



**Middle
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President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi
Arab Republic of Egypt
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Prime Minister Mostafa Kamal Madbouly
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Prime Solicitor-General Khaled Diauddin
Supreme State Security Prosecution in the Arab Republic of Egypt
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Public Prosecutor, Hamada El-Sawy
Office of the Public Prosecutor
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Dear President al-Sisi, Prime Minister Madbouly, Chancellor El-Sawy 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 deep concern regarding the deterioration of academic freedom in Egypt. Several scholars remain in detention, some without trial despite having served one year or more in detention. In addition, new charges have recently been leveled against researchers who are already arbitrarily detained, and travel bans continue to restrict the movement of many academics.

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 almost 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.

We acknowledge the release on 23 February 2021 of Professor Hazem Hosny of Cairo University after 17 months in detention. We are troubled, however, that in recent months there has been an escalation in detentions and the indictment of detainees on new charges, as well as a deterioration in the conditions to which both detained and formerly detained scholars are subjected. One of the most recent examples of this escalation is the introduction of a new case against Ahmed Samir Santawy. An Egyptian national and second-year student in the Master's program in Sociology/Social Anthropology at the Central European University (CEU) in Vienna, Santawy has been in pre-trial detention since 1 February 2021 (case 65/20). His charges include "joining a terrorist group with prior knowledge of its objectives, broadcasting false news aimed at disrupting security and public order, and using an account on Facebook for the purpose of spreading false news" [see our letter dated [22 February 2021](#)]. We were extremely disturbed

to learn that on 22 May, Santawy was charged in another case (877/21) in which the accusations are almost identical to those in the original case.

A second example is the ongoing detention of Dr. Ahmed Al Tohamy Abdel-Hay, Assistant Professor of Political Science in the Faculty of Economic Studies and Political Science at Alexandria University, who has been held in detention (case 649/20) since 3 June 2020 without trial. [see our letter dated [24 November 2020](#)]. As in many such cases, Al Tohamy has been accused of joining a terrorist group, spreading false news and statements, and misusing social media.

A third example is the *de facto* travel ban imposed on Walid Khalil el-Sayed Salem since his release from pre-trial detention in December 2018 and despite the lifting in March 2020 of the probationary measures that had been imposed on him. A doctoral candidate in the department of Political Science at the University of Washington, he was arrested in Cairo while conducting dissertation research on the Egyptian judiciary, but no charges were levelled against him [see our letters dated [4 November 2020](#); [14 August 2019](#); [6 July 2018](#)]. He continues to be prevented from leaving Egypt to complete his Ph.D. and re-unite with his young daughter, whom he has not seen in three years. In fact, when he attempted to depart from Cairo airport on 24 May, he was informed at the airport that he was on a “no fly list” and was denied boarding.

The fourth example is the treatment of researcher Ismail Alexandrani, who is currently serving a 10-year sentence. Alexandrani was arrested on 29 November 2015, upon his arrival at Hurghada International Airport, on his way to visit his ailing mother. Alexandrani’s mother passed away last month and he was denied permission to attend her funeral. Alexandrani is a sociopolitical researcher, investigative journalist and expert on militant groups in North Sinai. A civilian, he was sentenced by a military court on baseless accusations that he had obtained and published military secrets, joined a banned group, and spread false news abroad [see our letter dated [8 February 2016](#)]. It is worth noting that during the last four months of his mother’s terminal illness, rights groups called upon the Egyptian authorities to allow Alexandrani to visit his mother or at least contact her via telephone.

A final example of the deteriorating conditions for academic freedom in Egypt is the ongoing detention of Patrick George Zaki, a student at the University of Bologna, Italy. Arrested on 7 February 2020 upon his arrival in Egypt for a family visit, he has been held in pre-trial detention ever since. [see our letters dated [25 February 2020](#) & [18 February 2021](#)]. Not only has Zaki been denied due process, but the Egyptian authorities have produced no credible evidence to justify his incarceration.

As we wrote in our letter of [22 February 2021](#), there is a growing consensus within international human rights circles and academic institutions and associations that Egypt has become a dangerous place for both academic

research and free expression, for Egyptian and foreign researchers alike. In fact, Egypt continues to rank in the lowest group on the Academic Freedom Index. We have written to you repeatedly over the past several years regarding similar cases of arrests, detention, torture, and, as in the tragic and dreadful case of Giulio Regeni, death of scholars and researchers at the hands of state security forces [see, among others [4 February 2016](#), [11 February 2020](#), [25 February 2020](#), [28 May 2020](#), [9 September 2020](#), [4 November 2020](#), [24 November 2020](#), [24 November 2020](#), [18 February 2021](#)].

These ongoing attacks on academic freedom in Egypt constitute violations of the 2014 Egyptian Constitution's Article 65, which guarantees freedom of speech and freedom in all means of expression and publications, and of Article 23, which provides for freedom of scientific research. We call on you to take all necessary measures to put an end to the ongoing attacks on academic freedom and freedom of speech, the repeated violations of due process, and the abuses of the independence of the judiciary in Egypt. We urge you, as well, to release without delay Ahmed Samir Santawy, Ahmed Al Tohamy Abdel-Hay, Patrick George Zaki and all other detained academics, especially those who have not been tried, to drop all charges against them, and to allow them – including Walid Salem – to move freely and return to their studies and careers. We call on you, as well, to review the penal code and endorse the reform of counterterrorism and cybercrime laws that can be easily abused to impose unconstitutional restrictions on freedom of opinion and expression, access to information, and research in Egypt.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Dina Rizk Khoury
MESA President
Professor, George Washington University



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

cc:

Dr. Hanafi Gebali, Speaker, Egyptian Parliament
Motaz Zahran, Ambassador, Embassy of Egypt, Washington, D.C.
Mohamed Fathi Ahmed Edrees, Permanent Representative of Egypt to the United Nations
Verónica Michelle Bachelet Jeria, The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

Mary Lawlor, UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders

Irene Khan, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression

Maria Arena, Chair of the European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights

Hannah Neumann, Vice-Chair of the European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights

Raphael Glucksmann, Vice-Chair of the European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights

Viktor Almqvist, Press Officer for the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the European Parliament

Kati Piri, Member, Committee on Foreign Affairs, European Parliament

Dunja Mijatović, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights

Josep Borrell Fontelles, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy

Joey Hood, Acting Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, Department of State, United States Government

Philip McDaniel, Foreign Policy Advisor: Congressman Tom Malinowski (NJ-7), Member of Egypt Human Rights Caucus

Nancy Chen, Legislative Fellow: Rep. Don Beyer (D-VA), Member of Egypt Human Rights Caucus