

Cry, Beloved Country

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I DIDN'T WANT to write this article, but I had to.

I love Egypt. I love the Egyptian people. I have spent some of the happiest days of my life there.

My heart bleeds when I think of Egypt. And these days I think about Egypt all the time.

I cannot remain silent when I see what is happening there, an hour's flight from my home.

LET'S PUT on the table right from the beginning what's happening there now.

Egypt has fallen into the hands of a brutal, merciless military dictatorship, pure and simple.

Not on the way to democracy. Not a temporary transition regime. Not anything like it.

Like the locusts of old, the military officers have fallen upon the land. They are not likely ever to give it up voluntarily.

Even before, the Egyptian military had enormous assets and privileges. They control vast corporations, are free of any oversight and live off the fat of a skinny land.

Now they control everything. Why should they give it up?

Those who believe that they will do so, of their own free will, should have their head examined.

IT IS enough to look at the pictures. What do they remind us of?

This row of over-decorated, beribboned, well-fed generals who have never fought a war, with their gold-braided, ostentatious peaked hats—where have we seen them before?

In the Greece of the colonels? The Chile of Pinochet? The Argentina of the torturers? Any of a dozen other South-American states? The Congo of Mobutu?

All these generals look the same. The frozen faces. The self-confidence. The total belief that they are the only guardians of the nation. The total belief that all their opponents are traitors who must be caught, imprisoned, tortured, killed.

Poor Egypt.

HOW DID this come about? How did a glorious revolution turn into this disgusting spectacle?

How did the millions of happy people, who had liberated themselves from a brutal dictatorship, who had breathed the first heady whiffs of liberty, who had turned

Liberation Square (that's what Tahrir means) into a beacon of hope for all mankind, slide into this dismal situation?

In the beginning, it seemed that they did all the right things. It was easy to embrace the Arab Spring. They reached out to each other, secular and religious stood together and dared the forces of the aging dictator. The army seemed to support and protect them.

But the fatal faults were already obvious, as we pointed out at the time. Faults that were not particularly Egyptian. They were common to all the recent popular movements for democracy, liberty and social justice throughout the world, including Israel.

These are the faults of a generation brought up on the "social media", the immediacy of the internet, the effortlessness of instant mass communication. These fostered a sense of empowerment without effort, of the ability to change things without the arduous process of mass-organization, political power-building, of ideology, of leadership, of parties. A happy and anarchistic attitude that, alas, cannot stand up against real power.

When democracy came for a glorious moment and fair elections were in the offing, this whole amorphous mass of young people were faced with a force that had all they themselves lacked: organization, discipline, ideology, leadership, experience, cohesion.

The Muslim Brotherhood.

THE BROTHERHOOD and its Islamist allies easily won the free, fair and democratic elections against the motley anarchic field of secular and liberal groups and personalities. This has happened before in other Arab countries, such as Algeria and Palestine.

The Islamic Arab masses are not fanatical, but basically religious (as are the Jews who came to Israel from Arab countries). Voting for the first time in free elections, they tend to vote for religious parties, though they are by no means fundamentalist.

The wise thing for the brotherhood to do was to reach out to other parties, including secular and liberal ones, and lay the foundation for a robust, inclusive democratic regime. This would have been to their own advantage in the long run.

At the beginning it seemed that Mohamed Morsi, the freely elected president, would do so. But he soon changed

course, using his democratic powers to change the constitution, exclude everybody else and start to establish the sole domination of his movement.

That was unwise, but understandable. After many decades of suffering from state persecution, including imprisonment, systematic torture and even executions, the movement was thirsty for power. Once it got hold of it, it could not restrain itself. It tried to gobble up everything.

THAT WAS especially unwise, because the brotherhood regime was sitting next to a crocodile, which only seemed to be asleep, as crocodiles often do.

At the beginning of his reign, Morsi drove out the old generals, who had served under Hosni Mubarak. He was applauded. But this just replaced the old, tired crocodile with a young and very hungry one.

It is difficult to guess what was going on in the military mind at the time. The generals sacrificed Mubarak, who was one of them, in order to protect themselves. They became the darling of the people, especially the young, secular, liberal people. *“The army and the people are one!”*—How nice. How naïve. How utterly inane.

It is quite clear now that during the Morsi months, the generals were waiting for their opportunity. When Morsi made his fatal mistakes and announced that he was going to change the constitution—they pounced.

All military juntas like to pose, in the beginning, as the saviors of democracy.

Abd-al-Fatah al-Sisi does not have an exciting ideology, as did Gamal Abd-al-Nasser (pan-Arabism) when he carried out his bloodless coup in 1952. He has no vision like Anwar al-Sadat (peace), the dictator who inherited power. He was not the anointed heir of his predecessor, sworn to continue his vision, as was Hosni Mubarak. He is a military dictator, pure and simple (or rather, not so pure and not so simple).

ARE WE Israelis to blame? The Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, says so. It’s all the making of Israel. We engineered the Egyptian coup.

Very flattering, But, I’m afraid, slightly exaggerated.

True, the Israeli establishment is afraid of an Islamic Arab world. It detests the Muslim Brotherhood, the mother of Hamas and other Islamic movements which are committed to fighting Israel. It enjoys a cosy relationship with the Egyptian military.

If the Egyptian generals had asked their Israeli colleagues and friends for advice on the coup, the Israelis would have promised them their enthusiastic support. But there is nothing much they could have done about it.

Except one thing. It is Israel that has assured the Egyptian military for decades its annual big US aid package. Using its control of the US Congress, Israel has prevented the termination of this grant through all these years. At this moment, the huge Israeli power-machine in the US is busy ensuring the continuation of the 1.3 billion or so of US aid to the generals. But this is not crucial, since the Arab Gulf oligarchies are ready to finance the generals to the hilt.

What is crucial for the generals is American political and military support. There cannot be the slightest doubt that before acting, the generals asked for American permission, and that this support was readily given.

The US president does not really direct American policy. He can make beautiful speeches, elevating democracy to divine status, but he cannot do much about it. Policy is made by a political-economic-military complex, for which he is just the figurehead.

This complex does not care a damn for *“American values”*. It serves American (and its own) interests. A military dictatorship in Egypt serves these interests—as it does the perceived interests of Israel.

DOES IT really serve them? Perhaps in the short run. But an enduring civil war—on the ground or under ground—will ruin Egypt’s shaky economy and drive away crucial investors and tourists. Military dictatorships are notably incompetent administrations. In a few months or years this dictatorship will crumble—as have all other military dictatorships in the world.

Until that day, I shall weep for Egypt.