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## **Report- Behind the Dialogue: Confronting Egypt's Escalating Human Rights Crisis**

In a concerted effort to address the growing human rights crisis in Egypt, the Arab Organisation for Human Rights in the UK ([AOHR UK](#)), Be Magazine, and the Egyptians Abroad for Democracy organization held an engaging webinar on June 16, 2023. The [virtual event](#) was aptly titled "[Behind the Dialogue: Confronting Egypt's Escalating Human Rights Crisis.](#)"

The discussion was moderated by Melissa Turner, the co-founder and co-editor of Be Magazine. The panel comprised a dynamic mix of activists, scholars, journalists, and creatives, including Sarah Leah Whitson, executive director of Democracy for the Arab World Now (DAWN), Sara Flounders, co-director of the International Action Center, Dr. Maha Azzam, head of the Egyptian Revolutionary Council, Dina Sadek, Mideast Research Fellow at the Digital Forensic Research Lab, Abdelrahman ElGendy, an Egyptian writer and activist, Amr Waked, an Egyptian actor, Ramy Shaath, an Egyptian-Palestinian rights activist, Mohamed Ismail, director of Egyptians Abroad For Democracy, Missy Crutchfield, co-founder and co-editor of Be Magazine, and Albane de Rochebrune, a French journalist.

Ramy Shaath, a human rights defender active for over three decades, shared his harrowing experience of political imprisonment and exile, reiterating his unwavering commitment to fighting for democracy and human rights in Egypt. Similarly, Abdelrahman ElGendy recounted his six-year imprisonment experience, emphasizing his efforts to share the stories of political prisoners and advocate for their freedom. ElGendy is currently undertaking an MFA in creative writing at the University of Pittsburgh.

Amr Waked, a renowned Egyptian actor, also shared his activism journey, which culminated in his exile and a court-martial sentence in absentia. Despite the adversities, Waked remains hopeful and continues to advocate for human rights and democracy in Egypt.



Missy Crutchfield added her voice, underscoring the need for a global collective force to address these rights violations, while highlighting the power of arts in the fight for justice. Dr. Maha Azzam, head of the Egyptian Revolutionary Council, also underscored the urgency of bringing to light the crimes committed in Egypt and advocating for change. She also shared her personal account of facing charges and receiving a 15-year verdict, accused of tarnishing Egypt's image internationally.

Dina Sadek, a Middle East Research Fellow at the Digital Forensics Research Lab, introduced herself as a passionate researcher committed to identifying and exposing disinformation and human rights abuses through open-source research. Her work at the Planning Council focuses on documenting human rights violations and combating misinformation.

Sara Flounders, Co-Director of the International Action Center, expressed her honor and admiration for the resilient individuals who have endured and fought against oppression. With over 50 years of political activism, she has been dedicated to opposing US wars, invasions, occupations, and drone strikes that perpetuate repression worldwide. Sara commended the frontline fighters for their vital role in advocating for justice.

Alban de Rochebrune, a French PR and advocacy consultant, highlighted her extensive work in the field of human rights, rule of law, and democratization in Egypt over the past decade. Having previously been based in the UK, she expressed her commitment to these critical issues.

Mohamed Ismail, Director of Egyptians Abroad for Democracy, shared his background and motivation for getting involved in human rights activism. He recognized the importance of not taking freedom and democracy for granted and emphasized the need to amplify the voices of those in Egypt.

These powerful accounts of resistance, coupled with commitment and optimism, painted a compelling picture of the ongoing struggle for human rights in Egypt. It was a potent reminder of the importance of global solidarity and concerted action in addressing human rights crises.

During the webinar, critics voiced their discontent with Egyptian President AbdelFattah El-Sisi for his refusal to release political prisoners and implement amnesty.



Mohamed Ismail, Director of Egyptians Abroad for Democracy, opened the discussion by questioning the legitimacy of the national dialogue. He accused El-Sisi of using it as a façade to placate international critics and present an illusion of democratic discourse, despite ramping up political imprisonment.

Ismail criticized the international community for turning a blind eye to these issues in exchange for geopolitical stability and security of the Suez Canal. He highlighted that the Egyptian government receives \$1.3 billion annually from foreign sources, indirectly supporting these human rights abuses.

Melissa Turner reacted strongly to El-Sisi's statement, "Only God will hold me accountable," viewing it as a stark example of unchecked authority, justifying the detention of political prisoners in the name of national security.

Ramy Shaath, a political activist, shared his personal experience with this culture of immunity within the Egyptian military regime, emphasizing that even junior officers recognize their immunity. He suggested this is due to the strategic and economic favors their president offers the world, thus perpetuating the regime's abusive treatment of Egyptians.

Abdelrahman ElGendy concurred with Shaath, pointing out Egypt's strategy of propagating different narratives for local and international audiences. ElGendy stressed the importance of exposing this tactic, primarily when the international narrative is a misleading image of progressive dialogue and reform.

Amr Waked, a renowned actor and activist, suggested that El-Sisi has been successful in painting his own people as a threat to regional stability, thereby justifying his oppressive measures. He pointed out that the president's narrative, combined with the desperate conditions cultivated in Egyptian prisons, are part of a broader plan to perpetuate this harmful image of Egyptian society.

In the discussion, Sarah Leah Whitson expressed her scepticism about the situation, stating, "It's been a mockery so far, but perhaps it's too premature to form a definitive opinion. I don't believe anyone involved is under the illusion that el-Sisi has the capacity to reform. He is a brutal dictator, after all. The release of a few detainees is a small step, but it's better than nothing."



Whitson emphasised the need for caution to prevent the regime from painting itself as a reformist using these minimal actions. She pointed out the government's delaying tactics and the uncertainty over whether any significant concessions will be granted.

She emphasised that it wasn't a case of one or a few corrupt individuals, but a state policy to torture and abuse prisoners, especially political detainees. Islamist detainees or those believed to have Islamist associations suffer the worst conditions and seldom garner Western attention or support. In her participation in the webinar, Sara Flounders shared her views. Although she confessed she didn't have a 'crystal ball' to predict the tipping point, she recognized that even the creation of a seemingly artificial dialogue indicates the impact of international pressure.

Sara Flounders emphasized that even though the current regime, built mainly on military repression, might neglect to admit our influence, our voices hold power. She recollected the intense popular support for democracy and human rights that once surged in Egypt and insisted that this has not been forgotten despite the oppressive actions of the current regime.

Flounders acknowledged that a decade is an incredibly long time, especially for the imprisoned and their families. Still, she believes there's an accumulation of power and that the world's rapidly changing dynamics puts the current regime on unsteady ground. The ability to communicate, voice concerns, and engage in actions like petitions and meetings holds importance, she argued.

Drawing attention to the reason behind U.S. military aid and actual complicity with the Egyptian dictatorship, she suggested that it's due to what exists within the U.S., the largest use of torture and solitary confinement.

Flounders emphasized the importance of highlighting even small victories, as they reduce the credibility of the el-Sisi dictatorship. She argued that victories, no matter how minor, invigorate others to continue the fight. She concluded by suggesting a program focusing on the releases, the victories won through real struggle, and drawing attention to complicity.

Dr. Maha Azzam emphasized that the behaviour we witness from el-Sisi is indicative of a dictator's fear, one who strives to exert control and repress rebellion, haunted by the 2011 uprising.



Dr. Azzam cautioned against being fooled by el-Sisi's initiatives such as the national dialogue or the human rights strategy, as these are primarily used as facades to mollify Western critics and allies such as the U.S. and EU countries. She also highlighted the cyclical strategy of the regime, where for every prisoner released, multiple others are arrested.

She further stressed the complicity of Western governments, who are well aware of the situation but merely seek cosmetic changes that would make engagement with el-Sisi's regime seem more palatable since its blatant human rights violations have been exposed.

Finally, she drew attention to the issue of executions, branding Egypt as one of the leading executioners globally. She highlighted the grotesque nature of this strategy used by the el-Sisi regime, especially given the lack of a fair justice system. She also spoke about the regime's method of targeting family members of activists as a means of control, emphasizing the need to remember these tactics when discussing human rights violations in Egypt.

Missy Crutchfield shared her perspective passionately. The depth of her involvement in human rights advocacy stemmed from her early commitment to animal rights in the 1980s, a cause which she was drawn to due to her understanding of the sentient nature of all living beings. She noted that this empathy for sentient beings could be extended to all people, regardless of cultural or faith differences.

Crutchfield emphasized the importance of mobilizing young people to oppose repressive ideologies, uniting diverse causes under the banner of human rights. She particularly highlighted the intersectionality of the vegan movement with issues such as mass incarceration, women's rights, and environmental sustainability.

Crutchfield concluded by recounting a meeting she had in Washington with a U.S senator and his Foreign Relations staff, where they acknowledged the human rights issues in Egypt, but asserted that the responsibility of conveying the story to the public rested with activists, not elected representatives.

Ramy Shaath made significant contributions during the webinar. He observed that since President el-Sisi initiated the dialogue last year, there have been 1,636 releases but also 3,622 new arrests, leading to an increase of around 2,000 detainees within the year. Those released are mostly barred from travelling, their finances frozen, and



they live under severe restrictions, unable to resume work or communicate freely without security permissions.

Shaath advocated for collective action, emphasizing, "We cannot do this as isolated individuals or organizations. We need to amass power, focus more on people rather than governments." He criticized the governments for their passive stance towards President el-Sisi's crimes and expressed concern about activists outside Egypt facing oppression, threats, and risks of detention stemming from the Egyptian regime's exploitation of Interpol and the Arab League.

He highlighted the plight of those within the country, stating, "People are suffering in all ways imaginable. Many are attending the dialogue due to life threats to themselves or their family members or their party members. Egypt is truly a 'Republic of Fear' due to the constant threats."

Lastly, Shaath criticized the lip-service to human rights improvements without any substantial political change. He declared, "There's no improvement in human rights without political change, without real democracy, real freedom of speech, and the rule of law. Cosmetic changes won't truly alter the situation."

In his contributions, Abdelrahman ElGendy stressed the importance of unmasking the hidden narratives that are concealed within Egypt's political rhetoric. This involves amplifying stories like these through translation and sharing, to reveal the realities that are usually hidden from international audiences. It's vital, he argued, to challenge the narrative presented by official representatives, such as the Egyptian ambassador during their visits to international bodies like Capitol Hill.

He then spoke about his personal experiences, detailing his preoccupation with the idea of counter-narratives ever since his time in prison. He questioned where the untold stories of prisoners' hardships and suffering go if they're never documented or shared. This concern inspired him to begin writing in prison, acknowledging the responsibility he felt to narrate these stories.

He argued against the desensitization caused by the frequent presentation of statistics on human rights abuses and urged for the sharing of personal stories that can resonate universally.

ElGendy called for the creation of a cohesive community of creatives, like those who emerged during the revolution, to come together and contribute their artistic talents in



an effort to shape and propagate these counter-narratives. He highlighted the example of an annual conference of Palestinian artists and writers, wondering why a similar initiative has not yet been launched for Egypt.

In the discussion, Amr Waked referenced a report on terrorism incubation in Egyptian prisons, suggesting a deliberate process to create this desperation, feeding into the image Sisi aims to propagate. He contrasts this with the peaceful 2011 period when crime rates fell as citizens took charge during a police absence. His stance is clear: the West needs to understand Sisi's deceitful tactics.

Waked shed light on his personal experience, sharing that he had been forced to block 16,000 Twitter accounts over the last three years. He mentioned the existence of a large community of Egyptian artists and creators in exile, including internationally acclaimed novelist Alaa Elaswany and award-winning screenwriter Bilal Fadl.

Expressing a desire to create a fund for producing films and establishing a news agency for human rights and democracy advocates in the Middle East, Waked encouraged the union of forces to challenge the dominant propaganda machine. He believes that the narratives and true stories of these artists could mobilize public opinion.

Highlighting Bilal Fadl's impact, Waked shared that Fadl, after being in exile for almost eight years, has launched a YouTube channel discussing the current Egyptian situation. Despite controlling multiple media networks, the Egyptian government was frightened enough by this single truth-speaking YouTuber to offer him a truce deal. Waked sees this as evidence of the potential influence of such initiatives, emphasizing the need for more similar efforts.

In his contributions, Mohamed Ismail emphasized the importance of exerting pressure on the Egyptian government through various means, such as leveraging the presence of Egyptians in the United States and engaging in dialogue with policymakers. He stressed the need to advocate for the release of political prisoners and genuine democratic reforms, rather than accepting surface-level initiatives that lack substance.

During his interactions with members of the United States Congress, Ismail called upon them to consider the responsibility they hold for supporting the Egyptian government financially. He urged them to recognize the suffering of the Egyptian people and the need to support their aspirations for a more just and democratic society.



In conclusion, Ismail expressed his belief that true dialogue could only occur if the government demonstrated good faith by releasing political prisoners and fostering an environment of trust. He emphasized that those who participated in the national dialogue without demanding meaningful change were either naive or complicit in supporting the regime's false narrative.

During the discussion, Dina Sadek shared her insights from the DFR lab. Her study of the digital environment in Egypt revealed three main findings related to the state's manipulation of narratives on human rights.

First, evidence was discovered of coordinated behavior from suspicious pro-government Twitter accounts aimed at crafting a false perception of widespread support for the government. These accounts possess large followings, generate high post rates, and predominantly share pro-government content, exploiting trending Twitter topics to promote government narratives.

Second, Sadek highlighted coordinated malicious attacks, including disinformation and smear campaigns against fact-checkers and human rights defenders. These attacks intend to discredit and create suspicion towards these individuals, thus undermining overall messages about human rights in Egypt.

Thirdly, she pointed out the strategic promotion of pro-government propaganda in response to certain events. For instance, a trending hashtag emerged following President Sisi's decision to release 85 prisoners ahead of Ramadan and offer financial aid to their families. Despite these actions representing only a minor shift in Egypt's human rights record, they were amplified online as major reforms.

Sadek emphasized the challenges of identifying and tracking these accounts, given their sheer number and the vast amount of misinformation and disinformation they generate. Despite this, she highlighted the need to keep these human rights issues in the spotlight.

The French journalist Albane de Rochebrune shared her thoughts. She expressed her disappointment with how Western media, particularly French media, are reporting on Egypt's national dialogue. Despite knowing its hollowness, she criticized the media for seemingly lending credibility to it. This, she believes, has indirectly given a pass to governments such as France, allowing them to sidestep various scandals.





De Rochebrune, being French herself, is particularly focused on her government's role and expressed her concern about how these issues reflect on democracy in France and other Western countries. She questioned the ethical standing of countries that claim to champion democracy and human rights yet seem to ignore such evident issues.

She further discussed her work on the Operation Sirli scandal, a confidential cooperation agreement between France and Egypt initiated in 2016. The operation involved France aiding Egypt in surveillance activities along the Libyan border. Despite concerns raised by French officers about the misuse of this information for unlawful actions, the operation continued.

In her view, the evidence provided by French media should have resulted in the exposure and consequent resignation of the French government. However, she acknowledged this was perhaps a naive expectation.

In conclusion, de Rochebrune underscored the need for transparency, accountability, and democratic dialogue on matters of foreign affairs and defense, both in France and on the international stage.

The [webinar](#) provided a platform for these speakers to share their perspectives, experiences, and ongoing efforts to address the human rights crisis in Egypt. Their insights shed light on the challenges faced by activists and the importance of international solidarity in advocating for justice and human rights in the country.

Participants called for an end to the international community's complicity in this situation, asking for them to challenge El-Sisi's narratives and stand with the people of Egypt. These advocates for democracy argue that genuine stability and peace in the region can only be achieved by supporting the people's choice, not by upholding a regime that suppresses its own citizens.

Arab Organisation for Human Rights in the UK (AOHR UK)