

A New Era for Egypt's Military

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U.S. secretary of state John Kerry is scheduled to meet with Egyptian president Abdul Fattah al-Sisi in the South Sinai town of Sharm al-Sheikh, and their conversation will likely focus a great deal on Libya. Egypt's airstrikes there last month, which targeted Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) militants in the east, were bold and somewhat predictable. Most important, they were uncoordinated with the United States, despite being carried out with F-16 jets bought and paid for with U.S. Foreign Military Financing.

What Kerry and other U.S. officials must realize is that under Sisi, Egypt's military posture has changed. During the Mubarak years, Egypt generally responded to regional threats by shoring up its deterrent capabilities, notwithstanding its participation in the Gulf War and its seizure of the Halaib Triangle. However, since the coup against Mohamed Morsi in July 2013, Cairo has been particularly brash in its approach to security and appears more willing to project force abroad -- even when the United States is not. In fact, Muhammad al-Assar, an assistant defense minister, delivered a speech last May in Moscow in which he advocated carrying out preemptive strikes against suspected terrorists.

With Sisi's ascendancy, it seems, Egypt has embraced a doctrine of active defense.

As a member of the U.S.-led coalition against ISIS, Egypt's army chief of staff, Mahmoud Hegazy, joined senior Arab military commanders in Washington last October to discuss the coalition's strategy. Last month, another top general participated in the coalition meeting in Saudi Arabia, and U.S. Central Command's head of air operations was in Cairo earlier this week. But Egypt views its role in the fight as distinct, since it is confronting threats from ISIS in the Sinai Peninsula and, to a lesser extent, eastern Libya.

The 1979 peace treaty with Israel was supposed to decrease the potential for Egypt to fight a multifront conflict. Those days are gone, given the rapid rise of ISIS provinces to its east and west. Egypt's role in the combat mission in Syria and Iraq may be limited to facilitating materiel transfers. But from the perspective of Cairo, when the military

carries out operations against ISIS targets -- be they in el-Arish or Darnah -- it is not only securing Egyptian interests but doing its part to help the coalition too.

In late January, Egypt ramped up its operations against ISIS-affiliated militants in the Sinai under the control of a "unified command" led by Osama Askar, a newly minted lieutenant general. In his new position, Askar oversees all activities east of the Suez Canal. He also has better access to resources and heads a consolidated command structure, which includes both the Second and Third Field Armies -- the latter of which he previously commanded. So while this week's bombings and shooting cast doubt on the military's claims of success in the Sinai, the decision to promote Askar may suggest that the senior command is taking the insurgency more seriously.

Weeks later, after the Houthis took control of the Yemeni capital of Sana, Mohab Mamish, the former commander of the Egyptian navy and the head of the Suez Canal Authority, warned in a statement that Egypt was "ready to respond" should Bab al-Mandab close. Some criticized Mamish's comments, alleging that Sisi risked repeating Gamal Abdul Nasser's disastrous intervention in Yemen. But for Egypt, and indeed the international community too, the closure of an important oil choke point would be a matter of great concern.

Moreover, Sisi does not need to dispatch thousands of troops to Yemen, as Nasser did, to reopen the waterway. As part of its efforts to boost strategic ties with "brotherly" Arab countries, Egypt has held a number of training exercises with both Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. And to some degree, they have reflected operational realities in recent years, which is why the latest joint maneuver with the Saudis -- who share Egypt's concerns regarding Yemen -- is particularly noteworthy, and was likely discussed during Sisi's recent hours-long meeting with King Salman in Riyadh.

Egypt has also created a rapid deployment force (RDF) with the express purpose of carrying out quick incursions abroad. Although it remains untested on the battlefield, the RDF will reportedly form the core of a joint Arab military force, which would comprise Egyptian, Saudi, Emirati, and Jordanian troops and would be equipped to intervene in regional conflict zones. In a recent interview with Al-Arabiya, Sisi said that the force was not meant "for attacking, but for defending the security of our countries." "It is important in the light of the dangers and threats," he added.

Similar proposals have been floated since the late 1980s, when Mubarak offered to dispatch between 12,000 and 15,000 troops to protect the Arab Gulf states from Iran. In the early 1990s, after the liberation of Kuwait, Egypt, Syria, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries signed the Damascus Accord. As many as 60,000 Egyptian and Syrian troops were to be stationed in the Gulf, but the deal fell apart after the GCC countries opted to pursue bilateral security arrangements with the United States. As one Western diplomat explained in 1991, they "decided it's better to have 3,000 Americans than 40,000 Egyptians."

However, now that regional friends and foes are mostly united in opposition to ISIS, the climate might be more hospitable than it once was for an Arab military force. In fact, the proposal will top the agenda of the upcoming Arab League summit.

According to the Obama administration's 2015 National Security Strategy, the United States "requires partners who can defend themselves" in the Middle East. In striking Libya, perhaps for the second time in under a year, and pushing for a unified Arab force, Cairo has made clear that, with or without U.S. support, it intends to do so.

"We will respond to anyone who attacks," singer Medhat Saleh proudly declares in his new music video, which carries the logo of the military's Department of Morale Affairs. "The airstrikes have begun." So too, it seems, has a new era of Egyptian defense policy.

Gilad Wenig is a research associate at The Washington Institute and the managing editor of Fikra Forum, where this article was initially published (<http://fikraforum.org/?p=6539>). ❖

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