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## **Sisi's Egypt: Ten Years Since the Coup**

**Friday, June 30, 2023  
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### **Amy Hawthorne [0:59]**

Hello, everyone. Welcome to all our viewers. Welcome to this special POMED event, “Sisi’s Egypt: Ten Years Since the Coup.” I’m Amy Hawthorne, POMED’s Deputy Director for Research, and I’ll be moderating our discussion today. And I’d like to wish Eid Mubarak to all of those celebrating.

It is hard to believe that it has already been a decade since June 30, 2013, when truly massive popular protests backed by the security agencies called for the ouster of democratically elected president Mohamed Morsi, Egypt’s first democratically elected president ever. That was followed by an ultimatum by the military to Morsi. And then those days culminated on July 3 with the Army’s removal of President Morsi and direct takeover of the political system led by then defense minister Abdul Fattah al-Sisi and the installation of a civilian facade government.

The coup received crucial backing from Egypt’s regional allies, in particular Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Also importantly, the coup was in effect unopposed by Western democracies, including the United States—the Obama administration and Congress.

It’s also hard to believe that some people at the time and for a few years after argued that the military coup was necessary to reset, to restart the democratic transition that began in 2011. Sadly, as we’ve seen, Egypt’s trajectory has gone in the exact opposite direction. We’ve seen in Egypt truly shocking levels of mass repression, including the state’s massacre of more than 1,000 civilian protesters in broad daylight in August 2013. We’ve seen a greatly expanded role for the army in politics and the economy. And we’ve seen the crushing of opposition movements, most notably the Muslim Brotherhood, and we’ve seen the near snuffing out of independent political life. And sadly, for Egyptians, we’ve seen a steadily worsening economy over the past decade.

We have a really excellent panel today to look back at 10 years ago, to look back at the coup and learn what we can see and understand more clearly than we could during those very tumultuous, very complicated, and fast moving days. And also to look at Egypt today: where is the country headed now?

Let me introduce our distinguished speakers and they can go ahead and turn on their cameras now as I introduce them. First, we have Samar ElHussieny. She is an Egyptian human rights defender and programs officer at the Egyptian human rights organization, the Egyptian Human Rights Forum. She previously worked as MENA and Turkey research and engagement coordinator for the Coalition for Women in Journalism, and she served as executive director for the Andalus Institute for Tolerance and Anti-Violence Studies. Thank you so much, Samar, for joining us today.

Next we have Sharan Grewal, who is an assistant professor at the College of William and Mary, a Nonresident Senior Fellow at POMED, Nonresident Fellow at the Brookings Institution, and author of the forthcoming book, which I'm very excited about, to be published in July by Oxford University Press and titled, *Soldiers of Democracy? Military Legacies and Egypt's Arab Spring*. Part of the book looks at the role of the Egyptian military.

We are also very pleased to have with us David Kirkpatrick. David, if you want to go ahead and turn on your camera so everyone can see you.

**David Kirkpatrick [5:31]**

I am...someone else's turned it off, and I'm not able to start it. So I think I need the help of your host here to get my camera back on.

**Amy Hawthorne [5:38]**

Okay. Let me go ahead and introduce Nancy Okail. Oh, there's David. Okay, hi, David. Welcome. David Kirkpatrick is a journalist at the *New Yorker* magazine. He served as Cairo bureau chief for *The New York Times* from 2010 to 2014 [sic, 2015]. So in these extremely pivotal years he witnessed the ouster of Mubarak, the democratic transition, the lead up to the coup, the coup, and the aftermath. And he is the author of the truly excellent book *Into the Hands of the Soldiers: Freedom and Chaos in Egypt and the Middle East*, which was published by Penguin in 2019.

And last but not least we have Nancy Okail. Nancy is President and CEO of the Center for International Policy in Washington, DC. She is the former executive director for many years of the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy or TIMEP. She is a very well known scholar and human rights advocate. And along with 42 others, she was sentenced to prison in Egypt's infamous Case 173 against democracy NGOs.

So welcome to all of you. For the next hour, I'm going to ask each speaker a couple of questions. And then at the hour, we will open up the event to questions from the audience. For those of you who are joining us on Zoom, you can submit your questions right in Zoom's Q&A box at the bottom of your screen. For our other viewers, please send a question, email a question to [communications@pomed.org](mailto:communications@pomed.org).

So let me jump in and start. I'd like to start with Sharan. I'm very interested to hear what all of our panelists have to say. But I'm going to start with you, Sharan, and ask you: in your new book, you argue that the July 3, 2013 coup in Egypt was likely if not inevitable because of the "fundamental tension between the Egyptian military and democracy." And because structurally,

you argue, Egyptian political actors' choices “were fundamentally shaped by the military.” So tell us a bit about why you came to that conclusion about the extreme likelihood or perhaps even inevitability that there would be a military coup that would end Egypt's brief transition.

**Sharan Grewal [8:20]**

Great, thank you, Amy, for the introduction and for the invitation. I'm really starstruck, honestly, to be on a panel with real experts on Egypt whose work I've so long admired. So thank you. And thank you also for hosting this event. I think it's a great opportunity to take stock of what actually happened in the lead up to July 3, and why Egypt's transition fell to a military coup.

And I think the dominant view tends to blame the political parties—that the Muslim Brotherhood was not inclusive enough—it rammed through a constitution, it alienated the secular opposition. Or you blame the secular opposition—that they didn't cooperate with Morsi and they eventually condoned a military coup against Morsi. Or you blame perhaps public opinion, that Egyptians had grown disillusioned with democracy, and so they supported the coup on July 3. And there's no doubt that this polarization and this disillusionment are certainly part of the story. But in my mind, they ignore the elephant in the room, which is the military. These explanations portray the military as a purely reactive actor, that it was obliged to intervene because of the mass protests and because of the opposition's calls for a coup—as if the military was not already undermining the transition. And as if it didn't play a role in creating that polarization and that disillusionment in the first place. And so in my forthcoming book, I argue that the cause of the collapse is, first and foremost, the military, that it was aggrieved by democracy, and thus actively took steps to undermine the transition, not just on July 3, but throughout the transition.

And so the first contribution of the book is to show that there was this fundamental tension between democracy and the type of military that Egypt has—a military that has been empowered by Nasser, by Sadat, by Mubarak, one that was enjoying the lion's share of political power, a vast economic empire, and complete autonomy over its affairs. All of that, by definition, will be challenged by democracy and was challenged in Egypt. There's a widespread perception that Morsi was actually respecting all of the military's interests, appointing them as governors and as ministers, etc.

But what I show is that Morsi actually encroached on a number of the military's interests, which fueled the military's support for a coup. There are too many to detail here. But briefly, on the constitution, the military did not get everything they wanted in Morsi's constitution. They didn't want him for instance to be the supreme commander of the armed forces. They didn't want him to have the ability to choose the defense minister, even if it has to be a military officer. And they wanted the military to have a majority in the National Defense Council and not the 50 percent that they ended up getting, among many others that I detail in the book. Beyond the constitution, Morsi also encroached on the military's terrain of national security decisions. The military used to have veto power over security policy, but now a civilian president was in charge and making decisions that they disagreed with. For the military's taste, Morsi was too lenient towards militants in the Sinai, too lenient towards Hamas in Gaza. And by contrast, too aggressive for the military's taste vis a vis Ethiopia and vis a vis Syria.

Beyond security decisions, there were also economic contracts. Morsi did grant the military a number of contracts, but was more hesitant about the biggest contract or the biggest project, the Suez Canal corridor development project, where Morsi relegated the army to just one among many partners in that vast project.

And the final area where Morsi encroached on the military's interests was over the military's composition. Morsi tried to create a more inclusive military by lifting the ban on Islamists entering the military. Morsi's nephew even joined the military academy that year. And that fueled fears of infiltration into the military.

And so all of those encroachments—on the Constitution, on security decisions, on the economy, on the military's composition—all led the military to support the coup on July 3. In some ways, these encroachments on the military's turf, that was in some ways inevitable. That's what democratization means, in a country with an empowered military like Egypt. Democracy means a civilian president as commander in chief in charge of security decisions. It means weaning the military out of the economy. It means opening up the military to be inclusive of all Egyptians, whether it was the Muslim Brotherhood in power or the Christian Brotherhood in power. That's what democracy would entail for an empowered military like Egypt's.

And so could anything have been done differently? Certainly, it might have helped if Morsi had maintained a wide coalition with the secular parties, with the general public. Then perhaps the military would not have had the mass protests and the calls for a coup that helped Sisi legitimize his takeover. But the military actively undermined any attempt to build such a coalition. The military intentionally stoked the polarization and disillusionment. David's book covers this very well, showing how the military and security services helped to fund and organize the Tamarod movement that led the protests on June 30. Also it pressured folks not to work with the Muslim Brotherhood, and played each party off against each other at the start of the transition for siding with the Muslim Brotherhood for having elections first and then issuing the supra-constitutional principles or proposing these Selmy principles to side with the secularists, [this] actively stoked the polarization and undermined the negotiations between Morsi and the opposition. But I think even if the military hadn't taken that active role to polarize the forces, the mere presence of a politicized military like Egypt's inherently makes negotiations far more difficult between the government and the opposition, by giving an outside option to the opposition. For the secularists, why work with Morsi and get a share of the pie under Morsi, when you could, in theory, kick him out with the help of the military, and then get the entire pie for yourself? Or so they thought. In that scenario, when you have this outside option of siding with the military, there's very little Morsi can do to entice them to stay in the democratic game. When that outside option is present, it makes the negotiations far more difficult.

When, like in Tunisia, that outside option is not there, the polarization can still be severe, but eventually they had little choice but to come to the table. But in Egypt, where you had this type of military, this empowered military, it made negotiations much more difficult and ultimately terminated the democratic transition. So in short, I argue that it's the type of military Egypt has that's the primary cause of its breakdown. It helps explain why the Brotherhood and the secularists struggled to get along. And why Morsi encroached on the military's interest and ultimately why the military terminated the transition.

### **Amy Hawthorne [16:30]**

Thank you, Sharan, for that very cogent summary of your thesis. David, I'd like to turn to you. You reported from Egypt on the lead up to the coup, on the coup itself, on the aftermath. You watched events unfold close up as a *New York Times* reporter. Do you agree with Sharan's assessment that the coup was basically structurally highly likely, if not inevitable? And in particular, what did you discover in your reporting at the time and later for your book, which, by the way, I recommend to everyone, it's absolutely essential reading for this period of Egyptian history. What did you discover about the role of the United States, of the Obama administration

in, either as some argue, greenlighting the coup, or as others say, in failing to really do anything meaningful to try to stop it?

**David Kirkpatrick [17:26]**

So let's take those into parts. Sharan's analysis is solid. So there was gonna be conflict between the Egyptian military and a democratic movement, a democratic transition. How that conflict gets resolved, I really strongly hesitate to say, is anything close to inevitable.

For one thing, I just think there were a lot of contingencies in there, there are a lot of contingencies baked into the process. And I can tell you, as someone who was watching it intimately, it was full of suspense and uncertainty. And not just uncertainty for me, but also for the people who were participants.

You know, as late as April 2013, which is just a few short months before the coup gets into motion, there was dismay, if not despair, inside of the National Salvation Front, which was the organization of secular opposition, which was determined to oust Morsi, and by that time, frankly, hoping for a coup. I know that from many sources, it is well established, that they were in despair, they thought, my gosh, Morsi has done it, this guy is going to survive, we're going to have to live with this government. Let me add to that something that I've only one source for but it's incredibly vivid. And that source is Mohamed Hassanein Heikal, the former Nasserite speechwriter and historian. During this period, he was speaking to both Sisi as a kind of mentor and advisor and to Mohamed ElBaradei, the leader of the National Salvation Front, as a kind of sounding board. And he would tell me that in early 2013 ElBaradei would come to his apartment or his office and actually say, what is taking Sisi so long? So ElBaradei was expressing to Heikal, who was probably talking to Sisi, his own frustration that Sisi had not moved [against Morsi], and he couldn't figure out why not.

And when I look back over the period since 2011, the overarching thing to keep in mind from my point of view is that a revolution is taking place. That's why we needed a counter revolution. That's why there had to be a coup and there had to be bloodshed. And over that period, from the moment of Mubarak's ouster up to the coup, there were repeated attempts by the military to try to reassert their power. And time and time again, they would back down. I'm thinking about the Selmy Declaration, which ended after the Mohamed Mahmoud Street protests. I'm thinking about the long period where in one way or another the military council that was governing Egypt on a transitional basis would reassert their power and then retract it every Thursday before a big Friday demonstration, "the Thursdays of concessions, they used to call it, and again and again and again. And what emerges, particularly during the first part of the short-lived Morsi presidency, but really, throughout this period, is that it's too simple to speak of the military as unified. The military was empowered for sure. But they were also in some ways defanged. You know, the successful autocrat, and I would count Mubarak among them, keeps his military in check with rival security forces, like the Interior Ministry, but also by kind of playing the generals off against each other. The last thing you want is a really powerful defense minister in full control of the military because then you too are inviting a coup.

And so throughout this period, we saw people within the military—in a shadowy way because none of this happens publicly—people within the military, take aim at each other and defang each other. Sisi was clearly happy to see Tantawi go down. Sisi seems to have a somewhat complicated relationship with Sami Anan, another powerful general. There were lots of other figures who would rise and fall—Shafiq himself, Ahmed Shafiq who ran for president was himself a kind of product of the military establishment and was basically promising something close to a restoration of the old military backed order when he ran for president against Morsi.

And during that week-long delay between the counting of the votes and the announcement of results, there was a great deal of suspense. Many of us, me included, were wondering if the military was just going to end it for once at all, and put Shafiq in power. It emerged later that it was a close-run thing; they appear to have tried to have considered that and stopped short of it, partly because of their fear of opposition in the streets.

So where I'm going with this is, the military wasn't necessarily united or unified through this whole period, there were fissures in the military. And at times when the opposition was united, the military was forced to back down. And it's not unthinkable that they may have been forced to back down again, long enough for Morsi or a transition to survive.

That leads us to your next question, which is the role of external actors. You know, so in that period in 2013, when Sisi was hesitating, you know, I put myself in his shoes. Obviously, for the military as a power block, a transition to democracy is in some sense, a loss of power. For Sisi, or another military leader as an individual, it's not totally unattractive to imagine a transition where you are guaranteed some protections from prosecutions for previous corruption or misdeeds, where you are offered a fairly cushy landing, where you have a pretty great job as defense minister of what might be a stable democratic country, and where when your time is done, you can retire safely, not to a coffin or a jail cell, you can just go and retire. That's not a wholly unappealing outcome. In fact, I think a lot of American military officials would say that they are happy in their system in a civilian led government, that works out better for them, and they would not swap it for a military-backed autocracy.

So it's not unimaginable that a democratic transition would be totally unappealing to an individual military leader, even Sisi. Now he found himself in 2013 in a moment where all the old organs of the old state were probably pushing for him to oust Morsi, where the old military, the old sort of economic elite was probably pushing for him to oust Morsi, where the military at that point, probably he had mostly corralled behind himself and was fairly united. And yet he still hesitated and that does lead us naturally to the position of the external actors. Had the Persian Gulf not been tacitly offering an enormous amount of money, enough money to obviate the need to go hat in hand to the IMF, would Sisi pulled off the coup? I have some doubts about that. But they certainly were.

If the US, it is easy for me to imagine . . . well, let me caveat this, I should say that at the time, most intelligent Egyptian actors knew that very well, that the US was likely to back whoever emerged as the winner of whatever power struggle. I don't think there was any illusion on the part of any of the major Egyptian actors either in the military or in the opposition, or in the Muslim Brotherhood, that that was going to be the outcome, that the US was not going to exert a heavy handed force for democracy. The exception to that, the one person who might naively have thought that was possible, tragically, was Mohamed Morsi. And I think that's partly because he was hearing from Obama some actual support for democracy. And he naively thought that the US government was unitary. We know that what actually happened is that the US government was speaking out of both sides of its mouth—that some officials, Obama in particular, was saying we actually support a transition to democracy and was saying that to Morsi.

Other officials, arguably including Kerry, arguably including Hagel, probably including people within the intelligence and the military at lower levels, were suggesting to Sisi, look, we trust you, do what you have to do. The most important thing for us is our ongoing partnership with the Egyptian military. So they were hearing—Sisi and the generals around him—these two conflicting messages.

So from the US, if they didn't get a green light, they certainly got a yellow light on the subject of a coup. So would it have mattered if the US had taken a different posture? Would it have mattered if the US earlier on, you know a year ahead and had started talking publicly about the so-called coup law, which would require the US to withdraw military aid in the event of a military takeover? Wouldn't it matter if the US had worked more actively and more bluntly, to warn Morsi that a coup was in motion? I can't. . . . It's a counterfactual. Right?

We'll never really know. In a situation where Sisi appears to have been hesitating, where Sisi appears to have been sort of uncertain whether or not to move ahead and where the military had, time and time again, backed down in the face of public opposition—it's not impossible to imagine that a different posture from the US might have had a different outcome.

It's also, as long as we're listing contingencies, and before I turn over the mic, we should also keep in mind that the specific actions you know, Sharan is right. The military and people around the military were encouraging polarization. It's not axiomatic. It's not automatic that the two main players in this Mohamed Morsi on the one hand and ElBaradei or the secular opposition on the other would fall for it. Right? Imagine a smarter Morsi, imagine a Morsi who was more like Sheikh Rashid Ghannouchi in Tunisia, who was more adroit at cultivating, at getting himself out of the way and not becoming a lightning rod and perhaps even stepping down and holding elections willingly as an olive branch to the secular forces. Sheikh Ghannouchi came to Cairo and recommended a course like that. If that had happened, would the opposition to the military have been more united? Possibly. On the other side, suppose that ElBaradei had been even slightly more insightful about the likely outcome of a military coup. Suppose ElBaradei had not been on the phone with American and European diplomats saying this was going to be a restart for democracy. Suppose he had not lent his authority to the legitimation of the coup, and instead encouraged secular forces to believe that their best hope was to try to defeat Morsi in an actual election. That also is not impossible, and way may well have made a different contribution to the ultimate outcome of the coup.

**Amy Hawthorne [28:34]**

Thank you, David. And, Nancy, I'd like to turn to you, welcome, Nancy. I'd like to ask you— we may have forgotten now, but al-Sisi made three promises on which he built support for the coup. Remind us, what were those promises? And why has he not been able to achieve them?

**Nancy Okail [28:58]**

Thank you, Amy. Really interesting to hear the views from Sharan and from David.

Before I move to what happened after the coup and the promises, I just want to make a comment on the issue of external actors. I appreciate that David's response was nuanced, and does not give certainty. What if the US went the other way? I think there's an issue in all the analysis that we see from the perspective of Western influence on any developments, not just in the Middle East, but elsewhere in Africa and other places, there is an overinflated sense of influence of the US on the region. That's number one. The idea that Morsi got the assurance and he was naive about believing that the US will stand, and so was Mubarak, just actually a few weeks before he was just ousted, or when he stepped down and gave the power to the military, Hillary Clinton tweeted just few days before that saying Egypt is the most stable country in the Middle East.

So there is this idea of what if the US had acted differently, that would have changed the course of events. At least not dramatically. It's always a little bit inflated. And I appreciate that David

[unintelligible]. But the other thing is about the coup, that is not also an exception. The US has supported coups all over the world, before Egypt, after Egypt, in Sudan, and with the blessing of the US. So there's nothing really unique or new, whether about Morsi appearing to other presidents, whether compared to Egypt, to the rest of the countries who either the coups sometimes are being instigated by the US, or being ambivalent, or supporting it. So just to say that it [the US] is a key player, but not the main player.

Coming to the issue of the promises of Sisi, they were many, but if we can just put them together in the three categories you referred to, basically he came on three promises: ending terrorism, supporting the Christian minority, and restoring the economy and reviving the business and private sector, which were like the three main fears of Egyptians during the time of Morsi.

Now, I think he was sort of lucky on the side of terrorism. At the beginning of the first three years, it was like a total failure. And we were tracking the number of terror attacks in Egypt, and particularly in Sinai, it was on the rise, particularly the height of it, in the attack of July 1, 2015, which is like mostly just the grip of Wilayet Sinai, mostly took over parts of Sinai and raised a flag and it was a real battle. But the fact that these groups got integrated into the regional threat of ISIS, and became part of a regional threat, it gave Sisi a 9/11 moment like that it gave to Mubarak, when he turned around and said, Don't talk to me about human rights. Now, we're just facing terrorism. Well, that was the moment equivalent to that, for Sisi, this is a threat that is bigger than all of us, we have to address it. And because of that, we have to sideline or put aside all the issues related to freedom of expression, freedom of the press, this is all a national security matter. So that are on that side. However, even after that, even after the defeat of ISIS, the Egyptian military in particular were still getting attacked and were still losing officers through those attacks happening around the Sinai.

With the Christian minority, again, at the beginning, after Morsi was ousted, we've seen the burning of the churches. And there was a continuation of that and a slow down. However, this has not really affected the position and rights and empowerment of Christians in Egypt. And aside from the sort of optics of Sisi going to greet the Pope or, or going to give public greetings to Christians, all those symbolic gestures, beyond that there wasn't a real change in like the rights and the position of Christians.

I think the most important part and the biggest failure of all this is the economy, and this one, it was not inevitable. And Sisi, at that point, he had all power, he had all support from Gulf countries and countries who were afraid of what if Egypt turns into Syria. And he got financial support and no opposition. And I think everyone who's following Egypt knows the situation right now, what we have reached with 59 percent inflation in the prices of food, the devaluation of the pound, the astronomical foreign debt that we are seeing, and he did himself into a muddle.

And the problem is that he also continued, I don't think intentionally, putting the entire burden on himself. Because first of all, his control of the economy is unprecedented in terms of the military control over the economy in Egypt. There was control under Mubarak and the privilege for the military and all this, but never was it at this stage that it is right now, with the direct control and direct contracting of the military, in actually taking over all like the construction and all the other mega projects that he got involved in. I think with that, he also could not restore confidence in the Egyptian economy.

And David referred to the support that we got from the Gulf—even that is, he managed to shake that and it became its waning. And we've seen the Minister of Finance of Saudi Arabia in Davos



this year saying no more grants to Egypt, it will only be investment and only be investment, if there's reform. Also restoring the ability of this institutional setup for a healthy investment environment. And he [gave] an extended speech while he was opening the port in Alexandria a couple of weeks ago. And he did acknowledge and mention that they had a lot of problems with most of the countries who invested in Egypt, one of the obvious is Kuwait, which is [Kuwait and Gulf Link Transport](#), they had to sue Egypt for over \$400 million dollars [sic]. And in order to get their money, they had to go to international arbitration, because there is no confidence in the rule of law within the country. So he was able to lose all this.

Now, the one thing that he made a promise and he really did stick to it is the no politics promise. This is something that he said clearly and squarely in a speech, particularly talking to the Egyptian military first and foremost before the Egyptian people, and said I'm not a man of politics, and there will be no politics. And he did keep this promise. He has completely closed the public spheres, political parties, throwing the political actors in prison along with so many other sectors of society, he stifled civil society. And it is the 10th anniversary of the coup, it's also the 10th anniversary of my sentence when I got sentenced to 10 years in prison. And the interesting part is that, that was 10 years ago, the case is still open—the very case that I was indicted in, Case 173. And it's prosecuting some of the most successful and brilliant civil society leaders in Egypt, they are banned from traveling, they are unable to use their assets and unable to really operate freely. So he closed down politics, civil society, and in academia, it's actually it became more militarized than ever. Whether on the school or college level, his interference and the interference of the military in the affairs of even accepting and examining the teachers who pass their test is through the military, and also giving academic degrees to military officers. So this whole militarization and closing down of politics, civil society, and academia was just like shooting himself in the foot, because he came at a point now that he is realizing that this doesn't work, now that he is unable to contain the economic crisis. And he is aware of the failure and how is that affecting people. Now, he's trying to at least show the facade that there is a political process, we have a national dialogue, we are allowing some [unintelligible] parties to operate, releasing some known figures from prison, to allow that, to give the impression that we are all partners in this.

But one last point, I want to say is the three transitions that Sisi had through the past 10 years and his narrative. Well, first of all, the first narrative he had is that this is not the time for freedoms and all the other Western values, we have a priority. And he said this in France. Health and education is our priority, and putting food on the table. Then putting food on the table became a challenge. And [unintelligible]. And then later on, we reached a point that two weeks ago in that sort of discussion or dialogue he had in public with a presenter about the port opening in Alexandria, he said, openly and squarely, we cannot afford to maintain funding for health and education, because we are building a state. So it was first sacrificing freedoms to put food on the table, and then failing to put food on the table and saying we have health and education, and then failing to support health and education and reaching even the minimum 3 percent that is stipulated by the Constitution with the excuse of “because we're building a nation.”

### **Amy Hawthorne [42:11]**

Thank you, Nancy. Samar, last but not least, I'd like to ask you to reflect back on after the coup and the truly massive human rights crackdown that followed Morsi's ouster. Was the Egyptian human rights community surprised by the scale of the crackdown? How do you think Sisi and his regime were able to implement this repression, at least without sustained or effective popular pushback or opposition?

**Samar ElHusseiny [42:50]**

Okay, thank you. And thank you to all the panelists for the brilliant insights actually.

Well, the first question, did the human rights movement expect this? I think nobody expected this at all because what we are witnessing in Egypt, this is not a 21st century level of repression, this is a 20th century or 19th century level of repression actually.

Even when we looked at the capacity of the state itself at this moment, let me first just want to reflect shortly on the idea of counter revolution, I think, why the civil society because this is even one of the questions that were asked was why the civil society participated in this whole movement. I remember two scenarios during Morsi's one year in power. The first one was during the Ittihadiyya protests [in December 2011]. And during this time, Alaa Abdel Fattah, every regime has been actually targeting him, Alaa was beaten in a tent in a protest supporting President Morsi. I was in Belgium, and many of my friends advised me not to go back because it's not safe anymore, and this is going into the Iranian scenario. So there was clear fear. And actually, for some reason, they were legitimized by the practice of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Because in a minute, once they came to power, they decided to sum up democracy in elections. And all the [alliances] that happened, leading to them coming to power, they cancelled it. And they decided to ally with the military and [confront] the civil society organizations, civic powers in general. So this moment was really scary for everyone in the human rights movement. I remember there were meetings in the presidency, discussing the NGOs law. The Muslim Brotherhood in one year, they could have done tremendous progress for the overall movement, the human rights movement, but they were very reluctant. Because I think like the military, they consider human rights organizations and civic powers [as] the enemy. They didn't consider them an ally anymore. And I'm just like, evaluating this moment.

But right now this is the political powers who are targeted and people behind bars— all respect, of course, we are asking for the release of all the political prisoners— but it is very important to do this assessment to understand why the human rights organizations weren't totally against what happened in June 2013.

The second part of your question: Well, who here likes maths? Recently, I felt like we were taking repression for granted, while actually repression costs a lot. For that reason I did some mathematics, I don't like maths. I hate numbers, but I have to do it.

One of the TV anchors in a state media channel in Egypt, Ahmed Moussa, recently said that each prisoner in Egypt cost 6,000 Egyptian pounds per month. So I decided to do the simple maths. We had 60,000 political prisoners over the last 10 years. We can add or deduct, it happens from time to time. And I did a simple equation that led the Egyptian regime in order to make sure that they are actually having this country as repressive as they can, they spent \$3.5 billion on political prisoners.

And they have established 45 new prison establishments, each one cost around \$100 million. So \$4 billion over the last 10 years were spent on prisons. They wanted to control the media so they can do their own echo chamber. And they spent around \$1 billion, actually, to do this. Our president needed to build a legacy, a fake one. So he decided to do a national project called the New Suez Canal that every single economist in the world said there is no viability for this project, but he did it anyway: \$8.5 billion.

And as any dictator, he needed his new city, so he decided to do the new capital, with an overall \$59 billion in total. We are speaking of an estimation of \$76 billion that was spent to make sure that this country is as repressive as he would like it to be. And Nancy was mentioning about the foreign debt. The foreign debt when President Sisi came to power was \$40 billion. Right now it's \$162 billion.

So almost half of the new foreign debt were spent to make sure that this country is repressive. This is what the repression cost us in Egypt. There are many questions regarding why the regime is keeping political prisoners, he would have saved \$3.8 billion, which actually [is] the same amount of the IMF loan. So this is money that could have been easily, easily saved.

But I think one of the tactics that the current regime is using is that human rights in a way in Egypt are seized [sic] and monetized. So whenever they need more money from any country, the US, the EU, they would open a small window, or release some of the political prisoners, or do some adjustments that are actually not that effective in the human rights situation. But in practice, human rights is still, as with the national dialogue, and with all the claims that the upcoming elections would be competitive, and so on and so on. You can see that the human rights situation is still as restrictive as it was five years ago, seven years ago.

And last point, fears. The core tactic, I think, that worked tremendously in Egypt with the people was actually using security and stability. What we can call even like securitization of the public sphere in Egypt. So they use the terminology of security to make sure that they issue new laws that would be restrictive, that they would do extrajudicial killing in Sinai Peninsula, that they would do enforced displacement for people in Sinai, just make sure that, okay, we're keeping security. And until this moment, nobody asked us about what happens in Sinai. This is a big question, actually, that needs to be answered. And nobody is asking about the [unintelligible] rates in Egypt that was skyrocketing over the past 10 years. So yeah, security. And I think security always works in every country. This is the key thing. Thank you.

**Amy Hawthorne [51:44]**

Thank you so much Samar for really interesting comments. I want to turn next to another round of questions about Egypt today, and going forward. These topics are so fascinating. I could listen to all of you all day, but I want to ask you to keep your answers very brief, so we can allow a few minutes at the end for a question or two from the audience.

Nancy, I'd like to turn back to you and ask you, today versus a decade ago, what has changed in the regional and international dynamics in terms of the support for or the sustainability of the Sisi regime that could affect the regime's continuation?

**Nancy Okail [52:43]**

Yeah, I mean, if we can put it simply, the world in 2013 was a completely different place than it is today on so many levels, regionally and internationally, and on different aspects. Most of them were some of the factors that Sisi was betting on that [income] for his support.

Let's just look at the regional dynamics. Well, first of all, in 2013, Egypt was the only country with peace with Israel. And then came the Abraham Accords and that did not that has changed the dynamics in in the region the relationship between in different countries, whether formally normalizing or informally, like what we are seeing between Saudi Arabia, and Israel right now,

Many countries who are at least quite a few countries who were importers of arms, particularly from the US, are still importing arms, but they're also becoming exporters of arms. And that is

giving them a lot of power in the region. Now, the Gulf countries, first of all, the bloc of Egypt, UAE, and Saudi Arabia against Qatar, had created that dynamic and given people the illusion that these are the repressive ones where it's Qatar that's the safe haven for the revolution, the one that stood by, and as things change, and as they had the reconciliation, and as the dynamics even between Saudi Arabia and UAE has changed, now, Qatar is Asia's best friend. And they are collaborating on many fronts, including trying to resolve the issue of the Sudanese crisis and Sudanese migrants and support for them.

So you see here like putting your bet again, and that goes back to my earlier comment on external actors and their impact. It's not just that they are not guaranteed, but they're also very long time. And their positionality changes over time. So he was betting on in the past, does no longer exist, or were replaced by ones that will be replaced again. So it's a very fragile state to be in.

Adding to that, back in 2013, you did not have the pandemic, which has created a huge crisis across the world, but in countries like Egypt, particularly those who depend on a big portion of the economy on the informal sector, who had to be on lockdown.

Another crisis that affected his ability to maintain the stability of the economy is the country in addition of course to all his flawed decisions. Finally, the war in Ukraine, and this affects Egypt directly in the world in many ways, but Egypt is the biggest wheat importer in the world. And the two top countries that exports wheat to Egypt are Ukraine and Russia. And of course, that had an impact on increasing the price of wheat, let alone its availability. And also like how it affects the budget. And I think in 2021, just that line item had added 150 billion dollars to what was budgeted for in the Egyptian economy. And also one last thing I spoke in the first round is that also one of the things that Sisi was showing part of his legitimacy is he came on in correcting Morsi's failure in dealing with the [Grand Renaissance] Dam and the standoff on the Ethiopian dam. And 10 years later, it's a complete failure. He could not do anything, or move forward, that adds to the fragility of the economy and also adding to the scare of the water crisis.

So if we look at all the parameters and the factors that he was betting on in 2013, they have completely changed. And they put him in a much more vulnerable place than he thought he would be, regardless of the flawed policies that he had.

**Amy Hawthorne [57:37]**

Thank you so much, Nancy. David, I'd like to ask you, you know, the main target of this coup and of the subsequent repression was, of course, the Muslim Brotherhood. How do you assess the state of the Brotherhood 10 years later, you know, history shows that the group has been able to survive and revive after periods of intense repression. Is this time different?

**David Kirkpatrick [58:04]**

I'll try to keep my answer brief. You know, ultimately, we don't know of course.

I mean, they do seem to be very thin on the ground in Egypt, they're afraid to raise their head. They're mostly in jail. The place where you hear mostly about the Brotherhood is from Sisi, who continues remarkably to blame the Brotherhood for things even though they've been largely decapitated.

I have two thoughts about the future of the Brotherhood. The first is that really the founder of the Brotherhood, Hassan El Banna, his great genius was ambiguity. And so there has always been, if you look closely, a lot of debate within the Brotherhood about what the Brotherhood stands for.

And so it's not surprising that at this moment, there's quite a bit of debate among Muslim Brothers and their sympathizers over the lessons of the coup. That is, should some of them say, well, we should have gone faster, we should have confronted the military harder, we should have never trusted the liberal forces or tried to partner with them whatsoever, they were going to turn against us. Others say exactly the opposite, you know, we should have gotten out of the way, we should have moved more slowly and not let ourselves become targets, we shouldn't have run a presidential candidate, we should have worked harder to build our ties with those other secular forces, and that kind of common front is the only way. So the legacy of this whole experience is itself contested and will remain a subject of future debate.

When you ask Muslim Brothers, this is the second thought, we know what is going to happen to your movement, they will all say you can't kill an idea, you know, which is true as far as it goes. But the idea, of course, changes over time. And what I'm curious about, for our purposes, let's break down the idea of the Muslim Brotherhood into two parts. The first part is that the path forward, the path of revival for the Arab world, is by looking to its roots, by looking to Islam, as opposed to modernization, that is, following the path of the West. And that idea, I think, is likely to have legs, vague as it is. The other idea that I associate with the Muslim Brotherhood is this notion that the means of change is a kind of Leninist model—that you need to have a disciplined cadre, an elite, who will lead the lead the people, who will tell the society what they need to do and try to reform them from the top down. That idea was already under fire within the Brotherhood and within the Islamist movement before 2011.

So the question will be, is this a chance, you know, obviously, an authoritarian government of a repressive system like Egypt has now is conducive to cultivating an impulse for Leninism among the opposition, that's how to survive—a kind of cell structure like that is the way to survive in a more or less totalitarian country. On the other hand, you know, there certainly are people coming out of the experience of the uprising in 2011, who continue to take away the opposite conclusion: that a more democratic approach to approaching democracy is the path forward. And so, to my mind, that will be the interesting question about the future of the Brotherhood.

**Amy Hawthorne [1:01:12]**

Thank you, David. Great insights there for us. Samar, I'd like to ask you a hard question, but an important one. As a human rights defender, a human rights advocate, if you had to single out just one human rights issue in Egypt that you believe is most important for Egyptian human rights defenders and the international community to really push on, something where an improvement, a change would truly make a difference for Egyptians, what would that one issue be? And that's a hard question because we could list like 200 human rights abuses that have happened under Sisi, But if you had to just pick one that you think is the most important, the most pivotal, what would that be?

**Samar ElHussieny [1:01:55]**

Well like I would simply say, like, from a personal perspective, it would be the pretrial detention and releasing political prisoners, for sure. Even like me, myself, my dad was a political prisoner in 2018 for a few months. So I know the pain, I know how many families and friends and people are impacted by this in Egypt. I know about the kids who are growing up without their parents, I know about the trauma that they suffered because of their absence. So this is from a personal, a very personal perspective.

But from a larger perspective, I think it would be accountability measures. Because accountability measures means that the judiciary system would be operating, which we're all hoping for. It means that laws and legislation would be challenged and implemented. It means

that the Constitution might be respected, it means that perpetrators could be punished for their crimes and could fear even the consequences of the repression or the crimes that they're doing. Accountability means that corruption could be limited. It means that there is no more project without feasibility studies, as our president was saying that we don't need feasibility studies, but if he knows that he would be accountable for this project, if he knows that he will be accountable for the public spending, maybe in this case, this would be limited. It will mean that there will be rule of law, hopefully this might lead to a balance of power between the different branches.

It also means that maybe the militarization of the economy in Egypt might be shrunk a little bit, just give us a small space for foreign investment, for even the private sector in Egypt to operate with a free economy. So everybody can compete. Free competition. I'm coming from a leftist background. But again, I hope for an actual economic competition in Egypt.

Accountability would mean that the press would be free. And also it would mean that if someone is tortured, or someone is put behind bars for unlimited time, when they get out, they can even ask for remedies for what they suffered, for the pain that they have gone through. And it will also mean that maybe the regime will stop its transnational repression.

Because human rights defenders, if you are out of Egypt, you're not out of touch, still, they can reach out to your family, they can reach out to your friends, so they can even target you and in the new country that you moved to. I think two weeks ago, we had a case of an Egyptian Turkish citizen who was passing by a Kuwaiti airport, and they actually arrested him and threatened him to be deported. They denied his access to his new nationality, to his rights as a Turkish citizen, they didn't allow him to communicate with [[unintelligible], because Egypt sent a memo to the Kuwaiti government. So even when we're outside, we're not out of touch. And when you are inside, you're totally handcuffed in a way, even if you're outside the prison. So it would be accountability, I hope.

**Amy Hawthorne [1:06:09]**

Thank you so much, Samar, I think you've touched on three critical rights issues in Sisi's Egypt.

The first, pretrial detention. I think, all of us on this panel, personally know many, many, many friends and colleagues who have been or are still in pretrial detention, simply for their political opinions, or sometimes for no clear reason at all. So Sisi's use and abuse of pretrial detention as a tool of repression is really, really something very notable and very disturbing about his regime.

You mentioned the lack of accountability, the lack of accountability of this regime is also shocking. And even if we just talk about one particular event, which was the Raba'a and Ennahda massacres, where more than 1000 Egyptians were killed in broad daylight and one day, there's been no accountability just for that crime, not to mention all the other crimes.

And then you mentioned transnational repression. And this is something that really was not a feature of Mubarak's regime. But now, even human rights defenders, political activists who are living outside of Egypt are vulnerable to the repression of the regime. So thank you so much for mentioning those three issues. I know I only asked you to ask about one but the three are very, very important.

And before we turn to questions from the audience, I'd like to ask Sharan a very hard question, but you are a political scientist, professor among the group. So how do military regimes democratize? Under your analysis—I've read part of your book, it's very compelling—one would

come away thinking that, you know, it's impossible to think of Egypt ever democratizing with its military backed political system. So how do military regimes democratize, can they?

**Sharan Grewal [1:08:02]**

Yeah, so first, having an empowered military makes a transition far more difficult, as we've discussed, but there are a minority of cases that do make it to democracy, especially in Latin America.

Eventually, after many attempts with many coups eventually made it to democracy. And the way those minority of cases succeed is, in essence, what David was describing earlier: the pacted transition where you respect enough of the military's interests and you still retain enough public support that you can push the military in essence to accept whatever limited democracy with some veto power for the military or some concessions made to the military. That's in essence the way you get there. And that is, in essence, what was attempted in Egypt under Morsi, that there was a balance, he tried to strike respecting some of the military's interests encroaching on others.

But what makes a pacted transition so difficult is that you have to be weighing your public support and international support relative to the military's. And doing that in this very fast paced transition is a recipe for miscalculation. So O'Donnell and Schmitter who were talking about pacted transitions in Latin America, they describe it as playing coup poker, because you don't know, you don't have full information about how much support the military has, and what it's doing behind the scenes. Morsi didn't know that the military was helping to fund and organize Tamarod, as David recalls, Morsi didn't know that the US was sending Sisi directly a yellow light, even though made it think that Morsi thought the US was sending them a red light. So those miscalculations make it so that pacted transitions are very difficult. But if we go back to those Latin American cases, what also helped them beyond the sort of strategy of pacts was that the military had become thoroughly delegitimized as a political actor prior to the transition beginning. In some cases, it was because of defeat and war, [Argentina] with the Falklands War. In other cases, it was because the economy was so bad under military rule that nobody wanted to go back to that. So the military didn't have an opportunity to stage a coup.

And that delegitimization of the military didn't happen in Egypt, for 2011. On the contrary, the military had successfully created a myth that it saved the revolution in 2011, that it was one hand with the people and that gave it some political capital that allowed it to weather the storm and made a pacted transition difficult.

But moving forward, could that happen? Could the military in Egypt become delegitimized enough that you could succeed? The possible silver lining is this IMF deal that's occurring that might push some of the military companies to compete with private companies on a level playing field. I'm skeptical that will happen. But what it has done, it has called attention to the fact that the military does have this control over the economy. And thus, if the economy continues to worsen, it is possible that Egyptians would eventually blame not just Sisi but also the military writ large, that's what would be required for long term, no one to be calling on the military to come back into politics after seeing the mess they have made in the economy.

The other lesson I think we can learn from other cases is the process of political learning that might happen after a coup. And here I'm thinking about Turkey in particular, where after the 1980 coup, there was a realization among political parties in Turkey, that although [they] had supported previous schools in the 60s and 70s, after 1980, started to realize that those were not good for the country, nor were they good for the opposition parties. In that case, it didn't lead

opposition parties to come to power afterwards. And that process of political learning might occur in Egypt in the sense of understanding that Sisi wasn't going to hand over power to opposition parties, that they were wrong to trust the military to do so. And that, therefore, might also be a silver lining long term in terms of how Egypt could make it to democracy.

But I do want to end on one pessimistic note, which is that even if the general public and the opposition parties are opposed to a coup, there are still some militaries that will fight tooth and nail, seeing the losses that are going to come for them under democracy. I'm thinking of Myanmar, I'm thinking of Sudan recently, where even when the majority of the people and the political parties seem to be against the coup still, they fight tooth and nail for it.

**Amy Hawthorne [1:12:56]**

Thank you, Sharan. Lots of food for thought there. We just have a few minutes left. And I think we're only going to have time maybe for one audience question. And I'd like to start at least with one question from Aya Batrawy of NPR, National Public Radio. She asks a very timely question that has to do with migration and refugees and the horrible tragedy that we saw in the Mediterranean earlier this month, the ship that capsized and sank that many Egyptians were on board trying to get to Europe. I would like to ask you, Samar, what about the state of the economy in Egypt and what about the Egyptian government's policies that are driving seemingly very large numbers of Egyptians to put their lives at great risk and try to escape to Europe across the Mediterranean? What is driving this? Just maybe a minute? Complicated question, short answer, sorry.

**Samar ElHussieny [1:14:03]**

Okay. I will try. I think Nancy touched upon this when she was speaking about the inflation rate, the devaluation of the currency. The current economic situation in Egypt is very dire, especially for, even like, upper middle class and middle class and lower class. All social classes are suffering in Egypt right now. And ironically, the President right now is actually bargaining with the fact that he is stopping illegal migration to Europe. And he is saying that if you didn't support me, it means more illegal immigration coming your way. People are so desperate, the economic situation is getting harder every day. Even the social protection policies that the IMF or the IFCI have been advising, I don't think that they're helping, because the situation is getting out of control. Right now, you mentioned we are during the Eid and I know many families that didn't even consider the usual rituals of sacrificing in Eid because of the high prices. When it comes to even the level of [unintelligible] sometimes you can endure the economic crisis if you can see an actual impact. But I think the only operating project for the President Sisi in Egypt right now is repression, all other projects, our our our failure, a big failure, and doesn't bring back the revenue that they would actually save the country.

And just quickly, Sharan was mentioning that the private sector, there might be a window for competition with the military. And this leads us back to accountability. Recently, the Egyptian regime wanted to sell some of the military acquired project, the Wataniyya petrol stations, but they couldn't because there [are] no ledgers. So the investors don't know what is the financial feasibility of this project. So they cannot actually buy it, even if they wanted to, they can't. And we are coming to I wouldn't say revolution of the hungry, people are so desperate for stability right now in Egypt, but people are suffering. That's why they would prefer dying in the sea. And I think also Italy recently has been reporting a high number of children who are crossing the sea, because by law, they cannot send back children. So families in Egypt, they send children because they know that children cannot be sent back. I exceeded my one minute but okay, thank you.



**Amy Hawthorne [1:17:23]**

That's okay. Thank you so much.

I mean, it's really remarkable. You know, Egyptians are very resilient. They're used to difficult economic situations. But these are really desperate times. And what you just mentioned about people sending children across the Mediterranean shows how desperate a lot of Egyptians are. And going back to what Nancy talked about, Sisi's three promises to build support for the coup and one of them was prosperity or at least economic improvements—10 years later, we see the economy in worse shape than ever. So certainly Egypt under Sisi is a case study of where authoritarian rule has failed to produce economic growth, economic stability, economic improvement. So I don't know exactly what the answer is.

But where Egypt is today, Egyptians are much worse off economically. And in terms of rights and freedoms. I'm sorry that we're out of time and we didn't have a chance to get to the many other excellent questions from the audience, but I'm going to share them with the panelists just for their own food for thought. And one of the questions actually, Samar, was asking if you could share the interesting statistics that you provided. So we'll connect you with that questioner.

I'd like to thank so much all of our panelists: David Kirkpatrick, Sharan Grewal, Nancy Okail, Samar ElHussieny. Thank you for being with us today. And thank you to our audience. Again, I'm Amy Hawthorne from POMED, and we're marking 10 years since Egypt's military coup. Thanks so much and we hope to see you, our speakers and our audience, again soon at our next event. Bye bye.