



CARNEGIE
ENDOWMENT FOR
INTERNATIONAL PEACE

Congressional Testimony

**Egypt: Human Rights,
Seven Years After the Revolution**

Michele Dunne

Director and Senior Fellow,

Middle East Program

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Testimony Before the Tom Lantos Human Rights
Commission of the United States Congress

December 6, 2017

Co-chairmen and members of the Commission, thank you for inviting me to testify. You have heard from the other witnesses about the shocking and unprecedented human rights abuses in Egypt since the 2013 military coup. I will offer recommendations about how the United States, a longtime ally and supporter of Egypt, should engage on these issues.

The United States needs to be concerned about human rights conditions in Egypt for several reasons. There is a long-standing American commitment to the principle of defending and advocating internationally recognized human rights norms. Rights abuses in Egypt also endanger U.S. interests as well as those of our close allies in Israel and Europe, who can be affected directly by violence emanating from the country. Since the coup, the military-led government has inflicted repression and humiliation especially on younger Egyptians, whom it apparently fears due to the 2011 youth-led revolution. This has created a widespread sense of injustice and desperation that makes young Egyptians particularly susceptible to recruitment by terrorist groups in the country, who seem to have an unending supply of foot soldiers to fuel an insurgency that is escalating, as demonstrated by the recent horrific attack on a Sinai mosque.

Beyond principles and interests, the United States has a special responsibility to address human rights abuses in Egypt due to its longtime relationship with that country's government. The Egyptian military in particular has received more than \$47 billion in security assistance from American taxpayers since the mid-1970s, including about 20 percent of all U.S. Foreign Military Financing funds in fiscal year 2017.¹ That military is now ruling the country in a far more direct, brutal, and rapacious fashion than it has at any time since the bilateral relationship began. As a result, Egypt is increasingly vulnerable to instability due to a toxic combination of economic hardship, new laws that legitimize repression, human rights abuses, and terrorist violence.

How to undo the Gordian knot of military rule and rights abuses is a problem for Egyptians, not Americans. But as Americans we must look ourselves in the mirror, ask whether we are playing as constructive a role as possible, and adjust our actions accordingly.

My specific policy recommendations for the U.S. Congress and administration regarding engagement with Egypt on human rights are as follows:

- **Ensure that U.S. security assistance to Egypt is not used to carry out human rights abuses.** Within the past year alone, evidence has emerged that American-provided equipment has been used to carry out summary executions in the Sinai, and that American-trained security units have performed degrading exams on suspected members of the LGBT community.² The U.S. government should implement the recommendations contained in the April 2016 General Accountability Office report calling for strengthening end-use monitoring and human rights vetting, which the government of Egypt has often blocked.³
- **Act more assertively on behalf of American citizens and organizations that have been targeted in Egypt.** Whether we are speaking of American citizens who have been wrongfully imprisoned or the employees of American organizations and their Egyptian partners who have been unjustly prosecuted, it is imperative that Congress and the

administration press for full resolutions such as releases, acquittals, or pardons. No one in Egypt will take U.S. concern for rights and freedoms seriously if the United States does not even stand up for its own citizens and organizations.

- **Conduct the bilateral security assistance relationship with Egypt so as to signal that security and human rights are not separate realms, but rather deeply connected.** Maintain or expand the percentage of security assistance that can be withheld based on human rights conditions, and remove the waiver for national security interests or at least add clear benchmarks. Congressionally-imposed conditionality has provided unprecedented leverage, which the Trump administration is now using to show concern about a number of issues including human rights and the situation of non-governmental organizations.
- **Build an enduring relationship with the citizens of Egypt by showing that the United States is aware of their concerns and is using all venues to advocate respect for their rights.** While U.S. officials and some members of Congress are reluctant to publicly mention concerns about human rights violations for fear of offending Egyptian government interlocutors, it is important and effective to do so. The current administration should not repeat the mistake made during the term of deposed Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi, when the failure of U.S. officials to criticize his undemocratic actions fueled anti-American sentiment and conspiracy theories about U.S. intentions. The United States should call on the Egyptian government to accept visits and reports by the United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights as well as UN special rapporteurs to investigate alleged torture, extrajudicial killings, and other abuses, and should speak up in the UN Human Rights Commission. U.S. officials and members of Congress should make public mention of particularly important or egregious cases.

The argument that is often made against active engagement on human rights issues in Egypt is that no matter what the United States does, the situation will not improve. This is not true; the actions of members of Congress and U.S. officials have an effect. Sometimes the effect is direct and prompt; other times it is indirect but no less important. Let me give just two examples that came to my attention recently:

- First, the administration's current withholding of \$195 million in FY2016 security assistance has slowed down the Egyptian government's crackdown on civil society, and has the potential to reverse it. President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi has signed a draconian new law that would make it impossible for non-governmental groups to operate, but not yet implemented it. An Egyptian human rights defender told me recently, "I can't see any reason why the whole human rights community is not in jail—except that the United States has taken an interest in the matter."
- Second, mentioning individual cases of those unjustly imprisoned or persecuted can have important effects not only on the case but on the individuals themselves. Mohamed Soltan—an American citizen—tells the story that a recruiter for the self-proclaimed Islamic State (ISIS) approached him during his two-year imprisonment in Egypt, saying

“your government has abandoned you.” Mr. Soltan told the recruiter that he had just heard that day that Senator John McCain had mentioned his case publicly; the ISIS recruiter had no reply and went on his way. Hundreds, even thousands of young political prisoners could be spared the despair that paves the way to radicalization if they hear that their plight is being mentioned in the United States.

What you do and say here in Congress, as well as in the administration, matters deeply when it comes to the future of Egypt, a long-time ally in whose present and future the United States still has an important role to play.

¹ Jeremy M. Sharp, “Egypt: Background and U.S. Relations,” Congressional Research Service, March 24, 2017, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33003.pdf> ; and Susan B. Epstein, Marian L. Lawson, and Cory R. Gill, “State, Foreign Ops, and Related Programs: FY2017 Budget and Appropriations,” Congressional Research Service, May 26, 2017, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R44391.pdf> .

² Human Rights Watch, “Egypt: Video Shows Army Executions in Sinai,” April 21, 2017, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/04/21/egypt-videos-show-army-executions-sinai> ; U.S. Department of State, “Egypt” (mentions INL assistance to Forensic Medical Authority), <https://www.state.gov/j/inl/regions/africamiddleeast/218983.htm> ; and Reuters, “Egypt ‘hunting down’ gays, conducting forced anal exams – Amnesty,” September 30, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-rights/egypt-hunting-down-gays-conducting-forced-anal-exams-amnesty-idUSKCN1C50D3> .

³ United States General Accountability Office, “Security Assistance: U.S. Government Should Strengthen End-Use Monitoring and Human Rights Vetting for Egypt,” Report to Congressional Requesters GAO-16-435, April 2016, <https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-16-435>