

## Position Paper

# Sisi's Harvest: Illusion of Stability, Perpetuation of Unrest

*This paper was originally written in Arabic by: **Al Jazeera Center for Studies***

*Translated into English by: **AMEC***





**Egypt's unrest continues [Reuters Archive]**

## Abstract

Events in Egypt last Sunday, the fourth anniversary of the 25 January revolution, had been gestating for almost nineteen months. Popular opposition to the 3 July 2013 regime has continued at varying scales, ranging from massive assemblies at the Rabaa al-Adawiya and al-Nahda squares to small demonstrations all over the country, with larger ones on Fridays.

But the fourth anniversary's events marked a deep change in the popular opposition's temperament, and the sheer size of the demonstrations was more massive than any of last year's popular movements. This image presents a stark contrast to the message that the regime has been trying to disseminate regionally and globally, claiming it is finally and successfully in control of the country, and that the sole challenge it has to overcome today is that of the economy. This paper presents an initial reading of the events of that day, and their implications for the futures of both the popular opposition and the regime, ending with a discussion on how regional and global forces view the regime.

## Introduction

Late Sunday, 25 January 2015, hundreds of protests broke out all over Egyptian cities and towns. There were widespread attacks on public administration buildings and branches of the Interior Ministry. Dozens of police and security vehicles were set on fire. Roads and railways were cut off all over the country, and there were even armed attacks

on security patrols, with security personnel ambushed and attacked at roadblocks. Some of these activities lasted well into the following morning, with the death toll reaching more than twenty-five civilians and four security personnel, in addition to hundreds injured and hundreds more in custody. This paper presents an initial reading of the events of that day, and their implications for the futures of both the popular opposition and the regime, ending with a discussion on how regional and global forces view the regime.

### **Growth of the popular movement**

Given the sheer number and range of protests all over the country, it would be close to impossible to estimate the number of participants in the popular movement with any measure of accuracy. It is apparent, though, that Egypt witnessed the largest popular anti-regime gatherings since the Rabaa al-Adawiya and al-Nahda squares' sit-ins were suppressed in the summer of 2013. There are various reasons behind this escalation by the opposition, not least of which is the prevailing political climate in the country more than one and a half years after the birth of the 3 July 2013 regime. It has also become apparent just how big a reverse Egypt has suffered, from an unstable, but free, democratic situation to one of oppression, where the iron fist of security routinely cracks down on opposition and strangles political freedom, with no sign of stability on the horizon.

The acquittal, and subsequent release, of several figureheads of the Mubarak regime, including Mubarak himself and his two sons, only reinforces the general feeling that Egypt is rapidly slipping back under the old regime, even if the names of those at the helm have changed. Moreover, the devaluation of the Egyptian pound and the continuing deterioration of the economy have led to an increasing belief that the regime, despite considerable financial support from the GCC, is no longer able to contain the runaway economic crisis.

In this climate, more and more popular sectors are joining the opposition movement. But the situation isn't confined to growth in the popularity of the movement. In the larger cities, and especially in Cairo, there are growing signs that some political groups, such as 6 April, the radical left, and opposition student movements, have grown more willing to go out on the streets and participate with the Anti-Coup Alliance (the National Alliance Supporting Legitimacy) in popular demonstrations. On the other hand, the successive changes in the leadership structure of the Muslim Brotherhood, both within the country and abroad, have boosted confidence among the Brotherhood's rank-and-file, bolstering the ability of the movement and its sympathisers to mobilise, and reinvigorating its determination to continue its activities against the regime.

However, despite the massive mobilisation, and the sheer number and spread of the demonstrations, it would still be premature to say that the balance of forces between the opposition and the regime has reached critical mass. A significant majority of Egyptians are still wary of participating in the opposition movement, either out of fear of the regime and its oppressive machine, or out of a collective desire to see a return to stability. Some have been disillusioned by the lack of a viable alternative after the failure of the first attempt at democratic change and the crumbling of the revolutionary masses, while others actually support the regime out of fear that the Islamists might return to power. In other words, there are large segments of the population that have yet to reach a level of discontent high enough to prompt them to take to the streets and demand for the regime to be brought down.

### **Impeding the state's machine**

The popular movement's change in disposition is undeniable. Even though the Muslim Brotherhood (the main force behind the Anti-Coup Alliance that has led the opposition for the past nineteen months) and its partners in the alliance have adhered to completely peaceful methods in their opposition to the regime, there are some youth groups all over the country who are resorting to different methods. The subtle indicators of this shift began to appear about a year ago, but by 25 January 2015 and the subsequent days, they had grown so strong that they could no longer be ignored.

#### **These indicators fall into two main categories:**

1. Vandalism, destruction and arson of government and local administrative institutions, police and security stations and vehicles, telecommunications towers, and electric power transformers, as well as blocking roads and railways. More recently, there were calls for people to withdraw their cash deposits from various banks, a clear sign that the banking sector is being targeted.
2. Organised armed attacks on police and security stations and checkpoints, and attempts on the lives of security officers, judges, prosecutors and informers thought to be involved in the crackdowns.

The goal of the first category is to compromise the regime's ability to govern and cripple the state, while the motives of the second are revenge and settling scores.

There are three groups that have openly claimed responsibility for such actions during this time period. The first, Afnan Misr (Soldiers of Egypt), went public about a year ago, with a black flag that very closely resembles that of the Islamic State (IS). If a relationship, whether direct or indirect, between Afnan Misr and IS can be confirmed, the

group, which operates mainly in the governorates along the Nile Valley, would be the second to declare its allegiance to IS and its jihad-oriented interpretation of Islam, with the first being Ansar Bait al-Maqdis (Supporters of the Holy House), which is active in northern Sinai.

The second group, calling itself Harakat al-Iqab al-Thawri (Revolutionary Punishment Movement), announced its presence on 24 January 2015, the day before the fourth anniversary of the revolution, claiming to have active cells in fifteen of Egypt's twenty seven governorates. Despite the obvious difficulties in affirming the veracity of that claim, the wording of the announcement seemed free of the usual hallmarks of Islamist jihadi discourse, suggesting that this group has no jihadi leanings. However, the sheer magnitude of operations for which the group has claimed responsibility is astounding, since these occurred across the country, including Cairo, Alexandria, and cities along the Suez Canal.

Both Ajnad Misr and al-Iqab al-Thawri appear to have no qualms about carrying out deadly attacks and bombings using triggered devices and time-bombs, either targeting specific people or randomly killing security and police personnel. Despite the glaring contrast in discourse between the two, they clearly share the belief that armed violence is part and parcel of dealing with the regime, and that violence is the only course of action to bring about change in Egypt.

The third group, Al-Muqawama al-Shaabiya (Popular Resistance), emerged about six months ago. The wording of its statements implies a generally jihadist leaning, with close ties to the popular movement. Al-Muqawama al-Shaabiya is generally inclined more towards vandalism and road-blocking. To date, they are not known to have executed any armed attacks on security forces, even though they have been known to protect protesters from attacks by groups of criminal gangs believed to be affiliated with the regime's security apparatus.

Unlike northern Sinai, which has been witnessing almost open warfare between the armed forces and the Ansar Bait al-Maqdis since the 3 July coup, the magnitude and frequency of vandalism and armed attacks in the governorates along the Nile Valley have not yet reached sufficient intensity to be described as armed struggle. Unlike in Syria, where the popular movement waned as the armed struggle escalated, the armed conflict in Egypt has not reached a level which it could cripple the state or negatively impact the popular movement. That said, the magnitude and scale of events that took place this past 25 January 2015 did cause the regime's leaders serious concern.

## Illusion of stability

The military officers who led the 3 July coup, and most of the civilian politicians who supported them, were hardly oblivious to the fact that they were desecrating the democratic process, nor were they unaware that what they were doing was unwelcome to Egypt's US and European allies. Washington and various European capitals certainly wanted to tame the rule of former president Mohamed Morsi, but they also wanted the change to come about legally and constitutionally. On the other hand, the leaders of the 3 July regime were betting on the significant financial, economic and political support of some GCC countries, especially Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. In addition to Israel's open welcome of the coup, the current regime gambled on the probability that these countries would eventually help change the Western stance and build status-quo legitimacy for the regime. The regime also wagered that it would be able to quickly establish stability, providing a climate for continued Arab support and a gradual shift in the Western stance. It would be safe to say that that objective – achieving stability as quickly as possible – became such a high priority for the regime that it made the ill-advised decision to break up the Rabaa and Nahda sit-ins with brute force, in an attempt to put an end to these manifestations of popular opposition and social discord.

During the past eighteen months, the pro-regime GCC countries have pumped more than twenty billion US dollars into the Egyptian treasury and economy. With support from the pro-Israel West, these countries worked to help the regime gradually normalise its relations with the US and Europe. Over the past few months, the regime appeared to be slowly but surely achieving its aim of building an image of stability for the country, despite all the repressive actions of the security sector and the arbitrary tyranny of the judiciary, directed at quelling the opposition. But the events of 25 January 2015 clearly demonstrate that the dream of stability is still far from reality, that the regime is no longer capable of breaking, or even containing, the popular political opposition, and that the country is entering a phase of ever-worsening tension that could be far more destructive than anything it has witnessed over the past year and a half.

Western media outlets across the board showed significant interest in the events of that Sunday. Spokespeople for the US Department of State, the European Union, and a number of European countries expressed concern over the death toll among protesters. It is certain the impression of instability will make European governments hesitant to offer Egypt future direct financial or economic assistance. Likewise, there are growing signs that the enthusiasm with which some Gulf countries offered direct financial assistance to Egypt has waned since a year ago, either because of the proverbial black hole of corruption that exists deep within the structure of the Egyptian state (as the UAE believes), or due to the rapid, successive changes in the country's political leadership (as Saudi Arabia observes), or because of the dramatic decline in oil prices (as Kuwait fears). The decline in direct financial support is the only explanation behind the Central

Bank's inability to keep propping up the value of the national currency, and the subsequent dramatic freefall of the Egyptian pound's exchange rate to the US dollar.

### **Losing control**

Since 3 July 2013, the Egyptian regime has repeatedly gambled on the security option to suppress opposition and impose stability, and on the financial support of some GCC states to shore up the economy. But now, on the revolution's fourth anniversary, the regime finds itself staring down the barrel of instability, with increasing segments of the populace trying to cripple the state's control of the country, and with a rapidly dwindling cash lifeline from the Gulf, which has weakened the Egyptian pound, causing buying power to drop and prices of imported goods to skyrocket. This has made the lives of ordinary Egyptians ever more difficult. The bottom line is that the growing violence of the opposition and the state's dwindling ability to build a popular base will inevitably lead to more unrest and lawlessness, which in turn will chip away at the state's institutions and pave the way for violence to tear into the very fabric of society.

---

*Copyright © 2014 Al Jazeera Center for Studies, All rights reserved.*

*Al Jazeera Center for Studies*