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The Curious Case of the Egyptian Armed Forces

What was at stake when the Egyptian Military intervened against President Morsi?

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On 30th of June, millions of Egyptians took to the streets in Cairo and other major cities demanding the departure of Egypt's first democratically elected President, Mohamed Morsi, who is affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood. On the day following the massive protests, the Egyptian Armed Forces issued a statement recognising the appeals of the Egyptian people and granting political forces, including the President, 48 hours to respond to the people's demands, by having Morsi removed. Before the end of the ultimatum set by the military, President Morsi addressed the nation declaring that he was unwilling to step down. After the deadline, Egypt's Defence Minister Colonel General Abdel Fattah El-Sisi announced that the head of the constitutional court, Egypt's top judge, was appointed interim president, called for early presidential elections and suspended the constitution.

The prominent role played by the Egyptian Armed Forces in removing President Morsi has been both praised and criticised in Egypt and abroad. The military's move was seen by many as a classic example of a coup d'état mounted against an elected president, thus marking the end of Egypt's nascent democracy. On the other hand, others argued that without the military's intervention, Egypt would have slipped into chaos and that political turmoil might have turned into civil war. Both views, however, seem to ignore the complex background of the situation both prior to and after Morsi's toppling. Those who argue that Egypt experienced a full-fledged military coup ignore the political upheaval, social polarisation, economic debacles and foreign policy failures that paved the way for the unprecedented protests against Morsi on 30th of June. Likewise, some agree that without the military's intervention the country would have tumbled into chaos and those who romanticise the post-Morsi era fail to comprehend the political, economic and security challenges that face Egypt's new ruling elite. Furthermore, both views tell us very little about the motivations of the Egyptian Armed Forces, driving them to take a difficult, and possibly not their preferred decision, to remove Morsi.

The leaders of Egypt's army seem to have thoroughly, weighed the opportunities and risks of intervening in the political process. What is not clear, however, is whether they will be able to accept the consequences of their choice. This report tries to analyse the intentions of the Egyptian Armed Forces prior to removing President Morsi and discusses the challenges that await Egypt's political and military leaders.

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The Egyptian Armed Forces' Three Commandments

- *Thou Shalt Not Lose the Military*

The first thing that Colonel General El-Sisi, Egypt's Defence Minister, had in mind was the safeguarding of his own institution, the military establishment. Although it is the largest and one of the strongest militaries in the Middle East, the Egyptian Armed Forces can hardly maintain its strength and unity in an unstable political environment. The unfortunate fate, suffered by the Syrian, Libyan and Iraqi Armed Forces because of political turmoil, was too a recent a lesson to be ignored or forgotten by Egyptian military leaders. Political unrest had been on the rise since November 2012, when President Morsi made a constitutional declaration that placed him above the law. When the military proposed to mediate between the various political factions, President Morsi, backed by the Muslim Brotherhood, rebuked the army, demanding it should withdraw its initiative. President Morsi's attempts to marginalise the Egyptian military, while failing to solve any of Egypt's political, economic and security problems, resulted in anger within the officer corps. The situation worsened when Morsi started speaking on behalf of the military establishment itself, without prior consultations with military leaders. In his most controversial address delivered to an Islamist-organised conference to support Syrian rebels on 15 June 2013, President Morsi declared, "the Egyptian people and army are supporting the Syrian uprising." He added "the people of Egypt and its army will not leave Syrians until their rights are granted and a new elected leadership is chosen"[2]. While Morsi threatened the severing of diplomatic ties with the Syrian Al-Assad regime, Islamist preachers called for a Jihad in Syria, thereby raising all sorts of security risks not only for the military but also for the Egyptian nation state. The Egyptian military became wary of its Supreme Commander who seemed to be pushing the army to fight a lost battle for the sake of political gains. Morsi's remarks on Syria, made only two weeks before his ousting, fuelled the anger of already irate officers. It is not hard to imagine, that had Colonel General El-Sisi not intervened to remove Morsi from power, he himself may have had to face an officers' rebellion, in particular from younger officers, who see the military as the ultimate protector of the Egyptian state and its identity. Any hesitation shown by El-Sisi in removing Morsi would have been interpreted by his officers as an act of compliance, jeopardizing the unity of the officer corps.

- *Thou Shalt Not Fail the Nation State for the sake of a 'failed President'*

Unsurprisingly, the Egyptian Armed Forces was not the only state institution suspicious of President Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood. Egypt's first democratically elected president was at war with most state institutions, most notably with the police and the judiciary. While President Morsi was making hostile comments against the judiciary, accusing judges by name, former Jihadists who had been imprisoned for their involvement in the killing of police officers in the '80s and '90s, were invited to attend Presidential addresses and some even joined President Morsi on stage.

Morsi's unholy battle with the Egyptian state allowed him little time to solve its mounting problems. The Egyptian economy was on the verge of complete collapse, with a 48% increase in the budget deficit under Morsi's 12 month rule[3]. Morsi's government was unable to provide fuel and electricity on a regular basis. Society was deeply split politically and ideologically. Sectarian violence was increasing significantly without any meaningful action by the President or his government, taken to counter it, making life even more hazardous. The security situation was deteriorating as Morsi turned a blind eye on Jihadist activities, particularly in the Sinai, where he was unable to win the support of the police. Foreign policy was yet another area where the Muslim Brotherhood and President Morsi were failing. The worst case came in the Presidency's handling of the contentious Ethiopian Nile Dam, which is expected to have a negative impact on Egypt's share of the Nile waters. In an unprecedented move, the President allowed Egyptian television to air the live discussions

2 "Egypt's Morsi severs ties with Syria, warns of 'counter-revolution violence' "Ahram Online, 15 June 2013, http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContentPrint/1/0/74082/Egypt/0/Egypts-Morsi-severs-ties-with-Syria,-warns-of-coun.aspx

3 Ibrahim al-Ghaitany "The Performance of the Egyptian Economy under Morsi", Egypt independent, 25 June 2013, http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/performance-egyptian-economy-under-morsy

of political figures on the Ethiopian Dam crisis without their knowledge. The participants, believing they were speaking in confidence, in a secret national security meeting in the President's presence, made some very offensive remarks, calling upon the President to stage a military operation against Ethiopia or to secretly support the rebels in Ethiopia to de-stabilise the country and thereby gain leverage over Addis Abeba in negotiations over the dam. Diplomats at the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs were outraged and some younger diplomats openly criticised the President.

Morsi's failures politically, economically and in security and foreign policy issues were so enormous that Egyptians were unable to accept their first democratically elected President holding power for another three years. President Morsi himself was seen as a threat to the Egyptian state and the safety and stability of society. A petition called '*Tamaroud*', literally meaning "rebel", was launched in May 2013 with a view to 'withdrawing confidence' from President Morsi, calling for massive protests all over Egypt on 30th of June to demand Morsi's departure. Prior to the protests, Tamaroud campaign leaders announced that they had collected 22 million endorsements, a much higher figure than the one obtained by President Morsi a year before when he was elected. The choice for Egypt's military leaders was whether to save a failing President, to risk turning Egypt into a 'failed state' or to take the side of the protestors, police, judiciary and other state institutions in removing an elected President from power. It is hard to predict what the future of President Morsi's rule might have been, had the military not intervened. Almost all state institutions were against him, regardless of his growing unpopularity in the street.

- *Thou Shalt Not Lose Sinai*

The last, and yet most pressing issue, which was decisive in the military's decision to remove Morsi, was the deteriorating security situation in the Sinai peninsula, bordering Gaza and Israel. From the time that President Morsi assumed power, Jihadist activities were on the rise, with reports that militant Islamists from Gaza were involved in terrorist attacks against the Egyptian military and police in Sinai. The worst terrorist attack took place in August 2012, killing 16 Egyptian soldiers, only one month after Morsi had won the presidential elections. President Morsi acted strongly because of the attack, not against the militant Islamists, but against the military and the intelligence. In an unparalleled move, Morsi removed the long-serving Minister of Defence at the time, Field Marshal Tantawi, the army's Chief-of-Staff, and intelligence chief. As yet, the attackers' identity remains unknown, something that military leaders have promised to uncover soon, especially after Morsi's removal. Some security reports suggested that Hamas was involved in the attack. Hamas has refuted all the accusations and condemned the report. In this case, the military consider that the tunnels linking Gaza to Egypt which are not controlled by the Egyptian authorities, represent a threat to Egyptian national security. Following Mubarak's overthrow, the number of tunnels has mushroomed, they are used to smuggle food, cars, fuel, as well as weapons into Gaza. The strong ties between Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt made it extremely difficult for military leaders to block the tunnels, thereby giving more leverage to militant Islamists in Sinai. This was confirmed when 6 policemen and one soldier were kidnapped in May 2013. As the military was planning its operation against the terrorists in Sinai to free the kidnapped security personnel, President Morsi called for calm and dialogue. Furthermore, the President reaffirmed the importance of protecting those who had been kidnapped, as well as the kidnappers. A few days later, the victims were released, while the kidnappers' location remained unknown and they were never caught. Sinai was seen as spiraling out of the military's control and the President was held partially responsible. He appeared to be an obstacle standing in the way of the military's fight against terrorism in Sinai.

Challenges Ahead: Who said Egyptians would live happily ever after?

While the military's intervention to oust President Morsi was necessary to save Egypt from a catastrophic scenario, it has also created challenging problems that will prove hard to solve in the near future. Topping the list of these challenges is the Muslim Brotherhood and its sympathizers who feel deeply betrayed by the

military and are thinking of revenge. So far, President Morsi's supporters have continued demonstrating on a daily basis, calling for Morsi's release and his return as President. They have rejected all invitations for dialogue, made by Egypt's interim President Adly Mansour and his government. The organization of the Muslim Brotherhood and its supporters will remain a ticking bomb in Egypt's democratic transition; while their reconciliation into the political process is essential, it is a long way off. Failure to include the Islamists, including the Muslim Brotherhood, in the political process can only lead to their radicalization. It is very hard to ignore that Islamist radicalization has already started in Sinai. Since Morsi's toppling on 3rd July, numerous terrorist attacks have been staged against police forces and the military in Sinai, leaving 21 dead and more than 112 injured[4]. Sinai will need more than the military's guns and tanks in order not to become a terrorist hub, something that Egypt's civilian government should reflect on carefully.

It may seem an odd argument to make after listing Egypt's severe security challenges, but it is democracy and not security which should be seen as Egypt's biggest concern. While the military should focus on national security and not politics in the upcoming period, Egypt's interim President and his temporary government should work hard to reinvent democracy and restore the rule of law, granting everyone, including the Muslim Brotherhood, a place under the sun. For its part, the international community should support Egypt in this uneasy transition towards democracy. NATO, in particular, can offer advice to the Egyptian government and to the Egyptian Armed Forces, on issues related to Security Sector Reform (SSR), given the Alliance's wide range of partnership programs tackling the dilemma of democratic transition and the challenge of security. In other words, instead of debating whether the Egyptian Armed Forces' intervention to remove Morsi can be qualified as a coup or not, NATO should focus on Egypt's future, offering recommendations on the necessary steps needed to guarantee a steady progress towards democracy and democratic control over security institutions.

4 Mohamed Hesham, "21 dead, 112 injured in Sinai attacks since Morsi ouster, Egypt Independent, 22 June 2013, http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/21-dead-112-injured-sinai-attacks-morsy-s-ouster