

Creating Time Bombs: How Abuse in Egypt's Prison System Fuels ISIS Recruitment

Summary

Early hopes that the Biden administration would break from a decades-long U.S. practice of enabling Egyptian dictatorships are fading, with potentially catastrophic consequences for human rights. While the new administration has committed to “putting human rights at the center of U.S. foreign policy,” in the context of Egypt it appears to be adopting a traditional approach of mildly rebuking Cairo’s poor human rights record while plying the government with unconditional military and political support.

There is much to criticize in Egypt’s record, including most recently the [reports](#) that Egyptian intelligence officials assisted the Saudi Arabian killers of dissident and journalist Jamal Khashoggi in 2018. The repression and abuse occurring in Egyptian prisons are worthy of particular focus, though, because they vividly highlight how the status quo not only threatens the rights and dignity of Egyptians but also foments radicalism and strengthens terrorist organizations. Human Rights First’s 2019 report *Like a Fire in a Forest* [featured](#) the testimony of prisoners released from Egyptian jails between 2015 and 2018, who recounted how the Islamic State (ISIS) was successfully recruiting inside Egypt’s prisons, including by promising to ensure tortured prisoners received better treatment while in detention and offering a means for revenge after their release.

This new report uses testimony from prisoners released between 2019 and 2021 to update the earlier research. These former prisoners gave Human Rights First credible, consistent reports of the reality inside Egypt’s prisons. Their testimony shows that ISIS recruitment is still ongoing, unchecked by Egyptian authorities and fueled in substantial part by the torture and other abuse that pervade Egyptian prisons. This recruitment is deeply alarming, but there is little public evidence that U.S. officials are taking action to persuade Egypt’s government to prevent it, and to end the torture and abuse in prisons.

The Biden administration should act urgently to break the cycle of abuse and extremism. Continuing business as usual – including the practice of sending over \$1 billion in annual military aid to a series of repressive Egyptian governments – will not change the behavior of Egyptian authorities or end the policies that fuel violent extremism. While the U.S. relationship with Egypt is an important one, the U.S. government has the policy tools to credibly press for change without breaking that partnership. Indeed, Congress has repeatedly pressed some of these tools into the U.S. government’s reluctant hands, specifically making clear that U.S. security assistance to Egypt should depend at least in part on whether the country’s human rights record improves, and also creating targeted sanctions authorities that could be used to insist on accountability in egregious cases of abuse.

The Biden administration has an opportunity in Egypt to show it will apply its human rights commitments even where U.S. military allies are concerned. It should do so.

Biden and Egypt

The Biden campaign and administration gave some reason to expect that the United States might rethink its traditionally supportive posture toward Egyptian dictators. As a candidate for president in 2020, Joe Biden [tweeted](#): “Arresting, torturing, and exiling [Egyptian] activists like Sarah Hegazy and Mohamed Soltan or threatening their families is unacceptable. No more blank checks for Trump’s ‘favorite dictator.’” In November 2020, Antony Blinken criticized the jailing of Egyptian human rights defenders shortly before Biden announced he would be nominated as Secretary of State, [tweeting](#): “Share concern re. #Egypt’s arrests of three employees of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights. Meeting with foreign diplomats is not a crime. Nor is peacefully advocating for human rights.”

After taking office, Secretary Blinken [declared](#) in February 2021 that the administration would be “putting human rights at the center of U.S. foreign policy.” The following month, the U.S. government joined 31 countries in co-sponsoring a rare [statement](#) of rebuke at the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) on Egypt’s human rights record. Such statements indicated a welcome and essential step away from the Trump administration’s frequent expressions of indifference to human rights in a wide range of its bilateral relationships.

The true test of the U.S. government’s commitments to promoting human rights comes, though, when it is required to candidly and meaningfully confront the abusive practices of its friends and allies. Other than the HRC statement, the new administration’s Egypt policy has followed a disappointing pattern of business as usual.

The first substantive signal came in February, when the State Department confirmed a \$197 million arms deal with Cairo. A State Department spokesperson described the planned sale as “routine,” suggesting early on that the new administration saw little need to reconsider or even review the linkage between security assistance and human rights. When pressed about reported Egyptian government reprisals against the family of Egyptian-American human rights defender Mohamed Soltan, the spokesperson [claimed](#) that the U.S. government “won’t tolerate assaults or threats by foreign governments against American citizens or their family members,” but did not indicate what the U.S. government would do beyond “raising these reports” with Cairo to give effect to that position.

When President Biden spoke with his Egyptian counterpart Abdel Fattah el-Sisi by telephone in May, human rights in Egypt appeared to be an afterthought. In a readout of the call that covered a range of regional issues and offered little specificity, the White House [noted](#) that “President Biden underscored the importance of a constructive dialogue on human rights in Egypt.”

Under questioning at a congressional hearing the next month, Secretary Blinken appeared to offer praise for illusory improvements in the human rights situation in Egypt and [gave](#) a simplistic and favorable assessment of the country’s role in countering terrorism. Blinken acknowledged having “real concerns about human rights,” and cited specifically that “when it comes to freedom of expression, when it comes to civil society, there are very significant problems that we need to address directly with our Egyptian partners.” But he was silent on the crucial issues of torture and ISIS recruitment in prison, and he offered an overstated or unfounded take on other ostensible reforms, [claiming](#), “I think we have seen some progress in some areas, particularly religious freedom as well as women’s empowerment, dealing with gender-based violence and trafficking in persons.”

Diplomats often leaven criticism with praise, when possible, but the claim that there have been improvements on gender-based violence is puzzling to local activists. Mozn Hassan, a leading Egyptian woman human rights defender and the founder of the NGO Nazra for Feminist Studies, emphasized to Human Rights First that “there is still no law criminalizing gender-based violence, services for survivors of

sexual assault are poor, the draft law on personal status [for women] is horrible, and women human rights defenders are still in prison.”¹ The *New York Times* recently ran a series of [detailed accounts](#) from women who had “crossed paths with the Egyptian justice system” and reported being sexually abused by the authorities.

Even if the Biden administration’s public rhetoric on human rights in Egypt were more candid and accurate, though, the most consequential signal that it will send to Egyptian authorities is in its handling of assistance to the Egyptian military. The U.S. government has [provided](#) approximately \$1.3 billion in military financing to Egypt every year since 1987. Whether then-candidate Biden had this assistance in mind when he criticized the Trump administration’s “blank check” to Egypt and its presidents or not, no other aspect of the U.S.-Egyptian relationship better fits that description than the U.S. government’s unwillingness to condition its support on improved human rights practices.

Congress has made clear that the status of human rights in Egypt should not be a peripheral concern in U.S. policy, even where security assistance is concerned. For the last decade, Congress has conditioned around \$300 million of the annual \$1.3 billion on Egypt making improvements on human rights.² Each year, as Egyptian authorities failed to make such improvements, the Obama and Trump administrations have invoked a national security waiver allowing them to release the funds anyway.³ The Biden administration will have to decide before the end of September 2021 whether Egypt’s appalling human rights record will actually inform this most critical aspect of its policy.

The U.S. relationship with Egypt is in urgent need of fundamental change, and the Biden administration must reject the false choice between pushing for that change and maintaining relations with Cairo. The restrictions that Congress has imposed on a fraction of U.S. military assistance show one approach to taking seriously both of those goals, not just the preservation of ties. Similarly, the Biden administration could use its targeted sanctions tools to apply scrutiny and pressure on specific Egyptian officials, as it has done in [other contexts](#) where officials in a partner country’s government have been responsible for abuses or corruption.

How ISIS Recruits in Egypt’s Prison System

The stakes of this decision are extraordinarily high. The testimonies from former prisoners that Human Rights First has collected are frightening evidence that ISIS benefits directly from Egypt’s policies, including the routine and horrific abuse and torture of its prisoners.

Human Rights First has for decades reported on human rights violations in Egypt, perpetrated by a succession of Egyptian governments. This report is based on interviews conducted over several months in 2021 with former prisoners. For security reasons, some names of former detainees have been changed in this report.

Egypt’s prison system has 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. Those interviewed for this report agreed that the Egyptian government’s policies today are

¹ Human Rights First interview with Mozn Hassan, June 2021.

² For the criteria that apply to the funds currently under review, see [Further Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2020](#), Public Law 116-94, Section 7041(a), December 20, 2019.

³ In response, Congress has in the most recent fiscal years begun to take away the waiver authority for a small subset of the conditioned funds. For the funds that the administration will be reviewing next year, Congress has [imposed human-rights restrictions](#) on \$225 million of the funds, but on a waivable basis, and on an additional \$75 million without the possibility of a waiver.

strengthening ISIS, and the accounts of those who witnessed radicalization first-hand in detention demonstrate striking similarities across the period from 2015 to 2021.

All of the former prisoners interviewed by Human Rights First for this report said they had personally witnessed the successful recruitment of prisoners inside jails by ISIS. Malek said:

I have an example that I know personally. He was with me in prison – a 19-year-old young man. When he went to al-Natrun prison, he was greatly affected by the ISIS group, and when he returned, he began to say that the Muslim Brotherhood are infidels and that peaceful change is not feasible, and that change must be made by force of arms. The moderate prisoners tried to talk to him rationally and argue with him to change his thoughts, but he was very fierce and did not listen to anyone.⁴

Mahmoud told Human Rights First:

I saw groups of men in Al Aqrab prison join ISIS after being abused – not just one or two but several. They were just normal prisoners but then they joined ISIS. Young men who used to explain their views in a peaceful way were persuaded to find another, not peaceful, way.⁵

“It is a crisis,” one prisoner released in 2021 told Human Rights First. “Young, uneducated prisoners are getting an ideology presented as outwardly religious but is really about violence and hatred.”⁶

Another recounted:

The authorities are creating ticking time bombs by allowing this. I know of three guys who when they arrived in prison weren't radical. They would smoke cigarettes with us, joked with us; one of them came from a wealthy background and had been mistakenly arrested when he was leaving his university campus. They joined ISIS in prison. When they were released, two went to fight for ISIS in Sinai and one was killed fighting in Syria.⁷

Another prisoner released in 2020 told Human Rights First:

Unfortunately, they [ISIS] convinced some men, who after some time adopted their ways of violent thinking, and began to prefer a violent way of thinking. I had a friend in prison who they convinced. I found out that he joined ISIS and he was not even greeting people who did not agree with his newfound ideology.⁸

Those interviewed identified the main motivations for joining ISIS as revenge against the authorities and the protection and better treatment that come with belonging to ISIS in the penal system. Former prisoner Mahmoud emphasized the abusive conditions.

Prisoners face many kinds of violence - physical and psychological. There are electrocutions, or you can be hanged from the ceiling by your arms or legs for days. Sometimes they bring members of your family to where you are interrogated, a prisoner's sister or mother or daughter and threaten them and make the prisoner confess to things

⁴ Interview with Malek, June 2021.

⁵ Interview with Mahmoud, June 2021.

⁶ Interview with Youssef, April 2021.

⁷ Interview with Amr Hashad, June 2021.

⁸ Interview with Nino, June 2021.

he hasn't done. I know where wives were brought to the investigation offices and the prisoner was told that the officers would 'do things' to their wives if they didn't confess.⁹

Another former prisoner described the arc of abuse and recruitment as he witnessed it:

When I was first arrested, I was tortured for 60 days by state security. I was beaten, kept naked, and electrocuted, including on my genitals. I needed surgery afterwards. After that I was transferred to the prison and put in a cell for new arrivals. Prisoners are usually kept there for between 11 and 30 days, depending on when the officer in charge moves them to a more permanent cell. During that time in the new arrivals cell a prisoner from the Muslim Brotherhood encouraged me to put my faith in God and trust his ways, telling me that 'I should pray, and God will give me my rights on Judgement Day.' But an ISIS prisoner offered me a different proposition. He said 'We will help you get justice now. We will fight against the forces that did this to you and make them pay.' After 60 days of torture in which they break your mind, body, and soul – What side would someone choose?¹⁰

The interviewed former prisoners emphasized that ISIS prisoners often enjoy ready access to other prisoners. "What is a catastrophe is that authorities have not separated the prisoners connected to real cases of terrorism from those who simply oppose the regime on political grounds. So, ordinary political prisoners, especially the younger ones who are unjustly detained become prey to the terrorists inside the jails," said Youssef, who was released from jail earlier this year. "I have never seen the prison authorities interfere to prevent this from happening."¹¹ Another former prisoner, Amr, said "The ISIS leaders in prison can get easy access to other prisoners. Even guys arrested for petty crimes, guys selling hashish, are exposed to the ISIS recruiting in prisons."¹²

Others gave similar accounts of how ISIS approaches and grooms younger prisoners. Nino told Human Rights First he was released in October 2020 after spending four years in various prisons:

I was in Wadi Natron and Ataqá prisons. I saw ISIS inside prison in 2020. They were still trying to recruit other prisoners. It starts with a cup of tea or coffee for hospitality, and they sit to talk with the person.... At first the authorities segregated people who had these ideologies into separate cells, but by the end of 2017, they began to mix those with extremist ideologies with the rest of us. The government is the reason that these ideologies have spread within the prisons to ruin the minds of younger political prisoners.¹³

Malek told Human Rights First he was released from Wadi Natron prison in April 2019, and that he, too, saw ISIS there. "It is a huge prison with thousands of prisoners. Extremist groups would search for men who are younger, in their twenties. The ISIS prisoners had some special privileges that made other prisoners wish to stay in the same cells as them."¹⁴

Other testimonies speak to how ISIS factions in prison enjoy *better* treatment and privileges than those afforded to other prisoners. "ISIS prisoners got four hours of recreation a day compared to two hours for the rest of the prisoners," said Amr. His testimony continued:

⁹ Interview with Mahmoud, June 2021.

¹⁰ Interview with Amr Hashad, June 2021.

¹¹ Interview with Youssef, June 2021.

¹² Interview with Amr Hashad, June 2021.

¹³ Interview with Nino, June 2021.

¹⁴ Interview with Malek, June 2021.

ISIS prisoners were allowed mobile phones, and medical care, and their family visits would last 90 minutes. Other prisoners weren't allowed mobile phones, didn't get proper medical care and had visits of 20 minutes. It's attractive to prisoners to want to join them. ISIS prisoners could access any books that they wanted - even those promoting extremist ideology - whilst university students could not even get their textbooks. Some prison officers are just scared of ISIS and give them privileges. One officer in Istaqbil Tora prison was too scared to go into their cell.¹⁵

Mahmoud similarly reported that, "In Istaqbul, part of the Tora prison complex, I saw how ISIS prisoners had better privileges too. They had more free time, more recreation time, fewer restrictions than other prisoners."¹⁶

These reports echo those in our [2019 report *Like a Fire in a Forest*](#), where former prisoner Mohamed Soltan and others reported details of how the authorities afforded ISIS prisoners greater privileges. Former prisoner Malek explained to Human Rights First this year:

They [the prison authorities] allowed them [ISIS prisoners] more exercise time, from seven in the morning until five in the evening. They are allowed all the books they want, even if they talk about extremism. They allow them more visiting time, and let them have all sorts of food. Until my release I saw these privileges being given to ISIS in Wadi Natrun.¹⁷

These firsthand accounts make clear that ISIS recruiters continue to enjoy widespread access to other detainees and continue to successfully exploit their grievances, fueled in part by the Egyptian government's use of torture and other abuse. This makes it easier for ISIS to persuade them to join their extremist ideology with a mixture of offers of revenge and better prison conditions. Far from being confined to one or two places of detention, this phenomenon is widespread throughout the Egyptian prison system. This crisis is enabled most directly by the Egyptian government, but the Biden administration, too, will bear a degree of responsibility unless it takes immediate and sustained action to prevent abuse and the radicalization that flows from it.

Recommendations

Based on the situation that these testimonies highlight and our years of advocacy on Egypt's human rights record, Human Rights First offers the following recommendations:

- Because Egypt has not made progress satisfying the statutory human rights criteria, the Biden administration should withhold the \$300 million in military aid to Egypt conditioned on such progress under the Fiscal Year 2020 budget. It should make clear the same result is likely the next year if the status quo persists.
- U.S. Embassy officials in Egypt should immediately request access to prisons to assess conditions and make recommendations for improvement, including regarding torture and mistreatment but also the effective segregation of ISIS recruiters from the rest of the prison population.

¹⁵ Interview with Amr, June 2021.

¹⁶ Interview with Mahmoud, June 2021.

¹⁷ Interview with Malek, June 2021.

CREATING TIME BOMBS

- Visiting members of Congress should do the same. Members should join the recently founded Egypt Human Rights Caucus and make clear the importance they attach to improvement in Egypt's human rights record.
- In future years, Congress should increase the share of Egypt's foreign military financing that is contingent on significant improvements in the country's human rights record. It should also eliminate the Secretary of State's ability to invoke a national security waiver to the human-rights conditions.
- The Biden administration should impose targeted sanctions on individual Egyptian officials found to have engaged in or otherwise been responsible for serious human rights violations—especially torture and other abuses of detainees—using authority provided under the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act and Executive Order 13818.
- Any such sanctions designations and 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 Former U.S. Government Perspective: Ben Rhodes

Ben Rhodes was a Deputy National Security Advisor in the Obama administration, an influential figure in the making of foreign policy throughout the Obama presidency.

Speaking at a UCLA event in June 2021, Rhodes was asked about the U.S. government's support for President Sisi. He [answered](#) by citing the case of American Mohamed Soltan, tortured and jailed in Egypt, and whose testimony was featured in our 2019 report. We quote Rhodes' remarks here as a well-informed description of the perversity of a U.S. policy that fails to prioritize putting an end to the practices this report describes.

“Mohamed was an Egyptian American from Ohio who went back to Egypt around Tahrir Square [in 2011]. He sees Mubarak get toppled, he is hopeful, he stays there. Then he got shot in 2013 after the coup to remove Mohamed Morsi. He is thrown in prison, even though he is an American citizen. He is tortured in just brutal ways.

“They let people die in their cells, they encourage him to commit suicide. He goes on a hunger strike. Then, they let an ISIS recruiter into his cell, and he debates the ISIS recruiter about the merits of nonviolent resistance versus violent resistance. This is a government – the Egyptian government – that we have given billions of dollars to that is putting ISIS recruiters in the cells because they want to radicalize their opposition. Because that justifies their repression and keeps the billions of dollars coming.

“I wouldn't give them a cent. How can we talk to anyone in the world about democracy, and be shoveling billions of dollars to defense companies and contractors who then send the weapons to the Egyptians? It is the height of hypocrisy.... the degree of repression that we are... directly in the case of Egypt subsidizing, totally discredits anything we have to say about democracy. And it kind of corrupts ourselves.”

Testimonies

These testimonies were documented by Human Rights First during 2021. Former prisoners were identified via trusted human rights organizations and human rights defenders with whom Human Rights First has long histories. The interviews were conducted online. Some of the names of those quoted have been changed at their request to protect their identities. Human Rights First is grateful to all those who assisted with contacting former prisoners, and to those who agreed to be interviewed.

Youssef¹⁸

Youssef told Human Rights First he was released from prison in 2021 after nearly a year in detention. He witnessed extremist ideological elements trying to influence the prisoners' ideology and convince them of their extremist ideas, without any interference from the prison authorities or separating them from each other.

"If I wanted to use one word for what is happening in the prisons, I would say tragedy.

"What is a catastrophe is that authorities have not separated the prisoners connected to real cases of terrorism from those who simply oppose the regime on political grounds.

"So, ordinary political prisoners, especially the younger ones who are unjustly detained become prey to the terrorists inside the jails.

"Typically, torture is the first thing that follows after the accused is arrested, and also enforced disappearance, and only after all this is he brought before the public prosecution to start the investigation.

"Torture in prison is different from the torture at national security headquarters, but things happen in prison which are still ill-treatment or torture. These include assault, severe beatings, restrictions on visits, and solitary confinement. This treatment can push a young man towards those offering an ideology of violence.

"These terrorists speak to them with great tenderness, telling them they can draw them closer to God, and end the injustice.

"It is a crisis. Young, uneducated prisoners are getting an ideology presented as outwardly religious but is really about violence and hatred.

"The problems begin when the young person influenced by ISIS changes the way he deals with his family, his colleagues, his lawyers, or anyone who rejects the ideas that he is now convinced of.

"I have never seen the prison authorities interfere to prevent this from happening. There is no separation between those with terrorist ideas and the ordinary youth. They leave young people under the influence of those with terrorist ideas, without offering them any rehabilitation or cultural programs to try to save the young people from these ideas.

"There are many cases of young men in jail who have been or who are being exposed to this terrorist ideology. I won't name them because they are still in custody.

¹⁸ Interviewed in April 2021, name changed for security reasons.

CREATING TIME BOMBS

“But I know a guy arrested in his late twenties - he was politically active, had opposed the regime peacefully, and never committed any acts of violence. He was arrested, tortured, forcibly disappeared. He eventually appeared in a case brought by State Security and held in prison.

“ISIS manages to spread their ideology amongst the kids because they have a lot of time with them in prison without the prison guards who had confined them all together.

“There is no specific time that it takes someone to change their mind towards terrorism. It differs from one prisoner to another, based on his previous thinking and how much torture he has been subjected to.

“But if a person is subjected to a lot of torture, he is totally qualified for an ideology that incites him against those who have tortured him.

“But of those I have personally witnessed, it took a few months for them - surrounded by those with terrorist ideologies - to change their minds. Others take years to convert, and there are always those who will never be convinced.

“Overall, from what I saw in prisons, although ISIS targets all age groups, the most likely to be convinced are those between the age of 18 to the late thirties.”

Nino¹⁹

Nino was released in October 2020 after spending four years in various prisons.

“I was in Wadi Natron and Ataqqa prisons.

“I saw ISIS inside prison in 2020. They were still trying to recruit other prisoners. It starts with a cup of tea or coffee for hospitality, and they sit to talk with the person. They bring up ideas and talk directly to the prisoner about the ideology of extremism. If that prisoner does not respond, or does not respond positively, they will treat him [as] an infidel.

“They [ISIS] would take excerpts from the Quran and interpret them incorrectly and use that to convince people to join them. And they exploited the injustice and bad conditions in the prisons to pressure prisoners. There were some men who joined them to get back at the government.

“They [ISIS] tried to influence them and recruit them with their false ideas such as – there will be a state [Caliphate] and they called everyone who was against them infidels.

“Unfortunately, they convinced some men, who after some time adopted their ways of violent thinking, and began to prefer a violent way of thinking.

“I had a friend in prison who they convinced. I found out that he joined ISIS and he was not even greeting people who did not agree with his newfound ideology.

“At first the authorities segregated people who had these ideologies into separate cells, but by the end of 2017, they began to mix those with extremist ideologies with the rest of

¹⁹ Interviewed in June 2021, name changed for security reasons.

us. The government is the reason that these ideologies have spread within the prisons to ruin the minds of younger political prisoners.

“In 2020, I was in a cell with six men who had extremist ideologies although they also disagreed with each other. They did not eat or pray with the rest of us— each of them ate and prayed by himself.”

Mahmoud²⁰

Mahmoud is 30 and told Human Rights First he was arrested in 2013, and released in May 2019.

“I was held in three different prisons. I saw ISIS attract prisoners who had been abused. When you face violence from security officers, ISIS can use that to attract you. Young people without any other ideology or strong beliefs are the most influenced.

“Prisoners face many kinds of violence - physical and psychological. There are electrocutions, or you can be hanged from the ceiling by your arms or legs for days. Sometimes they bring members of your family to where you are interrogated, a prisoner’s sister or mother or daughter and threaten them and make the prisoner confess to things he hasn’t done. I know where wives were brought to the investigation offices and the prisoner was told that the officers would ‘do things’ to their wives if they didn’t confess.

“If I am a normal person, not a criminal or with any political ideology, and I am arrested and face physical harm from the authorities I will have a bad attitude to the authorities and I can easily be attracted by ISIS.

“I saw groups of men in Al Aqrab prison join ISIS after being abused - not just one or two but several. They were just normal prisoners but then they joined ISIS. Young men who used to explain their views in a peaceful way were persuaded to find another, not peaceful, way.

“In Istaqbul, part of the Tora prison complex, I saw how ISIS prisoners had better privileges too. They had more free time, more recreation time, fewer restrictions than other prisoners.”

Malek²¹

Malek told Human Rights First he was released in April 2019.

“I saw ISIS in Wadi Natron. It is a huge prison with thousands of prisoners. Extremist groups would search for men who are younger, in their twenties. The ISIS prisoners had some special privileges that made other prisoners wish to stay in the same cells as them, and so they would get enough time to convince the prisoners to join them.

“There were prisoners from the Muslim Brotherhood, and other prisoners who had no affiliations, and prisoners belonging to other Islamic groups, and prisoners belonging to Jihadi groups, and there were prisoners who were directly affiliated to ISIS.

“Prisoners from the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamic groups, and prisoners who were just against the [2013] coup were usually gathered in one cell and treated badly, but

²⁰ Interviewed in June 2021.

²¹ Interviewed in June 2021, name changed for security reasons.

prisoners from ISIS and Jihadi groups were gathered in another cell and the prison authorities treated them really well.

“They allowed them more exercise time, from seven in the morning until five in the evening. They are allowed all the books they want, even if they talk about extremism. They allow them more visiting time, and let them have all sorts of food. Until my release I saw these privileges being given to ISIS in Wadi Natrun.

“For the other prisoners I mentioned, these things are restricted. Their exercise time is reduced, the allowed visitation time is short, and we were prevented from getting many types of food.

“In addition to all these privileges granted to ISIS, they also have the freedom of movement to move between the wards [parts of the prison]. In light of this, any persons, especially young people, wish to request moving to sit with them, and from here the change of ideas begins.

“I have an example that I know personally. He was with me in prison – a 19-year-old young man. When he went to al-Natrun prison, he was greatly affected by the ISIS group, and when he returned, he began to say that the Muslim Brotherhood are infidels and that peaceful change is not feasible, and that change must be made by force of arms. The moderate prisoners tried to talk to him rationally and argue with him to change his thoughts, but he was very fierce and did not listen to anyone.

“As for what prison authorities should do, they should stop giving ISIS prisoners special privileges and prevent them from spreading their ideas.”

Amr Hashad (Amr Alaa Albib Hamed Farag)²²

Amr Hashad was released in January 2019 after five years in prison.

"I am 27 years old, and a human rights activist. I was kept in 11 different places of detention. I was convicted after taking part in anti-government protests and sentenced to three years in prison, but when the three years was up, they just transferred me to another prison and held me there instead of releasing me. They accused me of blowing up a train, an attack which actually happened when I was in prison.

“When I was first arrested, I was tortured for 60 days by state security. I was beaten, kept naked, and electrocuted, including on my genitals. I needed surgery afterwards.

“After that I was transferred to the prison and put in a cell for new arrivals. Prisoners are usually kept there for between 11 and 30 days, depending on when the officer in charge moves them to a more permanent cell.

“During that time in the new arrivals cell a prisoner from the Muslim Brotherhood encouraged me to put my faith in god and trust his ways, telling me that 'I should pray and God will give me my rights on Judgement Day.' But an ISIS prisoner offered me a different proposition. He said 'we will help you get justice now. We will fight against the

²² Interviewed in June 2021.

CREATING TIME BOMBS

forces that did this to you and make them pay.' After 60 days of torture in which they break your mind, body, and soul – What side would someone choose?

“Apart from that, ISIS prisoners were given privileges other prisoners were denied. For instance, ISIS prisoners got four hours of recreation a day compared to two hours for the rest of the prisoners. ISIS prisoners were allowed mobile phones, and medical care, and their family visits would last 90 minutes. Other prisoners weren't allowed mobile phones, didn't get proper medical care and had visits of 20 minutes. It's attractive to prisoners to want to join them. ISIS prisoners could access any books that they wanted - even those promoting extremist ideology whilst University students could not even get their textbooks.

“Some prison officers are just scared of ISIS and give them privileges. One officer in Istaqbil Tora prison was too scared to go into their cell. The authorities are creating ticking time bombs by allowing this.

“I know of three guys who when they arrived in prison weren't radical. They would smoke cigarettes with us, joked with us; one of them came from a wealthy background and had been mistakenly arrested when he was leaving his University campus. They joined ISIS in prison. When they were released, two went to fight for ISIS in Sinai and one was killed fighting in Syria.

“The ISIS leaders in prison can get easy access to other prisoners. Even guys arrested for petty crimes, guys selling hashish, are exposed to the ISIS recruiting in prisons. This was still happening when I was released in 2019.”

CREATING TIME BOMBS

© 2021 Human Rights First All Rights Reserved.

This report is available online at humanrightsfirst.org