



# Forbidden Belief...

Report on the Imprisonment of Quranist Blogger Reda Abdel-Rahman

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## Methodology

This report relied on several human rights and media reports published on the violations that were inflicted upon the Quranist Blogger Reda Abdel-Rahman over the past twelve years, in addition to information documented by AFTE in an interview conducted with one of his friends. The report also relied on testimony written by one of the relatives of Reda Abdel-Rahman, as well as the papers of investigations made with Abdel-Rahman which AFTE's lawyer in Sharqia Governorate obtained.

## Introduction

The case of Quranist Blogger Reda Abdel-Rahman raises many questions about the consequences of citizens' expression of belief or religion. Belonging to the religion of the majority of citizens of the state does not mean freedom from violation. This applies to the case of the family of Dr. Ahmed Sobhy Mansour who was teaching history in Al-Azhar University. Targeting by security forces led Mansour to a compulsory exile, and caused harm to his family in a series of violations the latest of which is what happened to his relative Reda Abdel-Rahman who is a teacher and blogger.

Abdel-Rahman has been subjected to a series of violations that started with harassment at his workplace, included arrest and arbitrary detention, and ended with pressing baseless accusations against him. All this happened to him because he expressed his religious beliefs and his belonging to the Quranist school of thought that does not fit with the formal conception of Islam adopted by the institutions of the state.

On the 22nd of August 2020, ten members of the family of Ahmed Sobhy Mansour were arrested. All of them were released later except Reda Abdel-Rahman who is a teacher in an Azhar Institute. Abdel-Rahman was arrested pursuant to Emergency Law in 2008, and then detained in 2016. After his release, he stopped writing or posting.<sup>1</sup>

State institutions started targeting this family when University Professor Ahmed Sobhy Mansour was still teaching history in Al-Azhar University. Ahmed Sobhy Mansour was arrested for two months in 1987 and was suspended from work because he had beliefs that are different from the dominant principles of the institution of Al-Azhar.<sup>2</sup> Security forces continued targeting this Azhar professor and his family to the extent that they arrested his son Shereif, when he was 17, and unlawfully interrogated him in the premises of state security apparatus in Lazoughly.<sup>3</sup> Harassments were supposed to stop when Sobhy Mansour decided to migrate to the United States in 2000, and obtained political asylum. However, state security officers continued targeting his relatives in Egypt.<sup>4</sup>

Sobhy Mansour insists that he has the right to believe in and belong to the Quranist School. In response, security forces continued prosecuting his relatives in Egypt. This also happened with his relative Reda Abdel-Rahman who has the same beliefs. In spite of releasing the rest of his relatives without pressing formal charges against them, Reda Abdel-Rahman forcibly disappeared for more than 40 days and he was charged with accusations related to terrorism.

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<sup>1</sup> A testimony by Sherif Mansour, son of Dr. Ahmed Sobhy Mansour, AFTE, December 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Ahmed Sobhy Mansour by Gareedat Al-Arab – Al-Hiwar Al-Mutamaddin, Issue no. 5830, 29 march 2018, last visited on 28 December 2018 at <https://bit.ly/3nYnuVV> (in Arabic)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> The Egyptian Initiative calls for the release of an Azhar teacher accused of spreading "Quranism" and the end to the prosecution of people with different religious affiliations, 17 September 2020, last visited on the 29th of December 2020 at <https://cutt.ly/jh5u75d>

## Preface: A Muslim Minority in a Muslim-Majority Country

Former president Anwar Al-Sadat decided to bestow a religious aura on the modern Egyptian state. He adopted Islamic Sharia as “a principal” source for legislation in the Constitution of 1971. In 2012, the Constituent Assembly added article 219 which stated that “the principles of Islamic Sharia include its general evidence, foundational rules, rules of jurisprudence, and credible sources accepted in the schools of the people of Sunnah and the community.” This addition reflected the hegemony of political Islamist currents. It was soon removed from the Constitution of Egypt with the amendments made by the Commission of Fifty in 2014 following the removal of Islamists from power in Egypt. The Constitution of Egypt guarantees freedom of belief as an absolute freedom in article 64.

There are different religious minorities in Egypt including Christians of different sects, the Jewish community, and the Baha’is who didn’t receive official recognition from the state until now. Within Islam, there are unrecognized minorities including Shiites and Quranists whose right to freedom of belief is violated, and who are prosecuted by security forces. Among state officials themselves, we see the President of the Republic and the Sheikh of Al-Azhar – the head of the formal Islamic institution – publicly disagree on the interpretation or explanation of a number of religious matters. <sup>5</sup>

The case of targeting Professor Ahmed Sobhy Mansour, and continuous security prosecution of his family members since mid-1980s, is a flagrant example of the deprivation of Muslim minorities from the right to free expression of religion and belief in a state whose official religion is Islam according to the Constitution. In the following sections, the report details violations and harassments by security forces to this family based on documented testimonies with some of its members.

## First: Quranist Blogger Reda Abdel-Rahman... Endless Targeting

The wife of Reda Abdel-Rahman didn’t receive any reply to the messages she sent to the President and Prime Minister demanding the disclosure of the whereabouts of her husband and his brother as security forces denied their presence after arresting them on midnight of 22 August 2020. The wife affirmed in her message that she fears that false accusations would be fabricated against her husband or that he would be implicated in cases he has nothing to do with. In October 2020, Abdel-Rahman appeared before State Security Prosecution for investigations in case no. 3418 for 2020 Kafr Saqr Misdemeanours State Security Prosecution.

Reda Abdel-Rahman was born in 1976. He lives in the village of Abou Hreez, Kafr Saqr district, Sharqia Governorate. He graduated from the Faculty of Education of Al-Azhar University.

Abdel-Rahman apparently enjoys all privileges that should have made him evade any kind of prosecution or targeting. He is a married Muslim man with a clean criminal record. However, Abdel-Rahman has been subjected during 12 years for prosecution at the hands of state security apparatus officers.

In 2008, Reda was 32 years old. He regularly went to work in an Azhar Institute in Sharqia Governorate. He had a blog on the internet called (Justice... Freedom... Equality...). Because of this blog, the state security apparatus directly harassed him for the first time. On the 27th of October 2008, Abdel-Rahman was arrested after his house was raided and searched. He remained arrested for 88 days based on Emergency Law which allowed administrative detention at the time. No specific accusations were made against Abdel-Rahman.

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<sup>5</sup> Nathan J Brown and Cassia Bardos, Power Politics or Principle? 13 December 2020 at <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/77956>

This arrest was preceded by a summons that Reda Abdel-Rahman wrote about it in his blog. Before he was arrested, the Legal Affairs Department of the Office of the Sheikh of Al-Azhar performed an investigation on the articles he published on the internet. This investigation ended in a clear threat to him, and he was forced to write an avowal “not to publish any articles on the internet or any religious writings.”<sup>6</sup>

Reda Abdel-Rahman was interrogated at least twice in that period of 2008 in the premises of the State Security Apparatus in Kafr Saqr, Sharqeya governorate. Most questions were related to his religious beliefs as a “Quranist” who believes that Quran is the only source of the rulings of Islam. The officer asked him if he believes in the Prophet’s traditions (Sunnah), if he prays or not, and how he prays.<sup>7</sup> Abdel-Rahman was forced to give them the password of his email. He was deprived of food for two full days. Then, he was detained in solitary confinement in Tora Reception Prison without being allowed to communicate with his family or being visited by them.<sup>8</sup>

On the 14th of December 2008, a court decided to end the arrest of Reda Abdel-Rahman. However, the Ministry of Manpower appealed the decision trying to keep him under open-ending arrest without trial. On the 6th of January 2009, State Security Emergency Court dismissed this appeal and issued a final ruling ordering his release.<sup>9</sup> Two days later, State Security Prosecution repeated investigations with Reda on charges of contempt of religion and asked him again about his beliefs and opinions in several religious matters. Then, it ordered his release. However, the Ministry of Interior didn’t execute the final ruling of the Court and the order of State Security Prosecution to release Abdel-Rahman. He remained in custody for 14 days before he was released.

Reda Abdel-Rahman was arrested again in 2016. State Security officers did not only ask him about his beliefs and opinions. They also ordered him to stop any writings or activities related to expressing his religious belief, and to terminate his relationship with his uncle Dr. Ahmed Sobhy Mansour.<sup>10</sup>

## Second: Free Expression of Belief and Religion... May it be Described as Terrorism?

Reda Abdel-Rahman was arrested for the third time in August 2020. Just like previous times, state security officers discussed his beliefs and personal relations. However, it was different this time as they submitted an inquiry report to State Security Prosecution accusing Abdel-Rahman of committing crimes related to terrorism. Although Abdel-Rahman was arrested on the 22nd of August 2020 and his wife tried to prove that he forcibly disappeared, the Public Prosecution didn’t decide on the allegations made by his wife.

All dates related to the case, starting from the inquiry report, were subsequent to the date of arresting Abdel-Rahman by more than forty days. This challenges the validity of all documents and formal procedures made by the Ministry of Interior and Supreme State Security Prosecution, as follows:

<sup>6</sup> EIPR Calls for Detained Qur’ani Blogger’s Immediate Release, 30 October 2008, last visited on 28 December 2020 at <https://cutt.ly/sh5iIPp>

<sup>7</sup> The New York Times, Egypt persecutes Muslim moderates, 3 February 2009, last visit, 28 December 2020. <https://nyti.ms/3hrd-WR1>

<sup>8</sup> EIPR, two days after the court’s order to end his arrest, State Security Prosecution orders the release of Quranist Blogger Reda Abdel-Rahman, 8 January 2009, last visited 28 December 2020 at <https://cutt.ly/Gh5i5ZX> (Arabic only)

<sup>9</sup> EIPR, Court Upholds Decision to Release Detained Qur’ani Blogger, 6 January 2009, last visited 28 December 2020 at <https://cutt.ly/Eh5iHZ7>

<sup>10</sup> Islam Barakat, Egyptian Quranists: A reading in their ideas and their relationship to the state and Al-Azhar, Egypt 360, 24 September 2020, last visited 28 December 2020 at <https://cutt.ly/5h5odzr> (in Arabic)

- **Police Inquiry Report:** On the 4th of October 2020, an officer in the State Security Sector of the Ministry of Interior wrote an inquiry report based on secret sources. He mentioned that according to his inquiries, Reda Abdel-Rahman belongs to a cluster cell that seeks to conduct terrorist operations against the members of the police and armed forces based on ideas of takfir (excommunication of one Muslim by another from Islam). This anonymous inquiry report didn't define the nature of ideas attributed to Abde-Rahman. These investigations concluded by confirming that members of this cell possess weapons, ammunition and bombs in their home. Later, no guns were found among the seized items registered in the case's papers relating to Reda Abdel-Rahman.
- **The Prosecution's Arrest and Search Warrant:** On the 5th of October 2020, the Chief Supreme State Security Prosecutor issued a warrant to arrest the accused people whose names are written in the police inquiry report and to search their houses. The reason he stated for issuing this warrant is that the inquiry report, that his writer didn't disclose any of its sources, included "committing crimes related to harming the interests of the government from inside and outside the country according to the Penal Code, and other crimes punishable by Anti-Terrorism Law." The Chief Prosecutor ordered the seizing of all weapons and ammunition the defendants have, as well as any organizational or takfir books, although the police inquiry report stated that publications are merely online.
- **Arrest and Searching:** On the 6th of October 2020, according to the arrest and search report, Reda Abdel-Rahman was arrested from his house in the village of Abou Hreez, Kafr Saqr district, Sharqia Governorate, and his house was searched. However, security forces had already raided his house in August 2020, and refused to disclose his whereabouts throughout the period before referring him to the Prosecution. The report confirmed that after searching Abdel-Rahman's house, contrary to state security investigations, no weapons of any kind were found. The only things said to be found are as follows: a message titled "Ba'ath party and Taghut" consisting of six pages, and a message titled "Message from Behind Bars: the Rule on Praying behind Apostles" consisting of four pages.
- **Investigation by the Prosecution:** the Prosecution didn't investigate the forcible disappearance of Abdel-Rahman, and accused him of joining the terrorist organization of ISIS, adopting terrorist ideas, and promoting takfir ideas in an indirect way via organizational papers found at his house which included ideas that consider institutions of the state, the police, and the army infidel; and that it is necessary to launch terrorist attacks against them.

Reda Abdel-Rahman denied all charges against him. He confirmed that he actually was arrested on the 22nd of August 2020 from his house. He stated that the police force that arrested him, including a police man he knows, didn't search his house but only seized his mobile phone. Abdel-Rahman stated in the investigation report that he was detained throughout the period of his disappearance in the Police Department of Kafr Saqr. However, the Prosecution decided to put him in remand detention pending further investigations although the police investigations report was obscure and imprecise in comparison to the arrest report.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

In this report, AFTE recorded violations against Quranist Blogger Reda Abdel-Rahman, the latest of which is his remand detention pending further investigations based on unserious accusations without evidence. Institutions responsible for arrest and investigation and the Public Prosecution use remand detention as a punishment against Abdel-Rahmn in order to prevent him from expressing his beliefs. So, AFTE calls upon the Public Prosecutor, Hamada El-Sawy, to:

- **Release Quranist Blogger Reda Abdel-Rahman and close the case based on which he is in remand detention for lack of evidence; and**
- **Investigate the case of forcible disappearance of Reda Abdel-Rahman in the police station of Kafr Saqr, and review the situation of people detained there in order to make sure that this violation does not take place with other people.**