

# Blood and Cynicism: The Egyptian Army and the Political Crisis

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**N**ovember 8, 2016

On the morning of October 14, a Friday, Egypt's military spokesman announced that there had been a terrorist attack on the Bir el-Abd checkpoint in the Sinai peninsula which resulted in the deaths of twelve soldiers. Apart from the enormity of the attack, what was notable about it were reactions on social media. In addition to the schadenfreude of many loyal to the Islamist movement, there were other voices which were impossible to ignore: those of a group mourning for the soldiers while simultaneously criticizing the army's leadership.

The opinion of this group was that the Egyptian army has become preoccupied with anything and everything except its central purpose — the defense of the nation — and that this is the result: our sons being hunted down and killed by terrorists in the Sinai.

Of course there are no precise statistics on the number of these critics, just as there are no objective measurements for their anger and its extent. However, it is undeniable that we have arrived at a state of estrangement between the army and a sizable portion of Egyptian citizens, including both the Islamist faction who despise the army and see them as coup-makers and an angry civilian segment who believe that the generals are transforming Egypt's most important institution into a for-profit enterprise.

Since the 1952 Revolution, and for many years after, the army was a staunch hero for most Egyptians. While this confidence may have been shaken by the rout of 1967 and the army's loss of the Sinai, it quickly returned with the army's victory in the 1973 Yom Kippur War, which restored the military as the country's "tentpole," as many ordinary people call it.

During the January 2011 Revolution, the warmth between the people and the army was unmistakable, as expressed in the most famous chant of, “The people and the army are one hand.” It was normal to see Egyptian families eagerly snapping souvenir photos with tanks.

Even during the confrontation between revolutionary groups and the military council in the wake of Mubarak’s resignation and the appearance of the chant, “Down with military rule,” everyone was still eager to emphasize that this was only a political dispute between the revolutionary movements and the military council. No one came near the army as an institution. On the contrary, many eagerly chanted, “The Egyptian army is ours but the military council is not,” thereby showing that the collective mind, even at the height of the confrontation, was keen to separate between the military council as a ruling body and the army as a national institution. In short, it was about the political role of the military council, and not about the army itself.

When General Sisi appeared, it seemed that from the very first moment this man was eager to link his name to the army, as shown in his insistence on announcing his nomination for the presidency while wearing military uniform, the significance of which many pondered at the time.

With time, whether due to the popular confidence or the security situation, the space available to the army in the marketplace increased, and its share of various enterprises increased notably. This became apparent as a number of newspaper reports dealing with the army’s businesses began to be published, at first timidly, and then like a deluge, the topic of everyone’s conversations.

Reports began to leak about the crisis between the authorities and the businessmen who viewed the encroachment of the military’s economic wing as a direct threat, pushing President Sisi to hold a large meeting at the start of December 2015 with a group of prominent businessmen the prime minister to reassure them there was no risk to their investments at all. The businessmen responded that they were eager to continue working with the state to further the development process, as one of them put it after the meeting.

The president’s meeting with the businessmen, even if it eliminated or reduced the tension between them and the authorities, did not stop the flood of press reports addressing the army’s investments and raising questions about their extent.

This period can be considered the first step in overcoming the sacrosanctity of the idea of the Egyptian army. For the first time, we see the “army” as an institution facing questions and criticism in the press, in addition to even more acute and harsh criticisms on social media pages.

With the passage of time, and as the army has become more involved in civilian affairs, satirical campaigns targeting it as an institution have appeared on social media pages. The harshest of these waves may have been the campaign Egypt witnessed last December, when a severe crisis occurred in the supply of children’s milk, pushing mothers to launch protest marches and cut off roads. To everyone’s surprise, the health minister announced that the armed forces had purchased 30 million packs of children’s milk, stamped them with the armed forces logo, and would send them to pharmacies to be sold for 30 EGP per pack, even as many said that the subsidized pack had originally been sold for 17 EGP before disappearing from the markets. The minister’s announcement severely embarrassed the military, which looked like it was trafficking in children’s food. Immediately, the sarcastic hashtag #soldiers\_milk began to trend.

This was the first time the army had been insulted in this blatant and shocking manner, which pushed it to issue an official statement in which it explained its position and called on citizens not to be misled by the rumors and defamatory campaigns launched by milk-importing companies.

Then the Sinai terrorist incidents occurred, with some believing that the reason for the army’s failure (so far) to eliminate a limited terrorist group is its preoccupation with domestic politics and economic activities, a trend which

those who hold this view see as an unjustifiable distraction for the most prominent security institution in Egypt.

Regardless of whether this view is correct or not, and whether the army has really failed in the Sinai or if it is actively achieving success, we now stand before a new reality: for many dissidents in Egypt, the army is no longer a red line beyond which criticism cannot cross. Indeed, it has become a subject of criticism and ridicule — sometimes a great deal of it. However, it is also undeniable that a large portion of Egyptians still consider the army to be the last bastion of safety guarding them against turning into another Syria.

The question now is whether the generals are aware of the decline in the military's popularity after the expansion of their economic role and their political association with the president. And if they are aware of this, what is the plan to restore the prestige and affection which many agree is vital for preserving the stability of this country? For now, it is not possible to say. ❖

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