

My name is Mohamed Salah Soltan. I am a 32-year-old Egyptian-American, a Midwest native, and a proud Ohio State Buckeye. As an Egyptian-American, I have always had a strong passion for social justice. As a college student back in Columbus, Ohio, I was active on my campus with many grassroots groups and student organizations, organizing numerous events, clothing drives and fundraisers for domestic and international catastrophes. Since then, I have [dedicated my life](#) to become a staunch defender of human rights and democracy everywhere. I am currently a Master's candidate in the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown, and I am the co-founder and President of the Freedom Initiative, a Washington D.C. based non-profit that works to free political prisoners across the Middle East.

This summer, I [filed a lawsuit](#) bringing forth claims under the Torture Victims Protection Act against the former Prime Minister of Egypt, Hazem Beblawi, also listing a host of unsued defendants including the current President of Egypt, Abdelfattah El Sisi, the former Minister of Interior Mohamed Ibrahim, and others who were complicit in my torture and unjust political imprisonment in Egypt from 2013 to 2015. My family and I have been the targets of the Egyptian government's repression and retaliation. [We are not the only ones](#): my story is one of thousands of Egyptian prisoners, more than 30 of them U.S. citizens, who suffer the consequences of a brutal authoritarian regime who will stop at nothing to intimidate those who dare speak out against it in their continued efforts to whitewash their misdeeds. I hope that sharing it here will help bring accountability and justice not only for myself and my family, but for everyone who Egypt has attempted to repress into submission.

The recent case was filed seeking remuneration from one of the chief architects of the brutal murder of at least a thousand unarmed protesters in Rabaa Square where I was nearly killed myself, and the resultant crackdown which I got swept up in and was held for 21 months in brutal conditions: former Egyptian Prime Minister Hazem El Beblawi. It details how during the summer of 2013, the military removed the duly elected President Mohamed Morsi after one year in office. In defense of the democratic principles I held so closely as an American, I covered the Rabaa sit-in protesting the July 3rd military coup as a citizen-journalist and volunteered as an interpreter for English-speaking journalists there speaking to protestors. I was present for the [August 14, 2013 massacre](#), when security forces violently dispersed the Rabaa sit-in by indiscriminately killing over a thousand peaceful demonstrators. On the day of this horrific massacre, I was shot in the arm after a bullet barely missed my head. While I recovered in my family's home in the Maadi suburb of Cairo, police raided the house and arrested myself and three of my journalist friends, Samhy Mostafa, Abdullah Fakhrany, and Mohamed Al-Adly on August 25, 2013, without a warrant. My father, a deputy minister in the deposed regime, was arrested a month later.

In my lawsuit, I detail the [horrifying twists](#) and turns of my near two-year struggle for freedom where I was moved between six prisons and police stations, met with "welcoming parties" of guards and officers who beat us with batons, whips and belts, and interrogated relentlessly by national security forces. For peacefully protesting a brutal military coup and violent crackdown on citizens, I was accused of the most heinous fabricated assortment of crimes – spreading false information to shake the grandeur of the state. There was no evidence or investigation, but still, I languished due to the fact that I told a story other than the one official Egyptian propaganda wanted outsiders to hear. Suffering from a bullet wound in my arm and a chronic blood clotting

disorder, my health deteriorated due to a [lack of medical attention](#), brutal beatings and torture. To protest my unjust imprisonment, for 489 days, I cut off all solid foods and drink only liquids. It was the longest ever hunger strike recorded in Egyptian history. I suffered a pulmonary embolism, nine hypoglycemic comas as my medical condition worsened and shed 160 pounds, flitted in and out of consciousness, and came close to organ failure and death multiple times.

Frustrated and embarrassed by my efforts, Egyptian prison authorities used all the tools at their disposal to break me. I was placed in solitary confinement, deprived of sunlight, human interaction, even books, newspapers, recess, and the simple reliefs of a clock or radio to connect me to the outside world. I was denied sleep, tortured with bright lights, and prison guards taunted me, slipping razors under my door and encouraging me to take my own life on multiple occasions. In one particularly scarring incident, prison guards carried a dying hospital patient named Rida into my room and demanded I take care of him. Rida screamed in agony, and I screamed for help, but we were met with deafening silence. Overnight, Rida died in my cell, and the guards did not open the door until 15 hours later, at which point they blamed me for his death. The guilt and grief I felt at Rida's death that night, haunt me to this day. This is just a glimpse into my 21 months inside Egyptian prisons, and I am one of the lucky ones. As an American citizen and with access to resources and a network that allowed me to garner international attention for my plight, I was finally able to win my freedom. The same cannot be said for the more than 60,000 political prisoners languishing unjustly in Egypt's prisons today.

My fight did not end when I was released from prison though and the work continues to this day. My release in 2015 was a result of a global campaign and bipartisan pressure by this body and the US administration. I came home not simply because I am an American, but because you, [my government, demanded it](#). Some of you in this room today were at the forefront of that fight for my life, so I am literally a living testament to the leverage and influence you have to do good. Since my release, I wasted no time joining the fight for good. I have had way too many terrible coffees in the Longworth and Dirksen cafeterias with many of your staff working tirelessly for the release of over 60,00 political prisoners, including fellow Americans. We have worked together, across party lines, with successive administrations to save innocent lives and secure their freedom.

My demand for accountability has again come at a great cost to [both me and my family](#). On June 9, 2020, nearly one week after the lawsuit was filed, approximately 20 heavily-armed members of the Egyptian security services raided the homes of my family in Egypt in the middle of the night. Men, women and children were held at gunpoint in my extended family home in Mounofiya Province, including the apartments of two of my uncles. Both apartments were ransacked, and computers, phones and other property were taken and examined by security officials. The persons present at the apartments were asked specifically about me and warned that even though I may be in the US, they are in Egypt and that officials will come back. On June 10, 2020, I filed a Notice informing the court of the disturbing escalations in Egypt in retaliation for my lawsuit. The Notice did not seek affirmative relief from the court at that time.

Subsequent to the filing and service of the Notice of Filing, on June 15, 2020, at approximately 1:00 AM in Egypt, [five of my family members were arrested](#) and are now being held in unidentified locations without warrants or charges having been filed. These arrests were accomplished through

coordinated actions of the Egyptian authorities in the cities of Alexandria and Monofeya, cities separated by approximately 150 kilometers. More than 15 officers took part in the arrests, all heavily armed with automatic weapons. The Egyptian authorities first arrived at the home of my uncle in Alexandria, where they entered without a warrant. After searching the apartment, the authorities arrested two of my cousins without providing a legal basis and inquired into the whereabouts of a third cousin who has now gone into hiding. Shortly thereafter, in Monofeya, another three of my cousins were arrested. The Egyptian authorities questioned my cousins on the street, inspected their cell phones and then placed the three young men into a vehicle and drove away. In the early hours of the morning of June 15, 2020, not knowing where my cousins had been taken, my uncle traveled to each of the police stations in the surrounding neighborhoods of the Monofeya Governorate to inquire about my cousins and their whereabouts. He continued this search for six hours and was eventually told by authorities that my cousins were being held “because of the lawsuit, we know the kids did nothing wrong.” He was then instructed to tell me to “drop the lawsuit and they will be released.” My cousins have yet to be released and my family has been told nothing of their whereabouts.

It is clear from the statement of the authorities and the aforementioned circumstances detailed in this filing that my five cousins have been detained in retaliation for the filing of this lawsuit and my June 10 Notice of Filing. I am terrified of the prospect that my entire extended family is being punished for my attempt to seek justice for the torture I endured. The intimidation, harassment and arrests in Egypt began immediately after the present suit was served on Defendant Beblawi and the unsued Defendants were identified. After the June 10 Notice of Filing alerted the Court to the first reprisals in Egypt, the authorities escalated their campaign of intimidation moving from raids to arrests.

Meanwhile, my father, who since September 2013 has been held as a political prisoner in Egypt, has disappeared in retaliation for my seeking legal redress in US courts. My family was informed that on the night of Sunday, June 14, 2020, my father was interrogated at Wadi Natroun Prison in the Baheira Governorate of Cairo, Egypt, where he was being held at the time. During this interrogation, my father was specifically questioned concerning his communication with me, this lawsuit, and about various family members and associates in Egypt and the United States. On the morning of Monday, June 15, 2020, a relative, who will remain unnamed for security reasons, traveled to Wadi Natroun Prison to drop off clothes, food, and supplies for my father. Once there, that relative was informed that my father had been moved to Tora Interrogation Center, one of eight prison facilities inside the Tora Prison Complex. The Tora Prison Complex is a government compound located on the Nile River at the southern edge of Cairo, where political prisoners are commonly held and where I was held and tortured for the majority of my time in detention. My relative immediately went to the Tora Prison Complex to look for my father but was informed that he was not there either and was given no further information by prison authorities.

Since that time, despite my family members checking six separate prisons to search for him, [my father has not been found](#) nor has any information been transmitted by authorities concerning his whereabouts. My family and I also are very concerned about my father’s physical health if indeed he has been moved to the Tora Prison Complex, as Egyptian human rights organizations have recently reported a potential outbreak of COVID-19 at the facility. My father, a green card holder, is 61 years old and at an increased risk for contracting the virus due to his age and various health

conditions, including diabetes and Hepatitis C. On June 20, I filed a formal complaint to the Egyptian Human Rights Council regarding the disappearance of my father. For 87 days, family members in Egypt have been unable to visit or communicate with him, and for 87 days, we have not known his location, or even whether he is safe, healthy, alive. What we do know is that Egyptian prisons are currently hotbeds for COVID-19, with reports of prisoners contracting the illness and dying due to lack of sanitary conditions and proper medical care inside. Every day, we fear for my father's health and wellbeing, and every day we pray for his freedom.

Our fear is legitimate. In the years since I have been released, over 600 people have died due to medical negligence. The latest of whom was Ahmed Abdelnabi Mahmoud, the father of an American citizen, [died on September 3rd due to medical negligence](#). Additionally, American Citizen, Reem Desouky's, brother remains in the similar conditions to my own detainment today. His life is in danger.

Egypt's ceaseless attempts to quiet me have not been confined to its illegal actions in its own borders, but has also spilled into the United States as well. In numerous filings before the Court, multiple letters from the Egyptian authorities on behalf of Beblawi have been appended reflecting a government desperate to obtain immunity for an official with blood on his hands and to preclude him from appearing in a U.S. court of law to answer for his crimes. Since the filing of my lawsuit, the Egyptians have applied an inordinate amount of pressure upon the State Department to try to circumvent the rule of law and to preclude the court from ever hearing the case. While signaling its desire for a "Suggestion of Immunity" declaring Beblawi to be a diplomat, despite his non-diplomatic function at the IMF where he is currently employed, [it obtained a curious letter from the State Department](#) that it has deemed to be some sort of "certificate of immunity" under the United Nations Headquarters Agreement. While this matter is currently being litigated before the court and unlikely to bear fruit for the Egyptians as the IMF has not signaled its agreement to Beblawi's status under the treaty, as it must do, what it reflects is the Egyptian's relentless efforts to toss all possible shields up against proper adjudication of this matter in court. Put simply, Egypt will stop at nothing to make both me and my case go away.

As has been made clear from the foregoing, the Egyptian government has used every tool at its disposal to pressure me into dropping my demands for justice and accountability. They have resorted to their usual tactics of repression and the stifling of protest, and have shown complete disregard for the rule of law in the U.S. And while they have intimidated and held hostage my family in Egypt, they have simultaneously pressured the U.S. administration and State Department to support them in this legal battle by granting Beblawi diplomatic immunity.

So, how exactly did we get here? How can a ruthless regime we subsidize with over 1.3 billion of our tax dollars each year, assault our judiciary and breach our sovereignty without any repercussions? How can they still be hailed as an "ally and a partner" while becoming increasingly resistant to pressure about its dismal human rights record? This didn't happen in a vacuum. In the past year, for instance, President Trump has met with President Sisi three times, and has not once raised human rights concerns. In fact, he has praised Sisi's "fantastic job" in Egypt. The Egyptian regime has not been held accountable for a single crime or violation they have committed since. The simple answer is impunity; toothless diplomacy in the face of bully diplomacy and state thuggery.

Egypt is an important strategic ally for the United States in the Middle East, with an important role in various efforts for stability in the region. But it continues to act with impunity outside of what should be acceptable for any U.S. partner, undermining the relationship with its utter disregard for human rights. It is in the interest of the US to ensure that El Sisi is not creating an ungovernable state in the case of his departure.

My story is emblematic of this toxic one way-relationship the US has with Egypt. In the same week that the Egyptian regime was granted a “certificate” of immunity for my torturer, the state department also signed the national security waiver to release the 300mn in aid— forgoing the leverage given to them by this body to advance human rights mere months after an innocent American citizen died in an Egyptian prison. The very next week, Egypt thumbed its nose at the US by gloating about the SU35 Russian fighter jets they were warned by DOS and DOD against acquiring.

I am honored and privileged to be here, to tell my story and the story of tens of thousands living in a constant state of crippling fear. And my being here today, will be for nothing if you do nothing. I implore this body to pursue these recommendations as concrete, realistic demands that would reassert US leverage and relieve the plight of tens of thousands of political prisoners.

1. Continue to make strong public statements in support of Egyptian prisoners of conscience and condemning human rights violations committed by the current government presided over by President Abdel Fattah El Sisi;
2. Continue, via public and private diplomatic channels, to demand and advocate for the release of political prisoners, including those whose families, colleagues, and friends are constituents of members of this House of Representatives;
3. Use legislative power of oversight to pressure the administration, including the Department of State and the office of the presidency, to refrain from engaging in head of state or other ministerial-level visits with Egyptian officials and to join demands for prisoner releases;
4. Use legislative power of the purse to protect conditionality on foreign military financing by reducing the amount of aid that may be released with the use of a national security waiver and by strengthening language in conditions to include suspension of and/or reprogramming of funds to the Egyptian government should it engage in hostage-taking tactics as an attempt to silence US citizens;
5. Use legislative power as lawmakers to review and amend legislation providing American citizens with tools to pursue justice where they have been victims of egregious human rights violations, specifically by closing loopholes in the Torture Victim Protection Act that allow for torturers to appeal to allies in the Department of State to secure immunity; and
6. Investigate the potential for application of sanctions or suspension of aid in accordance with provisions present in the Arms Control Export Act and Magnitsky Act.
7. Organize a Congressional delegation to Egypt, including an unobstructed visit to key Egyptian prison sites, in coordination with and including representatives from the International Committee of the Red Cross, to observe and monitor prison conditions (at a time when it is safe to do so given COVID-19 concerns).

And so, as a former political prisoner, whose freedom this body championed. As a human rights defender who has vowed to make freedom the fight of my life. As an Egyptian, whose only dream was to enjoy the same liberties and freedom I enjoy as an American. As a son, who doesn't know if he'll ever get to have another heated argument with his old man. I implore you to use the three C's he taught me when dealing with bullies: courage, consequence and consistency.

May you have the moral and political courage to take action, and place real consequences for the grave violation of human rights and rule of law, and the consistency in policies that advances our values alongside our interests. Your words matter, your actions matter, your signatures matter, your resolutions matter, your bills matter and your sanctions matter.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today, and I look forward to answering your questions.