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Egypt's Political Exiles: Going Anywhere but Home

Michele Dunne and Amr Hamzawy

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Introduction

While Egyptians have expatriated to find work abroad for decades, something different has been going on since 2011: thousands have expatriated for political reasons. Some have left based on a general sense that the political climate had become hazardous for them, while others left because of specific fears due to court convictions, lawsuits, job losses, attacks in the media, or direct physical threats related to their political, journalistic, or civil society activities. During the tumult of Egypt's brief political opening from 2011 to 2013, those opposing the rising prominence of Islamists [were told](#) that if they did not like it, they should go to Canada or the United States; and then after the military coup in 2013, Islamists were told that if they did not like it, they should go to Qatar or Turkey.

In contrast to waves of politically motivated Egyptian migration into exile in the 1950s–1970s, migrants now have highly diverse identities, motives, destinations, and experiences in exile. While specific data are hard to locate, post-2011 Egyptian exiles generally [appear to be](#) more numerous, younger, and more highly educated than those of the past. One reason for this diversity is that far more groups are at serious risk in Egypt—Islamists as well as Christians, liberals as well as leftists, artists as well as businesspeople, prominent intellectuals as well as scrappy activists—compared to the past, when fewer groups faced political or social persecution at any given time.

Anecdotal evidence suggests there have been three overlapping waves of Egyptians going into exile since 2011:

- small numbers of pro-regime businesspeople and larger numbers of Christians who left beginning in 2011;
- large numbers of Muslim Brothers and other Islamists who began leaving in mid-2013; and
- moderate numbers of secular intellectuals and activists who left as the crackdown against them escalated from 2014 onward.

Mapping the current phenomenon of Egyptians in political exile is challenging for many reasons; many exiles fear for their safety and do not stand up to be counted, while at the same time the Egyptian government does not advertise the fact that so many of its citizens are voting with their feet. What is clear, however, is that there are thousands of Egyptians in political exile and that some of their activities—particularly in mass media and human rights advocacy—worry the Egyptian government because of the potential impact on domestic public opinion as well as international views.

Who Left Beginning in 2011—and Why

After the forced removal of president Hosni Mubarak on February 11, 2011, former ministers and officials from his regime fled either to Western countries or to Gulf countries, such as Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, that rejected his fall. These former Mubarak higher-ups **had varying motivations** for leaving Egypt: they wanted to preempt any possible restrictions on their freedom of movement, and some (such as former ministers Youssef Boutros Ghali and Rasheed Mohammed Rasheed) **feared legal prosecution** as well as political instability.

During Egypt's short-lived democratic experiment from 2011 to 2013, the country witnessed the rise of political Islamist groups, most prominent among them the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafi movement. In reaction to this phenomenon, increasing numbers of middle and upper class Egyptian Coptic Christians (Copts make up roughly 10 percent of the country's population of 97 million) **sought ways to migrate** to North America, Europe, and Australia, **fearing the fallout** from Islamist political rule. In 2013, the German ambassador in Cairo **confirmed** to one of the authors of this paper that Christian Egyptians' **applications for asylum** in Germany **tripled** between 2011 and 2013.

Salafi movements, particularly the Salafi Dawa Movement and the associated Noor Party, engaged in discriminatory speech against the Copts, denying they had equal citizenship rights. These parties **exploited their presence** in constitutional and legislative bodies **to introduce greater religiosity** into the state, politics, and public space. **Repeated sectarian attacks**—for example, the Atfih and Imbaba church attacks in 2011 as well as sectarian attacks in Upper Egypt in 2012 and 2013—also added to the Copts' fears and, along with the general deterioration of economic and security conditions, pushed some of them **to submit applications** for immigration to and asylum in the West.

The Muslim Brotherhood **did nothing** to allay such fears. The Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party formed the largest bloc in the parliament elected in late 2011, as well as in the bodies entrusted with either amending the constitution or drafting a new one. The group's candidate, Mohamed Morsi, was elected president in June 2012. Brotherhood representatives in legislative and constitutional bodies repeatedly **refused to guarantee** political and civil rights for Copts. Moreover, then president Morsi did not visit any churches for holiday celebrations or funerals during his year in office (June 2012–July 2013). To the Coptic population, the political dominance of the Muslim Brotherhood, combined with its failure to adopt explicit political speech and practices committed to equal citizenship rights between Muslim and Christian Egyptians, **amplified and justified** fears of severe repercussions for their community.

Post-2013 Exiles

In the summer of 2013, the Egyptian military took control of the country amid popular demonstrations against Morsi. The military imprisoned Morsi and top leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood as well as the Freedom and Justice Party and ended the nascent democratic transition. The Egyptian authorities **used unprecedented force** to break up several sit-ins organized by supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood, notably in Rabaa Square in Cairo, in which more than 800 people were killed on August 14, 2013.

The interference of the military in politics and the violent dispersal of the sit-ins were followed by large-scale **repressive and punitive measures** against Brotherhood members and supporters. Some Brotherhood members and supporters **engaged in violent activities**; others **did not**. However, the majority soon found itself robbed of its freedom, facing legal prosecution regardless of involvement in violence, and having its assets confiscated. In December 2013, the Brotherhood **was declared a terrorist organization** in Egypt, making membership or even support an offense punishable by imprisonment.

In this highly polarized atmosphere, a broader **wave of migration** of lower-ranking Brotherhood members and supporters of all ages **began**. The members who fled came from various economic and social backgrounds as well as age groups, and they chose destinations such as Qatar, Turkey, Sudan, North America, Europe, and Asia. This group of politically displaced people is highly diverse socioeconomically, though all of them had some kind of Islamist ideological or political affiliation, and many of them left the country illegally. A few prominent members of the Brotherhood, the Freedom and Justice Party, or the Morsi administration managed to escape prosecution and **went into exile**.¹

Some of the Salafists, again the Salafi Dawa Movement and Noor Party, **turned on** their previous alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood and **joined forces** with those involved in the 2013 upheaval. Many unorganized Salafists **withdrew from politics altogether**, while others ended up in prison for supporting the Brotherhood in protest demonstrations.

Starting in 2014, Egypt's new rulers not only persecuted the Brotherhood and its supporters but also harassed young secular activists who called for democracy before and after the January 2011 revolution, subjecting them to harsh new laws and legal amendments passed in a hurry to remove citizens from public life. Military, security, and judicial authorities also turned their attention to the small minority of liberal and leftist writers as well as intellectuals who opposed the military takeover in 2013 and condemned the violent crackdowns on Islamist sit-ins (as well as the violence by some Brotherhood members and supporters). They **faced lawsuits** on trumped-up charges and/or other measures to deprive them of freedom to travel or to earn a living. Later on, the regime even **targeted** secular activists who had initially supported the military's takeover of power in 2013 but later became critical of the spreading repression.

Thus new groups joined the post-2013 wave of politically motivated emigration from Egypt. Young activists, writers, intellectuals, artists, and journalists decided to seek exile elsewhere, mostly heading for

European capitals, such as London and Berlin, as well as Canada and the United States. The government crackdown on civil society organizations, particularly human rights groups, [continued to escalate](#). Groups in Europe and the United States [began to receive](#) many more requests for emergency assistance to at-risk human rights defenders from 2016 onward.² Other members of the wealthy and educated classes, while not subject to direct repression, found the post-2013 atmosphere uncongenial and sought opportunities to study or work in North America or Europe.

Current Migration in the Context of Previous Waves

Many more migrants have left Egypt than in previous waves of politically motivated migration, and they are much more diverse in both identity and motivation for departure.

Before the end of Egypt's monarchy and the evacuation of British troops in the 1950s, large-scale migration was not reported. Some leaders of the nationalist movement were forced into exile while others knocked on Europe's doors to earn international sympathy for the "Egyptian question"—that is, the demand for independence. For example, in the late nineteenth century, Ahmed 'Urabi [was exiled to Sri Lanka](#) after leading a nationalist movement against British colonial forces. In the early twentieth century, [Mustafa Kamel](#) and [Mohamed Farid](#) spent years in Europe calling for Egypt's independence. In 1919, British colonial authorities [exiled](#) Saad Zaghlul and other nationalist leaders to Malta because they had [demanded](#) to represent Egypt at the Versailles Conference, which was attended by the countries victorious in World War I.

Waves of politically motivated Egyptian emigration grew larger after a tumultuous period in the 1950s that included the abolition of the monarchy, the declaration of the republic, the evacuation of British forces from Egypt, and the Egyptian army's seizure of power. In addition to the emigration of members of the royal family, the 1950s saw the exodus of [the vast majority of Egyptian Jews](#), victims of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the wars of 1948 and 1956. Egypt's new rulers [did not differentiate](#) between the few Egyptian Jews who sympathized with the Zionist movement and supported the foundation of Israel, and the vast majority who considered Egypt their home and did not wish to leave. After deportation, the latter did not resettle in Israel, but rather [sought exile](#) in Europe and North America.

Moreover, as then president Gamal Abdel Nasser [began to implement](#) nationalist and socialist policies, Egypt abandoned large industrial and commercial families, as well as some influential landowners, after the government placed their property under government control, or seized it to make it public property. Wealthy Egyptians also [sought exile](#) in Europe and America. In addition to all of this, the Egyptian state under Nasser sent large numbers of teachers, judges, and bureaucrats abroad [to help build state structures](#) in Arab countries and beyond.

Leaders and members of the Muslim Brotherhood fled Egypt from the late 1950s until the end of the 1960s. An attempted assassination of Nasser by members of the Brotherhood in 1954 **unleashed a wave of state repression** against the movement. That repression, which consisted of far-reaching measures to imprison, prosecute, and even execute Brotherhood members, even pushed Brotherhood members who had evaded attention from security and intelligence agents to leave Egypt. Most **went to Arab countries** such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, while a few **went to Europe**.

At the same time, many Egyptian communists faced repression from the military rulers and **were left with no room** for public action, either in government-controlled labor movements and trade unions or in political parties, which were outlawed by the Nasser regime. Beginning in the 1960s, Egyptian communists left for various destinations. Many Egyptian communist writers and journalists settled in Lebanon, Kuwait, Algeria, Britain, France, and Switzerland. Those with more academic experience, such as in economics and social studies, **settled in** the Soviet Union, East Germany, and other Socialist bloc countries. In the 1990s, one of the authors of this study had a rare opportunity to learn the biographies of a few Egyptian communists who settled in East Germany and later became citizens of unified Germany. They shared their stories of state repression and persecution of communists under Nasser, which **motivated their departure** from Egypt.

After the death of Nasser and Anwar Sadat's rise to power in 1970, a new wave of politically motivated Egyptian emigration began. From 1970 and 1973, Egyptian Copts **became victims** of sectarian attacks, the most severe of which were the **Khanka events** in 1972. Accordingly, the number of Copts seeking to leave Egypt **increased dramatically**.

After 1973, Sadat **began to reverse** the socialist policies introduced by Nasser and embraced economic liberalism. In the foreign policy sphere, Sadat moved away from Egypt's alliance with the Soviet Union and the Socialist bloc, pursued a peace treaty with Israel, and built a cooperative relationship with the United States. To destroy the legacy of Nasser's socialist experiment and to limit the influence of Nasserists and leftists, Sadat **excluded Nasserist and leftist leaders** from many official positions, some of whom **had already been excluded** in the so-called **correction revolution** in 1971. Sadat also **waged war against** intellectuals, writers, journalists, artists, and student activists who were known to hold leftist views and criticize Sadat's policies. At the same time, state and security bodies **allowed political Islam to return** to universities and other arenas of public space in an effort to counter the Nasserists and leftists.

This led to the emergence of two phenomena: the return to Egypt of leaders and members of the Muslim Brotherhood who had previously left, and a mass exodus of Nasserites and leftists to live in exile in Arab and European countries. Many intellectuals, writers, and journalists left Egypt for the Gulf countries, Iraq, Lebanon, and Libya. While in exile, a number of these emigrants **worked** for state-owned and private media companies, some of which **adopted anti-Sadat policies**, especially after his visit to Jerusalem in 1977 and his initiation of peace negotiations with Israel that year in the Camp David accords and the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty. Some leftist intellectuals, writers, and journalists **left for** Britain, France, and Switzerland, and some successfully joined the Arab media and

journalism scene in exile, with journalist Mahmoud al-Saadani's work in the Gulf and in London [serving as an example](#). Others, such as the novelist Bahaa Taher in Switzerland, were able [to produce literature](#) in unrestricted environments. At the same time, many Egyptians [emigrated for economic reasons](#), seeking employment related to the oil boom in the Gulf and Libya.

With the assassination of Sadat in 1981 and the elevation of Hosni Mubarak, the volatility of Egyptian policies gradually subsided. While Mubarak's successive governments did not return Nasserites and leftists to power, the majority of them were [able to return to Egypt](#) after opposing Sadat's policies and practices. Some [were allowed to resume work](#) at public press and media institutions in a gesture of goodwill from Mubarak. In the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, Mubarak [continued to allow the return](#) of Islamists from exile, especially with the expansion of political Islam in public life in unions, civil society organizations, and economic activity, even permitting them to compete in parliamentary elections. In addition, despite the armed conflict between state security forces and Islamist extremist groups—Islamic Jihad and al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya—in the 1990s, members of these groups who were not imprisoned [did not attempt to flee abroad](#), except for a few important cases such as [Ayman al-Zawahiri](#) and other Egyptian jihadists who became active in al-Qaeda. Between 1981 and 2011, politically motivated emigration from Egypt [was limited](#) to the Copts, some of whom [continued to move abroad](#) due to sectarian violence and discrimination.

Where Exiles Have Gone

While specific data on how many Egyptians have left and where they have gone is scarce, there is quantitative and anecdotal evidence of significant increases in emigration since 2011 and particularly since 2013. In a general sense, it appears that Egyptian exiles with Islamist backgrounds have been more likely to go to Turkey or Qatar as well as destinations in Africa (for example, Sudan) or Asia, whereas non-Islamists have been more likely to seek refuge in North America or Europe. This is by no means an absolute distinction, however, as exiles with varied ideological leanings live in all of these places.

Egyptians applying for migrant visas to the United States [more than doubled](#) over seven years, growing from 534,375 in 2011 to 960,279 in 2013 and to 1,274,751 in 2018 (only a fraction of which were granted). [World Bank data](#) show 181,677 Egyptians emigrated to the United States in 2018 and 171,985 in 2013, compared to 132,513 in 2010 (data are not available for 2011). Political exiles were most likely only a small subset of those migrants, most of whom probably moved for economic reasons, but it still shows a greater than usual number of Egyptians have been going to the United States.

Other countries that are known to have welcomed relatively large numbers of Egyptian exiles are Turkey and Qatar—where the governments are sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood—as well as Sudan, Canada, Germany, and the UK. Qatar, for example, received 166,840 Egyptian migrants in 2018 and 143,960 in 2013 compared to 87,727 in 2010 according to the [World Bank](#)—even though recent

years have seen open enmity between the Qatari and Egyptian governments as well as the Saudi/UAE blockade of Qatar.

Turkey has heretofore been welcoming to Islamist political exiles, with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan voicing consistent support for deposed president Morsi and opposition to current President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. [Egyptian government data](#) from 2016 showed some 25,800 Egyptians living in Turkey, with anecdotal evidence suggesting that many were political exiles and family members as well as some laborers. Turkey has been seen as protecting many members and supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood from potential persecution, which was why the mid-January 2019 [extradition](#) of a twenty-nine-year-old Egyptian who had been sentenced in absentia set off shock waves within the Brotherhood.³

From time to time, information emerges suggesting that Egyptian exiles are seeking refuge in countries well beyond the traditional havens of the Gulf, Turkey, North America, and Europe. The South Korean Ministry of Justice announced in July 2018 that the country would suspend [visa-free entry for Egyptians](#) due to the large number of asylum applications filed by Egyptians in 2017: 3,244, exceeded only by applications from China and Pakistan. “Many of them claim to have been forced to undergo criminal trials for their anti-government activities as part of the Muslim Brotherhood,” an official told a local newspaper.

Indirect and Direct Effects on Egypt

The unusually large and diverse wave of exiles from Egypt since 2011, and particularly since 2013, is bound to affect the home country. The expatriates who for decades have left Egypt to seek employment have provided a reliable flow of remittances, and have brought cultural as well as religious trends back with them when they returned. Egyptians who oppose the rising religious conservatism in their society from the 1970s onward [often blame their compatriots](#) who traveled to or worked in Saudi Arabia, for example, for [bringing back Wahhabi influences](#).

Egyptians who have gone into exile and remained there, however, have a different effect on the country than do those who work abroad for some years and then are able to return home freely. Exiles affect the home country by their absence as well as by their activities in exile.

Indirect Effects: Economic and Social Costs of Absence

When this large a cohort of intellectuals, activists, businesspeople, and journalists leave within a few years, brain drain becomes a real consideration. It is [difficult to quantify the effects](#) on Egypt’s economy of the absence of a few thousand people from a population of nearly 100 million. Nevertheless, there does seem to be an opportunity cost when some of Egypt’s most talented citizens leave permanently or semi-permanently. According to [a report](#) by the World Bank, “highly educated

workers generate positive externalities for society and these are lost when they emigrate.” Among the losses are labor productivity, contributions to key public services such as education and health, tax revenues, and—particularly relevant for this group—“their contribution to the debate on important social issues and their impact on policy and institutions.”

Egyptians themselves often remark on cases in which expatriates are able to achieve brilliant successes abroad that would not have been possible had they remained in Egypt due to social or political repression. Notable recent cases include the Nobel Prize winners in chemistry [Ahmed Zewail](#) and peace [Mohamed ElBaradei](#). The recent Academy Award to Egyptian American actor [Rami Malek](#) occasioned much comment inside Egypt; one young woman said, “If one day I traveled outside Egypt, I could accomplish something on my own because I have been crushed in all ways here, and I still can’t see a ray of light.”

While the Egyptians mentioned above expatriated long ago, many prominent people in various fields have left since 2013. Mohamed ElBaradei, who had returned to Egypt in 2010 after many years abroad, left again in the summer of 2013 shortly after the government disbanded Islamist sit-ins using excessive force, abandoning his position as interim vice president. Egyptians who have gone into exile since 2013 include prominent historians, political scientists, novelists, screenwriters, satirists, actors, broadcast or print journalists, and human rights defenders.⁴

Prominent names are just a small sample of the thousands of Egyptians who were making positive contributions to public life before 2013 but who now have left, leaving [noticeable voids](#) in journalism, political discourse, civil society, and arts—fields also strongly challenged by [constraints on freedom](#) of those remaining inside Egypt including [lawsuits and arrests](#). Moreover, the preponderance of exiles appears to be Egyptians in their twenties and thirties, whose potential has not yet been realized. Screenwriter Belal Fadl, who left Egypt after 2013 and has been critical of the Muslim Brotherhood as well as the military, reflected on how different Egypt might be if all had remained, [saying](#), “I don’t think I am capable of expressing the danger of the growing trend of the departure of Egyptian minds, especially the young ones.”

In addition to economic impacts, the impacts on Egyptian society are difficult to quantify but significant. Many exiles have [had to leave behind](#) spouses, children, parents, and other family members, creating untold personal hardships.

Direct Effects: Rights Advocacy and Media

The activities of the thousands of Egyptians in political exile, as well as their absence, affect their home country. The two most noticeable types of activities since 2013 have been exiles’ human rights advocacy and the media outlets they have started. While some exiles have attempted political mobilization, as of this writing they have been ineffective due to ongoing political polarization and lack of trust between Islamists and secular activists.

Rights advocacy. Stepped-up human rights advocacy and pressure on the Egyptian government from abroad is one result of the fact that many rights defenders have been forced into exile by unfounded charges or convictions. Several rights organizations still operating in Egypt are also working in exile (for example the [Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies](#)), while many new groups have sprung up headed by exiles (for example the Freedom Initiative). Working separately and in some cases together—as well as with international groups such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Frontline Defenders—these organizations have been active in publishing reports on human rights conditions in Egypt. They have also kept international media briefed, and have given frequent public testimony before Western parliaments and United Nations (UN) bodies such as the Human Rights Council in Geneva. A number of these groups [banded together](#) to form the Egyptian Human Rights Forum in March 2019.

Media. Since 2013, exiles have created a number of Arabic language media and online outlets, some of which have gained considerable audiences inside Egypt as well as among the diaspora. Popular outlets include the satellite television stations al-Sharq and Mekameleen, both broadcasting from Turkey, as well as the news website Rassd and the Facebook page al-Mawkef al-Masry. Three out of the four have some connection to the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood and propagate its discourse and political stances, while al-Mawkef is led by secular youth activists. Many Egyptian journalists have also taken employment with existing Arab media outlets in Doha or London, such as Al Jazeera, al-Araby TV, and *al-Araby al-Jadeed* newspaper, funded by Qatar and critical of the Egyptian government.

Al-Sharq and Mekameleen are the two main survivors from a group of satellite television stations started by exiles affiliated with or close to the Muslim Brotherhood. Both channels carry content strongly critical of the Egyptian government and even incendiary at times, particularly Mekameleen. Ayman Nour, a secular politician and former presidential candidate who sided with the Brotherhood against the 2013 coup, heads al-Sharq. One of its most popular programs is *With Mo'taz*, hosted by well-known media personality Mo'taz Matar, whose discourse is closely aligned with that of the Muslim Brotherhood. The funding of these channels reportedly comes primarily from the Brotherhood and the Qatari government.⁵

While current rating and polling data are not available, anecdotal evidence suggests that al-Sharq and Mekameleen (which broadcast on a European satellite) reach some audiences inside Egypt. In 2014, several Egyptian channels [filed lawsuits against IPSOS](#), a market research firm, arguing that low rankings in the company's viewership surveys lessened their revenue. IPSOS [responded](#) that the company has “no interest in manipulating or tweaking the research results to suit any personal or business interests.” The situation came to a head in 2017 after IPSOS [published a survey](#) (no longer available on the IPSOS website) showing that Mekameleen was the most-watched satellite channel in Egypt for the second year in a row. In July 2017, the Egyptian government [ordered the closure](#) of the company's Cairo office, citing workplace health and safety violations.

In Doha, the capital of Qatar, the number of Egyptian exiles working at television channels, print newspapers, and media websites and others, has increased. Egyptian journalists working in Qatar, some of whom left Egypt after the closure of Al Jazeera Mubasher's Cairo bureau in 2013, have produced documentary films, television programs, and newspaper articles that drew an audience in Egypt—Al Jazeera's recent documentary *The Last Hours* about Morsi's final days in power is an example. In London, traditionally a center for Arab media outside the Middle East, the increased presence of Egyptian exiles has translated into a more open media space for journalists, writers, thinkers, and politicians, with Al-Araby TV and the daily newspaper *al-Araby al-Jadeed* as examples. Both of these [receive funding](#) from the Qatari government, part of Qatar's strategy to oppose the Egyptian regime since 2013.

While television is the most widely consumed medium in Egypt, web-based news sources formed by exiles also have large readerships. The two most prominent are [Rassd News Network](#) (RNN) and [al-Mawkef al-Masry](#). Rassd originated inside Egypt shortly after the 2011 uprising, but now operates from exile. Funded and managed by the Muslim Brotherhood, Rassd functions as a complete news agency. It has a Facebook page with nearly 12 million followers and a YouTube channel with nearly 1 million subscribers.

Young, secular activists founded the Facebook page al-Mawkef al-Masry in exile, and as of this writing, it has nearly 1 million followers. Al-Mawkef carries articles and news updates, but is particularly known for featuring videos in which Egyptians—some well-known but many not—voice their opinions on political or other topics currently taboo inside the country. In spring 2019, it posted dozens of videos of Egyptians expressing opposition to proposed constitutional amendments that would expand presidential authorities regarding the judiciary and introduce changes in presidential term limits that could allow Sisi to remain in power until 2034. Expression on such channels is risky for Egyptians; authorities [arrested at least two people](#) who posted anti-amendment videos on Facebook in February 2019.

Politics. What Egyptians in exile have not done as of this writing is form any significant political organizations. The Egyptian Revolutionary Council was formed in August 2014 in Istanbul, and is composed of exiles including academics (for example, Maha Azzam, its president) and former officials (such as Judge Walid Sharabi). While the council [describes itself](#) as a body that “has brought together Egyptian citizens and organizations abroad, irrespective of their political or ideological affiliations,” it is seen as having strong ties to the Muslim Brotherhood. Its members write open letters or speak in the media frequently, but the council does not appear to have a large membership or social media following.

There are also country-specific organizations such as the [Alliance of Egyptian Americans](#) (established in 2005), formed primarily of longtime expatriates still hoping to have an influence on Egypt. There are also a number of Coptic expatriate organizations, such as [Coptic Solidarity](#). So far, however, the ideological polarization, primarily between Islamist and secular beliefs, that has seized Egypt [also affects](#)

those in exile, making it difficult for them to rally around any political objective—more difficult than it was in 2010, for example, when Mohamed ElBaradei garnered significant support from the diaspora for his National Assembly for Change.

Egyptian Government Responses to Exile Activism

While exiles from Egypt generally have not had much political impact in recent years, their rights advocacy and media activities have had an effect, at least to judge by the countermeasures taken by the Egyptian government. Measures have included creating new bodies to control exiles or counteract their work, legal prosecutions, mobilization of pro-regime organizations, media campaigns attacking exiles' credibility, and various forms of petty harassment.

Actions Against Rights Advocacy

The Egyptian government has taken several types of actions to blunt the effectiveness of exiles' human rights advocacy: creating an official body to rebut critiques, co-opting a few civil society organizations to engage on the government's behalf, making examples out of any Egyptians who speak to international audiences about human rights, and intimidating activists abroad.

- The Egyptian government in November 2018 created a High Permanent Commission on Human Rights specifically to combat international criticism, a body that includes the Foreign Affairs Ministry, Interior Ministry, military, and intelligence agencies. The commission joins several other existing bodies established by the government with similar mandates, notably the National Council on Human Rights founded in 2004.
- Under the guise of efforts to regulate and depoliticize human rights work, pro-government media outlets have gone after independent groups operating abroad that criticize abuses in Egypt, regularly publishing “black lists” of human rights organizations. Such reports, which often attempt to discredit prominent individual activists as paid agents of Western nations, the Muslim Brotherhood, or Qatar, are extremely common. Egyptian authorities have also resorted to extralegal harassment of rights defenders, for example at conferences held abroad.
- Tensions have become particularly high in Geneva when the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) is in session. Several ostensibly independent Egyptian organizations have been co-opted to defend Egypt's human rights record and to divert attention to other countries.⁶ During the February–March 2019 UNHRC session, these organizations carried out a plethora of activities on human rights abuses in Qatar, Turkey, and the Houthis in Yemen—with all of whom the Egyptian government is on the outs—as well as Somalia, Eritrea, and Israel. They worked assiduously at changing the subject from human rights abuses in Egypt, arguing that the country was in a “transitional period,” and that citizens' rights to healthcare,

housing, and infrastructure were far more important than the “politicized” issues raised by independent groups. These government-affiliated groups also **spent much time** defending themselves from allegations that they were government-organized nongovernment organizations, known as GONGOs.

- The Egyptian government has treated harshly any rights defenders participating in advocacy abroad. Lawyer Ibrahim Higazi, who cofounded Families of the Forcibly Disappeared, **was arrested** in September 2017 at Cairo International Airport while on his way to Geneva to participate in the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearance, and remains in pretrial detention as of this writing. Ismail Alexandrani, a researcher and specialist on Sinai who had worked for the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, was arrested in November 2015 when he tried to reenter Egypt after several years of research and public speaking in the United States and Europe. Held in pretrial detention for more than two years, Alexandrani **was eventually convicted** in a military court of “publishing false news” and “joining a banned organization,” and sentenced to ten years in prison.

Actions Against Media Outlets and Journalists

Egyptian government efforts against exile media outlets are even more direct than those against activists. This is not surprising, given the fact that exile-run media apparently are reaching some audiences in Egypt directly with a narrative counter to the government’s, whereas the activities of rights activists generally do not reach Egyptians beyond the elite (although they do reach an international audience).

- Domestically, nearly all broadcast and print media that were privately owned before 2013 have now been forced to sell out to shell companies fronted by government cronies, with the capital **provided sometimes** by intelligence agencies. Hundreds of websites, including virtually all of those that offered independent coverage of news in Egypt, **have been blocked**. Government-owned or -affiliated media **work day and night at discrediting** the owners and journalists behind exile-led media (often portraying them as foreign agents and/or corrupt) as well as specific reports.
- The government has taken direct legal and extralegal action against journalists or even guests on programs critical of Egyptian authorities. Egypt is one of the worst **jailers** of journalists in the world, along with Turkey, China, and Saudi Arabia. Perhaps the most stunning example of jailing a guest was that of Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh, founder of the Strong Egypt Party and a 2012 presidential candidate, who was arrested in February 2018 when he returned to Egypt after criticizing Sisi during an interview abroad with Al Jazeera. He has been detained ever since and is reportedly **accused of** “inciting violence and chaos through anti-state media outlets, joining an outlawed organization, and harming the state’s reputation.” Aboul Fotouh **has been also placed** on the terrorism list.

- Charges often are applied based on social media activity by prominent people; actor Amr Waked, for example, [was convicted in absentia](#) of “insulting state institutions and spreading false news,” apparently due to his tweets, and subsequently has faced various forms of harassment such as refusal to renew his expired passport. The Egyptian Actors Union [expelled Waked](#) and fellow actor Khaled Abol Naga in March 2019 after they spoke at a public event in Washington, DC, decrying the lack of political freedom in Egypt.

Legal Measures to Track or Control Exiles

In the summer of 2018, the Ministry of Immigration [announced efforts](#) to find and record statistics, including names, of the Egyptian expatriate community under the Egyptian Expatriate Database Project. The ministry also used its bureaucratic tools to hold forums for Egyptians abroad and encourage support for official policies and decisions. One example was the Forum for Egyptians Abroad, [held in the summer of 2018](#) in Cairo, which had the additional goal of encouraging investments from Egyptian businesspeople living outside Egypt. The Egyptian government [has submitted drafts](#) of various laws to the parliament, such as the Communities Bill, which the parliamentary Committee on Foreign Relations discussed in the summer of 2018, but has not been brought up since then.

Harassment

The Egyptian government has systematically utilized its repressive tools to rein in exiled dissidents while also targeting media professionals and others active in the Egyptian opposition.

- Examples have included refusal to renew the passports of opposition members, [prosecuting or imposing penalties](#) on them in absentia, and, in some cases, threatening their families with prosecution and imprisonment. One high-profile case has been [the prosecution of Amal Fathy](#), the wife of Egyptian-Swiss human rights activist [Mohammed Lotfy](#). His organization, the [Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms](#), [has been active](#) in advocacy abroad. Fathy was prosecuted for “fake news” and “belonging to an illegal organization” after she posted a video complaining of sexual harassment. She was imprisoned for much of 2018, and as of 2019 has been under house arrest.
- Extralegal measures often include pressure on the families of journalists, rights activists, or other prominent people in exile. Other exiles report other forms of harassment, for example, their family members in Egypt have been threatened with losing employment or their houses were broken into.

Conclusion

Egyptians have gone into political exile—sometimes self-imposed, sometimes by coercion due to discrimination, impending imprisonment, or threats of harm—in large numbers since 2011 and particularly after mid-2013. Many arrived in exile traumatized by discrimination, violence, imprisonment, or torture. Some spent months hiding or on the run, unsure whether the Egyptian government could still reach them or their loved ones. Many Egyptian exiles (whether Copts, Muslim Brothers, or secular activists) have struggled to find a place of legal residency and some form of employment.

Nearly all suffered from the deep social and political polarization in Egypt, and did not know whom they could trust. Even once-cohesive networks, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, were subject to new divisions in exile as members argued about why the post-Mubarak transition failed so abysmally and what should be done now. Secular activists and human rights defenders have continued to eye the Brotherhood with mistrust, especially as the movement has failed to offer a critical account of its role in the failed democratic transition from 2011 to 2013. Meanwhile, members and supporters of the Brotherhood have not forgotten the role of secular groups, liberal and leftist alike, in supporting the army takeover of politics in the summer of 2013 and in some cases justifying the bloody repression that followed. Egyptian Copts, who left fearing discrimination by Islamists, have been adamant about avoiding any contacts with the Brotherhood or other groups after their negative experiences. These circumstances have kept Egyptians abroad divided into small social and ideological networks within which they felt reasonably safe, preventing the emergence of broadly shared exile efforts.

More than seven years after the January revolution, five years after the military coup, and with repression continuing to deepen inside the country, Egyptians in political exile now face painful choices. Will they give up on their dreams for a freer Egypt and build permanent lives in exile? Will they remain engaged, watching for signs of a potential new opening, or even step outside their siloes and work together to offer an alternative vision for their home country? All of these choices offer certain comforts, and bear certain costs.

About the Authors

Michele Dunne is the director and a senior fellow in Carnegie’s Middle East Program, where her research focuses on political and economic change in Arab countries, particularly Egypt, as well as U.S. policy in the Middle East. She was the founding director of the Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East at the Atlantic Council from 2011 to 2013 and was a senior associate and editor of the Arab Reform Bulletin at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace from 2006 to 2011.

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Notes

- ¹ Among prominent current or former Brotherhood members who left after 2013 are former ministers Amr Darrag and Yehia Hamed, as well as former members of parliament Gamal Heshmat and Yehia Hamed.
- ² Author conversations with Frontline Defenders and EuroMediterranean Human Rights Network, March 15, 2019.
- ³ Turkey said the deportation was in error, and launched an investigation into the police officers.
- ⁴ Among prominent intellectuals who have left since 2013 are well-known writers such as novelist Ezzedine Choukry Fishere, screenwriter Belal Fadl, political theorist Heba Raouf Ezzat, and historian Khaled Fahmy; performers such as satirist Bassem Youssef, actors Khaled Abol Naga and Amr Waked; broadcast journalists such as Liliane Daoud (Lebanese but a prominent anchor in Egypt), Yosri Foda, Azzaa al-Hennawy, and Wael Qandil; and human rights defenders such as Bahey Eddin Hassan, Nancy Okail, Ahmed Samih, and Hend Nafea.
- ⁵ Rabaa TV, Misr al-An, al-Thawra, and Ahrar 25 were other outlets that closed down due to funding problems or unwillingness by satellite companies to carry their content, some of which was considered incendiary. A few others—Watan and Da’wah—still exist.
- ⁶ The Arab Organization for Human Rights and Egyptian Organization for Human Rights (both were independent before 2013) as well as Maat for Peace, Development, and Human Rights have been particularly active in this regard, along with a few other groups.



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