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DEMOCRACY ON THE NILE?

AS SISI (THE NEXT NASSER?) PREPARES FOR PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION— JOURNALISTS & ACTIVISTS ARRESTED, ISLAMIST VIOLENCE THREATENS CAIRO

Contents:

A Lopsided Election Victory: [Ariel Ben Solomon, *Jerusalem Post*, Jan. 16, 2014, 2013](#)— The Egyptian constitutional referendum brings back memories of past Arab elections where the ruling regime gained close to 99 percent of the vote.
Can Egypt Handle Ansar Bayt al Maqdis?: [David Barnett, *National Interest*, Jan. 26, 2014](#)— Shortly after 6:30am in Egypt on Friday, a massive car bomb detonated outside the Cairo Security Directorate.
Egypt's War on Dissent: [Max Boot, *Commentary*, Jan. 27, 2014](#)— The revolution which overthrew Hosni Mubarak is now three years old, and Egypt's future seems less promising than ever.
Egypt's Long Struggle For Democracy: [Ehab Lotayef, *Montreal Gazette*, Jan. 24, 2014](#)— Jan. 25 marks the third anniversary of the Egyptian people taking to the streets to occupy Tahrir Square, in the heart of Cairo, to demand bread, freedom and social justice.
Sisi and the Strong Man: [Max Strasser, *Foreign Policy*, Jan. 28, 2014](#)— As I walked down Talaat Harb St., a main drag off Cairo's Tahrir Square, a group of men and women stood on a balcony above a giant banner of former President Gamal Abdel Nasser's face, flashing victory signs at the people on the street below.

On Topic Links

Assessing Egypt and the Muslim Brotherhood (Video): [Barry Rubin, *Youtube*, Aug. 29, 2013](#)
Egypt to Put 20 Al-Jazeera Journalists on Trial: [Colin Freeman, *Telegraph*, Jan. 29, 2014](#)
What to Watch in Sisi's Run for President of Egypt: [Nervana Mahmoud, *Al Monitor*, Feb. 3, 2014](#)
Shadowy Jihadist Group Poses Grave Threat to Egypt: [Egypt Independent, Feb. 3, 2014](#)
Egypt and the Threat of Islamic Terror: [Col. \(res.\) Dr. Shaul Shay, *Besa Center*, Jan. 1, 2014](#)

A LOPSIDED ELECTION VICTORY

Ariel Ben Solomon

***Jerusalem Post*, Jan. 16, 2014**

The Egyptian constitutional referendum brings back memories of past Arab elections where the ruling regime gained close to 99 percent of the vote. Even though the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups boycotted the referendum, such lopsided results probably resulted from an unfair vote. This shows there is almost no question that Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Sisi will continue to lead, probably as president. In addition, US-Egypt relations are probably headed back to what they were during the reign of ousted president Hosni Mubarak. Reports that the US was unfreezing aid indicate it will accept the regime's legitimacy – though, as in the past, calls for more democracy and human rights will continue.

"If the Brotherhood and some Salafis did not boycott the election they could have got only around 20-25% of the vote," said Zvi Mazel, who served as Israel's sixth ambassador to Egypt and today is a fellow at the

Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs and a contributor to *The Jerusalem Post*. Even though the referendum results do not look good, Mazel continued, “we should also remember that the Salafi political party Al-Nour and its mother movement, Al-Dawa Al-Salafia, voted yes. But above all it was a vote of confidence to Sisi, the people asking him to present his candidacy to the presidency and work to stabilize Egypt after three chaotic years.” Sisi has said he is waiting for the people to call for him to run, and that is how the referendum is likely to be interpreted, Mazel asserted. “We probably are going to see Sisi as president,” he said.

As to what a Sisi presidency would mean for Israel, the former ambassador responded: “In time, the new regime may seek rapprochement toward Israel, but quietly at the beginning.” Egyptian society and the country’s Muslim establishment remain ardent opponents of Israel, so Sisi has to take that into consideration, he continued. After the regime is able to stabilize the domestic situation, then, perhaps, Egypt will try to promote economic cooperation with the Jewish state.

Prof. Efraim Karsh, a Middle East and Mediterranean studies scholar at London’s King’s College who recently joined the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies (BESA) at Bar-Ilan University, told the *Post* that the Egyptian army will try to hold onto power, just like the regime of Gamal Abdel Nasser did starting in 1952. A strong nationalist leader of the Free Officers Movement, Nasser overthrew King Farouk and moved to abolish the constitutional monarchy, leading to a series of dictators who came from the army as well. Sisi is a devout Muslim, and the undercurrent of Islam in the region is still swaying the political order, said Karsh, predicting that “sooner or later it will come up again – another blow-up.” The Egyptian regime will do its best to keep the Islamists at bay, he added. “If [ousted president Mohamed] Morsi was more intelligent, like Turkish Prime Minister [Recep Tayyip] Erdogan, he would still be in power,” Karsh said. He said he believed there would be no real democracy soon in Egypt or the larger Arab world, but that various forms of dictatorships will predominate.

[Contents](#)

CAN EGYPT HANDLE ANSAR BAYT AL MAQDIS?

David Barnett

[National Interest](#), Jan. 26, 2014

Shortly after 6:30am in Egypt on Friday, a massive car bomb detonated outside the Cairo Security Directorate. The attack killed at least four people and wounded more than 70, Egypt’s Health Ministry said. In the hours that followed at least three additional explosions were reported in the Cairo area with reports of two more fatalities and scores wounded. In the immediate aftermath of the first attack, some Egypt observers, myself included, said the car bombing was likely the work of the Sinai-based jihadist group Ansar Bayt al Maqdis (ABM). In a statement released to jihadist forums Friday night, ABM claimed responsibility for all of the attacks. While some may question the veracity of the claim, a couple data points support the idea that ABM was in fact responsible for attacks that appeared to leave Egyptian authorities chasing ghosts.

For one, ABM has repeatedly stated its intent to target police and military headquarters, which it has done on a number of occasions. This point was reiterated by the group in its claim of responsibility as it claimed that “we face difficulties while attacking without inflicting harm in the ranks of the Muslims.” There was also the question of timing. Just a few hours before the car bomb rocked Cairo, ABM released an audio message warning security personnel to repent and save themselves. “If you can escape with your weapon then do that. Otherwise, you know that soldiers are dealt with as one bloc. We will target you as we target your leaders,” an ABM official identified as Abu Osama al Masri said. The group’s forewarning echoed the group’s prelude to a suicide car bombing on December 24 outside the Daqahliya security directorate in Mansoura. About a day before that attack, which killed over a dozen and wounded more than 130, ABM

issued a statement in which it warned that those in the security forces who do not leave their posts would have no one to blame but themselves if they were attacked.

The Egyptian government blamed its bitter political rivals, the Muslim Brotherhood, for the Mansoura attack, despite ABM's claim of responsibility. Notably, one poll found that roughly a third of Egyptians believed the Muslim Brotherhood was responsible for the Mansoura bombing, while only 6 percent said ABM was the culprit. With significant support for their actions against the Muslim Brotherhood, the Egyptian government may not even care if ABM takes credit. With crowds calling for the Muslim Brotherhood's "execution" after Friday's attack, to some respect it makes sense politically for the government to blame supporters of fallen Muslim Brotherhood president Mohammed Morsi, who continue to partake in efforts to delegitimize the new regime. This is why Cairo, which believes it is in an existential battle, declared the Brotherhood a terrorist organization shortly after the Mansoura bombing.

The military rulers in Cairo have since alleged that there are ties between the Muslim Brotherhood and ABM. However, the evidence presented thus far is tenuous, at best. The command and control links that some Egyptian officials have suggested are unproven. And while ABM certainly has former members of the Muslim Brotherhood within its ranks, these are former members who specifically left because the Brotherhood was not, in their view, fully committed to offensive jihad. Cairo's current approach, in other words, may not be properly addressing the serious jihadist threat to Egypt that was once clearly limited to the Sinai Peninsula, but has now reached across the Suez Canal. Recent admissions by Egyptian officials indicate that Sinai jihadists have been avoiding security sweeps and reaching the Nile Delta and Cairo, among other locations. This, along with Friday's attacks, raises serious questions as to whether enough resources are being deployed to deal with Egypt's growing jihadist problem, particularly as these forces display an ability to adapt to ongoing Egyptian military operations.

[Contents](#)

EGYPT'S WAR ON DISSENT

Max Boot

[Commentary](#), Jan. 27, 2014

The revolution which overthrew Hosni Mubarak is now three years old, and Egypt's future seems less promising than ever. General Abdul-Fattah el-Sisi, the military commander, is preparing to run for president—and if he runs he will certainly win, becoming, in essence, a new Mubarak. The army has not only driven the Muslim Brotherhood from power, it has also declared war on all critics of the regime, whether Islamist or liberal. As the *Guardian* notes: Mohamed ElBaradei, the Nobel peace prize winner once billed as a potential president, is in exile. So too is Wael Ghonim, the Google executive whose Facebook campaign against police thuggery brought many to Tahrir Square. Ahmed Maher, the activist whose 6 April movement helped drive anti-Mubarak dissent, is in jail along with the group's co-founders, Ahmed Douma and Mohamed Adel. In the cell next door is Alaa Abd El Fattah, a renowned activist first jailed under Mubarak. Abd El Fattah returned from exile during the 2011 revolution to help build a new Egypt. Instead he was detained, first under the military dictatorship that followed Mubarak, then under the presidency of Mohamed Morsi, and now under the de facto leadership of General Abdel Fatah al-Sisi.

What happens when it's impossible to express dissent peacefully? That becomes an open invitation for radicals to take matters into their own hands, and that is precisely what is happening in Egypt today. The latest news on this front is ominous, namely that militants in the Sinai shot down an Egyptian military helicopter with a surface-to-air missile, killing all five soldiers aboard. Such missiles, in the wrong hands, can be a threat not just to helicopters but to civilian aircraft, including those flying in and out of Israel. Meanwhile, on Friday, four bombs went off in Cairo, killing six people.

These are worrisome signs of what some of us have feared all along: By declaring war on dissent, Sisi risks driving his country into a full-blown civil war. At the very least the terrorist threat is increasing, and it is unlikely to stay confined to Egypt—not when there are such close links among jihadists operating in the Sinai and the Gaza Strip. The situation got bad enough under the Muslim Brotherhood government, but there is little sign of improvement under the emerging military dictatorship whose ascension many Israelis understandably cheered. Sisi’s heavy-handed crackdown—undertaken by a corrupt and ineffective regime—unfortunately has the potential to spark a full-blown insurgency that will make current troubles seem benign by comparison.

[Contents](#)

EGYPT’S LONG STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY

Ehab Lotayef

[Montreal Gazette](#), Jan. 24, 2014

Jan. 25 marks the third anniversary of the Egyptian people taking to the streets to occupy Tahrir Square, in the heart of Cairo, to demand bread, freedom and social justice. For more than two weeks, the momentum kept growing until finally, on Feb. 11, President Hosni Mubarak stepped down after nearly 30 years in power. And yet here we are three years later, and Egypt finds itself back to square one — or even worse. Did the revolution fail? It was only seven months ago that large numbers of Egyptians took to the streets once again, frustrated with the lack of progress under Mohammed Morsi’s first year of rule. Their main demand was a referendum on the president — or hastened presidential elections. Morsi rejected both.

One has to keep in mind that the lack of progress during the one year Morsi spent in power could not be all attributed to Morsi or his Muslim Brotherhood. The disastrous situation the country was in after the Mubarak years didn’t help, and neither did the lack of cooperation from the “deep state” (the remnants of the old regime that controlled the police, army, civil service and judiciary). Last June 30, the coup started, with an ultimatum issued to the president by the minister of defence, General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. On July 3, the coup was completed, the president deposed and detained, the parliament dissolved, the constitution suspended, and the country once again under military rule.

Many Egyptian politicians and public personalities sided with the coup at first. El-Sisi appointed a puppet president and instructed him to rewrite the constitution. An unelected and haphazardly assembled group of 50 was chosen to help him with this task. The result was a constitution that gives full immunity and independence to the army, one that does not give the president the right to appoint the minister of defence. It leaves in place the rights of an army that owns businesses controlling 30 per cent of the Egyptian economy. It allows for trials of civilians in front of military courts, à la Guantanamo.

And even if we disregard the contents of the constitution, accepting the coup remains, pure and simple, the main problem. Accepting the coup — regardless of whether one supported it or not, and regardless of what one thinks of the Egyptian political situation more generally — has made it harder to imagine real democracy ever coming to Egypt. If the president and other elected officials know that they can be deposed of anytime by the military, and by the economic interests that support the army, how could anyone have confidence in Egyptian democracy? Why would the people even want to turn out to vote?

Before this month's vote on the constitution, the Muslim Brotherhood, the largest and most organized political movement in Egypt, was outlawed. Its leadership and many of its members were detained, as were many other liberal and progressive politicians. This followed the massacres of civilians last summer, after the coup. So as voting on the constitution approached, there was only one voice heard in Egypt: "Say Yes." The farce reached its climax with the arrests of anyone who tried to hang a No banner. Of course, the voting result was 98 per cent in favour of Yes, but the voter turnout reported by independent monitors was as low as 11 per cent. (The government claims 38 per cent.)

And so here we are today, three years after Jan. 25, 2011, that first day of occupation of Tahrir Square. Egypt is ruled by the military. Some may say there is no way out this time. But I don't. The struggle for democracy can be a very long path. Remember what happened in Chile in 1973; despite that, democracy did return to Chile. And democracy will return to Egypt. There will be bread, freedom and social justice in Egypt, sooner or later, as long as people keep working for it.

[Contents](#)

SISI AND THE STRONG MAN

Max Strasser

[Foreign Policy](#), Jan. 28, 2014

As I walked down Talaat Harb St., a main drag off Cairo's Tahrir Square, a group of men and women stood on a balcony above a giant banner of former President Gamal Abdel Nasser's face, flashing victory signs at the people on the street below. As they waved flags and cheered, a set of aged speakers blared a nationalist song from the 1960s. The headquarters of Egypt's Nasserist Party was bursting with jubilation. It was July 3, 2013, and the streets of downtown Cairo were heavy with anticipation. Two days earlier, Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, the head of Egypt's armed forces, had issued an ultimatum: Unless President Mohamed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood reached an agreement with their opponents, the army would lay out a "roadmap" for the country's political future -- which everyone knew meant Morsi's ouster at gunpoint. Nasser was suddenly everywhere. A man sat on a curb selling Nasser headshots, while throngs marched through the streets, holding posters of Nasser and Sisi side by side, and chanting "Sisi is my president!" For decades, Egypt's Nasserists had been a marginal opposition force. That day, it seemed their time had come. By nightfall, the army had placed Morsi under arrest and an assortment of national leaders from the military, the clergy, and various political parties unveiled a new interim government.

Six months later, a successful presidential bid by Sisi now seems inevitable. A new constitution blessed by the military passed in a referendum this month with a whopping 98 percent of the vote -- a level of support that Sisi's supporters described as a popular mandate for his candidacy. Of course, it helped that the new government brooked no opposition -- security forces arrested political activists who passed out fliers calling for a "no" vote. And on Jan. 27, Sisi's presidential candidacy took another step forward when the Supreme Council of Armed Forces, the country's highest military body, announced it was backing Sisi's candidacy. Supporters of Nasser, meanwhile, have continued to cheer on the new strongman in Cairo -- perhaps hoping he will follow in their hero's footsteps not only by crushing the Islamists, but also by restoring Egypt's international prestige. Nasser's daughter, Hoda, a political scientist and historian, published a fawning op-ed in one of Egypt's leading newspapers imploring Sisi to run for president, saying that the army chief had "achieved in less than two months what politicians cannot achieve in decades."

Since the July 3 coup, Sisi has repeatedly been likened -- by both allies and enemies -- to Egypt's most influential president. At first glance, the similarities are rich: Both Sisi and Nasser were military leaders who came to power on the back of a coup, and who began by crushing the Muslim Brotherhood before seeking to quash dissent from the left. At a more fundamental level, however, the comparison is spurious. Nasser was a

transformative leader, while Sisi appears to be a conservative who holds more in common with Hosni Mubarak. Sisi has claimed that he dreams about former President Anwar Sadat, but the public image that he has crafted for himself also harkens back to Nasser. Three weeks after ousting Morsi, he used the anniversary of the 1952 coup that brought Nasser to power to call for a pro-military, anti-Muslim Brotherhood protest. Last September, he visited with Nasser's family at the former president's tomb. Pro-Sisi media draws the comparison between the army chief and Nasser frequently -- something that would be unlikely if it wasn't an image the general was actively seeking to cultivate.

It's not hard to see why many Egyptians would yearn for a return to the Nasser era. The years between 1956, when Israel, France, and Britain embarrassed themselves in the Suez Crisis, to 1967 when Egypt embarrassed itself in the Six Days War, were in many ways Egypt's last golden age. Cairo's cultural and political influence was at its zenith: From Casablanca to Baghdad, millions of Arabs tuned in to *Sawt al-Arab* ("Voice of the Arabs"), a Cairo-based radio station that featured hours-long concerts from the legendary Egyptian diva Oum Kalthoum and anti-imperialist, pan-Arabist propaganda put out by the Egyptian government. The Nasser years also brought unprecedented class mobility to Egyptians, with a rollback of the feudalism that existed under the monarchy and universities and middle-class jobs suddenly open to the poor. At the same time, Egypt under Nasser's leadership was the undisputed political center of the Arab world. The Egyptian president spearheaded anti-imperialist movements throughout the region: His opposition to the Baghdad Pact, an anti-Soviet regional defense agreement dreamed up in Washington, helped sink the agreement, and he soon became the *bête noire* of America's allies in the region. In 1958, his popularity was so high that Syria voluntarily merged with Egypt, in a move that pan-Arabists hoped was a prelude to the unification of the entire Arab world. Politicians from Lebanon to Baghdad courted Nasser's support -- a kind of regional influence no Egyptian leader has come close to exercising since. Saïd Aburish, an Arab journalist and Nasser biographer, wrote that the colonel was "the most charismatic leader since the Prophet Muhammad." It is little wonder, thus, that Sisi embraces the comparison...

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ON TOPIC

[Assessing Egypt and the Muslim Brotherhood \(Video\)](#): Barry Rubin, *Youtube*, Aug. 29, 2013

[Egypt to Put 20 Al-Jazeera Journalists on Trial](#): Colin Freeman, *Telegraph*, Jan. 29, 2014 — Egypt's crackdown on press freedoms gathered pace on Wednesday as the military-led government said it would put 20 journalists from the *al-Jazeera* television network on trial.

[What to Watch in Sisi's Run for President of Egypt](#): Nervana Mahmoud, *Al Monitor*, Feb. 3, 2014 — It's official. Egyptian Minister of Defense Abdel Fattah al-Sisi is now Field Marshal Sisi.

[Shadowy Jihadist Group Poses Grave Threat to Egypt](#): *Egypt Independent*, Feb. 3, 2014 — A jihadist group behind a wave of spectacular attacks poses a serious threat to Egypt's stability as political turmoil triggered by the Islamist president's ouster rocks the country, analysts say. In less than a fortnight, Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis (Partisans of Jerusalem) has claimed responsibility for several high-profile attacks.

[Egypt and the Threat of Islamic Terror](#): Col. (res.) Dr. Shaul Shay, *Besa Center*, Jan. 1, 2014 — Egypt's new rulers are faced with a terror problem emanating from the Sinai Peninsula, with the emergence of radical jihad groups.