

Springtime for Morsi?

Michael Totten's review of *Arab Fall* By Eric Trager in [Commentary](#):

Almost everyone got the Arab Spring wrong.

At a casual glance, the Middle East and North Africa appeared to be sprouting political liberals like daisies at the tail end of 2010, when a nonviolent revolution in Tunisia spread to Egypt, Libya, and Syria. Tunisia's autocratic Zine El Abidine Ben Ali fell in a matter of weeks, followed a month later by Egypt's Hosni Mubarak. Rebellions then broke out in Libya against the tyrannical Muammar Qaddafi and in Syria against Bashar al-Assad.

Tunisia came through fairly well. It is now governed by a secular democratically elected government. But elsewhere, the Arab Spring failed spectacularly. Syria is ground zero for ISIS, and it's suffering its fifth year of catastrophic civil war. Libya is disintegrating into a terrorist war zone. Egyptians first elected a theocratic Muslim Brotherhood government, then cheered when the army toppled their first and only elected president—the Brotherhood's Mohammad Morsi—and replaced their fledgling pseudo-democracy with yet another military dictatorship.

The Arab Spring failed for different reasons in each place, but in no country were expectations so violently dashed as in Egypt.

With *Arab Fall: How the Muslim Brotherhood Won and Lost Egypt in 891 Days*, academic and journalist Eric Trager has written the definitive account of the Muslim Brotherhood's rise and collapse, beginning with the revolt against Mubarak, the elections that brought the Brotherhood to power, Morsi's inept and ill-fated reign, and its decimation at the hands of the army.

“What looked like a democratizing ‘Arab Spring’ to many foreign observers,” Trager writes, “was in fact a deeply uncertain ‘Arab Fall’ for many Egyptians, in which the political climate grew colder and colder as time wore on.”

How did so many journalists, diplomats, academics, and analysts get Egypt so wrong? It was partly the result of hope and naiveté. But the Muslim Brotherhood also waged a brilliantly effective campaign of deception at home and abroad, hoping to convince as many people as possible that it was a politically moderate organization with a broad and diverse base of support. It wanted to earn the trust of Egyptians who weren’t yearning for an Islamist theocracy, and it feared a hostile reaction from the West, so it mounted a full-court press in the Egyptian, European, and American media. The *Washington Post* even published an op-ed from one of its leaders, Abdel Moneim Abouel, who wrote that the Brotherhood “embraced diversity and democratic values.”

Its media-savvy spokesmen touted this line at every opportunity to every journalist and diplomat who would listen, but the Brotherhood’s decades-old motto revealed what they truly believed. “Allah is our objective,” it reads, “the Prophet is our leader, the Qur’an is our constitution, jihad is our way, and death for the sake of God is our highest aspiration.”

“The Muslim Brotherhood was never a moderate organization or a democratic one in any sense of that word,” Trager writes. “It is a rigidly purpose-driven vanguard that seeks total control over its members so that it can mobilize them for empowering [founder] Hassan al-Banna’s deeply politicized interpretation of Islam as an ‘all-embracing concept.’ It accepts electoral institutions as a mechanism for winning power, but its ultimate goal is theocratic: It seeks to establish an Islamic state and ultimately establish a global Islamic state that will challenge the

West.”

Trager saw what others did not in part because the Brotherhood blacklisted him and forced him to seek access beyond its smooth media handlers. “My goal was to interview the Brotherhood’s lesser-known leaders at every level, the individuals who attended the same meetings as their more prominent colleagues but who were less media-trained and therefore less guarded in sharing information,” he writes. “These folks, as it turned out, hadn’t received that blacklist memo.”

He slowly discovered what set the Muslim Brotherhood apart from all other Egyptian political entities, including other Islamist parties: its rigid and almost cult-like organization. Becoming a full-fledged member of the Muslim Brotherhood takes five to eight years. Each recruit must pass through several stages of an indoctrination process where they are thoroughly vetted and conditioned to toe the party line with unflinching and unquestioning obedience. “By the time the five-to-eight year (and sometimes longer) process is completed,” Trager writes, “the Muslim Brother’s social life revolves almost entirely around the organization, and leaving the organization would thus entail excommunication from his closest friends.”

The Brotherhood’s “ground game” and get-out-the-vote mobilization were also unparalleled. That’s why they won the parliamentary elections in late 2011 and the presidential election in 2012. Just three days before the first round of presidential elections, the Brotherhood’s candidate, Mohammad Morsi, came in a distant third place, yet by election day he took first place and beat the secular Ahmed Shafik in the runoff. “The Islamists won,” Trager writes, “because they were exceptionally well organized—not because they were extraordinarily popular.”

Analysts, then, got the Brotherhood wrong not once, but

three times. First, by swallowing the lie that the organization was moderate; second, by assuming it couldn't possibly win; and third, by thinking it was mainstream and popular after it did win.

Misunderstandings cut both ways. The Brotherhood and the Obama administration each misread the other. The Brotherhood leadership's paranoid anti-Americanism led them to believe Washington would do everything in its power to subvert or overthrow them. The White House and the State Department, meanwhile, thought that the friendly engagement Obama promised in his Cairo speech in 2009 would prevent the Brotherhood from clenching its fist. "From the administration's standpoint," Trager writes, "this policy was grounded in realism: Egypt is an important American ally, and the United States therefore had little choice but to work with the Brotherhood once it held power."

Washington gave the Brotherhood one pass after another, and a bewildered Morsi eventually felt that he was free to do and say whatever he wanted without being challenged. The Obama administration, for its part, seemed blissfully unaware that its well-meaning diplomatic outreach looked to Egyptians like an alliance with the Islamists against secularists. Thus when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Cairo during the summer of 2012 "protests followed her everywhere."

In time, the Brotherhood let its mask slip and the West caught on. When Navy SEALs killed Osama bin Laden, the organization released a statement calling the terrorist leader "sheikh" and expressing outrage at the United States for killing him without a trial. In early 2013, a video emerged showing Morsi referring to Israelis as "bloodsuckers" and "descendants of apes and pigs" and urging his countrymen to "nurse our children on hatred." The Obama administration finally lambasted Egypt's president in public.

Egyptian politics went from bad to worse. Morsi effectively declared himself pharaoh by asserting total executive and legislative power, something even Mubarak never did. A month later, he went further and placed himself above the judiciary by announcing that his constitutional declarations were “final and binding and cannot be appealed in any way or to any entity.” It was, Trager writes, “an assertion of absolute legal power, rendering Morsi a dictator and shattering his democratic legitimacy.” Morsi wasn’t just a ruthless dictator on paper; he was a ruthless dictator in action. After just seven months in office, he’d already arrested four times as many journalists for “insulting the president” as Mubarak had jailed over three decades.

By the time Egypt’s simmering populace boiled over in response to the Brotherhood’s misrule, the damage had been done, both to Egypt and to Washington’s reputation. The last straw came in June 2013 when Morsi named Adel al-Khayat as the governor of Luxor. Al-Khayat was more than just an Islamist. He was a terrorist who had massacred 62 people, most of them tourists, in 1997 at the Temple of Hatshepsut. Morsi found himself facing the largest protest in the entire history of Egypt. Al-Khayat barely lasted a week in office, and ten days after he stepped down, General Sisi mounted his coup and decapitated the Brotherhood.

Trager covered much of this before he wrote *Arab Fall*. He wrote about it in real time in various publications, consistently reporting that the Muslim Brotherhood was resolutely extremist and eternally hostile to the West, to pluralism, and to democracy. Unlike many observers, Trager has nothing for which he needs to apologize. His argument was controversial at the time. It’s not any more.