

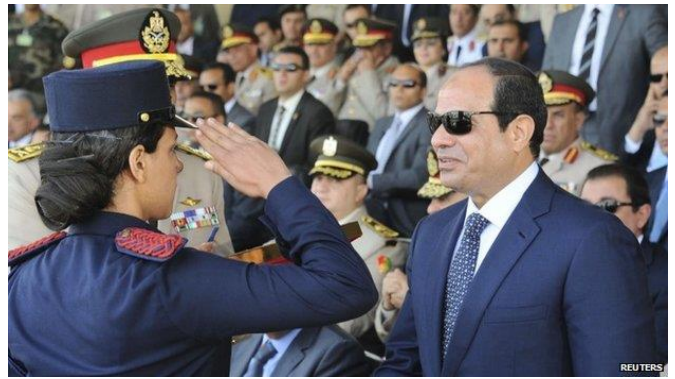
## Egypt's Military and the Second Republic

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Sights are on Egypt in 2014 as the new regime of former defense chief Abdul-Fattah al-Sisi takes its first steps, venturing out as a regional player mediating an Israeli-Palestinian truce, trying to strengthen the front against jihadist activities in northern Africa, and re-committing to a longstanding relationship with the countries of the Arabian Peninsula. In essence, the country is slowly returning to its former role as an anchor for security and stability after over three years of upheaval and change that forced it to retrench inward to put its own house in order.

### The Role Re-Asserted

But essential to Egypt's re-playing a leading role in regional affairs is the function, position, and allegiance of the Egyptian military that has taken it upon itself to steer the country through a number of domestic and regional challenges after it forced the ouster of the only elected civilian president, Mohammad Morsi, in July, 2013. As the state institution possessing the requisite legitimacy and power at this crucial juncture, the military remains a guardian of Egyptian politics and protector of the Egyptian polity as the latter embarks on its second iteration since the July 23, 1952, Revolution.



Former Defense Minister, now President Abdul-Fattah al-Sisi

In returning as the premier institution of regime stability, the Egyptian armed forces are in no way the ruler type they were at the time of that officers' revolution. As this author has argued elsewhere,\* that designation ended with the de-militarization of state and society that former President Anwar al-Sadat launched along with his establishment of a quasi-party system in the second half of the 1970s. Since then, and especially during the intermittent crises that beset the Egyptian state in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, the Egyptian military has acted as the protector of the regime and the state, so long as its corporate interests were protected and its share of the national economy was safeguarded. With public disaffection with, and revolution against, the Mubarak regime in February of 2011, the military quickly dissociated itself from the person of the president but remained the guardian of the state, assuring both state survival and its own centrality in the coming political architecture.

Constitutionally, the new political order 'grandfathered' the old prerogatives of the military into the country's new charter. In a process begun in 2012, during the presidency

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\* Imad Harb, "The Egyptian Military in Politics: Disengagement or Accommodation?" *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 57, No. 2 (Spring 2003), pp. 269-290.

of the Islamist Mohammad Morsi, continued after his ouster, and codified by popular referendum earlier this year, the new constitution has given the military brass the final say in choosing the Defense Minister from among their ranks, sanctioned military trials of civilians, and asserted the military-dominated National Defense Council's supervision over the military's budget. In essence, the military seems to have become stronger than it has ever been, although it maintains itself as a behind-the-scenes institution once again serving a civilianized military officer capable of projecting the confidence and strength necessary during a transitional period.

### **Domestic and Regional Contingencies**

And yet, many can argue that the Egyptian military's role in state and society after the collapse of the Mubarak regime is just what Egypt now needs to clear the many minefields besetting its transition and threatening its regional interests and position. Internally, the threat of terrorism has become real and requires an urgent response that the country's ill-equipped internal security forces cannot mount. Only the assurance that an organized military force can provide will save the day for Egypt; from Gaza's echoes in the east and the insipient terrorist Salafist cells in the mountains of the Sinai Peninsula, to attacks along the Suez Canal zone, to bombings in the cities, to reverberations from Libya's chaos in the west of the country.

The Egyptian armed forces are also the regime's strongest instrument that can defend against a resurgent Muslim Brotherhood that has been badly bloodied but is still capable of mounting a serious challenge, notwithstanding its illegal status and the incarceration of its top leadership. Indeed, the

Islamist movement constantly promises to remain a thorn in the regime's side and has on many occasions since Morsi's ouster tried to challenge it in the streets of Cairo and other cities by staging demonstrations, lackluster so far, and disrupting normalcy at Cairo University and other campuses. While the military itself has not interfered in what it considers to be strictly a police action, it will always consider itself a reserve force that - as on other occasions in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s - can be the regime's ace-in-the-hole should the need arise.

The Egyptian military is also indispensable in the overall battle against resurgent al-Qaeda-affiliated terrorists, currently laying siege to Libya's east and taking its political process hostage. Only a couple of months ago, 22 Egyptian soldiers were massacred on the Egyptian-Libyan border, a reminder that the entire North African region is also a front against jihadist terrorism. Although Egyptian officials are on record vehemently denying that Egypt may interfere in its western neighbor's affairs, it is not unfathomable to think that once the regime is stable in Cairo it might want to venture an intervention. To be sure, if the security situation continues to deteriorate in Libya -which would be a sign of worse things to come in Egypt, Tunisia and Algeria as well- military intervention against jihadists may very well be the only response to safeguard Egyptian stability.



22 soldiers were killed July 21<sup>st</sup> near the Libyan border

With Egypt's relations with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait on the mend after a period of uncertainty during Morsi's presidency, it is not at all unthinkable that the Egyptian military considers itself a strategic reserve force for the Gulf Cooperation Council. Immediately after the July, 2013, ouster of Morsi, the three countries provided about US\$20 billion in economic assistance to shore up the Egyptian economy. Egypt is assured of continuous assistance for the foreseeable future. As the council grapples with Iranian ambitions, Yemeni instability, and resurgent millennial terrorism in Iraq, only the Egyptian armed forces can provide a sense of assurance, now that the American security guarantee is in doubt and Washington's vacillation about the Middle East abounds.

Finally, the state of flux extant in Egypt's relations with Ethiopia and the uncertain fate of its water security necessitate a vigilant and strong military. Presently, diplomacy seems to be the only option safeguarding Egypt's water supply from the Nile River as Ethiopia builds its Renaissance Dam which is seen as threatening to countries downstream; namely, Sudan and Egypt. While Sudan seems to have reconciled itself to reality and accepted Ethiopia's assurances regarding its water supply, Egypt remains on edge,

considering the water issue a genuine threat to its national security. Absent a radical solution, the future does not portend peaceful developments between the two countries.

As political development in the Arab world's most populous country inches slowly forward, Egypt's armed forces will most likely continue to be the most important pillar of the Egyptian regime and polity. With domestic security threats and foreign strategic challenges, the future does not portend well for the goals of sidelining the Egyptian military and democratizing the political process. Indeed, Egypt's Second Republic is wedded to its military for years to come.

*Views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of  
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Images accessed 8/16/2014

President Abdul-Fattah al-Sisi's image

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-28126198>

Image of attack on Egyptian forces

<http://www.worldtribune.com/2014/07/29/egypt-sees-foreign-hand-attack-killed-22-soldiers-near-libyan-border/>