



Editor: Bruce Maddy-Weitzman      Assistant Editor: Brandon Friedman

Volume 9, Number 15

September 10, 2015

## **The “Sisi-Meter” is Ticking: ‘Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi and the Challenges Facing Egypt**

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In ‘Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi’s first television interview during the 2014 presidential campaign, he promised Egyptian citizens that they would begin feeling improvement in their everyday lives within his first two years in office.<sup>i</sup> Sisi adopted a Churchillian demeanor when he spoke of the sweat, toil, and selflessness that would be required to realize his plans. Following the March 13, 2015 economic summit held in Sharm al-Sheikh, the Minister of Planning, Ashraf al-‘Arabi, stated that “the citizens of Egypt should not hold their breath for an economic miracle to emerge the day after the summit, as all the projects presented will be implemented by 2030.”<sup>ii</sup> Sisi is aware that since the 2011 revolution, the public has been impatient with their governments, and the two previous post-revolution administrations (SCAF and Morsi) lasted less than two years in office. During Mohammed Morsi’s presidency, a group of Egyptian youth developed a website called the “Morsi-meter,” now renamed the “Sisi-Meter,” that evaluates the daily performance of the president across a number of metrics, including health, education, employment, housing, and law. Sisi understands the implicit message. If the metrics ultimately measure against him, he is likely to face a serious challenge to his rule.

The president of Egypt faces three central challenges. The first is the Muslim Brotherhood movement, against which Sisi has wielded an uncompromising iron fist. He has labeled it an enemy of the Egyptian people, defined it as a terror organization, and consequently declared it illegal. In addition, he ordered the arrest and imprisonment of many of its leaders, including the movement’s Supreme Guide, its most senior spiritual authority, Muhammad Badie. To date, the climax of this process were the death sentences imposed on Badie, in March 2015, and on Morsi, two months later. Egypt’s Grand Mufti confirmed the sentences, which are presently awaiting approval, mitigation, or commutation by

Sisi. On June 29, 2015, Hisham Barakat, Egypt's public prosecutor was killed in a car bombing, the day before the anniversary of Morsi's ouster. The government believes the Muslim Brotherhood was responsible and that, as Sisi stated, "the order to kill the Public Prosecutor was issued from the defendants' cells."<sup>iii</sup>

Sisi's declaration of war against the Brotherhood, backed by important sectors of the Egyptian public, has negatively impacted the cohesion and degree of social solidarity of Egyptian society, polarizing Egypt between supporters and opponents of the Brotherhood. The regime, for its part, has responded with violence that often fails to discriminate between terror organizations operating in Egypt and legitimate critics of the regime who play by accepted political rules. Indeed, Sisi's behavior has provoked regime critics, both at home and abroad, who accuse Sisi of denying freedom of speech and of excluding the opposition from the public sphere. For example, the veteran scholar of Egyptian affairs, Robert Springborg, states that Sisi's regime is *déjà vu* all over again, arguing that Sisi is doing everything in his power to replicate the Nasserist authoritarian police state.<sup>iv</sup> There is no doubt that the Muslim Brotherhood poses a serious threat to the stability of Sisi's regime. However there are new, moderate leaders within the Muslim Brotherhood who yearn for a dialogue with the regime.

The Islamic State's proclaimed *Wilayet Sinai* ("Sinai Province") is Egypt's second major challenge. It has dramatically increased both the effectiveness and frequency of its attacks against Egyptian security forces: in a span of five days, between June 28 and July 2, 2015, for example, the Islamic State carried out 32 attacks that resulted in a large number of casualties. Sisi, for his part, has demonstrated uncompromising determination in his war on terror. There is serious concern that the Islamic State in Sinai will extend its operations into the Egyptian heartland, targeting the large cities of Cairo, Alexandria, Isma'ilia, and Suez. Moreover, the chain of terror attacks has far-reaching social and economic implications.

First, the intensity of the attacks has delayed, and even prevented, the renewal of tourism that is the lifeblood of the Egyptian economy. Second, the uncompromising war against Islamic State terror has led Sisi to uproot Bedouin families, above and beyond those already displaced from their homes, primarily from Sheikh Zuwayd, al-'Arish, and Egyptian Rafah, in order to expand the security zone intended to stop the infiltration and consolidation of terror organizations in Sinai. Thus the uprooted Bedouin are transformed into the victims of the war on terror, and, for a lack of other options, are forced to cooperate with terror groups. In return for payment, the Bedouin are willing to smuggle weapons and drugs, and to provide intelligence information to these groups. Sinai's underdeveloped land and marginalized population have made it

much easier for radical organizations to use Sinai as a hub for carrying out terror attacks. The state's single-track strategy that focuses only on security and military measures to counter terror means dealing with the symptom rather than with the root cause of the problem. Egypt's National Agency for the Development of Sinai has stated that properly addressing the problem requires developing the area and empowering the Bedouin population, 45 percent of which lives under the poverty line. Sisi understands the plight of the Sinai Bedouin; on several occasions he has stated that Egypt must invest \$10 billion in Sinai development programs. The Egyptian Minister of Finance has also determined that the development of Sinai is of paramount national interest. However, these plans haven't been implemented yet. It is clear that the government recognizes the interconnection between combating Islamic terror and improving the economic and civil status of the Sinai Bedouin, yet it has still not moved beyond its single-track security and military strategy. Third, the Islamic State's attacks in Sinai have caused an alarming number of casualties among the Egyptian security forces, which has demoralized Egyptian officers, soldiers, and policemen. The Egyptian public, which has had its fill of official promises, is calling on Sisi to follow-up on his tough rhetoric with action.

The third, and by far the most complex, challenge facing Sisi is Egypt's economic and social situation. It is important to note that Sisi has taken a number of exceptional economic steps since becoming president, including the slashing of government subsidies on petrol, natural gas, and electricity, leading to higher prices. But unlike in the past, the Egyptian public has not protested these subsidy cuts. Instead, convinced of Sisi's honest intentions, it has accepted the cuts. Sisi reinforced his credibility by donating half of his salary to the government treasury, a step that increased public trust and was necessary to neutralize potential public protest. Sisi has also initiated a plan to reduce the size of the government bureaucracy. In March 2015, a law was passed to cut annual bonuses to government employees from 10 percent to 5 percent and force some employees into an early retirement.<sup>v</sup> Indeed, in 2012, the salaries of approximately 6 million government employees amounted to a quarter of the government budget. The bureaucracy that Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser had built, concentrated largely in offices located in Cairo's Mugamm'a Building, had become emblematic of the monolithic bureaucracy grinding down the average Egyptian citizen.

Another economic project that the president announced following his election, and which he promised to complete in eleven months, was the Suez Canal expansion. This venture, which had seemed to border on the megalomaniacal and whose cost was projected to be approximately \$4 billion (and ultimately reached \$8.5 billion), was intended to increase traffic through the canal. Its real

importance, however, was that it was expected to employ approximately one million Egyptians. The tender published by the Public Works Ministry featured thousands of positions for truck and bulldozer drivers, foremen, heavy equipment and machinery operators, medical teams, and a large number of blue-collar jobs. Sisi declared the venture a national project; as such, only Egyptian hands would dig, engineer, protect, and manage the project. He went even further and ordered that special preference should be given to the disadvantaged populations of the Canal cities – Suez, Isma‘ilia, and Port Said – and to the Sinai Bedouin. The project’s financing was also purely Egyptian. Around 40 percent was imposed on the military, 20 percent came from the “Long Live Egypt” Fund created by Egyptian businessmen, and 30 percent was drawn from banks and the government. The remaining balance will be paid for by the yearly income from the canal itself and by the sale of bonds to the Egyptian people. Sisi committed to completing the project by August 2015 and was indeed true to his word; on August 6, a dazzling official launch ceremony was held with world leaders in attendance. In reality, the first ship transited the canal two weeks before the official target date. During the canal’s opening ceremony, the Egyptian Minister of Finance declared that Egypt would issue a commemorative gold coin to be sold to the public. The Egyptian one-pound gold coin was to be engraved with the logo of the expanded canal, along with the slogan: “The new Suez Canal – from Egypt, the matriarch of the world (*umm al-dunya*), to the entire world (*li kul al-dunya*).”<sup>vi</sup>

This was not simply public relations for the project, *per se*. Its purpose was to inspire hope in the hearts of Egypt’s citizens and to buoy the national morale, as the head of the Suez Canal authority, Muhab Mamish, declared grandiloquently in a press conference a few days before the inauguration: “with the new canal we are passing from the darkness to the light.”<sup>vii</sup> Furthermore, the discovery of an estimated 30 trillion cubic feet of gas last week will certainly help to eventually ease the energy crisis Egypt has been facing.

Sisi is facing additional challenges that include the repeated postponement of elections for both houses of parliament, and the need for better public security. This last issue includes addressing sexual harassment. It is important to note that in this regard, Sisi has demonstrated consistency and determination. Besides the unprecedented prison sentences enforced on harassers as cautionary examples to others, Sisi visited the hospital bed of a young woman who was sexually abused, where, surrounded by the media, he conveyed a public apology to her in the name of the entire Egyptian nation. The unemployed youth crisis, which forces young men to delay marriage and extends bachelorhood, is yet another social challenge facing Sisi.

Presently, Sisi, who was seen by many Egyptians as a savior, continues to enjoy the public's trust. This is due to his charisma and the honest effort that he is making to rehabilitate Egypt. But he does not enjoy the same reverence that characterized the beginning of his presidency. Such admiration has faded as a result of the increasing autocracy in Egypt that Sisi has implemented through laws and ordinances that harm basic human and civil rights. For example, Egypt's new anti-terrorism law, which was approved by the cabinet in June 2015, contains many draconian articles, including ones that criminalize news reporting that contradicts the government's official accounts.

Egyptian internet sites and media caricatures reflect a growing impatience among some sectors of the public. For example, the April 6 Movement's slogan, "The rule of Sisi-Mubarak will be toppled." There was also a caricature of a severed head, with the caption, "No, it's not Daesh [the Islamic State], it's the head of someone who dared to criticize the president [Sisi]." Another caricature depicted a figure bandaged from head to toe, with the caption: "This will be done to a person that disobeys the word of the president [Sisi]."viii In these expressions of popular political humor, one can see warnings from the public to its president.



The 'Sisi-Meter' is still ticking. The public expects Sisi to fulfill his promises and demonstrate sensitivity to their everyday needs. If he doesn't, he may find that Tahrir Square is once again filled with frustrated Egyptians seeking change.

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**The Moshe Dayan Center publishes TEL AVIV NOTES, an analytical update on current affairs in the Middle East, on approximately the 10th and 26th of every month, as well as occasional Special Editions.**

**TEL AVIV NOTES is published with the support of the V. Sorell Foundation.**

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<sup>i</sup> "al-Sisi's First TV Interview (part 2): "We Have to Move, to Sprint," [Mada Masr](#), May 7, 2014.

<sup>ii</sup> [Moheet](#), September 11, 2015.

<sup>iii</sup> Patrick Kingsley, "Egyptian President to Change Law to Allow Faster Executions," [The Guardian](#), June 30, 2015.

<sup>iv</sup> Robert Springborg, "Arab Armed Forces: State Makers or State Breakers?" [Middle East Institute](#), July 7, 2015.

<sup>v</sup> Waad Ahmed, Rand 'Ali, "Doubts Hover Over Egypt's Civil Law," [Ahrām Online](#), August 19, 2015.

<sup>vi</sup> "A Gold Egyptian Pound to Celebrate the New Suez Canal," [Ahrām Online](#), July 30, 2015.

<sup>vii</sup> Karim El-Gawhary, "A Drop in the Ocean," [Qantara.de](#), August 6, 2015.

<sup>viii</sup> [Shabab6april's Facebook page](#), accessed November 19, 2014.