

## EGYPT: THE ARMY BETWEEN MILITARY FUTURE AND POLITICAL DESTINY

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The Arab and Western media quickly relayed a statement issued by the Egyptian army on its Facebook page. We learned that Abdel Fattah al-Sissi, the minister of Defense and commander in chief of the armed forces had invited, Tuesday, December 11, President Morsi, as well as representatives of the opposition and the civil society to meet to find together a solution to the acute political crisis which Egypt is currently in. Even though the press announced that the meeting would be held this Wednesday, December 12th at 16:30 am local time in a military club, a spokesman of the army, Colonel Ahmed Mohammed Ali stated that General al-Fissi had not launched an appeal for a “dialogue on national unity” and that the proposal of the army did not aim to start a dialogue with the opposition but only sought only to reassure the Egyptian people.

However, shortly before 16h local time, the Egyptian army posted on Facebook a statement declaring that the meeting, that should have started half an hour later, was postponed indefinitely because of backlash from representatives of the opposition parties and civil society. It should be added that the postponement of the meeting was announced by the Egyptian army a few minutes after the opposition had announced its decision to participate.

**In the first analysis, we can hypothesize that the reluctance of the army, followed by the abandonment of the project of organizing a meeting between President Morsi and the opposition are significant of its difficulties in clearly defining its political line.**

We recall the role played by the Egyptian military institution in the fall of the regime of Hosni Mubarak. Its refusal to ensure the defense of the institutions and thereby the interests of those in power had largely contributed to the defeat of Hosni Mubarak. The current situation in Syria demonstrates that the difficulties that opposition movements have in removing a political power, can always count on the active support of the army.

Particularly difficult in the context facing Egypt, is the personality of Abdel Fattah al-Sissi, and therefore the choices he is likely to pose, remains enigmatic. To everyone's complete surprise, President Mohamed Morsi appointed Abdel Fattah al-Sissi on August 12th after the astonishing dismissal off its predecessor, the powerful Marshal

Tantaoui. Today, the new Minister for Defense and Chief of Staff undoubtedly has the means to force the Egyptian presidency's hand. Does he have the will, is the question?

General al-Sissi belongs to the new generation of senior officers of the Egyptian army. Born in 1954 and graduated from the military academy in 1977, he is representative of army officers who took office after the end of the state of war with Israel and therefore did not have any significant experience of the battlefields

Discreet member of the inner circles of power, Abdel Fattah al-Sissi had a distinguished and fast military career. After commanding infantry units, he held the prominent function of military attaché in Saudi Arabia and since the end of 2008 he has served as director of the intelligence services of the army. It is in his latter capacity that he experienced the events of the Egyptian revolution and the electoral process leading to the election of Mohamed Morsi as President of the republic.

A practicing Muslim, General al-Sissi has sometimes been described as the "Man of the Muslim Brothers" in the Egyptian army. This hypothesis of an infiltration of the Brotherhood at the highest levels of the army at the time of President Mubarak and Field Marshal Tantaoui nevertheless seems highly unlikely.

**Contrary to popular belief, it is even possible that General al-Sissi is keener than his predecessor on maintaining trusting relationships with Washington.**

Marshal Tantaoui, remember, was trained in Moscow at the time of the Cold war and he was involved in the Israeli-Arab wars of 1967 and 1973. General al-Sissi, for his part completed his training at the War College of the U.S. Army in 2005 and 2006. As many Egyptian officers who knew the U.S. military academies, General al-Sissi undoubtedly returned from his stay in the United States with a new outlook on American society.

Most observers also agree on the fact that al-Sissi is liked and respected by the officers of the army. They recognize both his skills as a military commander but also, and this is perhaps the most important point, a real desire to upgrade the equipment and training of a military institution in poor condition. Concerns badly or not met by his predecessor.

Unlike Marshal Tantaoui, who saw himself as a "Kingmaker", it is possible that General al-Sissi simply wishes to assume his duties as highest military authority in the country. His profile is closer from Rachid Amar, the Chief of Staff of the Tunisian army, who has contributed to the departure of President Ben Ali, in particular because he had made the army the poor relative of the regime. In the end, it is thus credible to consider that it is the place reserved for the military by President Morsi that will indicate to General al-Sissi how he should behave.

Contrary to appearances, the Egyptian army could prove more concerned with its military future than by his political destiny. Under this scenario, it is likely that President Morsi will be able to impose his views on the upcoming Constitution referendum which should give him quasi-absolute powers. The army would certainly prefer to grant Mohamed Morsi a reasonable delay rather than venture to bet on a divided opposition.

In this happens, Mohammed Morsi, who was considered the “default candidate” of the Muslim Brotherhood in the presidential election of 17 June 2012, will have demonstrated once again effective tactics and political strategies by dismissing Marshal Tantaoui and appointing in his place General al-Sissi.

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