

## Islamist Winter

Elan Journo

ANDREW C. MCCARTHY, *Spring Fever: The Illusion of Islamic Democracy* (New York: Encounter, 2013), 184 pp. \$17.99.

Early on, the conventional view on the so-called “Arab Spring” was euphoric. In a nutshell, it was that the upheavals herald the triumph of freedom. Two-plus years on, however, Islamist groups have gained considerable political power—an ascendancy ominous not only for those subjugated under *sharia*, but also for American and Israeli security. Searching for silver linings on a darkening horizon, some point to Turkey: here is a regime widely feted as proof that Islamist rule is compatible with political freedom, after all.

Andrew McCarthy roundly refutes that view in *Spring Fever*. Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s regime, he contends, serves as a case study of what to expect of ascendant Islamists in the Middle East: more oppression, and more hostility toward the West. “The trend-lines are unmistakable,” he writes, “the trajectory of change more certain than its pace.”

Turkey’s Islamization hinges on the way Erdogan, like his Islamist brothers-in-arms, exploits the West’s uncritical embrace of “democracy.” McCarthy reports how, four years before his party assumed power, Erdogan explained that “democracy is just the train we board to reach our destination.” The ploy: feign an interest in freedom, then once in power shift toward Islamist rule.

Erdogan’s incrementalist campaign aims to remake Turkey’s institutions. He prioritized Islamic over secular education, encouraging greater enrollment in religious academies, and seeded the universities and government posts with Islamists. With religious mores—notably public displays of piety and the subservience of women—becoming the new normal, women withdrew from the workforce in droves. The rate at which women are murdered (including “honor killings”) has rocketed upward by 1,400 percent. For women aged 15 to 44, “gender-based violence” is now the leading cause of death (far outstripping cancer, traffic accidents, war, and malaria).

Erdogan also replaced some 40 percent of Turkey’s 9,000 incumbent judges with loyalists who embrace the Islamist agenda of his Justice and Development Party (known by its Turkish acronym, AKP). And, openly subverting rule of law, he selectively refuses to enforce uncongenial judicial rulings. Critics of the regime have found that freedom of speech is largely a mirage. Challenge the regime’s authoritarian control, and you risk being intimidated, detained, framed, and jailed. Last year, Ankara earned the horrifying distinction of having imprisoned more journalists than any other country (more than Iran, more than China). (When an Istanbul park became the epicenter for nationwide protests this summer, the major news outlets were conspicuously silent. And in the brutal crackdown on



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the crowds, the regime's authoritarian essence was on full display.)

It is in Turkey's foreign policy that McCarthy discerns a stark "transition from the Western to the Islamic sphere." Ankara once cultivated strong economic bonds and military cooperation with Israel. That relationship has frayed. Under the ironically labeled "Zero Problems with Neighbors" policy, Erdogan's regime has befriended Hezbollah, embraced Iran's *jihadi* leadership, and openly supported Tehran's nuclear program (even resisting attempts to impose UN sanctions against it). A particular favorite is the Palestinian *jihadi* group Hamas. "I don't see Hamas as a terrorist organization," Erdogan insists. "Hamas is a political party." In 2010, the "Gaza Freedom Flotilla," aiming to breach Israel's blockade of Gaza, sailed with Ankara's blessing. Erdogan has hosted Hamas leaders as visiting dignitaries, and Turkey has bankrolled the group to the tune of \$300 million. Erdogan has taken his country "from NATO ally to terror sponsor."

There are, to be sure, marked differences between Turkey and Egypt, a particular focus of the book, but the Islamists in both countries are working from the same playbook:

- Profess anodyne goals initially, then gradually ratchet up to full-bore Islamist objectives? Check. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood began by promising to contest fewer than 50 percent of the parliamentary seats—then contested nearly 80 percent; it promised not to field a presidential candidate—but eventually did so and handily installed a dyed-in-the-wool Islamist, Mohamed Morsi. Morsi had campaigned to ensure that Egypt's fundamental law would reflect "the sharia, then the sharia, and finally, the sharia."
- Roll out enforcement of sharia norms in daily life? Check. During Ramadan, a religious edict was announced prohibiting Egyptians from eating during daylight hours.
- Openly turn away from America, Israel, the West to embrace the *jihadi* agenda? Check. The Brotherhood's Supreme Guide issued a call for *jihadi* until "the filth of the Zionists" is cleansed and "Muslim rule throughout our beloved Palestine" is imposed.

McCarthy carefully delimits the scope of his predictive analysis. The Islamization of Turkey was slowed by the military, the designated guardian of the country's explicitly secular character. Egypt, by contrast, has never undergone an enforced secularization campaign, nor is the military's role predictable. (Having published the book well before the ouster of Morsi at the hands of the Egyptian military, presumably McCarthy would regard the ensuing pro-Morsi demonstrations as evidence of an enduring, potent constituency for Islamist rule.)

The significance of McCarthy's argument is broader than the rise of Islamists in Turkey, post-Mubarak Egypt, and elsewhere. The very notion of "Islamic democracy," he argues, is a dangerous misconception—one that the West fuels and Islamists exploit. Western leaders and intellectuals, he maintains, have failed (some refuse) to grasp the nature and popularity of the Islamist movement, and by advocating for "democracy" in the Middle East have encouraged and materially enabled forces hostile to the West.

Islamists, McCarthy ably explains, should be defined not by their tactics but by their animating goal of enforcing rule under the supreme dictates of sharia. Some adopt violent, terrorist means, others the genteel Western forms of political campaigning and advocacy,

but their objectives are identical. And McCarthy plausibly contends that in the culture of the Muslim Middle East, obedience to political authority and the totalitarian interpretation of Islam are both well within the mainstream.

McCarthy holds that culture shapes politics and law, and that elections merely reflect popular sentiment. The authentic, Western idea of “democracy,” in McCarthy’s view, is gutted of its substantive meaning when applied to Islamic politics. More than “just elections and constitution-writing,” democracy should be understood as a “shorthand description of a culture based on freedom.” But Islamists, he complains, view “democracy” as a “mere vehicle, a procedural path of least resistance” toward a theocratic society bereft of individual freedoms. So, when a culture has been methodically inculcated with the teachings of Islamic totalitarianism by the likes of the Muslim Brotherhood—when many in the culture have been taught to equate secular government with impiety, and when individual rights are unknown, and controversial speech is deemed blasphemous—what other result could possibly be expected at the ballot box?

The culture-comes-first argument is cogent, but McCarthy’s redefinition of “democracy” as identical with the culture of a free society is unconvincing. Perhaps colloquial usage agrees with him, and certainly “democracy” evokes upbeat connotations, but America’s founders would be aghast. They knew, from historical evidence and careful reflection, that the essence of democracy is mob rule, and that a government dedicated to protecting individual rights must never submit individual liberties to a popular vote. Unfortunately, recent American policy has arguably encouraged Islamists to embrace the actual meaning of democracy. President George W. Bush told reporters in 2004 that if Iraq, post-Saddam Hussein, were to vote in an

Islamist government, he would be disappointed, but “democracy is democracy,” adding, “If that’s what the people choose, that’s what the people choose.” McCarthy’s point would be better served by framing the issue in clearer terms.

“Where Bush airbrushed Islamic supremacists, Obama embraces them,” writes McCarthy, and he goes on to expose how President Obama has white-washed and abetted the Muslim Brotherhood-backed regime that emerged post-Mubarak. But in view of the book’s core argument, McCarthy is incongruously lenient toward Bush. When it was crucial to name precisely the nature and goals of the enemy, President Bush proffered designations (evil-doers, hijackers of a great religion, etc.) that deliberately obscured the identity of the Islamist movement, piling confusion upon the public’s ignorance. And, considering Bush’s signature policy of spreading democracy, it is hard to imagine a figure who did more to prepare the ground for the “spring fever” self-delusion, the view that McCarthy so skillfully demolishes in this book. The reluctance to reach a more critical verdict is a peculiar omission in an otherwise trenchant analysis.

Hard-headed and richly detailed, *Spring Fever* lays bare the facts and trend-lines behind the chilling ascendancy of Islamists.

