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## Egypt as crucible of Middle East tensions

By Victor Kotsev

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The news and images coming out of Egypt are deeply troubling. At least 36 people have died since last Friday, and over 1,250 have reportedly been wounded in clashes around Tahrir Square in Cairo (and in several other cities).

On Monday, the Egyptian government resigned and on Tuesday the military regime offered further concessions, and yet the crisis goes on. There is much at stake in the outcome of the confrontations, both for Egypt and for the Middle East as a whole.

To anybody who has been following the decline of the Egyptian economy and the repeated failure of key sectors of internal security since the ouster of former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak in February, none of this is surprising. Neither is the disappointment of the crowds surprising to any one familiar with the course of the countless democratic and "color" revolutions in Eastern Europe over the past 20 years; some of the latter - specifically the one in Serbia against former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic - inspired the organizers of the anti-Mubarak movement.

Still, the timing of the unrest is important, as it started just days before the parliamentary elections in the country that are scheduled for next Monday. Moreover, it began at the same time as another crisis in the region (and another episode of the Arab Spring), that in Syria, seemingly nears its climax. These apparent coincidences are deeply suspicious, and suggest that either external or internal forces (or both) may be involved.

The protests on Friday were organized by the Muslim Brotherhood, which rose up against an

attempt by the ruling military to pass a document that would guarantee its authority over the future elected government. They were quickly joined by pro-democratic activists and others.

Egypt's rulers, just as Mubarak's regime 10 months ago, attempted to clear Tahrir Square by force, and failed; by Tuesday, the scenes in Cairo were fully reminiscent of those in early February, with tens of thousand of angry Egyptians braving tear gas and police assaults and chanting more or less the same chants as back then, and calling on Egypt's de facto ruler, Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, to resign.

Tantawi, in a speech, responded by offering broad concessions, including a power transfer by July next year and an investigation into the events of the past days. [1] According to reports, the Muslim Brotherhood agreed to the offer, but the crowd was not appeased. The New York Times writes:

The crowd roared its disapproval when the deal was announced at 8 pm, fighting spiked on the avenue leading to the Interior Ministry, and the number of protesters continued to swell. Unlikely to satisfy the public demands for the military to leave power, the deal may have driven a new wedge into the opposition, reopening a divide between the seething public and the political elite, between liberals and Islamists and, as events unfolded, among the Islamists themselves. [2]

The danger of chaos is clear in this report, and others; we can only imagine what a power vacuum in the most populous Arab country would look like, and this specter has been drawing nearer by the week since February, as Egyptian currency reserves have dwindled and the Egyptian economy has continued to stagnate. Some analysts, such as Asia Times Online's Spengler, have warned about this danger since the very start [3].

However, the exact timing of the protests suggests that something more than economics and the inevitable popular discontent may be at play. It is hard to tell what exactly stirs under the surface of Egypt, and this is as true now as it was in early February, or over the summer, when Sinai gradually slid out of control and angry mobs stormed the Israeli Embassy in Cairo.

In January and February, most international media offered a romantic portrayal of what they described as a leaderless resistance facing a vast security apparatus; it took a number of weeks until the first accounts appeared that contradicted this framing, and even then the latter did not receive sufficient attention.

Pulitzer-prize winning journalist Tina Rosenberg, for example, provides a fascinating description of the links between the April 6 movement in Egypt and the Otpor movement against Milosevic in Serbia. [4]

A riddle that remains unanswered to this day is how come the formidable security apparatus that Mubarak had at his disposal failed to locate and take out the April 6 leaders in the early days of the protests against him.

In several reports over the past year, the think-tank Stratfor voiced suspicion that the Egyptian military might be more deeply involved in the unrest in the country than is openly acknowledged.

In this case, the protests were started by the Muslim Brotherhood, but it seems that the Islamists quickly lost control. Whether the army was willing - or able - to take a gamble and stoke the fire, after failing to put it out initially, with hopes that the threat of chaos would justify putting off the transfer of power further, is hard to tell.

The regional context in which the crisis occurred is similarly complex. The crisis between Iran and its regional enemies (and their Western patrons) is at an all-time peak. The Syrian regime, a key Iranian ally, seems to be on its last legs, having defied days ago the most recent ultimatum issued by the Arab League, and now facing an increasingly well-organized and well-armed uprising as well as an ever-more hostile international community.

In a recent analysis, Stratfor argues that the ouster of Syria's President Bashar al-Assad has become a key part of the strategy of the United States and its allies against Iran. "If al-Assad survives," writes Stratfor, "Iran will be the big winner."

Certainly, after the death of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya last month, Assad had become the key villain of the Arab Spring; a distraction in the form of chaos in Egypt could not come at a more welcome time for either Assad or his Iranian patrons.

In this line of thought, it is worth noting that high-ranking Israeli intelligence officers have been warning for months now of an ongoing Iranian infiltration of the Muslim Brotherhood. While some of these claims are clearly tendentious, it does not take a very high level of penetration to instigate a riot in a situation that is fraught with tensions.

A certain amount of less sophisticated penetration of Egypt by pro-Iranian elements is clearly visible in the Sinai Peninsula, which has become a terror hub of sorts in the past months, and has reportedly turned into a major smuggling route of Libyan weapons into the Gaza Strip.

Some of these arms go to the Hamas movement, which rules Gaza, and is an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood; others go to more radical Islamists who are even more closely dependent to Iran, such as the Islamic Jihad.

The relationship between the different Palestinian factions is a very complicated topic in its own right. This status quo, too, is at stake in the Egyptian crisis.

Suffice to mention that Egypt is the main patron of the ongoing Palestinian reconciliation process, and a major force in Palestinian internal politics. And while not much else is clear at this point, it can be said that if the Egyptian elections are put off as a result of further violence, Palestinian elections, also under discussion, will most likely be put off as well.

### *Notes*

1. Egypt military offers to speed up power transfer in meet with political parties, Ha'aretz, November 22, 2011.
2. Egypt Military Pledges Faster Handover to Civilian Rule, New York Times, November 22,

2011 (registration required).

3. Food and failed Arab states , Asia Times Online, February 1, 2011.

4. Revolution U, Foreign Policy, February 16, 2011.

5. Syria, Iran and the Balance of Power in the Middle East, Stratfor, November 22, 2011.

6. MI chief sees hope for Assad yet, Ynet, July 5, 2011.