14 Years After the Arab Spring

Egypt's Polycrisis Risks and Potential for Civil Unrest

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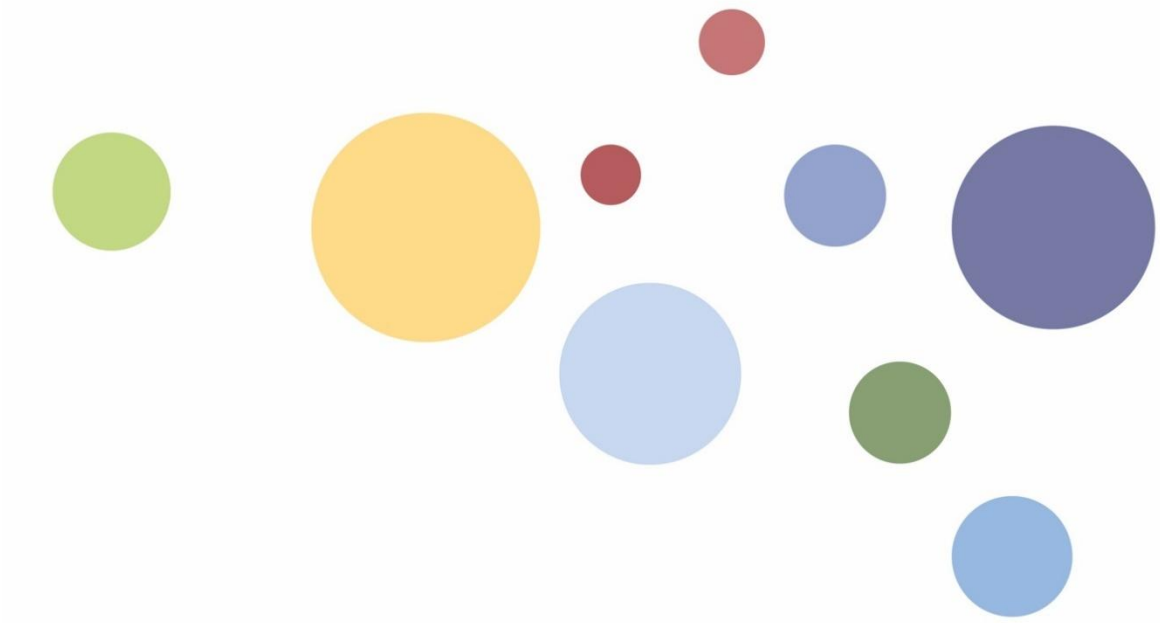

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Executive Summary

The Arab Spring revolutions can be viewed as an outcome and convergence of various interrelated crises, namely, a polycrisis. In a world of entangled systems, the fallout from the 2007-2008 financial crisis had major socio-political consequences for MENA countries. Merging with the global recession, climate change increased the frequency and severity of droughts in the region (and elsewhere), causing disruptions in food production, internal displacements, and reinforced ongoing socio-political stressors in each country; these included high rates of youth unemployment, wealth-inequality, corruption, repression and crony-capitalism[1]. Crucially, in the lead up to the Arab Spring, 'structural scarcity' in terms of unequal divisions in class, politics and social relations was reinforced by 'environmental scarcity' and vice versa leading to civil unrest and revolution[2]. As each force grew into crisis in one system, it spurred dysfunction in other systems leading to the domino effect of mass protests from Tunisia all the way to Bahrain.

14 years later, Egypt, a country that was widely affected by the Arab Spring, is still facing structural and environmental scarcity issues. Susceptibilities due to climate change and water precarity are at high risk of becoming flashpoints. Combined with a growing population, climate change and water scarcity, Egypt's food security is extremely vulnerable. As the world's largest importer of wheat, Egypt is prone to trade and price shocks as witnessed with the war in Ukraine which has the potential to cause food related unrest; these have been historically prevalent during periods of ecological strain and in times of disruptions to global trade. With rises in temperature and acute water precarity, droughts will be more frequent leading to rural unemployment and migration to crowded urban areas. Adding to further stress, Egypt is currently in an economic crisis brought on by massive debt borrowing due to President al-Sisi's megaprojects, which have been lucrative for the regime and business elites at the expense of most of the population. Likewise, arbitrary detentions, political repression and mass surveillance is commonplace. To change course, various environmental risk responses, economic reforms and socially just policies need to be implemented to mitigate potential civil unrest in the future.

Key messages

- The Arab Spring revolutions were the result of interconnected crises—a polycrisis—combining economic shocks, environmental stressors like climate change and water scarcity, and deep-rooted socio-political grievances such as corruption, repression, and inequality. These intersecting factors fuelled widespread civil unrest across the MENA region, including Egypt.
- Egypt remains highly vulnerable to environmental and economic stresses, namely climate change-induced water scarcity, a rapidly growing population reliant on the Nile, and dependence on global wheat imports exposed to price shocks and trade disruptions. These pressures threaten food security and risk triggering renewed social unrest.
- To prevent future instability, Egypt requires comprehensive reforms focusing on sustainable environmental management (water conservation, renewable energy, regional cooperation on Nile water), economic restructuring targeting small-scale farmers, improving social services, and socio-political openness through transparency, anti-corruption measures, and respect for human rights.

[1] see Korotayev *et al*,2014.
[2] Homer-Dixon 1999,16

(1) Introduction

The causes of the 2011 Arab Spring were diverse across different countries, but similarities emerged as in all cases populations were rejecting crony capitalism, growing gaps in wealth, high food prices, and repressive regimes. Likewise, these stressors were compounded by the 2007-2008 global financial crisis acting as a pressure point for both oil-producing and non-oil producing MENA countries. Combining this with the global economic downturn, another feature within this period was anthropogenic climate change, which put further stress on vulnerable national systems[3]. From 2007 to 2011, drought weakened wheat production in China, Russia and Ukraine affecting MENA countries who were reliant on wheat imports.[4] Concurring with this climate insecurity, speculation in food/energy prices after the financial crisis had real implications for populations in places like Egypt where soaring bread prices caused riots.[5] Moreover, a growing young population dissatisfied with the lack of opportunities, during a period when unemployment levels in the region reached almost 25%, all converged to create fertile ground for mass protests resulting in the Arab Spring.[6]

The Arab Spring revolutions are therefore best understood as a manifestation of multiple, interrelated crises across various domains – also known as polycrisis.

Understanding the Arab Spring revolutions from a polycrisis lens provides a fruitful framework to chart how economic, environmental and socio-political systems impact and feed off each other creating 'ramifying cascades' leading to civil unrest and in extreme cases revolutions.[7]

This policy brief takes a deep focus on Egypt in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. In the 14 years since the start of the Arab Spring, what has changed? In places like Egypt, political repression, crony capitalism, climate, economic and food insecurity, and growing gaps in inequality are still persistent. Due to growing vulnerabilities, Egypt could see renewed civil unrest in the coming years due to intersecting climate, economic and socio-political stressors. This policy brief's recommendations are intended for diverse stakeholders with interests in and capacity to shape (at least partly) policies, incentives, and practices in Egypt and the wider region. These include international financial institutions (IFIs) and donors, European Union (EU) and African Union (AU) decision makers, regional civil society groups, and Egyptian policy makers.

(2) Background and Analysis

Water Scarcity and Food Precarity in Egypt

Egypt is a climate vulnerable region with extreme temperatures and water deficiency being major sources of stress for the country, which is likely to continue and grow in the decades to come. Egypt's annual average temperature is expected to rise by 2.1 C by the middle of this century, and could increase by 4.4 C at the end of the century.[8] Currently, Egypt is experiencing water scarcity with an annual deficit of around seven billion cubic meters.[9] With rising temperatures, precipitation has also become more unpredictable with rainfall amounting to less than 1.8 cubic kilometres annually,

[3] Ainsworth and Hoyer, 2025
[4] ClimateDiplomacy.org. n.d.
[5] Heydarian 2021, 91
[6] Al-Shamahi 2020
[7] see Homer-Dixon et.al. 2015; Ainsworth and Hoyer 2025
[8] Al-Mailam et.al. 2023, 4.
[9] UNICEF 2021

while the heaviest precipitation is concentrated around the Mediterranean coast with an annual fall of around 200mm.[10] 95% of the Egyptian population live around the Nile Valley and the Delta, making the Nile River the vital source for freshwater[11]. Disruptions in rainfall patterns can severely impact Nile water levels and, hence, the availability of water for human consumption.

Population growth is also putting strain on water resources. Egypt's population is growing at a steady rate of 2% per year[12]. According to the World Health Organization, the population in 2023 reached 114 million and is expected to increase by 41% to reach 161 million people by 2050.[13] Not only is Egypt's population rising, the Upper Nile Basin countries of Ethiopia and Sudan are also projected to have an increase in population with the former growing to 75% and the latter to 70% by 2050 adding to the growing water demand throughout the long course of the Nile[14]. This can further tensions and spur potential regional conflict between Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia. We are already seeing signs of this, as tensions over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) have grown in recent years with both Sudan and Egypt arguing that the filling of the GERD reservoir impacts their own water flows.[15]

Interacting with climate change, water scarcity and population growth, is the need for agricultural production and food availability. Agriculture employs around 30% of the population and nearly half of the crops grown in Egypt are produced by smallholders[16]. The agricultural sector likewise accounts for 11-12% of the country's GDP[17]. To support this crucial activity, between 85-86% of Egypt's freshwater is extracted for agriculture purposes[18]. Within the agricultural sector, wheat and corn (maize primarily for livestock) production are the most essential as "Egyptians consume between 150 to 180 kg of bread per capita, more than twice the global average[19]. However, with a rising population, extreme temperatures and not enough arable land, Egypt has become the world's largest importer of wheat and the 9th largest importer of corn[20]. Disruptions during the Covid-19 pandemic and since the start of the 2022 war in Ukraine have demonstrated Egypt's susceptibility to global trade shocks and food prices. Both Ukraine and Russia were Egypt's main wheat suppliers. In 2020, 60% of Egypt's wheat imports came from Russia and around 25% from Ukraine[21]. Trade disruptions due to the conflict and resulting high market prices caused Egyptian annual food inflation prices to rise to 29.9% in November 2022, which then soared to 71.1% in October 2023[22]. The rise in food prices particularly impacts poor and low-income populations, 73% of whom rely on *Tamween* food subsidies. Vulnerabilities related to food prices have historically been linked to civil unrest in Egypt as exemplified in food riots and protests during 1977, 2008, 2011 and 2017[23].

Current Policies and Megaprojects Are Escalating the Country's Risks

In the past decades, the Egyptian government, with the help of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), have focused on new revenue streams through the export of high-

[10] Al-Mailam *et.al.* 2023,2; and RCCC 2024,1
[11] Al-Maliam et.al. 2023, 2; UNFCCC 2023,4
[12] Cohen 2021
[13] WHO n.d
[14] Cohen 2021; WHO n.d.
[15] Cohen 2021; Mbaku 2020; Al Jazeera, 2025
[16] RCCC 2024, 6; Bower 2024
[17] Cohen 2021; RCCC 2024, 6
[18] *Ibid.*
[19] Ben Hassen and El Bilali 2024, 6
[20] Ben Hassen and El Bilali 2024, 6; OEC, n.d.
[21] Ben Hassen and El Bilali 2024, 6
[22] El Nour et.al. 2024; CBE n.d.
[23] Ben Hassen and El Bilali 2024, 6-7; BBC n.d; Michaelson 2017

value crops like fruit and nuts, which has yet to make the economic impacts it has promised[24]. To have more available land for these high-value export crops, in 2015 President al-Sisi introduced new land reclamation projects for repurposing the Western Desert for farmland[25]. This multi-billion-dollar mega project controlled by the military is part of a larger scheme to turn 16,800 sq km of desert into productive land. To do this, the government has tapped into underground aquifers to supply the bulk of water needed for these new agricultural lands[26]. A study by Shalby et.al. has demonstrated that the Moghra aquifer, which is used in the Western Desert land reclamation:

"[w]as roughly untapped until 2008 [...] The development projects inaugurated in 2016 have multiplied pumping from the Moghra aquifer by nearly eight times; consequently, the aquifer has lost about 2.3km3 of its reserves from 2017-2021."[27]

These withdrawals of aquifer groundwater are minimally monitored with little to no restrictions on use, which threaten their water storage wells[28]. Not only do these agriculture practices exploit the groundwater reserves, but also makes the soil prone to salination, lessening the productivity yields and driving up prices[29].

As temperatures increase and water scarcity becomes more acute, drought will also become more prevalent. This will have major impacts on Egypt's agriculture, not only affecting crops, but also livestock. Rural populations will be more inclined to leave agricultural work and seek employment in already overcrowded urban areas causing strain for the Egyptian government[30]. This was a major issue that affected Syria in the lead up to its own 2011 Arab Spring revolution, as decades of poor agricultural and water policies interacted with a three-year drought. The drought led to the internal displacement of 1.5 million Syrians causing heightened socio-political pressure particularly in urban areas where people sought to find new labour markets and housing[31].

Egypt is also currently facing economic insecurity which has led to repeated bailouts led by the IMF and financial assistance from the EU, UK, US and the Gulf States[32]. According to a 2024 brief by Chatham House, "Egypt's debt has quadrupled under President Sisi. More than half of Egypt's state revenues goes to servicing its debt, which amounts to more than 90 percent of its GDP."[33] Besides Egypt's tendency to overvalue its currency, another main issue is its massive borrowing for al-Sisi's megaprojects such as reclaiming desert lands for agricultural use, expansion of the Suez Canal and the 58-billion-dollar development plan for the New Administrative Capital (NAC) in the desert

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away from the old administrative capital in Cairo[34]. The NAC is developed by the military and regime-linked contractors who greatly profit from this venture with no transparency or oversight, exemplifying the rampant crony capitalism that plagues the government[35].

[24] Ben Hassen and El Bilali 2024, 6-7; Bower 2024
[25] Reuters.com; Bower 2024
[26] Bower 2024; Shalby *et.al.* 2023
[27] Shalby *et.al.* 2023, 594
[28] Ibid.
[29] Shalby et.al 2023, 594; Bower 2024
[30] Al-Mailum *et. al*, 2023 4-6; Cohen 2021
[31] Kelly *et.al.* 2015, 3241-3242
[32] Agarwal and Mazarei 2024; HRW n.d.
[33] Sfakianakis and Springborg 2023
[34] See Agarwal and Mazarei 2024,12-13, WSJ 2023, Taweel 2023, 4-6
[35] Taweel 2023, 4-11 and WSJ 2023

Linked to its geopolitical role between Israel and Hamas in the ongoing war in Gaza, political analysts believe that Egypt has taken a stance that it believes 'it's too big to fail' minimizing its willingness for economic reform as the regime benefits from the status quo[36]. However, while the regime financially benefits from bailouts and megaproject developments, many Egyptians are struggling with high living prices as two-thirds of the population live in or close to poverty and the government only spending 0.2% GDP on social protections.[37]

Suppressing Dissent May Be Enflaming Tensions

Political repression is also widespread through Egypt with arbitrary detentions, suppression of protest movements, political opposition, activists and journalists and the use of mass surveillance programmes. In December 2023, President al-Sisi was elected for a third term, receiving 89% of the vote[38]. Many rights organisations however have asserted that the regime prevented any real challenger from running in the election[39]. Two months later, in February 2024, the Egyptian courts sentenced the well-known opposition leader Ahmed Al Tantway and his campaign director to a one-year jail term and prohibited Al Tantway from running for political office for the next five years, due to their campaign bid against al-Sisi in the 2023 election[40]. Journalists and critics continue to be targeted, highlighted by the case of blogger Alaa Abdelfattah who was sentenced to five years imprisonment and was scheduled for release in October of 2024, but still remains in prison[41]. Similarly, mass assemblies are repressed as security forces in July 2024 arrested over 100 individuals who called for peaceful protests because of the rise in the cost of living and frequent power cuts[42]. Protests speaking out against the war in Gaza have also been squashed, as the government fears that demonstrations could easily morph into anti-government rallies[43].

Mass surveillance is also intertwined with construction projects as the NAC is equipped with over 6,000 surveillance cameras and has a new headquarter for the Egyptian Ministry of Defence known as the Octagon[44]. Discussing with the Wall Street Journal, political analyst Maged Mandour argues that one of the main strategic points for al-Sisi to create this new capital is that: "Going to the desert allows him to create this distance between him and the urban centres so that in case there is a revolt somewhere, he can repress it without it being effective in blocking him." In conjunction with the new mega infrastructure projects, mass evictions in urban areas like Cairo have become common practice. Many designated 'informal' neighbourhoods in Cairo have been demolished to make way for new construction[45]. Researcher Omina Khalil has estimated that from 2018 to 2022, 2.8 million inhabitants in the Greater Cairo Area have been evicted and displaced. Khalil highlights, that these mass evictions are not only due to new construction projects but are linked to the fact that many residents of these neighbourhoods participated in both the 2011 Mubarak and 2013 Morsi protests and these neighbourhood demolitions and displacement have become a tool for "a broader securitization strategy"[46]. Coming into power in 2014, after a military-coup in the aftermath of the 2011 protests, al-Sisi's regime is bent on curbing any form of dissent

[36] Sfakianakis and Springborg 2023; Agarwal and Mazarei 2024,12-13
[37] HRW n.d.; Amnesty n.d.
[38] Saafan and Lewis 2023
[39] *Ibid.*
[40] Amnesty n.d.; HRW 2024.
[41] HRW 2024; Amnesty 2024; RSF 2025.
[42] Amnesty 2024. ; HRW n.d.
[43] Amnesty n.d. WSJ 2023
[44] Reuters 2024; Khalil 2024, 72; WSJ 2023
[45] Amnesty 2024. and Khalil 2024, 71.
[46] Khalil 2024, 71

which could potentially spark another Arab Spring revolution.

Prospects for Another Revolutionary Wave in the Region Remain High

14 years on, many of the conditions that led to the Arab Spring originally are still in place in Egypt and other MENA countries- and some are perhaps even at higher risk – meaning another wave of civil unrest is likely to sweep the region (arguably already started in Syria)[47] which could disrupt Egypt's projects and services, but transformative change can offer an off-ramp mitigating risks which are discussed in the Recommendations below.

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(3) Policy Recommendations

As environmental, economic and socio-political pressures continue to grow as our modern polycrisis deepens, Egypt will have to make resilient and lasting changes in the years to come to alleviate and/or avert a renewed bout of major, destabilizing civil unrest. Notably, many of the policies being taken by the current government are only accelerating these pressures, generating unrest through large-scale megaprojects and repressive response to dissent which weaken social justice and well-being outcomes, raising anger and frustration at the regime, while threatening to only increase Egypt's risk to the impacts of accelerating anthropogenic climate change.

The following recommendations are broken down into three subsections: environmental, economic, and socio-political guidance. While they are divided into themes, many of these solutions overlap across the three sector systems as resilience in one area can often combat risk and crisis in others. They are based on the peer-reviewed journal articles, reports and grey literature cited in the above section, along with the authors' ongoing analysis of crisis responses taken in historical and contemporary societies.

[47] see Ainsworth and Hoyer 2025

Policy recommendations

Environmental Solutions

(i) In the coming years, Egypt should invest away from its heavy use of fossil fuels and increase its spending on renewable energies and invest in carbon sinks projects to lower greenhouse gas emissions.
(ii) While Egypt has invested in treated wastewater and desalination plants increasing investments in water saving measures and reuse of wastewater will be crucial to combat water scarcity.

(iii) Strengthening farming and water education amongst small-scale farmers and providing assistance for better irrigation methods, i.e. drip irrigation could conserve more water. Similarly, poor households often connect illegally to water networks[48] which can waste water due to leakages. Having better public assistance in coordination with water companies to ensure that water access is affordable and that piping infrastructure is maintained will also mitigate against wastage.

(iv) Revived negotiations and new water security agreements or treaties via the AU should be made a priority and held with Upper Nile Basin neighbours to mitigate potential conflict over Nile River flows. Having better cooperation and water security measures in place will also protect each countries' populations and the health of the river.

(v) With the creation of new agricultural lands in reclaimed desert areas, there needs to be better investment in monitoring systems and restrictions on groundwater and aquifer use. Diminishes have major impacts on water security, salinity levels, soil productivity and agricultural prices.

Economic Solutions

(i) Egypt should move away from high-value export crops which do not increase needed revenues. Instead investing in small-scale farmers and using land for domestic production would benefit the country's resilience against trade and price shocks.
(ii) While harsh weather and rising temperatures will increase in the years to come, migration from rural areas to urban areas will become more common. The Egyptian government and policy makers should prepare for better social housing, offer re-training programs and new job sectors to lessen displacement impacts on the economy.
(iii) Egypt needs to move away from the 'too big to fail' mindset to make deep and sustainable economic reforms. This should be also monitored by the IMF and other IFI groups and donor partners. Runaway borrowing and soaring debt due to al-Sisi's megaproject need to be curbed as most of the Egyptian population do not benefit from these constructions and live in precarity.

Socio-Political Solutions

(i) The Egyptian government should report on expenditures and provide transparency on military construction ventures such as the NAC and the land reclamation projects. Similarly,

[48] UNICEF 2021

lending partners like the EU should hold the Egyptian government accountable in the form of sanctions or withholding money in regards to corruption and crony capitalism cases. Likewise economic pressure from trading partners should be enforced to incentivise Egypt to comply with human right standards. This could mean withholding military aid.[49]

(ii) The Egyptian government should prioritize anti-corruption, human rights and spend more on social services away from militarization and suppression. Investing in social services instead of privatisation and moving towards democratization of the press and the right to assembly will increase the populations' overall satisfaction with the government and reduce its frustration leading to civil unrest. The happier and more protected the population, the less likelihood of upheaval and social turmoil.

(4) Conclusion

14 years after its own Arab Spring revolution, Egypt is currently at the precipice of major polycrisis tipping points as various environmental, economic and socio-political pressures continue to mount which could ultimately transform these immediate risks into real crisis and renewed civil unrest. Rising temperatures and growing demand for water resources are putting strains on the Egyptian government causing vulnerabilities in farming, agricultural production and trade supply. With much of the population on bread subsidies, shocks to food prices will increase social tensions. Similarly, adverse weather conditions will make employment in the agriculture sectors untenable forcing many to move to urban areas seeking new employment avenues, which at the moment Egypt is unprepared for. Presently experiencing an economic crisis, Egypt is still plagued by crony capitalism and corruption that was a major source of frustration for citizens during the 2011 Mubarak protests. Likewise, human rights abuses and suppressive treatment against citizens and vocal critics are common tactics used by the regime to hold onto power.

Radical transformations in terms of environmental protections, monitoring, and new treaties with neighbours are paramount to maintain water security in the years to come. Investments in new agricultural technologies, education and promotion of small-scale farming instead of farming for export will strengthen the resilience of Egypt's water resources and food production. Government planning and preparation for changes in urban demographics will also need to be taken into account, providing for new job trainings, job markets and infrastructure. Economic reforms will also need to be a priority for the Egyptian government allowing for financial transparency and active investigations into cronyism and corruption. Moreover, socially equitable policies such as building up social sectors and providing protections for citizens are essential to provide trust and stave away political turmoil. Egypt is presently at a crossroad of critical tipping points and the coming years will be pivotal for Egypt in deciding which decisions it wants to take.

[49] see Taweel 2023

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