

‘Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi's "Rehabilitation of Anwar al-Sadat”

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In his 1882 lecture titled “What is a nation?,” the French philosopher Ernest Renan claimed that “the essence of a nation is that all of its members have a great deal in common and also that that they have forgotten many things.”¹ Rulers that seek to forge a collective memory for their nations select the historical events to be remembered (or alternatively to be forgotten or pushed aside to the margins of history); shape them into a coherent narrative, which then become the bases of national myths and a common ethos that will be propagated in museums and public spaces and commemorated annually. As the agenda of a regime changes, likewise there is a concomitant change in the structure of the regime’s narrative of the past. The rehabilitation of the leadership and legacy of President Anwar al-Sadat, which began during the second term of ‘Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi’s presidency, is a tangible example of this phenomenon.

Since the assassination of Sadat on October 6, 1981, he has been marginalized in the Egyptian collective memory. As such, the anniversaries of his historic visit to Jerusalem in 1977 and his signing of the peace treaty with Israel in 1979 were excluded from the Egyptian commemorative calendar. In contrast, the final liberation of Sinai – which took place in April 1982 during the presidency of Hosni Mubarak – was marked as a national holiday. This was Mubarak’s way of accumulating dividends and not sharing the credit for restoring Egyptian sovereignty over the Sinai Peninsula with Sadat, who conditioned the signing of the peace treaty with Israel on its evacuation of the territory.

¹ Ernest Renan, “What is a Nation?,” text of a conference delivered at the Sorbonne on March 11th, 1882, in Ernest Renan, *Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?* (Paris, Presses-Pocket, 1992), translated by Ethan Rundell, http://ucparis.fr/files/9313/6549/9943/What_is_a_Nation.pdf

During Sisi's first term as president, there was no significant change in how his regime related to Sadat. Moreover, on the face of things, it seemed that Sisi preferred Sadat's predecessor, Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser. This was evident in the image that accompanied Sisi's campaign, in which Sisi – then a child – meets and salutes Nasser. The first signs of Sadat's public rehabilitation appeared in the latter part of Sisi's first term. An expression of this is found in an interview with Jehan Sadat, Anwar el-Sadat's widow, published in *al-Arabiya* in May 2016. The former First Lady of Egypt noted that "if he [her husband] had lived presently, he would work to support the political and military standing of Egypt exactly as Sisi is doing."² She added that Sisi is a hero for strengthening the Egyptian military and turning it into one of the strongest armies in the region. In contrast to her praise for the acting president, she condemned the Muslim Brotherhood, calling them "the murderers of our sons and our soldiers." Accordingly, Jehan Sadat was providing legitimacy for the Sisi regime's policy of applying an "iron hand" towards the Muslim Brotherhood. In a later interview (October 2018) for the magazine of Egypt Air - the Egyptian national airline - when asked if she was optimistic about the future of Egypt, she replied: "I am very optimistic. I am following the activities of President el-Sisi and I think that he is a person ahead of his time exactly as President Sadat was ahead of his time."³

The Egyptian media published several articles between 2017 and 2019 praising President Sadat, indicating the shift in the regime's attitude towards the former president. Gamal Abu Al-Hassan's article, titled "The Extrication 'from the World of 1967,'" claimed that "had it not been for Sadat's courage, which returned our occupied lands by way of war and peace, Egypt would have remained captive in the chains of fear... for generations and years."⁴ On June 7, 2018, the Sadat Museum marked "International Archives Day," during which a workshop called "Sadat Archive between the Past and the Present" was held. This workshop was intended to raise public awareness of the contribution of the archives in general and of Sadat's archives in particular to the formation of Egypt's collective memory.

The rehabilitation process reached a peak with a series of events in January-February 2019, marking Sadat's 100th birthday. *Al-Ahram* published an article stating that only "with great difficulty it is possible to find among world leaders a leader similarly courageous in the way in which he addressed the problems of his country as did Sadat

² "[Widow of Late President Anwar Sadat Hails 'hero' Sisi](#)," *al-Arabiya*, May 10, 2016.

³ 'Amal Fawzi, An Interview with Jihan al-Sadat: "I'm Optimistic about Egypt's Future," *Egypt Air Bulletin*, October 2018.

⁴ Gamal Abu al-Hassan, "[Leaving the world of 1967](#) [Arabic]," *al-Masry al-Youm*, May 21, 2018.

in the eleven years of his rule as the President of Egypt.”⁵ Hany Ghoraba, the author of the piece, also praised Sadat on his signing of the peace treaty with Israel, a step that – in his opinion – saved Egypt from war that continued for three decades, a depressed economy, and international isolation, which resulted from the political confrontation with the West during Nasser's presidency. The Nasser regime, Ghoraba argued, damaged the Egyptian economy and bet on the lives of its residents, soldiers, and officers, when – in the name of pan-Arabism – it sent Egypt's military to fight an unnecessary war (in Yemen between 1962-67), and then went to war with Israel without calculating Egypt's odds of victory or defeat). If this was not enough, Nasser's policies created a rift between Egypt and the West, and it was President Sadat who largely succeeded in stopping the country's deterioration. Other Egyptian articles pointed out the direct connection between the triumph in the October War (in 1973) and the Sadat's initiation of the peace process, as well as his ultimate signing of a peace treaty with Israel. “The victorious war and the re-opening of the Suez Canal to international commerce in 1975 allowed President Sadat to initiate the most daring political step in the twentieth century, and that was to adopt a policy of peace with Israel and in doing so to end the never-ending wars with it.”⁶ Sadat's peace initiative - which the majority of Egyptian politicians and intellectuals had condemned over the years - has received favorable coverage in recent months and was described as a courageous step from a victorious leader who felt safe enough and strong enough to visit enemy territory, to speak before its parliamentary representatives, and to extend his hand to them in order to attain peace.

A festival in memory of President Sadat included cultural events that were held in the opera house with the backing of the Egyptian Minister of Culture, Dr. Inas ‘Abd al-Daim. One of these events was a performance that included a variety of popular national productions, among them the concerts: “Sadat Days,” “The Sixth of October,” “We Traversed the Defeat,” “Good Morning Sinai” and “The Man Whose Guiding Principle is Peace.”⁷ The High Council of Culture even dedicated a full day to discussions of Sadat's policies. One of these discussions focused on Sadat and statesmanship, another dealt with Sadat “the hero of war and peace,” and the main session of the day concerned social and economic changes that transpired during Sadat's rule. The Minister of Culture, Secretary-General of the High Council of Culture, and a representative of the Sadat family all participated in these discussions. Moreover, the government issued gold and silver coins marking the events. In this way, Sisi's regime embraced Sadat's legacy.

⁵ Hany Ghoraba, "[The Centennial of a Leader](#)," *Ahramonline*, January 23, 2013.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Sa‘id Khaled, "[October's most famous songs in celebration of Sadat's Centenary](#) [Arabic], *al-Masry al-Youm*, December 22, 2018.

Sisi also personally praised Sadat. He dedicated his address to the nation on December 25, 2018 (the date marking the Sadat's birthday) to Sadat and his peace with Israel.⁸ In the first part of his speech, Sisi focused on the October 1973 War, and claimed that this war, which restored the previously lost national honor of Egypt, was not a goal in and of itself for Sadat, but rather it was to pave the path to peace. Sisi reiterated that even 37 years after Sadat's assassination at the hands of Muslim extremists, the late president's legacy – which was based on realistic patriotism that prioritized Egyptian interests – continues to resonate and serve as a source of inspiration to the leaders of Egypt. To be sure, Sisi mentioned not only Sadat's achievements but also his failures, which include Egypt's economic opening (*infitah*) to the West that, according to Sisi, did not lead Egypt to economic prosperity but instead made it dependent on the United States. If Sadat had adopted a policy of cutting subsidies (the economic policy that Sisi himself has consistently implemented since he was elected president), Sisi argued that he would have resolved some of Egypt's significant and ongoing economic problems. However, Sisi failed to point out that on January 17, 1977 Sadat did indeed call for a reduction of subsidies on basic goods, including flour, rice, sugar, and cooking oil, but this resulted in a wave of protests that became known as "the bread riots," forcing Sadat to cancel his planned subsidy cuts after three days of demonstrations. The praise for Sadat accompanied by criticism of his economic policies mainly served to legitimize Sisi's policies of reducing government subsidies on basic goods without mass protests, which were a regular feature of prior attempts to cut subsidies.

Furthermore, Sisi is determined to present an image of an Egypt that seeks peace and is willing to broker resolutions to conflict in the region. For this reason, he does not miss an opportunity to express his support for an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement that will, as he argue, ensure security for both parties. Sisi has called on the Palestinians to adopt the Egyptian model of peacemaking to achieve a compromise. In this manner, Sisi seeks to restore Egypt's role as the "big sister" – a stature that Cairo has lost to Saudi Arabia over the years. The unwavering support for Sadat's legacy in general and his legacy of peace in particular is also aimed at the international community, mainly the United States and European Union, for the purpose of improving Sisi's image as a moderate ruler who is deserving of support. Moreover, Sisi's message of peace and his attempt to brand himself as the ideological successor to Sadat, also wins him strong military and strategic support from Israel, which is

⁸ ["Sisi commemorates 100th birthday of late President Sadat, says dedicated life to the homeland,"](#) Ahramonline, December 25, 2018.

needed for, among other things, assistance in conducting its ongoing military campaign against the Islamic State's terrorist insurgency in Sinai. Sisi is also appealing to Egyptian youth, who have been focused on economic, professional, and personal survival in recent years. For example, at an international youth forum in Sharm al-Sheikh in November 2018, Sisi stressed the direct connection between peace and economic welfare, and called on conference attendees to take initiative to advance the message of peace by all means available to them: social media, art in general and street art in particular, and to replace the anti-establishment protest culture, often directed at him personally, with one of peace.

The public rehabilitation of President Sadat's leadership, therefore, should be seen as a means to promote the political interests of President Sisi. Even his view of peace, which is not based on "a culture of peace" (*thaqafat al-salam*), seems largely instrumental. Its main purpose is to create the image that Egypt is reliable and moderate in the international arena; to facilitate cooperation with Israel for the purpose of defeating terror in the Sinai and reviving the Egyptian tourism industry; and lastly, but no less importantly to ensure an economically viable future for Egypt's sizeable younger generations.

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