

Sisi's Spin Man

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Articles & Testimony

Even Egypt's most well-educated military officer may have trouble selling the public on Sisi's prospects for overcoming the country's immense challenges.

S ometime before the July 2013 coup that put Egypt's military in de facto command of the country, top officers gathered with Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, then the defense minister, to discuss their concerns about the military's image. The sixteen months of direct military rule following Hosni Mubarak's ouster damaged the military's reputation, and the officers hoped to rectify that with a new civilian president, Mohamed Morsi, in power. In the meeting, a video of which was released by the pro-Muslim Brotherhood website Rassd, one officer suggested that Sisi replace Col. Ahmed Mohamed Ali, the military's boyish spokesman, "to satisfy the people's mental image of the military" -- which has historically been centered on staid and elderly generals, not youthful colonels. But Sisi disagreed with the suggestion: "Ahmed Ali is very attractive to women," he said.

Ali was the military's first official spokesman in nearly four decades, and the military viewed his relative youth and charisma as essential to its public-relations strategy, particularly after Morsi's ouster last summer. And it worked: "The handsome officer," as he is nicknamed, has been the subject of numerous and mostly adoring Twitter hashtags and Facebook groups, and he is often photographed in civilian clothes and out in public. As one writer at *Al-Ahram* opined, Ali is a "symbol of the rejuvenation of the military" under Sisi's leadership.

But it appears that as of the end of June, Ali is no longer a uniformed officer. In a widely anticipated move, he resigned his position as spokesman, and Brig. Gen. Mohamed Ghoneim, a former military intelligence official, has been appointed his successor.

While his next step is still not clear, it seems likely that Ali will join Sisi's administration either as a media advisor or spokesman. Either way, it's a natural transition for him. Sisi needs a trusted and skilled public handler by his side and Ali fits the bill perfectly.

Moreover, he is a tried-and-true member of the officer corps and is considered to be one of Egypt's warrior-intellectuals. In 2004, Ali became the first Egyptian officer to earn a degree from the US Army's School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS) at Fort Leavenworth, according to Col. (ret.) Kevin Benson, former director of SAMS. Nearly a

decade earlier, Ali broke similar ground when he became one of the first, if not the first, Egyptian since 1952 to attend the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst in Britain. Ali's experience abroad, much of which was funded by the armed forces, reflect the Egyptian brass' early appreciation for his potential.

Lt. Col. Tina Kracke, a classmate of Ali's at the Command and General Staff College, described him as "a highly intelligent, deep thinking, and well-spoken military professional." She recalled proofreading Ali's work and assisting him with English grammar and vocabulary. "He was determined to do his best in everything," including improving his English, she said.

But despite his reputation, Ali's actual academic output -- specifically a thesis he wrote while studying in the United States -- reflects an analysis of Egyptian history that is more grounded in fallacy than fact.

Titled "The Egyptian Way of War: A Tradition of Excellence Confronts the 21st Century," Ali's thesis is a dense survey of key military engagements and campaigns from the pharaonic, Islamic, and modern periods of Egyptian history. Ali attempts to trace the roots of Egyptian strategic culture to find "uniquely Egyptian understandings of the art of war," which he believes "can suggest fresh ways of dealing with current and future challenges" facing the country.

At nearly one-hundred-pages, Ali's thesis dwarfs the papers written by Sisi and defense minister Sedky Sobhy during their times in the United States, but only in length. The content is often hyperbolic and teeming with nationalistic undertones.

Take, for example, Ali's analysis of the 1973 Arab-Israeli war. According to him, Egypt's successes during it were "built upon ancient experience and the Islamic way of war." In reality, Egyptian strategy was mostly informed by Soviet military doctrine. But such an admission would undermine Ali's argument that Egypt has a coherent, centuries-old military tradition. As P.J. Vatikiotis observed, "Native Egyptians were never allowed to develop a tradition of military service or officer training" prior to the nineteenth century "since neither was open to them." Ali omits the fact that foreigners have had more of an influence on Egypt's modern military than any pharaoh or sultan.

Elsewhere Ali writes that "if one makes an allowance for the technological limitations of the Bronze Age, it is not difficult to conceive that the quality of generalship found in some Egyptian pharaohs was comparable to the best generalship of any period down to modern times." By what metric?

In a sense, the vacuity of Ali's thesis is to be expected. Like many foreign officers that study in the United States, his mere presence at an American military institution all but guaranteed his success in the Egyptian military. That said, there seems to be some continuity between Ali's thinking then and now.

For instance, Ali argues that the military must "align itself with the on-going information revolution" and exploit "information technology." From his perch in the armed forces' press briefing room, Ali was doing just that. His Twitter and Facebook accounts, the latter of which now bears Ghoneim's picture, were the official resources for military-related news. According to Ali, the military "learned from the lessons of [the] transitional period." His job as spokesman, or at least how Sisi reportedly envisioned it, was to "combat lies and rumors."

But Ali might find that mission too difficult to complete if he does indeed become the face and voice of Egypt's newest strongman. If the past three years have proven anything, it's that the presidency, though largely irreproachable, is not immune to unrest. The stakes are higher once you're in the spotlight, and given the challenges Egypt faces, the prospect of success isn't promising, even for the country's most educated officer.

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