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Monitoring and Documentation Unit
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Methodology

This report relied mainly on testimonies made by several Egyptian researchers who are currently studying abroad .In some cases ,the Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression) AFTE (has provided legal assistance in addition to documenting violations and advocating their case ,while in other cases the report’s editor contacted the researchers directly .The report also relied on a number of testimonies published by students studying abroad on their social media pages ,as well as tracking the statements of officials in this regard ,especially the Ministry of Higher Education and the Ministry of Immigration and Egyptian Affairs abroad.

Introduction

Egyptian researchers who are studying for masters or doctoral degrees, and holders of various educational grants or participants of exchange programs with foreign universities according to joint protocols, are subjected to various forms of constraints and violations that have been ongoing for over five years.

Through tracking a pattern where a number of researchers were exposed to these violations, it can be said that these violations varied in terms of their nature as well as the nature of those making them.

Starting from the surveillance, prosecuting, and tracking, whether in a broad manner or through directly targeting some of them from the moment they leave the country, whether by means of exposing them to intransigence or posing a diplomatic threat up to their arrest upon their arrival in Egypt, whether their return is final after the end of their educational mission or whether they are visiting for a short vacation to see family and friends.

Are all Egyptian researchers residing abroad subjected to such violations? In fact, it was not possible to ascertain the actual size of indictment and security-related stalking through the sample of researchers that AFTE was able to access. Likewise, it was not possible to determine the violations, whether on security or diplomatic fronts, that they are exposed to. However, the sample indicates routes that can be tracked to understand the policy of the Egyptian authorities in general towards them.

On the political level, the Minister of Immigration and Egyptian Affairs Abroad, Nabila Makram, warned last July that Egyptian students abroad are the most

dangerous segment of immigrants, as a result of several factors, foremost of which is the misconceptions they are exposed to from those with anti-Egypt tendencies¹.

This statement prompted great controversy and serious attacks against Makram, as activists on social media said it was waging a “war on academics”. This prodded pressure that implored Makram to “formally” retract her statement later, but it was probably more than a “slip of the tongue”, rather an impromptu expression of the policy pursued by the Egyptian authorities through its various agencies, which is highlighted by the seven cases of those who were directly subjected to various violations presented in the report. Some of whom were arrested upon their return to Egypt, or exposed to restrictions and arbitrariness by some Egyptian embassies abroad or by the university administrations which they work for inside Egypt, as a reaction to expressing their views on the Egyptian government’s policies on social media, or getting involved in academic work that the Egyptian authorities are apprehensive of.

This statement was not the first time that the Minister of Immigration attacked Egyptians abroad through her statements, which indicate Egypt’s surveillance of all statements or research made by its nationals residing abroad. Two years earlier, she said that she met with Egyptians expatriates in Canada, where she claimed that she asked them about “what is to do be done with anyone who speaks negatively of his nation,” one of the audience responded that they would “rip his neck off” and she responded by adding that “We would chop him”.

Makram’s chatter in her meetings and statement two years earlier come within context of her previous statement, as they reflect the Egyptian authorities’ position in general and that of the security forces in particular regarding students abroad; as to how dangerous they can be to the reputation of the Egyptian government, especially with regard to human rights conditions. Within two years or less, the hate speech and incitement practiced by Makram against Egyptian students abroad, especially those who express critical opinions of the Egyptian government’s policies turned into a strategy that is being implemented in full swing.

On July 13, 2021, less than one week after her statement,² Makram said during

1 Ahmed Ayman ,Minister of Immigration :Students abroad are the most dangerous segment of Egyptian immigrants for being influenced by hostile factions ,Cairo website ,July ,2021 ,6 last visit date :December ,2021 ,20 <https://bit.ly3/sjM2hk>

2 Osama Ali :Minister of Immigration :Our children abroad are the largest group at risk and are not the most dangerous ,Masrawy website ,July ,2021 ,13 last visit date :December ,2021 ,20 <https://bit.ly3/pgf9js>.

her opening speech at the “Speak Arabic” camp for the children of Egyptians Expatriates in Sharm el-Sheikh, “Our children abroad are the largest segment at risk, they are not the most dangerous segment, as some news websites have published.” However, the minister did not, in fact, deny the content of her statement, which is firmly established by her ministry's practices and also strongly backed up by de facto practices of the security, administrative and diplomatic authorities. In the same speech, she stressed that “The state's interest - embodied in the Ministry of Immigration - in our youth abroad, whether of second or third generations, as well as those studying abroad, primarily aspires to link them to their homeland, and to provide them with the necessary aid in all fields as well as deepen their spirit of loyalty and belonging, and also to protect them from factions that aim at recruiting them towards extremism, violence and terrorism, who often target young people, through flooding them with prejudices and misconceptions. Makram also explained that the camp, in addition to encouraging expatriates to speak Arabic, also aims at informing the participants of current developments and issues, whether economically, socially or culturally, in a simplified and pleasant way to encourage them to keep and enrich their ties with Egypt and to spend their holidays there.

In this report, we try to shed light on patterns of violations against Egyptian researchers abroad, and assess whether the statements made by Makram were a mere slip of tongue or an innate expression of security interest in Egyptian researchers abroad and the momentum of their impact on the reputation of the ruling political regime in Egypt. Whether this impact is made through expressing these views on social media or their involvement in academic spaces that are not to the liking of the political system in Egypt at the time being, at least.

Part I: Prison as a price for return

The Monitoring and Documentation Unit of the Association of AFTE was able to monitor at least five cases of Egyptian researchers who were arrested after their return to Cairo, including two who are still in prison until now, as they were convicted to heavy sentences by exceptional courts.

The security services target Egyptian researchers abroad upon their return for two reasons. The first reason is related to comments made by some Egyptian researchers abroad on social media sites that were critical of government policies, especially those related to the human rights situation in Egypt, which

applies to the case of the Egyptian master’s student Ahmed Samir Santawi,³ whom the Supreme State Security Emergency Court issued its harsh sentence to 4 years imprisonment and a fine of 500 pounds in the State Security Case 774/2021, registered with the no. 877/2021 at the Supreme State Security Prosecution, on June 22, 2021. This verdict is final and cannot be appealed, given that it was issued by the Emergency Supreme State Security Court, which is an exceptional court to which defendants are referred while the state of emergency is in effect. However, the President of the Republic can annul the sentence, mitigate it, order a retrial, or ratify it in accordance with the emergency law, which he suspended in November after seven years of application.

Santawi, 30 years, had returned to Egypt on a visit to his family and friends in mid-December 2020 through Sharm el-Sheikh airport, where the security authorities had arrested him and illegally interrogated him about the reasons for his travel and fields of study, before they allowed him to leave. Then he was summoned again for interrogation at one of the headquarters of the National Security Agency, which was followed by his arrest and presentation to the Supreme State Security Prosecution, afterwards he was held in pretrial detention, then tried and convicted.

Santawi was accused of spreading false news on his social media account, where the State Security Prosecution provided screenshots of comments criticizing the Egyptian government in relation to the human rights situation, which Santawi denied any knowledge of.

In a similar vein, the Mansoura State Security Court for Emergencies released Patrick George, a student of Masters at the University of Bologna and a researcher at the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, in December 2021. He was pending trial which he had been referred to in September of the same year, nearly 19 months after his pretrial detention by the State Security Prosecution over investigations into charges of spreading false news.

The State Security Prosecution based its charges against Zaki on an article he wrote in July 2019. It was published in the online news website Daraj with the title of “Displacement, Killing, and Duress: A Week’s Tally in the Diaries of Egypt’s Copts,” in which he describes a week of his life as an Egyptian Christian receiving news in relation to the status of Egyptian Christians on both the private and public spheres.

3 Profile of researcher Ahmed Samir Santawi ,Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression ,last visited on December ,2021 ,20 <https://bit.ly/3/Eehm3f>.

The security services at Cairo International Airport had arrested Zaki on February 7, 2020, upon his return from Italy, where he is studying for a master’s degree. He was transferred to a National Security building in Cairo, where he was tortured. On the following day, he was transferred to Mansoura Governorate, where the arrest report was forged, altering the date and place of his arrest⁴.

In the same context, Aliaa Musallam, a researcher specializing in oral history, qualifies as an example that reflects to a large extent the reality of the scene. Musallam was arrested upon her arrival at Cairo Airport on July 11, 2021, just two days after the Immigration Minister’s notorious statements against Egyptian researchers abroad.

Musallam was accompanied by her husband and their three children, who were visiting from Berlin, following post-doctoral studies. The Cairo International Airport authorities detained her and confiscated her phone for 17 hours. During which, the National Security officers interrogated her at the airport, before transferring her to the State Security Prosecution, on accusations of spreading false news. The Public Prosecution ordered her release on the same day in exchange for a bail of 10 thousand pounds⁵.

Expressing opinions on social media is not the only reason that sets off the security services to target Egyptian researchers when they return home. Rather, just working and being involved with academic spaces that the Egyptian authorities have concerns of may indicate that their return to Egypt is a mistake that thrusts them into prison. As was the case of Ismail al-Iskandarani, a researcher specializing in the affairs of marginalized communities, whose research focused on military activities in Sinai, which made the security services put him on pre-arrival watch lists to arrest him immediately upon his arrival in Egypt. Hurghada Airport security authorities arrested al-Iskandarani upon the arrival of his plane coming from Berlin in November 2015.

On the same day, al-Iskandarani was brought before the Supreme State Security Prosecution, which investigated him for two consecutive days and ordered his detention for 15 days pending investigations, after a case was made against him, in addition to the usual criminal charges of; belonging to the “Muslim Brotherhood” as a banned group that was established, contrary to the

4 After a year and a half of pretrial detention :Patrick George Zaki will be referred to the Emergency State Security Court tomorrow ,Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression ,September ,2021 ,13 last visited on December,2021 ,20 <https://bit.ly3/sEU0lt>.

5 Arresting researcher and historian Alia Mussallam at Cairo Airport and referring her to the State Security Prosecution ,Mada Masr ,July ,2021 ,11 last visited on December ,2021 ,20 <https://bit.ly3/ARYkhv>.

provisions of the law, and promoting its ideas as well as broadcasting False news and statements about the situation in Sinai.

Al-Iskandarani has been behind bars since then after his case witnessed exciting developments, as the security authorities did not think it was enough to prosecute him before the civil judiciary, but also summoned his case before the military judicial authorities after two and a half years of pretrial detention. Specifically because of his investigative research on the situation in Sinai, which the military judicial authorities saw as a matter that falls within their jurisdiction and investigated him in Military North Cairo Case 18/2018 where he was sentenced to 10 years in prison⁶ in May 2018. The military governor ratified the verdict in December of the same year.

In a similar context, in May 2018, the security forces arrested Walid Salem, a doctoral researcher at Washington University, while he was in Egypt after a meeting he had with an Egyptian faculty member as part of his work on his doctoral research, which tackles the history of the Egyptian judiciary.

Salem was brought before the State Security Prosecution⁷ as a defendant in the Supreme State Security Case 441/2018 on charges of spreading false news, and belonging to a terrorist group. Salem was held in Tora Prison for investigation for more than six months until a decision was issued to release him on December 3, 2018, with precautionary measures. On February 22, 2020, the Supreme State Security Prosecution canceled the precautionary measures imposed on him and released him with the guarantee of his place of residence.

Salem has not been summoned by security or requested for investigations in the case again since then. Yet, he was prevented from leaving the country on May 8, 2020 by the security authorities at Cairo Airport. The authorities confiscated his passport without giving any clear reasons or informing him of a judicial order being issued against him. Which compelled Salem, through his lawyer, to verify whether or not his name was included in the travel ban lists with the Attorney General in March 2021. The disclosure was negative. which prompted Salem to try to travel again after more than two years had passed since charges were pressed against him and he already served the period of pretrial detention in a case where he was not convicted, but he was not al-

⁶ Profile of researcher and journalist Ismail Al-Iskandarani ,AFTE ,last visited on December ,2021 ,20 <https://bit.ly3/edP8Lr>.

⁷ Joint statement ,for the second time ,the Egyptian authorities prevent researcher Walid Salem from traveling after he was included in the travel ban lists ,Foundation for Freedom of Thought and Expression ,May ,2021 ,26 last visited on December ,2021 ,20<https://bit.ly3/edRJFh>.

lowed to travel for the second time. This time it was disclosed that the Public Prosecution had placed him on the travel ban list just one day before his attempt to travel.

Diplomatic entities ranked as Security services?

In the case of Takadom AlKhatib ,a doctoral student at the Free German Universities, he said that” a group of state security forces stormed his family’s house in Luxor and asked his father several questions about his whereabouts and work ,and in which German university he was studying ?What is his academic major ?Is he residing in Germany or Turkey ?And when was the last time he visited Egypt ,why not visit Egypt ,and are there contacts between him and his family ?How often does he communicate with them ,and what is the method of communication ?Does he transfer money to his family “!?”in a testimony on his Facebook personal account on February ,2021 ,10which he confirmed to our report writer through e-mail correspondence. After asking his father all these questions ,the officer in charge seized his father's phone ,and photographed the identity cards of both his parents ,they also confiscated some documents belonging to him and his family ,along with personal photos of him.

“As it is known, I am an Egyptian academic. I live in Germany and work at the university after obtaining my doctorate two years ago. I exercise my right of expression according to what is guaranteed by the constitution and the law, as well as according to the academic freedoms I enjoy according to the Western academic system. Therefore, these measures are illegal and arbitrary, also the psychological terrorism against my family contradicts the constitutional rights guaranteed by the law and the constitution. I also hold the Ministry of the Interior accountable for the personal safety of my family, as they are of old age and suffer from various diseases and do not have any political orientations or tendencies.”

This security action against Al-Khatib was not coincidental .The strain between Al-Khatib ,Egypt’s Embassy in Germany ,and the administrative and security authorities in Egypt began in August ,2017 when the Cultural Counselor of the Egyptian Embassy in Germany ,Ahmed Ghoneim ,announced that Al-Khativ’s envoy mission had expired and that he had to complete his PHD scholarship - if he wanted - at his own expense .This came despite recommendations by Al-Khatib’s academic supervisor of his doctoral thesis ,Shalbo Talai ,Professor of Oriental and Semitic Studies at the Free University of Berlin ,who recommended extending the scholarship related to the envoy for an additional two years due to the great achievement of the envoy.

In September ,2017 the Faculty of Arts at Damietta University dismissed Al-Khatib from both his job as an assistant teacher in the faculty and his envoy abroad for PHD studies ,which the then-dean of the faculty justified to the media by saying that Al-Khatib had been dismissed only after the deadline for resuming work ended on September.2017 ,29

As for Al-Khatib ,he attributes this decision and other arbitrary measures against him to his stance towards Egypt’s political system and its policies ,especially his rejection of the maritime border demarcation agreement between Egypt and Saudi Arabia ,according to which Egypt cedes to Saudi Arabia the ownership of the islands of Tiran and Sanafir ,which was widely popular and politically rejected at the time. Al-Khatib also had an important role in assisting lawyers who resorted to the judiciary in order to prevent the agreement from passing ,through his research in Berlin’s Free Library and its archives ,for maps and documents confirming Egypt’s ownership of the two islands.

Accusations of persecution ,tracking and writing security reports against Egyptian expatriates ,especially those studying abroad ,is not a recent practice .In ,2016 Atef Boutros ,a lecturer at the German University of Hamburg ,was prevented from entering Egypt .He was detained for seven hours inside a security room at Cairo International Airport during his visit.

This incident brought about several accusations to Germany’s Egyptian Embassy of writing reports to the security authorities against its nationals who either work ,study or temporarily reside there ,especially the cases of academic Atef Boutros ⁸and journalist and researcher Ismail al-Iskandarani ,which the embassy denied vigorously ,in a strongly worded statement ;confirming that it does not play any roles outside its main mission in supporting Egyptian expatriates and protecting the interests of the Egyptian state wherever it is located .Badr Abdel-Aty ,the Egyptian ambassador at the time made several announcements expressing” sadness and shame “in response to being accused of writing security reports against Egyptians inside Germany.

At the time ,Ambassador Badr Abdel-Aty made several phone calls to Egyptian satellite channels and stated that he felt” sad and ashamed “for being accused of writing security reports against Egyptians inside Germany.

8 Abdel-Aty’s accusations of writing security reports on Egyptians in Germany ,Akhbarak website, January ,2016 last date on December ,2021 ,20 <https://bit.ly3/GZrCOC>.

Recommendations

- AFTE calls on the Egyptian President to utilize the authority provided to him by the law to repeal the emergency court verdict against Ahmed Samir Santawi, to release him immediately ,and to pardon Ismail Al-Iskandarani.
- AFTE calls on the Ministry of Interior to promptly stop targeting Egyptian researchers abroad for expressing their opinions or choosing their academic subjects.