

El-Sisi's First Year as President: Legitimacy, Democracy, and Relations with Israel

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Sources of Legitimacy for the Regime in Egypt

One of the main challenges facing the regime of General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in his first year in office was the need to build “governmental legitimacy,” namely, what is often an elusive connection between the ruler and his subjects, and defined as recognition by those ruled of the ruler’s right to rule the country and exercise the force of his authority. While regimes can use fear, benefits, and convention to ensure their stability, the optimal and most harmonious relation between ruler and ruled, and to which every regime aspires, exists when those being ruled accept the ruler’s authority of their own free will.¹

Legitimacy assumes different forms under different regimes. Democratic regimes acquire legitimacy first and foremost through periodic pluralistic elections. While already in its 1971 constitution Egypt was defined as a “democratic country” and the country has held referendums with periodic elections for president and parliament since the mid 1950s, these were pseudo-democratic processes directed from above and subject to manipulation. A book published during the period of Mubarak’s rule entitled *How the Elections are Faked?* revealed an array of methods used to modify the results of the parliamentary elections according to the needs of the regime and its associates, including the purchase of votes with money, blackmail, and falsification of the tally process.² From Nasser to Mubarak, the presidential elections did not serve as a means to reflect the people’s will, but rather as a propaganda campaign aimed at glorifying the Egyptian leader and delineating the boundaries between what was permitted and

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what was banned for his opponents. Majorities of 90 percent and more made clear the grave consequences of challenging a president in office. Persecution of the regime's opponents and legal restrictions on the formation of their political parties limited opposition forces, principally the Muslim Brotherhood, from participating in the political game.

Under all Egyptian autocratic regimes, official electoral legitimacy characteristic of democratic regimes was translated into autocratic-style legitimacy. This legitimacy waxed or waned over the years according to a process of subjective judgments, whereby Egypt's citizens assessed their president's performance, his ability to represent their interests, principles, and values, and his ability to achieve their goals. It included three key elements: (a) ideology: Egyptian presidents have based the legitimacy of their rule on ideological ideals, with the most prominent ideology being Arab nationalism. This peaked in the Nasser era, but gradually lost its power out of the failure to translate the slogans into concrete achievements; (b) economic welfare: Egyptian presidents frequently seek materialistic legitimacy, anchored in a commitment to the country's economic and social development and concern for the standard of living of the people; (3) religion: Egyptian presidents have customarily portrayed themselves as pious Muslims motivated by faith, and have taken advantage of the centrality of Islam in Egyptian society to obtain political legitimacy. At the same time, just as religion has served as a source of legitimacy for Egyptian regimes, it has also sometimes contributed to the efforts of Islamist opponents to undermine that legitimacy.³

The Revolutions in Egypt: Democracy with a Taste of Authoritarianism

The revolution of January 25, 2011 sought to redefine the relationship between rulers and subjects in Egypt; and indeed, at first it seemed that any future Egyptian regime would have to prove its commitment to a series of core liberal values in order to be considered an authentic and loyal representative of the "path of revolution." The April 6 movement, which played the decisive role in the protests against Mubarak, demanded that the Egyptian people become the source of the regime's legitimacy through the exercise of its rights to express its will in referendums and free and fair elections; that Egypt establish political parties representing the people's views and beliefs; and that Egypt enjoy freedom of the press and freedom of information. The reform proposed by this movement for post-revolutionary Egypt was designed to lead to a democratic and civilian state with a strict

separation of powers, limitations on the president's authority and term in office, and establishment of control mechanisms for government oversight and accountability.⁴

The call for freedom was one of the revolution's most frequently used slogans ("bread, freedom, social justice"), and in the early stages it indeed appeared that it would be realized through political revolution. The democratic parliamentary elections (in November 2011 and January 2012) and presidential elections (in May 2012 and May 2014) were supposed to institute new patterns of governmental legitimacy. The constitutions approved in 2012 and 2014 also marked the importance of democracy, personal freedom, political pluralism, and a non-violent transfer of power, by establishing that the source of the ruler's legitimacy and authority lay in the Egyptian people's right to determine its future. The constitutions further emphasized the role of the state in preserving the fairness of referendums and election procedures.⁵

The gap between liberal rhetoric and authoritarian practice surfaced quickly, however, in actions by both President Morsi and the military establishment that overthrew him on July 3, 2013. The Muslim Brotherhood rose to power using the electoral process as a source of legitimacy, but it quickly stripped that process of liberal and pluralistic content by trampling the mechanisms for defending democracy. Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood served as president for one year and tried during his short period in office to impose the will of his movement on the governmental power mechanisms, headed by the security forces. He worked to ground the status of clerics as the sole authority to interpret the constitution. In addition, he established red lines restricting freedom of expression; subjected the media to his messages; took for himself legislative and legal authority; and used repressive measures against his political opponents.⁶ In similar fashion, his successor, el-Sisi, likewise had no scruples about using his own harsh methods. Along with the trials of Muslim Brotherhood leaders, which culminated with the death sentence given to Morsi in May 2015 (and upheld the following month), his regime imposed severe restrictions on public gatherings, used tough measures against demonstrators, and arrested thousands of political activists – some of whom were liberals, including the April 6 leaders, who were put on trial and sentenced to long prison terms.

Democratic Life versus "Life Itself"

The Egyptian military establishment asserted that the overthrow of Morsi expressed the free will of millions of Egyptians who took to the streets to

demonstrate against his government, and should therefore be regarded as a democratic revolution, not a military coup. At the same time, from the beginning of his rule, el-Sisi faced a difficult political public relations dilemma. On the one hand, he took action to remove the Muslim Brotherhood from the public arena and prevent it from utilizing the democratic process as a means of gaining power; this was done by curtailing the political space allotted to it, and by conducting a campaign of delegitimization against it. On the other hand, he sought to appear as an authentic representative of the January 25 revolution restoring it to its original track, and as someone committed to its liberal values, rather than someone aspiring to restore the state of affairs that had prevailed under Mubarak.

El-Sisi's way of escaping the dilemma between a commitment to democracy as one of the original anchors of legitimacy in the revolution and the need to regulate the scope of democracy was to subjugate democracy to two other revolutionary values: security stability and economic welfare. Putting security and economic issues before democratic ones was not a caprice of an authoritarian regime seeking to fortify its status and suppress its political opponents; it was above all an expression of Egypt's authentic distress. The security situation in Egypt, which had declined greatly since the overthrow of Mubarak, continued to deteriorate under the Morsi regime, and in the el-Sisi period reached the state of a real conflict against jihad forces, mainly in Sinai. Terrorist activity increased in Egypt in 2014, with the country jumping from 27 to 13 on the global terrorism scale, ahead of Lebanon, Libya, and Israel in spots 14, 15, and 32, respectively, and behind only Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, in first, fifth, and eighth places, respectively, among the countries in the region.⁷ The Egyptian economy has stagnated in recent years, even more so since the January 25 revolution, with skyrocketing unemployment rates (especially among university graduates), steep inflation in the cost of basic goods, difficulties in the supply of electricity, a shortage of water and agricultural land, and a deep demographic crisis.⁸ In view of this economic and security situation, el-Sisi used four supplementary public diplomacy strategies to enable the regime to consolidate its government authority, even in the absence of concrete democratic processes.

First, declaring his commitment to democratic values: el-Sisi has adopted democratic rhetoric, even when this did not reflect actual political practice. For example, when presenting his candidacy for president, he stressed that he was not seeking to run as the only candidate, and would accept any other choice by the people – though at the same time forbidding Islamist

candidates to run against him.⁹ Furthermore, while his election by a 97 percent majority was due to the Muslim Brotherhood's boycott of the elections, el-Sisi congratulated the Egyptian people for having expressed its "true democratic will" at the ballot box.¹⁰

Second, portraying democracy as a goal, with the journey toward it still in its early stages, and conditions to realize it not yet ripe: el-Sisi has described a democratic regime as a future vision with an undefined date for its realization. One example of this was on the official Egyptian State Information Service website, which featured the slogan, "Egypt on the path of democracy." The site thus expressed the regime's democratic aspirations, but no less, that democracy is an abstract goal that requires traveling a long road before it is achieved. Similarly, an official essay that appeared on the website entitled "Egypt and the Democratic Path" stated that the January 25 revolution brought Egypt to a point defined as "the breaking of the dawn of democracy."¹¹ As if predicting his political future, el-Sisi, in an essay he wrote in 2005-2006 during his studies at the US Army War College, discussed his belief that the introduction of democratic regimes in the Middle East would require civil maturity, a suitable economic situation, and education for religious moderation.¹² Relying on similar reasoning, he stated in interviews just before becoming president that Egypt was not ready for democracy in the Western sense, and asked that the liberal concepts taken from democracies existing for hundreds of years not be applied to Egypt. He estimated that Egypt's process of transition to full democracy was likely to take 20-25 years, and said that opponents should therefore refrain from premature criticism of his regime and give him time to work.¹³

Third, declaring support for democracy, subject to economic and security safeguards, while in practice neutralizing some of its meaning: el-Sisi has formulated a clear set of priorities, led by the need to create a fertile climate for economic development, attract foreign capital, rebuild tourism, and advance projects, as well as repel the threat of terrorism and attain security stability. The Muslim Brotherhood's efforts to deny the legitimacy of ousting an elected president in the name of these goals were answered by el-Sisi with a verse from the Qu'ran: "Enter Egypt in safety, if God wills" (12:99), which he interpreted as religious sanction for placing the security of Egypt at the top of the institutional agenda, while implicitly setting democracy aside.¹⁴ El-Sisi explained that uncontrolled democratic reforms, removal of all restraints on freedom of expression, and the right to free assembly were liable to undermine stability in Egypt, weaken incoming tourism, and

have a negative impact on economic recovery.¹⁵ In an interview with *Der Spiegel*, when asked about the arrest of protesting liberals, he challenged his interviewers by asking whether Germany would invest capital in Egypt knowing that demonstrations were being held in its streets day and night.¹⁶ In a speech on Police Day, he added that democratic rights required civil duties, and that the state had to strike a balance between them. Egypt's limited resources require it to limit the right of assembly, because it cannot afford to have life brought to a standstill in the name of the right to demonstrate, thereby dealing a blow to industry and tourism, while it has difficulty paying its food and energy bills. El-Sisi warned, "The demand for [democratic] rights must not lead to the loss of the country itself."¹⁷

Fourth, reinterpreting liberal concepts to suit the regime's needs: el-Sisi continued to embrace the January 25 revolution's values of "freedom," "freedom of expression," and "human rights," but has made them fit his priorities, rather than those of the Tahrir Square young people. As explained by the Egyptian president, freedom is guaranteed to all, but must come to a halt at the boundaries of the freedom of "others"; otherwise, it becomes anarchy.¹⁸ Furthermore, the freedom for which the Egyptian demonstrators took to the streets on June 30, 2013 is not merely freedom in its liberal sense, but also, and primarily, freedom from poverty, freedom from educational ignorance, and freedom from religious coercion in the style of the Muslim Brotherhood.¹⁹ A tenth grade civics textbook published by the Egyptian Ministry of Education in 2014 defined "freedom" as "the release of a person from material or spiritual bondage,"²⁰ a definition that also leaves room for a materialistic interpretation of the concept. Concerning human rights, the Egyptian president said that these should not be confined to freedom of expression; they should be expanded to the rights to a good education, proper medical treatment, a suitable workplace, good occupational training, and hope for the future.²¹ Furthermore, in his many speeches, el-Sisi frequently makes analogies between a failed country and a tyrannical country, using expressions like "freeing the homeland from the captivity of tyranny and failure."²² This semantic combination helped the regime market a message that tyranny in Egypt has resulted from socioeconomic backwardness, and measures aimed at repairing the situation should focus on restoring the financial economy and rooting out corruption, and not necessarily on widespread democratic political reforms.

The Peace Treaty with Israel in Light of the Egyptian Agenda

The priorities set by the el-Sisi regime in its first year affect Israel-Egypt relations in two ways. First of all, the focus on internal affairs, at the expense of foreign affairs, lowers the Israeli-Palestinian conflict somewhat on the Egyptian public agenda, even if this has not been officially and publicly declared. This trend is not unique to Egypt, and was confirmed by a survey conducted in early 2015 among young people in Arab countries overall that ranked the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians in fourth place in importance, far below terrorist threats and unemployment.²³ Second, basing the legitimacy of the el-Sisi regime on security and economic affairs is likely to cast the peaceful relations with Israel in a positive light, and create opportunities for Egyptian-Israeli cooperation involving common interests.

The true standing of the Palestinian problem on Egypt's agenda was illustrated at the most recent commemorations of the 1973 October War and Sinai Liberation Day. In el-Sisi's speech on the forty-first anniversary of the war, neither Israel nor Palestine was mentioned or even hinted at, and the memory of the war was dedicated entirely to the internal Egyptian situation. The president drew an analogy between the war economy in Egypt in 1967-1973 and the resilience now required from the Egyptian people to "save and build the motherland." In its current version, the 1973 campaign for national liberation has been converted into a campaign for economic prosperity, while the Israeli external enemy has been replaced by the internal Islamist enemy "who has no God, and desires the destruction of the Egyptian state, while believing it is engaged in a holy war."²⁴ Similarly, the president's speech on the anniversary of Sinai Liberation Day was devoted to the importance of defeating the threat of terrorism in Sinai and its economic development. The memory of past struggles against Israel was replaced by an empowering message for Egypt's future: "The liberation of Sinai constitutes a living example that peoples are capable of overcoming weakness and meeting the challenges of aggression."²⁵

In addition to the reduced acuteness of the Palestinian problem, the security threats posed to Egypt by Hamas in the Gaza Strip and jihad groups in Sinai generate common interests that enhance the potential for cooperation between Israel and Egypt that include an exchange of information and containment of weapons smuggling. As perceived by the el-Sisi regime, Hamas constitutes a danger to Egypt's security, due to its affinity to the Muslim Brotherhood, its ties to terrorist groups in Sinai, and its ability to arouse undesirable unrest in the Egyptian street by fanning the

flames of the conflict with Israel. With this in mind, the Egyptian position on Gaza, as expressed in an official release by the Egyptian State Information Service entitled “Egypt and the Palestinian Problem,” is consistent with Israel’s desire to maintain quiet in the south and prevent an arms buildup by Hamas. Together with a mild condemnation of the “Israeli occupation,” Hamas was warned that its refusal to accept Egyptian efforts to prolong the lull with Israel was liable to serve as a pretext for Israeli aggression. Hamas was also accused of “trading in the blood of Palestinians.” It was further emphasized that although “resistance to occupation” is a legitimate right, Hamas must consider fully whether it is achieving gains for the Palestinian people, or rather ruin, destruction, and loss of life.²⁶

Similarly, making the economy a key parameter of the regime’s legitimacy has created an opening for extending economic normalization between Israel and Egypt. Throughout Mubarak’s rule, the two countries’ attitude toward normalization was asymmetrical. While Israel regarded the development of normal relations in all areas as a tool for strengthening the foundations of peace with Egypt, as well as a symbol of reconciliation and acceptance, the Egyptian regime was wary of showing any signs of rapprochement, insisted on a limited “cold peace” format, and made further development of relations contingent on a comprehensive peace settlement. It appears, however, that the priority assigned to the economic question in the el-Sisi era is making inroads in the traditional Egyptian wall of opposition to normalization. In view of the energy crisis afflicting Egypt, in January 2015 Egyptian Minister of Petroleum Sherif Ismail advocated consideration of importing natural gas from Israel based on purely economic criteria: “Everything should be considered. Egypt’s interest, economic needs, and leading political and economic role in the region will be the determining factors in a decision to import gas from Israel. The interest of Egypt is the supreme consideration, and we must consider the matter from a strategic perspective.”²⁷ Striking the same tone, Egyptian playwright Ali Salem stated in a television interview that normalization was essential for Egypt, and called on the government to expand it “for the sake of the Egyptian people,” because “Egypt will make no progress, not even a step forward, without friendly relations with its neighbors, including Israel.”²⁸ In view of the Minister of Petroleum’s remarks, the views of Salem and others²⁹ in favor of warmer relations with Israel, which made them outcasts in the Mubarak era and sometimes resulted in sanctions being leveled against them, no longer sound like such a stark deviation from the party line. At

the same time, it is difficult to assess to what extent the el-Sisi regime will encourage private businessmen in Egypt to join the normalization process, a step that could reinforce the standing of peace with Israel as a “democratic peace” between peoples – one that also takes place outside of the tight supervision of the authoritarian regime.

From the el-Sisi regime’s perspective, there are additional reasons why the peace treaty with Israel constitutes an economic asset. As in the past, it enables Egypt to receive American aid, and allows it to channel its resources to internal problems. Furthermore, for the new Egypt, the peace treaty is a “calling card” presented to the world as part of Egypt’s efforts to rehabilitate its international status as a stable and secure regional power worthy of being an attractive target for capital investments, trade, and tourism. Already in his inauguration speech, el-Sisi emphasized that Egypt was a “country of peace” committed to its international treaties.³⁰ In the booklet *Egypt – The Peacemaker*, published by the Egyptian State Information Service as part of Egypt’s campaign for its selection as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council in October 2015, the peace treaty with Israel was portrayed as an integral part of the Egyptian-Pharaohic national identity. Egypt, it was explained, is a worthy candidate in view of its ongoing contribution to world peace, security, and stability, from the days of Ramses II to Sadat’s peace initiative and Egypt’s continual efforts to promote peace between Israel and the Palestinians.³¹ Similarly, an article by an Egyptian diplomat who previously served in Israel portrayed preserving the peace treaty as one of the “six pillars of Egyptian national security,” given its contribution to the prevention of wars, Egypt’s bolstered regional and international status, and construction of bridges with the world powers.³²

Conclusion and Recommendations

In view of the momentous economic and security challenges facing Egypt, the el-Sisi regime’s citing them as an important prop for its legitimacy is a brave if not risky choice. Among President el-Sisi’s promises to his people are the restoration of stability and security and the struggle against terrorism, together with improvement in employment, food supply, education, medicine, and housing; and economic, industrial, and agricultural development, including national projects, headed by the expansion of the Suez Canal. El-Sisi’s degree of success in translating his promises into reality are expected to play a crucial role – certainly more significant than democratic progress – in designing his regime’s political

and public legitimacy in the coming years. At the same time, excluding the Muslim Brotherhood from the political game might spur some Brotherhood supporters to embrace violent jihad, in an attempt to make terror attacks (such as the attack in Sheikh Zuweid in Sinai on July 1, 2015) a routine event and frustrate the regime's efforts to achieve calm and stability – and ultimately, undermine its legitimacy.

Egypt's current priorities give Israel a window of opportunity for expanding security and economic cooperation, which will contribute to the consolidation of the regime's standing. The common security interests have for some time yielded fruitful security cooperation between the two countries, reflected in part by an unprecedented Egyptian effort to destroy the smuggling tunnels between the Gaza Strip and Sinai. At the same time, some of Egypt's views concerning the Gaza Strip conflict with those of the Israeli government, or are at least in tension with them, including Egyptian opposition to any increase in Gaza's reliance on Egypt, and Egypt's wish to end the separation between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank and restore Fatah to power in Gaza. Both Jerusalem and Cairo will therefore profit if they manage to forge long term understandings, beyond regular security matters, concerning the desirable future status of the Gaza Strip.

The key role attributed by Egypt to economic development is also likely to create more openness than in the past toward expanded normalization with Israel through cooperation in the natural gas, water, technology, agricultural, industrial, and tourism sectors. Such cooperation is likely to make modest and measured progress, even with no breakthrough in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, but it is clear that efforts will prosper more when the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is on the back burner, and maximum achievement of the potential depends on the emergence of a new political reality. In this context, in a speech at the international conference on the reconstruction of Gaza in October 2014, President el-Sisi mentioned the Arab Peace Initiative as a possible starting point for promoting a "peace that will ensure stability and prosperity, and turn the dream of coexistence into reality."³³

Notes

The author would like to thank Ayellet Yehiav, Center for Political Research, Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs for her assistance.

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