

El-Sisi, Egypt's Greatest Leader, Knows Which Identity To Embrace

It is not clear that the American government, or other governments in the West, understand what El-Sisi is trying to do. He is trying not only to do as much damage as he can – no one can destroy – the Muslim Brotherhood, but to do what he can to limit the tug of identities – Arab, Islamic – other than that of “Egyptian.” His recent remark shows that he understands perfectly that Egypt, alone among the Arab states, has a sufficiently long history, and within that history a sufficiently long pre-Islamic period in which pride can be taken (and it is that period, and that alone, in which tourists have an interest), and the more Egyptians focus on “Egypt” the less likely they will be to heed the siren song of Islam, of the supposed Islamic identity of a country whose truest Egyptians are the Copts, or rather those who stayed Copts, for so many of those who claim to be Arab and Muslim in Egypt, including those who torment and despise the Copts, are themselves the descendants of Copts who were forcibly converted over the centuries, either directly or to escape the terrific pressure of having to pay the Jizyah and be subject to other disabilities as well.

Of course El-Sisi cannot change, by himself, the political culture of Egypt, and there are plenty of examples – you can see some at www.memritv.org – of crazed Egyptians, including those who are newsmen, professors, journalists, religious leaders, still with their conspiracy-theories and absurd views of the universe. But he's doing, with what he has to work with, a good deal.

When he says this in a recent speech to an audience of Copts:

“Yes, a humanistic and civilizing message should once more emanate from Egypt. That is why we must not call ourselves anything other than ‘Egyptians.’ This is what we must be – Egyptians, just Egyptians, Egyptians indeed! I just want to tell you that – Allah willing – we shall build our nation together, accommodate make room for each other, and we shall like each other, love each other, love each other in earnest so that people may see.”

then you understand that Egypt has a leader who is not, as Nasser was, someone consumed with pan-Arabism, and in being the leader of “the Arabs.” Nor is he, like Sadat, full of self-importance, and insufficiently aware of the dangers of an Islam unconstrained. Sadat had a falling-out with the Muslim Brotherhood, but in his earlier years (the British imprisoned Sadat during World War II for being pro-Nazi) he was much closer to their world view, and while he regarded the Ikhwan as a political threat to himself, Sadat would never have seen concluded that Islam itself was a problem, or that Egypt should de-emphasize the “Arab” component of its identity. And he mistreated the Coptic Pope. El-Sisi is doing what he can to promote the Pharaonism of Taha Hussain, and that is a fantastic turn in Egypt’s history. If the young leftists so unhappy with the methods employed by El-Sisi’s regime still refuse to see that El-Sisi is an enlightened despot and that everywhere in the Muslim lands the best that can be hoped for is an enlightened despot, then they have an unrealistic view of the primitives who make up so much of the Egyptian population. And if someone brings up the “democracy” in Tunisia, one should note the uniqueness of that example. For Tunisia is a country that had a half-century of Habib Bourguiba and those who followed his militantly secular line. Beji Caid Essebsi, the leader of the secular forces just voted in, is 88 years old, of the old Bourguiba line, and he is experienced enough to know not to trust the feline leader of Ennahda, Rachid Ghannouchi, nor those who think deals can be made with such people, and he, and those around him, will be

ruthless and “undemocratic” if it turns out they have to be, to protect the half of the Tunisian population that wants to be French from the half of the population that wants to be Saudi.

It is a stroke of luck that Al-Sisi has become the ruler of Egypt, supported by others of apparently similar views in the army but not only in the army. He is the Copts’ great hope. He is the great hope, too, of those Muslims who know that something is very wrong with Islam. He has read Taha Hussain, and taken that “Pharaonism” to heart. Enough nonsense about the “Arab spring” and “spreading democracy.” That won’t do in Muslim lands; only the enlightened despot can constrain Islam and help to create secular class. Ataturk, who was such an enlightened despot, ruled Turkey for nearly 20 years and that rule ended only with his death. In those days, far from prying eyes and nosy reporters, Ataturk could do what he had to without having to worry about what Western public opinion thought. El-Sisi has a much harder job. May this man of the hour not prove to be the man of an hour, but given the time to do what he knows he must to save Egypt, just, from disaster.