Egyptian events worry many in Florida with eye to Mideast stability
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Marina Haroun Abdalla, thousands of miles away from her two brothers in Cairo, says her heart beats faster every time she turns on the TV in her West Palm Beach home and hears reports of her country's political unsteadiness.

Abdalla, a 19-year-old Palm Beach Atlantic University student, said her fellow Egyptians should be pleased about leader Hosni Mubarak's announcement Thursday that he will remain president until September but transfer presidential powers to his vice president.

"This is the best thing that anyone can do right now," Abdalla said shortly after Mubarak's address on state television.

Protesters should give Mubarak and his government a chance to stabilize Egypt, Abdalla said.

"If the president resigned right now, everything would be destroyed," she said. "Just give them time. If they don't make any changes, (the protesters) can come back."

But the thousands gathered in Cairo's Tahrir Square did not want to give Mubarak more time. And some Florida observers think the president's announcement will only fuel the opposition and further destabilize Egypt's economy.

Mideast stability was on the minds of many watching from Florida as developments unfolded Thursday.

"It's taking Egypt to another stage, a dangerous stage," said Robert Rabil, a Florida Atlantic University political science professor and an expert in U.S.-Arab relations.

Rabil, who watched Mubarak's speech, said he understood why protesters were chanting "get out, get out."

Mubarak "is going to remain there, but his protesters want his departure," Rabil said. "This is his pride speaking, and I think that his decision not to step down has very much complicated the issue in Egypt."

Mubarak may have thought granting the vice president the powers of the nation's leader would calm protesters, but Rabil wasn't so sure.
"The demonstrations are expanding and now you have members of the public sector who are beginning to demonstrate, to go on strike," Rabil said. "And this is the last thing the regime wants."

Some members of Palm Beach County's Jewish community, worried about the impact Egypt's instability may have on relations with Israel and on the Arab region, said the speech did not provide much reassurance.

"This is an unsettling time for the Middle East," said Rachel Miller, director of the Palm Beach County regional office of the American Jewish Committee.

For decades, Egypt has been Israel's closest ally in the Middle East. The 1979 peace treaty benefited both countries, and Mubarak has acted as a bridge between Israel and the Palestinians and between Israel and the broader Arab world.

"The AJC supports the Arab people's aspirations for freedom, democracy and prosperity, and we hope that the outcome of the political reforms will be a democracy that respects human rights, elections and the rule of law," Miller said.