

The Working Group on Egypt

July 24, 2015

The Honorable John Kerry
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Kerry,

We write to urge you to seize the upcoming U.S.–Egypt Strategic Dialogue as an opportunity to press the Government of Egypt to end its campaign of indiscriminate repression in order to advance a more effective strategy for countering violent extremism.

The trends in Egypt are alarming. Since President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi took control in 2013, militant jihadi attacks in Sinai and elsewhere in Egypt have increased dramatically. Violence in Egypt today comes in three main forms, all of which have been increasing in frequency and severity: sophisticated large-scale attacks carried out by well-organized militant groups, mostly based in Sinai; cruder small-scale attacks carried out by individuals or small groups; and violence carried out by government security forces, directed not only at violent extremists but also political opponents or critics of Sisi and his government.

State violence—several thousand killed during street demonstrations, tens of thousands of political prisoners, hundreds of documented cases of torture or forced disappearance, sexual assault of detainees or family members, reported collective punishment of Sinai communities possibly with weapons provided through U.S. military aid—is creating more incentives for Egyptians to join militant groups. The government crackdown on the press and civil society, as well as recent and proposed presidential decrees criminalizing peaceful protest and free expression, are closing off the political space necessary to counter violent extremists effectively. President Sisi’s pledge to accelerate death sentences handed down against individuals in highly politicized trials that fell short of internationally recognized fair trial standards could further inflame the situation. By carrying out a campaign of repression and human rights abuses that is unprecedented in the country’s history, and by closing off all avenues of peaceful expression of dissent through politics, civil society, or media, Sisi is stoking the very fires he says he wants to extinguish.

The United States should support the Egyptian people in efforts to eliminate threats posed by terrorist groups, as it is doing in other countries around the world. But the approach used by the Government of Egypt in recent months has been counterproductive and risks further inflaming a volatile environment.

As a bipartisan group of foreign policy experts formed in 2010 to garner greater U.S. policy attention to Egypt, we have serious concerns that the Government of Egypt will try to use the Strategic Dialogue as a sign of U.S. endorsement of its current repressive policies. Nonetheless,

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we do believe that the Strategic Dialogue could be a useful forum for raising deep concerns about the alarming situation in the country. We urge you to seize this opportunity to stress the need for a course correction in which Egypt would fight militants with effective military and law enforcement means, while ending repression of political rivals and critics, including civil society and media. Repression produces the grievances on which violent extremism feeds and therefore moves Egypt further away from the stability and security it desperately needs.

To that end, we hope that you will urge the Egyptian government to take the following steps immediately in order to break the destructive wave of violence:

- Bring counter-terrorism legislation into line with Egypt's constitutional requirements and its international human rights commitments;
- Revise its strategy toward the Sinai-based insurgency to adopt more effective security methods, along with political and economic strategies that will enlist the cooperation of the local population instead of disenfranchising it;
- Cease politically-motivated trials, annul related death sentences and other punishments handed down in questionable trials, and release all prisoners currently held with insufficient regard to due process of law;
- Bring to an end its assault on independent civil society organizations, including human rights groups, and on local and foreign journalists;
- Initiate processes of national reconciliation to end social and political polarization.

Furthermore, we ask respectfully that you resist the urge to give any public praise to the Egyptian government beyond what is precisely accurate and warranted. This is especially important regarding democratic reforms, rule of law, and human rights. We should learn from past experience that unwarranted praise in public can severely undermine the effectiveness of stern messages delivered in private, as well as undermining the efforts of Egyptians who, at considerable personal risk, are trying to fight radicalization with a more enlightened message based on the rights of citizens.

Sincerely,

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This letter reflects the views of the individual signatories; institutional affiliations are listed for the purpose of identification only.