

MIDDLE EAST

Egypt Opens Criminal Inquiry Over New York Times Article

By DECLAN WALSH JAN. 10, 2018

Egypt's prosecutor general has ordered a criminal investigation over a New York Times article that described a covert effort by Egyptian intelligence to sway public opinion in favor of accepting President Trump's decision recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

The article "undermines Egypt's security and public peace, and harms the country's public interest," the prosecutor, Nabil Sadek, said in a statement.

The investigation comes after a torrent of furious commentary in Egypt's pro-government media and in Parliament, where lawmakers denounced the article, published online on Saturday, as part of an international conspiracy to embarrass Egypt.

Egypt officially supports a future Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital. But The Times reported that Egypt, along with other Arab nations, had quietly acquiesced to Mr. Trump's decision last month to recognize Jerusalem as the Israeli capital and to move the U.S. Embassy there.

Mostafa el-Gendy, a lawmaker, said of The Times: "They are truly at war with Egypt, and are seeking to bring down the nation, not just the state or the president."

The Times quoted leaked audio recordings of an intelligence officer, Capt. Ashraf al-Kholi, coaching several talk-show hosts, as well as a prominent actress, about how to persuade their audiences to accept the American position on Jerusalem.

In an interview, one of the hosts, Azmi Megahed, confirmed the authenticity of the recording, and described the intelligence officer as a longtime acquaintance.

After the article was published, Egypt's State Information Service said in a statement that no one named Ashraf al-Kholi worked for the intelligence service and denied the accuracy of the Times report.

Mr. Megahed then retracted his original statement, and in an Egyptian television interview said The Times had misquoted him. "This is the first time I've heard of this Kholi man," he said.

The same audio recordings provided to The Times were later broadcast by an Istanbul-based television network linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, which Egypt has banned as a terrorist group. The suggestion of a connection with the Brotherhood added to the outrage from supporters of the Egyptian government.

The speaker of Parliament, Ali Abdel Aal, said the article proved that The Times was allied with the Brotherhood and with Qatar, which has supported the Brotherhood, and was stoking controversy in advance of presidential elections, state media reported.

The State Information Service, which also called the Times report “inappropriate,” said that Egypt had repeatedly declared its “inalienable position on Jerusalem.” Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry told reporters, “Egypt does not speak with two faces.”

In addition, a lawyer in Alexandria lodged a criminal complaint against The Times. Pro-government television anchors called on The Times to explain how the recordings ended up with the Brotherhood-affiliated channel, and suggested that the newspaper was secretly allied with Qatar. Egypt is one of four Arab nations that imposed a punishing boycott on Qatar last June, accusing it of financing Islamist terrorism and sheltering Brotherhood leaders.

“Our story was a deeply reported, consequential piece of journalism, and we stand fully behind it,” said Michael Slackman, The Times’s international editor. “We disclosed in the original report that the audio recordings were provided to The Times by an intermediary supportive of the Palestinian cause, but we had no agenda other than giving our readers the facts they needed to know.”

Egypt, which fought three wars against Israel, has positioned itself for decades as a champion of the Palestinian cause, which remains an emotional cause for most Arabs. But in recent years, critics have often accused Egypt of tacitly aligning itself with Israel, a charge that the government of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has denied.

The article comes at a delicate time for Egypt politically. The government said Monday that the first round of presidential elections would take place on March 26, with a result due on May 1. Mr. Sisi, who is expected to run for re-election, faces little opposition since his principal challenger, former Prime Minister Ahmed Shafik, pulled out of the race.

“I saw that I will not be the ideal person to lead the state during the coming period,” Mr. Shafik said on Twitter.

Mr. Shafik’s lawyers said that officials had pressed him to quit the race, threatening him with corruption prosecutions.

Correction: January 11, 2018

Because of an editing error, an earlier version of this article misstated the number of countries that imposed a boycott against Qatar in June. It is four, not five.

Follow Declan Walsh on Twitter: @declanwalsh

A version of this article appears in print on January 11, 2018, on Page A6 of the New York edition with the headline: Egypt Opens An Inquiry Over Article In The Times.