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What to expect of the Egyptian army?

by Pierre RAZOUX[1]

Hosni Mubarak's resignation from office and the wholesale transfer of his powers to a Supreme Military Council, comprising former notables of the outgoing regime, bring the Egyptian army to the centre of the political stage in this period of transition which began on 12th February 2011. Bearing in mind the context and the balance of power, it is not inconceivable that the army should favour coming to an agreement with the Muslim Brotherhood, still the best structured and most powerful political force in the country, while at the same time honouring Egypt's international commitments.

What is the Egyptian army's stated agenda?

1 – Satisfy the expectations of the Egyptian people in assuring the transition to a democratic regime.

2 – Assure that international treaties are respected, so as to maintain the support of the United States and the European Union, and to avoid a confrontation with Israel which the balance of power makes inadvisable (see boxed text on the military capacities of the Egyptian armed forces at the end of the article).

3 – Organize free elections by the end of the year.

4 – Assure the safety of citizens and maintain the country's stability.

5 – Prepare the country's economic recovery and ensure that the material welfare of Egyptians does not deteriorate further.

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What is the Egyptian army's hidden agenda?

1 – Maintain unity and cohesion within its ranks, since its leaders know that the army is the reflection of society and, as such, susceptible to the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood.
2 – Preserve its role as an arbiter of Egyptian political life.
3 – Avoid by all means possible the creation of a popular army in competition with it, along the lines of the Iranian Pasdaran. The Iranian precedent, like many others, shows that a regular army invariably ends up being brushed aside when a revolutionary army advances to the fore.
4 – Preserve its economic interests.
5 – Preserve American military assistance.

What could the army be tempted to do?

• Maintain apparent continuity of government, and gain time to secure its influence on the economy and protect all the advantages it was able to enjoy while at the service of the Mubarak family.

• Divide to rule, pending the organization of general elections, so as to assure it can count on a divided parliament and thus strengthen its role as an arbiter.

• Not provoke any further violent confrontation with the crowd, from fear that a new popular uprising will this time bring to the fore a real revolutionary power capable of relegating the regular army to the sidelines and creating a popular army to compete with it, along the lines of the Guardians of the Revolution in Iran.

• Initially come to an agreement with the secular, liberal fringe of Egyptian society, with which the military leadership share a certain number of values and interests, particularly in the economic field. An example of this course of action could be to endorse as a Presidential candidate a compromise figure from this circle of influence. The generals might in fact have decided, as in Turkey, that it is time to have a civilian in power, with a view to safeguarding their long-term legitimacy.

• Come to an agreement with the Muslim Brotherhood, in the event of a failure to do so with the liberal and secular elements of society. The Egyptian army knows that, in terms of striking a deal on the need for a change of regime, it could paradoxically have greater difficulty

agreeing with the more intransigent liberals than with the more organized, more pragmatic and more patient Muslim Brotherhood. The generals could thus assure the Muslim Brotherhood of a dominant position in the next Parliament, a more prominent role for them in the definition of domestic policy, a conciliatory policy vis-à-vis Hamas, and a better redistribution of the very sizeable handouts on which the Mubarak family had stamped its claim. To improve its image, gain time and inject cash into the economy, the army could also choose to bring the former President to justice, or at least strike a deal with him based on the principle of a certain degree of family immunity from the requirement to pay back misappropriated funds. In exchange, the army would oblige the Muslim Brotherhood to respect the peace treaty with Israel, to waive any claim to the Presidency, and to accept the perpetuation of the army's economic interests in society. The Muslim Brotherhood would indeed have every reason to preserve the military's contested role in the economy, knowing that everything which helps keep the population in a state of endemic poverty increases its frustration, reinforces the role of social redistribution exerted by Islamic influence and can only play in the Muslim Brotherhood's favour in the long term, weakening as it does the credibility of other political forces.

• Identify, given that its equipment is mostly American and European, alternative sources for munitions and spares procurement, thus pre-empting a possible Western embargo on arms supplies. The Egyptian army is faced with the same dilemma as the Iranian army after the fall of the Shah, in 1979 – i.e. the need to ensure long-term maintenance and supply of parts and munitions for military equipment purchased from the West.

• Transfer more troops into the demilitarized Sinai peninsula, without infringing the conditions of the Israeli-Egyptian peace treaty:
- to ensure that Hosni Mubarak remains at Sharm el Sheikh, perhaps with a view to his standing trial before an Egyptian court;
- to strengthen the authority of central power, after the terrorist attack against the gas pipeline supplying Israel and Jordan, the incidents targeting the Coptic Christian community and the various forms of trafficking which Bedouin tribes have been conducting to their advantage;
- to ensure that Hamas will not take control over transit points to the Gaza Strip;
- to regain prestige and offer tokens of good will to both nationalist and Islamist factions.

Are the Egyptian armed forces a threat for Israel and the West?

With 480,000 men (900,000 if the figure includes reserves), 3,000 tanks, 550 fighter aircraft, 250 helicopters and about fifty warships, on paper the Egyptian armed forces are the most powerful in the Arab world. They have considerable reserves of munitions, but their equipment is ageing and training of units leaves much to be desired. Only their 800 M-1A1 tanks and 230 F-16 fighters can match the standards of the Israeli arsenal, but do not bear comparison with the latest armaments used by Western armies. Egypt's main assets are its special forces and its ballistic missile capacity – particularly its Scud-B, Scud-C and alleged Nodong ground-to-ground missiles.

What will the decisive factors be?

• The evolution of Egyptian nationalist sentiment, fed by an anti-American and anti-Western mood.

• The thrust of Islamism as a conduit for popular frustration, also fed by anti-American and anti-Western feeling.

• The attitude of the Coptic community which, through its behaviour and stance, can increase nationalist sentiment and/or reinforce Islamist rhetoric.

• Acceptance by the United States, the European Union and Israel of an Egyptian foreign policy which can be independent of theirs, provided that existing treaties are respected, just as Turkey has been able to distance itself from American positions without casting any doubt on its membership of NATO in so doing. This is certainly the most difficult point for Westerners to accept, but it is one of the main factors for ensuring that Egypt does not become persistently entrenched in a camp which is hostile to the West.

• The West's capacity to develop what will be to all intents and purposes a "Marshall Plan" to help the Egyptian economy back to life, which would entail – particularly for the United States – a change in the nature of its financial assistance.

• Conclusion of a definitive agreement on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, implying that Israel agrees to make real concessions on this very important issue. Maintaining the status

quo, interpreted as proof of Western duplicity to Israel's advantage, can only mean greater clout for the Islamist and nationalist factions in Egypt and throughout the Arab world.

• The way other Arab regimes are going to react to the Egyptian revolution. In other words, will the model of the Egyptian revolt be exported to other Arab States and create a sweeping knock-on effect?

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