The Egyptian Army and Egypt's ‘Spring’

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The Egyptian Army and Egypt’s ‘Spring’

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ABSTRACT After Mubarak’s ouster, the Egyptian senior command had assumed a guardian role similar to the former Turkish model despite a shoddy performance in maintaining public order and the questionable loyalty of the lower ranked officers and the ordinary soldiers. Its relative success in managing the transition was due to the willingness of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists to negotiate as stakeholders in the system rather than to battle in the streets against the Army. The Muslim Brotherhood’s strategy worked. In August 2012, recently elected President Morsi subordinated the military by removing the veteran Minister of Defense, the Chief-of-Staff, and other key officers. The military caved in without a whimper.

KEY WORDS: Egypt, Army, Arab Spring, Political Transition, SCAF

Political scientists searching for universal laws of human political behavior will find little comfort in comparing the role of armies in the six Arab countries characterized by massive political upheaval since the Tunisian revolution. In general, differences regarding the role and performance of these armed forces far outweigh the similarities. In fact, only in Syria and Bahrain, whose rulers belong to ethnic minorities, did the armed forces play similar roles. In both states, the armies remained loyal to the regimes, retained internal cohesion, and have been so far relatively effective in protecting them.

The unique role of the military in Egypt is even more disconcerting to the political scientist loyal to his mission of seeking universal laws of political behavior. In Egypt, the armed forces have assumed, contrary to the existing constitution, a guardian role, similar to the Turkish model before the ascendance of the government Justice and Development Party in which the army does not only protect the state against outside competitors but maintains the regime internally as well. Yet, unlike the Turkish precedent, it achieved this status during the transition at least, despite a shoddy performance in maintaining public
order and control and despite the questionable loyalty of the lower ranked officers and the ordinary soldiers. There is a clear relationship between the two: it is precisely because the army elite formalized in the 23-man Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) did not trust most of the Army that it entrusted the control of public order to small highly specialized forces like the military police. There were too few of them to effectively control Egypt’s outlying areas and to contain demonstrators in its big urban centers.

How the army elite, especially the SCAF, managed to maintain its political control sufficient to stave off major chaos or civil disorder and get almost all the political forces in the country to acknowledge its privileged position until newly elected President Muhammad Morsi subordinated the Army to his rule in August 2012, is the focus of the following article. The article argues that the SCAF had its way for three reasons of which only one is indigenous to the nature of the military. Though the Army was weak, the SCAF and the senior officer class were united to a far greater degree than any other political force in the country. The army elite also benefited from the, albeit problematic and limited, incorporation of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Islamists into the political class under President Hosni Mubarak. It was an arrangement which the former President only reneged from in the 2010 elections. The period between their total marginalization and Mubarak’s ouster was too short to change the basis of the relationship. These forces preferred to negotiate within the elite in order to ‘capture’ the state and its organs. Their willingness to act moderately was probably due to the high levels of state institutionalization, with which they identified with, even if they were formally only partially co-opted into the system under Mubarak. Finally, the Army was fortunate to be backed by an electorate with considerable savvy; though it voted overwhelmingly for regime change in the parliamentary elections by voting for the Islamists and then in the presidential elections for a Muslim Brotherhood candidate, a considerable minority opted for a candidate belonging to the establishment who represented continuity and administrative and technical know-how. Only after a virtual military counter-revolution several days before the final round of the presidential election in which the military in a supplemental constitutional document seriously curtailed the powers of the president, and army incompetence in securing public security especially in Sinai, did the newly elected President Morsi act against the incumbent military elite.

The architecture of the article is built around these themes and arguments. Why there was nothing inevitable about the guardian role is covered in the next section. Since the 1960s at least, the Army has been a privileged group whose senior officers during retirement often served in high executive functions. Nevertheless, they did not rule. Mubarak’s
son Jamal and the successful entrepreneurial businessmen who surrounded him represented a looming threat to their privileged enclave. That ground is covered in section two. The politics of the SCAF and its relationship with the Islamists, especially the Muslim Brotherhood, is covered in section three. Section four focuses on the shoddy performance of the armed forces in maintaining public order, whose roots probably lie in the Mubarak era. In the final section, the role of the Army is analyzed in the context of the future relationship between Egypt and with Israel and regional stability.

Under Mubarak: A Privileged Yet Subordinated Army

Since Colonel Gamal Abd-al Nasser’s absolute rise to power in the mid-1950s, the Egyptian armed forces have neither ruled nor played the role of the guardian of the Egyptian regime.¹ In Egypt as elsewhere in the Middle East, the authoritarian leader, working with a small coterie of family members, senior officials, experts and businessmen, severely limited the military’s influence.² This state of affairs so characteristic of Nasser and replicated to even greater measure under Anwar Sadat and Mubarak, may explain why the guardian role was markedly absent from the 1970 and 1980 constitutions.

This is hardly to to say that the position of the Egyptian armed forces conformed to the normative civil-military relationship that characterizes mature democracies. If David Pion-Berlin is right that a system of civil control requires (a) the enhancement of the civilian presence in key defense institutions, (b) the empowerment of defense ministries, (c) lowering the military’s vertical authority along the chain of command, and (d) unifying civilian power while dividing military power – then only the fourth caveat characterized Mubarak’s relationship with the military.³ Defense institutions under Mubarak were totally manned by former or presiding military officers (Ahmad Badawi, ‘Abd al-Halim Abu Ghazala and Field Marshal Muhammad Hussein Tantawi being the most prominent examples since 1980). They presided over a strong defense ministry and senior army officers had direct access to Mubarak, albeit outside the media limelight.

Nevertheless, Mubarak weakened the military establishment even more than his predecessors in at least two ways. First, he enhanced the

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power of the police at the expense of the military, perhaps because Mubarak feared the Army’s opposition to his plans to hand over power to his son Jamal. Thus, police budgets soared almost seven-fold from 3.5 billion Egyptian pounds ($583 million) in the decade before 2002 to 20 billion pounds ($3.3 billion) in 2008 compared to the Army’s budget which merely doubled.\textsuperscript{4} It was not only a matter of money but of access to the President. Habib al-‘Adli, the veteran Minister of Interior who was sentenced to life imprisonment, and ‘Umar Sulayman, the veteran director of the Egyptian Intelligence Services, enjoyed greater rapport with the President than any army figure, including veteran Minister of Defense and Military Production, Marshal Tantawi, who had held that post since 1991. With a secure peace treaty neutralizing Egypt’s eastern front and weak neighbors north and south, Mubarak paid far more attention to the two institutions al-‘Adli and Sulayman headed; it was these institutions which were responsible for internal security by monitoring elections, containing demonstrations, and suppressing other opposition activity.

Second, Mubarak further distanced the military by making sure that former top military officers did not hold the position of Prime Minister, which General Kamal Hassan ‘Ali, the former Chief of Staff, held during Sadat’s presidency. Egypt under Mubarak, became if anything a police rather than a garrison state.\textsuperscript{5} Needless to say, the build-up of the police hardly proved to be an effective investment. The Central Security Forces, the principal arm of the regime against internal dissent, failed dismally in protecting the regime in the face of massive demonstrations that broke out on 25 January 2011.\textsuperscript{6}

Yet even under Mubarak, the senior officers of armed forces possessed privileges only the highest echelons of the political bureaucracy enjoyed. As Picard noted already in the 1980s, the reduction of military budgets in the Arab world led to a search for funding through privileged, often monopolistic, activities in the market place. The actors could be military organizations, military-owned companies, or senior and retired military personnel engaged in business with a connection to


the armed forces.\textsuperscript{7} The military justified this role as both seeking self-sufficiency (al-iktifa’a al-thati) and the armed forces’ need to supplement civil institutions in working to ‘institutionalize’ (taqnin) the state.\textsuperscript{8} While in the West, this often reflected the importance of private economic actors within the state at the expense of allocations to the military, in Egypt, the new more economic-oriented concept of national security was manipulated to enhance the Army’s privileged role in the state and its economy.

These underpinnings can be examined in the relationship between the military and arms production, over which the state has an exclusive monopoly. In the words of former Minister of State for Military Production Muhammad al-Ghamwari: ‘The state will not permit any sector to own military industry because of its role in producing military material for the armed forces.’\textsuperscript{9} The military’s monopoly over military production is moreover guaranteed by emergency legislation that effectively prevents any possibility of monitoring the industry by the legislature and the press.

The government facilitated military expansion in the economic sphere well beyond these limits through the Administration of National Service Projects, created in January 1979.\textsuperscript{10} By 1994, this organization ran 16 factories employing 75,000 workers, with 40 per cent of its production geared to the civilian market in the form of agricultural machines, fodder, cables, medications, pumps, and ovens. Companies owned by the military expanded into areas such as water management and the production of electricity to the chagrin of civil ministries.\textsuperscript{11}

As Egypt’s cities expanded outward, the military made big profits by selling land formerly used for army bases or developed by using soldiers as cheap labor. According to Akhbar al-Yawm, by 1994, the Army had made one billion Egyptian pounds from land development deals in the Suez area alone. The military has also been accused of smuggling through the two free-trade zones under its control in Suez and Port Said.\textsuperscript{12} The Army also is paid by the government for its work to combat illiteracy in the desert periphery, educating the inhabitants of

\textsuperscript{11}Droz-Vincent, ‘Le militaire et le politique en Égypte’, 21.
\textsuperscript{12}Ibid., 28.
Upper Egypt, organizing medical expeditions to the Western Desert, providing water to nomads, and producing and distributing medicines.

By far, the most important of the new areas of activity was land reclamation, or more specifically, the military’s role in the two biggest land reclamation and urban resettlement projects ever undertaken by the state. Egypt hopes that the implementation of two huge and highly contested 30-year projects, centered around the northern Sinai and the southernmost reaches of the Western Desert, will let Egypt disperse the country’s population over 20 per cent of its landmass compared to five percent at present.

The al-Salam canal, which feeds Nile water into the Sinai peninsula, is the most advanced of the two schemes, with 420,000 acres scheduled to be reclaimed. Half the reclaimed land will go to settlement and agro-industry and the remaining half to agriculture and flower-growing. The Egyptian government had hoped to increase the population in the Sinai to three million inhabitants, an almost ten-fold increase from its present level.

An even more ambitious venture is the New or Southern Valley project situated in the southern reaches of the Western Desert. The first stage of the Southern Valley project (scheduled for completion in 2017) involves canal construction, massive irrigation, agricultural infrastructure, the establishment of six large-scale cities and four free-trade zones, at a total estimated cost of 300 billion Egyptian pounds. About 35 per cent of investment was to be allocated to agriculture, with the remainder going to tourism and industry, especially the metallurgical and mineral sectors. Water was carried in the Toshke canal from Lake Nasser to the Farafra Oasis, 500 km away. The military was responsible for planning, canal construction, and earth removal.

Critics fault the projects for focusing on agriculture in which Egypt has no significant comparative advantage. Even more alarming is the diversion of water that will soon be necessary to meet Egypt’s current demands to desert areas characterized by high evaporation levels. The project also pushes the lower classes to be relocated, though they can rarely afford or succeed in this effort. Critics feel that the Southern Valley, especially, is far too distant and inhospitable to make population dispersion worthwhile. Doubts about this project’s feasi-

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16 Ibid., 72, 77.
bility can be documented by the slow pace of progress regarding the more hospitable and accessible Sinai Desert. The Egyptian authorities had hoped to increase the Sinai population in the past 20 years by one million inhabitants, but succeeded in attracting only one-seventh that amount. Moreover, the authorities themselves fear that creating large urban centers in southern Sinai might facilitate fundamentalist activity and thus harm tourism in the area.

Ostensibly, the military’s participation in the project is justified on strategic grounds. Israel’s successful assaults through vast stretches of wilderness have demonstrated that desert stretches, once considered an obstacle to invasion, no longer act as natural barriers. The collaboration of Sinai bedouin with the Israeli administration when Sinai was under Israeli rule suggested that Egypt’s security would be enhanced by settling non-bedouin Egyptians there. Whatever the true motives behind these grand national projects, there is no doubt that they offer ideal opportunities for the military to obtain more funds and strengthen its position within the state.

Thus, even when Mubarak weakened the military’s clout it remained a formidable pillar of the Egyptian state. Egypt’s Army is not only privileged, it is also costly and large. Jane’s Defence Weekly estimated the army budget at around five billion dollars and that its business operations amounted to 20 per cent of all domestic business activity.

The Threat of Gamal Mubarak’s Succession, the Business Class and Mubarak’s Ouster

Much of the Egyptian Army’s privileged existence stemmed from norms, policies and interests deemed appropriate to creating strong states in the mid-1950s. These norms and interests increasingly clashed with demands within and on Egypt to compete in the world market place. Indeed, Egypt during the last decade of Mubarak’s rule underwent considerable economic transformation. Economic growth averaged five per cent thanks to increasing competition (notably in telecommunications), relatively high rates of direct and indirect investment by international corporations and major improvements in highway and transportation infrastructure that bottlenecked economic growth, especially in the Cairo metropolitan region.

Emblematic of this capitalist transformation, was the political rise of Gamal (Jimmy) Mubarak under his father’s auspices. Unlike any

17 Ibid., 73.
18 ‘Egypt’s Army too Big to Fail’, Al-Arabiya, 9 Feb. 2012.
aspirant to rule Egypt since the 1952 revolution and in utter contrast to his father, Gamal never served in the army. Instead of army service, Gamal Mubarak worked in London at the Bank of America and then in a private equity firm he helped found. In 1995, at the age of 22, he returned to Egypt, joined the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) in 2000, and two years later was appointed at the 2002 NDP congress to head the Policies Secretariat, a board made up of businessmen and liberal economists.\(^{20}\) Collectively it was known as ‘Gamal’s cabinet.’ Many interpreted these moves as a grooming process of the heir-to-be after Mubarak’s death or retirement. The President’s persistent refusal to designate a successor and his failure to fulfill a promise made in 2005 to designate his vice-president only confirmed these fears.\(^{21}\)

As much as dynastic succession (tawrith al-sulta) insulted Egypt’s public (described by novelist Khaled Al-Khamissi, a ‘republican monarchy with houmus’), the rise of Gamal and the business class he represented threatened the interests of the Army.\(^{22}\) The tensions between the business class supported by Gamal and his father may explain why as early as in the late 1990s, articles in the official Egyptian press appeared questioning the large allocations to the Egyptian armed forces. As Osama al-Ghazali Harb, a senior policy analyst who quit the Policies Secretariat in 2006 stated before the outbreak of the 25 January 2011 revolt: ‘Gamal’s support comes from people in the business elite, . . . [T]hey are plotting away, trying to mobilize the support of members of the party and the army. But if his father dies tomorrow they [the Army] will shut him out . . . within five or six minutes of his death, you’ll see tanks in the streets.’\(^{23}\) Harb was prophetically right.

Higher ranks in the Army were easily led to believe that the massive working-class demonstrations that broke out in the industrial towns in the Delta region of northern Egypt in April and May 2008 against imports from China and elsewhere, suggested that Gamal’s likely policies in the future would not only threaten their interests but the interests of Egypt as a whole.\(^{24}\) The package deal of hereditary


\(^{23}\) Shatz, ‘Mubarak’s Last Breath’, 4.

succession coupled by a free-market economy was too much for the military to bear.\textsuperscript{25}

These tensions may explain why the Army after the first major demonstrations on 25 January 2011 did very little to support Mubarak’s incumbency. Even more telling was their reaction to Mubarak’s heir designate, Suleiman, when Mubarak finally did make the decision to resign at the end of his term of office in 2013. The highest echelons of the army set up the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) on 10 Feb., with the conspicuous absence of the supreme commander, the President or Suleiman.\textsuperscript{26} The SCAF’s appearance on the scene also coincided with the complete disappearance of Suleiman from Egyptian public life for over a year. It was hardly a coincidence. Throughout this period, army troops failed to come to the defense of the regime.\textsuperscript{27} As one observer astutely noted ‘[T]he military’s reluctance to save the regime from a people’s revolution was the prime factor in the regime’s relatively quick downfall. Had it chosen to take the president’s side, the outcome could have been violent.’\textsuperscript{28}

The Politics of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) and the Opposition

Knowing what they did not want – the continuation of Mubarak’s rule, his son’s nor Suleiman – proved much easier to define than what the highest echelons of the armed forces represented in the SCAF did in fact want. The timetable both over goals and dates varied considerable over the next 12 months that recalled events after the free officers’ coup in 1952. Six days into office, the SCAF announced that the transition was to be completed by mid-August. That date was soon delayed to October. At the beginning the SCAF declared that parliamentary elections were to be held in June followed by presidential elections two months later.\textsuperscript{29} Then, on 23 March 2011, it issued a constitutional

\textsuperscript{25}There are even those that think that the military wanted to depose Mubarak before the outbreak of mass demonstrations. See, ‘Egyptian Army Planned Mubarak Ouster before the Revolution: Stratfor report’, Al-Arabiyya, 28 Feb. 2012, <www.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/02/28/197559.html>.


declaration that ‘procedures for the elections of the People’s Assembly (lower house of parliament) and the Shura’ (Council, the upper house of parliament) would begin in September’, while remaining silent about the presidential elections. Instead, it announced that it would give the elected assembly a year to establish a committee to draft the constitution, which would then be subject to a popular referendum.\(^{30}\) Obviously, the SCAF wanted presidential elections after the constitution which is why in the summer of 2011 the SCAF talked of a transition period extending to 2013.

It was pressure from below, a culmination of a series of unanticipated violent events and pressure from organized political forces, mainly the Muslim Brotherhood, its newly formed political party, the Freedom and Justice Party (FJP), and the Salafists which forced a quicker timetable than the SCAF envisioned in summer 2011: elections to the assembly were held in three rounds during January and Feb. 2012, which led to a resounding victory for both these groups.\(^{31}\) Elections to the presidency at the end of May soon followed.

Nevertheless, one must not be waylaid by the tactical zigzagging to assume confusion of strategic vision within the SCAF. The SCAF had a very clear strategy: creating a system of checks and balances between meeting popular demands for regime change, which is why it favored throughout that parliamentary elections should be held before elections for the presidency took place. The elections would allow the dissipation of energies that could easily become centripetal and threaten the basic order of the state and its managed transition. The SCAF would then be well placed to act to weaken the parliament between the formation of the new parliament and elections to the presidency and divide its ranks. Once these goals were achieved, it could also bring considerable clout to bear to help determine the outcomes of the presidential elections in the direction of a presidential incumbent who was part of the old order. The SCAF would then be in an excellent position to negotiate between these two branches of government in a manner that would safeguard the Army’s interests and maintain some of the basic characteristics of the Egyptian corporate state.

The SCAF acted with a vengeance to achieve these goals. It consistently rejected the demands of the FJP to dismiss Kamal Ganzouri’s government, which showed contempt for the newly elected parliament at every turn. Ganzouri, a ‘reformist’ during his brief stint


as prime minister in the late 1990s, had clearly aged to become a stalwart of the SCAF-dominated order. The Islamist-dominated parliament responded by refusing to hold sessions, leading to considerable bickering between the Islamists who supported the move and the secular parties who opposed it.\(^{32}\) The SCAF moved to craft the presidential elections through the Elections Committee which disqualified nine candidates including the two most popular among Islamist ranks: Khairat Shater, the FJP candidate and Hazem Salah Abu-Isma'il, an Islamist backed by the the al-Nur party, the major Salafi party. Both were key dangers: Abu Isma’il because he polled second only to Amer Mussa and because he was least co-optable and Shater because of his good relations with Department of State officials and American businessmen.\(^{33}\) It was important for the SCAF to maintain as much as possible a monopoly over this crucial relationship.

Maneuvering between the Islamists and the Secular opposition to the SCAF’s benefit was made possible for two basic reasons. The first had to do with the outstanding unity the SCAF exhibited throughout the transition period. Even more than the free officers who took over Egypt in 1952, the SCAF spoke with one voice. Differences in opinion, which in so large a body must have existed, rarely if ever, were made public. Such unity contrasted visibly with divisions the civilian political parties and movements exhibited.\(^{34}\)

The SCAF also benefited from Mubarak’s policies during most of his rule to incorporate, however unevenly, the Islamists. The Muslim Brotherhood, with the notable exception of the 2010 elections, was allowed avenues of political participation that culminated in 2005 in fielding its candidates as independents.\(^{35}\) The Salafis, after being bludgeoned and ruthlessly suppressed in the 1980s and early 1990s, were co-opted into the system to such an extent that when the Salafis belatedly took part in the demonstrations leading to Mubarak’s ouster,


they were accused of being insincere. Most of the Islamists, except for bouts of violence directed against the Copts, stuck to peaceful demonstrations. Their leaders refrained even in the face of considerable provocations from the SCAF, from acting outside Parliament in a manner that could lead to direct confrontation with the Army. A good illustration of their acceptance of the basic political order, including the privileged standing of the armed forces in the future order, can be found in interviews two weeks before the first round of the presidential elections took place with the two leading Islamist presidential candidates, Muhammad Morsi of the JFP, and Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh, who won the endorsement of the two leading Salafist parties. Morsi stated his intention ‘to consult closely with the generals over matters concerning the military rather than impose his will, including in the choice of a defense minister’. Aboul Fotouh, a former Brotherhood leader who has taken a stronger line against the privileged position of the Army in the past, concurred. Regarding parliamentary oversight over the defense budget, the advisers to both said it would be limited ‘at most by a special committee of Parliament’.

Acquiescence to the standing of the armed forces in Mubarak’s time was not only expressed in words but in actions as well. Events in early May leading to the killing of at least nine demonstrators in Abbasiya Square opposite the Ministry of Defense was probably a watershed in maintaining the pre-Mubarak status of the armed forces in Egyptian life. For the first time since the outbreak of popular unrest and the ouster of Mubarak, demonstrators aimed specifically at the ultimate symbol of army privilege – the Ministry of Defense. The demonstrators were almost all adherents of former presidential candidate Abu Isma’il, who was rejected from running on the grounds that his mother took United States citizenship, which violated the constitutional amendments. Ironically, it was the Salafists whom Abu Isma’il represented,

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38 David D. Kirkpatrick, ‘Candidates in Egypt work to mollify the military’, New York Times, 6 May 2012.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
who endorsed the amendments (along with the Muslim Brotherhood) in the referendum over them in March 2011. After several days of demonstrations, thugs (baltija) attacked the demonstrators, killing nine of them. In subsequent riots, one soldier was killed. Instead of confrontation with the SCAF, who probably hired the thugs, the Muslim Brotherhood leaders flew the night of the worst clashes to meet the Saudi Arabian King. They sought to mollify him over the demonstrations around the Saudi embassy in Cairo to protest the arrest of an Egyptian civil rights lawyer arrested for smuggling drugs.

The Army and Public Violence: Questioning the Loyalty of the Lower Ranks

Surprisingly, the SCAF succeeded in cajoling the former political opposition and Egypt’s political majority to accept its vision of the Egyptian state during the transition period at least, despite a shoddy performance in maintaining public order or in protecting the integrity of the state. Since the ouster of Mubarak incidents on an almost daily basis exposed the weakness of the military at ensuring public security. These included at least 14 attacks on the Sinai gas pipeline that fed gas to Israel and Jordan, repeated kidnappings of tourists, the overrunning of police stations, all in Sinai. Elsewhere in Egypt, demonstrators frequently blocked major highways and railway lines over days and sometimes weeks. These events continue despite the Army’s commitment to maintain public security after the disbanding of the Central Security Forces soon after Mubarak’s ouster. The question it raises is why so large and relatively well-provided armed forces performed so poorly?

The relationship between legitimacy and policing efficiency has much to do with the problem. During both the parliamentary and presidential elections, the military maintained law and order in large part because the public overwhelmingly sanctioned the elections process. By contrast, in demonstrations over pay, environmental issues and strikes, the SCAF has refrained from sending large numbers of soldiers against demonstrators who closed transportation arteries and closed down factories.

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Yet legitimate exercise of force hardly explains the shortcomings of the military in Sinai and elsewhere. The obvious unwillingness of the senior brass to send the troops in massive numbers to confront civilians, especially the Islamists, might be due to fears of testing the loyalty of the lower rungs of the officer class and the rank and file as was the case during the 1980s and 1990s, when Egypt witnessed extreme acts of religiously inspired violence. Over 1,000 people were killed between 1991 and 1996 alone. The most infamous, though hardly the bloodiest event was the fundamentalist attack on tourists in Luxor in November 1997 in which 58 people were killed.\(^45\) The Army played only a minor part in the fight against these fundamentalists. For example in the Luxor incident, its role was limited to the evacuation of 14 wounded to Cairo in army transports from which they were transferred to a military hospital by army helicopters.\(^46\) The fight against terrorism is not therefore perceived as a task that the armed forces must address directly.\(^47\)

The regime’s cautiousness is hardly puzzling. Involvement in suppressing growing Islamic fundamentalist violence risked exposing the Army to fundamentalist infiltration as well. President Sadat’s assassins included a colonel on active service as well as a reserve lieutenant colonel. While Mubarak built up the CSF significantly, hoping it would counterbalance the military’s power, he was forced in the wake of the Feb. 1986 riots to dismiss 20,000 of its members, probably due to Islamist infiltration. The assassination of a high-level undercover agent, Major General Rauf Khayrat, during the riots could have only been possible through the complicity of high-ranking officers.\(^48\)

Some of the reluctance might have also been due to sheer incompetence in army ranks and an unwillingness to confront attackers. Frequently, readers commenting in writing on media reports of these events note the long delays until the troops get to the site. They accuse the troops of not wanting to engage the attackers. This ineptitude is hardly new to events after January 2011: Hamas easily breached the Egyptian–Gazan border in Rafah in January 2008.\(^49\)

\(^{46}\)Al-Nasr 702 (Dec. 1997), 61.
more surprising, it took the Egyptian army and security forces a month to send back an estimated 200,000 Gazans who entered Sinai back to Gaza.\(^{50}\) Clement and Springborg’s scathing attack on the Egyptian military’s inefficiency, in part because of coup-proofing techniques, seems to have much merit:

It is bloated and its officer core is indulged, having been fattened on Mubarak’s patronage. Its training is desultory, maintenance of its equipment is profoundly inadequate, and it is dependent on the United States for funding and logistical support. But even weapons systems the United States has given the Egyptian army, such as F-16s and M1A1 tanks, are underutilized. Many are also comparatively ineffective, in part because Minister of Defense Muhammad Tantawi, acting on behalf of Mubarak, denied them vital, state-of-the-art communication capacities. He did so to impede lateral communications within the officer corps and to prevent interoperability with nominally allied forces, including those of friendly Arab countries. The raison d’être of the military was always to support the Mubarak regime, not defend the nation.\(^{51}\)

Confidential cables sent from unnamed United States embassy officials in Cairo in 2008, disclosed by Wikileaks, seem to confirm the above assessment. General David Petraeus, then commander of the US Army’s Central Command (CENTCOM) in charge of the Middle East theater, claimed that the Egyptian Army’s tactical and operational efficiency had been downgraded under Marshal Tantawi’s long tutelage. Doubts were also expressed concerning the loyalty of the middle command to the highest echelons.\(^{52}\)

Ultimately, it was the weakness of the SCAF and the Egyptian Army that enabled the newly elected President in August 2012 to subordinate the military so easily. The massacre of 16 members of Egypt’s border


police near Rafah by 35 assailants on 4 August 2012, gave President Morsi the opportunity to act against the SCAF. He did it in two moves. First, he removed the commander of the military police, who headed the only military force that showed any willingness to protect the transitional regime under the SCAF. Then, in a complete surprise, he removed Minister of Defense Muhammad Tantawi, Sami ‘Anan, the Chief of Staff and the three heads of the Army, the Navy, and Air Force and replaced them with considerably younger officers. He also scuttled the supplementary constitution the SCAF publicized two months previously which limited the prerogatives of any elected Egyptian president. Morsi, in a conciliatory move, appointed Tantawi and ‘Anan advisors to the President, and awarded them medals for their long-standing service. All prospects of shared Muslim Brotherhood-SCAF rule came to an end.

The Army, the Transition and the Peace with Israel

Egypt’s civil-military relationship is not only crucial to Egypt’s domestic political future, but has major implications for regional stability. By far the most important are the potential ramifications of Egypt’s tumult and the role of the Army in Egyptian–Israeli relations and the continuation of a cold but stable peace.

Israeli concerns over the Egyptian crisis cluster over at least three issues each more menacing than the former. The most immediate has to do with the concern that the terrorist capabilities of Hamas government in Gaza and its allies will greatly benefit from the chaos in northern Sinai. During the demonstrations, the bedouin in El-Arish and elsewhere overwhelmed the police and razed most of the police stations to the ground. In their attacks, they used rocket propelled grenades and other weapons. One can assume that in the absence of a pro-Western government in Cairo that the Sinai will become a super highway for ammunition and weapons, much of it from Libya, and provide training

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56 Ibid., 13–14.
bases in which Izz al-Din al-Qassam members will train with counterparts from Hizballah with the possible participation of Iranian military trainers. To cope with the situation, Israel has already permitted two battalions of the Egyptian military to enter the Sinai. However, even their presence has not prevented a murderous attack by Egyptian and Palestinian radicals against Israelis along the Sinai border in August 2011 resulting in eight Israeli deaths, at least two salvos of rocket fire aimed at Eilat, Israel’s southern port and resort area, 14 acts of sabotage against the Sinai pipeline that feeds gas to Israel and Jordan, and the kidnapping of tourists in the Sinai. Even if a pro-Western military maintains control of the area, this means that Israel must commit major standing forces to the southern flank. Israel feared that were an Islamist government to take over, hundreds of Hamas fighters will be able to fly to Tehran for training directly from Cairo international airport.

Further down the line is the fear that a hostile Egyptian government will seek to substantially modify the Egyptian–Israeli peace treaty. The southern flank will then become the major strategic front facing Israel with tremendous economic and social implications as reserve duty could likely reach the onerous levels that characterized Israel in the first 30 years of its existence.

The third effect is more indirect – the security of Hashemite Jordan. There is a fear that an Egypt under an Islamic government will undermine Jordan by bolstering the Muslim Brotherhood opposition in ways that echo Nasser’s aggressive policies towards the Kingdom in the 1950s and 1960s. Excellent security cooperation between Israel and Jordan presently fortifies the security cooperation that exists between Abbas’ Palestinian Authority and Israel by preventing the smuggling of arms and men through Jordan from a variety of radical Islamic movements ranging from Hamas and Islamic Jihad to Al-Qa’eda affiliated groups.

Israelis are well aware of the often intimate and intense relationship between domestic revolutionary events and regional affairs. Iran, before the ouster of the Shah in 1979, was an important, albeit, unofficial ally of Israel. Both states faced Arab counterparts, which rhetorically at least, espoused an aggressive pan-Arab nationalism. The Khomeini revolution resulted in a 180-degree turn in the relationship. The Islamic Republic of Iran adopted a policy of ‘politicide’ – seeking the destruction of the Jewish State – that exceeded the pan-Arab ideology espoused by the Arab states in the 1950s and 1960s. Words were followed by deeds. Iran established, financed and armed Hizballah and later Hamas to wage a continuous low-intensity war

57 Katz and Lapin, ‘Eight Killed in Massive Terror Assault near Eilat’.
against Israel, supported terrorism against Jews in the Diaspora, and in the last decade has embarked on a nuclear program which is perhaps the gravest security threat facing the Jewish state.

However, Islamic Iran is hardly a model through which to gauge the future tenor of relations between Egypt and Israel. Islamic Iran enjoyed 95 billion dollars of net revenue, primarily from oil and gas and which it can sell under almost all political conditions – all the more so in the future as its two Asian buyers, China and India, continue experiencing rapid economic growth.\textsuperscript{58} Egypt by contrast has no comparable asset. In the energy balance it runs just about even, importing the same value of fuels as it exports.

Even in the best of times, Egypt is an ecologically fragile state of 80 million people living on just 50,000 square kilometers. Its economic prospects are highly dependent on maintaining good political and economic relations with the United States and the European Community and preserving regional stability. These factors are critical to its tourism industry, which contributes 11.3 per cent of its Gross Domestic Product (in 2008); to protecting revenues from the Suez Canal, which contribute another 2.5 per cent of the GDP; and to expanding industrial exports.\textsuperscript{59} The latter is also critical in staving off burgeoning youth unemployment.

Iranian subsidization of Hizballah (at around 300 million dollars annually) and partial subsidization of Hamas (an estimated 60 to 200 million dollars) in Gaza to counter Israel is hardly of the magnitude it would take to woo Egypt into the Iranian camp. To subsidize an aggressive Egypt in offsetting the economic losses that would be incurred in allying with Iran and abrogating the peace treaty with Israel would necessitate at a minimum Iranian outlays of $3.7 billion to offset the losses of tourism, $1.9 billion dollars of United States aid, an expected loss of 20 per cent revenue from the Suez Canal amounting to $1.0 billion – altogether 6.6 billion dollars. Such outlays amount to 1.65 per cent of Iranian GDP, a greater proportional dispensation of aid than the massive Marshall Plan for European recovery which amounted to 1.3 per cent of the United States’ GDP at the time.\textsuperscript{60} Note however that even then, the United States economy was at least seven

\textsuperscript{58}OPEC Revenues Fact Sheet’, US Energy Information Administration, \<http://205.254.135.7/emeu/cabs/OPEC_Revenues/Factsheet.html>.


times greater than the Iranian economy today. The Americans also knew that helping Europe economically would translate into economic dividends as the European economy picked up and imported goods from the United States. In the Iranian–Egyptian case, the dividends would be negligible.

Fortunately for future stability, however strong the hatred for Israel both among the Muslim Brotherhood, its political party, Freedom and Justice, and among the Salafists, they share along with other Egyptians a keen feeling of economic backwardness, a sense of time lost under Nasser’s regime and his successors, and the imperative of redressing it.

Economic reform is a major theme in the Muslim Brotherhood website and other related media outlets. Concerns over economic growth were an influential factor in the Freedom and Justice Party’s decision to run businessman Khairat Shater for the presidency. Shater has strong business connections in the United States and relations with United States officials. The Egyptian Elections Commission disqualified him, along with nine others, from contesting the elections.

The Islamists know that they can not have economic welfare and simultaneously heat up the relationship with Israel. Though the theoretical literature debates the extent of the choice between war-making and civilian consumption, few doubt that in the case of Egypt, the tradeoff is considerable and negative – the more one spends on ‘guns’ the less one will have of ‘butter’.

This was evident even when the Soviet Union was willing to subsidize Egypt at unprecedented levels. Today, Iran, despite windfall oil and gas profits nearing 100 billion dollars, is unlikely to foot the bill. Iran in all likelihood will give priority to its military nuclear program over aid to Egypt despite obvious strategic advantages. The NATO attack on the Libyan regime which gave up its nuclear efforts in contrast to North Korea’s persistent defiance of the West which achieved nuclear military capabilities sent a clear message to the Iranians: Going nuclear means regime protection;

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subsidizing Egypt means enhancing its strategic position. The first is essential, the second advisable but not critical to the Iranian regime’s self-preservation.

Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States as a Restraining Financial Force

Even if Egypt takes an Islamist turn, the new regime, prodded by the Egyptian military, will probably side with Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf States, rather than with Iran. Politically, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States are Sunni regimes like the overwhelming percentage of the Egyptian people. For 200 years, 1,000 years ago, Egypt was ruled by the Shiite Fatimid dynasty that is disparaged in Egyptian historiography. Economically, if one is going to search out economic aid, Saudi Arabia and most of the Gulf States are richer by far than Iran. Saudi Arabia’s oil and gas bounty amounted to 311 billion dollars in 2011, over three times Iran’s energy bounty. Saudi per capita net revenues from oil and gas is nearly seven times that of Iran ($10,465 compared to $1,409) and therefore has more wealth to dispense than Iran in foreign aid. Moreover, this accounting does not take into account at least one other wealthy Gulf State, the United Arab Emirates, which along with Egypt shares a bitter history with Iran and is keen to check its regional ambitions. The Syrian regime today wrestles with these states’ financial might in the death contract these states issued on the Alawite regime since March 2011 and the subsequent support they accord to the Syrian insurgency.

Though much of these states’ relationship with Egypt and with SCAF especially, is hidden from the public view, one can assume that these conservative monarchies are worried over the possibility of domestic revolution and seek to ‘derevolutionize’ the Egyptian crisis. This means taming the Islamists, cultivating a good relationship with the Egyptian military, maintaining the relationship between Egypt and the United States and consequently the status quo regarding Israel. Saudi Arabia

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65 OPEC Revenues Fact Sheet’.

66 Ibid.


already may be playing this moderating role. When an Egyptian civil rights lawyer was arrested in the end of April in Saudi Arabia for smuggling drugs, the Saudis chose Amer Mousa, a candidate directly linked to the ancien regime and to the military to be their interlocutor over the affair. The Saudis no doubt wanted to bolster his chances to win the election. The semi-official press, *al-Hayat* and *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, who rave uncritically against Bashar-al-Assad’s regime in Syria, were hardly critical of the decision of the election commission to disqualify the two leading Islamist candidates, the FJP’s Shater, and the Salafi candidate, Hazem Abu Isma’il, even though the latter consistently ranked number two in the polls.

**Conclusion**

Egypt’s military has played a critical role in transforming a potentially revolutionary situation with potentially dire consequences on the military itself, into a relatively stable political transition from an autocracy to a limited democracy. Its relative success can be attributed to the military’s hybrid nature. On the one hand, the military’s highest echelons, by forming the SCAF, committed themselves to playing a guardian-controlling role based on the Turkish republican model. This basic model is a far cry from the classical civil-military model that presumably governs in mature democracies. On the other hand, the lower ranks have mostly kept away from politics maintaining the civilian political-military divide. The latter characteristic facilitated the SCAF’s guardian and steering role.

Yet, the military’s hybrid nature cannot alone explain the SCAF’s relative political success (compared to its shoddier military and security performance). Facilitating the SCAF’s role was the perception of even the Islamist opposition that they were stakeholders in the Egyptian state whose preservation as a bureaucratic, administrative and professional center was critical in keeping Egyptian society afloat, let alone in securing its development. With the exception of their treatment of the Copts, these forces confined politics to negotiations and debates within official channels and institutions rather than forcing

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the issue through the power of the mob in the streets. When these forces
took to the streets, it was almost always measured and controlled by
the opposition elites who felt a stake in the state system.

The Muslim Brotherhood could have probably crushed the SCAF
already in February 2011, given the unwillingness of the troops sent
into Cairo to protect the regime. Instead, it bided its time, won both the
parliamentary and presidential elections to capture the state. However,
tensions between the military and the civilian politicians have yet to be
completely resolved. Egypt’s political and economic future rests on a
competitive capitalism which questions the existing position and
privileges of the Egyptian military. In that process, the military must
in some sense lose for Egypt to ‘win’ and prosper. Fortunately, the
centrality of the idea of the Egyptian state and the measured transition
the SCAF was able to craft until its denouement suggests that the
downsizing in the Egyptian military’s stature and privileges is likely to
be gradual and relatively peaceful in utter contrast to the fate of the
military after the Iranian Revolution.

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