

Egypt's Identity during the el-Sisi Era: Profile of the "New Egyptian"

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From the beginning of his presidency – and particularly since his second term of office began in June 2018 – Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has promoted an official campaign to shape Egyptian national identity and create a “new Egyptian.” Various actors are part of the campaign, which has received much coverage in the established media and in conferences dedicated to the young generation. An analysis of the campaign reveals two main themes: first, the “new Egyptian” is conceptualized as an antithesis to “the Islamist other”; second, the Egyptian identity is built as a rich mosaic composed of seven pillars – Pharaonic, Greco-Roman, Coptic, Islamic, Arab, Mediterranean, and African. The official identity discourse decries the clear preference that the Muslim Brotherhood attributes to the Islamic layer of Egypt’s character, and is intent on uniting the Egyptian public around the regime’s political, economic, and social agenda and improving its international image. Yet despite the regime’s efforts to inculcate a new identity, its messages are challenged by competing forces, and it is too early to assess to what extent they are internalized by the general Egyptian public.

Keywords: Egypt, national identity, Egyptian personality, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, Muslim Brotherhood

Egyptian author Fathy Embaby has likened the contemporary struggle over Egypt’s identity to a game of musical chairs, with identities standing up and sitting down – with one difference: the identity left without a chair

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does not leave the game, but rather, waits for the next round in order to recapture its seat.¹ Indeed, the last one hundred years have seen changes in the balance of power between competing perspectives on Egypt's identity, ranging from particularistic nationalism, which advocates "Egypt First" and considers the Nile Valley as a primary context for Egyptian loyalty, to supra-national identities that perceive Egypt as part of broader collective frameworks (Islamic, Arab frameworks).² In rough terms, particularistic Egyptian nationalism flowered during the 1920s and 1930s; throughout President Nasser's reign, Egypt's affiliation with the Arab world was emphasized; in 1928, the Muslim Brotherhood was founded as an Islamist alternative to the existing political order, but reached the government only during the presidency of Mohamed Morsi.

The upheavals that Egypt experienced following the January 25, 2011 and June 30, 2013 events had no clear and agreed ideological approaches toward national identity. Rather, they prompted competing forces to exploit the transitional stage to forge Egypt's future character according to their respective world views. Liberal activists advocated taking a pluralistic democratic direction that would ensure civil equality and focus on promoting Egypt's particular affairs;³ the Muslim Brotherhood sought to channel their victory in the parliamentary and presidential elections to institutionalize the Islamization of Egypt, and managed to enact a constitution in 2012 that inter alia established that Egypt is part of the Islamic nation;⁴ the Salafist jihadi organization Ansar Bait al-Maqdis swore an oath of allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2014, and became Wilayat Sinai, the "Sinai Province" of the Islamic State.⁵

The identity debate intensified after the Muslim Brotherhood was ousted from the government in the June 30, 2013 revolution and evolved under the regime of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. The new leader attempted to mold an identity that suited his needs and policies and instill it among the young generation, while weakening competing and revolutionary identities – particularly the Islamist identity – that threaten his hegemonic agenda. Early in his second term of office, the regime launched a wide scale campaign toward "building the new Egyptian" (*binaa' al-insan al-masri al-jadid*), to forge the character of Egypt's young population, cultivate their identification with el-Sisi's policies, and encourage norms that are consistent with his goals.

The current discourse about the identity of the "new Egyptian" in statements by regime officials, articles in official newspapers, and conferences targeting the young generation includes two fundamental

components. First, there is a negative component that conceptualizes the Egyptian identity as the antithesis of the Islamist identity advocated by the Muslim Brotherhood. While during Nasser's rule, the image of "the other," which the new Egyptian identity came to replace, was the West, colonialism, or Zionism, today, the Muslim Brotherhood fulfills this role. The second is a positive component, which presents the Egyptian personality as a multi-layered synthesis of identities: Pharaonic, Greco-Roman, Coptic, Islamic, Arabic, Mediterranean, and African. This construction constitutes an alternative to the prioritized positioning that was given to the Islamic layer in Muslim Brotherhood doctrine. However, it is too early to assess the extent of its assimilation into the general Egyptian society.

Egyptian Identity as the Antithesis of Islamism

The Tamarod coalition that led the demonstrations to oust the Muslim Brotherhood regime on June 30, 2013 was an opposition movement not supported by any organized or consensual ideological alternative. The idea that united the majority of its members, and the military that supported it, was concern about the Islamization processes instituted by the Muslim Brotherhood, such as the enactment of the constitution of 2012 and President Morsi's actions to expropriate authorities and push opposition groups from circles of influence.

The regime that rose to power after the June 30 revolution claimed that it rescued Egypt from a plot by a terrorist movement disguised as a democratic organization and from inevitable political, social, and economic destruction, which would have occurred were the Muslim Brotherhood to remain at the helm. Concurrently, the new regime launched a campaign about the Egyptian identity, focusing on the contrast between Egyptian citizens who are loyal to their homeland and Islamists who seek to undermine the legitimacy of the nation state and revert to the Islamic caliphate. This discourse served three main functions: first, to present the el-Sisi regime as the protector of the Egyptian identity, an outcome of a revolution that rescued Egypt from an existential threat that sought to convert its unique identity to a supra-Egyptian pan-Islamic vision;⁶ second, to legitimize the ousting of the Muslim Brotherhood government by describing it as an enemy that acts on behalf of ideas and forces foreign to Egypt and strives to fundamentally change the state's identity and hijack it from its citizens;⁷ third, to justify the iron fist that the regime wields against the movement

and its members, being “thieves of conscience and common sense, robbers of identity, and traitors to their homeland.”⁸

Already in his first interview to Egyptian television in May 2014, el-Sisi, then a presidential candidate, declared that the June revolution was launched by Egyptian citizens who were afraid of losing their identity.⁹ During a speech following his inauguration as President, el-Sisi argued that under the Muslim Brotherhood government, Egypt had experienced extreme polarization that nearly dragged the country into civil war and jeopardized its unity. Egypt, he argued, thwarted the plot, thanks to a “patriotic and united army that does not believe in any doctrine besides [the welfare] of our homeland.”¹⁰

The effectiveness of contrasting between patriotic Egyptians and “the other,” who undermines Egyptianism, derives from an authentic concern shared by many in Egypt about an Islamic theocracy, which was fueled at the time by the proliferation of the Islamic State. This contrast was able to forge national solidarity by negating Islamism, even without an orderly alternative vision and a firm perception of identity. However, over time, this proved to be insufficient. In his column in *al-Masry al-Youm* in November 2014, Mahmoud Kamal, a close associate of the President’s office, described the war over the abandoned identity between the Egyptian regime and the Islamist camp as a zero-sum game, and explained the necessity of building a positive national identity:

The battle [with the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafist jihadi forces] does not concern differences of opinion about the legitimacy of the ruler or about the regime’s economic and political trends, but rather, is about the continuing existence of the Egyptian homeland and country as we know it. This is a battle over Egypt’s culture and identity. [Although] the Egyptian identity is not secular, and religion has always been a component of its identity, it never was an exclusive component. The renaissance of Egyptian nationalism and the culture associated with it is the most important weapon needed to repel the current attack on Egyptian identity.¹¹

Building the “New Egyptian” in Response to Egypt’s Challenges

As his government became more established, el-Sisi began formulating a positive vision for Egypt’s future, which included economic reforms and ambitious development ventures. In tandem, he cultivated a discourse on identity to serve as an alternative to competing, primarily Islamist, debates

about identity. From el-Sisi's first term of office, a key role in formulating the new identity was assigned to the official religious establishment in Egypt. In November 2016, the Minister of Awqaf, Mohammad Mukhtar Jumaa, called for a dialogue whose objective is to "rebuild the Egyptian personality in a positive light."¹² A key figure in developing the discourse about the Egyptian identity is Usama al-Sayyid al-Azhari, the presidential advisor for religious affairs and a lecturer at al-Azhar University. Al-Azhari was appointed a parliamentary representative by el-Sisi in December 2015, and he undertook to devote himself to "reconstruct the Egyptian person" and strengthen Egyptian self-confidence in light of today's challenges.¹³ In his column in *al-Ahram* in September 2016 – which later was expanded into a book – he enumerated the unique qualities of the Egyptian persona, including steadfastness in the face of crises; strong roots; innovative capability; broad horizons; passion for development; cultural depth; and belief in God.¹⁴

The discourse about Egyptian identity gained momentum at the start of el-Sisi's second term of office. In his speech during his inauguration ceremony in June 2018, the President declared that building the Egyptian person is the country's top priority, in face of the attempts to undermine it.¹⁵ In July, he ordered his government to formulate an action plan on the subject of identity building,¹⁶ and Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouly announced the launch of a national policy for the young generation, for the purpose of building a "new Egyptian" who will be able "to reap the fruits of the economic reform."¹⁷ In September, Ministry of Education Spokesman Ahmed Khairy announced that the school curriculum for 2018-2019 would engage in strengthening the Egyptian identity.¹⁸ Efforts peaked with events dedicated to the young generation: the youth conference at the University of Cairo in July 2018, which included a special session on "building the new Egyptian," and the World Youth Forum in November, which adopted the seven pillars of the Egyptian identity as a leading motif. The events were organized by the Office of the President and were held under the auspices of the President and with his participation. The Ministry of Endowments, also recruited to join the President's efforts, held conferences on the subject of the Egyptian personality in July and in October.¹⁹

At the core of the establishment's identity campaign is the call to build a "new Egyptian" who is prepared for the political, economic, and security challenges facing Egypt. The call to "build a new person" is not unique to the el-Sisi regime. It appears in different countries throughout history, during times of revolutions, reforms, and dramatic changes, mainly under

authoritarian or totalitarian regimes.²⁰ The hegemonic government and intellectual elites designate the "new person" as a prototype, a utopian ideal that civilians should strive to achieve, and the development of that character involves active educational, cultural, and ideological efforts dictated from the top down.²¹

In modern Egypt, the concept of the "new person" has already undergone several permutations: during the al-Nahda period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the challenging encounter with the West stimulated intellectual attempts to construct a new Egyptian national identity, such as through the book by Qasim Amin *The Character of the Modern Egyptian Woman*.²² Following the 1952 revolution by the Free Officers Movement, the regime preached pan-Arab nationalism focusing on the "new Arab," whose identity was intertwined with the fate of the Arab nation;²³ during the Sadat era, the regime returned "the Egyptian" to center stage in lieu of "the Arab," as part of the focus on Egypt's unique political and economic interests. This trend of particularism was reflected in books and articles that engaged in the "new Egyptian," in the law devoted to educating the population to be "Egyptians," and even in an anthropological project sponsored by the University of Alexandria entitled "Rehabilitation of the Egyptian."²⁴

The purpose of this call, in its current permutation, is to recruit state institutions to reconstruct the Egyptian's character after decades of neglect, in a way that will enable him to contribute to Egypt's cultural and scientific renaissance.²⁵ An article in *al-Ahram* called for a multi-discipline reorganization of systems: an education system that will cultivate productive citizens; religious institutions that will instill values of respect, order, cleanliness, and integrity; cultural institutions that will encourage creativity; art that will disseminate values of tolerance; and communications that will focus on the positive instead of the negative.²⁶ Above all, the "new Egyptian" needs to be enlisted in the ambitious economic projects that the regime is promoting, to be steadfast in the face of difficulties, and to bear painful reforms, which involve a slash in subsidies, a hike in the cost of living, and deepened poverty, at least in the short term. He is also a conformist to the regime, cooperating with its policies and recoiling from the revolutionary model manifested by the youth of Tahrir Square. As clarified in an article in *Rose al-Yusuf*, "The greatest challenge that our country is facing is in transforming the populace in Egypt from a burden

on development and on the national economy into productive citizenry who push the development cart."²⁷

Naturally, the efforts to build "the new Egyptian" focus on the young generation. Within this framework, the regime announced the promotion of a curriculum to prepare Egypt's youth for the challenges of the 21st century, emphasizing mathematics and the sciences and encouraging openness to the West by learning foreign languages.²⁸ The regime further strives to build a new young elite that will support the establishment's political agenda, see itself as a partner to its objectives and values, and acquire the tools needed to fulfill the role designated for it in domestic and foreign arenas. The cultivation of a loyal, educated, and productive elite that will produce leaders, public opinion leaders, and experts is done, *inter alia*, through the youth conferences inside Egypt and through the World Youth Forum. These events send a message to the young generation that the regime is attentive to their needs and wants to see them integrating in the efforts to build Egypt. These forums also serve as an educational framework to "strengthen cultural consciousness among the youth" and to shape their identity.²⁹

The Egyptian Identity Mosaic

The identity that the regime ascribes to the "new Egyptian" is composed of a mosaic of historic layers (Pharaonic, Coptic, Islamic, and Greco-Roman) and geographic layers (Arab, Mediterranean, and African) that together comprise the Egyptian personality. The establishment's synthesis of identities helps it to convey a series of messages to domestic and foreign target audiences: on the domestic plane, it creates a roof that can accommodate a broad spectrum of the Egyptian population, thereby constituting an antithesis to the polarizing identity that the Muslim Brotherhood represents; on the international plane, it is designed to improve Egypt's branding as a country possessing a moderate, tolerant, and cooperative character and capable of playing roles in promoting peace, stability, and anti-terrorist efforts, and is deserving of outside assistance to help it contend with its economic and security challenges.

The building of the Egyptian persona as a mosaic of identities was also prevalent in past intellectual writings about Egyptian identity.³⁰ The current innovation lies in the regime's official adoption of an approach that does not prioritize the Arab and Islamic layers of identity and link it to its core narrative. The initial signs of the described formulation and synthesis

of identities were evident in the 2014 constitution, which included new references to the Pharaonic, Coptic, Christian, and Mediterranean layers of Egypt's identity. The preamble to the constitution states that Egypt is "the heart of the whole world and the meeting point between civilizations and cultures," "the tip of Africa on the Mediterranean," and a country that sacrificed "thousands of martyrs in defense of the Church of Jesus"; the constitution states that "Islam is the religion of the state and Arabic is its official language" (Article 2), and "the Pharaonic, Coptic, and Islamic Egypt" constitute part of its material, moral, and cultural heritage (Article 50).³¹

This discourse about identities expanded early in el-Sisi's second term of office. During the youth conference in July 2018, a session attended by the President explored the subject of the strategy for building "the Egyptian person." The secretary-general of the youth wing of the al-Tagammu' political party, Alaa Isam, delivered the keynote speech and emphasized that the Egyptian identity is not limited to the Islamic religion and the Arabic language, but rather includes components relating to Pharaonic history, Egypt's geographic location, and its cultural heritage. According to Isam, the ancient Egyptians invented the idea of the state in order to govern the Nile River regime and established a state of law and order while other peoples lived as tribes, and exported sciences throughout the world during their contacts with the major philosophers of ancient Greece. Furthermore, Egypt embodies the harmonious golden path (*wasatiyya*): a geographic point where Europe, the Silk Road, and Africa intersect; the stronghold of religious moderation; a melting pot of civilizations; the cradle of monotheistic and pagan religions.³²

A significant layer was added to the identity-building during the World Youth Forum in November 2018 in Sharm el-Sheikh, sponsored by the President and attended by thousands of young people from Egypt and around the world. The main motif selected for the forum was the seven pillars of the Egyptian identity that appeared in the book (1990) by the intellectual Milad Hanna (1924-2012): Pharaonic, Coptic, Greco-Roman, Islamic, Arab, African, and Mediterranean,³³ and they were highlighted during the Forum through sculptures, pictures, and posters. The canonization of the definition of identity originally designed by Coptic Christian philosopher was highly symbolized, while a film screened during the opening ceremony defined Egypt as the meeting point between continents, religions, nations, and cultures.³⁴ Osama Saraya, formerly the editor in chief of *al-Ahram*, summarized the spirit of the conference: "Egypt...recognizes that the modern

Egyptian is Arab by language and culture, but even so, he is incapable of disengaging from the Pharaonic heritage enrooted in him, from the Greek influences, and from its Coptic history that is intertwined in its genealogy. The introduction of Islam imparted a new aspect to our identity, but this is an identity that cannot be limited to a particular period, since the Mediterranean culture also constitutes a part of us, and the African dimension is our future."³⁵

Furthermore, in its establishment version, each of Hanna's seven pillars of personality fulfills particular functions that help the regime weave continuous intricate links between the collective past and Egypt's contemporary political orientation. For example, the ancient Pharaonic civilization is described as a nostalgic golden age that can and should revitalize Egypt's achievements by inculcating its values in the "new Egyptian" in a variety of fields: science, technology, efficient authoritarian government, and collective cooperation in establishing mega-projects.³⁶ Alaa Thabet, editor of *al-Ahram*, called on the Egyptian people to delve deeply and draw on their heritage of scientific innovation and capacity for collective work, which characterized their Pharaonic ancestors, since "it is inconceivable that the descendants of the builders of the pyramids will be at the bottom rung of the ladder of modern culture."³⁷

Similarly, the Greco-Roman component emphasizes ancient Egypt's contribution to Western civilization, and signals Egypt's aspiration to once again serve as an intercultural meeting place, a hub of global trade, and a scientific lighthouse that is a magnet for the entire world.³⁸ The Mediterranean component gives tangible and instrumental validity to these messages, in light of the extensive cooperative efforts between Egypt, Greece, Cyprus, Israel, and Italy in the field of gas and energy. Nasser Kamel, an Egyptian diplomat currently the secretary-general of the Union for the Mediterranean, announced during the World Youth Forum that the Mediterranean Sea is one of the most important pillars of Egyptian identity, and expressed hope that the cooperative efforts between Egypt and other Mediterranean countries would be upgraded to a comprehensive strategic partnership.³⁹ Additionally, the Forum's magazine stated that Egypt and Mediterranean countries maintain a harmonious relationship today as they did in the past, in the fields of culture and economics, which constitutes a continuation of their relations in ancient times.⁴⁰

Compared to the innovation reflected in the revival of Egypt's Mediterranean orientation, the World Youth Forum cited the Arab component

and the African component in the context of rehabilitating Egypt's leading standing in the two geographic regions where it operated and wielded influence in earlier decades. In relation to the Arab pillar, the emphasis was placed on Egypt's cultural leadership, which was defined as "the beating heart of Arabism" since the Islamic conquest.⁴¹ In relation to the African pillar, the importance of Egypt was highlighted as a trade artery between Africa, Asia, and Europe for its efforts relating to the economic development of Africa, and for its historic and cultural relations with Nile Basin countries and the current need to cultivate and strengthen them.⁴²

The Coptic component and the Islamic component, jointly and independently, served to emphasize Egypt's openness and religious tolerance. During the World Youth Forum exhibition, reference was made to the tolerance that Christianity instilled in Egypt, and the Forum's magazine contained a statement that Christianity is no less authentic in Egypt than in the Vatican. The more dominant Islamic component was conceptualized in newspaper articles and during the Forum by emphasizing the continuity of the unifying nonviolent meetings between religions in Egypt since the initial days of Islam and up to the coexistence that prevails between them today. Similar continuity was attributed to the historic educational standing of the al-Azhar institution, "the fourth most important symbol of Islam," due to its current role in resuming religious discourse and in preaching moderate interpretations that are helpful to the global ideological battle against terrorism and Islamic radicalism.⁴³ The references to Egypt's tolerant character did not disregard Judaism. In December 2018, Minister of Antiquities Khaled al-Anany expressed support for Egypt's financial investment in renovating synagogues, because "the Jewish heritage is part of Egypt's heritage...and it is prioritized equally to the Pharaonic, Roman, Islamic, and Coptic heritages."⁴⁴

Significance

Given the upheaval in Egypt since the beginning of the decade, the definition of Egypt's identity has become a controversial issue. The ousting of the Muslim Brotherhood from power in 2013 thwarted the fulfillment of the Islamist vision and created an "identity vacuum" that was gradually filled by the el-Sisi regime, which presented an ideal example of a "new Egyptian" to its citizens – one who is patriotic, supports the sciences, productive, moderate, tolerant, conformist and possesses a multi-layered identity. The most significant challenge facing the campaign to build the "new

Egyptian" is to ensure that the discourse trickles from the top down, from the government to the general Egyptian public.

The campaign has strengths and weaknesses: on the one hand, the regime can reach broad audiences through the education system and the mass media, which are under its control, and impact on small focus groups, such as through the youth conferences. Furthermore, the identity mosaic that the regime preaches is perceived by many Egyptians as authentic, since it encompasses historic, religious, and cultural realities, alongside Egypt's interests in the geographic circles where it operates – in the Arab, Mediterranean, and African arenas. Moreover, the agenda expresses the broad national consensus that currently prevails in Egypt about the need to prioritize domestic affairs over foreign affairs (a position supported by 84 percent of Egyptians).⁴⁵ The regime does not disregard the traditional supra-Egyptian layers of Egypt's personality, but it conceptualizes its links to them in an instrumental manner, while prioritizing their impacts on the robustness of the Egyptian nation-state in the channels of economic development, security stability, scientific advancement, religious tolerance, and civil solidarity.

On the other hand, unlike under Nasser and Sadat, who during their incumbencies enjoyed a wide monopoly over the agents of socialization when designing the "new Egyptian," the current regime operates in a multi-voice media reality of satellite channels, websites, and social networks, which make it difficult to maintain tight control over the discourse. The regime can attract a narrow elite, but inculcating an identity, norms, and values among the masses requires complex efforts of persuasion, which are exposed to major challenges from competing forces and factions. According to a survey by the Washington Institute, the Muslim Brotherhood still enjoys at least a "somewhat positive" opinion among about one third of the Egyptian population, despite the delegitimization campaign waged against it and the fact that the organization was outlawed.⁴⁶ Their supporters are obviously appalled by the regime's attempt to position the Islamic pillar of the Egyptian identity on par with other pillars. Furthermore, among the regime's critics, including some liberals, are those who consider the campaign to build the "new Egyptian" a cynical attempt to cultivate a disciplined and obedient young generation that is required to acquiesce to an identity that is dictated from above, without any ability to influence or appeal it. Critics are also pointing out internal contradictions in the establishment's narrative: calls for openness to the rest of the world, alongside the regime's

suppression of internal dialogue; slogans about pluralism, acceptance of "the other" and religious tolerance, alongside continuation of the practices of discrimination, persecution, and oppression.⁴⁷

Since the assimilation of identity and the building of the "new Egyptian" are long range processes, and since the efforts of the Egyptian regime in these directions are still underway, it is too early to assess the prospects for success. Their outcomes will be determined according to the regime's ability to convey its messages to the young generation and, more importantly, to back them up with an effective, credible, and consistent policy that will draw the "new Egyptian" toward the new reality, which it so desperately needs.

Notes

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- 47 For example, Saad al-Qarsh, "The Tumult of the World Youth Forum: Let's First Manage a Dialogue Between Us," *al-Arab*, November 6, 2018, <https://goo.gl/TjGpPi>.