

COMMENTARY

No. 69

Monday, 20 August 2012

King Morsi, the First

Mordechai Kedar

Bar-Ilan University, Israel

Nine months ago, in November of 2011, the Muslim Brotherhood won almost half of the seats of the Egyptian "Peoples' Council", thus translating the long-standing support of the population into a political asset of undeniable strength. This success encouraged them to contend for the presidency as well, and in June their representative—Mohammad Morsi—won this exalted office. The Supreme Military Council, the military body that had been managing affairs in Egypt since Mubarak was sent packing in February 2011, ground its teeth with rage, and the head of the Council—Field Marshall Hussein Tantawi—who was suspected of intending to remain in control until the end of his days, announced again and again that he does not intend to turn into Mubarak number 2. Despite this, there was an open rivalry between the military and the Brotherhood: on one side is an unelected body, which is powerful, violent, hated, secular, self-interested, armed, hierarchical, obedient and disciplined; and on the other hand there was an elected body, supported by the public, not violent, religious, ideological, connected to the population and perceived as the embodiment of the dream of many years.

During the past months, especially since Morsi was elected in June, Egypt seemed like a rickety cart, pulled by two horses, but each in its own direction. Each horse tries to step on the other's hoofs, trying to negate the strength of the other, despite the fact that both of them know that they are destined to pull the cart together. The Supreme Constitutional Court dispersed the parliament, thus pulling an important rug out from under the feet of the Brotherhood. The Supreme Military Council issued an order to freeze the powers of the president, but then Morsi cut off the head of the military snake, Tantawi, Commander in chief Sami Annan, Head of General Intelligence Mohammed Muaffi, and a long line of officers, "tails" of the old regime, who had been appointed by Mubarak, with one decision that appeared as if it was exploiting the attack on the Kerem Shalom Crossing two weeks ago.

Middle East Institute @ New Delhi, www.mei.org.in

As of the writing of these lines, not a word of public outcry has been heard by all of the symbols of Mubarak's regime that Morsi sent packing, and the impression that is created is that they have accepted the decision and quietly left their offices. It could be that they indeed have accepted this "boot upwards": Some of them have joined the "presidential team" as very close advisers to Morsi so that he would be able to keep an eye on their doings, and some accepted high positions in public service.

But behind the scenes a difficult struggle was being played out: In the middle of last week, President Morsi held a discussion of the Council of National Defence in his office, which dealt with the implications of the terror attack at the Kerem Shalom Crossing and with the security situation in Sinai. Morsi, Tantawi, Annan and other senior officers were all participants in this discussion, during which, Tantawi claimed that Egyptian intelligence had information on the involvement of Palestinian elements in the attack, and that Israel had paid them. Therefore—in his view—Egypt must hermetically close the Rafah Crossing, because of the threat to Egyptian national security that it poses. Morsi became enraged and said: "I do not believe that a Palestinian would do this, and if you had prior information about it why did you not act appropriately? I will not permit the closing of the crossing because I don't suspect that Hamas took part in the action." Tantawi rejected the words of the president and emphasized that the Supreme Military Council had decided to close the Rafah Passage completely, and perhaps it would be opened in the distant future. "We, the military people, are in charge of that." With these words, Morsi answered sharply: "I am the high commander of the Egyptian military." The meeting dispersed after deciding to deal with the centres of terrorism in Sinai with full determination and without any sensitivity, without the "Supreme Court" or the prying eyes of human rights organizations, as is commonly done in the Arab world. On 11 August, the president met with Tantawi and Anan, and did not reveal to them that he was about to fire them within a few hours.

The military did not come to the defence of Tantawi and Annan, and General Intelligence did not express a public objection on the dismissal of Muaffi. This begs the question: how did the powerful heads of all of these bodies submit and unquestioningly accept upon themselves the supreme authority of Morsi? Have they all become faithful followers of the Muslim Brotherhood? Not quite. One possible explanation is that those who were dismissed are quite advanced in years (Tantawi is 76 years old) and they have no desire to continue in difficult and demanding military roles for many more years. Another explanation, and in my opinion much more likely, is that those who were dismissed, especially Tantawi, told Morsi, either explicitly or implicitly, "Take the country and let's see you manage it with your Brothers". Because in the background is the precarious economic situation of Egypt: no tourism, no foreign investment, dwindling foreign reserves, all within the context of a deep global crisis, with European states collapsing, and there is no redeemer on the horizon except—perhaps—the United States, which, up until now has not understood how to relate to the Muslim Brotherhood: as a legitimate regime

or a group of radical Islamists. In this situation, a person would need great faith in the One Who dwells on High to believe that Egypt can be rescued, so those who were dismissed apparently are not enthusiastic believers after all.

However, it may be that in the near future, the military will indeed come into conflict with the president, when the latter tries to get his hands on the assets of the military. In Egypt the military is an economic empire, which is called "National Service Project Organization", and was founded in the beginning of the eighties in order to provide work for the many people of the military who were dismissed as a result of the peace agreement with Israel. There are estimates that between 25 and 40 percent of the Gross National Product of Egypt is connected with the companies, banks and corporations that belong to the military. The situation has become so severe that in recent months the military has been loaning money to the state. This may sound illogical, but this is the situation in Egypt: the military has more wealth than the state, and its economic power—most of which is hidden from the public eye—is not subject to the authority of the state. The companies that belong to the military are active in all areas of the economy: management of real estate, domestic services, restaurants, petrol stations, food industries, as well as chemical, petrochemical and plastics industries. The Egyptian weapons industry is entirely—and openly—under the auspices of the "minister of defence and military industries". This activity is conducted openly because of the connections that this industrial complex has with companies abroad, especially with the United States, and the global prohibition of clandestine action in the business of weapons and ammunition.

One of the important reasons for the wealth of the labyrinth of companies that have connections with the military is the fact that their earnings are tax-free and there is no need to report them to the tax authority. These companies have supported each other because they do not need to bid for contracts. The economic conduct of the military has created in Egypt two main economic classes: those who enjoy the benefits of the military industries and those who are far from the plate. This causes a wide economic gap resulting in corruption, discrimination, cronyism and public rage.

Morsi certainly knows the economic empire of the military well, and sooner or later he will try to get the state's hands on it. What will the military do then? Will it submit or will it fight?

It seems that the military would prefer to come to an agreement with the president and to avoid having a head-on collision with him, because since the revolution and the deep economic crisis, millions of Egyptian families have been brought to indigence, and this has resulted in public sensitivity toward the wealth of the military.

On the Way to a Religious Dictatorship?

The heads of the security system were dismissed because of the public rage that arose as a result of the murder of the Egyptian soldiers, and the sense of the public that the military did not act appropriately to safeguard the lives of the soldiers. Morsi exploited this mood to the fullest and enhanced his status as president by dismissing the almost omnipotent military chiefs. It is important to note that this public rage was also exploited by the media, because in dealing with the most recent attack, they are at Morsi's service in all matters. He is presented as the ideal man, with clean hands and a pure heart, redeemer of Egypt, the right man in the right place, man that Egypt has awaited for so many years. On the other hand, journalists and broadcasters who have dared to criticize him were silenced and arrested, and charges were brought against them for spreading lies. It seems that the Egyptian media, which, during the last year, enjoyed great freedom after sixty years of military rule, were again impressed into serving the regime, but this time for the benefit of civil rule. Anyone who listens today to Egyptian broadcast stations gets the impression that a heavy hand is controlling them and that they broadcast only whatever President Morsi expects them to broadcast.

However, in the international media, which are not under the supervision of the Muslim Brotherhood, many Egyptians express their concern over Morsi's style of rule: did the Egyptian people overthrow a secular dictator, in order to have a religious one? This question is especially sharp in light of the fact that the revolution originally was not religious, but rather civil, because the youth of Tahrir Square who overthrew Mubarak in January-February 2011 were secular, liberal and freedom seekers, while the Muslim Brotherhood rode the wave of revolution in a later phase, taking advantage of it in order to take over the state. The youth of the revolution hear the Egyptian broadcast stations today and understand that their sacrifice—including fatalities, wounded and severe humiliation—was in vain, because religious rule was the last thing they would have wished for.

On the other hand, Morsi is also severely criticized by the Salafis, who have great strength among the population, having won a quarter of the parliamentary seats. They complain about Morsi, mainly in their sermons in the mosques, that he does not intend to implement Sharia law as the law of the land, and their fixed question is: "Why did you deserve to come into power?" The question hints at the possibility that the Brotherhood is nothing but bloodthirsty pursuers of power and authority, and that they really have no intention to impose Islamic law on the state. This accusation is very disturbing to Morsi and his associates, because it is intended to undermine the religious legitimacy of his regime.

Criticism from a third side comes from the direction of the Christian Copts, who compose about twenty percent of the citizens of Egypt. Since Morsi was elected as president they feel increasingly threatened by Muslims, and bloody confrontations occur more and more often between these two groups. As a result of this, many Copts seek desperately for a way to emigrate

from Egypt, and this fact increases the Muslim rage against them, because although emigration will hopefully solve the problem of the Copts, the Muslims will remain to wallow in the mire of the chronic problems that Egypt suffers from

The Peace Agreement With Israel

Many in Israel and in the world are very disturbed by the possibility that Morsi will sacrifice the peace agreement with Israel on the altar of building his own and his regime's legitimacy. Won't the person who succeeded in removing the head of the Supreme Military Council, also be able to remove the Israeli ambassador? This could happen if Israeli attacks Gaza or Sinai, but even then, Egypt will keep the proper level of diplomatic representation, by means of maintaining a consulate, an acting Israeli Embassy or by placing an Israeli representative within the framework of another embassy, for example Switzerland.

Cancelling the peace agreement could cause severe damage to the already shaky Egyptian economy, because the atmosphere of war would chase away the tourists and investors, and might increase the price of insurance for the ships that pass through the Suez Canal, thus increasing the motivation of the carriers to find ways around the Suez Canal. One possibility is to transfer oil by way of the Eilat-Ashkelon pipeline, which will bring additional income to Israel.

Israeli politicians, ministers (this week it was the foreign minister), Members of Knesset and other officials, say publicly and without hesitation that the peace between Israel and Egypt is in the interest of Egypt, and that Egypt must put an end to the chaos in Sinai because it is a threat to Egypt, not only to Israel, and the attack two weeks ago proves this. I do not reject this Israeli evaluation, however the fact that many Israelis say this over and over again creates the impression that they are afraid and shaking with fear lest the peace agreement might be cancelled, and therefore they try to convince the Egyptians that this agreement is in Egypt's interest even more than it is in Israel's interest. But this kind of talk might cause the opposite result: a member of the Muslim Brotherhood might ask himself: if the Israelis are so fearful about the cancellation of the peace treaty then perhaps it's the right thing to do? Israelis do not understand that their obsessive preoccupation in the media with the question of the peace agreement with Egypt actually endangers the peace agreement. Irresponsible Israeli chatter on the subject exposes Israeli fear, and as a result of this, many Egyptians call on Morsi to open the agreements and to behave as the master and the sovereign over Sinai Peninsula, to stop supplying gas to Israel without regard to the resulting loss of income, and to remove the Israeli flag from Cairo.

Many Israelis do not know the rules of the game of the Middle East: the more they show enthusiasm for something, the higher its price rises, and the opposite holds true as well: the less interest they express in something, the lower the demanded price will be. If Israelis announce day and night that they want peace with their enemies or to obtain the release of a kidnapped

soldier who is in their hands—the price for the peace or the soldier will be more than Israel can pay. But if they broadcast a message that Israel can do without peace, and will not pay an exorbitant price for a kidnapped soldier, then the price will decrease to a reasonable level, one which is worth paying.

Israel has had another example in recent weeks: in order to fight terror in Sinai, Egypt requested from Israel to agree to bring tanks and helicopters into Sinai, which is forbidden according to the military appendix to the peace agreement. It seems that the government of Israel agreed to this extremely quickly and the process of decision making was greatly expedited. On one hand this is a correct and appropriate decision, because it is important that Israel supports Egypt to cope with the terror in Sinai. But on the other hand, the Israeli haste in taking the decision broadcasts the very harmful and dangerous message that Israel is willing to yield quickly a central component of its security—the demilitarization of the Sinai—in exchange for preventing terror activity on its borders. That is, Israel sees a terror group as a greater danger than the Egyptian army deployed on its borders. Have the eyes of those who make decisions about security, who have served in the most elite units in the IDF, become so dim? Has anyone thought about the long-term implication of bringing in the Egyptian military to Sinai? Was the permission that was given to Egypt limited in time, or might everything that was brought in remain forever? What will Israel do with requests to bring in additional weapons to Sinai? And what will Israel do if the Egyptians begin to stream weapons into Sinai—"in order to fight terror"—without Israel's permission?

I still harbour the hope within myself that the day will come when decision makers will understand better the mindset of the Middle East, and will take decisions in a way that will strengthen Israel and not weaken it. This is especially important since the Islamic King Morsi the First is increasing his strength in Egypt, and his personal and ideological view is that Israel can evaporate together with its peace agreement.

Note: This article was originally published in Hebrew in *Makor Rishon* and the English translation is reproduced here with permission of the author. Web link: <http://israelagainstterror.blogspot.co.il/2012/08/mordechai-kedar-king-Morsi-first.html>

Dr. Mordechai Kedar is a lecturer at Bar-Ilan University, Israel and the director of the forthcoming Center for the Study of the Middle East and Islam, Bar Ilan University. Email: Mordechai.Kedar@biu.ac.il

As part of its editorial policy, the MEI@ND standardizes spelling and date formats to make the text uniformly accessible and stylistically consistent. The views expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views/positions of the MEI@ND. Editor, MEI@ND: P R Kumaraswamy