

**Statement by Moataz El Fegiery, Front Line Defenders MENA Protection
Coordinator, During the European Parliament's Human Rights Subcommittee,
30 May 2017**

“Exchange of Views on the Human Rights Situation in Egypt”

I thank you for allowing me to address you today. This Parliament has been always an open platform for human rights defenders to convey their voices to European policy makers. The EU will soon formally adopt the new partnership priorities with a government whose human rights records are the worst and most bloodiest in Egypt modern history. This conclusion is supported by the research conducted by the most credible local and international human rights observers. The appalling conditions of human rights in Egypt is part of a systematic plan to break political and civil forces which emerged before and following the 2011 uprising and curtail any prospect for new political and social mobilisation. The counter-terrorism context has provided a pretext for the government to impose far-reaching legal measures that have gone beyond their declared purpose and systemically used to persecute peaceful opposition, civil society activists and independent media more than targeting the real terrorists.

Recent figures on crimes committed in Egypt indicate the decline of rule of law and justice institutions. In 2016, Egyptian rights groups documented the extra judicial killing of more than 1300 persons in Northern Sinai and across Egypt. In April, the world watched the horrible leaked video of the extra judicial execution of a group of detainees in Northern Sinai by the Egyptian army. This record is added to the crimes committed by the security services against protesters since July 2013. More than 900 cases of forced disappearance were documented in 2016. Military courts have tried at least 7000 civilians since August 2013. Torture and ill-treatment of detainees and

prisoners have been used routinely and with impunity. Poor conditions in prisons and detention facilities have been used to humiliate and punish political prisoners and detainees.

A significant crackdown on civil society has been taking place since 2014. Human rights defenders face an extremely challenging situation due to restrictions imposed on civil society and peaceful assemblies and protests, physical and communication surveillance, arrest and sentencing of lawyers, bloggers, journalists, and protesters. Yesterday, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi ratified a new restrictive NGOs law under which the existence of an independent civil society in Egypt will be impossible. The law places further restrictions on NGOs especially in relation to foreign funding and cooperation with international NGOs. This week, the government arbitrarily blocked 23 news websites accusing them of ‘spreading lies’ and ‘supporting terrorism’. Among the blocked websites are reputable secularist media outlets known of their active coverage of human rights and political and economic issues. Since May 2016, dozens of workers and labour rights defenders were arrested and charged in connection with peaceful protests and strikes and some of those workers were referred to criminal trials before military courts. More than 1000 student activists were detained between 2013 and 2016. At least 85 travel ban cases against human rights defenders, journalists, academics, and political activists have been recorded since June 2014. The politicisation and partiality of justice institutions have ramped up repression and created a climate of impunity for human rights crimes.

Eradicating human rights activism in Egypt was a clear goal set by Egyptian military since 2011. President el-Sisi in his capacity at that time as the director of the Military Intelligence orchestrated the crackdown on a group of American and German pro-democracy NGOs in the famous case that led in June 2013 to the conviction of 43 American and Egyptian activists. Since 2014, the most active and renowned Egyptian human rights defenders and NGOs have been subjected to wide-scale repressive

campaign. In 2014, security services pressured and threatened representative of international human rights NGOs to leave Egypt and incidents of death threats were documented against Egyptian human rights defenders. My friend and colleague Bahey Eldin Hassan was among the first human rights defenders who received death threat in 2014 and I received another death threat by the end of 2014.

Judicial harassment intensified in 2015 by charging leaders and members of 37 Egyptian human rights organisations with “receipt of illegal foreign funding” and “working without legal permission.” As part of this case, several human rights defenders have been subjected to travel bans, summons and interrogation and assets freezing. Today, most Egyptian HRDs are not allowed to leave the country or fear persecution if they return back. In this campaign, women human rights defenders are attacked for their gender identity, and for fighting for human rights, making them specifically vulnerable in an environment where they question fundamental assumptions about gender roles in society. Women’s rights NGOs such as the Center for Egyptian Women’s Legal Assistance and Nazra for Feminist Studies, whose services benefit thousands of Egyptian marginalised women, are being severely targeted with harassment measures, including interrogation, prosecution, travel bans and asset freezes.

The government’s crackdown on human rights movement has recently reached new heights by intimidating, monitoring and publicly inciting against Egyptian human rights defenders on foreign territories in a clear indication of how much this government feels strong and empowered. Few days ago in Italy, the home country of the young researcher Giulio Regeni who was abducted, brutally tortured and killed in Egypt in 2016, Egyptian security agents did not feel ashamed to harass, take photos and follow a group of Egyptian human rights defenders who were attending a meeting in Rome hosted by the Euro Mediterranean Human Rights Network. In parallel, a smear campaign was launched in Egyptian media outlets accusing

participants of plotting an attack against Egypt, and using the photos taken in the hotel lobby. The influential parliamentarian and tv presenter Mostafa Bakry broadcast the names and photos of human rights defenders who attended the meeting in his TV program, declared them traitors and urged security services to abduct and return them to Egypt in coffins for criminal trial. Although human rights defenders previously received death threats, this is the first time the threat and incitement against them is made publicly and by a politician known of his close ties to the President and security services.

To Conclude, while the threats of terrorism and religious extremism are real and longstanding in Egypt, the prospect for stability and security in the country cannot be approached in isolation from the domestic conditions of governance and human rights. The accumulation of grievances against the state and distrust of its governance institutions have created fertile ground for political extremism and violence. Recent studies in the West and Egyptian media reports argue that repression has turned Egypt's prisons to become centres for recruiting radicals and terrorists. Moreover, the systematic repression of civil society and closing the public space undermine the development of tolerant and liberal political alternatives, which are the most sustainable safeguards against religious extremism. Aggravating social and political divisiveness and polarization does not help the fight against terrorism or secure Egypt from tumultuous political changes. It is only through a process of consensus building, reconciliation, and public participation that Egypt can effectively respond to its deep security and socio economic challenges.

Thank you.