

E-PAPER

Policy Brief Egypt 4 – Military

# **After Egypt's military steps into politics, will politics step into the military?**

**ANONYMOUSLY**

In order to protect the identity of the author, the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung has chosen to publish the paper without naming the author.

# After Egypt's military steps into politics, will politics step into the military?

by Anonymous

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# Preface to the Series

## Policy Brief Egypt

*Contrary to external appearances and official propaganda, the Egyptian Armed Forces are not a unified and cohesive actor, and Abdelfattah al-Sisi is far from being an undisputed leader. Rather, the military is a collective actor criss-crossed by rival networks which the President manages but does not control. While dramatic internal rifts are unlikely to occur, political challenges – for instance, an even further deterioration of the economy – may well change the calculus of relevant actors. Somewhat paradoxically, the ever-wider remit of military power may well carry the seed for substantial conflicts of interest leading to new coalitions and power equations. External actors should not confuse the current political atrophy with stability: in the medium term, internal competition will grow. If politics is banned and crowded out by military authoritarianism, then political conflict will penetrate into the core of «the military institution» itself.*

After the uprising against President Hosni Mubarak of January 2011, the Egyptian armed forces emerged as the dominant actor on the political scene. Given the military's central role in Egyptian politics over nearly 60 years, this turn of events was hardly a surprise. Ever since the overthrow of the monarchy by the «Free Officers» on 23 June 1952, every Egyptian president had been a military officer. The armed forces wielded extensive influence over other, nominally civilian elements of the state, and used their leverage to maintain and expand a sprawling economic empire, the precise size of which remains unknown. Common Egyptian discourse aptly reflects this overbearing role by referring to the armed forces as «the military Institution» (*al-muassasa al-askariyya*), that is, as an integral, indeed a core component of state power.

Yet the military's undivided domination of the post-2011 order and the eventual return to military autocracy were by no means unavoidable or structurally pre-determined. A more nuanced reading of the events over the last five years suggests that the military institution was not immune to the political turmoil that faced Egyptian society as a whole; was divided on how best to tackle the unprecedented societal, economic and political unrest of 2011 and its aftermath; and was nervous about tensions within its own ranks. To understand what happened in the country's tumultuous recent history, and to assess the challenges lying ahead, it is crucial to understand that the Egyptian military is not a unitary actor, but beset by conflicting internal dynamics.

# An institution under stress from within

Official Egyptian discourse portrays the military as a unified institution that, time and again, acts as a selfless defender of national unity and stability, and is even willing to take extraordinary steps to defend the Egyptian people against abusive or irresponsible rulers. Accordingly, when the armed forces stepped in to remove first Hosni Mubarak and then to overthrow Mohamed Morsi, they responded to popular demand, and acted to prevent political divisions from escalating into a threat to national cohesion. In short, in contrast to divisive and contentious civilian politics, the military provides steadfast leadership in the name of the greater national interest.

Over the past five years, this narrative has been unceasingly echoed and reiterated through a wide-gamut propaganda effort that has resuscitated nationalist songs from the era of Egypt's confrontation with Israel, another moment of national mobilization behind the armed forces. It asserts that the military is the only institution in the country which, because it is underpinned by discipline, a clear chain of command and a patriotic mission, will not be paralyzed by political developments or riven by internal divides. In the current regional context, where national armies dominated by particular sectarian or tribal groups have become either irrelevant or factions in civil wars (Libya, Syria, Yemen) this message has proved persuasive to both Egyptians and Egypt's international partners alike.<sup>[1]</sup>

However, there is good reason to question the extent to which this narrative indeed corresponds to reality. On the one hand, it is debatable whether in June 2013 Egypt was really on the verge of civil war, as partisans of the current rulers claim, and whether it was not in fact the military itself and its allies who worked to increase, rather than decrease, political polarization and societal rifts. Less frequent is the question whether the military itself was – and is – indeed as united as is claimed. Part of this assumption rests on the image, inherited from the Mubarak era, of the military as a vast black box whose inner workings remain opaque and which was generally seen to behave as a cohesive actor. A closer look at the events that followed the 2011 uprising tells a different story.

## The revolution catches the generals off-guard

After the purges of Nasserists from public life (known as the «corrective revolution») launched by President Anwar al-Sadat in 1971, the military began a slow, gradual retreat from the political front line. This trend accelerated under Mubarak, with full consent from

**1** See for instance «Kerry: Ousting Morsi may have averted civil war», UPI, 18 July 2013, available at [www.upi.com/Kerry-Ousting-Morsi-may-have-averted-civil-war/92431374127200](http://www.upi.com/Kerry-Ousting-Morsi-may-have-averted-civil-war/92431374127200), accessed 9 February 2017.

the military itself. While the generals were content to partake in ruling the country, they had little interest in actual, direct governance.<sup>[2]</sup> Yet the military was thrust into a governing role when Mubarak stepped down on 11 February 2011 and his minister of defense, Field Marshall Hussein al-Tantawi, assumed the powers of the head of state as Chairman of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF). Quite unlike the 1950s and 1960s, when members of the Free Officers were public figures, the 20 members of SCAF (a number that has shifted over time, but includes the heads of the various functional branches of the armed forces, the heads of key ministry of defense departments and the heads of the seven army commands around the country) were mostly unknown to the general public.

The most senior among them – Tantawi and the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces Sami Enan – were both known as long-time Mubarak loyalists. While the former had been the longest-serving minister of defense in Egypt's modern history (since 1991), the latter was rapidly promoted by Mubarak for his handling of the 1997 Luxor massacre,<sup>[3]</sup> and was allegedly close to the president's son, Gamal Mubarak. In other words, even though Mubarak had stepped aside, the president's men were still in charge – a fact not lost on some of the more radical protestors who demanded that Tantawi and Enan step down in further protests that continued for months into 2011.<sup>[4]</sup> Within the leadership, there was a clear and urgent concern that the popular outrage over the corruption of the Mubarak regime which drove the protests would spread into the rank and file of the armed forces itself and affect internal cohesion, as much of the senior ranks had been involved in the corrupt schemes of the fallen regime.

SCAF's priority in the tumultuous months after Mubarak stepped down was thus to ensure cohesion in the armed forces. To some extent, this was achieved by buying loyalty through generous increases of salaries and bonuses.<sup>[5]</sup> On the other hand, the leadership looked for ways to restore order and end street protests before they would become contagious for its own flock. The Muslim Brotherhood, with its large number of disciplined followers, appeared as the most efficient political force to this end. Scheduling elections before the drafting of a new constitution – a key Brotherhood demand – secured the buy-in of the movement, but it also helped to break the momentum of the protests against SCAF itself. Differences, mostly along the secular-religious cleavage, quickly arose between opponents and supporters of the process, and deepened quickly as it became apparent that some would benefit at the expense of others – namely, that the well organized Islamists were likely to crush their far more heterogeneous secular competitors. Thus, the early align-

**2** Steven A. Cook, *Ruling but not governing: The military and political development in Egypt, Algeria and Turkey*. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 2007.

**3** Douglas Jehl, «At Ancient Site Along the Nile, Modern Horror,» *The New York Times*, 19 November 1997, available at [www.nytimes.com/1997/11/19/world/at-ancient-site-along-the-nile-modern-horror.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1997/11/19/world/at-ancient-site-along-the-nile-modern-horror.html), accessed 9 February 2017.

**4** Author's observations, Cairo, February-June 2011.

**5** Author's interview, dissident army officer, Cairo, February 2011; member of army special forces, April 2011.

ment of the military with the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist forces, first apparent through their joined support for a «yes»-vote in the constitutional amendments of March 19, was motivated by the military's concern about its own internal cohesion at least as much as by their commitment to restore stability and public order.

## Cracks at the top

When the army was deployed to the streets after the massive protests of 28 January 2011, fissures within the military establishment became visible almost immediately. The next day, Major-General Omar Suleiman, the longstanding head of the powerful General Intelligence Service (GIS), was appointed vice-president (Egypt's first in 30 years), and hence became Mubarak's heir-apparent. For a brief period, he was a chief interlocutor for political actors. On 4 February 2011, he narrowly escaped an assassination attempt (the only such attempt against a major political figure during that period). It is widely suspected that SCAF itself was behind the attempted murder, rather than the Muslim Brotherhood (which was engaged in negotiations with Suleiman at the time), in particular in light of the acrimonious relations between Tantawi and Suleiman.<sup>[6]</sup>

On 10 February, when Mubarak ambiguously announced his retirement, Suleiman effectively became Egypt's de facto president. However, his tenure lasted for less than 24 hours until he was forced to formally announce Mubarak's resignation on 11 February 2011, and to step down himself as vice-president a few hours after the SCAF suspended the constitution with its famous «Communiqué No. 1». Suleiman only briefly re-emerged in April 2012 when he tried to register as a candidate for the upcoming presidential election in June and was refused on a technicality. He died unexpectedly during a routine medical procedure in the United States a month after the election.

Suleiman's sidelining removed a natural contender for the presidency and gave SCAF, under Tantawi's leadership, time to consolidate power. Another close Mubarak ally, Prime Minister Ahmed Shafiq (who like Suleiman had been appointed on 29 January in response to the protests), was forced to resign on 3 March because of a disastrous performance on a television interview<sup>[7]</sup> and widespread opposition from protestors. A former commander of the Air Force (as Mubarak had been) with the rank of Air Marshall, Shafiq later resur-

**6** A prominent Egyptian journalist with close ties to the military claims that two members of SCAF told him they had ordered the assassination attempt soon after it took place. Author's interview, February 2011, Cairo. The assassination attempt, which was executed as Suleiman's motorcade drove between his office at GIS headquarters and the presidential palace, failed because he had chosen a different vehicle than he usually did. Author's interview, GIS official, September 2013.

**7** David Luhnow, «Egypt PM Undone by TV Debate», The Wall Street Journal, 5 March 2011, available at [www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704076804576180862540155764](http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704076804576180862540155764).

faced as a presidential candidate able to gather the support of many Mubarak supporters and opponents of the Brotherhood's Mohamed Mursi, his rival in the presidential election run-off – but never the explicit backing of the army (as was later given to Sisi in the June 2014 presidential elections). Indeed, for all the often-heard claims that Shafiq was the real winner of the tight 2012 election (many officials and regime supporters now routinely claim either that the Muslim Brotherhood cheated or that the United States forced SCAF to declare Mursi the winner), it appeared that in 2012 SCAF was at best divided on his candidacy, perhaps mostly because the prospect of a military man in the presidency would change the balance of power among different factions within the military.

It is in this context that Abdelfattah El-Sisi's appointment as minister of defense soon after Mursi's election should be understood. Although the immediate trigger for his nomination on 12 August 2012 was an attack on the border with Israel a week earlier in which 16 soldiers were killed, it appears that the move had been planned for some time. The appointment was Mursi's in name only – even if the Brotherhood attempted to claim that Sisi was a «general with a revolutionary flavor» and some speculated that the pious Sisi, who like many conservative Egyptians sports a prayer bruise on his forehead, was sympathetic to the Islamist movement. The key architect of this transition in the military leadership was in fact Tantawi, a longtime mentor of Sisi's.<sup>[8]</sup> In choosing his own successor, Tantawi ensured himself an honorable exit at a time when he feared possible retribution for decisions taken during the Mubarak era and under SCAF rule. Equally important, he made sure that his biggest rival in the military, Sami Enan, would be forced to retire at the same time, and that the new head of the GIS (Major-General Mourad Muwafi, who had succeeded Suleiman) would likewise be dismissed.

Over all, the ascendancy of Sisi and the generational change that came with it weakened the powerful network of officers in the army's regional commands (who had been close to Enan) as well as the GIS (whose leadership was mostly composed of former aides to Suleiman like Muwafi), which had assumed wide competences during the later Mubarak era. Conversely, it strengthened the position of the ministry of defense's headquarters' staff, which Sisi just had assumed control of, and of Military Intelligence, which Sisi had headed since 2010 and which prior to the 2011 uprising had been chiefly tasked with watching the military itself and preventing a coup. Hence, when he stepped into his new role, Sisi was already handed a powerful set of tools for working towards full control over «the Military Institution».

**8** Hossam Tantawi's relationship with Sisi dates back to the early 1990s, when he was an officer in a mechanized infantry battalion, and received repeated visits from the defense minister – a highly unusual occurrence for a mid-level officer. It was also Tantawi who promoted Sisi first as deputy director and then as director of Military Intelligence. Author's interview, former military officer, Cairo 2014; foreign lobbyist close the military, Cairo, 2014.

# Sisi's purges

As minister of defense, Sisi appeared to implement a retreat of the military from public life after SCAF's 16-month reign. This behavior was frequently interpreted as a sign that Mursi, and more generally the Muslim Brotherhood and its mostly Islamist allies, had struck a successful deal with the military, trading internal autonomy and a decisive say on national security affairs for the armed forces against free reign for Mursi on civilian matters. The military indeed made some rather ambiguous and short-lived attempts to mediate between secularists and Islamists after Mursi's polarizing constitutional announcement in November 2012, and did not voice explicit opposition to Mursi's policies before June 2013. While there are indications that the anti-Mursi movement did receive covert support from the military (as well as from other powerful actors), Sisi himself largely focused on the military's internal housekeeping, purging dozens of officers from key positions and replacing them with his own loyalists.

This trend accelerated after the 3 July 2013 coup, when Sisi appointed Major General Mohammed Farid al-Tuhami, a key mentor of his career and former director of Military Intelligence, as the head of the GIS. Tuhami proceeded with a thorough purge in GIS, decimating a group of 50–60 senior officers who had held key positions under Omar Suleiman. The move, together with the appointment of many Military Intelligence officers to GIS, put a definite end to the far-reaching autonomy from the military hierarchy that the agency had acquired during Suleiman's 18-year run, and brought it firmly under Sisi's control. In the army and in SCAF too, Sisi proceeded with the early retirement of dozens – some say several hundreds – of officers, although precise figures are difficult to ascertain.<sup>[9]</sup> In a few cases, these dismissals or demotions took place after signs of disagreements emerged in the press. For instance, the highly respected commander of the Second Field Army Major General Ahmed Wasfi, who had refused an offer by Morsi to replace Sisi in June 2013 on the eve of the coup, was nevertheless moved to a less important position in March 2014.

The run-up to Sisi's candidacy for the June 2014 presidential elections indeed saw a number of important shifts in the composition of the SCAF, including the removal of the heads of all major branches of the armed forces and a turnover in major regional commands of the army outside of the normal schedule for such nominations (at the end of the calendar year). Some new appointees had a clear, direct connection to the new strongman. For instance, Lieutenant General Mahmoud Ibrahim Hegazy, who was appointed as Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces (the number two position in the military) in March 2014, happens to be the father in law of one of Sisi's sons. Under the Sisi presidency, Hegazy has become a key figure beyond the traditional remit of his position, such as overseeing Egyptian policy in Libya, and has often appeared with Sisi in public *in place* of the minister of defense, Sedki Sobhi.

9 Authors' interviews, former GIS officials, Western diplomats and military attachés, Cairo 2013–2016.

Perhaps most telling of his desire to ensure no other military establishment figure would enter politics, in the run-up to the June 2014 presidential elections, Sisi clearly worked to prevent any attempt by other prominent former military officers to declare their candidacies. During the first half of 2014 in particular, Shafiq, Muwafi and Enan all made moves signaling their interest in running for the position. All were dissuaded in one way or another. Enan was implicated in corruption scandals over property he had acquired (a charge that initially surfaced in October 2012, a few months after Sisi became minister of defense)<sup>[10]</sup>, despite (or perhaps exactly because) the broad support that the announcement of his candidacy received in February 2014. Muwafi also ran a trial balloon for the presidency, receiving support from several conservative Mubarak-era politicians, before announcing he would endorse Sisi. Shafiq, in exile in Abu Dhabi since his failed 2012 presidential bid, also sought to return but was dissuaded by pending trials on corruption charges, and likewise announced that he would back Sisi. Even after these charges were dismissed, he reportedly remains banned from returning to Egypt.

In short, Sisi has ensured that no peer from the military or the intelligence establishment should be able to develop an autonomous political following. In addition to networks of support within the military and political establishment, all three potential rivals mentioned above also enjoyed a degree of popular support and connections to political parties. Even after Sisi became president, he has worked to keep them at bay – for instance, by shutting down their attempts to organize for the 2015 parliamentary elections, or to seek support from MPs as potential prime ministers. The efforts deployed by the presidency and intelligence services to engineer a tailor-made governing coalition can hence partly be understood by the desire to avoid having such prominent figures with military background establish themselves as political actors.<sup>[11]</sup>

## Sisi unchallenged?

Sisi made sure to get formal support from SCAF in June 2014 before he formally announced his candidacy for the presidency, and to date there has been no public sign of dissent within the military establishment. Nonetheless, within the small circles of Egypt-watchers with access to the military, reports of tensions between Sisi and Sobhi, the minister of defense, recur frequently. They include speculation as to why Sobhi is absent from strategic military communication – for instance the tour of Sinai carried out by Sisi

**10** Ahmed Shalabi, «The General prosecutor submits an injunction for illegitimate gain against the army's chief of staff Sami Enan,» Al-Masri al-Youn, 10 February 2012, available at: <http://web.archive.org/web/20121004233250/www.almasryalyoum.com/node/1151496>, accessed 9 February 2017.

**11** On the role of the intelligence services in choreographing the composition of the 2015 parliament, see Hossam Bahgat, «Anatomy of an election,» Mada Masr, 14 March 2016, available at [www.madamasr.com/en/2016/03/14/feature/politics/anatomy-of-an-election](http://www.madamasr.com/en/2016/03/14/feature/politics/anatomy-of-an-election); accessed 9 February 2017.

and his in-law Hegazy after the failed attempt by the Islamic State to take control of the town of Sheikh Zuwayyed in July 2015. Speeches are dissected for any hint of divergence between the two, in particular by political actors who would like to see Sisi deposed or abandon plans to run for a second term, such as many members of the Muslim Brotherhood, or by secularists disappointed with the turn of events after Mursi's ouster.

For the moment, most of this amounts to little more than wishful thinking. The Egyptian military, like most militaries in the world, is a politically cautious institution and not inclined to adventurism. Long privileged, it has been pampered under Sisi's rules even as Egypt's economic situation continues to deteriorate.<sup>[12]</sup> Yet the outlines of structural rifts can be divined. Sisi has empowered his old agency, Military Intelligence, to an unprecedented degree in Egypt's modern history, and especially weakened the historically far more important GIS as a result. This, along with the last few years' purges and appointments of Sisi loyalists, does appear to have created some internal friction. Moreover, the military made sure to include some checks in the on the power of the presidency when a new constitution was drafted in late 2013. For instance, any change in the minister of defense remains contingent on SCAF's approval until 2022, which is also the year when Sisi will have to step down under the constitutional provision that limits a president to two terms in office.<sup>[13]</sup>

Given the accumulation of challenges Egypt has faced under the Sisi presidency (political atrophy, a bleak economic outlook, increasingly difficult relations with key allies such as Saudi Arabia) and the still-fresh changes within in the military institution in the last few years, it is not hard to imagine that the military may respond to a future crisis by seeking to set clear limits to the currently all-powerful presidency. This need not come as a coup, even if the military more than ever claims the super-constitutional prerogative of interfering in politics in moments of national crisis. Through a myriad appointments made by Sisi since 2013, military officers have been inserted in the civilian state structure to an unprecedented degree. The already massive economic empire of the military has expanded even further. The intention of most of this was, of course, to build networks of loyalty that would bend civilian institutions to the will of Sisi and its allies, and to prevent private business networks from reclaiming the political influence they had until 2011. It may well cut the other way if a sudden crisis were to let many of these newly promoted officers scramble to protect their interests, and build up autonomous centers of power in the process. Recurrent speculation

**12** For instance, when the floatation of the Egyptian Pound in early November led to a drastic devaluation with exchange rates dropping from the official 8.8. to almost 20 pounds to the Dollar within less than a month, measures were immediately taken to compensate officers for the loss of real income. No other category of state employees received any compensation of this sort.

**13** Article 234 of the 2013 Egyptian constitution states: «The Minister of Defense is appointed upon the approval of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces. The provisions of this article shall remain in force for two full presidential terms starting from the date on which this Constitution comes into effect.»

that a former officer may be appointed as prime minister may be indicative of shifting alignments within the military's black box.

Any observer of Egyptian politics would do well to remember that when Mubarak became president in 1981, also at a time of national crisis, he faced a powerful rival in Field Marshall Abdelhalim Abu Ghazala, a war hero with a strong following in the army. Mubarak initially had to share in policymaking with other former top officers such as Lieutenant-General Kamal Hassan Ali, a former minister of defense and head of intelligence who served as prime minister during the early part of the era. It took Mubarak nearly a decade to neutralize his potential rivals in the military, and it took the major economic relief and international support that came after Egypt backed the 1990–1991 Gulf War to seal his appointment of loyalists in key positions (particularly Tantawi and Suleiman, who remained in their positions from then till Mubarak's fall). These are lessons that are surely not lost on Sisi himself.

The cult of personality around Sisi – which has faded since its peak in July 2013 due to widespread disaffection with some of the policies he has carried out, particularly the mismanagement of the economy – should not lead anyone to conclude that the current Egyptian regime is a personal dictatorship. Not only does the president face limits in setting the policy agenda – institutions such as the ministry of interior or judiciary have some autonomy and capacity for bureaucratic resistance – but he must also contend with a military institution that remains the biggest potential threat to his rule. Were Sisi's presidency a success, he might have been able, like Mubarak, to impose himself as a *primus inter pares* among an officer corps whose interests are prioritized. But this is not the case: politically, Sisi's presidency has been a disappointment to many Egyptian constituencies frustrated by his lack of inclusion. Economically the country is in worse shape than it has been in a generation. The question of whether he should run again in presidential elections scheduled for 2018 is openly raised by outside observers and local political actors, with some of his supporters were even defensive enough to suggest his term should be extended without an election, a proposal that was short-lived.<sup>[14]</sup> A potential challenge by former officers such as Enan, Shafiq or Muwafi continues to fascinate the Egyptian media and chattering classes, as do the rare sightings of Minister of Defense Sobhi. This reflects not only personal support for such figures, but perhaps more importantly, a desire to move towards greater political plurality and the presence of credible figures who, within the constraints of a historically military-dominated regime, can be vehicles for various constituencies to express their interests.

External actors seeking to influence developments in Egypt should therefore keep in mind that the current regime is still very much in gestation. In this context, external actors should prepare for the emergence of alternative leadership and its potential destabilizing

**14** See «Popular Campaign in Egypt Calls for Extension of Sisi's Presidential Term,» Egyptian Streets, 10 August 2016, available at: <https://egyptianstreets.com/2016/08/10/popular-campaign-in-egypt-calls-for-extension-of-sisis-presidential-term>; accessed 9 February 2017.

role. The temptation to echo regime propaganda and glorify Sisi's role should also be avoided, for multiple reasons ranging from how polarizing a figure Sisi is to the need to encourage a less personalized regime based on enhancing institutional capacity (including that of the military) and a move away from the political polarization and exclusion of the last few years. In time, this may include encouraging respect for the constitutional limits on presidential terms and the opening of political space to shift away from a mode of governance that is overly focused on the presidency at the expense of even limited pluralism. The demilitarization of the Egyptian regime may be a long time in coming, but its «de-Sisi-ization» looms on the horizon.

# The Author

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Place of publication: [www.boell.de](http://www.boell.de)  
Release date: February 2017  
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