



President el-Sisi (2nd from right) presents an economic plan for new universities, September 3, 2020. Photo: al-Ayam.

A Play in Three Acts: Could Egypt be Drawn into a Perfect Storm?

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Egypt is experiencing the dangerous dynamic of simultaneous crises in different arenas, creating a complex and multidimensional threat to its national security: possible military defeat in the proxy war in Libya and growing Turkish influence in the arena; unilateral moves by Ethiopia in the Renaissance Dam crisis and the direct consequences for the Egyptian water economy; and the Covid-19 pandemic and worrisome signs of an emerging widespread economic crisis. How Egypt handles these threats will be a test of the government and the President in terms of public opinion, but no less important, in the eyes of political and security institutions. Failure accompanied by damage to Egypt's image and its national security could undermine the President's status and lead to more internal upheavals. A possible threat to Egyptian stability is looming, in view of the intensity and complexity of the challenges and the links between them. However, the dynamics and actions of various actors (the Egyptian leadership, the security-military system, the public, and regional and international systems) will have a decisive impact on the final outcome.

Keywords: Egypt, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, internal stability, decision making, superpowers, Libya

Introduction

Egypt is experiencing the dangerous dynamic of simultaneous crises in different arenas, creating a complex and multidimensional threat to its national security: possible military defeat in the proxy war in Libya and growing Turkish influence in the arena; unilateral moves by Ethiopia in the Renaissance Dam crisis and the direct consequences for the Egyptian water economy; and the Covid-19 pandemic and worrisome signs of an emerging widespread economic crisis.

The global and regional focus in recent years in the various conflict arenas in the Middle East has pushed Cairo's agenda to the sidelines, increasing the difficulty of making political moves to promote a solution to its central security issues. Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic has reshuffled the cards and commands most regional and international attention and energy. Therefore, Egypt's strategic-security concerns have been squeezed out of the global and to some extent regional agendas, and Cairo's ability to manage the various crises with political tools is shrinking. How Egypt handles all these threats will be the critical test of the government and President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in terms of public opinion, but no less important, in the eyes of political and security institutions. Failure accompanied by damage to Egypt's image and its national security could undermine the President's status and lead to more internal upheavals.

This article contends that the possible threat to Egyptian stability is gaining momentum due to the intensity and complexity of the individual and often intertwined challenges. However, the dynamics and actions of various actors (the Egyptian leadership, the security-military system, the public, and regional and international systems) in light of events will have a decisive impact on the final outcome.

The Stability of the Egyptian Regime after the Upheaval

Nobody can play with Egyptian security when we are here. I will die

before I let anybody harm the country's security. I swear that I will not allow it, and I am ready to die for Egyptian security. I am ready to die but may 100 million live. I say this to you because I saw what happened seven or eight years ago, and this will not happen again in Egypt! Do those who failed then think they will succeed now? You know me and you know that I am speaking faithfully. By God's life! The price of homeland security and national stability is my life and the life of the army! I am not a statesman; I am not a man of words. I have never spoken like this, but we cannot build the country from words alone. (el-Sisi, al-Watan Hu al-Hadaf, 2018)

The extraordinary statement by President el-Sisi during the 2018 presidential race reflects the return of military hegemony and the authoritarian presidential regime to full control of the country's affairs. The Egyptian elections were held in March 2018, and even then it was clear that the main message of the elected President was that stability takes precedence over freedom, and that the January 2011 revolution—which as the regime sees it, caused serious damage to national security, undermined the Egyptian public's sense of safety, and led to the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood—will not happen again, if the army and political leadership can stop it. The slogan “the people and the army,” which currently hangs on every street corner in Cairo, exemplifies the idea that the military is the main source of strength with responsibility for managing the country's affairs, and that any challenge to the regime is a direct attack on the interests of the army and national security. The “state of institutions” in Egypt in its current incarnation establishes the ruling hegemony by strengthening the dominance of the army and the security system, the police and the legal system, the religious establishment and the clerical bureaucracy, and the political system,

which accepts the authority of the presidential directive. Regime stability is based on the power of institutions and their loyalty to the presidential nucleus. A weakening of any of the supporting pillars could rattle the entire structure, and therefore the central effort of the regime of the July 2013 revolution is to avoid this at any price, and to ensure the loyalty of internal backing.

The regime learned the lessons of the January 2011 revolution and in recent years has led a gradual process of suppressing civil rights and eliminating any opposition that might develop in the public space. The regime acted in the framework of establishing the “new-old” authoritarian hegemony by arresting active members of liberal-civil political movements, and also outlawed the Muslim Brotherhood, which bears historical weight and a widespread organizational presence in Egyptian society. The regime likewise led a gradual process of taking control of the media (establishment and independent) and using aggressive enforcement tools on the internet, together with extensive use of social media awareness as a tool for shaping all aspects of the media agenda. At the same time, the President spearheaded legislation that curbed civil rights while establishing effective deterrence, in order to prevent any expression of public protest (Blaydes, 2019). In this context, the chronology of government suppression moves helps to show the gradual process of restoring regime military and security hegemony:

a. *The Protest Law*, which was passed in November 2013 by Prime Minister Adly Mansour and in effect deprived social groups of the ability to organize and hold public demonstrations, was strongly criticized by human rights groups, both domestically and internationally. The law reflected a symbolic and practical move by a regime that wished to prevent public protest, and was a “declaration of intent” by the security services of their readiness to use force in order to enforce the law. Above all, the

law expressed the public separation of the regime from the ethos of the Tahrir Square Revolution (“Egypt: New Protest Law,” 2013).

- b. *The Rab’ah al-Adawiya massacre and the outlawing of the Muslim Brotherhood*: On August 14, 2013, Egyptian army and security forces stormed two protest centers in Cairo, in al-Nahda Square and Rab’ah al-Adawiya Square, where Muslim Brotherhood leaders and activists had gathered after the overthrow of President Morsi. The military attack followed six weeks of sit-ins by leaders and activists of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Freedom and Justice Party. The human rights organization described the military attack as one of the biggest massacres of demonstrators in modern history, in which some 817 people were killed (“All According to Plan,” 2014). In September 2013, the Egyptian Court decided to outlaw the organization and ordered confiscation of its assets. Three months later the Court labeled the Muslim Brotherhood a terror organization, and this was followed by a large-scale wave of arrests of its members. The movement went underground, and its senior members were either arrested or managed to escape from Egypt.
- c. *Arrest of senior members of the April 6 Group*, one of the most active and effective groups leading popular protests against President Mubarak and President Morsi. The movement consisted of politically aware young and educated people who wished to promote the idea of democracy in the country. The arrest of the movement’s leaders was in line with a broad policy of arresting young activists who criticized the regime and wanted to bring about change in the spirit of the January 2011 revolution (“Egypt Arrests Two More Prominent Activists,” 2019).
- d. *The Cyber and Information Technologies Law*, which was passed by President el-Sisi in August 2018, banned the publication in social media of extreme ideas identified with terror organizations seeking to undermine

state security. The law allows websites to be blocked if they are labeled by the Court as a danger to national security, and permits the arrest of the people behind them. The Egyptian regime blocked hundreds of sites alleged a threat to national security, and increased control of local media while establishing effective deterrence with the threat of force (Feingold, 2018). However, the regime is unable to block critical discourse in the age of global communications. The media in Qatar and Turkey publish items every day that taint the actions of the regime in general, and the President in particular, and these join the fierce criticism in the international Western media. A striking example of a media event that spun out of control concerns the building contractor Mohammed Ali, who moved to Spain and from exile published a series of video clips in which he exposed the allegedly deep-seated corruption of the army and the presidency. The clips went viral, were viewed millions of times, were widely disseminated—mainly through al-Jazeera, and led to rare demonstrations in Egypt against government corruption. These demonstrations showed that in spite of extensive repression, the public can still initiate actions in the public arena, albeit limited (“Who is Mohammed Ali?” 2019).

- e. *The Emergency Law*, which was in force almost throughout the Sadat and Mubarak presidencies, had a deep impact on human rights in Egypt, and enabled the regime to use unbridled and unsupervised force against civilians. The law was perceived by the Egyptian public as an expression of the arbitrary power of an unaccountable regime, and became one of the central issues in the public protest of January 2011. The law was repealed (January 24, 2011) by Minister of Defense and Chairman of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces General Muhammed Hussein Tantawi, who headed the interim government after Mubarak was ousted. The constitution of 2012 (under

the rule of the Muslim Brotherhood) and the constitution of 2014 (under el-Sisi’s leadership) limited the application of the law to three months only, based on an understanding of public sensitivity on the subject. In April 2017, President el-Sisi reinstated the Emergency Law following terror attacks on Coptic churches that led to the death of 45 worshippers. From then on, the law was extended every three months. In April 2020 the Egyptian parliament approved an amendment to the law that significantly extended the powers of the President and the security forces, to allow the regime to deal with the coronavirus crisis without unnecessary bureaucracy. Currently the main criticism of the law is that it exploits the broad powers granted to the security forces and the army to restrict human rights and implement broad and systematic repression against any element perceived as a threat to the regime’s stability. (Brown, 2017)

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In February 2019 a referendum was held that allowed President el-Sisi to retain his position until 2030. Over his last two terms of office, the President, who won an overwhelming majority of the vote (96.94 percent) in the May 2014 elections, has managed to establish a repressive authoritarian regime and block any organization by an establishment or public opposition. The Muslim Brotherhood was outlawed and its Egyptian infrastructure was dismantled. The liberal opposition has evaporated and has no significant presence either inside or outside parliament.

Alaa al-Aswany, one of the few intellectuals whose voices are heard, continues to call for the adoption of democratic principles in Egypt, the removal of President el-Sisi, and the dismantling of the military structure administered by the

state since the July 1952 Revolution. In March 2018 the Egyptian state prosecutor filed a charge against al-Aswany for causing damage to the presidency and the army because of articles published in the foreign press. Al-Aswany preferred to avoid the risk of imprisonment on returning to Egypt, and has spent the last two years in forced exile in the United States (Hincks, 2019). However, al-Aswany's criticisms are now directed at the public as well as at the regime. In his book *The Automobile Club of Egypt*, he portrays the public as not ready to spearhead change and accepting of its fate under a regime that provides security and stability, while suppressing any expression of freedom. "Democracy is the solution" is a slogan frequently used in al-Aswany's articles, but so far the people have chosen stability over basic freedoms.

And so here they are, the cowards and the defeated, recovering their rights without rebelling against Elco or harming his honor, except by obedience, absolute surrender, and consent to accept his punishments, however cruel. They [the waiters] bore their suffering patiently and bowed their heads before the storm and were finally able to get the tips back, while the rebels destroyed their future and their families. (al-Aswany, 2017)

Has the public now resigned from its role as the leaders of the processes of political change, and lost its voice after internalizing the price of protest and its lack of value in the absence of a real political alternative? Has the public stopped being an element that "undermines stability" due to its fear of descending into anarchy? Or is this a concept that should be challenged from the existing research perspective? Will the next revolution actually emerge from the ranks of the security-military establishment, in view of the intense impending challenges facing the Egyptian leadership?

Regime Stability in an Age of Growing Inter-Power Rivalry

In recent years the Middle East has once again become the "backyard" of the heightened competition for influence between the great powers, where struggles over energy resources, international shipping lanes, arms markets, control of local national infrastructures, information technologies, and communications are affecting countries in the region and their ability to maneuver in the regional and international arena.

The growing competition between the United States and Russia in the Middle East, along with the entrance of China as an economic power that exerts influence through its Belt and Road Initiative and extensive investment in local infrastructure, enables Arab regimes to conduct a policy with far greater room for flexibility in the international arena but also with a far higher risk of becoming enmeshed in an unplanned crisis with one of the powers. The conduct of the Arab powers echoes the dynamics of the Cold War, through the adoption of a policy of diversifying sources of support and willingness to take calculated risks in their strategic ties with the great powers in order to realize national interests (Singh, 2020).

On the other hand, the upheavals in the Middle East have affected global interests and led to the direct military involvement of the powers in regional conflicts and crises. The issue of stability in the Middle East states has become the concern of various actors on the international scene, and not only the local regimes, due to the direct consequences of phenomena that undermine national security: the spread of terror groups and radical Islamic ideas; a heightened refugee problem; damage to energy sources; humanitarian and health crises; and more. In addition, international intervention is intended to promote particular geo-strategic interests and the effort to establish influence and demonstrate strength, while restraining competing powers in the context of increasing global competition (al-Din & Badi, 2020).

As part of the dynamics of growing involvement by regional forces and powers in Middle East conflicts, Egypt under the leadership of President el-Sisi has sought to reinforce its strategic ties with Russia and China, while preserving US support. This policy emerged against the background of a crisis in the relationship during the Obama presidency, particularly after the military coup on June 30, 2013 and the removal of President Morsi, and also in view of the Egyptian leadership's fears of an end to US security and economic aid. Cairo perceives American support to be tenuous, unreliable, and sometimes even dangerous to its stability, as shown by the negative role played by Washington during the January 2011 revolution, which led to the overthrow of President Mubarak. Nevertheless, Cairo wishes to retain the political and security aspects of US aid and support as much as possible, while developing alternative sources of assistance (Berman & Albo, 2020).

In this context, the Egyptian interest in strengthening strategic relations, particularly with Russia, derives from a number of motives: diversified sources of security and military procurement (since 2015 important purchase agreements have been signed for advanced aircraft, air defense systems, anti-tank systems, and more); the need for the backing of a global power in the event of a crisis in relations with the United States around the issue of human rights and democracy in Egypt; the development of large-scope and long-term joint economic and civil ventures (in this context are two prominent strategic projects: the construction of nuclear reactors in northeast Egypt, funded and built by Russia, and the establishment of joint industrial zones on the Suez Canal); closer military cooperation focused on involvement in the civil war in Libya; the understanding between leaders of issues relating to strategy and policy on conflicts and crises in the Middle East (Syria, Libya); and the shared idea that issues of human rights and democracy are irrelevant and do

not affect the developing relations between countries (Mohamed, 2019).

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The Egyptian move was intended to reinforce the sources of political and security support for the regime by establishing strategic collaborations with Russia and China, mainly due to the fear of a change in American policy that could challenge the legitimacy of the regime in view of the severe abuses of human rights and democratic principles in the country. In concrete terms, the possible change in the US administration after the presidential elections in November 2020 could bring the subject of human rights back to center stage in the bilateral relations. In this scenario, the main concern is that US moves will provide a “tailwind” for waves of public protest and undermine stability, as happened after the overthrow of President Mubarak in January 2011. On the other hand, Egyptian policy that seeks closer security and economic ties with Russia and China involves a calculated risk with respect to the US administration, which wants to block growing Russian and Chinese influence in the Middle East, including by the use of penalties, reduced aid, and a political crisis (Wadhams, 2019; Kirkpatrick, 2018).

The coming year will present a complex challenge to the Egyptian leadership, as it faces a series of difficult, volatile foreign issues, including possible changes in US policy toward Cairo.

The Proxy Campaign in Libya: Dynamics of Escalation

Turkey is emerging as the winner of the proxy campaign in Libya. The Egyptian call for a

ceasefire and a start of talks between the warring parties (“Call for a Ceasefire and Start of Talks,” 2020) was perceived as recognition of the failure of the military move by the Libyan National Army (LNA) led by General Khalifa Haftar to oust the Government of National Accord (GNA) led by Fayeze al-Sarraj, and an expression of weakness. The victory consolidates Turkey’s presence and influence in the arena and threatens Egypt’s security and economic interests in Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean.

In April 2019, LNA forces, which had consolidated their control in the east and south of the country, began a military operation to conquer Tripoli with the aid of Russian mercenaries and military support from Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, in order to complete their takeover of centers of power in the country. At a certain stage it appeared as if the military operation had achieved its goals. International efforts to settle the crisis had failed, and the fall of Tripoli, which was under siege and subject to frequent shelling, seemed only a matter of time (el-Gamaty, 2020).

Turkish military aid arrived at a critical time. The Turkish President expressed Ankara’s commitment to the GNA, and in November 2019, two agreements were signed with al-Sarraj’s government: one marking the economic-maritime borders between the countries, and a military cooperation agreement. In 2019 Turkish army personnel arrived in Libya as advisors, together with militia forces from Syria, air defense systems, electronic warfare systems, and Turkish-made drones, which completely transformed the campaign (Wehrey, 2020). Turkey, contrary to the undeclared military support of Russia, Egypt, and the UAE, openly sent military aid to the al-Sarraj government. The capture of the al-Watiya air base on May 18 marked a turning point in the campaign, because the base served as the main operational and logistical command post of the LNA. In the following weeks, al-Sarraj’s forces took control of most of the northwest of the country, leading to the crushing military defeat of Haftar’s forces

(“How Did Turkey Change the Direction of the War in Libya?” 2020).

In this context, the Egyptian President presented his initiative for a settlement in Libya, which included a call for the UN to convene a meeting in Geneva to start talks between the warring parties; the imposition of a ceasefire from June 8; the dismantlement and removal of all foreign militias from Libya; establishment of a forum with representatives of the three main areas of Libya (south, east, and west) to draw up a constitution; and the establishment of a Council of Presidents that could at a later date choose and appoint a prime minister. However, the declaration that was presented in Cairo in the presence of General Haftar and the speaker of the Libyan parliament, Aguila Saleh, was not intended to put an end to the campaign, but to exert pressure on the GNA forces to stop the counter-attack, and to recruit international public support for the obstruction of Turkish moves in Libya (“Call for a Ceasefire and Start of Talks,” 2020).

The military defeat in the campaign over Tripoli and the withdrawal of the LNA forces and Russian mercenaries led to increased Russian involvement in the arena. Russian war planes were sent from Syria to the al-Jufra airfield in central Libya, to help Haftar’s forces establish aerial superiority before the next stage of the campaign. On the other hand, the weakness shown by Haftar’s forces in the Tripoli operation, in spite of the extensive assistance they received from Russia, Egypt, and the UAE, poses question marks over Haftar’s ability to reach a decisive outcome in Libya. Moreover, the antagonism that General Haftar arouses in Moscow and Cairo could lead to the imposition of a settlement with Russian and Egyptian pressure—with or without Haftar. The call from President el-Sisi for a ceasefire and renewal of talks reflects Egypt’s understanding that at this stage of the campaign, it must use political tools to serve Cairo’s security interests, and also block the possibility of further defeats that would change the situation in Libya. The GNA first rejected

the Egyptian initiative, and launched a military campaign to capture the strategic coastal town of Sirte between Tripoli and Benghazi, which is very important for the country's oil industry. The driving force is in the hands of the GNA army, and the capture of the Sirte-al-Jufra line could lead to the fall of Benghazi and Tobruk, and establish Turkish influence over the whole of Libya. For Egypt, such a situation would be intolerable (A'anmi, 2020). In August the GNA accepted the call for a ceasefire, urged that parliamentary and presidential elections be held in March, and called for an end to the oil blockade. The ceasefire that was agreed upon freezes the current operative "on the ground" status quo, but is considered fragile, due to the deeply conflicting interests. For now, the ceasefire is sustained because it serves the interest of the regional powers, but the nature of the Libyan conflict can lead to a quick renewal of the fighting.

The proxy war in Libya is heating up and the similarity to the Syrian arena is increasing, because of the growing involvement of the powers and of rival regional forces, and because of the inability of the international system to enforce a continual ceasefire and impose an effective embargo on the transfer of weapons. A further resemblance is that the physical battlefield in Libya reflects only one dimension of the regional and international competition over the architecture of the eastern basin of the Mediterranean, and the ideological rivalry between the political Islam camp and Egypt.

Egypt is eager to become a regional energy hub, given the gas liquefaction facilities at its disposal. Cairo established the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), intended to focus regional efforts on gas development in the Eastern Mediterranean and combine existing collaborations under one organization. Winter and Lindenstrauss (2019) showed how closer security and economic ties between Egypt, Greece, and Cyprus preceded the establishment of the Forum in the shape of a series of agreements: the laying of gas pipelines from

Cyprus to the Egyptian liquefaction facilities, connection of electricity networks, the outline of economic borders in the Mediterranean, the development of joint tourism ventures, joint military training, and more. In this context the claim was that the deliberate exclusion of Turkey from the EMGF and the strengthening of Egypt's strategic ties with Greece, Cyprus, and Israel encouraged Turkey to make contrarian moves that were designed to block the initiatives of Eastern Mediterranean countries.

The lack of an Egyptian response to a Turkish drilling move will directly harm Egypt's economic interest and could puncture el-Sisi's image as a leader in the eyes of the public, and more importantly, in the eyes of the security system.

Turkey contests the validity of agreements signed between Cyprus and the Greek islands, and Egypt and Israel, and interprets them as a move to isolate it in the region. The memorandum signed with Libya to mark the economic marine borders was intended to hinder the efforts of Greece, Cyprus, Egypt, and Israel to develop gas reserves, and it puts substantive difficulties in the way of plans to lay a gas pipeline to Europe, which must pass through Turkish territorial waters. Turkey wants to expand its influence toward Africa and Europe and establish its footprint in the arena by exploiting the gas and oil reserves in its economic waters and gaining hold of Libya's oil reserves. Ankara's vision clashes directly with Cairo's.

Another front where Turkey will test the determination of Egypt and its allies is already emerging in the Eastern Mediterranean, where Ankara intends to send drilling vessels to find gas reserves, pursuant to the economic waters agreement signed in November 2019. The central question that at this stage is unanswered is: will the Egyptian fleet block the Turkish move and risk direct military friction? Meanwhile, Egypt is restricting itself to deterrent threats and

recruiting international support to condemn Turkey. The lack of an Egyptian response to a Turkish drilling move will directly harm Egypt's economic interest and could puncture el-Sisi's image as a leader in the eyes of the public, and more importantly, in the eyes of the security system ("Erdogan: Turkey to Start Gas Exploration," 2020).

While Egypt has military tools that it can use in the context of direct involvement in the Libyan campaign, it will not rush to use them. Ground entry into Libya could lead to entanglement in a long campaign with no benefit, causing direct friction with Turkey and the international arena. The political and military costs of this scenario are too high. Egypt will apparently continue its support by supplying advanced weapons and equipment to Libya as well as required aerial assistance, but as much as possible will avoid ground intervention that could lead to political and military complications.

At the same time, the dynamics of escalation between the parties continues. The Egyptian President stated publicly (June 20) that Egypt has international legitimacy for its military intervention in Libya, and instructed the army to prepare to defend the motherland ("Direct Egyptian Interference," 2020). El-Sisi stressed that Egypt has the right to defend itself against the entrenchment—which has occurred with the support of foreign forces (Turkey and Qatar)—of terror organizations on its western border that openly threaten its security and stability (Mourad, 2020). El-Sisi's message is intended to rouse the international community, and above all the United States, to take action to prevent regional war in Libya, and to deter Turkey and the GNA from capturing the Sirte-al-Jufra line, which is currently held by Haftar's forces. In turn, the White House expressed strong opposition to any military move leading to further escalation in Libya, and called for an immediate ceasefire by all parties, while accepting Cairo's initiative and the political process drawn up in Berlin as the basis for talks ("US Says it Opposes Military Escalation," 2020).

In addition, the fact that Turkey hosts representatives of the Muslim Brotherhood who fled Egypt and is in effect the head of the political Islam camp only intensifies and complicates the existing hostility between the countries. The establishment of a regime that supports the Muslim Brotherhood on Egypt's western border is seen by Cairo as a direct threat to its security, in view of the risk of flows of funding, weapons, terror activists, and radical ideas that can challenge the stability and whip up opposition and terror forces at home.

Egypt's political tools are limited, but it is trying to exploit them also in view of the limitations of the international dynamic, which is currently focused on checking the spread of the coronavirus and finding a response to the global economic crisis. Cairo has succeeded in recruiting Washington to support its initiative, but this is not necessarily evidence of a practical change in American policy. The Trump administration is preoccupied with its political survival, the coronavirus, and preparations for the approaching elections, and it is not clear whether it will expend much political energy on stabilizing the Libyan arena. Also, the Pentagon views the growing Russian involvement in the region with concern. In spite of its public support for the Egyptian position, the United States is in no hurry to use leverage in the arena for fear that this will aid the entrenchment of Russian forces, similar to the Syrian model (Starr, Burrows, & Sirgani, 2017).

The current dynamic could lead to escalation and even direct friction between the parties, although this would not necessarily suit their interests, in view of the possible price. In this context, President el-Sisi met with tribal leaders from Libya (July 16) at a conference called "Egypt and Libya: One People, One Fate." There he linked Libyan security and stability with Egyptian national security, and expressed his commitment to the use of military force, if necessary, to prevent "foreign terror militias and terror organizations" from taking control of Libya. However, alongside the threat to use

military force, el-Sisi called on the parties to return to the political framework and impose an immediate ceasefire while accepting the “Cairo paper” as the basis for settling the conflict. The Egyptian parliament subsequently authorized the President to use military force in Libya if the circumstances require this (“Egypt’s Parliament to Mandate Sisi,” 2020).

At this stage, the President’s moves are perceived by the public as necessary in view of Turkish aggression and their legitimate effort to defend Egypt’s western border. If the Egyptian move deters the GNA in Libya and brings about a lasting ceasefire, el-Sisi will be seen as having successfully maintained national security while avoiding being dragged into unnecessary fighting. However, if the fighting develops, the red line is crossed, and the Sirte-al-Jufra line falls, Egypt will have to decide on the nature of its military involvement in Libya. In this context, Egyptian military success or failure in Libya—whether as part of a limited move (aerial attacks) or as part of a wider campaign (air and ground)—will have direct implications for the stability of the President’s status, in the eyes of the public and the military-security elite.

The Campaign on the Nile: The Renaissance Dam and the Egyptian Dilemma

On April 8, 2020, the Ethiopian government declared a state of emergency following the outbreak of coronavirus. The Finance Minister announced that the government would have to review its priorities regarding national projects, but there would be no delays of the Renaissance Dam, and the project would keep to the scheduled timetable (Gebre, 2020). Construction of the Renaissance Dam, also known as the Millennium Dam, began in April 2011 on the Blue Nile within Ethiopian territory, about 15 km east of the border with Sudan. The hydroelectric power station under construction on the dam will be the largest in Africa and the seventh largest in the world, and it is intended to supply electricity to millions of Ethiopians,

generate profits from the sale of electricity to neighboring countries, and bolster Ethiopia’s status in the African arena. The \$5 billion cost is astronomical for the country’s economy, but Ethiopia sees the dam as a [strategic project](#) intended to help the country’s economic and energy development (Lazarus, 2018).

The Nile is perceived both symbolically and practically as Egypt’s lifeblood. The Nile Agreements signed between Egypt and Britain and between Egypt and Sudan (1929) granted Egypt actual control over the river with an annual allocation of 55.5 billion cubic meters of water, and a smaller annual allocation of 18.5 billion cubic meters to Sudan. No allocation was made to countries through which the Nile flows, including Ethiopia, home to the source of the Blue Nile. In 1999 the countries of the Nile Basin started a move to change the 1929 agreements and define new allocations of the Nile water. Egypt and Sudan rejected all proposals raised at the talks, which led to a unilateral decision by Ethiopia in 2011 to build the dam, in complete opposition to the position of Cairo and Khartoum (Lazarus, 2018). Cairo, surprised by the move, strongly criticized its legitimacy, but the 2011 internal upheavals in Egypt sidelined the Renaissance Dam from the political and public discourse. In June 2013, Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi announced to a cheering audience that Egypt would not accept any threat to its water economy, and that “all options are open” if that happened. Morsi threatened that [“if Egypt’s allocation is reduced by even one drop, the alternative will be Egyptian blood.”](#)

President el-Sisi, who ousted Morsi in a military coup, abandoned the threatening tone in favor of an attempt to resolve the crisis with Ethiopia by political means. At this stage it was clear that the mega-project—which was expected to generate 6,000 MW of electricity for local use and export, and was perceived by the Ethiopian leadership as vital for the country’s economic and social welfare—was already at an advanced stage, and it was not possible to turn

back the clock. Since then, Egyptian diplomacy is concerned particularly with issues relating to the policy of managing the dam and the water reservoirs, and promoting agreed moves to minimize the threat posed by the dam to the Egyptian water supply. At the same time, Cairo sought support for its position from Sudan and other African countries, and in the international arena, particularly from the United States.

Sudan, which from the start shared Egypt's concerns over the effects of the dam on its water supply, gradually grew closer to the Ethiopian position. Although Sudan suffers from a water shortage, it is not as severe as Egypt's, and the main threat to Sudan is massive flooding if the dam should collapse. However, Sudan has recognized the positive aspects of the Ethiopian project—regulating the flow of water which will help local agriculture, and the purchase of cheap electricity from Addis Ababa—and therefore moderated its stance (Winter & Ben-Israel, 2018).

In March 2015 a tripartite (Egypt-Ethiopia-Sudan) agreement in principle was signed in Khartoum, as an agreed framework for a future agreement on the policy of filling reservoirs and operating the dam, after an examination of the consequences of its operation for Nile Basin states. El-Sisi stated: "The Renaissance Dam project will be a source of growth for millions of Ethiopian citizens by generating clean energy, but for the sister countries of the Nile Basin, and particularly for Egypt, which has a similar number of people to Ethiopia, the construction of the dam is a source of concern" (Egypt-Sudan-Ethiopia Agreement in Principle, 2013).

The tripartite agreement did not bring about the hoped-for breakthrough, and in view of the deep suspicion and mistrust between the parties, there was no progress in talks. In May 2018, Ethiopia agreed to an Egyptian demand to set up an independent scientific research committee, to provide an assessment of the dam's impact on water flow to Egypt. Cairo hoped to use the research findings to influence the method of filling the reservoirs and operating

the dam in order to minimize the damage to the Egyptian water economy. The talks seemed to be going well, with a visit by Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to Cairo (June 2018) and a joint declaration of understandings about the dam ("Egyptian President and Ethiopian Prime Minister," 2018). However, the gaps remain considerable, and there has been no practical progress on resolving the disputes. A new low in relations was reached when the Ethiopian Prime Minister announced in parliament that there was no power in the world that could prevent Ethiopia from constructing the dam, and if they were forced to go to war, they would recruit millions to defend the country's rights ("Ethiopian Prime Minister: If We Have To, We Will Recruit Millions," 2020).

At this stage, the United States tried to lend sponsorship to the talks in order to settle the disagreements. In November 2019 a first meeting took place in Washington between the Foreign Ministers of Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia, led by the US Secretary of the Treasury and the Governor of the World Bank. However, Ethiopia announced it would not attend the third meeting scheduled for February 27-28, 2020 in Washington, where the parties were supposed to move toward signing a joint agreement. The collapse of the talks and Ethiopia's announcement that it would not wait for an agreement with Sudan and Egypt, but would start operating the dam by July 2020, raised the level of fears in Egypt and the fiery rhetoric on all sides. The United States called for a resumption of talks and avoidance of unilateral moves. So far, the White House, which accepted the Egyptian version of the dispute, has not managed to influence the Ethiopian position. Sudan for its part declared that filling the reservoirs without an agreement would endanger the dams in Sudan, and that Khartoum wished to reach a joint agreement on matters relating to the safety of the dam and the method of filling the reservoirs. It expressed its opposition to any unilateral moves by Ethiopia that could set a dangerous precedent for other

future projects on the Blue Nile, but was careful to avoid strong rhetoric, and opted to serve as a mediator to bridge the gaps (Amin, 2020).

Egypt is at a crossroads of difficult decisions in view of Ethiopia's determination to operate the dam, even unilaterally, and the ever-present risk of future severe damage to the Egyptian water supply, if Cairo's terms are not met. Egypt has managed to recruit the White House to support its position and mediate talks, and in recent months even persuaded Sudan to take its side. However, as with Libya, at this stage the American pressure lacks effective leverage to force Ethiopia to change its direction. Egypt is trying to dissuade Ethiopia from making unilateral moves, including by means of indirect threats of force, but so far without real effect. A further round of tripartite talks mediated by South Africa is underway, but so far without success. Meantime, satellite pictures show that the dam reservoirs are starting to fill, apparently following the heavy rain in early July. Subsequently, senior Ethiopian personnel announced that the reservoirs would be filled even without the agreement of Egypt and Sudan, which raised the level of tension in the Egyptian public (Morsy, 2020).

Even if Egypt has a military option to stop operation of the dam, the cost of such action in the regional and international arenas would be both high and prolonged. In concrete terms, the failure of an Egyptian military action could lead the Ethiopians to take a more extreme position and directly harm the Egyptian water supply. No less important, it would have a clear effect on how President el-Sisi is perceived by the Egyptian public and security establishment. Cairo's main card at this stage is to exert pressure in the tripartite talks and try to reach a negotiated compromise. It is essential to coordinate their position with Sudan, since Khartoum is playing an important role of mediating between the two parties. In view of the weakness of the UN and international institutions, the support of the White House is also very important, since it has leverage over Ethiopia (including behind

the scenes) to persuade it to soften its stance (Gramer, 2020).

President el-Sisi has declared several times in recent years that the only way to resolve the crisis between the countries is through diplomacy. A failure of the talks, leading to a unilateral move by Ethiopia and filling of the dam in a way that affects the Egyptian water supply, would directly affect how the President is viewed by the public and the security-military establishment. On the other hand, reaching an agreed compromise would strengthen el-Sisi, casting him as a leader who can recruit international and regional support for Egypt's position, and thus prevent damage to the country's lifeblood. The drama surrounding the Renaissance Dam is reaching a climax, and the possibility of worsening relations between the countries is growing. The ball is in the Ethiopian court, and Egyptian pressure is reaching a boiling point.

The Coronavirus Pandemic and the Fear of an Economic Depression

In the last weeks of July, coronavirus cases in Egypt began to drop below the rate of 1000 new cases per day, and the Egyptian Health Ministry estimated that the first wave of the pandemic in the country was receding. In recent months, the health system almost reached a breaking point, with medical personnel badly affected by a lack of protective equipment and replacement staff, and a steadily rising death rate. At the same time, the Ministry of Health numbers should be regarded with caution, due to considerable evidence of widespread illness in the general population and aggressive moves by the regime to censor news items or studies that challenge the official statistics.

Although at this point the pandemic appears to be on the wane, the fear of a second wave, which could severely affect the performance of the health system and lead to extensive mortality, is reflected in the establishment of a public information campaign and some moves to limit social interaction. However, the

scenario of a broad and uncontrolled health crisis, where the state is unable to meet its obligation to provide the public with health security, is secondary in the eyes of the regime, in view of the more dangerous scenario of a collapse of the economy, leading to widespread poverty, hunger, and a breakdown of the public and political order. The Egyptian dilemma is the need to choose between two bad options, so at present the government is focused on managing the risk of an economic collapse, even if that means an increase in morbidity and mortality.

The trauma of the huge economic crisis of 1929 still forms part of Egypt's historical memory. Dr. Ismail Saraj al-Din, former Vice Chairman of the World Bank and a leading economic commentator, claims that the present economic dynamic on the world stage is reminiscent of the 1929 depression, and like a crisis that lasted more than a decade, this crisis has the potential to persist and have serious consequences for Egyptian society and economy in the coming years. Saraj al-Din warned that Egypt could experience extensive hunger and a crisis in food security, as happened in the twentieth century (Saraj al-Din, 2020).

The 1929 economic crisis affected people at all levels of Egyptian society—those with means and those without, laborers and peasants, traders, and the middle class. In 1928-1933 the relative value of Egyptian exports fell by a third, as well as annual per capita income and buying power. Unemployment in agriculture and industry reached record lows due to the shrinking of global trade and closure of markets, leading to increased migration of people seeking work from the countryside to the cities. Whole communities collapsed and were left with no work and no income. Some villages were hit by severe hunger, and the government had no real way of helping. The crisis led to new political and social phenomena: in the 1930s, the Muslim Brotherhood led by Hassan al-Bana became Egypt's leading popular movement, and the Communist Workers party and nationalist

Fascist movements appeared on the scene, influenced by European ideological movements. Politics and society were split, alienated, and violent, and this was one of the factors that shaped the Free Officers Coup on July 23, 1952 (Gershoni, 1999).

Today the Egyptian economy is intertwined with the global economy, and vulnerable in view of external fluctuations; a global collapse could have disastrous consequences for Egyptian society and politics. Egypt still faces severe basic problems: uncontrolled population growth (Egypt has over 100 million people) and increasing overcrowding in cities create ongoing difficulties in the supply of basic services (health, employment, education, modern infrastructures). The fear of a lengthy global recession, together with these unresolved issues and the inability to bring about fundamental structural changes that allow greater efficiency and reordering of priorities in the allocation of resources (such as cutbacks in the army and the inflated and inefficient civil service) all heighten the uncertainty over the future of the economy.

In fact, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) already expects a sharp drop in Egyptian growth next year (from 5.6 percent in 2019 to 2 percent in 2020). In 2019 the tourism sector reaped \$12.6 billion for the country and accounted for 10 percent of all employment, and its severe curtailment has extensive implications for all economic activity. Moreover, the expected drop in income from the Suez Canal as a result of the global recession in trade, accompanied by the loss of revenues from Egyptians working in the Gulf states (in 2019, Egyptians working outside the country brought in \$25.2 billion) who are now returning to Egypt in droves, will have enormous negative impact on economic performance. The main indicator, apart from the drop in growth, will be the rise in unemployment (which is predicted to exceed 10 percent in 2020), and even more serious—a dramatic drop in the quality of life and a sharp rise in poverty. If the global recession persists beyond 2020, the Egyptian collapse will mirror the 1929 crisis

and lead to waves of protest as well as new political movements (inside and outside the establishment) that will challenge the existing political order (Suleiman, 2020).

All this has led to the partial imposition of social and economic restrictions, of which the most striking were the halt to international flights, the closure of educational and cultural institutions, and the enforcement of a nightly curfew. At the same time, most of the economy continued to operate normally during the day, including the crowded markets and public transport. The government allocated 5.8 billion euros as “aid packages,” half of which were transferred to the collapsing tourism sector, which is so vital to Egypt as a source of employment and revenues. In the framework of moves taken to save other sectors, the IMF approved a loan of \$2.8 billion, and later approved an additional loan of \$5.2 billion to fight the pandemic (“IMF Approves 5.2 Billion Loan,” 2020).

The Egyptian government also announced the “living in the presence of the coronavirus” plan, which meant the gradual reopening of the economy from mid-June. The aim is to restore international flights, open hotels, and holiday resorts to revive the tourism sector, limit lockdowns and restrictions, and encourage the return of investment (“Egypt Reopens Airports and Welcomes Tourists,” 2020).

At the same time, the regime is acting aggressively to repress any criticism of how it is handling the pandemic. It is not willing to tolerate voices that affect Egypt’s image. A striking example is the arrest of doctors who expressed open criticism of the Ministry of Health. The arrest led to an unusual public call by a syndicate of Egyptian doctors for their immediate release and legal protection. In the campaign over its image, the regime acts aggressively to silence voices that undermine its narrative (“Egyptian State Media Accuses Doctors,” 2020).

The expected global recession and its severe impact on the Egyptian economy, together

with the most serious health crisis in modern Egyptian history, present a complex and dangerous challenge to continued stability. The central fear is of an economic tsunami, while the underlying assumption is that Egypt can cope with the health crisis due to the young median age of its population, as well as the lack of any benefit to a policy of social restrictions and lockdown in a country with such high population density and poor infrastructure. The price of a mistake in this policy could be high, including further upheavals in society and politics, but in view of the alternatives and the lessons of history, the choice of the economy over health is apparently unavoidable.

Conclusion

We are standing together at a historic moment in the annals of the people, in the struggle against the coronavirus, which obliges us all to join hands and show solidarity so that we can overcome this crisis in peace, while preserving everything we have succeeded in achieving in various fields. The efforts of the Egyptian state—the government of the people—are directed at fighting this virus while continuing to implement development plans and maintaining economic stability during this difficult period. The enemies of the state are trying to sow doubts about the country’s achievements and efforts. I place my trust in the Egyptian people, who have always known how to show determination when facing challenges like this. May God bless Egypt and the Egyptian people. (el-Sisi, quoted in Natzar, 2018)

This passage illustrates the pressures facing el-Sisi, as he stresses the need to reinforce economic stability and social cohesion, while pointing at the “enemies of the state”

who disseminate “lies” about the country’s failure in the fight against the pandemic. The regime, which expanded its powers under the Emergency Law as part of the struggle, is exploiting this measure to suppress systematically any expression of criticism or opposition to government policy. The public was deterred and at this stage there are no wide public protests, while the concrete threat of operation of the Renaissance Dam and Turkish entrenchment on the western border of Egypt means that attention can be diverted from internal matters to Egypt’s “real” enemies, who pose a substantive threat to its national security.

In recent years the regime responded to public protest with a closure of public spaces and an unprecedented attack on any kind of political or social organization that was perceived as threatening. Contrary to President Mubarak—who allowed relatively free discourse in the independent media and on social media, and even allowed the Muslim Brotherhood to participate in Egyptian society and politics, based on the assumption that a certain balance was necessary (even if only for appearances) in order to create essential valves for the public to let off steam—the policy of the current regime demonstrates a lack of tolerance for any kind of opposition. The government seeks to establish effective deterrence by weakening any ideological or organizational alternative and by creating a perception that “there is no alternative” based on driving home the message regarding the price of undermining national stability and security.

In recent years a number of models have been developed to deal with the research goal to assess the probability of regime stability and the potential for regime change. In studies conducted following the upheavals in the Arab world, researchers from the academic world and from intelligence organizations expressed their basic surprise at the undermining of local leaderships. Brun estimated that the era of stable leaders in the Middle East had come to an end due to the nature of the period and an

understanding by all the actors that regime change was in fact possible. He proposed a model that he sees as a framework for open research debate, focusing on three main contexts: states and organizations (the public, local elites, army and security mechanisms, etc.); the region and the zeitgeist (regional dynamics, political reciprocity, social ties, etc.); and the international system and its impact on local systems. Brun argues that there are two main failures in the research on the stability of leaders: a failure of imagination by the researchers, and the clinging to preconceptions, which prevent a critical examination and presentation of scenarios involving system change. These failures cast doubt on the researcher’s ability to correctly analyze the complexity of the subversive dynamics that can lead to change (Brun, 2018).

The assessment model of Yadlin and Golov seeks to answer the question of whether the probability of government stability in a country is low, medium, or high, and which country has the highest probability of erosion of stability. The model presents four parameters as influencing the development of uprisings and coups in the Middle East: the internal arena, the international arena, the economic arena, and factors that inhibit regime change. The model is based on the “expert’s choice” and is intended to help researchers in assessments of stability through thorough analysis of these parameters, and their qualitative and quantitative components. This method allows critical examination of basic assumptions by dismantling and reassembling all the defined parameters. Contrary to other models, the results are expressed as numbers. The main criticism of this model concerns the indexes that are inherently not objective and usually anchored in a research concept (Yadlin & Golov, 2013).

The argument presented in this article is that a research focus on the issue of stability requires critical humility and an understanding that there is no clear answer to questions dealing with predictions, particularly of emerging

situations, where the dynamics have driving significance. Brun and Cordesman describe the problematic aspects of relying on models to establish an assessment of leadership stability, due largely to the complexity of the issue—a multitude of actors that shape and influence at any given moment, plus the objective difficulty of responding to the many questions that arise when using a generic model (Brun, 2018; Cordesman, 2018).

Moreover, quantitative models for assessing regime stability are controversial due to the inherent subjectivity of the process and the question of the reliability of the researcher's sources. In this context, Brun and Roitman argue that in the age of fake news and post-truth, there is a genuine growing difficulty of defining and understanding reality as the basis for making decisions that are vital to the core issues of national security. This assumption is relevant to questions concerning research on stability. The fact that Middle East states use methods involving subconscious influence and denigration in order to take control of public awareness only intensifies the problem for researchers wishing to separate fact from fiction when marshaling the data for their studies (Brun & Roitman, 2019).

In concrete terms, Egypt is experiencing an unprecedented combination of crises that could undermine its security, economy, and political stability and impose a complex test of leadership on President el-Sisi. The use of various models to examine Egyptian stability could help to focus research perspectives and the analysis of variables, while mapping links between them. However, the dynamic process of decision making based on the conduct of the actors in the different contexts, miscalculation, the test of outcomes in the arenas of action, and the direct, indirect, and unexpected consequences of the coalescing of the threats to Egyptian national security all have a decisive impact on regime stability. Therefore, for this research, the job of the models is to provide a basis for discussion and indicate possible

directions of development; at the same time, subjective conduct, irrational reality, and unknown unknowns play an important role in the ability to correctly assess developments that affect the issue.

In conclusion, this article illustrates the possible cost for the Egyptian regime of decisions responding to complex challenges in various spheres. At this stage, Egypt's regional strategy is to block Turkish moves in Libya, prevent the unilateral operation of the Renaissance Dam in Ethiopia, and stabilize the economy while avoiding the collapse of the health system. Cairo is relying mainly on political tools, while threatening the use of force in Libya and Ethiopia. However, Egypt will try to avoid any military adventures that could drag it into unnecessary, costly, and destructive entanglements. The dilemma is real: military failure could have direct implications for the status of the President, but a failure to use force in the face of dangerous developments in Libya or Ethiopia could draw severe domestic criticism of the weakness of the leadership in protecting national interests. In addition, the intensity of the health crisis and the fear of a future economic tsunami demand the ability to manage a complex policy of opening the economy to business, while trying to contain the spread of the pandemic. However, an ongoing global recession will cause direct damage to the Egyptian economy leading to a deep crisis, irrespective of any Egyptian policy of opening the economy in a coronavirus routine, and this could have far-reaching consequences for Egyptian society and politics.

Over the coming year Egypt could find itself in the "perfect storm," which will be a real test of the President's internal support (the army, the security establishment, government ministries, and public bodies) and of public willingness to embark on further protests, in spite of repression and the absence of a political or social opposition. Decisions made in the next few months by Egyptian, regional, and international actors, the resulting dynamics, the

outcome, and how it is perceived will all have a direct impact on the President's image and status, and the stability of the entire system. The issue of stability in Egypt is once again on the agenda.

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