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## Cairo's Undercover Strongman



Meet Murad Muwafi, the Most Important Man in Egypt You have Never Heard of

BY MAGDY SAMAAAN

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CAIRO -- When Hosni Mubarak fell from power in February 2011, many elements of his regime remained in place -- at least at first. In the year since then, the Egyptian army, the police, and the

business elite have struggled to cope with the tide of revolutionary change washing over the Arab world's most populous country.

Not one of these institutions has made it through the process entirely intact. The deeply unpopular national police force has seen its authority relentlessly **eroded** by protestors and the press. Mubarak-era crony capitalists have **landed** in jail, their old deals under fire from rivals or the courts. And the military, which has ruled the country in the guise of the **Supreme Council of the Armed Forces** (SCAF), has become the focus of popular anger as it struggles to maintain its control. Now the **Muslim Brotherhood**, which has ridden recent electoral victories to a dominant position in the new parliament, is set to advance its own agenda, thus adding a fresh element of unpredictability to the struggle for power.

Yet one pillar of the old regime has survived the turmoil with its authority intact -- if not expanded. It is the **General Intelligence Directorate** (GID), the country's most powerful intelligence agency. As the elderly generals of the SCAF have only fanned the flames of discontent with their clumsy maneuverings in recent months, the GID, which reigns supreme among Egypt's competing security services, has gradually emerged as something like the brain trust of the leadership. Unlike the ruling generals, its officers act outside of the limelight, their workings largely obscure to the media and the public. Its role has enabled the GID (commonly known in Arabic as the *Mukhabarat*) to capitalize on the uncertainty that plagues other reigning institutions. As a result, the man who runs it -- an inscrutable 61-year-old by the name of Murad Muwafi -- is now poised to assume a key role in the next phase of high-level intrigue.

It is understandable that historians of revolution tend to focus on the revolutionaries, the drivers of change. Yet every political upheaval also spawns its share of Muwafi-like figures, the backroom operators who use their command of bureaucratic intrigue to make the leap from the old regime to the new. To be sure, the Egyptian spymaster is no **Talleyrand**. In contrast with that shrewd defender of monarchy who went on to side with the French Revolution and ultimately served as Napoleon's foreign minister, Muwafi is no silky intellectual. His rare appearances on Egyptian TV, for example, have tended to highlight his less-than-perfect command of Arabic -- befitting a long-time military officer who has risen through the ranks by virtue of a prodigious memory and a shrewd understanding of the realities of power. Yet there is no question that his long years as political troubleshooter have uniquely **equipped him** to maneuver through Egypt's turbulent transition.

When, for example, the leaders of the military decided it was time to talk with human rights activists last fall, it was Muwafi who represented the SCAF at the meeting. One factor may have been his ample experience as Egypt's **chief mediator** between Israel and the Palestinians. And when the SCAF dispatched emissaries to Washington last year, Muwafi figured in that delegation, too. (He even had his own private **audience** with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.) U.S. Defense Secretary Leon Panetta made a point of **including** Muwafi among his interlocutors when he visited Egypt in the fall -- right after a **session** of cheesecake and bowling with SCAF supremo Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi. And perhaps most revealingly of all, it was Muwafi -- rather than Tantawi or the Egyptian foreign minister -- to whom Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu **turned** when a mob stormed the Israeli Embassy in Cairo in September.

Yet no one should make the mistake of assuming that the GID's work is restricted to lofty strategic issues. Muwafi's agency is uniquely equipped to navigate the everyday details of domestic politics by virtue of its position as the country's **top domestic security agency**. To this day, no one can get a job in Egypt's vast public bureaucracy without being vetted by the secret police -- and the GID has full access to the files, along with its lower-ranking sister agency, the **State Security Service (rebranded** in March last year as the "National Security Force"). Decades of tracking, interrogating, and blackmailing dissidents give the GID vast leverage over Egypt's new generation of politicians.

Given its past involvement in matters that hardly fit the traditional Western definition of national security (such as management of the government crisis response during Nile flooding), the spy agency almost certainly has extensive knowledge of Egypt's economic affairs as well. "Events since the fall of Mubarak demonstrate that SCAF's plans to control Egyptian society were actually dominated by State Security and the GID, which served as the eyes and the memory of the regime," wrote political analyst Amin Al-Mahdi in a **column** last year. Former army officer Ahmed Ezzat, who started a Facebook page that tracked allegations of corruption among Egypt's military establishment, claims that the GID has used its budget funds to start private companies whose profits benefit high-ranking officers of the intelligence service. What's more, says Ezzat, GID companies have no-bid access to government contracts. "The GID is a state within the state," he **writes**. "There is no professional, financial, or legal oversight of its operations."

Muwafi's background remains something of a mystery. But what is clear is that he would not be where he is without **Omar Suleiman**, his predecessor as Egypt's chief spymaster. During his 18-year reign as head of the GID starting in 1993, Suleiman, one of Mubarak's key confidants, vastly extended the agency's reach, broadening its more traditional intelligence portfolio to include sensitive national security issues ranging from relations with Iran and Israel to monitoring the Islamist opposition. At the same time, however, the GID continued to involve itself in the minutia of everyday Egyptian life. GID operatives have been known to intervene in a sectarian conflict involving a Coptic Christian priest, or to arbitrate a labor dispute between managers of a textile factory and their dismissed employees. Cairo human rights lawyer **Ahmed Seif El-Islam Hamad** recounts a case when sociologists at a provincial university decided to conduct a survey on young people's attitudes towards sex. Unsettled by the potentially sensitive nature of the study, a dean at the university called in a local GID officer for advice.

Muwafi's talents made him a perfect fit for the peculiarly Egyptian national security establishment. Beginning his career as an army officer, he gradually rose to the head of Egyptian military intelligence. (A rare Arabic-language article on his career is shown **here** in a rough version provided by Google Translate.) That background served him well when he took on a job as governor of the strategically sensitive **Northern Sinai District** in 2010. Though he was able to take some credit for improving security in the border zone, he later came under fire for describing the area's itinerant Bedouin tribes as "criminals" who earned profits from their smuggling business with Gaza.

In January 2011, Mubarak promoted Suleiman to the vice presidency in a desperate bid to bolster the foundering regime. But Suleiman, like his boss, failed to live up to the task, and he resigned soon after the dictator's ouster. Meanwhile, State Security found itself facing the indignities of

popular discontent. In early March, a mob attacked its offices in Cairo, seizing files documenting persecution of the government's opponents. But unlike the **seemingly comparable storming** of Stasi headquarters in East Berlin in January 1990, this event didn't mark the end of Egypt's internal security services. If anything, it ended up shifting even more power to the elite GID, which, as part of the military establishment, maintains its most sensitive facilities on inaccessible army bases, out of the reach of the turmoil on the streets.

Muwafi, in any event, has only continued to thrive in the post-Mubarak era. Last spring he was one of the first Egyptian officials contacted by the U.S. after it emerged that the SCAF had freed the brother of al Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri from jail as part of an amnesty for political prisoners. The brother, Muhamad al-Zawahiri, was **re-arrested** just a few days later. Around the same time Muwafi was **mediating** in "**unity talks**" between Hamas and Fatah, as well as participating in discussions with Hamas about a possible move of its headquarters from Damascus to Cairo. (So far, at least, the move has not **materialized**.) When Muwafi made an unprecedented trip to Syria last year in connection with those talks, the event was a source of considerable **disquiet** to both the Americans and the Israelis, who wondered whether Egypt was in the process of reorienting its policies away from the relatively pro-Israel line of the Mubarak era. Muwafi was also **credited** with helping to broker the **prisoner exchange** that freed Israeli soldier Gilad Schalit from Hamas captivity.

But Muwafi -- though rarely figuring in Egyptian media coverage -- has continued to expand his domestic portfolio as well. As SCAF bosses continued to make misstep after misstep, it was Muwafi who engaged the regime's opponents in two separate meetings in October 2011. Hamad, the human rights lawyer, who participated in one of the sessions, recalls Muwafi saying that he would report on the talks directly to Tantawi. The encounter was revealing for the insights it afforded into the Machiavellian mindset of the governing military elite. When some of the activists present suggested firing Prime Minister Esam Sharaf, at the time trying to negotiate a delicate course between the SCAF and the demands of protestors in the streets, Muwafi, according to Hamad, responded, "If we let him go now he will become a national hero." And when the oppositionists demanded the government lift the state of emergency effective in the country since 1971, Muwafi declined on the grounds that "it will look like we succumbed to American pressure."

There is scant indication that the GID or Egypt's military rulers have changed their thinking in any substantial ways. Even today, many months after Mubarak's downfall, activists tell of development projects that have been scotched by the intelligence service's refusal to grant a "security approval." It is widely rumored that the **recent raids** on 17 Egyptian and foreign NGOs, ostensibly triggered by funding irregularities, were based on reports supplied by the intelligence agency. "The SCAF places more trust in the intelligence service because it's part of the military," says Bahi El Din Hassan, head of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies. "Reports from the Interior Ministry" -- which controls the police -- "don't enjoy the same sort of credibility."

The dialogue Muwafi started with the activists did not continue. "It seems that the mission was linked with its timing," says Hassan. "That was a period when the SCAF was making lots of mistakes in its management of the transition period and criticism of its actions was rising." It

may be that the Muslim Brotherhood's success at the polls has convinced the generals that they no longer need to take the secular opposition into account; many observers of the Egyptian political scene suspect that the SCAF and the Brotherhood may have already negotiated a covert power-sharing deal. But no matter what happens next, expect to see Murad Muwafi playing a pivotal role.