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AMERICA'S AID AND EGYPT'S INDIFFERENCE
Dina Khayat

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, no country stood by the U.S. more staunchly in its fight against al-Qaeda than Egypt. Having been through its own war against terror in the 1990s, Egypt was able to provide valuable information and logistical support. Now the war is back on Egyptian territory, in the Sinai and other Egyptian provinces. A direct link between the Muslim Brotherhood and its jihadist allies was established by the Brotherhood itself in July, shortly after President Morsi's ouster, when Mohamed Beltagui, a senior Muslim Brother, said on television that the violence in the Sinai and elsewhere would cease the moment Mr. Morsi was reinstated as president.

Yet rather than condemn the terrorist attacks that have since increased and spread across the country, the Obama Administration decided last week to send a different message. The State Department released a statement on Oct. 9 saying that it would be "recalibrating" its assistance provided to Egypt. It also said it
would continue working with the interim Egyptian government to help it move toward democracy and inclusiveness. The statement came just two days after three deadly terrorist attacks in Cairo and Sinai: a drive-by shooting near the Suez Canal that killed six soldiers, a car bomb that killed three police officers and wounded dozens near a Red Sea resort area, and a rocket-propelled grenade attack that damaged a government satellite transmitter in southern Cairo.

Which forms of aid would be cut, and whether these were permanent cuts or just suspensions, were left unspecified in the State Department's statement. As was the total reduction in the amount of aid, which at $1.3 billion yearly pales, in any event, next to the $12 billion quietly advanced by Egypt's Arab neighbors in the past three months.

This was a baffling message to Egypt's interim government and the vast majority of Egyptians, millions of whom who came out to protest Mr. Morsi's rule on June 30. What they heard was that the Obama Administration stands firmly behind the Muslim Brotherhood, even if it means damaging the two countries' strategic relationship.

To call the curtailing of U.S. aid a prod to the Egyptian government toward democracy is disingenuous. There was neither outrage nor threats from Washington last November, when Mr. Morsi issued a constitutional declaration that effectively put him and his diktats above the law. Or during the ensuing demonstrations in December, when dozens died just behind Mr. Morsi's palace walls at the hands of Muslim Brotherhood supporters.

When Gen. Sisi appeared on television on July 3, the day Mr. Morsi was ousted, he was flanked by the Sheikh al Azhar, the Coptic Pope, women, youth, politicians left and right, and representatives of Salafist groups. Only the Muslim Brotherhood, which had turned down an invitation, was missing. That picture contrasts starkly with the one presented by Mr. Morsi, who, during his brief tenure, surrounded himself solely with members of his organization and appointed them to executive positions. Copts, secularists and even Salafists were conspicuously absent. Calls by the Obama administration for inclusiveness should have begun then; today they ring hollow.

When millions of Egyptians took to the streets on June 30, they took the only path possible to changing their government. There was no prospect of impeaching Mr. Morsi. The army intervened solely to prevent the chaos that would surely have occurred had Egyptians been left to fight one another. Now, three months into the new interim government and with a constitution being written by 50 representatives of society—again, all but the Muslim Brotherhood—there is no turning back. The draft constitution is almost complete, and dates and plans for parliamentary and presidential elections are set.

The challenge remains the economy, but it is hard to rebuild when so many resources are diverted to fighting weekly violence, as Muslim Brotherhood demonstrators, often armed, take to the streets. The Brotherhood has chosen to exclude itself from the governing process, preferring instead to bully their way into negotiating the best possible deal for themselves, which includes the reinstatement of Mr. Morsi as president. Brotherhood supporters who are not implicated in the present violence will eventually be included in a new government—but only when the organization changes its mind and decides to operate within the context of a state.

Egyptians are yearning to get it right this time. They are determined to build a democratic state and avoid the mistakes of the past. What will eventually emerge is a country much more sensitive to human and religious rights. It will not be a repetition of the Mubarak years. We would have liked America with us at this time, and its support would have sent a strong message to the Egyptian people.

Instead, upon hearing the news of the U.S. aid cuts, there was a collective shrug in Egypt, and a general sense of relief at being rid of any shackles that had tied the government's hands in fighting terrorism. Such is the popular anger against the Brotherhood and their daily annoyances that there are even calls for martial law to be applied—or at least for demonstrations by any faction to be outlawed by force for a period.
The Egypt-U.S. relationship is decades-old, built on mutual strategic interests. It has withstood many challenges.

Even in the midst of the June 30 demonstrations, and at the height of anger against U.S. policies, banners in the streets proclaimed Egyptians' love for Americans. To throw all that to the wind for unfathomable benefits and spurious justifications in the name of democracy and inclusiveness is a pity.

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THERE ARE TWO EGYPTS AND THEY HATE EACH OTHER

Ashraf Khalil

Time World, Oct. 08, 2013

Egypt’s latest spasm of violence over the weekend—which led to at least 57 deaths and 400 injured—confirmed the troubled nation’s new reality: The emergence of two distinct, opposed Egypts that hate each other. One Egypt is in the ascendant—that of a nationalist, pro-military populace that has nothing but contempt for the country’s Islamists, represented chiefly by the Muslim Brotherhood. The Egypt of the Brotherhood is reeling and embittered: it has seen its democratically-elected President ousted by the military this July and its supporters gunned down in the streets. But it’s showing no sign of backing down.

The enmity existed well before senior Muslim Brotherhood official Mohamed Morsi won the presidency in June 2012. But the chasm between these two sides widened dramatically over the course of Morsi’s chaotic and divisive year in power, which culminated in Morsi’s July 3 ousting, cheered on by millions of citizens.

Both sides covet the deeply symbolic real estate that is Tahrir Square—epicenter of the original February 2011 revolution that ousted long-ruling President Hosni Mubarak and the launchpad for Egypt’s faltering revolutionary moment. Tahrir’s fortunes, and who controls it, have shifted multiple times since the initial uprising. But an unprecedented spectacle of division took place on Oct. 6: one side celebrated inside of Tahrir Square, while the other side desperately fought—and died—to reach it and confront its rivals.

Inside of Tahrir Square, supporters of the military rallied in the thousands with flags, fireworks, patriotic songs and vuvuzelas. Oct. 6 is a national holiday—a militaristic one that celebrates the launching of a successful surprise attack on Israel in the 1973 war. So the current national mood, characterized by nationalist and anti-Islamist fervor, dovetailed neatly with the holiday. Posters of Defense Minister Abdel Fatah Al-Sisi (notably not civilian Interim President Adly Mansour) dominated the day—many of them directly comparing Al-Sisi with Col. Gamal Abdel Nasser, the beloved and iconic force behind the 1952 coup that ended the monarchy and ushered in almost 60 years of military rule.

Outside of Tahrir Square, the losers of the country’s political shakeup continued their Sisyphean campaign for their voices to be heard and heeded. “Our target is to go back to Tahrir to bring the revolution back to the square,” said Diaa El-Sawy, spokesman of the Youth Against the Coup group, ahead of their protest. But the Brotherhood—which marched in the thousands from multiple directions on Sunday—never managed to get near Tahrir Square. The entire downtown area was heavily secured with riot police, Army APCs, barbed wire and ID checkpoints at the entrances to Tahrir. The subway station underneath Tahrir had already been closed for months to prevent unauthorized infiltration.

Three separate Brotherhood marches were violently repelled. In Ramses Square, about a 20 minute walk from Tahrir, the two sides battled into the night with the Brotherhood marchers confronting a combined force of army soldiers, riot police and local youth gangs hurling rocks, Molotovs and fireworks and apparently working in coordination with the security forces. The final death toll from the day reached 57—the vast majority of the dead from the Brotherhood side.
In the aftermath, there is no sign of either side backing away from the chasm that threatens to swallow post-revolutionary Egypt. The Brotherhood—which has managed to retain a high level of coordination and planning despite most of its senior decision-makers being arrested—has announced plans to launch a fresh push to occupy Tahrir Square this coming Friday, Oct. 11. The Square, according to a statement released late Sunday night, “belongs to all Egyptians and no one will prevent us from demonstrating in it, no matter the sacrifices.”

Many trying to resist the current polarization or find some sort of middle ground are punished by both sides. One of the clearest examples of this dynamic came in mid-September when senior Brotherhood official Salah Soltan published a unilateral apology to the nation on behalf of the Brotherhood. Soltan’s US-citizen son Mohamed was shot in the Aug. 14 siege on a Brotherhood sit-in site and later arrested after two weeks on the run. Nevertheless, Salah Soltan wrote a month later that the Brotherhood should “apologize to the nation for our political mistakes…we are not against Egypt. We are part of Egypt.”

Among the mistakes he mentioned was a failure to better include the non-Islamist and revolutionary youth into their decision-making processes—spawning divisions and a national paranoia over the Islamist agenda that eventually turned much of the country against the Brotherhood.

But rather than becoming some sort of rallying point for the start of a push for reconciliation, Salah Soltan immediately became a man without a country. The Brotherhood distanced itself from his comments, saying Soltan did not speak for the organization. And, within days Soltan was arrested at Cairo airport by the very government with whom he was trying to reconcile.

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Ehab Ramzy, a Coptic attorney in Egypt, provided the context. He stated in a televised interview that his office building was set on fire along with 50 churches and 1,000 Christian businesses. They were destroyed in Upper Egypt, Ramzy explained, on the day that Morsi was forced out. This was the Ikhwan strategy, he said: to punish the church for not supporting Morsi.

Since the ouster of Mohamed Morsi, the problem has only intensified: anti-Christian violence now manifests itself in Egypt with increasing regularity. Since ouster of Hosni Mubarak in February 2011, what happened to the Christians in Delga and Kerdasa, has been happening throughout Egypt. The Christians of the village of Marinab in the Aswan Governorate, 700 miles south of Cairo, were also placed under siege by jihadists in October 2011. Their food supplies and contacts with the outside world were cut off until they agreed to have their church demolished because they violated the building code by displaying a cross, which the jihadists said was offensive.

The death of Iskander Toss and the ongoing attacks against Christians in Egypt demonstrates a troubling reality in the Middle East: On September 19, Mohamed Hassanein Heikal, adviser to many leaders in the Middle East, stated in televised interview that most countries in the region owned chemical weapons, the poor nation's weapon of choice.

Heikal also stated that in the short run, President Obama's incoherent foreign policies in the Middle East will threaten the stability of countries such as Lebanon, especially its Christian minority; and in the long run, the Persian Gulf countries. He added that what happened in Delga is not just an indicator of what the Ikhwan is capable of, but of what is coming.

The issue came to a head with the current U.S. administration's response to the sarin gas attack that killed several hundred people on the outskirts of Damascus on Aug. 21, 2013. By not attacking Assad, a puppet of Shiite Iran, the U.S. has not only strengthened America's adversaries, Russia and China, but also emboldened the mullahs in Iran and Sunni extremists in Syria and Egypt, who now apparently think that the radicals' war of attrition with the U.S. -- which has been going on for decades -- is finally bearing fruit.

While the British and American people have made it clear that they do not support a strike on the Assad regime in Syria, Christians in Syria and in the rest of the Middle East have also been unanimous in their opposition to such a strike: they fear it would unleash the forces of jihadists and cause the total destruction of Christianity in the region.

There is an irony here: by failing to act against the Bashar Al-Assad after stating it would, the U.S. policy has not only put religious and ethnic minorities in the region at even greater risk; it has also put moderate, reform-minded Muslims in even greater danger. By speaking about the use of chemical weapons as a red line, and Assad's days being numbered, the U.S. gave leaders in the Middle East an expectation that it would act in the face of atrocity.

By not acting, the U.S. has unintentionally given the signal that America is retreating from the region. The implication of this retreat is that violence against Christians and other non-Muslims can proceed with impunity. U.S. President Barack Obama's recent speech, given on the eve of the twelfth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, did nothing to disabuse global jihadists of this notion. As American credibility in the region has deteriorated, Islamist violence against Christians in the Middle East has escalated.

The problem is particularly evident in Syria, where Christians have been driven from their homes in Maaloula by Sunni jihadists associated with Al Qaeda. Earlier this year, the Christian quarter of Homs was completely destroyed and emptied of all of its inhabitants -- more than 100,000 people were evicted from their homes. Churches dating back to the second, third and fourth centuries were destroyed.

If the violence against Christians in the Middle East continues without a meaningful response from the U.S. administration and leaders in the Middle East, it will indicate to jihadist cells currently residing in Europe and North America that their hour has finally arrived.
Although the Ikhwan has now been outlawed and driven from the halls of power in Egypt, as an international organization, it is still a force to be reckoned with: even if it is blocked in Egypt, its stated plan is to create problems for Western democracies.

If the American people and the current Administration turn their backs on the Middle East region, the destruction of both Christianity and freedom there is a virtual certainty.

*Michael Armanious is US based analyst and a video producer. He was born in Egypt.*

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**ISLAMIST OR NATIONALIST: WHO IS EGYPT’S MYSTERIOUS NEW PHARAOH?**  
*Raymond Stock*  
*Foreign Policy Review Institute, October 2013*

Egypt's new de facto pharaoh, General Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi, is a man of mystery. Is he an Islamist, or a nationalist? Is he a person of high principle, or a lowly opportunist? And in a land which has known five thousand years of mainly centralized, one-man rule, with limited experience of democracy, when have we seen his type before, and where will he lead the troubled, ancient nation now?

These questions are crucial to knowing how the U.S. should react to al-Sisi's removal of Egypt's first "freely elected" president, Mohamed Morsi on July 3 in answer to overwhelmingly massive street protests demanding that he do so, and to the ongoing bloody crackdown on Morsi's group, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), that began on August 14. Citing the ongoing, actually two-way violence in Egypt, President Barack Obama's administration has now suspended much of our annual $1.6 billion aid to the country, save for money needed to maintain security operations along the Israeli border in Sinai and to directly support the 1979 Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty.

Earlier, the administration had stopped the scheduled delivery of four out of twenty F-16s to Egypt, cancelled the bi-annual “Bright Star” joint training exercises that had been set for September, and launched a review of the bi-lateral relationship. There has now been a delay in paying the final $585 million tranche of this year's aid package, pending that review, according to an October 9 report by the global strategic analysis firm, Stratfor.

However, the administration has been careful not to classify Morsi’s removal a “coup,” which under U.S. law would require an immediate cut-off of all of our aid to Egypt. That assistance is vital to the U.S.’ favored access to the Suez Canal, maintenance of the 1979 Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty and crucial bi-lateral security cooperation against international terrorism. Nonetheless, the latest move puts the entire alliance at great risk, and plays into popular demands that Egypt switch to a more independent stance, or even adopt Russia as chief military supplier instead of the U.S., an idea made more enticing by Washington's apparent weakness in surrendering its interests in Syria to Moscow, and its seeming haste to make concessions to Cairo's post-MB regional antagonist in Tehran over the latter's nuclear program.

Yet along with a number of key Congressional leaders and most of the mainstream media, Obama has been far more critical of al-Sisi and his use of force against a group that our government wrongly supported while in power under the illusion that it was "moderate," than they have been of the violence and mayhem of the MB.

Meanwhile, the MB’s “peaceful demonstrators” have been busy burning scores of Christian churches and schools along with hundreds of Christian businesses while attacking other citizens, museums and public buildings, the police and the army, and waging an open war against the state in Sinai and around the country. As the total number of deaths in the past nearly two months of confrontations climbs toward the thousands, the MB clearly hopes to use its own "martyrs" (as both sides call their fallen) to generate sympathy for their unaltered goal of restoring Morsi to power. So far, however, it's not working. Despite a
surge in turnout at demonstrations it organized to coincide with the State’s grand celebrations of the 40th anniversary of the 1973 war on October 6, fewer and fewer people have been joining its protests, which have been tiny compared to the unprecedentedly huge demonstrations against the Islamists.

But what besides the obvious hard realities pushed al-Sisi to act when he did? What does he believe, and what does he want? A quiet man known for saying little and keeping his own counsel, in his year of study at the U.S. Army War College in 2006, al-Sisi produced a research paper or brief thesis on his views of Islam and the state. That document was first exposed by Robert Springborg, an expert on Egypt’s military, in a July 28 article in Foreign Affairs.

Springborg predicted that al-Sisi, who has sworn to swiftly restore democracy after a nine-month transition, intends to keep real power for himself. Furthermore, Springborg warned of his “Islamist agenda,” saying that he would not likely restore the “secular authoritarianism” practiced by Mubarak, but would install “a hybrid regime that would combine Islamism with militarism.” Intriguingly, though it holds no state secrets, the document was classified, and was only released under a Freedom of Information Act request by Judicial Watch on August 8.

In it, al-Sisi declares, “There is hope for democracy in the Middle East over the long term; however, it may not be a model that follows a Western Template” (sic). By that, al-Sisi makes plain, he means that Middle Eastern democracy must be based not on secularism, but on Islam.

However, in an August 16 profile of the previously obscure general published by The Daily Beast by Mike Giglio and Christopher Dickey, those who know al-Sisi (few of whom will talk much about him) say that he grew up in a family that was both religiously conservative—not radical—but extremely nationalistic. And indeed it is that sense of nationalism which seems to have had the upper hand in motivating the actions he’s taken thus far.

The chaos, economic calamity, and political upheaval that have rocked Egyptian society since a much more limited popular uprising against longtime president Hosni Mubarak resulted in Mubarak’s ouster by the military on February 11, 2011 (at Obama's thinly-veiled urging the night before)—and which led in part to al-Sisi’s move against Morsi—have all been seen before.

In 1952, the widespread corruption, resort to political assassination, and the burning of the most elegant parts of downtown Cairo (both of the latter done, it is thought, mainly by the MB) led a group of so-called Free Officers to overthrow Egypt's last king, the feckless Farouk—with covert aid from the U.S.[1]—in a coup, and to declare a republic the next year. Though the move was clandestine and confined to the army, it gained massive popularity and created a mythic hero (who was really an epic failure), Colonel Gamal Abdel-Nasser, the movement's charismatic leader, himself initially a mystery—and to whom al-Sisi is often compared today.

Or perhaps he will be more like Anwar al-Sadat, another Free Officer, who in 1970 succeeded Nasser—the father of one of Egypt's greatest military defeats, in the war of 1967. Sadat partially made up for Nasser's many economic and political blunders by launching a successful surprise attack against Israeli forces in Sinai in 1973 (though it culminated in yet another defeat), partially repealing Nasser's reckless state socialism, trading an alliance with the Soviet Union for one with the United States, and daring to make peace with Israel—though it cost him his life when Islamists shot him down on the anniversary of that "victory" in 1981.

Al-Sisi has rapidly returned to the direct and confident military cooperation with the Jewish State that Morsi reviles, in order to prevent al-Qa`ida-affiliated groups (believed to have cooperated with the Muslim Brotherhood) from staging deadly incidents along the sensitive border. However, much less reassuringly, al-Sisi has begun to flirt with both Russia and China, and is known to have neither much affection for the U.S., or patience with Obama's pro-MB policy. But going back even further, to 1805, al-Sisi could turn out to be like Mohamed Ali Pasha—Farouk’s first direct royal forebear, an Albanian-Kurdish mercenary who used popular discontent against Egypt's oppressive Ottoman governor to replace him in office.
And yet, brace something close to monotheism, a fanatic who threw out five aged tutor Ay, who had married his widow. But when he did take it, he promptly y without a fight. The nation's sacred prestige fell for the first time in centuries, and genty. This he saw not alt in the assassination of President Anwar al-Sadat on ck the military had no interest. Al-Sisi was similarly piqued that Morsi allowed some in his nd he she he nd th Israel

Mohamed Ali would briefly revive Egypt's long-lost military glory, and more relevantly, would do so by breaking with his own patrons in Istanbul--a possible cautionary tale for Washington now. And yet, plumbing much more deeply the currents of Egyptian history, al-Sisi may really most resemble Horemheb, the last king of the fabled 18th Dynasty.

Horemheb served as head of the army under Akhenaten (ruled 1353-1336 B.C.), the "heretic king" who became the first ruler of any country to embrace something close to monotheism, a fanatic who threw out the traditional pantheon of ancient Egyptian gods in favor of worship of the Aten, the disc of the sun. Akhenaten's navel-gazing neglect of the nation's economy and security while he persecuted the believers of other deities and—like Morsi—inserted his own followers everywhere in the bureaucracy, led to massive unrest and perhaps prompted his most trusted lieutenant, Horemheb, to overthrow him—though his exact fate is unknown.

Born a commoner, Horemheb did not seize the throne until its last royal claimant, Tutankhamun, had died—as well as the boy-king's aged tutor Ay, who had married his widow. But when he did take it, he promptly stamped out the hated Aten cult and brought back that of the suppressed Amun-Ra, leading to a century of initially strong and stable rule by people mainly bearing the name of his successor and military protégé, a man called Ramesses.

As a soldier, Horemheb was no doubt angry that Akhenaten allowed Egypt's hard-won empire in the Near East to largely slip away without a fight. The nation's sacred prestige fell for the first time in centuries, and had to be reestablished so that ma`at—meaning everything from truth to order to righteousness, bound up with Egypt’s well-being—could reign once again. And that he quickly set out to do.

Here is a degree of parallel with al-Sisi, who reportedly had been enraged by Morsi’s actions that led not only to a loss of Egypt's international prestige but also damaged her national sovereignty. This he saw not only in Morsi’s apparent covert cooperation with militants who had killed and kidnapped many Egyptian troops in Sinai, but also in his release of numerous terrorists convicted of murdering their fellow Egyptians plus members of the army, police and foreign tourists. Two symbolic acts by Morsi also not only raised eyebrows, but a sense of alarm about his intentions.

The first was Morsi’s decision not only to invite Tarek al-Zomor, a member of the terrorist organization, al-Gama’a al-Islamiya (the Islamic Group), who took part in the assassination of President Anwar al-Sadat on the eighth anniversary of his 1973 brief but psychologically crucial triumph over Israel in Sinai, but to place him in the front row during the commemoration of the day on October 6 last year. The second was Morsi’s June 2013 appointment of Adel Mohamed al-Khayat, a leader of al-Gama’a al-Islamiya, which waged a civil war against the Mubarak regime in the 1990s, killing scores of foreign tourists as well as hundreds of security officials, politicians and Egyptian civilians, to be governor of Luxor—where its most violent attack killed 58 foreigners and four Egyptian police and tourist guides (who died trying to defend the others) in November 1997.

Moreover, in late June this year, Morsi threatened to declare jihad on the embattled Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria in which the military had no interest. Al-Sisi was similarly piqued that Morsi allowed some in his cabinet to make threats to attack a controversial dam in Ethiopia that it is feared will lessen Egypt’s accustomed share of the Nile’s vital waters. And he was reportedly appalled that Morsi had evidently even told Sudan’s Islamist president, Omar Bashir, whom the U.N. has accused of genocide in Darfur, that he would consider giving that country land which lies in dispute between them on their common border.

To Egyptians since antiquity, to yield any part of the nation’s territory is an unforgivable heresy. “But I loved Egypt more.” Perhaps worst of all, the MB calls for the establishment of a new caliphate, and lately demanded that its capital be in Jerusalem, which would not only mean a war to the death with Israel for which Egypt is not prepared, but—if successful—would obliterate the nation’s independence. Misr al-Mahrusa—“God-Guarded Egypt,” an ancient epithet for the country—would be no more.
Though the general wrote nostalgically in his U.S. War College paper of the caliphate that united the Islamic world for seventy years after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632, he stated as well that only extremists were calling for its immediate return now. And if it does come back, he would undoubtedly want it to be based in Cairo.

Adding to all this was Morsi’s rapid and relentless attempt to turn Egypt into a one-party Islamist dictatorship, and how it had destroyed both tourism and foreign investment while turning formerly rather small, if persistent protests by scattered secularist groups in an historically pious society into the largest demonstrations the world had ever seen.

On October 8, The Washington Post ran an AP story that quoted the first of a three part interview of al-Sisi by the respected Egyptian daily, AlMasryAlYoum, in which the general-turned-king breaker recounts for the first time what led to his actions on July 3:

El-Sissi said the turmoil of the past three months could have been avoided if Morsi had resigned in the face of the protests that drew out millions against him, starting on June 30. Days after the protests began, el-Sissi said, he met with senior Brotherhood figures, including the group’s strongman Khairat el-Shater.

He said el-Shater warned him that the Brotherhood, which made up the backbone of Morsi’s administration, would not be able to control retaliation by Islamic groups in Sinai and other areas if Morsi were removed.

“El-Shater spoke for 45 minutes, vowing terrorist attacks, violence, killings by the Islamic groups,” el-Sissi told the paper. “El-Shater pointed with his finger as if he is shooting a gun.”

He said el-Shater’s speech “showed arrogance and tyranny,” adding: “I exploded and said ... ‘What do you want? You either want to rule us or kill us?’”

Addressing Islamists now in the wake of Morsi’s fall, el-Sissi said, “Watch out while dealing with Egyptians. You have dealt with Egyptians as if you are right and they are wrong ... (as if) you are the believer and they are the infidels. This is arrogance through faith.”

In the first part of the interview published Monday, el-Sissi said he told Morsi in February, “your project has ended and the amount of antipathy in Egyptians’ souls has exceeded any other regime.” He added that the military’s move against Morsi was driven by fears of civil war.

Given all this, could it be any wonder that the highly-patriotic, if also pious general with whom Morsi had replaced the aged Mubarak holdover Mohamed Hussein Tantawi because of his seemingly solid Islamist credentials had—after long hesitation—eventually felt that he had to act for the sake of his country? Ironically, al-Sisi was born and raised in the old Islamic quarter of Cairo called Gamaliya, the native district of Egypt and the Arab world’s first (and so far only) Nobel laureate in literature, Naguib Mahfouz (1911-2006).

Mahfouz, despite a very strict Islamic upbringing, was from his youth a pharaonist—someone who placed Egypt’s unique national heritage above anything else, including Islam, in defining her identity—as well as his own. One of Mahfouz’s most prescient works is his peculiar 1983 novel-in-dialogue, Before the Throne. In it he hauls about three score of the nation’s rulers—from Menes in the First Dynasty to al-Sadat—before the Osiris Court, the divine tribunal which in ancient Egyptian belief judged the souls of the dead. Before the Throne features many cycles of tyranny, rebellion, chaos and restoration, which presage the events of the past three years in uncanny ways.

In the afterlife trial of Horemheb, there is an exchange between the general who turned on Akhenaten and the addled religious zealot himself that could well have taken place between al-Sisi and Morsi, though without the intense mutual affection, no doubt:
“I loved none of my followers more than you, Horemheb,” Akhenaten reproached him. “Nor was I as generous with anyone as much as I was with you. My reward was that you betrayed me…”

“I deny nothing you have said,” replied Horemheb. “I loved you more than any man I’d ever known—but I loved Egypt more.”

Time will tell if al-Sisi, currently calling the shots behind an all-secularist civilian government of technocrats of his choosing, is truly more nationalist than Islamist—whether he will restore ma`at or shari`a (Islamic law)—and if he will guide Egypt back into stability (or fails to do so) as a democrat in uniform, or as a martinet behind a “democratic” curtain. A key clue will be if he pushes for a new Constitution that omits the central problem with the one rammed through by Morsi, which not only made shari`a the main source of legislation (as it was before)—but which also empowered the clerics of al-Azhar, the highest authority in Sunni Islam, to interpret all laws to ensure compliance with it.

A draft of the new Constitution, released on August 21, would reinstate the Mubarak-era ban on religious parties, throw out the most offensive aspects of Morsi's Islamist Constitution from the point of view of religious tolerance, and ban the formation of religious parties—a very good sign. The fifty-member commission (headed by former Arab League chief and presidential candidate, Amr Moussa), that is now reworking the draft, in coordination with the panel of experts that produced it, may entirely rewrite the Morsi-era charter.

The only Islamist group to join the body and to play any part in the transition, the Salafi al-Nour Party, has protested against the removal of the shari`a provision—but the secularists, including the commission's spokesman, head of the Arab Writers' Union Mohamed Salmawy, seem to control the process so far. However, the August 21 draft specifically outlawed the removal of the president by popular protest, reserving that right for parliament (the lower house of which has been dissolved due to violations of elections laws since June 2012)—to the outrage of the activists who fought to bring down both Mubarak and Morsi.

A recent decree replaces the oath that members of the armed forces formerly took to the nation's president, Constitution and laws with a declaration of loyalty solely to the country's military leadership. As the experience not only of Egypt both before and under the Brotherhood, but also Pakistan under its own generals, Gaza under Hamas and even Turkey under the more stealthily Islamist Recep Tayyip Erdogan has shown, only a separation of mosque and state with civilian control of the military can deliver anything like real democracy.

In Egypt, arguably the most religion-obsessed country on earth all through her world’s-longest history (and one of the most authoritarian as well), we should not expect to see either genuine democracy or even its prerequisite, a strong degree of secularism, with or without the new Constitution—or al-Sisi himself--anytime soon. Yet at least Egypt will not be ruled by the MB—which threatens not only the world's oldest nation, but us all--thanks to this enigmatic character from the heart of Old Cairo:General Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi.

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ON TOPIC

The Real Force Behind Egypt's 'Revolution Of The State': Reuters, Oct. 10, 2013 —In Hosni Mubarak's final days in office in 2011, the world's gaze focused on Cairo, where hundreds of thousands of protesters demanded the resignation of one of the Arab world's longest serving autocrats.

Interview with Defence Minister Abdel-Fattah Al-Sisi (part 1): Al-Masry Al-Youm, Oct. 9, 2013
Interview with Defense Minister Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi (part 2): *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, Oct. 10, 2013—During a four-hour interview, Sisi did not refrain from answering any question but chose to hold back some details because, according to him, it was not yet the time to elaborate on them. While Sisi believes that the decision to oust former President Mohamed Morsy prevented a civil war in Egypt, he speaks of Morsy respectfully. He says that the Muslim Brotherhood were not equipped enough to lead a country as big as Egypt.

Egypt’s Economic Competitiveness Plunges To New Lows: Hend El-Behary, *Egypt Independent*, Oct. 12, 2013—Political instability has caused Egypt’s economic competitiveness to tumble from 107th to 118th out of 148 countries, according to Global Competitiveness Index (GCI), an annual report issued by the World Economic Forum.

Sinai: Can the Truth Be Told?: Drew Brammer, *Egypt Independent*, Oct. 11, 2013—A young, niqab-clad journalist carefully tiptoed through the black, burned out shell of a house, her feet cracking broken tiles and stone as she stepped. Sunlight glared into the charred room through massive openings blown out of the bullet-ridden walls. This destruction is a result of one of many recent military offenses in Sinai.