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Sisi Builds a Green Zone for Egypt

MICHELE DUNNE

Egypt's new administrative capital, currently under construction—and tentatively named Wedian, which means “desert valleys”—represents concretely where President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has been trying to take his country during his five years of authoritarian rule. Built and run primarily by the military, it is to be a sleek, contemporary “smart city” of government institutions and apartment blocks, located some 28 miles into the desert east of the heavily populated thousand-year-old metropolis of Cairo. Wedian's echoing emptiness also symbolizes the fact that most Egyptian citizens have no place in Sisi's vision—it is an equivalent of Baghdad's Green Zone, where he will rule indefinitely behind a security cordon, shielded from the demands of the country's 97 million inhabitants.

The fact that Wedian will be a controlled-access city serves as a metaphor for Sisi's most impressive achievement, if it can be called that: rebuilding the wall of fear separating citizens from the state. In Egypt's 2011 uprising, the fear barrier constructed during the eras of presidents Gamal Abdel Nasser, Anwar Sadat, and Hosni Mubarak was breached, bringing joy to the hearts of youthful revolutionaries and alarm to those of senior military officers. Demonstrators burned down the ruling party headquarters building in January 2011 and ransacked state security offices in early March of that year; the presidential palace, the interior ministry, and the supreme court were sites of frequent protests in Cairo. Egyptians also tried, with mixed success, to dismantle less tangible structures of authoritarianism such as the emergency law in effect almost continuously during Mubarak's 30 years in power, a constitution observed mostly in the breach, laws

on political participation, and a myriad of restrictions on freedoms of association and expression.

A chaotic year of “transitional” military rule followed Mubarak's ouster in February 2011. Then the political party formed by the Muslim Brotherhood (the country's oldest and largest religious and political movement) won a majority in parliamentary elections. Reneging on an earlier pledge not to seek the presidency as well, the Brotherhood got Mohamed Morsi elected to that office in June 2012.

Morsi did reasonably well for his first six months in office—during which he appointed Sisi as defense minister—but started showing authoritarian tendencies as he faced increasing opposition from secular groups. Tensions escalated as Morsi issued a constitutional declaration placing his decrees above judicial challenge, and then forced a rewriting of the constitution with minimal input from political rivals. After large demonstrations called on Morsi to resign, Sisi brought the whole democratic experiment to a crashing halt with a military coup on July 3, 2013. The Brotherhood reacted to the coup predictably with its own massive protests. Sisi responded with a terrifying crackdown that culminated in the mass killing of approximately 1,000 protesters at a Cairo sit-in on August 14, 2013.

In the ensuing five years, Sisi has shown that his repression was aimed far beyond the Brotherhood itself. He has incarcerated an estimated 60,000 political prisoners from across the ideological spectrum. Many of them have been subjected to torture including sexual abuse, dangerous overcrowding, and denial of routine medical care. Although many are accused of “terrorism,” only a small fraction of these prisoners had any connection to an armed insurgency affiliated with the so-called Islamic State that has been especially active in Sinai. Most were young people who dared

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to show up at anti-coup demonstrations, or were suspected of involvement in activist groups such as the secular April 6 Youth Movement. Draconian new laws to counter demonstrations and terrorism (the definition of which was expanded to include nonviolent dissent) were used at mass trials in which hundreds were sentenced to years in prison or to death.

At the same time, institutions of public life that had taken root during the Mubarak era and flourished after the 2011 uprising—independently owned broadcast media, news websites, satirical television and web programs, political parties, civil society organizations—came under ferocious attack from the security state that was empowered again under Sisi. Even those who supported the coup and Sisi but tried to maintain some modicum of independence were systematically eliminated. Parties like the pro-business Free Egyptians, rights organizations such as Nazra for Feminist Studies, and the daily newspaper *Al-Masry Al-Youm* (to name but a few) were either taken over by government stooges or driven out of business—along with the political parties, media outlets, and hundreds of civic groups that had once been affiliated with the Brotherhood or the revolutionary left.

By 2018, most Egyptians who had played important roles in public life between the mid-2000s and the 2013 coup were either in prison or in exile abroad in what amounted to a massive brain drain. Those who remained in the country were preoccupied with trying to survive a difficult economic situation while keeping their heads (and voices) down.

GATEKEEPERS OF THE ECONOMY

When it comes to Wedian, the military is leaving little to chance. “The army will be in the command and control center and will manage and control the whole city via the center,” retired Brigadier General Khaled el-Husseiny Soliman told NBC News in August 2018. Soliman serves as the spokesman for the organization overseeing the new capital’s construction, in which the military has a controlling interest along with the housing ministry. This cozy arrangement encapsulates Sisi’s second major “achievement” in five years: re-orienting Egypt’s economy as well as the polity to serve the interests of its army.

While the military has had substantial revenue-generating operations for decades—since it stopped fighting regional wars and turned into a jobs program and profit center—under Sisi its

economic activities have reached a new level. A series of legal changes has made it easier than ever for military companies, or so-called private companies headed by current or retired military officers, to be awarded most government contracts. The ministries of military production and defense, along with the military-owned Arab Organization for Industrialization, oversee dozens of companies that produce everything from weapons to toll roads to appliances and food for the commercial market. Exempt from taxes (including the value-added tax enacted in 2016 as part of reforms required by the International Monetary Fund in exchange for a \$12 billion loan), enjoying free access to conscript labor and vast tracts of state-owned land, and benefiting from a massive network of officers who can thread through the country’s legendary bureaucracy, military companies boast that they can get things done more efficiently than the private sector.

The military’s actual share in the economy is impossible to determine, but high-ranking officers often are not shy about their mushrooming role. A representative of the ministry of military production told Reuters in May 2018 that revenues for the 20 firms under the ministry’s control would reach 15 billion Egyptian pounds (around \$840 million) in 2018–19, five times greater than in 2013–14.

Any civilian discussion of the military’s economic reach or of government mismanagement can bring down the regime’s wrath. The economist Abdel-Khaleq Farouq was arrested in October 2018 (and later released on bail) on a charge of “spreading false information.” The accusation stemmed from his recent book, *Is Egypt Really a Poor Country?*, which alleges that the policies of military-controlled governments have kept wealth in the hands of the few at the expense of the many. Farouq’s publisher was also arrested and then released.

NO PLACE FOR POLITICS

While the new capital for now is mostly a construction zone, one memorable scene has taken place there already: Sisi’s appearance at the January 2018 Orthodox Christmas Mass celebrated by Pope Tawadros at the new Coptic cathedral. The photos of the event must have been carefully edited to avoid showing that the church was still largely unbuilt at the time. While it might have been far more comfortable for Copts to spend that chilly Christmas Eve in their fully enclosed main cathedral in Cairo, they were compelled to troop out

to the construction site so that Sisi could keep a promise made a year earlier. News outlets in Egypt and around the world duly carried the photos of Sisi and Tawadros in the new cathedral, illustrating a story of great public-relations value to the president, particularly in the United States and Europe.

Some Copts told media outlets that they were happy to have the new cathedral, but they worried that the constant touting of it as “the largest in the Middle East” would make it a target for terrorists (who have carried out a series of attacks on Christian holy sites and pilgrims in Egypt, most recently this November). Unfortunately, Christians as well as the country’s official Muslim religious establishment have been Sisi’s hostages since the fateful day of July 3, 2013, when the Coptic pope and the sheikh of al-Azhar were seated with military officers flanking Sisi as he announced the coup that deposed Morsi.

Foreign diplomats are another group being pressed to move to the new capital. Many missions have been reluctant to commit to leasing what will be expensive real estate for their offices and housing, choosing to wait and see or commit only to a token presence. As is typical under Sisi, when persistent urging has not brought the desired results the regime turns quickly to coercion: officials reportedly have hinted darkly to foreign missions that their safety cannot be guaranteed if they choose to remain in Cairo. Such treatment is characteristic of the Sisi regime’s bullying approach to diplomacy. Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry has not been above threatening that Egypt could unleash a flood of migrants across the Mediterranean should European leaders not support Sisi.

Another feature of Sisi’s Egypt is that there is no place for politics. Not only was the Muslim Brotherhood declared a terrorist organization and its political party outlawed, but even the secular parties that tried to stay on Sisi’s good side—the Free Egyptians, al-Doustour (Constitution), even the venerable Wafd (Delegation), and many others—have been compromised. Egyptian intelligence has fomented leadership splits, financial problems, sex scandals, and other maladies to ensure that not a single independent political party or prominent leader is left standing. The five men (three of them military officers) who tried to challenge Sisi for the presidency as he campaigned for reelection in 2018 were systematically pounded down: two

were imprisoned, one put under house arrest, and the other two intimidated into withdrawing.

Also largely missing in action, by contrast to the pre-2013 period, are young people. Those under 30 make up 60 percent of Egypt’s population, but they are greatly underrepresented in the labor force (with at least 30 percent unemployed, a figure that rises to 40 percent for those with university degrees) as well as in public life.

After paying lip service to the January 2011 youth-led revolution during his initial period in power, Sisi made his intention to block any future mass demonstrations plain in a January 2018 speech that went viral on social media: “What happened seven or eight years ago in Egypt will never happen again . . . no, it seems you don’t know me well enough.” Gone at least for now is the April 6 Youth Movement, a force in youth mobilization since the mid-2000s that was declared a terrorist group after the coup. Even Tamarod (Rebellion), an anti-Brotherhood youth group that worked with the military, was pushed aside uncer-

emoniously after it had served its purpose of building public support for the coup.

Most of the well-known young activists, bloggers, and satirists who captured the public imagination from the late 2000s until 2013 have paid

the heavy price of imprisonment or exile. Now, youth may only speak when spoken to—by Sisi, in carefully orchestrated, invitation-only forums held by the president at the beach resort of Sharm El Sheikh.

HAUNTING PROBLEMS

Such are Sisi’s accomplishments: rebuilding the wall of public fear, reorienting the economy to serve the interests of the military, compelling religious leaders to go along with him, and crushing political and civic life. While he is far from beloved internationally, Sisi can claim credit for maintaining traditional alliances with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, the United States, and Europe while building closer relations with Russia, China, and Israel. He is far from resolving a critical water dispute with Ethiopia and Sudan over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, which Ethiopia is building upstream on the Blue Nile, but he has worked at improving ties with various African nations to strengthen Egypt’s hand against Ethiopia.

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Building Sisi's dream city, however, has diverted his regime's energies from other problems that might well come back to haunt him, including dwindling fresh water supplies as well as rapid population growth and a chronic inability to attract the investment needed to generate enough jobs. Egyptian women have an average of 3.5 children each, nearly double the replacement rate, erasing decades of progress in reducing fertility that began reversing around 2008, for reasons including a shift of government and foreign donor funds to other priorities. That rate of population growth means the economy must generate at least 700,000 new jobs a year, far beyond its capacity. It also means Egypt is headed for a water crisis unless it cleans up its wasteful usage practices (especially in irrigation), whether or not Ethiopia completes its dam.

So far Sisi has pleased the IMF by cutting energy subsidies and introducing the value-added tax, but over the long run he will need to attract investment by foreigners as well as Egyptians into productive sectors that employ large numbers of workers. Tourism is slowly coming back after being damaged by terrorist attacks, but remains fragile; the ISIS-linked insurgency might well flare up again. Natural gas production in the Mediterranean is growing quickly and can help relieve the government budget, but employs relatively few.

Foreign direct investment fell in 2017 compared with the previous year, then recovered somewhat in 2018—but is by no means soaring, even with Chinese companies taking significant stakes in Wedian. The tepid interest in investing in Egypt, whether among local businesspeople or foreigners, is rooted in several general problems and one specific one. As Egypt's relatively low rating in the World Bank's annual "Doing Business" report shows, the lack of transparent practices for enforcing contracts, customs, and taxation remains a major problem and is in fact worse now than it was under Mubarak.

Moreover, the military's proliferating involvement in many sectors is a disincentive for foreign

as well as local investors; who wants to compete on a tilted playing field? While Egyptian businesspeople generally supported the coup, expecting a government like Mubarak's (under whom they thrived), they have become increasingly critical in private about the military's rapid spread into new sectors, as well as its rapaciousness. The major deal to emerge from an October 2018 visit by an American business delegation was a memorandum of understanding signed by the military's Arab Organization for Industrialization and The Armored Group to manufacture vehicles.

THE SAND CASTLE

Sisi's next big political project, according to persistent reports, will be to oversee amendments to the constitution to remove term limits (which were imposed to meet a principal demand of the public after Mubarak held on to power for 30 years) so that he may remain in office beyond 2022. Approval will be easy to obtain from the tame parliament elected in 2015, and while public participation in the necessary referendum might well be sparse, Sisi has grown accustomed to doing without the shows of mass enthusiasm he once could command.

And so it might be that by 2020 or thereabouts, Sisi will ensconce himself in his new gated Green Zone, surrounded by just enough military officers, civil servants, and foreign diplomats to create a faint hum of traffic, but far enough from the jostle and bustle of Cairo that he need never worry about another angry crowd protesting outside the presidential palace. He might even be able to sleep several nights in the same location without worry, dispensing with his current security precautions. Certainly, the type of popular uprising that took place in 2011, with thousands gathering in front of government buildings to demand change, would be difficult to imagine taking place in the new capital. Then again, Egypt's restless and resourceful youth, aggrieved Islamists, embittered businessmen, and ambitious military officers—working separately or together—might yet find ways to pull down Sisi's castle of sand. ■

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