

All eyes on Egypt's military: How will it respond?

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As mass demonstrations continue to threaten Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak's grip on power, the country's powerful military is emerging as perhaps the crucial player in determining the course of events in the Middle East's most populous nation.

Already, the army -- which has long enjoyed close ties to the ruling regime -- is playing a key role in the efforts of the embattled Mubarak regime to control the growing chaos. Over the weekend, after police withdrew, [the army deployed to cities across Egypt](#), keeping order but generally not forcing protesters from the streets. Today, the Egyptian government [received permission from Israel](#) to move soldiers into the Sinai Peninsula, which has been largely demilitarized since a 1979 peace treaty between the two countries. And Mubarak has now [turned to three career military men](#) -- including Omar Suleiman, a former army general and head of the intelligence services, now appointed vice president -- to help run the government.

But the army has [promised not to fire on peaceful protests](#), and has said it recognizes the legitimacy of the protester's demands. If it were to turn completely on Mubarak, he could lose his already tenuous hold on power. The Lookout asked Stephen Zunes, a professor of politics and chair of Middle Eastern Studies at the University of San Francisco, about how the Egyptian military might respond, and how that response might influence events:

LOOKOUT: What role has the military played in Egyptian society during Mubarak's regime? How is it viewed by ordinary Egyptians?

SZ: Egypt has essentially been under military rule since the revolution that overthrew the monarchy in 1952. Mubarak, for example, was the commander of the Egyptian air force prior to Sadat (also a career military officer) naming him as vice-president in 1975. In recent years, the military hierarchy appeared to oppose Mubarak's intention of naming his son Gamal as his successor. With the naming of military intelligence chief Suleiman as vice president, the military hierarchy is reasserting its political leadership.

LOOKOUT: Now that the army has been called out into the streets in certain areas to confront protesters, are Egyptian soldiers expected to remain loyal to Mubarak? Would that still likely be the case if they were ordered to fire on Egyptian citizens?

SZ: While the military might be willing to push Mubarak aside, they are unlikely to support a democratic transition of the kind being demanded from the street. And there are certainly those in the military leadership who would be willing to try a Tiananmen Square-style massacre to stop it. The bigger question is whether soldiers, overwhelmingly from the poorest and most disenfranchised segments of the Egyptian population, would be willing to obey those kinds of orders. I would tend to doubt it.

LOOKOUT: Without the support of the army, would Mubarak have any way to hold onto power?

SZ: In either case, it appears at this point that Mubarak is finished. Certainly by September, when the presidential elections are scheduled, but I am assuming long before then. You can have all the formal trappings of government you want and all the military firepower at your disposal you can muster, but if people don't recognize your authority and refuse to obey your orders, you no longer have power. Dictators from [Ferdinand]

Marcos to [Slobodan] Milosevic, when faced with similar uprisings, found this out the hard way, and it's becoming increasingly likely that Mubarak will as well.

LOOKOUT: What are the various pressures acting on the military, both the commanders and the rank-and-file troops?

SZ: The Obama administration has apparently told the military that a crackdown would lead to the severing of US military aid and cooperation, which -- given the \$1.5 billion annual taxpayer-funded US assistance -- is quite a disincentive. For the troops, they may be faced with the choice of disobeying commands or attacking their friends, family and neighbors.

LOOKOUT: The military could well play a role in any new regime that replaced Mubarak. What might such a government look like and how might it rule differently from Mubarak's regime? Would it be any more democratic or open?

SZ: Some argue that the military under Oman Suleiman's leadership is essentially in charge already. In any case, Suleiman has shown strong leadership and mediation skills, and is well liked in some Western capitals, but he is no democrat. He is despised by many Egyptians as a result of his ruthlessness as head of military intelligence, where he effectively served as torturer-in-chief.

While some hope he might be pragmatic enough to lead a democratic transition, it is unlikely that the protesters will be satisfied unless there is a broad representative civilian interim government that can oversee free elections. Neither Mubarak nor the military can be trusted to supervise free and fair elections.

(AP Photo/Ben Curtis: A man wearing the uniform of a captain in the Egyptian army is carried by demonstrators on Tahrir, or Liberation Square, in Cairo, Egypt, Monday.)