



**Middle
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His Excellency Abdel Fattah al-Sisi
President, Arab Republic of Egypt
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Your Excellency:

We write on behalf of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) of North America and its Committee on Academic Freedom to express alarm and dismay at the recent reopening of the prosecution of Egyptian non-governmental organizations that monitor human rights. Together, these organizations produce some of the finest and most detailed research on the state of civil and human rights in your country. Their prosecution casts a pall over freedom of inquiry in Egypt.

MESA was founded in 1966 to promote scholarship and teaching on the Middle East and North Africa. The preeminent organization in the field, the Association publishes the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* and has nearly 3,000 members worldwide. MESA is committed to ensuring academic freedom and freedom of expression, both within the region and in connection with the study of the region in North America and elsewhere.

Academic freedom entails freedom of inquiry, including the right of faculty and students to study topics of their choosing and distribute their findings without fear of duress. This freedom is not restricted to academics. Indeed, the right to conduct research is part and parcel of freedom of thought and freedom of expression, core human rights that extend to all persons and are enshrined in the Egyptian constitution.

To date, the Cairo Criminal Court has reopened cases against Hossam Bahgat, former director of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, Gamal Eid, director of the Arab Network for Human Rights Information, and leaders of Nazra for Feminist Studies. Additionally, two members of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies have received summons for questioning.

The state has put the NGOs on trial for the alleged crime of having received foreign funding. The charge that foreign funding itself is illicit is risible, given that the Egyptian state and many of its agencies receive much larger levels of support from foreign sources. Nor is it convincing that there is a problem in the manner in which the NGOs handle this funding: They are properly registered with the state, and have been operating openly for years. In the absence of coherent charges and evidence, we strongly suspect that the court case has to do not with the sources of the NGOs' funding but with the fact that the content and quality of their research embarrasses some organs of the Egyptian state.

It is difficult to overstate the importance of these organizations to the state of knowledge about Egypt. EIPR and ANHRI produce some of the most authoritative and scholarly studies on an array of subjects of public utility including civil liberties and environmental justice. Nazra for Feminist Studies promotes women's rights in many areas, such as organizing to protect women from public sexual violence, and training women to run for Parliament, including several who ran in the 2015 elections. The findings of these groups are the bedrock for much academic research in Egypt and around the world. Attacks on them will have an immediate and long-lasting negative impact.

Further reasons to doubt the charges include the following: Bahgat, who now works as a journalist, was summoned by military intelligence last November and interrogated about an article he wrote about an alleged foiled coup plot. On February 1, ANHRI published a lengthy report on mounting obstacles to democracy in Egypt throughout 2015. Later in February, both Bahgat and Eid were barred from leaving the country at the Cairo airport—a violation of their freedom of mobility for which they were given no reason.

Recent proceedings undertaken to freeze their assets and properties threaten the ability of these crucial organizations to function. The last actions in particular are ominous for the philanthropic libraries that Eid's organization started with prize monies it was awarded for its work in human rights. In the poor neighborhoods they serve, the Karama libraries are the only place where school-age children and adults can go to borrow books, or to attend literacy classes and tutoring, all free of charge. If the prosecutor's case moves forward, these libraries will soon close.

There are worrisome signals that these actions are part of a larger campaign of shuttering institutions of independent research in Egypt. The prosecution has already made such moves against other important human rights NGOs, such as the El-Nadeem Center for the Rehabilitation and Treatment of Victims of Torture. The El-Nadeem Center was confronted with a closure order in mid-February after the results of its research into police brutality in Egypt were disseminated in local and global media. It has also conducted path-breaking work on the rights of women and girls. To cite one example, in 2013 El-Nadeem published a report on the opinions of women in the Delta and Upper Egypt on marriage of girls under 18. The Egyptian government outlawed such marriages with the Child Law of 2008. Knowing why girls continue to get married at that age, then, is central to achieving what the government has stipulated is a key public policy goal.

We are greatly concerned that other organizations less in the public eye may also be targeted as part of this campaign.

We are disconcerted, finally, to learn that the judge in this case has issued a gag order effective indefinitely. While such orders may sometimes be necessary, we can think of no sound legal reason for one in this instance. Indeed, according to



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media reports, the gag order came shortly after a cabinet meeting that laid emphasis on polishing Egypt's image abroad. We respectfully suggest that the decision to stifle public discussion will only damage, and not improve, your country's reputation.

This letter is the fifth our Committee has written in the past ten weeks in protest of violations of academic freedom, such as denial of entry to scholars from abroad, and other indices of an erosion of state respect for civil liberties in Egypt. We are hardly alone in deploring this deterioration of the human rights situation, which has been the subject of numerous front-page stories and editorials worldwide.

We urge you to intervene personally to call off this unwarranted and dangerous prosecution, rescind the closure order against the El-Nadeem Center, lift the travel bans on Bahgat and Eid, reverse the denial of entry to scholars from abroad, and halt any other measures of intimidation or surveillance directed against the researchers and activists who work for these and other organizations. We further call upon you to affirm publicly that human rights, including academic freedom, freedom of speech and freedom of inquiry, will henceforth be protected by the Egyptian state.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. We await the honor of your reply.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'B. Baron' followed by a horizontal line.

Beth Baron
MESA President
Professor, City University of New York

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Amy W. Newhall' in a cursive style.

Amy W. Newhall
MESA Executive Director
Associate Professor, University of Arizona