

# Egyptian army: Defining a new political and societal pact

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For a proper consideration of the question of the role of the Egyptian military in a post-Mubarak Egypt, some background is useful. Since the death of President Anwar Sadat, a tacit agreement has defined the relations between the state and the army in Egypt. The army was willing to accept a role that was subordinate to the civil state for as long as a former officer, a military man in civilian suits, headed the executive. The military would not interfere in politics, provided that its economic empire was safe, and it had access to some senior jobs within the civil service and the public sector. It was also clear that the army was the last shield and the main sword of the regime. However, every president was reluctant to use it; the logic of the system required that the head of state did not owe anything to anybody, and using the army would have been an admission of failure.

In 1989, the regime took a number of preventive measures before firing the popular defence minister Abd al-Halim Abu Ghazala in 1989. This included sending Abu Ghazala's main clients outside Cairo on the day he was fired. Thereafter, it repeatedly briefed officers for months. This incident illustrates how the regime is sometimes unsure that the army will abide by the tacit rules.

### **The pact: state and army**

On more general grounds, the regime had developed considerable skill in the art of preventing military coups.

1. The screening of youth who were admitted to the military academy and the officers' corps was intense. After his appointment as defence minister, the first task of General Mohamed Hussein Tantawi was to eliminate any jihadist or Muslim Brotherhood presence in the army, and he seems to have succeeded.
2. The presidential guard was considerably developed.
3. Four security services watched strategic roads and positions: military intelligence, military police, mukhabarat (intelligence) and state security.
4. Rigid rules governed coordination between the various military units and the communication of instructions.
5. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) was organised in such a manner that collective action among members of the council, let alone a military coup, was extremely difficult to achieve: only the president had the power to summon a meeting, there was a regular rotation of members, and nobody could control the whole apparatus.
6. It is safe to assume that only completely reliable officers were appointed to key positions such as leadership of the presidential guard, and of the central area.

Despite his recent claims, former president Hosni Mubarak tried to change the rules of the game, grooming his civilian son for the top job. Moreover, the latter had an ambitious programme to redefine the Egyptian social pact which had three aims: keeping key sectors of the economy in Egyptian hands; producing goods at affordable costs for the middle class and petite bourgeoisie; and providing jobs and safety networks for the children of these classes. Its main drawback was that it proved to be unsustainable. It is easily overlooked that the officers' corps had a vested interest in each component of the pact. For instance, young officers needed goods at affordable prices. The top brass was deeply committed to the 'Egyptianity' of the economy and began to criticise, increasingly

vocally, the privatisation process embarked on by Mubarak and supported by his son Gamal.

The president's handling of military affairs also evolved over the past ten years. He kept a close and watchful eye on military issues, and took care to appoint good professionals to key posts. Merit was the main criterion, it was claimed; other considerations were irrelevant. The informal official explanation was the fear of a terrible faux pas that would lead to regional conflagration, with Israelis and Palestinians going crazy, or with the fighting between them extending into the Sinai Peninsula. Commentators believed the true rationale was different: good professionals who were busy with the task of upgrading the army, they said, would not interfere in politics. The fact that both Mubarak and Tantawi were much older than the military top brass was supposed to give them considerable leverage.

It should be noted that Sami Enan, the chief of staff, despite being a remarkable professional, did not come from the crucial infantry or cavalry sectors of the army. This was supposed to make it more difficult for him to build informal networks. Another noteworthy fact is that Tantawi was never seen as a likely candidate for the presidency. Lastly, Gamal Mubarak attempted to improve his relations with the officers' corps: visiting military units, going to the Nasser academy, and so forth. The effectiveness of these efforts was often debated in journalist and official circles. We now know the answer.

There were warning signs that things were not going smoothly for Gamal. First, when the president collapsed during a speech in parliament in 2003, Tantawi and officers of the presidential guard took firm control. They even determined when Gamal could see his father. It was clear that they held the keys to a transition. Second, it was clear that the military did not like Gamal's great design for the economy, and that they did not like the businessmen who were his allies and beneficiaries of his scheme. This was emphasised by many leaks to the opposition media. The raqaba idariyya (an administrative body where the military holds key positions) even arrested some of Gamal's aides in their offices. Last, it was widely known in Cairo that the top brass had expressed strong reservations last year about, and probably vetoed, Gamal's presidential ambitions.

## **The crisis**

It was known, in political circles, that the army had the plans and skills to enable it to quell an uprising, especially if this would be centred in one location. What was unknown was the will of the military to use force, and its reaction toward a generalised uprising.

The army has certain assets – material and intangible – that must be protected. All the polls indicate that it is the most respected institution in the country. It is seen both as the only legal rational institution, and as a family that takes care of its children. It is also seen, rightly or wrongly, as the least corrupted state institution, and as the only one that really cares about the national interest. This popularity ultimately determined Mubarak's destiny: the army was not ready to compromise this asset for an autocratic head of state who was, anyway, ending his presidency, and who displayed such incompetence. Although unlikely, this asset will be in danger if the crisis in the police forces causes the army to enter into more repressive operations.

Complaints about the behaviour of the military police and military intelligence have been growing stronger. It is difficult to know whether the current instability will provide a rationale for authoritarian military solutions, or will, on the contrary, hasten a democratic transition, and how it will shape the latter. The military has recently been making the

right noises, and gives the impression that it favours a quick transition. But there is also a strong case for a slower approach that will allow for the drafting of another constitution, neutralising the executive instead of giving it legitimacy.

The army's best-case scenario is a democratic regime that will be committed to peace with Israel – which is widely seen as an prerequisite for Egypt to be able to confront its economic and demographic challenges, with an elected head of state who would come from its ranks and protect its interests, and with real competition between political parties. The question is whether this is possible. The Muslim Brotherhood eased the situation by saying it would not try to seize power by presenting a candidate or by seeking a majority in parliamentary elections. Of course, it will try to extract a price for its support or for its benevolent attitude. The main problem for the army is to find common ground with the Brotherhood and other new political forces, and to conceive a new institutional setting that will give the military a decisive say in foreign policy and in strategic issues, and a leading role in the defence of a new constitution. The Turkish model is often cited as an example – but the Egyptian situation may be different.

An important concern for the military top brass is the need to protect the army's discipline and to avoid internal dissension, or at least to keep it at a manageable level. It seems that this factor – the need for minimal consensus and cohesion – is often underestimated, and helps to explain the army's behaviour during the crisis. It moved quickly, and still does, when a consensus was easy to reach – for instance, to get rid of Gamal Mubarak and his allies, including former minister Habib al 'Adli and other businessmen. On other issues, the plan was designed to avoid internal dissension. Nobody within the ranks could disagree with instructions that state buildings should be protected, or the prohibition of the use of force against the population. But, things are likely to become more difficult, and this may be a good argument for a transfer of power to civilians. For the army, the need for cohesion is, more often than not, a good argument in favour of its 'sticking to its mission' as defined by the law, customs and ethos. The army will also do its utmost to prevent internal contestation.

We know nothing about the debates within the SCAF. This is well-known Egyptian military tradition: heated internal debates, but external unity. Nevertheless, some remarks can still be made on this issue.

1. The defence minister and head of the SCAF, Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, is much older than the other members of the SCAF. This is, for him, a double-edged sword. On the one hand, being a senior brings prestige and authority. On the other hand, he could easily become isolated. Furthermore, he is from a relatively modest social background, another factor which could be both an asset and a liability. He is known to be strongly committed to the social pact that Gamal tried to dismantle.
2. Others on the Council are supposed to be excellent professionals, with no real interest in politics. It remains to be seen whether this is true or not.
3. It is very difficult, as every student of small group dynamics knows, for twenty persons to reach an agreement. Decision-making on the SCAF will probably be slow. However, some strong men may emerge. The need for consensus will be important; the army cannot afford the luxury of division. Special attention will be given to minority views.
4. Some officers will likely emerge as 'more equal' than others. But it is too early to ascertain this.

5. Omar Suleiman lost his seat on the Council. But that is not necessarily the end of his career. He is a character that should be watched.

A remark is necessary about the impact of American pressure on the Egyptians, as discussed in media reports. It seems to me that this impact is over-estimated. Firstly, it is clear (from Wikileaks documents) that the US did not succeed in forcing Egypt's military top brass into restructuring the army in a manner that they perceived to be contrary to Egypt's national interests. Secondly, we should ask how the army might have behaved without US pressure. The answer seems obvious: much the same. It is deeply committed, for instance, to the agreements with Israel, and it drew, as soon as 12 February, a red line: Egypt will respect its international commitments.

A final remark about the army's economic interests and its economic policy is appropriate. Many commentators think that protecting its economic empire is crucial to the calculations of the military top brass. This empire includes public works firms, the oil olive industry, the food processing industry, manufacturing of televisions and other goods, the weapons industry, and so forth. I do not believe this is an immediate source of concern. Nobody is seriously considering raising it. The military's control in these sectors is seen, rightly or wrongly, as a shield against big capitalists. The question of eventual civilian control over army finances and operations is buried for the time being. The real question, however, is the army's commitment to economic reform. Its first steps, even before Mubarak's resignation, were to eliminate the economic reformists. Most of the latter were unpopular and had reputations for corruption. But there are legitimate concerns. Has economic reform been buried with the reformists? Time will tell.

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