

# Egypt: A Moment of Change and Challenge

by [J. Scott Carpenter \(/experts/j-scott-carpenter\)](/experts/j-scott-carpenter), [David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

Feb 7, 2011

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[J. Scott Carpenter \(/experts/j-scott-carpenter\)](/experts/j-scott-carpenter)

J. Scott Carpenter is an adjunct fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.



[David Schenker \(/experts/david-schenker\)](/experts/david-schenker)

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Program on Arab Politics. He is the former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs.



Brief Analysis

**O**n February 2, 2011, J. Scott Carpenter, Dina Guirguis, David Schenker, and Robert Satloff addressed a special Policy Forum luncheon at The Washington Institute. Mr. Carpenter is the Institute's Keston Family fellow and director of Project Fikra: Defeating Extremism through the Power of Ideas. Ms. Guirguis is a Keston Family research fellow with Project Fikra. Mr. Schenker is the Aufzien fellow and director of the Program on Arab Politics at the Institute. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks; Dr. Satloff's remarks were published separately as [PolicyWatch #1751 \(templateC05.php?CID=3303\)](#).

**Watch this event at C-Span.org (<http://www.c-span.org/Events/Washington-Institute-Discussion-on-Situation-in-Egypt/10737419362-1/>)**

## J. Scott Carpenter

**P**lacing Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution and Egypt's current unrest into historical context is important when discussing broader transition in the Middle East. In the 1990s, a phenomenon known as the Third Wave swept across Central and Eastern Europe, promoting democratic political transition throughout the former Soviet Union, Africa, and Latin America. The Middle East was notably absent from this global transformation. After the September 11 attacks, members of the Bush administration began asking why this political opening had failed to occur in the region. Many argued that such a transformation was simply impossible in Arab lands, but President Bush called these claims "the soft bigotry of low expectations."

Today, many are asking whether this is truly a revolutionary moment in Egypt, one that might usher in an Islamist, theocratic takeover of a broad-based political movement. While certainly revolutionary, these events are not the result of a democratic domino effect in the region, nor do they represent an ideological revolution akin to Iran's in 1979. Rather, events in Egypt and Tunisia more closely parallel the Romanian revolution of 1989 (where a popular

mass demonstration led to the ousting and execution of President Nicolae Ceausescu) or Turkey's political transition in 1980 (where the military united opposition leaders and established a constitution).

In short, although this is indeed a critical moment for Egypt, the country is not yet at a point of transition. Nothing has changed, either fundamentally or structurally. President Obama has committed the United States to transition in Cairo, but Hosni Mubarak's statements are seemingly part of a larger survival strategy. If given another eight months in office, both he and the National Democratic Party (NDP) will likely reassert themselves.

## **Dina Guirguis**

**C**urrently, the Egyptian opposition includes several key players. Among them is the National Association for Change (NAC), an umbrella organization established by former International Atomic Energy Agency chief and Nobel laureate Mohamed ElBaradei. It consists of Ayman Nour (who ran against Mubarak in 2005 and was subsequently imprisoned), Kefaya movement figures George Ishaq and Abdelgelil Mustafa, and others. ElBaradei may step forward during the transition despite domestic and international reservations about his ability to lead.

Another faction, the People's Parliament, consists of 100 opposition figures of various stripes. Established after the November 2010 elections as a protest parliament parallel to the national legislature, it includes members of the Wafd, Karama, and al-Ghad Parties, the National Association for Change, and the Muslim Brotherhood, which currently holds fifteen seats.

Other figures are establishing an opposition coalition that includes some co-opted (or "loyal") opposition parties such as Tagamu, Wafd, and Nasserites, as well as other independent opposition forces. The Muslim Brotherhood, though not a member of this coalition, has chosen to negotiate with newly appointed vice president Omar Suleiman on its own. In addition, a group of public figures, self-designated the "Council of the Wise," which includes scholar/activist Amr Hamzawy and businessman Naguib Sawiris, is currently in negotiations with Suleiman regarding constitutional reform, the lifting of Egypt's notorious emergency law, and other reforms; the council, however, is not explicitly insistent on Mubarak's immediate departure. It is not clear whether the council or its requests are representative of the majority of the demonstrators, who have largely been absent from negotiations with the vice president, as has the ElBaradei-led NAC. Representatives of both groups continue to insist on Mubarak's immediate departure as a condition to any negotiations with Suleiman.

The Muslim Brotherhood has not been the movement's key driver thus far. Demonstrations have seen little in the way of religious slogans, and although some figures have issued overt calls to Islam and Islamism, the people have largely rejected them.

As for Mubarak, he has promised not to run for another term in the scheduled September election. He has also pledged to address legislative election fraud complaints, reinstate opposition figures in the legislature, make constitutional amendments, and move toward free and fair presidential elections in September. These promises could result in a parliamentary shift in which the opposition might receive up to a third of the seats. Additionally, amendments to constitutional articles 76 and 77 -- which govern conditions on presidential candidacy and term limits -- could be enacted. The amendments would presumably ease the conditions of Article 76, allowing independent candidates to contest elections with greater ease.

Going forward, some believe newly appointed prime minister Ahmed Shafiq will run in September in order to ensure some continuity in the post-Mubarak era. Dissolution of parliament prior to the presidential election is not in Mubarak's interest, as a new legislature with significant opposition presence could withdraw its confidence in both him and his regime and influence the constitutional reform process that Mubarak promised.

## **David Schenker**

**A**t the moment, the United States does not have a solid sense of the Egyptian military's thinking regarding the country's future direction. This gap exists despite the fact that U.S. personnel work at the Office of Military Cooperation in Egypt, have conducted Bright Star exercises with Egyptian forces since 1981, train hundreds of Egyptian officers each year, and hold joint senior-level meetings routinely.

One thing is clear, however: once transition becomes imminent, the Egyptian military is well positioned to determine how the process unfolds. It is thus difficult to imagine that Mubarak would have given a speech of the sort he delivered on February 2 -- when he said he would remain in office for another eight months -- without the military's backing, given the likely popular response. Less clear are the sympathies of the rank and file -- the conscripts who face the same frustrations as the demonstrators. The military is not a monolith, and units may not respond uniformly to new developments. Historically, however, unit cohesion has been one of the military's strengths.

At the political level, recently reappointed defense minister Muhammad Hussein Tantawi -- who previously served in that post and as commander-in-chief for twenty years -- has appeared alongside Mubarak in the media and joined him in a January 31 meeting with the new cabinet. He has largely stayed out of the public eye since the beginning of the demonstrations, with the exception of a brief visit with troops in Tahrir Square on January 30. It is unclear what he said during the visit, but according to *al-Khaleej* newspaper, he told the soldiers, "Egypt needs you." Tantawi is seventy-five years old, however, and may be too close to the regime to survive the transition.

As for the military leadership, Chief of Staff Sami Anan has been noted as a top candidate to manage the transition. Many Egyptians credit him as the driving force behind the military's neutrality during the protests, including the way it has distanced itself from both the regime and the general security services. According to *al-Akhbar* newspaper, Anan refused Mubarak's order for the military to suppress the demonstrations.

In contrast, Gen. Omar Suleiman is considered too close to the Pentagon, the CIA, and Israel to be accepted by much of the opposition. Although the longtime head of Egyptian intelligence was recently appointed to the vice presidency, interestingly, he is not a member of any party. Suleiman is closely identified with the regime, however, so he might not survive even the transition if the opposition pushes forward with its maximalist demands.

Less well known is Air Marshal Ahmed Shafiq, the new prime minister who until recently served as civil aviation minister. In April 2010, Egyptian daily *al-Dustour* caused a stir when it named Shafiq as a potential successor to Mubarak or, failing that, a candidate for vice president. Shafiq also has credibility with the military, having served during the 1973 October War against Israel and the War of Attrition. At the same time, however, he is a close friend to Mubarak and a member of the National Democratic Party, so he could also be a casualty, should the regime collapse and the opposition launch a campaign to cleanse NDP elements from the government.

*This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Allison LeBlanc. ❖*

---

## RECOMMENDED

---



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022



Sana Quadri,  
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

## Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)

### TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

Democracy & Reform (/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

### REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Egypt (/policy-analysis/egypt)

North Africa (/policy-analysis/north-africa)

