COMMENTARY

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Egypt's Third Way: a Blend of Islamism and Militarism

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T he United States quest for stability in the Middle East and North Africa that amounted to support for autocratic regimes at the expense of America's projection of its democratic values was in part fuelled by fear. This is the fear that changes in countries like Saudi Arabia threatened to open the door to the replacement of conservative, pro-Western rulers by military officers steeped in a vision that combined nationalism and Islamism.

Significant elements of this vision tap into a widespread sentiment among Egyptians and Arabs across the Middle East and North Africa and are not alien to Islamist thinking, even if many would not want to see Islamism literally implemented. This hybrid vision can be traced back to the emergence of the new generation of military officers in the last two decades.

Insights from Al Sisi's papers

A look at papers produced by Egyptian military strongman General Abdel Fattah Al Sisi and other senior officers as part of their training and education at US military institutions suggests that the US fear may become reality. It also explains why Morsi last year put his faith in these commanders, replacing the military's Mubarak-era old guard with this new crop of officers who shared his adherence to conservative and Islamic values. And it provides a reasoning for the military's apparent decision to not simply remove Morsi from office but to attempt to significantly weaken, if not destroy, the Muslim Brotherhood.

In effect, the dispute between the military and the Brotherhood, like the rivalry in Turkey between Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and self-exiled cleric Fethullalh Gulen, amounts to a struggle for power among Islamists. The difference with Egypt is that one party to the

dispute is the military, along with the security forces, the most powerful institution in the country.

The thinking of these military officers further suggests that Saudi Arabia's support for the military's ousting of Morsi was rooted in more than a shared rejection of the Muslim Brotherhood. The kingdom and the Egyptian military have similar visions of an authoritarian state grounded in Islamic values that maintains close relations with the US and yet is conscious of the public's anti-American sentiment and critical of its policies in the Middle East.

Israeli-Palestinian peace becomes a necessity

The rise of a class of Islamist and nationalist-minded military officers in Egypt gives urgency to renew US attempts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian dispute that figures prominently in the officers' thinking. Resolving the dispute would potentially remove a key irritant in US-Arab and US-Muslim relations and put those relationships on a new footing. Despite widespread pessimism, US negotiators are banking on the fact the Arab uprisings make peace more important for both Israel and the Palestine Authority.

Also the renewed peace effort is backed by a majority of Arab states, Hamas is weakened by Morsi's downfall and a resolution of the dispute would enable Israel to significantly improve its internationally tarnished image.

Palestine figured prominently in a 10,000-word paper entitled 'the U.S. military presence in the Middle East: Issues and Prospects" written in 2005 by General Sedky Sobhy, who was last year appointed under Morsi as the Egyptian military's chief-of-staff. While he was at the US Army War College in Pennsylvania, Sobhy warned in his paper, disclosed by Cairo-based journalist Issandr El Amrani and various other media that unmitigated US support for Israel was fuelling anti-Americanism and embroiling the US in a conflict with Islamists that it would not be able to win.

Solutions to the Middle East's security problems "will find their ideological underpinning if the U.S. were to truly work for a permanent settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict…Truly international cooperation, and heeding the ideological, religious, and cultural concerns of the Arab and Muslim world, can successfully change the current course of events," Sobhy said. He argued further that US hostility towards the Sharia -Islamic law – was undermining its democracy effort in the region. That effort "must have and project political, social, cultural and religious legitimacy," he wrote.

Reviving principles of the Caliphate

General Al Sisi, in a thesis entitled 'Democracy in the Middle East' written a year later while he too was at the US War College, sounded a similar note that is not dissimilar to the Brotherhood's thinking. Al Sisi, widely viewed as a religious conservative with close ties to Saudi Arabia, focused his thesis on the key role of religion in politics and argued that democracy in the Middle East and North Africa would only take root if it demonstrated "respect to the religious nature of the culture," sought "public support from religious leaders (who) can help build strong support for the establishment of democratic systems," and sustained "the religious base versus devaluing religion and creating instability."

Al Sisi asserted further that secularism "is unlikely to be favourably received by the vast majority of Middle Easterners, who are devout followers of the Islamic faith." He pushed the notion that democracy needed to be informed by the 'concept of El Kalafa,' the earliest period of Islam that was guided by the Prophet Muhammad and the Four Righteous Caliphs who succeeded him. The Kalafa kind of government, involving obedience to a ruler who consults his subjects, needed to be the goal of any government in the Middle East and North Africa, he wrote.

The military's dilemma

Traces of the new military leadership's thinking have been evident since the fall of Mubarak. Al Sisi defended enforced virginity tests for female demonstrators detained in protests against the military while it was in power in the first 17 months after the ousting of Mubarak. He ensured that whatever constitution emerges from Egypt's current crisis would maintain the principle that Islamic law is Egypt's "main source of legislation" – a demand put forward by the Salafist Nour party that supported the Military's ousting of Morsi. Al Sisi further thought to drive a wedge between the Brotherhood's leadership by reaching out to its followers.

It is a thinking that would serve to secure the military's key interests in a future Egypt: control of national security; independence from civilian oversight; immunity from prosecution; maintenance of its economic empire that accounts for at least 10 per cent of Egyptian gross domestic product; and preservation of its independent relationship with the US. To do so, it will likely struggle with how to balance its nationalist and Islamist outlook with its vested strategic and economic interest in close ties to Washington. An Israeli-Palestinian peace would help the military resolve its dilemma.

All in all, it is a vision that is far cry from the goals a vast number of Egyptians had in mind when they camped out two years ago on Cairo's Tahrir Square, forcing Mubarak to ultimately resign. In the words of national security expert Robert Springborg in a recent Foreign Affairs article: "If Sisi continues to seek legitimacy for military rule by associating it with Islamism, it

could prove to be a disaster for Egypt. At the very least, it would set back the democratic cause immeasurably."

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