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NOVEMBER 2017 / BRIEFING PAPER

# Renewing the American- Egyptian Alliance

SAMUEL TADROS AND ERIC BROWN



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Cover: Tahrir Square, Cairo, in the early morning.  
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## ABOUT THE REPORT

The following brief on Egypt is part of a series of occasional papers that assess the challenges and opportunities facing governments across North Africa and the Middle East. Specifically, these reports focus on those polities where political stability is increasingly threatened but which, under the right conditions, also hold the potential to become long-term U.S. allies. The analysis and recommendations contained in each brief are largely drawn from field research conducted by the authors, and from interviews with each polity's political and military leaders, religious and secular actors, and academic community, among others. The authors' goal has been to assess the political conditions in these countries, map U.S. competitors, and look for opportunities for U.S. diplomatic and political strategy to advance stability, prosperity, and alliance-building.

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# I. BACKGROUND

Although the Arab uprisings began in Tunisia in 2010, the subsequent events in Egypt focused the forces of change and then unleashed them across the region. However, the same Egyptian squares and streets that fed the Arab Spring eventually also witnessed the uprising's dreams come crashing to the ground. Democratic hopes were short-lived in Egypt, as the popularly elected Muslim Brotherhood moved to implement total rule, sectarianism rose, economic and security conditions deteriorated, and the failures of civic republicanism and non-Islamist currents became evident. As the country slipped into chaos an army general stepped in, promising deliverance for a people desperate for order and stability, and for a nation in a perpetual quest for modernization.

But as with so many other grand promises made to the Egyptian people, the country's new rulers have not delivered. Since the 2013 military coup that ousted the Muslim Brotherhood, and despite the vows of Abdel Fattah El Sisi's military regime to reverse the country's decline and shore up its crumbling state institutions, the situation in Egypt has continued to deteriorate. Despite billions of dollars of cash infusions from Arab Gulf patrons and also Western nations, the national economy is flat-lining and burdened by structural problems that the government has failed to address. Meanwhile, the rise of an Islamic State affiliate in North Sinai and the growth of a low-level Islamist insurgency and worsening sectarian strife in the mainland are but the most obvious aspects of the state's deteriorating ability to govern, enforce basic order and secure the population. All in all, the Sisi regime's refusal to acknowledge the desperate need for far-reaching governance reform and its failures to foster reconciliation to fix the country's broken national compact have generated a deeper political crisis. The ongoing decay of state institutions has left the country's leaders with few

tools to confront the nation's multiplying problems. On its present course, Egypt, a country of ninety-four million souls and of great strategic significance, is at risk of becoming a failed state.

This perilous situation requires a thorough reappraisal of how the U.S. approaches Egypt. For decades, the case for Egypt has been straightforward in American strategic thinking, as Egypt has often set the pace in the Middle East as the region's most populous country. Egypt contains a quarter of the world's native Arabic speakers, and people across the region have long looked to it for strategic and political leadership and for its iconic cultural output, including music, literature, and movies. During the Cold War, U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat formulated the basis of a lasting security partnership by guiding Egypt out of its crippling dependencies on the Soviet Union and its self-destructive war with Israel and enabling Egypt to play a leading and constructive role in regional affairs. Egypt benefited greatly from large-scale U.S. financial, military, and development assistance and the return of the Sinai Peninsula. Since then, Egypt has been a cornerstone of America's regional alliances structures, helping to deal with a host of regional security and diplomatic challenges. The alliance has also provided the U.S. with key strategic benefits such as expedient passage through the Suez Canal, flight rights over Egyptian airspace, and since 9/11, cooperation in the ongoing wars with Islamist terrorism and insurgency.

Yet the old basis for the U.S.-Egypt alliance no longer exists. With the 1991 collapse of the communist threat, the original strategic rationale for the alliance evaporated, and the bilateral relationship has struggled to keep up with the dramatic changes in the regional security and political

environment taking place in the 1990s and 2000s. Since the 2011 revolution, Washington has become increasingly frustrated with a host of Cairo's actions at home and abroad, and many have started to question whether the alliance is still worth maintaining. America's most pressing interests lie farther east, and Egypt has not shown the will to play the constructive role in promoting regional security and peace that America had always expected it would. Cairo refused to take part in operations against Islamic State in the Levant, while it has pursued scorched earth policies to wipe out the caliphate movement's Sinai affiliate and the Islamist insurgency within. As an external power, Egypt is a shadow of its former self, and there are well-founded doubts about its capacity to play a leading and constructive role even if it wanted to. Instead, Egypt itself has increasingly become a locus of the region's unfolding strategic competition and the unprecedented political and ideological crisis of the state-based order. Meanwhile, the Obama administration made clear the U.S.'s opposition to the Sisi regime's crackdown on legitimate political and civic spaces, its repression of all forms of dissent and other egregious human rights abuses. But instead of convincing the Sisi military regime to change its ways, American policy helped push Cairo closer to Russia.

The case for continued American engagement with Egypt and investment in a robust U.S.-Egyptian alliance remains, although it must not be based on outdated understandings. Despite Egypt's declining regional position and influence, the country still matters. Washington cannot afford to alienate a country of

**IN THE ABSENCE OF A SERIOUS U.S. STRATEGY FOR EGYPT, THE TWO COUNTRIES WILL CONTINUE TO DRIFT APART, AND EGYPT'S DECLINE WILL LIKELY ACCELERATE, LEAVING THE NATION MORE VULNERABLE TO THE FORCES OF REGIONAL DISORDER.**

ninety-four million people that borders Israel and controls a major waterway that carries 10 percent of world trade. Moreover, the country still occupies a central role in the Arabic-speaking world. While Egypt may no longer represent the region's aspirations, people across the Middle East still see Egypt's struggles as a mirror of their own. The regional order of nation-states is faltering, the result of decades of neglect, a deepening crisis of governance, an unprecedented ideological convulsion, and intensifying strategic-sectarian rivalries. Egypt, where the Middle East's first nation-state model emerged a century ago, will be key if the Middle Eastern order of nation-states is to survive and rejuvenate itself in the twenty-first century. In the absence of a serious U.S. strategy for Egypt, the two countries will continue to drift apart, and Egypt's decline will likely accelerate, leaving the nation more vulnerable to the forces of regional disorder and chaos.

# Executive Summary

The hopes of the Arab Spring were short-lived in Egypt, as the popularly elected Muslim Brotherhood moved to implement total rule, sectarianism rose, economic and security conditions deteriorated, and the failures of civic republicanism and non-Islamist currents became evident.

Since the 2013 military coup that ousted the Muslim Brotherhood, and despite the vows of Abdel Fattah El Sisi's military regime to reverse the country's decline and shore up its crumbling state institutions, the situation inside Egypt has continued to deteriorate.

Although Egypt appears to have returned to its pre-2011 state, the revolution and its bloody aftermath have transformed the country in far-reaching ways. An unprecedented growth in conspiracy theories regarding nefarious U.S. plots against Egypt is having a significant impact on the country's politics.

In Sisi's calculus, Hosni Mubarak's big mistake was bowing to American pressure and not clamping down on free expression and civil society. Sisi has since removed legal and procedural constraints on security agencies, giving them virtually free rein to protect the country from internal threats as they see fit.

The Egyptian military's controlling position in government and society has likewise compromised its reputation as an impartial actor defending the nation's interests.

The decay of state institutions continues apace, leaving the country's leaders with few mechanisms to confront growing challenges, including a rolling economic and sectarian crisis. On its current path, Egypt, a country of ninety-four million, is at growing risk of becoming a failed state.

The old basis for the U.S.-Egyptian alliance no longer exists. As an external power, Egypt is a shadow of its former self, and there are well-founded doubts about its capacity to play a leading and constructive role in regional affairs even if it wanted to.

Instead, Egypt itself has increasingly become a locus of the region's unfolding strategic competition and the political and ideological crisis of the faltering state-based order.

The deepening mistrust between Cairo and Washington presents a major obstacle to any real cooperation. The weakness of the American-Egyptian alliance largely stems from Washington's failure to cultivate a dependable constituency in Egypt with shared interests and principles. Thus, at this time of crisis, few in Egypt have defended the central importance of an alliance with America.

In the absence of a serious U.S. diplomatic strategy for Egypt, the two countries will continue to drift apart, and Egypt's decline will likely accelerate, leaving the nation more vulnerable to the forces of regional disorder and chaos.

# Key Recommendations for U.S. Policymakers:

Any U.S. effort to renew its alliance with Egypt should not follow the twentieth-century framework of a principally military partnership based on now-outdated understandings of Egypt or the region at-large. Instead, restoration of the alliance requires clarity about Egypt's rapidly deteriorating predicament and assistance to help the country deal with it.

This requires an American shift, from a primarily threat-centric approach to alliance-building and maintenance that is focused on military cooperation and building the capacity of Egypt's security forces, to a more population-centric approach focused on long-term partnerships with Egyptian political actors and aimed at resolving the governance and ideological crises they face.

The U.S. must not shrink from its commitments to civic republicanism and human rights, but without addressing the faltering state, it will not be possible to create a more just and stable political order.

As a practical matter, the U.S. embassy in Cairo, America's second-largest in the Middle East, along with other agencies, should be empowered with the strategic mission, new capabilities and expertise, and resources to develop a whole-of-country approach to contesting U.S. adversaries and identifying opportunities and political strategies that enjoy broad Egyptian support for addressing Egypt's problems.

## **CIVIL**

### *Countering Anti-American Conspiracy Theories and Hostile Foreign Powers*

**The U.S. should insist that for a healthy bilateral relationship, President Sisi must publicly repudiate the anti-American conspiracy theories rampant in the country.** Despite billions of dollars in aid to Cairo spanning decades, no major official in the public eye has defended the relationship and its benefits to Egypt at this time of crisis. It is important for Cairo to make the case that such a friendship is important to the Egyptian people and to repudiate conspiracy theories—especially those propagated by the Sisi regime itself—that claim there is American ill will toward Egypt.

**The U.S. should penalize Egyptians who deliberately create and propagate anti-American conspiracy theories.** For example, Washington could make perpetrators ineligible to participate in American-Egyptian exchange programs, receive funding from the U.S. government, or receive visas to visit the U.S.

**The United States needs to establish a fact-based news outlet and develop better methods of providing existing outlets with fact-based content.** The Egyptian media market suffers from a real vacuum in fact-based reporting that provides accurate information regarding international, regional, and local developments.

Additionally, Russia and Iran have established widely followed news outlets in Egypt that air a constant anti-American message. Public diplomacy programs at the U.S. embassy in Cairo can provide Egyptian publications with information regarding stories they have published and generate favorable coverage, and can also reach out

directly to the Egyptian people through social media posts or short online videos to debunk incorrect information.

**To reach out to Egyptian society, the U.S. embassy should engage with organizations such as trade unions, farmers, and professional syndicates.** Moreover, special emphasis should be placed on going beyond Cairo and reaching out to Egypt's other governorates to create supporters who understand the importance of the American-Egyptian alliance and are willing to defend it publicly.

**The U.S. must challenge Moscow's propaganda inside Egypt, which depicts Russia's modern development as a success while concealing the many unsavory details of living in Vladimir Putin's dictatorship.** Past association with the Soviet Union did not help Egypt, which nearly ceded sovereignty to Moscow. Egypt's national pride did not accept this in the past, and neither should it today.

#### *Reforming Education*

**The U.S. needs to rethink and expand its longstanding educational mission in Egypt to address the country's educational deficit and decaying state institutions.** In addition to working with Egyptian partners to expand opportunities in each governorate, the U.S. should support Egyptian efforts to reform the educational curriculum through a cross-disciplinary approach that instills civic republican principles. This is essential for winning the struggle of ideas with Islamism, establishing civic peace, and fostering progress.

**The U.S. should encourage Egypt to integrate Al-Azhar's parallel education system into the state system to standardize the curriculum and eliminate resource disparities between the schools. Likewise, the U.S. should work with the Ministry of Higher Education in revising the teacher's college curriculum and introducing new ideas and pedagogical techniques.**

#### *Promoting Civic Republicanism*

Egypt is once again caught in a vicious struggle between authoritarianism and the threat of Islamist insurgency, with no end in sight. Overcoming social and political fractures will be crucial to helping Egypt avert the same fate as other countries in the region.

**The U.S. should work with existing networks that are fostering reconciliation at the municipal level and seek to build on these efforts as part of its overall strategy to foster a new national compact.** It should also contrast the success of pluralistic societies in the region, such as Morocco, with Egypt's failing efforts to defend an illusory ethno-religious homogeneity.

**The U.S. must extract a commitment from Egypt to protect its Coptic citizens and roll back policies that discriminate against Copts.** This should not be framed as a religious freedom question, but rather as a central issue for Egypt's viability as a nation and for its future.

**Just as the U.S. invites thousands of Egyptians to come to America on exchange programs, it should pursue reverse programs in which Egyptian-Americans bring their experience back to Egypt.** The U.S. needs to engage the Egyptian diaspora in America and other Western countries. Egyptian-Americans have unique knowledge of their former country, and many of them remain deeply connected to it through relatives. The Egyptian diaspora in the West has developed civic values, including hard work and personal social responsibility, and the United States should open avenues for these experiences and values to be transferred back to Egypt.

#### ***ECONOMIC***

In revising its economic mission in Egypt, the U.S. must understand that Egypt's economic woes have never been caused by the absence of money but by the misallocation of funds, poor governance, corruption, and a lack of the rule of law.

**To help Egypt create a civil economy, the United States should expand its economic mission to engage a wider spectrum of businesses and sectors, including small business associations and new organizations, such as Rise Egypt, which focus on encouraging entrepreneurship.**

**The United States should devote special attention to bureaucratic reforms and to expanding the banking system, which has an extremely low participation rate.** These are major hurdles for small businesses and for developing entrepreneurship.

**In its economic and development aid to Egypt, the United States should develop a local approach that rewards governorates and municipalities based on metrics related to good governance and equal opportunities for all citizens.**

**The United States should encourage and de-risk U.S. business involvement in areas that are pursuing promising reforms.** Even in Cairo's poorest districts, popularly elected members of Parliament have succeeded in building a new model of politics and development that discourages patronage and rent-seeking through better governance and private-public partnerships.

## **SECURITY**

**The U.S. should work with the Egyptian military to decrease the military's involvement in state institutions and the national economy.** The Egyptian military believes it has a national duty to reinforce the state's crumbling institutions and prevent the collapse of the country. However, such involvement creates a non-competitive environment in which the military's structural advantages impede healthy economic development. This situation is damaging the military and, more important, damaging the country.

**While the Egyptian military sees the Pentagon as its best ally in Washington, the bilateral military channel has not been effectively utilized by the United States.**

U.S. representatives should stress that while they understand the military's desire to serve military personnel and protect them from the impact of inflation, its involvement in construction and commercial projects is not in the nation's long-term interest.

**A realistic discussion about the strategic rationale for twenty-first century U.S.-Egyptian military cooperation is also needed.** Many Americans have indicated a desire to see Egypt lead through creation of an "Arab NATO" force that can serve, among other things, to check Iranian expansionism. But balance-of-power and realpolitik calculations will not mesh well with a Middle East made up of poorly formed states ruled by regimes whose main goals are not, or may not always be, stability and order.

**Instead, the U.S. should work with its partners in the Egyptian military and build the key capabilities that they need to conduct complex political-military and intelligence operations based on the rule of law.**

**The U.S. should reexamine military training and exchange programs that bring Egyptian officers to the United States.** More effort should be made to engage lower- and middle-ranking officers in non-combat educational programs.

**The U.S. should offer assistance to Egyptian police and domestic security forces, which are ill-equipped to deal with sectarian mob violence.** The United States should aid in establishing, training, and equipping special units tasked with confronting mob violence.

# After the Revolution

It is tempting to see Egypt today as essentially unchanged from what it had been prior to the January 25, 2011 revolution, and there are indeed some similarities: an ex-general as president, authoritarian rule and a severely restricted civic space, and widespread abuses of human rights. However, these similarities are superficial and can be deceiving, as Egypt has been transformed in recent years, and the conceit that normalcy has returned to the country fails to grasp the full impact of the revolution and the violent upheaval that ensued. Though the outcome of the Arab Spring in Egypt may not please outside observers, it has left its mark on every aspect of life in the country.

Among other things, the people's relationship to politics has been changed in far-reaching ways. During the Mubarak era (1981–2011), Egyptians had grown accustomed to political stagnation. Despite a deepening sense of social malaise, political apathy was the norm. In 2011, contrary to outside perceptions, few Egyptians actually participated in the revolution, with the vast majority choosing to watch the events unfold on their television sets with growing alarm.

Egyptians have since developed a real appetite for political fare, and they have turned to social media and numerous newly available private TV channels that embrace political content. President Sisi's regime has tried to impose control on this expanding and unruly information landscape, but a state monopoly on information is no longer possible. The regime has tried to adapt and taken the offensive, attempting to shape the public narrative by coordinating pro-regime propaganda campaigns and spreading misinformation via social media. Yet despite the state's efforts to control the public

discourse, monopolize the debate over policy, and return Egyptians to their former apathy, the people have become deeply interested in politics, and public opinions and sentiments now matter in Egyptian politics in ways that were not previously the case.

Some see in this evidence of a popular and democratic "awakening," and it may become that, but there is also a darker side, as Egypt's new political and information landscape has become saturated with conspiracy theories and fabricated news, including about bizarre and nefarious foreign plots against the country. Of course, Arabic-speaking countries have for decades been producers and consumers of a variety of conspiracy theories, especially anti-Semitic ones, yet the contemporary explosion of conspiracy theorizing is unprecedented in size and scope. This is in part a reaction to the ongoing regional convulsion and violent upheaval that came suddenly after a period of relative calm and stability. The precipitous collapse of a string of Arab regimes has driven many across the Middle East who feel helpless and vulnerable to resort to conspiracy theories as a way of explaining why their lives were abruptly torn apart. Moreover, the growth of conspiracy theories is also the result of a deliberate propaganda campaign by the Cairo regime. President Sisi has said that "enemies of Egypt"—the U.S. especially—are seeking to undermine and divide the country as part of a "fourth-generation warfare campaign." In the regime's narrative, foreign powers have connived with local agents recruited from Egypt's politicians, intellectuals, civil society organizations, and media to stir up a "color" revolution in Egypt similar to the ones that occurred in Georgia and Ukraine. The regime's propaganda is not simply a defensive mechanism or attempt to deflect blame from its

own failures. It is actually a reflection of the worldview of the new Egyptian leadership, which firmly believes the U.S. has conspired against Egypt and continues to hold ill will toward it.

The mainstreaming of this worldview affects Egyptian political life in far-reaching ways. Domestically, the belief that Egyptians are serving as foreign agents to destroy their own country has been used to justify state repression, and it has greatly undermined the already low levels of trust in society. This worldview has also become a major factor shaping Egyptian foreign relations and diplomacy. Foiling the Western conspiracy against Egypt has been used by the Sisi regime as a pretext for seeking alignment with Russia, supporting other autocratic and brutal governments such as Bashar Al-Assad's regime in Damascus, and challenging the United States diplomatically.

Meanwhile, the Sisi regime is facing rising public discontent because of its failures to address the sinking economy and growing insecurity. In the last year, for instance, mass protests erupted against police abuse in Luxor and El Darb Al Ahmar, while professional organizations such as the Doctors' Syndicate publically challenged the regime when their interests were threatened, and Copts voiced their anger following the December 2016 church bombing in Cairo. However, these and other eruptions of mounting social tensions have been and are likely to remain largely localized affairs; the regime may respond appropriately or ignore them, but they are not likely to lead to nationally coordinated efforts for large-scale change. Those in and outside of the country who still hope a popular movement will emerge to establish a more democratic order are destined for disappointment. The populace as a whole has become deeply averse to revolutionary enthusiasm and promises of wholesale change. An idealistic minority may still be nostalgic for the revolution, but most Egyptians, while not necessarily wanting a return to the Mubarak era, view the 2011 revolution as a destructive event that has pulled

their country backwards. Many Egyptians watched with horror as the Muslim Brotherhood came to power through popular elections in 2012. They feared Islamists would drastically change the country's identity and be nearly impossible to remove. Now, the lingering trauma from the Brotherhood's rule and the violent unrest that came after the military coup have combined with fear of the Islamists' return to keep local protest movements from expanding. Moreover, there are today no nationally viable civic republican alternatives to the current regime. Despite misgivings with the Sisi regime, Egyptians prefer strong rule at home to the wars and anarchy they see when they look to the wider region.

Ever since an Islamist murdered President Sadat in 1981, three broad coalitions have contested one another for Egypt's future: the military, Islamists, and non-Islamists. The non-Islamists are little more than a loose-knit amalgam of leftists, liberals, nationalists, bureaucrats, and others who reject the two other poles. Their political weakness and lack of a coherent set of ideas leave them with no chance of actually running the country anytime soon. However, the non-Islamists do have the potential to legitimize the power they choose to back due to their social and intellectual stature, connections abroad, and wealth. Frightened by the prospect of an Islamist takeover after Sadat's assassination, the non-Islamists threw their weight behind a military man and mediocre bureaucrat; they sustained Mubarak in power for twenty years, until the last decade of his rule, when they began to entertain alternatives. The unraveling of the ruling compact was partly caused by Mubarak's success in ending the Islamist insurgency and the threat of Islamist takeover, which had sustained his ruling coalition and support from the non-Islamists. At the same time, the Muslim Brotherhood successfully rebranded itself as a moderate organization through its outreach to certain non-Islamists, which produced avenues for joint political action between Islamists and non-Islamists. During the Tahrir Square protests, with non-Islamist groups and politicians

providing a respectable face in the eyes of the general public and Western capitals, the regime fell. Frightened by the Islamist avalanche that came after, non-Islamists eventually swung their support back to the military, seeking intervention against Islamist rule and sectarianism. While the military regime has failed to accommodate non-Islamists and alienated many, the abiding fear of an Islamist resurgence provides the military regime with bases of support among important segments of the population.

Egypt, therefore, is once again caught in a vicious struggle between authoritarianism and the threat of Islamist insurgency, with no end in sight. Unlike in the past century, however, the revolution and its aftermath has created an unprecedented state of division within Egyptian society. At the height of the clashes with the Brotherhood, a song lyric proclaimed, “we are a people and they are a people.” This sentiment is now deep-seated among both Islamists and pro-regime elements, and it shows no sign of receding. Egyptians across this political and identity divide are no longer capable of working together or interacting on a daily basis, and their separation is now being entrenched into two factions.

Simply put, too much blood has been spilled for people to forgive or forget. Escalating violence and the emergence of a low-level insurgency in mainland Egypt indicate that these hatreds and tensions are likely to persist, if not increase, in coming years.

Moreover, such polarization is not limited to the Islamist vs. pro-regime divide, as other societal rifts have developed in the past six years over the question of the revolution, rights and freedoms, and the very meaning of being an Egyptian. National politics have become increasingly fragmented and contested through street fights and crowd sizes rather than reasoned political debate and electoral competitions. The ruling regime is party to these factional disputes and, at present, it is neither willing nor politically capable of promoting national reconciliation where it can work. No healthy political equilibrium is to be found under such circumstances, and it is rare to find an Egyptian family today that has not itself been impacted by these larger societal rifts. This has significantly affected the traditional fabric of the country, and it is weakening Egypt’s long-held understanding of itself as the only true Arab nation-state in a region of “tribes with flags.”

# President Sisi

Understanding the worldview of President Abdel Fattah El Sisi, who rode a wave of popular support to power between 2013 and 2014, and the nature of the regime he constructed is of great importance if the United States is to engage Egypt constructively and help it to reverse its downward spiral. Sisi's relative obscurity prior to 2013 allowed Egyptians and outside observers alike to project their own hopes and fears onto him, depicting him as everything from Nasser reincarnated to a continuation of the Mubarak regime, or from an Arab Pinochet to the awaited reformer of Islam.

Three years of rule have since provided ample evidence of the enigmatic general's core beliefs. To understand the worldview of the president and others in the upper echelons of the ruling regime, it is useful to begin with their interpretation of the 2011 revolution. Sisi acknowledges economic problems and corruption as a source of the revolt against President Mubarak. Like his fellow military officers, he was never enthusiastic about the possibility of Gamal Mubarak inheriting the presidency from his father. However, Sisi firmly believes the revolution and the relentless criticism of the military's management of the country that followed it surpassed legitimate popular demands while proving the existence of a larger foreign conspiracy against Egypt.

In Sisi's calculus, Mubarak's big mistake involved bowing to American pressure to open Egypt and not clamping down on free expression and civil society. Indeed, Egypt's military remains deeply suspicious of U.S. intentions after nearly a decade of poorly executed democracy-promotion efforts, which by and large supported select civil society organizations that eroded the legitimacy of authoritarianism but failed to inculcate civic toleration and

**IN SISI'S CALCULUS, MUBARAK'S BIG MISTAKE INVOLVED BOWING TO AMERICAN PRESSURE TO OPEN EGYPT AND NOT CLAMPING DOWN ON FREE EXPRESSION AND CIVIL SOCIETY.**

other republican obligations in society, thereby increasing polarization. President Sisi believes that to fend off these threats, the state must take control of the media and actively shape the message Egyptians receive. He has also removed legal and procedural constraints on security agencies, giving them virtually free rein to protect the country from internal threats as they see fit. This new approach reverses policies that Presidents Sadat and Mubarak had both promulgated. While neither were democrats, both understood the need to maintain a half-open society to alleviate pressure on the regime, while also upholding clear redlines and a legal framework for state oppression. This made the regime more predictable and the polity more stable after Nasser's Republic of Fear. By contrast, President Sisi has permitted the security agencies to strike out at will, often at random and without coordinating with each other. As security officials behave more and more erratically, the public is not clear about what the regime's redlines are. The result has been flagrant human rights abuses and growing public fear.

Unlike Egypt's previous presidents, Sisi had no experience or training in national politics prior to assuming high office. Both Nasser and Sadat belonged to a politically active generation whose worldview was formed during the interwar period; prior to launching the military coup in 1952, both former presidents had joined and cooperated in the 1930s and 1940s with illiberal activist groups, from Young Egypt to the Muslim Brotherhood. Mubarak, despite his reputation as an apolitical officer, had nonetheless acquired political experience during his six years as vice president and manager of the security apparatus under Sadat. Mohamed Morsi, for his part, had been a Parliament member and top leader within the Muslim Brotherhood. General Sisi, on the other hand, had zero political experience and had demonstrated no real interest in politics before becoming president.

The president who emerged from the barracks is thus averse not only to democracy, as some suggest, but to the very practice of politics, as he disdains negotiations and compromise, cutting deals, and developing a program. After the revolution, the squabble for power among Egypt's politicians and their failure to offer the people any practicable agenda reinforced Sisi's belief that politicians serve only themselves and care little about the nation. In the president's mind, only he and the military have the country's best interests at heart, as they are the true nationalist defenders of Egypt. Thus, under his rule, President Sisi has aimed to remove politics from the public square, to delegitimize Parliament and civil society, and to monopolize the policy discussion.

The military is Sisi's comfort zone and the only institution he fully trusts. His inner circle of advisors is devoid of any figure remotely involved in politics, and he relies almost exclusively on the military and intelligence services in managing affairs of state. The military has nearly completely taken over the state apparatus through the appointment of officers to high-ranking government positions. The military's reach has also extended into the economic realm, with the intelligence services handpicking economic portfolio ministers and shaping the state's overall economic policy. The military has also become President Sisi's go-to body for implementing all of his grandiose development projects, from digging the New Suez Canal to building bridges and roads throughout the country.

Those attempting to ascertain President Sisi's economic vision have been confronted with contradictory signals. On the one hand, the president has taken the bold step of cutting fuel subsidies twice. On the other hand, in a throwback to the command economies of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Sisi has expanded the size of the state bureaucracy, stubbornly refused to allow the currency to float (before being forced to do so), and undertaken large-scale developmental projects such as the New Suez Canal in the hopes these will jumpstart the economy. Such policies are a result of the president's lack of knowledge about economic matters and his reliance on military officers who also fail to understand the basic mechanisms of modern economics. As Sisi is accustomed to the unwavering compliance of his military subordinates, he has refused to listen to civilian experts and disregarded their advice, believing he knows a policy's likely effects better than they do.

# The Egyptian Military

A Prussian minister once quipped that “Prussia was not a country with an army, but an army with a country,” and this saying has often been invoked to describe Egypt’s relationship with its own military. With former military officers ruling the country for more than six decades, and thousands more occupying key government and economic positions, the Egyptian military has been the subject of numerous studies and many persistent myths. To understand the military’s role in the country, an historical summary of its creation, self-perception, and changing role in society is necessary.

The exterior wall of a military building on Cairo’s main road, Salah Salem, depicts four battle scenes from history: the victories of Ramses II at Kadesh, Saladin at Hattin, and Qutuz at Ain Jalut, and the crossing of the Suez Canal during the October War. Taken together, the scenes tell the story of a continuous and successful Egyptian military that has existed across the centuries, and this myth is central to the contemporary military’s self-understanding. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, when the Ottoman commander Mohamed Ali first launched Egypt on the path of modernization, the military has embraced the mythological narrative that it has been the primary vehicle of modernity and progress in Egypt during the past two hundred years. In reality, the military is a much more modern invention, one that owes its founding to a 1936 treaty with the British Empire that removed British officers from its command and opened the service’s gates to lower-middle-class Egyptians.

Following Egypt’s humiliating loss in the 1948 war with Israel, the military became the center of conspiracies aiming to overthrow the country’s political order. Building a strong military was a core goal of the Free Officers who

assumed power through the 1952 coup, and a matter of national as well as personal honor. After being rebuffed by the West, Gamal Abdel Nasser turned to the Soviet Union for strategic patronage and, over the next decade and a half, the Egyptian military’s equipment and doctrine became heavily Soviet. Despite military defeats in the Suez crisis and Yemen wars, it was not until 1967 that the full extent of the military’s failures became clear.

Egypt’s desperate position after the 1967 war ushered in important changes that institutionally transformed its military in at least three ways. First, in need of Soviet support in his quest to liberate Sinai, Nasser allowed the Soviet Union to expand its presence in Egypt in the form of a naval base, and he welcomed thousands of Soviet military experts to oversee the military buildup and take effective control of the Egyptian military. The increased Soviet presence created widespread resentment among Egyptian officers, as their Soviet advisors routinely treated them poorly. Second, the military’s ranks were dramatically expanded with the addition of hundreds of thousands of soldiers, many of them college graduates conscripted between 1967 and 1974. This more than tripled the military’s size and fundamentally changed its composition. Third, after 1967 and under the leadership of General Mohamed Fawzi (1968–1971), the military had to overcome the damage to its prestige caused by its poor performance and rising public antipathy toward it. Prior to 1967, when it was commanded by the flamboyant Field Marshal Abdel Hakim Amer, the military had increasingly taken over civilian positions, with officers taking nearly a third of the cabinet’s positions and heading everything from factories to sports clubs. This greatly reduced the military’s effectiveness as a fighting force and was the cause of growing public resentment, evidenced when

**TODAY, THE MILITARY'S POWER IS UNRIVALED AND VIRTUALLY UNCONTESTED. YET THE PAST FOUR YEARS HAVE ALSO BROUGHT NUMEROUS CHALLENGES ON AN INSTITUTION THAT IS NOT EQUIPPED TO GOVERN A COUNTRY OF NINETY-FOUR MILLION.**

Egyptian officers walking back from Sinai in 1967 were greeted with a derisive song, “tell the sun not to be too strong, the Egyptian army is walking back on its feet.”

Despite the military defeat in the 1973 war, Sadat achieved his political goals, as he created an opening for his ultimate objective of moving Egypt into the American camp and making peace with Israel. Given their treatment by the Soviets, military officers overwhelmingly backed Sadat’s push to realign with the U.S., and the military became the institutional bedrock of the U.S.-Egypt alliance. Further, to solidify his rule and reverse Nasser’s policies, Sadat needed a myth of a great military victory in the war to cultivate public support. In this respect, the myth of the 1973 military victory served him well, but it also served the officer class, who were desperate to regain their honor.

But the end of hostilities with Israel posed a novel and serious dilemma for the Egyptian regime: what to do with the military, which in 1973 had nearly 800,000 men under arms. These conscripts had abandoned their families and careers during the mobilization, had been trained for war, and had seen their comrades die. Returning them to civilian life was further complicated by the huge inflation and economic crisis of the late

1970s and early 1980s, which directly affected military officers, who could no longer afford cars, decent housing, vacations, groceries, or even membership in sports clubs and language schools. Whereas in Nasser’s time the military had been a platform for social advancement, officers now found themselves slipping down the social and economic ladder.

The military would find a champion in the ambitious minister of defense, Abd El-Halim Abu Ghazala (1981–1989), who launched hundreds of government projects to satisfy the officers’ needs and give them the benefits many felt they had earned. To provide veterans with gainful employment, the military dramatically expanded its industrial operations beyond weaponry by setting up factories for the production of everything from cement and plastics to mineral water and macaroni, and it also developed a vast agricultural and livestock enterprise. The military’s diverse business initiatives benefited from four advantages that gave it an edge in the market: free labor in the form of conscripts, exemption from taxation and customs on its imports, complete control of all uninhabited lands, and a privileged ability to push for legislation that directly benefited its enterprise.

Even as the military grew its economic empire, its political power and influence gradually diminished in the Mubarak era. While some former officers were appointed to positions in government or the Suez Canal Authority, the Egyptian cabinet became overwhelmingly led by civilian technocrats. The officers’ domain further shrank with the rise of the Ministry of the Interior as a competitor for the president’s favor and post-service jobs, and then again with the rise of Gamal Mubarak and his close confidants in big business and the ruling National Democratic Party.

For the military, the 2011 revolution was initially a blessing, as although the officers respected Mubarak as their commander and a war hero, they had little affection for Gamal and his coterie of businessmen and technocrats. Steeped in Nasserite conceptions of national security, the

military viewed the opening economy and privatization of the 2000s as threats to the country's interests—as well as their own. The 2011 revolution subsequently swept away the military's competitors within the governing apparatus and the economy. However, the public's support for the military itself proved volatile, and the military found itself cornered with demands for radical change, clueless as to how to run a country of then nearly ninety million, and increasingly criticized and ridiculed. Revolutionary youths, unsatisfied with the glacial pace of change, lambasted the military as a tyrannical and feckless institution, thereby eroding redlines that had been enforced for decades and causing military morale to suffer.

The Muslim Brotherhood's one year in power proved yet another blessing for the military. Military officers were alarmed by worsening unrest and sectarian strife, as well as by perceptions of the Brotherhood regime's pan-Islamist foreign agenda, illustrated most vividly in the June 15, 2013 rally at which President Morsi declared Egypt's support for the rebels fighting the Assad government in Syria. It was Morsi's removal of the military's old guard that finally gave the military an ambitious commander intent on reversing its declining power and prestige. Riding a wave of popular frustration with Morsi's lackluster performance and growing fears about Brotherhood rule, the military under Sisi was able to return to power, this time with immense public support.

Today, the military's power is unrivaled and virtually uncontested. Yet the past four years have also brought numerous challenges and placed novel demands on an institution that is not equipped to govern a country of

ninety-four million. Previously, the military could distance itself from top civilian leaders and thus protect its interests while preserving its reputation as an impartial and national institution. Now this is no longer possible, as the military has become, in the eyes of the public, the ruling regime. Indeed, the very candidacy of General Sisi for president was officially endorsed by the armed forces—despite warnings from former presidential candidate Ahmed Shafik and others that this overtly political move would tarnish the military's reputation.

The military's controlling position in government and society has likewise compromised its image and mythology as an impartial actor defending the nation's interests. President Sisi's reliance on the military as an institution to run the government and economy leaves it exposed to public discontent and criticism. His decision to involve the military in infrastructure and development projects has removed the aura of competence the military had so carefully crafted since 1973. As officers assume leadership roles in government and the military's engineering corps is stretched to its limit building bridges and roads, Egyptians are discovering that the military can be just as incompetent as other bureaucracies. The military's takeover of various economic tasks has also alienated the business community, which finds itself in an unfair competition with an advantaged military. This loss of support and the unraveling of the military's mythology puts it and the country as a whole in a dangerous position. If the military is no longer viewed as an impartial and nationalist institution, it will lose its ability to step in at a moment of national crisis to save the country.

# The Decay of the State

One of the most important, yet neglected, long-term trends in Egypt over the past several decades has been the steady decay and unraveling of state institutions. Observers have long taken note of Egypt's decline as an external power, yet little attention has been given to the deterioration of key organizations and governing institutions at home. As the country that first erected the *Mukhabarat* intelligence state, Egypt has customarily been seen as having a strong state internally, with many falling for an all-powerful "deep state" narrative to explain political developments in the country. Nothing could be further from the truth.

During Nasser's rule, the foundations of a state structure and ruling formula were laid that would continue to shape Egypt for six decades and become the model for military strongmen elsewhere in the region. The Nasser regime, with its mantra of Arab Socialism as an imagined blend of Arab nationalism and Socialist ideas, was able to counter challenges from the left by introducing progressive policies in the areas of agrarian reform, state-dominated unionization, price fixing, and especially rent controls. This was coupled with a tremendous expansion of public education, health-care services, and government employment, as well as an attempt at national industrialization strictly controlled and managed by the state. In return for these services and benefits, the population effectively relinquished its social, economic, and political rights. In sum, an Egyptian national was offered free education, health care, affordable housing, and a pension in exchange for abstention from politics, which was to be the sole domain of the ruling regime.

On top of the Nasserite state stood the undisputed leader, but his power was not absolute. Sharing the executive's power was the military officer class, especially those who

had belonged to or were associates of the Free Officers. The military takeover of the state took place as officers, both serving and retired, were placed on top of every state body, from domestic and foreign ministries, local governorates, and companies and state enterprises, to cultural and sports associations. A similar process took place in the Ministry of the Interior, which in Nasser's time was headed by former military officers. Below the military officer class emerged a cadre of technocrats who were used by Nasser to implement his various economic schemes. The greatly expanded bureaucracy functioned as a tool for delivering services to the population and controlling them. The prospects for the rule of law were further reduced as Nasser purged the judiciary of all perceived opponents of his nationalist vision and created alternative judicial structures in the military to ensure the desired verdicts.

The Nasserite state was shaken to its core in the Sinai in 1967 and, with the Arab Socialist project proved a failure, the state should have collapsed. In the short term, Nasser's extraordinary political talent was key to averting regime collapse. But over the long term, the state's survival was the result of measures by his successors, both Sadat and Mubarak, which ensured the state's and the regime's continuation by revising the ruling formula. These measures included expanding the ruling class by including other state bodies such as the Ministry of the Interior and the judiciary in the governing coalition, as well as alleviating the economic pressure on state institutions through cutting back on public services. In return for taking away part of the original Nasserite bargain, the state also loosened some restrictions on the political and civic space. Nasser's totalitarian system was thereby replaced with what can best be described as a half-open

one in which the state permitted a certain level of public dissent to relieve pressure on itself, but prevented the formation of truly free and independent political and civic organizations that could pose legitimate threats to the ruling regime.

But regardless of the measures taken to ensure the state's and the regime's survival, a slow process of decline was underway. At the heart of the slow unraveling of state institutions is the reality of the decline in the country's human capital. Simply put, the Egyptian educational system does not cultivate the competence and talent that a modern state needs to function. Observers have pointed out that the educational system is overstretched and underfunded and continues to be based on rote learning, but the problem goes well beyond the obvious. At the core of the educational system's failure is a mindset that discourages any form of free inquiry, as students in public schools are not required to conduct any independent research or offer their own thoughts on the subjects they study. The Nasserite obsession with industrialization and its lingering influence have meant that the social sciences and humanities are severely neglected, and Egyptian students are taught very little basic information about the world, with few, if any, lessons on world history, humanities, or religions. This educational deficit has become evident in every aspect of Egyptian life, from the low-caliber workers in the state bureaucracy to the country's cultural decline. Egyptians who are able to escape this either through private education or by emigration have succeeded in leading prosperous lives and successful careers, but the majority of the population is not as fortunate.

While some observers of Egypt have noted how the educational deficit has impacted the country's cultural and political life, none have reached the further conclusion that this deficit also adversely impacts the functioning of the state. In fact, the problems that now plague the military, intelligence, police, and judiciary are made worse

## **AT THE HEART OF THE SLOW UNRAVELING OF STATE INSTITUTIONS IS THE REALITY OF THE DECLINE OF THE COUNTRY'S HUMAN CAPITAL.**

by the lack of healthy competition, by nepotism, and by corruption. While the private sector has been able to outperform the public sector due to the higher quality of its employees, among other factors, state institutions have been reluctant to open up and replenish their ranks due to a deep mistrust of outsiders. This is compounded by rampant nepotism, which is evident in medicine, pharmacy, and even the cinema, although little attention has been given to a similar process that is taking place within state institutions. Now, an increasing number of military officers, policemen, and judges are themselves the sons of former military officers, policemen, and judges. In effect, key state bodies increasingly function in a way that has been compared to a Mamluk caste, with each caste attempting to maintain its social and economic standard and pursue its own agenda. Moreover, these key state bodies have not been spared the rising levels of corruption that penetrates throughout Egypt, but rather have become bastions of corruption due to the lack of transparency and oversight of their work and budgets. Even within the security apparatus, there is a growing gap between the economic and social opportunities afforded to top officers and the rank and file.

President Sisi has said that he views the rebuilding of the state and its institutions as his most important task, yet under his rule, the decay of national government has continued and actually accelerated. Unable to reform the bureaucracies, Sisi has instead sought to create parallel

structures to implement his programs. The state increasingly does not function as a national governing body, with the military, the various security agencies, and the judiciary operating independently of one another and according to competing agendas and bureaucratic self-interests. This has been abetted by Sisi's belief, mentioned earlier, that Mubarak had constrained the ability of state bodies to confront the conspiracy against Egypt. To reverse this, the new president has given free rein to each state body to perform its function as it sees fit. The result has been a haphazard system characterized by deepening governmental dysfunction and shoddy performance and building public frustration

and anger, which has been met by state repression. A population may choose to welcome authoritarian leadership after years of instability, but the government needs to serve the people with a steady and fair hand. Now, not only do known regime opponents and terrorists end up in jail or dead, but special forces can drag even one of the country's most powerful businessmen out of bed in the middle of the night and publish the humiliating pictures on newspapers' front pages with impunity. Arbitrary and erratic rule in which no one knows what the redlines are is terrifying, and today, even obedient Egyptians no longer know how to behave and what to refrain from.

# The Muslim Brotherhood

Once the dominant force of opposition to the ruling regime, the Muslim Brotherhood is today a shadow of its former self, and no longer has the ability to affect the country's future. What had taken Hassan El Banna and his disciples eighty-five years to build has been nearly eradicated in just four.

For more than a decade, Washington's discussions about Egypt policy have revolved on the question of how to deal with the Muslim Brotherhood. Those advocating for engagement portrayed the Brotherhood as an ideologically moderate and homegrown bulwark against jihadism, while deeming the Brotherhood a grassroots and cooperative Islamist group that would not implement a radical program if allowed to reach power. The group became impossible to ignore after the 2011 revolution, and the Obama administration embraced it seemingly unconditionally, despite many signs of danger.<sup>1</sup> Even after it was ousted, many, both within and outside the Obama administration, insisted on keeping channels open with the Brotherhood, claiming that the group is still a potent force in Egyptian politics and dismissing any signs that its membership was embracing violence. While this heated debate continues in Washington, events on the ground have moved on. There is simply no Muslim Brotherhood to speak of today in Egypt.

The Brotherhood's fall from grace and its complete disintegration in the face of Sisi's crackdown, while surprising to observers, is deeply rooted in the group's own history, ideology, and structure. While the movement was the most organized opponent of the Mubarak regime

**WHILE THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD AS AN ORGANIZATION ATTEMPTING TO IMPLEMENT THE ISLAMIST PROJECT IS NO MORE, ISLAMISM ITSELF REMAINS A POWERFUL IDEOLOGY IN EGYPT THAT STILL HAS SWAY OVER MILLIONS.**

and, after the 2011 revolution, proclaimed its readiness to run the government, the Brotherhood actually lacked basic conceptions and understandings of government. Its shortcomings included the lack of an actual program and any experience in governance, a mediocre rank and file, a leadership promoted for discipline and obedience rather than merit and aptitude, and a habit of blaming failures and setbacks on an outside conspiracy against the Islamist project. To compound this, the revolutionary moment and the absence of a strong competitor proved too tempting for the Brotherhood, which after eighty years of hungering for power had an enormous appetite for it.

To understand why the Muslim Brotherhood has ceased to be a unified, powerful actor within Egypt, we must look at the four challenges it has confronted since the 2013 military coup. First, the Sisi regime's crackdown has been unprecedented in scope, surpassing all that even Nasser had brought on the group during the infamous "Ordeal."

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<sup>1</sup> We, the authors of this report, disagree over whether constructive engagement between the U.S. and the Brotherhood government was possible after 2011. Whatever opportunity there was, it has now been lost.

Through extrajudicial killings, imprisonment, and the systematic dismantling of the movement's associations and informal networks, Sisi's regime has decimated the pyramid structure of the group and destroyed its ability to act. Second, the flight of members into self-imposed exile and dissimulation has left the Brotherhood rudderless, and it has miserably failed to develop a strategy to confront the regime. Although four years have passed since Morsi's removal from power, the group still has no plan for bringing an end to its predicament. Third, the Muslim Brotherhood is no longer unified organizationally and ideologically. Internal tensions and quarrels, including disputes over the best methodology for regaining power and personal clashes over control of the group's finances, various associational and welfare networks, and media, have led to the emergence of at least two competing leaderships, each more focused on confronting the other than the regime. Lastly, and most importantly, the Muslim Brotherhood has lost its support among the Egyptian people. The group is no longer an unknown to the population, which was willing to give it a chance after the fall of the Mubarak regime. The Egyptian people have experienced Islamist rule and have found it wanting in all respects. Through this, and an intensive propaganda effort by the Sisi regime and its supporters, the Brotherhood has lost the support and good will it had built up over decades.

Despite the Muslim Brotherhood's claims that it maintains a non-violent approach, it is undisputed today that a significant portion of the movement has turned to violence with the early blessing of some of the Brotherhood's leadership. What began as organized protection of Brotherhood demonstrators in late 2013 quickly morphed into aggressive violence directed at the state. This

radicalization process has been abetted by the new amalgam of various Islamist organizations and tendencies that formed in reaction to the 2013 massacre at Rab'a and the Brotherhood's own ideological weakness, which permitted other Islamists to fill the vacuum of ideas with revolutionary Salafist ones. These revolutionary Salafist units have sabotaged the electricity grid, destroyed police stations and cars with Molotov cocktails, conducted attacks on multinational corporations, and assassinated police officers believed to have participated in the crackdown on Islamists. After the first wave of violent Islamist retaliation for the massacre at Rab'a, a second wave brought more violent groups such as Popular Resistance and Revolutionary Punishment. Egypt is now battered by a third wave of violence led by groups such as Hasm and Liwaa El Thawra.

Barring a dramatic turn of events, it seems unlikely that the Brotherhood in Egypt will be able to put its internal house in order, develop a strategy to confront the regime, rein in its members, or win over the Egyptian people once again. Brotherhood members now in exile in Istanbul and elsewhere may yet resume their fight against Cairo with external support, including from Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government in Turkey and from Qatar, but within Egypt itself, the old Brotherhood is dead. Importantly, however, although the Muslim Brotherhood as an organization and a methodology for implementing the Islamist project is no more, Islamism itself remains a powerful ideology in Egypt that still has sway over millions. The demise of the Muslim Brotherhood has not only given rise to the new radical Islamist sects mentioned earlier, but it has also inspired the growing appeal in Egypt of Islamic State and its proclaimed caliphate.

# Salafism and the Islamic State

The Western analysis of Sunni Islamism has tended to see the Muslim Brotherhood and the diverse forces of salafi-jihadism as the twin poles of the overall movement, yet neither one of these tendencies dominates Egyptian Islamism. Indeed, the Egyptian Islamist scene is an extremely complex one, with virtually every major Islamist movement from across the Muslim-majority world developing a following along the Nile Valley. Given Egypt's geographic and cultural centrality, the Salafist ideological devotees of Ibn Taymiyyah, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the Ahl El Hadith of South Asia, and Nasir Al Albani have all mixed and morphed with native Egyptian ideologues, from Mohamed Abduh to Hassan El Banna and Sayed Qutb. In terms of sheer numbers, Salafism is the largest and most dynamic—albeit also a deeply variegated—Islamist force in the country.

Despite Islamism's political setback, Salafism remains a powerful and appealing ideology for millions of Egyptians. A former Muslim Brotherhood leader estimated that for every Brotherhood member there were twenty Salafis, putting the total number of Salafist or Salafi-leaning Egyptians at around ten million. The attraction of Salafism rests on its simplicity, its claims of authenticity, and the body of literature its leading sheikhs have produced. It has come to offer a simple solution to the crisis of modernity that Egypt and other Muslim-majority countries have grappled with for more than two centuries: a return to a time in which Islam and Muslims were dominant, namely, the time of the pious Salaf (a term that usually refers to the first generation of Prophet Mohamed and those who immediately followed it). The very basic notion of Islam as a religion and civilization that was dominant in a past era, and of the link between worldly success and personal and societal piety, is widely accepted in Egypt. It also remains a largely unchallenged narrative. Salafism is also appealing because of its lack of

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organizational rigidity compared to the Muslim Brotherhood. Moreover, by claiming the mantle of the pious ancestors, Salafi currents enjoy an aura of authenticity that other ideologies and competing groups like the Brotherhood have struggled to compete with. Lastly, Salafi sheikhs have developed an elaborate body of literature that offers answers to the vexing religious and worldly questions that Egyptian Muslims confront in their everyday lives.

Within the Egyptian Salafi universe, the Nour Party, which was born from the Alexandria-based Salafi Call and emerged as the second-largest political party in the country following the revolution, is no longer a powerful political force. The party's support for the military coup has delegitimized it in the eyes of the majority of Egyptian Salafis. Two competing currents have risen to fill the vacuum. Madkhali Salafism, named for the Saudi cleric Rabee Ibn Hadi al-Madkhali, promotes religious conservatism and enjoins fealty to established political authorities, and thus produces politically inactive adherents. The Islamic State's radical apocalyptic vision of bringing the caliphate back competes with this more pietistic and deferential strain of Salafi thought.

The Islamic State currently threatens Egypt from its bases of operations in North Sinai, in neighboring Libya, and in mainland Egypt, and the caliphate movement now poses

**THE SISI REGIME IS ALSO AT WAR WITH A VARIETY OF SMALL BUT GROWING TERRORIST CELLS AFFILIATED WITH THE ISLAMIC STATE, AL QAEDA, AND GROUPS LIKE HASM AND LIWAA EL THAWRA THAT ARE OPERATING IN MAINLAND POPULATION CENTERS.**

a major security threat to the country. The failures of the methodologies of political change adopted by the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafist parties like Nour, and even Al Qaeda have allowed the Islamic State to position itself as the most successful and the only available methodology for the implementation of the Islamist project.

An Egyptian jihadi cell, Al Tawid wa al Jihad, was formed in Sinai at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and carried out significant attacks on tourist resorts between 2004 and 2006 before subsequently melding with Palestinian salafi-jihadi terrorists. The group took advantage of the security vacuum created by the 2011 revolution to acquire weapons and build a strong presence in North Sinai. Rebranded as Ansar Bayt al Maqdis (ABM), the group attacked Egyptian military outposts and launched rockets into Israel. Later, ABM flourished in the post-coup environment, recruiting disgruntled Islamists who abandoned political activism for violent revolution as it expanded its operations in Sinai. In November 2014, the group gave an oath of allegiance to the Islamic State's caliph, rebranding itself once again, this time as Wilayet Sinai. Over the last two years, the group has carried out spectacular attacks, including the downing of a Russian airplane, attacks on the Egyptian navy, and major assassination attempts in mainland Egypt. Despite the military campaign to wipe it out, the group continues to

operate in North Sinai and successfully conducts small but near-daily attacks on the military.

Libya also remains a serious security threat for Egypt. While the situation in the Libyan territory close to Egyptian borders has improved and there have been no major attacks in Egypt's Western Desert recently, the situation remains volatile. For the Egyptian military the Western Desert is a new battle space, unlike Sinai, where it has fought before and knows the physical topography (though not necessarily the human terrain). And while Cairo's allies in Libya provide a measure of security from their side, they have neither the capacity nor the resources to match Israel's role in Sinai via intelligence sharing and other forms of cooperation with Egypt.

The Sisi regime is also at war with a variety of small but growing terrorist cells affiliated with the Islamic State, Al Qaeda, and groups like Hasm and Liwaa El Thawra that are operating in mainland population centers. The June 2015 assassination of the country's prosecutor general is a reminder of the presence of these groups and their ability to conduct attacks. While Wilayet Sinai remains a Sinai-based group that has failed to develop a significant presence in the mainland, it has been a source of training and resources for other jihadi cells. Perhaps more alarmingly, Egyptian prisons, which are now brimming with regime opponents including former Brotherhood members, continue to act as breeding grounds for future jihadis, as inmates reportedly undergo further radicalization and exchange experiences in prison. Likewise, thousands of Egyptians are today fighting in the battlefields of the Levant and North Africa, and their return home will also pose a serious security threat. As we have seen, the Islamic State has also developed an extensive network of cells in Egypt. It has seized on rising anti-Christian sentiments and targeted Copts. Through attacks in Cairo, Alexandria, the Delta, and the south, the caliphate movement has shown its desire to make Egypt a central locus of its future activities.

# The Sectarian Crisis

For nearly fourteen centuries Christians and Muslims have lived side by side in Egypt, despite periodic waves of Christian persecution. According to the British colonial administrator Lord Cromer, “the only difference between the Copt and the Muslim is that the former is an Egyptian who worships in a Christian church, whilst the latter is an Egyptian who worships in a Mohammedan mosque.” While originally meant as an insult to Copts, Cromer’s remark is seen by many Egyptians as evidence of the deep roots of their inclusive national identity, which they contrast with the sectarian politics and hatreds that have ripped apart the Arab Levant. In reality, however, the country is facing a worsening sectarian crisis.

The Egyptian government today engages in discriminatory policies against Coptic Christians in five areas. First, Ottoman-era laws restricting the building of churches remain in force. Egyptian presidents have granted only eleven church construction permits in the past six years, and a recent law for building churches passed by the parliament does little to ease the problem. Second, Christians have been systematically excluded from important government positions. The current Egyptian government has only one Christian minister, while there are no Copts serving as provincial governors, university presidents, or school deans. Coptic representation in the military, police, judiciary, and foreign service is miniscule, and Christians are prohibited from serving in the state security or intelligence services. Third, Coptic heritage is excluded from the country’s schoolbooks as well as official government media. Fourth, the Egyptian government continues to uphold discriminatory regulations such as blasphemy laws, which are mainly used to target Copts and other religious minorities; inheritance laws, which force Copts to divide inheritance according to sharia; and legal

**AN ESTIMATED ONE MILLION COPTS HAVE LEFT EGYPT FOR PERMANENT SETTLEMENT ABROAD, INCLUDING ABOUT HALF A MILLION IN THE UNITED STATES AND MORE THAN 150,000 EACH IN CANADA AND AUSTRALIA.**

punishments for converts to Christianity. Lastly, the Sisi government has failed to stop attacks on Copts and has repeatedly refused to punish the attackers. Attacks on Copts normally result in government-initiated reconciliation sessions, which often force majoritarian demands on the Copts without holding the perpetrators accountable. This has created a culture of impunity and encouragement that has led to a dramatic increase in the number of attacks on Copts in recent years.

Islamists regularly incite violence against Copts, and terrorist organizations have launched horrific attacks on the community. Anti-Christian attacks include prominent incidents such as the Alexandria church bombing on New Year’s Eve 2010; the August 2013 destruction of 100 church buildings by Muslim Brotherhood supporters, which was the largest wave of anti-Coptic violence in Egypt since the fourteenth century; and several Islamic State attacks in Sinai, which have killed at least seven Christians in 2017 alone. In the last year, an unprecedented wave of terrorism against Copts has included bombings of churches in Cairo, Alexandria, and

the Delta, and the gruesome murder of Copts in Menya. Anti-Christian incitement has risen dramatically since the 2011 revolution due to the increasingly public and political role Copts have taken. When the Muslim Brotherhood was in power, the practice of blaming Copts for Egypt's woes enabled the Brotherhood and its supporters to avoid dealing with their own failures to govern. Nowadays, Islamist social media is rife with delusional conspiracies about Egypt becoming a Christian country.

The most worrisome aspect of the deepening sectarian crisis, however, is the increase in attacks by ordinary Muslims on their Christian neighbors. Starting with the massacre in El-Kosheh in January 2000, many anti-Coptic attacks have not been orchestrated by Islamist groups, but rather are spontaneous outbursts of ordinary Muslims' anger at perceived affronts to Islam. While the exact cause of each incident differs, the spark for communalist violence is generally innocuous, and mob attacks take Christian lives and destroy Christian property while the perpetrators routinely evade justice.

Through this violence, coupled with increasing societal discrimination against Copts, the sectarian divide has deepened and is becoming ruinous for the Egyptian nation. In the absence of the state, the Church has stepped in to provide private tutoring, health care, playgrounds, and employment for its members. Today, Copts and Muslims lead increasingly separate lives, attending different schools and sports venues and seeking treatment from different hospitals.

The persecution of Egypt's Christians is truly a cultural tragedy, as Copts are one of the world's oldest Christian communities, tracing their origins to St. Mark the Evangelist. They have played an important role in the history of Christianity, and they represent more than half of the Christian presence in the Middle East today. Copts have resorted to emigration to escape persecution despite their historic ties to Egypt, from which the name of their community is derived. Under immense pressure and with opportunities opening up in the West, an estimated one million Copts have left Egypt for permanent settlement abroad, including about half a million in the United States and more than 150,000 each in Canada and Australia.

This massive demographic outflow is often ignored by policymakers in Egypt and the West despite its far-reaching social and economic implications. The Copts took advantage of modern schooling during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and they embraced modernization efforts to a greater extent than their Muslim neighbors, making them a disproportionately well-educated community. Copts who emigrate to the West are often engineers, doctors, pharmacists, university professors, and small-business owners who contribute greatly to the societies and economies of the countries that receive them. Egypt's loss of its Copts, like the loss of the hundreds of thousands of Jews, Greeks, and other minorities during Nasser's rule, is having a profound impact on the country's future and undermining its potential.

# The Economic Crisis

The Egyptian economy faces a multitude of structural problems, including an unsustainable system of subsidies inherited from the Nasser era, which successive governments have failed to control; a large and expanding bureaucracy of seven million whose salaries are a huge and unsustainable burden on a state budget already stretched thin; the overall low productivity of workers, a consequence of poor education and lack of serious technical training; an over-dependence on volatile sources of revenue such as the Suez Canal, tourism, and remittances by Egyptians abroad; a massive informal economy that the government fails to regulate and also fails to derive tax revenues from; an unwelcoming business and legal environment that discourages investment; and a weak banking system with limited penetration and minimal financial capacity to empower ordinary people and start-ups, aside from loans to big businesses and government bonds.

Egypt's overall economic trajectory has further worsened because of non-economic factors in the past few years. The deteriorating security situation and a legal framework that allows courts to cancel economic decisions have both discouraged economic reform and investment. Further, the tourism sector has failed to rebound since 2011, while the downing of a Russian airplane and a botched military operation in Sinai that killed Mexican tourists have also hurt the industry.

But above all, Egypt's economic misery is the direct result of both the regime's economic policies and the lack of a coherent economic strategy. Since Mubarak's fall, state bureaucracies have responded to the economic crisis by adding nearly a million new employees, putting unsustainable pressure on the country's budget. Despite a

major economic conference that promised to open the Egyptian market to foreign investment by removing bureaucratic hurdles, the military regime has failed to deliver required reforms. Moreover, the regime has proven deeply reluctant to listen to outside advice even from its closest economic patron, the United Arab Emirates. Instead of addressing the structural problems of the economy, the military regime has been obsessed with mega-projects such as the New Suez Canal, a 1.5-million-acre reclamation project that has little chance of becoming viable, and an equally far-fetched new capital complex, both of which have cost the country billions of badly needed dollars. Perhaps more significantly, the government refused to allow the free floating of the Egyptian pound, wasting the country's foreign currency reserves. Simply put, the Egyptian government has no viable national economic plans and continues to take half-measures that exacerbate rather than ameliorate the economic crisis.

Forced to finally confront reality by the International Monetary Fund, Cairo has allowed the free floating of its currency, though the move was made too late and the state had failed to prepare for it. Massive inflation and severe shortages in basic commodities have made the lives of millions of Egyptians harder. The middle class, which had grown significantly during Mubarak's last decade in power, has seen the depletion of its life savings, and it is disappearing. As prices of commodities and services have soared, expected middle-class amenities such as affordable private education are becoming less attainable. Insofar as the middle class becomes less educated, it will further the country's economic deterioration and likely have profound ramifications over the long run.

**EGYPT HAS BECOME SIMPLY  
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AID ALONE.**

In recent decades, Egypt has benefitted from cash infusions from foreign powers at critical junctures, thus preventing its total economic collapse. Egypt averted economic failure in 1990 after receiving billions of dollars in loans and debt cancellation from Western allies in return for its participation in the First Gulf War. Since the 2011 revolution, money has poured in from Western nations, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia to help shore-up state budgets and finance large-scale development initiatives. However, with a population now of over ninety-four million, Egypt has become simply too big to save with foreign aid alone. Unless Cairo embraces a serious plan to address the structural problems and stimulate growth that can serve this burgeoning population, the country is heading to a catastrophe.

# The U.S.-Egyptian Relationship

Egypt has been a key American ally in the Middle East for nearly four decades. However, despite the longevity of the relationship and large transfers of U.S. military and economic assistance to Egypt, relations between the two countries have reached their lowest point since the Camp David Accords in 1978. Renewing a strong American-Egyptian alliance that can deal with the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century—not only the ongoing implosion of order in the Middle East, but the worsening crisis in Egypt itself—will be a key test for the Trump administration.

The relationship between the two countries had never been a smooth one. The compact forged by Secretary Kissinger and President Sadat held during the Cold War despite a host of challenges, including the Arab Steadfastness and Confrontation Front's rejection of the peace treaty, Sadat's assassination, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990. However, flashpoints such as the 1985 Achille Lauro hijacking and the 1988 attempted smuggling of missile material from the U.S. by then-Egyptian defense minister Abd El-Halim Abu Ghazala prevented deep ties from developing. Even so, cooperation on a variety of security challenges, from Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 to the rise of Islamist terrorism, and the successful (albeit cold) peace between Egypt and Israel, stoked American optimism. Washington has always hoped Egypt would lead the region to peace, as it had led it to war in 1967, and progress in Israeli-Arab peace negotiations in the 1990s seemed to vindicate America's investments in Egypt.

Yet below the surface, cracks in the relationship began to appear in the late 1990s, which went largely unnoticed in Washington. These subsequently grew into a chasm because of Egyptian policy choices and America's

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changing regional interests. While Cairo upheld its peace agreement with Israel and continued to reap rewards from the alliance with the United States, it permitted the Egyptian press to engage in vehement anti-American and anti-Semitic tirades and failed to live up to U.S. expectations, including by not pressuring Yasser Arafat to accept the Israeli offer for peace at Camp David. Instead, during the 1990s, Cairo was busy trying to limit Israeli-Arab economic cooperation, fearing such cooperation would weaken Egypt's position regionally and lead the way to Israeli economic dominance in the Arab world. It seemed that while Cairo liked having peace with Israel, it did not wish the same for its Arab neighbors, in part because it feared an end of the Arab-Israeli conflict would also end Egypt's importance to the United States.

Following the 9/11 attacks, the Bush administration developed a new regional framework that emphasized the advance of democracy in an attempt to decrease

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radicalization and terrorism. This new emphasis antagonized the Mubarak regime, which saw U.S. democracy-promotion efforts as destabilizing. The gulf separating the two countries widened as disagreements arose over Egypt's human rights record and the activities of American NGOs in Egypt. The short honeymoon that President Obama's election introduced to the relationship lasted for two years. In 2011, the administration's decision to call for Mubarak to step down and to pressure the military leadership to hold elections led to growing antagonism toward the U.S. in Cairo. The perception of a U.S. bias against Mubarak and in favor of the Muslim Brotherhood convinced the military and many non-Islamists that the United States was unreliable and wanted to undermine Egypt. President Sisi has since sought to align Egypt more closely with Moscow, and his military regime has aimed to advantage itself by balancing the U.S. and Russia against each other.

This is a dangerous game, one the Nasserite regime tried once before in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and failed at, thereby damaging Egyptian sovereignty and security greatly. Sisi's

embrace of Russia has been driven by mistrust of the U.S., and it is not unpopular because of prevalent anti-Americanism in Egypt. But the roots of the policy go much deeper. President Sisi is personally enamored with President Vladimir Putin, and he looks favorably at the Kremlin's policies at home and abroad. Admiration for the alternative models of development and authoritarian politics pursued by Russia as well as China is widespread among Egyptian intellectuals and opinion-shapers, and is based on shallow understandings of the reality in both countries as well as the real global balance of power. Russia's external assertiveness and growing strategic involvements in the Middle East have led many Egyptians to imagine it as a greater power than it actually is, and they believe that Egypt, given its (also imagined) centrality to both American and Russian strategic calculations, can benefit from a reprise of the Cold War rivalry. A previous generation of military officers came to realize that Soviet Russia had little to offer but disdain, and that a full alliance with the United States was necessary, as Nasser's balancing act had undermined the country's independence and set Egypt on the road to Soviet serfdom. The new generation of officers that now rules the country has not absorbed these lessons.

Egypt may eventually come to see that no other power can replace the United States. At present, however, Cairo's perilous flirtation with Russia (and tilt toward China), insofar as it deepens, will greatly undermine the country and fail to stop its downward trajectory. The United States alone has the capacity and the potential political desire to help Egypt avoid such a scenario and reestablish its sovereignty, security, and prosperity.

But the deepening mistrust between Cairo and Washington presents a major obstacle to any real cooperation. While most Egyptians have long disagreed with U.S. policy in the Middle East, Washington's erratic and often contradictory messages to Cairo, from the aftermath of 9/11 through the 2011 revolution, have led

many Egyptians to question America's intentions toward their country, reinforcing their belief that the U.S. harbors ill will toward Egypt. Today, the intensity and scope of conspiracy theories about U.S. nefariousness are unprecedented. Even non-political stories such as the discovery of Egyptian strawberry exports causing Hepatitis A in the United States are widely seen as part of an effort to sabotage Egypt. In retrospect, the weakness of the American-Egyptian alliance largely stems from Washington's failure to cultivate a dependable constituency in Egypt with shared interests and principles. Thus, at this time of crisis, no one in Egypt has defended the central importance of the alliance with America. This may be the biggest failure of U.S. diplomacy in Egypt.

**WASHINGTON'S ERRATIC AND OFTEN CONTRADICTORY MESSAGES TO CAIRO HAVE LED MANY EGYPTIANS TO QUESTION AMERICA'S INTENTIONS TOWARD THEIR COUNTRY, REINFORCING THEIR BELIEF THAT THE U.S. HARBORS ILL WILL TOWARD EGYPT.**

## II. OPPORTUNITIES AND STRATEGIES

The American-Egyptian alliance is crumbling, and many in Washington who are aware of this consider it unfortunate. However, there are questions about whether this requires a serious U.S. response or if, indeed, Egypt deserves it. President Obama grew extremely frustrated with Egypt, as his policies there produced little except disappointment, including Cairo's unwillingness to cooperate as regional security melted down, its embrace of Russia, and its repressive and erratic behavior at home. In an interview with Jeffrey Goldberg, an administration official went as far as stating, "If you want to put Obama in a bad mood, tell him he has to go to a Situation Room meeting about Egypt." But ignoring a complicated problem will not make it go away, and aloofness is not a strategy.

The new U.S. administration may be in a good position to set the foundations for renewing the alliance. President Sisi, frustrated by Obama's policies, could not hide his support for Trump's candidacy in the U.S. elections. The Egyptian president was one of two foreign leaders that Trump met with during the campaign, and Trump's election was greeted enthusiastically in Cairo. President Sisi, who believes Western nations regard him as illegitimate, was finally granted a state visit to Washington, which Obama long denied him. The Egyptian leader's expectations, personal needs, and admiration for President Trump may present an opening for American diplomacy.

Any U.S. effort to revitalize the alliance should not follow the 20<sup>th</sup> Century framework of a principally military partnership based on now-outdated understandings about Egypt or the Middle East at-large. Egypt is no longer a leading Middle Eastern power, nor will it be able to act as a regional strategic and political pacesetter anytime soon. The Middle Eastern security environment has also been

upended by an unprecedented political convulsion that has tested regional states. Some have already cracked up under pressure, yet all have been found wanting. The faltering order of nation-states is now menaced not by one but a diversity of new revolutionary and politically subversive threats. The region's controlling regimes have struggled to cope with these threats effectively because of their own political weaknesses and their ongoing failures to address internal problems of governance and legitimacy.

Any new American effort to restore the alliance requires clarity about Egypt's rapidly deteriorating predicament and help for the country to deal with it. This requires an American shift, from a primarily threat-centric approach to alliance-building and maintenance that is focused on military cooperation and building the capacity of Egypt's security forces, to a more population-centric approach focused on long-term partnerships with Egyptian political actors that is aimed at resolving the governance and ideological crises they face. As a practical matter, the U.S. embassy in Cairo, America's second-largest embassy in the Middle East, along with other agencies, should be empowered with the strategic mission, new capabilities and expertise, and resources to develop a whole-of-country approach to contesting U.S. adversaries and identifying opportunities and political strategies for resolving Egypt's crises that enjoy broad Egyptian support. The U.S. must not shrink from its commitments to civic republicanism and human rights, but without addressing the faltering state, fostering a more just and peaceful political order will not be possible. This will, by its nature, be a long and complicated undertaking, one that will require American patience and fortitude. Even so, the U.S. should understand that this has become essential to both American interests and the national aspirations that many Egyptians have for their own country.

# Conspiracy Theories

One core focus of U.S. diplomacy in Egypt needs to be contesting the spread of anti-Americanism and conspiracy theories that have undermined political support in Egypt for the alliance. The widespread belief that America harbors ill will against Egypt increases hostility to our country, threatens our security, and hinders U.S. efforts to advance our interests elsewhere. It has also held Egypt back from acknowledging its internal governance problems and tackling them head-on.

President Sisi believed that the Trump administration, unlike Obama's, would meet Egypt's economic and military needs; indeed, many in Cairo believe they are entitled to American aid. The United States should require the Egyptian government to desist from propagating anti-Americanism and conspiracy theories and to play an active role in repudiating them. If President Sisi is interested in a closer friendship with the United States, he should make the public case as to why such a friendship is important to the Egyptian nation, speak truthfully about all that the United States has done for Egypt in recent decades, and publicly repudiate claims about American ill will toward Egypt. The U.S. should explore how the Egyptian state's progress in this can be made a condition of future military and economic aid.

The U.S. should also seek Egyptian government cooperation in countering the anti-American propaganda that is spread by foreign-run media outlets. In doing so, the United States is late to the game, as the non-Arab media in Egypt and the Arabic-speaking world have come to be dominated by Russia and Iran. Both countries have established widely followed media networks in Egypt that air a constant anti-American message based on selective news reporting, dissimulation, and blatant lies. This has

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found a receptive audience, as Russian and Iranian propaganda are cleverly designed to reinforce existing prejudices in large segments of society and the military regime itself, all to the detriment of the American alliance and Egyptian national sovereignty.

In addition to making the case that such foreign propaganda and conspiracy theories undermine public discourse and impede Egypt's ability to deal with its problems, the U.S. embassy should be given the policy guidance and capabilities it needs to proactively contest the spread of false ideas. As a first step, a thorough and regular analytical review of the Egyptian mediascape needs to be conducted. The Egyptian mediascape suffers from a real vacuum in fact-based reporting that provides accurate information regarding international, regional, and local developments, and the United States should help to fill that vacuum. Egypt-based media outlets should be provided with factual information and encouraged to correct the record when they have published false stories. U.S. public diplomacy programs should also make

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debunking false information a top priority by reaching out directly to the Egyptian people through social media or short online videos. At the same time, a serious reform of Al Hurra is required to reestablish it as a serious news source and platform for advancing reasoned policy debate on Egypt's economic, sectarian, and educational

problems, among others. As of now, Al Hurra is not a useful instrument in the larger struggle of ideas, since it provides few, if any, ideas to neutralize the propaganda of adversarial foreign regimes or the anti-American narratives spun by Islamist, Arab nationalist, and leftist currents. To compete, Al Hurra must serve as a venue for liberal and civic republican viewpoints, and it must help to show how the crises that ail Egypt can be dealt with only by responsible government and policy.

Finally, the U.S. embassy should penalize Egyptian media personnel who deliberately invent and propagate anti-American conspiracy theories by making perpetrators ineligible to participate in American-Egyptian exchange programs, receive funding from the U.S. government, or receive visas to travel to the U.S.

# The President's Call for Religious Reform

In a January 2015 speech at Al-Azhar, the leading center of Sunni Islam, President Sisi called for a “religious revolution” and admonished religious scholars and clerics for failing to curb Islamist fundamentalism and overcome intellectual atrophy. The Egyptian president decried how Islamic thought and discourse was becoming antagonistic to the whole world: “It is inconceivable that the thought that we hold most sacred should cause the entire Umma [global community of Muslims] to be a source of anxiety, danger, killing, and destruction for the rest of the world.” Importantly, Sisi emphasized that the problem was not inherent to the Islamic faith, but arose from the stagnation of the prevailing religious doctrines, “that corpus of texts and ideas that we have sanctified over the centuries, to the point that departing from them has become almost impossible.”

President Sisi's speech created a stir inside Egypt and other Arabic-speaking countries. Despite an outpouring of support from some quarters, Islamists were quick to declare him an apostate. The president has since moderated his message in the face of a conservative backlash from Al-Azhar, which provides crucial religious support to his regime. Muslim reformers who took Sisi's initial speech seriously and tried to advance the critique of Al-Azhar quickly found themselves facing the wrath of both the Sunni institution and the state. Some were charged with blasphemy and jailed.

President Sisi's call is limited by the reality that although it is clear about the need for religious reform, there is no evidence of an actual plan for its implementation. Meanwhile, the official religious establishment remains resistant to any serious calls for change, and the restrictive public space in Egypt limits the capacity of civil society to take the initiative.

**SISI'S CALL NONETHELESS HAS CREATED AN OPPORTUNITY FOR THE UNITED STATES AND ITS ALLIES TO WORK WITH EGYPTIAN PARTNERS IN DEVELOPING A NATIONAL STRATEGY TO TACKLE ISLAMISM AND THE CULTURE OF INTOLERANCE THAT PERMITS IT TO SPREAD.**

Sisi's call nonetheless has created an opportunity for the United States and its allies to work with Egyptian partners at both at the governmental and non-governmental level in developing a national strategy to tackle Islamism and the culture of intolerance and grievance that permits it to spread. For this, the United States should develop a multilateral approach that includes Egypt's existing friendships. The Sisi regime has had no better patron in the past three years than the United Arab Emirates, and this close relationship also provides an opportunity for the United States. While the U.S. and UAE have major disagreements on many issues, there is still enough common ground to allow productive cooperation on tackling the ideological threat to Egyptian security and prosperity. The development of an Egypt-wide strategy should focus on two areas: countering and “deconstructing” the ideology of Islamism, and addressing the educational deficit.

# Countering Islamism

Winning the struggle of ideas with Islamism requires defeating the other side's ideas and replacing them with better ones. The strong anti-Islamist sentiment provoked by the Muslim Brotherhood's year in power and President Sisi's call for religious reform present political opportunities to contest the Islamist narrative in Egypt. Of course, the United States should be cautious about involving itself in such an endeavor, as perceptions that America is interfering in religious matters or attempting to define Islam for its adherents will provoke a counterproductive backlash.

Instead, the focus should be on defeating Islamist political claims. The struggle of ideas is not only about countering "narratives," but about changing social reality and how people cope or fail to cope politically with actual "facts on the ground." The appeal of the Islamist project derives in part from its capacity to explain modern Egypt's woes, including the failures of government and national decline, and from Islamism's program or methodology for dealing with this. This program rests on utopian and impractical ideas about political life, and the impossibilities of creating utopia, the mythological golden age of the original "Islamic State," lie at the core of what drives Islamism's anti-pluralistic, destructive, and totalitarian confrontation with modern civilization. Muslim intellectuals such as Taha Hussein and Farag Fouda have questioned the reality of the mythological Golden Age that Islamists aspire to replicate. Such works have done more to undermine popular support for the Islamist project than billions of dollars of American aid. Similar critical studies of Islamic history and of Egyptian history in international context—histories that help to explain Egypt's ongoing quest for modernization, and why some countries succeed at this and others do not—can further

demonstrate that Islamist utopianism is not based in historical reality and that the Islamist project and methodology cannot address modern political problems.

The U.S. can help its Egyptian partners to rethink Islamism and deal more constructively with the nation's modern challenges by addressing the educational crisis. Education has always been part of the U.S. attempt to improve conditions in Egypt, and dealing with the educational deficit must be a top priority now. Past efforts have focused on opening up opportunities for Egyptians to study in the United States. The American ideal of liberal education combined with practical training is attractive to many Egyptians, and many schools in Egypt offer an American style of education, yet they only serve those in the upper class who can afford their high tuition fees.

In conjunction with regional allies like the UAE, the U.S. must adopt a multidimensional approach to remedy the educational deficit in Egypt. Among other things, the United States needs to reform and expand its educational mission by establishing new programs in each Egyptian governorate to provide English-language, computer, and other courses, as well as a library and other research resources. Moreover, while American universities include hundreds of Middle East departments, Egypt (and for that matter, other Arabic-speaking countries) lacks a serious center for American Studies. Establishing such a center, and ensuring that it maintains the highest standards of academic integrity and honesty, is vital to improving intercultural understanding.

The United States must also work with Egyptian partners, including teachers' unions and the sprawling American University of Cairo community, to facilitate ongoing efforts at reforming the national educational curriculum through a

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cross-disciplinary approach that instills basic civic republican principles of equality, civic peace, citizenship, and pluralism. Past reform efforts have failed because they sought to simply remove controversial and intolerant content by haphazardly replacing it with a few passages on tolerance without introducing a broader framework for these concepts. Serious reform of the Egyptian educational system cannot focus on one subject or two and ignore the rest. Values of equality, respect for other opinions, reasoned argument, and civic obligation must be stressed across the curriculum, along with the essential idea that the heterogeneity of human society is a given and that dealing with this reality constructively through a politics based on human interdependence and responsibility—not enforced and artificial ideals of national homogeneity—is essential for civic peace and a nation's progress.

Further to this, the U.S. has an opportunity to partner with Egyptian organizations that are working to revise the country's textbooks to provide a balanced understanding of world history, philosophy, religion, and culture. Many Egyptian graduates today have little knowledge of

important historical events, with the world and its cultures outside of Muslim-majority countries an enigma to them. The period of European colonialism is covered, but Egypt's long history as a Mediterranean society of deep cultural exchanges with Europe and the benefits of this are not taught. For the betterment of the country, students should likewise learn about the contributions Christians, Jews, and women have made to Egyptian society to increase their appreciations for pluralism. Making students aware of these contributions will improve their understanding of their national heritage and is necessary for developing a less-distorted approach to the future.

Moreover, the U.S. should encourage Egypt to integrate Al-Azhar's parallel education system into the state system to standardize the curriculum and eliminate resource disparities between the schools. Nearly 25 percent of non-technical high school students in Egypt and 17 percent of university students study at Al-Azhar-affiliated institutions. These schools, which exclude non-Muslims and use a curriculum that differs from the state's, receive government and private funding, allowing them to offer more individual instruction than understaffed and overcrowded government schools. With their heavy focus on religious subjects at the expense of science, math, language, and world humanities, these schools do little to prepare their graduates for modern life. Over the longer term, the United States could potentially generate support among partners in the Egyptian government and NGOs to establish new public schools that adopt the American educational system. The United States could provide the technical knowledge and training for operating these schools, but the Egyptian government must raise the capital. These schools, ideally one in each governorate, would create opportunities for students across the country to earn a high-quality education and achieve social and economic mobility.

# Building a Constituency for the U.S.-Egyptian Alliance

**IF THE ALLIANCE IS TO BE RENEWED AND TO ENDURE THROUGH THE CURRENT CRISIS, THE UNITED STATES MUST ACTIVELY SEEK TO FOSTER A CONSTITUENCY IN EGYPT.**

Despite four decades of U.S. investment in the alliance with Egypt, including billions of dollars poured into the country, American generosity has not generated popular support or a well-organized constituency for the U.S. alliance in Egypt. While the Sisi regime and others have portrayed the United States as an enemy, no one has publicly defended the relationship with America and its many benefits to Egypt. If the alliance is to be renewed and to endure through the current crisis, the United

States must actively seek to foster a constituency in Egypt.

In doing so, the U.S. should review past engagement practices that failed to penetrate Egyptian society and focus on a whole-of-society approach. While the United States cannot win the hearts and minds of all Egyptians, it must seek to win over some. The State Department should engage not only with its counterparts in government via the chambers of commerce, and with the shrinking number of Western-backed civil society organizations, but also with trade unions, farmers, and professional syndicates. In time, they could become partners for fostering needed internal reforms through education, the rule of law, and commerce. Moreover, special emphasis should be placed on diplomatic outreach beyond Cairo to Egypt's other governorates with the goal of creating supporters who understand the importance of the American-Egyptian alliance and are willing to defend it.

# Contesting Russian and Chinese Influence in Egypt

The Kremlin's new strategic involvements in the Middle East aim to roll back American influence by disrupting U.S. alliances and securing a controlling stake in the region's arms and energy commerce, including in the Eastern Mediterranean. For all of Russia's aims, winning over Egypt is key, and the United States needs to respond and contest Russia's growing influence in the country. It should point out, among other things, that Russia is hardly a model for a nation that seeks to modernize and develop. Egypt's Cold War-era associations with the Soviet Union did not help the nation, but rather, nearly caused it to cede sovereignty to Moscow. Egypt's national pride did not accept this in the past, and neither should it today. The U.S. must challenge Russian propaganda campaigns that depict the country's modern development as a success while concealing the many unsavory details of living in Putin's oppressive and kleptocratic dictatorship. Whatever Egyptians might think of the various factions attempting to overthrow Bashar Al-Assad, Syria's ongoing civil war clearly illustrates that Russia is all too willing to abet and ignore incredible suffering in distant lands to advance its interests.

Similarly, China's growing involvements in the Middle East and Mediterranean have generated a new debate over its geostrategic intentions. While the U.S. monitors Chinese collaboration with the Egyptian military, a more immediate concern should be the political effects of large-scale Chinese capital investments on Egypt's capacity to deal with its internal crisis. Many Egyptians see China's authoritarian system as an appealing model of development and political organization but know little

**THE KREMLIN'S NEW STRATEGIC INVOLVEMENTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AIM TO ROLL BACK AMERICAN INFLUENCE BY DISRUPTING U.S. ALLIANCES AND SECURING A CONTROLLING STAKE IN THE REGION'S ARMS AND ENERGY COMMERCE, INCLUDING IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN.**

about realities inside China itself. Theoretically, Chinese investments in Egypt could be designed to benefit the people directly, but Beijing has shown little interest in promoting better governance or transparency through its international economic ventures. Instead, Beijing's economic outreach has abetted corruption and greater dysfunction in African states (Algeria, Zimbabwe). In addition, there are growing fears in many other countries that unequal deals in which Chinese state-owned enterprises set terms with unrepresentative and corrupt ruling regimes are abetting the rise of a new form of economic imperialism that harms national sovereignty and development. Egyptians already express discomfort with the influx of Chinese products and labor in their country, and they should be alerted to economic arrangements that are extractive and neither fair nor balanced, and to the adverse effects these could have on national development.

# Engaging the Egyptian Military

For the past four decades, the linchpin of the American-Egyptian alliance has been bilateral military cooperation, and U.S. military assistance to Cairo—now estimated to be over \$1.3 billion annually—has enabled Egyptian military hardware purchases since 1980. But the Egyptian military is not entitled to American largesse, and the Trump administration has withheld \$195 million in military aid and an additional \$96 million in other aid. So far, there is some confusion in Egypt over the reason for these cuts, and this needs to be corrected. The administration should make it publicly clear what it expects from the military in terms of cooperation on strategic issues and progress on governance reforms and human rights. At the same time, the new administration has resumed joint military exercises with Egypt, and this is a good policy, as the United States should not neglect its close relationship with the military.

American concerns about the Egyptian military's declining competency and its behavior at home, particularly in its fight with Islamists and its heavy-handedness toward peaceful civil and opposition groups, are legitimate. But the military also remains one of the most well-regarded institutions in Egypt. It is widely seen as the most competent of official institutions that is responsive to the needs of ordinary people, and it acts as an important interlocutor between the state and the public at large.

One of the thorniest issues for U.S. engagement with the Egyptian military, albeit a critical one, is the latter's growing involvement in key state bodies and the national economy. What the U.S. sees as self-damaging institutional overreach, the military perceives as its national duty to reinforce the state's crumbling institutions and prevent the collapse of the country. The U.S. should

respect this nationalist sentiment while demonstrating the inherent dangers of the current approach, both to the country and to the military as an institution. Militaries cannot effectively run national economies, particularly ones that need to sustain a growing population of ninety-four million. Such involvement creates a non-competitive environment in which the military's structural advantages, such as free labor and land, tax-exempt status, and the ability to change laws unilaterally to accord with its own interests, stunt private investment and grossly impede national development. This is making Egypt's national economic crisis worse, and insofar as it deepens, it will continue to damage the prestige of the military as an institution as a whole, with adverse consequences for stability and order.

These sensitive conversations are difficult to broach via traditional diplomatic instruments, as the Egyptian military mistrusts the State Department and Congress. By contrast, Egyptian military officers consider the Pentagon their best ally in Washington, yet the U.S. to date has not effectively utilized the bilateral military channel to press its diplomatic agenda. Egypt's armed forces, we believe, would be far more receptive to hearing about American concerns from Defense Secretary James Mattis, given his deep knowledge of their country and the respect for him in the Egyptian military leadership. The chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and commander of United States Central Command should likewise reinforce the secretary's message to their counterparts in Cairo.

U.S. representatives should stress that while they understand the Egyptian military's desire to serve military personnel and protect them from the impact of inflation, its involvement in construction and commercial projects

## **THE AMERICAN MILITARY MISSION SHOULD FOCUS ON IMPROVING EGYPT'S CAPACITY TO CONDUCT COMPLEX POLITICAL-MILITARY OPERATIONS AT HOME AND ALONG ITS PERIPHERY.**

exposes it to public anger. The military cannot continue to absorb other institutions' functions to compensate for the state's overall institutional weakness, as it, too, is afflicted by Egypt's declining human capital. The Egyptian military's attempts to replace a dysfunctional bureaucracy undermine its ability to perform its main task: securing the nation against the myriad security threats that demand its full attention. American officials can rely on Egypt's historical precedents in making this case, as the military's past involvements in non-military matters provoked a sharp backlash among a previously reverent and trusting population. General Fawzi, who rebuilt the Egyptian armed forces after 1967, hoped that lesson would guide his successors.

Meanwhile, a clear-headed discussion about the strategic rationale for 21<sup>st</sup> Century U.S.-Egyptian military cooperation is also needed. Many Americans have

indicated a desire to see Egypt lead through the creation of an "Arab NATO" force that can serve, among other things, to check Iranian expansionism. Improving the Egyptian military's capacity and readiness to respond to a future crisis may be a prudent long-term planning objective. But realpolitik and balance-of-power calculations will not mesh well with a Middle East made up of poorly formed states that are ruled by regimes whose main goals are not, or may not always be, stability and order. More importantly, a regime facing a legitimacy and governance crisis at home has limited potential to be a force for stability and peace in the wider region.

The most urgent challenges confronting Egypt's security forces right now lie closer to home. The situations in the Sinai and in Libya may yet become debilitating for Egypt, and they cannot be effectively dealt with by the Egyptian military's current capabilities and doctrine. The American military mission should focus on improving Egypt's capacity to conduct complex political-military operations at home and along its periphery. In addition, the United States should reexamine its military education and exchange programs with Egyptian officers. While some military training initiatives target lower-ranking officers, the important and coveted strategic studies programs engage only top commanders. Expanding programs for the lower ranks on counterinsurgency, civilian security, and intelligence practices based on rule-of-law principles should be a top priority.

# Creating Economic Opportunities

In engaging with Egypt on economic issues, the U.S. must be clear-eyed about the fact that the country is not in need of charity. The country's economic woes have not been caused by the absence of money but instead by the misallocation of funds, increasing state encroachment over economic sectors, and poor institutions that neither help the growth of a civil economy nor permit the state to improve its governing capacity. A thorough review of American economic aid is required, and any future aid should be targeted on fostering enterprise not controlled by the military and conditioned on the ruling regime's adoption of serious economic reforms.

While President Sisi's government continues to drag its feet on reforming economic institutions and laws, other segments of Egyptian society have a greater interest and demonstrated willingness to drive forward meaningful economic reforms that serve the people. The United States should expand its economic mission and engage with a wider spectrum of businesses. Small business associations, including new organizations that have formed since the revolution—some of which involve the diaspora, such as Rise Egypt—focus on encouraging

entrepreneurship. Those who want to found new businesses face immense bureaucratic hurdles, and eliminating these should be a key goal of U.S. economic diplomacy. Special attention should also be devoted to expanding the banking system, which has an extremely low penetration rate.<sup>2</sup> The lack of finance is a major hurdle for small businesses. Property registration should be a priority to help people acquire loans.

The overall U.S. economic agenda in Egypt needs to be coordinated with Saudi Arabia and the Emirates. Both countries have grown increasingly frustrated with Cairo in recent years because the large capital infusions they have provided to shore up the Sisi government have not produced the sustainable growth or the Egyptian strategic orientation that the Gulf wants to see. The U.S. and its key Arab Gulf partners have a common interest in Egyptian stability, and there is a new opportunity to advance fresh thinking. Greater multilateral coordination is required to ensure that our aid policies do not work at cross-purposes and that they maximize the prospects that capital investments in Egypt will encourage reform and produce viable economic and political outcomes.

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<sup>2</sup> World Bank numbers indicate that fewer than 15 percent of Egyptians have any form of bank account, and fewer than 3 percent receive their salaries through banks. While 26 percent of the population have saved money and 34 percent borrowed money, only 4 percent have saved and 6 percent borrowed money from a financial institution.

# Fostering Social Reconciliation

Deepening sectarian and political divides in Egyptian society and a widespread culture of mistrust do not bode well for Egypt's chances of avoiding state collapse. The very term "reconciliation" has come to be associated in Egypt with reconciling with the Muslim Brotherhood, and it has thus become a taboo subject. Overcoming Egypt's social and political fractures will be crucial to helping the country avert the same fate as other countries in the region. Egypt's religious and cultural heterogeneity can be a source of national strength if its leadership and civic institutions can make it one.

First, the United States should seek out and support existing initiatives to bring Egyptians from different religious, economic, and regional backgrounds together. Egypt has always prided itself on being a nation-state, unlike its Arabic-speaking neighbors. If that inclusive sense of national identity and of belonging and duty to country is to outlive the current era of factions and polarization, it must be reinvigorated. There are a number of existing religious and other networks working on reconciliation at a neighborhood level and among families. The U.S. government and NGOs should actively build on these efforts as part of a larger country-wide strategy to compete with growing factionalism and foster a new national compact. Over the long term, one goal should be to foster a national dialogue, especially among the country's youth, about national identity and what it means to be Egyptian. Moreover, while Egypt's pride sometimes prevents it from learning from supposedly inferior foreign societies, the United States should highlight how countries like Morocco have succeeded in reconciling communities and advancing social pluralism after a sustained period of violent turmoil.

**OVERCOMING EGYPT'S SOCIAL AND POLITICAL FRACTURES WILL BE CRUCIAL TO HELPING THE COUNTRY AVERT THE SAME FATE AS OTHER COUNTRIES IN THE REGION.**

Second, the United States must extract a commitment from Egypt to protect its Coptic citizens. This should not be framed as a religious freedom question, but rather as a central issue for the viability of Egypt as a nation and for its future. The continued loss of highly educated and talented Copts, who have fled the country in droves in recent decades, is a massive loss for the national economy and society. Coptic Americans are among the most successful immigrant communities in the United States, an indication of the loss Egypt has suffered due to their emigration from the country. Among other things, the United States should also urge that the regime's policy of excluding Copts from educational missions abroad, including military training, be revised. Through its economic and development programs in Egypt, the United States should develop a local approach that publicly rewards governorates based on metrics related to good governance and their efforts to secure equal citizenship.

As a practical matter, the United States should focus more resources on police and internal security reform. The Egyptian police and domestic security forces are ill-equipped to deal with the rising instances of sectarian mob violence, and often their interventions have inflamed rather than defused social tensions. The U.S. should offer assistance in establishing, training, and equipping special units tasked with confronting mob violence.

# Outreach to Parliament

**MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT ARE SPEARHEADING THE DEVELOPMENT OF A NEW MODEL FOR POLITICS THAT DISCOURAGES PATRONAGE AND PROMOTES BETTER GOVERNANCE.**

Since coming to power, the Sisi regime has taken every step possible to ensure that Parliament remains under its control and weak. The recent parliamentary elections were not open to the Muslim Brotherhood, and the state directly interfered in the list-forming process. Even so, Parliament is a vitally important institution, and many Parliament members who have won individual seats do enjoy popular bases of support in their districts. Washington should cultivate relationships with these parliamentarians directly as well as through staff training and exchange initiatives. There should be no illusion as to who controls power in the country. The United States should nonetheless develop these relationships and build on their examples with a

long-term mindset, all while it presses the case with the military that representative civilian leadership is important to preserving the military's reputation and, above all, for dealing with the national political crisis.

While many members of Parliament hail from the same family networks that have occupied parliamentary seats for more than a century, the 2011 revolution did upset the establishment and has brought many Egyptians who previously had no interest in public service into the political fray. A number of Parliament members already provide a ray of hope for the emergence of a serious and responsible politics in the country through their performance in parliamentary debates and the expectations they created in their districts for parliamentary behavior. Even in Cairo's poorest districts, members of Parliament are spearheading the development of a new model for politics that discourages patronage and rent-seeking and promotes better governance and private-public partnerships as a means of improving conditions in their districts. These members are also attempting to attract Western companies and corporate social responsibility divisions to their districts. The United States embassy could help to direct and encourage U.S. business involvement in these districts to bolster good governance and demonstrate how it benefits people.

# The Egyptian Diaspora

## **EGYPTIAN-AMERICANS CAN BE POWERFUL ALLIES AND EXAMPLES FOR U.S. ENGAGEMENT WITH EGYPT TO DEVELOP VALUES OF TOLERANCE AND PLURALISM.**

The Egyptian diaspora numbers in the millions, including both temporary residents in the Gulf States and permanent immigrants to Western countries. Egyptian immigration to the United States intensified after the Hart-Celler Act in 1965, and today there are well over half a million Coptic and tens of thousands of Muslim Egyptian-Americans, including the second and third generations. As a whole, Egyptian-Americans enjoy higher levels of education and wealth than the U.S. average, and they are an integral part of American communities as entrepreneurs, university professors, scientists and medical doctors, lawyers, athletes, and actors.

The United States needs to engage the Egyptian diaspora in the United States and in other Western countries as part of its efforts to help Egypt. Egyptian-Americans have unique knowledge of their former country, and many of them remain deeply connected to it through relatives. Working with the diaspora, the United States can develop numerous educational, economic, and developmental programs to implement in Egypt. The model of private-public partnership should be utilized in creating educational initiatives and entrepreneurship opportunities in Egypt. The Egyptian diaspora in the West has developed civic values, including hard work and personal social responsibility, and avenues can and should be opened for these experiences and values to be transferred back to Egypt. Egyptian-Americans can be powerful allies and examples for how U.S. engagement with Egypt can develop values of tolerance and pluralism. Just as the United States invites thousands of Egyptians to come to America on exchange programs, it should conduct reverse programs through which Egyptian-Americans bring their experiences back home.

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