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WHAT EGYPT'S PRESIDENT SISI REALLY THINKS

Daniel Pipes

[Middle East Forum](#), Fall 2014

Former air marshal Husni Mubarak, now 86, had ruled Egypt for thirty years when his military colleagues forced him from office in 2011. Three years and many upheavals later, those same colleagues replaced his successor with retired field marshal Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, 59. The country, in short, made a grand round-trip, going from military ruler to military ruler, simply dropping down a generation. This return raises basic questions: After all the hubbub, how much has actually changed? Does Sisi differ from Mubarak, for example, in such crucial matters as attitudes toward democracy and Islam, or is he but a younger clone? Sisi remains something of a mystery. He plays his cards close to the vest; one observer who watched his presidential inaugural speech on television on June 8 described it as "loaded with platitudes and very long." He left few traces as he zoomed through the ranks in three years, going from director of Military Intelligence and Reconnaissance to become the youngest member of the ruling military council and, then, rapidly ascending to chief of staff, defense minister, and president.

Fortunately, a document exists that reveals Sisi's views from well before his presidency: An essay dated March 2006, when he attended the U.S. Army War College in Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania. His 5,000-word English-language term paper, "Democracy in the Middle East," has minimal intrinsic value but holds

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enormous interest by providing the candid views of an obscure but highly Islamist/soon and unexpectedly to be elected pharaoh of Egypt. While one cannot discount careerism in a term paper, Sisi's generally assertive and opinionated tone—as well as his negative comments about the United States and the Mubarak regime—suggest that he expressed himself freely. In the paper, Sisi makes two main arguments: Democracy is good for the Middle East; and for it to succeed, many conditions must first be achieved. Sisi discusses other topics as well, which offer valuable insights into his thinking.

Sisi endorses democracy for practical, rather than philosophical, reasons: It just works better than a dictatorship. "Many in the Middle East feel that current and previous autocratic governments have not produced the expected progress." Democracy has other benefits, as well: It reduces unhappiness with government and narrows the vast gap between ruler and ruled, both of which he sees contributing to the region's backwardness. In all, democracy can accomplish much for the region and those who promote it "do have an opportunity now in the Middle East." In parallel, Sisi accepts the free market because it works better than socialism: "[M]any Middle East countries attempted to sustain government-controlled markets instead of free markets and as a result no incentive developed to drive the economy." It is reasonable, even predictable that Gen. Sisi would view democracy and free markets in terms of their efficacy. But without a genuine commitment to these systems, will President Sisi carry through with them, even at the expense of his own power and the profits from the socialized military industries run by his former colleagues?...

Sisi lays down three requirements for democracy to succeed in the Middle East: It must adapt to Islam. He describes "the religious nature" of the Middle East as "one of the most important factors" affecting the region's politics. Islam makes democracy there so different from its Western prototype that it "may bear little resemblance" to the original. Therefore, it "is not necessarily going to evolve upon a Western template" but "will have its own shape or form coupled with stronger religious ties." Those religious ties mean that Middle Eastern democracy cannot be secular; separating mosque and state is "unlikely to be favorably received by the vast majority of Middle Easterners," who are devout Muslims. Rather, democracy must be established "upon Islamic beliefs" and "sustain the religious base." The

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executive, legislative, and judicial branches all must "take Islamic values into consideration when carrying out their duties." Presumably, this translates into the Islamic authorities under President Sisi reviewing proposed laws to safeguard Islamic values, regardless of what the majority of voters wants.

(2) The West should help, but not interfere. The West looms large for Sisi, who fears its negative influence even as he seeks its support. He has many worries: The great powers want a democracy resembling Western institutions rather than accepting a democracy "founded on Islamic beliefs." He interprets the then-named global war on terror as "really just a mask for establishing Western democracy in the Middle East." To meet their energy needs, Westerners "attempt to influence and dominate the region." The wars they started in Iraq and Afghanistan need to be resolved before democracy can take root. Support for Israel raises suspicions about their motives. Sisi's major concern is U.S. rejection of democracies that "may not be sympathetic to Western interests." He demands that the West not interfere when its adversaries win elections: "The world cannot demand democracy in the Middle East, yet denounce what it looks like because a less than pro-Western party legitimately assumes office." Translation: Do not call President Sisi anti-democratic when he pursues policies Washington dislikes...

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Daniel Pipes is president of the Middle East Forum

and a CIJR Academic Fellow

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EGYPT, ABBAS, REFUGEES, AND PEACE

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Jonathan S. Tobin

Commentary Magazine, Sept. 4, 2014

When the Egyptian government reached out to Palestinian Authority leader Mahmoud Abbas recently, one surprising and one predictable thing happened. The tale of this offer and its rejection tells us all we need to know about Palestinian politics and the changing political landscape of the Middle East. The Palestinian Ma'an News Agency reported today that in a speech given to members of his Fatah Party on Sunday, Abbas said that the Egyptian government had made a startling offer to the PA. The Egyptians told Abbas that they were willing to cede a 618-square mile area of the Sinai adjacent to Gaza for resettlement of the Palestinian refugees, an idea first floated by former Israeli National Security Adviser Giora Eiland. "They [the Egyptians] are prepared to receive all the refugees, [saying] 'let's end the refugee story'," Abbas was quoted by Ma'an news agency as saying. The Palestinian leader noted that the idea was first proposed to the Egyptian government in 1956, but was furiously rejected by Palestinian leaders such as PLO militant Muhammad Youssef Al-Najjar and poet Muin Bseiso who "understood the danger of this." "Now this is being proposed once again. A senior leader in Egypt said: 'a refuge must be found for the Palestinians and we have all this open land.' This was said to me personally. But it's illogical for the problem to be solved at Egypt's expense. We won't have it," Abbas said.

The remarkable thing about this is the decision of the Sisi government to embrace such a practical solution to the long, sad tale of the 1948 Palestinian refugees and their descendants. Like the rest of the Arab world, the Egyptians were never interested in resettling the refugees anywhere, let alone on a huge swath of the Sinai next door to Gaza. Not even during the 19 years during which Egypt illegally occupied Gaza and Jordan illegally occupied the West Bank and part of Jerusalem did either nation seek to ameliorate the suffering of the refugees by offering them the full rights of citizenship or a home anywhere but in the State of Israel. The same applies to every other Arab and Muslim country. All stuck by the demand of a "right of return" aimed at destroying the newborn Jewish state which was at that time absorbing an equal number of Jewish refugees that had fled or been thrown out of their homes in the Arab and Muslim world. Israel's enemies purposely kept

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the Palestinian refugees in order to use them as props in their never-ending war on Israel.

Egypt's offer was, of course, not merely aimed at finally doing the right thing by the refugees. The Hamas stronghold in Gaza is a threat to the Egyptian military government in Cairo because of its alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood. They also recognize how toxic the situation in Gaza—where hundreds of thousands of the descendants of the refugees live—and the need to get these people out of a bad situation that is only made worse by their exploitation by the Hamas terrorist government of the strip. Resettling the refugees could be the first step in neutralizing Hamas as well as in reforming the political culture of the Palestinians to the point where it might be possible for them to start thinking about making peace instead of sticking to demands for a return to Israel. That is something that could only happen after the demands in Hamas's charter are fulfilled: the destruction of the Jewish state and the deportation/genocide of its Jewish population. But in making this proposal, Egypt, which was the first Arab country to make peace with Israel, wasn't just seeking to deal with the threat from Hamas and its jihadist allies to the Sisi regime. It was making clear that the new unofficial alliance between Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan and Israel isn't mere talk. These Arab countries haven't suddenly fallen in love with Zionism. The Jewish state is very unpopular even in Jordan, which has a peace treaty with it and also signed an agreement to import Israeli natural gas this week. But all these moderate Arab governments understand that the real threat to their future comes not from Israel but from Iran and its Islamist allies in the Middle East, such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad.

PA leader Mahmoud Abbas is nominally in the same boat as these governments since he knows that Hamas's goal is to topple him in the West Bank just as they did in Gaza in 2007. He also has an interest in defusing the Gaza tinderbox and offering some alternative to the "right of return" to a refugee population whose adamant opposition to peace with Israel is one of the primary reasons why the PA has rejected offers of statehood and peace with Israel over the last 15 years. If Abbas is serious about peace with Israel, as his apologists in the West and in Israel insist he is, this is an offer that he should have jumped at. But he didn't, and from the sound of it, it was not even a close call. Why? Let's first dismiss the idea that

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the offer was refused out of solicitude for Egypt as Abbas said. As Egyptians always used to say back in the decades when they were fighting wars against Israel, the Palestinians were always willing to fight Israel to the last Egyptian. Rather, the refusal reflects Abbas's recognition that although Hamas has followed in the path of his old boss Yasir Arafat and led the Palestinian people to more death and destruction with no hope in sight, it is the Islamists who seem to represent the wishes of the Palestinian people, not the so-called moderates that he leads. Any acceptance of any refugee solution that does not involve "return" to what is now Israel is the political third rail of Palestinian politics. Indeed, the refugees themselves are adamant about their rejection of any solution short of "victory" over Israel.

That is why Abbas, though supposedly in favor of a two-state solution, has rejected it every time the Israelis have offered the PA independence over almost all of the West Bank, Gaza, and even a share of Jerusalem. As much as we are told that in the aftermath of the latest war in Gaza that the time of the moderates is upon us, Palestinian opinion polls indicate that they are still backing Hamas. That means they won't make peace with Israel no matter where its borders are drawn. So long as the refugees remain homeless, when Palestinians speak of Israeli occupation, they are clearly referring to pre-1967 Israel, not the West Bank.

Egypt's offer to the PA is a healthy sign that many in the Arab world are rising above their hatred for Israel and ready to make peace, if not for the sake of the Jews then to help them combat the Islamist terror threat. That is a remarkable thing that should be celebrated. The Palestinian refusal is, however, a very unremarkable confirmation of the fact that they remain unready and unwilling to make peace.

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SHOULD WASHINGTON WITHHOLD AID TO EGYPT?

Yehuda Blanga

[*Middle East Forum*](#), Fall 2014

Two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the attendant weakening of the radical Arab camp, and three-and-a-half decades after the conclusion of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty and the removal of the foremost threat to Egyptian security, Cairo's continued acquisition of thousands of tanks and hundreds of fighting aircraft seems to make no sense. Yet Washington's withholding of \$1.3 billion in annual military aid following the Egyptian army's July 2013 ouster of President Mohamed Morsi sparked an angry retort, with the military regime threatening to turn to its former Russian patron. Why does Cairo continue to adhere to this anachronistic military and strategic *raison d'être*? Has the U.S. administration overplayed its hand by assuming that the threat of military aid suspension could be leveraged to obtain political influence? And what are the implications of this episode for Egypt and the Middle East as a whole?

Despite its 1979 peace agreement with Israel, Egypt has yet to internalize the idea that it is at peace with its neighbor to the east. What prevails between the two countries is a "cold peace" as the Mubarak regime made no attempt during its 30-year reign to further the normalization of bilateral relations or to modify public opinion and perceptions of Israeli citizens in particular and of Jews in general. Thus, "establishment Egypt" and, all the more so, the public at large still view Israel as a potential adversary with whom strategic parity is imperative. Former defense minister Muhammad Tantawi alluded to this in his remarks to the People's Assembly in February 1996: Peace does not mean relaxation. The endless development of military systems and the arms race prove that the survival is for the strongest. ... Military strength has grown to be a prerequisite of peace.

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Accordingly, the Egyptian armed forces have conducted large-scale exercises that simulate a frontal attack on the country—usually from the east. In the three largest such exercises—held in September 1996, April 1998, and February 2009—Egyptian troops simulated parrying an Israeli invasion by transitioning from defensive to offensive operations, crossing the Suez Canal, and regaining full control of the Sinai Peninsula. As a result, the Egyptian defense establishment has pursued a policy of strategic parity with Israel, manifested in a prolonged and comprehensive modernization program that began in the early 1980s and continued for more than twenty years. By the end of the process, the Egyptian armed forces had been transformed into a modern Western military organization and had cast off the Soviet influence that dated back to the mid-1950s. As of 2014, Egypt has the tenth-largest military in the world with approximately 460,000 soldiers in the standing army...

Since 1979, Egypt—along with Saudi Arabia—has been one of two cornerstones of U.S. policy in the Arab world. It has served as a mediator in Israeli-Arab and Israeli-Palestinian peace talks; it has worked to moderate and counter trends toward radicalization in the Arab world; and it provides military support for U.S. forces stationed in the region. Egypt's geostrategic importance lies in the fact that it is a bridge between East and West, located as it is at the intersection of the Middle East, North Africa, and Asia, and most importantly through its control of the Suez Canal. In order to move quickly between the Mediterranean Sea and the Persian Gulf, the U.S. fleet transits the Suez Canal with permission from the Egyptian authorities. Any delay or restrictions would require the United States government to station naval forces near the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa and round it in order to reach the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. As a result, Washington would appear to have a vital interest in maintaining good ties with Cairo, despite the regime changes there since 2011.

The other main component of the continued military assistance to Egypt has to do with benefits to the U.S. military industry. Every year since 1986, Congress has approved US\$1.3 billion in military assistance to Egypt, the second-largest aid package after that given to Israel. But the Egyptian military does not receive this

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sum in cash: As in the Israeli case, a sizable portion of that largesse to the Islamic
American military contractors who assemble tanks and warplanes and send them
on to Egypt. Since 1986, Washington has transferred 221 F-16 fighter jets with a
total value of \$8 billion to Egypt as part of its military aid package despite the fact
that U.S. military advisors have been saying for years that Cairo had more than
enough planes and tanks and does not need any more. Likewise, over a thousand
Abrams tanks have been transferred to Egypt since 1992 at a total cost of \$3.9
billion though close to 200 of them are in mothballs and have never been used.
Such an arrangement can have economic benefits within Egypt as well: The Abu
Zaabal tank repair factory (aka Factory 200) in Helwan is the site of a joint
production of Abrams tanks that employs thousands of local
workers...

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AP INTERVIEW: EL-SISSI, EGYPT AND THE TERROR FIGHT

[Washington Post](#), Sept. 20, 2014

Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi is feeling vindicated by the world's alarm over Islamic extremism that is fueling wars and bloodshed across the Middle East. The former army general has faced widespread international criticism for his ouster last year of Egypt's first freely elected president and his ferocious crackdown on Islamists that has killed more than 1,000 and imprisoned more than 20,000. A year later, after el-Sissi's election as president, his critics fear he is leading his country into autocracy, with pro-democracy dissenters jailed or silenced. But in an interview with The Associated Press — his first with the foreign media since he took office in June — el-Sissi insists all his actions were to combat militancy and save the country from civil war. He said Egypt is a model for fighting

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terrorism and that the U.S.-led coalition to fight the Islamic State group in Iraq and Syria should take note. “More than a year ago, I warned that the region was heading to great danger from extremist thought,” he said. “It didn’t receive proper attention until the events in Iraq took place and the Islamic State swept over the Iraqi-Syrian borders.”...

Washington is looking for support by Arab nations for its strategy to strike the Islamic State group. But at the same time, it has been critical of Egypt’s crackdown on Islamists, withdrawing some military aid and straining a longtime alliance. El-Sissi makes his first visit to the United States as president to attend the U.N. General Assembly in the coming week. So far there are no plans for talks with President Barack Obama. El-Sissi said he is ready to help the U.S.-led coalition. Asked if Egypt might provide airspace access or logistical support for airstrikes, he said, “We are completely committed to giving support. We will do whatever is required.” But he appeared to rule out sending troops, saying Iraq’s military is strong enough to fight the militants and that “it’s not a matter of ground troops from abroad.” Most importantly, he said, extremism across the region must be tackled — not just the Islamic State. He warned that the greatest danger came from foreign fighters flooding into the region’s conflicts, saying they will eventually return to their home countries — including in Europe — and spread extremism there. He said they “must be prevented” from entering the region. He said Egypt and Algeria were cooperating “to restore stability in Libya,” but would not comment on reports Egypt had cooperated in airstrikes on militants in the North African nation. He confirmed for the first time that two deadly attacks on Egyptian troops in its western desert were carried out by militants who crossed into Egypt from Libya. He said any strategy must also deal with the causes of militancy by fighting poverty, improving education and moderating religious discourse. “When all that happens together, it will bring a decisive result.”

His comments seemed a contradiction: So far, Egypt’s main approach has been the heavy-handed crushing of Islamists, along with other critics, bringing it international condemnation. But the comments also pointed to a characteristic the career military intelligence officer has shown ever since he rose to prominence by ousting Islamist President Mohammed Morsi in July 2013: A self-confidence that he can dramatically change Egypt and that others will fall in line. His government is

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planning economic reforms that would reduce massive subsidies for food and foodstuffs and, he says, funnel the money instead into education and health. El-Sissi said Egyptians set an example for the region, saying they had supported the Brotherhood and elected them to power but then turned against them after Morsi's year in office. He said Egyptians realized that the idea of political Islam advocated by the Brotherhood "won't work in Egypt." Millions joined protests against Morsi, leading to his ouster. If he had not stepped in to remove Morsi and the Brotherhood, Egypt "would be like all the countries that now suffer from widespread violence, internal conflicts and civil wars," he said, referring to Syria, Libya and Iraq. In the face of criticism over a range of human rights concerns, el-Sissi argued that the need to establish security in Egypt — where Islamic militants have waged a campaign of violence — and repair the economy took priority. Rights groups have condemned a draconian law last year that effectively bans protests by requiring a police permit. Several democracy advocates have been handed long prison sentences under the law. "I would never say that what is happening in Egypt is ideal," he said. "Of course, I want there to be a very large degree of freedom. But we want to do that without hurting our nation. Our nation is in very difficult circumstances. You see what's going on in the region," he said...

He argued the number of arrests was not high, saying "security agencies have shown great patience." The protest law, he said, was the same as ones in Europe that require police permits. Egyptian police, however, rarely give permission for gatherings. Justifying the past year's crackdown, he said the Brotherhood had "chosen confrontation." But he said followers of the group could participate in politics in the future if they renounce violence. Parliamentary elections are to be held by the end of the year, he said. The Brotherhood and its political party, however, have been banned. "To anyone who doesn't use violence, Egypt is very forgiving," he said. "The chance for participation is there." He also said he cannot interfere with the judiciary in the case of three journalists from *Al-Jazeera* English television who have been sentenced to seven years in prison over terrorism-related charges. Their trial was dismissed by human rights groups as a farce, and their convictions brought heavy international criticism. "If I had been in charge at the time, I never would have let the issue go so far. I would have deported them," he said — though one of the three is Egyptian. But he said that if Egypt is to have an independent judiciary, "We can't accept criticism or comment" on court rulings...

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[Russia and Egypt Agree to \\$3.5B Arms Deal](#): *Jewish Press*, Sept. 17, 2014—Russia and Egypt have reached a preliminary agreement for a \$3.5 billion arms deals, according to a Reuters report.

[Understanding the Israeli-Egyptian-Saudi Alliance](#): Caroline B. Glick, *Jerusalem Post*, Aug. 21, 2014 — Hamas's war with Israel is not a stand-alone event.

[The Mirage of Political Islam](#): Mustapha Tlili, *New York Times*, June 3, 2014—“You must maintain your power through consent, not coercion; you must respect the rights of minorities, and participate with a spirit of tolerance and compromise; you must place the interests of your people and the legitimate workings of the political process above your party. Without these ingredients, elections alone do not make true democracy.”

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