President Sisi's Worldview

by Marc Sievers **(/experts/marc-sievers)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Marc Sievers (/experts/marc-sievers)

Marc J. Sievers, a career member of the senior foreign service with the rank of minister-counselor, was the Diplomat-in-Residence at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy in 2014-15. Mr. Sievers is the first person to be appointed to this one-year position, which is a collaborative program with the U.S. Department of State.

Articles & Testimony

A former senior official at the U.S. embassy in Cairo describes how Sisi's background is shaping his approach to domestic politics, counterterrorism, Israel, and other issues.

Egypt's former defense minister and current president, Abdul Fattah al-Sisi, is not yet a well-known personality outside of Egypt. In addition to his bilateral meeting with President Obama in late September, the Egyptian government took advantage of Sisi's attendance at the United Nations General Assembly to arrange a series of meetings with American analysts, pundits, business leaders, and interest groups to formally introduce the country's new president to American audiences perceived as having an influence on U.S.-Egypt relations. Yet Sisi remains the subject of conflicting and contradictory reports. For example, he is the nemesis of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, but he is also known to be a pious Muslim who was appointed to the position of defense minister by former president Muhammad Morsi as part of an effort to assert greater control over the military. The following is an attempt by an American diplomat who had the opportunity to attend a number of meetings with Sisi over the past year to offer some observations on one of the Middle East's most important emerging leaders.

Sisi is first and foremost a product of the Egyptian military, where he spent much of his professional life since becoming a military cadet reportedly at age 15. Like most senior Egyptian military officers, Sisi comes from a traditional Muslim middle-class family, although unlike many officers who grew up in villages in the Nile Delta region, Sisi was born and raised in Cairo -- first in the Gamaliya quarter of Islamic Cairo made famous in Naguib Mahfouz's Cairo Trilogy, and later in the modern urban suburb of Heliopolis, where he continues to live.

Certainly part of Sisi's appeal to many Egyptians is his ability to communicate directly in colorful colloquial Arabic, even while he has mastered the eloquent formal Arabic used for official occasions. Moreover, his attitude toward Islam, as he has explained both publicly and privately, is that of a traditional believer who is comfortably devout in his daily life but rejects the contemporary politicization of religion by Islamist preachers and movements. It is worth

noting that when Morsi appointed Sisi as defense minister in August 2012, replacing Field Marshal Muhammad Hussein Tantawi, Cairo's always-imaginative rumor mill churned out the idea that Sisi was actually a closet supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood. Within less than a year, Sisi ordered the arrest of Morsi and most of the Muslim Brotherhood's leadership. Sisi now insists that the Muslim Brotherhood is a terrorist organization and the original source of Islamist terrorism, but initially, as defense minister, he appeared to view the military as a mediator between Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood on one hand and Egyptian non-Islamist political parties on the other. As mediation efforts failed and violence in the streets became routine, the military began to issue statements that they would "not allow Egypt to enter a dark tunnel." Sisi insists the military ousted Morsi to avert a civil war, but by that time, it was clear that the Muslim Brotherhood also perceived Sisi and the military as their primary foe. Morsi made many mistakes as president, but no doubt his most serious error of judgment was to view Sisi as a potential sympathizer due to his reputation for piety.

Regarding the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), Sisi urges Western governments to look for and shut down the recruitment centers that operate among Muslim communities in the West. Sisi insists that the Egyptian military's counterterrorism campaign in the Sinai Peninsula and perhaps over the border in Libya is part of the same battle against Islamist extremism that the United States is leading against ISIS. Sisi reacted sharply and defiantly to the October 24 jihadist attack on an Egyptian military position in the Sinai that resulted in the death of at least thirty soldiers, declaring a state of emergency in parts of North Sinai, accusing unnamed foreign powers of financing the attack, and vowing to wage "extensive war" against terrorism. Reported Egyptian intervention in Libya, while officially denied by the government, probably marks a new departure from the cautious policies toward trans-border security threats followed by Hosni Mubarak, Tantawi, and Morsi, demonstrating the seriousness with which the new leadership takes the threats posed by the presence of armed terrorist organizations in the Sinai and Libya's ungoverned desert. Echoing the views of Egypt's Islamic establishment, Sisi insists that extremist organizations exploit religion and religious ideas for political ends but do not represent a true understanding of Islam.

At the same time, he continues to say that there is room for the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists not involved in violence to rejoin the political process. Efforts by Egyptians and others to promote dialogue between Sisi's government and some remaining Brotherhood representatives or other supporters of Morsi have gone nowhere so far, but it will be interesting to watch the extent to which Brotherhood/pro-Morsi elements will be allowed to participate in upcoming parliamentary elections as independents, or if the Brotherhood will decide the boycott the process entirely.

Sisi has made clear that his priorities as president are to restore order and revive the economy. His statements on Egypt's economy indicate his understanding that the current subsidy system is unsustainable, and his first initiative as president was to implement a series of subsidy reforms that had been carefully planned by civilian economists. Sisi's relations with Egypt's business elite will be one key to whether his economic policies succeed. Some of his statements indicate a belief that the military should continue to have an active role in the economy, especially in the development of infrastructure. Given his military background and education, he will need first-rate economic advice to get the policies right. His ambitious plans to expand the Suez Canal have been well received by the Egyptian public, probably more due to the project's nationalist symbolism than to its economic viability.

Political reconciliation is not at the top of the agenda, and in Egypt's current hypersensitive nationalist environment, the term "reconciliation" is perceived by many as taboo because it implies that the Brotherhood remains a legitimate partner for dialogue. The government's crackdown on political dissent, including the conviction of Aljazeera journalists and a number of prominent left-wing and liberal activists, has generated considerable international criticism. But among most Egyptians it appears likely that the success or failure of Sisi's economic policies will play a larger role in determining whether he will be able to retain popular support. Unlike Mubarak, Sisi states openly that

there has been a fundamental change in the relationship between Egypt's rulers and its citizens. Sisi reportedly told a group of French parliamentarians, "If the Egyptian people decide they don't want me, I will go." Whether or not this statement is sincere, it represents an interesting acknowledgement that Egyptian rulers can no longer take popular legitimacy for granted.

Since the July 1952 overthrow of King Farouk by a group of military officers, military men have ruled Egypt for all but one year. Sisi fits the pattern in many ways, but in others he may represent a transitional figure. He is a graduate of the U.S. Army War College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, and speaks warmly of his many years of close cooperation with the U.S. military, a marked contrast from the Soviet-trained Tantawi, his immediate predecessor as defense minister. Yet he is also a proud nationalist who insists that Egypt needs to develop its relations with other powers, such as Russia and China. And of course Sisi has made restoring Egypt's traditionally close ties to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates a strategic imperative. Yet despite repeated media reports of a massive new arms deal with Russia, it appears that so far, Sisi's Moscow connection is more a matter of exploring options than a strategic shift, and Egyptian government spokesmen repeatedly state that Cairo is not seeking to replace one partner with another.

Meanwhile, Sisi's close security cooperation with Israel in the Sinai and his understanding of Israeli security concerns in Gaza are underlined by private Egyptian military and intelligence expressions of appreciation for Israel's supportive attitude. The October 24 attack in the Sinai led the Egyptian government to postpone hosting Israeli-Palestinian negotiations on Gaza that were scheduled to be held in Cairo, and it will likely also lead to further behind-the-scenes Egyptian-Israeli security cooperation. The Egyptian government has indicated that it suspects Palestinian groups in Gaza of involvement in the attack, but the basis of these charges is not clear. Despite new tensions between Egypt and Hamas, and barring some major breakthrough between Israel and the Palestinians, it appears unlikely that the new security cooperation will lead to a more openly friendly political relationship with Israel.

Even if it is no longer a U.S. client state, Egypt remains a strategic prize and a key element of Middle East stability. At least for the next few years, the direction it takes is likely to be determined by the fate of Sisi and his policies.

Marc Sievers is the Diplomat-in-Residence at The Washington Institute and former U.S. deputy chief of mission and charge d'affaires in Cairo. The views in this article are his own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Department of State or the U.S. government. ❖

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