

Book Review: Soldiers, Spies and Statesmen: Egypt's Road to Revolt

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*Revolutions are difficult to understand, let alone predict, and the recent revolt in Egypt was no exception. In **Soldiers, Spies and Statesmen: Egypt's Road to Revolt**, Hazem Kandil presents the revolt as the latest episode in an ongoing power struggle between the major components of Egypt's authoritarian regime. **Gülay Türkmen-Derivoğlu** commends the book for its accessible style and content; a must-read for not only those interested in the January 2011 revolution but also for readers interested in the wider history of Egypt.*

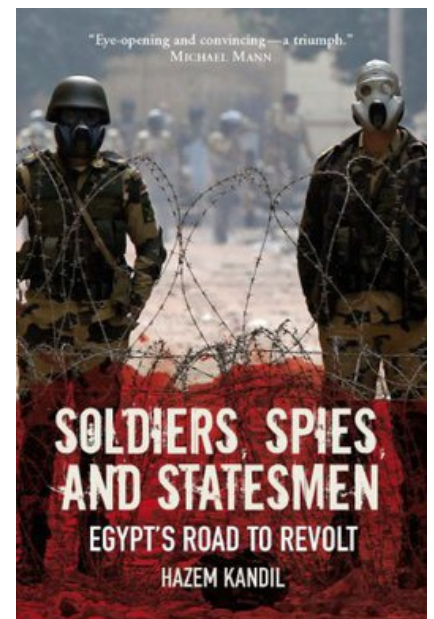
Soldiers, Spies and Statesmen: Egypt's Road to Revolt. Hazem Kandil. Verso. November 2012.

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When, in January 2011, Egyptians revolted against Hosni Mubarak's dictatorial regime, the world was taken by surprise. Little had we paid attention to the growing discontent in Egypt up to this point, and little did those who had paid attention expect this discontent to turn into an uprising of such force. When Mubarak's regime was toppled in just two weeks, commentators asked the same question: after thirty years of repression under Mubarak, what made the Egyptians revolt in January 2011? What was the catalyst for this swift revolt?

Since then, hundreds of articles and scores of books have been written in an attempt to answer these questions. Believing that providing the answer as early as two years after the revolution is a "formidable – and probably futile – task" (p. 1), [Hazem Kandil](#), in his insightful and enlightening book, *Soldiers, Spies and Statesmen: Egypt's Road to Revolt*, sets out to answer another important question: how did Egyptians manage to oust as strong a dictator as Mubarak in two weeks' time? After all, Mubarak had been ruling Egypt with an iron fist for more than three decades. "How was it possible for the people to defy this seemingly invincible dictatorship and get away with it?" (p. 1)

According to Kandil, a lecturer at the University of Cambridge's [Sociology department](#), the answer to this question requires an in-depth understanding of the tripartite power struggle between the institutions that make up Egypt's authoritarian state: the military, the security services, and the political elite. Kandil utilises a host of primary and secondary sources to trace the development of this struggle for power, starting with the 1952 coup of the Free Officers Movement and culminating in the January 2011 revolution. Employing an institutionalist approach, he "reconstructs the critical junctures of the six-decade power struggle that consumed Egypt" (p.4). According to this reconstruction, what cleared the path for revolution was the military's decision to eventually depose Mubarak, who has for years been favouring security forces over the military in an attempt to isolate the latter. When the masses revolted, the embittered military decided to act with the masses against Mubarak. The revolution was "an episode that simply reshuffled the players and reconstituted the field of forces to pave the way for yet another round" (p. 4).



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Across six chapters, Kandil challenges the conventional view of the army's support for the Egyptian regime as "a constant not a variable" (p. 5), and diligently portrays Egypt's transformation from a military state into a police state. The first two chapters discuss the origins of the power struggle between the military and the political elite during Nasser's rule (1956-1970), with the third and fourth chapters telling the story of the expansion of the politically-loyal security forces, and the forced metamorphosis of the military from a combat-oriented institution to an economic institution under Sadat (1970-1981). By the time Mubarak came to power in 1981, the military had been isolated, "marginalized and increasingly regarded with suspicion [whereas] the police had proven to be loyal and reliable. But (...) apparently, the army still had some fight left in it" (p. 174). The last two chapters trace the evolution of that fight until the January 2011 revolution, along with a close-up of the social tensions brought about by the economic policies of Sadat and Mubarak.

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. Thus, in Kandil's words, this is "a book about history unexpectedly caught in real time" (p. 1); a detailed and rigorous historical narrative which not only covers the sixty-year fight between the military, the police and the political apparatus but also the decisive moments of Egyptian history in the second half of the twentieth century. It is a narrative that depicts the repercussions of the Cold War on Egyptian politics, namely, the changing relationships of Egypt, United States, Israel, and Russia, as well as the impact of these changes on the economic and social system in Egypt.

The only criticism one could raise against Kandil is the too strong a role he gives the institutions in paving Egypt's road to revolt. As meticulous and convincing as his institutionalist account may be, it leaves out a vital element: the people themselves. In the course of 246 pages, the reader is provided with plenty of detail about the politicians, the soldiers, and the police, but much less so about the people and their reactions to vital political events. Mass movements in the country, such as the 1966 Kamshish Affair, 1977 Food Riots (also known as [Bread Riots](#)), the [Kefaya Movement](#) (2004), or the [National Association for Change](#) (2010) are mentioned in passing and the 80-year-old Muslim Brotherhood has only a shadowy existence throughout the book. The people of Egypt make a substantial appearance in the last two chapters, but only in an assisting role: as subjects of Kandil's arguments about the deteriorating standard of life under Mubarak. What this reviewer is calling for is not a romanticized account of the "revolutionaries who managed to topple a regime on their own", as such a portrayal would only be unrealistic; but the reactions of the people including non-governmental organizations and youth movements should be given a bit more attention than Kandil gives if we are to have a more complete picture of the January 2011 revolution.

That said, Kandil does accomplish what he promises in the title. Building on rigorous academic research he skilfully brings to light the historical details of Egypt'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. It is a must-read for not only those interested in the January 2011 revolution but also for everyone interested in the history of modern-day Egypt.

Gulay Turkmen-Dervisoglu is a Ph.D. candidate at Yale University's Sociology department. She is affiliated with the Yale Center for Comparative Research, the Yale Council on Middle East Studies and the Yale MacMillan Center Initiative on Religion, Politics and Society. Her research interests include sociology of religion, comparative-historical sociology, nations/nationalism and cultural trauma and collective memory in the context of national identity formation. She is specifically interested in the ways religious and nationalist identities intersect, intertwine and compete with each other, especially in the Middle East. Her dissertation project focuses on the role of supra-national religious identities in ethno-nationalist conflicts, specifically on the conceptualization of ethnicity by Muslim clergymen in the Kurdish-Turkish conflict and Catholic clergymen in the Basque-Spanish conflict. Her work can be reached at <http://yale.academia.edu/gulayturkmendervisoglu>. She occasionally tweets [@gulayturkmen](#). [Read more reviews by Gulay](#).