

SINCE THE RABAA MASSACRE

A Decade of U.S. Failure
on Egyptian Human Rights



Introduction

Local activists say the United States government has failed human rights defenders (HRDs) in Egypt for the last ten years.

After Abdel Fattah El-Sisi took power in Egypt in a violent coup in July 2013, his security forces massacred over 1,000 people on the streets of Cairo the following month when clearing protests in the neighborhoods of Rabaa and Nahda.¹ Egyptian human rights activists see the lack of a U.S. response to that massacre – which took place a decade ago next week – as part of a broader and continuing failure to protect human rights in Egypt.

This report offers a brief analysis of U.S. human rights policy towards Egypt over the last decade, including the performance of the U.S. embassy in Cairo, as assessed by some leading local human rights activists who spoke with Human Rights First. The Biden administration's promises to tackle authoritarianism and support human rights are deemed to be false by activists struggling to stay out of prison. The HRDs say President Biden's continued military and political support for President Sisi undermines White House and State Department rhetoric on human rights, and that little has changed in Biden's approach compared to previous U.S. administrations.

One of the activists who spoke with Human Rights First for this report is Aya Hijazi, an Egyptian-American HRD.² After the 2013 coup, police in Cairo raided her NGO Belady, arresting her and her team. She was imprisoned on fabricated charges for three years and released after an intervention by President Donald Trump following international attention on her case. She told Human Rights First:

"I don't feel the U.S. has in any way done enough to support human rights in Egypt since the Rabaa massacre; none of the U.S. institutions – the executive, the legislature, even the media – have done enough... Rabaa was the worst massacre in modern Egyptian history and in no way has it got the attention it deserved. I read somewhere the numbers are equivalent to the [1989] Tiananmen Square

¹ <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/08/12/all-according-plan/raba-massacre-and-mass-killings-protesters-egypt>

² Aya Hijazi holds a Master's degree in Public Administration from Harvard. She studied law in Egypt and Conflict Analysis and Resolution in the United States. During the Arab Spring, she returned to Egypt where she cofounded an NGO, Belady -- An Island for Humanity. She is now back in the U.S. where she restarted Belady with a mission to defend human rights and freedom. She has written several articles for the *Washington Post* and the *Intercept*, and received a democracy award from the Project on Middle Eastern Democracy.



massacre and yet within American common knowledge almost everyone knows about Tiananmen Square and almost no one knows about Rabaa.”³

This report also presents recommendations from leading Egyptian HRDs on what the U.S. government should do. These include imposing meaningful conditions on security assistance to Egypt, sanctioning corrupt and human rights-abusing officials, bringing accountability for the Rabaa massacre, supporting HRDs who have been jailed in Egypt, and activating the U.S. embassy to push for human rights.

2013: Coup and Massacre

Abdel Fattah El-Sisi took power in Egypt in a violent coup in July 2013, deposing President Morsi, the country’s first civilian president who had been elected in June 2012. Morsi, a senior member of the Muslim Brotherhood, had won the Egyptian presidency in an election that followed mass street protests across Egypt in January and February 2011, which ended the 30-year dictatorship of President Mubarak.

President Barack Obama’s White House refused to describe Sisi’s coup as a coup. Acknowledging that Sisi had taken power in a coup over an elected government may have required the U.S. to cut off military aid to Sisi’s government.⁴

After Sisi’s coup removed Morsi from power in July 2013, the Muslim Brotherhood organized two huge sit-ins in Cairo, which lasted for six weeks. Sisi’s security forces then massacred over 1,000 people in the Cairo neighborhoods of Rabaa and Nahda; Egyptian soldiers and police opened fire on protestors and cleared the demonstrations.

According to an exhaustive study by Human Rights Watch (HRW), more than 1,150 people were killed on August 14, 2013, in relation to the protests in what is now known as the Rabaa Massacre.⁵ HRW suggested the killings “likely amounted to crimes against humanity, given both their widespread and systematic nature and the evidence suggesting the killings were part of a policy to attack unarmed persons on political grounds.”⁶

For several decades, Human Rights First has visited Egypt to document human rights abuses. It reported from Egypt during the Mubarak regime, the temporary military

³ Assessments by the BBC in 2021 and Amnesty International in 2023 put the numbers of protestors that Chinese security forces killed in June 1989 at hundreds, possibly thousands. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-48445934>; <https://www.amnesty.org.uk/china-1989-tiananmen-square-protests-demonstration-massacre>

⁴ <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/IF11267.pdf>; <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/09/obama-egypt-coup/565733/>; See Kirkpatrick, David *Into the Hands of the Soldiers* (Viking, 2018)

⁵ <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/08/12/all-according-plan/raba-massacre-and-mass-killings-protesters-egypt>

⁶ <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/08/12/all-according-plan/raba-massacre-and-mass-killings-protesters-egypt>



government which succeeded him, the Morsi government, and the Sisi government. The organization has testified in the U.S. Congress on some of its findings and produced detailed recommendations on how to support human rights in Egypt for U.S. administrations of both parties and on how to better support local human rights activists for the U.S. embassy in Cairo.⁷

Human Rights First was in Cairo the week preceding the massacre, and when it happened. The day before the massacre, Human Rights First visited the Nahda and saw “thousands of families in the camps, which include bouncy castles, ping-pong tables and other amusements to entertain the many kids.”

The same day, Human Rights First posted a piece from the Egyptian capital describing the two protest sites:

“The larger, in Rabaa, is estimated to have tens of thousands of men, women, and children. One report says the kitchen serves 35,000 meals at each sitting. The other at Nahda is smaller, next to Giza Zoo, and despite all the talk of forced removals, the surrounding streets were bustling as normal today with soldiers and policemen camped several blocks away.”⁸

We noted that in the days before the massacre there had been a concerted diplomatic effort that “included U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Bill Burns, Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham, and senior EU diplomats” to persuade the Egyptian government not to use force to clear the protests.

Human Rights First spoke at that time to locals near Rabaa, and one woman predicted that unless a deal was struck soon between the authorities and the demonstrators “to guarantee a peaceful end to this, there will be a lot of blood.” She was right.

The next day, around 6:30 am, the police and army attacked Rabaa; they had attacked at the Nahda site about 30 minutes earlier. Live rounds and army bulldozers cleared the protests at both sites over the next 12 hours.

⁷ A selection of testimony and reports includes:

humanrightscommission.house.gov/sites/humanrightscommission.house.gov/files/documents/Brian%20Dooley%20Testimony.pdf;
<https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/mubaraks-visit-in-washington-a-chance-for-human-rights-in-egypt/>; <https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/breaking-the-steel-vise-u-s-government-support-for-civil-society/>;
<https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/letter-u-s-needs-to-be-more-critical-of-egypts-diminished-democracy/>;
<https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/egypt-attacks-on-the-media/> ; <https://humanrightsfirst.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/HRF-Egypt-Blueprint-Dec2014.pdf>; <https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/back-to-square-one-the-u-s-government-and-political-change-in-egypt-2/> ; <https://humanrightsfirst.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Egypt-Report-July.pdf>; <https://humanrightsfirst.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Like-a-Fire-in-a-Forest.pdf>; <https://humanrightsfirst.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Time-Bombs-Egypt-Final.pdf>

⁸ <https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/cairos-dispersal-dilemma/>



Witnesses at Nahda said “security forces demanded from loudspeakers that protesters leave the square, but then, almost immediately, resorted to firing at protesters, including those attempting to leave from the designated ‘safe’ exits.”⁹

That evening, Human Rights First reported from the city on local activists' shock at what was happening:

“Getting around much of the city is now dangerous. Downtown Cairo is very quiet with few people on the streets, but many neighborhoods are unsafe and there has been shooting between security forces and gunmen. Trains and main arteries into Cairo have been stopped to prevent protestors from the rest of the country from entering the city.”

That evening, activists called on the U.S. State Department to clarify what was happening “by releasing information on casualties and the scope of the violence gathered by the Embassy in Cairo.”

Human Rights First also recommended that “U.S. government aid to the military should be suspended after [that] day’s violence. The resumption of military aid should be conditioned on the implementation of a credible program of national reconciliation in Egypt, and the empowerment of an inclusive, civilian-led government with control over the military and security forces.”

The U.S. government did not take these actions. Activists say that since the coup and the massacre the U.S. government and its embassy in Cairo have been poor allies in the country’s struggle for human rights. Washington has continued to supply the Sisi regime with weapons worth billions of dollars that have solidified his dictatorial rule.

HRDs Reflect on the Rabaa Massacre

As next week’s anniversary of the Rabaa massacre approached, several Egyptian activists shared their views on U.S. policy with Human Rights First.

A prominent HRD for many years, Esraa Abdel Fattah was jailed in 2008 for her activism during the regime of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, before leading human rights activism in the 2011 uprising. She spent nearly two years in pre-trial detention under the Sisi government before being released in July 2021.¹⁰ She told Human Rights First:

⁹ <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/08/12/all-according-plan/raba-massacre-and-mass-killings-protesters-egypt>

¹⁰ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-57882069>



"In 2011, under Obama, there was a clear message to us from the U.S. government that it supported principles of human rights and democracy, and human rights defenders. But that faded over time and now, under Biden, while this message is better than under Trump, it's not as much as we expected."

Another leading Cairo-based activist, who did not want his name used for fear of reprisal by Egyptian authorities, told us:

"Egypt has witnessed the worst ten years in living memory in terms of killings, arrests, disappearances, death penalty, everything... it's the worst ten years on record, and we haven't seen any significant change under Biden. Any improvements are more of the government of Egypt feeling pressure because of the [U.S.] Congress tying aid to the release of prisoners. But overall, those small changes and shifts are not proportionate to the catastrophic direction that Egypt has taken since 2013, since the coup, since Rabaa."

Egyptian academic and HRD Moataz El Fegiery told us: "The Rabaa massacre was undoubtedly a turning point in Egypt's human rights crises. This tragic event caused deep polarization within Egyptian society and led to a climate of impunity and unchecked state violence, where human rights violations continued to persist."¹¹

Another experienced human rights activist in Cairo, who asked not to be named for fear of reprisals, told Human Rights First:

"Ten years after Rabaa there is impunity for what happened; no one has been held accountable for the killings. When it comes to human rights in Egypt, I can't see much difference between the last two [Trump and Biden] administrations, it's more or less business as usual under Biden. There is a difference in perception that human rights defenders in Egypt were in even greater danger when Trump was president, that Sisi had a green light and could do whatever he wanted. The perception at least is that our safety is a bit better under Biden, but there's really no firm stance for human rights."

Shaimaa Aboelkhir is an Egyptian journalist and HRD who in a recent interview stressed the need for the U.S. to press for accountability for what happened at Rabaa:

¹¹ El Fegiery is co-founder and general coordinator of the Egyptian Human Rights Forum (EHRF). In Cairo in August 2013 he was active in human rights advocacy as a member of the executive committee of the EuroMed Rights and as a board member of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies.



“What has happened about the investigation into the killing of the thousand people? We haven’t seen any real action from the U.S. government about the impunity for Rabaa. Who in the U.S. government is pressing for charges against those who did the killings? ... Many thousands of the protestors from that time are in prison, some for ten years, but those who did the killings are not. Even the humanitarian situation in the prisons is very bad—many old people, ill people.”¹²

No one knows how many political prisoners are held in Egypt, though estimates are around 60,000.¹³ Prison conditions are harsh; torture is routine. Human Rights First has detailed in two reports, based on the testimony of former prisoners, how abuse in custody drives prisoners into the arms of ISIS and other extremist groups who recruit followers from inside Egypt’s prison system.¹⁴

A Decade of Failed Policies From Washington

Since Rabaa, successive U.S. administrations have continued to transfer large amounts of military aid to Egypt. Since the 1979 Camp David peace deal, roughly the same amount (\$1.3 billion) has been given to Egypt each year. Although in recent years a portion of that (usually \$300 million) has been nominally dependent on Egypt making progress on specific human rights conditions, the money is usually transferred irrespective of their progress. Under a waiver procedure, the U.S. government can decide not to comply with the statutory human rights requirement if it deems the transfer to be in the U.S. national security interest.

The annual debate about whether and how much military aid should be conditioned or withheld is now a permanent fixture in Washington politics (and is underway in 2023), but the U.S. government generally sends all, or nearly all, of the \$1.3 billion in aid each year.¹⁵ Last year, through a State Department decision and a Congressional hold, the U.S. government withheld \$205 million.¹⁶

Some Egyptian HRDs looked back at the last decade and assessed the U.S. government’s performance on human rights since Rabaa.

¹² With a background at the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Avocats Sans Frontières (ASF), Euro Med Rights, and European Endowment for Democracy, Shaimaa Abouelkhir focuses on freedom of expression, media independence, and the right to fair trial.

¹³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/08/world/middleeast/egypts-prisons-conditions.html>

¹⁴ <https://humanrightsfirst.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Like-a-Fire-in-a-Forest.pdf>; <https://humanrightsfirst.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Time-Bombs-Egypt-Final.pdf>

¹⁵ See <https://pomed.org/publication/human-rights-conditions-on-u-s-military-aid-to-egypt-under-the-biden-administration/>

¹⁶ <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/senator-blocks-75-million-us-military-aid-egypt-over-rights-concerns-2022-10-17/>



El Fegiery suggested that “While there were some instances where the U.S. pressured the Egyptian government to release certain Egyptian-American political prisoners in response to growing human rights lobbying, the overall attention to the catastrophic trajectory of human rights conditions in Egypt remained significantly sidelined.” He added:

“The U.S. administration's approach to human rights promotion in Egypt has been inconsistent. While rights institutions and diplomacy, engaged with multilateral human rights institutions, and faced pressure from Congress to cut certain amounts from military aid, it has also provided political endorsement to the repressive government in Egypt. The Egyptian army has continued to receive financial support from the U.S., which has raised concerns about the potential role of this support in perpetuating human rights abuses.”

Other HRDs see the relationship as being fairly static for many years. “There’s not much change in what the U.S. wants: seeking stability with whoever is in power, seeking cooperation and deals and regional stability with the Egyptian regime and preserving the partnership since the Camp David peace deal. So, the national security priorities of the U.S. have been the compass of U.S. foreign policy,” said an activist in Cairo.

He noted that the Congressional strategy of conditioning aid on Egypt to free some prisoners had sometimes worked. He added:

“I’m not sure these small maneuvers tied to aid, or the differences in rhetoric between Biden and Trump are really significant in sending a clear message to the Egyptian government that their direction has to change... The Egyptian government is buying time: it launches a human rights strategy, pretends there is a national dialogue, it reactivates a pardons committee, but all of this is cosmetic in terms of a real change of direction, as cosmetic as the changes in the administrations of the U.S.”

Disappointment With the Biden Administration

Despite Biden’s 2020 campaign promise that there would be “no more blank checks” for Trump’s “favorite dictator” (as Trump once described Sisi), and despite the Biden administration’s promises to put human rights at the center of its foreign policy and “to



stand together in defending against threats from autocracies," the U.S. government has continued to support the Sisi dictatorship at the expense of local rights activists.¹⁷

Esraa Abdel Fattah said:

"In 2011, under Obama, there was a clear message to us from the U.S. government that it supported principles of human rights and democracy, and human rights defenders. But that faded over time and now, under Biden, while this message is better than under Trump, it's not as much as we expected. My concern is that Biden is too old. Maybe he's better than Trump but he hasn't been what we had expected."

Aboelkhir agreed:

"What's happened so far with Biden isn't what we had expected at the start of his administration. We know those in senior positions in the U.S. administration are well aware of what's happening on human rights in Egypt, but we don't see any action to condition U.S. support for Sisi."

An HRD based in Cairo also compared Biden to Trump and his predecessors: "When it comes to human rights in Egypt I can't see much difference between the two administrations, it's more or less business as usual under Biden."

Another suggested, "There is a difference in perception that human rights defenders in Egypt were in even greater danger when Trump was president, that Sisi had a green light and could do whatever he wanted. The perception at least is that our safety is a bit better under Biden, but there's really no firm stance for human rights."

Inaction From the U.S. Embassy In Cairo

For many years, Human Rights First has recommended that the U.S. embassy in Cairo have greater public engagement with those local HRDs that want it, and that it should publicly support them when they are attacked. The HRDs that Human Rights First spoke to for this report have all had some interaction with the embassy in Cairo.

¹⁷ https://twitter.com/joebiden/status/1282419453939113989?s=46&t=-SUMKV_ecYFSSIFRSN4iPA;
https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/biden-egypt-mohamed-soltan-sissi/2021/02/18/b25ca226-720a-11eb-93be-c10813e358a2_story.html; <https://www.state.gov/putting-human-rights-at-the-center-of-u-s-foreign-policy/>;
<https://www.state.gov/further-information-the-summit-for-democracy/>



"I have had some contact with the American embassy in Cairo, but I don't see any clear or direct public messaging from them in terms of news or statements on human rights," said Esraa Abdel Fattah.

Another HRD based in Cairo said, "The [U.S.] embassy in Cairo under both Trump and Biden seems close to the regime. We don't see any firm actions for human rights in Egypt from the embassy."

Another said:

"The U.S. embassy gets interested in some topics, and in some individuals, but generally speaking the trend is 'Let's seek co-operation, let's find influential interlocutors within the Egyptian security agencies and government,' and they see that as progress. From the embassy's point of view, finding interlocutors they can sit down with and discuss human rights is what they want, and the higher up they can go in terms of officials is what they see as success. ... So the embassy is generally against escalation from Washington, from Congress, because they think that would close those doors that are ajar to officials they have access to now, so the embassy puts the brakes on any potential increase in pressure on the Egyptian government, because they think it would backfire and they would lose leverage altogether."

A survey of tweets over the last year from the account of the U.S. embassy in Cairo ([@usembassycairo](https://twitter.com/usembassycairo)) supports the view that the embassy is reluctant to openly criticize the Egyptian government. The embassy's tweets do not often mention human rights, when they do, they are usually part of routine readouts following meetings between U.S. and Egyptian officials where "human rights" are included on a long list of issues discussed or are addressed in vague and general terms that do not reference Egypt's ongoing human rights crisis. For example, on March 21, 2023, the embassy retweeted Secretary of State Antony Blinken saying "Human rights are universal. They aren't defined by any one country, philosophy, or religion. They apply to everyone, everywhere."¹⁸

The embassy has been willing to tweet praise for ostensible progress on human rights in Egypt that State Department officials have claimed to see, but it does not appear to have used social media to directly criticize Egypt's record on human rights in at least a year.¹⁹ The

¹⁸ https://twitter.com/statedept/status/1638374944382894080?s=51&t=-SUMKV_ecYFSSIFRSN4iPA; The @usembassycairo twitter account had a following of 171.2k as of July 2023. See also <https://twitter.com/USEmbassyCairo/status/1620094163458068480?s=20>; <https://twitter.com/USEmbassyCairo/status/1620094163458068480?s=20>; <https://twitter.com/StateDeptSpox/status/1620062539316072449?s=20>; <https://twitter.com/StateDeptSpox/status/1620071301082914816?s=20>; <https://twitter.com/USEmbassyCairo/status/1618653926076862464?s=20>; <https://twitter.com/USEmbassyCairo/status/1603381438660849664?s=20>; <https://twitter.com/StateDept/status/1601585026663071750?s=20>

¹⁹ <https://twitter.com/USEmbassyCairo/status/1603381438660849664?s=20>; <https://twitter.com/USEmbassyCairo/status/1588434994661556224?s=20>; <https://twitter.com/USEmbassyCairo/status/1561719146424983553?s=20>



embassy even failed to retweet public calls from the State Department for the release of jailed Egyptian Human Rights Defender Patrick Zaki.²⁰

At Human Rights First's urging, the State Department in 2013 produced guidelines on supporting human rights defenders -- "Guidelines for U.S. Diplomatic Mission Support to Civil Society and Human Rights Defenders" -- for its embassies and other missions.²¹ In a series of reports, Human Rights First recommended that the U.S. embassy in Cairo better engage and support of local HRDs by translating these guidelines and promoting them on the embassy's website.²²

While the State Department updated and reissued the guidelines in 2021, in July 2023, Human Rights First was unable to find the guidelines on the website of the U.S. embassy in Cairo.²³

Geopolitics Shapes the Region

Local Egyptian activists recognize that U.S.-Egyptian relations take place in the context of multipolar engagements. They know the world is not the same as it was in 1979 when the U.S. first agreed to annually give Egypt over a billion dollars in military aid, nor even the same as when President Biden took office in 2021.

El Fegjery makes this point:

"There was indeed a growing expectation that the Biden administration would take a firmer stance on promoting human rights in Egypt. However, various global and regional geopolitical factors, such as the Russian-Ukrainian war, have posed challenges and weakened the administration's resolve to prioritize human rights issues in Egypt."

An experienced Cairo rights activist observed:

"The geopolitics of Russia, NATO, Ukraine, and so on shows if you stay too lenient with Putin then you get more Putins around the world, and you end up threatening the world order. The aggression against Ukraine is undermining the security

²⁰ https://twitter.com/elizhagedorn/status/1681406952159543296?s=46&t=-SUMKV_ecYFSSIFRSN4iPA

²¹ humanrightscommission.house.gov/sites/humanrightscommission.house.gov/files/documents/Brian%20Dooley%20Testimony.pdf

²² <https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/egypt-attacks-on-the-media/>; <https://humanrightsfirst.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/HRF-Egypt-Blueprint-Dec2014.pdf>

²³ <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Human-Rights-Defenders-Guidance.pdf>;
<https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/state-departments-second-chance-to-get-hrd-guidelines-right/>



council, and it emboldens other dictators, including partners of the U.S. in the Middle East, and that the U.S. needs to understand that being lenient with dictatorships can backfire. Sisi was an inspiration to Trump, and he called him his favorite dictator, and Trump himself has a tendency towards that sort of politics, so what the U.S. politicians need to understand is that democracy at home is at risk if you are too lenient with dictators who are partners of the U.S."

Aboelkhir shared this view:

"The U.S. is just looking to Egypt as a stable ally in the region, but the Egyptian government isn't stable even like during the Mubarak regime. Sisi is developing stronger relations with the Gulf countries and enabling the political rehabilitation of Syrian dictator Bashar Al Assad. Sisi is in a weak political position, the economy is weak, and it's time to put pressure on Egypt if it is to access international funds and make these funds conditional on human rights improvements."

Using the Imposition of Conditions and Sanctions

Over the past decade, local activists told Human Rights First that Washington should impose meaningful conditionality on U.S. aid to Egypt, and they continue to urge that stricter conditions be placed on aid.

Said Hijazi:

"With the military aid and the waivers that the US gives on human rights, we haven't seen any significant difference between the Biden administration and Trump. ... The U.S. could raise issues in statements from Congress and use soft power in relationships with the regime. Of course, pressure could come from freezing military aid."

Aboelkhir made a similar point:

"Even when Egypt doesn't meet the standards required for aid from the U.S., they receive it anyway. And this support is used against us, to harm human rights defenders. There has to be some conditionality... What we hear all the time is that they [U.S. officials] are talking behind closed doors to [Egyptian government] officials. But what we need is conditionality, and actions against some officials to show that impunity can't be tolerated."



Since 2014, Human Rights First has urged the U.S. government to use its powers to sanction corrupt Egyptian officials.²⁴ Local activists also want Washington to impose sanctions on known perpetrators of human rights violations in Egypt. One human rights defender in Cairo said:

“The U.S. knows who is violating human rights in Egypt, it knows their names, but they aren't willing to take sanctions against these people. If they did it would signal to the Egyptian government that they should shift their policies but it's not happening. Unless you're willing to take these measures you're really not helping. People across Egypt of course lose faith that the U.S. cares about human rights.”

Human Rights First reported last year that Egyptian security forces and government officials have committed a wide range of extrajudicial killings, custodial abuses, and arbitrary detentions that meet the relevant legal criteria for U.S. human rights sanctions.²⁵ Several civil society organizations have recommended specific Egyptian officials or agencies be sanctioned under the U.S. government's Global Magnitsky sanctions program for their roles in such abuses.²⁶ Neither the Treasury nor State Departments have acted on these recommendations.

These omissions are part of a broader U.S. practice of omitting the Egyptian government from foreign policy programs or lists of concern on which it belongs. Despite the Egyptian government's arbitrary detention of several dual Egyptian-American nationals, the State Department has not applied to Egypt a new travel-warning indicator that highlights to U.S. travelers the “risk of wrongful detention by a foreign government.” The State Department also has not included Egypt on its “special watch list” for violations of religious freedom as the U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedom has recommended.

²⁴ <https://humanrightsfirst.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/HRF-Egypt-Blueprint-Dec2014.pdf>

²⁵ Human Rights First, “Friends Like These: U.S. Security Partners and Selectivity in the Global Magnitsky Sanctions Program,” <https://humanrightsfirst.org/library/u-s-should-use-magnitsky-sanctions-against-abusive-security-partners/>.

²⁶ Some recommendations have been submitted confidentially. For public calls for sanctions, see, e.g., Human Rights Watch, “Security Forces Dealt with Them,” calling for sanctions on Egypt's National Security Agency and several officials for their role in extrajudicial killings (https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/media_2021/09/egypt0921_web.pdf); and Democracy for the Arab World Now, “Egypt: Judge Shabeeb al-Damarany Enforces Arbitrary Detentions, Indiscriminate Sentences,” calling for sanctions on a judge for his role in the arbitrary detention of peaceful protestors (<https://dawnmena.org/egypt-judge-shabeeb-al-damarany-enforces-arbitrary-detentions-indiscriminate-sentences>).



Recommendations

Drawing on the recommendations of Egyptian human rights defenders, Human Rights First recommends that the U.S. government should:

- Impose meaningful human rights conditionality, without waivers, on its security assistance and arms sales to Egypt.
- Impose targeted financial and visa sanctions on Egyptian officials against whom there is sufficient credible evidence of their involvement in serious human rights abuse or corruption.
- Publicly call for the perpetrators of the Rabaa massacre to be brought to account.
- Publicly support human rights activists in Egypt, including by naming arbitrarily detained activists, calling for their release, and requesting to visit them in prison.

The State Department should instruct its embassy in Cairo to:

- Prominently promote, on its website and elsewhere, the U.S. guidelines on engaging with human rights defenders. Regularly and prominently criticize human rights violations in Egypt and publicly call for accountability for these crimes.



Mission Statement

Human Rights First works to create a just world in which every person's intrinsic human rights are respected and protected, to build societies that value and invest in all their people. To reach that goal demands assisting victims of injustice, bringing perpetrators of abuse to justice, and building institutions that ensure universal rights.

Human Rights First is a nonprofit, nonpartisan international human rights organization based in Los Angeles, New York, and Washington D.C.

Cover photo: President Biden greets Egyptian President Sisi in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Photo courtesy of the White House.

This report was researched by Brian Dooley, Senior Advisor at Human Rights First. Human Rights First thanks the Egyptian activists who were interviewed for this report.

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