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## THE EGYPTIAN FARCE

There were no doubts that the Egyptian presidential elections of March 26 would have confirmed the victory of General Abdel Fattah al Sisi and his “right” to a second term in office.

After all, following the military coup that ousted president Morsi on July 3, 2013, thus reinstating the military dictatorship that governed the country since Nasser’s time, every election in Egypt is just an empty ritual with a known victor.

Everyone knows that the administration of power in Egypt is in the hands of the military. The brief parentheses of the Muslim Brothers was just dictated by the social circumstances after the beginning of the Arab Spring and the popular uprisings. After a technical stretch to recover from the surprise, everything went back to normal. In the Egyptian political comedy, tragedies turn to farce. The military coup d’état was transformed, in the imagination of the military leaders, into a revolution.

### **The opposition cannot run for election**

Al Sisi didn’t have any valid contender in the elections. The real opposition was blocked by preposterous bureaucratic issues or by intimidation. Others yet were arrested before they could present their candidacy. There was a systematic elimination of any and all antagonists to the General.

The Muslim Brothers were removed from the elections with a presidential decree. Just to make things clear and transparent, one of the candidates closest to the Brothers, Abdul Moneim Aboul Fattah, was arrested.

Another former military, Sami Annan, was also arrested. The official motivation was that he had failed to ask for an authorization from the military to run for office and that he had appeared on television wearing a uniform.

For the former Prime Minister and General, Ahmed Shafiq, a man with close ties to the deposed president Mubarak, the intimidation came from the United Arab Emirates, one of Al Sisi’s main sponsors, where Ahmed had sojourned before being invited to leave. Ahmed got the message and withdrew his candidacy.

Mohammed Anwar Sadat, the nephew of the murdered Egyptian president, had members of his staff arrested and was refused the use of hotels, conference halls and appearances on television. He also got the message and withdrew from the competition.

Lawyer Khalid Ali, an activist for human rights, ended up in prison during a demonstration. He was sentenced to three months behind bars for having “offended public decency”. Another withdrawn candidacy.

Colonel Ahmed Konsowa, another military would-be candidate, is facing 6 years behind bars for expressing views that were contrary to the decor of the military ordering.

In the end, there was but one adversary left, Moussa Mustafa Moussa, practically unknown, who was authorized to run for office against the General at the last minute as the leader of the “Al Ghad” (“Tomorrow”) party, which backed President Al Sisi himself.

### **The violation of human rights**

Amid such an electoral context, one that was heavily influenced by intimidation and arrests, by the recurrent introduction of measures that limit individual freedom – from 2013 until today – various international organizations have pointed their finger at the regime. One of them was Human Rights Watch, another was the representative for human rights of the UN, the Jordanian prince Zeid Ra’ad al Hussein, who accused the regime of threatening the opposition. Obviously, the continued abuses by the police with torture, indiscriminate arrests, forced closures of newspapers and arrest of journalists, closing of websites hostile to the regime, depict a regression of the already precarious social and political system in the country, with numerous violations of civil rights, but especially violations of human rights.

The prisons are filled with opposition members; in the order of tens of thousands. In practice, paradoxically, the brief period of participated democracy that followed the demonstration in Tahrir Square during the so-called Arab Spring, which ended with the arrival of the Muslim Brothers, now serves as a pretext for an even greater oppression by the regime, hidden behind the facade of the “justified” necessity of the fight against terrorism.

### **The situation**

The country’s economic situation is particularly difficult and has even worsened since Al Sisi’s rise to power. The poverty rate reached 28% of the population. The local currency has lost 35% of its value after the exchange with foreign currencies was unblocked. There was an attempt to liberalize the economy by withdrawing subsidies to consumer goods and basic commodities, which had a negative impact on the population. This contraction of expenditure did not involve the military sector, which saw weapon expenses hiking strongly and budgets reach the ceiling.

### **The promises**

Al Sisi promised to develop the Sinai even though, with terrorism currently running rampant in the deserted peninsula, the task seems nearly impossible.

He then promised to do away with bureaucracy, to cut taxes and to stimulate investments. It is not clear with what money he intends to do all of the above. Maybe with the money

received from the Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE, with which Egypt is solidly lined up on various middle eastern issues. Or maybe with the cash from the International Monetary Fund, which lately disbursed 12 billion dollars in aid.

Another recurring promise is to modernize the country, which is certainly a priority, but it clashes with the lack of funds and the ground-low level of infrastructure and services.

The fight against corruption is another strong suit of the regime's propaganda, although the corruption finds room mostly inside the regime's folds.

### **A democracy that doesn't exist**

It is the fourth time in Egyptian history that presidential elections are held. Among these, this is the second time with Al Sisi as president.

There was an election under Mubarak in 2005 (participated by 27% of voters), one in June 2012, won by the leader of the Muslim Brothers, Mohammed Morsi, with over 51% of votes (participated by 52% of voters). This last election was perhaps the only real competition between opposing candidates that saw a significant participation by voters. Seen the Egyptian electoral context of late, the result seemed like a hint in the direction of participated democracy.

But the Egyptian elections were not held to decide whether Al Sisi would win. This was already an ascertained fact. The only reason for holding said elections was to see how many of the 60 million voters, out of a 100-million-strong population, would actually cast a ballot.

The so-called alternative candidacy of Mustafa Moussa was just a facade. In the traditional manipulation of votes, those attributed to Moussa (roughly 3%) just served the purpose of showing that an opposition did exist (in 2014, the opposition reached exactly the same result).

The Civil Democratic Movement, a coalition of 8 parties, had invited the population to boycott the elections. But one must take into account the fact that to not vote means to show hostility towards the government. Many just voted out of fear.

Excluding the effect of manipulations, the participation was "officially" less than 42%, which is even less than in 2014, when there was an "official" 47% of Egyptians casting their votes. The plebiscite that the regime hoped for and that would have legitimized Al Sisi's hold to power, did not occur.

### **Al Sisi and the military and economic establishment**

Al Sisi doesn't govern with his own, personal, power but with the power granted to him by Egypt's military leaders. There were recently rumors of a possible coup d'état to oust him. This happens every time that popular malcontent grows and people tend to target the president while saving the military castes. Al Sisi's power is tied to the power of the military and of the security services that allow him to exercise power seen that the president never

founded his own, personal, political party. In practice, the General answers to the Supreme Military Council.

Although Al Sisi removed the Chief of Staff and the head of General Services, placing his own trusted men and family members in key roles, the support that he enjoys from the military is not so solid as it would seem.

After all, the military and civil industries, the health sector, the construction sector, public investments and general services – in short, much of the country's economy – is in the hands of the military. Even the widening of the Suez canal was carried out by the army. But when the economy falters, it is not just do to popular malcontent, but also to military malcontent.

### **A useful military dictatorship**

The stability of Egypt, albeit to the detriment of democracy and human rights, is convenient to many countries. Egypt and its policy, its military prowess, its demographic weight in the Arab world, plays a central role in issues of security and terrorism in the Middle Eastern and North African theater.

Egypt is a force to be reckoned with both in the relationships with Israel and the Palestinian National Authority. It talks and mediates with Hamas, it opposes the military expansion of Iran, it is involved in the war in Yemen, it has close ties with Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf countries, it is an essential partner in the US Middle Eastern policy, it enjoys backing by France and is on the front line of the fight against the ISIS, both in the Sinai and in Libya. In a strongly conflicting theater, Egypt guarantees the balance of interests of many regional and international actors. So if Egypt is governed by a military regime, if there are violations of human rights and the total absence of democracy, so be it.

### **The future?**

The Egyptian population, which was never instructed or sensitized on the concept of democracy (they have never had a taste of it) and of human rights, is more inclined to accept a dictatorship if it produces social stability coupled with economic prosperity.

So the parameter used to evaluate Egypt's system is not democracy but rather the bettering of the population's living standard. Terrorism is fueled by social malcontent and, if this happens in the most populous Arab country, it represents a huge problem.

We must not be surprised if Al Sisi, after a second and final term, according to Egypt's constitution, will try to change regulations to become, like his predecessors, president for life. That is, if he isn't ousted in the meanwhile by another military coup.

Al Sisi presents himself as a savior of his people and a man who can solve the economic and security problems in the country: He even stated that democracy is a luxury item that Egypt cannot afford for the time being.

So far, the General has only saved the power of the military elite, which ran the risk of extinction with the advent of the Muslim Brothers.

## **A SAUDI ATOMIC BOMB?**

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action signed between Iran on one hand and the five Permanent Members of UN Security Council plus Germany on July 14, 2015 was the final act of a negotiation that went on for over 13 years amid threats, accusations, international controls and several moments of tension. That deal is now under barrage by President Donald Trump who would like to see it canceled or modified. A stance that is supported by Israel, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. The European partners to the treaty are not as convinced.

Recently, Saudi crown prince, Mohamed bin Salman, visited Washington to express his fear about Iran's nuclear program and asked to evaluate how his country could advance and acquire nuclear technology.

### **On the side of Iran**

The threat of new sanctions by the US will only be effective if China and Russia agree. Iran is one of Moscow's key assets in the region and especially in Syria. Tehran's role is also useful to Russian interests to counter Turkish aggressiveness, as events in Afrin have widely shown.

As far as China is concerned, they are only partly involved in the Middle East. But, just like in the past with the Syrian nuclear program, Beijing could allow the North Koreans to offer their technical support to the Iranians.

Generally, targeting Iran would mean pushing Tehran yet closer to both Moscow and Beijing.

### **On the side of Saudi Arabia**

The idea that Saudi Arabia could acquire nuclear technology is seen with distrust by Israel, that wants to remain the sole country in the region to own an atomic bomb. However, Mohamed bin Salman can count on his friendship with Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law and an orthodox Jew.

The new US President has struck a deal worth over 100 billion dollars to sell weapons to the Saudis and could open a partnership in the nuclear sector. A policy change with respect to the Obama era at the White House.

### **A longtime wish**

Saudi Arabia has expressed its interest to developing nuclear technology several times in the past. Back in 2006 it had launched a joint nuclear development program with the other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council. And had then struck a series of deals with companies from the US, France, Argentina, China, South Korea, UK, Kazakhstan and Russia.

In 2010 a royal decree signed off a long term project to build 16 nuclear reactors that could produce both electricity and help desalinize marine waters. The project claims that 20% of Saudi Arabia's energy could come from nuclear power by 2032. Nuclear power plants that

were to be used for civilian purposes – just like in Iran – but that imply the development of a nuclear know how. Currently, the Saudi nuclear program has not even taken off and the hypothesis of building the 16 reactors has been delayed to 2040. However, the partnerships that have been agreed could help booster the program.

In February 2018, US Energy Secretary Rick Perry has began negotiating the transfer of nuclear material to Saudi Arabia with the Saudis as long as non-proliferation commitments are respected. Although the kingdom is a signatory of the 1988 Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty and is a member of the International Atomic Energy Agency, just like any other country using nuclear technology, shifting from civilian to military use is not complicated. However, in order to do so, the Saudis need to build the infrastructure and acquire the competences needed to avoid a meltdown. And this will take some time.

Unlike Israel, South Africa and North Korea – that have covertly developed their nuclear programs – the Saudis want to openly pursue the technology. This is one of the other factors that will affect the development of the Saudi nuclear program. A collateral issue of a potential military use of nuclear technology, is the acquisition of the vectors or missiles that could potentially carry and drop a nuclear warhead. The Saudis lack ballistic missiles, but could use the F-15s to carry a nuclear weapons over an enemy target.

### **Pakistan's role**

Pakistan is a key country for the Saudi's nuclear ambitions, given the longtime relationship between the two countries. Saudi Arabia helped finance the development of Pakistan's nuclear program and, according to unconfirmed sources, 4 out of the 7 Pakistani nuclear bombs are allotted to the Saudis. It is unclear whether the warheads are in Pakistan, as is more likely, or in Saudi Arabia. Regardless of where they are, we know Ryad could potentially rely on nuclear weapons if need be.

### **Israel's stance**

Israel is the one country in the Middle East that wants to keep the region denuclearized. After all, Tel Aviv owns some 200 nuclear warheads and is a non-signatory to international conventions. The Israelis want to maintain the primacy as the sole nuclear power in the region. And they do everything in their power to prevent their neighbors from developing the technology.

In September 2007, the Israelis raided a research center in Deir Ezzor, in Syria, where the regime had been developing its nuclear ambitions with the aid of North Korea. Tel Aviv has recently claimed that strike, something it generally doesn't do, as a reminder to Iran.

Similarly, in 1981 the Israelis destroyed a nuclear reactor that had been built with French assistance in Iraq. What is remarkable is that at the time the Iraqi nuclear program had been financed by the Saudis to support Saddam Hussein in his conflict against Iran and to help the kingdom of the Saud acquire nuclear weapons. The Saudis had even supported an Iranian nuclear program during the days of the Shah.

### **A common enemy**

An Israeli air strike against Iranian nuclear infrastructure would encounter a series of difficulties, the main one being the distance from the target that would allow Tehran to anticipate the threat. Another inevitable consequence would be to open another war front in the region. Had this been an easy option, the Israelis would have struck Iran years ago.

However, the possibility of a military op against Iran is still on the table. This is confirmed by a series of informal talks with the Saudis to allow Israeli commercial flights over Saudi airspace on their way to India. This is a tactic that has been used by Israel in the past for this type of action: get closer to the target by exploiting the cover of commercial flight routes.

After all, the nuclear deterrent is valid only if your competitors don't have one. This is the case for Iran, but also for the Saudis. Israel and Saudi Arabia currently share a common enemy: Iran. But they don't necessarily share a common strategy on the other fronts in the region. They are allies today, but could cease to be so in the future. And this is why Israel will prevent the Saudis from developing a nuclear bomb.

### **The danger of nukes in the Middle East**

Donald Trump's erratic approach does not contemplate the consequences of his actions. The United States seem to want to regain the prestige they have lost in recent years in the Middle East by supporting a series of reckless initiatives. To support Saudi Arabia's nuclear programs to counter the Iranian one is one of such actions.

Saudi Arabia is an important commercial partner and has wide oil reserves. But it is also one of the countries that has been financing Islamic terrorism. Despite Mohamed bin Salman's pseudo-reforms, the kingdom of the Saud is still heavily reliant on the radical islamic Wahabi clergy that supports its grip onto power. Offering nuclear technology to a country at risk of being overcome by radicals is never a good idea.

Back in 1967, the United States were willing to supply Iran with 5 nuclear reactors. It was the Shah's decision to block the project and join the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Had the project moved ahead, Iran would now have a nuclear warhead. Similarly with Pakistan, whose nuclear weapons are exposed to both Islamic radicalism, instability and a war of attrition with India. We should have learnt that lesson. Or maybe we didn't.

## **SYRIA'S DIRTY WAR**

The US-led coalition's attack on three military sites with links to chemical weapons in Syria on the night of April 13, 2018 is the last act of a conflict that has been ongoing for the past 7 years. Over 100 rockets were fired in response to an alleged chlorine gas attack in Douma, a suburb of Damascus, by the Syrian government. But it was more than a "humanitarian" gesture.

US President Donald Trump finally showed his muscles after years spent criticizing Barack Obama's inaction in the Middle East. Secondly, the attack was a message to Russia: the United States are still a player in the region. Not that they really have the power to shift the current balance in the area. Russia, Turkey and Iran are sitting at the victors' table; the latest trilateral summit helped define a de facto partition of the battle ground.

Roughly two thousand US troops that station in the surroundings of Manbij will not be able to play any pivotal role in the future of Syria since their main allies from the YPG, the leading force behind the Syrian Democratic Forces, have been abandoned by the United States in Afrin.

### **A Deadly Weapon**

Chemical weapons are the best way to get rid of your enemy. They guarantee great results on the field and have a great impact on the enemy's morale. Chemical weapons don't distinguish between civilians and militias; they strike indiscriminately and this is precisely the reason why they have been banned. The Chemical Weapons Convention was signed in 1993 and it bans the use, development, production and stocking up of these chemical agents, while prescribing for their destruction.

The Paris agreement has been ratified by several countries, but not by all of them. When we look at the Middle East: Egypt is a non-signatory, Israel signed the Convention but failed to have it ratified by the Knesset, Syria sent a letter to the UN Secretary General in December 2013 saying it was adhering to the Convention. Bashar al Assad's regime decided to do so to prevent another American attack following an alleged chemical attack in Ghouta. However, Syria's government did not comply with the deadline for the handing over of their chemical arsenal set for January 2014. Even Russia has claimed it will delay the destruction of its stocks until 2020.

An agency, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPWC), has been created in 1997 to monitor the application of the Convention. Although it is not a UN agency, it still works closely with them. Presently, the OPWC is responsible for all the Security Council approved investigations on the use of chemical weapons in Syria and elsewhere across the globe. Their work has been obstructed by Russia, who's placed its veto to any extension of the OPWC's mandate. After all, the Syrian regime has been accused of using chemical weapons at least a dozen times over the past six years.

The OPWC's inspectors have a hard time carrying out an investigation in a war zone; unbiased information is hard to find and there is very little hard evidence that can be actually gathered on the ground. Furthermore, during a civil strife it is extremely

complicated to draw a line between opposing factions and to define the perimeter of responsibility between alleged attackers and victims. Chemical weapons have been used in Syria by both the government and the rebels.

The use of chemical and biological weapons is a low cost alternative. They don't need huge production infrastructures. They don't require an advanced technology. You only need the guts to employ them. The most common is SARIN, a nerve agent, both in liquid and gas state. It produces a painful death within minutes. Mustard gas is another all time favorite for its vesicant effect, known since World War I.

Since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, over 600 thousand people have died and thousands have been killed by chemical weapons. Over one thousand people were killed in Ghouta on August 21, 2013 alone. It is still unclear whether it was a deliberate attack on the part of the government, or whether a stock of chemicals owned by the rebels – and consequently provided by Saudi Arabia – was accidentally hit.

That was only the prelude to a coalition strike to punish Bashar al Assad. On April 4, 2017 fifty-nine Tomahawk missiles were fired against the air base where the regime planes had taken off to drop chemical weapons over Khan Sheykun. Just like in the recent past, Russia was told ahead of time about the strike. But also in this case, independent journalists claimed that the Syrian government had hit a rebel deposit of either chemical weapons, chlorine-based disinfectant or fertilizers.

Syria had a stock of around one thousand tonnes of chemical agents before the beginning of the civil war, and part of it was seized by the rebels during the conflict. ISIS for instance developed the skills to produce Mustard gas. Turkish police has recently seized radioactive material, californium, that could have been used for either a nuclear weapon or, as is more likely, to contaminate an area, people or water. Although a signatory of the Convention on chemical weapons, Syria has maintained a research and production facility in Masyaf, close to Hama, the Syrian Scientific Research Center, that was hit by Israeli fighter jets in September 2017.

The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic is the entity allegedly investigating human rights abuses in the country. The organisation was founded by the UN Security Council in March 2011 and so far has exposed around two dozen human rights violations. Syrian authorities have never granted the commission the possibility of conducting its research on the ground. Being never allowed in Syria has had serious consequences on the findings of the commission. And all the actors on the ground have been able to continue to act with impunity.

### **The North Korean Connection**

The equipment (valves, thermometers, acid-resistant containers) and the raw materials that have been used by the Syrian regime to produce chemical weapons all come from North Korea. Or at least this is what a team of international experts claims. The two countries have been collaborating in the development of chemical agents and ballistic missiles for the past 50 years. During the first two conflicts against Israel in the 60s and

70s, North Korean pilots were flying Syria's fighter planes. The collaboration went so far as the nuclear sector; the joint program was interrupted when Israeli warplanes bombed a reactor that was being built in Deir Ezzor on September 5, 2007.

Currently, North Korean experts are allegedly helping Syrians assemble chemical agents and prepare them for their use. There have been at least 40 shipments of military supplies – including for the chemical sector – from North Korea to Syria since 2011. This is one of the many businesses that keep the Pyongyang regime afloat. An open secret for two countries that unsurprisingly enough are under UN embargo.

Generally speaking, the shipments employ a series of tricks: from trans-shipments from one boat to another along the route, to covert shipment companies and financing to triangulations. And no one really cares about the embargo violations. China doesn't see when the weapons leave North Korea. Russia doesn't talk when the supplies land in one of the Syrian ports under its control. The world pretends not to hear the echoes of the victims.

### **An Endless Agony**

A chlorine attack has recently struck Ghouta, a suburb of Damascus. The regime wanted to get rid of the last rebel holdout near the capital. But that was not the only target. Chlorine-filled barrel bombs have been dropped over Idlib and Saraqib. The ISIS used Mustard gas in Umm Hawsh in September 2016. The attack on Douma only served the purpose of igniting a US reaction. But apart from that, it was the latest act of a cruel conflict.

Probably chemical weapons have been employed more than we know about. Impunity prevails when it is difficult to obtain non-biased information. The Russians don't see anything, don't want to see anything and are often complicit. The US just bark or, as for Douma, drop a few missiles without nothing but a mere symbolic impact on the ground. The Israelis are slightly more effective when they strike military facilities, preferably the ones hosting Iranian advisors or Hezbollah. Ultimately, no one cares about the suffering of the Syrian population.