

AFRICA RISK CONSULTING

Egypt Monthly Briefing October 2023

Egypt Summary 17 October 2023

Egypt is under pressure from Israel, the United States and European nations to open its border and take in millions of citizens from Gaza who are fleeing from Israeli airstrikes after a cross border attack by Hamas. Egypt will hold a presidential vote on 10-12 December, months earlier than expected as a nervous government mired in a deep economic crisis faces backlash in response to record inflation and foreign currency shortages. US federal prosecutors charge United States Senate foreign relations committee head senator Robert Menendez and his wife, Nadine, on 22 September with taking hundreds of thousands of dollars in bribes including cash, gold bars, and other gifts in exchange for the senator's influence on foreign aid and military sales to Egypt.

Egypt pressured to take in the population of Gaza amid Israeli bombing

Egypt is under pressure from **Israel**, the **United States (US)** and **European** nations to open its border and take in millions of citizens from **Gaza** who are fleeing from Israeli airstrikes.¹ Israel has been attacking the besieged enclave with airstrikes for 10 days after militant group **Hamas** launched an unprecedented cross border attack on Israeli settlements and towns on the Israeli-Gaza border on 7 October, killing many and taking a number of hostages.² Israeli defence minister **Yoav Galant** ordered “a full siege of Gaza”:

“No power, no food, no gas, everything is closed. We are fighting human animals and we act accordingly.”³

Gaza is a thin strip of territory wedged between Israel, Egypt and the **Mediterranean Sea**, where 2.5 million people live in an area of 360 square kilometres. The territory has been under an Israeli-imposed blockade by land, air and sea since Hamas came to power in 2007. Israeli prime minister **Benjamin Netanyahu** (1996-1999; 2009-2021; 2022-present) on 8 October called for people “to leave” Gaza, although there is no means by which they can do so.⁴ On 13 October, Israel instructed 1.1 million Gazans to evacuate south toward **Rafah**, where the border with Egypt is situated.⁵ The **Israel Defence Forces (IDF)** later targeted convoys of fleeing civilians with airstrikes, so although many have heeded the calls to flee, scores of others remain in their homes and in hospitals unable to leave.

Former deputy foreign minister and former Israeli ambassador to the US, **Danny Ayalon**, in an interview with **Qatari-owned Al Jazeera** said the idea is to move Gazans through the Egyptian border crossing in Rafah located in North **Sinai** in Egypt. Israeli general **Amir Avivi** called on the **United Nations** and the “international community” to speak to Egypt’s President **Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi** (2014-present) about opening the border to Palestinians, during a televised **BBC** interview on 14 October.⁶ Plans to exile Gazans to Egypt are not new, and have been suggested

¹ Reuters, 11 Oct 2023.

² AP, 7 Oct 2023.

³ Times of Israel, 9 Oct 2023.

⁴ TO1, 8 Oct 2023.

⁵ CNN, 13 Oct 2023.

⁶ BBC, 14 Oct 2023.

previously by Israel, reemerging in 2019 during **Donald Trump** (2017-2021) administration's push for a "peace deal" in the region.⁷



Source: AP

The border between Egypt and Israel has remained mostly closed since 7 October, because Israel told Egypt that it would target any attempts by Egyptian convoys to deliver aid, and later after multiple Israeli airstrikes made it impossible for the entry point to be used.⁸ Egypt has also refused the setting up of a "safe corridor" within its territory that would allow civilians to flee, for several reasons.⁹ Firstly, while a corridor is being depicted as a humanitarian option, it is widely believed to be a means of ejecting Palestinians permanently so that Israel can re-occupy the territory.¹⁰ The majority of those living in Gaza are already refugees who were told in 1948 during the creation of Israel to temporarily leave their homes in what is now Israel and were never allowed to return. President Sisi said on 12 October that the Palestinian people in Gaza must stay "steadfast" and "remain on their land", warning of "the liquidation" of the Palestinian cause.¹¹ Hamas' political leader, **Ismail Haniyeh**, also said "there will be no migration from Gaza to Egypt".¹²

Historically Egypt has kept tight control of the border, only opening it sporadically to allow Gazans to seek medical treatment, study or travel abroad. That control has increased since 2013, during which time the Egyptian government has been battling a local insurgency in the area and has cleared thousands of farms and homes to create an exclusion zone. **North Sinai** has been effectively closed off with non-residents barred from entering since 2016. Egypt sees opening the border as a potential threat to national security, both because it could mean the potential transfer of weapons, but also because Egypt is worried it could be forced into being the de facto administrator of the area.¹³ The international community has largely left **Jordan** and **Lebanon**, which took hundreds of thousands of refugees after the creation of Israel and then **Syrians** fleeing conflict, to provide for these refugees who have since become political

⁷ Reuters, 19 Apr 2019.

⁸ AFP, 10 Oct 2023.

⁹ Reuters, 11 Oct 2023.

¹⁰ Source, Official, Cairo.

¹¹ Youm7, 12 Oct 2023.

¹² The Guardian, 15 Oct 2023.

¹³ Source, official, Cairo.

flashpoints domestically.¹⁴ Egypt, which is already home to an estimated 9 million refugees, not including the 500,000 **Sudanese**¹⁵ who have recently crossed the border, does not have the resources to handle further arrivals. Furthermore, the Egyptian public would not accept any of these scenarios, viewing the opening of the border or the ceding of Egyptian territory as red lines.

Public support for President Sisi is already at an all-time low with Egypt in the midst of a deep economic crisis that has caused a dramatic increase in the price of basic goods such as food. The government is acutely aware that the public perception of its handling of Gaza is crucial to its survival. On 13 October, authorities ordered all mosques shuttered after the Friday prayer, fearing protests. Despite this, at least 10,000 protested outside **Al Azhar Mosque** in central **Cairo** in support of Gaza. There has also been huge turnout to protests in **Rabat (Morocco)**, **Amman (Jordan)**, **Sanaa (Yemen)**, **Manama (Bahrain)** and **Baghdad (Iraq)**, cities in which protests are usually prohibited.

An Egypt-based source told **ARC Briefing** about the huge pressure on Egypt to open its borders in return for economic and other incentives.¹⁶ He added that Egypt had rejected all these offers fearing that if it were to agree to treat the injured or temporarily provide safe haven to women and children, that they would not be allowed to return. The issue of Palestinian self-determination “*will not be solved with airstrikes or a cheque book*”:

“We will not cave to pressure to facilitate the removal of Palestinians from their land or bargain away Egyptian sovereignty to solve a problem we have not created.”¹⁷

US secretary of state **Anthony Blinken** arrived in Cairo on 15 October as part of a flash trip to the **Middle East** to drum up support from Arab leaders. Sisi told him the continued bombing of Gaza constitutes “*collective punishment*”, as did **Saudi** crown prince **Mohamed Bin Salman** (2017-present).¹⁸ In a clip of the talks that is being broadcast across Egypt, Sisi is shown commenting on Blinken’s recent remarks in Israel in which he invoked his Jewish heritage:

“You said that you are a Jewish person and I am an Egyptian person who grew up next to Jews in Egypt.”¹⁹

Egypt analysts view the clip, as a clear signal from the government to Egyptians and the region that Egypt rejects the premise that the conflict is one between Jews and Muslims, but rather a dispute over Israeli occupation, and will not cede its own territory based on this notion. It taps into a wider perception in the region that the Middle East is paying for the consequences of historical antisemitism in **Europe**.

The US has also been in talks with the Egyptian government to facilitate the exit of dual nationals who hold US and/or European passports. However, Egypt has insisted that it will only facilitate this in return for being allowed to deliver aid into Gaza, which has been without food, water and other essential supplies for 11 days.²⁰ Following his meeting with Sisi, Blinken told reporters that he was sure the Rafah border will re open but as of 17 October, more than 10 tonnes of aid has been stalled on the Egyptian side with the border yet to open.²¹ Late on 16 October, Egyptian officials told reporters that Israel is still refusing to co operate to facilitate the transfer of aid.²²

¹⁴ The Economist

¹⁵ Al Ahram, 12 Oct 2023.

¹⁶ Source, diplomat, Cairo.

¹⁷ Source, diplomat, Cairo.

¹⁸ The Washington Post, 15 Oct 2023.

¹⁹ The Washington Post, 15 Oct 2023.

²⁰ The Wall Street Journal, 16 Oct 2023.

²¹ Source, aid worker, Cairo.

²² Source, journalist, Cairo.

Multiple sources conveyed to ARC that continuing conflict will have long-term impacts for Egypt. One day after the Hamas attack, an Egyptian policeman opened fire on a group of Israeli tourists visiting the seaside city of **Alexandria**, killing two tourists and an Egyptian guide.²³ Incidents such as these and fears that there could be an all-out conflict in the region have the potential to be detrimental to the rebounding tourism sector, which has been having a bumper year after years of slumps. The industry is a crucial source of GDP and foreign currency.

Egypt's ambitions as a gas exporter in the **Eastern Mediterranean** are also in question after Israel halted gas exports from the **Tamar** field on 9 October, resulting in a 20% drop in imports to Egypt.²⁴ On 11 October, US-based oil giant **Chevron**, which operates Israel's largest gas field, **Leviathan**, stopped delivering gas through the **East Mediterranean Gas Pipeline** to Egypt and instead rerouted the deliveries through Jordan. Egypt uses the natural gas to generate electricity for the national grid, and liquefies and exports the surplus volumes to generate foreign currency revenue.²⁵ Former petroleum minister **Osama Kamal** has told press that Israel is also using this as a means to pressure European countries sensitive to potential shortages and represents leverage on Egypt.²⁶ The decision upends an agreement signed by Israel, Egypt and the European Union (EU) in 2022 to boost gas exports to Europe via the Egyptian-founded **East Mediterranean Gas Forum** in what was an attempt to diversify gas supply away from **Russia**.

The **Egyptian Stock Exchange (EGX)** dropped 1,300 points on 10 October responding to wider fears that the conflict could further destabilise global food and energy prices but has since rebounded on 16 October despite ongoing uncertainty. On a regional level, the massive public support for Palestinians serves a reminder to governments that have been on course to normalisation with Israel that the Palestinian cause remains a rallying cry for the citizens across the **Middle East and North Africa (MENA)**.

Much remains uncertain but there is real potential for the conflict to spill across the region and destabilise **Syria, Lebanon** and Jordan. Egypt is sandwiched between **Sudan, Libya**, Israel and Gaza, and is a mediator in violence taking place in each country. Watchers have been pointing to history as a guide. One analyst noted that the modern Egyptian republic was born in 1952 as an indirect result of the **Nakba** (Arabic term for the expulsion of Palestinians from their ancestral lands), while protests in Cairo for the Palestinian Intifada in 2000 laid the groundwork for the 2011 Egyptian revolution.²⁷

Amidst fragile economic situation, Egypt will hold elections in December

The **National Election Authority (NEA)** announced on 25 September that it will hold a presidential vote on 10-12 December, months earlier than expected, as a nervous government mired in a deep economic crisis faces backlash in response to record inflation and foreign currency shortages.²⁸ The announcement comes as the government faces increased pressure from the **International Monetary Fund (IMF)** to again devalue the Egyptian pound. IMF managing director **Kristalina Georgieva** said on 5 October that Egypt would "*bleed*" precious reserves unless it devalues its currency again.²⁹

Sisi, who came to power after he ousted Egypt's first democratically elected president, **Mohammed Morsi** (2012-2013) in a coup in 2013, has portrayed himself as the saviour of the nation determined to bring stability after the 2011 ousting of former president **Hosni Mubarak**

²³ BBC, 8 Oct 2023.

²⁴ *S&P Global*, 10 Oct 2023.

²⁵ Mada Masr, 12 Oct 2023.

²⁶ Mada Masr, 12 Oct 2023.

²⁷ Source, political commentator, Cairo.

²⁸ AP, 3 Oct 2023.

²⁹ Bloomberg, 5 Oct 2023

(1981-2011) in the **Arab Spring** uprisings. However, the past decade of his rule has seen successive economic crises, and massive spending on mega infrastructure that has almost bankrupted the country and created a cost-of-living crisis. When Sisi came to office, 1 US dollar was equal to 7 Egyptian pounds. Today, foreign currency is scarce and only accessible on the black-market where 1 US dollar is equal to 43 pounds. An estimated 60,000 political prisoners are said to be detained even as Sisi has been pressured to release some activists and begin a national dialogue forum.³⁰

Sisi won the 2014 and 2018 elections with 97% of the vote in campaigns marked by voter suppression and widespread intimidation.³¹ However, this election has been somewhat different: When Sisi announced his campaign on 2 October, protests – which are strictly forbidden – broke out in the city of **Marsa Matrouh**, a city close to the Libyan border, known for its influential tribes.³² Residents used the infamous catchphrase of the 2011 revolution, shouting “*The people demand the fall of the regime*”. Police later broke up the protests and made several arrests. These scenes are unheard of in a country where political life and dissent is almost nonexistent.

Candidates who want to run for election need 25,000 public signatures. In the run-up to the registration deadline, authorities targeted the frontrunner to challenge Sisi, former parliamentarian **Ahmed Tantawy**, before he could submit the endorsements, he needed to formally enter the race. It was also reported that Tantawy’s phone had been subject to multiple attempts at hacking, after his campaign asked **Citizen Lab**, a research lab based at the **University of Toronto (Canada)**, which tracks digital espionage, to analyse his phone. The lab concluded that the hacking was linked to **Sandvine Inc**, a computer company whose tools has previously been used by **Belarus** and other countries to censor the internet.³³ On 15 October, Tantawy and **Gameela Ismail**, the wife of a prominent former opposition leader, who had intended to run, announced they were withdrawing their candidacy.³⁴

Amir Adib, the country’s most watched television host, called on the government to stop suppressing opposition campaigns from gaining endorsements and allow the press (which is entirely government-controlled) to speak freely.³⁵ Adib’s comments on his programme, which is broadcast by a Saudi-owned channel, would have been unthinkable just several years ago and reflect that there are prominent forces in Egypt and the **Gulf** who no longer support Sisi’s hold on the presidency.

The economic situation in Egypt is increasingly dire with sources discussing with ARC the potential for default and the increasing possibility that even if the president makes it to the election, he will not remain in power in 2024.³⁶ On 5 October, multiple Egyptian banks suspended the use of Egyptian debit cards abroad, effectively blocking citizens’ access to their savings abroad.³⁷ Since January there have already been severe limits imposed on the use of debit and credit cards abroad. On 6 October, **Moody’s Investor Services** downgraded its assessment of Egypt’s sovereign debt by one notch to Caa1.³⁸ The last time the rating was so low was in 2011. Egypt’s debt servicing bill in 2024 is forecasted to be \$29.2 billion, 85% of its foreign currency reserves.³⁹

³⁰ Reuters, 27 Sep 2023.

³¹ Reuters, 27 Sep 2023.

³² Source, official, Cairo.

³³ Bloomberg, 26 Sep 2023.

³⁴ Al Ahram, 11 Oct 2023.

³⁵ Al Hakeya, 3 Oct 2023.

³⁶ Sources, company CEO, investor, Cairo.

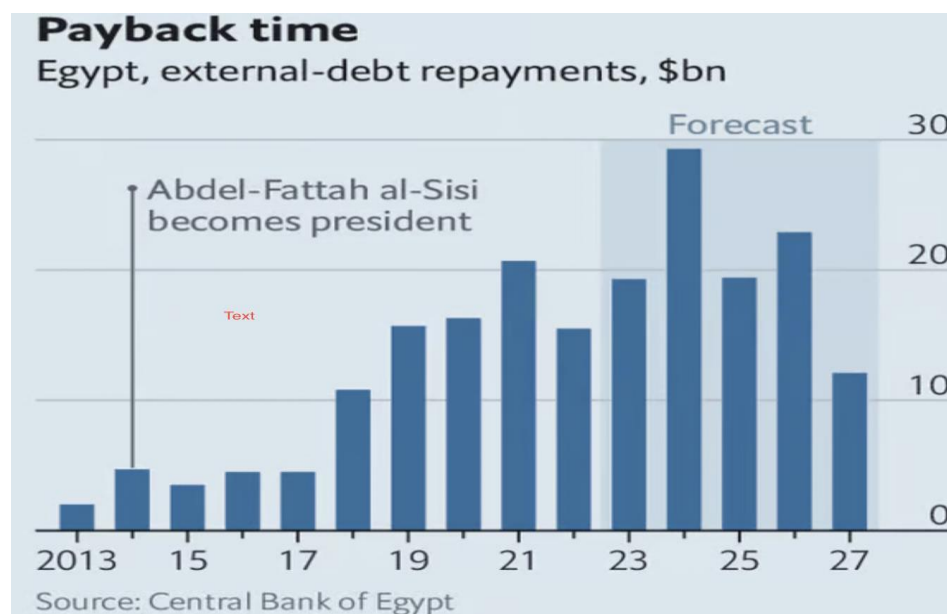
³⁷ Reuters, 5 Oct 2023.

³⁸ Bloomberg, 6 Oct 2023.

³⁹ Al Ahram, 3 Oct 2023.

Sisi, who is expected to win the election, is nevertheless attempting to persuade Egyptians that he has been a good leader for Egypt. On 5 October, he held a conference titled *Story of the Homeland*, designed to showcase his achievements in the new administrative capital, a costly new city in the desert that is largely still unoccupied. During his speech, Sisi told Egyptians, who are already unable to afford staples such as eggs, cheese and meat with food inflation topping 60%,⁴⁰ that hunger is the price for development:

"Don't you Egyptians dare say you would rather eat than build and progress... If the price of the nation's progress and prosperity is to go hungry and thirsty, then let us not eat or drink."⁴¹



There is anxiety in Cairo's business circles about the country's future. Company owners are battling continuous wage raises, lack of foreign currency needed to purchase key materials, and the complete absence of foreign investment. Workers at white collar firms are leaving the country in large numbers to take up lucrative offers in regional financial capitals such as **Dubai (United Arab Emirates)** and **Riyadh (Saudi Arabia)** and global banking hubs in **London (United Kingdom)** and **New York (US)**. Two sources ARC spoke with called the situation "disastrous", and added that while they hope there will not be another uprising, both suggested this was becoming an increasingly possible reality.

US senator accused of bribery and spying for Egypt

US federal prosecutors on 22 September indicted prominent **New Jersey (US) Democrat** and US Senate Foreign relations committee head **Robert Menendez** and his wife, **Nadine**, on charges of taking hundreds of thousands of dollars in bribes including cash, gold bars, and other gifts in exchange for the senator's influence on foreign aid and military sales to Egypt.⁴² Menendez is also accused of sharing sensitive information about staff at the US embassy in Cairo with members of Egypt's security apparatus.

⁴⁰ The Guardian, 5 Oct 2023.

⁴¹ The Guardian, 5 Oct 2023.

⁴² NBC, 22 Sep 2023.

The indictment centres around the Menendez's connection to **Wael Hana**, an Egyptian businessmen based in New Jersey, who was a close friend of the senator's wife. Hana, also indicted, is accused of being the go-between between the couple and members of Egypt's intelligence bodies. Hana, who was awarded contracts by Egypt to certify imported meat products, gave the couple bribes while passing information to Egyptian officials. The appointment of Hana's company raised many questions, given he is a Christian with no previous experience in the Halal certification sector, and that his company significantly raised the certification fees, causing hikes in the cost of meat in Egypt and abroad.

Among the charges, the senator is also accused of ghostwriting a letter to fellow senators asking them to lift a hold on \$300m in aid to Egypt, one of the largest recipients of US aid since it signed the **Camp David Peace** accords in 1979. Menendez is also said to have urged the US secretary of state to help block the development of Ethiopia's **Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam** project on the **Blue Nile**, which Egypt opposed.⁴³

US officials have also charged the Menendez's with acting as agents for a foreign nation after their dealings with Egyptian officials became known in more detail. In a message to Hana from the second in charge of Egypt's most important security body, the Egyptian official referred to Menendez as "*our man*". The indictment which has been made public contained numerous damning text messages exchanged between Nadine Menendez and Egyptian security officials and showed that the Menendez's had personally assisted the head of Egypt's General Intelligence who had flown to **Washington** to meet with senators about aid to Egypt by briefing him on what questions US lawmakers might ask. In one of the exchanges, Nadine Menendez told the second in charge of General Intelligence, an Egyptian general:

*"Anytime you need anything you have my number and we will make everything happen."*⁴⁴

The accusations have further highlighted the way in which that Egypt's intelligence bodies under Sisi's leadership have overtaken traditional ministries in the government – fundamentally reshaping the nature of governance in Egypt – to control central aspects of the country's running from business to the media, education and especially foreign affairs, in the process amassing significant wealth and influence. Evidence of the immense power the security establishment has gained in the last decade has increasingly been made public knowledge. In 2017, it was reported that **General Intelligence** hired its own lobbyists **Cassidy and Associates** in Washington.

Planner

Oct 2023 **Cairo (Egypt)** *Al Mal*. **Saudi** and Egyptian officials will meet to follow up on a project to connect the national power grids of Egypt and Saudi Arabia;

8 Nov 2023 **Cairo (Egypt)** *Enterprise*. **Turkish-Arab Economic Forum 2023**;

Dec 2023 **Cairo (Egypt)** *Enterprise*. **Kenyan** trade conference in Egypt;

⁴³ AP, 23 Sep 2023.

⁴⁴ The New York Times, 13 Oct 2023.

4Q 2023 **Cairo (Egypt)** *Enterprise*. **Egyptian Stock Exchange (EGX)** to launch a new futures exchange;

4Q 2023 **Cairo (Egypt)** *Enterprise*. **Egyptian Stock Exchange (EGX)** to launch a shariah-compliant index

2023 **Cairo (Egypt)** *Enterprise*. Government to sign agreements with a consultant for the **EuroAfrica** electricity interconnector;

25 Feb 2024 **Cairo (Egypt)** *Enterprise*. Deadline for bidders for oil and gas expansion in 23 new regions.

Chronology

16 Oct 2023 **Cairo (Egypt)** *Mada Masr*. Egyptian media report that **Israel** has bombed the **Rafah** crossing for a fourth time while international efforts are intensifying to get aid into **Gaza** and help stranded dual nationals leave;

16 Oct 2023 **Cairo (Egypt)** *Reuters*. Egypt says **Israel** is not cooperating with delivery of aid into **Gaza** and evacuations of foreign passport holders via the only entry it does not wholly control, leaving hundreds of tonnes of supplies stuck;

16 Oct 2023 **Riyadh (Saudi Arabia)** *Al Arabiya*. **United States (US)** Secretary of State **Antony Blinken** says US will not back calls from **Israel** to resettle thousands of **Gazans** in **Egypt**;

16 Oct 2023 **Riyadh (Saudi Arabia)** *The Washington Post*. Saudi ruler **Mohamed Bin Salman** keeps **United States (US)** Secretary of State **Antony Blinken** waiting several hours for a meeting presumed to happen in the evening and only shows up for the next morning, as **Middle East** leaders make it clear to the US they don't support the killing of civilians in Gaza;

16 Oct 2023 **Cairo (Egypt)** *The Wall Street Journal*. Egypt refuses to allow **United States** citizens and foreigners to pass through the **Rafah** crossing unless an agreement is reached to allow the delivery of water, food, medical supplies and other humanitarian aid to the **Gaza Strip**;

16 Oct 2023 **Cairo (Egypt)** *NPR*. **United States (US)** Secretary of State **Antony Blinken** says the **Rafah** border crossing between Egypt and **Gaza** "will reopen" to humanitarian aid for **Palestinians** currently under siege by **Israeli** forces;

15 Oct 2023 **Cairo (Egypt)** *Al Ahram*. Egypt pushes for humanitarian aid into **Gaza** telling visiting **United States (US)** Secretary of State **Antony Blinken** that **Israel's** bombardment of the territory was disproportional;

15 Oct 2023 **Cairo (Egypt)** *Al Ahram*. The **International Monetary Fund (IMF)** will announce the dates for the first and second reviews of Egypt's economic reform programme by the end of October;

13 Oct 2023 **Cairo (Egypt)** *AP*. **Israel's** call for half of the **Gaza Strip's** population to evacuate south raises Egypt's fears of a massive influx of refugees across the heavily fortified border into its territory;

13 Oct 2023 **Cairo (Egypt)** *Al Ahram*. Egyptians protest following Friday prayers at Cairo's **Al-Azhar Mosque** against the **Israeli** attack on **Gaza**, following suit with protesters in several other Arab capitals;

13 Oct 2023 **Cairo (Egypt)** *CNN*. **Israel's** military tells 1.1 million people in northern **Gaza** to evacuate south toward Egypt despite **United Nations** saying "*this is impossible*";

11 Oct 2023 **Cairo (Egypt)** *Reuters*. Egypt rejects corridors for civilians fleeing **Gaza**, citing fears of ethnic cleansing of **Palestinians**;

9 Oct 2023 **Cairo (Egypt)** *Haaretz*. **Israeli** defence minister announces "*complete siege*" of **Gaza** following Hamas' surprise attack in Israeli territory on 7 October, withholding power, food and fuel;

9 Oct 2023 **Cairo (Egypt)** *S&P Global*. United States-headquartered oil company **Chevron** shuts down its **Tamar** natural gas field off the coast of **Israel** at the request of Israeli authorities, which will impact Egyptian LNG exports;

6 Oct 2023 **Cairo (Egypt)** *Bloomberg*. Egypt's dollar bonds slump after **Moody's Investors Service** downgrades the country's ratings to one of the lowest rungs of speculative grade and **International Monetary Fund** managing director **Kristalina Georgieva** urges another devaluation in the Egyptian pound;

5 Oct 2023 **Cairo (Egypt)** *Reuters*. Egyptian banks suspend debit card use in foreign currency;

3 Oct 2023 **Cairo (Egypt)** *The Washington Post*. New **United States** senate foreign relations committee head **Ben Cardin** says he will block \$235m in foreign military assistance that the **Biden** administration approved only weeks ago, and will seek to prohibit future military aid and arms sales if Egypt "*does not take concrete, meaningful and sustainable steps*" to improve human rights conditions;

2 Oct 2023 **Cairo (Egypt)** *Youm7*. President **Abdel Fattah al-Sisi** confirms he will stand for a third term in office in the December election;

22 Sep 2023 **Cairo (Egypt)** *AP*. **United States (US)** federal prosecutors indict US foreign relations committee head **Robert Menendez** and wife on bribery charges as the **FBI** seizes gold bars and \$500,000;

21 Sep 2023 **Cairo (Egypt)** *Citizen Lab*. Aspiring presidential candidate **Ahmed Tantawy** says **European** commercial spyware hacked his phone by several times after he announced his interest in running for the Egyptian presidency.

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