

Egypt's President el-Sissi says Iraq, Syria militants headed to Libya

09/11/2017 06:40 by admin

Sharm el-Sheikh (Egypt): Egypt's president said the defeat of the extremist Islamic State group in Iraq and Syria was likely to have forced militants to seek a safe haven in neighboring Libya, from which they will later cross into his country where his security forces have been battling militants in the Sinai peninsula and, more recently, in its vast western desert.

File pic - Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi participates in a meeting with a group of young people from around the world in Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh

President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi also said Egypt's ongoing arms buildup was designed in part to equip the country to deal with terrorism and redress the "strategic imbalance" in the region created by conflict and turmoil engulfing several countries in the area like Iraq, Syria, Libya and Yemen.

Egypt has since 2014 spent more than \$10 billion on French-made Rafale fighter jets and helicopter carriers, MiG-29 fighter jets and assault helicopters from Russia and submarines from Germany. Moreover, Egypt receives \$1.3 billion in annual U.S. aid.

El-Sissi would not be drawn into specifics about militants leaving the battlefields in Iraq and Syria after they lost almost all territory they seized in 2013 and 2014. He said it was only "natural" for them to move to Libya, where mostly Islamist militias wield influence over large swathes of territory, and eventually to Egypt.

"We must have the military capabilities that compensate for that imbalance in the region and to counter terrorism," he said. "This is a threat not just faced by us, but also by Europe," he told a wide-ranging, two-hour news conference in the Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh in southern Sinai.

There are no reliable estimates for the number of militants fighting Egyptian security forces, but they are believed by experts to number in the low thousands. Ominously, there has been an uptick in recent months in attacks in Egypt's western desert close to the Libyan border, raising questions on whether the area has become a second theater of operations for the militants beside Sinai.

The latest such attack was last month, when authorities said 16 police officers were killed in what appeared to be an elaborate ambush. Security officials, however, said the number was as high as more than 50.

El-Sissi said subsequent operations by his security forces have killed the 14 militants he said participated in the attack. A "foreign" militant who also took part was captured alive, he said. He also suggested that the militants were planning to attack a desert Coptic Christian monastery. He did not elaborate, but added that joint army and police forces were actively combing the entire length of the country's porous borders with Libya to the west and Sudan to the south.

A spate of attacks earlier this year that targeted Egypt's minority Christians were blamed by authorities on militants based and trained in Libya. One attack hit Christians traveling on a quiet side road making their way to a remote desert monastery.

El-Sissi said up to 20 vehicles loaded with weapons, ammunition and fighters have been destroyed in the past week, all in the vast western desert near the Libyan border.

El-Sissi also delivered a stern, though implicit, warning to Ethiopia, which is finalizing construction of a massive dam on the Blue Nile and will eventually start filling a giant reservoir behind it to power Africa's largest hydroelectric dam, which Egypt fears would significantly reduce its vital share of the river's water, on which it's heavily dependent.

Ethiopia maintains the dam is essential to its development and has repeatedly sought to assure the Egyptians that it would not hurt its interests. However, Cairo's efforts to persuade the country to engage in closer coordination over the dam appear to have made little headway, causing alarm in mostly desert Egypt, home to 95 million people.

"We positively view the developmental needs of our friends and brothers in Ethiopia," said the general-turned-president. "Water to us is not merely a question of development, it's a matter of life and death. We are capable of protecting our national security and water to us is a question of national security. Full stop."

The Egyptian leader did not say what Egypt intended to do if Ethiopia continued to build the dam and fill the water reservoir without consulting with his government, but Cairo has publicly ruled out military action. However, top Egyptian officials have in recent months been hardening their rhetoric on Ethiopia, reflecting widespread exacerbation over its perceived lack of cooperation over the dam issue.

El-Sissi has since taking office in 2014 given priority to overhauling the country's economy, but his efforts have been hampered in part by the costly war against the militants and rapid population growth. On Wednesday, he said he was working to reduce the country's heavy dependence on the vital, but battered tourism sector to spare the economy the jolts it suffers as a consequence of terror attacks.

Russia suspended all flights to Egypt in 2015 after IS militants downed a Russian airliner over Sinai shortly after it took off from Sharm el-Sheikh. All 224 people on board were killed. Britain, another major source of visitors to Egypt, suspended all flights to Sharm el-Sheikh following the incident.

On Wednesday, el-Sissi pledged to restore security to the country, but made clear he was not doing that to revitalize the tourism sector.

"We never nagged (the Russians) and never will" to restore flights, he said, adding that he appreciated Moscow's concern for the safety of its citizens.

- AP