

## **Egyptian military backs president's retirement of senior generals**

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The Egyptian military on Monday said President Mohammed Morsi's decision to force into retirement the two most senior generals was a "natural thing.

"Changing the army's leaders is a natural thing and the armed forces have never been a source of trouble for the country," the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces said in a statement.

Morsi on Sunday ordered the retirement of Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi, who was defence minister, and army chief of staff Sami Anan.

"The council (SCAF) did its duty and steered Egypt to the port of safety. It proved it had no ambitions for power," the statement said.

It said the latest replacements "have handed over responsibility to a new generation" in the army.

Tantawi headed the military council that ruled Egypt after Hosny Mubarak was toppled in February 2011 until Morsi took office in June.

Tantawi, 76, was replaced with Abdul-Fatah al-Sessi, a 57-year-old former head of military intelligence.

Anan was replaced with Maj.-Gen. Sedki Sobhi, a 56-year-old army commander.

The surprise shake-up comes at a time when the army is engaged in an offensive against militants in the lawless Sinai desert, where 16 soldiers were killed in an attack in the town of Rafah on the border with the Gaza Strip more than a week ago.

The White House on Monday said it looked forward to working with al-Sessi.

Jay Carney, spokesman for United States President Barack Obama, said the U.S hoped that the shake-up "will serve the interests of the Egyptian people and maintain good relations with Egypt's neighbours."

State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland noted that the "security issue in the Sinai" was a major concern to the U.S.

She said that the way Egypt regains control of the restive Sinai "has an impact on the neighbours and on existing treaties and relationships."

She noted that the new Egyptian military leadership includes many officers who have trained in the U.S.

Morsi also cancelled a temporary constitutional decree issued by the military in mid-June curtailing the president's powers and boosting those of the generals.

The military retook legislative control after the country's top court in June dissolved the lower house of parliament where Islamists, including Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood, had a majority.

Under Morsi's decree, he will have legislative powers until parliamentary elections are held later this year.

Nobel Peace Prize laureate Mohammed ElBaradei praised Morsi's decisions, saying that ending the military's political role was a step in the right direction.

However, ElBaradei, the former head of the UN nuclear watchdog, called on Morsi not to keep legislative control for long.

"A president having both executive and legislative powers contradicts the core of democracy and should be exceptional and temporary," ElBaradei said.

Morsi defended his decisions in an address late Sunday, saying they were in the "interest of the nation and its people."

He will travel to Saudi Arabia on Tuesday to attend an emergency conference of Muslim leaders, the state-run newspaper Al Ahram reported online.

The EU said Morsi's decisions completed the handover of power to democratically elected civilian authorities.

"The EU looks forward to a speedy completion of a new constitution that safeguards the rights and freedoms of all Egyptians, and to the holding of parliamentary elections as soon as possible thereafter that will complete the democratic transition," a spokesman for EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton said.

Egyptian liberals fear that Islamists would try to influence the new constitution.

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