

TRANSCRIPT
Podcast #18: Back to Tahrir
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(INTRO MUSIC)

KHALIL: Hello, it is November 20th, 2011. This is The Arabist Podcast. We are here in the subterranean lair of the Arabist himself. And I am Ashraf Khalil. We have Issandr El Amrani.

EL AMRANI: Hey there.

KHALIL: Ursula Lindsey.

LINDSEY: Hello.

KHALIL: And we are all back from a chaotic and tear gas filled Tahrir Square. Regular listeners will recall that the last podcast was the “doom and gloom” edition and well, things have really taken a turn for the better since then. We were wrong--

(CROSS TALK)

EL AMRANI: We out did our selves, I think.

KHALIL: Yeah, yeah.

LINDSEY: So, your bottle of vinegar is sitting on the table that you brought with you for the tear gas.

KHALIL: I’m here with my vinegar soaked bandanas that are my survival . .

(CROSSTALK)

EL AMRANI: I have heard so much, as anyone listening to this probably knows, the last day or two have been unusually violent, and have really opened up Egypt’s transition--if you can even argue that it was a transition to begin with--into unknown territory, into a real uncertain political future. Not only about the upcoming elections that are only in eight days, but really about who is going to be controlling this country by the end the end of the year really.

KHALIL: The backstory for those of you who don't know, the large Friday protest that we had mentioned in the previous podcast, happened and was rather large and a little bit diverse. I mean, it was heavily Islamist but had other forces in there. They weren't all on the same page, but they were all kinda, you know, there and gathered.

LINDSEY: They were mostly, if you talked to the people, they all mentioned, you know, they were there to protest this document of so-called supra-constitutional principles and the proposal that had been made that exceptional powers and privileges would be granted to the army. So it was a protest that had a kind of anti-army message: that we want a transition to a civilian government soon, and no, the army is not going to have some exceptional position above the law in the future.

KHALIL: Right; the Islamists were protesting the idea of a supra-constitutional document that would limit the writing of the constitution, the upcoming writing of the constitution. The secular liberals, for lack of a better term, were protesting not the idea of it but some of the more obnoxious clauses that granted the army this special status above and beyond any kind of the elected civilian authority.

LINDSEY: Because, as I just mentioned, this document originally was supposed to be a consensual, foundational, lets establish some basic principles of democracy and human rights that all the parties can sign onto so that there is less tension over the elections and over the writing of the constitution, because we have this common ground. It was basically highjacked by the army, who tried to insert into it other principles that nobody asked for--

KHALIL: That nobody was asking for.

LINDSEY: That enshrined the army's power. Now, they have since released a revised draft, where they have sorta taken all that back, but it's much too late. The protests on Friday ended peacefully. A few people stayed over night, including this little group who I had actually spoken to a few days before--there were some people injured during the revolution who'd been camping in Tahrir, we're talking like three or four tents--who are complaining about the fact that they haven't seen any justice in court, that their treatment isn't being taken care of, the government isn't paying attention to them. Those people and a few other people left over from the protests were there yesterday morning, Saturday morning, and were violently cleared by the police. This led to, you know, lots of other people coming out in support of them.

KHALIL: Everything just spiraled from there. The Friday protests led to a small sit-in. The army tried to clear the sit-in.

LINDSEY: Well it was the police yesterday.

KHALIL: The police yesterday, okay. And I don't think . . . and it has since devolved into waves and waves of new people coming to Tahrir, and ongoing clashes with the military as of an hour ago when I left the square, Tahrir itself was in the hands of the protestors

completely. The army had fallen back--the combined army and police--had fallen back closer to the Ministry of the Interior and were basically guarding the entrance ways to the Ministry of Interior. A lot of tear gas, some buckshot, reports of heavier ammunition, but nothing that I saw. Issandr you visited the makeshift clinic that was set up in Tahrir. What kind of wounds did you see?

EL AMRANI: Well, by the time I got there most people . . . the fighting had ended and the people there were being treated for buckshot and things like this. We know that several activists--we don't have a clear number--lost one of their eyes. One activist who lost his first eye on January 28th, lost his second last night.

LINDSEY: There are at least three people dead and we were told much higher figures. I think it bears emphasizing that when they went back in to clear the square again today, we saw a level of brutality, I mean there are pictures now circulating online where you see piles of bodies just lying on the side of the sidewalk where the police have dragged them. We were told at the mosque tonight that there eight bodies inside the mosque. There are ambulances going nonstop up and down Qasr al-Aini street to Tahrir. So, I mean, the army has cleared the square violently before, but I think we're seeing a level of violence that we haven't seen since the revolution.

KHALIL: A level of violence--

LINDSEY: Or since Maspero, which was the other . . .

KHALIL: A level of violence and a fierce response, in that every time the army pushes in, it feels like more people are coming, are flooding to Tahrir to take part in this fight. And I think there are a couple of points here, in that, one, I have a feeling that the army did not anticipate this kind of response when they went in to clear Tahrir.

LINDSEY: Which is stupid. They should have.

(CROSSTALK)

KHALIL: I'm not sure I expected it.

EL AMRANI: Yeah, their experience for the last few months had been that it's fairly easy to clear out Tahrir Square once when there is a big demonstration that's held, but then there are only a few dozen protestors left behind, and they are fairly easy to clear out. I think that the issue here, is that first, the mood toward the army changed after Friday's demonstration and this whole debate over its future privileges under the constitution, and secondly, they obviously used excessive force when they tried to clear out those three dozen protestors and it escalated from there. I mean, you know, we've seen the videos that show them shooting at head level. People, a lot of people, friends of mine, who got birdshot in the head, they were lucky that's all that they have is a bruise. Other people lost their eyes, some people lost their lives because all it takes is a rubber bullet or bird shot ripping--

KHALIL: Yeah, a shot to the throat will kill you.

EL AMRANI: Ripping open your jugular, and you're dead if you don't get attention quickly.

LINDSEY: We also still don't know if there's--the protestors, some of them claim that there was live ammunition used, now it's hard for people to tell in these situations, but they said people, you know, that their heads are blown open

KHALIL: There's going to be evidence, forensic evidence, video evidence that still hasn't even seen the light of day, that's still kind of circulating. So look for that in the coming days, and that's going to lead to an escalation in tensions. This mood towards the army was something that was, I mean, we've talked about our frustrations with the army, and peoples' frustration with the army but I was seeing . . . we witnessed a very intense scene at the Omar Makram mosque, which is right on the edge of Tahrir. Where apparently, I came late to this and sorta caught up to it, but that two army generals--this was after the initial army charge to clear the square--two army officers went to the Omar Makram mosque to apparently appeal to the protestors and speak to them, and the crowd kind of turned on them and it turned into a bit of rescue situation. When I came upon mosque there were crowds of people trying to get into the mosque to get to these army officers and people from the mosque were forming a human chain, saying no, these people are under our security, they are here as our guests. And eventually they got away.

EL AMRANI: And the guys in the mosque were chanting "salmiya, salmiya"--peaceful, peaceful--trying to calm down the crowd outside. I was just outside and I saw the ambulance finally.

KHALIL: You saw them make the getaway.

EL AMRANI: Yeah, the getaway.

KHALIL: This is a far cry from the people and the army are "one hand," and some, at least a certain percentage of the people, are really fed up with the army and taking to the streets about it. And we can't say how much of the country feels this way, but as of right now, as of about 10 o'clock, 9:30 at night Cairo time on the 20th there are protests in Alexandria and in Suez, so if this is spreading around the country then we are headed into a situation where a postponement of the elections, which do start in eight days, is on the table.

LINDSEY: So this is the big question now, is where do we go from here? We have the question of what's going to happen with the elections. You have the question of--I mean, people are stuck on this factor, almost everybody is dissatisfied with the army and the puppet government that the army has set up and been controlling and giving orders to for the last 10 months. But still they are concerned with, so what does it mean to get rid of the army, who do we get instead? So I think the question and what happens is also a

question of what alternatives are proposed. What do you guys think? What are the scenarios now?

EL AMRANI: The problem with that question is that someone has to offer a scenario. Now, we are expecting within half of an hour Mohamed ElBaradei, head of the National Association for Change, Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh--a former Muslim brother who is also running for president like ElBaradei--to appear on Mona El-Shazli's show *El-Ashira Masa'an*, which is often a venue for new ideas and important political developments to be presented. And you know, maybe they'll have a solution to offer. A couple of days ago Elbaradei and a few of other politicians offered an alternative to the current transition that would involve possibly postponing the elections, but basically, going the constitution first, something that Elbaradei has been proposing for months now. And having . . . stopping the current transition by having a civilian transitional council being formed, basically taking over most of the running of this transition and of the government. The army will presumably stay there of course for security issues, probably with a veto power over foreign policy and so on, but--

KHALIL: But wouldn't be running the cabinet.

EL AMRANI: Wouldn't be running the time table with the transition and the everyday, you know, all these crises. And this for me is the big thing that's been missing since February from the military, is leadership. People looked to the army in February, generally when they said the people and the army are one hand. There was a lot of trust.

KHALIL: There was a lot of trust, a lot of respect. I can't say I fully got it, but I am not raised here.

EL AMRANI: But they were saying . . .

KHALIL: I never had to go into the Egyptian military because I am a dual citizen, I got an exemption.

(CROSSTALK)

KHALIL: I never felt this automatic affection and trust towards the military, but--

(CROSSTALK)

KHALIL: It was genuine, what we saw out there was trust.

EL AMRANI: People where looking for leadership, were looking for someone to offer them a solution, and the SCAF has failed at this.

LINDSEY: And also the military had just come out as taking the right side on the revolution, right?

KHALIL: Yes, there was gratitude.

LINDSEY: They had just negotiated Mubarak's, or pressured Mubarak out of power. They had more or less done the right thing, and so that also gave them a lot of credibility, which they have mostly squandered. I mean at this point, you go around talking to people from all the political forces, and they talk about a crisis of *shar'iah*, a crisis of legitimacy, that the SCAF has lost its legitimacy and this is the reason people don't want to postpone the elections. They want to go ahead with them because at least you'd have an elected body that could negotiate SCAF's exit from power. We are really in a crisis situation where the people controlling the country no longer command, you know, the legitimacy. And if you look at state TV though, unfortunately in the last hour, the statements from the current government have been, you know, reaffirming its support of the minister of the interior, saying that the people in Tahrir are trying to postpone the elections and knock the democratic transition off course. I mean, there's one minister who is apparently, reportedly resigned.

EL AMRANI: The Minister of Culture.

LINDSEY: But other than that--

KHALIL: If there was a mass cabinet resignation that would kick this up into a whole new level.

LINDSEY: But I feel like this cabinet was selected because they were the kind of people who wouldn't resign. I mean, this is the problem, is that you don't have a government that has the kinds of figures with the kind of credibility that can actually govern.

(CROSSTALK)

KHALIL: Essam Sharaf had credibility. Is it gone?

EL AMRANI: It evaporated--

LINDSEY: Months ago I think.

EL AMRANI: I mean, he would have had much more credibility even if he stood up to the SCAF and then was forced to resign. At least he would have shown leadership. This is the kind of person that you need to have. Someone with the integrity, with the stubbornness to deal with these people and say: no, this is the transition that we need, this is a much better plan. I thought for a long time that Mohamed Elbaradei could have had been that man if he had wanted it more. The problem with Elbaradei is he never shows a sign of wanting it that much.

KHALIL: He seems to want it handed over to him.

EL AMRANI: I think there are other people even if you choose, you know . . . because the big problem right now is that if you postpone the elections the Muslim Brothers will--

KHALIL: Freak out.

EL AMRANI: Will freak out. They have invested a lot in these elections, they expect to do well out of them. And their plan is come January, once they have maybe 30, 40 percent of parliament, plus with other allies, that they might be, finally, have the legitimacy to challenge the SCAF, and maybe that's what will happen. Postponing the elections is a good idea, if only because they have been badly prepared, but you have to have . . . you can't postpone the elections and continue having SCAF in power. I mean, that has to change. It is better to have bad elections and eventually take SCAF out of power, than to postpone the elections, have them better later but SCAF still being in power. So I think the only really plausible transition, alternative transition model is this one where--

LINDSEY: The current government resigns.

EL AMRANI: Elbaradei proposes the current government resigns, you have a super prime minister, or a new national council, civilian council--

KHALIL: Some sort of council: Elbaradei, some sort of Islamist figure, a third or fourth person who is trusted--

(CROSSTALK)

KHALIL: And get the generals back to the barracks.

EL AMRANI: I don't think it has to be a council even.

(CROSSTALK)

KHALIL: And press the reset button on the whole thing, just take it back to March and . . .

LINDSEY: I don't even think it is taking it back, it's taking it forward. It's been paused for the last ten months, it hasn't happened.

EL AMRANI: You'd have to find the right formula.

(CROSSTALK)

LINDSEY: You see the same crowd in Tahrir tonight. A lot of those people were there in January of last year, a lot of those people said: I was here. And you saw it for--I think one of the things that was interesting about the crowd was that you saw that mix again. It was no longer, as on Friday during the demonstration, an Islamist dominated crowd. It was a lot of young people.

KHALIL: Lets talk about the make-up of the crowd. What did you see?

LINDSEY: I was surprised at the number of women, given what an absolutely insecure situation it is down there.

KHALIL: Women on the front lines. I saw some women fighting.

LINDSEY: I mean, and everyone is coming back out and saying this is the moment, you have this weird feeling that its kinda a reboot of the revolution.

KHALIL: Yeah, I think that there's going to be a semantic debate in the coming days over whether this is a second revolution or people going, no, this is still the first revolution, we never finished the job. We had half of a revolution and then it ended in a coup and we went home, and the second half never materialized. So I think that's the sentiment out there. It was a very young crowd . . I did see some 40 and 50 year old people out there, but this was a young crowd. It wasn't predominately Islamist or predominately non-Islamist based on visuals. There was, you know, normal percentages. There was a lot of people very equipped for battle. I saw some people with some heavy duty looking gas masks, and a lot of vinegar, and a lot of organization. You get near the front lines--

EL AMRANI: People are experienced now.

KHALIL: They are experienced. There were triage units, there was--you get near the front lines and there's a guy with a spray bottle full of vinegar saying "close your eyes," he just coats your face in vinegar and sends you into the maelstrom.

(LAUGHTER)

KHALIL: There were volunteers, a kind of first aid . . yeah, the sales of vinegar. Everyone should invest in vinegar.

LINDSEY: And gas masks.

KHALIL: Vinegar, surgical masks and those paint supply masks. But, so, if we're going to finish the job, what should replace the SCAF? This tripartite commission?

EL AMRANI: I don't think the civilian council is as reasonable enough, and as basically an agreement, explicit or implicit, that SCAF just retreats from public life, stays in charge of basic security of foreign policy and so on. I think the two important things are an independent prime minister and a civilian interior minister.

KHALIL: Oh yes, a civilian interior minister is at the top of my list and I've been asking for six months why we don't have that now and people say: oh it's not the right time . .

LINDSEY: Now lets talk about the minister of the interior for a second because the other thing is these elections, which are so poorly planned, which are traditionally dogged by violence in Egypt, and now you have a relationship with the police that has just degenerated to the point where I don't see how they can play the role of ensuring security during the elections. I just do not see it. I mean, not only are they not trusted, but as you say, people are increasingly aggressive towards them. They are not seen as a sort of trusted arbiter of public safety, that they can step into a situation and calm things down. And their behavior is absolutely atrocious. They just seem to escalate the violence against protesters and against the people. The more they feel on the defense and delegitimized, the worst their behavior seems to become. So I don't see how they can play the role they need to play in securing the elections.

EL AMRANI: I think the problem in this is a vicious circle because the police misbehavior encourages the civilians to misbehave too. I mean we shouldn't, you know, let ordinary people off the hook completely either, they are guilty sometimes of taking advantage of the situation, taking advantage of the--whether it's the security vacuum or of the way people are very dismissive of the police.

(CROSSTALK)

KHALIL: However, I have to credit the behavior of the protesters, I was impressed by the behavior of the protesters tonight. I went deep onto Mohammed Mahmoud street, you know, up to the front lines and it was a war zone, but none of the stores, none of the restaurants were touched. The anger of the protesters was entirely focused on the security forces.

EL AMRANI: Sure, but at the same time--

(CROSSTALK)

KHALIL: So keep an eye out for headlines tomorrow, news reports, anyone who is calling this chaos. This is not chaos, it's not anarchy.

EL AMRANI: No, no, hold on, I'm sorry, there's a whole bunch of cars burnt on either side of Bab al-Luk market.

KHALIL: Okay.

EL AMRANI: There's a lot of vehicles that have been destroyed. Now, maybe they were destroyed by thugs and thieves and so on. Maybe it was the police trying to frame the protesters, maybe it was the protesters themselves. This kind of chaotic situation is going to create those kind of incidents, maybe--

KHALIL: But I saw no looting, no vandalism.

EL AMRANI: I didn't see any looting, I saw some vandalism. I think in the Bab al-Luk area there's some vandalism. It's where a lot of the fighting has been concentrated, on that street that leads from Tahrir along the American University in Cairo, called Mohammed Mahmoud street. That kind of situation almost automatically creates that, and I met people this morning, I went out this morning when things had quieted down, there were still occasional clashes with the police, but it was mostly quiet, a lot of ordinary people circulating through downtown Cairo, and the mood was mixed. A lot of people were saying, you know--a guy just, I put a video of it actually up this morning on the blog, told me: so is this the Egyptian revolution? is this the revolution? what our revolution has become? as there were burnt out shells of cars on either side, the cars of locals, you know, poor peoples' cars. And I think that's the thing, where is the public's mood at now. Is it: oh my god this is chaos? we need stability at all costs even if it means the army? Or is it: this is chaos, the army has never brought any stability, we need to fight a solution, a way out of this.

LINDSEY: And of course though, the thing is, this choice between chaos and stability is a false choice because we wouldn't be in this level of chaos if the transition had been better managed. And I agree with you, that there is a degeneration in the rule of law and this is not a good thing, but then again, why is that happening? Because there has been absolutely no attempt to reform the minister of interior, because there's been no real accountability process, because the policemen who are accused of killing people ten months ago showed up to court with their guns and insult the relatives of the people they killed and bring in a whole of gang of thugs with them and march around the courtroom. I mean, this is the fundamental reason and it's not easy to explain to people who are just concerned about law and order, and just want things to be back to normal, and don't want their car to get burnt. But the fundamental responsibility lies with the fact that the minister of the interior, which has never been a real a police force to begin with . . . no efforts have been made to hold it accountable or to improve it or to empower people within it who wanted to be better, because they're not all criminals. There are small movements within the minister of interior--of this group of so-called honorable policemen--who made suggestions for how it could be reformed. Egyptians NGOs have laid out an exact plan for how the minister of interior can be reformed, and they've just never been listened to.

EL AMRANI: Sure, but at the same time, personally I think, the problem is even bigger, not to get all metaphysical about it, but it's a question of the atmosphere, a question of the environment, the political environment in which the transition has taken place, which is one of lack of trust, lack of trust in the state, its institutions, its leaders. And a lack of leadership I think, lack of people who have been able to build that trust, who have been able to go to the Egyptian people and say: this is going to be a rough ride, this transition that we are going to carry out is going to be difficult, but here, we have a plan, be patient, help us keep everyone patient, you're not going to get Jeffersonian democracy overnight, but help us get through the steps one at a time. And you know, with the SCAF you had this ad hoc decision making, you've had last minute planning--

KHALIL: Ad hoc, nontransparent, thin-skinned, slightly bitchy.

EL AMRANI: You know, any leader would have a difficult time, but . . .

LINDSEY: But if you had something to show, if ten months in there was something to show, if the judicial process was taken seriously, I mean, Mubarak's trial has been put on hold, almost nobody has been held accountable. Peoples' daily lives are worse. I think I totally agree with you in the lack of trust, and I also think the lack of trust between the parties, the secularist-Islamist divide has been very damaging as well, but part of that dynamic that has been very damaging is that the sides, instead of talking to each other and coming to some sort of national consensus, keep trying to negotiate with SCAF to get SCAF to give them what they want, and there's this triangulation between Islamists, secularists and the military that happens, and then of course when ever you bring SCAF in, it doesn't move you forward in a constructive way. They're only interested in their own privileges, I mean, as we saw with this document, with the constitutional document. So also, it requires--I agree with you, real leadership where the people in these movements need to speak to each other and come up with a common plan for the future of this country that gets the military out of the picture gradually, and propose an alternative that's convincing to people.

KHALIL: Now, last week, I mentioned the possibility, or the fear, my fear of an army-Islamist alliance. To my mind that becomes a stronger possibility, because who are the two sides in the country that are the most motivated to jam these elections down our throats in eight days. The Brotherhood is going to wake up tomorrow morning and say--because this is going to invigorate calls for the postponing of the elections, and the Brotherhood are not going to play ball on that one.

EL AMRANI: They already don't play ball on that one.

LINDSEY: They've issued similar statements, the SCAF and the Muslim Brotherhood have both issued statements saying the elections must proceed at the appointed time. I think it is worth pointing out though, that the people in Tahrir are not calling for a postponement of the elections. They're calling, for example, on SCAF to set a date for the presidential elections, which is when they will be fully out of power. They're saying: okay fine, maybe we have to move forward with this but we want an end to military trials, we want real accountability, and we want the date for presidential elections set, we want it this year not in 2013. What they are calling for is a clear plan for when the military will be gone. They're not, per se, against holding the elections. And it maybe like you said, they're not going to be postponed because too many are invested in them moving forward, but, you know, boy are these unpromising circumstance for them to take place under.

EL AMRANI: I think we should explore some alternative scenarios. I mean, you mentioned one, that this pushes the Brotherhood, the Brotherhood makes a strategic choice to side, you know, thinking that there is no way to get SCAF out of power, to side with SCAF and be . . . again like I think SCAF tried to use it in February as an agent of

social stability. The Brotherhood probably has the biggest network of people around the country and they can calm things down.

KHALIL: Right.

EL AMRANI: The country needs calming down now, so this will lead to a Brotherhood-SCAF alliance. But let's look at the alternatives: SCAF imposes a new order of martial law--we're under emergency law--but the situation deteriorates, imposes itself and decides force is the only thing possible, whether elections go through in a dominantly sham way, or they're postponed or suspended, it doesn't matter.

KHALIL: Presumably, presumably accompanied by a media campaign that paints the Tahrir protesters as fanatical saboteurs that are holding up the progress of the country and . .

EL AMRANI: And so SCAF could toughen up and just use more force, the tactic that--

LINDSEY: I mean, how much force have they got?

(CROSSTALK)

EL AMRANI: They've got more, they've got more.

(CROSSTALK)

LINDSEY: Endless reservoirs of force, that's about the only thing they've got to bring to the table these days.

EL AMRANI: I mean, if you look at their tactics today, the attack on Tahrir--joint apparently by police and army--was not about one thing. It's funny how some of the protesters media is covering this thing, that the army and police attacked the square and that the protesters want it back. That's not what happened. They attacked the square, they threw incendiary bombs on the tents, burnt all the stuff that belonged to the people who were in the middle of Tahrir Square who were ready to camp over night, and then withdrew.

KHALIL: Yes.

EL AMRANI: It lasted less than half an hour. And that was their aim. And I think the idea is that if other people come and start to set up tents and things like that again, they'll attack again.

(CROSSTALK)

LINDSEY: But then again, we're talking about turning Cairo into a war zone, I mean, it's a real war zone tonight. And it's devastated Tahrir Square, and so we're talking about

halting all of downtown Cairo and regularly attacking civilians. I mean, they also killed people today. Are they going to kill people everyday?

EL AMRANI: I mean, frankly, other regimes have done it. If they think it is sustainable, they might do it.

LINDSEY: I don't think Egyptian public opinion can sustain it. I really don't. I still think, you know, however much people may be upset by the instability they are also upset by civilians being killed--

KHALIL: By martyrs.

LINDSEY: And this is the thing, this is how the revolution started, and I think a big mistake that they keep making--you go in and you kill people and the people who remain say things like: we're ready to die too.

EL AMRANI: And what this leads to is the scenario that some on the radical wings would love to see, which is basically a coup against the SCAF by younger military officers, and that's a complete unknown, an unknowable--

LINDSEY: Well, but talking about scenarios, so maybe if it's not a giant, internal army revolution, but just, you know, some of the members of the SCAF . . . one thing is, they get the government to resign and try to appease people that way, they set a date for presidential elections, another thing is you have a move against the Field Marshal Tantawi from other members of SCAF. That's also possible.

KHALIL: I think that's more likely than some sort of non-SCAF move against the entire SCAF because the SCAF is such a broad range of generals that represent every aspect, I mean, coast guard . . . whatever, that I find it more likely than half the SCAF would turn against Tantawi.

EL AMRANI: Yeah, but I think the problem with that idea, I mean it's a possibility, Tantawi is very popularly, is very personally unpopular. But other names get mentioned, so lets say Tantawi goes down and Anan takes over, but Anon is also mentioned increasingly, and then he becomes--

KHALIL: Anon was being chanted against, not as much as Tantawi, but he's a target.

EL AMRANI: I do think that SCAF acts as a collegial entity whose number one priority is the institutional integrity of the army, and that's its obsession.

LINDSEY: Yeah, but if the regime was willing to sacrifice Mubarak at some point, it's possible there are also further fraction lines that could appear.

EL AMRANI: Of course, but the other . . . yet another possibility is, whether--if not a possibility, perhaps a question that should be asked--what's the optimum scenario,

what's the best outcome of this. How do you create the conditions where you can correct what's wrong with the SCAF, you can get more civilian input into the transition, and have a transition process that--I still don't think the elections should be held now if there is an alternative to SCAF leadership, but what do you do? How do you appease the Muslim Brothers? The Muslim Brothers I think, are likely to do well in elections in a year's time or whenever they're held. They've been strong for a long time and will continue to be strong, so how do you convince them that it is also in their interests? I mean, do you have, if you had a triumvirate, a civilian triumvirate ruling the country, do you include them?

LINDSEY: You would have too, I think.

KHALIL: Yeah, you do.

EL AMRANI: You have to, or do you choose a person like Aboul Fotouh who has distanced himself from the Brotherhood officially, precisely because he has that distance but he represents the Islamists--

(CROSSTALK)

LINDSEY: But he would be their conduit though.

KHALIL: If they agree, if they sign off on him, fine, but I don't see anything to be gained by forcing this civilian triumvirate down the Brotherhood's throats. They need to be brought into it. What's the point of excluding them, they've earned the right to sit at that table.

EL AMRANI: Sure, sure. I mean, maybe all of this is too far-fetched, that SCAF will not accept relinquishing power, and then the plan that the Brotherhood is pushing for is the only option left, which is lets get this election done with and depending on the results you may have an outcome, that assuming that the elections are not held with a hundred and one problems and crises . .

KHALIL: And toxic ink.

EL AMRANI: And toxic ink.

LINDSEY: That is an unsubstantiated allegation, we should say.

(LAUGHTER)

EL AMRANI: What's next then? Because even if this dies out in a few days--the protesters are driven from Tahrir and things return to normal--even if that happens, it's going to pop up in January, the elections are going to be six weeks of people being distracted and political movements being distracted by other things, in January it comes back and I think of we see results where the Brotherhood and a few other parties do

well and can agree on a transition now, presidential elections now, they're going to fight for it and we are going to see another fight. Whether it's in Tahrir, or parliament, against SCAF about imposing a three, four month transition period by which time SCAF will be out of power and you have elections for a new president.

LINDSEY: And that's if the elections themselves, if chaos and violence doesn't break out to a degree during elections themselves, will the people take to the streets again saying this is an unfair, or you know, ridiculous, crazy process and we hold you, the government SCAF, responsible for the failure of this. I mean, because you could have the first round be a complete disaster and people could be out on the street much sooner than January.

EL AMRANI: Which goes back, I think, to how do you regain a level of public trust in this process, whatever the process is going to be.

LINDSEY: I have tons of suggestions, and also lots of other people, but the problem is--

EL AMRANI: You should be ruling Egypt, Ursula.

LINDSEY: The problem is that they don't do a single one of the things that anybody asks of them.

KHALIL: They don't do anything unless there are street protests to respond to.

LINDSEY: Or even now, it's you know, now is the time to, at the very least if you replace the government you could buy yourself some time, some calm, some credibility.

KHALIL: Replace the cabinet, replace the civilian cabinet? That won't do anything, the problem is the SCAF.

LINDSEY: No, no with a cabinet that is much more independent and credible, because people who aren't willing to blame the SCAF are spending all their time blaming the government right now, people who don't want to go that step and blame the military, blame the government. And at this point the government is seen as nothing but an absolutely ineffectual puppet of SCAF. If you brought people with real credibility in and gave them actual power that would be one thing that could be useful. If you said yes, okay, we are going to have the presidential elections this spring, that would be another thing that would be very appealing to these protesters. I mean, there are a lot of steps that could be taken, it's just they are unwilling to take any of them.

KHALIL: I kinda feel bad for Essam Sharaf, I kinda feel bad for the prime minister--that he seemed like a sincere guy, qualified, heart was in the right place, he seemed like a guy who could have led the transition. You don't have any sympathy because you think he should have resigned in protest, which is really the only card he could play to pressure the SCAF, you think he should have done it months ago--

(CROSSTALK)

LINDSEY: No, there are other pressures, you can say things to the media, you can leak stuff, you can go up against them, you can resign, but I mean, you know--I'm not making any judgement on the man personally and he did come in with a lot of respect. But I think the problem is that the entire government is that they have been much too pliable. And the problem with the whole process has been that it did not bring in after the revolution people who were really different from the old regime, people who were really willing to challenge the logic of the old regime, because they were afraid of those people. So you don't see people with real credibility coming out of the revolution--

(CROSSTALK)

KHALIL: The people who would really change things.

LINDSEY: Yeah.

KHALIL: Okay.

EL AMRANI: Well, we decided to make today's podcast fairly short because a) we are exhausted and b) we have very long days and nights ahead of us as this crisis unfolds, but we will be back soon. Hopefully, not because there is more bloodshed.

KHALIL: But possibly, because there's more bloodshed.

LINDSEY: But hopefully not.

KHALIL: Nope.

EL AMRANI: In the meantime, keep us in mind if you have any questions, write to podcast (at) arabist (dot) net. Please donate for the podcasts at arabist (dot) net (slash) donate.

KHALIL: Yes, pay for our gas masks and vinegar.

EL AMRANI: Exactly, vinegar is very expensive in Egypt. It is.

(LAUGHTER)

LINDSEY: All right, well . .

EL AMRANI: And we'll see you next time.

LINDSEY: Bye.

KHALIL: Bye.