

February 2014
Newsletter - Issue No. 44

Egypt:

Egypt New Decorative Cabinet

El-Sisi: What Happens If He Fails?

Is There any Real Alternative to El-Sisi

On Egypt Foreign Policy: Between Africa and Asia

On National Security

Lebanon:

Lebanon's New Cabinet: The Delusion of Normality

Lebanon's New Government: Through a Syrian Lens

All Eyes on the Presidency

Syria

The Southern Offensive and Fragmentation

Egypt New Decorative Cabinet



Mohamed A. Fouad

Mission Impossible

*"Out of the box thinking" has been the buzzword in every cabinet reshuffle. There are always talks about how Egypt needs some fresh ideas on how to resolve age old problems. This time is no different. While the new cabinet has not been sworn in as of this very moment, talks of fresh ideas and creative solutions are already starting to surface. Even old faces are already talking about how they have solutions to resolve persisting problems. Egypt needs no magic wand and there isn't a miracle drug that would make all the worries go away. As said before, **Egypt needs a detailed long term plan for development; no amount of fresh ideas or quick fixes will ever alone suffice. The problem in the past three years has been all about lack of long term vision and lousy execution.** The current cabinet is destined to be short lived by design. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that it will be able to bring about much needed structural changes. **So while Mehleb can continue talking about the economy, it is all likely to be lip service"***



[Read More](#)



Bassem Sabry

Biblawi's resignation leaves more questions for Egypt

*"Perhaps the most important thing to look for, other than Sisi's anticipated potential exit and nomination, will be this: **The composition of the Cabinet will say a lot about where the political power centers in Egypt see the country, how it sees its Mubarak past, the January revolution and the future it wants the country to go toward"***



[Read More](#)



Nervana Mahmoud

Egypt's New Buffer Government

"Mehlib's government; a buffer government between the past and the future can allow Sisi to position himself at the center of the political dynamics without owing to its mistakes and decisions. The army's men can be rough, but Sisi likes to fashion his future career slowly, like a carpet weaver; he will not declare his plan until he has made the final touches, dots all the i's and crosses the t's. It remains to be seen whether Mehleb will help him in this task or if Mubrak's man will create a greater mess for the Marshal"

[Read More](#)

El-Sisi: What Happens If He Fails?



The Big Pharaoh

What Can Happen If "President El-Sisi" Failed....Or Succeeded?

"If El-Sisi failed to save Egypt's economy and improve the lives of millions who have been suffering during the past three years, the masses could react in two ways. First, they could do what they did best during Mubarak's 30 years era: do nothing. Second, the masses could start taking to the streets against the same person whom they glorify today. Judging from the past three years, it is hard to believe that Egyptians, especially the young generation, will settle down again. The genie is out of the bottle"

[Read More](#)



Alfred Raouf

Sisi Not Egypt's Civilian Messiah

"Everyone knows that the next president will face a considerable amount of serious problems: a deteriorating economy, energy crises, internal and external debts, and worst of all, a population exhausted from three years of revolution with hardly any hope and looking for a savior. Some expect him to fail, some hope he will succeed and some will work to overthrow him. It is all speculation, but one fact stands clear: No one in Egypt, not even the military establishment, can take on the responsibility alone and solve all the aforementioned problems. That is why my answer was that it matters not who"

[Read More](#)



Mohamed A. Fouad

El-Sisi's Reality Check

"Terrorism: eliminating terrorism is an important ingredient of economic recovery; the ongoing terrorist attacks are dealing a devastating blow to both tourism and foreign direct investment, which are central to the struggling economy. In his capacity as defence minister, Al-Sisi has called for nationwide rallies on 26 July of last year to mandate the army and the police to confront terrorism. Six months later, terrorist attacks have been escalating with bombings carried out against police, military and civilian targets. And while major military operations have been launched in the Sinai Peninsula, the lawlessness in that region remains alarming with no near end in sight." [...]

"Energy Crisis: constant blackouts and fuel shortages in the summer of 2013 have quickly soured the public mood towards President Mohamed Morsi. While, these issues have been partly alleviated by generous fuel assistance from Gulf countries, Egypt remains very much under energy pressures. In a recent analysis of the energy situation, Amr Hussein concludes that Egypt is treading towards another dark summer. Justin Dargin, a Middle East energy expert at the University of Oxford sees that: "The situation is one of duress, of survival"

[Read More](#)



Sendmonkey

El-Sisi Presidency Will Not Work

"The problems Egypt faces in the next few years are insurmountable, and the widely held belief among many in the Egyptian population that the Gulf will continue to bail us out and will open the money floodgates once Sisi becomes president seems like a delusional pipe dream, once one does the math. The new government is already expected to fail, given that they are facing bad economic conditions, alongside huge corruption and no political will to reform how the government functions. With foreign reserves dwindling, we no longer have any safety nets, and the waste we have in government due to our exceptional corruption is simply unsustainable. The Sisi believers don't care about any of this, talking about him in messianic fervor, with expectations so high that they dwarf those of the most enthusiastic Obama fanatic circa 2008. Once Sisi becomes president, their prayer says, he will make the government run right, and will deliver us from all of our problems" [...] "It will work for maybe a year or two before it all falls apart because of economic and political realities that cannot be cheated or bargained with. Once that happens, the population will turn on Sisi, and the state, once again, will have to sacrifice

his neck to save its own. For better or worse, the moment he announces his candidacy, he will seal his fate"

[Read More](#)



Mina Fayek

Four Reasons for Throwing Down a Gauntlet to El Sisi

"With increasing workers' strikes, gas shortages and daily power cuts (in winter, when the demands of electricity are a fraction of what they are in the hot summer months) **in addition to a dwindling economy and tourism industry, Egypt's next president is already up against a huge challenge.** Presidential hopefuls, including Sisi, should be aware that using traditional tactics to solve Egypt's problems is not going to work in his or anyone else's favour. This indeed at the least will put pressure on the military strongman to translate his "no going back" promise into an effective electoral programme, or else he's at risk of losing the support he's secured so far and could potentially face another uprising"

[Read More](#)



Is There any Real Alternative to Sisi



Mai Shams El-Din

Hamdeen Sabbahi: A Civilian Alternative or Not?

"For those critical of the military's entrenchment since Morsi's ouster, Sabbahi does not present a credible "civilian" alternative, given his Nasserist views on the role of the military in politics and his endorsement of the privileges granted to it in the constitution passed last month. That's why activist and former member of Mohamed ElBaradei's campaign Yasser al-Attar believes that people should not "twist the lemon twice." [...] "Sabbahi dreams about the days of Gamal Abdel Nasser, the Muslim Brotherhood dreams about the era of Hassan al-Banna,

Shafiq dreams about the days of Hosni Mubarak," he says. "All of those dream about the past and only few dream about the future"

[Read More](#)



Nervana Mahmoud

Islamist Abul-Fotouh Sits Out Egypt's Election

"In a way, Abul-Fotouh is the Islamic version of Mohamed ElBaradei. He has a great ability to analyze the political situation, define the problems and even suggest solutions. However, he is limited in his ability to negotiate a compromise deal with both sides in order to defuse polarization, and translate solutions into reality. When things turn bad, he, like ElBaradei before him, plays the moral card and withdraws from the political arena. Politics is not just moralism; it is about achieving the right balance between idealism and realism, a skill that Abul-Fotouh, like many other politicians, is unable to master. **Regardless of the current oppressive atmosphere in Egypt, former presidential candidate Abul-Fotouh has made the right decision not to run for president, as he cannot afford another heavy political defeat"**

[Read More](#)

On Egypt Foreign Policy: Between Africa and Asia



Sayed Shalaby

On Egyptian-Russian Rapprochement

"On the future of Egyptian-Russian relations in its new era: what attracts attention is the Russian president's saying that Russia will enact its agreement with Egypt after the election of a new president and parliament, and the formation of a stable new government. The implication of this statement is that Russia implicitly connects its future relations with Egypt's success in building a consistent and stable political system, which is the same for most foreign powers, and what they expect"

[Read More](#)





Ziad Akl

Egyptian Interests in Libya

"The real dilemma is not a matter of political will or ideological position, it is actually a matter of communication. Since the ouster of Mohamed Morsi, Egypt has been ruled by a network of state institutions, mainly security institutions, which deal with the institutionalized aspects of the Libyan state. But the problem is how unreliable the institutional state in Libya is. State institutions in Libya are neither stable nor representative of actual power centers in the country" [...] ***"The situation in Libya is undoubtedly bleak, but if the Egyptian state cannot ensure that tangible steps are being taken to safeguard Egypt's citizens and interests in Libya, then it should officially inform more than a million Egyptians of its inability to protect them in Libya's politically contentious and possibly violent state"***

[Read More](#)



Nader Bakkar

Egypt's Presidential Elections: The Russian Factor

"The common denominator between the two sides seems to be hostility towards the Muslim Brotherhood. All Sisi truly needs from Russia's support is solid ground to stand on, before returning to normal relations with the United States and its allies as expected—and with a new set of conditions and constraints. Meanwhile, Russia welcomes this strategic opportunity to compensate for its forty-year absence in the region, ever since former president Anwar Sadat decided to put an end to the work of Soviet experts in Cairo. It welcomes the opportunity to strengthen its position in the Middle East, especially with such a pivotal country as Egypt"

[Read More](#)



Sandmonkey

Egypt Caught between Russia and Saudi Arabia

"The actions of Russia and Saudi Arabia are springing from an awareness of a new reality: The United States is no longer the world's policeman, and is focusing on becoming a major oil and gas producer whose production is expected to surpass both Russia and Saudi Arabia. The United States is leaving the world to settle its affairs based on the work of the respective regional powers. **Given what they perceive is a growing vacuum, Saudi Arabia — and the rest of the**

Gulf — are investing in the Egyptian army as their most reliable option to counter Iran. Russia, for its part, is determined to create buffer zones around its borders and solidify its position as the regional power that Europe has to contend with. Unfortunately for Egypt, no such plans or ambitions exist; it's just happy to be in the news"

[Read More](#)

On National Security



Mai El-Sadany

Legislating National Security

"Mansour's four decrees reflect a nation-wide obsession with the "war on terrorism," represent a consolidation of the powers determining national security and defense policy within the Armed Forces, entrench national security policy into a range of ministerial portfolios, and distance civilian oversight of the military institution. While the President maintains some superficial authority in declaring war and influencing defense policy, the move further solidifies the power granted to the military institution by Egypt's newest Constitution. The issuing of these four decrees at this vital time begs asking whether Field Marshal Abdel Fattah El-Sisi will remain Minister of Defense in light of the position's newly-strengthened powers, or whether a new military strongman is set to rise in the upcoming months. Regardless, Egypt's military institutions in their varying manifestations have just been empowered to an even greater degree"

[Read More](#)

Lebanon's New Cabinet: The Delusion of Normality



Moulaahazat

Eleven Months Later: Who Won?

"Although it might seem at first that this is an all-embracing cabinet where centrists, M8, and M14 have equal shares of 8 seats, it's not actually an 8-8-8 cabinet. Technically, M8 didn't give up the blocking third, since Jumblat is now more or less considered to be part of the M8 sphere. Also technically, M14 are controlling the majority in the government since the president hasn't quite been a Hezbollah fan for the past 6 months and most importantly because Tammam Salam – just as a reminder- is Future Movement's Beirut Member of the parliament more than he is a centrist" [...] "Also Hezbollah shouldn't care a lot since the two PSP ministers and Abdel Motleb Hannawi are likely to be closer to M8, which means that the 8-8-8 government formula eventually turned out to be a 9-8-7 one – or to be more realistic, a 13-11 one (If you count Hannawi and the PSP ministers as M8 ministers)

[Read More](#)



Marina Chamma

A Warm Welcome to Lebanon's New Cabinet

"Although some are satisfied just by having a cabinet and with it some illusion of normalcy, not many are happy with its composition. And in true Lebanese fashion, "what difference does it make anyway," some will say: if it's not the same faces on the cabinet table, then it is the same faces behind the scenes that brought them, and if there has been some alternation in portfolios (based on political affiliation and sect), it all remains part of the same game of sectarian and power politics that has brought so much misery to the majority of the Lebanese throughout the years, and will continue to do so in the years to come..."

[Read More](#)



Elias Muhanna

Lebanon's New Government (Feb 15, 2014)

*After nearly eleven months (329 days to be exact), Lebanon has a new government. Here are some quick observations: 1. **There are***

twenty-three men in the cabinet and one woman. (Update: Alice Shabtini is a judge who previously headed the Military Appeals Tribunal, and was reportedly President Michel Sleiman's preferred candidate to head the Judicial Supreme Council. As the head of the Military Affairs Tribunal, she played a role in knocking down the sentence of Fayez Karam to just two years, despite being convicted of collaborating with Israel. Fun fact...) 2. **The two main blocs (March 14 and March 8) are each represented by eight ministers, while the Prime Minister, the President, and Walid Jumblatt control another eight ministers between them, in the so-called "centrist" bloc.** 3. **The one-third share for each bloc is designed to prevent passage of any significant legislation by denying quorum to the cabinet.** 4. In addition to the one-third share, it appears that **each bloc also has a mole in the centrist bloc, whose sole function is to help bring down the government if one side decides to resign.** (A cabinet falls when more than one third of its ministers resign). March 14's mole is Ramzi Jreij; March 8th's mole is Abd al-Muttalib Hennawi. In other words, **this probably isn't an 8-8-8 cabinet but a 9-9-6 cabinet.** Why both blocs have agreed to keep up appearances is not yet clear"

[Read More](#)



Mustapha Hamoui

A Team of Rivals

"To understand how important that achievement is, take a step back and try to give Lebanon a bird eye's view: **This is a country that has only two neighbors: One is an enemy and the other is in open civil war, a war that brought us a million refugees, killed our tourism, blocked our export routes to arab countries and exacerbated the violence between our national factions. This is a country where nothing works: lights don't turn on, sewers don't drain, cars blow up and water is facing a catastrophic shortage. Our country is the very definition of a sinking ship.** Commentators are wondering whether Lebanon is still a viable country, analysts are speculating about new borders and rating agencies are wondering about our solvency. Everyone was asking: Can Lebanon still form a government or will it forever languish in a headless limbo? Today we got our answer." [.....] **"The important realization here is that our political parties did not form this government because they're greedy. They formed it because they really are panicking. Even thieves don't want their country to fall apart. They'd have nothing left to loot.** It is tempting to judge things through the lenses of politics, cult of personality and ideology. **But in the end, the regular man**

and woman on the street will always prefer a government over no government. At least now they'll have someone to blame"

[Read More](#)



Jean Aziz

Avoiding the 'Disaster Scenario' in Lebanon

If we want to know the seriousness of the government crisis and if we are to predict where Lebanon will be in a few weeks, months or even years, and also if we want to predict the prospects for regime change in the next phase, then we have to consider how many days Tammam Salam's government — which was formed on Feb. 15 — may last. According to the political and constitutional practice, there are three possibilities for how long the government may last: 1. The government's rule will be 30 days, until it resigns on March 17. This possibility is a problem. 2. The government lasts for 3 months and 10 days, until it resigns on May 25. This possibility means that there are solutions and breakthroughs. 3. The government lasts beyond May 25. This possibility would represent a major crisis and may even turn into a disaster. Why? The answer lies in politics and the constitution" [...] "Thus, predicting what will happen in Lebanon depends on how many days the Lebanese government will last"

[Read More](#)

Lebanon's New Government: Through a Syrian Lens



Elias Muhanna

Lebanon's War in Syria

"Whether the overdue arrival of an ostensibly functional government has any effect on the violence spilling across the border remains to be seen. Nasrallah announced a few days ago that his party would not stop fighting against jihadists in Syria—a statement that was answered by two suicide bombings in a Shiite neighborhood of Beirut. But other observers are more optimistic about the outlook for the new Cabinet. "Since the Syrian crisis began, in 2011, Lebanon's Sunnis and Shiites have been unable to speak to each other," Alain Aoun, a member of the Lebanese Parliament, told me. "This government was the first sign, really, of Lebanon's ability to distance itself from the Syrian war."

[Read More](#)



Raphaël Lefèvre

What Does the Lebanese Cabinet Mean for Syria?

*"Insofar as the new cabinet reflects a Saudi-Iranian understanding, it seems more like a short- to medium-term agreement between both powers to continue confronting each other in Syria while leaving Lebanon quiet for now. Both hold major stakes in Lebanon, and neither wants to bet it all at the moment. Furthermore, a full-scale political breakdown in Lebanon would only serve to complicate the Syrian conflict, which is difficult enough as it is. All in all, we are seeing clear signs that Syria is now progressively replacing Lebanon as the region's geopolitical chessboard. **This means more, not less, Saudi and Iranian involvement in Syria—and it means that Lebanese politics will increasingly be viewed through a Syrian lens**"*

[Read More](#)



All Eyes on the Presidency



Moulahazat

Lebanon: The Time for Moderation

*"The constitution stipulates that a 2/3 majority is necessary to elect a president in the first round, while an absolute majority would be needed for all the rounds after that. Unlike 2007, when the presence of M8 and M14 in the parliament would have probably ended in an M14 candidate as a president (since they held the majority), the elections of 2014 are different. Even if everyone shows up, the elections would be like a play. **The MPs will keep voting for the same candidates, and since no camp can secure 65***

*votes, the elections can go on forever. In other words, none of the two coalition will take it upon itself to boycott the parliamentary session and get treated with disregard from the public for “paralyzing the states’ institutions”. Because unlike 2008, there is no coalition holding the majority of votes in the parliament which means that the minority coalition doesn’t need to boycott and block quorum in order to prevent the majority of electing a president of its ranks. **While nothing is official or definite, we are approaching the elections with 2 candidates, Michel Aoun of M8 and Amine Gemayel of M14 that are – unlike 2007 – fighting to get the support of the rival camp by playing the moderate card, while the name of the third consensual candidate is soon to be determined”***

[Read More](#)



Michael Young

Hezbollah’s Presidential Headaches Grow

“What Hezbollah has not considered is that whoever becomes president will have a natural tendency to challenge the party. The party’s very existence represents a daily contradiction of the state and its unity, whose prime representative is the president. Even if a successor to Sleiman is found, this reality will persist. Any president, by definition, only gains by appealing to all sides of the political spectrum, and by not curtailing the authority of the state, hence his own. That applies as much to Sleiman as to Aoun, were he to enter the presidential palace. **In the end the incompatibility between the state and Hezbollah will endure, whatever the party does”**

[Read More](#)

The Southern Offensive and Fragmentation



Maya Gebeily

Is the Southern Offensive Finally Happening?

"The moment Syria's southern rebels have been waiting for is drawing closer. With the newly announced "Southern Front" group uniting 49 of the south's moderate factions, the opposition's momentum in the battle for Damascus may have just gotten a significant boost" [.....] "Groups fighting in the southern provinces include the Syrian Revolutionaries Front, Free Syrian Army units, the Islamic Front – a large coalition of hard-line groups like Ahrar al-Sham – and the powerful Jabhat al-Nusra, totaling 64,000 fighters" [....] "Unlike the ongoing battle for the border area of Yabrud, it appears that Hezbollah has yet to get heavily involved in the southern fighting" [.....] "In the short- to medium-term, an expansion into the south is unlikely for the Party. "The suggestion I've seen is that Hezbollah is either unwilling or incapable to be involved in more than one major operation at a time in Syria. With Hezbollah preoccupied, rebels cooperating, and weapons coming in, a push towards Damascus could be a big part of the rebels' springtime plans"

[Read More](#)



Hassan Hassan

Front to Back

"Two developments took place in the past month that point to remarkable changes within Syria's Islamist landscape. In early February, al Qaeda's central leadership disavowed the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) -- a favor ISIS repaid a few weeks later, when it launched a suicide attack that killed al Qaeda's representative in the country, Abu Khalid al-Sur" [.....] "Two top rebel leaders told Foreign Policy that the Islamic Front had collapsed in all but name. Speaking from northern Idlib governorate, Col. Haitham Afisa, the Free Syrian Army's newly-appointed deputy head, said that Islamic Front members recognize the failure of the alliance, but due to the fact that they present themselves as the most powerful alliance in Syria, they fear that its official demise would incur significant financial and political costs"

[Read More](#)