

**October 2022 - World Food Day**

**Hunger Strike ... A  
Weapon against Tyranny**



## Hunger Strike ... A Weapon against Tyranny

### Belady: an Island for Humanity -- A Human Rights Organization Supporting Egyptian Children since 2017

Belady aims to dismantle institutionalized violence by documenting the Egyptian regime's violations against children and educating national and international society and decision makers about them. We also advocate for the amendment of legislation that codifies violations while pressuring authorities to implement overlooked laws and treaties that would ensure respect for rights and freedoms. Belady provides legal and psychological support for Egyptian children and women detained for political reasons.

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#### Summary

On the World Food Day (October 16), Belady publishes an analytical research of data on **82** women and children who were imprisoned in political cases and went on hunger strike in Egyptian prisons over a period of nine years (2013-2021).

The research sheds light on the violations inflicted on women and children during arrest, trial and/or imprisonment, which compelled them to go on a hunger strike as a means of protesting against these violations. The research also documents cases, along with their outcomes, in which prisoners protested through a hunger strike to confront the violations and maltreatment to which they are subjected. The research also reminds us of the goals of World Food Day and offers recommendations in order to prevent the authorities from committing further violations that threaten the right to life of prisoners, especially children.



## Introduction

World Food Day aims to raise awareness of the suffering of the world's undernourished countries and encourage people around the world to take measures to combat hunger. Millions of people around the world do not have adequate access to safe food, which is the key to sustaining life and promoting good health.

Food safety and nutrition, and food security are closely related. Unsafe food causes a vicious circle of disease and malnutrition and affects especially infants, young children, the elderly, and the sick. This is especially evident in Egyptian prisons, where prisoners of all ages suffer from the poor quality or sometimes absence of “el ta’yin” (food provided for free in prisons). In addition to these inhumane conditions, we find illegal detention and trials free from the elements of fair trial, as well as the various violations and unjust verdicts against detainees in political cases. Due to the absence of legal mechanisms that enable them to exercise their rights, detainees resort to illegal methods of non-violent protests. Hunger strike is a significant and widespread method in Egyptian prisons. A hunger strike is the willful refusal of one or more people to eat or drink, to manifest an injustice in the public arena by mobilizing opinion and power simultaneously.

On World Food Day, Belady sheds light on women and children on hunger strike in Egyptian prisons since 2013, based on data on 82 women and children.

This data was collected over five years, during which Belady used several tools, including direct semi-structured interviews, or through Belady's legal unit, in addition to observing secondary indirect sources, such as following up on press and news websites, social media, follow-ups of civil society organizations, and observational data.

## Results

### First, Reasons for the Hunger Strike

Against the diversity of rights-violating practices by the Egyptian regime, Belady has observed 82 cases of hunger strike by women and children in protest against illegal detention or torture and other forms of ill-treatment in prison. The number of strikers who objected to their imprisonment reached 60%. (42/70) compared to 40%. (28/70) who objected to ill-treatment and other violations.

The hunger strike has a long history in non-violent resistance movements globally and in the Arab world. People resort to hunger strikes as a means of political protest, or to draw attention to their suffering, or to challenge their jailers.

**Non-violent struggles** against the occupation and dictatorships in the Arab countries witnessed a long history of hunger strikes in order to defend rights, the most prominent of which is a series of strikes by Palestinian prisoners in Israeli prisons that started from Nablus prison in early 1968. Palestinian detainees went on a hunger strike to protest against the policy of beating and humiliation to which they were subjected. Moreover, 1,600 Palestinian prisoners waged a hunger strike under the title ‘The Battle of the Empty Intestines’ to achieve several demands, including ending administrative detention and solitary confinement and obtaining the right to visit.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [El Jazeera, Learn about the Battle of the Empty Intestines of Palestinian Prisoners](#)

In 1924, Egypt recorded an open hunger strike that lasted for 40 days, which was carried out by the Egyptian lawyer “Antoine Maroun” after declaring in court that he was a member of the Egyptian Communist Party, saying: “I proudly confess that I am a communist and an advisor to the Federation of Labor Unions. I dedicate my life to serving and defending the workers whenever they face injustice.” Later, he died in prison due to the hunger strike. This form of protest continued in Egyptian prisons due to the succession of dictatorships in Egypt until the current political authority. Since assuming power in 2013, detentions, violations, and inhumane conditions have intensified in most Egyptian prisons. This period witnessed many hunger strikes, chief among them was the strike of 300 prisoners in “El Aqrab” (Scorpion) Prison in January 2020 as the prison authorities starved prisoners and deprived them of clothes and blankets, which led to the death of two prisoners because of the cold.<sup>2</sup>

The current Egyptian authority has witnessed numerous hunger strikes that affected all imprisoned groups, including women and children, which we will discuss in the following sections of the research.

## Second, Unjust Charges and Verdicts

The Egyptian regime besieges women and children through a set of charges, mainly terrorism charges (joining or forming a terrorist, banned or illegal group or gang, supporting, financing or helping it achieve its goals, etc) with a rate of 90.7%. (68/75). Second, political charges (obstructing pedestrian and vehicular traffic, disrupting an officer or an institution from carrying out their duties, demonstrating without a permit, organizing a demonstration, striking or organizing a strike or inciting to participate in a strike, attempting to overthrow the regime, etc) reached a rate of 80%. (60/75). Lastly, charges relating to ‘cyber/electronic crimes’ (operating an electronic page, publishing false news, inciting violence on social media, possessing, installing, and activating communication radio devices, photographing, sharing a video clip on social media to incite overthrowing the regime, etc) reached a rate of 6.7%. (5/75).

All levels of imprisonment in first instance trials (imprisonment, life imprisonment, aggravated imprisonment, imprisonment with hard labor, imprisonment with a fine) reached a level of 29.5%. (18/61). These were followed by acquittals with a rate of 3.3%. (2/61). Imprisonment durations ranged between 12 and 288 months (24 years), with an average of 82 months (6 years).

Case dismissals and release of defendants constituted the majority with a rate of 67.2%. (41/61) in case No. 9924 of 2017, El Amiriya Second Misdemeanor, which was referred to the Military Prosecution in case No. 186 of 2017, Alexandria Military Felonies, known in the media as ‘the events of Borg El Arab Stadium’. This case includes 235 defendants, 41 of them, whom Belady observed, were below the age of 18. The events of the case date back to July 9th, 2017, when the security forces in Alexandria arrested fans, including children, after the match between El Zamalek and El Ahly Tripoli (Libya) in the CAF Champions League against the backdrop of violence and riots in the Borg El Arab stadium. The case was referred from the West Alexandria Prosecution to the Military Prosecution. The children were detained in El Hadra Prison in Alexandria with adults and were beaten, which propelled them to go on a hunger strike to protest their imprisonment and abuse. On December 16th, 2017, the Military Prosecution in Alexandria dismissed the case and released the defendants.

## Third, Violations in Mass- That Included All Kinds of Violence and Abuse against Women and Children

Belady observed a set of violations to which women and children were subjected, whether during or before the strike, as follows:

- **Physical Violence:** 85.4%. (70/82) of the sample of this research were subjected to several methods of physical violence, such as beating, kicking, electrocution, and dragging, in addition to other methods of ill-treatment and torture such as denial of exercise, sleep deprivation and detention in inhumane conditions such as small cells filled with insects and smoking and lack lighting, ventilation, and sanitary facilities.

<sup>2</sup> El Araby El Gadeed, ‘El Aqrab’ (Scorpion) Detainees Are on Hunger Strike to Escape Death

### Story of the Child Ahmed Gomaa

The most prominent example of this form of violence is the **16-year-old** child, Ahmed Gomaa Abdel Hadi El Desouky, who was severely beaten and dragged on Gihan Street in Mansoura by security forces during his arrest, which fractured his right and left calcaneus. The child Ahmed required a surgical operation to fix the fracture with metal wires and nail, as well as a plaster below the knee for a month and a half. Before the child was fully recovered, the security forces in Kafr El Dawar transferred him to Damanhour Public Prison “El Ab’adiya”, which refused to receive him, due to the lack of reports indicating that he had recovered. This prompted the security forces in Kafr El Dawar to issue a false medical report stating that he had recovered, in order to imprison him. When the child went on strike to protest the violations to which he was subjected, the security confiscated his belongings and placed him in “ta’deeb” (solitary confinement).

- **Political and Institutional Violence: 20.7%. (17/82)** of the sample of this research were subjected to prolonged renewal of pretrial detention, arbitrary detention, solitary confinement, imprisonment with ‘non-political’ prisoners, denial of health care, prohibition from completing studies or passing exams, enforced disappearance, military trial, “rotation”, investigation in the absence of a lawyer, enforced transfer from one prison to another.

### Story of Dr. Basma Refaat

The **33-year-old** doctor, Basma Refaat Abdel Moneim, is one of the most prominent cases of political and institutional violence. She was forcibly disappeared in **2016** for three days after submitting a report stating the enforced disappearance of her husband. Consequently, she appeared before the State Security Prosecution as a defendant in case No. **314** of **2016** Supreme State Security, known in the media as “the murder of Public Prosecutor Hisham Barakat”. She was charged with financing the cell that murdered him and was sentenced to fifteen years imprisonment. The prisoner Basma Refaat was subjected to several types of violations. She was denied visitations in El Qanater Prison, which forced her to protest through an open hunger strike. In addition, her lawyer was prevented from attending the investigations and she was subjected to deliberate health negligence, which led to swelling in her left breast, complications in a heart valve, blood pressure, and lumbar vertebrae. Furthermore, the prisoner confirmed that she had confessed to participating in the event under threat of rape and murder of her husband, Yasser Seif, the engineer and former army colonel, by the National Security officers.<sup>3</sup>

### Institutional Violence- A Tool of Pressure on Hunger Strikers

According to the testimony of an ex-prisoner, one of the most significant practices of the Prison Administration while treating hunger strikers is the so-called ‘carrot and stick’ approach, which is to inquire the prisoner, as a first step, about the reasons for her strike, then placing her in solitary confinement to isolate her from the outside world. Later, all forms of blackmail are exercised against her. She might even be forced to break the strike.

It is noteworthy that solitary confinement is a disciplinary measure taken against prisoners. It is not a cell to detain those who have fallen into disfavor or hunger strikers. When a prisoner goes on hunger strike, due diligence must be provided by placing them in the hospital for health care, not to endanger their lives.

- **Psychological Violence: 15.9%. (13/82)** of the sample of this research were subjected to humiliation, insulting, cursing, threatening, being forced to listen to the torture of another person, and delivering food in front of the bathroom door.
- **Social Violence: 12.2%. (10/82)** of the sample of this research were subjected to isolation from the outside world through denial of visitation.
- **Sexual Violence: 4.8%. (4/82)** of the sample of this research were subjected to verbal and physical harassment and humiliating search.

<sup>3</sup> The Story of Dr. Basma Refaat and Her Husband ... They Threatened Her with Rape, Tortured and Deprived Her of Her Children

### Story of the Child Muhanad Ehab

A prominent example of the regime's unsanctioned violations is the story of the late Muhanad Ehab. The child was arrested three times, two of which were when he was a minor. The first time was when he was 17 years old, during the protests of August 2013. He was blindfolded by the security. They kept him tied and blindfolded for many hours and beat him at the Security Directorate.

In December of the same year, he was arrested for the second time, at a protest in Sidi Bashar after Friday prayer, where he was beaten in a security microbus. He was then investigated at the Security Directorate, where he was electrocuted in his armpit. Later, he was detained in solitary confinement, along with other detainees.

“The cell did not have a single place where someone could stand, and it was very difficult for us to enter, even closing the door was difficult because the cell was very crowded. We remained in this narrow space for two entire days. ”

**The child Muhanad Ehab**

Muhanad was later transferred to the 'non-political' prisoners' cell at the Security Directorate, which he described as 'extremely dirty', full of drugs and overcrowded. He was charged in two cases: one for demonstrating and the other for possessing a pistol. Muhanad remained in the juvenile facility in Koum El Dikka for three months, during which the officer forced him to bring a "bucket of dirty water from the bathroom and pour it on the floor". Then, he forced him to crawl in the water and beat him (with a hose). The punishment of crawling and being insulted repeated regularly, which urged the prisoners to strike by closing the cell's door and prohibiting entry.

In response, Alexandria's Chief Inspector, along with special forces, threatened them that they would shoot and fire gas at them in the corridors. Forty people were sent to the Directorate, only with their clothes and without their personal belongings in order to be able to control the prisoners. The rest of the prisoners were denied their rights to visitation and exercise. As a result, they went on a full-scale hunger strike.

“When we went on a full-scale hunger strike, it had a great impact on the Interior Ministry. Officers came to us daily and asked us to end the strike and sometimes threatened us. Visits were banned, but some families were able to visit, so the officers asked the families to ask their children to end the strike. Once, I told my family to send me nothing but water. When they succeeded to bring me water once, the officer violently abused them, and told them that you are helping them harm themselves, ask them to end the strike! He also threatened to file new reports and cases for us because of the strike. ”

**Child Muhanad Ehab**

Muhanad was arrested for the third time in January **2015** when he and his colleagues passed near a demonstration. They were imprisoned in Borg El Arab Prison in Alexandria, during which he contracted leukemia. In the police station, he was handcuffed and forced to stand against the wall. He was blindfolded and beaten with wooden chairs and pistol-whipped on his back, in addition to beating with pens and being subjected to the most hideous insults. When he was presented before the National Security, the officer stripped him of his clothes and sexually assaulted him!

“ In a way that affects your psyche more than it affects your body, it was a kind of sexual assault. He told me that he filmed me and asked me if I want him to publish it on the Internet. I was blindfolded and tied during the assault. ”

**Child Muhanad Ehab**

At the beginning of May **2015**, his health deteriorated significantly and he informed the officials that he needed to go to the prison hospital for treatment. However, they prohibited him until about three weeks later. After two months in prison without treatment, he was transferred to El Amiri Hospital. He specifically needed to be transferred to the hematology ward. Instead, he was placed in the geriatric ward where he was handcuffed to bed, which made him unable to move.

Finally, he was transferred to the hematology ward, where doctors diagnosed him with leukemia (blood cancer) with a rate of **93%**. He started treatment late by receiving chemotherapy doses, without the knowledge that it was chemotherapy for leukemia, in conjunction with the renewal of his pretrial detention. He was transferred to the renewal hearings in a wheelchair.

Muhanad did not learn of his illness until his lawyer told the judge that he had leukemia, and the judge released him. However, the verdict was only implemented after **18** days which he spent in the hospital while he was handcuffed. Muhanad Ehab passed away after failing to treat him from leukemia on October 3rd, **2016**.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Journalists around the World Organization, an interview with Muhanad Ihab, who was arrested by El Sisi regime three times, two of which were when he was a minor. Muhanad was released from prison with leukemia, with a rate of 93%.

## Conclusion

Amid the daily suffering experienced by Egyptian prisoners of different age groups, the political authority denies committing violations and fails to provide legal guarantees to protest the mistreatment from arrest to detention. Throughout this research, Belady sheds light on a non-violent protest method used by the victims of this regime whose malicious hand affects all social segments despite their fragility. Instead, the violations intensify when they request to halt the harm. The case shifts from violating rights, such as freedom of demonstration and expression to guaranteeing the bare minimum humane conditions in prisons, defending physical inviolability, the right to air in cells, and the right to food, water, and visitation.

Through the documentation of these cases in this research, it is obvious that the authorities are slowly murdering prisoners. They also contribute to ending the life of those who engage in public affairs or even pass by a demonstration. The most prominent example is the tragedy of the late child Mohanad Ehab.

Despite the importance of food on its international day and the discussions of the countries to provide food security and safety, Egyptian citizens in the third millennium still deprive themselves of food in order to defend their most basic rights!

## Belady Recommendations:

- Release of political prisoners and halt of systematic torture,
- Enable detainees to have effective legal mechanisms to complain about torture practiced in police stations and prisons,
- Establish an independent committee from the authority, consisting of civil society organizations to examine treatment in prisons and detention conditions,
- Urge state structures concerned with children to provide a minimum level of protection from violations within Juvenile Detention Centers,
- Hold accountable all those involved in cases of torture and other violations, and
- Review the system of pretrial detention, which was found to be a punitive tool, rather than fulfilling its legal role.

