu has divided the forms of capital. The objectified form of cultural capital is the result of the materialization of the embodied form described by Bourdieu; thus, this objectification is seen as the process in which social subjects try to bring into materiality the disinterested capital being produced in the embodied state of capital. The objectification includes books, writing, art, monuments, instruments and mass media and can be depicted both materially – the economic capital here is a prerequisite – and symbolically, where a load of cultural capital is needed.<sup>2</sup> This objectified state, appears to be an autonomous universe, which is run by its own laws and uses its own language. So, all in all, the idea of an autonomous internet culture, is seen, by the Egyptian state apparatus and the like, as a potential threat. And, indeed, the cruel assassination of Khaled Said by two police officers in Alexandria, in 2010, boosted an already growing awareness in social media. Khaled Said’s fatal mistake was to post online a video of officers sharing the spoils from a drug bust among themselves.<sup>3</sup> That is not to say, in any way, that the assassination of Khaled Said and the subsequent emergence of the Facebook page “We are all Khaled Said” designed and directed by Wael Ghonim was fundamental to the outbreak of the 25th January protests, as the scholar Kara Alaimo suggests.<sup>4</sup> In any case, political activism and pioneering do not start or end in the internet. The most celebrated example is Alaa Abd el-Fatah, a software engineer (who has used his expertise to develop Arabic versions of important software) that has been imprisoned several times for his political activity, both as a blogger and as a militant public political figure.

Egypt, gradually, comes very close to a total surveillance of internet activity. Its global ranking is actually low related to the freedom of speech on the internet.<sup>5</sup> Trying to put it in a more global context, Egypt is not of course a unique phenomenon in surveillance tactics. The monopoly of cultural production and cultural norms, has been largely lost by the state, such as, at times, the monopoly of violence. Thus, dur-



ing the last years, the Egyptian state is trying to concomitantly combine political with cultural hegemony in order to regain its legitimacy to monopolize public discourse of any sort.<sup>6</sup> The Egyptian President has actually managed to convince part of the Egyptian intelligentsia to side with him, such as writer Sonallah Ibrahim. So, criticism towards the regime or the army is viewed as a terrorist act and is harshly punished. For instance, Abdullah al-Fakharany and Samhi Mustafa, respectively the executive director and cofounder of the news website Rassd, have been detained for spreading “fake news”, as well as the infamous cases of the Al Jazeera journalists. Maybe a more familiar case for us (in Greece) is the one of Mohammad A. who posted online the assassinations of members of the Muslim Brotherhood in 2013 by the Egyptian security forces. He then escaped Egypt in fear of his life, and started a hunger strike upon his asylum rejection in the island of Lesbos.

The paradox that appears here, but also in other Muslim countries in general, is that Egypt and Sisi are fighting Islamic extremism and democratic forces using an imaginary Islamic morality, which sometimes resembles to Salafist methodologies. Incidents of religious motivated attacks on Christians for allegedly insulting Islam in Facebook pages are numerous and are often taking place with the police’s concurrence.<sup>7</sup> Even though Egypt does not block access to the internet, or claims that the freedom of speech is protected, this is hardly the case especially after the cybercrime bill that passed for monitoring and filtering internet activities, in 2015. In the middle of September 2014, information was leaked regarding a contract made by Systems Engineering of Egypt (SEE) with an American company specialized in cyber surveillance and spying, called Blue Coat.<sup>8</sup> Until recent years, Egyptian authorities were controlling certain domains of cyberspace with several ways (slowing down certain sites, blocking access, and more). After 2014-15, the new bill and the newly-obtained technology gives the legal right and the technical opportunity, respectively, to monitor all activities. A victim of this criminalization process, even before the bill was in vigor, was Alber Saber, who through a meticulous judiciary investigation of his internet posts, was found guilty of atheism in 2012. Egyptian activists from a wide spectrum of political views have litigated against the aforementioned bill since it is contrary even to the Egyptian legislature, which allows communications surveillance by authorities only in suspicious activities. According to the same legislature, surveillance should be also limited to a certain period of time.<sup>9</sup>

The growing disappointment from the counter-revolution’s victory in Egypt has led, however, digital activism to blossom. While the space for dissent is being gradually narrowed and the threat of imprisonment, torture and even murder is evident for dissidents, a new language of activism is being constructed. Literature, online texts or prose is one of them.<sup>10</sup> In addition, cartoonists have made their remarkable presence known in Egypt’s blogosphere, with the exceptionable example of Islam Gawish. Gawish was put shortly into custody for running an unlicensed webpage and for holding pirate software, while the real reason behind his arrest is his sarcastic criticism of Sisi.<sup>11</sup> Egyptian bloggers frequently use pictorial badges on their sites to show support for various campaigns, such as for freeing bloggers, calling for reform, or promoting social and political issues such as ending military trials. Most of these blogs have used the cultural capital produced even before 2011, and especially after 2005, when Egypt witnessed a growing militant politicization. Progressive media outlets in Egypt, such as Mada Masr or Mosireen, have risen from the ashes of whether bankrupted media or out of the explosion of citizen media and cultural activism in Egypt during the revolution. Nevertheless, despite the regime’s crackdown on internet activity, we should



also consider self-criticism or Islamic public domination as an important factor of a conservative public morale. Islam's dominant position is causing what Samia Mehrez has called 'street censorship', which latently imposes a dominant religious discourse upon a secular and democratic one.<sup>12</sup>

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# Egypt: Navigating the treacherous geopolitical waters of the new Middle East

Charalampos Tsitsopoulos

*Egypt, the Mediterranean's most pivotal Arab state, has always had to navigate muddled waters. At the epicentre of recurrent crises throughout the 20th century, the country is once more in the limelight; this time facing a combustible mix of dire finance, increasing political authoritarianism, a Salafist insurgency in the Sinai, the civil war of its western neighbor and all this amidst renewed geopolitical competition in the Eastern Mediterranean.*

Egypt has long been considered a reliable, faithful Western ally. Ever since the death of President Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1970, Egyptian presidents have secured unimpeded access to and passage via the Suez Canal, have preserved the state's secular character and have in one way or another prioritized the security of Israel. Muslim Brotherhood President Mohammed Morsi's brief interlude in power didn't seem to set the country on a different trajectory.<sup>1</sup> His regime's beliefs, goals and strategies were at best unclear and at worst only embryonically formulated. After a long underground struggle, the Muslim Brotherhood seemed more bent on engaging in internal struggles than recalibrating Egypt's international posture. The same seemed to be true under President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who deposed Morsi in July 2013. A man used to operate in the shadows, Sisi prioritised cementing his internal rule, while seemingly preserving the foreign policy pillars of his predecessors.

## *Geopolitical context changing, Saudi Arabia and Russia rising to prominence*

Yet, Sisi's reign commenced within a changing geopolitical context. Its first parameter was the war in Syria, which came to test all regional actors. Then there was the US retreat from the region; as shrewdly pointed by Christopher Phillips in a recent book on Syria, whether this retreat is actually happening or is simply perceived as such regionally is of little significance; the mere perception of it at times more than suffices in influencing regional actors' behaviour and policies. Finally, and in conjunction with the above, the contours of this fluid context were also shaped by a new regional Sunni-Shia rift, to different extents a product and a driving force of the wars in Syria and Yemen.



It is no secret that the wars in Syria and Yemen have boosted the regional presence of Russia (in the first case) and Saudi Arabia (in both). And while Russia's regional policies seem to be relatively understandable (securing access to the Mediterranean and fighting extremist Islam), Saudi Arabia's views toward political Islam are slightly more perplexing. Thus, while funding and arming a motley archipelago of extremist organizations in Syria, the Saudis abhor the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, whose rise in other countries has always made it think of its own potential downfall. Thus, the Saudis' external and internal concerns could not have failed to be mirrored in Egypt: Sisi received unconditional support in his fight against the Muslim Brotherhood. But his policy on Syria has been an irritant one for the Saudis. Although Egypt has supported the Saudi-led coalition by fighting ISIS politically (and unequivocally), it sees it as promoting its own agenda, which is mainly sectarian and aims to counter Iran's hegemony.<sup>2</sup> It also deems the non-inclusion of its battle against domestic insurgents in the Sinai in the war on terror as immensely unjust. And it would like to see this war extended to Libya as well.<sup>3</sup>

Interestingly enough, all of the above seem to be closer to the positions of Russia. It is no coincidence that Egyptian and Russian views on key regional issues have been characterized as "convergent". Egypt's relationship with Russia fits easily with Egypt's domestic and regional priorities.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Russia views Syria mainly through the lens of the regime's non-implosion. A Russian passenger was blown up above the Sinai by the same insurgents Sisi's regime is fighting. And the two countries are on the same page on Libya, from the Egyptian vantage point an "imminent threat",<sup>5</sup> where they both support General Haftar.

Increasing identification in regional issues does not, however, entail the substitution of the US-Saudi alliance with Russia. The US remains irreplaceable as arms' supplier, even after a \$3.5 bln arms deal in 2014 with Russia. At the same time, Egyptian-Russian relations remain "shallow and limited",<sup>6</sup> with Russian direct investment very low and business links modest. In addition, Gulf money assistance is vital to Egypt's long-term viability, which means that for the foreseeable future, Sisi's foreign policy is bound to be a delicate balancing act, which will aim to (dis)please all sides equally. This was evident during October 2016, when Egypt voted in favour of a United Nations Security Council resolution introduced by Russia, which called for a ceasefire in Aleppo and the resumption of Russian airstrikes. At the same meeting, Russia voted for an opposing French resolution (!), supported by the Saudis, which called for a no-fly zone. Obviously, the duplicitous act aimed at both placating the Saudis while currying favour with the Russians.



### *A flailing economy*

Sisi regime's economic performance has been poor, to say the least. That army penetration and control of the Egyptian economy has always been pervasive is no secret. Yet, astonishingly enough, following the ousting of Morsi the army's share of the country's economy seems to have expanded to 1/3 in total.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, any effort at reform failed staggeringly. Food and fuel subsidies, both sacred cows in Egypt, have had their share of trouble; in March 2017 subsidies on bread were reduced. Following vehement protests in Alexandria, the regime announced that the cuts would be rescinded and by the end of the month possibly increased. In 2014, an attempt was made to reduce fuel subsidies. But it was nipped in the bud, as the popular support these subsidies engender is massive.

Another failed experiment was the country's floating of its currency in November 2016, resulting in a 48% drop of the Egyptian Pound (EGP)'s value. The effects of this measure could well have been mitigated had Egypt immediately set itself on a path towards luring foreign investment, travel and increasing exports. Instead, the only institution benefitting from the devaluation was the army, whose domestic economic activities welcomed the overnight doubling of import costs.<sup>8</sup> In addition, el-Sisi has adopted an "austerity rhetoric" that bodes ill for the economy's future.<sup>9</sup> Yet this didn't prevent the Egyptian state from spending \$13 million only for the inauguration (!) of the New Suez Canal in August 2015.

Finally, Gulf money is no solution either; the latter serve to fund Egypt's state budget, 80% of which is spent on either interest payment for previous loans, subsidies or public employees' salaries. And the public sector remains bloated, with 6 million servants more than double the United States and the United Kingdom combined.<sup>10</sup>

### *A restoration of past glory?*

Egypt has always been the political, intellectual and artistic avant-garde of the Arab world. This seems to be changing today. Egypt has indeed very little saying in regional affairs; when it recently tried to play a role in an Iraqi settlement, the KRG's President Barzani's media advisor called Egypt "of little influence".<sup>11</sup> In addition, its artistic/intellectual output and its political discourse are regrettable.<sup>12</sup> To top it all, the country seems to remain "captive"<sup>13</sup> to the influence of Saudi Arabia. This subservience was on full display on the issue of the Tiran and Sanafir islands: in April 2016, Egypt announced their transfer to Saudi Arabia. The concession was then met with virulent protests. Egypt's higher administrative court then annulled the agreement. But in April 2017, Egypt's Court of Urgent Matters voided the previous ruling.<sup>14</sup> The general feeling was that Egypt conceded the islands, whose waters are destined for oil and gas exploration, in return for continuing aid.<sup>15</sup> Long gone were the days of President Nasser, when it was adamantly asserted that the two tiny islands belong to Egypt.

As mentioned, the foreseeable future will most likely hold a delicate balancing act: keeping all sides satisfied, while trying to diversify its foreign policy<sup>16</sup> as much as it can, not of its own volition but because the structures of the regional and international settings are becoming more multipolar.



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# Egypt through the secular looking glass

Stavros I. Drakoularakos

*Throughout the years 2011-2012, the waves of the Arab Spring uprisings hit Egypt, paving the way for the party of the Muslim Brotherhood to win the first elections following the removal of former President Hosni Mubarak from power. The focus of the newly-elected government to implement Sunni Muslim values and the rule of Sharia law eventually led to its downfall, via a coup orchestrated by the military, in 2013. A new military government led by Abdel Fattah al-Sisi was soon placed into power and won the elections that followed. This situation sparked an already present discussion on the degree of implementation of secular values within the Egyptian society, as well as within the Egyptian institutions.*

The Egyptian political system could be viewed as a hybrid entity, bridging the religious values of Islam with the secular values of a democratic society. While Egypt is a Sunni Muslim majority country, it is also the home of large religious communities of Christians Copts and Shia Muslims, estimated at 10 million and 1 million people, respectively. The al-Azhar University is widely promoted as the highest religious authority in Sunni Muslim Affairs, with a strong reach domestically, as well as abroad. Nowadays, there are a number of issues originating from the focus on the Sunni Muslim identity in Egyptian everyday life: the identity card debate; the Islamic verbal divorce law; the blasphemy of religion law; the rapport between the government and al-Azhar University; and sectarian strife.

## *The identity card debate*

The identity card debate was retriggered in October 2016 by the joint decision of both the students, the academic and administrative staff of the University of Cairo to no longer require the mention of one's religious identity on their paperwork. Although not a new topic, the reaction in the Egyptian political and media was swift and provoked heated and controversial discussions between religious figures, political personalities, seculars and atheists. The debate quickly grew from talking



about the university paperwork to focusing on aspects of the national Egyptian identity card. The issue at hand was that by removing religion from identity cards, the predominant Sunni Muslim identity of the Egyptian people would be challenged and at stake. Soon enough, the Cairo University's decision was revoked. Nonetheless, it seems the decision's effects were here to stay: in January 2017, the Ain Shams University moved forward with its own decision to remove religious affiliations from its forms.<sup>1</sup>

What is more, this incident is indicative of a larger issue at hand within Egyptian society. There subsists a divide on who is considered a part of the Egyptian national population. Copts and Shia Muslim seem to be communities of people living in Egypt as guests with no real sense of belonging. As a result, they are treated as second-class citizens whose religious, judiciary and political rights are often the subject of negotiation or dismissal. Prime examples of this situation are the annulment of the Shia celebrations of the religious Day of Ashura and the inconsistencies regarding the bill on building churches, both during 2016.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Egyptian



Copts consider themselves citizens with full constitutional rights, as they are one of the oldest communities in the Middle Eastern region. Therefore, their status in Egypt should not be one related to respecting and protecting the rights of minorities, but one linked to their constant presence throughout Egyptian history. The issue boils down to limiting the effects of discrimination within Egyptian society. The prospect of removing the religious affiliation – or the lack thereof – from official paperwork would be an important step forward for the assimilation of non-Sunni Muslims in all aspects of Egyptian life.<sup>3</sup>

### *“Hisbah lawsuits” and Islamic verbal divorce*

Although “Hisbah lawsuits” (or disdain of religion lawsuits) have been a hot topic of discussion for the past decade in Egypt, they have been on the rise since 2011. The disdain of religion law applies to all three officially recognized religions by the State: the Islamic, the Christian and the Judaic religion. Its offenders are often atheists and Christian Copts, and are sentenced from six months to five years of prison time. To date, the most commonly known victims of the “Hisbah lawsuits” have been Coptic teenagers, novelists, media personalities and journalists. Its subjects are forced to either accept their sentence, fight it, or to flee the country and seek asylum abroad.<sup>4</sup> Despite some optimistic parliamentary initiatives, efforts to annul or to reform the law have fallen on deaf ears.<sup>5</sup> The disdain of religion law impedes both freedom of speech and non-Sunni Muslim religious practices. It is law which is unilateral, as it applies equally for all three officially recognized religions by the State, bi-



ased as it pertains mainly to the practices of one particular religion, and unjust since it effectively prohibits outside critical thinking of any and all aspects of Sunni Muslim religion and enforces their respect at the same time.

On another legal topic, verbal divorce is in vigour in Egypt. As a result, according to the rule of Islamic family law, a man has the right to verbally divorce his wife without any witnesses present. The direct repercussion of this situation is that a woman can be informed of her legally binding divorce after the fact and with no prior knowledge.<sup>6</sup> Steps have been taken by the Sisi government to remedy this predicament through amendments that would switch the divorce proceedings from verbal to written ones.<sup>7</sup> Sisi's call for reform has been met with strong disagreement and rebuttals from the al-Azhar University, despite an overwhelming majority of 63% of the Egyptian population in its favour, according to a poll conducted by the Egyptian Center for Public Opinion Research.<sup>8</sup>

### *Al-Azhar University, Copts, and sectarian strife*

Although the government of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi was supported both by the al-Azhar University and the Coptic community in Egypt, their current relationship is strained, especially over the past year. While the Coptic community welcomed President Sisi and the downfall of the Muslim Brotherhood, the attacks of the past few months, sectarian and/or Islamic State-related, shook the foundations of their relationship with the current administration. The al-Minya region has been – almost traditionally – the epicentre of sectarian strife in Egypt.<sup>9</sup> However, in 2017, the tensions between the Coptic and Muslim communities have gradually escalated, reaching Alexandria and Cairo, and effectively bringing the issue to the front door of the government.<sup>10</sup> The sectarian tensions are the by-products of a larger problem, one directly related to the above-mentioned issue of Egyptian citizenship and belonging. Despite governmental declarations in support of one unique Egyptian identity over communities separated by religion, the division within society remains.

President Sisi has been making headlines with his call for a “religious revolution” and his public disagreements with the head of al-Azhar University. Government-approved committees have been formed and steps have been taken in order to update the University's curriculum, to formalize Friday prayer, as well as to promote a moderate Islamic rhetoric. These initiatives were put forward without any input from al-Azhar and were considered an affront to its authority and its independence on religious affairs.<sup>11</sup> Although the call for a “religious revolution” is directed at al-Azhar University, its intended aim is to temper extreme views and to marginalize radical elements within Egyptian society. As an aftermath of the ramifications of the Arab Spring, as well as the financial crisis, the targeting of religious communities seems to be in vogue. The latter, coupled with the growth of the Islamic State's clout in Northern Africa, has given way to uneasy living conditions and great uncertainty in regard to the prospects of peaceful coexistence and interreligious dialogue.

Although it seems that a rift is slowly growing between the government and the Egyptian religious authority, perhaps giving a way for a separation of church and state, one aspect of the relationship between the two parties should be underlined. The al-Azhar University has been a mainstay in Egyptian politics since the 1970s. During that period, President Sadat attempted to refocus Egypt's identity in the Middle East from a pan-Arab to a Muslim one. This decision effectively enabled



al-Azhar to become the institution which provides legitimacy to a government at any given time. Hence, the relationship between the government and al-Azhar is one that cannot be simply excised from policy making. At the same time, since Egypt is a Muslim majority country, secular views and reforms are often viewed negatively by the general population. To that effect, by maintaining al-Azhar's official status, governments have the opportunity to push forward with reforms that would otherwise be deemed too secular and contrary to the values of the Egyptian State.<sup>12</sup>

Another dimension related to the issue of secularism in Egypt is the respect, or lack thereof, of human rights. As of late, the work of non-governmental organizations and web access to news networks have been hindered by state intervention. Due to the advent of supporters of the Islamic State, as well as the rise in incidents and terrorist attacks in Egypt, state measures have been implemented. However, these measures seem to refrain from targeting a specific problem within society and are used ambiguously in an all-encompassing policy. In other words, current challenges are used as a means to an end, impeding actors that do not fit within the government's view of things.

Nevertheless, supporters of a more secular Egyptian State are challenging a quid pro quo relationship between the government and its religious institution. It remains to be seen whether the relationship will be put to good use, benefitting Egyptian citizens of any gender and walks of life, or if its strain will enable radical views to jump to the forefront and unravel the progress already achieved.



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# U.S.- Egypt relations: From Obama to the Trump Era

Melanthi Loucaidou

*Egypt is considered as one of the main allies of the US in the region of the Middle East and North Africa. Decades of stability, alongside the recent strained years, define the bilateral relations between Washington and Cairo. Despite the decades-long American assistance to the country, decisions of the former US administration relied on advancements in Egyptian domestic affairs – starting from Mubarak, then Morsi and finally Sisi – having shaped a troubled bilateral relationship. However, this seems to change rapidly since Trump took charge of the Oval office.*

## *A beneficial relationship for both*

Historically, Egypt has been an important and dependable country for US national security interests in the region. Egypt's geographic position, its demographic weight in the Arab world, its political and cultural legacy as well as its presence on the border of Israel are all characteristics that should explain why Cairo was chosen as a close partner of the US half a century ago. Egypt is the second-largest recipient of US foreign aid after Israel. The country receives \$1.3 billion military assistance annually, that is about a quarter of the aid that the US gives globally.<sup>1</sup> Security and military ties are the partnership's core. Specifically, since the 1979 Israel-Egyptian Peace Treaty, the US has upgraded Egypt's military capabilities. The country now owns and operates more than 200 F-16 jets, and more than 1.000 M1 tanks. Also, common weapon platforms and tactics have facilitated Egyptian and Emirati military cooperation in Egypt's western border as well as the Sinai Peninsula.<sup>2</sup> The US also provides training for Egyptian military figures in US war colleges. The current President of the country, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, attended the US Army War College, in Pennsylvania back in 2006. A further benefit for Egypt from its relationship with the US accrues from the economic ties. Egypt hosts some of the most prominent US-based multinational firms – such as IBM, Microsoft, ExxonMobil – and bilateral trade has stood at more than \$5 billion for a decade. From the US perspective, the aid to Egypt, especially the one in the military framework, is considered as an investment in regional stability in a completely turbulent area.



The shared partnership has benefited the US as well. For example, during a regular year there might be more than 30 American warships crossing the Suez Canal, including nuclear-powered aircraft carriers. Moreover, more than 2,000 US military planes pass through the Egyptian airspace per annum. Based on these occurrences, Egypt appears as a major asset for the US defense position in the Middle East, Europe, Africa and undeniably, a substantial buyer for the US military industry. However, apart from the close economic and strategic ties, domestic policies and the human rights affairs have frequently vibrated the shared relations. The Egyptian revolution of 2011, as part of the populous Arab Spring, alongside with the following advancements that occurred inside the country, transformed the until-then stable, albeit silent, cooperation, into a problematic one.

### *From Mubarak, to Morsi to Sisi*

Although the Egyptian protests of 2011 were a response to domestic grievances (authoritarianism and political repression, police brutality, corruption, etc.), little, if anything, has changed with respect to these encroachments. In the aftermath of the demonstrations, the US encouraged Egypt's long-serving President Hosni Mubarak to step down. The Obama administration's choice to abandon a long-time ally was met with criticism not only in the US, but also and most importantly in Egypt. After Mubarak's overthrow, the once-banned Muslim Brotherhood, a historical part of Egyptian politics, emerged as the most important political organization in the country, compelling the US policymakers to take notice and begin to cultivate ties to its leadership.<sup>3</sup> A major actor who seemed to be concerned about the rise of the Egyptian Brothers in power was the Army, the country's leading institution since Nasser's time. The Egyptian army repeatedly warned the Obama administration that the rise of Islamist political forces threatened the country, while several Egyptian officials speculated that the US had a master plan to install the Muslim Brotherhood as well as far-right Salafis in government.<sup>4</sup> When it appeared that the Brothers' candidate, Mohamed Morsi, would win the election in the second round in 2012, the military hesitated to announce the results, prompting criticism from the US.

Following Morsi's victory, many Egyptians were convinced that the US was willing to deal with suppressing and illiberal forces. This was precisely the feeling that was being shared by the youth revolutionaries who took in action in Tahrir Square during 2011 protests, as well as by those political parties structured on liberal philosophies. In addition, reform-minded professionals feared that the Islamists of the Muslim Brotherhood would never relinquish power once they had won in the ballot box.<sup>5</sup> At some level, the 2012 presidential elections were a step towards further dissociation. This can be explained by the fact that many supporters of the Brotherhood came out in a powerful manner, while the youth and liberals struggled between the Brothers and a reversion to the old regime. In fact, the relatively low rates Morsi gained pointed out the society's dilemma: Egyptians were forced to choose between Brothers' Morsi and Ahmed Shafiq, former Air Force Commander, former Minister of Civil Aviation and, primarily, Mubarak's last Prime Minister. The former represented the political agenda of the Muslim Brotherhood, an undesirable program for several masses of the Egyptian civil society; the latter was connected with the authoritarian regime that was ruling Egypt for thirty years.



As far as the US is concerned, the tumultuous political transition in Egypt appeared as an enduring headache for Obama.<sup>6</sup> US officials initially hesitated to abandon their longtime ally President Mubarak and were criticized when they eventually did. However, they engaged the new government in Cairo cautiously, as they tried to maintain ties with the military while acknowledging the legitimacy of the elected president. Subsequently, the US President gambled on Morsi as he found him to be a useful and pragmatic partner in handling issues like a violent flare-up in Gaza.<sup>7</sup> Although crackdowns by the new Egyptian authority occurred, Americans chose to say nothing, maintaining their cooperation with the government in Cairo. In particular, when then-Defense Secretary Leon Panetta visited Cairo in 2011, after meeting with Morsi, he stated that the latter was “his own man”, suggesting that Morsi had resigned from the Brotherhood and was acting independently.<sup>8</sup>

Morsi’s first year in power further polarized an already diverse society considering that he failed to either manage economic problems or bring society’s sections into alignment. According to Gallup, 80% of Egyptians interviewed shortly before Morsi was removed said their country was worse off then, than it was before Mubarak resigned in 2011.<sup>9</sup> Morsi clashed with opposition parties, but the major turning point for his downfall was the unilateral declaration of judiciary immunity in November 2012. Following a new period of demonstrations against Morsi’s rule, in the summer of 2013, the Egyptian military and General Commander Sisi unilaterally dissolved the government. Washington’s response was directed towards the Army, demanding the restoration of civilian governance. As a result, the US administration suspended military aid to Egypt for two years (October 2013-March 2015), canceled the joint US-Egypt exercise (“Operation Bright Star”), suspended the deliveries of certain military systems (such as F-16s, Apache helicopters, Harpoon missiles), and also canceled the planned cash transfers of economic aid.<sup>10</sup>



At this point, it must be marked out that Israelis officials shared concerns on the military cutting, commenting it as a strategic error. Israel used to hold close ties with Sisi when the latter was serving at the military intelligence. Also, according to Tel Aviv, the security cooperation between the two countries has grown closer than ever since General Sisi removed Morsi from power. From Israel’s point of view, the assistance cutting was a threat to the 1979 Peace Treaty, a danger for the Egypt-



ian-Israeli border, and it would possibly serve as an opportunity for the Gulf States to engage in Egypt's domestic affairs. Therefore, in the wake of Israel's concerns, the influential American Israel Public Affairs Committee sent a letter to Senators opposing the idea, saying that "it could increase instability in Egypt and undermine important US interests and negatively impact our Israel ally".<sup>11</sup>

### *From Obama to Trump*

The strained relations between Obama and Sisi would give way to a new American administration with Donald Trump in charge. During the 2016 presidential campaign in the US, Trump attempted to differ his approach towards Egypt from his predecessor. Friendly phone calls between Trump and Sisi, a meeting during the UN General Assembly in New York in September, an invitation – which never came during Obama's tenure – and a visit to the White House last February – after thirteen years – as well as a "good chemistry" between them two have set the tone for a new era in the US-Egypt relations. Sisi was the first leader to congratulate Trump on his victory and it gradually came into view that both Trump and Sisi share similar opinions with respect to security, stability, cooperation and terrorism. However, beyond a certain support that Sisi enjoys, US officials, observers and human rights organizations are concerned about the Egyptian government's abuses. For example, Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham – key players in providing military aid as heads of the Appropriations and the Armed Forces Committees, respectively – have expressed concerns about Sisi's campaign against Egyptian and American NGOs. After the meeting in Washington, Trump acknowledged that the two countries "have a few things" they do not agree on but he did not mention US concerns about human rights at the end. Hence, it can be argued that the new US administration places more value on Egypt as a partner in the fight against ISIS than it does on the matters of democracy and human rights.

To sum up, both countries are obliged to handle a number of situations involving the perilous presence of ISIS in Egypt's neighborhood alongside with regional threats for cooperation and stability. The question whether Egypt can pass through certain difficulties in its domestic policies and claim itself as a regional power will be answered in the long run. A successful tradition to democracy, economic success, religious tolerance and the respect of the human rights along with a foreign policy that set Egyptian interests as the top priority would certainly turn the country into a role model in the region.



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# The social dynamics of post-Arab Spring Egypt: Are they lost?

Maria Kourpa

*Six years after the Arab popular uprisings that shook North Africa and the Middle East, the case of Egypt is considered a relatively successful one that led to the ousting of the dictator and national elections. Since then, after a coup d'état, escalating violence and several persecutions, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's regime is slowly gliding into a dictatorship -if the regime was ever a democracy in the first place. At the same time, the Egyptian society still suffers from poor living conditions. A generation brought up in the streets remains in discontent. Can the driving forces of the "Arab spring" turn the table over again?*

After two bombings on April 11th by the Islamic State targeting Christian churches, Sisi's government declared, for the first time after the 2014 constitution, the emergency law. Egyptians have lived under the state of emergency for 53 years since 1956, with short breaks of normality. The new Egyptian constitution voted in 2014, in an attempt to mitigate state abuse of power, predicted that a state of emergency would be valid only for three months, with a possible extension of another three. Also, the President is left with a limited set of powers -compared with the ones he got in the previous constitution-; notably, the power to refer citizens to State Security Emergency Courts without any right to request review of their trial.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, fears have risen that the government will find a way to extend the state of emergency for a longer period of time. At the same time, Egypt is on the spotlight for human rights violations, not permitted even under the emergency law.<sup>2</sup>

The government is gradually getting more authoritarian and oppressive. The police forces, the secrete services and the army are regaining power as the regime consolidates itself, following the path of Mubarak's leadership and pausing the brief democratic period of 2011-2013. The red flag, or the excuse for the Egyptian regime is the Muslim Brotherhood. Even before



the state of emergency and after the 2012 protests, political opponents and activists were arrested, sentenced or killed with the accusation of being members of the Muslim Brotherhood, which is designated once again as a terrorist organisation.<sup>3</sup> Islamic organisations such as the Muslim Brotherhood -or what is left of them- are present but they are only a fragment of the Egyptian opposition. Sisi's opposition consists also of leftists, liberals and some secular parties. But political participation in Egypt asphyxiates; parties, movements and communities are being cut off the political processes and debates, which, coupled with poverty and poor living conditions, could lead the Egyptians again in the fight against their government at any time.

### *Egyptian economy rings the alarm*

One should never neglect the economic factor in this political equation. On the one hand, the pressure upon the liberalisation of the economy is another difficult task Sisi government has to shoulder. On the other hand, the escalation of the economic crisis creates further pressure upon the society, along with the violation of its rights. A traditionally state-centred economy for years, during the 21st century, Egypt tried to attract investments and open up to international economy. Nevertheless, this did not go well with the Egyptian society, which expressed demands for jobs and dignity. The collision resulted to the uprisings of 2011. The present government is, unfortunately, not responding successfully to the demands of the Egyptian people, which have not changed since 2011. In 2015, the Egyptian government got a \$400 million loan from the World Bank to run two programs, Solidarity and Dignity, with the aspiration to help the poor and the disabled.<sup>4</sup> But welfare programs are most probably to get cut as Egypt entered an IMF driven program in order to get another \$12bn loan.

Sisi's government has to balance between complying with international markets and, at the same time, providing its people with employment and welfare. Traditionally, Egypt had a rebellious urban population of internal migrants that left the rural areas of the country for better job opportunities. These austerity measures will test an already unpopular government in front of the rebellious urban centres. Authoritarianism seems like the only solution for Sisi in order to cope with social unrest and implement the measures. When it comes to privatizations and cut of subsidies, the International Monetary Fund and the European Union are being persistent on further liberalization of the economy. In addition, after the 2013 coup, the Egyptian government excluded big companies from politics and cut its cords with powerful businessmen, not only in fear of their power, but also in order to avoid clientelism and corruption. But this time, the state is becoming all the more dependent on big companies for employment and economic development.<sup>5</sup>

Last November, the government was forced to devalue by roughly half the Egyptian pound as a shock therapy measure. Inflation is going sky high on a monthly basis, peaking at its highest last April. It is expected to rise even more due to new subsidised cuts and new taxes. Inflation is worsening up the living condition of the Egyptian people; food and beverage inflation is close to 32 %, while fuel and electricity prices are rising considerably for Egyptian families. The state responded in despair by providing bread and other food subsidies.<sup>6</sup> This would not be enough; in March, many street fights broke out in the cities of Egypt when people asked for bread. Inflation and devaluation of currency caused rise in the prices of daily im-



ported goods and people have to turn to black market goods to avoid high cost. Last but not least, shortages of daily products have already appeared in markets, such as rice, while, subsidies are not equally, nor fairly distributed.

### *The wild youth*

One of the leading forces of the 2011 uprisings were the youth, who introduced new methods of cooperating, communicating and protesting, such as the social media. Of course, since the uprising, the regime has been controlling the mass media



in Egypt and surveilling users' profiles on social media. Given the emergency law the government continues to control media and censorship. Cases of lawyers being sentenced for a Facebook post that insulted the president, while a number of journalists face trials and suspension for criticising the government.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that the opposition, especially its youth, has a string grip on social media. Earlier on April, Sisi declared that he would resign immediately if the Egyptian people want him to. After that,

social media crashed under the hashtag #We\_DoNotWant\_Sisi, while other hashtags like #Why\_should\_we\_have\_another\_revolution trended too.<sup>8</sup> According to a survey by the Egyptian Centre for Public opinion research showed that Sisi's approval has decreased from 82% to 68% last October.<sup>9</sup>

The Egyptian youth is still politically active, especially inside the university campuses; the government assigned private security companies to enforce security in the universities and stipulated punishments for students with an anti-governmental stance. So far, hundreds of students have been arrested and many of them are facing trial.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, the government tries to approach the youth with entrepreneur initiatives and education programs. But the generation that led the Arab Spring cannot forget the persecutions it faced. Besides the oppression, the Egyptian youth is the one that struggles with the highest unemployment and half of them live under the poverty line. Young activists believe that they united for something more than merely ousting Mubarak in 2011; instead, they aspired to a more radical change in the socio-economic milieu of Egypt.<sup>11</sup>

### *The Syndicates against Sisi*

Not only the youth, but also the syndicates protested against the regime. While the youth has had a rather dynamic role in



the society, the syndicates were state-controlled and were attached to the government, be it Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood or now Sisi, even during the uprisings.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, the new independent trade unions that rose after 2011, try to consolidate, overcome their internal inconsistency and unify against the establishment. Especially the syndicate of journalists faces great oppression and arrests. The syndicate of doctors and nurses is also being really active. It is not really news that when the syndicate protested against the function of public hospitals, it was brutally crashed by the police. More syndicates are joining their struggle and support them, including civil servants and teachers.<sup>13</sup> It is quite obvious that Sisi could not appeal to the labour force in Egypt. The government has campaigned against the syndicates in order to turn the society against them or to punish the leaders of protests and strikes in order to silence them.

The uprisings of 2011 betrayed the Egyptian people. Continuous violations and authoritarianism from the government's side are enough to have people in the streets fighting for their dignity once again. Yet, this time, it is more likely, given the ongoing devaluation of human development and living standards. This would push students, syndicates and the more disadvantaged citizens into political activism. Whether Islamism and religious populism could penetrate the social unrest as it did some years ago, is an issue that needs to be examined.

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# Energy security in Egypt: Challenges and opportunities

Evangelia Kardasi

*Up until 2009, Egypt was the sole Eastern Mediterranean country with great energy resources and an extended energy grid. Unfortunately, since 2011, political instability, coupled with bad financial options and corruption, changed the rules of the game. As a result, Egypt turned into an energy-seeking country, dependent on gas imports in order to address the increased domestic demand. In 2015, the discovery of the Zohr field along with the push for structural and financial reforms provided the country with newfound potential to boost the national economy and to offer fresh opportunities for the region as a whole.*

## *Egypt's energy profile*

According to the Energy Information Energy (EIA), “Egypt is the largest non- OPEC oil producer in Africa and the second-largest dry natural gas producer on the continent. The country also serves as a major transit route for oil shipped from the Persian Gulf to Europe and the United States”.<sup>1</sup> Total oil production reaches 708,000 barrels per day, originating mainly from the fields in the Western Desert, as well as the Gulf of Suez. Another very important energy resource in Egypt is natural gas, with reserves estimated at 77 tcf (trillion cubic feet). Nonetheless, on August 30, 2015, the Italian energy company ENI SpA announced the discovery of a “supergiant” natural gas field in the Shorouk Block of Egypt’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), the largest field ever found in the Levantine Basin. It is projected to contain 30tcf of natural gas. ENI and BP discovered the Nooros Field and the Baltim SW Field in the Delta Nile, in July 2015 and June 2016, respectively, with a total potential of 3tcf of gas.<sup>2</sup>

Due to its energy reserves, Egypt developed, since the second half of the last century, an extended energy infrastructure grid. More specifically, the Suez Canal connects the Red Sea Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea and has become the most vital strategic route of the world seaborne trade in the region. In addition, there is also the SUMED (Suez-Mediterranean) pipeline (established in 1977), through which crude oil is transported from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean. Furthermore, an Arab



Gas Network is available since the 2000s, consisting of two LNG (Liquefied Natural Gas) terminals (Damietta and Idku at the Mediterranean Sea) and two pipelines (the Arab Gas Pipeline which connects Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and could extend to Turkey, and its branch, the El Arish-Ashkelon pipeline, which connects Egypt with Israel). In 2014, Egypt leased from the Norwegian energy company Hoegh LNG, a Floating Storage and Regasification Unit (FSRU) for a five-year period, located at the Ain Sukhna port on the Red Sea. Additionally, during 2017, new gas infrastructure projects are being developed in order to connect the Mediterranean gas fields with the Egyptian coast.<sup>3</sup> To say the least, Egypt maintains a very strong energy profile and is considered an important actor in the Eastern Mediterranean energy rally.

### *Challenges in the Egypt's energy sector*

Although Egypt is rich in hydrocarbon resources, it is an energy-poor country. While its oil and gas reserves place it at the 21st place on the world list of energy producing countries – with reserves larger than Norway's and Canada's – it suffers from energy deficits.

In July 2003, Egypt began to export natural gas to various markets (to Jordan, Israel, Europe, and Asia) earning up to \$3.2 billion per year. This was due to its large reserves, which could both meet its energy needs and be exported. On the domestic front, there was an overall growing demand for natural gas because of demographic reasons (population growth), rising living standards and cheap prices. In that sense, “[...] gas gained market share, providing 50% of the country's total energy in 2012 compared with 35% in 2000[...]”.<sup>4</sup> The government encouraged the population and the industrial sector to use natural gas instead of oil for their electricity needs by offering subsidies – as it was a cheap and affordable source of energy. For instance, the price that Egypt paid foreign operators for buying natural gas was capped at \$2.65/million Btu (British Thermal Unit). Compared to the price paid on the world market (approximately \$7-\$10/ million Btu), the margin was non-negligible.

Despite Egypt's energy potential, since 2011, the country's natural gas exports declined significantly, switching from being a net exporter into becoming a net importer. During the years 2015-2016, it spent \$2.5 to \$3.5 billion for importing LNG.<sup>5</sup> This dramatic change of its energy status was due to multiple factors: the rise in energy consumption at a pace of approximately 10% per year; the extremely low cap in selling prices; and the rising debt from damage compensations to energy companies. The latter was due to either sudden supply interruption (because of sabotage attacks to the infrastructure, as in the case of Israel), or a change of policy from the government, unilaterally deciding to interrupt exports in order to satisfy the increased domestic demand. As a consequence, the Israel Electricity Company addressed a French Arbitration Court in order to claim compensation for the damages. The compensation was set to \$2 billion. Later on, in 2017, a Swiss Arbitration Court rejected the appeal of the Egyptian Natural Gas Holding Company (EGAS).<sup>6</sup> In light of these developments, the energy companies were discouraged from continuing to cooperate with Egypt and from investing in a politically unstable country, one that had shown itself unreliable at its export duties. Soon enough, the country started to run out of foreign exchange and faced financial instability.

Under these circumstances, Egypt began to import LNG in 2015, through its FSRU. It should be pointed out that Egypt



mainly imported natural gas from Russia and Algeria. In 2014, it signed non-binding letters of intent with the companies licensed to the largest fields in the Eastern Mediterranean (the Leviathan and the Tamar ones). The following year, Egypt, the Republic of Cyprus and Greece signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in order for the Republic of Cyprus to export gas to Egypt. Moreover, at the end of 2015, Egypt signed a MoU with Jordan and Iraq in order to import Iraqi oil and gas. In 2015, the Tamar field licensed energy companies signed an agreement with Dolphinus Holdings Limited to export gas to Egypt. Negotiations for a potential future cooperation between Israel's Leviathan licensed energy companies and Egyptian ones are still in progress. It is true that these negotiations are difficult because of the compensation due to the Israel Electricity Company, the unstable regulatory framework in Israel, as well as the because of negative public opinion in both countries. Nevertheless, a deal is pending, according to leaks from government sources,<sup>7</sup> in order to unlock the necessary – as it is still an unexploited field – exports.<sup>8</sup>

### *Perspectives*

Even though Egypt was in a very difficult position, it seems that the natural gas discoveries in the past few years reversed the perspective of the country's energy sector. The announcement by ENI's CEO<sup>9</sup> that the production in the Zohr field will start at the end of 2017 – three years earlier than originally anticipated – buys time for its vulnerable economy: the LNG buying price from imports was much higher than the selling gas price from the domestic market, a fact that affected Egypt's already vulnerable fiscal balance.

In addition, Egypt signed a three-year financial program with the IMF in November 2016, in order to stabilize its currency rate, to unlock foreign flows, to boost export, and to revitalize its economy.<sup>10</sup> What is more, it was obliged to implement a number of structural economic reforms, including the reform of its energy subsidy program. This program was developed in the 1960s as an attempt to fight poverty and inequality, but it failed to address the inequalities in society and distributed the wealth to the elite. 20% of total public spending was dedicated to the subsidy program. Moreover, the government, in July 2014, introduced a five-year program of subsidy reduction, and intends to phase out subsidies by 2019, surely not without strong social reaction.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, it paid back the greater part of its debt to the energy companies, with the exception of



Israel's Electric Corporation, as it is used as a negotiating card for an agreement to export Israeli surplus natural gas to Egypt.<sup>12</sup> Egypt also promised a differing pricing policy for natural gas. All these measures attracted foreign investment and now Egypt reenters the energy market with confidence and with the eye on exports by 2019, according to the the EGAS Chairman, Mo-hamad El Marsy, coupled with a relative agreement in 2016 between the Egyptian government and ENI. It is of note that the involvement of the Russian energy company Rosneft in the Zohr field – after buying 30% from ENI in 2016 –<sup>13</sup> opens the door to the European market, as the Russian and Arabic press report.<sup>14</sup>

### *The potential for the Eastern Mediterranean*

The discovery of vast energy resources in the Eastern Mediterranean, since 2009, has completely altered the geopolitical status quo of the region. The Israeli, Cypriot and Egyptian natural gas discoveries promise even greater finds in the EEZ of Libya, Jordan and Syria. Exxon Mobil has already won the 3rd licensing round for hydrocarbon exploration in the Republic of Cyprus, and is about to start the exploration of the No. 11 field, which borders with the Zohr field.<sup>15</sup> The entire region faces energy shortages due to the lack of proper energy resources and infrastructure required to address the demand of an ever-growing population. As a result, the latest discoveries are here to satisfy their current need for energy security and stability.

In 2003, Egypt signed an EEZ delimitation agreement with the Republic of Cyprus, a unique one in the region, at the time, due to political disputes between the bordering countries (e.g. Israel-Libya). Since 2014, Egypt is planning to import gas from Israel, the Republic of Cyprus and Iraq. Egypt, the Republic of Cyprus and Greece have already completed three Summit Meetings during which they discussed energy cooperation, as was the case in the Summit Meeting between Israel, Greece and Cyprus. Currently, Israel has already begun to export to Jordan and Palestine. Furthermore, it is clear that a multilateral network of energy cooperation is in the stages of being developed with great chances of expansion. If one considers Europe's need to differentiate its supply routes from Russia and to use the money flows for financing infrastructure projects (e.g. The EastMed pipeline), one fully understands the great potential of the Mediterranean countries for attracting world interest. Even though the agreements with Israel and Cyprus for exporting to Egypt will not be realized, at least as originally conceived, due to the discovery of the Zohr field, the two countries could use the already existing infrastructure in Egypt to export their surplus gas.

For the time being, every plan and every proposal is on the table and is being discussed. The negotiations, of course, are long and strenuous due to the deep political differences between the interested countries, but the potential and profit are so great that a good deal in the name of the improvement of the population's living standards could smooth the route for lucrative cooperation. As it turns out, the Zohr field discovery promises to reform the whole region's energy profile.

It is needless to say that the challenges and opportunities in the Eastern Mediterranean are numerous. Finding the most profitable and lucrative way to capitalize on the gas findings is the missing link, in order to improve people's living standards, to boost economies, and to transform a region on fire



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# Political Islam in Egypt: In a State of Limbo

Costas Faropoulos

*In a highly volatile environment, political Islam in Egypt is struggling to remain visible in the political scene. Islamist parties are in decline, with only Hizb al-Nour in parliament, although others such as al-Wasat are attempting a comeback. The Muslim Brotherhood is under constant repression, which has forced it to go underground to survive. The only Islamic institution in the country that preserves its authority and influence is Al-Azhar University, which has lately openly defied government decisions. The question that begs to be answered is whether Islamist parties are capable of navigating through the Egyptian political scene without invoking the regime's wrath, and if they can efficiently oppose it.*

In his 2015 New Year's speech in Cairo, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi talked about the need of a "religious revolution" in Egypt and the Arab world. This is a position he has repeated since on many occasions, when expressing his commitment in battling radical Islamism. Sisi's "revolution" though, indicates also his desire to control the religious discourse in Egypt, at least in terms of state policy. The University of Al-Azhar, being the most prominent Sunni authority on religious matters in the country and the Middle East in general, has been a tough nut to crack for Sisi, as it opposes fiercely any attempt at state intervention in religious matters. There is indeed an ongoing power struggle between the Sisi administration and the Al-Azhar leadership that has been quite intense lately.

The government has attempted in recent months to bypass Al-Azhar and regulate certain religious practices through legislative initiatives. Most characteristic has been the decision of the Ministry of Religious Endowments to unify sermons at Friday prayers across the country. The government's justification behind the decision has been the prevention of radical imams from spreading extremist ideas across the country.<sup>1</sup> Al-Azhar rejected the Ministry's decision, as scholars commented that the university is solely responsible for the topics of the sermons and not a government agency. In light of Al-Azhar's objections,



the plan was finally discarded. Another point of friction has been Sisi's desire to abolish verbal divorce, in favor of state-granted divorces. The verbal divorce is a tradition consistent with Islamic law that allows the husband to divorce his wife simply by uttering three times the words "You are divorced". Al-Azhar once more pushed back against this initiative, with a council of scholars from Al-Azhar describing the verbal divorce as a "perfectly Islamic practice".<sup>2</sup>

While the religious reform promoted by Sisi is a source of disagreement between the government and Al-Azhar there is a larger issue at stake, and that is the balance of power between the two sides. Al-Azhar is highly independent of the government and an authority on religious matters. Sisi's attempt at undermining its authority and presenting the state as an agent of moral authority could not go unnoticed by the Al-Azhar leadership. The Grand Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayyeb has in the past supported Sisi's regime, most prominently when he supported Morsi's ousting by Sisi in 2013, but he has maintained a critical stance towards any religious-related initiative by the government. Despite any attempts at curtailing its autonomy, Al-Azhar is determined not to lose its stand in Egypt as a religious authority. Moreover, Al-Azhar is a highly symbolic institution in the country, and while el-Tayyeb denies any desire to tackle politics, the truth remains that the university has significant influence on the Egyptian society, as it functions as a social stronghold of traditional thinking.<sup>3</sup> Sisi has come to realize early on that Al-Azhar's authority is not easily undermined, and that he needs to have it on his side, if he truly wants to proceed with his religious reforms.

The complex nature of the relations between the government and Al-Azhar University gives way to an almost monolithic approach, when it comes to its handling of the Muslim Brotherhood. Its persecution has been relentless for the past four years and continues to be so. According to Sisi, there is no difference between the Muslim Brotherhood and the so-called Islamic State, as he has repeatedly stated that he considers the organization to be the origin of all extremist movements in the Arab world.<sup>4</sup> In 2013, Sisi declared the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization, and taking advantage of the people's discontent against it, along with depicting it as a national threat, he managed to mobilize popular support for his government. Hundreds of members of the Brotherhood have been arrested and imprisoned to this day, while Mohammed Morsi's death sentence has just recently been overturned in court, though he remains in prison serving three consecutive sentences.

Under these circumstances and with its credibility severely damaged as an organization, due mainly to its one year of authoritarian rule, the Muslim Brotherhood is currently struggling to maintain its place in the political and social sphere. On top of that, it has lost most sources of its political leverage and has been forced underground. Of course, its roots dig deep in Egyptian society, but the internal divisions that have been brewing since Morsi's overthrow, have alienated the Muslim Brotherhood even more from the people. The Brotherhood stands now divided between the old and the new leadership that emerged after the 2013 coup. The formation and dissolution of organizational committees according to each wing's interests and the undermining of veteran leaders, such as Mahmoud Ezzat, are characteristic of the power struggles within the organization. The younger generation of leaders is more inclined to forcefully oppose the regime's oppression, while the older leadership holds a more pragmatic stance.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the leadership stands, at the moment, divided, as it is split between power centers that operate both in Egypt and abroad. Nonetheless, the leadership in Egypt has managed during these trou-



bled years to hold elections and elect a new Crisis Management committee that is responsible for managing the Brotherhood's affairs in Egypt.

Albeit the Muslim Brotherhood still adheres consistently to its non-violent philosophy, several members, mostly belonging to the younger generation, are calling for a more violent response to the state's persecution of the Brotherhood. There are those who in face of the ongoing aggression dismiss the older leaders' insistence on non-violence, arguing that it amounts even to treason.<sup>6</sup> In an interview last year, Amr Darrag, one of the leaders of the Brotherhood responsible for the political office abroad, addressed the issue of non-violence. He discussed the revolutionary program the Brotherhood adopted, as one which has as a sole purpose the rejection of the Sisi regime and its removal. "We will strive to remove it by the same means that many other peoples have tried, primarily non-violent civil activism and refraining from cooperating with it from inside as loyal opposition".<sup>7</sup> These remarks indicate that there are concerns within the Muslim Brotherhood of the desire of many younger members, along with the younger generation of leaders, to react violently to their persecution. While there are attempts at curbing these tendencies, it is not certain that they will be enough to stop this current. Reports have linked the more radicalized wing of the Brotherhood with the insurgency taking place in the Sinai Peninsula, naming the internal divisions and the operational collapse of the organization as reasons for its de facto autonomy.<sup>8</sup>

In an environment of strict state control over the functioning and activities of Islamists in the country, Islamist parties are forced to be very careful in their political endeavors. Hizb al-Nour is the only Salafi Islamist party and representative of the Islamist movement in parliament at this moment, as it managed to survive under very hostile conditions, although extremely weakened. In the 2012 elections, it managed to win 111 seats in parliament, second only to the Muslim Brotherhood party, but in the elections of 2015, only got twelve seats out of 600. Al-Nour has adopted a rather pragmatic approach to politics that has helped it remain politically active. The party has been willing to ally with other non-Islamist parties in parliament, while at the same time maintaining a staunch sectarian stance in religious matters. With the collapse of the Muslim Brotherhood, the leaders of al-Nour hoped that they would gain in popularity and political prominence, but they were sorely disappointed. On the one hand, their electoral gains were not what they hoped they would be. On the other hand, prior actions and choices of the party were not looked favorably upon by the Sisi regime. Their support for Morsi's candidacy in 2012, and their participation in the Anti-Coup alliance, even if they withdrew from it in 2013, led to their marginalization by the Egyptian government. Furthermore, between the Salafis and Al-Azhar University, Sisi preferred Sheikh el-Tayeb as a more trustworthy partner in regaining and controlling the Islamist community in the country.<sup>9</sup>

Notwithstanding the harsh conditions under which Islamists function in the country, there has been relative mobility in the Political Islam terrain. The Building and Development Party, the political wing of the Islamist group Gamaa Islamiya, held in April and May internal elections for the appointment of new secretaries across Egypt. Gamaa Islamiya is an Islamist movement, which appeared in the 1970's and had as its main goal the overthrow of Mubarak and the establishment of an Islamic State in Egypt. In its time and until 2003, when it denounced terrorism, it was responsible for many attacks in Egypt, resulting in the killing for hundreds of police officers, soldiers and civilians. The party had been inactive since Morsi's ousting and



its participation in the Anti-Coup alliance in 2013, alongside with the Muslim Brotherhood. The restructuring plan that was announced in April and the public elections it held, suggest that, in order for it to be able to participate in the political process, the party may be willing to reconcile with the current regime. The government, on the other hand, by allowing the elections to take place, aims to prove that the regime can tolerate Islamist parties participating in the political arena, as long as they openly reject the Muslim Brotherhood and play by the rules of the regime.

It is this policy of seeming tolerance towards Islamist parties that has prompted some parties that were inactive to reemerge. A prime example of this is the resurfacing of the al-Wasat party. The party was first founded in 1996, when it broke



away from the Muslim Brotherhood, but it was unable to participate in elections till 2009 due to legal obstacles. It is a moderate Islamist party that seeks to combine an Islamic view of the world with a liberal democratic system.<sup>10</sup> Al-Wasat's leader, Abul-Ela Madi, was arrested and imprisoned in 2013, during the Muslim Brotherhood crackdown, and was released in 2015. In 2016, he began reemerging through interviews and speeches. In recent comments, he has kept his distance from the Muslim Brotherhood by dissociating from it, "Al-Wasat is a project that is independent of the Muslim Brotherhood, different from them and a

contender".<sup>11</sup> This has been common practice among Islamist groups under the Sisi regime, if they so desired to remain afloat and not be targeted by the government. How capable Al-Wasat is, though, to actually have any influence in the political scene of Egypt, remains to be seen.

In a volatile political environment, many Islamist parties have chosen to adjust to the current political milieu, by safeguarding their electoral participation. The Islamist narrative is certainly appealing in Egypt, and it is not inconceivable that the Islamist parties can draw popular support in opposing the regime. Moreover, the government is facing many open fronts, as the insurgency in Sinai and a staggering economy, and has a difficult road ahead. With the Muslim Brotherhood's younger members, who have been incarcerated after 2013 and radicalized in prison, feeling more and more comfortable with the idea of violence as a means to opposing the regime, the Sisi government may be forced to deal with unpredictable developments in the future.

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# Political representation within the Coptic community: Time to move forward?

Maria Tare

*During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Christians in Egypt, alongside Muslims, supported secular notions of citizenship when raising the banner of Arab nationalism as a trail to attain equality. After the 2011 uprising though, religion-based agitation is on the rise, while the spirit of “Egyptianess” has waned. Nowadays, the estimated eight million Copts, about 10% of the country’s population, have become more inclusive, granting church leaders the undisputed political role as the sole representatives of the community in Egypt’s political life.*

In the Eastern Christian tradition, as Fiona McCallum notes, the patriarch has historically enjoyed a dual role, as both the spiritual and the temporal leader of the community. The modern history of the Coptic Church in Egypt can only reaffirm the above statement. To put it in a historical context, when the secular leadership of the community lost its political influence under Nasser’s nationalization policies, Patriarch Kyrillos VI secured his role as the sole political representative of its adherents. In what appeared as an indigenous millet system, the Patriarch provided loyalty to the government, amidst the 1956 Suez crisis and the 1967 war, whereas in return, the state protected the Coptic community and considered him as its legitimate spokesman.<sup>1</sup>

With Nasser’s death in 1970 and that of Kyrillos’s in 1971, there were sharp changes concerning the Coptic issue; Sadat’s later Islamization process of the state apparatus stroked an immediate response by Kyrillos’s successor, Pope Shenouda, who urged the revival of Coptic cultural nationalism. The long period of Sadat-Shenouda confrontation -with the latter even sent to exile-ended with Mubarak’s rising to power. Under Mubarak, the church authorities, and Pope Shenouda in particular, reached a modus vivendi with the government. This “neo-millet” integration was re-established partly due to the church’s



fear of an Islamist ascendancy and, more importantly, the regime's acceptance of the Pope as the sole representative of the Coptic community.<sup>2</sup>

The uprising that erupted in the beginning of 2011 was to change these dynamics; new movements had already emerged from 2009, calling for full judicial independence, worker's rights, and political reforms, even as a section of Coptic youth wished to distance themselves from their Pope's decision of backing the regime. Thus, the argument of defeating despotism was brought within the church's walls as well.<sup>3</sup>

The fall of the regime in February 2011, however, only escalated anti-Coptic violence. Different patterns of sectarian-motivated attacks against Christians and their properties, as well as their churches, were reinforced; among the most prominent of these acts were the burning of churches in Sol, Imbaba and Al-Marinab. Rattled by the horrification of these events, Copts' place in Egypt's future was brought into question. The formation of political movements, such as the Maspero Youth Union (taking its name from the Maspero area of Cairo, where sit-in protests against religious discrimination arose), aimed partly at addressing that question. Unlike most Coptic politicians, the movement rejected the Church's status as the sole political representative of the community, and it was thus met with scepticism and suspicion from clerical authorities.<sup>4</sup> Most notably, Pope Shenouda seemed to be critical of the uprising. He might have feared that the uprising would not only threaten the establishment, but furthermore, it would release Islamist groups from any legal constraints, in case of a state collapse.



Copts, while celebrating in Tahrir square a more democratic and pluralistic polity and society, were caught off guard when the constitutional referendum, passed in December 2012, accelerated an electoral process, which led to overwhelming victories for Muslim Brotherhood candidates and Salafists. Mohammed Morsi's presidential victory in June 2012 was greeted with great concern, especially within the Coptic community, more so since the newly formed parliament left out of its political agenda provisions regarding Christian-Muslim equality, freedom of worship and freedom of religion.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, on June 30th 2013, Copts and Muslims joined once again their forces against what they believed to be a repressive Islamist regime. Political activism after 2011 had taken the form of inter-denominational grassroots mobilization, illustrating the need of Egyptians, and particularly Copts, to participate in Egypt's political life. After the military coup, the



Church's new Patriarch Pope Tawadros II felt the need to reassert his control over the political representation of the community. In July 2013, he endorsed the military coup of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, as he did with his presidency in June 2014. Pope Tawadros' stance seemed to have prompted a revival of the old "pact" between the clerical authority and the Mubarak regime.

Such strategy, however, placed the Coptic community clearly on one side of the political and socio-religious polarization; as Ishak Ibrahim of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights noted, Muslim Brotherhood members were spreading rumours that the coup was a "Coptic conspiracy to exclude them from power."<sup>6</sup> Such unfounded conspiracy theories have been breeding outbreaks of sectarian tensions and discrimination against Egypt's Christian community. For the Copts, these sectarian tensions have spearheaded an intensification of self-awareness, notwithstanding their diversity in political, class and geographical affiliations.<sup>7</sup>

Tawadro's support of Sisi's regime is often interpreted in terms of security. However, Copt's feelings on the above have been rather mixed. After the 2011 bombing at the Alexandrian Church of the Two Saints, a vast majority of Copts held the impression that state officials were exacerbating sectarian tensions rather than addressing them. In August 2013, a wave of attacks on forty churches led to accusations that the security forces had either left their posts or stood idly as the fury unfolded. Furthermore, the jihadist violence in the Sinai has forced at least 154 Christian families in Al Arish to flee their homes for Ismailia, marking the largest uprooting of Egyptians due to sectarian violence in recent years.<sup>8</sup> After numerous murderous attacks by armed groups against Copts, Sisi's displays of national unity and reconciliatory tones do not seem to ensure the security of Christians.<sup>9</sup>

These developments have motivated a large segment of the community to pursue emigration towards the West; a path taken for the first time in big numbers since the 1952 Revolution. Waves of emigration, towards mostly the United States, also occurred during Sadat's and Mubarak's regimes. Thousands more Copts left Egypt before the uprising, when the events in Kosheh, the All Saints Church in Alexandria, and Omraniya took place. By 2013, there was an estimated number of 900.000 Copts living in the United States.<sup>10</sup> The Coptic diaspora in the United States has become more vibrant; during Sisi's latest visit to Washington, several Coptic associations and individuals issued calls for demonstrations so that to put pressure upon the president and its government to address properly Egyptian Christians' safety and interests.<sup>11</sup>

Over the past decades, the Egyptian state has regarded the papacy as the central political force of the Coptic Orthodox community. This sectarian logic in governing the Coptic issue has failed to address either the discrimination or the rising violence the Coptic community faces. With such an arrangement still prevailing under Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi, the embracement of an active Coptic civil society and the depoliticization of the Patriarch seem rather unlikely.

For the time being, however, most of the Christians are showing support for Sisi. Putting pragmatism before principles, they most probably believe that the "realistic alternative to a police state isn't a thriving democracy, but [their] annihilation".<sup>12</sup>



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