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Introduction

Since the military coup in Egypt on July 3, 2013, the Egyptian-Russian relations have witnessed remarkable convergence on the political, military, and economic levels. Militarily, Russia has become a significant source for arming the Egyptian military since the U.S. withheld delivery of some military items to Egypt (Oct. 9, 2013) after the brutal dispersal of Rabaa and Nahda sit-ins. (The frozen military items at the time included Apache attack helicopters, Harpoon missiles, M1- A1 tank parts, and F-16 warplanes)

Egypt and Russia have held more than 14 military deals to arm the Egyptian military so far, including: Yak 130, Mil Mi-17, Su-30MK, MiG-29, Mi-35, Alligator, and Ka-52 aircraft, Tor-M2, S-300 BM, and Kornet missiles, as well as T-90 tanks, RPG launchers, ships and boats.

The two countries have also expanded their joint military operations, most notably "Defenders of Friendship" military exercise. Although this exercise is not on the agenda of Egyptian army's annual exercises, yet it has been conducted jointly by the Egyptian and Russian armies for the second year in a row.

What are the objectives of this exercise? And why now?

First: 'Defenders of Friendship' exercise

The first Egyptian-Russian military exercise, codenamed 'Defenders of Friendship-2016' was conducted from Oct. 15 to 26, 2016, in Egypt's northwestern region of Al-Alamein - within the northern military zone, Alexandria - where units of Egyptian and Russian airborne troops took part with more than 700 soldiers.

Although Defenders of Friendship-2016 exercise was not on the agenda of Egyptian army's annual exercises for 2016, yet it was conducted because Russian experts believed that both countries needed training in a desert environment in preparation



for counterterrorism. “Given the regional situation, the exercise focused on the steps that must be carried out by paratroopers during storming cities and releasing hostages,” according to the Russian Defense Ministry. “The participating forces carried out joint military actions to locate and destroy illegal armed groups in a desert environment,” the Russian Defense Ministry added.

After the training activities of Defenders of Friendship-2016 were concluded last year, it was unknown that the exercise would be conducted every year on a regular basis. However, the Russian Defense Ministry said in a statement on August 28, 2017, that the Russian-Egyptian paratroopers will hold their joint military exercise, dubbed ‘Defenders of Friendship-2017’ on Russia’s territory for the first time on Sept. 10. “The tactical exercise will take place in a mountainous area in the Krasnodar region, southern Russia,” the statement said. It is noteworthy that Krasnodar is a mountainous region in southern Russia, with a dry semi-tropical climate, similar to the climate in northern Sinai, Egypt, where the IS- affiliate militants are located. “During the joint Russian-Egyptian military drills, the two countries’ paratroopers will train their skills in landing, arriving at the drills site, as well as in seizing and holding a mountain pass,” the statement added.

The Russian Defense Ministry announced on Sept. 9 that the Russian paratroopers received their Egyptian counterparts in Anapa, southwestern Russia in preparation for the Defenders of Friendship-2017. “Today the military personnel of Airborne troops of Russia has held a grand welcome of the arrived division of paraborne troops of armed forces of the Arab Republic of Egypt in airfield in the city of Anapa. Arrived division of the Egyptian paratroopers will participate in the joint Russian-Egyptian tactical exercise “Defenders of Friendship-2017,” the press service of the Russian Defense Ministry said in a statement.

Also, the Egyptian army announced on Sept 10 2017 that “Egyptian paratroopers and Russian troops started on Saturday (Sept. 9) conducting joint military exercise “Defenders of Friendship 2” which will last till September 22,” according to MENA.



Second: Implications and interpretations

There are many interpretations for holding Defenders of Friendship military exercise for the second year in a row, including:

a) Political maneuver

The Defenders of Friendship military exercise is a new activity on the training agenda of the Egyptian army, and was not included in the army's plan for annual external exercises. Moreover, after the training activities of Defenders of Friendship-2016 were concluded last year, it was not announced at the time that the exercise would be conducted annually on a regular basis, similar to the Bright Star military exercise with the United States which is held periodically every two years. Also, the decision to hold the Defenders of Friendship-2017 was only disclosed on August 28, 2017, that is, nearly six days after the US decision to withhold part of its economic aid to Egypt and postpone another part of the US military aid granted to the Egyptian army on August 22. So, some observers think that the Defenders of Friendship joint Egyptian-Russian military exercise was only a political maneuver from the Egyptian army in response to the US decision. The exercise could be a hidden message to the US administration under Donald Trump that if the U.S. kept on dealing with the Al-Sisi regime in the same way the former US administration under Barack Obama used to do, using the file of human rights violations in Egypt and suspending the US military and economic aid, the Egyptian army would shift to the Federal Republic of Russia for armament as it has already done over the last four years.

Some observers linked the remarks released by US officials that Bright Star-2017 "will focus on counterterrorism, key for the battle in the Sinai Peninsula" and Russian defense ministry's statement that the Defenders of Friendship-2017 "will take place in a mountainous area in the Krasnodar region, southern Russia," similar to the environment of the Sinai Peninsula – as both statements refer to the events in Sinai. So, it is believed that Al-Sisi wanted to send a message to the US administration that the Egypt could rely on Russia in training the Egyptian army on the modern methods for counterterrorism, in addition to strengthening its armament capabilities.



b) Carrying out military operations inside Libya

Some observers believe that Egypt and Russia are currently helping Khalifa Haftar to capture Eastern Libya completely, especially after Haftar's self-styled Libyan National Army (LNA) announced on August 9 2017 the launch of an extensive ground operation to liberate the northern city of Derna East of Libya, from the grip of armed groups. In this context, the Egyptian paratroopers and the Russian airborne troops that are now participating in the Defenders of Friendship-2017 will likely carry out future operations inside Libya, specifically in Derna, against the armed factions that stand against Haftar's militias there.

c) Deteriorating situation in Sinai

Some observers believe that Egypt is keen on participating in joint military exercises with major powers to enhance the fighting capabilities of the Egyptian army to confront the irregular armed groups. Defenders of Friendship-2017 probably came at this time to train the Egyptian army on modern means and methods for confronting militants in the Sinai, where the Egyptian army is actually suffering. Also, the statement of the Russian defense ministry that the Defenders of Friendship-2017 "will take place in a mountainous area in the Krasnodar region, southern Russia," which is similar to the environment of Egypt's Sinai Peninsula – probably came within this context.

Conclusion

The United States will not give up the Egyptian army, nor will the Egyptian army abandon the United States because the relationship between them is strategic. Thus, the card of Egyptian-Russian rapprochement used by the Al-Sisi regime is only a tactical step for bargaining. Through this tactical rapprochement, Al-Sisi wants to achieve more gains, especially in Libya, since Russia is very interested in what is happening on the ground there.

In fact, the Al-Sisi regime believes that what is happening in Libya is an extension of what he did in Egypt on July 3, 2013 (the military coup), so, both Al-Sisi and Russia



have common interest in supporting and empowering Khalifa Haftar. Also reports that the Defenders of Friendship is a prelude for carrying out military operations inside Libya remains a strong hypothesis.

