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**The Protests in Egypt: A Wake-Up Call?**

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**Over recent weeks, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi was confronted with his gravest public crisis since taking office. Mohamed Ali, a former Egyptian military contractor, posted videos on social media accusing the top military and political echelons of a range of corruption offenses and encouraged the public to protest against the President. Despite the wide dissemination of the videos, only a few thousand people responded to Ali's call and took to the streets. But the regime's success in containing the protests is no cause for nonchalance on its part, as the fundamental economic and political problems that sparked the public anger remain in place. Many of the regime's supporters see in the protests a wake-up call and an opportunity to embark on measured policy amendments from a position of strength, hoping to prevent another wave of protests. Initial announcements on behalf of regime spokesmen promised economic, political, and media reforms, but these have yet to be translated into action on the ground. Egypt's stability is important for Israel, and Israel can contribute through economic and security cooperation, as well as through support in the international sphere and the avoidance of moves that are liable to add fuel to the Egyptian fire, chiefly vis-à-vis the Palestinians.**

Over the course of September 2019, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi faced his most severe public crisis since taking office in June 2014. Videos circulated widely on Facebook accused Egypt's top military and political echelons of a slew of corruption offenses and encouraged the public to demonstrate against the President. The fire was ignited by Mohamed Ali, an Egyptian contractor and actor in exile in Spain, who had worked for the Egyptian military for 15 years and exposed financial irregularities that allegedly involved senior Egyptian military staff, the President, and members of his family. In the videos, Ali criticized the profligacy and ostentatiousness typical of much of the ruling class, while in the name of Egypt's economic reforms, ordinary Egyptian citizens are forced to tighten their belts. While the reforms may have enabled impressive economic growth, they have also entailed the rescinding of subsidies and measures that brought about a sharp rise in prices, which in turn have lowered the standard of living for many Egyptians, and indeed, a large part of the public suffers from poverty.

The videos became a cause célèbre in Egypt and prompted el-Sisi to convene a youth conference, where he responded to the allegations. These were described by the President

and state media as baseless rumors aimed at diminishing the regime's achievements, driving a wedge between the military and citizenry, and threatening the stability of the homeland, as well as a plot of the Muslim Brotherhood and its regional allies – Turkey and Qatar. The attention by the President to the videos increased Ali's public exposure, and he gradually evolved from "whistleblower" into "protest leader" and began issuing daily videos calling explicitly for a popular movement to oust the President. Although Ali has avoided declaring a political or party affiliation, satellite TV channels and news sites aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood have rushed to disseminate his messages. The pragmatic Gulf states, chiefly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, have, meanwhile, voiced support for el-Sisi. US President Donald Trump met him and lauded his leadership. Hamas, for its part, has straddled the fence and avoided taking sides publicly.

Despite the wide distribution of Ali's videos, only a few thousand people answered his call to demonstrate throughout Egypt on September 20, 2019 and even fewer on September 27. The relative failure of the two protests, initiated by Ali, stemmed from several reasons, beginning with the effective control and deterrence evinced by the regime and the broad security preparations, which included sweeping arrests, the blocking of squares and main roads in Egyptian cities, and the disruption of the internet and social media. Second, the limits of the power mastered by the Muslim Brotherhood were evident, as the movement failed in mobilizing the wide public in a protest against the regime, despite having invested noticeable media efforts to this end. Television reports from the protests that were aired on satellite channels supportive of the Muslim Brotherhood, and which were quickly found to be fake, harmed the credibility of the protest and bolstered the establishment narrative. In addition, most of the campaigns on social media were run from outside Egypt and were hard pressed to spur the Egyptian public into the streets. Third, the upheavals of the Arab Spring have left their mark on the Egyptian public, with concern about a revolution that might lead to renewed anarchy and worsen their difficulties, especially in the absence of an attractive and clear alternative leadership.

Yet the failure of the protests has not granted a decisive victory to the regime and the President. The Mohamed Ali affair has thrown a spotlight on the corruption problem in Egypt, exposed a reality of fury and frustration at the economic distress, highlighted deep societal polarities and curbs on the freedom of expression and assembly, and questioned the country's economic and political path. Similarly, the regime's response to the events – even if it did not bring about bloodshed – drew international censure, given reports of more than 2,000 arrests, including of non-violent political activists. In addition, the public ferment is a blot on Egypt's efforts to maintain its economic benchmarks such as

attracting foreign investment and stabilizing the tourism sector, and led to the Egyptian stock market's sharpest tumble since 2011.

Furthermore, despite the fact that the Egyptian regime has managed, for now, to contain the protests, the fundamental economic and political problems that fueled the public anger remain in place. Thus a possible resumption of the protests, perhaps in even more violent form, cannot be ruled out. As recent events have shown, the Muslim Brotherhood is lying in wait. Another threat is presented by internal power players, military and economic, which are liable to weigh openly opposing the President if his status is undermined. Another unknown factor is the Egyptian street. Most of those who took part in the recent protests were young demonstrators who had not personally experienced the trauma of the previous revolutions. They operate without a leadership, and it is hard to assess how they will act in the next wave of protests, should such erupt.

### **Recalibrating the Route?**

The regime's success in containing the demonstrations and dousing the protest fire before it spread is no cause for it to relax. Many of its supporters favor addressing the events as a wake-up call and an opportunity to embark on corrective measures from a position of strength. Initial announcements by regime spokesmen promise a fresh economic and political approach, but many in the Egyptian public doubt their sincerity and await actions on the ground. On the economic level, the President issued a statement emphasizing his concern for citizens who lost their rights to basic food subsidies in the wake of the economic reforms, and voiced his personal commitment to attend to their distress. In accordance with this directive, the Ministry of Supply and Internal Trade hastened on October 1 to announce, the restoration of 1.8 million citizens to the list of beneficiaries as well as a month-long extension of the deadline for appealing against the rescinding of subsidy rights. The Health and Population Ministry declared that it was moving forward with plans for universal medical insurance, beginning with the poorest governorates. Similarly, media reports surfaced about intended reshuffling of ministers in several cabinet ministries. The key question is whether deep-set redress will be enacted, including a fight against corruption and economic monopolies.

On the political level, on October 1 Egyptian Parliament Speaker Ali Abdel Aal announced looming reforms in the political, party, and media realms. A lawmaker close to the regime, Mustafa Bakri, warned that without "a real soul-searching" Egypt was liable to experience another revolution. Media reports suggest that there is intent to expand the latitude accorded to opposition elements, though it is still too early to assess whether these changes would be substantive or merely cosmetic. In parallel, pro-regime media have featured articles calling for liberalizing reforms, including: expanding freedom of expression; opening up the public space to dialogue and constructive

criticism; permitting party pluralism; and permitting legal demonstrations. With that, it was made clear that the planned reforms would be limited to those who accept the idea of the Egyptian nation-state and recognize the Egyptian constitution and Egyptian law, and would not serve as an opening for a return of the Muslim Brotherhood to political and public life or to the rescinding of its designation as a terrorist group.

While the steps taken to alleviate economic hardship are intended to strengthen the regime's standing among the lower class, the political reforms are aimed at the educated upper middle class and the young generation who drove the revolution of January 25, 2011 and were embittered by its outcome. Many of them hold liberal views, share the regime's misgivings about the Muslim Brotherhood, and prefer a gradual and partial reform to an all-out revolution that entails inherent risks. Reducing the alienation between them and the regime may serve to broaden the President's support base ahead of future protests and improve his image in the West. The editor of the daily *al-Shorouk*, Emad el-Din Hussein, assessed that a greater political and media openness would have prevented the storm set off by Ali's videos on social media. Yasir Rizk, the editor of the daily *al-Akhbar*, said that sidelining the political forces that helped the army oust the Muslim Brotherhood in June 2013 was a "grave error," and urged that it be rectified. Such calls encourage the opposition forces to expect dialogue with the authorities about changing the political atmosphere, and their non-implementation is liable to provoke renewed and potentially volatile frustration.

### **Ramifications for Israel**

Ali's criticism of the regime focused on domestic affairs, and Israel was not mentioned in the videos. By contrast, some opposition figures who supported Ali, chief among them the Muslim Brotherhood, have tried to drag Israel into the campaign against President el-Sisi. The President has been dubbed a "Zionist agent" working for Israel and the United States, with an overlay of lies about "his Jewish mother." Playing the anti-Israel incitement card may be old hat and more on the fringes than before, but it is still part of the discourse.

Israel, for its part, has been justifiably careful not to take a stand on the protests in Egypt, though it is certainly monitoring them tensely. Egypt's stability is important for Israel for various reasons: the peace treaty between the countries; continued cooperation vis-à-vis security and political challenges; fear of anarchy that would compromise Egyptian governance over the Sinai peninsula and be liable to stoke terrorism against Israel and migrant waves arriving at its border; and the implementation of contracts for the export of gas from Israel to Egypt and multilateral cooperation in the East Mediterranean.

Though Israel's ability to contribute to Egypt's stability is limited, it can take the following steps: alongside additional countries, participate in efforts to support Egypt's security, stability and economic prosperity and encourage essential reforms; provide quiet diplomatic support in the international sphere to some of Cairo's positions, for example in the counter-terrorism realm; and to the extent possible, avoid steps liable to add fuel to the Egyptian fire, mainly vis-à-vis the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and around Jerusalem's holy sites.