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Egypt's Prisons: History of Negotiations for Freedom

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Egypt's Prisons: History of Negotiations for Freedom

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There are several reports that have recently been circulated about repentance, reconciliation, or negotiations run by some political detainees with the current Egyptian regime, hoping to be pardoned and released from prison to continue their lives away from involvement in any religious or political activities.

This paper will address the history of negotiations with the regime for the release of detainees since the reign of President Gamal Abdel Nasser up to now, and the regime's attitude towards these initiatives and reviews launched from time to time by some political detainees:

History of negotiations for the release of detainees

First, the regime tried to negotiate with Sayyid Qutb

Perhaps the issue of negotiations with the regime on the suffering of political detainees has started during the reign of President Gamal Abdel Nasser. There are [reliable reports](#) that have been circulated broadly that Nasser sent Hamida Qutb, sister of Sayyid Qutb, a thinker and writer who was detained along with many other Egyptians at the time, immediately before his execution, in attempt to convince him to write and sign a memo, in which he should falsely admit that he worked as a spy for the United States, in return for a pledge from the regime to commute his death sentence (after publishing Qutb's fake confession in pro-regime newspapers). However, Sayyid Qutb refused the offer and told his sister that he had solely worked for the sake of God and was happy to sacrifice his soul for that. In the end, Sayyid Qutb was executed after refusing to negotiate with Nasser's unjust and repressive authority.

Second: Reviews of the Islamic Group

In the late 1970s, the Islamic Group adopted armed resistance against the Egyptian authority during the reign of President Anwar Sadat, starting with planning to assassinate Sadat himself in front of his armed forces, where one of the army officers, Khalid al-Islambouli, carried out Sadat's assassination with the help of a military intelligence officer, Abboud al-Zomor, his brother Tariq al-Zomor, and other prominent members of the Islamic Group. The conflict between the Islamic Group and the regime at

that time continued for nearly two decades, until some [Islamic Group](#) cadres from inside the prison announced abandoning any armed action against the regime. This statement was delivered on June 5, 1997 by a member of the group in court during his trial session, although some of the group's thinkers and leaders, such as Sheikh [Rifa'ah Taha](#), had rejected the initiative.

Although the Egyptian regime under Mubarak, especially [Maj. General Ahmed Raafat](#), who was then responsible for religious extremism, encouraged the ideological reviews of the Islamic Group, however, the regime did not relieve its oppressive security grip on members of the Islamic Group, both at home and abroad, and did not release any of them. The situation continued as such until the early 2000s, especially after the 11/9 events in the United States, when the Egyptian regime started to respond to the initiative, which was introduced in the form of ideological reviews issued in four books that reflected the convictions of the Islamic Group:

- 1- Stop Violence Initiative: A realistic Vision and A Shari'a View.
- 2- Highlighting the Mistakes Committed During Jihad Action
- 3- The sanctity of excessive religion and atonement of Muslims
- 4- Advice and Identification in Correcting Concepts of Mohtasibs

As a result, the harassment of detainees and their relatives had been eased and the detention centers had turned into intellectual arena for discussion and dialogue with leading intellectuals and thinkers. Many members and leaders of the Islamic Group were released, such as Nageh Ibrahim and Karam Zuhdi, who are currently supervising part of the file of the ongoing ideological reviews in Egyptian prisons made by some youth from the Brotherhood and some other organizations in coordination with the security services.

Despite the current regime's accusations of the Islamic Group of practice of violence and designating it as a terrorist organization, the Islamic Group leaders, such as Tariq al-Zomor, have reiterated [commitment](#) to the group's initiative of renouncing violence.

Third: Current prison reviews

Over six years, the regime has thrown tens of thousands of Egyptians into prisons on political charges since General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi led a military coup against President Mohamed Morsi. With the oppression, injustice and torture practiced on detainees in the prisons, and amid loss of hope that

the Brotherhood leadership may adopt any initiative to negotiate with the regime about the release of political detainees, some young Muslim Brotherhood detainees as well as others have started to launch initiatives from time to time seeking a solution for their crisis that may rescue them from the regime's prisons, including the following:

1- The initiative of some detainees in Gamasa prison:

In mid-2016, 'Khalil' (a pseudonym), a 20-year-old detainee at Gamsa High Security Prison - Ward 1, reports that a campaign led by a young man in his late twenties named 'Farid' (a pseudonym) was circulating a form that was required to be filled for reconciliation with Egypt's security system, including recognition of the regime and pledging not to oppose it in return for release signatories from prison.

After the spread of the campaign, a state security officer came to prison for talking with those who signed the form, without giving any promises to release them. According to the testimony of 'Mohamed' (a pseudonym), a young 20-year-old detainee in the same prison (denying any connection to any organization inside or outside the prison), he confirmed that the Farid group, no more than 20 persons, was actually ostracized by all other detainees, especially Brotherhood leaders. Mohamed says he attended some sessions organized by Brotherhood leaders in each cell after Isha prayer, denouncing the leader of the campaign (Farid) and calling him rebellious and deviant even though he is son of one of the Brotherhood. They accused him together with his supporters of trading the blood of the martyrs and submission to the unjust power.

Indeed, 'Farid' and his group have become outcasts, as everyone avoided talking to them for fear of bad reputations. Later, the prison administration moved Farid from Ward 1 to another ward. Despite the concessions made by 'Farid' and his fellows, they were deceived by the authorities and never received any promise to release them.

2- Mohamed Al-Rayes Initiative and Reviews of Fayoum Detainees :

[Mohamed al-Rayes](#), a detainee in Istiqbal Tora Prison with a bachelor's degree in law, has announced an initiative last May (Al-Rayes is an Islamic-oriented detainee, formerly a member of the Islamic Group. He was arrested in 1995 when he was 19 years old and spent eight years in prison. He was re-arrested during the security campaign against the regime opponents after the coup of July 3, 2013.

al-Rayes' initiative called on the Egyptian regime to allow detainees who reviewed their organizational and administrative ideas and strategies to get out of prisons and integrate into society in all its institutions and segments, relying on Articles of the Constitution and related laws, especially that they had abandoned any Islamist organizations, including the Muslim Brotherhood or any Salafi entities, and rejected any extremist ideas. The initiative has so far received little resonance from the public opinion, and the Egyptian regime did not respond to it positively. The regime only followed up the situation through the state security officers that supervise prisons. This initiative, which is closest to a superficial move, lacked any real intellectual reviews, unlike the one presented by detainees in [Fayoum Prison](#), which included genuine criticism of the ideas and literature of the group's founder, Sheikh Hassan al-Banna. However, these reviews were also useless and did not lead to the release of detainees although they were real discussions of the Brotherhood's ideas and goals.

3- The message of some Muslim Brotherhood youth in prison to MB leaders abroad and reactions to it:

At the beginning of August 2019, a message attributed to some detainees addressed to the Brotherhood leaders was broadly circulated. The message, entitled: "Messages of Young Detainees to Brotherhood Leaders Abroad", was the first of its kind addressed by young detainees to leaders abroad, unlike other initiatives and reviews, which are often discussed with the security services in prisons. However, this message caused a lot of fanfare and interaction among users of social networking sites. In general, this message highlights the suffering of young people in prisons and their inhumane living therein. It has also revealed the deep intellectual and administrative gap between young people and the elderly ones within the same cell and demonstrating significant differences and problems between them. The message came as a distress call to Brotherhood leaders abroad to take any steps towards negotiations with the Egyptian regime on the release of detainees as soon as possible.

While some questioned the credibility of the message, stressing the steadfastness of the Muslim Brotherhood and all other detainees in prisons in their positions against the ruling regime, and accusing those who sent it of implementing the agenda of security services; others, especially families of young detainees, supported the message and attacked Brotherhood leaders and accused them of being the reason for the fatal suffering of detainees and their families.

In response to the message, Brotherhood leader [Ibrahim Mounir](#) said in an interview on Al Jazeera Mubasher that the Muslim Brotherhood did not force young people to join the MB or engage in working with them, and added that the group understands the positions of anyone who wants to disown the group for conducting negotiations with the regime on their release as happened during the reign of President Gamal Abdel Nasser. Also, the Brotherhood [spokesman](#) Tala'at Fahmy said in an interview on Al-Jazeera that the Egyptian regime had closed all doors to any negotiation attempt by the group. This came in answer to a question by the program presenter about any negotiation attempt by the group with the Egyptian regime during the six past years since the outbreak of the crisis.

Ibrahim (a pseudonym), a young man who had been detained for more than two years before, comments on the prevailing situation between the younger generation and the older generation in prison, saying that the main reason for this situation is the wide gap between the way of thinking and management between the parties. This has led some young people in prison to quit the group and refrain from attending the meetings with its senior leaders; they even sought to move to other wards away from the intellectual and administrative controls that are no longer easy for them to accept. In addition, some of the Brotherhood's youth were recruited by ISIS, the organization that dislikes the Brotherhood most in prisons. This is an indicator that some young people have lost confidence in the Brotherhood's leaders, accusing them of ignorance of the reality of the current crisis with the Egyptian regime.

The Egyptian regime's attitude towards these initiatives

The Egyptian regime has always been silent on media towards initiatives and intellectual reviews undertaken by young people in prisons from various streams, ideas, and opinions. However, they follow the situation through state security officers in charge of supervising prisons.

However, some members of the government-sponsored National Human Rights Council commented on these initiatives: [Maj. Gen. Fouad Allam](#), a member of the National Council for Human Rights, called for listening well to and communicating with launchers of these initiatives, considering this a true repentance and an intellectual review of the organizations to which young people were had joined. [Mokhtar Nouh](#), a dissident leader of the Muslim Brotherhood and a member of the National Council for Human Rights, commented on one of the initiatives presented as equivocation from the

Brotherhood's youth to get out of prisons, stressing that these young people should disown the organization and seek to dismantle it completely.

As for the reaction of pro-regime media, Amr Adib, a well-known TV presenter at MBC satellite channel, in his al-Hekaya (the story) talk show, launched a strong attack on prominent Muslim Brotherhood leaders abroad, especially Youssef Nada and Ibrahim Mounir, and accused them of promoting reports that the current Egyptian regime wants to engage in reconciliation with the MB, denying any intention of the regime in this regard.

Ahmed Farid Mawlana, a researcher in Islamic movements, in an interview with [al-Jazeera Mubasher](#), divided the political detainees into three categories:

A- The first category of detainees includes those who have been arrested on charges of belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood or demonstrating against the regime after the military coup. Those detainees that received minor sentences (less than 10 years) are already the ones that the security policy in Egypt works to release either through pardoning or after serving their prison term.

B- The second category includes the charismatic cadres that the regime fears may push a stagnant social trend towards protests or revolution, such as Sheikh Hazem Abu Ismail, Dr. Hossam Abu Al-Bukhari and Dr. Mohamed al-Beltagy.

C- The third category includes those accused of carrying out acts of violence and resistance against the regime, such as members of Hasm, Liwa al-Thawra, and the Islamic State organizations.

Mawlana has ruled out the likeliness of releasing any of the detainees included in the second and third categories from prison unless the Egyptian regime changes dramatically. Commenting on the recent message addressed to the Muslim Brotherhood leaders abroad for engaging in reconciliation with the regime, Mawlana said that the Brotherhood leaders have nothing to offer for negotiation with the current Egyptian regime.

On the other hand, the Egyptian regime believes that it will never allow the release of detainees who have engaged in ideological reviews, albeit real, in light of the continuing violence and targeting army and police officers and soldiers in Sinai, especially after some of these operations had moved (from Sinai) to Greater Cairo. In this regard, "The prison administration wants to convey a message that they would never allow the release of those accused of participating in any acts of violence even if they renounced Islam," Mawlana said.