

The Egyptian Military and the Fate of the Regime

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Brief Analysis

The Egyptian Armed Forces (EAF) is perhaps the key actor in the current crisis. Although it has largely remained aloof from the struggle in the streets and has yet to show its hand regarding the fate of the regime, many are counting on it to act in the nation's interest, force President Hosni Mubarak from power, and facilitate a smooth transition to a successor government. This places a great deal of responsibility on the EAF and makes understanding its role in the process essential. Observers inside and outside Egypt should not take for granted that the military will either do "the right thing" or act monolithically. It is an actor with many faces and capacities, and one whose internal motivations and processes can be seen only dimly at the moment.

Military Response So Far

Although many wish that the military was more involved in the crisis -- whether in suppressing or supporting the protesters -- the EAF has taken a restrained role so far. When the internal security forces collapsed, the army intervened to stabilize the situation, prevent attacks on government institutions, and forestall a descent into chaos. It did not move against the protesters; in fact, it publicly stated that it would not fire on peaceful demonstrations.

More recently, the EAF has increased its presence on the street, helped control criminal activity, and moved to constrain freedom of movement by pro-democracy demonstrators. These forces have shown commendable discipline in tense situations and maintained unit cohesion despite exposure to the crowds and the emotional nature of the situation. At the same time, the increased deployment has prevented any further attacks on government institutions and shielded the regime from direct pressure from antigovernment elements. This has been key to Mubarak's ability to stay in power. The military has also allowed itself to be seen in association with the president, and some of its public statements have echoed his calls for order and stability. The EAF's apparent neutrality in the crisis has a definite tilt toward the regime at this time.

Taken together, the military's actions so far have preserved its position within the state and society and perhaps helped pave the way for a smooth transition. The EAF has also preserved its freedom of action in the crisis.

Nevertheless the Egyptian military is under severe stress at all levels. Soldiers and units deployed on the streets are subject to the corrosive effects of close contact with the demonstrators, potentially weakening discipline and cohesion. The EAF is also being asked to perform a role for which it has not been trained or equipped. In short, it is a

conventional force in an unconventional situation. That places new and unaccustomed demands on unit commanders and staff at all levels. Most important, the military, especially at the senior command level, is being pressed to decide where it stands -- with the regime or with the opposition. It must also look to the long-term preservation of its historically important role in the state. Coping with these stresses is a major challenge for an institution not known for its ability to adapt to fluid situations.

The Military and the Regime

For three decades, the EAF has enjoyed an essentially symbiotic relationship with the Mubarak regime, one based on personality, patronage, privilege, and mutual interest. Relationships between senior officers and senior regime figures -- along with the personal and organizational benefits of close association with the regime, and the maintenance of a relatively privileged officer class within Egyptian society -- have proven to be ties that bind.

These bonds are not unbreakable, however. The stresses currently being placed on the EAF could cause it to sever the relationship with Mubarak and look to its self-preservation. One such breakpoint could come if military personnel are ordered to use force to suppress the demonstrations. Another breakpoint could emerge if the EAF begins to sense that the regime has lost the capacity to deal with the situation and is leading the country into chaos. Alternatively, senior military commanders may simply decide that Mubarak's time has passed, and that the relationship with the United States (especially the U.S. military) is at risk. Finally, the EAF may conclude that its best hope for preserving its privileged role lies in supporting transition sooner rather than later.

Nature of the Military

Since the Egyptian revolution of 1952, the military -- most prominently the army -- has played a key role in domestic political life. Every president since the revolution has been a military man, and military officials, active or retired, have occupied key positions in the government throughout the country's modern history.

Traditionally, the military has played two key roles: guaranteeing national security against external foes and propping up whatever regime has been in power. These roles overshadow other important functions such as serving as a symbol of national unity, a socializing force, and an economic engine. Since the 1973 war with Israel, the military has enjoyed high status within Egyptian society even though it has twice been called on to put down internal disturbances: the 1977 bread riots and the 1986 mutiny by the Central Security Forces.

Much of the commentary on the EAF since the beginning of the crisis has treated it as essentially a unitary actor. The military is not a monolith, however, and not all its components are equally important. It is a highly differentiated organization with various centers of power, capabilities, and interests. Accordingly, there is no guarantee that all its elements would respond in lockstep if the crisis reaches a crossroads.

Organizationally, the EAF is divided into four major components: the army, air force, Air Defense Force, and navy, with an approximate total of 470,000 active personnel and a reserve force of equal size. Both the army and air force are well represented in Mubarak's new government, with active or retired officers in key positions: vice president, defense minister, prime minister, and deputy prime minister. Mubarak himself is former commander of the air force.

The army is the largest branch of the EAF and, at the moment, the most important, given the nature of the crisis. The burden of involvement so far has fallen overwhelmingly on the army, and its future will probably go hand in hand with the outcome of the crisis. The air force, the second most important service, has played only a limited role in the crisis so far, and the other services appear to have little if any involvement.

The three army-level commands are another important organizational layer to consider. The First, Second, and Third Field Armies, headquartered in Cairo, Ismailia, and Suez, respectively, have operational control of Egypt's

ground combat forces, including the units deployed to crisis points in the capital and other cities. Accordingly, each of these commands represents a potential power center. And underneath each of the armies are a number of corps, divisions, and brigades that could potentially take independent action in a crisis.

Also important to how the EAF, especially the army, acts during the crisis is the military's culture and pattern of recruitment. Enlisted personnel are conscripted from all over the country, [including the least advantaged and most religiously influenced sectors of society. Officers are better educated and better off economically. Consequently, unlike some Western armies, the EAF is characterized by a stark divide between the officer class and enlisted personnel. And within the officer corps, the dominant qualities of the senior leadership leave little room for individual expression and initiative by more junior officers.

Moreover, the military is not immune to penetration by external political forces, especially radical Islamism, despite significant efforts to prevent it. Several plots against the regime, including the assassination of President Anwar Sadat, have been based in the military and influenced by radical Islamist ideas. Given the current political turbulence, at least some military personnel are likely affected by liberal and radical Islamist notions.

Will the EAF Fracture?

Each of the above factors has an impact on military cohesion, discipline, and professionalism -- three critical elements in how the EAF responds to the crisis. A decline in any of these elements could spell serious trouble for the military's efficacy as events unfold.

Given its structure, its culture, and the stresses being placed on it, the EAF could potentially break along several lines. This is one of the military's most significant threats at the moment, and one the senior command must guard against. Such splits could occur between service components, Field Army commands, units, or individuals. And as they respond to the forces unleashed by the popular uprising, EAF elements could break along social lines, including religion, economic status, and the officer-enlisted divide.

Unknowns

There are several major unknowns regarding the Egyptian military in the current situation. The relationship between the regime and the senior military commanders is obscure at best. This dynamic is very difficult to access, but it may be the most critical question at this point in the crisis. Related to this are the dynamics within the military itself, in terms of the attitudes, positions, and interactions of the key personnel and their commands. Do, for example, the army chief and the air force chief see the situation in the same way? Also important are the attitudes of senior unit commanders, midlevel officers, and the rank and file.

The nature of the opposition will also be important in shaping the military's role in the crisis. Something has to emerge by way of opposition leadership and direction, and the EAF will respond to that. It is probably already looking carefully to this issue. A moderate secular leadership displaying deference to the military, or at least not overtly threatening it, would be one thing. A radical Islamist leadership or one hostile to the military would be quite another.

At present the military probably sees several potential threats to its role in the state. Immediate threats include: the potential for units to disobey orders if directed to fire on civilians, being perceived as an enemy of the people if it becomes involved in violent action against the demonstrators, splintering or factionalization under the stresses of the crisis, and dissolution in a chaotic political-social environment. For the long term, the EAF probably fears being reduced in importance in a new political system and potentially being captured by political forces or caught up in political factionalism.

Outcomes

Although the outcome of the crisis remains unclear, it poses no less danger to the EAF than Egypt's past wars with Israel. The military can help pave the way for a nonchaotic and restrained transition, but it will also seek to remain a central institution afterward. Although Mubarak is a military man and has taken good care of the armed forces during his thirty years in power, the EAF is unlikely to sacrifice its position and role for him. It may give up on Mubarak, but it will not give up on itself.

It is very difficult to envision an Egypt without the military in a key role. Whatever comes next, any new leadership in Cairo will need to seek an accommodation with the military. Although some military figures may leave the scene, the military as a critical institution will not.

This assumes that the EAF remains largely intact through the crisis. An alternative future could emerge if the military splits along one or more of the lines discussed above. In such a scenario, competing centers of military power could develop, with political factions attempting to co-opt various EAF elements. That would be a dismal future.

Jeffrey White is a defense fellow at The Washington Institute, specializing in military and security affairs. ❖

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