

# SOLDIERS, SPIES AND STATESMEN: EGYPT'S ROAD TO REVOLT

Hazem Kandil, (Verso, 2012), 303 p.  
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The so-called Arab Spring came as a surprise to many academics and policy makers. Scholars have tried to understand the nature of the protests and the motives behind the uprisings. Likewise, the Egyptian revolution is now among the most studied cases. Hazem Kandil's ambitious project is only one of them, but it is unique with its institutional historical approach. In *Soldiers, Spies and Statesmen: Egypt's Road to Revolt*, Kandil simply/mainly traces the political power struggle of actors/institutions within the Egyptian authoritarian regime structure during the last 60 years. It is a well-organized account of the complex relationships and shifting positions of the institutions that have been the major actors of the political and economic life in Egypt. Such an attempt is important for three reasons: (1) to understand the nature of Egyptian political life; (2) to explore the survival methods of different power bases within the regime in Egypt; and (3) to explain the structural causes of the Egyptian revolution.

To give a brief summary, the book divides the Egyptian political power three major parts. The first part is the militarist state where Free Officers ruled the country with the support from officers within their ranks. Secondly, there is a police state where interior ministers and their bureaucratic ties became more influential in political life, particularly during the last years of Anwar Sadat's presidency. This has continued throughout Hosni Mubarak's rule. Thirdly, it is the capitalist state where businessmen became the most powerful group in politics. They utilized bureaucracy/*statesmen*, security/*soldiers* and the intelligence/*spies* forces to sustain their premiership. In all these political settings, the group that suffered the most were the people of Egypt. Kandil argues that people suffered to the extent that they no longer had the patience to stay silent. This, he argues, explains when and why the uprising in Egypt started. In order for the reader to grasp today's events successfully, Kandil gives a lengthy review of the civil-military relations in Egypt.

Kandil's compelling historical account discloses how the power struggles between different groups have consumed the wealth and resources of Egypt. According to him, the blame for Egypt's current political hardships goes to every leader since Nasser. Mubarak, Sadat and Nasser have all contributed to the failure by expanding the role of intelligence, giving privileges to businessmen, planning backdoor settlements to topple rivals and by forgetting the real problems which inflicted on the Egyptians.

*Soldiers, Spies and Statesmen* provides a comprehensive historical account of the political history of Egypt in six chapters. Developing chronologically, Kandil's narrative begins with the 1952 Coup and Nasser's rise to power which led the Egyptian political arena to be filled by military cadres. At the outset, the book explains the competition for power between Nasser and other leading groups within the military (pp.31-38). The book shows how military coups have played a crucial role in Egypt's political life since 1952. Since then, Nasser and other leaders have faced coup attempts (pp.87-89). Such plans against Sadat are also explained in the book (pp.102-103). Kandil successfully hints at the tradition of coups and its danger for the post-revolutionary political leaders, particularly those of the Muslim Brotherhood. Since the political history of Egypt is very much entwined with military coups, it is interesting to witness how Morsi ruled out such possibilities against himself, yet still faced a military coup in 2013.

An important aspect of the book is that it points to quite a number of similarities between different practices in the political life of Egypt. For instance, the book puts forward an interesting and obvious similarity between the way Naguib was forced out of office and that of Morsi (p.35). Another such example is the pressure from the military cadres against the Islamic movements, mainly the Muslim Brotherhood. Just like Abdel Fattah El-Sisi is nowadays doing in Egypt, Nasser exerted very harsh pressure against the Muslim Brotherhood by arresting thousands of members and even killing them (p.40).

As an insider, Kandil's work presents useful observations for those studying Egypt's military history as well. This is crucial in understanding the country's military failures against Israel. It explains how Nasser bluntly went into war with Israel despite the reports from the military ranks of a lack of preparation for such a confrontation (pp.71-72). A similar situation took place when Sadat did not take seriously the warnings by the military officers during the 1973 War. Kandil also elaborates on how the US supported Israel against Egypt in 1967 (pp.93-97). Just days before the 1967 War, Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban, American Secretary of Defence, Chairman of Joint Chief of Staff and the CIA director convened at Pentagon and discussed the strategy against Egypt. The United States telegraphed Nasser promising him that Washington would help negotiating a peaceful settlement (p.94). American hypocrisy was at its highest level, when state

officials asked Egypt's Ambassador to Washington to assure Nasser that "Israel would never begin hostilities". Kandil points out this situation by stating that "the United States not only betrayed Nasser but also tried to make fool out of him" (p.95). Secret negotiations and plans between the US and Israel prior to 1967 War are clear indicators of US's betrayal against Egypt. It was a total humiliation of a nation which was then supposed to have far-reaching consequences. However, when Nasser died and Sadat came into power, the past had been forgotten and Egypt's policy makers tried to satisfy US as much as they could. That is why Egyptians have always felt unease with Sadat as his funeral attended by a very small crowd shows.

It has to be noted that Kandil directs harsher critique towards Anwar Sadat than towards Mubarak and Nasser. Sadat is pictured as an incompetent figure; knotty and fragile for political leadership. This negative approach towards Sadat is based on his wrong decisions during the war times (pp.127-129) as well as on his backdoor negotiations with Henry Kissinger, the then US Secretary of State (pp.130-142).

Kandil's work also provides important statistical figures on the Egyptian military's economic influence. Following the establishment of military-economic complex during the last years of the Sadat era, military spending started to decrease. Mubarak followed the suit in order to give way to newly created business tycoons to boost their share in the

economy. Kandil notes that "While military spending in the mid-70s represented as much as 33 per cent of Egypt's GDP, it fell significantly afterward, to 19.5 per cent in 1980 and further down to 2.2 per cent in 2010" (p.183).

Another striking observation the author makes is about the geopolitical alliance between Egypt and the USA. In exchange of political power domestically, Sadat made great concessions to America and tried to sustain support from Washington. A quite similar strategy was followed during the Mubarak era as well. However, Kandil argues that America's alliance has never been based on mutual interest but rather favoured the interests of America and Israel. That's why he argues US's help to Egypt was always under one condition, that is, the Israel's security. For this reason, despite the fact that Egyptian regime received great amount of military aid from US, they were never allowed to be more equipped than the Israel's army. In a letter from President Ronald Reagan to Israeli Premier Menachem Begin in 1986, American leader ensured Tel-Aviv for "guaranteeing Israeli superiority in armaments over all the Arab states combined" (p. 185). Another important aspect of the US policy toward Egypt during Sadat and Mubarak eras was that Washington never allowed Egypt to exert its influence over Arab nations. As a superpower that is defending its interests in the Arabian peninsula the US helped Arab countries to remain as divided and weakened as possible (p.187).

The Mubarak era witnessed a security state in its strict sense, forcing citizens to cease all kinds of opposition against the regime. Mubarak's tough policies against dissent as well as formidable intelligence and security agencies created an environment of "total fear". Kandil's numbers about Egypt's interior security agencies are horrifying as they show the level of suppression in the country. During the final decade of Mubarak's rule, Egypt had around two million security officials (including police, intelligence and other related persons) in a population of 83 million. In Kandil's words "to grasp the enormity of this figure, one should remember that the Soviet police force under Stalin in the 1930s was a mere 142.000 men; that today 142 million Russians manage with a 200.000-strong security force; that the entire Chinese army in 2009 numbered only 2.3 million in a population of 1.3 billion and that Egypt's own army in 2010 was no more than 460.000" (p.194). Accordingly Interior Ministry's expenditure increased from 3.5 per cent to almost 6 per cent of GDP between 1988 and 2002 (p.195).

It was not only the numbers but the methods and practices of security forces that were hated by the Egyptians. Police-connected thugs were harassing citizens indiscriminately and helping police to create an environment of fear. Torture in detention was a widespread practice, sometimes resulting in deaths with no further investigation. Endemic police violence continued despite heavy criticism from both citizens and international human rights organizations (p.196).

The numbers and practices above by any means show that the Egyptians have been living under heavy pressure of the regime despite new technological developments that allowed them to see the wider world. As a result of increasing internet use, satellite TV channels as well as regional and international people exchange, the Egyptian youth could no longer stay silent about the oppressive policies of Mubarak's regime.

Kandil also explores the economic performance of the Mubarak regime. During the initial years the economy was struggling because of the heavy debt inherited from the Sadat's era. Deteriorating statistics led Egyptian economy to collapse in 1989. Two years after the collapse, the country started running again with the help from the US in exchange for Egypt's involvement in the Gulf War against Iraq. Bush administration forgave half of Egypt's debt, when Mubarak agreed to send troops to Iraq (p.205).

Mubarak initiated a new strategy on economy by creating a new wealthy class through such sectors as real estate, construction and media. Lands were allocated to government-friendly companies and certain businessmen who were supported by the state were allowed to build luxury hotels. To the surprise of any analyst who studied political economy, Egypt was paving over its arable land while its people were forced to import their food need from the West (p.206-207). Despite the deteriorating economic situation of Egyptians, Mubarak continued to support businessmen loyal to the regime. During

his era, through regime-friendly businessmen, Egypt sold gas to Israel at a reduced price leading the country to lose up to 11 billion dollars but making loyal tycoons richer. Another shocking figure given in the book is that the land which Mubarak allocated to loyal businessmen is bigger than the size of Palestine, Lebanon, Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain combined (p.214-215). Because of all these irregularities and corruption, Mubarak's policy of creating state-supported newly elite resulted in heavy unequal distribution of wealth. Because of this injustice there were only two classes in Egypt: the well-off who have dominated more than 90 per cent of the economy and the poor who barely survived. Both economic constraints and political oppression led Egyptians to rise up and topple the regime.

Kandil's main argument is that the Egyptian regime's decisions have been shaped mainly by military cadres as well as police forces, security institutions, political figures and business tycoons. In brief, he concludes that all of these different power bases aimed to maximize their share in the power structure and this led to the collapse of the state and forced its citizens to take to the streets.

Finally, an interesting aspect of Kandil's work is its timing. In Kandil's own words, this is "a book about history caught unexpectedly in real time" (p.1). What distinguishes *Soldiers, Spies and Statesmen's* from other studies on the Egyptian revolution is that this book is the product of a longer research that somehow pre-

dicted what happened in 2011. Due to this fact, the book is not only important for those who study Egypt, but also for others doing research on social transformations.

Overall, *Soldiers, Spies and Statesmen* is a well-structured analysis of Egypt's recent history. Kandil's work, however, has one shortcoming. The book puts so much focus on the institutions to the extent that the actors and the people are rarely discussed in the analysis. One would like to see the role and the position of the social movements during this historical period, for they played a crucial role in the power struggles. Groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafis, liberal organizations and the socialists have persistently opposed to the regimes of Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak. Therefore, the struggle between these groups and the political power should have been included in the analysis. This would have granted the reader a better understanding of the dynamics that shaped the power struggle in the country since the WWII.

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Unlike many books published after the January 2011 revolution, *Soldiers, Spies and Statesmen* was not triggered by and is not an immediate product of the revolution. Kandil had been working on this subject for five years when the revolution happened. Only days before the revolution he published an article analysing the prospects of revolution in Egypt, and his manuscript was already in progress when the Egyptians finally revolted in early 2011.Â Building on rigorous academic research he skilfully brings to light the historical details of Egyptâ€™s road to revolt, and he manages to do this in a style free from the academic jargon which plagues other similar texts, making this book as enjoyable and accessible for the lay reader as it is for academics and researchers.