



## BRIEFING PAPER

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# Egypt since the mosque attack

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# 1. Summary

In November 2017 a Sufi mosque in Northern Sinai was the scene of a very violent attack, killing over 300 people, including many children. It was the worst ever terrorist incident in Egypt.

The group did not claim it, but most analysts thought it was the work of 'Wilayat Sinai', the Sinai 'province' of ISIS/Daesh. A little-noticed military campaign has been going on in Northern Sinai for some time, where Egyptian armed forces have been carrying out air strikes against the ISIS affiliate's alleged strongholds.

The Sinai ISIS group is not the only problem, however. Al-Qaeda is also trying to [boost its operation](#) in Egypt; there have been several attacks in western Egypt, and the instability in neighbouring Libya is a threat to Egypt.

The 2018 election is likely to see Abdel Fattah el-Sisi stand again, and observers think he will probably win.

There has been, though, a very widespread campaign to repress political dissent. The Muslim Brotherhood was declared a terrorist organisation and hundreds of its supporters have been sentenced at mass trials that [rights groups](#) have deemed unfair. According to [Amnesty International](#), the police and other security forces regularly torture detainees.

Journalists and non-governmental organisations critical of the government have been targeted.

Christians are vulnerable in Egypt and despite constitutional protections, the authorities [have been accused](#) of failing to enforce them. Some activists complain of a campaign by the security forces against LGBT people.

Egypt's international relations are in flux. Cairo moved away from Washington after the US did not support its ally, Hosni Mubarak, and [closer to Moscow](#), whose regional profile has risen, partly due to the Syria intervention. The contradictions in the Trump Administration's attempts to move closer to traditional allies were shown up when Cairo denounced the decision to recognise Tel Aviv as Israel's capital.

Relations with the Gulf States and particularly Saudi Arabia were strained for a while, but Abdel Fatah el-Sisi seems to have regained Riyadh's confidence.

One relationship that is going well is that with Israel. Egypt and Israel collaborate on security in the Sinai and share a mistrust of Iran.

## 2. Mosque attack

On Friday 24 November, a Sufi mosque in Northern Sinai was attacked. Vehicle-borne bombs went off inside or near the mosque then, as worshippers and others tried to escape they were attacked with rocket-propelled grenades and gunfire. As emergency services attended the scene, they too were attacked by pre-positioned snipers. At the time of writing, the death toll was 309, with many others injured. About 27 children were among the dead. It was widely reported as the deadliest terrorist attack in Egypt's modern history.

No organisation moved quickly to claim responsibility for the attack, but many suspected that the North Sinai affiliate of ISIS/Daesh was responsible.

### 2.1 Response

Shortly after the attack, President Sisi ordered the Egyptian military to restore security in the Sinai Peninsula using "all brute force" according to the English-language press.<sup>1</sup>

President Trump telephoned the Egyptian counterpart and tweeted that the attacks showed that a military response was needed:

The world cannot tolerate terrorism, we must defeat them militarily and discredit the extremist ideology that forms the basis of their existence!<sup>2</sup>

While the Israeli Government sent messages of support to Cairo, there was an undercurrent of exasperation with Egypt for failing to prevent the large-scale and well prepared attack not far from the borders of Israel.

In the UK, Prime Minister Theresa May telephoned the Egyptian President Abdel Fata al-Sisi the following day to offer the condolences of the British people. They agreed that the attack was "terrible example of the threat Egypt faces" and that international cooperation was necessary to counter the "growing threat of terrorism around the world".<sup>3</sup>

"Terrible example of the threat Egypt faces"

Shadow Foreign Secretary Emily Thornberry said in the House of Commons:

I want to ensure that all of us in the House join in sending our thoughts to the families of all of the hundreds killed, including 27 children, and injured in Friday's horrific terrorist attack on al-Rawda mosque in north Sinai. It is a brutal reminder that by far the biggest targets and the highest number of victims of jihadi terrorists are people of the Muslim faith, and that the inhuman

<sup>1</sup> ['Sisi orders 'brute force' against mosque killers; Egypt', \*Financial Times\*, 30 November 2017](#)

<sup>2</sup> ['Trump gives Sisi his support after more than 300 killed in Egyptian mosque attack', \*Politico\*, 24 November 2017](#)

<sup>3</sup> ['PM call with President Sisi of Egypt: 25 Nov 2017', Downing Street press release, 25 November 2017](#)

evil that is Daesh, which worships no gods but death and publicity, must be wiped from the face of the earth.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> [HC Deb 27 November 2017, cc59-60](#)

## 3. Terrorist troubles

### 3.1 Wilayat Sinai

There has been a little-noticed military campaign going on in the Northern Sinai for some time. The self-proclaimed Sinai 'Province' (or Wilayat Sinai) of ISIS/Daesh is the most dangerous and active of Egypt's militant groups. The group was known as Ansar Bait al-Maqdis until it pledged allegiance to ISIS in November 2014. It had probably benefited from the withdrawal of troops from Sinai to stabilise the capital after the political upheavals of 2011, and attacks in the Sinai Peninsula have killed at least 1,000 members of the Egyptian security force since 2013.<sup>5</sup>

The area has been

under a state of emergency since

2014, but it has been troublesome for much longer; it is an

underdeveloped region many of

whose residents belong to Bedouin tribes.

Sufism is a tendency within Sunni and Shia Islam. Sufis stress the spiritual and mystic nature of Islam and reject worldly things; according to one [scholar](#), "the interiorisation and intensification of Islamic faith and practice."

The group's objective is to seize territory in the Sinai and to rule it as part of the so-called Islamic State, according to Salafi fundamentalist principles, although it has not so far proved strong enough to hold any territory. Many of its operatives are local Bedouin, although it may have received some fighters from Gaza.<sup>6</sup> It raises money by collecting ransoms for kidnappings and extorting money from local businesses. The group releases slickly-produced videos of its attacks and executions, in much the same way as central ISIS did.<sup>7</sup>

As well as acting in the Sinai Peninsula, the group has carried out attacks in central and western Egypt along with other individuals affiliated to ISIS.

Wilayat Sinai also targets Christians, and Muslims whom it considers members of sects of which it disapproves, such as the Sufis worshipping in the al-Rawda mosque in November 2017. Any foreigners are possible targets.

In 2015 Wilayat Sinai claimed responsibility for the downing of Metrojet 9268, the Russian airliner travelling from Sharm el-Sheikh to St Petersburg.

Metrojet 9268

There may have been other motivations for the mosque attack. Some of the local clans had been collaborating with Egyptian security forces to prevent Wilayat Sinai recruitment. Meanwhile Wilayat Sinai had also been trying to stop or control smuggling activities including of

<sup>5</sup> ['Egypt Is Failing to Deal With Its Sinai Insurgency'](#), *New York Times*, 24 November 2017

<sup>6</sup> Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Centre, Wilayat Sinai

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

cigarettes. A local clan depends on the illicit cigarette trade for its living.<sup>8</sup>

### **Gaza**

Wilayat Sinai has been struggling in recent months, however, since Hamas started cooperating with the Egyptian Government. The reconciliation deal between Hamas and Fatah over the control of Gaza, brokered by Egypt and sealed in October 2017, led to talks between Hamas and Cairo and the cutting off the flow of fighters, money and logistical support for Wilayat Sinai from Gaza. Wilayat Sinai is trying to undermine the Palestinian reconciliation.<sup>9</sup> The movement of Palestinians from Gaza into Egypt is highly restricted; the government kept the Rafah crossing to the Gaza Strip closed for all but 46 days of the year in 2016. In its attempts to stop traffic going through the tunnels under the Gaza/Egypt border, Egypt has demolished much of the town of Egyptian Rafah and resorted to flooding the tunnels with sea water.

### **Connection to Raqqah**

To what extent does did ISIS central command in Raqqah really control all its provinces, or are declarations of loyalty more publicity stunts? In the case of the Sinai group, this question is particularly relevant. The Sinai group immediately claimed the destruction of the Russian airliner. But analysts wondered whether the Raqqah leadership in Syria would have supported it, since the attack might be expected to cause the Russians to concentrate their Syrian operations against ISIS. Up until then, the Russian intervention had concentrated on Western- and Gulf States-supported rebel groups in Syria.

The attack on the Egyptian mosque has also raised questions about the Sinai group's connection to the ISIS leadership; the fact that over 300 Muslims died could mean that it was poor strategy for the group in the longer term. Some analysts are suggesting that the attack was directed at local people who did not support Wilayat Sinai.<sup>10</sup> The attack strengthened local tribes' determination to fight the group.<sup>11</sup>

## **3.2 Western Desert, Libya, al-Qaeda**

In May 2017 gunmen killed 26 Christians in a bus journeying to a monastery south of Cairo. The attack was believed to have been carried out by ISIS, and shortly after it, Egyptian air force jets carried out strikes against a militant base near Derna in Libya, where the authorities believe that the militants responsible for the attack were trained.

In October some 52 police officers and conscripts were reported killed during a raid on a *jihadi* base in the Western Desert. The group

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<sup>8</sup> ['Mosque attacks is testament to Egypt's failure to control Sinai'](#), *Times of Israel*, 25 November 2017

<sup>9</sup> ['Sinai jihadis seek to sabotage Palestinian reconciliation'](#), *AL-Monitor*, 17 November 2017

<sup>10</sup> ['Egypt mosque horror 'will work against extremists'](#), *BBC News Online*, 26 November 2017

<sup>11</sup> ['ANALYSIS: Egypt mosque attack backfires as Sinai tribes call for mobilisation'](#), *Middle East Eye*, 28 November 2017

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concerned is thought to have been behind several attacks on judges and policer personnel in and around Cairo.<sup>12</sup>

Hisham al-Ashmawi, a former Egyptian commando who had received training in the US, was expelled from the army for his radical Islamic views and aligned himself with Ansar Beit al Maqdis. When the Sinai group aligned itself with ISIS and became the 'Wilayat Sinai'. He is thought to be behind many of the attacks in the Sinai over recent months. He refused to go along with the ISIS alignment, however, and joined an al-Qaeda affiliate, al-Murabitun.<sup>13</sup> Later he moved to the Western desert, possibly over the border into Libya, and now leads a new group, Ansar al-Islam, loyal to al-Qaeda. On 1 November the group claimed a major attack on security forces to the west of Cairo, killing 16.

Hisham al-Ashmawi

On 11 November, another al-Qaeda-affiliated group claimed an attack on late October on an ISIS-related group in Northern Sinai. Also on 11 November, the Egyptian military said that air force jets had destroyed 10 vehicles carrying weapons, ammunition and smuggled goods near the Libyan border.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> ['Egypt police suffer scores of casualties in ambush'](#), *Aljazeera*, 21 October 2017

<sup>13</sup> ['Hisham Ashmawy – Egypt's most dangerous wanted terrorist'](#), *Egypt today*, 21 October 2017

<sup>14</sup> International Crisis Group, [Crisis Watch Egypt](#), November 2017

## 4. Egypt politics

Egypt is due to have a presidential election in March or April 2018.<sup>15</sup> The sitting President, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, has hinted that he may run if the people want him to. Many analysts have taken this as an indication that he will.

Perhaps seeking to reassure voters that he would not turn into another Hosni Mubarak, the 'pharaoh' president who was atop Egypt's pyramid of power for 30 years until he was toppled in the 2011 revolution, Sisi stressed in a recent interview that he had no intention of amending the two-term limit in the constitution: "I am talking about the four year terms. We will not interfere with it."<sup>16</sup>

In the 2014 election, Sisi ran against Hamdeen Sabahy, who has described himself as "the upcoming president of a civilian democratic country".<sup>17</sup> Other prominent Egyptian politicians declined to stand, while the Muslim Brotherhood called for a boycott. Sabahi, a left-wing candidate and admirer of the socialist/nationalist President Nasser, faced an uphill battle against the state-backed media, which backed Sisi. And many ordinary Egyptians were grateful to Sisi for his role in ending the chaotic presidency of Mohammed Mursi. Turnout was perhaps going to be the biggest indicator of the legitimacy of Sisi's presidency. In the end, the second day of voting was made a national holiday and the voting period was extended by a day at the last minute; non-voters were threatened with fines and free train tickets were offered.

Official turnout figures showed that almost 97% had voted for Sisi, on a turnout of 47%. Sabahi said that the official turnout figure was an insult to the intelligence of Egyptians.<sup>18</sup>

97% for Sisi

### 2018 presidential election

In November 2017, **Ahmed Shafiq**, briefly Prime Minister just before the fall of Hosni Mubarak, announced his intention to stand in 2018 from the United Arab Emirates, where he had fled after being narrowly beaten by Mohammed Mursi in 2012. He was arrested shortly afterwards by the UAE authorities and deported to Egypt, according to reports,<sup>19</sup> but the next day said that he was free in Egypt and still considering standing.

Human rights lawyer **Khalid Ali** of the Dostour Party announced his intention to stand in November 2017. He stood in the first round of the 2012 election, when he won only 0.5% of the vote.

**Essam Heggy**, a NASA space scientist, has indicated his intention to stand. He said in November 2017 that Egypt needed education

<sup>15</sup> ['CNBC Interview: Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi'](#), *CNBC*, 7 February 2017

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> ['Hamdeen Sabahi: Egypt presidential candidate'](#), *BBC News Online*, 16 May 2014

<sup>18</sup> 'A coronation flop', *Economist*, 31 May 2014

<sup>19</sup> ['Former Egyptian PM missing after being held in UAE'](#), *Financial Times*, 2 December 2017

reforms rather than the arms deals he said the present government is prioritising.<sup>20</sup>

## 4.1 Human rights

Particularly since the downfall of Mohammed Mursi, the Muslim Brotherhood President, the Egyptian Government has used mass arbitrary arrests to suppress demonstrations and dissent, according to Amnesty International.<sup>21</sup> Journalists, human rights defenders and protesters have been arrested and hundreds have been 'disappeared'. The National Security Agency (NSA) and other security forces are accused by human rights organisations of torturing detainees.

One young protester was sentenced without trial to more than two years' detention for wearing a T-shirt with the slogan "Nation without Torture" and a scarf with "25 January Revolution" written on it.<sup>22</sup>

The NSA is reported to have detained 14-year-old Aser Mohamed on 12 January 2016 and subjected him to enforced disappearance for 34 days. He said that NSA interrogators forced him to 'confess' under torture to charges of terrorism.<sup>23</sup>

In February 2016, a juvenile minor offences court sentenced four Christian boys to five years' imprisonment for on online video mocking ISIS/Daesh. They fled Egypt in April of that year.<sup>24</sup>

National Security officers in Alexandria allegedly forcibly disappeared and tortured 20 people, including eight children in connection with a protest and alleged arson attack on a garage and a police vehicle.<sup>25</sup>

Freedom House, a US NGO, says: "Serious political opposition is virtually nonexistent, as both liberal and Islamist activists face criminal prosecution and imprisonment."<sup>26</sup>

"Opposition is virtually non-existent"

### Muslim Brotherhood

Islamists and those close to the Muslim Brotherhood continued to be convicted in mass trials that have attracted criticism from rights groups. The Muslim Brotherhood was designated a terrorist organisation by the Egyptian Government in 2013 and its assets were seized. Tens of thousands of Brotherhood associates were arrested and continue to face trials that are described as 'unfair'.

Nearly 500 suspects of anti-government violence after the overthrow of Mohammed Mursi were tried in September 2017 at courtroom in a prison. 442 of them were sentenced to terms from five years to life

<sup>20</sup> ['Can this Egyptian scientist shake up political scene?'](#), *Al-Monitor*, 17 September 2016

<sup>21</sup> Amnesty International, [Egypt 2016/17](#)

<sup>22</sup> ['Egypt: detention of a 20-year old for more than two years over an anti-torture t-shirt an utter disgrace'](#), Amnesty International press release, 26 January 2016

<sup>23</sup> ['Free Aser, tortured into 'confessing' when he was 14'](#), Amnesty International, August 2016

<sup>24</sup> Human Rights Watch, [Egypt: events of 2016](#)

<sup>25</sup> ['Egypt: Children Reported Tortured, 'Disappeared''](#), Human Rights Watch, 21 April 2016

<sup>26</sup> Freedom House, Freedom in the World 2017, [Egypt](#)

imprisonment. Amnesty International says that evidence was presented by the prosecution relating to only two defendants.<sup>27</sup>

Confronted with a military coup to remove its leader and the crackdown on its supporters, including designation as a terrorist organisation, many observers thought that the Muslim Brotherhood was likely to turn to violence. Although some former members may have joined Wilayat Sinai and other violent groups, the large majority seems to have remained peaceful. In 2014 a new younger leadership was elected and in 2015 issued a strategy to step violence up throughout the year. Until July this appeared to be happening but older leadership figures, in what was partly a struggle over the relationship between the leadership and individual members,<sup>28</sup> re-established control over the group and re-asserted their traditional policy of non-violence.<sup>29</sup>

Struggle for control

## Christians

Christians remain a threatened group in Egypt. Some 10% of the population identify with the Coptic Church, although the number of Copts emigrating is reported to have increased since 2011. The authorities are accused by some of not responding quickly enough to incidents of harassment.<sup>30</sup>

Mark Field, a Foreign Office minister, said in a debate on religious freedom in October 2017:

Her Majesty's Government have been clear that freedom of religion or belief needs to be actively protected. The Government of Egypt have stated their commitment to protecting the rights of minorities and the need for religious tolerance. We regularly raise concerns with the Egyptian Government about the deteriorating human rights situation, including issues that affect Christians. The Coptic Christian community is made up of 8 million to 9 million people and has been around as long as any other Christian group, but there are great fears for its future, and certainly for its future stability.

## NGOs, journalists and LGBT people

In May 2017 the President signed into law a bill requiring non-governmental organisations to register and comply with a series of restrictions.<sup>31</sup>

Ismail al-Iskandrani, a journalist, has been detained without trial for more than two years because, according to Amnesty International, he reported critically on the Sinai military campaign.<sup>32</sup>

Activists from the Nubian region in the south have been detained.

<sup>27</sup> ['Egypt: Irish national acquitted, hundreds sentenced following grossly unfair mass trial'](#), Amnesty International, 18 September 2017

<sup>28</sup> Georges Fahmi, ['The Struggle for the Leadership of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood'](#), Carnegie Middle East Center, 14 July 2015

<sup>29</sup> ['Why Aren't More Muslim Brothers Turning to Violence?'](#), Chatham House, 27 April 2017

<sup>30</sup> US State Department International Religious Freedom Report for 2016, [Egypt](#)

<sup>31</sup> 'Egypt's Sisi approves controversial NGO law', *Al-Jazeera*, 29 May 2017

<sup>32</sup> ['Egypt: Release journalist who has spent two years behind bars without charge or trial'](#), Amnesty International press release, 29 November 2017

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Human Rights Watch released a report in September 2017 alleging that torture of persons detained for political dissent had become “routine”.<sup>33</sup> The day after the report was released, the Egyptian Government blocked access to the HRW website.

Campaigners have also highlighted what they see as a growing campaign against anyone who does not adhere to heterosexual norms. The authorities arrested 33 people after a rainbow flag was raised at a pop concert in Cairo in September 2017, subjecting many of them to intrusive examinations, supposedly to establish whether they were guilty of “habitual debauchery”. A spokesperson for Amnesty International said that the examinations should not be permitted:

Forced anal examinations are tantamount to torture – there is no scientific basis for such tests and they cannot be justified under any circumstances.<sup>34</sup>

At least one man, a 19-year-old, has already been sentenced to six years’ imprisonment. Amnesty said that the present wave of persecution was the worst since 2001. Same-sex relations are not specifically prohibited in Egypt at present but in November 2017 a Bill was proposed by a group of MPs which would criminalise homosexuality and the ‘promotion’ of it, with sentences ranging up to 15 years.

The UK Government said that it was concerned about the ‘crackdown’ in answer to a recent PQ:

We are very concerned about the current situation for LGBT people in Egypt, especially in light of the recent crackdown. The Egyptian government is well aware of our position on LGBT rights and we call on the Government of Egypt to uphold and protect the rights of all minorities in the country.<sup>35</sup>

Four young Gazan men, having crossed from Gaza into Egypt at the Rafah crossing in August 2015, were abducted by armed men. Their families believe that they have been abducted by the Egyptian authorities and held incommunicado. Human Rights Watch has seen [photographic evidence](#) that may confirm this, and in April 2017 wrote to the Egyptian Government calling on them to disclose whether or not they are holding the men.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> [‘Egypt: Torture Epidemic May Be Crime Against Humanity’](#), Human Rights Watch press release, 6 September 2017

<sup>34</sup> [‘Egypt escalates LGBTI crackdown with fresh wave of arrests and anal examinations’](#), Amnesty International press release, 2 October 2017

<sup>35</sup> [HC Written question – 107575\\_20 October 2017](#)

<sup>36</sup> [‘Egypt: Confirm Detention of Missing Palestinians’](#), Human Rights Watch press release, 13 April 2017

## 5. International relations

### 5.1 US

In August 2017, the US decided to cut \$95.7 million from its general aid to Egypt and to delay another \$195 million in military aid, because of Egypt's failure to make progress on human rights and democratic norms

Egypt will still receive most of its \$1.3 billion in military assistance, so the cut looked more symbolic than anything. But the move reflected frustration in the US about the crackdown in dissent in Egypt, particularly the law on regulating NGOs.

After the aid move, President Trump called President Sisi to stress his intention to improve relations with Egypt.<sup>37</sup> Jared Kushner, the President's son-in-law and adviser, visited Cairo shortly afterwards.

US criticism of Egyptian alleged human rights violations has been relatively muted under the Trump Administration and the President has [praised](#) Sisi personally. The announcement that the US would recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel rather than Tel Aviv could undermine the relationship, however. Sisi warned against taking any "measure that would undermine the chances of peace in the Middle East"<sup>38</sup>

### 5.2 Russia

Strategic alignments in the Middle East have been in flux over the last few years. Russian military intervention in Syria has increased its leverage in the region, while reluctance to intervene has reduced American clout. Specifically, the failure of the Obama Administration to support Hosni Mubarak in 2011 has led Cairo to seek to rebalance relations, towards Moscow.

In October 2016, Egypt voted in favour of a Russian Security Council draft resolution at the United Nations

Reports emerged in March 2017 that US sources were saying that Russia had posted special forces to an airbase in western Egypt. On 30 November, information emerged about a preliminary agreement for Russia to use Egyptian airspace and airfield infrastructure. Reports suggested the Egyptian airbase at Sidi Barrami, about 50km from the Libyan border in western Egypt.<sup>39</sup>

Special forces?

In December 2017, Russia re-established direct flights to Sharm el-Sheikh; they had been suspended since the downing of the Russian Metrojet airliner in 2015. It was one of the outcomes of talks between Vladimir Putin and Abdel Fatah al-Sisi. Flights should begin in February 2018. They also signed contracts for the Russian state nuclear power company Rosatom to build a reactor in Egypt.

<sup>37</sup> ['Trump calls Egypt's Sisi, says keen to overcome obstacles'](#), *Reuters*, 25 August 2017

<sup>38</sup> ['Sisi cautions Trump against 'complicating' matters in Middle East: Egyptian presidency'](#), *Reuters*, 5 December 2017

<sup>39</sup> ['Russia negotiating access to Egyptian airbases'](#), *Janes Defence Weekly*, 30 November 2017

## 5.3 Gulf

Ahmed Shafiq's residence in Abu Dhabi and an appearance on Emirati television criticising the Sisi government suggests that he had some support in Abu Dhabi as an alternative to el-Sisi. Having given many billions in aid to the Sisi government, about half of the Gulf total according to reports, Abu Dhabi was reportedly frustrated with Sisi's performance in power. Relations between Egypt and Saudi Arabia and the UAE had soured particularly over the Egyptian vote in favour of a Russian resolution over Syria on the UN Security Council, after which Saudi Arabia suspended oil shipments to Egypt.<sup>40</sup>

Oil shipments  
suspended

Shipments were resumed in early 2017, at the same time as a document resolving the ownership of disputed islands in the Red Sea was presented to parliament. The islands, disputed between Egypt and Saudi Arabia for some time, were to be granted to Saudi Arabia. Although there was significant opposition among Egyptians to the deal, and it had been overturned by a senior Egyptian court, the parliament passed the deal.

In another sign of improved relations, Egypt supported in November 2017 Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's purge in Saudi Arabia.<sup>41</sup> At the same time he argued against any military action against Iran or Hizbollah in Lebanon, however, saying that the region needs stability.<sup>42</sup>

When Ahmed Shafiq was arrested in Abu Dhabi and deported to Egypt, following an announcement that he intended to challenge the incumbent in the forthcoming presidential election, it looked like a confirmation of the Gulf States' renewed support for Sisi.

## 5.4 Israel

According to the International Crisis Group's analyst: "Egyptian-Israeli relations are today at their highest level in history."<sup>43</sup>

Best ever relations?

Sisi met Binyamin Netanyahu, the Israeli Prime Minister, in September 2017, marking a remarkable thaw in relations since the deposition of Mohammed Mursi. The Israeli embassy in Cairo had re-opened in 2015 and in 2016 Sisi sent an ambassador to the Egyptian embassy in Tel Aviv after this predecessor was recalled by Mursi.

The new closer relationship is built on two perceived security threats: the Sinai, with which Israel shares a long border, and Iran. Israel and Egypt have collaborated extensively over the Sinai threat, as Israel has encouraged Egypt to send large military force into areas where they are restricted according to the 1979 Egypt-Israel peace treaty, which set out demilitarised zones. The Egyptian authorities are even reported to have

<sup>40</sup> ['Egypt faces consequences of voting for Russian peace resolution'](#), *Daily News Egypt*, 10 October 2016

<sup>41</sup> For more on the purge, see the Commons Briefing Paper *Saudi purge*, November 2017

<sup>42</sup> ['Egypt's president backs Saudi purge, urges de-escalation with Iran'](#), *Reuters*, 8 November 2017

<sup>43</sup> ['Egypt-Israel relations 'at highest level' in history'](#), *Aljazeera*, 20 September 2017

allowed Israel to deploy offensive drones to Sinai, although neither side would confirm this.<sup>44</sup>

Like other Sunni Arab states, Egypt sees Iran as a threat to regional stability, and Israel is building on that to improve relations. The Egyptian ambassador to Israel spoke at the Knesset, the Israeli Parliament, in November 2017, to mark the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1979 peace treaty. He urged Israel to resolve the dispute with the Palestinians for better relations with the Arab world.

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<sup>44</sup> 'Drone kills one in Sinai after rocket hits Eshcol region. Israel closes Taba entrance to Sinai', *Jerusalem Post*, 12 April 2017

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