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Syria: Egypt Joins the Fray to Support Russia-Backed Coalition

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Finally, Egypt has taken a clear stance on Syria. This is an event of great importance to drastically change the situation. Speaking on the Portuguese TV network RTP on November 22, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi publicly affirmed his support for the forces of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. In response to the question of whether Egypt will send troops to Syria or not he stated: «*Our priority is to support our Army in issues such as controlling some parts of Libya and dealing with extremist forces for establishing peace, including in Syria and Iraq*».

President al-Sisi restored diplomatic relations with Syria after coming to power in 2013.

Last month, Egypt backed a Russian-backed motion calling for a ceasefire in Syria. Egypt had known the support for the Russian measure would put it at odds with the West and Saudi Arabia. Riyadh responded by suspending oil shipments to the country but the Egyptian government does not give in under pressure. For instance, it has defied the US and Saudi Arabia by refusing to get involved in the Yemen's conflict.

Citing «well-informed Arab sources», Lebanese newspaper *Al-Safir* reported that 18 Egyptian pilots arrived at Hamah military airbase in Syria on November 12. The servicemen are part of a

special helicopter squadron. A source «close to the Syria file» told the newspaper that a large deployment of Egyptian troops will arrive in Syria in late January to take part in military operations «not limited to air support at Hama airbase».

Last month, Syrian security services chief Ali Mamlouk met with Egyptian officials in his first public foreign visit in five years to discuss Egypt publicly backing the Syrian government. According to Middle East Observer, the first group of 4 high-ranking Egyptian officers from the Egyptian General Staff entered Syria a month ago and was deployed in the Syrian army's base in Damascus. The military officials visited the armoured division stationed near Daraa and an airbase in Sweida province.

Also last month, Syrian National Security Bureau head Ali Mamlouk visited Cairo to meet Khaled Fawzy, the head of Egypt's General Intelligence Service. The two sides agreed to coordinate political positions and strengthen cooperation in «the fight against terror» according to Syria's Sana news agency.

Egypt's open support of the Russia-backed coalition in Syria is a game changing event of fundamental importance. In the West, the war in Syria has been widely believed to be a conflict between Sunni and Shia forces - the 1400 old Islam schism. Now the largest Arab Sunni state has taken the side of the Syria's government to become a coalition ally with Russia. The sectarian interpretation of the conflict is not valid anymore.

The conflict is about fighting terrorists. As the Egyptian president noted he believes that the national army the Syrian government forces are best positioned to combat extremists and restore stability in the war-torn nation.

Recently, Russia and Egypt have intensified their bilateral ties in many areas, including defense cooperation. Joint military exercises were held in Egypt in October. Both countries see eye-to-eye on Libya and many other issues.

There is another event to demonstrate the strengthening of the Russia-supported coalition joined by Egypt. According to Iranian Fars News Agency, Iranian Defense Minister Hossein Dehghan stated on November 26 that Tehran could allow Russia to use Nojeh airbase near Hamadan for Moscow's aerial operation against terrorists in Syria. Also, Mr. Dehghan told reporters that purchase of Russian-made Sukhoi Su-30 fighter jets is on the agenda.

The same day, Victor Ozerov, the Russian upper house of parliament's defense committee chair, said Russia could use Iran's Hamadan airbase in case the Admiral Kuznetsov aircraft carrier moves away from Syria. On August 16, Russian bombers used Iran's Nojeh to launch attacks on terrorist positions in Syria.

On November 26, Syrian armed forces and allies managed to seize control of Hanano, key district in the northwestern city of Aleppo, which has been a flash point over the past few

months. After Aleppo is retaken, the Russia-supported coalition in Syria will control vast swathes of land in the country. With the government of Bashar Assad firmly in power, the post-war settlement no longer seems to be a pipe dream and the US-led coalition will hardly be the one to call the shots.

Russia's military effort in Syria has become an operation of a much broader scope than it was back in September 2015, when the first Russian aircraft flew its first sortie. The operation has marked Russia's spectacular return to the Middle East as a major player. New actors, like China, Egypt and others, get involved. Interaction between the coalition members gets closer as illustrated by Russia and Iran.

Egypt's decision to support the Syria's government provides a good opportunity to influence the events in the region in a positive way.

In broad terms, the teaming up of large countries indicates that a regional anti-terrorism entity or even a military block independent from the US might emerge at some point in future.