

My name is Mohamed Salah Soltan. I am a 27 years old Egyptian-American. I grew up in the Midwest and am a proud Ohio State Buckeye. As an American and a Muslim, I have always had a passion for social justice. While in college, 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. I have dedicated my time, money and effort to being a staunch defender of democracy and justice everywhere. So, like many of you, I was inspired and hopeful when I saw peaceful protesters take to the street on January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2011, demanding the same rights that I had enjoyed and come to love as an American. To me it was an expression of the universal truth of American values. I felt that the so-called “Arab Spring” was a defining moment for my generation, so I took a break from school to go participate in the protests. Still being a good Egyptian boy from a hard-working immigrant family, I graduated the following year from Ohio State and started a steady job as a manger in a medium size oil service company. But again life got in the way. I had to move to Egypt in March 2013 to take care of my mother who was diagnosed with breast cancer and my younger brother who was fighting Crohn's disease.

I never personally supported the ousted president, Mohamed Morsi, but I was appalled at the prospect of the military removing Egypt's first democratically elected leader in its history. In defense of democratic principles, I joined the Rabaa sit-in protesting the July 3rd military coup, acting as an interpreter for Western journalists there. I personally witnessed the two preliminary massacres, where peaceful protesters were shot while praying in front of the Republican Guard headquarters on July 8, 2013 and in Minasa on July 27, 2013. I was also present for the August 14, 2013 massacre, when the security forces violently dispersed the Rabaa sit-in by indiscriminately killing over a thousand peaceful demonstrators. On the day of this horrific display of military violence, one bullet struck my arm after an initial one missed my head by mere inches. A few days later, in the back of a clinic, a doctor had to insert metal nails to support the broken bone after taking out the bullet. The police arrested myself and three journalist friends, Samhy Mostafa, Abdullah Fakhrany, and Mohamed Al-Adly later on August 25<sup>th</sup>, 2013, while I was recovering at my family's house in the Maadi suburb of Cairo. My father, a deputy minister in the deposed regime, was arrested a month later.

During the beginning of our imprisonment, my friends and I were moved between six prisons and police stations (Basateen, Manshiyat Nasir, Alkhaleefa, Istkibal Torah, Lieman Torah Max security, and Wadil Natrun 2). In overcrowded dungeons, “welcoming parties” of guards and officers lined up in two rows; they made us run in between them, Soul Train style, only we were greeted with batons, whips and belts, and I was beaten on my still-healing broken arm for two hours, after being stripped down to our underwear. I was handcuffed to another prisoner at all

times, even while utilizing the lavatory. I was interrogated by the national security forces, blindfolded and asked about my father's whereabouts and information concerning him.

Two days after we were arrested, an arrest warrant was retroactively issued and dated August 25, 2013. We were then transferred to the state security prosecution building, where we were interrogated relentlessly about our political opinions. We were accused of unbelievable crimes, which included: being part of a terrorist organization, forming a gang, plotting to overthrow the regime, and best of all, spreading false information internationally with the intention of shaking the grandeur of the state. These are the exact charges the Al-Jazeera Staff were charged with. At no time was any evidence presented, or was a legitimate investigation conducted. Throughout this period and until the first session of our trial, neither we, nor our lawyers, were permitted to see the evidence against us. Without any legal authority for doing so, Egyptian state security officers interrogated me twice in the Tora Prison while blindfolded.

On many occasions, the prosecution neglected my repeated pleas for any modicum of health care. This, despite the fact that my arm was fractured and I suffer from a chronic blood clotting disorder for which I took blood thinners. I had numerous bruises on my elbow and shoulder due to the beatings and torture. One of the nails penetrated the skin at my elbow, and another ripped through my deltoid shoulder muscle. I underwent a procedure to remove two 13” nails that were placed in my left arm to support and repair the damage sustained from the gunshot wound I suffered at the hands of the Egyptian security forces. I was forced to undergo this procedure without any anesthesia or sterilization whatsoever, because the Egyptian authorities overseeing my illegal detention refused to transfer me to a hospital for proper surgical care. The doctor who performed this procedure was a cellmate, and he used pliers and a straight razor in lieu of a scalpel while I laid on a dirty mat, my other cellmates held me down to ensure that I did not jolt from the pain and risk permanent loss of feeling and function in that arm. The pain was so excruciating, it felt like my brain could explode at any given point. I was finally given two aspirin almost an hour later when the guards found my cellmates' screams for help unbearable.

Realizing that our case was a duplicate of the Al-Jazeera Staff case, and in an effort to avoid a similar international outcry, we were told by the prosecution that leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood as well as other prominent political and media figures would be added to the case against us. When the initial 150 days of our detention lapsed, we grew optimistic because we were told we were going to be seen by a judge. We thought, finally, we would gain an audience in front of a neutral judge who would hear us out and inevitably grant us our release. But we were shocked when the judge ordered our imprisonment for another forty-five days without even hearing us. On that same day, January 26, 2014 I decided to conduct an open-ended hunger-

strike to protest my unjust arrest.

While on my hunger strike, I cut off all solid foods and drank only liquids for months. This was the first such strike ever recorded in Egypt. Due to the lack of medical care, I suffered a pulmonary embolism and nine hypoglycemic comas in prison. Each time, my medical situation was so dire, it left the prison authorities with no choice but to transfer me to an outside hospital because the prison hospital was not equipped to handle my situation. After sixteen months on hunger strike, I shed 160 of the original 270 pounds of my initial body weight, went in and out of consciousness multiple times, risked organ failure and was knocking on death's door.

From December 18th, 2014 until the time of my released, 163 days later, I was placed in a windowless room. This room was just 2.5m x 3m, in complete isolation in a building in the corner-most part of a maximum security prison complex, nine layers in. I had been in solitary confinement for the 8 months before, but this was much harsher, much crueler. I was in utter isolation, no human contact, no windows for sunlight, no sound of anything living, no recess, no exposure to the sun, and for the first two months I was not allowed books, newspapers, clock or a radio. Basically nothing that could possibly help with the passage of time. After a few days of silence, I broke down and started banging my head against the door until I bled enough to need a bandage. As the psychological torture continued, the prison authorities began to encourage me to kill myself. Guards would slip razors under the door or would leave the electrical wires exposed in the room. A senior prison official, General Mohamed Ali, told me to "Relieve us and yourself of this headache."

Then the prison authorities tried sleep deprivation. First they kept me awake by having guards come to my door at random hours of the night with keys as if they are about to barge in. They later positioned other inmates, who would scream in agony right outside my door. Then I was put under a 72-hour spotlight. Finally the guards put a blinking strobe light in my room that made me suffer a seizure. In retaliation, I refused to allow the prison doctors to take my vital signs. The guards, under orders of senior officials, handcuffed me to my wheelchair and beat me into submission.

One evening a few weeks later, a guard and a nurse carried a prison hospital patient named Rida into my room. "Take care of Rida," the guards told me, and they locked the door behind them. Rida began screaming in agony, and I banged on the door for help but no one came, although the guards assigned to me were always right outside my solitary door. Rida died in front of me, and the guards did not open the door again until the next day, almost 15 hours later. "You did not knock hard enough!" the guards, doctors and senior officers told me. "You let this man die? How

could you do this?!” A prison doctor later told me that Rida had been terminally ill with cancer. Although at the time, I knew the psychological and emotional tactics they were using to break me, but Rida’s death was too much of an overwhelming experience for me. I could not overcome the amount of guilt I felt and continue to feel. I still have nightmares about that night.

After these tactics failed to break me or get me to take my own life, the prison authorities transferred my father back to the same prison and started to use some of the systematic psychological torture methods they had used on me with him, while instructing the guards to tell me in detail everything that was happening to my father. In short, torture by proxy. They kept this up until my last hour in prison. I begged them to see my father, who is on death row, or even hear his voice before I left, but they did not allow it. I left not knowing when and if I would ever get to see him or hear his voice again.

This is an overview of my 21 month experience in Egyptian prison, which barely scratches the surface of the struggle that more than forty thousand political prisoners from every ideological and political background are facing in Egypt’s prisons today. Due to the notoriety of my case and international efforts, everything I had to endure occurred with US embassy awareness. For the unfortunate 40,000-plus political prisoners who are not known or have no international connection, there is no oversight or accountability at any level: NGOs and human rights organizations have all been driven out of Egypt; and journalists are subject to a fine and imprisonment if they report facts that depart from the narrative of the state. Having had the privilege of carrying two citizenships, I had an opportunity that not many have—a democracy to turn to in my defense. Many of Egypt’s famous blogger-activists and leaders of the April 6th youth movement, including Alaa Abdel Fattah, Ahmed Maher, and Mohamed Adel, are still imprisoned for violating the law banning all protests. Women have been subjected to sexual assault and rape in prison. Minors have been imprisoned for peacefully protesting against the regime. Journalists and lawyers have been imprisoned for doing their jobs. Egyptian authorities are responsible for activists’ forced disappearances where people vanish and then appear in prisons months later. Many others have yet to reappear.

In the Declaration of Independence our founding fathers explicitly wrote that we are “endowed by [our] Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, — That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.”

In Egypt, what was at stake, before it entered into the world of politics and revolution, was a call for human dignity and freedom and how Egyptians should treat each other. Freedom is a God-given right and it is not a choice or a favor. When this right is turned into a distant dream, there is no doubt that oppression exists. I am not speaking to you about theoretical situations derived from newspapers and talk shows. I am one of the youth who was not involved with anything other than purely and simply calling for freedom. God gave us freedom and it was unjustly stolen from us.

When this happened, Egyptians resisted peacefully, whether through protests or hunger-strikes. However, those outlets were quickly stifled and the population became more oppressed. With non-peaceful mechanisms for dissent and the climate to speak out against injustice stifled, what is to be expected? The attempt to force a perceived stability through the rape of freedom will breed nothing but extremism. This is a dangerous reality because the youth are the majority in a country like Egypt, making the future quite perilous. Oppression will only cause a gap between the regime and the future. Freedom is the only solution.

However, The current regime in Egypt has no interest in granting basic liberty to their people. Freedom for the general population does not promote the interests of the Egyptian military industrial complex. To economically control Egypt the way the military currently does, the population must either be bought into the system or subservient to it. There are no other options; to disagree is to all but guarantee a hefty prison sentence, or death.

In Egypt, the regime has polarized society and suffocated all avenues of peaceful expression and dissent through politics, civil society or media, leaving many dead, disappeared, imprisoned, hiding or exiled. The anti-protest and anti-terrorism laws have left no space for any meaningful dialogue in Egypt, let alone dissent. This is not only true for the demonized Islamist camp; the crackdown has reached every voice of opposition across the ideological and political spectrum. The current environment is fertile ground for radicalization, as many disenfranchised young Egyptians find themselves questioning the ideals of freedom and democracy that they once cherished when they see the free world silent in the face of Sisi's repression. The government continues to allocate every resource to suffocating any political opposition instead of effectively combating extremism. The hunger strike I staged gave me a positive outlet to resist oppression and radicalization simultaneously, but for thousands of prisoners that is not the case, although some cling on to hope.

Social polarization, moral and ethical degradation and a growing disbelief in the democratic

model are some of the very clear implications of these grave injustices, violations of basic human rights by a regime that is escalating in its repression. I know first-hand the feeling of desperation that takes over in the confines of Egyptian captivity, and have also been on the receiving end of mocking reports from Egyptian officials stating that the developed world has abandoned its ideals and values and has turned a blind eye to the abuses of the military-run state. This type of environment is the most fertile breeding ground for extremist ideologies. The current security-heavy US policy towards Egypt is to turn a blind eye to these violations as an “unfortunate cost” of combating terrorism. But this approach must be reconsidered.

To give you an example from my own personal experience of the misallocation of resources, I will tell you about the day my father, a friend, a journalist and 11 others got the death sentence in the case I was charged in. On the evening of March 16th, 2015, in the transport car back to Torah Maximum security prison, a long-haired, black-turbaned man who had pledged allegiance to ISIS and confessed that to the judge, was celebrating news of his release verdict as my father and 13 others had received news of their death sentences. These sentences were handed out by the same judge. A judge I personally witnessed joking with the aforementioned defendant after he had narrated the progression of his change of allegiance from Al-Qaeda to “The Islamic State.”

The current regime is not only failing to combat terrorism but it is using the war on terror as a facade to shut out every voice of opposition in order to cling on to power. It is labeling all political dissidents as terrorists, while ISIS is advancing to the heart of Cairo while its future foot-soldiers are being created in these prisons.

By not addressing the causes of the rise of extremist mentality, we only create more enemies to fight in the future. The cost of fighting terrorism cannot be creating more terrorists, yet that is exactly what is taking place in present-day Egypt. We are fueling the exact fire we are trying to put out by supporting Sisi.

Supporting ruthless, authoritarian, totalitarian regimes is not a long-term solution and has not worked in the past to defeat extremism, so why would it work now? If we really want to combat extremism in an effective manner, the approach needs to change. Inside of prison, given the lack of space for dissent and a growing feeling of betrayal and abandonment, is a very large and diverse crowd of young political prisoners who are more susceptible to the process of radicalization. And we know from history what problems such treatment in Egyptian prisons can spawn. By taking peaceful resistance off the table, Egypt has become a breeding ground for extremism rather than a partner in the war against it.

The fact of the matter is, with every day that passes without addressing the 40,000 political prisoners, the likelihood increases of more moderate pro-democracy prisoners turning to extremist causes. In light of the growing fight against extremism worldwide, this makes this matter both important and urgent. The US can no longer afford to take the risk of supporting an unsustainable authoritarian regime.

Can Something be done?

I am living proof that we have leverage. Those arrested with me languish, while due to U.S. pressure I am free. The only proven strategy to relieving the plight of a few political prisoners has been direct and consistent pressure from the international community; with the US at the forefront. This is not only true for the dual nationals such as myself, Canadian-Egyptian, and Australian citizens (AJ Staff), but also true the Egyptian AJ staff as well as tens of activists whose particular case has received international attention.

What Can be done?

I believe it would be largely beneficial for the US's interests for stability in Egypt and the region, for the fight against ISIS and extremism, and for democracy as a principle that you:

- Make public statements urging the Egyptian authorities to release all political prisoners. There are at least 7 dual citizens (5 Americans), over 20 journalists, 176 ex-parliamentarians, tens of ex-officials, hundreds of academics and thousands of youth languishing in unspeakable conditions. This not only gives the Egyptian regime notice that the world is watching, but also slows down the process of disbelief in democracy and freedom within the youth. I only hung on to hope because I knew that there were people that have not abandoned me.
- Demand that the Egyptian regime be held accountable in a manner that is proportionate to the massive aid we provide and as a major ally in an important region.
- Pass the Egypt language that is currently in the Senate FY16 appropriations bill. The language on Egypt's military aid would require all political prisoners be released, and additional global language would require a list of American citizens imprisoned as prisoners of conscience abroad. Ensuring both of these is included in the final version of the bill is very important.