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A TALE OF A HELPLESS HERO:

A CASE STUDY OF THE EGYPTIAN REGIME'S
NARRATIVES ON THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND
THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE WAR

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Introduction

The Egyptian regime strategically employs narrative to justify its public policies, recognizing the equal significance of narrative and the decisions themselves. This fundamental premise underlies the Narrative Policy Framework, which aims to enhance comprehension of the relationship between narrative and public policy. By concentrating on the Egyptian context and comparing the regime's narrative during the COVID-19 pandemic with its narrative on the Russia-Ukraine war, new avenues emerge for comprehending the formulation of Egyptian public policies.

The narrative approach offers untapped spaces for research and understanding that have previously been overlooked. Particularly noteworthy is the narrative analysis of policymaking, considering the limited access to reliable data and statistics regarding the Egyptian regime's procedures and policies exacerbated by escalating security restrictions and increasing constraints on academic freedom. Furthermore, policy-making processes are veiled in secrecy and opaqueness, rendering policy support, networks, and alliances inaccessible to researchers. These systemic challenges are not unique to Egypt but extend to numerous authoritarian regimes in the Arab region and an expanding number of countries in the global south. In this context, the narrative approach in public policy demonstrates its primary advantage: it transcends these objective challenges by focusing on the regime's self-produced and publicly disseminated narratives. Consequently, these disclosed and available narratives serve as the gateway to comprehending the regime's overarching policy orientations and their subsequent transformations.

The exigencies of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war further emphasize the necessity of employing a narrative approach in policy analysis. Political regimes, as a rule, must furnish overarching narratives to justify their actions. These narratives typically undergo significant changes only in times of crises, when a confluence of circumstances necessitates a shift in the political discourse or its reformulation. The context of the pandemic and the war allow us to explore and comprehend the narratives deployed by the Egyptian regime as it confronts these crises and challenges. We can discern alterations in the political leadership's rhetoric resulting from these crises and ascertain the formulas employed in presenting available options during such critical junctures. The narrative approach, in this case, aids our understanding of the general policies and the subsequent modifications introduced to them.

Given these considerations, this paper endeavors to examine the shifts that have occurred in the fundamental narrative of the Egyptian regime in response to the COVID-19 pandemic

and the Russia-Ukraine war. The primary question to be addressed is: What are the principal narratives put forth by the Egyptian regime during these two crises? Furthermore, what implications and meanings do these narratives convey concerning the content and trajectory of public policy in Egypt as a whole?

To address this question, the paper draws upon the theoretical contributions of the Narrative Policy Framework, which is based on five main postulates:¹

Socially Constructed Formulations: Public policy facts are not objective truths, but rather socially constructed formulations. Understanding these facts is contingent upon the ideas, impressions, and meanings that individuals ascribe to them. While public policies involve concrete actions and decisions, these programs and decisions are interpreted through the lens of associated meanings, sentiments, and perceptions.

Limited Comparisons: Statements about policy only allow for limited comparisons. There is no exhaustive and limitless array of options for policymaking. The identity and culture of a particular context constrain the available alternatives from which individuals select specific impressions or meanings to associate with public policy.

Common Narrative Structure: Despite their diversity across places and time, different narratives share a common structure. Narratives possess distinct components that can be identified, as elaborated further in this paper.

Three Levels of Analysis: The Narrative Policy Framework proposes three levels of analysis. Firstly, the micro level examines narratives at the individual level and how individuals interact with public policy narratives. Secondly, the meso-level focuses on specific groups and their patterns of interaction with the presented narrative. Lastly, the macro level centers on the culture, institutions, and structures that govern narratives.

Shaping Perceptions: Narratives significantly shape people's perception, understanding, and engagement with policies. The narratives disseminated about public policies are just as important as the actions undertaken within those policies. People's interpretations and responses to policies are heavily

1 Elizabeth A. Shanahan, Michael D. Jones, Mark K. McBeth, and Claudio M. Radaelli, "The Narrative Policy Framework", in *Theories of the Policy Process*, 4th ed., Routledge, 2018, p.179 (Shanahan et al, "The Narrative Policy Framework").

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influenced by the narratives presented to them.

This paper specifically focuses on the statements made by Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, who serves as the figurehead of the current Egyptian regime and is the primary spokesperson for the regime's policy orientations. To analyze these statements, a systematic approach was undertaken to gather the necessary data. Initially, the Al Manassa platform, which regularly publishes written transcripts of El-Sisi's statements accompanied by video recordings, was accessed. Subsequently, a search was conducted within these statements from 22 March 2020 (when the first statement regarding the pandemic was issued) until the end of October 2022, using the keywords *COVID-19*, *Russia*, *Ukraine*, and *war*. A comprehensive list was compiled, including interviews and official statements, recording their titles, the respective timestamps, and links to the corresponding web pages.² Finally, the statements and their contexts were thoroughly examined, and efforts were made to cross-reference them with available online videos to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the transcriptions.

The Hero Facing a Crisis

Every political narrative possesses a distinct structure and content. The structure establishes the context in which the narrative unfolds and identifies its central protagonist(s). Meanwhile, the narrative content's most crucial aspect lies in the employed strategy. To comprehend the narratives propagated by the Egyptian regime concerning the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war, it is essential to scrutinize both the structure and content of these narratives. Consequently, our analysis will start with an examination of the narrative structure.

Structure plays a pivotal role in political narratives and consists of four key components:³

Context: The context refers to the environment and circumstances in which the problem or phenomenon being studied unfolds. It encompasses the time and place of narrative production. In the case of Egypt, the context remains relatively similar for both the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war. These narratives share a

common spatial framework and temporal proximity. Notably, the context is characterized by the popular uprising in 2011, which led to a change in the Egyptian government system and subsequent instability. The consolidation of power by Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, with the support of the military establishment, brought about political stability following economic reforms initiated in 2016, including the comprehensive economic reform program implemented under an agreement with the International Monetary Fund. However, the emergence of the COVID-19 crisis in early 2020 and the Russia-Ukraine war in early 2022 significantly affected local and global economic activity. These major changes within the narrative's context necessitated the adoption of suitable narratives in response to the sudden and emergent circumstances.

Characters: Political narratives often involve multiple characters representing various roles such as heroes, villains, victims, beneficiaries, allies, and opponents. In the case under consideration, the main narrative revolves around General El-Sisi as the hero or savior who eliminated the perceived "villainous" Muslim Brotherhood regime, restored stability, combated terrorism, and brought order to Egypt. Other characters play supporting roles within this narrative, such as politically uninvolved citizens portrayed as victims of President Mohamed Morsi's regime. The presence of these auxiliary characters constructs an integrated narrative centered around a hero fighting villains to save victims and the innocent. However, with the onset of new crises, the significance of these supporting characters diminishes. The emergence of urgent and emerging challenges tests the protagonist's ability to fulfill promises made, especially as economic and living conditions were expected to improve with the completion of the economic reform program.

Plot: The plot involves the relationships, interactions, and developments that occur among the characters within the temporal and spatial framework of the narrative. The COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war significantly shape the plot of the narratives related to these crises. The pandemic's impact on the Egyptian scene served as the primary catalyst for events over the past three years. Initially, political and economic matters took a backseat to public health concerns due to the initial uncertainty surrounding the pandemic. Subsequently, economic matters regained prominence, particularly amid economic crises and the decline in economic activity caused by the pandemic. Hopes were initially pinned on a swift return to normalcy, bolstered by the availability of vaccines. However, as economic activity began to recover, the Russia-Ukraine war ensued, disrupting international stability and causing adverse effects on energy and food supplies. One crisis was followed by another, exacerbating the existing challenges. Various countries, including Egypt, grappled with economic crises resulting from the compounded impact of COVID-19 and the Russia-

2 A copy of this list is included in the Annex.

3 Shanahan, "The Narrative Policy Framework"; Michael Mintrom et al., "Policy Narratives, Localisation, and Public Justification: Responses to COVID-19", *Journal of European Public Policy* Vol.28 No.8, 3 August 2021, p. 1220; Paul Cairney, *Understanding Public Policy: Theories and Issues*, 2nd ed., Macmillan Education UK, 2019.

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Ukraine war. With external support becoming increasingly difficult to secure, local solutions became the primary path forward. As time passes, the plot gets increasingly complex for the main protagonist, creating obstacles to achieving anticipated economic successes following the heralded political achievements.

Moral of the Story (Resolution): Each narrative carries a moral meaning in the form of a solution or several policies intended to help citizens overcome the problems they face. This solution or set of policies is presented to them by the narrative's protagonist. The main narrative before 2020 in Egypt emphasized the need for patience and promised a better future on the economic front in the coming years. However, as crises unfolded, the promised future gradually shifted. The solutions presented by the narrative's hero differ between the first crisis (the pandemic) and the second crisis (the Russia-Ukraine war). These differences in the solutions offered will be further explored in detail in the subsequent section on narrative content.

The narrative structure employed by the Egyptian regime during the COVID-19 crisis and the Russia-Ukraine war revolves around the concept of a virtuous hero confronting emergent crises deemed "evil." The primary context of this narrative was marked by political instability, which was ultimately overcome by the central hero of the narrative, Abdel Fattah El-Sisi. However, economic challenges persistently confront this heroic figure, posing significant obstacles. Initially, it was believed that these economic hurdles could be surmounted. However, the subsequent crises intensified the narrative's development, leading the hero to face increasingly arduous challenges over time. Moreover, the resolution of these economic issues does not appear to be imminent. This raises the question of how the regime will address these challenges. To gain insight into the strategy underlying the regime's public policies in the context of the crisis, a thorough analysis of the narrative's content becomes essential.

Narrative Content: Hell is Other People!

The focus of the paper now transitions from the narrative structure to the content of the policies and strategies that convey them. Analysis of El-Sisi's statements during the first year of the pandemic and the initial eight months of the Russia-Ukraine war reveals a notable evolution in the content of these narratives. The narrative methods employed by the regime in early 2020 differ from those used by the end of 2022. Regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, the content of the Egyptian regime's narrative positions itself as part of a global

challenge that extends beyond Egypt, affecting the entire world. In the face of this universal crisis, the regime's narrative emphasizes the importance of managing the situation with a "calm, scientific approach" and "balance" to safeguard the achievements made during the preceding period. There is a clear emphasis on equipping the regime with scientific knowledge to confront this unprecedented crisis and on preparedness for all possible scenarios. The narrative highlights the willingness and readiness of the Egyptian armed forces to intervene if necessary, as well as the regime's previous focus on building a strategic reserve of essential commodities, which has proven beneficial. Additionally, there is a focus on restoring the capabilities of state institutions, exemplified by the government aid packages and programs in response to the pandemic. These efforts serve as evidence of the recovery of Egyptian state institutions and the increased capacity of the country to deliver public services following the implementation of economic reforms and adherence to the International Monetary Fund program. It is worth noting that the primary narrative, which promises to overcome the challenge and anticipates a brighter future, remains present, albeit to a lesser extent.

As the narrative shifts from a focus on the country to society, there is repeated emphasis on the accuracy of the reported numbers, even when the rates of COVID-19 infections and deaths in Egypt are relatively lower compared to other countries. The regime attributes this lower percentage to "divine mercy" toward the Egyptian people. This reliance on divine support for Egypt and its people becomes more apparent in subsequent waves of the pandemic, particularly from September to November 2020, when there were claims that other countries envy Egypt for its low infection and death rates. Religion is utilized to reinforce the narrative's content and to ascribe a sense of divine or miraculous blessing to the measures and policies implemented. Conversely, there are repeated warnings against societal negligence or non-compliance with social distancing and mask mandates, as such recklessness can lead to adverse consequences and jeopardize the achieved progress and interests.

In general, the regime's narrative during the COVID-19 crisis showcases a celebratory tone, highlighting accomplishments made before and during the pandemic, as well as the effective management of the crisis by state institutions. There is a persistent emphasis on the state's ability to provide based on its capabilities, which were rebuilt in the years leading up to the epidemic. The narrative stresses the importance of preserving these achievements and conveys the message that Egypt possesses the capacity to successfully overcome the crisis.

The narrative content during the Russia-Ukraine war exhibited a distinct shift, characterized by waning optimism

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for the future and an increased emphasis on external factors as the source of domestic crises. Blaming external actors, circumstances, and uncontrollable factors became a central theme in this narrative. The Russia-Ukraine war, as portrayed in the Egyptian political discourse, was perceived as an event beyond their control or influence. Notably, the focus shifted to the role of international institutions in supporting developing countries in addressing energy and food crises resulting from the war. These institutions were criticized for not providing sufficient support or intervention. Shifting from the global stage to the national context, there were repeated acknowledgments that economic conditions were challenging. However, it was emphasized that the situation would have been even more difficult had the regime not implemented previous economic reforms and plans.

Examining the context in which statements regarding the Russia-Ukraine crisis were made provides valuable insights into their content. Initial statements primarily comprised protocol meetings with presidents or officials, focusing on Egypt's foreign policy position concerning the international crisis. A similar pattern emerged during the pandemic, with official protocol statements mainly addressing Egypt's management of the COVID-19 crisis.

The contexts in which the Russia-Ukraine war were discussed initially took place during El-Sisi's meetings with journalists, media professionals, or events related to food and livestock projects. Detailed discussions about the war's impact on Egypt and the measures taken to address the crisis were held during these engagements. The timing of these statements offers an indication of their content. Notably, there were no statements issued by El-Sisi regarding the Russia-Ukraine crisis in the first two months of the war, suggesting that the issue did not initially receive significant attention, perhaps with the hope that it would be resolved quickly or its repercussions would be limited. However, by the end of April, a shift in position became evident. The Ukrainian crisis and its effects on Egypt were mentioned during El-Sisi's meeting with the media, followed by a statement when he met with an Egyptian family in their home where a call for national dialogue was made. Subsequently, detailed statements regarding the crisis reemerged periodically, becoming one of the primary topics addressed in public meetings.

A similar pattern was observed during the pandemic. Following El-Sisi's initial statement about COVID-19, subsequent statements were made during meetings with the government or armed forces. These contextual shifts indicated a growing recognition that the Russia-Ukraine war differed from the COVID-19 pandemic, and that state institutions alone would not be sufficient to confront this new context. Therefore, the regime sought to garner support from political parties, public figures, and civil society organizations.

This paper's specific focus excludes the regime's narrative on national dialogue. However, it is worth noting that the call for internal national dialogue, unprecedented since at least 2014, was made amid challenging economic conditions and was linked to the war in Ukraine. This suggests a potential shift in the regime's perception of the magnitude of existing economic and political challenges, which could explain the change in its narratives towards the crisis.

Although the regime engaged in conversations with individuals and institutions beyond official state channels, it does not necessarily indicate a greater openness of the narrative towards society. In the content of the regime's narrative during the Russia-Ukraine war, a discourse of reproach and threat is evident. The narrative laments the citizen uprisings in 2011 and 2013, which the regime claims as the cause for worsening economic conditions. Simultaneously, there is a threat that the occurrence of similar demonstrations could result in the loss of the achievements made, pushing the regime back to square one. In contrast to the emphasis on the efforts and coordination of state institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic, the regime's narrative on the Russia-Ukraine war highlights the limitations of certain state institutions in confronting the crisis. It repeatedly refers to programs and policies that were expected to succeed but instead failed to materialize.

The primary content of this narrative revolves around the strategy of shifting blame by citing circumstances beyond the regime's control and the actions of others in previous periods. This strategy involves evading responsibility by focusing on external factors outside the regime's control. Additionally, the optimistic tone that characterized the regime's readiness to face crises and difficulties is absent, replaced by narratives portraying a "helpless hero" searching for programs or policies that can contribute to resolving the crisis, albeit without success.

The narratives of the regime during the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war tend to shirk responsibility in the face of current challenges and crises that are not entirely beyond their control. The narrative seeks to avoid accountability for the feasibility and effectiveness of economic policies during and before the crisis. Notably, the significant difference between the two narratives lies in the decline of optimism during the war in Ukraine, marked by heightened uncertainty and a sense of helplessness.

Does Difference in Narrative Mean Different Policies?

A crucial aspect of understanding the shift in Egyptian public policies lies in contrasting the regime's core narrative with the emerging narratives arising from the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war. The core narrative portrays the regime as an "honest hero" that can overcome political and security challenges and achieve desired goals without external aid. The nascent narratives develop into sub-narratives, with the hero facing unexpected challenges and finding solutions during the pandemic, followed by another surprising challenge where available solutions seem ineffective and no new solutions are in sight. At this point, the main narrative, along with the second sub-narrative, reaches its climax, raising questions about how the honest hero can employ effective policies, solutions, and measures to confront this new challenge without appearing helpless. What new policies or ideas can assist in achieving these goals?

Reaching the climax within the grand narrative signifies the pinnacle of the challenge faced by the hero regarding changes in public policies. There are two main possibilities for this challenge. The first possibility involves altering the core narrative of the honest hero to a new narrative distinct from the current sub-narratives, potentially leading to changes in associated public policies. The emergence of a new grand narrative suggests a significant forthcoming change in public policy. The second possibility would be to maintain the main narrative while occasionally introducing minor modifications or supporting narratives. In this case, the regime adheres to the general course of previous policies with slight adjustments that do not impact their core, while remaining steadfast in the associated grand narrative.

The key conclusion drawn from this discussion is that observing the continuity or change of the core narrative aids in understanding the potential for change in public policies, especially within authoritarian regimes that lack the necessary means to shape or influence policy-making processes. From a practical standpoint, the current narratives of the Egyptian regime indicate that the second possibility, maintaining the core narrative, is more likely. This suggests that no substantial or genuine changes have occurred in the essence of the state's general approach to policymaking. The regime strives to preserve the narrative of the honest hero as the dominant narrative, yet the public policy responses gradually transform it into the narrative of the helpless hero in terms of content. There have been no alternative policies or ideas presented to address the current crises and the

accompanying political, economic, and social changes. The focus remains solely on the character of the honest hero. From a theoretical perspective, this conclusion opens the door for further examination and future research on understanding the changes in public policies within authoritarian regimes through the study and analysis of the narratives produced by the regime about itself. Political regimes often construct specific narratives to justify their policies and attempt to persuade the public. In democracies, there are greater opportunities for competing or opposing narratives, whereas authoritarian regimes significantly limit such opportunities. Instead, authoritarian regimes tend to reinforce and replicate their narratives while suppressing alternative narratives. Therefore, a shift in the regime's narrative, whether voluntary or in response to external changes, can offer valuable insights not only into the transformation of narratives but also into the accompanying changes in public policies. The Egyptian case provides a notable example, as studying the regime's narratives regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war sheds light on understanding public policy in authoritarian regimes that withhold substantial data and information about these policies. Delving into authoritarian regimes' narratives produced by and about themselves and their public policies, and the continuities or changes within them, may serve as a gateway to uncovering what these regimes attempt to conceal about their policies.

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Annex

Abdel Fattah El-Sisi's meetings and statements wherein he references the COVID-19 pandemic or the Russia-Ukraine war:

| | Titles (with reference to COVID-19) | Date | Source |
|----|---|-----------|----------------------|
| 1 | Text of El-Sisi's speech and his first comment on the COVID-19 crisis | 22 -03-20 | Link |
| 2 | Text of El-Sisi's speech during his armed forces' readiness inspection. | 7-04-20 | Link |
| 3 | Text of El-Sisi's speech on the state's efforts to confront the COVID-19 pandemic | 7-04-20 | Link |
| 4 | Text of El-Sisi's speech on Sinai Liberation Day | 22-04-20 | Link |
| 5 | El-Sisi's speech to the directors of quarantine hospitals | 28-04-20 | Link |
| 6 | El-Sisi's speech at the Non-Aligned Movement Summit | 4-05-20 | Link |
| 7 | Launch of Bashayer al-Khair Project | 21-05-20 | Link |
| 8 | Global Vaccine Summit | 4-06-20 | Link |
| 9 | The African-Chinese Mini Summit | 18-06-20 | Link |
| 10 | Anniversary of the June 30 th Uprising | 1-07-20 | Link |
| 11 | Phase III of Asmarat Project | 12-07-20 | Link |
| 12 | Launch of Adly Mansour metro station | 16-08-20 | Link |
| 13 | United Nations 75th Session | 22-09-20 | Link |
| 14 | Egyptian Refining Company's Mostorod Projects | 29-09-20 | Link |
| 15 | Mostorod and comment on calls to protest | 27-09-20 | Link |
| 16 | World Biodiversity Summit | 30-09-20 | Link |
| 17 | African Union Summit | 22-10-20 | Link |
| 18 | Speech during the second wave of COVID-19 | 24-11-20 | Link |
| 19 | Joint press conference with the President of the French Republic | 7-12-20 | Link |

| | Titles (with reference to Russia-Ukraine War) | Date | Source |
|----|---|----------|----------------------|
| 1 | El-Sisi's statements during a media interview | 24-04-22 | Link |
| 2 | Sisi's breakfast with an Egyptian family | 26-04-22 | Link |
| 3 | Launch of future project for agricultural production | 21-05-22 | Link |
| 4 | Joint press conference with the Polish President | 30-05-22 | Link |
| 5 | Launch of livestock projects | 13-06-22 | Link |
| 6 | Press conference with the President of the European Commission | 15-06-22 | Link |
| 7 | Meeting with journalists and media professionals in Sadat City | 13-06-22 | Link |
| 8 | Commencement of the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum- | 17-06-22 | Link |
| 9 | Annual meeting of the African Export-Import Bank | 16-06-22 | Link |
| 10 | Speech marking the anniversary of the June 30 th Uprising | 30-06-22 | Link |
| 11 | A meeting with media professionals at the opening of the Adly Mansour metro station | 3-07-22 | Link |
| 12 | Joint press conference with the Chancellor of the German Republic | 18-07-22 | Link |
| 13 | Petersburg Climate Dialogue | 21-07-22 | Link |
| 14 | Joint Press Conference with the Serbian President | 20-07-22 | Link |
| 15 | Egyptian-Serbian Business Forum | 20-07-22 | Link |
| 16 | El-Sisi receives honorary doctorate from the University of Belgrade | 21-07-22 | Link |
| 17 | Speech during the inspection of the Military Academy | 6-08-22 | Link |
| 18 | Egypt Forum for International Cooperation and Development Finance | 7-09-22 | Link |
| 19 | Inauguration of projects at the General Authority for Investment | 27-09-22 | Link |
| 20 | October War educational symposium | 4-10-22 | Link |

About the Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is an independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change and social justice. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality, and gender equality.



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About the Project

The Knowledge as a Public Good Project examines the relationship between knowledge production, academia, scholarship, and public policy with a local focus and addresses the tension between international and local knowledge. The project includes workshops that aim to promote evidence-based research by providing technical skills and a translation platform for up-and-coming scholars who write in Arabic.