



On Mental Health in Egyptian Detention Places

World Mental Health Day, October 10th, 2021

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Belady: an Island for Humanity-- a Human Rights Organization supporting Egyptian Women & Children since 2017

Belady aims to dismantle institutionalized violence by documenting the Egyptian regime's violations against women and children and educating national and international society and decision makers about them. We also pressure and advocate amendment of legislation that codifies violations while calling upon authorities to implement overlooked laws and treaties that would ensure respect for rights and freedoms. Belady provides legal and psychological support for Egyptian women and children who have been arrested and / or imprisoned in political cases.



Executive Summary

On World Mental Health Day, Belady aims to provide an overview of the suffering of prisoners - political and criminal - in Egyptian detention places and the deterioration of their mental health, which, in many cases, leads to suicide attempts.

First, Belady presents an analysis of the observed available legal, economic, social and health data regarding 46 prisoners who attempted suicide in detention places during their arrests and/or imprisonments from August 2013 until August 2021. The outcomes of this analysis are also discussed based on the factors that lead to the deterioration of mental health against political prisoners through raising issues related to the poor conditions of detention, ill-treatment and double punishment that led to psychological pain and ended with suicide attempts during detention.

Introduction

World Mental Health Day represents an opportunity to raise awareness and mobilize efforts to support mental health. Statistics indicate that each 40 seconds a person loses his/her life by committing suicide, along with a greater number of people attempting suicide. Each suicide is a tragedy with long-term repercussions for those the suicidal people leave behind¹. Mental wellness is an integral part of health. It provides a basis for positive feelings, thoughts, impressions, knowledge, communication and behaviors (including inside the detention places).

Rule 31 of the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules) stipulates that "The physician or, where applicable, other qualified health-care professionals shall have daily access to all sick prisoners, all prisoners who complain of physical or mental health issues or injury and any prisoner to whom their attention is specially directed. All medical examinations shall be undertaken in full confidentiality"². Moreover, Article 20 of the decision of the Interior Minister No. 79 of 1961 related to the internal regulations for prisons stipulated that:

"The prison psychiatrist specializes in the following:

- 1- To completely study the prisoner's personality
- 2- To measure their intelligence and their various abilities
- 3- To know their tendencies and orientation and reveal their emotional and temperamental aspects
- 4- To formulate a policy for the treatment plan, therapy and guidance, including guidance for the professional aspect that suits the prisoner"³.

Hence, this research aims to illustrate that the mental health of prisoners has been negatively affected due to neglect, harsh conditions of detention and human rights violations in contravention of international and Egyptian law, which drives them to commit suicide.

¹ [World Health Organization, World Mental Health Day 2019 - Focus on suicide prevention](#)

² [The United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners](#)

³ [The decision of the Interior Minister No. 79 of 1961 related to the internal regulations for prisons](#)

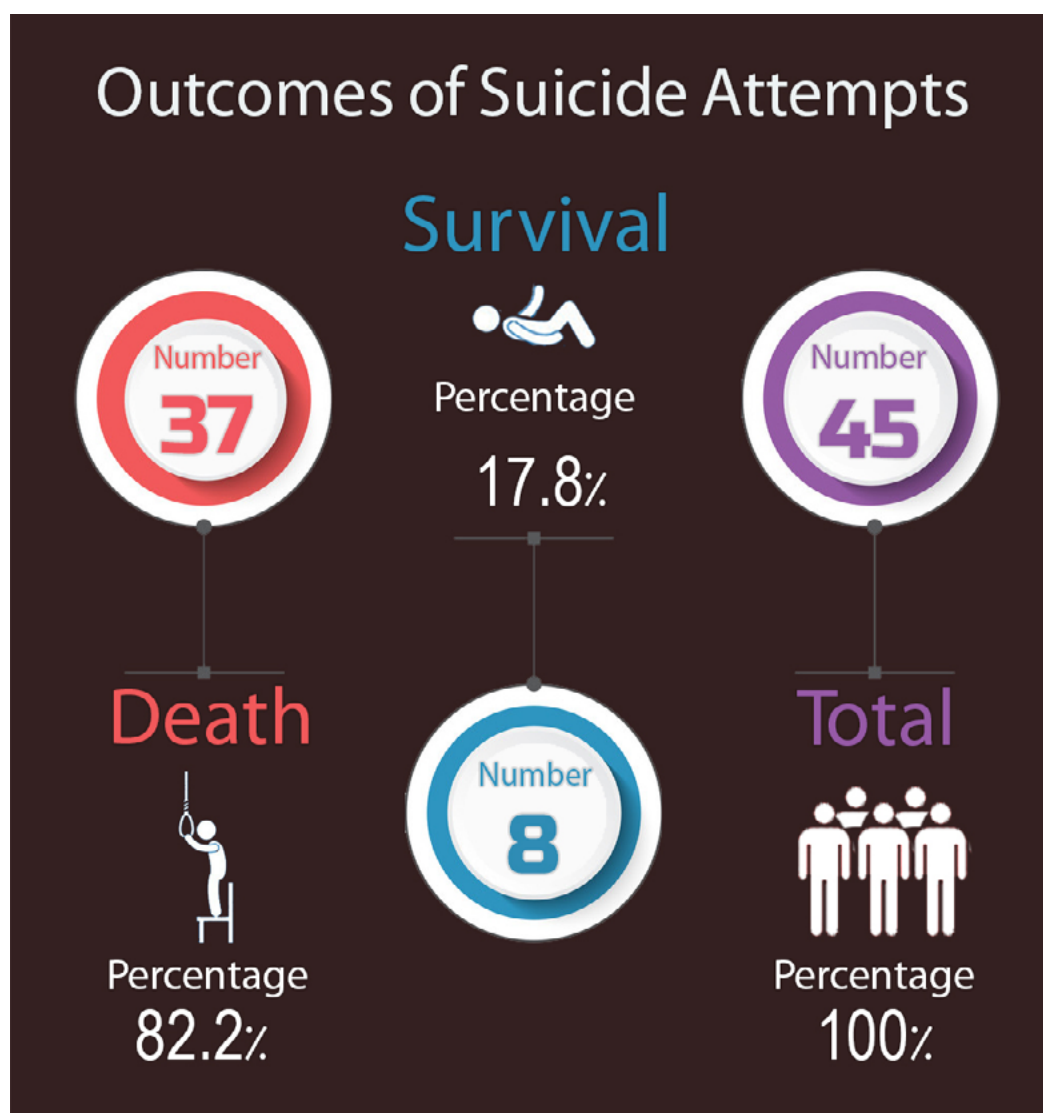
Research Methodology

This research is based on an analysis of the available legal, economic, social and health data of 45 prisoners who were arrested and/or imprisoned from August 2013 until August 2021 (the date of arrest) who had attempted suicide at least once inside the detention place as a tragic response to the pressure and inhumane prison conditions. To collect this quantitative and qualitative data, Belady used indirect secondary sources, such as follow-ups on press, news and social media websites, as well as follow-ups on civil society organizations and observational data.

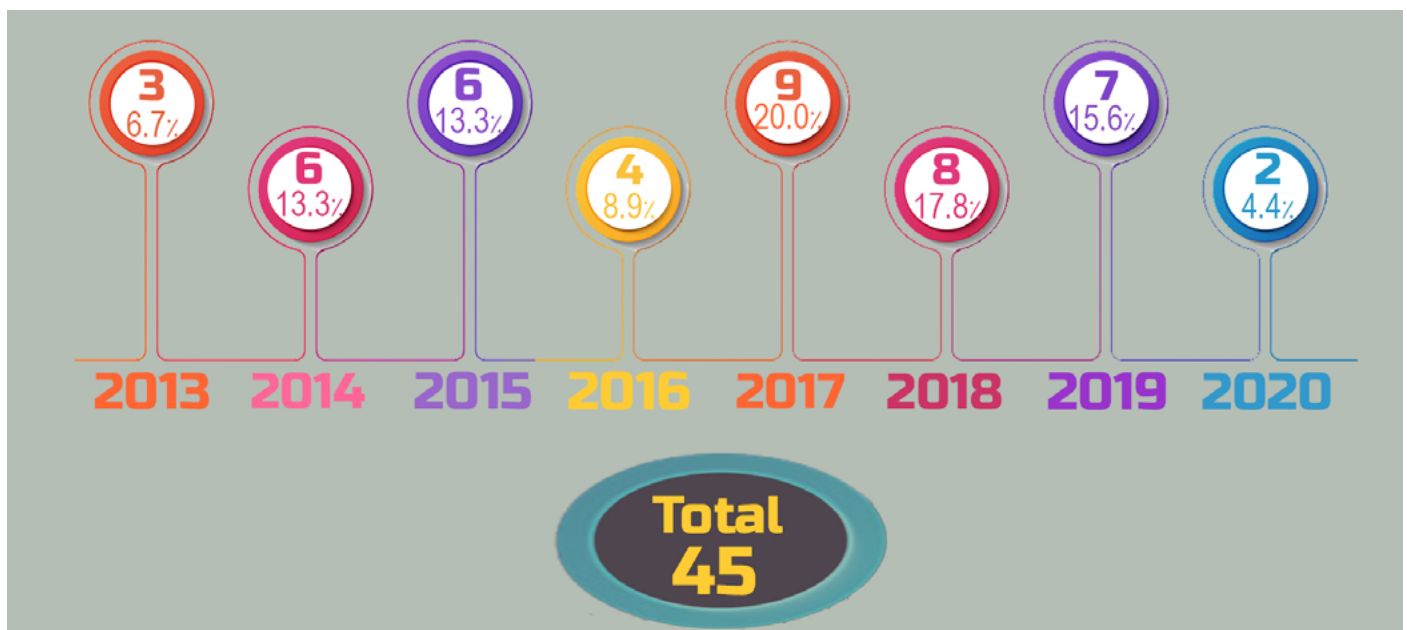
Results

• The Mental Health Deterioration Spares No One

Belady has observed a total of 45 prisoners who attempted suicide at least once inside a detention center (prison, police station, state security headquarters, etc) from August 2013 to August 2020. Most of them died 37/45 (82.2%), as the following graph shows.



Their ages ranged between 12 and 58 years at the time of arrest. 62.5% of them were young adults from 19 to 35 years old, and 28.1% of them were adults from 36 to 60 years old, in addition to 3 minors. The most prominent example is the story of Abdallah Boumedien, the child who attempted suicide in 2020 after being arrested in 2017 and forcibly disappeared for more than two years. The -12year-old child suffered many psychological and physical violations inside the prison, where he was prevented from pursuing his studies and completely deprived of visitation. He was also subjected to medical negligence as he was deprived of receiving care for his dyspnea and deprived of the physiotherapy for the disability in his right hand. Abdallah was also subjected to physical torture by electrocution, which rendered him unable to move. After the deterioration of his mental condition from all these violations, Abdallah tried to end his life by taking a large amount of therapeutic pills. It should be noted that suicide attempts in detention places were recorded disproportionately in all the years in question, as the following graph shows.



Belady has also observed suicide attempts of human rights activists and defenders, at a rate of 8/33 (24.2%) prisoners whose field of work is known. One example is the case of Osama Ahmed Murad, who has been imprisoned since 2015 and attempted suicide in 2019 due to physical and psychological violations that drove him to collapse. He was transferred to more than 5 prisons during his detention. Camera and audio surveillance was also imposed on him. He was dispossessed of his personal belongings and ill-treated, in addition to imposing unnecessary restrictions during family visits, as he used to receive them in the execution ward. He showed signs of isolation and became accustomed to silence for fear of being abused. After spending three months in Minya prison, he fell into a severe depression, then had a psychological breakdown, which consisted of outbursts of rage and intense screaming, and finally, he attempted suicide. Belady's statistics also included that 25/33 (75.8%) common law prisoners also committed suicide, 23 of them were imprisoned for a felony and two for a misdemeanor.

• The Mental Health Deterioration is the Product of Constant Exposure to Human Rights Violations

Out of 28 prisoners whom we know, whether or not they enjoy their right to legal representation, Belady has observed 27 (96,4%) suicide attempts among those who were interrogated without being able to hire a lawyer. Others have been subjected to multiple violations, such as torture through starvation and food deprivation in one case, and deprivation of pursuing further education and examination in another. 8/30 (26.7%) were subjected to solitary confinement, 4/31 (12.9%) were deprived of visitation, 5/32 (15.6%) were subjected to frequent psychological violence through insults and threats of violence, 2/28 (7.1%) to sexual violence, such as rape and sexual harassment, and 9 others were subjected to deliberate medical negligence.

The most prominent example is the case of Khaled Hassan. He has been a prisoner since January 2018 and was forcibly disappeared for 4 months, during which he was subjected to the most heinous violations, such as severe beatings, frequent electrocution in the head, tongue, anus, and testicles, denial of visitation, and rape. They stripped him of his clothes and hung him by the arms for days, causing his shoulders to be dislocated. The police also used a taser on his leg, which caused an open wound that inflamed later, causing his swollen leg and frequent fainting. Then, they operated on the wound without anesthesia.

Discussion

First: The Detention Conditions are Among the Main Causes for the Mental Health Deterioration of Prisoners

Detention conditions in Egypt are like revenge against prisoners. There is no place in the depths of prisons for international law, such as the Nelson Mandela and the Bangkok rules, or national law, such as Law No. 396 of 1956 and Resolutions No. 79 of 1961 and No. 150 of 2011 of the Interior Minister. Considering the indicated results of this research, we deduct that this arsenal of laws is only considered a formality but that there is no room for its application. This turns the prison into a hell in which the prisoner awaits their death, affected by the deteriorating conditions, or seeks to end their life by suicide. Therefore, the deterioration of the psychological state to the extent of committing suicide is preceded by many sirens wailing by prisoners, both political and criminal. For instance, the Egyptian Network for Human Rights reported that 15 prisoners in “Scorpion” Prison had tried to set themselves on fire after spending days on hunger strike with no response to their demands from the prison administration to stop the violations against them, despite the fact that the number of strikers reached 100 at least ⁴.

Second: The Egyptian Authorities Drive Young Adults to Commit Suicide

A number of prisoners had recently attempted suicide, including Abdul Rahman Tarik “Moka”, Mohammad Ibrahim “Oxygen”, and others over the past periods, as well as the suicide of some young adults after their release due to their suffering from post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD) due to what they experienced in prisons. The activist Sarah Hijazi is the most prominent example in this regard. Suicide after the deterioration of the psychological state is a reflection of losing hope in the existence of a justice system, in addition to the increase in violations and pressures exerted by the security authorities on political prisoners, especially young adults. Belady has observed that those attempting suicide were subjected to psychological, physical and sexual torture, in addition to deliberate health negligence.

⁴ [The Egyptian Network for Human Rights, Suicide and Hunger Strike](#)

Third: Escaping from Pretrial Detention to Death

Originally, pre-trial detention is a legal measure taken by the investigative authority or the competent court to ensure that the accused is kept in a safe place until the case and the accusations against them are decided. On the other hand, it is a measure taken to avoid tampering with the evidence of the case, influencing the witnesses, or harming society. The Egyptian legislator also did not set a legal definition for this procedure. It only specified the period of pre-trial detention not to exceed six months for misdemeanours, eighteen months for felonies, and two years if the penalty for the crime is life imprisonment or death. Adly Mansour, the interim President of the Republic, added a decree by Law No. 83 of 2013 to amend some provisions of the Criminal Procedures Law issued under Law No. 150 of 1950. This gave the Court of Cassation and Referral the right to renew the defendant's pretrial detention for 45 days, making it renewable without considering the previous periods⁵. Nowadays, with the targeting of activists and the return of the regime to imprison anyone who jeopardizes the order, pretrial detention has transformed into a punitive tool that can continue indefinitely. This makes the prisoner lose hope in getting out of the vicious and continuous cycle of renewal and seek death. Perhaps the most prominent example of this is the death of director Shadi Habash in mysterious circumstances in prison, after the continuous renewal of pretrial detention for a period of 26 months.

Conclusion and Recommendations

World Mental Health Day is an opportunity to remember that health is the right of every human being, including prisoners. The suffering of prisoners in Egypt is summarized in the absence of any glimmer of hope, whether on the legal level, such as depriving them of a fair trial or transforming pretrial detention into a punitive system based on retaliation and gloating, or the standard of living inside detention places. Prisoners do not enjoy any basic rights to life inside prison, starting from meeting basic biological needs, through torture and ill-treatment, to depriving them of any social or cultural activity such as receiving visitation or pursuing further education. Belady calls for a glance at all prisoners and states that freedom-depriving punishments serve as deterrence and reform, and not to discipline anyone who exercises his freedom and putting more pressure on the public sphere.

Accordingly, Belady recommends the acceleration in:

- Releasing political prisoners to reduce overcrowding inside prisons.
- Providing health care for prisoners on a psychological and physical level.
- Implementing national and international legislation regulating the treatment of prisoners.
- Allowing the monitoring of prisons by national and international organizations, and seriously dealing with human rights reports.
- Complying with Egyptian law in relation to pretrial detention by avoiding its use as a punitive tool for political prisoners.
- Enabling independent committees composed of the intervening parties (judges, lawyers, human rights organizations...) to monitor the state of prisons and prisoners.

⁵ [Democratic transition & human rights support center \(DAAM\), Pretrial Detention in Egypt: a Measure or a Punishment?](#)