Portrait of the General as a Not-So-Young Grad Student

by **Eric Trager (/experts/eric-trager)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Eric Trager (/experts/eric-trager)

Eric Trager was the Esther K. Wagner Fellow at The Washington Institute.

Articles & Testimony

Egypt's army chief is not an Islamist -- in fact, his work at the U.S. Army War College suggests he may be a Mubarak clone.

What does Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Sisi really think about democracy in the Middle East? From the moment President Mohamed Morsy promoted Sisi as Egypt's defense minister in August 2012, rumors have swirled about his supposed Islamist leanings. The army chief was said to be particularly devout, and the fact that Morsy passed over more senior generals in selecting him fueled claims that Sisi was a Muslim Brotherhood sympathizer. Even after he deposed Morsy, observers of Egyptian politics have wondered whether he hopes to use his newfound power to implement an Islamist agenda.

A 2006 paper Sisi wrote while studying at the U.S. Army War College, titled "Democracy in the Middle East," has garnered much attention in this regard. Naval Postgraduate School professor Robert Springborg contended in *Foreign Affairs* that the document "reads like a tract produced by the Muslim Brotherhood," and "embraces a more radical view of the proper place of religion in an Islamic democracy."

This view of Sisi as an Islamist may prove accurate, because little is known of the sunglass-sporting general who is now Egypt's de facto leader. But after thoroughly examining Sisi's paper -- **which you can download here (PDF) (http://www.foreignpolicy.com/files/war-college-paper.pdf)** -- I found little evidence of Islamism. If anything, the paper reflects the boilerplate, nationalistic rhetoric of Mubarak-era Egyptian officials -- not the theocratic rhetoric of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The paper is not a strident manifesto, but rather reads like the sort of work graduate students routinely produce when a rote assignment is due. It weighs in at 11 loosely-spaced pages -- less than half the length of the paper that his deputy Sedki Sobhy wrote for the same assignment -- and is quite disorganized.

Sisi penned this paper just as President George W. Bush's "Freedom Agenda" peaked. The previous year witnessed successful elections in Iraq, the Palestinian Authority, and Lebanon, while Washington also successfully pushed

Hosni Mubarak to hold Egypt's first-ever multi-candidate presidential elections (sham though they were). But in 2006, much of this progress was reversed: The Iraq War's violence derailed hopes the country would quickly emerge as a stable democracy, and Hamas won the Palestinian parliamentary elections. The Mubarak regime highlighted these failures to resist further pressure to liberalize, arguing that America's attempts to bring democracy to the Middle East were not only intrusive, but undermined the very stability that democracy required.

Sisi's paper echoes the Mubarak regime's arguments. It primarily lays the blame for the persistence of Middle Eastern autocracy at the feet of outside powers. Given the region's "huge oil and natural gas reserves," the general writes, "the Middle East is under constant pressure to satisfy multiple country agendas that may not coincide with the needs or wants of the Middle Eastern people."

Sisi argues that the Arab-Israeli conflict and U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan also undermine the prospects for democracy in the region. "[T]he existing conflict and tension needs to be resolved before democracy can be more fully accepted by the people of the area," he writes. U.S. foreign policy, Sisi argues, has only enhanced Middle Easterners' skepticism about democracy, due to concerns "that the Global War on Terrorism is really just a mask for establishing Western democracy in the Middle East." He also highlights American support for non-democratic regimes, and proceeds to list them -- without, of course, mentioning Mubarak's Egypt.

What, you may ask, does the war in Iraq or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have to do with whether Egypt holds fair and free elections? Sisi never really says. At one point, he tries to link these conflicts to socio-economic factors: "Poverty in the Middle East is driven by a number of factors that include war, for example, Arab-Israeli conflict, Iran-Iraq war, Morocco-[Western] Sahara conflict and Syria-Lebanon, to name a few," he contends.

But Sisi doesn't really flesh out in any detail how such conflicts have contributed to the region's poverty. And the inclusion of the rarely mentioned Western Sahara conflict -- as a cause of regional poverty and thus autocracy, no less! -- suggests Sisi is trying to satisfy a grad school paper word count, not offering a meaningful view into his ideological outlook. Moreover, the very notion that democratization cannot occur until all the region's conflicts are solved is a classic Mubarak-era can-kicking strategy.

Sisi does not only focus on war and poverty -- he also lists a host of internal factors that undermine democratization in the Middle East. Some of these are particularly interesting in light of recent events: Sisi notes, for example, that "many of the nation's [sic] police forces and military forces are loyal to the ruling party," and that "there is no guaranty [sic] that the police and military forces will align with the emerging ruling parties" in nascent democracies. That latter argument may be the only point on which Sisi and the Muslim Brotherhood can now agree.

Sisi was not blind to the failings of Middle Eastern governments. He notes that weak economies force people to "do what they need to do to get by," which catalyzes corruption and "creates cultural behavior that is contrary to the values upon which a democracy is based." And he admits that "bloated public payrolls stifle individual initiative and tends [sic] to solidify the powerbase of ruling parties."

But for the most part, Sisi falls back on the Mubarak-era pabulum that Middle Easterners are just not ready for democracy. "Changing a political culture is always hard," he writes. "It is one thing to say that a democracy is a preferred form of government, but quite another to adjust to its requirements and accept some of the risks that go along with it."

He notes that democracy will affect the economic, religious, media, and legal systems of the region -- and that adjusting to these changes "will take time." He warns of trying to move too fast on any of these fronts: Rapid change "can affect the stability of the region as American motives may be perceived as being self-centered and not supportive of the Middle Eastern way of life," he cautions.

It's in the context of declaring the Middle East unready for democracy that Sisi argues that Islam is at odds with

Western democracy. "Democracy, as a secular entity, is unlikely to be favorably received by the vast majority of Middle Easterners, who are devout followers of the Islamic faith," he writes.

Sisi argues that the people of the Middle East only view democracy "as a positive endeavor so long as it builds up the country and sustains the religious base versus devaluing religion and creating instability." For this reason, Middle Eastern democracy "is not necessarily going to evolve upon a Western template." This is a jumbled way of saying what Egyptian officials routinely told Westerners under Mubarak: If you push democracy, our people will view this as an affront. Let us define democracy for ourselves -- when we're ready.

This is when Sisi begins sounding a bit like an Islamist. "Democracy cannot be understood in the Middle East without an understanding of the concept of El Kalafa [the caliphate]," he writes, referring to the historic era covering the first four decades of Islam (he writes, incorrectly, "seventy years"). This period, he says, reflected the values of "fairness, justice, equality, unity and charity."

Sisi then argues that restoring the ideals of this period "is always at the forefront of the Middle Eastern society," and proposes two Islamic concepts that, in his view, could reconcile Islam with democracy. The first is *al-bayaa*, which he incorrectly defines as "the election process" for choosing a caliph -- in fact, it's a process through which one swears allegiance to the caliph. The second is *shura*, which he defines as "an advisory and oversight body" for the caliph.

But more than reading like an Islamist tract, this section reeks of typical grad student laziness. Sisi never explains how *bayaa* and *shura* can be incorporated into democracy, transliterates these concepts with remarkable imprecision (he uses the definite article twice), and cites this entire section to a single source -- a book by prominent Salafist Sheikh Abdul Rahman Abdel Khaliq, whom he fails to mention in the footnotes.

Meanwhile, the phrases and ideas that are standard in true Islamist discourses are nowhere to be found. For example, Sisi never talks about implementing the sharia (Islamic law), or having a sharia reference. Nor is there any echo of the Brotherhood's "Islam is the solution" slogan.

Sisi's paper, in other words, doesn't reflect Islamists' obsession with constructing an Islamic state -- it reflects Mubarak's obsession with preventing Western pressure to democratize. For Sisi, the question is not whether Islam and democracy can coexist, but "whether the rest of the world will be able to accept a democracy in the Middle East founded on Islamic beliefs."

It's an especially ironic sentence to read today. For better or worse, the international community was prepared to accept a state in Egypt "founded on Islamic beliefs." Sisi and millions of his fellow Egyptians, however, were not.

Eric Trager is the Wagner fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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