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Shaul Shay

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Exercise "Defenders of Friendship-2016", joint Russian-Egyptian counter-terrorist exercise, took place in the territory of the Arab Republic of Egypt in the area between the city of Alexandria and El Alamein, on October 15-26, 2016.<sup>1</sup>

It was the first joint Russia-Egypt anti-terrorism military exercise, based on earlier agreements between Russia and Egypt. In June 2015, Russian and Egyptian navy forces conducted their first ever joint naval drills in the Mediterranean Sea near Alexandria.<sup>2</sup>

According to Russia's Defense Ministry, exercise "Defenders of Friendship-2016", involved, 6 airfields and 15 helicopters and planes. During the drills, Russia's Ilyushin-76MD transport planes dropped five combat vehicles BMD-2 and one armored personnel carrier BTR-D and about 300 Russian and Egyptian paratroops parachuted themselves. Russian and Egyptian paratroopers practiced localization and elimination of militant groups in desert conditions.<sup>3</sup> According to the Russian Defense Ministry, a new uniform for hot climate had been developed for servicemen who were participating in military drills with the Egyptian army.<sup>4</sup>

The exercise has been controlled by operation groups of both countries from the joint command center, which had been formed at the El Hammam military base.<sup>5</sup>

## The main stages of the exercise:

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**On October 18, 2016**, the Russian Airborne servicemen have left al-Umaed military base of the Egyptian Armed Forces in order to hold joint day and night firing with small arms at the Alam al-Hadem range. Through co-firing was used a range of weapons ranging from throwing knives for stealthy destruction of enemy forces, until anti-tank grenade launchers and assault rifles.<sup>6</sup> Military servicemen of both countries have performed more than 600 firing tasks and engaged more than 800 targets at different distances.<sup>7</sup>

**On October 19, 2016**, About 200 servicemen of the Russian and Egyptian Airborne troops have performed joint landing operation from the altitudes of 2,000, 6,000 and 7,000 feet. Joint landing operation was held with use of D-10, T-10V, Arbalet, and MS-5 parachute systems from Il-76MD aircraft of the Russian Aerospace Forces as well as from C-130 and CASA ones of the Egyptian Armed Forces on the Tallet landing site.

On the same day, Russian and Egyptian servicemen attended special medical training. The exercise participants practiced providing medical assistance in conditions of modern combined-arms combat in the

desert. The paratroopers also got familiarized with methods of extreme medicine used by the Russian medical service.

**On October 21, 2016**, Russian Airborne servicemen familiarized the Egyptian counterparts with capabilities of Russian transport aircraft. They demonstrated different ways of loading combat hardware into Il-76MD transport. Russian military servicemen informed their counterparts how to embark more than 40 types of equipment, including self-propelled guns, howitzers, special vehicles, and heavy wheeled and tracked hardware, for transporting.

**On October 24, 2016**, in the main phase of the Russia-Egypt exercise, Russian Airborne troops and Egyptian Airborne troops practiced locating and eliminating illegal armed formations in conditions of desert and liberating a city.<sup>8</sup>

## **Egypt – Russia joint navy exercise "Friendship Bridge 2015"**

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On June 2015, Russia and Egypt conducted the first joint naval exercise, codenamed the "Friendship Bridge 2015".

Russia and Egypt have commenced their joint naval exercise off the Mediterranean Egyptian port of Alexandria, as part of efforts to strengthen the military cooperation between the countries.

The Russian side was represented by the ships of the Black Sea and Baltic Fleets. The Russian vessels in the exercise included the guided missile cruiser Moskva and the catamaran missile corvette Samum, the tanker Ivan Bubnov and landing ship Alexander Shahalin.

Egypt's ships in the "Friendship Bridge 2015" exercises included the frigates Taba, Dumyat and Sharm El-Sheik, two missile patrol boats, April 25 and June 18 and two F-16 fighters.

Coastal staff of both navies has been located in the "United Control Centre" of the Navy of Egypt. The Moskva cruiser was the exercise flagship, housing the mobile headquarters. Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Black Sea Fleet Vice Admiral Valery Kulikov and chief of the Egyptian Navy's combat training department Lieutenant General Mahmud Mufarrah were in command of the drills.

The eight-day exercise has covered: supply and communications at sea, search operations, as well as all forms of defense at sea and firing exercises. During the exercise, Russian and Egyptian Navy ships performed protection tasks over sea routes against different kinds of threats.

"According to the exercise joint command, crew members of the two countries' warships drilled maneuvering in column at the exit from the Alexandria naval base, successfully conducted an exercise to repel an attack of a small target, and in accordance with the set parameters and standards conducted a joint air defense drill in the area of operations with the involvement of the F-16 fighters of the Egyptian Air Force," Russian Navy spokesman said. For the Russian crew it was a good opportunity to practice the drills on the US made modern air crafts.

## Summary

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The joint "Defenders of Friendship-2016" exercise should be analyzed on the background of three main strategic developments: The Russian "come back" to the Middle East as dominant player, Egypt as a regional power and the international cooperation in war against terror.

### Russia

In last years, one of the most significant geostrategic developments in the Middle East has been Russia's increasing political and military involvement. Aside from its deepening military and political involvement in Syria, Russia is improving its relations with Egypt.<sup>9</sup>

As Russia's military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean grows, it was the first-ever deployment of Russian Airborne Troops stocked with their own weapons and equipment on the African continent and one of the first opportunities for the Russian paratroopers to participate in the joint exercise held in the territories in a desert of North Africa.

The joint military exercise is significant for Russia's gradual reemergence as a major player in the Middle East. Egypt is a regional power in the unstable Middle East and strategic cooperation with Egypt is a significant step toward reasserting a regional role that Russia has not enjoyed since 1970.

### Egypt

Russia is one of the main non-Arab supporters of El-Sisi's government and was among the first countries to endorse El-Sisi's presidential bid in 2014. Cairo has sought to strengthen its ties with Moscow, against the backdrop of strained ties with its long-time ally Washington, since the ouster of Islamist president Mohammed Morsi in July 2013. Egypt, though interested in forming stronger relations with Russia, primarily seek to signal to the international community that its foreign policy is not to be dictated by others.

Diversifying the sources of Egypt's armaments became a priority among state strategists after the 30 June Revolution. Overreliance on one provider was now seen as shortsighted. Egypt was also keen to ensure its armaments policy responded to international political developments, including the growing influence of China and Russia.

The "Defenders of Friendship-2016" exercise is a significant step in the fast-growing strategic alliance between Egypt and Russia. Egypt and Russia have never been that close since the era of late President Gamal Abdel Nasser, referring to the level of economic and military cooperation.

### Cooperation in war against terror

The Middle East has witnessed an increase in military exercises in recent years and Egypt is part of this trend. The rise in joint exercises can be explained in light of the increasing intensity of terror threats faced by those countries.

Exercise "Defenders of Friendship-2016", was monitored by representatives of more than 30 countries, among them military observers from 25 countries, as well as ambassadors of CSTO.<sup>10</sup>

Military cooperation and joint exercises are part of the Egyptian foreign policy and strategy and Egypt has carried out 30 joint military exercises in 2016 with 20 Arab and African countries, as well as European countries including France and Russia.<sup>11</sup>

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Defenders of Friendship-2016 joint Russian-Egyptian counter-terrorist exercise, Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation.

<sup>2</sup> Russia, Egypt start first joint military exercise in the desert, Egypt Daily News, October 16, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Defenders of Friendship-2016 joint Russian-Egyptian counter-terrorist exercise, Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation.

<sup>4</sup> Boris Egorov, Defenders of Friendship: Russian Airborne Troops in Egypt, *RIR*, October 16, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Russia-Egypt first anti-terrorism drills. TASS, October 26, 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Russian and Egyptian paratroopers conducted exercises “Defenders of friendship”, True News, October 19, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Airborne servicemen of Russia and Egypt carry out joint firing in course of Defenders of Friendship-2016 joint exercise at day- and nighttime, Military Techno cooperation, October 19, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Russia-Egypt first anti-terrorism drills. TASS, October 26, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> John C. K. Daly, Russia deepens Middle East military footprint with Joint Exercises in Egypt, *Eurasia Daily Monitor* Volume: 13 Issue: 165. October 14, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> The Collective Security Treaty Organization, formed under the framework of the Commonwealth of Independent States, serves as a mutual defense alliance among Russia, Belarus, Armenia and the four Central Asian states except Turkmenistan.

<sup>11</sup> Egypt, Jordan military drills to begin next week, *Ahram Online*, November 2, 2016.