

Egypt's Military in Power: Dynamics, Challenges, Prospects

by [Jeffrey White \(/experts/jeffrey-white\)](/experts/jeffrey-white)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Jeffrey White \(/experts/jeffrey-white\)](/experts/jeffrey-white)

Jeffrey White is an adjunct defense fellow at The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of the Levant and Iran.



Brief Analysis

Egypt is now effectively under military control and will likely remain so for some months. The Supreme Military Council (SMC) holds effective decisionmaking authority, although a civilian cabinet remains in place. The SMC has pledged to make a swift transition to a new civilian government, but to date it has retained state-of-emergency powers and has not invited any civilians to share in its deliberations. What happens within this body -- its dynamics, processes, and evolution -- will be a key to Egypt's future. And although the military is currently displaying a united face, there is no guarantee it will remain so going forward. Indeed, human factors, good and bad, will influence how the SMC plays its role, whether it is able to meet the demands placed on it, and whether Egypt's transition to democracy is smooth, rough, or even aborted.

The Moment

The moment they took power, the members of the SMC committed themselves to a hazardous enterprise. Egypt's political stability, economy, and social fabric were tearing. The military acted to prevent the situation from descending into chaos. And from all appearances, it did so reluctantly, only after giving the regime the opportunity to stabilize the country and right itself. This was not a case of the military seeking power -- the responsibility was thrust upon them.

Nevertheless, the SMC now has both the responsibility and the power to deal with the crisis. It commands a substantial measure of popular goodwill based on its careful handling of the demonstrations, but still faces a reservoir of suspicion about its role in the regime and its intentions for the future.

The 1952 revolution and the rise of Gamal Abdul Nasser provide at least an indication of how an Egyptian revolution can go bad. After the coup ended the monarchy, any progress toward democracy was scuttled by military ambition and political infighting. Egypt in 2011 is very different from Egypt in 1952, but the outcome of the previous revolution -- nearly sixty years of autocratic rule -- should give caution about the latest revolution, which is by no means guaranteed to produce the democratic outcome that many desire.

The Supreme Military Council

Limited reporting indicates that the SMC consists of some fifteen to twenty senior officers, many of whom were little known (or unknown) before the takeover. The size of the council suggests it is intended to ensure that all

interests in the military are represented, and to diffuse individual responsibility. All of the major components appear to be represented, although the army seems to be the strongest contingent, as would be expected. Given the SMC's composition, factions could well develop over time.

The officers on the SMC are all long-serving professional soldiers, many with substantial exposure to U.S. forces and modern military concepts. Although this does not mean they are democrats in uniform, it does suggest they may be more open to political reform than their counterparts following the 1952 revolution, who were trained and influenced by the Soviet Union.

Field Marshal Muhammad Hussein Tantawi, the defense minister, has emerged as the SMC's active face and probably commands some measure of loyalty due to his rank, position, and history. He already has at least one likely ally on the council in Maj. Gen. Mohsen al-Fangari, his deputy defense minister and now the SMC spokesman.

A second key officer is army Lt. Gen. Sami Hafez Enan, the chief of staff. In addition to enjoying some of the same advantageous as Tantawi, he commands the army, Egypt's largest and most powerful military branch.

Indeed, the Tantawi-Enan relationship is likely key at the moment. Tantawi does not seem to be personally ambitious, but that could change. Little is known of Enan, and even less of the other officers. It will be important to see how their relationships work in practice, who clusters around whom, and what other senior officers emerge as key players.

Some potentially important individuals to watch are air force commander Reda Mahmoud Hafez Muhammad (who is on the SMC), as well as Central Region commander Maj. Gen. Hassan al-Rawani, the various field army commanders, and perhaps the director of military intelligence, all of whom are on the council. Whatever the case, the SMC appears to be dominated by army officers.

In the near term, the military's goals will be to maintain discipline (both within military ranks and within society), restore social and economic order, ensure a smooth transition to a (not necessarily democratic) successor system, preserve its position in the state and society (including its role as Egypt's defender against internal and external threats), and maintain the military relationship with the United States. The SMC will have to pursue these goals in a complex and dynamic environment.

Dynamics

How the SMC works internally will be important to how well it deals with the challenges it faces. There are perhaps three models for how the SMC will operate: a military hierarchy in which a senior officer dominates the proceedings, a collective leadership with senior officers representing various interests within the military but cooperating to rule, or the emergence of internal competition for power and influence centered on key officers. Some observers do not consider Tantawi strong enough to dominate the council, so this role could fall to Enan (who may be more aggressive and energetic) or someone else not yet identified. Alternatively, Tantawi could prove more ambitious and capable than some suspect.

For now, collective leadership seems more likely, with Tantawi as the front man and perhaps Enan as the most influential behind-the-scenes figure. This arrangement could prevent fractures from developing within the SMC and mitigate personality conflicts.

Over time, however, and in the face of the pressures and opportunities afforded by exercising power, the SMC could become factionalized based on rival personalities and competing interests. Labor unrest, increasing prices on food and oil products, and unrealistic expectations about reform and economic improvement among the opposition and general public will challenge the council. And the fluid political situation and likely stumbles by some senior officers will provide opportunities for the ambitious. Indeed, it is important to keep in mind that the Egyptian military

contains multiple centers of power, with senior officers standing at their heads.

The SMC will also be in a dynamic relationship with various opposition elements. The council members likely have a very complex and skeptical view of the opposition, given the manner in which it brought down one of their own by toppling Mubarak. The SMC has already met with the youth movement, and established a committee to revise the constitution.

The inexperience of some opposition elements and their fragmented nature will allow the SMC to play them to a degree, but how successfully and to what ends remains to be seen. Council members may even seek allies within the opposition to support their goals in the transition process. Human ambition being what it is, they will likely find some.

Although its focus so far has been on domestic matters, the SMC will also become involved in important external dynamics. Two relationships seem most important: with the U.S. government and military, and with Israel. The council will need to maintain good relations with the United States at both the political and military levels during the transition period, which will make it difficult for council members to frustrate the democratization process. Nevertheless the military will not be subservient to U.S. interests, especially where these impinge on what it regards as Egypt's national interest or the interests of the Egyptian military.

The SMC will also need to ensure a stable relationship with Israel through the transition. It has already moved to do so by stating its intention to adhere to all of Egypt's international agreements. Inevitably, though, it will have to deal with controversial issues such as Gaza, the security situation in the Sinai, and perhaps pressure to dissolve the bilateral peace treaty as emerging Egyptian political groups seek to exploit nationalist sentiment. The SMC will need to keep such pressures under control, particularly if relations with the opposition and external dynamics impinge on the internal processes of the council itself.

Outlook

Not much can be predicted at this point with any expectation of accuracy. There are many unknowns and uncertainties in the situation.

The SMC must deal with major challenges both within Egypt and in its external relations. Internally, it has the tasks of asserting its authority, restoring normalcy, removing the most objectionable vestiges of the old regime, and making the transition to a new regime. Externally, it must deal with the United States and Israel.

At the same time, the SMC faces the dangers of factionalization, the seduction of power, and simply failing to overcome the challenges it faces. It has no guarantee of success or even a clear path to it.

At least four scenarios could emerge in the coming months. First, the military forms an effective partnership with opposition elements and proceeds toward real political reform and transition to democracy. Second, the military attempts to rush the process in order to return to the barracks and avoid direct responsibility for mounting political and economic difficulties, or at least to reduce its overt role; this approach would produce a flawed or incomplete transition. Third, the SMC employs a divide-and-conquer strategy against the opposition in an attempt to retain essential control. Fourth, the military slowly gains power by default in response to a weak and fragmented opposition.

In the last scenario, the military might find itself in the difficult position of not having a competent partner for a transfer of power. At the moment, one of the first two scenarios seems most likely, but the others are well within the realm of possibility. Much will depend on how well and for what purposes the SMC plays the game in the period ahead. Mistakes will be made by all those involved, and new crises may develop. Revolutions are not deterministic processes, and as in most human affairs, the laws of unanticipated consequences and unexpected outcomes apply.

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