



Egypt: May 2014 update

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- The Muslim Brotherhood has been brutally suppressed in Egypt, following the deposition of Mohammed Morsi. Hundreds of his supporters have been sentenced to death.
- The new constitution gained massive approval from those Egyptian voters who turned out for the referendum in January 2014.
- There is widespread concern at the threat from terrorism, especially in the Sinai Peninsula.
- Egyptian public opinion still seems to be broadly supportive of the new regime, and the leader of the coup against Mohammed Morsi, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, looks likely to win the forthcoming election easily.
- UK politicians have expressed concern about the removal of the Muslim Brotherhood president and the death sentences handed down to some of his supporters.
- The UK has warned against travel to certain areas of the country and has suspended some arms export licences.

Contents

1	Suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood	2
2	New constitution	2
3	Other human rights concerns	2
4	Radical Islamist violence	3
5	Egyptian public opinion	4
6	Presidential election	4
7	UK Views	4
	7.1 Travel Advice	6
	7.2 UK Aid	7
	7.3 Arms exports	7

1 Suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood

Egypt's first ever democratically elected head of state, Mohammed Morsi, was removed by the Egyptian armed forces in July 2013. He was put under house arrest and several other Muslim Brotherhood leaders were arrested. Protest camps set up by his supporters were dispersed, with the Egyptian Ministry of Health saying that at least 540 people were killed and nearly four thousand were injured as police used force on the pro-Morsi demonstrations.

Several pro-Brotherhood news channels were shut down and journalists were arrested.

In December, the government designated the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organisation. Mohammed Morsi was charged among other things with incitement to the killing of protesters in 2012.

In April, a trial judge recommended the death sentence for 683 people, including the leader of the organisation Mohammed Badie. At the same time, the judge commuted to life imprisonment some of the 529 death sentences that had been handed out in a similar trial in March.¹

In May 2014, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi said that the Muslim Brotherhood was 'finished' in Egypt and would not come back if he won the presidency.² This apparently ruled out any reconciliation with the group.

2 New constitution

The new constitution was voted on in January 2014. The approval for the new constitution was massive, at about 98%, according to official results, although on a weak turnout of 39%.³ The turnout was slightly higher than the previous referendum in 2012.

There was an 'omnipresent' Yes campaign and very little campaigning for a No vote.⁴ Many parties and civil society organisations came out in favour of a Yes vote and, rather than manipulation, it seems likely that the 98% approval was the result of Muslim Brotherhood supporters and possibly some liberals boycotting the vote, rather than any rigging.

There have been some anecdotal reports that more women voted in favour of the new constitution than men; this was commented on by the former interim Prime Minister Hazem al-Beblawi. There are also reports that older voters turned out in greater force than younger voters.⁵

3 Other human rights concerns

According to Reporters without Frontiers, there was an increasing climate of repression for the freedom of expression under the Morsi government, which pushed to bring the news media under Brotherhood control.⁶ Several journalists from the news channel al-Jazeera have been detained by the authorities. The channel has sometimes been accused of bias in

¹ [Egypt: Brotherhood's Badie among mass death sentences](#), *BBC News Online*, 28 April 2014

² ['Egypt's Sisi says Muslim Brotherhood is finished'](#), *Reuters*, 5 May 2014

³ ['Table: Official results of Egypt's 2014 constitutional referendum'](#), *Ahramonline*, 19 May 2014

⁴ Bassem Sabry, ['The meanings of Egypt's referendum'](#), *al-Monitor*, 18 January 2014

⁵ ['Officials Push for High Turnout on Final Day of Egypt Referendum'](#), *Voice of America*, 15 January 2014

⁶ ['Mounting freedom of information worries after one year of Morsi'](#), Reporters without Frontiers press release, 27 June 2013

favour of the Muslim Brotherhood and is a bone of contention between the government of Qatar, which owns it, and some other Arab governments, particularly the Saudis, who are strongly opposed to the Muslim Brotherhood.⁷

An al-Jazeera journalist, Abdullah al-Shami, was detained in August 2013 by the police and has been in detention ever since. He is on hunger strike and his case has been taken up by human rights groups such as Human Rights Watch.⁸ The authorities have transferred him from his previous location and his whereabouts is presently unknown.

Despite these concerns, Reporters without Frontiers left Egypt in an unchanged 159th position in its 2014 annual world press freedom ranking list.⁹

In November 2013, the government passed a new anti-protest law, banning any demonstrations that have no specific police authorisation. The law was widely seen as directed against supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood.

The government has also banned a pro-democracy group, the April 6 Movement, for allegedly ignoring a ban on demonstrations not sanctioned by the police.

4 Radical Islamist violence

The fall of Mohammed Morsi was associated with the military's frustration at the increasing instability in the Sinai Peninsula, a deserted region between Egypt and Israel. A severe crackdown by the Muslim Brotherhood government failed to pacify the region, which is notorious not only for extremist Islamist groups but also kidnapping and organised crime. In May 2013 a number of army personnel were kidnapped by armed tribesmen in the region. That crisis was resolved but, shortly afterwards, the Muslim Brotherhood government was removed and a renewed crackdown started by the armed forces.

A group called Jamaat Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, a militant Sunni organisation based in the Sinai, has conducted attacks against both Egyptian and Israeli targets, including rocket attacks into Israel and bombing attacks on pipelines.¹⁰

There has also been an upsurge in armed incidents elsewhere since the overthrow of Morsi, with bombings and shooting incidents aimed at the police and the military. There was an assassination attempt against the interior minister in September 2013 and in May 2014 al-Sisi said that there had been two assassination plots against him. The government has blamed some of these attacks on the Muslim Brotherhood although Jane's security consultancy attributes most of them to Jamaat Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis.¹¹ Jane's also says that al-Qaeda was responsible for five attacks in Egypt in the year to May 2014.

The rise in militant attacks and the suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood have caused some observers to worry that there is an increasing terrorist risk in Egypt.

⁷ For more on the foreign policy of Qatar, see the Library Standard Note, [Qatar 2013](#), October 2013

⁸ 'Egypt: Free Illegally Jailed Journalist', Human Rights Watch press notice, 15 May 2014

⁹ [World Press Freedom List 2014](#), Reporters without Frontiers

¹⁰ Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Centre, Jamaat Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis

¹¹ *Ibid.*

5 Egyptian public opinion

According to the pollster Pew, attitudes among Egyptians were ‘increasingly glum’ in May 2013, just before the coup.¹² Nevertheless, that survey showed that more Egyptians had a favourable impression of the then president (53%) than an unfavourable one (43%).

The Egyptian military’s main justification for the removal of President Morsi was that he had lost the support of the people. The military encouraged mass demonstrations in the days leading up to his removal and the mobilisation against the government was certainly enormous. The return of stability and of economic growth is high on most Egyptians’ agenda.

A later poll suggested that not very many Egyptians thought the former Beblawi government was doing well.¹³ In the run-up to the presidential election, Al-Sisi is well ahead in the opinion polls and looks likely to win the forthcoming election easily. One set of polls suggested that his popularity was declining, however, as the election approached.¹⁴

6 Presidential election

The first government after the fall of Mohammed Morsi, led by Hazem al-Beblawi, resigned in February 2014 and a new government was installed. This was widely interpreted as a move to allow the then defence minister and first deputy prime minister, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, to leave the government and prepare to run in the forthcoming presidential election, set to take place on 26 and 27 May 2014.

It may also have been a response to the declining popularity of the interim government, as Egypt’s problems failed to show dramatic improvements. The present interim leaders are the interim President Adli Mansour and new interim Prime Minister Ibrahim Mehleb.

Polls suggest that Abdel Fattah al-Sisi will win the presidential election with something like three quarters of the vote. Egypt is in the grip of a personality cult, with tee shirts and mugs printed with al-Sisi’s image widely available.

The other main candidate is Hamdeen Sabahi, a veteran secularist socialist opponent of the Mubarak government. He ran in the 2012 election and did surprisingly well, gaining about a fifth of the vote and coming third behind Ahmed Shafiq. He has campaigned as the defender of the 2011 revolution.

At the invitation of the Egyptian government, the EU has sent an election monitoring mission for the presidential election, composed of about 150 observers.¹⁵

7 UK Views

Both government and the Opposition have expressed concern about developments in Egypt. In an interview in August 2013, Foreign Secretary William Hague said that the UK would maintain a dialogue with the Egyptian authorities but he condemned violence:

We’re very clear to them that we completely disapprove of and condemn the killing of protesters, just as we also condemn the actions of some opposed to the Government

¹² ‘Egyptians Increasingly Glum; Not Optimistic about Economy or Certain They Are Better Off Post-Mubarak’, Pew Research Global Attitudes Project, 16 May 2013

¹³ ‘The Government’s performance and Egyptians’ Living Standards’, Egyptian Centre for Public Opinion Research, 16 December 2013

¹⁴ ‘Pretending to be a civilian; Egypt’s probable president’, *Economist*, 5 April 2014

¹⁵ [European Union Election Observation Mission - Egypt 2014](#)

in attacking hospitals, in killing police and attacking churches. That will not win the support of the world either.

...

We have to do our best to promote democratic institutions, to promote political dialogue and to keep faith with the majority of Egyptians who just want a free and stable and prosperous country.

In Britain so far we have suspended projects with the Egyptian security forces, we have revoked a number of export licences. I think then among the European countries we should review together how we try to aid Egypt, what aid and assistance we give to Egypt in the future.

We should be available to assist in the future, recognising that it is Egyptians ultimately who determine their own future.¹⁶

The following excerpt, an introduction to the Egypt section in the FCO's Human Rights and Democracy Report, show the UK government was troubled by the removal of Egypt's first democratically elected president and the deterioration of the human rights situation:

As a result of political upheaval, the human rights situation in Egypt deteriorated in 2013. Following the removal of then-President Mursi, Egypt's first democratically elected president, in July 2013, the Foreign Secretary said that the UK did not support military intervention as a way to resolve disputes in a democratic system, and called on all sides to avoid violence. The military announced a political roadmap for the return to democracy, led by a military-backed civilian interim government.¹⁷

The UK government has expressed its concern over the death sentences handed down in Egypt, as set out in this recent answer to a question tabled by Lord Patten:

Lord Patten: To ask Her Majesty's Government what is their assessment of the number of death sentences handed down so far during 2014 in Egypt; and whether they have discussed the issue with the government of Egypt.[HL6751]

Baroness Warsi: The British Government is aware of 559 people who have been sentenced to death in Egypt during 2014, including 529 by a court in Minya on 24 March. We are deeply concerned by these sentences. We have raised this issue with the Egyptian government, most recently during the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my Rt. Hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Mr Hague)'s meeting with Foreign Minister Fahmy on 2 April. The Foreign Secretary asked the Egyptian government to review these sentences as a matter of urgency and to ensure that the individuals' human and legal rights were properly upheld. The Foreign Secretary also made a statement on 24 March in which he expressed his concern over the sentences.

It is the long-standing policy of the British Government to oppose the death penalty in all circumstances.¹⁸

Baroness Symons, former shadow Lords spokesman for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office expressed concern about the removal of President Morsi and called for a return to

¹⁶ ['Foreign Secretary William Hague condemns violence and underlines the Government's support for the Egyptian people'](#), Foreign and Commonwealth Office press release, 20 August 2013

¹⁷ [Country case study - Egypt: post-revolution political upheaval](#), *Human Rights and Democracy Report 2013*, 10 April 2014

¹⁸ [HL Deb 6 May 2014, c347WA](#)

civilian government as soon as possible. She called on the government to assist with the formation of more effective parties in Egypt:

One of the problems in the last election in Egypt was that there were two sectarian non-liberal parties standing for election as opposed to 40 secular liberal parties. Of course, Her Majesty's Government cannot intervene directly, but is it possible for them to encourage agencies that already work with the Department for International Development on these issues, such as the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, to advise and mentor the profusion of secular liberal parties in Egypt in order to provide effective party organisation, which is so necessary in any democratic society?¹⁹

In August 2013, Shadow Foreign Secretary Douglas Alexander called for the suspension of US aid to Egypt.²⁰ Writing in the *Guardian*, Mr Alexander:

- Said that Western governments should recognise the action as a military coup
- Welcomed the EU decision to review arms export licences to Egypt
- Said that the US should also review civilian and military aid
- Warned that an attempt by the new Egyptian authorities to freeze the Brotherhood out of politics threatened democracy and security in the region.²¹

7.1 Travel Advice

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office advises against travelling to the northern Sinai and against all but essential travel to the south of the Sinai and parts of central Egypt.

¹⁹ [HL Deb 4 July 2013, c1323](#)

²⁰ ['Douglas Alexander: 'Egypt generals cannot act with impunity'', BBC News Online, 16 August 2013](#)

²¹ ['This was a coup: we must support Egypt's people, not its generals', Guardian, 21 August 2014](#)



FCO [Egypt travel advice](#), 15 May 2014

7.2 UK Aid

According to the Department for International Development's Development Tracker, DFID has only one project in Egypt, with a 2014-15 budget of about £620,000.

7.3 Arms exports

On 21 August, the EU agreed to suspend all export licenses for equipment that might be used for internal repression. On 28 August, the UK government suspended 49 export licences for Egypt.²²

²² 'Business Secretary suspends 49 export licences to Egypt', Department for Business, Innovation & Skills press release, 28 August 2013