

AFRICA RISK CONSULTING

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Egypt Summary 22 February 2021

The administration of United States (US) president Joe Biden (2021-present) announces new arms sales to Egypt despite Biden's promise during the 2020 election campaign to rethink the US relationship with Egypt and other countries it accuses of human rights violations. President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi (2014-present) calls overpopulation a national security issue and emphasises the need for Egyptians to have fewer children in order for development policies to work. Egypt begins vaccinating frontline workers and general population against Covid-19. Egypt drops 11 places in Germany-based non-governmental organisation Transparency International's 2020 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI).

US sells weapons to Egypt amid outcry over human rights abuses

The **United States (US) Joe Biden** (2021-present) administration announced on 16 February that it had approved plans for a \$197m missile sale to **Egypt**.¹ The move comes despite Biden's electoral campaign promise to reconsider the US relationship with countries accused of serious human rights abuses, including Egypt and **Saudi Arabia** and just days after Egyptian security forces detained the family members of prominent Egyptian-American activist and former prisoner **Mohamed Soltan**.² In July, while campaigning for president, Biden tweeted "*NO MORE blank checks for Trump's 'favorite dictator'*"³ after members of Soltan's family were first arrested:

*"Arresting, torturing, and exiling activists like... Mohamed Soltan or threatening their families is unacceptable."*⁴

The **US Department of State** said the planned weapon sales would

*"... support the foreign policy and national security of the United States by helping to improve the security of a Major **Non-NATO Ally** country that continues to be an important strategic partner in the **Middle East**".*⁵

Soltan spent more than two years as a political prisoner in Egypt after being arrested protesting the 2013 coup by then defence minister, and now president, **Abdel Fattah al Sisi** (2014-present).⁶ Authorities released Soltan in 2015 after he renounced his Egyptian citizenship after two years of detention. His father, **Salah Soltan**, a prominent **Muslim Brotherhood** figure, has been jailed since 2013. Officers 'disappeared' him on 15 June when they escorted him from **Wadi al-Natrun** prison to an unknown destination.⁷ Authorities have refused to provide his family and lawyers information about his whereabouts.

Since his release, Soltan has filed a lawsuit against Egypt's former prime minister, **Hesham Qandil**, alleging that he was tortured while in custody in the country.⁸ He has also claimed that Egyptian intelligence officials have harassed him in **Washington DC (US)**.⁹ Critics cite these actions as further

¹ Press release, 16 Feb 2021.

² CNN, 16 Feb 2021.

³ Twitter, 20 Jul 2020.

⁴ Twitter, 20 Jul 2020.

⁵ Press release, 16 Feb 2021.

⁶ CNN, 16 Feb 2021

⁷ Human Rights Watch, 19 Feb 2021.

⁸ ABC, 16 Feb 2020.

⁹ Washington Post, 18 Feb 2021.

evidence of Sisi's attempts to silence the exile communities of Egyptian activists abroad by targeting their families in Egypt, which has been an alarming pattern over the past three years.

A US State Department 2019 report on human rights abuses in Egypt said these included:

"Unlawful or arbitrary killings, including extrajudicial killings by the government or its agents and terrorist groups; forced disappearance; torture; arbitrary detention; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; political prisoners; arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy; extreme restrictions on expression and , the press, and the internet, including arrests of journalists, censorship, site blocking, and the existence of unenforced criminal libel; substantial interference with the rights of peaceful assembly and freedom of association, such as overly restrictive laws governing civil society organizations; restrictions on political participation; violence involving religious minorities; violence targeting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender persons; use of the law to arbitrarily arrest and prosecute LGBTI persons; and forced or compulsory child labor."

... as Sisi calls overpopulation a national security issue

President Sisi in a speech on 16 February called for Egypt to lower its annual population growth rate to 400,000 from its current rate of 2.4 million births per year, in order for citizens to reap the fruits of development efforts, labelling overpopulation a national security issue.¹⁰ With Egypt's population currently at 101.5 million, development experts have long warned that the next big conflicts in Egypt will be over land, water and food. Urban development challenges are already creating tension in cities, and alongside climate change, could have existential consequences with Egypt already expected to have crucial water shortages by 2025. Speaking at the inauguration of a new hospital in **Ismalia**, Sisi said:

*"Didn't you do a revolution in 2011 for a better life? It won't happen with a population crisis... You overwhelm yourself and the state. Then, you revolt and the series of destruction goes on."*¹¹

After Sisi in 2017 called overpopulation as big a threat to security as terrorism, the government has moved to stem the birth rate. In 2018 it launched a programme called "**Two is Enough**",¹² establishing family planning clinics and sending volunteers on home visits to discourage couples from having large families. While there is almost no publicly available data to suggest whether this has had any effect, the government has reported that five million visits were made to 750,000 rural women to raise their awareness of family planning. While having large families is deeply rooted in local culture, poor rural families tend to have more children so they can work the land and contribute to the family income stream. One in three Egyptians lives below the poverty line.

Critics say the government's efforts are not enough to reverse the current rate of population growth. While it is making efforts to develop infrastructure and reform the economy, these will be futile in the absence of meaningful long-term policy efforts to curb population growth in rural areas. The government is also sensitive to the consequences of creating punishing policies in the context of socio-economic inequality and increasing discontent over rising costs of living amid diminishing income.

Covid-19 update

Egypt continues to record new cases of **Covid-19** at a rate of about 600 per day, although numbers are widely believed to be much higher. The health ministry reports a cumulative total of 177,543 cases of Covid-19 and 10,298 Covid-19-related deaths as of 21 February.¹³ Vaccination of frontline workers began on 28 January after Egypt received its first shipment of vaccines developed by **Chinese**

¹⁰ Al Masry Al Youm, 16 Feb 2021.

¹¹ Egypt Today, 16 Feb 2021

¹² Ahram Online, 20 Feb 2019

¹³ Egypt Today, 21 Feb 2021.

pharmaceutical company **Sinopharm** in December.¹⁴ Health minister **Hala Zayed** announced on 21 February that other citizens would be able to register to take the vaccine starting 28 February, with priority given to the elderly and high-risk people with existing conditions.¹⁵

Egypt will get 40 million vials from the **GAVI** vaccine alliance for 20 million people, or 20% of the population. The government said it is procuring multiple sources of the vaccine, including from **Pfizer** and **Moderna**, but has not confirmed numbers.¹⁶ **Russia** has also signaled the potential for Egypt to manage production technology to manufacture its **Sputnik** vaccine locally.¹⁷ Egyptian officials have said that Egypt could be the export hub in **Africa** for the region, with **Viscera** already an African leader in vaccine production, and could serve as the production hub if an agreement is reached.¹⁸

Egypt drops in corruption rankings

Egypt has fallen 11 places in the rankings of **Germany**-based non-governmental organisation (NGO) **Transparency International's** annual **Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI)**. The latest CPI, released on 28 January, places Egypt 117th out of 180 countries surveyed.¹⁹ The survey ranks countries on perceived levels of corruption in the public sector. Countries are given a score out of 100, with 100 being very "clean" and 0 being very corrupt. On this metric, Egypt scored 33, two points lower than its 2019 CPI score of 35.²⁰

Transparency International CPI rankings for Egypt					
	2020	2019	2018	2017	2016
Ranking	117/180	106/180	105/180	117/180	108/176
Score (out of 100)	33	35	35	32	34

Egypt scored below the **Middle East and North Africa (MENA)** average of 39, and lower than its regional counterparts, **Tunisia** (44 points, 69th position), **Morocco** (40 points, 86th position) and **Algeria** (36 points, 104th position), but better than **Libya** (17 points, 173rd position). Both Algeria and Tunisia improved in their 2020 rankings, Tunisia by five places from 74 to 69 while Morocco, Egypt, and Libya fell in the 2020 rankings.²¹

CPI Rankings Regional Comparison ²²					
	Tunisia	Morocco	Algeria	Egypt	Libya
Ranking	69/180	86/180	104/180	117/180	173/180
Score	44/100	40/100	36/100	33/100	17/100

While data on corruption is useful as a general barometer, the numbers fail to capture the constant corruption embedded in doing business across almost all sectors in Egypt for decades. In a country like Egypt access to basic data is difficult. One source was quick to comment that the level of secrecy and paranoia has grown exponentially over the past five years under the current government, as well as nepotistic practices that favour people considered supporters by the government.²³

¹⁴ Al Ahram, 29 Jan 2020.

¹⁵ Al Ahram, 29 Jan 2021;

¹⁶ Press release, 6 Dec 2020.

¹⁷ Press release, 14 Jan 2021.

¹⁸ El Watan, 16 Jan 2021.

¹⁹ Transparency International, 28 Jan 2021

²⁰ Transparency International, 28 Jan 2021

²¹ 2020 Corruption Perceptions Index, 28 Jan 2021

²² www.transparency.org, 28 Jan 2021

²³ Source, think tank analyst, Cairo.

Planner

2020-2021 **Cairo (Egypt)** *Al Mal*. Government-led initial public offering programme;

Feb 2021 **Cairo (Egypt)** *France 24*. France's finance minister, **Bruno Le Maire**, is set to visit Egypt;

March 2021: **Cairo (Egypt)** *Enterprise*. **Russia's** President **Vladimir Putin** potential visit

1 Mar 2021 *Al Ahram*. **Eastern Mediterranean** Gas Forum comes into effect

Chronology

22 Feb 2021 **Cairo (Egypt)** *Arab Weekly*. **Israel** and Egypt's energy ministers agree to build a gas pipeline from the offshore **Eastern Mediterranean Leviathan** field to Egypt, aimed at boosting exports to **Europe**;

20 Feb 2021 **Washington D.C (United States)** *CNN*. **United States** announces it will de-link its pause on some aid to **Ethiopia** from its policy on the **Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam** on the **Blue Nile** that has sparked a long-running dispute between Egypt, Ethiopia and **Sudan**;

20 Feb 2021 **Cairo (Egypt)** *Al Ahram*. Egypt reconciles with two **Hosni Mubarak**-era figures, **Mohamed Ibrahim Suleiman** and **Magdy Rasekh**, in return for EGP 1,315,724 (\$83.9m);

17 Feb 2021 **Cairo (Egypt)** *Aljazeera*. **United States (US)** government approves an arms sale worth nearly \$200m to **Egypt** but vows to press human rights issues after a US activist reported his family had been harassed;

8 Feb 2021 **(Cairo) Egypt)** *Reuters*. Rival **Palestinian** factions **Hamas** and **Fatah** hold Egyptian-brokered reconciliation talks in **Cairo**;

7 Feb 2021 **Cairo (Egypt)** *Al Jazeera*. Authorities release journalist **Mahmoud Hussein** after holding him in pretrial detention for more than four years;

4 Feb 2021 **Cairo (Egypt)** *Axios* President **Abdel Fattah El Sisi** is reportedly making a potential upcoming visit by **Israeli** prime minister **Benjamin Netanyahu** contingent on the Netanyahu publicly moving the ball forward on the peace process with **Palestine**, possibly including a commitment to a two-state solution;

4 Feb 2021 **Cairo (Egypt)** *Colliers International*. Hotel occupancy in four of Egypt's biggest tourist destinations fell almost 60% in 2020 to average just 30% as the **Covid-19** pandemic brought the country's tourism sector to a halt;

2 Feb 2021 **Cairo (Egypt)** *Al Masry Al Youm*. Cabinet announces Egypt has received its first shipment of **AstraZeneca** vaccine;

31 Jan 2021 **Cairo (Egypt)** Egypt's current account deficit widens to \$2.8 billion in July-Sept;

26 Jan 2021 **Cairo (Egypt)** *Reuters*. Egypt will push development financing as a way to expand private sector engagement, leveraging support obtained during the **coronavirus** pandemic, with a focus on green projects and sustainable growth;

24 Jan 2021 **Cairo (Egypt)** Egypt begins **COVID-19** vaccination drive with frontline medical staff;

20 Jan 2021 **Cairo (Egypt)** *Egypt Independent*. Foreign ministry says it has agreed with its **Qatari** counterparts to resume full diplomatic relations;

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