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24 November 2020

President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi
Arab Republic of Egypt
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Prime Solicitor-General Khaled Diauddin
Supreme State Security Prosecution in the Arab Republic of Egypt
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Dear President al-Sisi and Prime Solicitor-General Diauddin,

We write to you on behalf of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association of North America to express our grave concern about the arrests of Mohamed Basheer, Karim Ennarah, and Gasser Abdel Razek. These three individuals work at the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), a highly respected institution, founded in 2002, to address and produce studies and reports about issues related to personal freedoms, criminal justice, economic justice, rights to health and safety in Egypt. Basheer, who is the Administrative Manager of the EIPR, was arrested on 15 November 2020; Ennarah, a researcher and director of the criminal justice unit, was arrested on 18 November, and Abdel Razek, the executive director, was arrested on 19 November. That such prominent employees of the EIPR have been arrested, and in rapid succession, suggests that the Government of Egypt seeks to shut down this most esteemed and authoritative human rights organization and block its valuable work.

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 2800 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.

At midnight on 15 November, security forces arrested Mohamed Basheer from his house in Cairo and detained him for more than twelve hours at an unidentified State Security Sector facility. He was questioned about a visit to his home by European ambassadors and diplomats on 3 November, at which they discussed the human rights situation in Egypt. After his interrogation, he appeared before the Supreme State Security Prosecution (SSSP) in the Fifth Settlement district, where he was questioned about his work with EIPR and its publications and legal work. The SSSP accused Basheer of “joining a terrorist organization with knowledge of its purposes”, “using a personal account on the internet to spread false information that undermines public security”, “committing one of the crimes of funding terrorism”, and “broadcasting false news and statements that undermine public security, and harming the national interest.” According to the EIPR, the prosecution did not present Basheer with reliable evidence, but referred to “investigations that uncovered a mobilization that aims to spread false information and baseless rumors.” The SSSP added Basheer to Case 855 of 2020 in which people have been detained, charged, and held for months without trial. Detainees in this case include human rights activists and lawyers such as Mohamed al-Baqr and Mahinour

al-Masry, journalist Islam Mohamed, and political science professor Hazem Hosny. It ordered that Basheer would be detained for 15 days pending investigations of these charges.

It is worth noting that the EIPR has posted publicly on its social media pages about Basheer's meeting with the above-referenced diplomats, who included representatives from Germany, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland, Canada, and other countries. The group's executive director, Gasser Abdel Razek, told *Mada Masr* that "[The meeting was] a very natural and frequent occurrence for all countries that consider human rights part of their foreign policy." He added that "Just like representatives meet people who work in arts, culture, agriculture, and health, they also meet with people who work in journalism and politics and human rights." Indeed, the government's concern regarding that meeting demonstrates the extent to which the human rights situation in Egypt has deteriorated, such that activities that would not have been considered rights' violations in the past are now treated as such.

On 18 November, the Egyptian authorities arrested Karim Ennarah. According to a brief statement by the EIPR, Ennarah was "arrested while on vacation in Dahab, South Sinai," and was escorted by National Security officers to an undisclosed location. *Jadaliyya* reported that, according to a friend who had witnessed the arrest, Ennarah was sitting at a restaurant on the beach in Dahab when two security agents approached the restaurant staff and asked for him. They questioned him for a few minutes before two more security agents arrived. The four agents took Ennarah's phone and led him away to a car. When Ennarah's friends tried to intervene, the agents told them that he was being taken to the local police station. When these friends went to the police station, security agents escorted them to Ennarah's hotel room, where they took his identification documents, laptop, and other belongings. On 19 November, the state security prosecutor ordered the detention of Ennarah for 15 days pending investigation of terror charges in case 855/2020.

On 19 November, the Egyptian authorities arrested the EIPR's executive director, Gasser Abdel Razek, at his home in Cairo, and took him to an undisclosed location. He later appeared before the State Security Prosecution, which ordered his detention for 15 days in case 855/2020, pending investigations into charges of "joining a terrorist group", "disseminating false statements that undermine public security", and "using the internet to publish false news." Furthermore, it has come to our attention that at his most recent interrogation on 23 November, he told the SSSP that he was being subjected to inhumane and degrading treatment in his cell and that this was putting his health and safety at risk.

The arrests of Mohamed Basheer, Karim Ennarah, and Gasser Abdel Razek are part of a disturbing new crackdown on academic freedom and on freedom of speech more generally. In taking this action, the Egyptian authorities have violated Article 65 of the Egyptian Constitution, which states that "Freedom of



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thought and opinion is guaranteed. All individuals have the right to express their opinion through speech, writing, imagery, or any other means of expression and publication.” As for the EIPR and its legitimacy, it is worth noting that all of its economic reports are issued in collaboration with Egypt’s main governmental agency of statistics: the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics. Furthermore, it collaborated with the Egyptian Parliament in drafting the Comprehensive Health Insurance Law (Law Number 2 for Year 2018), issued in 2019. Within the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the EIPR has continued to work and has published some of the most important documentation about health and prisons conditions in Egypt. These recent arrests indicate a concerted effort to both silence independent voices and impede the critical work of one of the most important human rights organizations in the region.

We urge you to release Mohamed Basheer, Karim Ennarah, and Gasser Abdel Razek, drop any pending charges against them, and allow them to return to their work. We call on you, as well, to review the penal code and endorse the abolition of easily abused counter-terrorism and cybercrime laws that can be used to impose unconstitutional restrictions on freedom of opinion and expression, access to information, and research in Egypt.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Dina Rizk Khoury', with a long, sweeping underline.

Dina Rizk Khoury
MESA President
Professor, George Washington University

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Laurie Brand', with a stylized, cursive style.

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

cc:

Dr. Ali Abdel Aal, Speaker, Egyptian Parliament
Ambassador Yasser Reda, Embassy of Egypt, Washington, D.C.