

**Middle  
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His Excellency Abdel Fattah al-Sisi  
President, Arab Republic of Egypt  
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Office of the Public Prosecutor  
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Supreme State Security Prosecution in the Arab Republic of Egypt  
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Dear President al-Sisi, Members of Supreme State Security Prosecution in the Arab Republic of Egypt:

We write to you on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association of North America to express our deep concern regarding the arrest and sentencing of Cairo University's Professor Hasan Nafaa, Professor Hazem Hosni, Professor Magdi Kerqar and Teaching Assistant Ahmad Helmy Hamdun in the wake of the 20 September protests against your government that by 9 October 2019 had led to more than 3000 arrests.

MESA was founded in 1966 to support 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 over 2500 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.

Professor Hasan Nafaa of Cairo University's Faculty of Economics and Political Science is a highly respected political scientist and commentator. His arrest on 24 September came in the wake of a media campaign against him initiated by *Kol Youm's* Wael al-Ebrashy, who [aired](#) a leaked recording of a phone call between Nafaa and a journalist asking him to appear in a documentary produced in cooperation with Al-Jazeera. *Al-Ahram*, [Al-Bawaba News](#), [Sada al-Balad](#) and other papers then published pieces about the recording with headlines accusing Nafaa of treason. Lawyer Samir Sabry, known for litigiousness in support of your government, then filed a complaint to the public prosecutor and Supreme State Security Prosecution, accusing Nafaa of publishing fake news and incitement against the Egyptian state. A *New York Times* report of 3 October further indicated that Nafaa, along with other academics, journalists, lawyers, opposition figures and human rights activists, was the victim of a sophisticated cyberattack which targeted their phones and which has been traced to offices of your government.<sup>[1]</sup> The day before his arrest, Nafaa had written a Facebook post which argued in part that "I have no doubt that the continuation of Sisi's absolute rule will lead to catastrophe, and that Egypt's interest requires that he leave office as soon as possible, but he will not step down without popular pressure from the street."

Following his arrest, Nafaa was taken for a long interrogation session which ended in his being sent to the Supreme State Security Court on 26 September. The Court sentenced him to 15 days in Tura prison for “participating in a terrorist group,” “spreading false news,” and using social media to spread rumors.

According to the Egyptian Center for Economic and Social Rights, the Public Prosecutor levied additional charges against Nafaa on 5 October: “participating in a terrorist organization with knowledge of its goals; committing one of the crimes of financial terrorism by receiving money with the goal of harming the national interest by achieving the goals of a terrorism organization; accepting and taking money with the intent of committing an injurious act against the national interest and damaging public security and peace, as he is a public employee, and in implementation of terrorist goals; deliberately publishing false news, statements and rumors in order to upset public security, spread fear among the people, and damage the public interest; and using a private account on the internet with the goal of committing the previously listed crimes.” On 6 October, Nafaa was ordered detained for an additional 15 days.

Professor Hazem Hosni, also a Professor in Cairo University’s distinguished Faculty of Economics and Political Science, was arrested in front of his home on 24 September; he too was sentenced by the Supreme State Security court on 26 September to 15 days in prison for “participating in a terrorist group”, “spreading false news” and using social media to spread rumors. In addition, he was charged with “using his personal online profile to publish rumors which endanger public safety, spread terror among the population, and harm public interest.” Like Nafaa, Hosni had written a Facebook post critical of President Sisi’s regime in the days immediately preceding his arrest. Professor Hosni has actively participated in electoral politics, serving as the spokesperson for the presidential campaign of former Egyptian military chief of staff Sami Anan, who was imprisoned two months before the March 2018 presidential elections and remains in custody. On 7 October, Prof. Hosni’s detention was extended for an additional 15 days.

Another Cairo University professor active in electoral politics, Professor of Urban Planning Magdi Kerqar, has also been arrested. Kerqar is the general secretary of the opposition Independence Party. At least 19 other leaders and members of the party were arrested around the same time as Kerqar. Finally, Ahmad Helmy Hamdun, a teaching assistant in the Faculty of Economics and Political Science, was arrested on 26 September 2019 while sitting with his brother, lawyer Mohamed Helmy Hamdun and his sister-in-law, a well-known feminist and founder of the group “Daughter of the Nile,” Asmaa Dabees, in a café in Damanhour. They were bundled forcibly into a van outside the cafe by men in civilian clothing and remained incommunicado with their whereabouts unknown for five days. On 1 October, all three of them were sentenced to 15 days in jail.

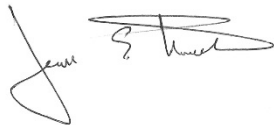
For the past five years, many voices have been raised in protest of your government’s repeated violations of basic academic, civil and human rights. In April 2019, Scholars at Risk (SAR) and the Association for Freedom of Thought and

Expression (AFTE) in Egypt issued a report that highlighted attacks and pressures on higher education in Egypt. The report mentioned in particular Egypt's Law Regulating Universities which, among other provisions, shifts certain vaguely defined crimes or attacks on universities to the jurisdiction of military, rather than civilian, courts, thus limiting due process protections. In addition, the report detailed a number of incidents involving violence, wrongful arrests, and university disciplinary proceedings against scholars and students.[\[2\]](#)

What has transpired since 20 September, however, goes well beyond these already gross excesses and violations of basic and internationally recognized freedoms. The arrested academics about whom we are writing are but four examples/victims of a massive and brutal round-up of peaceful protestors by your regime, using baseless charges of "terrorism" or "endangering public safety". Indeed, the recent arrest wave has also targeted journalists while doing their work (such as Hisham Foad and Hossam Moaness)[\[3\]](#); human rights attorneys while attending court sessions related to political detainees' cases (such as Mahienour El-Masry and Mohamed El-Baqir); ex-parliamentarians who had announced plans to run in the next elections (such as Ziad El-Elaimy); leaders of political parties (such as Abdel-Aziz *al*-Husseini of the Karama Party, Khaled Dawoud of the Constitution Party, and Abdel Nasser Ismail of the Popular Socialist Alliance Party),[\[4\]](#) as well as prominent bloggers and activists while under police custody after serving an overnight parole sentence (such as Alaa Abdel Fatah and Mohamed Ibrahim Mohamed, known as Mohamed Oxygen).

To flourish, academic freedom requires freedom of the press and expression, respect for the rule of law, and transparency. We call upon you to see to the immediate release of Professors Nafaa, Hosni, Kerqar, and Mr. Hamdun, and the dropping of all charges against them. We further urge you to release all other peaceful protesters and critics of your government who have been unjustly swept up and charged in these mass round-ups.

Sincerely,



Judith Tucker  
MESA President  
Professor, Georgetown University



Laurie Brand  
Chair, Committee on Academic Freedom  
Professor, University of Southern California

cc:

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Prime Minister

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Minister of Foreign Affairs

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[1] <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/03/world/middleeast/egypt-cyber-attack-phones.html?action=click&module=Latest&pgtype=Homepage>

[2] <https://mesana.org/advocacy/committee-on-academic-freedom/2019/04/17/attacks-on-academic-freedom-in-egypt-require-global-response>

[3] [https://rsf.org/en/news/wave-arrests-journalists-website-blocking-egypt?fbclid=IwAR0w5NAK2%20Rd3tMD9vKL7qO2CYtIX\\_rM71tvKdJxRvj7v73mBStb2tQBf2yc](https://rsf.org/en/news/wave-arrests-journalists-website-blocking-egypt?fbclid=IwAR0w5NAK2%20Rd3tMD9vKL7qO2CYtIX_rM71tvKdJxRvj7v73mBStb2tQBf2yc)

[4] Ismail was arrested from his home on 23 September 2019. At the time of writing this letter, he has not been subjected to legal proceedings. His family and rights groups believe that he is in a state of enforced disappearance, and express concerns about his safety.