

Chapter 3: Egyptian Elite's Views on Egypt, and Its Relations with the EU

This chapter provides a summary of the elite survey pursued in Egypt, where a total of 31 interviews were conducted in accordance with the concept paper for this particular research.¹ Of the interviewees, 16 were male, 12 were female and two individuals chose not to provide any demographic information. Access problems were experienced at the official level, in regard to anonymity and as people are wary of internationally-funded projects in Egypt since the passing of the new law with respect to foreign funding. Questions focused on perceptions of the EU, its member states and their policies; perceptions of the Mediterranean and key issues in this region; as well as issues specifically related to Egypt.

Regarding methodology, the initial list of interviewees was compiled by the researchers with oversight and approval. The list was later amended with new names as some individuals who were contacted either did not respond or stated that they did not wish to participate in the interview. The compiling of names was in accordance with categories of the types of individuals which were desired to be interviewed. These categories included: policy-makers, activists, artists, journalists, designers, business and banking professionals, start-up sector professionals, humanitarians, and academics. Individuals were contacted by email primarily, with full information on the purpose of the interview and the consent form. At the interview, individuals first received information on the purpose of

1 See Zeynep Gülöz Bakır and Gülşah Dark, "Review of Surveys on Euro-Mediterranean Relations, and an Introduction to the Elite Survey in MEDRESET", in *MEDRESET Methodology and Concept Papers*, No. 5 (July 2017), <http://www.medreset.eu/?p=13424>

the interview. The interviews lasted one hour and followed the interview structure and questions that were provided.

As mentioned in the concept paper, the three main questions of the project focus on how elites perceive European policies in the Mediterranean area, how they perceive the Mediterranean region, and the major policy issues that they see.²

To briefly summarize the findings, our interviews reveal that in Egypt, the elite holds a mixed perception of the EU, as an area of the world with a high standard of living, but also as an entity with increasingly pragmatic, security-oriented policies, including toward Egypt. In Egypt, the interlocutors mentioned the refugee crisis as a key representative factor of the Mediterranean currently. They also saw the Mediterranean as an area in conflict, with threats of extremism and terrorism. Within Egypt, the interlocutors saw the ongoing instability which results in unemployment, lack of human rights, a more oppressive regime, and the ongoing threats and realities of terrorism. Given this context, they mentioned economic development and civil society as key areas for co-operation with the EU.

In the first section, background data is provided on the demographics, history, politics, and economy of the country. The history of relations between the EU and Egypt is provided as a timeline. In the second section, we discuss our data pertaining to: perceptions towards EU policies in the MENA; an analysis of the challenges confronting Egypt; expectations for the EU's future role in Egypt; and co-operation areas with the EU. A list of anonymized interviewees with interview dates is provided. In the conclusion, we summarize the findings of the interviews.

2 Ibid.

1. Country profile of Egypt

1.1 Demographics

The Arab Republic of Egypt, a country of just over one million square kilometres situated at the north-eastern corner of the African continent abutting the Mediterranean and Red Seas, is dominated by the Nile River, its valley and delta. It is in these confined regions that the vast majority of its population lives. According to the Egyptian Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics, this is estimated at 98 million, and with a median age of 24.8, continues to expand rapidly.³ Approximately 40 percent of the population is urban, and the majority of the remainder rural. Egypt is about 90 percent Sunni Muslim and 10 percent Coptic Christian, the latter forming the largest Christian community in the Middle East.

1.2 Relevant stakeholders at domestic, regional, and global levels

The Egyptian republic was established in 1952, and the military that seized power that year continues to be the dominant force in the country's political system.⁴ The internal security forces are also an important player in their own right. In recent decades the business community has become increasingly influential, often on the basis of intimate ties to the state and political leadership.⁵ The bureaucracy and clerics represent subordinate rather than independent sources of power,

3 Egyptian Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS), *Statistical Yearbook – Population*, September 2018, https://www.capmas.gov.eg/Pages/Publications.aspx?page_id=5104&YearID=23188.

4 A. Bernard Knapp, *The History and Culture of Ancient Western Asia and Egypt*, Chicago, Dorsey Press, 1988; Selma Botman, *Egypt from Independence to Revolution, 1919-1952*, Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 1991.

5 Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002; Steven Heydemann (ed.), *Networks of Privilege in the Middle East. The Politics of Economic Reform Revisited*, Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

but are not without influence. Whilst organized political opposition has been proscribed by law or otherwise undermined for most of the republic's existence, the Muslim Brotherhood is considered the leading such force although it has been unprecedentedly persecuted by Egypt's current rulers.⁶

At the regional level, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are considered the leading stakeholders in Egypt, primarily on account of their political sponsorship of the current regime, and heavy financial investment in it. Qatar, and to a lesser extent Turkey, which supported the previous government led by the Muslim Brotherhood, have by contrast experienced a deliberate eradication of their influence. Although Egypt concluded a formal peace treaty with Israel in 1979, relations were initially slow to develop. In recent years they have however reached exceptional levels of co-ordination, particularly in the security sphere.

Internationally, the US has been Egypt's closest ally since the late 1970s. The US is Egypt's largest trade partner. The EU is also a key partner, particularly in economic terms. EU–Egypt trade has more than doubled from 11.8 billion euro in 2004 to 27.9 billion euro in 2017. The EU's main imports of goods from Egypt in 2017 were fuel and mining products (3.2 billion euro), chemicals (1.3 billion euro), and textiles and clothing (8.6 billion euro). The EU's main exports to Egypt were machinery and transport equipment (6.9 billion euro), chemicals (3.1 billion euro), fuel and mining products (2.6 billion euro), and agricultural products (1.3 billion euro).⁷

Egypt has more recently also experienced significant improvements in its relations with Russia, from which it imports a large amount of wheat. Egypt is the largest buyer of Russian goods, more than China at 1.8 billion euro, according to reports from the Russian Export Center

6 Abd al-Monein Said Aly and Manfred W. Wenner, "Modern Islamic Reform Movements: The Muslim Brotherhood in Contemporary Egypt", in *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (Summer 1982), pp. 336-361; Eric Trager, "The Unbreakable Muslim Brotherhood", in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 5 (September/October 2011), pp. 114-126.

7 European Commission DG Trade, *European Union, Trade in Goods with Egypt*, 16 April 2018, <http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/html/113375.htm>.

in 2017.⁸ Russia is also planning to begin exporting more construction materials to Egypt.

1.3 A chronology of key events since the start of the Arab uprisings

Egypt has played a central role in the region's upheaval virtually from the outset. On 25 January 2011, several weeks of sustained mass protests inspired by the successful uprising in Tunisia commenced in Cairo and elsewhere in the country, forcing the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak on 8 February and forestalling the succession of Security Chief Omar Suleiman. Power was assumed by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), which ruled by decree pending parliamentary and presidential elections in 2012, then won by the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Morsi administration which subsequently assumed office appeared to herald the emergence of the Brotherhood from opposition to regional power. Although fiercely criticized by its detractors, it also represented the most democratic period in Egypt's history since 1952. The Muslim Brotherhood was elected in democratic elections in Egypt in 2012. They came into power both through parliamentary and presidential elections. Yet less than a year later, in July 2013, the popular-supported military removal of Morsi took place; a month later the events of Rabaa of perhaps 800 Brotherhood supporters in one of Cairo's squares presaged a brutal crackdown on the movement, and thereafter on opposition and dissent in any form.⁹ This also led to the strengthening of a jihadist threat in Sinai which has extended into periodic attacks in Cairo and elsewhere in the Egyptian mainland. Sisi has since replaced his uniform with a suit and tie, and conducted two elections that lacked strong candidates of opposition and had a very low voter turnout, most recently in March 2018. It is generally recognized that regional powers are more heavily invested in the outcome of Egypt's political transition (and its reversal)

8 "Egypt Becomes Biggest Market for Russian Goods", in *RT*, 21 February 2018, <https://on.rt.com/8znh>.

9 Shadi Hamid, "The Massacre That Ended the Arab Spring", in *The Atlantic*, 14 August 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/08/arab-spring-rabaa-massacre/536847>.

than elsewhere in the Arab world on account of the country's influence on others in the region.

1.4 Main geopolitical challenges

Egypt faces a variety of geopolitical challenges, some of which are perceived to be existential in nature. Potentially the most important derives from Ethiopia's construction of the Renaissance Dam, which could significantly reduce the downstream flow of the Nile providing Egypt with virtually all of its already increasingly-scarce water resources. Climate change threatens to erode not only the Nile Delta, vital to Egypt's economy, food supply, and infrastructure, but also to make a 'northern passage' from Asia to Europe viable and thus reduce reliance on the Suez Canal which is a key source of revenue for the Egyptian state. More immediately, Egypt is facing a determined jihadist threat in the Sinai Peninsula that at times extends into the Egyptian mainland and which it has thus far been unable to bring to an end.

To the east, the Gaza Strip adjoining Egypt's Sinai Peninsula ensures that Cairo will continue to have direct influence—and therefore be continuously involved in—on the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. To the west, Libya's descent into anarchy and hosting of various jihadist groups pose a significant security concern to Egypt. Egypt has been accused of supplying weapons to armed factions in Libya. Other regional powers are accused of similar actions. To the south, Egypt has yet to resolve longstanding challenges in its relationship with Sudan.

1.5 An overview of EU–Egyptian relations

2001: Conclusion of EU–Egyptian Association Agreement.

2004: At the bilateral level, within the framework of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, the Association Agreement entered into force in June 2004, forming the legal basis for EU–Egypt relations.¹⁰

10 Hélène Michou, "EU-Egypt Bilateral Relations: What Scope for Human Rights Advocacy?", in *EuroMed Rights Reports*, June 2016, <https://euromedrights.org/publication/eu-egypt-bilateral-relations-scope-human-rights-advocacy>.

2007: Adoption of EU–Egypt Action Plan, resulting in EU assistance of 1 billion euro during 2007–13 within the framework of the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI).

2011: EU reviews its policies with Egypt due to the Arab Spring. Final review of the neighbourhood policy was published in 2015.

2013: The EU expressed strong concern during the removal of Morsi, holding internal meetings with EU Ambassadors to discuss the event and its repercussions. The EU expressed disapproval of Morsi but was wary in its wording, not meaning to express support for Morsi.

2013: The EU expressed strong concern about the events of Rabaa. Subsequently, the EU suspended aid and arms sales to Egypt; however, individual EU member states were still able to sell arms to Egypt during this time.¹¹

2014: ENPI replaced by European Neighbourhood Instrument.

2017: EU–Egypt Partnership Priorities adopted by EU–Egypt Association Council, superseding 2007 Action Plan.

2017: New Egyptian law on oversight of NGOs prevents many Egyptian organizations from receiving foreign funding, including from the EU.

1.6 The changing structure and nature of interactions with the EU

The EU forms a significant trading partner for Egypt in terms of both exports and imports. Specific numbers were mentioned in the first part of this chapter. EU priorities in its relationship with Egypt have been the promotion of economic development, trade, stable governance, and more recently counter-terrorism and the refugee crisis. Supporting Egyptian–Israeli peace and the Middle East Peace Process are also important rationales for EU relations with Egypt. Enhancing human rights and strengthening civil society have been consistent themes for the EU in its relationship with Egypt but were prioritized only in the immediate aftermath of the 2011 revolution. Since the 2013 removal

11 Human Rights Watch, *All According to Plan. The Rab'a Massacre and Mass Killings of Protesters in Egypt*, August 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/node/256579>.

of Morsi, these have been all but formally overtaken by the gradual normalization of relations with the Sisi regime and co-operation with Cairo's rulers on matters of more immediate interest to the EU and its member states.¹²

These various challenges are complicated by the diminution of Egypt's regional role. Formerly the unquestioned leader of the Arab states and their primary representative in international fora, it today holds this status symbolically at best and has thus seen a dramatic decline in influence in regional and international affairs.

2. Elite Survey: Research findings on Egypt

2.1 *Perceptions towards the EU and its policies in MENA*

Within Egypt, the EU is generally viewed positively by elites, though this as often as not has little to do with perceptions of EU policies in Egypt.

'Socially and economically, the EU has a very positive perception amongst Egyptians, as a representation of high standard of living, wealth, culture, arts, and freedom of practice in general. On the other hand, politically, it is up to the political elites and the government to view and transfer this perception to the public on how they take the EU. This 'take' comes regarding anti or pro its policies, especially if the EU or any of its member states have criticized the government or [withhold] some development of military aid.'¹³

A surgeon who is outside of general political involvement stated the following,

'I personally see the EU as a successful example of economic and political co-operation between countries, despite the recent failings at both. To name three countries: UK (not for long, though), France, Germany. They are generally

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- 12 Judy Dempsey, "Germany Welcomes Egypt's Sisi", in *Judy Dempsey's Strategic Europe*, 1 June 2015, <http://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/60260>.
 13 Interviewee 1: Communications consultant, male, 2 September 2017.

perceived as examples of democracies, economic opportunities, financial aid, and by some as a source of conspiracy and political interference.¹⁴

Secondly, the EU benefits from not being the US, World Bank, or International Monetary Fund, which are often seen in a more nefarious light.

‘The Egyptians don’t have the same hostility against the EU as they have for the USA. On the contrary, the EU is the greatest example of the successful unity of the developed countries, and the place where all people are trying to travel to, for work or studies.’¹⁵

The cloud to this silver lining is however that it is perceived as a substantially less influential body that plays a much smaller role in Egypt, and that its efforts are, at least in perception, more concentrated on elites than on other actors.

While individual member states are on the whole ranked very highly by Egyptians and for many are aspirational destinations for migration as well, the EU as such is somewhat overshadowed in the Egyptian public consciousness by the more visible policies of key member states, particularly Germany, the UK, France, and—on account of its proximity—Italy. Furthermore, the EU and its member states are often perceived mainly as donors.

‘As workers in the civil society organizations, we see the EU as just donors. In the past few years, the EU became more influential, and this is a good thing. Ordinary people do not exactly know what the EU is doing and what is its job and purpose, or even how many countries are in it. I believe the most important three countries are Germany, Belgium because most of the meetings to take decisions are held in Brussels, and France.’¹⁶

Those more familiar with the EU point out that there are often contradictions between the positions it holds and those of individual member states; Brussels proclaims an agenda of democracy, human

14 Interviewee 26: Surgeon, male, 28 August 2017.

15 Interviewee 6: Journalist and researcher in political economy, male, 6 November 2017.

16 Interviewee 2: Programme manager and monitoring and evaluation officer at major CSO, gender not given, 5 November 2017.

rights, and social equality, while member states conduct relations with the Egyptian government seemingly independently of these values and objectives. The following quote came from an individual well aware of EU workings.

‘During the past 25 years, and after the new European foreign policy, the Middle East had high expectations regarding the co-operation with Europe, and the common policies that emerged in the early 2000s were expected to strengthen the relationships, expand the economic co-operation and solve the illegal immigration problem among others. However, the last ten years witnessed a state of depression; since 2005, the European reactions towards the protests were different. There was no united voice of the EU. There are many problems in the structure of the EU itself. The idea that the individual countries have a powerful voice rather than the EU is very obvious in the leading countries of the EU such as the UK, Germany, or France. After the Arab Spring, this problem became bigger and more complicated as the EU has to deliver common reactions towards the events in 2011/2012, such as guiding reactions; on the other hand, the other countries are reacting like independent countries with their own foreign policies and adapted some reactions towards the Islamists and the old regimes. [...] I believe that, generally, the EU is now in the phase of redefining itself, especially after the separation of the UK. The individual countries are still strong as regards the foreign policies and their direct benefits. As a result, the policy of interests and governments dominates the common interest.’¹⁷

Given the momentous developments Egypt has experienced in recent years, many respondents perceived changes in both the priorities of European policies towards Egypt and the attitude of the Egyptian authorities towards EU programmes during this period. Prior to the 2011 revolution, the EU—in addition to its primary focus on maintaining economic and security relations with the Mubarak regime—also sought to promote civil society and its various democratization agendas and was able to utilize the space available to it to do so.

The EU response to the upheaval in the Arab world is seen by Egyptian elites as having undergone a significant shift. In the initial phase, it was seen as one of promoting and supporting a democratic transition, particularly in Egypt which played a critical role in these events. In the aftermath of the 2013 removal of Morsi, the 2014 expansion

17 Interviewee 4: Editor-in-chief at a local newspaper, male, 20 August 2017.

of the IS movement and the Syrian refugee crisis, EU policy is seen as having shifted decisively towards counter-terrorism, security, and control of migration. One consequence is that Europe is seen as having made its peace with Egypt's new rulers and other authoritarian regimes, and quietly dropped democracy promotion. Largely on this basis, many respondents would like the EU to more energetically adopt an agenda of democracy promotion, and re-engage with Egyptian civil society, over the next decade. Continued support for economic development enjoys even broader support. In the words of a public relations professional at a hotel, who is also involved in politics:

'I don't have any information about these issues. But I can tell you that when it comes to the EU, they are working a lot with Egypt on anti-terrorism and I don't see their policy as effective. I don't think that terrorism exists for any other reason than people feeling needy or deprived. For example, people in Sinai are really deprived of everything, if we give them good living conditions and, for example, give them their own football team, this would be a reason for them not to turn to terrorism. They will be focused on their work and they will have good spaces to socialize. These people literally have nothing, we should help them, so they won't become terrorists.'¹⁸

A recent graduate also stated,

'Between 2011 and 2013, the EU policies toward the popular uprising in Egypt were very constructive and seemed promising in enhancing and supporting the democratic movements. But with the setback of the democratic Intifada, the rise of ISIS and other transnational terrorist groups, [and] the Syrian humanitarian crisis, the EU policy starts to become more pragmatic and realistic. Supporting democratic movements and civil society retreats, the co-operation and the rapprochement with new-born authoritarian regimes increased. This policy, in my opinion, could be helpful and fruitful in the short term, but it seems useless in the long term since the causes and the grievances the led to the outbreak of the revolutions and the re-emergence of terrorism in the region are still present and expanding. Yes, there is wider co-operation in civil society activities between my country and the EU. Since the mid-1990s, the EU was one of the largest humanitarian, developmental donors to the Egyptian civil society organizations, especially in the Upper Egypt region. The EU aid helps thousands of poor Egyptians and improves their life standards.'¹⁹

18 Interviewee 13: Hotel employee in the PR department and political party member, female, 15 August 2017.

19 Interviewee 31: Recent graduate, male, 28 August 2017.

At the same time, European priorities, with respect to both Egypt and the region, became dominated by the prioritization of security and stability, and stemming migration to Europe in particular.

‘The first response of the EU to the Arab Spring was very positive, but it got tuned down because Europe felt it is affecting its social integrity and security with the influx of migrants and the instability in those countries of the Arab Spring that resulted in the rise of Islamic terrorism. The priorities for the EU were supporting the democratic transition, and people’s aspiration to freedom and a better life, then those priorities got changed to security and anti-radicalization and preventing illegal migration.’²⁰

An individual who preferred total anonymity also expressed concern,

‘In my opinion, the refugee situation the EU is dealing with right now is causing an extreme panic, and most of the EU policies—either in terms of economic, political, or developmental—are coming from this place. From my interactions and knowledge, I feel although it is coming from a state of panic it is not causing any harm, but I am honestly worried about EU collaborations with governments and how this can be misused by countries around the neighbourhood to oppress their citizens.’²¹

Similarly, an engineering lecturer expressed concern regarding the intentions of EU policies,

‘I know a little about this, but my impression is that it is negative in general. The main EU policy is to co-operate with the Mediterranean countries to curb illegal immigration. This doesn’t meet the expectations of the people in the region.’²²

‘The EU today is seen as a much more self-interested, pragmatic actor than in previous years, pursuing “business as usual” to a greater extent than before. This may also help explain why those who have not specifically studied or engaged with the European Neighbourhood Policy seem completely unaware of it. I believe they are mainly self-serving and inconsistent with the entity’s rhetoric.’²³

Additionally, at the regional level, respondents mentioned European support for authoritarian regimes as an impediment to improved Euro-

20 Interviewee 1: Communications consultant, male, 2 September 2017.

21 Interviewee 27: S.K. no further description, gender not given, 2 September 2017.

22 Interviewee 28: Engineering lecturer, male, 1 September 2017.

23 Interviewee 7: Translator and news editor, male, 1 September 2017.

Mediterranean relations, viewing terrorism and the migration crisis as symptom rather than cause. A greater focus on human rights, economic development, and clean/renewable energy in the coming years could thus help redress this imbalance, even as those advocating such a course of action express scepticism that it will come to pass.

2.2 Challenges confronting Egypt and expectations

Looking at their own country, Egyptians tend towards pessimism if not outright fear. Economic collapse—particularly mass unemployment and inflation-driven price rises—as well as the potential for widespread civil strife (including terrorism) dominate their concerns, even if these are not necessarily expectations. A further consolidation of authoritarianism, greater repression of human rights, and absence of democracy are widely anticipated.

‘The situation is scary. I didn’t believe that it would be that bad especially after the end of the Muslim Brotherhood reign. I know that Sisi is bad, but better than the Muslim Brotherhood. It’s like shooting the bullet into your leg not your head! At least you’re still alive and can think. It’s getting worse now. There’s no vision and planning for anything such as education. The military is dominating everything, and the president doesn’t accept the other opinion, so people fear to speak up. In addition to restrictive laws on the NGOs and others. We have to keep on working, however the impact we leave is very minor. We don’t have another option.’²⁴

A journalist and talk show editor, who is also a self-identified Arab nationalist, stated the following:

‘I believe that this dictatorship will remain until 2020. I think that the regime is here to do the Americans’ bidding in certain files, such as the Palestinian cause. The Egyptian people will suffer economically. But I have hope that the situation will change. Egyptians need the political powers to reform themselves. The opposition in Egypt needs to be prepared with plans and alternative policies for the future.’²⁵

24 Interviewee 2: Programme manager and monitoring and evaluation officer at major CSO, gender not given, 5 November 2017.

25 Interviewee 11: Journalist and talk show editor and Arab nationalist, male, 21 August 2017.

The conflicts in Syria and Libya are identified as the primary external threats, along with extremism, terrorism, and the refugee crisis, which are viewed as closely-related to these conflicts. Notably, a number of respondents also perceive benefits in the refugee crisis, pointing for example to the inflow of Syrian capital and entrepreneurship into Egypt. The regional situation at large is seen as affecting Egypt directly.

‘All the developments happening in the world affect Egypt directly, such as the current situation in Saudi Arabia as it is the main country that supports the Egyptian economy. Also, the unstable situation in Libya affects the safety of our borders, and the continuous feeling that we’re always exhausted to secure our borders with Libya. When the US decides to take hard decisions towards the Arab world, it affects the situation in Egypt.’²⁶

At the same time, some Egyptians also see opportunities for their country. This is based on its natural resources, tourist facilities, and human capital. But for these to be realized will require political and economic stability, development of the rule of law, and significant investment in the education sector. Each of these are seen as areas where the EU can make a significant contribution to Egypt, whether through different policies vis-à-vis the Egyptian authorities or greater co-operation with Egypt. As put by a professional in the field of social development:

‘It really depends! I believe that the economy is the key here. If we manage to recover economically, then we may stand a chance in democracy and political openness. However, I believe that this will not happen on its own, it needs good policies from the government. To be honest, I sometimes cannot stop myself from believing that the economic crisis was made up by the government to corner the middle class in Egypt. The current economic policies are mainly targeting this social class and sometimes I can’t find any reason for them. So, the government aims at shutting up the middle class because this is the most educated class that talks a lot about political reform and the need for democracy and so on. Consequently, it was better for the government to adopt bad economic policies to make the middle class think about nothing else than how to survive and cope with the current economic situation instead of the constant headache about democracy and human rights. The richer classes in Egypt have no problem with the State or the ruling elite, and the lower classes can be bought—as was the case before—with goods and services before the elections. The middle class is—as far as I believe from some

26 Interviewee 3: Researcher, female, 5 November 2017.

development theories—the avant-garde of development in a country. In Egypt, everyone I know now from highly-qualified and educated people want to flee the country for one reason or another. This is a major problem, because if we lose these people, who will stay behind and help build the country?’²⁷

Many other interviewees did not see any opportunities. Either they felt that there were no opportunities, or they did not answer the question. Responding to a follow-up question on the next 5 to 10 future years of the country, most expressed negativity. In the words of a researcher and media platform professional:

‘What a question! I am not very sure what I can say! I am not even sure the presidential elections will take place in 2018! I believe the future is quite obscure in Egypt, we are faced by many very dangerous scenarios. I believe we are way past the last hope of peaceful reform/transition without bloodshed and major damages in Egypt. This moment was in 2011 and it’s way past us now. The remaining options are: 1) a continued deterioration of both the economic and political situation under the military rule, which will eventually lead to a huge build-up and then a massive and violent social explosion. This is similar to what happened in Argentina in 2001; 2) or the deterioration can last even longer, with a political instability by frequent changes in the regime façades, without any real change in policies. This buys more time for the regime and slows down the struggle and the deterioration a little bit. But I don’t think this will happen! There is no way to prevent these radical endings from happening, because we are way past that now.’²⁸

A recent graduate also expressed belief in the people but not in the government:

‘I always believe in the abilities and the will of the Egyptian people. But with the draconian authoritarian regime in Cairo, the future is not that promising. The massive human rights violations, corruption, and suppression will restrain any sustainable reform and mobilization.’²⁹

Similarly, this same individual stated that opportunities are only those that are coming from abroad: ‘The continuation of foreign aid from the GCC, the EU, and the USA represents a good opportunity for Egypt.

27 Interviewee 10: Professional in the social development field, male, 28 August 2017.

28 Interviewee 30: Researcher and professional at media platform, male, n.d.

29 Interviewee 31: Recent graduate, male, 28 August 2017.

However, such assistance is temporary and not solving any serious economic or social problems.’³⁰

2.3 Co-operation areas with the EU

Within Egypt, the EU and European states are widely recognized for their active role in supporting the agricultural and energy sectors, and additionally their focus on environmental agendas such as clean energy, water conservation, and the like. Civil society can play a key role in all of these issues, but their reduced footprint is not solely attributed to the new restrictions introduced by the government in Cairo.

The available space for programmes previously pursued by the EU and its member states was substantially restricted by Egypt’s present leaders, for example, through a new NGO law that made it increasingly difficult for local civil society to acquire foreign funding and implement many of their programmes.

‘There used to be [co-operation between the EU and civil society] but currently it has decreased drastically. This shift is because of the political situation in my country and the government’s crackdown on the work of the civil society organization and limiting this sector from securing foreign funds including from the EU. The government, in general, doesn’t approve of the EU agenda to support civil society actions within its borders.’³¹

‘Before the Revolution, there was a huge impact of the EU, as it wanted to play that important role. After the rule of the Military Council until the last year, the role of the EU has decreased very much. It was very hard to start funding new projects. At some point, the EU wanted to merge the Egyptian government and the civil society organizations within the projects. One of the main challenges is the restrictions, not all the organizations can stick to the requirements, terms, and conditions set by the EU. For instance, the EU prefers project with partnerships, because when you have many partners, this strengthens your project. However, not all organizations are able to find partners or prefer that. Usually, many organizations have problems with partners regarding the implementation of the projects. The other challenge is that the EU connects the probability of implementing projects with the political conditions in Egypt. So, if there is any clash between the EU

30 Ibid.

31 Interviewee 1: Communications consultant, male, 2 September 2017.

and Egyptian government, it has the power to stop funding the project, which has already happened from 2013 to 2016. At that time, the EU froze its role in Egypt until knowing what the situation would be like.³²

Another researcher who focuses on politics stated:

‘Generally, I believe that the EU had a negative effect on the civil society in Egypt as it only focused on the political cases, that would cause problems and direct confrontations with the state; and did not focus on the human rights side overall, such as prisons, torturing, and these thorny issues. However, human rights includes other issues like development and others; this was not considered by the EU. They only focused on the big political figures and specific organizations to which they gave out money.’³³

Onerous bureaucratic requirements imposed by European funders, in some respects viewed as inapplicable to the Egyptian context, are also cited as impediments. While there is broad appreciation for European support for Egyptian civil society, this is in some cases tempered by a view that the policies and priorities of such programmes—in for example the gender field—are formulated within Europe rather than in partnership with Egyptians, and thus not always properly calibrated to the local context. Similar observations were made regarding EU support to Egyptian industry.

‘I think there are trends to focus on, it’s good to collect opinions to design the proposal, but we need to cope with the current situation as it is changing every moment in Egypt. Sometimes when we design a project on a specific call, we’ve got to make sure that the cause and call are the same, to avoid the gap between the design and the reality. I think this is because of bureaucracy in the EU and the difficult forms for written proposal rather than the real negotiations to make sure that the ideas are sustainable and will be successful. The EU is one of the main donors in the region and their projects can make a huge change if they’re implemented in different methods on both the policy and implementation level, because the delegation here is playing an essential role. In the last few years things are better.’³⁴

32 Interviewee 3: Researcher, female, 5 November 2017.

33 Interviewee 5: Political researcher, female, 2 November 2017.

34 Interviewee 2: Programme manager and monitoring and evaluation officer at major CSO, gender not given, 5 November 2017.

Some of those more supportive of the EU gender programme argue that it should be integrated into every EU programme rather than continue separately. ‘It has a positive effect. I believe that all the projects related to gender equality and culture, especially in Upper Egypt, were only funded by the EU. It worked on women’s empowerment, gender equality, supporting women, and others.’³⁵

‘Programmes such as gender and sexuality—mostly funded by the EU and its member states—were really great during the revolution. Now, no one can start a workshop on these topics, civil society organizations like Nazra for Feminist Studies or others are under attack at the moment. Sexuality topics are being kept as a taboo. Gender is not a safe topic anymore. Organizations like Nazra used to speak about sexual harassment and from my readings and training courses I know there were waves of the feminist movements. We are in the third wave of feminist movement, which is mostly preoccupied with sexuality and the body in general. Sexual harassment is an important topic because the society sees it and feminists managed to put pressure on the government to change their stance. This issue managed to get huge support from all classes and categories of the Egyptian society. Any man can be sexist but would work on fighting sexual harassment, but for example my right to control my body or determining my sexual orientation are still taboos. If I talked about those topics, I will be in jail. It was always like that but for three years after 2011, people were talking in closed rooms about these topics. After 2013, people are being arrested and gender and sexuality are no longer safe topics. I know people who got arrested for working on a project related to awareness and protection against HIV.’³⁶

Finally, interviewees urged more investment in education, as it has a long-term impact. As put by an editor-in-chief of a local newspaper:

‘I think that the economic pressures in Egypt would encourage the EU to invest in such a substandard country in culture and education. That would result in bearing a higher cost. Whenever the problems are getting bigger, the funds are directed to the initial needs of the inhabitants, not in culture and education. This can be helpful in defeating extremism and radicalism with a complete cultural project run by the EU and in co-operation with the government and the civil society organizations, to increase the awareness of the importance of culture in a country such as Egypt.’³⁷

35 Interviewee 3: Researcher, female, 5 November 2017.

36 Interviewee 6: Journalist and researcher in political economy, male, 6 November 2017.

37 Interviewee 4: Editor-in-chief at a local newspaper, male, 20 August 2017.

Conclusion

Most of the interviewees were wary about the future of their country, many stating that their hope was low. They were also unsure about how the country would change, grow, or progress. Many interviewees expressed a strong sense of uncertainty. However, they did not look to the EU or any other outside power to serve as a saviour. Instead, they were mostly concerned with the ongoing political and government developments which are impeding progress within their country. Further, the interviewees were acutely aware that the EU is in some ways less powerful than individual member states, especially Germany and France. Finally, although many recognized the positive work done by the EU and funds provided, they were aware of what some called hypocrisy, in that the EU continues to collaborate with the Egyptian government.

In regard to areas where the EU could directly engage, interviewees mentioned education, job creation, and supporting the economy. However, they also looked at long-term investment and suggested initiatives that work in the fields of education and culture. Interviewees expressed concern about sexual harassment in the country, and perhaps this is another area of possible intervention. Finally, interviewees stated that there was previous EU engagement with Egyptian civil society, but now this is limited due to new government policies. Interviewees believed that work with civil society is still necessary.

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Annex: List of Interviewees

- Interviewee 1: Communications consultant, male, 2 September 2017
- Interviewee 2: Programme manager and monitoring and evaluation officer at major CSO, gender not given, 5 November 2017
- Interviewee 3: Researcher, female, 5 November 2017
- Interviewee 4: Editor-in-chief at a local newspaper, male, 20 August 2017
- Interviewee 5: Political researcher, female, 2 November 2017
- Interviewee 6: Journalist and researcher in political economy, male, 6 November 2017
- Interviewee 7: Translator and news editor, male, 1 September 2017
- Interviewee 8: Political activist and engineer, male, 17 August 2017
- Interviewee 9: Executive director of a research centre, male, 28 August 2017
- Interviewee 10: Professional in the social development field, male, 28 August 2017
- Interviewee 11: Journalist and talk show editor and Arab nationalist, male, 21 August 2017

- Interviewee 12: Economic researcher involved in politics, female, 21 August 2017
- Interviewee 13: Hotel employee in the PR department and political party member, female, 15 August 2017
- Interviewee 14: Documentary filmmaker, male, 20 September 2017
- Interviewee 15: Human rights defender, female, 6 September 2017
- Interviewee 16: Accountant, male, 1 September 2017
- Interviewee 17: Civil society professional, female, 16 September 2017
- Interviewee 18: Lecturer, female, 4 September 2017
- Interviewee 19: Researcher and co-ordinator for research centres, male, 2 November 2017
- Interviewee 20: Professor, female, 7 August 2017
- Interviewee 21: Industry and import professional, male, 28 August 2017
- Interviewee 22: Bookstore manager, female, 21 August 2017
- Interviewee 23: Lecturer and research associate, female, 4 September 2017
- Interviewee 24: Professor in Economics and Political Science, female, 7 August 2017
- Interviewee 25: Writer and filmmaker, female, 7 September 2017
- Interviewee 26: Surgeon, male, 28 August 2017
- Interviewee 27: S.K. no further description, gender not given, 2 September 2017
- Interviewee 28: Engineering lecturer, male, 1 September 2017
- Interviewee 29: Writer and filmmaker, female, 4 September 2017
- Interviewee 30: Researcher and professional at media platform, male, n.d.
- Interviewee 31: Recent graduate, male, 28 August 2017