



# The Egyptian Military: A Slumbering Giant Awakes

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Article

After nearly half a century of stagnating operational capacities, the Egyptian Armed Forces (EAF) appear to be undergoing significant capacity upgrades under President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. This reflects several considerations: intensified domestic and regional security threats; pressure from Washington to redirect and improve the military's performance; additional external support for the Egyptian military, provided especially by Russia and France; and the president's greater confidence in his abilities to stave off coups than all his predecessors (save one, Gamal Abdel Nasser). As a result, Sisi is pushing long overdue overhauls of Egypt's military doctrine, its weapons procurement, and its interoperability with allied forces. Less clear is whether or not these changes are being accompanied by improvements in training, maintenance, and overall readiness.

The much delayed, yet only partial upgrades attest to the complications and difficulties entailed in military assistance programs, no matter how generous or lengthy. Their timing seems also to suggest a paradox: as the military relationship has become less central to both sides, it may have become more effective. Egypt's reduced dependence on the United States, coupled with a greater need for more agile, diversified forces, may convince its leaders to permit and even facilitate the closer working relationships essential to the success of assistance programs. Whatever the causes, Egypt's growing commitment to military professionalism could substantially reduce long accumulating frustrations within the U.S. military about the aid program, to say nothing of substantially improving Egypt's armed forces.

The promise of U.S. assistance transforming the half-a-million-strong EAF from a Soviet-style military—which was organized and equipped to fight a major land battle against Israel—into a more mobile and diversified military was not realized during Hosni Mubarak's long presidency from 1981 to 2011. Like his predecessor, Anwar Sadat, who ushered in the strategic relationship with the United States, Mubarak suspected that U.S. support for modernization of Egyptian forces revealed a desire to have them deployed in support of American objectives in the region. Mubarak moreover feared that his own officers would develop political ambitions as they became more professionalized and autonomous. Having little if any need of a large military to confront Israel, with which Egypt was now at peace, and having no desire to convert it into a modern, integrated fighting force capable of projecting power in the region, Mubarak diverted his military into economic activities. He also appeased the officer corps by showering it with near state-of-the-art U.S. weaponry. That weaponry was not accompanied, however, by the organization, training, and sustainment necessary to render it truly effective, nor was it suitable for newly arising domestic and regional security challenges.

Ostensibly, the Egyptian military was upgraded, but in reality it was sidelined by Cairo's strategic agreement not to threaten Israel in return for U.S. aid to support the Mubarak government. The U.S. military assistance program thus operated within a policy framework that militated against its effectiveness, leaving the EAF a slumbering giant among Arab militaries.

## Foregone Opportunities for Military Upgrading

From the outset of their relationship with the United States, the Egyptian Armed Forces benefited from "cash flow financing," which allowed them to pay for major weapons purchases over time. This in turn permitted the acquisition of the high-visibility, high-dollar weapons systems that enamored the Egyptian military, although they were not necessarily the best choice given the range of possible threats. Even as the possibility of hostilities with Israel became ever more remote following the Camp David peace accords, Egyptian acquisition was heavily weighted toward building conventional capability at the expense of lighter, more flexible, more mobile forces needed in counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operations.

This stubborn focus on the perceived status conveyed by advanced weaponry, as opposed to its possible use, continued at least until the Egyptian military was faced with turmoil in the wake of the 2011 uprising. Pleas by U.S. officials to reduce the size of the conventional force and invest more in special operations, air mobility, reconnaissance and surveillance platforms, and command and control were resisted by Egyptian officers who dismissed the possibility of insurgent threats while insisting that their mission was "to defend the borders of Egypt."

From 1982 to 2015, Egypt ordered 240 F-16 dual role fighters of steadily increasing sophistication, the latest twenty at a cost of approximately \$1.7 billion. Similarly, since 1987 Egypt has assembled 1,200 U.S. M1A1 Abrams main battle tanks under a U.S. co-production program, at an approximate cost of \$3 million each. Combined with the 1,700 older U.S.-supplied M60 tanks, and various remaining Soviet supplied models, Egypt possesses at least 4,000 main battle tanks, far and away the largest such fleet in the region. According to the U.S. General Accounting Office, between 1999 and 2005, "With about \$7.8 billion to Egypt in FMF [Foreign Military Financing] funds, Egypt spent almost half, about \$3.8 billion, on major equipment such as aircraft, missiles, ships, and vehicles."

Spurging on expensive, high-tech equipment has left fewer funds available for sustainment and modernization. The Egyptians claim to spend only 30 percent of their U.S. aid on sustainment, compared with the minimum of 50 percent recommended by U.S. military logisticians. And it is questionable whether even this small amount is expended efficiently. Low levels of sustainment funding, in addition to other factors, probably explain the poor utilization rate of Egyptian equipment compared to that of the United States. Based on time elapsed between depot maintenance visits, for example, the average Egyptian F-16 flies less than half the number of sorties per year as its U.S. counterpart. The M1A1 tanks co-produced near Cairo routinely sit outside the factory for months before being delivered to operational units. The Egyptians had produced over 850 tanks by 2010, according to one source, but 25 percent of them had yet to be delivered to field units. U.S. supplied Knox- and Perry-class frigates spent most of their time in port at Alexandria.

The low utilization rate of Egyptian equipment suggests an equally low level of training activity, and regardless of its equipment, no military can succeed without rigorous, realistic, constant, and repetitive training. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that Egyptian training too often lacks free play in favor of rigid, pre-planned scenarios where the outcome is obvious and no surprises are permitted. Debriefings are similarly stage-managed, with a reluctance to address failures and develop lessons learned. There is little evidence of realistic joint training and no apparent effort to instill the kind of flexibility and resilience in leaders and decisionmakers that is so critical to success in any conflict, but perhaps especially so in counterinsurgency operations, which necessarily confront fluid and frequently ambiguous circumstances.

In spite of numerous training programs and exercises over the years, conducted both in Egypt and the United States, Egyptian doctrine and organization have until recently remained largely focused on large-scale conventional operations. The chain of command has been rigid and top heavy. Decisionmaking authority has been held at the highest possible level, with junior officers given little opportunity to show initiative. NCOs have rarely functioned as supervisors, instead relegated to routine duties that in the U.S. military would be assumed by junior enlisted members. In fact, the amount of responsibility and authority retained at any given level in the Egyptian military is noticeably lower than for a U.S. counterpart. Many officers and NCOs continue to perform the same tasks and are promoted within the same units for extended periods; this may allow them to develop a high degree of technical expertise in a specialized function but also makes them too narrowly focused.

## Causes of the EAF's Possible Awakening

Reduced economic and strategic U.S. leverage over Egypt has made the military relationship less risky for Cairo. But two additional factors have prompted the EAF's awakening under Sisi. First, his coup-proofing strategy has not required the military's energies be diverted substantially into economic activities. While upgrading both the economic and political roles of the military, he has simultaneously sought to enhance its capacities to discharge security duties. This includes the vital measure of force interoperability, which necessarily requires that he sufficiently trust his army, air force, and navy and their subordinate units to allow them to operate jointly.

Sisi's trust is not based on a sense of idealized loyalty or abstract professionalism but on his past background as the head of Military Intelligence. He has experience with monitoring the officer corps and extensive contacts with other personnel who have occupied operational as well as intelligence commands. He was thus well-placed on being promoted to minister of defense in 2012, and upon unofficially assuming presidential powers in 2013, to place loyalists in key positions in Military Intelligence; the General Intelligence Service; in operational commands of the First, Second, and Third Armies; and ultimately, the chief of staff and the head of the president's Republican Guard.

By contrast, Mubarak was an air force officer, hence he was marginal to the politically more vital army so unable to directly control it, while Sadat was essentially a part-time officer, having served only intermittently in the army as his nationalist activities caused him to be jailed twice prior to 1952. So while neither Sadat nor Mubarak had the institutional background or connections to be confident in their ability to monitor the officer corps, especially in an energized military, Sisi does. He is, therefore, more willing to risk its greater empowerment not only politically and economically but also in its vital security functions.

The second driver of change is deterioration of Egypt's security. Domestically the 2011 uprising stimulated the rise of violent extremism, initially in the Sinai Peninsula and subsequently elsewhere in Egypt, including the western frontier with Libya. This new challenge required the Egyptian military substantially upgrade both its counterterrorism and border control capacities, the latter also driven by concerns over the Sudanese border resulting from deteriorating bilateral relations and conflicting claims over the Hala'ib Triangle.

Further south in Africa, Ethiopia's construction of the Renaissance Dam on the Blue Nile warned Egypt it might need to project forces far from its border. Increased human smuggling across the Mediterranean required heightened maritime surveillance. Egypt's relatively weak naval capacities needed upgrading to protect newly discovered gas fields in the eastern Mediterranean and, in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, to respond to growing competition between Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Iran, and various African countries, as evidenced by the war in Yemen and struggles over port access in Hudaida, Djibouti, Berbera, Assab, and elsewhere.

Deterioration of the regional security environment has paralleled that of the domestic one. Conflict in

Libya and Gaza became endemic after 2011, while Syria and Yemen slid into civil wars that drew in various of Egypt's neighbors. Growing Russian assertiveness throughout the region, combined with a Saudi- and Emirati-led initiative to confront Iran in various theaters, including Syria and Yemen, provided Egypt with opportunities to benefit from those engagements, while enhancing risks associated with so doing. As a result, Egypt has needed to upgrade its forces while that task has been rendered financially more feasible because of support provided by various contending parties, such as Russia and Saudi Arabia, or by Western countries anxious to support their domestic arms industries, most notably France.

One example of such pressure and Egypt's response to it was the January 2018 signing of a Communications Interoperability and Security Memorandum of Agreement (CISMOA) with Washington. This agreement is legally required by the United States for it to supply encrypted communications equipment and systems to allies, enabling them to have real time, direct communications. It requires signatories to permit access to their facilities and communication systems by U.S. military personnel. Egypt had resisted signing for some thirty years and delayed announcing that it had done so for two months, presumably out of fear of negative domestic reactions, even though numerous Arab countries, including Morocco, Jordan, and the key GCC states, had previously signed CISMOAs. A knowledgeable U.S. Department of Defense source reported that Sisi finally agreed to sign as a result not of U.S., but of Saudi pressure, brought to bear because Egyptian aircraft operating in the Yemen theater could not communicate with their Saudi counterparts, hence endangering them.

The third cause is increased pressure from the United States, still Egypt's major provider of military assistance. Washington's pressure results from

- its growing concern with Egypt's domestic security challenges;
- its diminished worry that upgrading EAF capacities would be threatening to and opposed by Israel;
- its desire for Egypt to contribute more effectively to securing regional order;
- its hope that its vital security relationship with Egypt will not be undermined by Russia, France, or any other competitor; and
- its frustration over Egypt's failure to take adequate advantage of the opportunity provided by the U.S. military assistance program for almost forty years.

## U.S. Pressure on the EAF

In the wake of the Raba'a al-Adawiya and Nahda massacres in Cairo in 2013, the Obama administration suspended the bulk of Egypt's FMF and withheld delivery of several already-ordered major weapons systems including F-16 fighters, AH-64 Apache helicopters, and M1A1 Abrams tank kits. The Apaches were subsequently released in 2014 on the grounds they would be useful in the Sinai counterinsurgency campaign. When the administration restored funding and released the remaining weapons systems in 2015, two significant changes to the aid program were announced: First, cash flow financing was terminated, denying Egypt the ability to pay for current year purchases over time using future appropriations. Second, military aid would henceforth be directed into four categories—counterterrorism, border security, maritime security, and Sinai security, or would be used for sustainment of existing Egyptian weapons systems.

The combined effect of these changes deprives Egypt of the means to make significant annual purchases of high-end equipment while forcing them to use the funds thus made available for security/counterinsurgency operations and, perhaps most importantly, for sustainment. Indications are that Egyptian officials feel constrained by these restrictions, but the changes have the potential

to significantly improve the Egyptian military's capacity to face the most likely current and future threats.

The imminent end of the Egyptian M1A1 co-production program will also offer an opportunity to shift resources from acquisition to modernization and sustainment, as the resulting excess production capacity can be used to upgrade the earlier increments of Egypt's 1,200 Abrams tanks. Egypt's eagerness to participate in co-production programs, and its stated desire to become a significant arms exporter, may be leveraged by the United States in discussions regarding the future of the tank plant. For instance, approval of a new co-production program may be made contingent on Egyptian progress in improving counterinsurgency capability.

## Egypt's Other Options

Egypt has always hedged its bets regarding foreign suppliers and has been willing to accept the logistical complications and higher expense that come with operating and maintaining multiple weapons systems. In the current environment, this trend has become more pronounced. The decreasing purchasing power of U.S. FMF, the uncertainty of U.S. funding in recent years, and the strings attached to it suggest a continuation and possible growth of Egyptian purchases from other sources. Since the Sisi regime took power in 2013, Egypt has placed major weapons orders with France, Russia, and Germany.

While it is likely that these other suppliers will gain a measure of influence at the expense of the United States, the impact may be minimal. The Egyptians have always held their cards closely, and U.S. influence was never as strong as many seemed to think. Despite the competition for weapon sales, France and Germany's aims in the region are largely aligned with those of the United States. While reports of an agreement to allow Russian access to Egyptian air bases would, if true, increase Russian flexibility and responsiveness in the area, the Egyptians are astute enough to understand that Russia is in no position to match, let alone replace, U.S. presence in the region.

A more significant strategic challenge to the status quo may come from the Chinese, who thus far have concentrated primarily on economic assistance. The importance the Chinese place on the Suez Canal as part of their Belt and Road Initiative may ultimately bring their goals into conflict with those of the United States. So far, however, the Egyptians have shown no desire to curtail either the United States' priority canal access or its expedited aircraft overflights that are so important to U.S. operations in the region. The Egyptians have long been adept at juggling—and accepting money from—a variety of suitors and will no doubt continue to do so.

It is likely that Egypt's recent military spending binge is driven in part by the Sisi regime's ambition to return Egypt to its former position as a regional leader. Efforts to achieve this objective may encourage steps toward at least modest interoperability with Egypt's Gulf neighbors, which in turn would help drive further change in the Egyptian military. While it seems unlikely that the much-touted Middle East Strategic Alliance will amount to much given the history of such initiatives in the region, the Egyptians are increasing their participation in multinational exercises. Their desire to save face in front of their Arab neighbors may provide an additional incentive to overcome historical reluctance and take the necessary steps to address the deficiencies that until recently have undermined operational capacities.

## Impacts on the EAF

Indications are beginning to emerge that the EAF's "awakening" in response to these domestic and external pressures, combined with Sisi's confidence in his ability to control the officer corps, may be occurring. The foremost indication is the intensified counterterrorism campaign in the Sinai, as manifested in particular by Comprehensive Operation Sinai 2018. By fall 2018, the EAF announced

it had killed 450 “terrorists,” destroyed 900 vehicles and 1,000 motorcycles belonging to them, and seized 118 tons of hashish and 24 million drug tablets while executing 195 billion Egyptian pounds’ worth of development projects in the region. The operation has continued, with the EAF claiming to have killed forty-nine insurgents in the beginning of 2019. Yet seven men have also been lost, suggesting the operation’s shortcomings despite assistance from French satellite imagery and Israeli airstrikes. Sisi recently replaced the head of Military Intelligence, who headed up the operation.

Under Mubarak, counterterrorism had been the responsibility not of the military but of Interior Ministry forces. Mubarak steadfastly resisted U.S. pressure to upgrade the country’s counterterrorism capacities and engage the military directly in that effort. Even under Sisi, it took almost four years before the military was prepared to launch a campaign of the magnitude of Operation Sinai 2018, in which not only the army and its special forces have participated, but the navy and air force have as well. Previously, the army and air force provided backup for Ministry of Interior forces confronting violent extremists in middle and upper Egypt in the mid-1990s, and Egypt participated in Thunder of the North, a joint counterterrorism exercise involving troops from twenty countries in northern Saudi Arabia, in 2016. But Operation Sinai was the first combined operation of this sort to be conducted on Egyptian soil.

The second indicator of greater military preparedness is the growing strength of the navy, long the weakest component of the EAF with equipment dating to 2000. A 2015 acquisition from France enabled the navy to station a Mistral-class carrier, able to hold sixteen helicopters, off the Sinai in the Mediterranean and another in the Red Sea. In addition, three French corvettes are to be built in the Alexandria shipyard, the first having been launched in September 2018. Shortly after signing the deal with France, Egypt announced the purchase of fifty Russian KA-52 Alligator attack helicopters, originally intended by Moscow for the Mistral-class carriers then blocked by the Western arms embargo. Simultaneous with the purchases from France and Russia was an acquisition from Germany of four new submarines. The Egyptian military acquired the Alexandria shipyard from the public sector in 2003, and since 2014, has invested \$280 million in upgrading it. This has enhanced the navy’s maintenance capacities, which previously had been heavily dependent upon U.S. contractors.

A third, albeit indirect, indicator of enhanced EAF capacities consists of force deployments and joint operations. In the first instance, the air force and army special forces have operated in Libya intermittently since the fall of strongman Muammar Qaddafi and have conducted major exercises along the border. Joint air operations with the UAE have been conducted over eastern Libya since at least 2014. The Egyptian navy has engaged in joint operations with Saudi, Emirati, and American naval forces off the Yemeni coast in the Red Sea. There are reports of Egyptian special forces also being involved.

With regard to training, Egyptian naval units joined American, Saudi, and Emirati counterparts in the Eagle Response 2018 exercise in the Red Sea last July. Joint training exercises have occurred since 2014, including the 2017 resumption of Operation Bright Star, the annual exercise led by Egyptian and American forces that had been suspended since 2010. In October 2018, the army participated in the Tabuk-4 Exercise with Saudi troops in Egypt’s “southern military zone,” with Emirati, Omani, and Bahraini forces observing. Simultaneously the EAF was conducting paratrooper training exercises with Russian forces. A month later Egypt hosted the militaries of eight Arab countries participating in “Arab Shield 1” training exercises based in Mersa Matruh. In July 2018 it had been reported that Sudan had returned a missing Egyptian patrol that had been operating in the Sudanese-Libyan-Egyptian border area.

Whether these indicators of increased activity by the EAF are accompanied by organizational, training, and equipment improvements necessary for battlefield success is unclear. Turnovers in the high command since 2017, including that of the minister of defense, chief of staff, and heads of the three major armies, could suggest either that Sisi is seeking more dedicated and efficient military

leadership, or is shuffling the deck to prevent a coup. While Egypt's interoperability with other militaries has improved and has been further bolstered by its access to up-to-date communications equipment resulting from the 2018 CISMOA, it is unknown whether these improvements extend into EAF service branches and the relations between them. One possible indicator that this has not happened is that air defense remains a separate command rather than being integrated into the air force, as logically it should be. The proportion of U.S. military assistance dedicated to sustainment, principally of major weapons systems, has only been increased as a result of the U.S. pressure.

Finally, the EAF's overall organization and recruitment have been substantially improved. Officers are still educated almost exclusively in military-run institutions, so they are not exposed to the broadening effects of interacting with civilian academics and students, as is typical in Western militaries. NCOs must serve for eighteen years before they have a chance of becoming commissioned officers, but most only attain that status as an honorific on retirement. There is no evidence that their vital contribution to military effectiveness has, as yet, been appreciated. Officers spend too long in the same assignment, and thereby they do not have sufficient opportunities to learn new skills and outlooks associated with varied experiences. Conscripts continue to be treated as cannon fodder—as indicated by their relatively high casualty rate in the Sinai—and as free labor for military-owned enterprises. Most university-educated youths are loath to serve in the military. Instead of seeing it as a career step, they see military service as tantamount to a career holding pattern. Many do whatever is necessary to avoid conscription, including paying bribes. Of the total number of active duty and reserve personnel of some 850,000, poorly educated conscripts comprise the overwhelming majority.

## Conclusion

The EAF has been a slumbering giant since the late 1970s, but appears to be awakening. This process is being driven less by generous U.S. military assistance, which has largely been ignored for years, than by more overt pressure from Washington and increasing internal and external threats. Sisi's apparent confidence in his personnel-based means of coup proofing also plays a vital role.

Egypt's new receptivity to refocusing and upgrading its military capacities provides an opportunity for it finally to capitalize on heretofore underutilized, underappreciated U.S. military assistance. But awakening a slumbering giant is one thing, strengthening it another. This will require more time and presumably continued U.S. commitment, now in question at what seems precisely the juncture at which it might enjoy real professional success.

At present the EAF remains overly large, insufficiently professionalized, and too dependent upon poorly educated and inadequately valued and rewarded personnel at the lower levels. Associated with these characteristics is an organizational culture not receptive to change; although this is a subjective rather than objective obstacle to professional upgrading, it is nevertheless difficult to overcome. No external assistance provider, including the United States, can mandate wholesale reforms of organizational culture. But the EAF could be nudged in that direction. The Sinai campaign, for example, might be used as a learning experience. This would involve assisting the EAF to adopt U.S. tactics, techniques, procedures, and planning processes for that limited theater, hopefully thereby demonstrating their benefits before then supporting their generalization elsewhere in the EAF.

As far as the trajectory of the bilateral military relationship, it will depend in part upon whether the EAF successfully adopts U.S. methods and succeeds with them. The awakening is driven primarily by Sisi's calculations, not by U.S. interests. But it provides an opportunity to focus assistance in areas of actual need, to be seen as a friend during perilous times, and to tie aid directly and rigidly to EAF progress toward mutually agreed upon goals. The EAF's new activism, in sum, coupled with continuing U.S. support, provides the contexts within which deficiencies that have plagued the bilateral military relationship might finally be addressed, some forty years after it commenced.

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