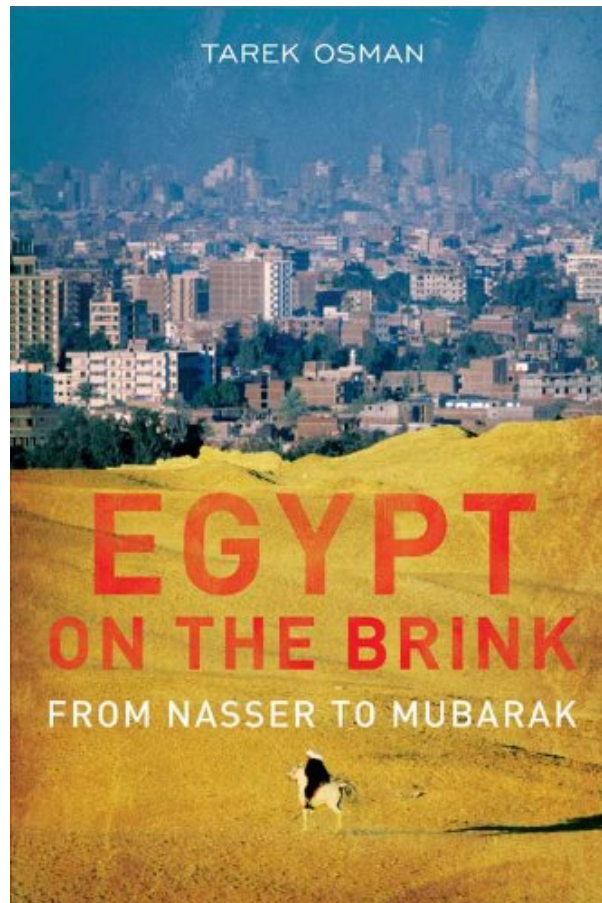
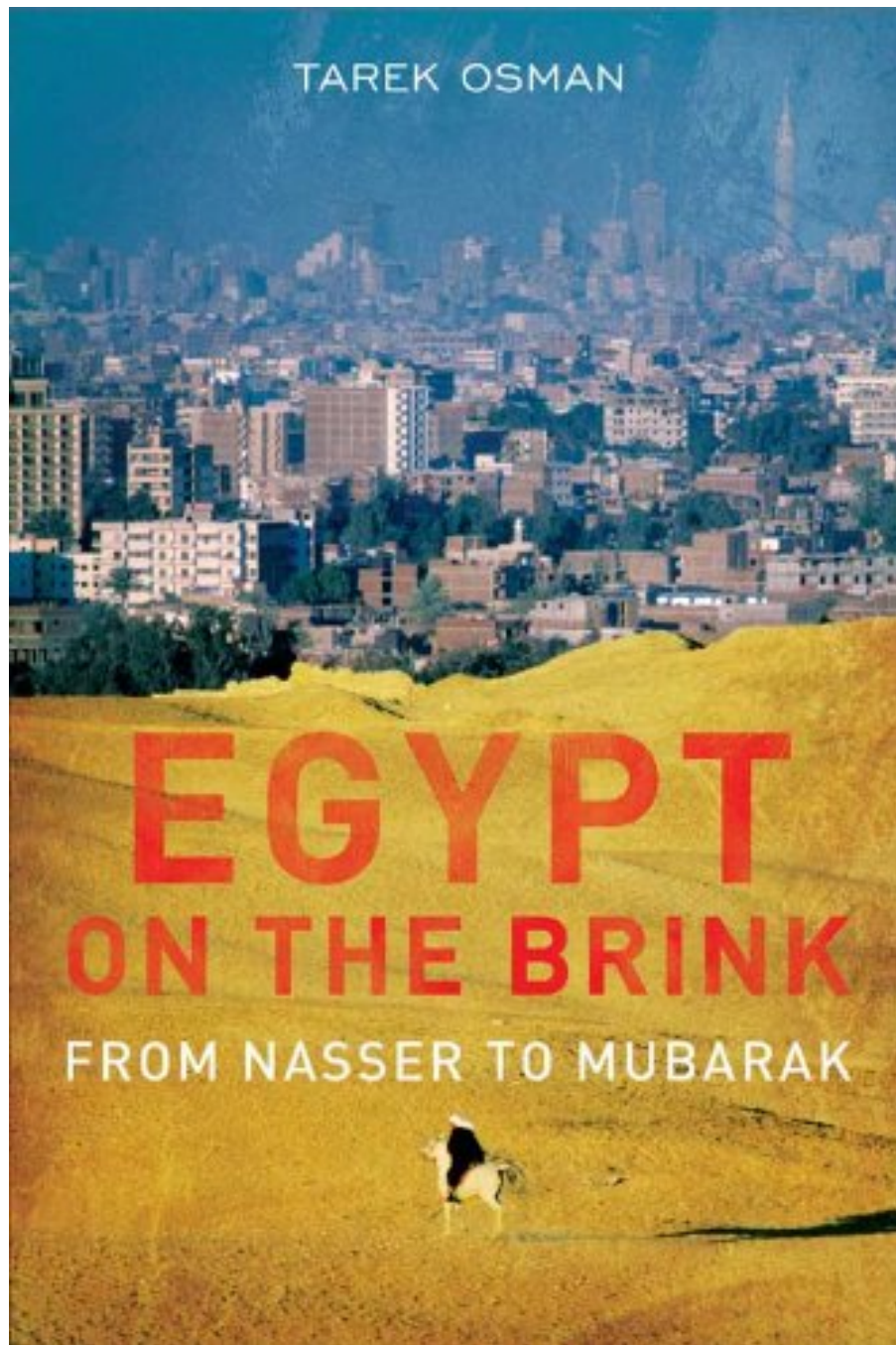


EGYPT ON THE BRINK: FROM NASSER TO MUBARAK BY TAREK OSMAN



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EGYPT ON THE BRINK: FROM NASSER TO MUBARAK BY TAREK OSMAN PDF

Famous until the 1950s for its religious pluralism and extraordinary cultural heritage, Egypt is now seen as an increasingly repressive and divided land, home of the Muslim Brotherhood and an opaque regime headed by the aging President Mubarak.

In this immensely readable and thoroughly researched book, Tarek Osman explores what has happened to the biggest Arab nation since President Nasser took control of the country in 1954. He examines Egypt's central role in the development of the two crucial movements of the period, Arab nationalism and radical Islam; the increasingly contentious relationship between Muslims and Christians; and perhaps most important of all, the rift between the cosmopolitan elite and the mass of the undereducated and underemployed population, more than half of whom are aged under thirty. This is an essential guide to one of the Middle East's most important but least understood states.

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Most helpful customer reviews

13 of 13 people found the following review helpful.

Strong explanatory power

By Theodore M. Horesh

This is a clear and concise account of recent Egyptian history. It is comprehensive, covering recent social, political, religious, and economic transformations. And published by Yale University Press, it is easily an academic level text, in spite of the author's apparent lack of academic or publishing background. More importantly, the book is well written and has deep explanatory power. In short, it is the sort of book in which I find myself underlining every line.

Having read other accounts of recent Egyptian history, I have often come away feeling that I still didn't understand Egyptian passions. Osman probes deeply into the successes and failures of the early twentieth century constitutional monarchy and parliament, the opening and westernization of the culture during that time, and why that opening failed to take root. He thoroughly explains not just the events of Nasser's revolution and rule from 1952-1970 but also his successes and failures, why Nasser did so much to galvanize national pride, and why he ultimately failed. He does the same for Sadat and the Islamists and Mubarak, bringing to the subjects far greater nuance than I have yet to find elsewhere.

This is an objective reading of Egyptian history. But Osman's reading of say the rule of Nasser or the rule of Sadat is sympathetic enough to give the impression he is on their side. He does this continually, bringing sympathy and intelligence to his subjects. This lends to the book far more cultural explanatory power than is to be found in most histories. You will come away not just feeling like you understand what is happening in Egypt and why it is happening but how different classes probably feel about what is happening. This can ennoble Egyptians without sweeping anything under the rug. Ultimately, this is what good history and cultural writings should always do.

This book deserves to be a widely read best seller. And with the literature on Egypt being so slim, one can only hope that Osman will write more on the subject and find a way to get it translated. Egypt will need many voices like his own to bring clarity to Egyptian affairs in the coming years of change. And as the American alliance with Egypt is such an important one, now that Egypt is awakening, America will need such voices as well.

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful.

Prescient; 4.5 Stars

By R. Albin

This very well written, concise, and insightful book is a short survey of recent Egyptian history aimed at providing the background for understanding the present difficult situation of Egypt. Written prior to the recent overthrow of the Mubarak government, it is notable for laying out many of the tensions of Egyptian society that led to the apparently successful revolution.

This book is organized chronologically. The first chapter briefly covers the 19th century reformist efforts of the Mohammed Ali dynasty and the modernizing, liberal constitutional monarchy that was its successor (under British colonial control). Osman presents this as something of a Golden Age of Egyptian elite society with a relatively dynamic economy, cosmopolitan culture, religious toleration, considerable innovation in Islamic theology and social thought, a high rate of artistic achievement, the development of important and relatively democratic political institutions, and a sense of "Egyptianism." Osman is careful to point out the defects of this period, notably the monopolization of wealth by a relatively small oligarchy and some notable political failures. The following and particularly good chapter is very nice overview of Nasser's dominance of Egypt, stressing the revolutionary nature of his regime, both in terms of developing a state dominated economy that did initially produce substantial growth and opened up opportunities for many Egyptians, and the "Arabization" of Egyptian politics in which Egypt was the center of the Arab world and Egyptians had a broader consciousness of themselves. The failure of Nasser's "project" with the enormous defeat in the Six Day/June war, economic stagnation, and political repression is described objectively and critically. The succeeding chapters are nice descriptions of Sadat's and Mubarak's regimes, with their efforts to retain control by increasing repression, the relative radicalization of Egyptian politics in an Islamic direction, the shift from being the center of the Arab world to a junior partner of the USA, and efforts to promote economic growth as a panacea via neo-liberal policies. Osman has 2 chapters on the predicament of Egyptian Christians and the problems faced by the enormous mass of young Egyptians.

Osman ultimately described a profoundly blocked society with a huge mass of young Egyptians lacking opportunity, failing governmental institutions, an eroding middle class, neo-liberal reforms with some positive effects but whose major effect has been the prosperity of a relatively small and well-connected elite, and a government resorting to repression to maintain its grip. This book gives the sense, now vindicated by recent events, that even a modest amount of additional stress would precipitate a revolution. From Osman's discussions, any successful successor governments will have to provide both economic and political opportunities for a large mass of Egyptians not served by the present system. He is quite clear that while there is an inchoate and widely distributed Islamism in Egypt, this is not the political Islam of conservative American caricature. Osman also suggests that any successful new regime will have to promote some broad ideal to legitimate itself and promote social cohesion, though what he thinks this can be is not clear.

Perhaps because of the brevity of the book, there are some significant omissions. The discussion of the elitist character of the "liberal" regime of the first half of the 20th century barely mentions the British colonial regime, which must have significantly retarded social and political change. Osman makes much of the demography of Egypt, its recent large population growth, and the huge mass of young Egyptians, but there is not discussion of why this occurred. Some North African nations, such as Tunisia and even Algeria, appear to have had significantly faster drops in birth rates. My impression is that the Egyptian military, assisted by generous American subsidies, plays a larger role in the Egyptian economy than Osman's comments imply.

A final, excellent feature is the excellent footnotes and bibliography.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful.

Egypt on the Brink

By Paul J. Markowitz

The recent "peaceful revolution" in Egypt has successfully started a transition of power in this most important and strategic Middle Eastern country. Perhaps even more significantly it has begun a seismic shift throughout the Middle East and beyond, whose ultimate impact has yet to be fully determined. Therefore it is a most propitious and timely moment for a book to be published that traces the political, social and religious history of Egypt from Nasser to Mubarek.

Osman's thesis is that at the end of the first half of the 20th Century, Egypt was an agrarian nation where people were attached to the land. Now it is the largest exporter of cheap labor in the Middle East and is suffering a major "brain drain". In this process Egypt has transformed from a beacon of tranquility (where there has been no civil war for 7000 years), to a breeding ground for aggression.

Although Osman focuses on the period from 1950 to present, he puts into historical perspective much of the earlier history of Egypt. Egypt had a long history of being foreign-ruled by stronger societies that coveted Egypt's geopolitical position of being at the crossroads of the world. Even Mohamed Ali (1805-1849), credited with being "the founder of modern Egypt", was of Albanian origin and came to Egypt as a soldier of the Ottoman Empire. It was Ali who initially Europeanized the country, educated the best and brightest Egyptians in Europe, and created an independent modern army.

Although Ali's successors ruled with a highly authoritarian style, a middle class began to emerge, and both Cairo and Alexandria took on the appearance of a European style metropolis. This became cemented in 1869 with the opening of the Suez Canal. By 1882 Britain occupied Egypt to maintain control of Suez. Despite a revolution in 1919 and the establishment of an independent nation in 1922, Britain ruled by proxy until 1945. The constitutional monarchy that was established was ultimately upended when a series of scandals by King Farouk caused young army officers to overthrow his government, abolishing the monarchy and thus changing Egypt forever.

Much of the book is devoted to describing and analyzing the leadership of Gamel Abdul Nasser, Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarek. Although these successive strongmen shared the fact that they were military men who came to power and maintained their positions largely due to their military connections, they were very different personalities who acted and were perceived by the populace in very different ways. Nasser was dynamic and revolutionary carrying out a socialist and populist doctrine. He became a hero by nationalizing the Suez Canal, and maintained his popularity even after suffering his worst defeat, the Six Day War with Israel. Sadat, although not possessing the charisma of Nasser, did emit a fatherly persona. His support of free market capitalism, peace with Israel and rapprochement with the United States were relatively popular with the populace. Mubarek remained largely a mystery to the Egyptian populace, but was seemingly a competent head bureaucrat who was initially acceptable. It was only when a drop in oil prices forced Mubarek to adopt International Monetary Fund prescriptions that required painful restructuring did his popularity plummet.

Osman successfully weaves into his history the rise of Egyptian Islamists, the rise of Egyptianism, the rise of liberal capitalism, the fluctuating significance of Egyptian Christians, and the ultimate wild card - the huge spurt in the growth of the number of Egyptian youth. The author points out that having 45 million Egyptians under the age of 35, many of them underemployed or unemployed, many who were relatively well educated, most feeling disconnected from their older compatriots was in fact an incendiary device just waiting for a light.

Although not a spot on prediction of what has actually come to pass, the book is full of critical knowledge to better understand what has happened and why. Perhaps even more importantly it gives us a roadmap to predict where it is most likely to impact both Egypt's and the United States' future. Egypt could, as Asman

suggests, revive its earlier role as a Mideast power broker filling the vacuum that now exists. This would give Egypt a new prominence in the Mideast while causing the United States and Israel to reassess their geopolitical strategies. In any case, what is clear in this pertinent and well-written book is that it is able to bridge the fine line between recent history and tomorrow's newspaper headlines.

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