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Egypt's President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi inaugurated on January 5, 2017 the new headquarters of Egypt's southern naval fleet command in Safaga on the country's Red Sea coast during his visit to the Port of Safaga Development Project which cost EGP 510 million.¹

During the visit, El-Sisi also raised the Egyptian flag on the Mistral-class helicopter carrier Gamal Abdel-Nasser, one of two carriers Egypt acquired from France in 2015. The Mistral Class ships, designed for a large helicopter aviation role as well as amphibious landing and support of troops, would improve Egypt's capabilities in these areas. The Ka-52K helicopters, combined with the Mistral ships' troop landing capabilities, offer Egypt a whole new dimension of offensive and influence operations.

The event in Safaga was attended by newly appointed navy commander Ahmed Khaled Hassan and other high-ranking Armed Forces commanders.² Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi issued a decree in December 2016 in his capacity as the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, appointing General Ahmed Khaled Hassan, 57, Chief of Staff of Naval Forces, to the Commander of Naval Forces, replacing Lieutenant-General Osama Mounir Mohamed Rabie. Rabie was appointed the deputy head of the Suez Canal Authority, which operates the Egyptian strategic shipping route between Europe and Asia.³

The purpose of creating the Southern Fleet Command was to secure complete control over the theatre of naval operations in the Red Sea area. Egypt has a 1,500km-long coast along the vital maritime artery that links Bab Al-Mandeb, the southern gateway between the Red Sea, the Horn of Africa and the Gulf of Aden, with the entrances to Aqaba and the Suez Canal, gateway to the Mediterranean.⁴

The Southern Fleet Command, with its new naval formations, offers a powerful shield against anyone who might venture to violate Egyptian territorial waters," said Commander-in-Chief of the Egyptian Navy Rear Admiral Ahmed Khaled Hassan Said, adding that such a shield was crucial at a time "when the region is awash with threats and challenges to Egyptian national security".⁵

The Egyptian Navy is a two-sea force with a Mediterranean fleet and southern naval fleet in Gulf of Suez and the Red Sea. Egypt naval bases on the Red Sea are Safaga, Hurghada Berenice and Suez. The Southern Fleet is composed of a Mistral-class helicopter carrier, destroyer, missile crafts, coastal patrol and special forces units.⁶

The special forces units who are currently based in the Red Sea are a special forces brigade that is specialized in bombing operations against submarines or warships and they are distinguished by their standards and unprecedented level of fighting professionalism.⁷

Egypt considers the Red Sea as an area of strategic interests of the country. The Bab al-Mandeb Strait is a strategic waterway for Egypt's national security and the main entrance for access to the Suez Canal. Located

between Yemen on the Arabian Peninsula and Djibouti and Eritrea in the Horn of Africa, it connects the Red Sea with Gulf Sea.

As a part of operation "Decisive Storm" that was launched in March 2015, one of the Saudi-led Gulf coalition's first actions was to place Yemen's ports under naval blockade, in part to prevent the military resupply of the Houthis by Iran. On April 14, 2015, UN Security Council Resolution 2216 lent international support to the blockade, calling for member states to "take the necessary measures to prevent the direct or indirect supply" of arms to these actors.

Egypt has joined the Saudi Arabia-led military campaign of Gulf States against Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen and Egypt has since May 2015, four warships in the area of Bab al-Mandab straits as part of the Saudi Arabian led coalition.

Days after joining the Gulf alliance, President Sisi stated that Egypt has the right to intervene militarily to prevent Houthis from controlling or closing the strait, adding that such a closure "would have negative effects on the trade in Egypt's strategic Suez Canal, one of the country's main sources of income."⁸

From Egypt's perspective, Houthi control in Yemen of the strategic straits threatens maritime traffic in Bab al-Mandab, the strait that connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and might threaten Suez Canal traffic, which has been one of the Egyptian government's most reliable revenue streams.

Addressing the threat that the Houthis pose to maritime security in the Red Sea, is helping its Persian Gulf allies resist Iran's hegemonic ambitions in the region. For this reasons, the Egyptian navy plays a significant role in the blockade around Yemen.

One of the routine tasks of the Egyptian navy in Red Sea is to prevent arms and drug smugglings into Egyptian territory.

The Egyptian Navy has carried out a successful bust on drug smugglers attempting to smuggle over 170 kg of drugs from Iran into the country by sea on December 16, 2016. Egyptian Naval Forces intercepted "Abadan", an Iranian vessel in Egyptian waters in the Red Sea, and upon inspection found 319 packages containing drugs weighing some 171 kg, in addition to nine mobile phones, a satellite phone, and wads of cash in a number of different currencies. All seven crew members — consisting of four Iranians, two Indians, and a Pakistani man have been arrested and transported to a naval base on mainland Egypt.⁹

Summary

Egypt has one of the biggest navies in the Middle East, and the arms deals of the last years (2014 – 2016) will help Egypt to upgrade and modernize its navy. The creation of the new command signals a qualitative leap in the capacities of the Egyptian navy in terms of planning, organization and military hardware.

The area constitutes part of Egypt's strategic depth and is, therefore, crucial to its national security. By setting up the Southern Fleet Command Egypt is designating the Red Sea region and its extensions as an operational sphere, sending an important message to international and regional powers that Egypt has vital interests in the area that it is determined to safeguard.¹⁰

The deployment of the Mistral-class helicopter carrier Gamal Abdel-Nasser, one of two carriers Egypt acquired from France in 2015 in the Red Sea is a reflection of the strategic importance of this area for Egypt. Egypt could use the two new warships to transport about 1,000 troops, armored vehicles and helicopters to intervene in Yemen or other countries where Egypt and a joint Arab force might become involved. The addition of the Mistral ships and the new helicopters could also provide a counter-balance against increasing Iranian influence in the region.

Security arrangements in the Red Sea, in tandem with regional security developments, required a stronger Egyptian naval presence along the Red Sea coast not only to facilitate the management of maritime traffic but to strengthen Egypt's deterrent capacities in the face of the threats in the Red Sea region, especially in the vicinity of Bab Al-Mandeb given the deterioration in the state of security of Yemen. Egypt's navy is currently taking part in a Saudi-led Arab operation against Houthi rebels in Yemen.

Notes

- ¹ Egypt's Sisi inspects southern naval fleet units at Port Safaga, Ahram Online, January 5, 2017.
- ² Egypt's Sisi inspects southern naval fleet units at Port Safaga, Ahram Online, January 5, 2017.
- ³ Egypt's Sisi appoints new commanders for Navy and Air Defense Forces, Ahram Online, December 18, 2016.
- ⁴ Ahmed Eleiba, Looking south, Al Ahram Weekly, Issue No.1327, January 12, 2017.
- ⁵ Ahmed Eleiba, Looking south, Al Ahram Weekly, Issue No.1327, January 12, 2017.
- ⁶ Ahmed Eleiba, Looking south, Al Ahram Weekly, Issue No.1327, January 12, 2017.
- ⁷ Taha Saker, Egypt establishes highly-trained special navy forces brigade in Red Sea, Daily News Egypt, January 7, 2017.
- ⁸ Egypt sends Special Forces to Mandeb Strait, Red Sea, Gulf for more 3 months, nsbc, May 4, 2015.
- ⁹ Egypt navy busts 170kg of heroin on Iranian boat, The New Arab, December 16, 2016.
- ¹⁰ Ahmed Eleiba, Looking south, Al Ahram Weekly, Issue No.1327, January 12, 2017.