

House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on the Middle East, North Africa, and International Terrorism

EGYPT: TRENDS IN POLITICS, ECONOMICS, AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Testimony of

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Thank you, Chairman Deutch, Ranking Member Wilson, and distinguished members of this subcommittee for holding this important hearing and for inviting me and my esteemed colleagues to testify.

My testimony concerns Egypt's alarming repression and human rights violations, why they matter to the United States, and how we should respond.

Alarming Repression and Human Rights Violations

Seven years ago, then-defense minister, now President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi led the armed forces' removal of unpopular but freely elected President Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood, **promising** a quick return to elected civilian rule, a democratic reset, and stability. Instead, within weeks al-Sisi was presiding over mass arrests and mass killings of pro-Morsi protesters. He then proceeded to crush all opposition and build up a new military-backed dictatorship that is the most repressive in Egypt's modern history. Under al-Sisi, the facade of civilian government grows thinner by the day, fundamental freedoms have vanished, and impunity is built into the system. Since the 2013 coup, the country has become, as Egyptians put it to me, "a dark place" and a "republic of fear."

The al-Sisi regime claims its iron grip is necessary to combat terrorism. While Egypt does face actual terrorism threats, the ongoing crackdown vastly exceeds any legitimate security concerns, as an ever-growing list of peaceful activities are criminalized. The regime's "security" measures are more often about stifling dissent, imposing control, and entrenching its power than about protecting citizens.

Worse Than Mubarak

The human rights crisis under al-Sisi is **dramatically worse** than Hosni Mubarak's dismal record in scale, breadth of targets, and viciousness.

- *Scale:* At least tens of thousands of Egyptians have been arrested on political grounds and denied any semblance of justice. Untold thousands are trapped in a terrifying network of jails, prisons, and **secret**, even underground, detention centers.
- *Breadth of Targets:* Those caught up in the dragnet are not limited to alleged members of the Brotherhood or other Islamist groups. They also include secular youth activists and **members** of secular political parties; human rights defenders; women's rights campaigners; journalists; civil society workers; novelists, poets, and professors; university students; people protesting price hikes and corruption; **singers, musicians, and street vendors**; LGBTQ youth waving rainbow **flags**; devout Muslims; Christian **teenagers** and Coptic rights **activists**; detainees' attorneys; senior military **figures** and civil **servants**; and **civilian residents** of the northern Sinai Peninsula, where the military's scorched-earth **tactics** have failed to quell a relatively small but **fierce** jihadist **insurgency**.¹ Scores of activists and intellectuals have been forced into **exile**, fearing for their lives. In al-Sisi's Egypt, no one is safe—including a host of American citizens who have been unjustly detained, a phenomenon unheard of under Mubarak. Shockingly, in January an American from

1. The U.S. Department of State's *Country Reports on Terrorism: 2019* states that the main terrorist group in Sinai, ISIS-Sinai Province, is "estimated to have between 800 and 1,200 fighters in the Sinai Peninsula and affiliated cells in the Nile Valley." See <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2019/#ISIS-SP>

New York, Mustafa **Kassem**, died in prison, despite repeated U.S. **entreaties** for his **release**. At least three Americans are thought to be unjustly detained at present.

- *Viciousness*: Repressive tactics used against peaceful citizens include: media smear campaigns; asset freezes and travel bans; arrest of family members of activists, including Egyptian-American activists living **abroad**; forced disappearance; incommunicado detention; serially renewed pretrial detention; sham trials, including the prosecution of civilians in military courts; severe mistreatment of detainees, including rampant torture and sexual assault, overcrowding and solitary confinement, and denial of medical care. Deaths in detention occur with disturbing regularity, with even former president **Morsi** dying in custody in 2019 in what UN experts **called** a result of inhumane prison conditions. Several deaths in custody have occurred in the past few months **alone**. Extra-judicial killings and the increasing use of the death penalty without due process are other alarming tactics.

In recent months, faced with the Coronavirus and a sinking economy, the regime has ratcheted up repression. Young women have been imprisoned for posting “immoral” TikTok **videos**. **Doctors** have been locked up for criticizing the government’s pandemic response. Reports indicate that detention conditions are worsening during the COVID-19 **pandemic**. Last month, prominent human rights defender Bahey eldin Hassan was sentenced in absentia by a “terrorism” court to 15 years in prison—for a **tweet**. Last week, several women’s rights campaigners and witnesses who came **forward** to testify about an alleged gang rape at a five-star Cairo hotel were, outrageously, themselves detained and threatened with **crimes** including “debauchery” and “harming Egypt’s image.” Reportedly some detainees were subjected to “virginity tests” and anal exams while in **custody**.

Al-Sisi’s Political System

The authoritarian system in which all these abuses are occurring has several key characteristics. Al-Sisi has created a new legal **framework** that severely restricts or denies basic freedoms. This framework, which includes a **draconian NGO law**, an over-reaching cybersecurity law, and an overly expansive anti-terrorism law, enables the authorities to deem a wide range of nonviolent activities “terrorism” and “harming national security” and to impose harsh punishments. Due process for citizens and accountability for officials are absent. State institutions like the judiciary and the **parliament** that under Mubarak had limited pluralism have been purged of all but avowed regime supporters and put under firm security oversight. Independent political and civic activity is not tolerated. Atop the system is a leader whose main governing mode is control and fear and who appears to **disdain** civilian governance, as he increasingly empowers his military colleagues to run the **government**, oversee the media and **culture**, and dominate the **economy**.

This is not run-of-the-mill Middle East authoritarianism. More and more, it appears that al-Sisi’s state seeks to **dominate** all aspects of life, including the non-political and the private. Security agencies aim to control what Egyptians can **watch**, **read** and **say** online, and **listen** to, as well as where they can **worship**, **travel**, and **live**.

Why This Matters

The United States has important security interests in Egypt, but we cannot look away from the repression and human rights abuses. Indeed, we are implicated in them through our financial and

diplomatic support. Not only is the situation in Egypt morally abhorrent, it also has directly harmed American citizens. What is more, al-Sisi's repression threatens the development and stability of the Middle East's most populous country. Egypt needs the contributions of its citizens to find solutions to the country's socio-economic, employment, education, and natural resource challenges. Yet instead of empowering citizens to participate and focusing on reforming the economy, managing a health crisis, building a social safety net, or defeating the Sinai insurgency, the Sisi regime is busy chasing phantoms and brutally enforcing an ever more exclusionary political system. As we have seen before in this region, the combination of repression, deteriorating socio-economic conditions, and a large, alienated youth population can be combustible. It tends to produce large numbers of aggrieved citizens, setting the stage for a potential backlash against the ruling regime. An upheaval against al-Sisi may prove far uglier than the January 2011 Tahrir Uprising against Mubarak and reverberate far beyond Egypt's borders.

What the United States Should Do

In terms of how to respond, the United States cannot turn Egypt into a democracy, or even a more rights-respecting country. U.S. influence, and indeed that of all external actors, is limited. Egypt's future lies mainly in the hands of Egyptians, as it should. But that does not mean that U.S. policies are irrelevant to Egypt's political trajectory. At the very least, we cannot conduct business as usual with a supposed partner that treats its citizens, and ours, in this manner. We should cease actions that have the effect, whether intended or not, of strengthening al-Sisi's authoritarianism.

What does this mean in practical terms?

- At a minimum, the United States must speak out consistently about human rights violations and must not offer undeserved praise and other legitimation to President al-Sisi and his regime.
- Some clear red lines should be set. Al-Sisi should not be invited to visit Washington so long as he continues to unjustly imprison American citizens and carry out other horrific abuses. Congress should reduce military aid, make tranches of the remaining funds conditional on specific Egyptian government actions, and remove the national security waiver. These could include releasing American political detainees; allowing U.S. officials to adequately monitor the end-use of U.S.-supplied weapons to ensure they are not being used in human rights violations; paying just restitution for [April Corley](#), who during a 2015 tourist visit was badly injured by the Egyptian military, using U.S.-supplied weapons, during a botched counterterrorism operation; and improving prison conditions and NGO freedoms.
- We also should reassess our civilian assistance programs to ensure that we are not funding activities that inadvertently strengthen repressive actors.
- At the same time, we should do whatever we can to support those Egyptians who continue to bravely and peacefully struggle for human rights, democratic values, and dignity.

Thank you.