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My family knows Egypt's human rights abuses first hand

By Aayah Hossam

Last month, the Trump administration blocked nearly \$300 million dollars in U.S. military and economic aid to Egypt, citing its atrocious human rights record. This decision was a long time coming. It is no secret that state-sanctioned human rights abuses against civilians and foreigners have dramatically increased in Egypt over the past several years.

The worsening human rights situation has had devastatingly personal consequences for my family. My mother and father, Ola Al-Qaradawi and Hosam Khalaf, are two of the estimated 60,000 political prisoners detained without rights in Egyptian jails: an estimated 1200 percent increase since the 2011 Revolution that saw the end of Hosni Mubarak's rule.

My parents Ola and Hosam are legal permanent residents of the U.S. and both graduated from the University of Texas-Austin, where my brother and I were born. I am an American citizen, along with my husband, our two children, and another four relatives.

On June 30, 2017, my parents were arrested in Egypt without a warrant or explanation by Egyptian State Security, associated with the Egyptian Interior Ministry. After two days of enforced disappearance, they were immediately placed in solitary detention in separate prisons, where they remain today. My parents are forbidden from speaking with me or any other member of my family, and they have only seen their lawyer a handful of times.

I've heard that their cells are cramped — no more than 5.25 ft. by 5.9 ft. — and have no windows or ventilation. I am especially afraid for my mother's health, as she only has access to inedible food and contaminated water, and has lost considerable weight. Both Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have criticized my parents' detentions. And our international lawyer filed a complaint about their mistreatment with the United Nations.

The Egyptian State Security prosecutor said my parents are detained because of vague

allegations of “terrorism” and allegedly belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood. However, my parents have not been presented with any official charges or evidence whatsoever. Instead, they are being held under temporary 15-day detention orders, which to date have been renewed five times. Their indefinite detention, with no charges or set trial date or any ability to defend themselves has put all in a constant sense of dread.

Unfortunately, this isn't the first time my family has had to deal with the unpredictable cruelty of the Egyptian authorities. Back in 2014, my father was stopped at the Egyptian airport and prevented from leaving the country. The Egyptian authorities then threw him into prison for nearly two years and ultimately released him without his ever having even been charged with a crime. In the Egyptian security apparatus beatings, solitary confinement, and starvation rations are common.

After my father was ultimately released in 2016, I knew we needed to act quickly to get them out of Egypt and back to the U.S, where they would be safe from arbitrary persecution. He and my mother applied and were awarded U.S. green cards. I breathed a sigh of relief; my parents would finally be able to live in the U.S. near me, my husband, and my two young daughters, who would be overjoyed to have their grandparents so close. I could never have imagined that, months later, both of my parents would be imprisoned before they could get to the safety of U.S. soil.

We are trapped in a living nightmare in which my parents are collateral damage of an Egypt that believes it can act with impunity. This Egyptian government has destroyed any remaining political process and targeted anyone who dreamed of a better Egypt like my father.

However, by withholding military aid for human rights abusers in Egypt, President Trump has thrown families like mine a lifeline. Through these aid cuts, Trump reminded Egypt that human rights violations have consequences, and that the U.S. is not willing to stand idly by as the Sissi government torments its own civilians.

My parents have fallen victim to this regime's viciousness and are being arbitrarily detained for baseless accusations. I urge Trump to publicly and unequivocally condemn Egypt's human rights violations, and to call for the immediate and unconditional release of my parents, Ola and Hosam.

President Sissi's unbridled contempt for human rights can only be stopped by an international community willing to hold him to account. My own parents' lives, and the lives of so many others, hang in the balance.

Aayah Hossam lives in Seattle, Wash. She is the #free_Ola_and_Hosam campaign spokesperson.