



# Between ISIS and Egypt's Counter-Terrorism Measures

Children are Radicalized,  
Exploited, and Taken as  
"Hostages"

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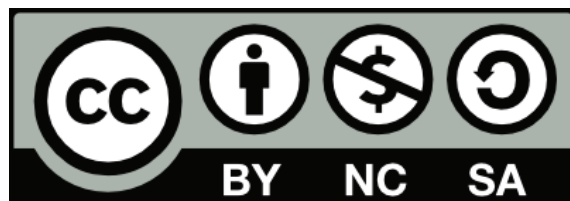


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## Children are Radicalized, Exploited, and Taken as “Hostages”



**The Belady Center for Rights & Freedoms (BCRF)** is an Egyptian organization that promotes human rights and freedoms through research and litigation. BCRF proposes and advocates for policies, legislation, and amendments that promote the respect of international human rights standards. BCRF specifically focuses on violations that occur to children in relation to political or social turmoil. It provides legal and psychological support for children during their incarceration and upon their release, and documents the violations committed against them in the hope that its reports may contribute to their redress.



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## Introduction:

The military coup in Egypt and the subsequent killings and arbitrary arrests of dissidents and civil society members, led by former military general and current President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, led to the creation of a suitable environment for extremism in Egypt. The extreme oppression by the new government facilitated the path to radical organizations such as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria to expand and carry military operations and recruitments to Egypt, leading the Egyptian state to announce a war on terror. Between terrorist attacks, recruitment and exploitation and state counter-terrorism measures, Egypt entered a vicious cycle of violence that is shattering the lives of children.

In the five years following the coup, military operations in Sinai killed more than double the number killed by ISIS.<sup>1</sup> Security forces began arresting children and subjecting them to a wide range of violations throughout the judicial process.<sup>2</sup>

Grievances from violations, coupled with the political void, are leaving fertile ground for ISIS and terrorist groups to radicalize and exploit the children, turning them to extremists and loyalists, and even to perpetrators of terrorist operations. The trend of radicalization has become so flagrant that it prompted Dar al-Iftaa to issue a statement calling for the necessity to fight radicalization amongst Egyptian youth.<sup>3</sup>

This paper examines the changes in ideology and behaviors of child prisoners, their exploitation by terrorist groups, effective hostage-taking, and, ultimately, the victimhood by both the State and terrorist groups.

The research is based on testimonies of former detainees, interviews with the detainees' lawyers and parents, and the BCRF databases. The research concludes with recommendations to follow with children in detention facilities that would decrease the risk of child radicalization and hence support the state in the fight against terrorism.

<sup>1</sup> 37 children were killed and 20 injured from terrorist attacks, and 64 children were killed and 24 injured by military operations. Belady Center for Rights and Freedom, "Children Without Protection," Human Rights report, 19 <https://beladyrf.org/sites/default/files/2019-04/childern.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> BCRF. "Children Without Protection," 2019. 19

<sup>3</sup> Dar al-Iftaa. "Iftaa Observatory to Parents: How Do You Protect Your Children from Extremism?," March 2019. <http://www.dar-alifta.org/AR/Viewstatement.aspx?sec=media&ID=6407>.

## First: Imprisonment and Inhumane Treatment Reproduce Terrorism:

From July 2013 until December 2018, the state carried out 1556 politically related arrests of children under 18.<sup>4</sup> Prisoners come from all political affiliations, as well as no political affiliations.<sup>5</sup> Yet, in nearly 450 cases involving children, the prosecution charged the prisoners with terrorism. The typical charge includes "joining a terrorist group or providing logistical support to its networks", most commonly ISIS or the Muslim Brotherhood (MB).<sup>6</sup>

Besides arbitrary arrest, arrested children face countless violations throughout the judicial process. In the five years that followed the coup, there were 163 cases of military and summary trials, 198 enforced disappearances, three extrajudicial killings, 66 incidents of torture-one to death, three sexual assaults<sup>7</sup>, and 35 cases of medical negligence two leading to death. Furthermore, 192 children were sentenced to prison, three of them to life, and two to death.<sup>8</sup>

While in detention, children live dismal in conditions.<sup>9</sup> Detention facilities typically lack proper ventilation, room for exercise and sun exposure, are overcrowded, lack separate wards for children leaving them to mix with adults some of whom belong to ISIS and terrorist groups.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, the state manages political prisons in a way that causes deliberate suffering, more than mandated by theories of punishment. Children are often denied access to schooling and family visits and any contact with the outside world.<sup>11</sup> Once they are transferred from the police station, they are inducted to prison with a "Tashrifa/reception," the cynical term of a "welcome," where they are stripped naked, beaten, humiliated and slandered.<sup>12</sup> Sometimes, the "tashreefa" is repeated when prisoners go in and out of prison.<sup>13</sup>

Authorities also place children in solitary confinement, commonly referred to by prisoners as "taadib/discipline," when they are accused of breaking the rules. The typical "taadib" room is insufficient for a prisoner to stand or fully extend. It has a pale in place of a lavatory, and a single loaf of bread is provided per day.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>4</sup> BCRF. "Children Without Protection," 2019. 8

<sup>5</sup> Human Rights Watch | 350 Fifth Avenue, 34th Floor | New York, and NY 10118-3299 USA | t 1.212.290.4700, "Egypt's Political Prisoners," Human Rights Watch, March 6, 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/03/06/egypts-political-prisoners>.

<sup>6</sup> "Egypt Designates Muslim Brotherhood as Terrorist Group," *Reuters*, December 25, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-explosion-brotherhood-idUSBRE9B008H20131225>.

<sup>7</sup> Amnesty International, "Egypt: Child 'Raped with Wooden Stick by Police Officers' Must Be Released," accessed December 12, 2019, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/12/egypt-child-raped-with-wooden-stick-by-police-officers-must-be-released/>.

<sup>8</sup> All death sentences were overturned, but the initial sentences were clear violations of the Egyptian law, aside from the psychological harm caused to children.

<sup>9</sup> Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms, "The Siege: Human Rights in Egypt. The Harvest of 2016," Law (Egypt, 16:16:41 UTC), <https://www.slideshare.net/ecrf/2016-72142910>.

<sup>10</sup> Human Rights Watch | 350 Fifth Avenue, 34th Floor | New York, and NY 10118-3299 USA | t 1.212.290.4700, "Egypt: A Year of Abuses Against Detained Children," Human Rights Watch, November 19, 2012, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2012/11/19/egypt-year-abuses-against-detained-children>.

<sup>11</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Human Rights Monitor, "Torture: the Constitution of Egyptian Prisons," 06-26, <http://humanrights-monitor.org/Posts/ViewLocale/25639>.

<sup>13</sup> Egyptian today, "Testimonies from Borg El Arab Prison: Prisoners are subjected to torture (video and photos)," accessed December 12, 2019, <https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/1042192>.

<sup>14</sup> Arabi 21, "Death Cells in Egyptian Prisons ... Killing Under the Pretext of Disciplining," Arabi 21, July 23, 2019, <https://arabi21.com/story/1196455/بحجة-التأديب-المصرية-القتل-في-السجون>.

Former prisoner Ayman Mohamed<sup>15</sup> recounts the assault of Borg El Arab<sup>16</sup> prison on 20 imprisoned students as they returned from exams administered outside. Upon their return, authorities ordered them to disrobe under the threat of batons. When the students collectively refused, the authorities brutally beat them, tore off their clothes, and transferred some to taadib, only to resume the assaults.

According to Mohamed's testimony, this incident caused pivotal behavioral changes for the youth and children. Mohamed witnessed extreme agitation, anger, panic attacks, loss of trust in others, and hostility towards security forces inside and outside of prison. He recounts that following this incident, three children increased time spent with ISIS members in their cells.

The increase in the number of ISIS members in prison has helped them build social support networks that provide their members and recruits with protection and access to scarce goods and services such as food, books, and phone calls. Moreover, they provide an opportunity to fill a political and ideological void. Child political prisoners become easy targets for recruitment. When violations such as the recounted assault occur with no recourse to redress and accountability, they increase the prisoners' sense of oppression and injustice, leading them directly to extremism.<sup>17</sup>

In the Borg El Arab incident, neither the state nor the prison authority took any action to redress the violations nor prevent the radicalization of the children. On the contrary, they seemed to let radicalization fester. According to the testimony of a former detainee, "prison authorities sometimes benefit from terrorists to control the balance of power within the prison wards."

### Case 1: Safi:<sup>18</sup> From Opposing the MB to an Extremist

Radicalization becomes evident when children begin echoing the language and stances of ISIS members. An example of an early sign is a refusal to eat with colleagues as their food becomes "haram/religiously forbidden," since it comes from infidels who reject the "baya'a/oath of allegiance" to ISIS.<sup>19</sup>

The rhetoric and small daily actions slowly transform into big decisions that children take to their detriment. Children begin to reject both the legitimacy of national law declaring it to be contrary to Sharia, and the authority of judges who apply it, deeming them infidels.<sup>20</sup>

Most radicalized children had no prior contact with radical thought before imprisonment, and some such as Safi, who received a ten-year prison sentence for rioting and attacking the MB headquarters, were even charged with committing violence against Islamists. Despite his initial supposed hostility towards Islamist groups, ISIS succeeded in radicalizing him, leading him to declare the judge an infidel during the court hearing. Once sentenced, Safi refused to change his stance and

<sup>15</sup> Not his real name

<sup>16</sup> Borg El Arab Prison hosts political and criminal prisoners, located in West Alexandria. It is one of the most heavily guarded prisons due to hosting political inmates of the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as dangerous defendants of criminal crimes.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with a former prisoner

<sup>18</sup> Not his real name

<sup>19</sup> Interview with a former prisoner

<sup>20</sup> BCRF lawyers

sign the appeal, believing that his signature meant acknowledging the legitimacy of the trial, in contradiction to the teachings of ISIS<sup>21</sup>.

## Case 2: Mahmoud Shafiq: From Arbitrary Arrest to a Church Suicide Bomber

In 2013, 17-year-old Mahmoud Shafiq,<sup>22</sup> the son of a former military officer, was walking with a friend near an MB demonstration in Fayoum. When security forces started arresting protesters, Shafiq was apprehended and forcefully disappeared for three days, tortured and denied food. He later appeared at the Demo prison, home to many extremists, and was charged with joining a terrorist group, illegal protest, and possession of weapons.

Shafiq's lawyer, Yasmin Omar, demanded his referral to forensic medicine to prove his torture, but the request was declined. Afterward, Omar requested Shafiq's transfer to a juvenile detention facility in place of prison for adults, but the request was also declined.

After six months of imprisonment, Shafiq was released, with the charges of illegal protest still pending. The other charges, including acquiring a weapon and use of firearms, were dropped. Following his release, national security forces raided his family's home several times, prompting the family to flee. Shafiq, living in a perpetual state of fear, decided not to attend his trial. He headed to Cairo, where all communication with him ceased.

On December 11, 2015, the Botroseya Church was bombed. Twenty-nine Copts were killed, and approximately 50 others were injured.<sup>23</sup> The authorities declared Shafiq to be the suicide bomber who was wearing an explosive belt and published his photo in news outlets and on the Ministry of Interior's Facebook page.<sup>24</sup>

"This is not my son. Ask everyone in the neighborhood about his kindness and good manners", Shafiq's mother said in a televised interview. When Omar, Shafiq's lawyer, heard the news, she was in disbelief and she doubted the authenticity of the photo published by the Ministry of Interior. Omar described Shafiq as a kind child who did not exhibit any sign of radicalization. She added that Shafiq referred to residents of his ward as "good people who treat me well and share food with me."

A former cellmate told Shafiq's lawyer that he had spent his entire imprisonment with extremists, who must have radicalized him and prompted him to travel to Sinai and join ISIS, receive training on the use of weapons, and ultimately make an explosive belt to detonate the Botroseya Church.

<sup>21</sup> Safi's father was able to sign the appeal amid the protest of his son.

<sup>22</sup> Shafiq's lawyer.

<sup>23</sup> Egypt Independent, "Botroseya Church Bombing Death Toll Rises to 29 Victims," Egypt Independent, February 4, 2017, <https://egyptindependent.com/botroseya-church-bombing-death-toll-rises-29-victims/>.

<sup>24</sup> BBC News Arabic, "Important Information about the Accused in the Bombing of the Botroseya Church in Cairo," *BBC News Arabic*, December 13, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast-38304028>.

<sup>25</sup> Dream TV Egypt, *Ten PM TV Show: The Mother of Accused "Mahmoud Shafiq" Announces That the Circulated Photos Do Not Belong to Her Son*, accessed December 19, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pKlvLoXWHno>.



Omar described Shafiq's case as a clear example of the consequences of torture and systematic abuse, stressing that Egyptian prisons produce individuals eager for revenge.<sup>26</sup>

### Case 3: Sami Retaliates Against the Police

Sami<sup>27</sup> was 15 when his father was arrested at an MB demonstration in 2013. Following the arrest, security forces repeatedly broke into the family home and assaulted the family, leading Sami to feel victimized and helpless. In 2014, Sami was arrested for allegedly building a rudimentary bomb and planting it in an officer's car. Case files mention that the bomb failed to cause any casualties.

Sami's mother recounts how she saw her son's photo on the Ministry of Interior's official Facebook page. She recounts that he was pictured standing behind a collection of weapons and incendiary devices that were not at his home or in his possession at the time of the arrest. Sami was charged with committing several offenses including joining a terrorist group and exploding a police officer's car. He was sentenced to 15 years in prison that was reduced to 7 in the appeal. Sami's lawyer submitted a request for probation after he served half of the sentence, but the request was denied. The court cited that "Sami is dangerous Egypt's national security."

Sami's father was sentenced to three years in prisons, and an additional three years of prohibition, having to spend 12 hours a day in the police station. Following his release, and fearing to be arrested again from the police station, as is now common,<sup>28</sup> he fled.<sup>29</sup> Meanwhile, the security forces continued to assault the family home forcing them to flee.

## Second: Terrorists Exploit Children:

### Case 4: Mahdi Selmi's Impossible Dilemma

In May 2016, Selmi was 14. His cousin, who has joined ISIS, approached him while working in a carpentry workshop in El Arish<sup>30</sup> and put a knife on his neck. He threatened to decapitate him if he refused to collaborate, track the movements of the Egyptian military, and report back to ISIS.<sup>31</sup>

A few days earlier, ISIS had decapitated someone in El-Arish leaving his head in the street. Selmi recalled the image, feared for his life, and obeyed. As he was monitoring the military's movement and relaying the information to ISIS, he was arrested. He was forcibly disappeared for 90 days, after which he was charged in Case 148 of 2017 commonly referred to as the "attempted assassination of Sisi", in the Supreme State Security Court. Selmi was charged with joining a terrorist group, possessing and using explosive devices to kill president Sisi, vandalizing public

<sup>26</sup> After the incident, the authorities confiscated the papers of Mahmoud Shafiq from his lawyers' office and then threatened to kill her when she demanded to verify his identity or investigate the violations he suffered.

<sup>27</sup> Not his real name.

<sup>28</sup> "Egypt: Punitive Probation Measures Latest Tactic Used to Harass Activists," accessed December 19, 2019, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/03/egypt-punitive-probation-measures-latest-tactic-used-to-harass-activists/>.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Sami's lawyer

<sup>30</sup> capital and largest city of the North Sinai Governorate of Egypt.

<sup>31</sup> BCRF lawyers.

buildings and facilities, attempting to kill two “police aides,” destroying two vehicles and attempting to obtain classified documents.

In June 2018, the Military Court found a lack of jurisdiction and transferred his case to the Juvenile Court.<sup>32</sup> Selmi was transferred to the Marg Juvenile Detention Center where has been awaiting trial for three years. Without having violated prison rules, Selmi is denied family visits and the right to enroll in school.<sup>33</sup> Further, his name was added to the terrorism list, although he was never convicted. Selmi was victimized twice, once by ISIS and once by the state.

### Third: Children as Hostages:

#### Case 5: Abdullah Boumediene: The Victim of All: Case 570 of 2018, Supreme State Security

Children are often targeted, subject to travel bans, and even arrested because of their families' activities and affiliations<sup>34</sup>. Abdullah Boumediene is one example. Boumediene, a resident of Sinai, is the victim of his brother who joined ISIS, and the security force's arbitrary measures against him and his family.

Boumediene was 12 when his family received a call from his older brother, Abdel Rahman, telling them that he had joined ISIS. As a result of the call, security forces apprehended and forcefully disappeared the father on December 5, 2017, seemingly to learn about his son's location and activities. Several days later, on December 31st, security forces raided Boumediene's house, assaulted his mother, and arrested Abdullah Boumediene, who was asleep in bed.

In February 2018, security forces demolished the family's house in El-Arish and expelled them without compensation. Meanwhile, Boumediene was sent to various detention centers, including the National Security Center, the 101st Military Battalion, and the Central Prison in Sinai. Boumediene saw his father in the 101st Battalion being stripped of his clothes and tortured, but he could not communicate with him. He was later told by a prisoner that his father died from torture.

Boumediene himself underwent harrowing abuse. He was tortured with electricity, waterboarding, and hung from a hand from which he suffered a disability. He was placed on an iron bed that was set on fire. He was handcuffed, beaten, deprived of food, and bathing. While in the police station, Boumediene recounted to BCRF lawyers that heard continuous screams of women being tortured and was threatened that his mother would endure the same fate if he does not disclose information about his brother.

In July 2018, Boumediene was transferred to Azbakiya police station in Cairo, where he spent approximately 100 days in solitary confinement. He was not allowed

<sup>32</sup> As required by national law “Article 122 of the Child Law, “The Juvenile Court shall have the exclusive jurisdiction of the child's matter when accused of a crime or subjected to delinquency.” <https://www.elwatannews.com/iframe/pdf/14325298321514283518.pdf>

<sup>33</sup> Child law requires that detained children enroll in school.

<sup>34</sup> Human Rights Watch “Egypt: Families Of Dissidents Targeted.” Human Rights Watch, November 19, 2019. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/11/19/egypt-families-dissidents-targeted>.

family visits and underwent ongoing torture. The National Security Prosecution investigated the case<sup>35</sup> and charged Boumediene with joining a terrorist group and aiding to plant explosives and endangering national security.

On December 27, 2018, the Court of Juvenile Appeals ordered the release and transfer of Boumediene's custody to his guardians. Fourteen days after the order, he was transferred to the second police station of El-Arish. On January 18, 2019, the police at the station asked Boumediene's sister to sign her brother's receipt and promised to transfer his custody the following day. When she returned to receive him, the police refused and denied knowledge of his whereabouts.

Meanwhile, Boumediene's brother, Abdulrahman, was killed in an attack in El-Arish on April 12, 2019, and his case was closed. His appearance did not affect Abdullah's fate, who remains disappeared to date.

## Recommendations to Fight Radicalization in Prison:

In the fight against extremism and violent radicalization, we call on the state to treat children and youth as victims of political and armed conflict. We thus encourage the state to transform the prison/juvenile system from one used for political retribution to a social reform institution that promotes citizenship. Therefore, we recommend the following:

1. To release the children who have not been involved in a murder.
2. To comply with national and international standards, especially in observing the following:
  - a- Making arrest and imprisonment of children as a measure of last resort.
  - b- Separating children from adults, especially extremists.
  - c- Allowing for measures that maintain the wellbeing of detained children, including visits, phone calls, enrollment in school, and exercise with exposure to sunlight.
3. To allow local and international NGOs to conduct prison visits and verify compliance with national and international standards.
4. To rehabilitate the children once out of prison and build their capacities to become active and engaged citizens.
5. To replace the 12-hours surveillance in the police station, used as a precautionary measure after release, with psychological rehabilitation and public service.
6. To allow Al-Azhar's and civil society to play a constructive role in deradicalizing and supporting children in prisons and Sinai.
7. To implement transparency and accountability for the violations in detention facilities.
8. To compensate the child victims of torture and wrongful imprisonment.

<sup>35</sup> In contravention of national law, The second paragraph of Article (122) of the child Law prohibits national security courts from investigating children under the age of 15. <https://www.elwatannews.com/iframe/pdf/14325298321514283518.pdf>