Sinai: Implications of the Security Challenges for Egypt and Israel: Egyptian Discourse on the Social Networks, June 2013

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On Thursday, May 16, 2013, seven Egyptian soldiers were kidnapped in El Arish in northern Sinai. According to the Egyptian press, the kidnappers belonged to a Salafi jihadist group affiliated with al-Qaeda. Sheikh Muhammad al-Zawahiri, an Egyptian Salafist cleric and the brother of al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri, announced the kidnappers' demands for the release of several prisoners who were held as terrorists and tortured at al-Tura prison.

Throughout the crisis, a recurrent theme on the Egyptian social media stressed that this was a classic case of negotiating with terrorists in exchange for kidnapped soldiers. According to one prominent Egyptian commentator, "In Egypt, we elect terrorists, release terrorists, and negotiate with terrorists." Despite army recommendations to the contrary, President Morsi authorized Interior Minister Mohamed Ibrahim to initiate negotiations, which after one week resulted in the release of the hostages.

This article highlights several public opinion trends that emerged in the Egyptian social media against the backdrop of this event, reflecting popular ideas of the "Egyptian street" on Muslim Brotherhood-military relations, Sinai, Gaza, and the peace treaty with Israel.

The Military vs. the Presidency: An Ongoing Conflict

Who holds the power on matters of national security powers? On November 17, 2012, President Morsi issued a presidential decree granting Defense Minister Abdul Fatah el-Sisi exclusive authority on issues of national security, military operations, deployment of troops, and mobilization of the reserves. This transfer of power took place at a time when President Morsi sought the support of the military in the upcoming national referendum on the Egyptian constitution. Since then, however, relations between President Morsi and the Defense Minister have deteriorated. Two incidents surrounding the kidnappings further highlight the growing rift between the two sides and the problematic implications for issues of national security. The first was the President's decision to retake authority on national security matters into his own hands, violating his earlier decree. Although the

army advocated for a military operation, President Morsi opted for negotiations. In the second incident, the President then transferred those powers to the Ministry of the Interior, reflecting his mistrust of the army.

The Military and the Egyptian Public: The Demand for a "New Army"
What follows is a sampling of the Egyptian social media discourse: "Armies are measured by their ability to fight, not by how many pasta factories they own." "We need a new army." "Is the Egyptian army just another militia that we, the public, is sponsoring?" "If the army cannot free its own soldiers, why do we think that it can defend Egypt's borders?"

The Egyptian social media clearly demanded the use of military force against the kidnappers. Most social media members advocated cleansing" the Sinai area of jihadist terrorist cells, even at the expense of military and police casualties. The army's failure to act provoked serious criticism among social media users, many of whom argued that "national security should take precedence over political considerations."

The Gaza Nuisance: End of the Romance between the Two Publics
Both the Egyptian and the Gazan publics have begun to blame one another for their woes. Many activists in the Egyptian social media have begun to view Gaza as the source of Sinai's security problems, pointing the finger at Gaza for every terrorist attack or kidnapping before evidence of Palestinian involvement even emerges. Immediately after the abductions, allegations began to appear in the Egyptian social media implicating the Dughmush clan from the southern Gaza Strip. Calls emerged for the immediate closure of the Rafah crossing and a large scale operation against the smuggling tunnels connecting Gaza and Egypt. The public resentment was such that Hamas Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh felt obligated to condemn the kidnappings, proclaiming Hamas' respect for Egyptian sovereignty in Sinai and refuting Palestinian involvement.

For their part, commentators in the Gazan social media protested the allegations of the Egyptian street, asking, "Why are Gazans the first to pay the price of security problems in the Sinai?" and asserting that "in the past, we were the scapegoat of Israel, and now, we're the scapegoat of Egypt." Soaring Gazan expectations that the Muslim Brotherhood's rise to power in Egypt would bring an improvement in their standard of living was soon followed by disillusionment, disappointment, and frustration. They now accuse Morsi of being worse for Gaza than Mubarak. Some Egyptians and Gazans argue that the Gazan festering resentment will soon explode.

The Peace Treaty with Israel

Egyptian social media activists in do not wish to annul the peace treaty with Israel, but they demand changes in the military annex of the agreement. Many now call for an end to the "winks and hints" method that has replaced official policy between Egypt and Israel in Sinai. Although it is widely known that Israel is now permitting Egyptian forces to enter into the sparsely manned demilitarized zones, many demand that the military annex be revised to legally codify full Egyptian sovereignty throughout Sinai. Many are even prepared to accept closer security cooperation with Israel, provided that it be transparent and open. Some question why the Egyptian military does not enlist Israeli aid in fighting terror, since "in any case, we have an agreement with [Israel], so let's at least benefit from it."

The Fear of a Second Naksa: Will Israel Reoccupy Sinai?

There are two prevalent fears expressed on the Egyptian social media in relation to Israel and Sinai: Sinai will continue to be fertile breeding ground for jihadist militias, whose activities could lead to an Israeli decision to reoccupy Sinai (a second Naksa) or an open-ended military operation that would violate Egyptian sovereignty. Even though Israel is not yet considering any such action, Egyptian social media users remain unconvinced because of their collective memory of the naksa in 1967. There is therefore a growing demand for a comprehensive Egyptian military operation in Sinai to cleanse the area of these terrorist elements.

Conclusion

The social media discourse reveals that there is considerable concern over the possible negative consequences for Egypt of the Sinai security and governance vacuum. The three forces competing for dominance in Egypt – the Muslim Brotherhood, the military, and liberal activists – view Hamas in Gaza and other extremist armed organizations as a challenge to Egyptian national security. They fear that their smuggling and terrorist activities could drag Egypt into a military conflict with Israel, which is not in Egypt's best interests.

President Morsi is systematically chipping away at the army's national security powers in violation of the presidential decree that transferred extraordinary powers to the army during the referendum of the constitution. At the moment, the army has shown restraint, focusing its energies on preserving its assets and interests, as well as the salaries and pensions of its senior officers. The army views its relationship with the IDF as a unique strategic asset that affords it power and authority to deal with future internal and external challenges.

Overall, Egyptian social media activists are advocating transparency and an end to political doublespeak and the withholding of information from the Egyptian public. They prefer to expose the entire system of security ties, including increased cooperation with Israel, and amend the military annex of the peace treaty to allow for full Egyptian sovereignty in Sinai.