The Truth About Egypt

by **Eric Trager (/experts/eric-trager)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Eric Trager was the Esther K. Wagner Fellow at The Washington Institute.

Michael Totten, a contributing editor for World Affairs, interviews Dr. Trager regarding the direction of Egypt's political dynamics since Morsi's ouster.

Egypt looks dodgier than ever right now. Just six weeks after overthrowing the government in a military coup, the armed forces opened fire on civilians protesting the removal of President Mohammad Morsi and killed more than 500 people, prompting President Barack Obama to cancel joint American-Egyptian military drills.

Springtime never came to Cairo at all. In some ways, Egypt is right back where it was when Hosni Mubarak still ruled the country. The political scene is exactly the same. Two illiberal titans -- a military regime and an Islamist opposition -- are battling it out. But in other ways, Egypt is in worse shape now than it was. It's more chaotic, more violent. Its economy is imploding, its people increasingly desperate.

I recently interviewed Eric Trager, a scholar at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. He's a real expert on Egypt and has been more consistently right than just about anyone. He called out the Muslim Brotherhood as an inherently authoritarian organization while scores of other supposed "experts" falsely pimped it as moderate. And contrary to claims from the opposing camp, that the army "restored" democracy with its coup, he saw the recent bloody unpleasantness coming well in advance.

I spoke to him before this week's massacre happened, but it's clear from his remarks that he suspected something like it was coming.

TOTTEN: For starters, what do you say to those who insist the Muslim Brotherhood is a moderate and democratic political party?

TRAGER: The Muslim Brotherhood is certainly not democratic. Its view of Egyptian politics in one in which it should control everything. For example, while it is willing to pursue power through elections, once it comes to office its goal is to establish and Islamic state in which it and its institutions control the Egyptian bureaucracy and institute its version of Islam while sidelining and oppressing all opponents.

"Moderate" is an even less accurate word in describing the Brotherhood. It's designed to weed out moderates during

the recruitment process. The process of becoming a Muslim Brother is a five to eight year ordeal where potential Muslim Brothers are vetted through five tiers of membership that tests their commitment to the cause and their willingness to take orders. Anyone who has second thoughts about the organization, the ideology, or their willingness to blindly do what they're told, is out.

When the Brotherhood first emerged as the leading organization after the 2011 uprising, a lot of observers thought it would become more moderate when forced to actually govern, but what those analysts overlooked that is that the Brotherhood prevents moderates from becoming members and prevents members from becoming moderates.

TOTTEN: How did you learn about their internal structure? What are your sources?

TRAGER: I've interviewed dozens of their leaders and rank-and-file members. I've interviewed many of the top figures that you read about in the press, including Mohammad Morsi.

TOTTEN: So your sources are inside the organization rather than outside.

TRAGER: Yes. I'm one of the few people who talked about this during the aftermath of the uprising, but I didn't discover it. Richard Mitchell wrote about it in his book, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*. It was originally published in 1968 and it's considered the classic text on the Brotherhood, but many people who put themselves out there as experts on this subject haven't read one of the most basic studies of the organization's history. I've talked about this at conferences and been told by supposed experts that the Brotherhood isn't structured that way. They obviously haven't read Mitchell even though they have to if they're going to call themselves experts.

TOTTEN: But surely the organization has changed at least somewhat since 1968. That was a long time ago, before I was even born.

TRAGER: Yes, of course. Mitchell lays out the early history of the organization, describes its recruitment process, and spells out the nationwide chain of command. He does these things well. The recruitment process and chain of command have been updated in some important respects. The recruitment process, for instance, has a few more membership levels now than it used to. But the basic idea that this is a vanguard and a closed society that ensures its members are totally committed to the cause and are willing to die for it is still true.

He also wrote that the Muslim Brotherhood was fading, and that didn't pan out. But he was writing in 1968 during the time of the Nasser regime when the Brotherhood was severely repressed. He didn't foresee its re-emergence under Sadat in the 1970s and then again under Mubarak. That much is understandable.

Many people think of the Brotherhood as an Islamist organization that rejects Al Qaeda style violence, so therefore it's "moderate." And this, in fact, is how Muslim Brotherhood leaders describe themselves when I talk to them. I'll ask them what they mean when they say they're moderates, and they'll say, "we aren't Al Qaeda." Frankly, that has never been my standard of moderation. [Laughs.]

I think Washington's fascination with the Brotherhood is the product of a search for an Islamist organization that reflects the "culture" of the Middle East and isn't violent. There is a lack of appreciation for the fact that just because an organization doesn't lead with violence doesn't mean it's going to be moderate or democratic or capable of governing.

And too many analysts took the Brotherhood's claim of moderation at face value. The Brotherhood says it views shura, an Islamic concept that means consultation, as democracy. Many analysts said the Brotherhood is not only adopting democracy, it's finding an Islamic justification for it. My view is that far from finding an Islamic justification for democracy, they were simply redefining democracy in a way that wasn't democratic but sounded good to the West.

TOTTEN: What do you make of all the Brotherhood's talk lately about martyrdom? Is that a threat? Are they saying

they're willing to be killed by the government? Or is it just talk?

TRAGER: The Brotherhood seems to believe that if it can draw the military into a fight directly, it can create fissures within the military -- not necessarily because there are many Islamists in the military, although that's possible, but because the Brotherhood believes Egyptian soldiers won't fire on fellow Egyptians.

Remember that during the initial uprising, the soldiers didn't fire on demonstrators in Tahrir Square. I think, although I can't be certain, that many soldiers would have refused to follow that order. We can see this belief that the military would fracture if such orders were given reflected in the Brotherhood's statements. For its part, the army insists it's one army, that there aren't any fissures. So I think that's the Brotherhood's angle right now.

One other thing: the Brotherhood has a five-part motto. The last two components of that motto are "Jihad is our way" and "Death for the sake of Allah is the highest of our aspirations."

It's an open question how seriously they take that, but I often ask young Muslim Brotherhood members if they'd be willing to die as a martyr in Palestine, and some of them say yes.

I interviewed a young Brotherhood member in 2008 and he said he had recently snuck over the border into Gaza, and he said he hoped he'd be killed by an Israeli missile. It was incredibly disturbing to hear. He was a fairly intelligent twenty year-old. So now I always ask young members if they'd be willing to die as martyrs in Gaza, and many say they would like that.

So at least some of them take that motto seriously. We've also seen children of the Muslim Brothers dressed in shrouds at demonstrations, which suggests they're ready to die. A critical mass of Muslim Brothers have prepared themselves for this possibility.

TOTTEN: Why do you think General Sisi removed Morsi? Some Egyptian activists are calling it a "correction," that the democratic revolution went off course, so the army stepped in and hit the reset button. I don't buy it, personally. Sisi looks like he might even be somewhat of an Islamist himself. Either way, the man doesn't strike me as any kind of democrat.

TRAGER: I don't buy it either, but I should say that during my conversations with officials in the Egyptian military leading up to Morsi's removal, they didn't seem at all eager to re-enter politics. The generals admitted they aren't good at governing. They had a bad experience running the country after Mubarak. They aren't trained to do police work, they're trained to fight wars and defend borders.

But two things happened. First, we had a massive outpouring against Morsi due to his frankly undemocratic rule of the country and his bid to consolidate power for the Muslim Brotherhood.

Second, Morsi completely lost control of the state. By the time the protests started on June 30, he didn't control anything. He didn't control the police and he obviously didn't control the military. He didn't control any of the institutions of government, and it made his presidency untenable. So the military stepped in, somewhat reluctantly, first to respond to the protests and also to prevent impending state failure.

But once the army made the decision to step in, as reluctant as it may have been, it's modus operandi unquestionably changed. It entered into a direct conflict with the Muslim Brotherhood, perhaps even an existential one. The military believes it not only has to remove Morsi, it has to decapitate the entire organization. Otherwise, the Brotherhood will re-emerge and perhaps kill the generals who removed it from power.

That's what's in Egypt's future right now -- persistent civil strife between the military and its supporters on one side and the Brotherhood and its supporters on the other.

TOTTEN: When you say civil strife, I assume you don't mean an Algerian-style conflict.

TRAGER: Right. I mean something that's probably -- and hopefully -- less deadly and less all-consuming. But it's likely to become a constant feature of Egyptian life and politics. There's likely to be a steady flow of violence, but it probably won't be ubiquitous. It will consist in pockets around demonstration sites. It will be bad enough to disrupt life, and it will likely undermine a transition moving forward, but it probably won't be as ugly as in Syria or Algeria.

TOTTEN: Do you think getting rid of Morsi was a good thing, a bad thing, or is it too soon to tell?

TRAGER: I don't think it's a good thing or a bad thing. It's not really for me to say, and anyway I think it was inevitable. Once a president loses control of the state -- whether he's removed by a mass uprising, a military coup, or some other scenario -- his presidency become untenable.

When I was standing in Tahrir Square after Morsi was removed, a felt a certain amount of sadness because I knew that violence would be an inevitable and significant consequence. People in the square were very happy, but people in another square a few miles away people were mourning. They believe something has been stolen from them, and they intend to fight to get it back.

I think the Brotherhood won't get it back. It's highly unlikely that Morsi will see the light of day outside a courtroom. But it's a fight that's going to continue for a while, and it's a fight that many of those celebrating in the square that evening didn't think about. Egyptian society is so polarized right now that the anti-Morsi camp and the pro-Morsi camp are beyond talking past each other. They exist in their own separate universes.

TOTTEN: How much support do you think the Muslim Brotherhood actually lost since it won the election?

TRAGER: It has lost substantial public support. Think back to the early presidential elections in 2012. Morsi only won five million votes, which was 25 percent of the votes cast. That's not a high number. It's substantially lower than what the Brotherhood had won just a few months earlier in the parliamentary elections. So already by May 2012, the Muslim Brotherhood's support shrunk back to its base which is only around five million people.

The Brotherhood's power is not derived from mass public support and it never has been. It is derived from its exceptional organization capabilities on one hand, and the fact that the rest of Egypt is deeply divided and highly disorganized on the other. That's still the case. I think if Egypt had free and fair elections today, the Brotherhood would still do well and might even win because nobody else is prepared to run in an election.

Of course, I don't expect there will be free and fair elections ahead, and the nature of the Brotherhood is about to change because the military is decapitating it. It's hard to see right now exactly who will emerge, but whoever emerges given the current trajectory will need significant military support.

TOTTEN: Why don't you expect a free election?

TRAGER: As reluctant as the military may have been to remove Morsi, now that it's back in the picture, it won't repeat the quote unquote "mistakes" it made last time. Certainly it's going to view one of those mistakes as working with the Brotherhood to have parliamentary elections that the Brotherhood could win. I assume it will not allow the Brotherhood to re-emerge. The military will do something to the elections or to the Brotherhood that will take "free and fair" out of the equation.

TOTTEN: Okay, so let's say the White House were to ask you for advice about how to proceed if what you just said turns out to be true. What would you tell them?

TRAGER: I've been telling the White House that they need to remember what they in Alcoholics Anonymous call the Serenity Prayer. "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference."

I've never been to Alcoholics Anonymous and I'm not an alcoholic, but it's relevant to what's happening in Egypt

right now. We need to understand what the consequences of removing Morsi are for the military. For example, Secretary of State Chuck Hagel told Sisi he needed to release Morsi, but this is something that's never going to happen. A general is not going to release a president he just toppled.

TOTTEN: Right.

TRAGER: This is something we can't change, and if we try to change it, we're going to fail, and we're going to look like failures. Better to focus on the things we can change.

One thing we might be able to do is convince the military to deal with the Brotherhood and its supporters less violently. The military needs to find other mechanisms for containing these protests. That's the first thing.

The second thing is to try to get a civilian-led transition process going that is open to participation by the Brotherhood, but isn't dependent on participation by the Brotherhood. Instead of focusing on inclusion during the transition, we should focus on its effectiveness giving the Brotherhood -- or what's left of it -- the choice to participate or not participate.

When the military removed Morsi, it promised exactly that kind of process and we should hold them accountable to what they've promised at the very least.

TOTTEN: I assume that when you go over there you hear the same sorts of things from secular Egyptians that I do. Secular people in Egypt tell me they think the Obama administration is allied with the Muslim Brotherhood. Secular people in Tunisia say the same thing, and liberals in Lebanon think we're siding with Bashar al-Assad in Syria. I hear this every single day without exception when I'm in the region.

TRAGER: Of course, so do I.

TOTTEN: What do you make of all that? Is it a result of unforced errors on the part of the United States government, or is it just typical Middle Eastern insanity?

TRAGER: The United States has done a very poor job managing perceptions in Egypt. The administration assumed if it wasn't critical about Morsi's behavior domestically, they'd win his cooperation on foreign policy. The problem is that Morsi was only willing to cooperate with us on foreign policy in the short run. The Muslim Brotherhood wants to consolidate power in Egypt and then create a global Islamic state. It's a key part of their ideology and their rhetoric. They talk about it with me. They can't be our partners.

Worse, by not speaking up and criticizing Morsi as he tried to create unchecked power for himself, it created the impression that the United States wanted to replace Mubarak with the Muslim Brotherhood. That's extremely damaging in a place like Egypt with such tumultuous politics.

We didn't support the Brotherhood. We failed to speak up and manage perceptions. In the future, the only way to address this problem will be to make sure we don't put all our eggs in one basket. We have to spread our risk by making sure we engage everybody.

TOTTEN: Okay, now let me ask you this. Why should everyday Americans care about what happens in Egypt?

TRAGER: For the simple reason that Egypt is a lynchpin of American foreign policy in the Middle East. It's important for counter-terrorism, for maintaining the peace treaty with Israel, ensuring overflight rights so our planes can deliver goods to the Persian Gulf, to check Iran's interests, and ensure passage through the Suez Canal.

But what I've found is that Americans not only understand Egypt's importance strategically, they're fascinated by Egypt. We study Egypt in the sixth grade. We learn about ancient Egyptian history even as children. It's mentioned in the Bible. It's one of the few countries in the world that actually resonates with ordinary Americans.

I think that's why the American news media focused mostly on Egypt during the Arab Spring. Democratic uprisings

in other countries wouldn't attract the same kind of attention.

TOTTEN: That's certainly true. Tunisia was and still is mostly ignored, and it's practically right next door.

TRAGER: And farther afield we have countries like Burma. Most people don't pay attention to these places. But Egypt resonates in America the way few other countries do.

I went on Egyptian television recently because people were angry about something I wrote on Twitter. So I went on to clear the air, and one of the things I said was that Americans are rooting for Egypt and that Egyptians should know that even when we have disagreements, Americans like Egypt. That's not just rhetoric, that's a fact.

Here's something interesting: In 2010, Israel's popularity in the United States was at 63 percent according to a Gallup poll. That same year, Egypt's popularity was at 58 percent.

We know why Americans like Israel. We can trace it to the Bible, the fact that Israel is a Jewish country, it's democratic, it's developed, and all these other things. But Egypt is not democratic. It is not well-developed.

TOTTEN: Yes, that is interesting.

TRAGER: When Americans think about Egypt, they think about the pharaohs, the pyramids, and the Bible. They know about the peace treaty with Israel.

Some Egyptians get upset when they find out that Americans equate Egypt with the pyramids and the pharaohs, but for whatever reason, Egypt holds a special place in the American imagination.

TOTTEN: What do Egyptians say when you tell them about the Gallup poll?

TRAGER: I mention it all the time. And it's not just that 58 percent of Americans liked Egypt in 2010. In 2011, something like 88 percent supported the uprising against Hosni Mubarak. That's incredible.

TOTTEN: And what the Egyptians say about that?

TRAGER: One on one, it touches them. So I think it needs to be part of our public diplomacy. We have interests there. The United States Embassy in Egypt is one of the largest in the world. But Americans also like Egypt. They like visiting Egypt and seeing the pyramids and going to Luxor. And they like being with an ally.

TOTTEN: Is Egypt really an ally at this point?

TRAGER: Among Egyptians there is strong hostility toward the United States and American foreign policy. Conspiracy theories are rampant, especially about 9/11. Dealing with that will always be a significant challenge.

At the same time, Egypt has been basically cooperative with American strategic interests for nearly forty years. We have significant disagreements about Egyptian domestic politics, and it's a tumultuous place, but unless hostile Islamists emerge yet again -- which is certainly possible -- Egypt will remain in the American camp.

And there's the odd fact that Americans really like Egypt.

TOTTEN: That is odd. It seems even more odd to me now that I've actually been there several times.

TRAGER: I was shocked when I saw these polls.

TOTTEN: Me too, but I suppose I'm only a little bit shocked. I used to think about Egypt in exactly the way you described -- that it's a great ancient Mediterranean civilization. My perception of the place is very different now, but my original impression was precisely the one you described.

TRAGER: Of course Egypt's popularity has declined in America since 2010. It's tumultuous, full of radicals, and has an aggressive military. Its popularity is not what it was a few years ago. ❖

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