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Egypt Is Holding US Green Card Holders In Solitary Confinement Without Charges

A middle-aged couple is caught up in a power play involving President Trump, Qatar, the Muslim Brotherhood and the top Democrat on the House Armed Services Committee.

By Akbar Shahid Ahmed

WASHINGTON — Ola Al-Qaradawi, a 55-year-old research assistant, used to regularly travel from Egypt to the United States to visit her American daughter and two American granddaughters.

In 2016, she decided to spend more time with them. Her daughter helped her apply for a green card, which U.S. authorities issued earlier this year. Qaradawi began preparing to leave. That's when Egypt's National Security Agency — the top domestic security force of a government receiving more than \$1 billion in U.S. aid annually — got involved.

Today, Qaradawi is in solitary confinement in a five-by-six foot cell with no toilet, no bed, no natural light and no ventilation in a women's prison north of Cairo, trying to eat and drink as little as possible because she only gets five minutes of bathroom time a day. She has no access to family and only briefly sees her lawyers every 15 days when the state prosecutor renews her detention. More than three months after she was first arrested, she has received no official charges.

Qaradawi and her husband, Hosam Khalaf, a fellow green card holder arrested with her and now also held in solitary confinement without charge at a separate facility, are caught up in a clash over political Islam that has divided U.S.-aligned governments and inspired repression across the Middle East.

Qaradawi isn't political. But her father is Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, a Qatar-based spiritual icon for the region's Muslim Brotherhood movement. The Egyptian government, which gained power thanks to a 2013 military coup against a democratically-elected Brotherhood government, has issued statements suggesting its treatment of Ola Al-Qaradawi is tied to its desire to punish her father and the Brotherhood, which it classifies as a terror group. (Most national security officials and experts in the U.S. and Europe do not believe the popular, largely nonviolent Brotherhood deserves that label.)

Egypt and its allies, which have been boycotting fellow U.S. partner Qatar since this summer, see the 91-year-old preacher as a major threat whom the Qataris should immediately imprison.

Now, Aayah Hossam Khalaf, Ola Al-Qaradawi's Seattle-based daughter, has launched a loud campaign to draw U.S. attention to her parents' conditions and urge them to be released. She sees their detention as entirely baseless — they have never supported the Brotherhood, she told HuffPost, and are being punished simply because of a family connection.

Her lawyers are seeking urgent intervention by United Nations special rapporteurs on torture and health, as well as a ruling from a U.N. working group that their detention is illegal under international law.

And Congress, where concern over Egypt's crackdown has grown in recent years as the government has targeted American citizens and U.S.-backed NGOs, is paying attention: Khalaf has been in close contact on the matter with aides to her congressman, Rep. Adam Smith (Wash.), the top Democrat on the powerful House Armed Services Committee. Smith has made formal inquiries about the case to both the State Department and the Egyptian Embassy in Washington, he told HuffPost Tuesday.

The State Department has no consular obligations to Khalaf's parents because they are not U.S. citizens, Smith said. But he hopes the Egyptians can provide further information about the couple's detention. Egypt has confirmed the couple's arrest, but Smith's

questions on their health, well-being and access to lawyers have not yet been answered, one of his aides told HuffPost in an email. “The Egyptians remain in active communication with our office on this case ... we hope to receive a response to those questions soon,” the aide wrote.

The couple’s detention adds to a long list of challenges in U.S.-Egypt relations, and highlights the conflict between U.S obligations to international human rights commitments — which Khalaf’s lawyers say Egypt is clearly violating — and its commitment to a long-time strategic partner.

“Egypt’s Interior Ministry is bulldozing not only over the embattled judiciary’s authority but also over everyday Egyptians like Ola Al-Qaradawi and Hosam Khalaf’s basic rights. Their case is a sad example of what has become all-too-familiar in Egypt,” Sarah Leah Whitson, the Middle East director at Human Rights Watch, said last month. The group says officials should immediately offer formal charges based on evidence or release the couple.

President Donald Trump meets with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi during the U.N. General Assembly in New York on Sept. 20, 2017. Earlier this year, Trump hosted the authoritarian leader at the White House, something President Obama had declined to do.

Egyptian National Security Agency officers — who did not have a warrant — arrested the pair at a family-owned vacation home on Egypt’s north coast on June 30, 2017, less than a month after Egypt and other governments cut off ties with Qatar, where Qaradawi was born. They also searched the couple’s home in Cairo. Authorities then held the couple incommunicado for two days before adding them to one of Egypt’s notorious mass trials and moving them to the prisons where they are detained now, according to the couple’s advocates.

Officials initially said they were investigating the couple because they were moving furniture at a family property belonging to Qaradawi’s preacher father, whose assets in Egypt are now frozen. But Khalaf said documents show that the home actually belongs to her grandmother — and her initial hope was that authorities would realize the mistake in a matter of days and set the couple free.

Khalaf now thinks her parents were initially targeted for the reason the National Security Agency officers said, but that they held fast and ramped up the persecution once they realized the couple could be used as leverage in trying to reach the elder Qaradawi.

“Even if we assume that my grandfather has to do with whatever they’re saying, what does this have to do with my parents?” Khalaf said. In an op-ed published last month, she wrote that she simply wants to see them in the U.S. spending time with her two young daughters.

Weeks after the arrest, state-run media reported that Egypt would now consider all of Yusuf Al-Qaradawi’s children linked to terrorism and freeze their assets. Khalaf is worried that more family members could be next.

Egyptian authorities had previously detained Khalaf’s father for nearly two years, apparently for his membership in a liberal Islamist political party that remains legal and is seen as opposed to the Brotherhood.

They released him last March with no charges — a move she cites as evidence that the government has no basis for accusing the couple of criminal behavior. Her father’s arbitrary persecution was one reason her parents began exploring the option of a new life in the U.S., Khalaf said. Her father was seeking government approval to leave Egypt at the time of his arrest.

But despite their green cards and personal political views, the couple may struggle to win sympathy in the U.S. because of their family’s link to the Brotherhood.

Anti-Islam activists and some conservative scholars have spent years portraying the Brotherhood as fundamentally opposed to America, in cases saying it nefariously employs a global network among Muslim communities, and those claims have received unprecedented White House attention under the Trump administration.

For months after Trump’s inauguration, the administration mooted labeling the Brotherhood a terror group, and Qaradawi in particular remains unpopular with many even in the mainstream national security establishment because of statements defending violence against Americans and Israelis. The cleric was once banned from traveling to the U.S, Britain and France. And President Donald Trump earlier this year appeared to sour on Qaradawi’s protector, the U.S. partner nation Qatar.

The couple's case will likely be met with some skepticism in official circles, and some might feel the Egyptians are justified in holding them since they do consider Qaradawi a terrorist, a U.S. official working on U.S.-Egypt policy told HuffPost. Although the cases of Americans caught up in Egypt's repression have gained attention, those U.S. citizens' advocates both in and outside the government will not want to be associated with this couple, the U.S. official added.

How the administration ultimately chooses to respond to the case may offer clues about whether it remains ideologically wedded to the harsher instincts of the president's Brotherhood-fearing base or open to assessing situations based on the facts at hand.

Some of the Trump aides closest to the Islamophobia movement have now left their jobs, and after the question of designating the Brotherhood as a terror group was debated in Washington foreign policy circles earlier this year, the administration eventually seemed to accept the establishment consensus that the broad movement cannot be held responsible for violence against U.S. interests. There "was an important realization: it shouldn't have anything to do with Qatar or the Gulf crisis or whether or not political Islamism is palatable to people... [terror designation] has nothing to do with ideology. It has to do with actions," said Michele Dunne, a Middle East expert at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Dunne, a former long-time State Department official, believes Trump has proven willing to push Egypt on specific matters even as he publicly praises its authoritarian leader. Khalaf and the jailed couple's advocates are pursuing the right path by drawing public attention, she told HuffPost.

"In many cases of these kinds of detentions people here in Washington don't hear about it at all," she said. "It turns a spotlight on the fact that many, many Egyptians are in similar situations."

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