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Dismissal Hegazi: Dimensions and Interpretations

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Introduction:

On Saturday evening, Oct. 28, 2017, Abdel-Fattah Al-Sisi held a meeting with Defense Minister Sedki Sobhi, Secretary General of the Ministry of Defense Maj. General Mohammed Farid Hegazi, Interior Minister Magdi Abdel Ghaffar and Director of the General Intelligence Service Khaled Fawzi. Presidential Spokesperson Alaa Youssef said the meeting was in the framework of following up the security developments in the country, as well as the efforts to pursue the armed groups, especially after the clashes that took place on Friday, Oct. 20, between the police forces and some militants in Al-Wahat, killing a great number of police officers.

The meeting resulted in the promotion of Maj. General Mohamed Farid Hegazi, the Secretary General of the Ministry of Defense, Mohamed Farid Hegazi, to the rank of 'Lt. General' as of Oct. 28, and appointing him as Chief of Staff of the Egyptian Armed Forces. Youssef also announced that former Chief of Staff Lt. General Mahmoud Hegazi was appointed as Al-Sisi's adviser for strategic planning and crisis management. Also, Maj. General Mahmoud Shaarawi, Assistant Minister of the Interior for the National Security Agency, Maj. General Hisham El-Iraqi, Assistant Minister of Interior for the Giza Security Sector, Maj. General Ibrahim El-Masri, as well as the Director of the National Security Directorate in Giza – were all dismissed.

First: Mahmoud Hegazi's activity before his dismissal:

Former Chief of Staff Lt. General Mahmoud Hegazi – who was appointed in April 2014, before Sisi's running for the presidency (in May 2014) – has been exercising his powers normally over the past few days.

Hegazy's activity during October, days before Al-Sisi's decision to dismiss him, was as follows:

- On Oct. 01, Lt. General Mahmoud Hegazi accompanied Minister of Defense Sedki Sobhi at the graduation ceremony of Batch 152 at the College of Reserve Officers.



- On Wed., Oct. 4, Hegazi attended the meeting of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) headed by Al-Sisi and in the presence of the Minister of Defense Sedki Sobhi, the commanders of the main branches of the armed forces and all SCAF members. The meeting reviewed the latest developments in the internal security conditions, where the Armed Forces' procedures for securing the borders, especially the Western border. Maj. General Sherif Bishara provided a presentation for the situation in the western military zone and confrontations between the army and smugglers there. The Western Military Zone Command stated that the air force would be at the forefront of forces in the confrontations to come because the smugglers booby-trap the sand roads which they use in smuggling, making it difficult to confront them with armored vehicles and infantry forces. Lt. General Mahmoud Hegazi, being responsible for the Libyan file, explained the security and military situation, especially in Eastern Libya – the areas adjacent to the Egyptian border and controlled by General Khalifa Haftar.

On Oct. 8, Mahmoud Hegazy met with Director General of the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) Robert Stephen Beecroft, who was the former US ambassador to Cairo. During the meeting, they discussed facilitation of the MFO work in Sinai.

- On October 10, Lt. General Mahmoud Hegazi, Minister of Defense Sedki Sobhi and Commander of the Western Military Zone Maj. General Sherif Bishara attended the main stage of the live ammunition tactical project "Thunder 28" carried out by a unit of the Western Military Zone.

- On Oct. 14, Lt. General Mahmoud Hegazy and Defense Minister Sedki Sobhi attended the rocket-firing "Sky Defenders 2" exercise by some air defense units.

- On Oct. 18, Lt. General Mahmoud Hegazi met with the U.S. Chief of Staff Michael Garrett, Commander of the Ground Forces of the US Central Command and his accompanying delegation who were on a visit to Egypt. They discussed developments of the situation in the region.

- Between Oct. 15 and 17, Lt. General Mahmoud Hegazi reportedly traveled to the UAE, to meet with officials in the UAE.



- On Oct. 20, the Western region's Kilo 135 area on the road to Al-Wahat, Giza, witnessed violent clashes between the security forces and an armed group, resulting in the death of dozens of security officers. However, details about the Al-Wahat clashes are still ambiguous, and no one knows what actually happened there, amid conflicting reports that make things more ambiguous. However, it is extremely obvious that the armed group that carried out the operation was highly-trained.

- On Oct. 22, Mahmoud Hegazi headed to the United States upon an invitation from the US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to attend a conference on counter terrorism joined by chiefs of staff of 43 countries. The conference focused on coordinating regional and international efforts to eliminate terrorism. Hegazi delivered a speech during the conference, and held meetings with the Israeli and US chiefs of staff, according to Haaretz , an Israeli newspaper. The meeting was attended by chiefs of staff and senior officers from Arab countries including Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Jordan. Hegazi returned to Egypt on Thursday Oct. 26, and Al-Sisi's decision to dismiss him was announced on Oct. 28. With the dismissal of Hegazi, only 5 military commanders are remaining from the members of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) that was existing during the military coup in July 2013, namely:

- 1- Lt. General Sedki Sobhi, the defense minister,
- 2- Lt. General Younes A-Msri, the air force commander,
- 3- Maj. General Mohamed Farid Hegazi, the defense ministry's secretary general,
- 4- Maj. General Mohamed Amin Nasr, the head of the financial affairs agency of the defense ministry, and
- 5- Maj. General Mamdouh Shahin, the assistant defense minister for constitutional and legal affairs.

Second: Interpretations and Prospects:

Although Sisi's decision to dismiss Mahmoud Hegazi was a surprise for many, and despite the scarcity and inconsistency of available information, yet, there are several interpretations for the decision:



1 - Linking Hegazi's dismissal with Al-Wahat clashes

Some observers say that the repercussions of Al-Wahat clashes between security forces and militants that resulted in a massacre among police officers on Friday, Oct. 20, were not far from the dismissals and changes that Al-Sisi conducted, including Egypt's Chief of Staff Lt. General Mahmoud Hegazi, Head of the National Security Agency Maj. General Mahmoud Shaarawi (a domestic intelligence service), Assistant Minister of Interior for the Giza Security Sector, Maj. General Ibrahim El-Masri, and Director of Special Operations of the Central Security Forces Maj. General Magdy Abul-Kheir.

The sudden movement of dismissals of high-ranking officers in the military and security institutions may be an evidence on the validity of the leaks, broadcast by Ahmed Mousa, an Egyptian media man, and later denied by the Interior Ministry. However, the leaks highlighted the security failure in the operation, resulting in the worst massacre among the Egyptian police in decades.

According to intelligence reports, there was a great deal of complacency before, during and after Al-Wahat operation, western Egypt, amid accusations of treason that came from former high-ranking Egyptian army commanders. Most notably among critics was Egypt's former Chief of Staff Sami Annan, who wondered: "Should our sons, the most precious and efficient thing that we have, become victims of treachery, weak and poor planning, and inaccurate data?" He added: "Put emotions aside now, as the language of reason and rationality is what we need at present. Look for the reasons and motives and put them in the right context. Diagnose the disease realistically and rationally, and realize the magnitude of the disaster we are experiencing and living.

Referring to treachery was repeated more explicitly by Ahmed Shafiq, the former presidential candidate, former Egyptian prime minister, and former military commander, who said: "What happened to our sons, who are at the highest level of efficiency and training? Was this due to unfair treachery, or to the poor planning, or both?" Shafik said in a statement on Twitter, adding: "Please, do not rush to take revenge before you understand the truth of what happened yesterday deep in our wounded country. Please, you have to understand that what happened in Al-Wahat



was not just an assassination of an isolated ambush, nor was it an attack on a bank in a border town. No... For those who do not understand and for those who do not want to understand, let them know that what happened there was a full-fledged military operation, which was unfairly carried out against our most efficient, capable, and sincere sons.”

In addition, it is circulated that the Egyptian army refused to act to protect the police in the Al-Wahat incident because the Interior Ministry did not let them know before the operation. This may explain the delayed intervention of the army which came 12 hours after the clashes

Some observers suggest that al-Sisi's intention to get rid of Mahmoud Hegazi was pre-meditated but he was only waiting for the right moment; and that Al-Sisi exploited the incident for this purpose.

Others suggest that Al-Sisi might have been behind the incident, and that he was the one who designed it as a pretext for dismissing Hegazi.

However, some have argue that Egypt has witnessed over the past four years similar incidents, but Al-Sisi did not dismiss officials of the significance of Lt. General Mahmoud Hegazi after them.

2 - Linking Hegazi's dismissal with his visit to the United States

Sisi did not hold a meeting immediately after the incident to discuss the repercussions of the incident as he used to do. On the following day, Al-Sisi attended a ceremony to mark the 75th anniversary of the Second Battle of El Alamein which took place in the Egyptian desert in 1942. The 2nd Battle of El Alamein was a decisive battle of the Second World War that took place near the Egyptian railway halt of El Alamein.

Al-Sisi used to hold a security and military meeting to discuss the repercussions of incidents like these immediately after they take place, which he did not do this time, leaving many unanswered questions, especially that Hegazi was still in Egypt at the time before he later headed to the United States to attend the Conference of the Chiefs of Staff of 43 countries to discuss the war on terrorism. After Hegazi's departure, Al-Sisi held a meeting with the defense and interior ministers as well as the



General Intelligence director on Sunday, Oct. 22. It is difficult to rule out what took place in Washington meetings and may be was among the reasons for Hegazy's dismissal. Hegazi participated in this conference along with the heads of the armies of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Jordan, the NATO countries, Australia, and Israel. Some talk about something that had taken place behind the scenes. It is said that Mahmoud Hegazi exposed the weakness of the Egyptian army in combating terrorism during his speech at the conference and during his meetings on the sidelines of the conference. It became very clear that the Egyptian regime's approach to combating terrorism, which only relies on military confrontation, has not achieved any success over four years, especially that the conference was after the Al-Wahat incident directly.

In fact, this was behind Al-Sisi's rage in light of the American rebuke due to this failure. It is known that Cairo receives an annual economic and military assistance from the United States, and other aids from the Gulf States. It is also circulated that the CIA agreed with Hegazi on the need to remove Abdul Fattah al-Sisi from power because he, himself, has become one of the factors that are behind terrorism in a way that threatens the world, particularly the United States' interests in the region.

3 - Linking Hegazi's dismissal with his visit to the UAE

Although Hegazi's visit to the UAE has not been confirmed, a similar action took place before when Al-Sisi sacked Lt. General Abdel-Meni'm Al-Tarras, the air force commander, in December 2016. Al-Tarras visited the UAE in November 2016 under the pretext of holding meetings with officials in the UAE, but at his return on Dec. 18, 2016, Al-Sisi fired him along with 10 other military commanders. It was not possible to know then what happened during Al-Tarras's visit to the UAE. The commanders that were dismissed after the return of Al-Tarras from the UAE were:

- 1- Lt. General Abdel-Meni'm Al-Teras, former air force commander,
- 2- Lt. General Usama Moneir Rabi'e, former naval force commander,
- 3- Maj. General Ahmed Wasfi, former head of the training authority of the armed forces,
- 4- Maj. General Usama Askar, former commander of Sinai unified command,



- 5- Maj. General Tawhid Tawfik, former head of the training authority of the armed forces,
- 6- Maj. General Mohamed Abdella, former commander of the third field army,
- 7- Maj. General Nasser Al-Asi, former commander of the second field army,
- 8- Maj. General Yehia Taha Al-Hemali, former commander of the southern military zone,
- 9- Maj. General Mohamed Al-Zamalout, former commander of the northern military zone,
- 10- Maj. General Wahid Ezzat, former commander of the western military zone,
- 11- Brig. General Mohamed Samir, former army spokesperson.

4. Linking Hegazi's dismissal with internal conflicts

It is known that Al-Sisi came to power through a military coup, so he does not trust the circle surrounding him even if they were his partners in the coup, or had strong or family relations with him, as it was in the case of Hegazi (Al-Sisi is father in law of Hegazi's daughter). As for al-Sisi, since July 03, 2013, he sacked 27 military commanders from within the military junta, so that he could impose his unilateral decisions within the army. Al-Sisi has also worked to remove the powerful figures of the military institution. Since the January revolution 25, 2011, Hegazi was seen as a distinctive political figure; he and maj. General Al-Assar then led the media scene representing the Egyptian army, and Hegazi used to meet with the revolutionary youth. Therefore, the decision to dismiss him was not a surprise, but was expected according to Al-Sisi's mentality.

Since Al-Sisi came to power after his military coup, there have been many reports on the existence of conflicts within the Egyptian army because of Al-Sisi's policies which were viewed by some army commanders as harmful to the entire military institution. So, Al-Sisi has worked since his military coup to remove all those whom he is not sure of their loyalty within the army, to tighten his control over the military institution. So, it is expected that there are other commanders within the army who could be removed in the near future.



Mu'taz Mahmoud Ibrahim Hegazi, son of Lt. General Mahmoud Hegazi, wrote on Twitter only one day after the removal of his father: "You will remain the source of pride and honor for all those who know you. You will remain high as much as you respect yourself. You may remain strong with your objective unbiased positions..." These tweets were interpreted by some as an indicator that Mahmoud Hegazi was against Al-Sisi's policies.

5- Implications of Mohamed Farid Hegazi 's appointment

According to some observers, the appointment of Maj. General Mohamed Farid Hegazi - the secretary-general of the Ministry of Defense (known as the "secretary" within the Egyptian army), who was far from any field activities within the army over the past seven years - as head of the army (Chief of Staff), proves that Al-Sisi's policy is to promote military figures that are easy to control. The chief of staff of the Egyptian army must be an army field commander; how come that Al-Sisi brings an administrative officer and appoint him in this position, the highest military position after the Minister of Defense.

The day after he dismissed Mahmoud Hegazi (Sunday 29/10/2017), Al-Sisi attended the procedures of inspection and raising the combat potentials of the Armed Forces 19 Division, Third Field Army in Suez. The event was attended by Prime Minister Sherif Ismail, General Commander of the Armed Forces Defense Minister Colonel General Sedki Sobhi, Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces General Mohamed Farid Hegazi and senior army commanders and statesmen. In fact, Al-Sisi wanted to send a message that the army commanders stand behind him, and that the removal of Hegazi from the military will not cause any kind of conflict within the military institution.

The behavior of the Egyptian media toward the dismissal of Mahmoud Hegazi raises many questions due to their total disregard of this important event. Some observers suggest that media men received instructions from security services warning them against discussing Hegazi's dismissal, restricting coverage of the decision only to reading the news story without adding any comment; and this what Amr Adib, a prominent pro-Sisi TV presenter, did in his program on ON-E TV channel.



Others believe that the appointment of Mohamed Farid Hegazi was based on a desire from former Defense Minister Mohamed Hussein Tantawi: to remove Al-Sisi's first man (Mahmoud Hegazi) from the military institution, and appoint Mohamed Farid Hegazi, who is said to be Tantawi's man in the army since he appointed him as Secretary-General of the Ministry of Defense in 2010, being one of his most loyal men. Some interpret act as an attempt to separate the army from the presidency: the military institution under Mubarak was greatly dominated by Field Marshal Tantawi, while Mubarak at the time controlled the state through his closest men such as Zakaria Azmi, Safwat El-Sherif and Fat'hi Sorour. Therefore, Al-Sisi may have brought Mahmoud Hegazi from the military to be one of his closest men in the presidency, and at the same time fulfill the army leadership's desire to separate between presidency and the army.

It seems that Al-Sisi's regional and international supporters as well as the army commanders, most notably Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, now believe that he (Sisi) is now a burden on everyone, and that the dismissal of Hegazi - who represented the most important support for Al-Sisi within the military institution according to some observers - was in fact a step for weakening him in preparation for getting rid of him later.

Other observers say that Al-Sisi's decision came at this time – a few months before the presidential elections - to prepare for the next period, either through the appointment of Hegazi as prime minister instead of Sherif Ismail, who is likely to be removed from office due to his illness, (and hold him responsible for the deterioration of the Egyptian economy during his premiership). However, others say that Hegazi is likely to be one of the candidates in the upcoming presidential elections, as a pre-arranged plan with Sisi, or that he is to be appointed as vice-president in Al-Sisi's second term.

One of the signs that Al-Sisi intends to make use of Mahmoud Hegazi in the next phase, is the fact that he did not remove him from responsibility for the Libyan file. But, if this thesis was true, why did he not appoint him directly as a prime minister or vice-president?



6 - Claims that Hegazi's dismissal is a step to remove Sedki Sobhi

From time to time, the Egyptian parliament - reportedly based on Al-Sisi's directives – announces, through pro-Sisi political circles, that the constitutional article on the defense minister's immunity in his post for eight years will be amended, to allow Al-Sisi to get rid of Sedki Sobhi and appoint Hegazi as Minister of Defense. Therefore, Al-Sisi rushed to dismiss Hegazi to avoid his appointment as defense minister instead of Sobhi if this constitutional article was modified.

It is noteworthy that the relationship between Sedki and Hegazi over the past four years was always strained. This was very obvious when Hegazi's mother died on Nov. 5, 2016, when both Al-Sisi and Sobhi did not participate in the funeral with no reasonable excuse. Also, the armed forces did not issue an official note of condolence in this regard, but the armed forces' spokesperson issued an official statement saying that the chief of staff was thanks and appreciates "all those who shared his sorrow in the death of his mother, praying to God Almighty to protect Egypt and its people from all evil". However, this statement was not published on the official website of the Egyptian Ministry of Defense.

Conclusion

All of the above interpretations have some sort of reasoning and logic. Therefore, it may be difficult to weigh one possibility at the expense of the other. However, it is most likely - in terms of accuracy and variety of indicators - that there is a real conflict within the military institution and that there are contradicting interests at the expense of the security of the nation and its stability, and also at the expense of the blood of soldiers and officers. In fact, what happened in Al-Wahat would not have taken place unless there had been a major security defect or penetration, or wing conflicts inside the military institution.

I think that the scenario of interpreting the dismissal of Mahmoud Hegazi as a political escalation aimed at paving the way for an alternative to Al-Sisi with his consent- I think this is somewhat distant from reality. Al-Sisi will never allow promotion of someone who is likely to replace him. Also, if this was true, it would certainly be carried out



against Al-Sisi's will - especially that Hegazi was in the United States for several days before the decision to get rid of him.

