The purpose of this report is to provide analysis and policy implications to assist the African Union (AU), Regional Economic Communities (RECs), Member States and Development Partners in decision-making and in the implementation of peace and security related instruments. The opinions expressed in this report are the contributors’ own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Institute for Peace and Security Studies.
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Egypt, the most populous Arab country with the largest Arab army, is a key regional power in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The country’s economy relies mainly on agriculture, tourism, oil and gas, Suez Canal revenues, remittances from Egyptians working abroad, and foreign aid. After Egypt’s formal independence from British protectorate status in 1922, military officer Gamal Abdel Nasser led a coup in 1952 forcing King Farouk from power and established the Arab Republic of Egypt. Under Nasser’s military-backed regime, Egypt became an Arab nationalist leader and founder of the Non-Aligned Movement. Following Nasser’s death in 1970, President Anwar Sadat enacted a rapprochement with Western powers and signed a peace agreement with Israel in 1979. After Sadat was assassinated in 1981, President Hosni Mubarak maintained his predecessor’s foreign policy while ruling with a firm hand, and Egypt remained under an uninterrupted state of emergency throughout his 29-year rule. In 2011, inspired by the uprising that toppled Tunisian President Ben Ali, Egyptians staged massive anti-government protests that led to Mubarak’s ouster. The military then became responsible for national leadership until a new parliament was established in early 2012. In 2012, the Muslim Brotherhood, led by Mohamed Morsi, won the presidential elections in Egypt’s first truly competitive election. A year later, Field Marshal Abdel Fattah al-Sisi removed Morsi from office and reversed the brief democratic opening through a massive crackdown against the Brotherhood and other political forces. Since becoming president in 2014, al-Sisi has reinforced his power against opponents and tightly restricted civil liberties. In April 2019, the constitution was amended to enable al-Sisi to remain in office until 2030 and significantly boost his and the military’s powers.

Under al-Sisi, incidents of conflict have ranged from peaceful protests to Jihadi terror attacks. Violent Islamist extremist groups have been active in Egypt since the 1970s, targeting the state, civilians, and foreigners. Although these groups have never gained a mass following, they have threatened security and stability, and since the early 1990s several thousand Egyptians have been killed as a result of extremist violence. Since the 2013 coup, jihadist violence has flared up in the Nile Valley and the Western desert, and has skyrocketed in the Sinai Peninsula, where the state has launched multiple military campaigns against Islamic State-affiliated groups. While these interventions appear to subdue attacks for a period of time, they are overtly cosmetic and do not comprehensively address the structural factors causing them. Al-Sisi’s heavy-handed

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security approach in the Sinai has harmed civilians by severely restricting civil liberties, detaining thousands of people and displacing many from their homes, but has not eradicated the estimated 1,000-2,000 Sinai-based insurgents. Analysts warn that al-Sisi’s overall counterterrorism strategy based on repression will not succeed in the long-term. In order to prevent radicalization, the government needs to address socio-economic and political marginalization and put a halt to indiscriminate repression.


Socio-economic inequalities

Socio-economic marginalization often spurs popular grievances that can lead to anti-government mobilization, from peaceful protests to armed rebellion. According to the World Bank, around 60% of the Egyptian population is “either poor or vulnerable.” Around a third of Egyptians live below the poverty line, many middle-class families have trouble meeting their basic needs, and inequality is severe. Corruption is widespread and entrenched (Egypt scores 35/100 in Transparency International’s corruption index), living costs are rising while the currency remains weak, the informal sector is large, wages generally remain low, and unemployment is pervasive. In particular, Egyptians youth and people with advanced education persistently suffer from unemployment and under-employment. According to official figures from the International Labour Organization (ILO), 21% of Egyptians with university education and 32.6% of Egyptians aged 15–26 were unemployed in 2018. High population growth (at 1.9% in 2017) and rapid urbanization, combined with a heavy strain on resources and overburdened and ineffective public services, especially in cities, compound public frustration over living conditions. As a result, disgruntled urban youth were the first to rise up against the Mubarak regime in 2011 to denounce economic mismanagement and corruption.

A vast majority of Egypt’s Bedouin community, made up of some 30 tribes with distinct origins, culture, and languages, based mainly in the Sinai, experience stark socio-economic inequalities. Bedouins have been routinely marginalized by successive Egyptian governments, who have denied these local communities the right to own land, expropriated their property, and excluded them from the tourism and natural resources industries and mainstream state employment. North Sinai in particular lacks adequate clean water, health services, education, infrastructure, and employment. Consequently, these tribes, for income generation, have sometimes relied on illicit activities such as drugs, weapons and human trafficking, especially to Gaza. Some Bedouin have mounted small-scale attacks to pressure the government into addressing local demands, while small numbers have joined violent anti-state extremist groups. Instead of responding to their needs and improving their livelihoods, the state has consistently prioritized a securitized approach, aggravating Bedouin grievances.

Authoritarian rule

Since 1952, Egypt has been mostly led by military-backed authoritarian regimes that exclude many Egyptians from the political process through formal and informal means. Throughout Mubarak’s rule, the country remained under emergency law, allowing the authorities to detain individuals without charges and for undetermined periods of time. The country, however, enjoyed a brief 18-month democratic opening after Mubarak’s resignation, but since the July 2013 coup Egypt has reverted to an authoritarian system where citizens lack basic rights and political representation. The military, which has control over the judiciary, backs widespread repression, often in the form of military trials against civilians.

Elected in 2015 with an official participation rate of 28%, the parliament is effectively controlled by security agencies and dominated by actors loyal to al-Sisi, which prevents it from serving a checks and balances function. President al-Sisi, who did not run for office with a political party, was elected in 2014 with an official 96.91% of the vote and re-elected in 2018 with 97% following the withdrawal by all real challengers, who faced intimidation and arrest. Local representation in the country is strictly limited, as no municipal elections have been held since 2008, while provincial governor positions are appointed by the president and dominated by security figures. Labour union activity is also restricted outside the pro-government Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF), and government bans trade unions from criticizing officials, or other acts of civil disobedience.

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activists, and ordinary citizens.\textsuperscript{15}

The state’s tight control over the public sphere limits Egyptians’ ability to choose and peacefully petition their rulers, hold them accountable, or channel their grievances. Many have thus become disgruntled with formal politics, thereby encouraging a small number to turn to violence. It is thought that indiscriminate repression and harsh prison conditions have led some Egyptians to use violence in retaliation for the detention, mistreatment and killing of individuals, especially their relatives and friends, from their communities.\textsuperscript{16} In Sinai, the Bedouins were not allowed to vote until 2007 and are reportedly prevented from joining the army and security forces, forming political parties, or holding high government positions. This political marginalization, along with repeated detention campaigns following terror attacks since the mid-2000s, has fuelled local resentment against the government. Across Egypt, anger among Islamist groups over the forced removal of President Morsi and subsequent crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood has been a significant driver of discontent, leading to a flare-up of violence since 2013.

\textbf{Islamist extremism}

Salafi Jihadism is a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam that has produced various movements and groups aiming to replace the secular state with an Islamic system through violence. Jihadist groups in Egypt are influenced by the ideology of Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), a Muslim Brotherhood theorist who advocated TakfIR (fighting against so-called infidels, including “unbelieving” Muslims).\textsuperscript{17} While Jihadism is unpopular among most of Egypt’s Islamists, it has gained ground among revolutionary groups over time, especially since Egypt’s defeat in the 1967 six-day war against Israel, which Islamists interpreted as the inability of secular politics to protect the Muslim community.\textsuperscript{18} The rise of Jihadism fuelled a low-level Islamist insurgency in the Egyptian mainland starting from the 1980s. After the assassination of Anwar Sadat in 1981 by members of the group Islamic Jihad, the state cracked down on Islamist fighters, leading many jihadists to flee to Central Asia, including Ayman Zawahiri, who later co-founded Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan in the 1990s.

In the Sinai, the peninsula’s large size, desert land, and remoteness from Egypt’s centre, in addition to weak central government and constraints on Egyptian military presence in the area since the 1979 Peace Treaty with Israel (which occupied the Peninsula between 1967 and 1982), have all contributed to the spread of Islamist ideologies. In the mid-2000s, the state severely weakened the terror group Tawhid al-Jihad, which launched multiple attacks against tourism facilities between 2004 and 2006. However, new Jihadi groups emerged after the 2011 uprising, during which security forces temporarily withdrew from Sinai, which facilitated the flow of foreign Islamists and weapons into the peninsula. Jihadism in the Sinai is now dominated by ISIS, which has been increasingly focusing on North Africa after being weakened in the Levant.\textsuperscript{19}

Following the 2011 uprising, an important factor leading to the rise of Islamist violence is the crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood and its followers. While the Brotherhood officially renounced violence in the 1970s and gained power democratically in 2012, the 2013 military coup and subsequent repression led some Islamists to believe that moderation and democratic participation were not effective to achieve their goals of reforming society towards Islamic laws and principles. The stream of radicalized Brotherhood members who turned to violent means in response to repression appears to be ideologically distinct from Salafi Jihadi groups, who hold violence as a central dogma.\textsuperscript{20}

\textbf{Regional instability and geopolitical factors}

Egypt faces various pressures from neighbouring countries, which could increase the risk of conflict inside the country. The Israel-Palestine conflict negatively influences the security situation in the Sinai, as the region’s proximity to Gaza, tribal links, and smuggling tunnels, facilitate border crossing by Hamas fighters and favour the spread of weapons. The blockade imposed by Israel and Egypt on Gaza following Hamas’s taking over of the strip in 2007 aggravated this trend by increasing illicit activities. The conflict in Libya since Muammar Gaddafi’s overthrow in 2011 has also affected Egypt by creating a security vacuum along the border that facilitates the circulation of fighters and weapons into Egypt, where many are brought to North

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
Sinai for use in the insurgency there. Regional conflicts affect Egypt through migration, as an influx of Syrian refugees (131,433 registered as of June 2019), in addition to previous waves of Sudanese refugees in Egypt, reportedly add pressures on already inadequate public services and resources.21,22

Egypt also has longstanding geopolitical disputes with certain neighbours. Since 1958, Egypt has been involved in a territorial dispute with Sudan over the Hala‘ib triangle, an area of land by the Red Sea that Cairo has been de-facto controlling since 1995.23 Trans-boundary water use is also becoming a major source of disagreement with Nile Basin countries. Depending on the Nile for fresh water, food production and energy, Egypt, a water-poor country, is impacted by bordering countries’ increasing use of the river. Ethiopia’s project to build the massive Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) perceivably threatens Egypt’s use of the Nile water, and has created tensions between the two countries, as well as with Sudan, which hopes it would benefit from the construction of the dam.24 Egypt is mainly concerned with the timeframe that Ethiopia will use to fill the GERD reservoir and is also worried that, if Ethiopia builds its dam without an agreement, other upstream Nile Basin countries might follow these steps. Conflicts over water use will likely be heightened by population growth in Egypt as well as by climate change, which makes seasonal flows more unpredictable, reduces water availability, and increases salinization.25

The combination of socio-economic inequalities and repression threatens Egypt’s long-term stability by generating widespread grievances among Egyptians. In turn, the authoritarian system in place prevents Egyptians from engaging with the state through formal politics, making violent expressions of dissent, such as Islamist extremism, potentially more appealing to certain disgruntled Egyptians. Regional instability, which favours the spread of extremist ideologies, fighters and weapons, amplifies internal conflict dynamics. It should nonetheless be noted that, given high levels of repression and economic hardship, the number of Egyptians taking up violence is still low, which testifies to the strong social fabric of Egyptian society.

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25 Ibid.
Egyptian Armed Forces (EAF)

Constitutionally, the Egyptian state is a sovereign democratic republic based on citizenship and rule of law, and the army has the mandate to “protect the country and preserve its security and territorial integrity”. Since the constitutional amendment of April 2019, the Egyptian Armed Forces (EAF) are also mandated to “safeguard the constitution and democracy, and preserve the basic elements of the state and its civil character, the people’s gains and the rights and liberties of individuals”. Since Nasser’s military coup against the monarchy in 1952, the military has been the dominant political institution in Egypt, with all presidents coming from the army (except Morsi in 2012-2013). Enjoying popular support among many Egyptians due to its image as provider of stability and social services, the military dominates the economy and politics, although Mubarak also privileged other elites (business, judiciary, and police networks) in his inner circle. After Mubarak’s overthrow in 2011, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) took on the role of a ‘revolution safeguard’ and ruled the country by interim until Morsi’s election in 2012.

Since taking power after removing Morsi in 2013, al-Sisi has been restoring and expanding the military’s control over politics and justice, and has reinforced the military’s already widespread influence over key economic sectors, from agriculture to tourism, manufacturing, and construction. While the defence budget officially represents 1.36% of Egypt’s GDP, the army’s finances are not fully disclosed and its control over the economy remains opaque. With 439,000 active troops, the EAF is the largest Arab army, as well as the world’s third largest importer of weapons between 2013 and 2017. France, Germany, and Russia are among Egypt’s main weapon suppliers, in addition to the United States, whose military assistance takes the form of grants given to Egypt to purchase weapons.

For intelligence, the EAF works in tandem with the National Security Agency (NSA), formerly the State Security Investigation Services (SSIA). In 2011, the SSIA was dissolved and most of its members were removed, creating a temporary intelligence vacuum that favoured

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the rise of insurgent groups and created challenges for the current agency, renamed the NSA. Against Egyptian militants based in Libya, the EAF collaborates with Libyan General Khalifa Haftar, who opposes the Tripoli government. The EAF also unofficially partnered with some Bedouin tribesmen in North Sinai to perform intelligence and police functions, providing them with arms and other support.

Muslim Brotherhood

The Muslim Brotherhood was founded by Hassan al-Banna in 1928, with the objective of transforming Egyptian society towards a system based on Islamic law and principles, while unifying Muslim countries against Western values. The Brotherhood has a tumultuous history with the state, alternating between different levels of toleration, collaboration, and repression. After mass detentions under Nasser in the 1950s, Brotherhood members were released in the 1970s by Sadat, who sought reconciliation with the group. Under Mubarak, who mostly tolerated but also controlled the group, the Muslim Brotherhood then progressively developed a strong network by providing social services to local communities. After the 2011 uprising, the Brotherhood’s party (the Freedom and Justice Party, FJP) won the 2011-2012 parliamentary elections and then the presidency, a success that can be attributed to its unmatched organizational capacity, among other factors. However, amid large protests against the Brotherhood’s economic mismanagement and popular fears of an Islamist power grab, the military took this loss of popularity as an opportunity to remove Morsi from office in July 2013 and labelled the FJP a terror organization in December 2013.

Forced to turn into an underground network following the mass arrest of its members, the Brotherhood scattered into multiple cells divided along ideological lines. The organization now has a moderate faction mostly composed of members who remain committed to non-violence and political reforms, and a stream of revolutionaries who seek to overthrow the regime through violence. Weakened by internal divisions and by Jihadi groups’ appeal to some Islamist youths, the Muslim Brotherhood has sought to adapt to the new political environment, launching a series of internal reforms giving more power to younger leaders critical of the group’s traditional leadership.

Islamist Extremist Groups

Since 2011, new Islamist groups have emerged in Egypt that routinely launch attacks against government forces and civilians alike. The most active group, Wilayat Sinai, is affiliated to ISIS, while other organizations are loyal to Al-Qaeda.

Wilayat Sinai originates in Ansar Beit al-Maqdis (ABM), a coalition of jihadist cells that launched attacks against Israel and Egypt after 2011. In November 2014, ABM pledged allegiance to ISIS and was renamed Wilayat Sinai (Sinai Province). Seeking to establish an Islamic Caliphate in Egypt, the terror group aims to eliminate the Egyptian government and army, non-Muslims, and non-jihadist Muslims. Since 2014, Wilayat Sinai has become one of ISIS’s most important branches, as well as Egypt’s most powerful insurgent group, although it has failed to control territory in Egypt except from a short-lived attempt to seize the town of Sheikh Zuweid in July 2015. The group mostly operates in the Sinai, using conventional guerrilla tactics against security personnel and political figures, but also carrying out increasingly sophisticated large-scale attacks against civilians. The organization’s exact size and structure are unknown, but intelligence accounts estimate that it has around 1,000 members, both Egyptian and foreign. Wilayat Sinai uses ISIS propaganda techniques to recruit local youth, but its extremist ideology limits its ability to influence large segments of the population. Another distinct ISIS branch in Egypt, the ‘Soldiers of the Caliphate’, led by Amr Saad, appears to have emerged in 2016 outside Sinai, carrying attacks against Coptic churches.

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Other jihadist groups are linked to Al-Qaeda and operate in the Sinai, as well as in Egypt’s Western Desert. Established in 2015, Al-Murabitun is a terrorist group led by Hesham Ashmawy, a former military officer who trained ABM fighters before defecting from the group. Al-Murabitun was significantly weakened when the Libyan National Army (LNA) captured Ashmawy in Libya in October 2018 and returned him to Egypt in May 2019. Other Al-Qaeda affiliates are Ansar al-Islam, responsible for a single known attack against the police in October 2017, and Jund al-Islam, which emerged in September 2013 and launched several attacks on the military and police. Jund al-Islam is a rival of Wilayat Sinai and condemns ISIS’s targeting of Muslim civilians.

Finally, extremist groups reportedly off-shooting from the Muslim Brotherhood include Hassm and Lewaa al-Thawra, which emerged in 2016. These groups do not claim any formal connection to the Brotherhood but are composed of former (and possibly current) Brotherhood members who contest the Brotherhood’s traditional leadership. Hassm and Lewaa al-Thawra are responsible for attacks on infrastructure, security forces, and religious figures in the Egyptian mainland, but do not target civilians. To recruit Islamist youth reluctant to join Al-Qaeda or ISIS, these groups use discourses that are more anchored in the Egyptian context than those of foreign jihadist groups, and thus appear as more amenable to local militants. However, the groups have limited organizational capacities and combat skills, and have shown little signs of activity since 2017.

**Trade Unions/Civil Society Organizations**

Trade unions have played a key role in Egyptian history, from taking part in the struggle against British colonial rule to staging strikes during the 2011 uprisings. Until 2009, the state-controlled Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF), which claims to represent 3.8 million workers, was the only legal labor union organization since its creation in 1957. Emerging out of the 2006 workers’ movement in the industrial city of Mahalla, the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU), which claims some 2.45 million members, was allowed to register in 2011. The EFITU is a coalition of independent trade unions that played a pivotal role in the 2011 uprising, during which hundreds of newly created unions staged strikes and other collective mobilizations across Egypt. While some EFITU leaders were opposed to the Muslim Brotherhood and supported al-Sisi’s presidency, many members started to resent al-Sisi’s economic policies and attempts to weaken the union. In 2017, the parliament passed a law that significantly restricted the activity of independent unions, which virtually institutionalized the monopoly of the government-controlled ETUF. However, the independent EFITU continues to mobilize support and to stage strikes and labour protests, under the strict watch of the state.

Al-Sisi’s crackdown on peaceful opposition has considerably weakened other civil society actors. In addition to imposing strict NGO and assembly laws, the government has been restricting the activity of CSOs and NGOs through politicized trials, travel bans and asset freezes. Consequently, many of Egypt’s 47,000 NGOs shut down or considerably downgraded their staff and scope of activities. Some organizations have also started to operate informally, while others have dedicated their work to defending activists convicted under the restrictive legal framework developed under al-Sisi.

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39 Awad, A Challenging State
41 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
DYNAMICS OF THE CONFLICT

The 2011 uprising marked a turning point in Egyptian politics by challenging the status quo in unprecedented ways. Seeking to end decades of corruption and authoritarianism, and inspired by the Tunisian revolution, Egyptians rose against the regime in protests that quickly led to Mubarak’s ouster. After 14 months of interim military rule led by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), the aftermath of the uprising offered Egyptians a short-lived opportunity to participate in democratic politics through free elections that brought the Muslim Brotherhood to power in 2012. As Egypt’s oldest, largest, and best-organized socio-political movement, the Brotherhood had the capacity to rapidly mobilize a wide pool of voters, which other opposition parties lacked. However, their electoral victories pitted the FJP against the judiciary and the military in a power struggle, and Morsi largely lost popular support after issuing constitutional decrees intended to increase his power and shield himself from judicial oversight in November 2012.

Fearing an Islamist takeover of Egyptian institutions and contesting the Brotherhood’s economic mismanagement, many Egyptians, backed by the military and members of the former regime, rallied against the Brotherhood. Meanwhile, Morsi supporters staged counter-demonstrations in Cairo, leading to regular street clashes between rival political sides. In July 2013, the military deposed Morsi and appointed top judge Adly Mansour as interim president. Opposing the coup, the Brotherhood and its supporters continued to protest in large marches and sit-ins, which the authorities violently repressed. On 14 August 2013, the police and military suppressed two pro-Morsi protest camps, killing almost 1,000 protesters during what is now referred to as the ‘Rabaa massacre’. Al-Sisi’s government, after declaring a ‘war on terrorism’, officially labelled the Brotherhood a terrorist organization and detained over 12,000 Brotherhood members and supporters.

After the 2013 coup, the authorities increasingly targeted peaceful civilian opposition, which revealed that the government used its war on terrorism to extend its control over society. Following his election in 2014, Al-Sisi initially ruled by unilateral presidential decrees for one year amid delayed parliamentary elections, which allowed him to expand the scope of activities labelled as terrorism. New anti-terror legislation, and the state of emergency declared in 2017, facilitated mass arrests of individuals involved in peaceful political activity, lack of due process, and prosecutions of civilians in military courts. Human Rights Watch estimates that 60,000 political prisoners have been detained since July 2013 and regularly reports cases of torture and forced disappearances. The authorities also cracked down on independent media, labour unions, and NGOs. In May 2017, al-Sisi signed one of the strictest NGO laws in the world, which increased the authorities’ ability to control the work of NGOs, imposed harsh restrictions on funding, banning activities deemed “political” or “harmful to national security”, and placed high constraints on foreign organisations. Responding to criticism, al-Sisi vowed to amend it in November 2018 and in July 2019, the parliament approved amendments to the NGO and Trade Union laws, which, according to rights groups, have only introduced superficial changes. In December 2018, under US pressure, an Egyptian court acquitted 43 NGO workers condemned in 2013 on political grounds.

This climate of repression, and especially the harsh clampdown on Brotherhood supporters after July 2013, contributed to the rise of new insurgent groups. Islamists and pro-Brotherhood activists adopted more violent tactics encouraged by the discourse of Salafi preachers and Islamist media. After a wave of spontaneous attacks, violence has intensified over the years and new extremist groups emerged, not only in the Sinai, but also around the Nile Delta and Upper Egypt, as well as in the Western Desert. In the Sinai, allegiance to ISIS made Wilayat Sinai the most powerful terrorist organization in Egypt. Initially attacking security personnel, since 2015 the group has been increasingly targeting civilians in more complex attacks, such as bringing down a Russian aircraft that killed 244 people in October 2015.

Wilayat Sinai employs ISIS-style sectarian tactics against religious minorities, and in November 2017, the group launched its deadliest attack in a Sufi-affiliated mosque.

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48 Awad, A. Challenging State
has also repeatedly targeted Egypt’s Coptic Christian minority, which represents roughly 10% of the Egyptian population. Coptic Christians have been experiencing increasing levels of persecution in the form of killings, kidnappings, physical attacks and property destruction since 2011, leading many to flee their homes. While some view al-Sisi as a safeguard against Islamists, Coptic Christians have complained about the government’s inability to protect them against sectarian violence and terror attacks and to prosecute perpetrators of violence. Members of the Coptic community also denounced government discrimination, ranging from low representation in state institutions to legal restrictions on the renovation and building of churches.

In response to mounting attacks in North Sinai, Israel permitted the Egyptian army to send more troops to the peninsula despite the 1979 Peace Treaty’s limit on military presence in the Sinai. The military established a buffer zone by destroying dozens of houses and schools, in order to prevent access to the border with Gaza. In September 2015, the army launched ‘Operation Martyrs’ Right’, killing dozens of militants and destroying Sinai-Gaza tunnels to stop smuggling and militant movements. This operation successfully prevented Wilayat Sinai from seizing territory, but was shortly followed by new insurgent attacks. In February 2018, the government then started Operation Sinai 2018, a major anti-terror campaign relying on large parts of the military’s armament and forces. During the campaign, the government suspended classes in the area, restricted freedom of movement, and limited access to fuel.

The army says it has killed dozens of fighters and detained thousands of suspected supporters through its counter-terror campaigns. However, studies suggest that the government’s military approach is more likely to escalate political violence in the long term instead of curbing it. In North Sinai, mass detentions, forced displacement and civilian fatalities caused by the military’s scorched-earth techniques, as well as the destruction of the Sinai-Gaza tunnels, have fuelled anti-government sentiments, which could push more local militants into the ranks of terror groups and make non-affiliated civilians less likely to support the state’s counter-terrorism efforts.

Across the country, the resurgence of repression after the 2013 coup and the relentless crackdown on peaceful demonstrations have led to a decline in protests since 2013. This situation has benefitted al-Sisi, who can stay in office until 2030 since a referendum approved constitutional amendments to extend presidential terms. These amendments also add additional political power to the military and reinforce the president’s control over the judiciary. In this light, analysts observe that because al-Sisi is now attempting to institutionalize his personalistic leadership through legal and constitutional means, Egypt under al-Sisi has become more autocratic compared to Mubarak’s rule.

In this repressive context, worsening living conditions have led to rising discontent and mistrust of leading institutions among many Egyptians. According to a 2018 poll, confidence in the military has dramatically dropped from 93% in July 2013 to 41% in 2018, while 64% of Egyptians estimate that they are worse off than they were in 2013. In September 2019, hundreds of Egyptians took the streets of Cairo and other cities in a rare instance of public dissent. Reacting to online calls for mobilisation against government corruption, the protesters called for al-Sisi’s step-down and denounced the impact of austerity measures, which the government adopted in November 2016 under recommendations from the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

To disperse the protesters, the authorities used tear gas, rubber bullets and live ammunition, deployed armored vehicles, and arrested nearly 2000 people in one week, according to rights groups.

In addition to internal tensions, Egypt also faces the challenge of geopolitical disputes. Concerned about the GERD’s future impact, Egypt and Ethiopia have exchanged multiple diplomatic threats since 2011. In April 2018, the leadership change in Ethiopia contributed to reducing these tensions, as Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed guaranteed that Ethiopia’s project would not negatively impact Egypt, while Sisi vowed to avoid a military confrontation. Tripartite talks have taken place since 2011, leading to the signing of a Declaration of Principles in 2015. After years of deadlock, negotiations resumed in November 2019 after the US (along with the World Bank) stepped in as a mediator upon Egypt’s request. In January 2020, a joint statement declared that Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan had agreed on a schedule to fill the dam in stages and on mitigation mechanisms for filling and operations during dry periods and droughts, but the final comprehensive agreement was not signed. Pending issues remain, including safety questions and dispute resolution mechanisms. At the end of February 2020, Egypt initialed the draft agreement without the presence of Ethiopia, which had called on the US to postpone the last round of talks to obtain more time for internal consultations.

Negotiations have now come to a halt: Ethiopia does not see the US’s mediation as legitimate, as Washington’s position seems to be biased in favour of Cairo, which insists on implementing the clauses of colonial-era agreements (from 1929 and 1959) that allocated an advantageous annual water flow to Egypt.

Finally, while the Sudan-Egypt border issue had de-escalated since in the 1990s, it re-surfaced in 2016 when Cairo decided to hand over two Red Sea islands to Saudi Arabia, in an agreement that recognized Egypt’s ownership of the Hala’ib Triangle. Sudan filed a complaint against this decision at the United Nations in January 2018, shortly after allowing Turkey to rehabilitate and manage the city of Suakin in the Red Sea. After the fall of Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir in April 2019, al-Sisi met the head of the Transitional Military Council in Cairo and assured him of his strategic support for maintaining the ‘stability and security’ of Sudan.

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66 International Crisis Group, *Bridge the Gap in the Nile Waters Dispute*
67 Ibid.
Overall, the international community and regional organizations have been supporting the Egyptian government under al-Sisi despite the mass human rights abuses that threaten the country’s long-term stability. By prioritizing short-term stability over the promotion of political reform and rule of law, regional and international actors overlook the impact of authoritarianism on security in Egypt. In particular, international donors’ unwillingness to pressure Cairo to adopt inclusive political reforms allows the state to maintain a level of repression that could push internal opposition actors to commit to violence.

The Arab League

Riddled by internal disagreements and overshadowed by the United States and other outside powers, and generally reluctant to intervene in its member states’ internal affairs, the Arab League has a limited role in regional crises. Egypt, which is home to the League’s headquarters, views it as a key instrument to promote its own foreign policy. Given Cairo’s strong influence over the organization, which has almost always been led by Egyptian Secretary Generals, the Arab League has no incentive to intervene in Egyptian domestic issues. Consequently, the League remained silent during the 2011 Egyptian uprising and refrained from criticizing the security forces’ abuses in 2013. The League’s Secretary General, refusing to qualify Morsi’s deposing in July 2013 as a military coup, did not initiate mediation among Egyptian stakeholders to address the crisis.

Regarding the Nile dispute, on 4 March 2020, all Arab Leagues members but Sudan adopted a resolution rejecting any “infringement of Egypt’s historical rights to the waters of the Nile”. In reaction, Ethiopia condemned what it called the League’s “blind support” to Egypt.

Gulf States

Since al-Sisi’s coming to power, Gulf countries, and especially Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), who share similar positions with Egypt on regional issues (such as hostility to Brotherhood Islamism, and to Qatar, Turkey and Iran), have significantly increased their political and financial backing of Egypt. Following the coup against Morsi, Saudi Arabia and the UAE donated $8 billion to Egypt in support of the military’s move. In May 2015, al-Sisi and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman signed the Cairo Declaration to increase economic and military cooperation and committed to a joint Arab force comparable to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In March 2018, Cairo and Riyadh created a joint fund to develop a mega-city along the Red Sea. Such cooperation allows Saudi Arabia to secure its economic power and curb Iranian influence in the MENA, while providing al-Sisi’s government with regional legitimacy and granting it much-needed economic funds. However, al-Sisi’s political support to Russian intervention in Syria, and Egypt’s limited involvement in the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, contradict the Saudi position and could eventually strain the partnership between the two countries.

The African Union (AU)

The African Union suspended Egypt from the organization on 6 July 2013, referring to Morsi’s removal from office as an unconstitutional change of government in line with the 2000 Lomé Declaration. In addition, the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR) called for an investigation into the killing of protesters in 2013. In July 2014, an AU high-level panel for Egypt released a report deploiring the international community’s lack of engagement in the post-coup crisis and concluded that the AU “Council made history by standing up to an important AU Member State.”

The AU norm banning unconstitutional governmental changes, according to which perpetrators of a military coup should not participate in post-coup elections, would have required the extension of Egypt’s suspension after al-Sisi’s election. However, in June 2014, after validating the presidential election’s results, the AU reinstated Egypt into the organization. Apart from issuing communiqués condemning terror attacks and calls by the ACHPR for Cairo to end mass death sentences and the harassment of journalists and activists, the AU has not substantially intervened in Egypt since 2013.
In 2018, the AU election observation mission set up for the presidential elections qualified the voting process as “peaceful and well managed”, despite multiple irregularities, increased repression, and the harassment of al-Sisi’s opponents throughout the electoral process.  

In 2019, al-Sisi chaired the African Union, vowing to place security as a top priority for the AU. Rights groups warned that the Egyptian chairmanship could threaten the independence of the AU’s human rights mechanisms, and as Egypt hosted the 6th session of the ACHPR in May 2019, numerous African human rights officials denounced mistreatment and intimidation by Egyptian security forces.  

The United States (US)

While occasionally standing up against some of the Egyptian government’s actions, the US, out of concerns for regional stability, has been supporting Cairo’s security policies since 2013. The US provides $1.3 billion in military aid to Egypt each year, and both the Obama and Trump administrations have been reluctant to maintain pressure on Egypt. The reason behind this support is anchored in Washington’s belief that Cairo is too strategically important for the US to alienate it, combined with scepticism over the US’ ability to influence Egyptian policies through pressure. In 2013, following the Rabaa massacre, the US froze some military aid to Egypt, but resumed it in April 2015. In August 2017, the Trump administration also suspended a portion of military support to Egypt, and based any reversal to the revision or repealing of Egypt’s NGO law, the exoneration of US and other democracy aid workers convicted on political charges in 2013, and a downgrading of relations with North Korea. However, the administration released the suspended funds in July 2018, despite only limited progress in the fulfilment of these conditions. In September 2019, President Trump expressed his strong support to al-Sisi in the face of anti-government demonstrations across Egypt and minimised the scope of the mobilisation.

The European Union (EU)

After initial calls for inclusive dialogue after the 2011 protests, the EU now seems to prioritize security cooperation with the regime against terrorism and illegal migration, reverting their relations with Egypt to Mubarak-era levels. Despite the EU officially condemning repression in Egypt (especially since the suspected killing of an Italian researcher in Cairo in 2016), France in particular has repeatedly shielded away from condemning human rights abuses and became Egypt’s first weapons supplier in 2016. The EU also agreed to a new aid partnership for 2017-2020, with an indicative funding of €432-€528 million to promote socio-economic and institutional development in Egypt. In December 2018, the European Parliament passed a resolution calling for the revision of Egypt’s NGO law, but EU-led discussions on the Egyptian government’s current approach to security have been limited.

Israel

The Treaty of Peace signed between Egypt and Israel in 1979 limits the number of troops that Cairo can send to the Sinai and where they can be deployed. However, as Israel is directly affected by insecurity in Sinai, it has allowed Egypt to deploy additional forces to curb terrorism during the January 2011 uprising, the first time since the signing of the peace treaty. In early 2018, the New York Times documented the presence of Israeli drones over Sinai and alleged that Israel was launching covert airstrikes in the region with the help of Egypt, since at least 2015. While both Israel and Egypt denied these reports, in January 2019 al-Sisi affirmed that Egypt’s cooperation with Israel had reached its highest level. The two countries also cooperate in intelligence sharing on militant groups in the Sinai. The Multinational Forces and Observers (MFO), the peacekeeping force monitoring the Peace Treaty implementation in the Sinai, is still present in the peninsula and has been the target of several militant attacks since 2012.

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SCENARIOS

Best case Scenario

The best case scenario for Egypt would involve a shift from heavy militarization to democratic reforms, accompanied by inclusive economic development. In the Sinai, the government has shown willingness to commit to socio-economic development by investing $15 billion in the region since February 2018 and constructing tunnels under the Suez Canal, connecting the mainland to the Sinai for the first time. Increased investment and the exploitation of the region’s untapped natural resources could promote socio-economic development and reduce anti-government hostility. However, to be most effective, development efforts within the region must involve continuous consultations with all stakeholders and not just top-down project implementation. The holding of local elections, which have not taken place since 2010, could improve local representation. Nevertheless, given the post-2011 era’s failure to bring about the transformative changes hoped for during the revolution, the unprecedented level of repression, and the subsequent absence of parties and leaders who could unify opposition to al-Sisi, a democratic transition in Egypt is highly unlikely in the near future.

Most likely Scenario

The most likely scenario is the military’s continued domination of politics and al-Sisi’s sustained attempts to consolidate his power through legal and other means. The authorities might have effectively neutralised the September 2019 protests, but new demonstrations could also gain momentum and turn into mass mobilization similar to the protests that led to the resignation of Algeria and Sudan’s long-standing authoritarian presidents in 2019. If popular mobilization intensifies in Egypt, al-Sisi, who relies on a narrower support base than Mubarak did, could be disavowed by the military if the institution deems it too costly to keep supporting him. In other words, in the case of a serious popular challenge to al-Sisi’s power, the military elite will make sure to safeguard its entrenched interests regardless of who will rule the country.

In the Sinai, the state will most likely maintain its current approach to security, obtaining some tactical victories, but only for new attacks to emerge in new areas, fuelling the protracted insurgency through cyclical attacks. With the root causes of the conflict left unaddressed, instability could threaten tourism and investment in the long term, worsening the economic crisis and pushing more people into the ranks of terror groups.

Finally, rapid population growth and climate change will significantly reduce the availability of water and arable land, undermining food and water security in the country and increasing the likelihood of civil unrest in the long term.

Worst case scenario

The worst case scenario for Egypt would be nation-wide anti-government mobilization that would spur violence against the state and among citizens, following a massive crackdown on protesters. Given the worsening of living conditions and frustrations over government corruption, anti-government protests could intensify and be met with harsh police repression, which would aggravate popular anger, polarize society and spur violent conflict. This scenario could play out in favour of terror groups, especially ISIS, which is increasingly shifting its focus to North Africa after losing territory in Syria and Iraq. Because of its size, population, geographic location, and geopolitical influence, a violent crisis across Egypt could have devastating effects on an already fragile region.

At the regional level, there is a risk that tensions between Ethiopia escalate to the level of a military confrontation. Al-Sisi could act upon his threat to use “all means available” to defend Egypt’s national interests, if deemed necessary. If this happened, Ethiopian officers warned that Ethiopia would “retaliate if there were any attacks on the dam.” Al-Sisi’s vow is to be taken seriously, especially since Egypt views the dam as an existential threat, and defending the country against it represents a unifying national cause that could galvanize domestic support for al-Sisi. To avoid such a scenario, it is crucial for both countries to resume negotiations toward an agreement.

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STRATEGIC OPTIONS

To the national government

Egypt should commit to inclusive political reforms by increasing rights, improving representation, reforming electoral, NGO and assembly laws, while respecting media freedom and reducing restrictions on civil society, which would allow for peaceful expression of dissent and a reduction in anti-government grievances.

The government should also prioritize socio-economic development projects and make them inclusive in order to create opportunities for marginalized groups, especially unemployed youth and Sinai residents.

Stopping arbitrary mass detentions, guaranteeing fair civil trials, improving prison conditions, including by stopping detainee torture and other abuse, would help reduce radicalization and hostility to the state. Besides, in order to adequately respond to terror threats, the Egyptian authorities should make a clear distinction between political dissidents, non-violent criminals, and terrorists.

Egypt should intensify its current efforts to reach an agreement with Ethiopia and Sudan over the use of Nile water. In order to avoid the escalation of trans-boundary conflicts, the riparian countries should agree on a clear, comprehensive framework to regulate future projects in the area. Egypt could also adopt improved water management and irrigation techniques that could reduce the potential risks posed by new infrastructure on the Nile.

To international donors

Egypt’s international allies should continue to support the government’s counter-insurgency efforts, but also control their weapons exports and their end-use monitoring to prevent the government from using such weapons to quell peaceful dissent.

In addition to financial, economic and military support, international allies should concentrate on the development of marginalized regions, especially the Sinai.

The EU and US can use their economic and military aid as leverage to urge the government to promote political reforms, including free and fair parliamentary elections in 2020. They should denounce repression and press Egypt to free political prisoners, improve human rights conditions, and open up space for peaceful political activity. They should call for the lifting of the state of emergency, while continuously engaging with political parties, NGOs and CSOs in order to promote inclusive politics.

To the African Union

The African Union and its member states should make sure that Egypt respects the AU’s values and commitments to human rights and refrains from undermining the work of the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR), which Egypt has repeatedly criticized since 2015. Accordingly, the ACHPR should raise the topic of human rights violations in Egypt during its ordinary sessions.

The AU Peace and Security Council should, within the framework of its responsibilities in conflict prevention, monitor Egypt’s efforts toward the promotion of democratic governance and human rights, in line with Article 7.m of the PSC Protocol.

Finally, AU member states should encourage Egypt to sign and ratify the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG).

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REFERENCES


## CONFLICT TIMELINE (1922-2019)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1922</td>
<td>Egypt obtains its independence from Britain, which maintains strong influence over the country. Fuad I is sworn in as king.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1928</td>
<td>The Muslim Brotherhood is created by Hassan al-Banna.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1948-1949</td>
<td>Egypt controls the Gaza strip following the First Arab Israeli War.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>The Free Officers’ Movement overthrows King Farouk. Egypt is declared a Republic and coup leader Muhammad Najib becomes president.</td>
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<td>1954</td>
<td>British troops withdraw from Egypt, ending an evacuation process started in 1936.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td>Gamal Abdel Nasser becomes president and nationalizes the Suez Canal to finance the construction of the Aswan High Dam, following British and US withdrawal from the project. The UK, France and Israel fail to invade the Canal, amid Soviet support to Egypt.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1958</td>
<td>Nasser establishes the United Arab Republic with Syria (which will last until 1961), becoming the leading figure of pan-Arabism in the MENA.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>Israel attacks Egypt, defeats the Egyptian, Jordanian and Syrian armies, and seizes control of the Sinai and Gaza.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1970 Sep</td>
<td>Nasser dies and his Vice-President Anwar al-Sadat becomes president.</td>
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<td>1973 Oct</td>
<td>Egypt and Syria start a war against Israel to retrieve the territories lost in 1967.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>President Sadat signs the Camp David Accords with Israel and regains control over the Sinai. Egypt is suspended from the Arab League (until 1989) and becomes the top recipient of US aid.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1981 Oct</td>
<td>President Sadat is assassinated by Islamist extremists amid widespread riots. Vice-President Hosni Mubarak becomes president and then imposes a state of emergency, limiting civil rights and political expression.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2005 May</td>
<td>After months of popular mobilization, a referendum supports a constitutional amendment that allow multiple candidates to run for presidential elections.</td>
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<td>2005 Jul</td>
<td>Dozens are killed in bomb attacks in the Red Sea resort of Sharm al-Sheikh as Islamists resume terror attacks.</td>
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<td>2011 Jan</td>
<td>Anti-government demonstrations and strikes take place across Egypt, encouraged by Tunisian street protests that prompted the departure of President Ben Ali.</td>
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<td>2011 Feb</td>
<td>Mubarak steps down and hands power to an army council and is brought to trial in August on the charge of ordering the killing of demonstrators.</td>
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<td>2012 May</td>
<td>The state of emergency in place since 1981 is ended.</td>
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<td>2012 Jun</td>
<td>Mohammed Morsi wins the presidential election by 52%.</td>
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<td>Year</td>
<td>Event Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>2012 Aug</td>
<td>Islamist fighters attack an army outpost in Sinai, killing 16 soldiers, and mount a brief incursion into Israel, beginning a new insurgency.</td>
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<td>2012 Dec</td>
<td>The Islamist-dominated constituent assembly approves a draft constitution that boosts the role of Islam and restricts freedom of speech and assembly.</td>
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<td>2013 Jul</td>
<td>The army deposes President Morsi amid mass demonstrations against him. The authorities crack down on two pro-Brotherhood protest camps in Cairo, killing hundreds.</td>
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<td>2013 Dec</td>
<td>The government declares the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist group.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2014 May</td>
<td>Abdul Fattah al-Sisi, former head of the army, wins the presidential election. The African Union suspends Egypt from the organization.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2014 Nov</td>
<td>The extremist group Ansar Beit al-Maqdis pledges allegiance to ISIS and takes the name of Wilayat Sinai (Sinai Province).</td>
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<tr>
<td>2015 May</td>
<td>Former President Morsi and 100 other people are sentenced to death over the mass release of prisoners from the Muslim Brotherhood in 2011.</td>
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<td>2015 Oct</td>
<td>An attack on a Russian airstrike kills 224 people in Sinai. ISIS claims responsibility for the attack.</td>
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<td>2016 Nov</td>
<td>The IMF grants a three-year $12 billion loan to Egypt aimed at addressing the country’s economic crisis in the long term. Egypt devalues its currency amid strict austerity measures.</td>
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<td>2017 Apr</td>
<td>Suicide bombings kill dozens of people who were celebrating Palm Sunday in two churches. A state of emergency is declared, which has been renewed 11 times since then.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2017 Nov</td>
<td>Jihadists attack the Sufi-linked al-Rawda mosque in North Sinai, killing 305 people.</td>
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<td>2018 Mar</td>
<td>Al-Sisi is elected for a second presidential term after the withdrawal (or arrest) of all but one of his rival candidates.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2018 Feb</td>
<td>The authorities launch the counter-terror military campaign Operation Sinai 2018, killing dozens of insurgents in the following months.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2019 Apr</td>
<td>A referendum approves constitutional amendments extending presidential terms.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2019 Jun</td>
<td>Former President Morsi dies in court after multiple warnings of his deteriorating health and ill-treatment in prison.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2019 Sep</td>
<td>Thousands of people protest in Cairo, Alexandria and other Egyptian cities to denounce corruption and call for al-Sisi’s step-down. The authorities respond with tear gas, live and rubber ammunitions, and arrest approximately 2000 people.</td>
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</tbody>
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