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Targeting Egyptian Defense Minister

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Targeting Egyptian Defense Minister

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Introduction

On Tuesday, December 19, 2017, the Egyptian army announced that one officer was killed and two others were injured in an attack on Al-Arish airport in North Sinai governorate during a visit by the defense and interior ministers to the city. One day after the incident, the Islamic State-affiliate in Sinai – Sinai Province – claimed responsibility for the attack.

This attack is the second of its kind that targets prominent security and military figures after the coup d'état on July 3, 2013, where the first attack targeted former Interior Minister Maj. General Mohamed Ibrahim on September 5, 2013.

The visit of Defense Minister Sedki Sobhi to North Sinai governorate on December 19, 2017, was not the first of its kind, as Sobhi and Interior Minister Magdi Abdel-Ghaffar visited North Sinai governorate more than once at times when the area was witnessing more violent clashes. Since the military coup on July 3, 2013, and development of the security situation in light of the armed insurgency in Sinai, the North Sinai governorate has witnessed visits of senior military and security officials to inspect the developments of the security situation there. Between July 2013 and December 2017, 18 declared military visits to Sinai Peninsula were monitored.

Among the most important remarks on the military visits to Sinai by senior officials were the following:

- Sadki Sobhi had the lion share of these visits, as he visited North Sinai governorate 13 times, accompanied by current Minister of Interior, Magdi Abdel Ghaffar, in most of them.

- All the visits were declared only after officials returned to Cairo,

- The military spokesman used to announce these visits together with several pictures and video clips showing the Minister of Defense and the Minister of Interior while inspecting the security and military sites in the area, which means that the visits were very discreet, known only by special circles within the military institution.

First: Analysis of the attack

On Tuesday morning, 19 December 2017, Defense Minister Sedki Sobhi together with Interior Minister Magdi Abde-Ghaffar headed to the city of El Arish in North Sinai to visit a number of security and military sites in the governorate. As the official data indicated, the visit was agreed by Abdel-Fattah Al-Sisi and Sedki Sobhi during a meeting between them – which was not attended by any other official – only one day before the visit.

The visits of leading figures to Sinai are usually top secret, where communication and internet services are cut off, security measures are tightened, and movement is restricted. It seems that these regular security measures were almost neglected during Sobhi's latest visit to North Siai governorate.

We are not sure whether the Minister of Defense was able to make his inspection tour before the attack or that his helicopter was bombed immediately after it landed. However, the reality is that the Sinai Province militants bombed the helicopter which had the Minister of Defense and the Minister of the Interior on-board after landing in Al-Arish airport, killing two people, namely Lt. Col. Ismail Al-Shehabi, Director of Office of the Defense Minister, and Group Captain Rifaat El-Mandouh, the pilot of Minister Sobhi's plane.

On his official page on the internet, the military spokesman did not explain the details of the attack, but he merely mentioned that Al-Arish airport was targeted and one

officer was killed and two others were injured, and one of the helicopters was damaged. He added that this came during a visit by the Ministers of Defense and Interior to the area for inspecting the forces and the security situation in the city of Al Arish.

The official page of the Egyptian Ministry of Defense took pictures and video clips during the arrival of Sedki and Abdel-Ghaffar at Cairo's Almaza military airport and published them to show that Sedki and Abdel-Ghaffar were not affected by the incident. However, the footage showed the extent of anxiety that appeared on the faces of both Sobhi and Abdel-Ghaffar.

One day after the incident, (Wednesday, December 20, 2017), Al-Sisi held a meeting with Sedki Subhi, Magdi Abdel-Ghaffar, Egyptian Army Chief of Staff Lt. General Mohamed Farid Hegazi, head of Military Intelligence Maj. General Farag Al-Shahat, and director of Al-Sisi's office Maj. General Abbas Kamel, for discussing details of the Sinai incident and what happened during the visit. No more details were disclosed about the meeting, but the picture that was taken there shows clearly Sobhi and Abdel-Ghaffar's angry faces.

The Egyptian Presidency said that during the meeting al-Sisi received a report from the ministers of defense and interior on the security situation in the North Sinai region and the procedures taken by security services in light of the visit of the two ministers to Al-Arish city for inspecting the forces and the security situation there. During the meeting, Al-Sisi, as usual, reiterated directives for continuing efforts to uproot terrorism, pursue militants, and clear Sinai of them all. After the Al-Rawda Mosque massacre, Al-Sisi authorized Chief of Staff Mohamed Farid Hegazi to "purify" Sinai within three months. However, no change has been made in the security situation so far. On the contrary, the defense and interior ministers were targeted in an unprecedented development.



About 24 hours after the incident, the Sinai Province organization claimed responsibility for the attack, where Amaq News Agency, linked to the Islamic State (IS), announced targeting the general commander of the armed forces and the Interior Minister at the airport of Al-Arish in northern Sinai, adding that the Sinai Province (SP) fighters were aware of the time of arrival of the of defense and interior ministers at Al-Arish airport for inspecting the military sites in North Sinai governorate. The SP then targeted one of the "Apache" helicopters accompanying the delegation with a Kornet anti-tank guided missile after landing at the airport, which led to damaging the helicopter, killing two officers, and injuring at least two others.

The Al-Naba IS-linked newspaper published in its 111 issue details of targeting the ministers of defense and interior by the Sinai Province on December 19. The newspaper said "After receiving security information on the arrival of the defense and interior ministers, the Mujahedeen made due preparations for targeting them. A guided missile was launched on a helicopter belonging to the military, killing Group Captain Mohamed Rifaat Al-mandouh, and Lt. Colonel Ismail Al-Shihabi. Al-Naba newspaper cited an IS-linked military source as saying, "The targeting of heads of the Egyptian government is a priority to us, especially the minister of defense for his role in bombing Muslims in Iraq, Syria and Libya through the aircraft that take off from Egyptian airports."

In the same context, the Amaq News Agency released a video clip documenting the moment of bombing the ministers' helicopter. Through the footing, it was noticed that the attack was carried out by a Russian-made anti-tank guided missile of the Kornet type. The missile, according to experts, goes at about 320 meters per second. By reviewing the released footing, we find out that the missile hit the helicopter 13 seconds after it was launched, which means that the missile was fired about 4.2

kilometers from the Al-Arish airport though the missile's range is estimated at about 10 kilometers.

A military source, according to Al-Naba newspaper, said that the attack was not the first of its kind, as the Sinai Province militants had launched a missile attack on the airport more than once while some leaders were there in preparation for carrying out security campaigns, adding that the airport had no regular flight movement.

Second: Interpretations and indications

1- Yes. It was Sinai Province, but ...

The technical, tactical and armament capabilities of the Sinai Province organization are clearly developing, in light of its accurate and qualitative operations against the army and police forces in the North Sinai governorate as well as attacks against the military camps, barriers, checkpoints, and police stations. The Sinai Province's efficiency also appears in the bombing of military and police vehicles using explosive devices, and the sniper operations carried out by the organization, which shows that the SP militants are highly professional and skilful amid the organization's keenness on providing qualitative training and armament to its members.

The Sinai Province organization had announced that it was behind targeting the helicopter of the minister of defense during his visit to Al-Arish, and announced details of the operation through statements, pictures, and video clips. The organization statements show that Sinai Province had got prior information about the visit of the Egyptian ministers of defense and interior, and that the organization was able to make necessary preparations for the operation based on this information.

Anyway, there are two possibilities for the sources of this information, namely:



a) The Sinai Province probably had its own sources within the very close circle of decision makers in the regime and was able to obtain information about the visit. This means that we are facing a turning point in the conflict between the Sinai Province organization and the military regime in Egypt. Therefore, the coming period will witness more similar attacks, not necessarily within the North Sinai governorate, but they can extend to other governorates, including the Egyptian capital, or anywhere else.

If this possibility (penetration of the regime) is true, it means that we have a new addition to previous anti-regime segments that oppose the current regime from within the military. One of these segments had decided to confront the regime by armed force and joined armed movements and groups to achieve this goal. Another segment within the army believes that the current regime harms the entire military institution and must be removed, but within the framework of protecting the structure of the state by legal and constitutional means. An example for this trend was Colonel Ahmed Konsowa, who expressed his desire to run for presidential elections and was prosecuted and sentenced to six years in prison by a military court. However, the segment that we are talking about has likely decided to face the current regime from within the military by supporting the movements and groups that face the regime by all means and ways but without identifying themselves.

b) The visits of military officials to the governorate of North Sinai are usually undeclared, and carried out in strict secrecy. (They used to be announced only after they were already carried on.) Also, the al-Arish airport used to be secured over a wide range area extending dozens of kilometers to prevent short or long-range missile attacks. However, the missile that targeted the ministers' helicopter was launched from a distance of about 4 kilometers, which indicates the extent of security failure (or even indulgence) and negligence of security measures that are usually taken in such

visits. Some observers suggested that this security and military gross negligence, as well as the prior disclosure of information about the visit, would not have taken place unless a green light had been given by higher security bodies within the state. Therefore, some suggested that al-Sisi himself or higher security bodies were behind targeting the defense and interior ministers to get rid of both or any of them.

2- Getting rid of Sedki Sobhi

Abdel-Fattah Al-Sisi reached power through a military coup, and the rulers who come to power in this way do not usually trust the circle surrounding them even if they were partners in the coup, and therefore they work to completely control the security and military institutions and get rid of partners.

Since July 3, 2013, Al-Sisi has sacked 28 military commanders from within the military junta, leaving only six members of the old council, including only two who are authorized to give orders for the movement of forces, namely, Defense Minister Sedki Sobhi and Air Force Commander Younis al-Masri (Keeping in mind that the air force on its own does not have the capacity to carry out military coups where it needs ground forces that can control the land).

Some believe that Al-Sisi has worked from the very first moment to take full control of the military institution, dismissing influential figures and sacking others within the army for their uncertain allegiance to him.

Other observers say the scene inside the Egyptian Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) is "divided" into two points of view. An evidence for this was Al-Sisi's comments during the 24th intellectual seminar on Thursday, February 9, 2017, when he pointed out that "There are army personnel with certain orientations, which is unacceptable," adding that they will be dismissed "as we will not allow this in the army," Al-Sisi said.

Before Al-Sisi's dismissal of Lt. General Abdel Meneim Al-Taras and Lt. General Osama Mounir Rabie in mid-December 2016 – when Al-Sisi sacked 12 SCAF members – there were reports about conflicting views within the junta about Al-Sisi's policies. Some SCAF members reportedly believed that Al-Sisi's way of governance would harm the Egyptian army as a whole and sought to convince him not to run for a second term in office.

Other reports indicated that the Al-Sisi regime is suffering from internal divisions and that the security measures taken by the Egyptian government to prevent protesters from taking to the streets on November 11, 2016, when some revolutionary forces called for a "Revolution of the poor", was due fears that such protests could be exploited by groups within the Egyptian army for carrying a military coup.

Al-Sisi has removed 28 military commanders from within the military institution by decree, but Sedki Sobhi is not like other SCAF members. He is protected by the Constitution in accordance with Article 234 which states that: "The appointment of the Minister of Defense shall be after the approval of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces for two full presidential sessions." Therefore, Al-Sisi cannot sack Sobhi unless he changes this article; so some believe that one of the biggest challenges facing Sisi in getting rid of Sedki Sobhi is his immunity in the constitution.

Al-Sisi would not be able to get rid of Sedki Sobhi through legal and constitutional means at the present time if he wanted to. However, he might resort to other methods to get rid of the defense minister. Based on this hypothesis, observers suggested that Al-Sisi and his security services might have leaked the information about Sobhi's visit to Sinai to be targeted by the Sinai Province.

Conclusion

Al-Sisi has worked to have full control over the military institution, leaving no one inside the military that can compete with him or cause any threat that might lead to removing him from power, including Lt. General Mahmoud Hegazi, despite their close family relationship.

This means that the next stage will witness significant developments within the military institution, ahead of the upcoming presidential elections in mid-2018. Will Al-Sisi continue to have full control of the army, or will Sedki Sobhi have another opinion? It is also clear that the question of resolving the conflict and stopping the insurgency in northern Sinai (which is still considered by the regime as a mere terrorist act) is still far from being achieved in the absence of the security and military strategies and competencies required to impose stability in the region. However, some argue that the instability in Sinai is intended in the framework of evicting the population under the so-called “Deal of the Century”.

Also, the closure of all outlets to those who demand change from within the military through the regime’s practices against Ahmed Shafik immediately after announcing his intention to run for the presidential elections. (He is reportedly under undeclared house arrest), the imprisonment of Colonel Ahmed Konsowa after his presidential election bid, and the pressures practiced against Lt General Sami Anan to prevent him from running for the upcoming presidential election – all this can likely prompt anti-regime groups within the military – who seek legal and constitutional change – to resort to other ways for achieving their goal.