

March 1, 2018

Ola al-Qaradawi remains in a windowless cell in Egypt as regional powers feud

Ola al-Qaradawi and her husband Hosam Khalaf have been detained for eight months with no official charges

By: Ali Harb

For more than 240 days, an unsuspecting Egyptian family has found itself at the crossroad of a major international geopolitical crisis.

Ola al-Qaradawi has been in solitary detention in an Egyptian prison since 30 June 2017. With no sunlight, ventilation, visitors or human contact, her situation is deteriorating, according to her lawyer.

Her only crime, her family says, is being the daughter of Qatar-based imam Yousef al-Qaradawi at a time when Cairo and Riyadh are feuding with Doha.

Imam Qaradawi, a renowned Islamic scholar and former TV personality critical of the Egyptian government, has been put on a "terror list" by Saudi Arabia and its allies and attacked as a symbol of Qatar's alleged links to the Muslim Brotherhood.

Ola and her husband Hosam Khalaf were arrested last year while on holiday at their vacation home on Egypt's north coast. Eight months later, they remain in jail without formal charges.

Qaradawi and Khalaf had been approved for US permanent residency. Their three children live in the United States.

"We were basically getting the house ready for them," Aayah Hosam, their daughter, told Middle East Eye, saying that her parents' imprisonment has been "devastating" to the family.

Hosam added that the experience has also been traumatising for her two daughters, ages 6 and 9, who had been awaiting their grandparents' arrival.

"It's really hard for kids to absorb that," she said.

Since the arrest, the couple's incarceration has been regularly extended - first for 15 days and later for 45 days.

"It's a routine renewal. There's no actual hearing or investigation being done - just renewal after renewal," Hosam said.

Qaradawi and Khalaf had been initially detained over suspicion that the vacation home belonged to imam Qaradawi, whose assets had been seized by Egypt. But the house belongs to Ola's late mother, Hosam said.

She added that her 56-year-old mother is being "tortured", placed in solitary confinement in a windowless cell, where she only gets one daily bathroom break in the morning.

They have since been under investigation on suspicion of belonging to the blacklisted Muslim Brotherhood, but they have not been officially charged or arraigned.

Ola is not politically involved, according to Jared Genser, a human rights lawyer retained by the family in the US. Before his latest arrest, Khalaf was jailed for two years for being a member of al-Wasat opposition party, but he ceased all political activities after his release in 2016.

Genser dismissed allegations of the couple's ties to the Brotherhood, noting that Khalaf had been a member of a rival party.

He added that Qaradawi and her husband were granted green cards under the Trump administration, which has stressed "extreme vetting" of immigrants.

The Muslim Brotherhood is not designated as a terrorist organisation by the US.

Qaradawi and Hosam were arrested before making the move, but the lawyer said they have enough US ties to prompt Washington to press for their release.

Yousef al-Qaradawi

Hosam, a US citizen who lives near Seattle in the northwestern state of Washington, suspects that her parents' arrest was intended as a jab at Qatar, an opinion shared by Genser.

"They're probably taking them as a hostage because of the conflict that's going on," she told MEE.

On 6 June 2017, Saudi Arabia, joined by the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt, severed relations with Doha and announced a blockade on the rich Gulf emirate.

Three days later, the Saudi-led bloc released a "[terror list](#)" allegedly linked to Qatar. The most notable name on it was Yousef al-Qaradawi, a socially conservative Egyptian Islamic scholar who used his show on Al Jazeera network to back the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011.

Qaradawi is not officially associated with the Muslim Brotherhood, but the imam is often described as the spiritual leader of the Islamist group.

On his Al Jazeera programme *Religion and Life*, Qaradawi vocally condemned the 2013 military coup against Egypt's first democratically elected president, Mohamed Morsi, who was a member of the Brotherhood.

Despite being 91 years old and having been off the air for more than four years, Qaradawi has been made a major figure in the Gulf crisis.

Qaradawi and his children, including Ola, hold Qatari citizenship.

Saudi Arabia's education minister [banned](#) his writings from the kingdom's libraries shortly after Riyadh and its allies started boycotting Qatar. The Saudi-owned Al Arabiya news network

dubbed him "the top advocate of suicide bombings." He was even mentioned by his first name in an anti-Qatar song performed by the UAE's most prominent singers.

"Not the chairman of the Brotherhood, not Yousef, not a million like them can turn a stone, as long as Abu Khaled (Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohamed bin Zayed) is protecting the glory of Arabs," the [song](#) goes.

In January, an Egyptian court sentenced the Islamic scholar in absentia to [life in prison](#) for "incitement to murder".

"Why should my mother be a part of a conflict between two countries or even between them and my grandfather," Hosam said.

'Unfounded charges'

Several rights groups have denounced Qaradawi and Khalaf's detention.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) said the couple were denied "[basic rights](#)." Amnesty International has accused Egyptian authorities of arresting the couple on "unfounded charges."

Hosam said she has received ample support from US lawmakers and officials in her quest to free her parents, but the situation has not changed.

In a hearing on human rights in Egypt, the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, a bipartisan caucus in the US Congress, highlighted the plight of Qaradawi and her husband.

Congressman Randy Hultgren, the Republican co-chair of the commission, [said](#) on 6 December that the couple's detention is "in violation of Egyptian and international law."



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Ola Al-Qaradawi turns 56 years old today in #Egypt. "It breaks my heart that my mom is in such horrific conditions in violation of her most basic human rights, particularly on her birthday," her daughter says. Take action now! [amnesty.org/en/documents/m...](https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/m...)

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Hosam said the US State Department has been helpful but also "hesitant" about tackling the case. The State Department said it has brought up the case with Cairo.

"The Department is aware of Ms. Al-Qaradawi and Mr. Khalaf's detention and has raised the matter with Egyptian authorities," a State Department spokesperson told MEE in an email.

US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson visited Egypt in February, and said he discussed "the promotion and protection of human rights" with President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. But critics have denounced the US silence on Cairo's crackdown on dissents ahead of Egypt's March presidential elections.

US President Donald Trump has repeatedly expressed his admiration for Sisi. During a visit by the Egyptian president to Washington, Trump heaped praise on his Egyptian counterpart, saying that the former general has done a "fantastic job."

But US diplomacy is more complicated than what gets reported in the media, lawyer Genser said.

"No administration, Republican or Democrat, is monolithic in the approach that it takes," he said.

The human rights attorney's strategy is to "escalate the cost" of detaining US permanent residents for the Egyptian government.

"You do that through a combination of legal, political and public relations advocacy efforts," he told MEE.

Washington's \$1.5 billion annual aid to Egypt is an apparent key factor in pressing Cairo to weigh the benefits of continuing to detain Qaradawi and Khalaf. And Genser said the family has "strong support" among lawmakers on the Congressional committees that allocate foreign aid.

"It's not as simple as just saying: 'Well, President Trump likes President Sisi; he can just write him a blank check and give him a free pass to do whatever he wants.' We have a system of checks and balances in our government, and Congress has a critical role to play," the lawyer said.

The administration had successfully pushed for the release of aid organiser Aya Hijazi, a US citizen who had been dubiously charged with child abuse in Egypt. After her acquittal in April 2017, Hijazi was invited to the White House where she met Trump and his top advisers.

In August, the White House cut US aid to Egypt by \$100m and delayed another payment of \$200m, citing human rights abuses.

"The policies that President Trump has put forward suggest that he is prepared to put his foot down if he doesn't like what he sees," Genser told MEE.

However, the lawyer added that the administration needs to exert more pressure on Cairo.

He said Americans have a right to question how their tax dollars are being spent.

"Why should we hand over a blank check - billions of dollars - to the government of Egypt that - with total impunity - is mistreating American citizens and legal permanent residents," Genser said.