

# Egypt's Army of God

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Articles & Testimony

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**Islam's growing role in the military is likely part of an ideological battle to reclaim the spiritual mantle from the Muslim Brotherhood, but manipulating religion for political gain has a history of backfiring in Egypt.**

**W**eeks before March 27, the day Abdul Fattah al-Sisi resigned his position as Egypt's defense minister in order to mount what would prove to be a successful campaign for the presidency, he participated in Friday prayers at the Air Defense Force's mosque in the Cairo district of Nasr City. Sisi was accompanied by Sedky Sobhy, the army's chief of staff, and other leaders from the country's military, political, and religious establishments. Ali Gomaa, the former grand mufti of Egypt, delivered the sermon. "Egypt is a country that God Almighty mentioned in the Koran unlike any other," Gomaa said, addressing the seated crowd. "We are an army that the Messenger of God [the Prophet Muhammad] has blessed, and made its soldiers the best on the planet, and gave it his blessing," he went on to say.

Gomaa's comments underscore a simple truth that is often misunderstood by outside observers: the Egyptian military, in its present form, is not a secular force. Islam is woven through the military, just as it is through the broader Egyptian society. In the armed force's own propaganda, it casts itself as the heir to the forces of Saladin, the twelfth-century Muslim leader who fended off the Crusaders and conquered Jerusalem, and whose empire was seated in Cairo. On the battlefield, the military regularly makes use of religious references: Egypt's largest training exercise is dubbed "Badr," a reference to the seventh-century battle in Mecca between Muhammad and his followers and the Quraysh tribe. And in speeches, the generals invoke God, the Koran, and the Prophet to reinforce a sense of spiritual legitimacy.

Although Sisi did not initiate the military's religious awakening, he has undoubtedly encouraged it. Soon after Muhammad Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated leader who became Egypt's president in 2012, made Sisi defense minister, Egyptian media was rife with reports that Morsi had chosen him because of his religious devotion. (Notably, Sisi's wife dons a headscarf -- inviting comparisons between him and Abdul Halim Abu Ghazalah, a former defense minister who was also openly devout.)

Morsi seemed to think -- incorrectly, as time would tell -- that a religious bond would be sufficient to ensure the

loyalty of his new military chief. In fact, at the time, some commentators and analysts, such as Zeinab Abul Magd, a former professor at the American University in Cairo, raised the possibility that Sisi was himself a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. There were fears that with his newfound power, Sisi would Islamize -- or, more accurately, Brotherhood-ize -- the armed forces. Ibrahim Eissa, an influential journalist and media personality, wrote that "[t]he disaster would be that we find ourselves forming an army like Pakistan's that grows beards and fights a war for implementation of sharia [Islamic law]." Despite denials by both the Muslim Brotherhood and military officials, the charge was reinforced by reports that Sisi, in the weeks after his appointment, had overturned the ban on prayers during military exercises that former President Hosni Mubarak had enacted. "Pray as you please," he was quoted as saying, in a move hailed widely by Islamists of all stripes. Sisi's rhetoric was also religiously charged. In November 2012, for example, he told a crowd of 1,500 military and police officers that "God Almighty has singled us out for a great mission," citing two verses from Surat Quraysh, a chapter of the Koran, that guarantee God's "security against fear (of danger)." Although Sisi is not the first Egyptian general to use such rhetoric, his ascendance at the hands of a Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated president made it seem all the more consequential to Egyptians. Around the same time, the director of the Military Academy in Cairo announced that the school would, for the first time ever, begin accepting students belonging to families affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, including Morsi's nephew. In previous decades, the military had maintained a policy of turning down recruits who openly espoused religious or political beliefs in order to curb infiltration by Islamists who harbored their own agenda.

But throughout his service as defense minister, Sisi also resisted certain demands made by Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood. Reports leaked that Morsi wanted to replace Sisi and his deputy, Sobhy, due to their refusal to embrace Muslim Brotherhood recruits; however, the idea was quickly downplayed after it reportedly provoked discontent within military ranks. In March, after the judiciary ruled in favor of allowing policemen to grow beards, an outward sign of religiosity, Sisi reiterated the military's ban on beards for any active soldier or officer. By the summer of 2013, the relationship between the president and the military had deteriorated beyond repair, ultimately leading to Morsi's ouster in July.

Although Sisi opposed efforts by the Muslim Brotherhood to subsume the military under its control, he appears to believe that Islam should play a more central role within the powerful institution. That is due, in part, to Sisi's own religious upbringing; by all accounts, he was raised in a conservative family in Islamic Cairo. But it can also be credited to an institutional drift toward religion that began in the 1970s, when Sisi was a young upstart soldier. Egyptian President Anwar Sadat was eager to build up the Islamists as a counterweight to the country's Nasserists, and in doing so, he allowed them to gain a foothold in society and, by extension, the armed forces. In the post-revolutionary period, however, it seems as though this tendency has picked up pace, especially as the military-backed government tries to shore up its legitimacy following last year's coup and the crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood.

To a significant extent, the military's Department of Morale Affairs, which is led by Major General Muhsen Abdel Nabi, has organized the effort. In addition to serving as the military's office for media and propaganda, Morale Affairs also oversees religious activities, and those who end up joining it effectively become the military's religious emissaries. Officers from Morale Affairs have become responsible for a wide range of religious activities, including meeting with members of Egypt's minority Christian communities; delivering speeches on behalf of the military on Islamic holidays; hosting Muslim clerics at seminars on religious topics, such as "faith and security" or "Sinai in the Koran"; determining whether conscripts have memorized the Koran, a credential that can shorten their mandatory military service; organizing Koran memorization contests; distributing food and hosting pre- and post-fast meals during the month of Ramadan; and arranging religious pilgrimages by troops to Mecca. (Just this month, Morale Affairs paid for and led a hajj comprised of officers, retirees and their families, and families of soldiers wounded and killed during military operations.) According to a former conscript, Morale Affairs is also in charge of drafting the

weekly sermons that soldiers hear during Friday prayers.

The style of Islam propagated by Morale Affairs is consistent with the goals of the Sisi presidency, which is trying to impose a "moderate" and state-sanctioned version of Islam in Egypt. Morale Affairs has joined hands with al-Azhar, the country's top Islamic institution, to "counter radical ideology and disseminate moderate and enlightened thinking." The military has also leaned on several high-profile clerics, including Salem Abdel Galil, Sherif ElSayed Khalil, and Khaled el-Genndy, to help justify its policies from an Islamic standpoint. Galil and Khalil both work directly for Morale Affairs as preachers, and regularly participate in military-run events, as does el-Genndy. According to a *New York Times* report, Galil referred to pro-Morsi protesters as "aggressors who have to repent to God," though he retracted his comments after being criticized for justifying violence. (Galil later acknowledged that his wife and children participated in anti-coup protests in Cairo's Rabaa al-Adawiya Square.) In a video posted on the *al-Ahram* website, his counterpart, Khalil, warns militants against attacking the military, taking a line out of the Koran: "But whoever kills a believer intentionally -- his recompense is Hell." Morale Affairs also publishes *al-Mujahid*, a magazine focused on religious outreach, and el-Genndy serves as its general supervisor. According to the defense ministry's publishing house, approximately 45,000 copies of *al-Mujahid* are published monthly, reaching military and civilian audiences alike.

Officers from Morale Affairs are not the only military personnel spreading Islamic iconography and rhetoric. Religious motifs have become commonplace throughout the military. According to one former conscript, motivational posters calling for jihad were prominently displayed in his barracks. Meanwhile, this past September, as Sisi watched the rapid deployment forces conduct exercises, a banner with a quote from the Koran (the same quote that the Muslim Brotherhood references in its logo) was emblazoned on the wall behind him: "And prepare against them whatever you are able of power and of steeds of war by which you may terrify the enemy of Allah and your enemy and others besides them whom you do not know [but] whom Allah knows." Weeks later, at the military's official ceremony commemorating the 1973 war, Sobhy implored the "promulgators of extremist thought" not to "obey the desires of Satan, as the Almighty said in His noble Koran."

Religion and military life seem to be closely entwined. Muslim clerics address military personnel in mosques, and military figures use religious references when speaking in public. Following the coup that ousted Morsi, Ahmed Muhammad Ali, the military spokesman at the time, called on the Egyptian public to emulate Prophet Mohammed in showing mercy; the statement was strikingly similar to one published days before by an al-Azhar scholar. That same month, Major General Muhammad Masri, commander of the Western Military Zone, concluded one of his speeches in the Matrouh governorate by quoting the Koran: "For the scum disappears like froth cast out, while that which is for the good of mankind remains on the earth."

In a sense, the military's embrace of Islam is unsurprising given the prominent role religion plays in Egyptian life and culture. Moreover, the generals understand its potency to maintain cohesion, boost morale, and garner public support. But in light of the coup against Morsi, it must also be seen as a significant element of the Egyptian state's ideological battle to reclaim the mantle of Islam from the Muslim Brotherhood. So far, the government seems to be successful. But as Egyptians learned in 1981 when Islamist officers assassinated President Sadat, manipulating religion for political gain also has a history of backfiring.

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