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Looking south

Reports on the expansion of Egypt's naval operations

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The Egyptian Navy's Southern Fleet Command was officially inaugurated on 5 January in a ceremony attended by the president and commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces, the prime minister, the minister of defence, the army chief-of-staffs, the commander-in-chief of the navy and senior military officers. The creation of the new command signals a qualitative leap in the capacities of the Egyptian navy in terms of planning, organisation and military hardware.

The Southern Fleet is composed of destroyer, missile craft, coastal patrol and special forces units. Of particular note are the Amstral-class helicopter carrier the Gamal Abdel-Nasser and the Russian-made Molniya-class missile craft, the Ahmed Fadel, which Moscow presented to Egypt in August 2015.

“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”.

The navy has recently undertaken a series of parallel programmes “to bolster weapons systems, build the individual combatant and develop the infrastructure of ports and naval bases,” said Said. In addition to the Mistral-class helicopter carrier and the Russian-made P-32 Molniya-class missile craft, Said listed other new additions to the fleet including the Suleiman Ezzat missile craft, the FREMM multi-purpose frigate Tahya Misr, the Mistral-class helicopter carrier the Anwar Sadat, a number of Swift craft as well as the recently acquired Type 209/1400-class submarine.

Another crucial component of the navy’s development is the local manufacture of military vessels, from high-speed coastal patrol craft, tugboats and escort boats to Gowind corvettes, manufactured by the Alexandria Arsenal company. The commander of the navy also noted that Egypt will soon receive another French-made Gowind-class corvette after which three more ships of this class, manufactured locally in partnership with France, will be added to the fleet later. He added that with these systems Egypt will have laid the foundations of a modern navy capable of carrying out all the tasks assigned to it by the general command of the Egyptian Armed Forces.

Egypt has the sixth strongest navy in the world, according to a recent ranking by Global Firepower compiled after the addition of the Amstral but before the addition of the Type 209/1400-class submarine. The Iranian navy ranks fourth while those of Israel and Turkey rank 36th and 14th respectively. The Egyptian navy is the only one in the Middle East to possess an aircraft carrier.

According to official military sources, 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 where Egypt has another 1,000km of coastline.

Sources say 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.

According to Mohamed Kamal, a political science professor at Cairo University, there is a race to establish military bases in Djibouti, strategically poised in the Horn of Africa overlooking Bab Al-Mandeb. The US has established its largest military base in Africa there, Camp Lemmonier, where more than 4,000 troops are stationed. France has retained a base since the colonial era, where 2,000 troops are currently deployed. Western countries are not alone in this competition, says Kamal. Since 2011 a division of Japan’s defence force has been stationed in Djibouti. More recently, the Chinese reached an agreement with Djibouti to establish a base, China’s first military installation abroad.

“The Red Sea region is important to all these countries because it is the major transport route for oil,” says Kamal. “The region is becoming an arena for US-Chinese and Chinese-Japanese rivalry. Saudi Arabia has also entered the arena. A few weeks ago the Djibouti foreign minister agreed to a Saudi military presence. He said that Saudi military leaders had inspected parts of the country that will host Saudi military forces.”

Many countries have set their sights on neighbouring Eritrea which also overlooks the Red Sea. There, Kamal said, “in addition to an Israeli and Iranian presence, the UAE is currently building a military base which it has already started to use for aerial operations”.

In 2015 the UAE signed an agreement with Eritrea to use the Assab port for military purposes.

Qatar is also in on the game. According to Kamal, it has been trying to expand its influence in Eritrea for years. It mediated a border dispute between Eritrea and Djibouti and succeeded in brokering a peace agreement between them in Doha in 2010 after which Qatari soldiers were deployed as a peacekeeping force. In June 2016 Doha launched an initiative to mediate between Eritrea and Ethiopia.

“If we expand our scope somewhat to include the east African countries that form an extension of the Red Sea and Horn of Africa we also find a growing Turkish role,” says Kamal. “President Erdogan has made repeated visits to the region.”

The bases and agreements mentioned by Kamal are among the growing signs of international competition to establish a military presence and influence in the Red Sea, Horn of Africa and eastern African region. 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.

General Talaat Moussa, Chairman of the National Security Studies Department at the Higher Nasser Military Academy, explained that the purpose of creating the fleet is to “strengthen security and protect the Egyptian state in its regional spheres of security which, in terms of maritime security, extend from the Zagros Mountains in Iran to the Straits of Gibraltar in the western Mediterranean and from the Horn of Africa to the sources of the Nile”.

“The mission of the fleet within this sphere is to perform vital tasks that include securing the eastern Egyptian coastline and ensuring the safety and stability of maritime traffic at Bab Al-Mandeb and navigation through the Suez Canal.” The task has been made more urgent by “the threats that Iran poses via the Houthi movement, its proxy in Yemen”.

General Moussa stressed that though the fleet’s main mission is to deter potential threats to Egypt it will also perform logistical functions within the Arab regional framework. The fleet is prepared “to offer safety, security and rescue assistance to our Arab brothers in the Gulf”. It will also undertake anti-smuggling operations in the Red Sea where small islands have been used for arms and drugs smuggling.