

Advocacy dossier

Ahmed Samir Santawy

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At liberty **Egypt**

Ahmed Samir Santawy is a researcher on reproductive rights and Central European University graduate who was imprisoned from 2021 to 2022 over social media posts and released by presidential pardon. He remains barred from leaving Egypt under a prosecution travel ban issued in April 2026.

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The case at a glance

Ahmed Samir Santawy is a researcher on reproductive rights and Central European University graduate who was imprisoned from 2021 to 2022 over social media posts and released by presidential pardon. He remains barred from leaving Egypt under a prosecution travel ban issued in April 2026.

Status	Arrested	Country
At liberty	**1 Feb 2021**	**Egypt**

Sentence: Four years in prison and a fine of 500 Egyptian pounds (approximately 27 Euros).

Charges:
Joining a terrorist organization
Deliberately spreading false news and data
Using a social media account to spread false news
Funding a terrorist organization
Spreading false news from outside the country about the internal situation

What we ask

We call on the authorities to:

01 Immediately lift the travel ban imposed on Ahmed Samir Santawy and on any family members affected by the same order.

02 Restore valid travel documents and remove any border-watch flags placed in connection with peaceful human rights work.

03 Comply with the ICCPR Article 12 guarantee of freedom of movement.

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Documented violations

Each violation and the international standard it breaks.

Arbitrary detention International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 9

Criminalisation of solidarity International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Articles 21, 22
UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, Article 5

Enforced disappearance International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, Article 2
International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Articles 9, 16

Inhumane detention conditions International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 10
UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (Nelson Mandela Rules)

Judicial harassment UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, Articles 9, 12

Prolonged pretrial detention International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 9(3)

Torture Convention against Torture, Articles 1, 2
International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 7

Unfair trial International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 14

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How the case unfolded

23 January 2021

Home raid

Family home raided by armed police

On 23 January 2021, seven masked and armed policemen raided Ahmed Samir Santawy's family home when he was not there

23 January 2021

Summons

Told to report to the National Security Agency

instructed for Ahmed Samir Santawy to present himself to the National Security Agency (NSA)

February 2021

Solitary confinement imposed

Held in solitary confinement

he has been held in solitary confinement

February 2021

Detention conditions and health

Held in a cold cell without adequate clothing

in a cold cell without access to adequate clothing and bedding

February 2021

Interrogation

Questioned about his research

During his initial arrest, National Security Agency officers also questioned him about his research work.

1 February 2021

Arrest

Arrested during visit to Egypt

Ahmed Samir Santawy was arrested on 1 February 2021 during a visit to Egypt. He was held incommunicado until 6 February, with no contact with family or legal counsel.

1 February 2021

Start of enforced disappearance

Forcibly disappeared until 6 February

subjected him to an enforced disappearance until 6 February

1 February 2021

Torture and ill-treatment

Beaten by National Security officers

He said that during this period NSA officials beat him, including by slapping him on the face and punching him in the stomach, while handcuffed and blindfolded, at the Fifth Settlement Police Station.

6 February 2021

Charge filed

First appearance before State Security Prosecutor

Ahmed appeared before the State Security Prosecutor and was formally charged with joining a terrorist organization, spreading false news, and using social media to disseminate false information in Case 65/2021. He reported ill-treatment during his interrogation on 1 February.

6 February 2021

Pretrial detention ordered

Remanded in pre-trial detention and transferred to Liman Tora Prison

Ahmed was remanded to pre-trial detention and transferred to Liman Tora Prison, south of Cairo. He reported very poor detention conditions upon transfer.

23 February 2021

Hearing

Additional charge of funding terrorism

The Supreme State Security Prosecution brought a new charge against Ahmed of funding a terrorist organization, citing alleged new evidence from the National Security Agency. Ahmed again reported ill-treatment and poor detention conditions during the hearing.

22 May 2021

Investigation opened

Second investigation opened

The Supreme State Security Prosecution opened a new criminal investigation against Ahmed under Case 774/2021, based on social media posts he allegedly wrote from outside Egypt about the country's internal situation.

22 May 2021

Referral to trial

Referred to an emergency court

referred him to trial in front of an emergency court

22 June 2021

Conviction

Emergency court sentences to four years

The Misdemeanours Emergency State Security Court convicted Ahmed and sentenced him to four years in prison and a fine of 500 Egyptian pounds on charges of spreading false news from outside the country. The verdict is not subject to appeal.

23 June 2021

Hunger strike begins

Began hunger strike in protest

Ahmed began a hunger strike in Liman Tora Prison to protest the emergency court's verdict and his ongoing arbitrary detention.

December 2021

Transfer between places of detention

Moved to Mazraet Tora Prison

before being moved to Mazraet Tora Prison in December 2021

30 July 2022

Release

Released by presidential pardon

Santawy was released from prison after a presidential pardon.

30 July 2022

Pardon

Presidential pardon

He was pardoned by presidential decree and released the same day.

27 August 2022

Travel ban imposed

Travel ban imposed

Despite the pardon, immigration officers prevented Santawy from returning to his master's studies at the Central European University in Vienna.

June 2023

Travel ban imposed

Stopped again at Cairo airport

Cairo International Airport officials again prevented him from travelling to Austria to resume his studies.

15 September 2023

Defender activity

Completes his master's degree remotely

Barred from travelling, he defended his thesis remotely from Cairo and graduated from the Central European University.

April 2026

Travel ban lifted

Court annuls the Interior Ministry travel ban

The Supreme Administrative Court annulled the travel ban imposed at the request of a security body, citing his constitutional right to freedom of movement.

16 April 2026

Travel ban imposed

Prosecution imposes a new travel ban

Soon after the court ruling, the Public Prosecution imposed a new travel ban on him in connection with Case 65 of 2021, so he still cannot leave Egypt.

5 July 2026

Other act

Amnesty urgent action on his travel ban

Amnesty International issued an urgent action calling on the Public Prosecutor to revoke the travel bans on him, lawyer Mohamed El-Baqer and three current and former staff of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, and to drop outstanding charges and investigations against them.

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The full story

Update, 12 November 2026: Ahmed Samir Santawy is free but cannot leave Egypt. After the Supreme Administrative Court annulled the Interior Ministry's travel ban on him, the Public Prosecution issued a new ban on 16 April 2026 in Supreme State Security Case No. 65 of 2021, and on 5 July 2026 Amnesty International issued an urgent action calling for it to be revoked, alongside the bans on lawyer Mohamed El-Baqer and staff of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights. No decision on the new ban has been reported since.

Background and Academic Work

Ahmed Samir Santawy was enrolled in the master's program in Sociology and Social Anthropology at the Central European University in Vienna at the time of his arrest. His research centered on women's reproductive rights in Egypt, with particular attention to the history of access to safe and legal medical treatment. His work examined how legal frameworks and health policy affect women's autonomy and survival, documenting the barriers women face in obtaining reproductive healthcare.

Ahmed's scholarship placed him within a field of study that Egyptian authorities have increasingly treated with suspicion. Research on gender, rights, and civil society has become grounds for surveillance and prosecution, particularly when conducted by students with international academic affiliations. Ahmed was one of several researchers and students targeted in recent years under vague national-security pretexts.

Arrest and Enforced Disappearance

Ahmed was arrested on 1 February 2021 during a visit to Egypt. He was held incommunicado until 6 February 2021. No information about his whereabouts or legal status reached his family or legal representatives during that period. On 6 February 2021, he was brought before the State Security Prosecutor and formally charged in Case 65/2021. The charges included joining a terrorist organization, deliberately spreading false news, and using a social media account to disseminate false information. The prosecution's evidence consisted of screenshots from a Facebook account it claimed belonged to Ahmed.

Ahmed was remanded to pre-trial detention and transferred to Liman Tora Prison, south of Cairo, on the same day. During his initial hearing on 6 February, he reported to the prosecutor that he had been subjected to ill-treatment during interrogation on 1 February. He described the detention conditions at Liman Tora as very poor.

Additional Charges and Emergency Trial

On 23 February 2021, the Supreme State Security Prosecution brought an additional charge against Ahmed: funding a terrorist organization. The prosecution cited alleged new evidence obtained from the National Security Agency. During this hearing, Ahmed again reported the ill-treatment he had suffered and the severe conditions of his detention.

On 22 May 2021, the Supreme State Security Prosecution opened a second criminal investigation against Ahmed under Case 774/2021. This case was based on social media posts the authorities alleged he had written from outside Egypt about the

country's internal situation. The new charge was "spreading false news from outside the country about the internal situation."

On 22 June 2021, the Misdemeanours Emergency State Security Court convicted Ahmed and sentenced him to four years in prison and a fine of 500 Egyptian pounds. Emergency court verdicts in Egypt are not subject to appeal and take effect immediately upon presidential signature. The following day, 23 June 2021, Ahmed began a hunger strike in Liman Tora Prison to protest the sentence.

Legal Process and Violations

Ahmed's prosecution illustrates the systematic use of counter-terrorism and national-security charges to silence academic inquiry and critical expression. The charges against him, joining and funding a terrorist organization, spreading false news, are standard formulations used against journalists, researchers, activists, and students. The evidence presented consisted entirely of social media content, a pattern repeated across dozens of similar cases.

The use of an emergency state security court foreclosed any possibility of appeal. Emergency courts in Egypt operate outside the ordinary judicial system and deny defendants fundamental fair-trial guarantees. Ahmed's trial and sentencing took place while he remained in prolonged pre-trial detention, a practice Egyptian prosecutors routinely employ to punish defendants before conviction.

Ahmed's reports of ill-treatment during interrogation and poor detention conditions are consistent with documented patterns in Egypt's national-security detention facilities. Liman Tora Prison, part of the sprawling Tora complex, is known for overcrowding, inadequate medical care, and denial of family visits.

Context and Pattern

Ahmed Samir Santawy is not the only international student Egypt has detained on national-security grounds. On 7 February 2020, Patrick Zaki, a master's student at the University of Bologna and a researcher with the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, was arrested at Cairo airport upon his return from Italy. Patrick was allegedly tortured during interrogation and was held in pre-trial detention in Tora Prison. His case, like Ahmed's, involves charges of spreading false news and incitement, based on his academic work and online expression.

The targeting of international students reflects a broader climate in which Egypt's security services treat foreign academic affiliation, human rights research, and critical scholarship as inherently suspect. Students returning home for visits, researchers conducting fieldwork, and academics corresponding with Egyptian colleagues have all faced arrest, interrogation, and prolonged detention. The pattern suggests a deliberate policy to sever Egypt's academic and civil society communities from international networks.

Latest updates on this case Scan the code or visit: https://humena.org/defenders/ahmed-samir-santawy/

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