



Protest at Egyptian Embassy, Washington, DC // Ted Eytan

| ANALYSIS |

A Homeland Lives Within Us, But We Cannot Live in It: Egyptian Organizing and Activism from Exile

03/23/2022 Mohamed Mandour



اقرأ المقال بالعربي.

Last June marked the first anniversary of the death of queer activist Sarah Hegazi, in exile in Canada. The days following her death witnessed vigils [in cities](#) across the United States, Canada, and Europe—and in some Arab countries as well. In Tunis, for example, a vigil [was held](#) in front of the Egyptian Embassy to denounce the oppression that Sarah had suffered at the hands of authorities and that had forced her to leave Egypt. Though friends, loved ones, and advocates in Egypt took to the online space to mourn her, organizing public vigils in Cairo was impossible, with the country under the fist of a regime that [has placed](#) harsh restrictions on the public sphere. Its circle of repression has expanded to reach unprecedented levels, pushing many Egyptians to leave. In leaving, some have attempted to continue engaging politically, albeit from exile.

Egyptians abroad played a major role in organizing the vigils for Hegazi. And they have taken similar actions in response to other events. In the fall of 2021, Egyptians [demonstrated](#) in Glasgow, Scotland to protest the participation of President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi in the United Nations Climate Change Conference. Four months prior to Sarah's death, the detention of graduate student Patrick George Zaki [inspired](#) a massive solidarity campaign that [included](#) vigils in European capitals.



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Egypt: what are the most notable forms of organizing and activism which those in exile have participated in? what are the most significant challenges faced by Egyptian activists abroad? This piece seeks to answer these questions.

A brief history of post-monarchy exile from Egypt

After securing power, Gamal Abdel Nasser's authoritarian and exclusionary ruling nature led to the [mass departure](#) of three main groups: Egyptian Jews, some members of the Muslim Brotherhood, and communist intellectuals. Following Sadat's succession as president, Egypt saw the emigration of Copts on a larger scale and the beginning of their [activism from the diaspora](#). This departure was motivated by the sectarian politics of Sadat's regime and the rise of sectarian rhetoric and violence more generally. Separately, economic liberalization policies and the Egypt-Israel peace treaty brought Sadat into confrontation with communist and Nasserist currents, which caused many of those affiliated to leave

Egypt as well.

During Mubarak's era, expatriation was not associated with any particular currents or factions. On the contrary, some left-wing and Nasserist intellectuals started to return to Egypt to occupy various governmental positions in the press and media. Despite Mubarak's strife with armed and unarmed Islamic movements, not as many departed the country under his rule. Those that did, did so temporarily and left to neighboring Gulf countries.

Mubarak was engaged in a clash with the Egyptian human rights movement that emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s. In 2000, the State Security Prosecution [charged](#) activist Hafez Abu Seada with receiving foreign funding. At the time, he was in France where he was said to have been seeking political asylum, which upset Mubarak's regime as it was concerned about the image it was trying to promote abroad. There was also fear that Abu Seada's departure may mark the beginning of human rights activities from abroad. As a result, Mubarak [sent](#) two of his senior state officials Chief of Presidential Staff Zakaria Azmi and Minister of Parliamentary Councils Kamal El Shazly to convince Abu Seada to return. After his return, he neither stood trial, nor was he acquitted of charges. This incident reflected the situation of human rights work during Mubarak's reign, where human rights organizations continued to work in Egypt, but under [heavy security scrutiny](#).

Under the Mubarak regime, Copts [continued](#) to leave the country, despite improved relations between the presidency and the Coptic Orthodox Church. Mubarak annulled President Sadat's decree that had stripped Pope Shenouda of his official state recognition and exiled him to a monastery. He returned as head of the Coptic Church once more. Nonetheless, incidents of sectarian violence against Copts did not stop during Mubarak's reign.

The political movements that emerged at the end of Mubarak's era—such as the April 6 Youth Movement and the National Association for Change—attracted an audience of Egyptians abroad. Consequently, groups affiliated with them were formed in some European capitals and the United States, with their role concentrated on the collection of signatures for the political reform campaign launched by Mohamed El-Baradei in 2010. In addition, some demonstrations were organized abroad in support of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, particularly in front of Egyptian embassies.

As for the period between 2011 and 2013, it witnessed the beginnings of [three waves of expatriation](#). The first wave was associated with the departure of many of the leaders of Mubarak's regime after he stepped down. It was followed by a second wave, which witnessed a significant departure of Copts as a result of the escalation of violent incidents against them, the high percentage of Muslim Brotherhood members and Salafists in the 2012 parliament, and the rise of then-President Mohamed Morsi to power. The third wave occurred with the removal of former President Mohamed Morsi from office in July 2013 and the resurgence of the confrontation between the state and Islamists, and at their heart the Muslim Brotherhood—which led to the dispersal of Rabaa al-Adaweya and al-Nahda sit-ins and the detention of Muslim Brotherhood leaders, members, and sympathizers. With the rise of President El-Sisi to power, the regime's circles of oppression [expanded](#) to include the activists of liberal and left-wing opposition parties and civil society activists, which caused Egypt to witness one of the largest expatriation waves in its modern history.

This most recent wave of departure can be characterized in many ways, including the unprecedented numbers it entails. Secondly, there is ideological and occupational diversity among those who have left Egypt during this wave. They vary between Islamists—most of whom are affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood—and adherents of more liberal currents, political activists, human rights activists, artists, writers, academics, journalists, and lawyers. There is also a diversity in age and socioeconomic background. Thirdly and most relevant to this piece, these waves of expatriation occurred alongside a rise in different forms of political activity taking place in exile to confront the authoritarian reality in Egypt.

Why did Egyptians go into exile after 2013?

Many factors pushed Egyptians into exile, most prominent of which included reasons related to personal security and attempts to avoid arrest and prosecution. Others departed after experiencing detention—those who served full terms, those released under investigation, and those who were acquitted—and fear of being re-arrested. Some also departed after being summoned by the National Security Agency to be investigated or threatened, or in attempts to compel them to disclose information on their activities and colleagues to security officers. Security threats also played a factor—some received indirect threats through the media, including human rights defender [Bahey-Eldin Hassan](#), who was the target of death threats from an Egyptian television presenter. Some families left the country after the arrest of their loved ones; some traveled to join them abroad to escape from prosecution. This form of departure was often done without clear plans and, sometimes, informally. As a result, Sudan (under the ousted Omar al-Bashir), Qatar, Turkey, Malaysia, and some African countries were recipients of the biggest share of this wave of expatriation.

The security clampdown in Egypt has consolidated the regime's hold on [universities, media, press, and artistic production](#)

and accordingly, it has [restricted](#) the work of [human rights organizations](#) and many of their staff (such as via [Case No. 173/2011](#)). This has resulted in less opportunity for change via partisan and political on-the-ground work. Many civil rights defenders, journalists, academics, political activists, and others in these fields have had to leave Egypt out of fear of security threats. Others have left for professional reasons. When some individuals have been given promising opportunities to work or study abroad, they have also opted to resume their academic, human rights, journalistic, or artistic work from outside of Egypt. Consequently, in addition to Turkey and Qatar, many Egyptians have traveled to Tunisia, Europe—particularly [Germany](#) and England—the United States, and Canada, where they started to establish organizations that were born abroad.

Some local and [international](#) civil society organizations also opted to leave the country after the Ministry of Social Solidarity issued its July 2014 warning to civil society organizations operating in Egypt to adjust their status in accordance with the 2002 NGO Law by November or face penalties of imprisonment and closure. This was followed by the amendment of [Article No. 78 of the Penal Code](#) criminalizing the receipt of foreign funding and making it punishable by life imprisonment. Among the most prominent organizations that left Egypt [was](#) the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS) after 20 years of working from Cairo. When the regime later [escalated](#) its attacks against human rights defenders and detained many, others decided to expatriate team members who were most at risk due to their work in advocacy, funding, and media representation of the organization, while maintaining their offices or keeping some employees in Egypt. As a result, resorting to full or partial exile has become one of the strategies adopted by some human rights organizations to be able to pursue their work and fulfill their missions.

During this time, some Egyptians traveled abroad to work or study in a more traditional sense. They had no reason to expect that they would not be able to return. However, as a result of the repeated detention of [master's](#) and [doctoral students](#), [activists in political parties](#), and [journalists](#) on their arrival to Egypt—which turned Cairo Airport into a [trap for those coming from abroad](#)—a significant group of Egyptian émigrés now live in doubt of being able to return to Egypt. While many of them have not been politically active for years, they still fear the apparent arbitrariness with which detentions occur and the vindictive nature towards former activists by the security apparatus. One of them states, “I legally departed from the airport to pursue my studies. Throughout my entire life in Egypt, I have never been detained for any reason, but today, after following the developments of detentions, I am afraid to return, and I will not risk it.”

What is distinctive about the experience of Egyptians in exile from others is that most of those who departed believed they would return imminently. However, fears over the possibility of detention now preclude many from this return. By expanding its circle of oppression and targeting those returning from abroad, the authoritarian regime in Egypt has turned the departure of some Egyptians into forcible exile.

Forms of organizing and activism in exile

Egyptians in exile leave behind family and friends, some of them in prison and all of them living under authoritarian rule. Though they left behind a dream for change and the fight for a better homeland, many [still hope to return to](#) an Egypt where they can live with [security, freedom, and democracy](#). Some of them left career paths in which they spent years building experience tailored to an Egyptian context. These reasons and others have prompted Egyptians abroad to practice various forms of activism and organizing from exile.

On the short-term, activism and organizing from exile often seeks to bring about a breakthrough in the situation of rights and freedoms in Egypt, including the release of political detainees, the amendment of several authoritarian pieces of legislation, and the creation of an environment that allows political parties, civil society organizations, and independent press to conduct their work from inside Egypt. The strategic objective of such organizing and activism as some suggest, is to contribute to [existing pressures within Egypt](#) to force the regime to negotiate with Egyptian opposition forces—both at home and abroad—to bring about a political transition that avoids prior mistakes and that provides the necessary guarantees to implement successful and effective [transitional justice](#) in the future. In order to meet these objectives, Egyptians abroad are developing forms of organizing and activism whose different modes will be discussed in detail.

Activism and organizing in exile have been informed by [a number of factors](#), most primary of which has been the transformation of the authoritarian regime inside Egypt, the state's unprecedented domination of the public sphere, the shrinking space for civil society, and the elimination of many forms of domestic mobilization—all of which have forced the Egyptian diaspora to advance its role in a manner that responds to the state of the regime in Egypt and the needs of activists inside. Organizing and activism in exile have also been influenced by the host countries—their political systems, their diplomatic relations with Egypt, and their general international standings. Finally, this work has been shaped by the nature of the professional skills of the activists themselves, alongside their statuses and the personal, academic, and

professional networks in their host countries.

Knowledge production

Since coming to power, Sisi's regime has been keen on asserting its dominance over all forms of knowledge production in Egypt, criminalizing any form that it cannot control or that represents a threat to the authority's political narrative. This is what Diaa Rashwan, Chairman of the State Information Service, [expressed](#): "We are hit from three directions: media, human rights organizations, and some research centers. I am not afraid of official states, but these three influence official positions and can shake them at any moment." Egyptian authorities are aware of the potential influence of these three knowledge production entities. And professionals in these fields, in turn, are aware of the possibility that Egypt may turn into a closed, dark room controlled by a single voice—the voice of the regime.

Many in the knowledge production space have opted to work in exile, where they have found a haven in which professionalism is appreciated, and which enjoys a wider sphere of influence that addresses a larger audience. In resuming their work while in exile, they challenge the regime's narrative and can offer an alternative one. The move abroad of a large part of knowledge production activities related to Egypt is a reflection of the challenges facing the production of knowledge from within, as well as the nature of those who left Egypt, the skills they possess, and their desire to employ their functional capacities in resisting authoritarianism in Egypt.

On the academic and research side, a number of academics and researchers who left Egypt joined various universities and research centers, some in the [United States](#) and others across [England](#), Europe, Qatar, and Turkey. Some established research institutions, such as [the Egyptian Institute for Political and Strategic Studies](#), which works from Turkey and dedicates the largest portion of its work to matters involving Egyptian affairs. Qatari support played a role in supporting some Egyptian researchers, particularly those sympathetic to political Islam, in research centers of varying sizes and degrees of professionalism, present in Qatar, Turkey, and other countries.

Across the various areas of focus and ideology, some Egyptian researchers abroad are studying authoritarianism and its transformations—often in an attempt to develop an understanding of shifts in governance in Egypt, how to respond to them, and how not to repeat the mistakes of the past decade. At times, the work of these researchers has played a role in influencing decision-making toward Egypt in host countries, including the work of those in [senior positions](#) in prestigious research centers in Washington and London. A number of parliaments—including the U.S. Congress—engage with these scholars during hearings and other meetings, drawing from their knowledge when it comes to the statements that they issue regarding Egypt and the Middle East. The work of these scholars and researchers influences international public opinion. Academic and former diplomat Ezzedine Choukri, for example, [currently holds](#) the "Jamal Khashoggi Fellowship" at the Washington Post—this position provides him with a platform to address American and international audiences at one of the world's most prominent outlets.

Organizations working abroad in the human rights space produce reports and archives that document the abuses of the regime in accordance with international human rights standards. This documentation is used to counteract the narrative that the state touts regarding human rights progress and is used in advocacy by international bodies. These reports have become critical resources for international actors during their assessment of the human rights situation in Egypt. For example, following his May 2021 meeting with President El-Sisi in the framework of joint efforts to reach a ceasefire between Israel and Gaza, the U.S. Secretary of State [cited](#), in response to a question concerning the release of Americans and others from Egyptian prisons, a report [issued by](#) the Freedom Initiative on the impact of Egypt's Wrongful Detention Practices on U.S. Persons and Families in 2020. At a hearing [conducted](#) in September 2020 concerning Egypt's political and economic future and human rights situation, Mohamed Soltan, founder of the Freedom Initiative, and Bahey-Eldin Hassan, Director of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, were among those heard by a congressional subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa. Then-Executive Director of the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP) Dr. Nancy Okail [testified](#) in a similar hearing years earlier in May 2015.

In the media and journalism sphere, journalists and television-hosts who left Egypt have joined various international media networks, such as Alhurra in the U.S. and Deutsche Welle in Germany; their social media projects—such as [Elsaha](#) and [Sulta5](#)— have attracted a wide audience of followers. [Before Egyptian-Qatari rapprochement](#), Qatari support played a significant role in the emergence of some media platforms in which Egyptians abroad have worked. These platforms gave Egyptian affairs notable priority in their coverage, particularly *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed* (*The New Arab*) newspaper, and Al Araby TV channel that broadcasts from London and hosts the "In Egyptian Time" program, which serves as a platform to

interview some of the aforementioned researchers, journalists, and human rights activists. Channels affiliated with the

interview some of the aforementioned researchers, journalists, and human rights activists. Channels affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood are still broadcasting from Turkey, and they [arguably](#) have some form of influence on the Egyptian street. The most famous of these are Al-Sharq and Mekameleen, despite the more [recent pressure](#) that Turkish authorities have taken against these channels.

Media initiatives affiliated with liberal currents have also played an important role abroad in providing low-cost and independent media that frees them from the pressures of regional powers. A number of writers and journalists in exile have started their own podcast shows that host Egyptian intellectuals, academics, and human rights defenders from inside and outside Egypt to discuss political developments there and around the world. Among the most famous of these are [Podcast11](#), which was first presented by journalist Mohamed Aboelgheit and is now presented by the recently-released journalist Solafa Magdy. Prominent journalist Hafez al-Mirazi also launched a new podcast under the name [With Hafez al-Mirazi](#). Likewise, best-selling author and political commentator Belal Fadl just launched a new podcast from his exile in New York. Independent media has also materialized on Facebook in pages like [The Egyptian Position](#), which is managed by democratic activists in exile, and has more than one million followers. The page uses simple language to present and assess the decisions and actions of the president and the government, inviting citizens to discuss them with families and friends. It is reminiscent of the style of the We are all Khaled Said Facebook page, which influenced mobilization leading up to the January 25 Revolution. Thus, media platforms from abroad have been used to challenge the dominance of the ruling regime over the media inside Egypt, whether directed to Egyptians or to the world.

Exile has provided an opportunity for writers, artists, and thinkers to pursue their creative work after many of them were subjected to harassment and even arrest by authorities, among them novelist [Ahmed Naji](#), who was sentenced to two years and spent nearly a year in prison. His case was an example of how Sisi established a morally conservative authoritarianism where free forms of artistic creativity were near-impossible, as Naji was charged with “violating public modesty.” Living abroad has provided Naji with the safety to continue his artistic creativity, as he authored several books while in exile, the most famous of which is [Haraz Mukamakum](#), which focuses on his experience as someone accused of violating public morals. It has also allowed him to write for a wider audience about [his experience](#) with the revolution and literature as a writer from exile. Others include singer Ramy Essam, who held a sold-out concert in Washington D.C. in January 2020; many of the participants were Egyptians in exile, sparking nostalgic memories of the Tahrir Square concerts that he used to perform. Just a few months after that concert, in May 2020, director Shady Habash, who had been arrested for directing a clip in which Essam criticized President Sisi, died in prison.

Advocacy

Prior to 2013, most advocacy efforts by Egyptian human rights organizations were focused domestically, particularly in the direct aftermath of the January 25 Revolution. Internationally, the focus had been largely on utilizing UN mechanisms. With the dwindling space for domestic advocacy activities after June 2013, however, the focus turned abroad. The presence of Egyptians in exile helped human rights organizations and think tanks inside Egypt—which had been most active in conducting advocacy—to develop their advocacy knowledge and tools further.

Partnerships with international organizations and think tanks have played a major role in this transformation. Furthermore, Egyptians abroad, inspired by the 2011 Revolution, have played an unmistakable role in establishing organizations abroad and developing advocacy strategies with their expertise, practical experience, and greater ability to integrate into societies abroad, one example being the [Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy \(TIMEP\)](#). Some organizations hired employees from the same countries they intended to conduct advocacy with, which contributed to better tailoring their recommendations and discourse.

Advocacy initiatives abroad have sought to urge international stakeholders to prioritize and center human rights when dealing with the Egyptian government and have managed to employ an array of mechanisms, such as those associated with the United Nations Human Rights Council, which has issued reports and statements as a result. This type of advocacy [helped facilitate](#), for example, the joint statement issued by the governments of 32 countries submitted before the Human Rights Council in which states expressed deep concern “about the trajectory of human rights in Egypt.”

It is worth mentioning that while the governments of Qatar and Turkey—before rapprochement with Egypt—were very active in supporting and growing knowledge production about Egypt, they were always noticeably absent (as both funders and targets) from advocacy activities due to the nature of their political regimes and previous political positions toward Egypt. Instead, organizations conducting advocacy from abroad have opted to direct the majority of their advocacy work toward democratic countries that share a strategic partnership with Egypt, including the United States and the EU countries, urging them to change their policies towards Egypt.

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Some Egyptian organizations abroad, along with their international partners, have [taken part](#) in advocacy campaigns targeting the reduction and conditioning of the U.S. Foreign Military Financing (FMF) package to Egypt, which is considered the second largest recipient of this type of assistance in the Middle East at a value of \$1.3 billion. Others have supported and helped inform other objectives. For example, Coptic Solidarity has worked to [pass resolutions](#) in Congress regarding the rights of Copts. On January 25, 2021 to mark the tenth anniversary of the Egyptian Revolution, Representatives Don Beyer (D-VA) and Tom Malinowski (D-NJ) [announced](#) the formation of the Egyptian Human Rights Caucus in Congress to monitor the human rights situation in Egypt and issue statements on its developments; one of the most significant [statements](#) issued by the caucus's members and other representatives criticized the administration's decision to withhold only \$130 million out of the total \$300 million that Congress had sought to withhold. The statement added that it would work in the future to ensure that this administration and future administrations would be unable to evade the requirements of Congress. The Egyptian opposition [has also](#) turned to the U.S. Congress to influence U.S. policy toward Egypt more broadly, especially after the Biden administration presented its 2022 budget with the same amount of military assistance for Egypt. Some have [engaged offices](#) like those of Bernie Sanders and Chris Murphy, who introduced a bill aimed to assert Congress's powers over arms sales, emergencies and military operations. Across these steps and others, Egyptian organizations and individuals abroad played a vital role in informing, supporting, and amplifying these actions.

Egyptian organizations and individuals abroad have also conducted advocacy in Europe. In December 2020, the European Parliament issued a [resolution](#) described as the "[harsheset yet,](#)" which featured 18 recommendations, the most prominent of which included establishing a long-term international mechanism to monitor the human rights situation in Egypt, imposing sanctions on the Egyptian government, prosecuting officials who are implicated in human rights violations, and urging for the immediate release of political prisoners. Egyptian activists in Europe have also successfully formed initiatives that strategically focus their advocacy toward particular countries. Certain external factors have made advocacy successful in these countries, including the fact that these are democratic countries with independent decision-making branches and that, at least rhetorically, state their respect for human rights, civil society, and a free press.

In Italy, the killing of Italian student Giulio Regeni at the hands of Egyptian officials and the arrest of master's student Patrick George Zaki played a role in the emergence of advocacy activities in Italy, where the country's parliament became the focus of advocacy efforts regarding the human rights situation in Egypt and the cases of Regeni and Zaki. In a hearing in the Italian Senate, the Egyptian-Italian Initiative for Human Rights (Egypt Wide) [called](#) for a comprehensive review of Egyptian-Italian relations and tangible progress in the human rights space as a major consideration for further Italian-Egyptian cooperation. Italian lawmakers [also called](#) on the government to grant Italian citizenship to Zaki, to further involve the Italians in pressuring their Egyptian counterparts to release him. Advocacy efforts succeeded [in making](#) Egypt's human rights record an obstacle in the way of further military and economic cooperation. In England, we find a similar example in the ways [Egypt Watch](#) directs its advocacy programming. In one instance, the organization arranged a conference to explore how authoritarian regimes in the Middle East employ Western arms and technology imports to oppress populations. This was done with the [Peace and Justice Project](#), founded by the famous British politician Jeremy Corbyn.

Additionally, the foreign partners and wives of human rights defenders [have also played](#) a role in supporting advocacy activities abroad for the release of their relatives. Recently, a number of British parliamentarians [urged](#) the British Foreign Secretary to call on the Egyptian government to drop charges against three staff members of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) including researcher Karim Ennarah, the spouse of a British national. Similarly, Céline Lebrun, the French wife of activist Ramy Shaath, [addressed](#) President Macron to press Egypt's Sisi during his last visit to Paris to release her husband. Though Macron refused [to condition](#) the sale of weapons to Egypt on human rights grounds, the advocacy carried out by Egyptians in exile in partnership with French and international civil society [have enhanced](#) the chances of exposing human rights violations practiced in Egypt with French weapons. The [French press](#) recently revealed how Egypt has employed French weapons, technology, and intelligence to commit multiple human rights violations, [which prompted](#) the opposition in parliament, as well as the French Minister of Defense to open investigations. Advocacy has also occurred at local executive levels, as the mayor of Paris recently [granted](#) Egyptian activists honorary citizenship for their sacrifices and defense of human rights in Egypt. Across these activities and others, Egyptian organizations and individuals were active and present. It is worth mentioning that when the political will of foreign democratic governments to play a role in improving human rights conditions in authoritarian regimes is lacking, transnational advocacy efforts can still play a role in persuading those otherwise reluctant democracies to revise their foreign policies.

Building coalitions and expanding networks

Exile has provided Egyptians abroad with opportunities to build coalitions and networks on several levels, including coordination with other Egyptians, which has taken two forms. The first has been between activists and organizations operating from exile with their counterparts in Egypt. For example, Egyptian women activists in exile played an important role [in supporting](#) the anti-sexual violence movement and [addressing](#) the state's oppression of women under the pretense of protecting "Egyptian family values." Activists abroad played roles that their counterparts in Egypt could not play, [including](#) taking to the streets to protest against the sentences issued against the TikTok bloggers, participating in media appearances, and engaging with research centers and human rights organizations to provide international support to press the Egyptian authorities on these cases. Separately, activists abroad and their counterparts in Egypt worked together to build safe platforms for women to share their experiences with sexual violence.

At the institutional level, partnerships between organizations in Egypt and abroad have contributed to increasing the impact of activities conducted by organizations in Egypt. For example, some organizations abroad have provided technical support to their Egyptian counterparts in drafting reports and submissions directed to the United Nations mechanisms, including the special rapporteurs. Partnerships have served as a communication channel to enhance opportunities for coordination. Some organizations abroad have brought on researchers and lawyers from Egypt in order to continue the work they had been doing in Egypt after their organizations were shuttered or restricted by authorities.

Other forms of Egyptian-to-Egyptian coordination have been between organizations and individuals in the diaspora through the building of coalitions and networks among Egyptians in exile for the purpose of political coordination. The [Egyptian Human Rights Forum](#) is one of the most prominent examples. It is an independent coalition of Egyptian human rights defenders abroad that seeks to coordinate efforts in order to build a broad consensus on the mechanisms necessary to confront authoritarianism.

The second level of coalition-building has been establishing alliances for joint work between Egyptian organizations abroad and regional or international organizations based in a host country. [Tunisia](#), for example, has become a destination for many international human rights organizations looking for a regional headquarters in the Middle East, as well as for regional human rights organizations and human rights defenders coming from countries like Egypt, Libya, and the rest of North Africa. This climate has allowed Egyptian human rights organizations operating from Tunisia to build partnerships with the regional offices of international organizations as well as with Tunisian and Libyan human rights organizations present in Tunisia, and to open themselves up to new experiences and strategies for human rights work. This has also turned Tunisia into a destination for human rights workshops in the Middle East, among other activities. By way of example, [the Intersection Association for Rights and Freedoms](#) was established as an independent human rights and research organization, emerging as a result of cooperation between Egyptian and Tunisian human rights defenders working on gender and LGBT issues in the Middle East. Separately, the presence of Egyptian activists in important positions in international human rights organizations has also provided momentum for cooperation and the building of sustainable partnerships between Egyptian human rights organizations and international organizations.

The third level of coalition-building has involved the formation of partnerships between Egyptians abroad and other Arabs in exile in Europe and the United States. Berlin, [for example](#), has become the city of choice for many Arab exiles from the Middle East. In one example, Egyptian academics and artists established [Nawara](#), a Berlin-based association that brings together researchers, artists, and activists from North Africa and West Asia. Nawara's activities focus largely on feminist and queer issues; the organization works to provide local communities coming from the region with research, trainings, and consultations. In cooperation with [Masahat](#), a Syrian organization that works from Norway to spread Arab culture in exile, Nawara organized a series of seminars with Egyptian and Syrian academics in exile to reflect on the decade since the Arab Spring. Exile has provided an opportunity for activists to reflect on the Arab Spring in partnership with other countries; it has provided an opportunity to spread an alternative narrative of events to the ones portrayed by regimes, and to preserve the collective memory of revolution and its surrounding events through various cultural and artistic interventions.

The fourth level of coalition-building has taken place between Egyptians abroad and professional networks and entities abroad. This has included engagement with bodies like the [Working Group on Egypt](#), a group of international relations experts who hold high positions in research centers and prestigious American universities and in previous U.S. administrations. The group's work focuses on urging the current U.S. administration to adopt foreign policies that reflect the American values of democracy and respect for human rights. Another example has been work with [the Middle East Studies Association \(MESA\)](#), which pays attention to the state of academic freedom in Egypt, and the violations that

[STUDIES ASSOCIATION \(MISA\)](#), which pays attention to the state of academic freedom in Egypt, and the violations that academics in Egypt have faced. The association has directed a number of statements to Egyptian authorities to [release detained Egyptian academics](#) and to [stop violating academic freedoms](#). It has also directed [letters to the U.S. State Department](#) to play a more effective role in stopping the deterioration of academic freedom in Egypt. [It previously issued a security alert to scholars and researchers intending to conduct research from Egypt](#). Across these two examples and beyond, Egyptian organizations abroad have played a role in maintaining communication and engaging with these entities.

The fifth level of coalition-building has taken the form of building grassroots-level support in a particular host country made up of Egyptians holding citizenship of the relevant host country. For example, the Freedom Initiative organizes an annual event called [Egypt Advocacy Day](#), where Egyptian-Americans come together to raise the issue of human rights in Egypt with their representatives in Congress. Besides being an advocacy activity, the day also aims to build and organize a base of Egyptian-American support and to provide participants with the skills and expertise needed to play more professional roles in advocacy. In other countries, there have been attempts [to organize](#) grassroots-level support by incorporating host country citizens into advocacy efforts, and to sustain and grow influence with representatives and members of elected councils. For several reasons, advocacy efforts that address parliamentary and local council representatives can, at times, be more effective than advocacy efforts targeted at the executive branch of government.

Leveraging the law

Even prior to the 2011 Revolution, human rights organizations inside Egypt used international law and leveraged international legal mechanisms in order to pressure Egyptian authorities to adopt certain reforms at home. In December 2010, for example, the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) [filed a complaint](#) involving administrative detention in Egypt to the African Commission on Human and People's Rights. In December 2013, the African Commission accepted a separate complaint filed by EIPR involving the "[virginity tests](#)" undergone by female protesters in 2011. This use of international law from the pre-revolution period up until July 2013 took place in parallel with the [expansion](#) of Egyptian human rights work in Egypt, and alongside efforts to provide legal support to victims and conduct successful strategic litigation in the country.

[The legalization of repression](#) in Egypt, the [president's control](#) over the judiciary through constitutional amendments and [amendments to the Judicial Authority Law](#), [the consolidation of executive domination over oversight bodies in Egypt](#), and the increased targeting of human rights organizations and [lawyers](#) have diminished the space for accountability at home, particularly of those responsible for human rights violations and corruption. This has prompted Egyptians abroad to consider leveraging international law and the laws of democratic countries that would allow for Egyptian officials to be held to account in foreign courts instead.

In 2014, a number of lawyers [representing](#) the Muslim Brotherhood and the Freedom and Justice Party requested that the International Criminal Court (ICC) investigate crimes against humanity committed in Egypt since June 1, 2013. The court dismissed their request for procedural reasons and stated that its rejection of the request did not necessarily mean that crimes had not occurred or that they did not need to be investigated further. Rather, the best way to move forward would be when Egypt ratified the Rome Statute and became a state party to the ICC, which has yet to be done.

In 2020, former detainee and founder of the Freedom Initiative [Mohamed Soltan](#) leveraged U.S. law to attempt to hold former Egyptian Prime Minister Hazem El-Beblawi accountable. Soltan sought to bring legal proceedings against El-Beblawi under the Torture Victim Protection Act (TVPA), accusing him of attempted extrajudicial killing and torture. The legal complaint alleged that as Prime Minister, El-Beblawi directed security forces to carry out the Raba'a sit-in dispersal; it also alleged that El-Beblawi was responsible for the torture Soltan had suffered at the hands of Egyptian officials during his detention. Though the case became the subject of legal contestation between El-Beblawi's defense team, the U.S. State Department, and Soltan's lawyers regarding the extent to which El-Beblawi enjoyed diplomatic immunity as an IMF Resident Representative of Egypt, it is still considered to be a significant first in seeking to hold a high-ranking Egyptian official accountable for involvement in violations related to torture and extrajudicial killing. It opened a new door for victims of the Egyptian regime in the different countries whose laws may allow for the prosecution of those involved in human rights violations in Egypt.

Some organizations working in the U.S. are also taking advantage of the Global Magnitsky sanctions regime to hold accountable Egyptian government officials involved in human rights violations. Under this regime, the U.S. government can impose sanctions on perpetrators of severe human rights abuses and corruption all over the world. It was previously leveraged [to impose sanctions](#) on Saudi officials involved in the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

The partnerships established by Egyptian human rights organizations and international human rights organizations abroad have enhanced their ability to employ domestic legislation in host countries to hold the Egyptian regime accountable. In November 2017, the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and the French Human Rights League, with the support of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, [filed a complaint](#) to the Crimes against Humanity and War Crimes Unit affiliated with the Paris Prosecutor's Office. This was regarding the participation of Nexa Technologies Company in the operations carried out by the Egyptian regime through the sale of surveillance technology, which was later confirmed in further detail by Disclose in an investigation titled "[Surveillance made in France](#)." In June 2021, judges in the Unit affiliated [brought charges](#) against the company's executive directors for complicity in the crimes of torture and enforced disappearance in Egypt for their role in providing Egyptian officials with tracking technology. [The French decision](#) is important because it establishes an important precedent that surveillance technology companies can be held to account for complicity in human rights abuses abroad.

Separately and in reliance on Egyptian and international human rights reports on the deterioration of human rights situation in Egypt, a group of Dutch and international human rights organizations leveraged Dutch domestic law and [the International and European Arms Trade Treaty to sue](#) the Dutch Government in emergency proceedings for the suspension of Dutch arms exports to Egypt. This case opens another door for Egyptian and international organizations to leverage the law in pressuring Egyptian authorities to improve the human rights situation in the country.

Support institutions

Egyptians in exile face a series of challenges related to securing legal status and financial and employment stability, which can affect their ability to organize. Accordingly, support institutions are another critical resource or tool that Egyptians seeking to organize have leveraged.

Although there are little or no institutions providing direct legal and financial support for this specific purpose, the Muslim Brotherhood offers financial support and education assistance to its members until their personal situations have improved. There have also been cases in which Brotherhood leaders have provided financial support to members as a tool to spread their control over the group and silence critical voices. The Coptic diaspora has some institutions that offer legal and financial support to its communities as well.

Egyptians in exile seeking support largely depend on programs offered by international organizations that work with [human rights activists](#), [academics](#), journalists, and [writers](#) facing threats in their homelands. Among other things, these organizations offer [fellowship opportunities](#) in their organizations, with partner organizations, or in other entities abroad. These fellowships help activists resume their work abroad. However, they are limited in number and cannot meet the extent of the need; they largely do not have the capacity to support activists in climbing the professional ladder, in overcoming language barriers, and in addressing mental health challenges. These fellowships are also competitive due to the fact that there are other countries in which human rights crises are ongoing and the need is great.

The challenges of organizing toward a political vision

As evident from the examples above, most organizing and activism in exile has been conducted by professional civil society organizations. This can be seen as a continuation of a historical pattern of engagement by political activists in human rights work at home in Egypt, [which began](#) with the establishment of human rights and civil society organizations by left-wing and Nasserist activists in the early 1980s. As the regime's control has tightened over the political sphere and as human rights conditions significantly deteriorated, a number of [new human rights organizations](#) were established inside Egypt with founders and staff members coming from political movements (such as the April 6 Youth Movement), political parties, (al-Dostour Party, Strong Egypt Party, etc.), or the Muslim Brotherhood. Among the many factors which make this a preferred mode of organizing at home and abroad is the fact that working in the human rights and civil society landscape allows for associations to connect with a global network, providing the discourse, narrative, and mechanisms needed for human rights work. This continued to remain a preferred mode of organizing at home, and ultimately remained the case when organizing work moved abroad. As a result, human rights organizations in Egypt and in exile currently play a role that transcends [the traditional role of such organizations in non-authoritarian contexts](#), to become among the most prominent and constant opposition of the Egyptian regime at home and abroad.

During the nineties, a very important [discussion](#) took place inside Egypt between the leaders of the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights—which many [studies](#) consider the starting point for human rights work in the country—about the ideal organizational form. This discussion would affect the form that the Egyptian human rights movement would take in most of its organizations on the ground. The options centered around three possible forms of organization. The first and least

popular form was a front for the defense of democracy to serve as a representative platform for political opposition forces. This proposal was rejected by the majority for fear of Islamists taking control of the organization. The human rights organizations were also not willing to abandon their defense of the universality of human rights in order to boost popularity with Islamists. The second form was a membership organization that could eventually bring about a popular human rights movement, and this option was rejected for the same previous fears. As for the form that was successful and later adapted by most human rights organizations on the ground, it was for the organization to be limited to professionals in human rights work. This option preserved the organizations' full commitment to the universality of human rights, but it also limited their ability to turn into a popular human rights movement.

Most human rights organizations, even after the 2011 Revolution and after the move to exile, continued to operate in the same professionalized form. On the ground and as described above, this form has deprived the organizations of connectivity to a popular movement back in Egypt, with the same constraints replicated in exile. Thus far, organizations in exile have largely not been able to incorporate a broader support base or initiate a popular human rights movement among Egyptians abroad. Egyptian organizing in exile may be influential, but it lacks connectivity with a mass social movement, a broader political project, and a clear vision of desired political change and the way to achieve it.

There have been a number of attempts at creating entities that seek to organize the opposition and potentially build a mass movement in exile, opening the door for membership to Egyptians abroad. This includes the [Egyptian Revolutionary Council](#), which was established in Turkey in 2014 and defines itself as an "entity of Egyptian forces and individuals abroad, with different political leanings and intellectual affiliations." However, these calls largely failed to present a new concrete vision on the political level for several reasons, chief among them an inability to present a political project capable of overcoming polarization, as most of these calls came from people affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood or close to them. These entities also lacked the appropriate tools for effective political activism from exile that human rights organizations enjoyed; failed to oversee an effective partnership between exiled dissidents, institutions, and individuals; and were unable to galvanize support over common issues of concern like the Saudi exile community did with Jamal Khashoggi's case. Consequently, such entities continued to suffer from an absence of influential organizing tools, which made them unable to mobilize a mass base. Therefore, we see the Egyptian exile today as influential and effective organizations without a mass base or political project, and masses without a channel or platform for political organizing.

Political polarization and sectarian politics

As detailed in this section, some of the issues affecting Egyptian political forces inside the country moved with them to exile and were even exacerbated there. This includes the fragmentation and decay of most political forces, and political polarization, particularly between Islamists and liberals. Some Islamists and those affiliated with them see liberals as supporters of the 2013 coup and responsible for what transpired thereafter; they believe that there is deliberate absence of human rights solidarity by liberals with Islamist detainees. Some liberals, on the other hand, find it impossible to build an alliance with political Islamists and the Muslim Brotherhood, following their role in the events of 2011-2013 and use of violence by some; there are also concerns regarding the Brotherhood's relationship with other sovereign entities including Turkey and Qatar. This, [coupled with](#) the internal conflict and increasing divisions within the Muslim Brotherhood, has increased doubts about coordination with them, and is further complicated by the absence of a unified entity that represents liberal forces in exile.

Despite the significant presence of Egyptian Copts abroad and their [rich historical experience](#) in political activity from diaspora, it is difficult for there to be political coordination between the Copts who fled from Egypt to escape violence and sectarianism, and the Islamist movement, which some Copts see as one of the parties responsible. Moreover, there continue to be fault lines between the liberal opposition, including human rights organizations, and Coptic organizations in the diaspora, thus posing a barrier to coordination between them. This is due largely to the fact that some members of the Coptic diaspora consider the issues faced by Copts in Egypt to be deeper than the existence of an authoritarian regime; some also view the 2011 Revolution as a threat, despite the political openness it represented, especially considering the [serious incidents of violence against Copts](#), which led to further exodus. Further, a number of human rights organizations do not prioritize the issue of religious minorities. Though some do attempt to document incidents, they often make a case regarding the extent to which the regime's repression has affected all parties and work to counter the regime's narrative on religious freedom with the international community, particularly the United States, rather than focus on the topic as a matter of importance on its own. This hinders the opportunities for cooperation between the human rights movement and Coptic organizations in the diaspora, though there have been limited examples.

Coordination between Egyptian opposition inside and abroad

Although there are different forms of coordination between Egyptians inside and outside the country, there have also

been several barriers to optimal coordination, including the divergence of political approaches. This can be attributed to a number of factors, among them the absence of a unified political project under which activism at home and abroad can crystalize, and accordingly results in different strategies to oppose the regime. On the one hand, some inside the country [have adopted](#) an approach that contends with the current circumstances by avoiding direct confrontation with the regime and leveraging existing spaces for opposition. Another approach, including among some of those abroad, is a confrontation with the regime on very sensitive files, such as U.S. military aid and arms transactions.

Certainly, each strategy must differ according to the nature of the opportunities available for each party, the context they are working in—including the extent of security risks that each party might be subjected to—and their vision for change. A divergence between and among some of the opposition at home and abroad has been furthered amid a series of recent conversations, including ones involving the attempts of the regime [to involve](#) a few opposition parties in the last parliamentary elections, the [calls of the regime](#) for reform in the human rights portfolio, the [closure of Case No. 173](#) for certain defendants, and the release of [some prisoners of conscience](#) in Egypt. This poses new challenges to coordination between and among the domestic and exile opposition, but is a critical area to explore further.

The practical challenges of organizing and activism in exile

There are a number of practical challenges facing Egyptians abroad who seek to organize and engage in activism in exile. These challenges have made activism and organizing in exile a somewhat limited phenomenon to the extent that it involves only a select number of institutions and activists, whose skill sets, networks, and situations allow them to secure a job in the field, to establish or join entities, or to engage in individual political activities. These challenges have added to the obstacles toward the emergence of a broad-based, effective, and well-grounded social movement that mobilizes and organizes Egyptians in exile toward a particular political objective.

On the individual level

First, there are the personal challenges. The trajectory pursued by individuals, as well as their living conditions in exile, have a significant and consequential impact on their level of engagement and forms of activism. Because the Egyptian exile experience is relatively new (it ranges from one year to eight years in many cases), many Egyptians in exile are experiencing precarious living conditions and instability on different levels. The first relates to a person's legal situation in a host country, coupled with the difficulty of applying for asylum or seeking legal status. This forces some to move from one country to the next, further adding to instability. The second relates to employment and financial instability as the search for employment in a new country requires—in addition to the existence of a legal status that allows for work—new skills, contacts, and language proficiency, which may not be accessible to everyone. This forces some to accept jobs that do not align with their qualifications and career paths in order to secure financial stability for themselves and, sometimes, their families. On the third level, we have mental health challenges. Detention, torture, feelings of defeat, exile, loss of hope in change, lack of clarity in the future, and survivor's guilt all leave a deep psychological impact that may amount to trauma. At times, this trauma affects the ability of activists in exile to continue their political work from abroad. Collectively, these factors pose obstacles for many, drain their energy, and force some to de-prioritize political organizing, even if they remain keen on following political developments in Egypt on a daily basis.

On the institutional level

Some Egyptian organizations abroad, particularly newly-established ones, suffer from operational challenges that impact their effectiveness. These include navigating the legal procedures of establishing organizations abroad and funding difficulties, since Egypt is no longer as important as it once was for donors, who tend to prefer regional projects that target countries with a wider space for impact by civil society. Moreover, many donors still prefer funding organizations where most staff work inside the country, or projects whose work is not of a political character in direct confrontation with the regime. Another challenge encountered by organizations abroad is the difficulty of maintaining staff in Egypt, as many lawyers and researchers are subject to arrest and threats at the hands of Egyptian security. There are also some fears that because of this oppressive atmosphere, no new human rights advocates will enter the field, which will later affect the organizations abroad and human rights work in general.

In the face of the challenges facing Egyptian organizing in exile and given the relatively new nature of the Egyptian exile experience, time remains an essential factor in developing the ability of Egyptians abroad to address challenges, build on their successes and opportunities, and implement new forms of organizing. Among the most important of challenges to consider are the policies and practices of the Egyptian state in dealing with those in exile (which will be discussed in a forthcoming piece).

Author's Note: *This piece is informed by desk research, two private convenings involving Egyptians and Arabs abroad, and 18 individual interviews with Egyptians abroad. Interviewees were located in countries including the United States, Turkey, Tunisia, Belgium, Germany, England, Qatar, Spain, Switzerland, and Canada, worked in diverse fields from journalism to law, and were of varying political and ideological backgrounds. The names of interviewees, as well as the names of certain organizations and the details regarding certain tactics have not been included in the piece for security purposes amid the rise of the [Egyptian regime's transnational repression](#).*

[Mohamed Mandour](#) is TIMEP's Bassem Sabry Democracy Fellow, with his area of focus on Egyptians in the diaspora, the challenges they face, and the opportunities for organizing in exile.

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CONTACT US:

The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy
1717 K Street NW Ste 900, Washington, DC 20006 202-967-8589
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