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Like a Fire in a Forest

ISIS Recruitment in Egypt's Prisons

FEBRUARY 2019

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Executive Summary

Speaking in Cairo on January 10, 2019, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo praised Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi for “his vigorous efforts to combat the ongoing threat of terrorism as well as the radical Islamism that fuels it. His leadership, his assertion of leadership, is consistent with Egypt’s historical role as a true leader...Our robust battle against ISIS, al-Qaida, and other terrorist groups will continue.”¹

Pompeo’s praise notwithstanding, Sisi’s brutal crackdown on dissent is fueling ISIS’s growth, as the group recruits supporters in Egypt’s prisons at an accelerating rate.² Today, ISIS has effectively taken control of parts of the country’s vast prison system. “It’s like a fire in a forest,” one former prisoner told a Human Rights First researcher.³ The scope of the problem is vast. As a prisoner released at the end of 2017 told Human Rights First, “By the time I left, the radicalizing was spreading very fast...When you start off with a cell of two hundred people, you could have by the end of a year at least one hundred of them radicalized. It was happening everywhere I was detained.”⁴

The Egyptian government under Sisi has arrested and detained thousands upon thousands of Egyptians, many on spurious grounds. Many of the prisoners are peaceful dissidents, or are apolitical, and others simply fell out with a local police officer. In prison they are likely to face torture or other forms of brutality. As the State Department’s most recent Human Rights Report

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<https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2019/01/288408.htm>

² ISIS stands for the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, though it is also often called ISIL (Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant), IS (Islamic State), or Daesh. The terrorist organization came to global prominence in 2013 and 2014.

³ Ayman Abdelmeguid, interview with Human Rights First, October 2018.

on Egypt noted, “The most significant human rights issues included...harsh or potentially life-threatening prison conditions.”⁵

ISIS wins favor with prisoners by exploiting the humiliation and rage caused by abuse. The group offers the promise of vengeance against Egyptian authorities, and protection against both guards and other prisoners. As the number of ISIS prisoners has grown, they have become an increasingly powerful force inside the penal system, intimidating guards, and in some instances taking de facto control over parts of prisons.

This report is based primarily on interviews with ex-prisoners conducted during a trip to Egypt in January 2019. Those interviewed provided detailed, credible, and consistent reports, which included graphic accounts of torture. For security reasons, some agreed to speak on the condition that they not be quoted, while others asked to use assumed names to protect their identities.⁶

Sisi is engineering a constitutional change to extend his presidency. On February 14, 2019, the Egyptian parliament approved far-reaching measures to change the constitution. The proposed amendments would allow President Sisi to extend his term until 2034. The result of a referendum is seen as a foregone conclusion in

⁴ Ibrahim Halawa, interview with Human Rights First, December 2018.

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<https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/index.htm#wrapper>

⁶ Human Rights First also spoke to women former detainees, but they said they had not witnessed ISIS recruitment in the women’s prison, so most of the evidence cited here is from men held in various prisons since 2014.

Sisi's favor, as little opposition will be tolerated, and the vote is expected in the coming months.⁷

There appears slim chance that Sisi will unilaterally curb the repressive policies that are fueling the growth of ISIS.⁸ Nor is his government likely to face pressure to do so from the Trump Administration, which—despite withholding a portion of military aid to Egypt in 2017—has gone out its way to praise the Sisi in recent months.

The national security threat posed by Sisi's policies aren't lost on certain members of Congress. In June 2017, for example, a bipartisan group of ten senators led by Marco Rubio (R-FL) and Ben Cardin (D-MD) wrote to President Trump, pointing out that the denying human rights “risks enabling Egypt to perpetuate the very sorts of conditions that help to breed violent extremism and terrorism.”⁹

Security aid, however, continues to flow to Egypt, the second-largest recipient of U.S. Foreign Military Financing (FMF) after Israel. In total, Egypt received some \$47 billion in FMF since 1979.¹⁰ The FY 2019 State and Foreign Operations Appropriations Act, which was signed into law in February 2019 as part of the 2019 Consolidated Appropriations Act, essentially maintains conditions imposed in 2018 on the \$1.3 billion in military aid provided annually to Cairo. Under the FY 2019 law, \$300 million of the \$1.3 billion is subject to certain human rights conditions, though the legislation includes a waiver allowing the secretary of State to release

the restricted funds if he deems doing so to be in the national interest.¹¹

The appropriation act's human rights conditions don't, however, reference prison reform and other steps to combat the growth of ISIS in the penal system. In any case, the Egyptian government isn't meeting the human rights conditions contained in the legislation, and the United States once again releasing all available funds would amount to a vote of confidence in a leader whose policies are weakening, not strengthening, U.S. national security. Human Rights First recommends, therefore, that the United States use military aid and other forms of leverage to press Sisi to end arbitrary arrests and torture and to improve prison conditions, among other steps to reform the country's egregious human rights situation.

A full list of recommendations appears at the end of this report.

Background

Human Rights First has for many years reported on human rights violations in Egypt. This report is based on dozens of interviews conducted over several months with former prisoners, lawyers, activists, and diplomats. Those interviewed broadly agreed that the Egyptian government's policies were strengthening ISIS. While every prisoner's story is different, the accounts of those who witnessed radicalization first-hand demonstrate striking similarities concerning the

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/14/world/middleeast/egypt-sisi.html>

⁸ <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2019-02-04/constitutional-proposals-could-allow-sisi-to-stay-in-power-till-2034-document>

⁹ <https://www.rubio.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/press-releases?ID=7E6423EB-9612-4F6F-A49F-EF4211243298>

¹⁰ For a history of U.S. military aid to Egypt, see <https://pomed.org/fact-sheet-u-s-military-assistance-to-egypt-separating-fact-from-fiction/>

¹¹ <https://www.congress.gov/116/bills/hjres31/BILLS-116hjres31enr.pdf>

process of recruitment, and what motivates prisoners to join ISIS.

The term “radicalization” was used by those who spoke to Human Rights First to mean the practice of conversion to a commitment to use extremist violence, similar to the European Commission’s definition that radicalization “...is understood as a complex phenomenon of people embracing radical ideology that could lead to the commitment of terrorist acts.”¹²

ISIS in Egypt has its roots in Sinai, with the violent extremist group Ansar Bait al-Maqdis. Between 2011 and 2013 Ansar Bait al-Maqdis carried out a series of attacks across Egypt. Some of its leaders had previously fought for Al Qaeda. In 2014 most of its members officially pledged allegiance to ISIS, and the group became Wilayat Sinai (the Sinai Province of ISIS), the ISIS affiliate in Egypt. Members are spread throughout Egypt’s prison system, recruiting fellow detainees to ISIS.¹³

Since 2014, when ISIS came to widespread international attention and first began to recruit in Egypt’s prisons, those interviewed by Human Rights First identified the main motivations for joining ISIS as revenge against the authorities, and the benefit of protection offered by being part of ISIS in the penal system. More recently, as ISIS has become more powerful, it can offer more material benefits to recruits, including books, better food, and access to phones.

There are no definitive figures available for how many people are held on essentially political grounds in Egypt’s prisons and jails. In a TV interview aired by the CBS news show 60 Minutes in January 2019, President Sisi claimed that Egypt holds no political prisoners, while Human Rights Watch puts the number at over 60,000.¹⁴ In 2016 World Prison Brief estimated that around 90,000 prisoners, whether political or not—were held in the country’s prisons, and another 16,000 in its jails.¹⁵

Whatever the exact numbers, Egypt’s prison system maintains a long history of incubating extremist violence. Al Qaeda leader Ayman Al Zawahiri is believed to have been radicalized while being tortured and humiliated in Egyptian jails in the 1980s.¹⁶

Mahmoud Shafiq, the son of an Egyptian army officer, was reportedly arrested in 2013 at the age of 16, while running past a demonstration by the Muslim Brotherhood on his way to school. Shafiq was released a year later, but in December 2016 President Sisi named him as the perpetrator of an ISIS suicide attack on the church of St. Peter and St. Paul in Cairo, which killed 26 people. He was reportedly radicalized in prison after being tortured.¹⁷

While Human Rights First’s research appears to underscore a worsening environment concerning prison-based radicalization, a problem documented in recent years by media outlets and policy-makers.

¹² https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/crisis-and-terrorism/radicalisation_en

¹³ <http://www.rulac.org/news/egypt-a-non-international-armed-conflict-in-the-sinai-peninsula-with-wilaya>

¹⁴ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/egypt-president-el-sisi-denies-ordering-massacre-in-interview-his-government-later-tried-to-block-60-minutes-2019-01-06/>;
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/01/07/egypt-little-truth-al-sisis-60-minutes-responses>;

¹⁵ <http://prisonstudies.org/country/egypt>

¹⁶ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-13789286>

¹⁷ <https://en.qantara.de/content/egypts-hotbeds-of-radicalization-from-inmate-to-jihadist>;
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/13/islamic-state-cairo-church-bombing>;
<https://catholicherald.co.uk/news/2016/12/13/suspect-in-cairo-bombing-was-a-teenager-radicalized-after-police-torture/>

During a visit to Egypt in August 2015, then-Secretary of State John Kerry told reporters of his fears over “radicalization that can take place through imprisonment, through incarceration” and “a sort of revolving cycle of terrorism.”¹⁸

A few weeks before Kerry’s remarks, jailed revolutionary leader Ahmed Maher of the April 6 movement— a youth group that played a key role in the mass protests that began on January 25, 2011, which led to the collapse of the regime of President Hosni Mubarak— gave a media interview from an Egyptian prison. In it he said, “Prison has really become a breeding ground for extremists. It has become a school for crime and terrorism, since there are hundreds of young men piled on top of each other in narrow confines, jihadists next to Muslim Brotherhood members next to revolutionaries next to sympathizers. There are also a large number of young people who were also arrested by mistake and who don’t belong to any school of thought.”¹⁹

“Everyone is suffering oppression and punishment inside the prisons. Everyone is accused of being either a terrorist or a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. This is turning the people arrested by mistake who don’t belong to any movement into jihadists... The authorities treat the prisoners like slaves, and this inspires a thirst for revenge, not to mention the undignified treatment that the families face when they visit,” he added.²⁰

In April 2016 local Egyptian news outlet Al Shorouk ran an in-depth article titled, “Here is Tora [Prison]...A government centre for ISIS recruitment.” It quoted one prisoner who said that

in the notorious prison complex, “some young men in the hands of the ISIS prisoners could be radicalized in as little as ten days.” The paper reported that one man said he spent five months in the infamously harsh Scorpion Prison, and that the inhuman living conditions and cruel treatment of prisoners made “many young people see ISIS as brave heroes who will come and break down the prison walls, because they lost hope in ever getting out legally.” He said some young men could be turned “in only one session in the hands of the members [of ISIS]” with promises of vengeance.²¹

And, in May 2017, former United Nations high commissioner for human rights Zeid Ra’ad al-Husseini said that Egypt’s “state of emergency, the massive numbers of detentions, reports of torture, and continued arbitrary arrests—all of this we believe facilitates radicalization in prisons.”²²

These warnings did not prompt the Egyptian government to seriously address the problem. Nor did they apparently convince the Trump Administration to raise the issue with Egyptian authorities, based on the administration’s public statements.

Revenge and Protection

Egypt’s prisons are dangerous, violent places. Revenge and protection were the most commonly-cited reasons for prisoners to join ISIS, above ideology and theology. Those interviewed cited the desire for revenge against prison authorities and Egypt’s security services as a leading motivator, alongside the protection offered

¹⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/29/world/middleeast/us-citizen-once-held-in-egypts-crackdown-becomes-voice-for-inmates.html>

¹⁹ <https://arabist.net/blog/2015/8/17/in-translation-april-6s-ahmed-maher-on-egypt-under-sisi>

²⁰ <https://arabist.net/blog/2015/8/17/in-translation-april-6s-ahmed-maher-on-egypt-under-sisi>

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<http://cms.shorouknews.com/news/view.aspx?cdate=21042016&id=2b8f13ca-e5d8-4b0f-8868-d24288fa4161>

²² <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-rights-un/u-n-rights-boss-says-egypt-crackdown-facilitates-radicalization-idUSKBN17X1MI>

by ISIS to those who join them. With mass brawls between ISIS and Muslim Brotherhood prisoners relatively common, inmates say they feel better protected both against the guards and fellow prisoners if they join one of the larger groups.

Former prisoner Mohamed Nabil was a prominent member of the April 6 Movement. In 2015, while being held in an Egyptian prison, Nabil saw fellow detainees being put into cells with ISIS prisoners “Often straight after being tortured. The torture including electric shocks, either with an electric baton or just with two wires plugged into the wall and held against bare skin. Some detainees were raped with an electric baton. Other were suspended from the ceiling and electrocuted. I saw that happen....I met a guy they called the ‘Prince of Sinai.’ He told me a few years before the Egyptian air force had struck his house in Sinai, killing his wife and children, and leaving his body burnt on one side. He said he was arrested and tortured by Egyptian security forces, held for over a year. As soon as he left jail he immediately joined ISIS because of what had happened to him. I was in a cell with another guy from Cairo who had been a peaceful protestor. But he was detained for two years, mostly in a solitary cell. When he joined our cell he told me he had been tortured and so joined ISIS.”²³

Another former prisoner referred to as Laith told Human Rights First that he was released in May 2015 after spending seven months in jail for protesting. Laith said the group identifying itself as ISIS recruited “with continuous talk of jihad, especially with those who have long sentences, and they make them listen to their songs and watch videos on phones of their successful terrorist attacks. They exploit the loss of hope for

any change, and say that carrying weapons is the only way for change.”²⁴

Former prisoner Nabhan adds that he was jailed for nine months over two periods in 2015 and 2016, and that the “torture by the regime...of ordinary prisoners...incites them to revenge.”²⁵

Other former prisoners concurred that revenge is a powerful motivation for those tempted to join ISIS in jail. In August 2013, Egyptian-American Mohamed Soltan was shot and later arrested while covering Cairo’s Rabaa Square protest as a citizen journalist. Soltan spent a total of 22 months in detention at three police stations and three prisons. During some of that time, he was held with his father, who remains detained. Prior to his release in May 2015, Soltan’s case and ensuing hunger strike attracted intense U.S. media and political attention.

In an interview with Human Rights First, Soltan relayed that:

Radicalization isn’t a light switch. It’s a process, it happens gradually usually. If you’re abused, you’re more likely to give up your ideas of nonviolence and democracy. At that time, in 2013 and 2014, the ISIS guys were the only ones getting good news in prison. The rest of us, anyone who believed in democracy or peaceful change, were just hearing all the time about how the international community was abandoning us and embracing Sisi. The ISIS guys walked around with an air of victory, all this news coming in of their attacks in Egypt and Syria and everywhere, and the rest of us were just feeling defeated.

²³ Mohamed Nabil, interview with Human Rights First, October 2018.

²⁴ Laith, testimony received by Human Rights First, February 2019 (name changed to protect his identity).

²⁵ Nabhan, testimony received by Human Rights First, February 2019 (name changed to protect his identity).

It's already a fertile ground for radicalization when you have the ISIS guys as the only ones who look like they're winning, but then you add the harassment and the torture and the terrible conditions on top of that.²⁶

Ayman Abdelmeguid was in prison in 2015 and 2016. He adds:

Sometimes the interrogations include physical torture, including sexual torture. A lot of people came out of those interrogations with an appetite for revenge...If you're put in with mostly ISIS guys and you're already looking for revenge against the authorities they say 'Come to us and we will give you a clear opportunity to take revenge. If you don't then fine but you will always have to live with sense of anger.' You live and eat with these people, there is no privacy in Egyptian prisons, and over time they can be very persuasive."²⁷

Egyptian authorities held activist Salem in jail for several months in 2016 for his human rights work. "I met many young prisoners who were easy prey for ISIS," he told Human Rights First. "It's a simple offer to provide revenge—they say to the kids from Sinai that the army humiliated you, so you should humiliate the army. Sometimes people in jail are there because they were picked up at a checkpoint or had something against the government on their Facebook. Then in prison they get electrocuted, in the mouth, on their

genitals. After that they're ready to listen to ISIS."²⁸

Fahad left prison in November 2018. He said some of the prisoners are impressed by ISIS men "who fought the Soviets in the 1970s in Afghanistan and are in the prisons, and they're very prestigious, respected...The Muslim Brotherhood has a range of options to oppose the system—ISIS just has one, violence. It's so much clearer."²⁹

Mohamed Hassanein was arrested in May 2013 on a series of politically-motivated charges—including operating an unlicensed organization and inciting street children to join protests. He and his wife, dual U.S.-Egyptian citizen, Aya Hijazi, spent three years in prison after setting up an NGO they named the Belady Foundation to protect Cairo's street children. The couple were released together with four others from the organization in April 2017, after being acquitted on all charges. Noted Hassanein:

The Muslim Brotherhood has a social network where they look after the prisoners. But those who are outside of that structure were targeted by ISIS, who started to support them financially. The next targets were those who were tortured badly in national security, so they start telling them they are being victimized because the Islamic State is still weak, but if it was a strong nation no-one would be able to torture its soldiers, that its soldiers would be strong and no-one could victimize them.³⁰

²⁶ Mohamed Soltan, interview with Human Rights First, January 2019.

²⁷ Ayman Abdelmeguid interview with Human Rights First, October 2018.

²⁸ Salem, interview with Human Rights First, January 2019 (name changed to protect his identity).

²⁹ Fahad, interview with Human Rights First (name changed to protect his identity).

³⁰ Mohamed Hassanein, interview with Human Rights First, January 2019.

Ibrahim Halawa is an Irish-born citizen who was on vacation in Egypt in 2013 when he was arrested. He told Human Rights First he was held in nine different locations over more than four years in detention. He was charged with various crimes, including inciting riots and sabotage, and put on trial with nearly five hundred others.³¹

Halawa was acquitted and released in October 2017. As he recalls:

I remember the first time I heard about ISIS. We would always wait for one of the prisoners having a family visit to come back with news from outside. I remember a guy walks in from his visit around the middle of 2014 and he goes 'There's these videos online about people being attacked in Iraq and Syria by this group called ISIS' and we were all like 'Who the hell is that and what the hell is happening—this was supposed to be a revolution against Bashar...but he was like 'No, the world is changing, these guys broke from Al Qaeda.'

By the end of 2014 we saw some people in prison were starting to get interested in the ISIS ideology, but didn't feel confident enough to say much publicly. But then as ISIS gained more power on the outside, so those ISIS guys on the inside got more confident, got stronger. I saw a lot more ISIS guys coming into prison towards the end of 2014 when I was in Al Marg Prison...I first saw ISIS have its own cell at the end of 2015 in the 440 Prison in the Al Natrun complex.³²

Halawa also recounted horrific conditions in the prison system that encouraged ISIS to prey on younger prisoners:

[W]hen Sisi really established power the police on the outside started behaving much worse, and local police were just putting people in prison over parking issue or for running a traffic light—these guys then get tortured in prison and accused with a list of terrorism charges. We had a lot of guys like these, and they were the most likely to be radicalized after they'd been beaten and tortured.

And then the guards beat who they wanted when they wanted. More and more prisoners were being compressed in cells. I can tell you, I saw a cell 3.5m x 5.5m and it took up to 50 people. I saw this with my own eyes—a criminal who was sort of in charge of the cell would make the prisoners lay on the ground on their sides all pressed up against each other, then he would sit down on his butt, brace himself against the wall, and with his legs squash them all up against the wall to fit. This was in Prison 440—that's how they would sleep, squished up. If you're sleeping like that for the next three years, you're open to hearing from the ISIS recruiters.

Sometimes you had prisoners who had been protestors, and they were tortured and beaten, sometimes their families were tortured in front of them, or taken and disappeared by the authorities. Those who were most vulnerable were the youth and the illiterate guys.³³

³¹ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/ibrahim-halawa-freed-egypt-prison-death-penalty-release-cairo-a7954281.html>

³² Ibrahim Halawa, interview with Human Rights First, December 2018.

³³ *Ibid.*

The offer of helping prisoners get revenge was simple and effective, said Halawa.

Some guys are just radicalized into being armed—it's not always about the theology. I saw that in the guys from Sinai, thinking 'We don't care who gives us the gun, if it's ISIS then okay. Whoever brings me arms is my friend.'

The ISIS ideology offers a practical path to revenge, rewards in heaven and protection and loyalty in prison, stronger than the other groups can offer. For instance, say some guy punches you in prison over something. Usually people step in to try and break it up before it escalates, and you both end up being punished in solitary. But if you're with ISIS, the ISIS guys they all pile in to help you, even if they all get beaten together by the police they'll support you. I saw that happen—it was a visible guarantee of support from ISIS. Some guys were like 'Yeah, I want part of this, I want to be backed by this.' It's gang membership stuff, and very effective.³⁴

Other former inmates reported how ISIS offered an attractive, simple offer of vengeance. Sherif was released from prison on October 2018. As he recalled:

In Giza Prison I saw an 18 year old...he was arrested for generally being a bit out of control—playing around with drugs, always in trouble. When he arrived he was a partying kid with a cool nickname. Then the guards hung him from the ceiling with his hands behind his back,

flogged him, tortured him with electrical wires. The ISIS guys talked to him, offered him revenge. He joined them and changed his nickname to Suicide Vest.³⁵

Taking Control

A policy of non-cooperation with prison authorities earned ISIS a reputation for toughness inside Egypt's prisons, which producing benefits for their members as the authorities, cowed by the extremists' defiance and threats of violence, make concessions to their demands. As Hassanein said, ISIS "could first get at those who were put in [court] cases with them, to convert them to their ideology, and then they went hunting when they had a solid power base."³⁶

Faisal is a lawyer in his 40s with clients across Egypt's prison system. Some have been radicalized and now refuse to allow him to represent them. Faisal relayed:

The ISIS groups in prison offer better food to the poorer prisoners, and they provide much better protection against the guards and against the other prisoners. Other benefits, depending on the prison, include good access to smuggled phones, and sometimes books. They even provide a sort of education system where prisons can study for an ISIS 'diploma.' Some guards are scared of the ISIS groups because of threats of revenge when they get released. Some of the very religious guards are frightened by the ISIS guys praying against them, and ask them not to do it.³⁷

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Sherif, interview with Human Rights First (name changed to protect his identity).

³⁶ Hassanein, interview with Human Rights First, January 2019.

³⁷ Faisal, interview with Human Rights First (name changed to protect his identity).

Other former detainees also recount how ISIS has managed to take control of parts of the system.

Per Soltan:

[ISIS] had power inside the prisons too—in my last six months the same two or three ISIS guys from Sinai had access to me when no-one else did, when I was completely cut off, in complete isolation, with two guards outside my cell. That access was enabled by the authorities somehow.

It was always very hard for us to get smuggled phones in prison, but not for the ISIS guys. One came in to my cell once asking me for advice on the best VPNs [virtual private networks] so he could access them on his phone. One guy who was converted to ISIS, he made his pledge of allegiance to ISIS during recess on a phone.³⁸

Soltan and others described how ISIS's aggressive attitude in prison towards the authorities results in respect and benefits for their members:

The ISIS guys definitely got preferential treatment. This was partly because the guards were scared of them; no-one else was crazy enough to fight the guards directly. The democracy guys can be a bit soft. The ISIS prisoners stand up for themselves and the regime thugs give them a sort of respect, like mutual respect between thugs. But it's also because the regime needs the ISIS guys to exist to justify their own violence and repression.

It's no coincidence they get better treatment.³⁹

ISIS “mediates for prisoners with the prison authorities and gets them to implement their demands,” said Nabhan.⁴⁰

ISIS members challenge the guards directly, said Halawa. “[W]e’ll fight you if you try to control us and we are willing to die—this is where they got more respect and strength in the prison,” he noted. “They became strong and managed to get books in to help them spread radicalization—they got food and clothes, basic necessities for their group.”⁴¹

Sherif described that when ISIS prisoners refuse to cooperate with the prison system they earn some degree of power:

They don't respond if a prison guard says 'Hi,' [and] they refuse to leave their cells to go to court or to get into the police vans. Then they refuse to leave the police vans or to have lawyers, refuse to recognize the court. So getting them to court can be hard because they refuse to go, and the authorities have to either take them by force or negotiate. Their reputation is enhanced in the prison because the guards have to negotiate with them.⁴²

This behavior, in Sherif's view, leads to ISIS becoming steadily more powerful:

ISIS threaten the guards, [and says] that they will attack them and their families in their homes. [The guards] don't do proper searches of their cells. In some prisons only the ISIS group manages to keep the smuggled phones. This radical brand is

³⁸ Soltan, interview with Human Rights First, January 2019.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Nabhan, testimony received in February 2019.

⁴¹ Ibrahim Halawa, interview with Human Rights First, December 2018.

⁴² Sherif, interview with Human Rights First, January 2019.

very attractive to those with grievances, how they stand up to the authorities.... They celebrate openly and loudly in their cells when they hear of a successful attack outside. The guards, even the senior officers, are scared of them. They get all the books they want, they make sure the guys in their group get proper portions of food, they offer people protection and revenge.”⁴³

One woman in her 30s told Human Rights First how she went to visit a relative in Tora prison in 2018:

The rules are that only three family members are allowed at the visits, the prisoner has to be hand cuffed and searched on the way in and the way out. But on my visit, in comes an ISIS prisoner, no handcuffs, not searched, and with about 15 family members there to see him. When the visiting time ended, we had to leave but he was still there, allowed to carry on chatting with his family.”⁴⁴

Said Fahad, a prisoner released in November 2018:

In some prisons, like Al Natrun, there are hundreds in the ISIS group and they're really powerful. They control parts of how the prison is run and can identify vulnerable prisoners they want transferred to their cell to radicalize, and the guards do it. They basically threaten mass disobedience if the prison authorities don't give them what they want, and the guards

don't care that the radicalization is happening.”⁴⁵

Countering Extremism

Some former prisoners told Human Rights First they tried individually, or in pairs, to counter the influence of ISIS in prison by talking to those targeted by the group. One even managed temporarily to set up a book group to divert the conversation onto other issues. Others said they tried to talk to prison authorities about what was happening, but were ignored. There appears to be no concerted effort by Egypt's prison officials to prevent radicalization. Former detainees said this was either because the guards didn't care, or because they were becoming too scared of the power of ISIS inside prisons to attempt to stop it.

“The authorities should isolate ISIS prisoners from the others, and establish awareness campaigns in prisons against radicalization. Those given harsh sentences for just protesting or opposing the regime should have retrials,” said Laith.⁴⁶

Added Nabil, “When I was interrogated, I told the officer about this cycle of torturing people who then join ISIS. He just fell silent.”⁴⁷

Mahmoud is a lawyer and former prisoner. He told Human Right First that in jail, “Another inmate and myself tried to counter what the ISIS guys were saying to the others in the cell, to try on an individual basis to stop the radicalization, but they threatened us physically so we stopped. I went and told the prison authorities what was

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Interview with Human Rights First, January 2019 (name withheld to protect her identity).

⁴⁵ Fahad, Interview with Human Rights First, January 2019 (name changed to protect his identity).

⁴⁶ Laith, testimony received by Human Rights First, February 2019.

⁴⁷ Mohamed Nabil, interview with Human Rights First, January 2019.

happening about the radicalization but they didn't give a shit."⁴⁸

Hassanein, the wrongfully-detained NGO leader, said that:

Many are arrested who are ISIS sympathizers but they haven't really adopted the full ideology. They might have joined out of some transient frustration, to avenge someone or a victimized group. Then, when they hear how others reject their ideology, or they meet the April 6 people, they develop friendly human relationships and it melts the ice and this has a really positive effect on them. That mingling reduced the spread of ISIS because the ISIS guys had very weak religious ideology. The ISIS guys aren't the most educated and don't have the best arguments, so the mixing and mingling reduced their influence.⁴⁹

Speaking about conversations with a particular ISIS member, Hassanein added:

He didn't know how to read the basic religious texts, but he would talk about complicated jurisprudence issues of jihad, so I started discussing democracy with him. When ISIS people hear democracy they go berserk. I said by the way there are examples of democracy in Islam and the guy couldn't believe it, so I gave him several examples but he thought I was making them up, and he wanted to ask the sheikhs. So they confirmed what I'd said about there being democracy in Islam. So the guy started questioning all

sorts of things and came to me with many questions.⁵⁰

Then he was talking about the women fighters in the [Kurdish] Peshmerga [fighting ISIS in Iraq]. He said he wanted to fight them and conquer them. A big part of the ISIS appeal was about sexual promises of having women slaves in this life and virgins in the afterlife. So I said 'why would you want to fight the Peshmerga, when they're Sunni Muslims,' and he insisted they were Shia. So we went to the ISIS sheikh in prison, the emir, a guy who had fought in Syria. The emir confirmed they were Sunnis and so the ISIS guy became more skeptical, when he realized the fight with the Peshmerga was about politics and territory, and you could have a war that wasn't about religion.⁵¹

Salem said he started a book discussion group in jail in 2016 after bribing the guards to allow some books—including ones by Kafka and Orwell—into the cells. "The books and the discussions gave us something else to talk about, it was a different conversation from one about radicalizing, opening minds a bit, and it helped counter the ISIS guys. But then the guards took the books and put me in solitary confinement."⁵²

"Diplomats at the American embassy, those members of Congress who come here, they should go to the prisons and see the truth for themselves," he added.⁵³

⁴⁸ Mahmud, interview with Human Rights First, January 2019 (name changed to protect his identity).

⁴⁹ Hassanein, interview with Human Rights First, January 2019.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Salem, interview with Human Rights First, January 2019.

⁵³ Ibid.

“Once [the authorities] brought in a moderate religious scholar to speak but he was very superficial,” said Nabhan.⁵⁴

Former detainees say a program aimed at having radicalized prisoners renounce violent extremism has failed. “In 2016 hundreds of prisoners signed a document renouncing violence and radical thoughts after being promised early release,” said Mahmoud, the lawyer and former prisoner. “But they weren’t released, so now they have given up the benefits of being in the ISIS group and have to be kept separate from ISIS for their own safety. This scheme has been completely discredited—those who signed are now in physical danger from ISIS inside prison.”⁵⁵

Other former detainees told Human Rights First the so-called “Revision and Renunciation” program was really aimed at requiring Muslim Brotherhood prisoners to pledge allegiance to the Sisi regime, and that some prisoners signed to get the benefits of access to TVs and exercise time, but have no intention of giving up violence.

Former prisoners say that measures that would help curb radicalization include ending torture, improving conditions inside the prisons, and enabling closer family contact, to reduce ISIS preying on those who feel isolated or alienated.

Others suggest that families be given an allowance to visit relatives in prison, for the prisoners to be given access to moderate religious texts and teachers, and for prisoners to be allowed to continue their studies in detention.

Fahad suggested that “Better prison conditions would take away some of the grievances that ISIS uses to convince prisoners—it’s not a guarantee, but if you stop the torture and the beatings it takes away a bit of the power from ISIS.”⁵⁶

Faisal said the authorities could take immediate steps to stop the radicalization. “First they have to recognize it’s happening. Then stop the random detentions, stop torturing prisoners and give them their rights. Prisoners shouldn’t have to attach themselves to an ISIS group to get their rights,” he said.⁵⁷

“Stop the torture, stop mixing ISIS with non-ISIS people in the same cases,” said Sherif. “If you put them in cells together, [and] put them to court together, they become part of the ISIS group by default,” said Halawa.⁵⁸ “The authorities aren’t fighting it, they’re allowing it to grow, maybe because it supports Sisi’s bullshit—it creates the problem that Sisi wants to exist. He needs ISIS to be in Sinai or wherever,” he said.⁵⁹ Added Halawa:

Most guys just want to live normally, even some of those radicalized, they just want to go back to a normal life. If you gave prisoners TV, newspapers, phones to talk to your family—this happened a bit in the Mubarak era, and it slowed the radicalization. Some families can’t afford to visit prisoners in the middle of the desert, and so the prisoners become isolated from them, and more vulnerable to the recruiters. Having more family visits, books, this would make the recruitment harder.⁶⁰

⁵⁴ Nabhan, testimony received in February 2019.

⁵⁵ Mahmoud, interview with Human Rights First, January 2019.

⁵⁶ Fahad, interview with Human Rights First, January 2019.

⁵⁷ Faisal, interview with Human Rights First, January 2019.

⁵⁸ Halawa, interview with Human Rights First, December 2018.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

Soltan suggests that “International oversight of prisons is needed, you can’t let the Egyptians just run it like this. American officials could ask to see inside the prisons, not just the showcase soft prisons but inside Tora and the harsh places.”⁶¹

“What would help would be access to prison libraries, and to disperse the thought leaders, the moderate democracy guys, across the system. They’re held separately and they could be a moderating force in prisons against the ISIS groups, their ideas are the best firewall against ISIS,” added Soltan.⁶²

“The sense that the world has abandoned you is really powerful, and the ISIS guys exploit that,” said Soltan. “I had a visit where I learned that [former] Senator [John] McCain spoke about my case, and on the way back it was an ISIS guy who was pushing me in my wheelchair. I came back at him with this—that the outside world was watching out for us, that we hadn’t been abandoned. It makes a huge difference if an official says something, you don’t feel forgotten—give a floor speech, pick a case, make a statement, just show you care,” he said.⁶³

American Influence

Late Senator John McCain (R-AZ) was a leading critic of Egypt’s human rights record, particularly after the popular uprisings that forced the removal of President Hosni Mubarak in 2011. Along with Senator Lindsey Graham (R-SC) and Senator Patrick Leahy (D-VT), among others, McCain was

one of several members of Congress that urged military aid be withheld from Cairo contingent on reform.⁶⁴

Since FY 2012, Congress routinely passed appropriations legislation withholding military aid to Egypt until the secretary of state certifies that the Egyptian government is taking various steps toward supporting democracy and human rights. With the exception of FY 2014, lawmakers included alongside this conditionality a national security waiver to allow the administration to waive the certification requirement under certain conditions.⁶⁵

As in FY 2018, the language signed into law under the 2019 Consolidated Appropriations Act outlines conditions that the Egyptian government must meet in order to allow the release of the \$300 million in FMF. This includes that “the Government of Egypt is taking sustained and effective steps to”:

- (i) advance democracy and human rights in Egypt, including to govern democratically and protect religious minorities and the rights of women, which are in addition to steps taken during the previous calendar year for such purposes;
- (ii) implement reforms that protect freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly, including the ability of civil society organizations, human rights defenders, and the media to function without interference;

⁶¹ Soltan, interview with Human Rights First, January 2019.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ <https://www.politico.com/story/2013/08/john-mccain-lindsey-graham-egypt-095236>;
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/john-mccain-and-lindsey-graham-cut-off-aid-to-egypt/2013/07/12/5850a1f4-eb19-11e2-a301->

[ea5a8116d211_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.97bb2753cd8f](https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2017-09-07/senate-panel-slashes-military-aid-to-egypt); <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2017-09-07/senate-panel-slashes-military-aid-to-egypt>; Senator Leahy also reportedly put a hold on aid to Egypt contingent on additional conditions to those outlined in appropriations legislation, including compensation for U.S. citizen April Corley, grievously injured when Egyptian security forces mistakenly bombed a group of tourists in 2015.

⁶⁵ <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33003.pdf>

- (iii) release political prisoners and provide detainees with due process of law;
- (iv) hold Egyptian security forces accountable, including officers credibly alleged to have violated human rights;
- (v) investigate and prosecute cases of extrajudicial killings and forced disappearances; and
- (vi) provide regular access for United States officials to monitor such assistance in areas where the assistance is used.”⁶⁶

While these conditions reflect many of the human rights violations endemic under Sisi’s increasingly repressive rule, they notably do not directly reference penal reform and other actions that could be taken to reduce prison-based radicalization, beyond the release of political prisoners.

Conclusion

Eyewitness accounts from former prisoners, as compiled by Human Rights First, suggest an intensifying problem of recruitment by ISIS in Egypt’s prisons that is largely ignored by authorities. Not only is ISIS exploiting the widespread abuse of detainees with promises of enabling revenge, the extremist group appears to be asserting greater control over parts of the prison system itself.

This phenomenon is not confined to one or two places of detention, and has been happening for years. Lawyers and former detainees who spoke with Human Rights First largely agree that the dynamic occurs throughout the penal system and is growing more acute. The growth of ISIS supporters and other violent extremists is clearly a problem for Egypt, for the region, and for the

United States. If the Trump Administration is serious about countering terrorism, it should immediately investigate the state of Egypt’s prisons, identify key drivers of radicalization, and urge Egyptian authorities to change their enabling behavior.

According to former prisoners, such behavior includes the rampant use of torture and other forms of mistreatment, abysmal prison conditions, and the frequent mixing of violent and non-violent offenders (including those incarcerated for peaceful dissent and other political crimes), which also likely contributes to radicalization.

Recommendations

- U.S. government officials should privately and publicly make clear to the Egyptian government their alarm that prison conditions in Egypt are fueling recruitment to ISIS, and that urgent reform is required.
- U.S. embassy officials in Egypt should request access to prisons to assess conditions and make recommendations for improvement, as should visiting members of Congress.
- The Trump Administration should nominate a suitably qualified ambassador to Egypt as soon as possible.
- Congress should significantly reduce the amount of FMF contingent on significant improvements in the country’s human rights record in the FY 2020 Appropriations Act, while increasing the amount of funds conditional on human rights progress beyond \$300 million. Congress should further limit the secretary of state’s ability, absent a national emergency, to invoke a national security waiver to end-run congressional intent.

⁶⁶ <https://www.congress.gov/116/bills/hr648/BILLS-116hr648eh.pdf>, p.714.

- Congress should include prison reform conditions in appropriations legislation concerning FMF to Egypt—including an end to torture and mistreatment in detention in Egypt, and evidence of effective segregation of hardcore ISIS prisoners from the rest of the prison population.
- The administration should sanction individual Egyptian officials found to have engaged in human rights violations—including torture and other the abuses of detainees—using authority provided under the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act. Such designations and any withholding of aid should be accompanied by a robust diplomatic strategy intended to improve Egypt’s human rights record and contribute to regional and international security.

A Selection of Testimonies from Lawyers and Former Prisoners

Mohamed Nabil⁶⁷

Mohamed Nabil describes himself as a liberal activist, a Human Rights Defender, and a member of April 6 Youth Movement’s Political Bureau. He states that he was arrested for his political activity.

I was held at Central Security Centre for over a month in 2015.

There the detainees were separated—the political prisoners and the ordinary criminal suspects. It’s a pretrial detention center, called 10.5k because it’s 10.5km from Cairo.

Within the political section the liberal and the Muslim Brotherhood detainees were held together, and there was a separate cell for the ISIS prisoners. After an altercation with a guard

when I arrived I was put in the ISIS cell as punishment for several weeks with between 35-50 others in the ISIS cell.

Other prisoners were exposed to ISIS this way, by being put in their cell, often straight after being tortured. The torture including electric shocks, either with an electric baton or just with two wires plugged into the wall and held against bare skin. I was forced to watch detainees being tortured that way, including a teenager.

Some detainees were raped with an electric baton. Others were suspended from the ceiling and electrocuted. I saw that happen.

What I saw didn’t involve the detainees being asked questions for information, it was just punishment, usually done by a team of five or six, with one of them an officer and others junior.

In the ISIS cell I met a guy they called the “Prince of Sinai.” He told me a few years before the Egyptian air force had struck his house in Sinai, killing his wife and children, and leaving his body burnt on one side. He said he was arrested and tortured by Egyptian security forces, held for over a year. As soon as he left jail he immediately joined ISIS because of what had happened to him.

I was in a cell with another guy from Cairo who had been a peaceful protestor. But he was detained for two years, mostly in a solitary cell. When he joined our cell he told me he had been tortured and so joined ISIS.

When I was interrogated I told the officer about this cycle of torturing people who then join ISIS. He just fell silent.

⁶⁷ Interviewed by Human Rights First October 2018.

Mohamed Soltan

Egyptian-American Mohamed Soltan was shot and later arrested in August 2013 at Cairo's Rabaa Square protest, where he was covering the mass sit-in as a citizen journalist. He spent 22 months in detention at three police stations and three prisons before being released in May 2015.

I saw ISIS guys throughout the time I was in prison. The interaction began in early 2014 when their recess times overlapped with others and then we were just all in the same recess.

There was one ISIS guy who was in Tora Istiqbal prion with me in late 2013, he was on a liquids-only hunger strike. We used to ask the guards to give him drinks. They transferred him to the prison hospital and then he ended up in the same ward as me, next to the hospital, two cells down from me and my dad. I remember once my dad offered the guy food and some pieces of clothing, but the next morning we found the food and clothes outside out cell with a note saying, "I can't accept gifts from infidels."

So my dad confronted him about it and the ISIS guys says 'You and your son have been good to me and I'm starting to like you, but I know when the Islamic State reaches Cairo you're going to be the first I'm asked to kill, and I don't want to have emotions for you.'

At that time, in 2013 and 2014, the ISIS guys were the only ones getting good news in prison. The rest of us, anyone who believed in democracy or peaceful change, were just hearing all the time about how the international community was abandoning us and embracing Sisi. The ISIS guys walked around with an air of victory, all this news coming in of their attacks in Egypt and Syria and everywhere, and the rest of us were just feeling defeated.

It's already a fertile ground for radicalization when you have the ISIS guys as the only ones who look like they're winning, but then you add the harassment and the torture and the terrible conditions on top of that.

In prison, the ISIS guys would constantly come by and try to talk me out of my hunger strike and tell me the rest of the world doesn't care, and violence is the only language the world understands.

They had power inside the prisons too—in my last six months the same two or three ISIS guys from Sinai had access to me when no-one else did, when I was completely cut off, in complete isolation, with two guards outside my cell. That access was enabled by the authorities somehow. The ISIS guys would say they're in the next ward to my father, that he's being tortured, that I should come off the hunger strike and give up my non-violence. They were able to get in to see me a dozen or more times in the last six months.

It was always very hard for us to get smuggled phones in prison, but not for the ISIS guys. One came in to my cell once asking me for advice on the best VPNs [virtual private networks] so he could access them on his phone. One guy who was converted to ISIS, he made his pledge of allegiance to ISIS during recess on a phone.

The ISIS guys definitely got preferential treatment. This was partly because the guards were scared of them; no-one else was crazy enough to fight the guards directly. The democracy guys can be a bit soft. The ISIS prisoners stand up for themselves and the regime thugs give them a sort of respect, like mutual respect between thugs. But it's also because the regime needs the ISIS guys to exist to justify their own violence and repression. It's no coincidence they get better treatment.

On March 16, 2015, lots of us went to court, all in the same prison van and then in the holding cells together. There was one ISIS guy there, one of those who used to have access to my cell. The same judge hears our various cases and we're all there in the court, listening. The judge tells the ISIS guy he's guilty of being part of ISIS, has done this and that etc. Then he says he's releasing him on bail. We're all confused. And then the judge hands out sentences in our case, and gives the death penalty to 13 guys, including my dad. The contrast was incredible, I couldn't make sense of it. For me it was a clear indication that the regime needs these guys to be radicalized, that it needs these radicalization factories of prisons.

The sense that the world has abandoned you is really powerful, and the ISIS guys exploit that. I had a visit where I learned that Senator McCain spoke about my case, and on the way back it was an ISIS guy who was pushing me in my wheelchair. I came back at him with this—that the outside world was watching out for us, that we hadn't been abandoned.

It makes a huge difference if an official says something, you don't feel forgotten—give a floor speech, pick a case, make a statement, just show you care.

Radicalization isn't a light switch, it's a process, it happens gradually usually. If you're abused you're more likely to give up your ideas of nonviolence and democracy.

International oversight of prisons is needed, you can't let the Egyptians just run it like this.

American officials could ask to see inside the prisons, not just the showcase soft prisons but inside Tora and the harsh places.

What would help would be access to prison libraries, and to disperse the thought leaders, the

moderate democracy guys, across the system. They're held separately and they could be a moderating force in prisons against the ISIS groups, their ideas are the best firewall against ISIS.

Ayman Abdelmeguid⁶⁸

Ayman Abdelmeguid describes himself as a liberal Egyptian political activist living in exile in Europe, and says he was arrested for being a member of the 6th of April movement on charges of being part of a banned movement, and coordinating a march without a permission.

I was in prison for three months at the end of 2015 and the start of 2016. I was held and experienced solitary confinement in multiple different prisons and jails, including the 10.5km prison, Al Qanatar prison and the jail of Giza court in addition to several different police stations.

I was interrogated by state security three times. I was blindfolded and handcuffed, and they threatened to break my injured shoulder; they made threats against me and against my wife.

Some people in jail aren't political at all—they're neutral and are there because they were talking to a girl when a march came by and they got swept up in it and were arrested, or because they're related to someone involved in political Islam.

Sometimes the interrogations include physical torture, including sexual torture. A lot of people came out of those interrogations with an appetite for revenge.

At the 10.5km prison there were five cells for political prisoners. If you're put in with mostly ISIS guys and you're already looking for revenge against the authorities they say "Come to us and we will give you a clear opportunity to take

⁶⁸ Interviewed by Human Rights First October 2018.

revenge. If you don't, then fine, but you will always have to live with sense of anger." You live and eat with these people, there is no privacy in Egyptian prisons, and over time they can be very persuasive.

Then the ordinary criminals, the non-political prisoners, maybe they're in for smoking hash or something, or just because they fell out with their local police officer. They see how committed the ISIS guys are, they see them as "Men of God" offering a religious path, a life of prayer and humility before God. One told me "I cast my old life aside and joined ISIS." He owned a shop next to a shop owned by a police guy. They had a dispute and the guy was put in jail for three years without any trial. He lost his business, and his wife was left penniless. He said: "Give me a gun and a bomb and I will go to the nearest police station and bomb it."

People who used to be moderate Islamists are also attracted by ISIS—they say they no longer believe in politics or democracy, that they won the elections but have ended up in prison, so why not try weapons?

I saw ISIS guys mingling with the other prisoners in various places I was held, it's complete bullshit that they're segregated. Also the ones recruited by ISIS attract others, it was like a fire in a forest.

Faisal⁶⁹

A lawyer in his 40s, Faisal said his clients tell him how ISIS is recruiting in the prison system across the country. Like other lawyers who spoke to Human Rights First, Faisal says he has clients who were radicalized and now refuse all legal representation.

⁶⁹ Interviewed by Human Rights First, January 2019. His name has been changed.

The ISIS groups in prison offer better food to the poorer prisoners, and they provide much better protection against the guards and against the other prisoners. Other benefits, depending on the prison, include good access to smuggled phones, and sometimes books. They even provide a sort of education system where prisoners can study for an ISIS "diploma."

Some guards are scared of the ISIS groups because of threats of revenge when they get released. Some of the very religious guards are frightened by the ISIS guys praying against them, and ask them not to do it.

They have a much simpler, clearer message than the Muslim Brotherhood—it's just about revenge. The head ISIS guy in the prison is called the emir, and he's very powerful.

To stop the radicalization, he says the authorities should take immediate steps.

First they have to recognize it's happening. Then stop the random detentions, stop torturing prisoners and give them their rights. Prisoners shouldn't have to attach themselves to an ISIS group to get their rights.

Salem⁷⁰

Salem is a human rights activist in his 30s who spent several months in jail in 2016.

I met many young prisoners who were easy prey for ISIS. The older guys are sort of immune to what ISIS says, but for the younger ones it's a powerful appeal. The ISIS guys tell them 'You tried politics, elections, and it didn't work,' and many of the younger guys are susceptible.

⁷⁰ Salem, interviewed by Human Rights First, January 2019. His name has been changed.

It's a simple offer to provide revenge—they say to the kids from Sinai that the army humiliated you, so you should humiliate the army.

Sometimes people in jail are there because they were picked up at a checkpoint or had something against the government on their Facebook. Then in prison they get electrocuted, in the mouth, on their genitals. After that they're ready to listen to ISIS.

One ISIS guy in prison with me was effective—he would say to the young Muslim Brotherhood guys that 'when you have an election it's your arguments against their arguments, but once a gun enters the equation you need your own gun to fight back.' I saw many people attracted by this logic.

Salem said he started a book discussion group in jail in 2016 after bribing the guards to let in some books—including by Kafka and Orwell—into the cells.

The books and the discussions gave us something else to talk about, it was a different conversation from one about radicalizing, opening minds a bit, and it helped counter the ISIS guys. But then the guards took the books and put me in solitary confinement.

Diplomats at the American embassy, those members of Congress who come here, they should go to the prisons and see the truth for themselves.

Mohamed Hassanein⁷¹

Mohamed Hassanein was arrested in May 2013 on a series of politically-motivated charges including operating an unlicensed organization and inciting street children to join protests. He and his wife, dual U.S.-Egyptian citizen, Aya Hijazi, spent three

years in prison after setting up the Belady Foundation, an NGO seeking to protect street children in Cairo. The couple were released in April 2017 after being acquitted of all charges with four others from the organization who had also been jailed.

In 2014 there weren't that many ISIS guys in prison but they had a base. There weren't national security officers in the prison, just regular police guards. Then in 2015 national security officers appeared and that was a bad development.

Every prisoner has a file, it's called a ticket. When I was arrested it had all my case details in it, but then when the national security officers came to the prison they added another category to classify my thinking.

Before they arrived too everyone was mixed in together—the liberals, various kinds of Islamists, Muslim Brotherhood guys, and ISIS guys.

But the national security officers started to allow people to choose which group they would be in a ward or a cell with. They let the ISIS guys be with each other, though they were less flexible about the liberals being together. So, the ISIS guys got together and everyone left them alone, but I stayed in that cell with them. The police were surprised that I wanted to stay there with them but I thought it was an opportunity to understand them and learn how they think.

When they were dispersed they sort of melted, but when they were together they formed a hard nucleus.

They could first get at those who were put in cases with them, to convert them to their ideology, and then they went hunting when they had a solid power base.

⁷¹ Mohamed Hassanein, interviewed by Human Rights First January 2019.

The Muslim Brotherhood has a social network where they look after the prisoners but those who are outside of that structure were targeted by ISIS, who started to support them financially. The next targets were those who were tortured badly in national security, so they start telling them they are being victimized because the Islamic State is still weak but if it was a strong nation no-one would be able to torture its soldiers, that its soldiers would be strong and no-one could victimize them.

The first cell I was in had someone from the April 6 movement and others from very moderate non-violent groups, Brotherhood guys and some from ISIS too.

Many are arrested who are ISIS sympathisers but they haven't really adopted the full ideology. They might have joined out of some transient frustration, to avenge someone or a victimised group.

Then when they hear how others reject their ideology, or they meet the April 6 people, they develop friendly human relationships and it melts the ice and this has a really positive effect on them. That mingling reduced the spread of ISIS because the ISIS guys had very weak religious ideology. If they mixed with other nonviolent Islamists they would start to discuss religion, and if they met with the April 6 prisoners they would talk about human rights and politics and there would be an exchange of ideas. The ISIS guys aren't the most educated and don't have the best arguments, so the mixing and mingling reduced their influence.

I met one guy, an unsophisticated guy who was with ISIS. He didn't know how to read the basic religious texts, but he would talk about complicated jurisprudence issues of jihad, so I started discussing democracy with him. When

ISIS people hear "democracy" they go berserk. I said by the way there are examples of democracy in Islam and the guy couldn't believe it, so I gave him several examples but he thought I was making them up, and he wanted to ask the sheikhs.

So, they confirmed what I'd said about there being democracy in Islam. So, they guy started questioning all sorts of things and came to me with many questions.

Then he was talking about the women fighters in the Peshmerga [a Kurdish military force fighting ISIS in Iraq], he said he wanted to fight them and conquer them. A big part of the ISIS appeal was about sexual promises of having women slaves in this life and virgins in the afterlife.

So, I said why would you want to fight the Peshmerga, when they're Sunni Muslims, and he insisted they were Shia. So, we went to the ISIS sheikh in prison, the emir, a guy who had fought in Syria. The emir confirmed they were Sunnis and so the ISIS guy became more skeptical, when he realized the fight with the Peshmerga was about politics and territory, and you could have a war that wasn't about religion.

Then I argued with him about basing a state on religion, and we discussed who decides who are the leaders, and eventually we just started connecting on a human level. He started to see me as someone other than as just a leftist, and we were just men of a similar age talking about life.

Ibrahim Halawa⁷²

Irish-born citizen Ibrahim Halawa was arrested while on vacation in Cairo in 2013 during security raids on a mosque where he was sheltering with his family during anti-government protests. He was charged with inciting violence, riot, and sabotage,

⁷² Interviewed by Human Rights First December 2018.

and was placed into a trial with almost five hundred other defendants.

International media and political attention in Ireland and elsewhere kept his case highlighted for more than four years. His trial was adjourned over 30 times before he was finally acquitted and released in October 2017, when he then returned to Ireland.

I was detained for over four years, and held in nine different places.

I remember the first time I heard about ISIS. We would always wait for one of the prisoners having a family visit to come back with news from outside. I remember, a guy walks in from his visit around the middle of 2014 and he goes, "There's these videos online about people being attacked in Iraq and Syria by this group called ISIS and we were all like, "Who the hell is that and what the hell is happening—this was supposed to be a revolution against Bashar," but he was like, "No, the world is changing, these guys broke from Al Qaeda."

By the end of 2014 we saw some people in prison were starting to get interested in the ISIS ideology but didn't feel confident enough to say much publicly, but then as ISIS gained more power on the outside so those ISIS guys on the inside got more confident, got stronger. I saw a lot more ISIS guys coming into prison towards the end of 2014 when I was in Al Marg Prison.

At that time, you had about half a dozen guys in the ISIS group, others in Al Qaeda group, or the Muslim Brotherhood group, in the April 6 group, or from Christians Against the Coup. Various groups all in the same cell but in separate corners, whispering. As the numbers got larger the groups were segregated into their own cells, and I first saw ISIS have its own cell at the end of 2015 in the 440 Prison in the Al Natrun complex.

Over the years the oppression got heavier, and ISIS recruitment picked up. At the start, the political situation outside was less certain, and the officers were a bit more wary about how they treated us, but when Sisi really established power the police on the outside started behaving much worse, and local police were just putting people in prison over parking issue or for running a traffic light—these guys then get tortured in prison and accused with a list of terrorism charges. We had a lot of guys like these, and they were the most likely to be radicalized after they'd been beaten and tortured.

And then the guards beat who they wanted when they wanted. More and more prisoners were being compressed in cells. I can tell you, I saw a cell 3.5m x 5.5m and it took up to 50 people. I saw this with my own eyes—a criminal who was sort of in charge of the cell would make the prisoners lay on the ground on their sides all pressed up against each other, then he would sit down on his butt, brace himself against the wall, and with his legs squash them all up against the wall to fit. This was in Prison 440—that's how they would sleep, squished up. If you're sleeping like that for the next three years, you're open to hearing from the ISIS recruiters.

Sometimes you had prisoners who had been protestors, and they were tortured and beaten, sometimes their families were tortured in front of them, or taken and disappeared by the authorities.

Those who were most vulnerable were the youth and the illiterate guys without much understanding of what hate was about, just an understanding that, "This guy is attacking me, so he deserves to be killed but I need to justify it somehow." So, this is where the ISIS guy comes in, offering to help, and giving a reassurance that if you die trying you'll end up in heaven anyway.

One of the ISIS guys said to me, "You're not really a Muslim and your dad's not a Muslim." And I was

like, "Whoa my dad is a Muslim cleric what are you saying?" For a Muslim to tell another Muslim he's not really Muslim is kind of weird, like Christian telling another Christian you're not a Christian. But they'd say, "This officer did this to you, but no Muslim would do that to another Muslim for calling for freedom—this is anti-Islam and so these officers can't be a real Muslims and should be killed."

The more abuse that happened inside and outside of prison the more the uneducated guys without a religious background were accepting the ideology of revenge. They were often just normal guys—he could be my friend, he's sleeping beside me in the cell, eating with me. I've seen two brothers from the same family fight because one's radicalized and the other isn't.

The ISIS ideology offers a practical path to revenge, rewards in heaven and protection and loyalty in prison, stronger than the other groups can offer. For instance, say some guy punches you in prison over something—usually people step in to try and break it up before it escalates and you both end up being punished in solitary. But if you're with the ISIS guys they all pile in to help you, even if they all get beaten together by the police they'll support you. I saw that happen—it was a visible guarantee of support from ISIS. Some guys were like, "Yeah, I want part of this, I want to be backed by this." It's gang membership stuff, and very effective.

The various other groups are negotiating with the officers all the time over everyday things—about food, getting paper and pens, access to books. Sometimes if I got a visit my family would bring me basics—spoons and cups or whatever, but we weren't allowed to have that stuff so I would try to negotiate with the officers to let me bring them in. Of course, the more money you spread around to the guards, the more you're allowed to bring in.

But the ISIS guys refused to do that. They refuse to bribe the guards. They say we'll fight you if you try to control us and we are willing to die—this is where they got more respect and strength in the prison. They became strong and managed to get books in to help them spread radicalization—they got food and clothes, basic necessities for their group.

A lot of the everyday problems between prisoners are like, "Oh it's my turn in the toilet or you're sleeping on my space," but with the ISIS group they keep their problems to themselves and don't go to the officers to sort it out. So, part of their unity is to solve the problems within the group, and the officers respected that too.

When the groups are segregated in prisons the ISIS guys still manage to access the other prisoners, maybe at recess, or talking to them at a visit. They find those who have fallen out with their own group, and say, "You don't have to embrace our ideology at the start, just join us and then see."

By the time I left the radicalizing was spreading very fast. When you start off with a cell of 200 people, you could have by the end of a year at least one hundred of them radicalized. It was happening everywhere I was detained.

It's not about money, families of those joining ISIS aren't being given monthly payments by them.

Basically, it's a revenge ideology sugar coated with religion. It's about an ideology that builds on your inner plan of revenge, because you don't have much else to do in prison. Some guys are just radicalized into being armed—it's not always about the theology. I saw that in the guys from Sinai, thinking, "We don't care who gives us the gun, if it's ISIS then okay. Whoever brings me arms is my friend."

A lot of the youth would ask the older leaders why they should take a peaceful path, saying, "If you

look at Europe everything that was won was done through firearms.” The elders would tell them to have patience, that it might take 25 years. For the youth, their next 25 years seems like their whole life. So, ISIS comes in with arms, promises of allowing the youth to fight back when they get released.

The authorities aren’t fighting it, they’re allowing it to grow, maybe because it supports Sisi’s bullshit—it creates the problem that Sisi wants to exist. He needs ISIS to be in Sinai or wherever.

Most guys just want to live normally, even some of those radicalized, they just want to go back to a normal life. If you gave prisoners TV, newspapers, phones to talk to your family—this happened a bit in the Mubarak era, and it slowed the radicalization. Some families can’t afford to visit prisoners in the middle of the desert, and so the prisoners become isolated from them, and more vulnerable to the recruiters. Having more family visits, books, this would make the recruitment harder.

Sherif⁷³

Sherif is in his 30s and told Human Rights First he spent a total of over a year in prison in various spells since 2016. He was released in October 2018 after several months in prison for peacefully protesting a rise in Cairo’s metro fares.

I saw ISIS targeting two main groups—the younger members of the Muslim Brotherhood, and kids from the Ultras [a gang of fanatical football supporters].

In Giza Prison I saw an 18 year old from the Ultras, fans of Zamalek’s White Knights team. He was arrested for generally being a bit out of

control—playing around with drugs, always in trouble. When he arrived, he was a partying kid with a cool nickname. Then the guards hung him from the ceiling with his hands behind his back, flogged him, tortured him with electrical wires. The ISIS guys talked to him, offered him revenge. He joined them and changed his nickname to Suicide Vest.

Those with longer political histories are more immune but the Ultras don’t know much politics and in the police station jails some kids are as young as 14.

With the younger Muslim Brotherhood guys the ISIS line is different—“You had your democracy, you won, but now you’re in prison. Violence is the only answer. Join us, take up arms and establish an Islamic State.”

The segregation of ISIS guys in the prisons started properly in 2018 but they can still get access to other prisoners in lots of ways—everyone’s mixed when you go to court, when you’re in court, at exercise breaks, various other times.

In some places, the ISIS group is really strong even if it’s still a minority. Like in Al Qanater Prison there were 32 cells with 20-25 prisoners in each. ISIS had five of the cells.

They condemn all the other prisoners and guards except for the Al Qaeda men. They don’t respond if a prison guard says “Hi,” they refuse to leave their cells to go to court or to get into the police vans. Then they refuse to leave the police vans or to have lawyers, refuse to recognize the court. So, getting them to court can be hard because they refuse to go, and the authorities have to either take them by force or negotiate. Their reputation

⁷³ Interviewed by Human Rights First January 2019. His name has been changed.

is enhanced in the prison because the guards have to negotiate with them.

ISIS threaten the guards, that they will attack them and their families in their homes. They don't do proper searches of their cells. In some prisons only the ISIS group manages to keep the smuggled phones.

This radical brand is very attractive to those with grievances, how they stand up to the authorities, and having a lawyer doesn't seem to have much benefit anyway.

They celebrate openly and loudly in their cells when they hear of a successful attack outside. The guards, even the senior officers, are scared of them. They get all the books they want, they make sure the guys in their group get proper portions of food, they offer people protection and revenge.

Fahad⁷⁴

Fahad is in his mid-20s, and told Human Rights First he was released from prison in November 2018 after being detained in six different jails over nearly four years because of his peaceful protesting.

I saw ISIS successfully recruiting in all of the places I was held, except one place where I was held in solitary confinement the whole time, so I didn't see anything. In some prisons, like El Netrun, there are hundreds in the ISIS group and they're really powerful. They control parts of how the prison is run and can identify vulnerable prisoners they want transferred to their cell to radicalize, and the guards do it.

They basically threaten mass disobedience if the prison authorities don't give them what they want, and the guards don't care that the radicalization is

happening. The Muslim Brotherhood has a range of options to oppose the system—ISIS just has one, violence. It's so much clearer. The ISIS groups co-operate closely with the Al Qaeda groups, though Al Qaeda is much smaller.

First, they invite a prisoner to pray with them, and read the Quran together. Then they educate them with a history that emphasizes Afghanistan, Israel, Syria, Iraq, the war against communists, what's happening in Sinai. Some of the guys who fought the Soviets in the 1970s in Afghanistan are in the prisons, and they're very prestigious, respected.

I tried with a friend to stop the radicalization by talking to some of the guys ISIS was talking to, tried to debate with them, but there's no real organized program to stop it, just a few of us here and there. The ISIS group is very good at smuggling in books—they put a different cover on the radical books and they get them in. Sometimes the ISIS prisoners will have memorized whole books and then write them out inside prison.

The problem got worse over the years I was inside partly because the conditions got worse. They identify young and angry prisoners, often the petty criminals, and offer them a way to express themselves, through revenge.

The police round up big groups of men and they know not all of them, maybe most of them, aren't with ISIS. But they put them all in the same cell and after a while they're all ISIS. It's self-fulfilling.

Better prison conditions would take away some of the grievances that ISIS uses to convince prisoners—it's not a guarantee but if you stop the torture and the beatings it takes away a bit of the power from ISIS.

⁷⁴ Interviewed by Human Rights First, January 2019. His name has been changed.

