

PLAYING WITH FIRE: THE SHOWDOWN IN EGYPT BETWEEN THE GENERAL AND THE ISLAMIST PRESIDENT

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General Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, May 2013: "No one should think that the solution is with the army.... This army is a fire. Do not play against it and do not play with it."¹

El-Sisi: "The Army's decision to intervene [on July 3] was dictated by national interest, national security necessities, and fears of a civil war breaking out... if the situation continued... We believed that if we reached civil war, then the army would not be able to stop it."²

Last July 9, I commented in an FPRI E-Note on the vast public protests that had just swept Egypt, which culminated in General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's arrest of President Mohamed Morsi on July 3.³ A wide range of Egyptians demonstrated to restore the country to the path of political and socio-economic democratization longed for in January 2011 but delayed by seventeen months of military rule and then side-tracked by a year of the elected president's increasingly divisive and authoritarian behavior. Even as the minister of defense seized power in July, he claimed he was acting at the request of the public and was following the road-map proposed by *Tamarod* (rebel!), the informal group of protest organizers who wanted the head of the Supreme Constitutional Court to be the (symbolic) interim president with a technocratic cabinet, pending elections for a new president.

In this essay, I focus on the indications before July 3 that El-Sisi was increasingly angry at Morsi's policies. His perspective shifted from trying to manage a difficult situation, to threatening a putsch, to encouraging a popular uprising. It is possible to partly reconstruct those shifts because of the interviews and statements that El Sisi⁴ and

¹ General Abdel Fattah El-Sisi on May 11, 2013, quoted by Bassem Sabry, "Why Only Democracy Can Save Egypt," *al-Monitor*, May 19, 2013 (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/05/democracy-egypt-future.html> who also cites <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cidge5ztGQE>).

² Interview with El-Sisi by Yasser Rizq, *al-Masry al-Youm*, October 10, 2013; <http://www.egyptindependent.com/node/2196186> For a similar statement about the risk of unstoppable civil war, see his remarks on August 18, 2013, at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LC93fn9s3-c>.

³ Ann M. Lesch, "A Second, Corrective Revolution?" Foreign Policy Research Institute E-Notes, July 2013, <http://www.fpri.org/articles/2013/07/second-corrective-revolution>

⁴ El-Sisi was interviewed at length by Yasser Rizq the editor-in-chief of *al-Masry al-Youm* (October 9 and 10, 2013, "Interview with Defence Minister Abdel-Fattah Al-Sisi" (<http://www.egyptindependent.com/node/2193176> and <http://www.egyptindependent.com/node/2196186>) and Rizq's "The General Sisi I Know," July 25, 2013 (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/politics/2013/07/sisi-egypt-morsi-ouster.html>). Unless otherwise indicated, quotations from El-Sisi are from

senior security officers made before and after July.

It is clear that the police never reconciled to serving under a president whose base of power lay in the Muslim Brotherhood.⁵ Police never differentiated between the Brotherhood, which eschewed violence, and the jihadist groups operating in Sinai. Having been humiliated (from their perspective) during the January Revolution – and especially on January 28, when they lost control over the street, the police stations, and the prisons – they (inaccurately) blamed the revolution on the Brotherhood and vowed revenge. Indeed, a senior officer stated that lower and mid-rank officers agreed to perform routine duties only when senior officers assured them that they would find the right moment to depose the president. They refused to guard the offices of the Brotherhood's political party or, notably, the Presidential Palace, when it was surrounded on December 5 by protesters against Morsi's November 22 Constitutional Decree.

Morsi responded by firing the minister of interior, whom he replaced with Mohamed Ibrahim, deputy minister for prisons. Morsi had no idea that the new minister would quickly mobilize senior and mid-level security officers to persuade the armed forces that the Brotherhood was a threat to national security and was disloyal to Egypt as it (allegedly) sought to create a region-wide Islamic caliphate. Of course, the security forces also feared that Morsi would restructure the interior ministry, threaten their careers, and take them to court for crimes against civilians during the revolution – none of which he actually attempted to do. Police overtly encouraged – and signed -- the Tamarod petition campaign, supported the June 30 march and, at gatherings in their club, chanted: “Down, down with the rule of the [Brotherhood's] General Guide!”

Interviewed after July 3, El-Sisi was frank about the deep ideological divide between the Brotherhood and the armed forces ever since Gamal Abdel Nasser seized power in 1952. When El-Sisi took office in August 2012, he was concerned that Morsi would serve the interests of “the group” rather than the national interest. But he did not conflate jihadists and Brothers and seemed to search for a *modus vivendi* between the restive armed forces and the new political elite.

When Morsi had elevated El-Sisi to defense minister and head of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) that month, ousting the elderly top brass after a serious security lapse in Sinai caused heavy military casualties, he thought that the general would focus exclusively on improving the operational capacity of the armed forces. Morsi seems not to have realized that his frequent meetings with El-Sisi since the spring of 2011 were not because El-Sisi had a personal political interest in the Brotherhood but because SCAF had tasked El-Sisi with managing the relationship with that rapidly emerging and potentially dangerous political movement. Moreover, El-Sisi was a loyal protégé of ousted Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, whom he replaced, and of ousted General Mohamed Farid el-Tohamy, whom El-Sisi had succeeded as head of military intelligence. Furthermore, El-Sisi had worked closely with Mubarak's general intelligence director Omar Suleiman, keeping watch over both international security issues and the loyalty of Egyptian soldiers and officers.

El-Sisi's concerns emerged quickly. Key examples include the sidelining of the military during the annual celebration of the October 6 war, organized exclusively by the Brotherhood's minister of youth, which infuriated army officers and soldiers; insults to former commanders such as Tantawi on Brotherhood websites, which brought officers' anger to the boiling point; the president's propensity “to clash with everyone – the police, judiciary, media, intellectuals, armed forces and the opposition” (in El-Sisi's words) and try to involve the military in his conflict with the judiciary; and the Guidance Council's rejection of El-Sisi's hosting a national dialogue on December 11, in the wake of the frightening clashes on December 5. When Morsi promised to open his own dialogue, El-Sisi deferred to the president, not only because he preferred to not interject the army directly into the political arena but also because he wanted to give the president a second (last?) chance. However, when the Brotherhood insulted the armed forces itself by criticizing Tantawi, the army raised a public red-flag – issuing a sharp warning to stop, or else.

Rizq's interview. For excerpts from the interview that Rizq did not publish, see the *Karma Mole* translation of a YouTube video, December 13, 2013 (<http://www.karmamole.com/septic/english-translation-of-el-sisis-new-leak/>) and Gregg Carlstrom, “Egypt's New Dictator Was Made in the USA,” *Politico Magazine*, February 18, 2014 (<http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2014/02/el-sisi-egypt-dictator>).

⁵ See, for example, Asma Alsharif and Yasmine Saleh, “Special Report - The Real Force Behind Egypt's ‘Revolution of the State’,” Reuters, October 10, 2013 (<http://uk.reuters.com/article/2013/10/10/uk-egypt-special-report>).

El-Sisi considered himself in charge of Egypt's national security, which encompassed not only military preparation and operations but also ensuring that foreign policy and internal political relationships were managed effectively. As the guardian of the nation, he claims that he initially sought to help "the regime that was elected by the people succeed." However, by spring 2013, the divisive constitution had come into effect, Morsi had failed to open a meaningful political dialogue and even alienated his salafi Nour Party allies, and the Egyptian pound was in free-fall amid floundering economic policies. Moreover, Morsi had ordered the armed forces to quell protests and maintain order in the Suez Canal cities, even as rumors spread that the president would fire El-Sisi, having been emboldened by successfully replacing the interior minister. El-Sisi responded bluntly: "Your project has ended and the repulsion you have created among Egyptians is unparalleled by any former regime. You achieved that in just [eight] months."

By then El-Sisi's public statements projected a potential putsch. Stating that the state risks "collapse" and signaling that the nation could rely on the army, he added ominously that "dismissing Sisi would mean political suicide for the entire regime."⁶ Chief of Staff Sedki Sobhi even made the extraordinary pronouncement: "The armed forces do not belong to a particular faction and don't practice politics. We have our eyes on what's going on, and if the people need us we'll be on the streets in less than a second."⁷ But those senior officers sent a mixed message: Would they launch a coup only if the military's interests were directly challenged? Or would the army respond to a renewed popular uprising even if the president did not challenge the powerful military establishment?

The generals were also deeply concerned about national security issues, as the president sidelined the military-dominated National Defense Council as well as the foreign ministry in promoting initiatives related to the status of Halayib, bordering Sudan; diplomacy toward Syria and Iran; development of the sensitive Suez Canal area; security in Sinai; and the looming crisis over Ethiopia's construction of a dam that would reduce the flow of water through the Nile. In SCAF's last meeting with Morsi on April 12, El-Sisi pronounced its assessment that Egypt was "in danger" due to these national security threats as well as mounting internal tensions.

During the winter, a military coup would have been the only way to oust Morsi, and it would have occurred in defense of the military's institutional interests. However, the emergence of public protests galvanized by Tamarod altered the political calculus. At a Sinai Liberation Day celebration on April 28, El-Sisi responded to tearful pleas to "please take care of Egypt" by assuring the audience that the army would protect the people as it had during the Revolution.⁸ As host for an unprecedented gathering of intellectuals and artists at a "war inspection" ceremony on May 11, during which many attendees implored the army to intervene in order to end the political crisis, El-Sisi stressed the importance of dialogue and relying on the ballot box, and reassured them that the army would ensure the fairness of upcoming parliamentary elections. He warned that the alternative to dialogue and voting "is very dangerous."⁹ Direct military intervention "would risk dragging the country backwards" for as long as 30 to 40 years. El-Sisi later expanded on this risk:

The public had "the misconception that the Armed Forces would solve all problems and end the crisis between the people and the presidency.... I wanted to give the former president a chance to change his position to save face and I called him after that meeting and said 'You now have an opportunity for a genuine initiative.'... I did not want to launch a coup, as ... there would be grave dangers in the case of a coup and change would be better brought about through the ballot box."

And yet, El-Sisi continued to send mixed signals. At that May 11 gathering, his final words were: "Please, don't rush things." And a prominent field commander, as he left the ceremony, remarked to the *al-Masry al-Youm* editor: "We are at the disposal of the people." He gestured the number three with his fingers, indicating – "only three days in the streets."

In June, Morsi inflamed a wide swathe of Egyptians by appointing controversial and ill-qualified Brothers and hardline Islamists as ministers and governors, triggering violent attacks on governorate and Brotherhood buildings

⁶ Quoted by Carlstrom.

⁷ Statement on Abu Dhabi TV quoted by Rizq, "The General Sisi I Know."

⁸ Sabry, who also links to a youtube video: After folk dancers performed, El-Sisi stood up, among the audience, to talk informally with a hand-held mike. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-x1xN8LUYG4>.

⁹ Sabry cites <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cidge5ztGOE>.

– proof that he no longer could govern outside the capital. A mid-June rally to support jihadists in Syria crossed the final red line. Speakers urged Egyptians to fight in Syria, denounced Shi'a as heretics, and smeared Egyptian political opponents as infidels.¹⁰ Fear that jihadists would return to fight for a militant Islamist state, like those who had returned from Afghanistan in the 1980s, cemented the alliance between the military and the security sectors, which the Interior Minister had assiduously cultivated.

Evidence indicates that El-Sisi kept looking for a resolution short of a putsch. If Morsi had broadened the cabinet, appointed respected governors, and coordinated with the National Defense Council over foreign policy, he could have deflected a coup. But Morsi failed to do that, and public calls for SCAF to act kept mounting among the increasingly distraught public. Tamarod, the National Salvation Front (NSF), and Mubarak's old guard, who had been biding their time to return to the political arena, saw the military as their savior as long as it did not subsequently monopolize political life and revert to authoritarian behavior. Just as Morsi ignored El-Sisi's warning to not play with fire, so did the political opposition: As he warned, unleashing the armed forces would have unpredictable consequences that could last for decades to come.

As June 30 approached, polarization became acute, with anti-Morsi demonstrators calling to “End the Rule of the Brotherhood” and Islamists claiming electoral legitimacy while warning that they would crush their opponents. El-Sisi feared that Egypt would “slip into a conflict that will be hard to control,” as he stated in his first ultimatum on June 23. SCAF agreed to a seven-day deadline, during which El-Sisi hoped that Morsi would announce a referendum on his presidency. This informal agreement apparently angered the Brotherhood. Deputy Supreme Guide Khairat al-Shater and Sa'ad El-Katatni, head of the Brotherhood's political party and former speaker of the people's assembly, requested to meet El-Sisi the next day. Shater lectured the general for three quarters of an hour and explicitly warned that – should Morsi be deposed – the Brotherhood would not be able to control terrorist attacks and violence by Islamists in Sinai and the Nile valley. El-Sisi later claimed that Shater pointed his figure as though he were pulling a trigger and made noises like gunfire. The general blew up at Shater's “arrogance and a show of force,” shouting:

You've destroyed the country... You've made people hate religion... You're the worst enemies of the Islamic call. I won't allow you to scare and terrorize the people. I swear to God that whoever fires a bullet at a citizen or approaches a military facility will meet his end; him and whoever supports him.

Shrinking back, El-Katatni asked what would be the solution, to which El-Sisi replied: “Resolve your problems with the judiciary, church, al-Azhar, the media, political powers and public opinion” – an impossibility for the Guidance Council, as El-Sisi well knew.

That day SCAF decided that, while El-Sisi should convince Morsi to hold early presidential elections (upping the ante from merely holding a referendum), the army would support the public if millions of people took to the streets on June 30. On June 26, as tanks deployed in Cairo, El-Sisi spent two hours with Morsi, reviewing the text of the speech that the president would deliver that night. But Morsi delivered an entirely different speech. Rambling on for two and a half hours, the president praised the army and the interior ministry and placed the blame for the regime's failures on “enemies” among the media, judiciary, opposition politicians, and supporters of Mubarak. He even threatened to take court cases against those whom he specifically named. El-Sisi sat sphinx-like in the audience, understanding that Morsi had submitted to the Guidance Council and that time was running out. Nonetheless, El-Sisi later asserted that the “tens of millions of people [who] took to the streets [on June 30 were what compelled] the armed forces face its historic responsibility of achieving the people's will, again.”

Once again El-Sisi met with Morsi prior to issuing his next ultimatum, which gave Morsi 48 hours to announce fresh presidential elections. El-Sisi commented later: “I saw grave dangers and thought that any resolution is better” than army intervention. He also met with Morsi for four hours on July 2. Angry at the request to resign, Morsi instead offered to form a widely-based cabinet and revise the constitution. For El-Sisi, this was far too late: Whereas the public would have accepted a cabinet change a few months earlier, that was no longer enough. With no agreement possible, Morsi's final speech forcefully rejected the ultimatum and repeatedly stressed his electoral

¹⁰ Yasmine Saleh and Tom Perry, “Mursi Role in Syria Rally Seen as Tipping Point for Egypt Army,” Reuters, July 2, 2013, <http://in.reuters.com/article/2013/07/02/egypt-protests-army-mursi>; Ibrahim El-Hodeiby, “Egypt: Nothing was Inevitable,” *Ahram Online*, September 13, 2013, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/81424.aspx>

legitimacy, warning that ousting him would plunge Egypt into bloodshed.

By then, Morsi was detained in the Republican Guard Club, most cabinet members had resigned and denounced him for pushing the country toward a civil war, and SCAF's Facebook page, headlined "The Final Hours," stated: "We swear to God that we will sacrifice even our blood for Egypt and its people to defend them against any terrorist, radical or fool." SCAF used the flagship *al-Ahram* newspaper to proclaim its roadmap under the banner "removal or resignation": The generals would "abolish the controversial constitution," form a committee of experts to write a new constitution, form an interim presidential council with three members led by the chief of the constitutional court, and put a military leader in charge of the executive branch as interim prime minister.¹¹ (In the end, the provision for a military prime minister was dropped.)

That night, El-Sisi mulled over "how to achieve the national will with the least amount of damage to the capacities of the Egyptian state." As huge rival demonstrations spread across Cairo and other cities on July 3, following clashes in the streets the previous night, he convened pillars of civic and political life: Mohamed ElBaradei (representing NSF and Tamarod), who apparently urged El-Sisi to intervene to stop the bloodshed but not assume direct executive rule, and then the heads of al-Azhar and the Coptic church. When El-Sisi delivered his ten-minute statement that night, in which he stressed that the military did not seek to rule but rather to reset the political course, he was flanked by those three figures plus representatives of Tamarod and Nour. El-Sisi had invited Katatni, who (not surprisingly) declined – and was arrested that night. During the afternoon, security forces raided and silenced Islamist TV channels. Morsi denounced the "full coup" via tweets and in an audio message to his supporters massed near Raba'a al-Adawiyya mosque: A defiant "I am the only legitimate president in Egypt," coupled with the cautionary: "Do not fall for calls of bloodshed. We'll all regret it."¹²

What does this tell us about El-Sisi's views on the role of the armed forces? On the one hand, he warned that the "army is a fire" that could burn indiscriminately and that its rule could set back the country by decades. On the other hand, he considered it both appropriate and necessary for the armed forces to step in to support a public uprising against an elected president. Moreover, he viewed that intervention as essential in defense of national security.

There are further hints as to his views. As head of military intelligence, El-Sisi had presented Tantawi with a report in April 2010 that predicted a popular revolution in May 2011, if Mubarak announced his retirement (on his 83rd birthday) and transferred power to his son Gamal. When Tantawi is said to have asked El-Sisi what the armed forces should do, El-Sisi replied: "We will support the people's uprising and will not fire on a single citizen."¹³ Much later, El-Sisi criticized the sequence that SCAF endorsed after Mubarak's fall, saying that we learned "lots of lessons... from the transitional period, the first of which is that the Armed Forces should not be at the forefront and that power has to remain in the hands of a civil government and president." Second, the constitution should be amended first. And third, parliamentary and presidential elections should be held after amending the constitution. He followed the proposed sequence in 2013.

In an essay written at the US Army War College in 2006 on "Democracy in the Middle East," El-Sisi noted the structural obstacles to democracy, but also denounced the rigged elections and control over the media that underpinned the Mubarak police state and argued that Islamist parties should be allowed to participate.¹⁴ And yet his (and SCAF's) first instinct on July 3 was to appoint a military prime minister and to follow the lead of the interior minister in cracking down on the Brotherhood.

El-Sisi saw the armed forces as the guardian of the nation and the people, not just the defender of the borders of the country. (Of course, 'nation' and 'people' are slogans, easily manipulated for varying political purposes.) The military's loyalty should be to Egypt, not the regime or the ruling party, in his view. The armed forces should wield exclusive control over their own operations, as a sovereign institution, not subject to executive or legislative

¹¹ David D. Kirkpatrick and Ben Hubbard, "Morsi Defies Egypt Army's Ultimatum to Bend to Protest," *The New York Times*, July 2, 2013; <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/03/world/middleeast/egypt-protests.html>

¹² "Egyptian Army Suspends Constitution and Removes President Morsi," *The Guardian*, July 3, 2013 (<http://www.theguardian.com/world/middle-east-live/2013/jul/03/egypt-countdown-army-deadline-live>).

¹³ Rizq, "The General Sisi I Know." El-Sisi commented to Rizq that the revolution came earlier than he expected because of the rigged parliamentary elections in November 2010 and the Tunisian revolution in January 2011.

¹⁴ Carlstrom.

oversight. The armed forces should also control national security and policies toward regional states, either directly through SCAF or through the military-dominated National Defense Council. Moreover, as guardian of the ‘people’, the armed forces should secure the internal political order. He considered it his right and his duty to intervene at multiple points to chastise, correct, and then remove the president. He crafted the roadmap, appointed the interim president, orchestrated the public performance on July 3, and even considered appointing a military officer as interim prime minister.

Today, the new constitutional order – endorsed overwhelmingly in the referendum in January 2014 – cements the autonomous powers of the military and security establishments as sovereign authorities, shielded from presidential and parliamentary oversight.¹⁵ As further bolstered by sudden decrees issued by the interim president on February 27, the defense minister must be a general (not a civilian) and he supplants the president as the head of SCAF, which must approve his appointment at least for the next eight years. Similarly, the minister of interior must be a senior officer, approved by the Supreme Police Council. Both that council and the military-dominated National Defense Council have commanding policymaking roles over their areas and determine any sectoral reform. Neither the government nor the parliament can exert effective oversight over their single-figure budgets and both institutions (including intelligence officers) are shielded from legal action in civilian courts, while retaining the power to try civilians before military courts.

Egypt seems to have entered a path not anticipated by the protesters on June 30 but predictable if one listened to the general’s warnings. Just as Morsi failed to control the fire, is there now the possibility of controlling the fire burning since July 3? Has El-Sisi actively encouraged – or merely fallen prey to – the realization of his prediction that direct involvement of the military would set back by the effort to democratize? In my next essay, I draw lessons from the interim period, a period in which the fires of revenge have burned fiercely and the political inclusivity and public self-expression essential for democratization have faced severe setbacks.

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¹⁵ See Nathan J. Brown and Michele Dunne, “Egypt’s Draft Constitution Rewards the Military and the Judiciary,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/12/04/egypt-s-draft-constitution-rewards-military-and-judiciary>