

El-Sisi On “60 Minutes” – Take Two

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Abdulfattah El-Sisi some time ago gave an interview to Scott Pelley of CBS’s “60 Minutes.” Shortly after it was taped, Egypt’s ambassador to the United States requested that the interview not be aired. CBS refused the request. All reports suggest that El-Sisi had reconsidered the wisdom of having his remarks broadcast about close military collaboration with Israel in the Sinai.

In the interview, El-Sisi made a number of remarks that have raised eyebrows. He was asked about the killing on August 14, 2013 of what Pelley described as “nearly 1,000” supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood, in Rabaa Al-Adawiya Square and al-Nahda Square. They were there to protest the coup that on July 3 had deposed Mohamed Morsi. El-Sisi questioned Pelley’s information. He said the Egyptian government’s figure is not 1,000, but 638 dead. El-Sisi then said, “There were thousands of armed people in the sit-in for more than 40 days. We tried

every peaceful means to disperse them.” It is true that the Egyptian government continually broadcast messages to the more than 10,000 who had set up camps, and offering a safe exit out for anyone who wished to take advantage, until August 14, when the security services – police and army – used tear gas, rubber bullets, birdshot, and finally, live ammunition to disperse the protesters.

What is not clear is how many of those protesters were armed. The Egyptian government itself reported that just over a dozen guns were recovered among the thousands in the protest camp. Had it been trying to convey the message that many of these were “armed protesters,” it could simply have announced that “hundreds of guns” had been found. As for recovering “just over a dozen guns,” that of course does not include guns that could have been spirited away by the thousands of protesters who finally left. About 50 policemen were killed during the melee, evidence that not all the Muslim Brotherhood protesters were unarmed.

El-Sisi was then asked by Pelley how many “political prisoners” Egypt is holding. He replied that “We don’t have any political prisoners or prisoners of opinion. We are trying to stand against extremists who impose their ideology on the people.” He also dismissed a report by Human Rights Watch that said Egyptian authorities “have arrested or charged probably at least 60,000 people” since the 2013 military coup that ousted Morsi. El-Sisi reply: “I don’t know where they got that figure. I said there are no political prisoners in Egypt.” This categorical denial is absurd. And perhaps it, too, along with his remarks about Israel, was something El-Sisi wished, on second thought, not to be broadcast.

El-Sisi might have said something different. He might have replied, more comprehensively, and going on the offensive:

I don’t know how they arrived at this figure. Mr. Pelley, let me tell you about the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Muslim Brotherhood is regarded not just by us in Egypt, but by other Arab states – the Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain – as much more than a political movement; it's been designated as a "terror group" in those countries. And in your own country, your Senators have been considering passage of the "Muslim Brotherhood Terrorist Designation Act." A leading American Muslim moderate, Mr. Zuhdi Jasser, testified in favor of this designation. Here is what he said:

"No group embodies the threat of the radical Islamist more than the Muslim Brotherhood, or in Arabic, Ikhwan Muslimin. The Muslim Brotherhood is a terrorist organization[.] ... Help us, modern-minded, secular, liberal Muslims marginalize their influence by declaring them what they are – a terrorist organization."

Apparently you think, Mr. Pelley, that we in Egypt, who have had 90 years of experience with the Muslim Brotherhood, are supposed to endure forever their violent challenge to the state. We gave them forty days to disperse from the center of Cairo. That was more than enough. As for the Human Rights Watch figures, figures which my government strongly disputes, those apparently include both those who have "been arrested" and those who have been "charged." So how many were "arrested" in a sweep and then let go, and how many were in the end actually "charged"? These two categories need to be disentangled.

What could Pelley then reply?

The part of the interview that caused the Egyptian government to request that it not be broadcast had to do, of course, with Israel. Pelley asked El-Sisi about whether his military was working with Israel against terrorists in North Sinai. El-Sisi confirmed this.

Asked if this cooperation was the closest ever between the former enemies, El-Sisi said, "That is correct... We have a wide

range of cooperation with the Israelis.”

Here is what he might have said, going on the offensive:

“That is correct, Mr. Pelley. We have a wide range of cooperation with Israel. Egypt and Israel are both concerned with Daesh establishing itself in the Sinai. Daesh – you know what that means. It means unbelievable terror of every kind, suicide bombers, mass decapitations, burning people to death. The Israelis have not objected in the slightest to our moving soldiers and weapons – artillery, helicopter gunships – into all areas of the Sinai as needed.

This is an oblique reference to the provisions of the Israel-Egypt peace treaty, which put limitations on the number of troops and weapons Egypt can have in the part of the Sinai closest to Israel.

And we have not objected to the Israelis hitting Daesh targets from the air, with drones, helicopters, planes. And we share intelligence on Daesh and other terrorists. If our interests coincide, why shouldn't we cooperate? Mr. Pelley, are you trying to make me apologize for this? You know what Daesh is like. I won't do it.

He can, of course, still offer these replies, on facing down the Muslim Brotherhood five and a half years ago in Cairo, on political prisoners, and on cooperation with Israel against Daesh. El-Sisi need only arrange to be interviewed by another American news outlet. He's a despot. But a semi-enlightened one. What do people expect? Florence Nightingale? This is the Middle East.

First published in