

The Egyptian Media, the Conflict of Agencies, and the President

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Articles & Testimony

Despite the wave of derision and mockery in response to Egyptian president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's latest discourse, the president appears determined to send a message of forbearance towards those who view him with fear and apprehension. He repeatedly delivered this message: referring to the office of the presidency, he stated "Do you think I'll give it up? By God, no." He then challenged naysayers with great strain: "Who do you think you are? What do you want?!"

The vexation and tension manifesting in the president's demeanor is exposing the amount of pressure he is facing. The man who quickly ascended to power borne on the backs of so many in 2014 today faces serious concerns over waning popularity and increasingly harsh criticism of his leadership.

It is certain that Sisi's popularity today is not what it was in 2013. His successive decisions have led to increased dissatisfaction among many sections of Egyptian society, and this discontent grows daily. Sisi no longer clashes only with the Brotherhood; the widening scope of suspicion and arrests has also made him an enemy of youth revolutionary forces and political activists. Sisi's leadership remains relatively secure since the ideological conflicts between revolutionary and Islamic currents do not allow for a unified stance against him. But adversaries to his presidency have nevertheless increased and diversified significantly.

But the most dangerous front exposing its opposition to Sisi is the media, whose attacks are escalating in an unprecedented manner. Sisi has been concerned about media support since his initial rise to power, and has stated that Gamal Abdel Nasser was fortunate in that he received support from a media geared toward public mobilization. This statement has led to Sisi's direct criticism and tacit threat against journalists: "This sector of yours, it's got no troubles, or what?" He has also recently attempted to incite Egyptians against the media, saying, "Don't listen to what anyone else says, just listen to me," and frankly adding, "The media doesn't understand anything. Whoever wants to know something should come to me."

Sisi knows just as well as everyone else that the Egyptian media groups mostly operate as propaganda arms for Egypt's centers of power. Accordingly, an analysis of Sisi's media message that takes the political orientation of different media arms into account reveals much of what most concerns the president. These statements also cast

light on the reality of what can be described as a conflict among security agencies in Egypt.

The most influential media is Egypt's printed and visual "private" media. Sisi used his understanding of this media when he ran for president, choosing to appear publicly to Egyptians for the first time on a private channel. It was a universally understood sign that the era of official state media was over. Sisi has continued this focused on the private media, and it served as one of his most important weapons against the Muslim Brotherhood. Private channels played a large part in mobilizing the masses against the Muslim Brotherhood government and conveyed reassuring messages to the people: come out to the streets and the squares if you want to protest against the Brotherhood – don't be afraid, the army will protect you. These messages encouraged an ample sector of what is called the "Couch Party" to go out and protest, paving the way for the removal of the Brotherhood from power.

But lately concerns have arisen in Egypt over "the conflict of agencies," competing goals of Egypt's centers of power – the general intelligence, military intelligence, and national security agencies.

These three agencies each have means of pushing forward their agenda and their own media arms to express its positions. And since it is known in advance whose channels are condemning the other agencies, the media arms present a mirrored image of what is going on behind the curtain in a state that is beginning to be known as "the land of fear."

In the last ten years of Mubarak's rule, the State Security Agency's influence rose to a frightful degree alongside the rise of the then expected heir to the state Gamal Mubarak and his circle. The parallel successes led many to link Gamal's name to State Security and to former Minister of Interior Habib el-Adly. Some speculated that Gamal was strengthening and supporting State Security so that it would become his right hand in imposing rule over the streets and securing his position in the event that he ascended to the presidency. The grumbling among army generals over the idea of the presidency being handed down from father to son gave credence to this idea.

Despite potential internal differences and complexities, the 1990s were something of a golden era for the State Security Agency. State Security approval became an official and explicit condition in order to obtain any job, from sovereign decision-making positions to ordinary jobs like university, foreign service, or newspaper positions. This growing influence intersected with the interests of businessmen, so the agency came to possess influence and in some cases wealth. No one was surprised when it was revealed after the revolution that director of the State Security Agency General Hassan Abdel Rahman was a business partner of businessman and crony Gamal el-Sayyid el-Badawi.

State Security ascendance coincided with the General Intelligence agency's marginalization, even though the General Intelligence leader General Omar Suleiman was a close associate of Hosni Mubarak. During the last ten years of Mubarak's rule. As the balance of power between the three agencies shifted, the streets became the domain of State Security. General Intelligence plunged itself into the Israeli-Palestinian portfolio and negotiating the reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas. Military Intelligence had barely any presence on the ground.

But the outbreak of the January 25 Revolution and the painful blows to security that followed—symbolized by the burning of police departments and the storming of State Security centers – shifted the equation once more. The state fell back into the military's control, as it was the only organized and functioning institution at the time. Military Intelligence and its then-director, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, began to develop a shining public reputation. In less than two years, Sisi had become president of the country.

With Sisi's rise to power, everyone began trying to establish new footing in the new regime. There appeared to be skirmishes behind the scenes to redefine the relative heft of each agency. State Security, changing its name to National Security Agency, is now striving to regain its dominance. It appears to be attempting to leverage the relationships it fostered with businessmen and key figures of the National Democratic Party. Meanwhile, Military

Intelligence, which the president considers trustworthy because of their close ties, is striving to develop an arrangement that ensures that another Gamal Mubarak will not emerge and that Egypt is not driven to revolution once again.

Recalibration began during the presidential election, when the embarrassing site of empty polling stations became public as media responded, “Scandal – You Have Shamed the President.” Of course, Egyptians were not much concerned with elections when Sisi’s presidency was all but guaranteed, but the National Democratic Party machine headed by State Security took advantage of the situation to highlight the lack of participation through their television channels. Some said that the business-aligned State Security was trying to send a message to the president that he could not marginalize the institution, and that the army and Military Intelligence were not strong enough to prop up Sisi without external aid.

Some have dismissed this quietly offered explanation as a conspiracy theory. But with the passage of time, his actions appear to demonstrate that General Sisi trusts only the military and favors Military Intelligence reports over other agencies. He has assigned major new projects to the armed forces’ engineering corps while ignoring businessmen and their companies. In short, Sisi’s preferences present a clear threat to the interests of the business-National Security alliance, drawing the discontent of certain capitalists and security forces tighter together. This is especially true after the pressures placed on businessmen to contribute to the Long Live Egypt fund, which is directly controlled by the office of the president.

The clash of the two security agencies will not remain hidden for long. The newly formed parliament has only sharpened the conflict and pushed it to the surface, as State Security formed a coalition led by Major-General Sameh Seif el-Yazal under the name “For the Love of Egypt,” Which attempted to impose its rule over Parliament. The truth about the role of the security agencies in this parliament emerged for the first time when Major-General Badawi Abdel Lateef, a deputy of the Wafd party, announced to the media, “State Security spoke to us and said, ‘You have to sign the document.’ I went and signed and didn’t understand a thing, because it did not lay out the hopes and demands of the people.” Thus it is State Security that controls parliamentary proceedings – it authors working documents and has deputies sign them!

Military Intelligence did not remain silent on the issue for long. Shocking the Egyptian public, it collapsed the coalition from within through a series of successive surprise withdrawals which led to its collapse and removed Seif el-Yazal from parliament. The Military Intelligence partisan and journalist Tawfik Okasha attacked Seif el-Yazal, asking, “is Sameh Seif el-Yazal more powerful than the president? Is he the one running President Sisi?” Concurrently, a number of high-ranking leaders were removed from the National Security Agency in what was considered another harsh blow orchestrated by Military Intelligence.

Television screens have become visible battlefields of this conflict, showcasing bouts of verbal abuse. Most astonishing was the position of regime partisan Lamis el-Hadidy—the first Egyptian journalist to meet with the president—when she stated frankly on her television program recently, “The public sphere is in need of order.” She added that, “Every deputy has a different agency behind him, employing him and giving me information!” In light of her connection to power circles, many viewed el-Hadidy’s statement as a sign that the rupture has widened beyond the point of repair, rising to a level that cannot be ignored or concealed. It has reached the point where a broadcaster nearest to power has directly demanded that the president impose order and discipline.

Thus the existence of a struggle between the security agencies in Egypt has become semi-overt. But what remains unclear is how deep the struggle goes; Is it only over power and influence, or are there other differences? An authority close to decision-making circles who must remain anonymous has said: “It appears to me that the clash revolves on several issues. A part of it has to do with power and influence, another part is strongly connected to the economic scene – to who supports the engineering section of the army, and who prefers that projects rely on

business firms.”

But what this authority did not touch on is perhaps the deepest issue: each agency’s view of the Egyptian revolution. While State Security considers the January 25 Revolution a conspiracy against Egypt which must be effaced from history, Military Intelligence believes that January 25 led to June 30 and must be built upon, even by referencing it overtly. This difference in thinking has major and extremely sensitive repercussions, including on what the previously quoted official was willing to say. Now Egyptians wonder how Sisi will deal with this now half-acknowledged conflict. Up until now the focus of the Egyptian political scene has been on the president himself. Despite escalating economic problems and repeated fiascos, “Sisi” has remained the watchword among a large sector of Egyptians. And despite the decline of the sweeping popularity he enjoyed when the Brotherhood government was first removed, there are still large sectors of the Egyptian public that back and support him.

But it is now unclear whether the former intelligence leader will succeed to manage this difficult controversy between intelligence agencies and bring all parties back under his authority. His latest speech strongly indicates that the president has begun to strain under these pressures, but no one can predict how and whether Sisi will settle the conflict.

So until now, Sisi remains the keeper of both his own secrets and those of the state. In his own words, “Whoever wants to know, let him come to me. I say again, me – alone.”

Maged Atef is a journalist living in Cairo. This item was originally published on [the Fikra website](http://fikraforum.org/?p=8893#.Vu80rOIrLIU) (<http://fikraforum.org/?p=8893#.Vu80rOIrLIU>). ❖

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