Punishment by Proxy in Egypt: Families of Exiled Journalists, Activists and Human Rights Defenders Held Hostage by the Authorities

Joint Statements · Egypt · 10 November 2025

The undersigned organizations express their deep concern over the escalating pattern of *"punishment by proxy"* employed by the Egyptian authorities, which has only intensified in recent months. This years-long practice involves targeting relatives inside Egypt of activists, writers, and dissidents living abroad through raids, arrests, and enforced disappearances, in an attempt to pressure or punish them for their peaceful opinions and activities.

These practices constitute a **flagrant violation of fundamental human rights**, notably the right to liberty and security of person, respect for private and family life, and protection from all forms of collective punishment and retaliation.

On **22 October 2025**, National Security Agency officers arrested **Sobhy Eid (63)**, the father of podcast host **Seif al-Islam Eid**, from his home in the Al-Mandara district of Alexandria. He was taken to an undisclosed location after security forces raided, on the same day, the family's house in Kafr al-Dawwar and the home of his 82-year-old father-in-law. During the raids, relatives were questioned about Seif's activities abroad. Eid was **forcibly disappeared for three days** before appearing on **25 October** before the **Supreme State Security Prosecution**, which ordered his **pretrial detention** pending case no. **6468/2025** on charges of *joining and financing a banned group*, without allowing him access to his lawyer or family during the period of disappearance.

Seif al-Islam Eid hosts Anbar Kollo Yesma ("Everyone in the Cell Must Hear"), the first Egyptian podcast to document life inside the country's prisons after 2013 through testimonies from former detainees. He also contributes to several independent media outlets. He believes that his father's arrest was retaliation for a recent podcast episode featuring a former political prisoner detailing his experience of torture inside Egypt's most secretive detention facility, Al-Azouly Prison.

Eid had previously been arrested on **30 April 2025** and held for **18 days**, during which he was questioned about his son's activities abroad, before being released without charge. This repeated targeting reflects the continuing use of retaliatory family-based repression, whereby relatives of activists are detained and interrogated about the work of their family members living abroad, in blatant violation of their fundamental freedoms.

This case is not an isolated incident. In May 2025, Sayed Khamis appeared before the Public Prosecution after three weeks of enforced disappearance, following his arrest without legal basis due to the human-rights work of his brother living overseas. His other brother, Shaaban Khamis,

was also briefly detained before being released on health grounds.

In an earlier incident, security forces arrested the father of journalist Ahmed Gamal Ziada in August 2023 and held him for several days before his release, in what rights groups described as a clear act of reprisal against his son's journalistic work and outspoken criticism from abroad.

In a similar case, the Egyptian authorities targeted the relatives of human rights defender Mohamed Soltan, raiding family homes and arresting several members in 2020, in an apparent attempt to pressure him after he filed a lawsuit in U.S. courts against former Egyptian officials. In 2025, violations against his father, Dr Salah Soltan, who remains in detention in one of Egypt's prisons, escalated as he was subjected to harsh treatment and deliberate medical neglect, believed to be in retaliation for his son's human rights work abroad.

Similarly, journalist and researcher Abdelrahman Ayyash was referred to trial in absentia before terrorism circuits in September 2024, due to his journalistic and human rights work from exile. Several members of his family inside Egypt were also subjected to harassment and unlawful summonses linked to his activities, as part of a systematic policy of punishing activists through their relatives.

In 2020, security forces arrested four relatives of Egyptian TV presenter Hisham Abdallah, who has been living in exile in Turkey. Three of them are currently facing politically motivated charges before terrorism courts. Hassiba Mahsoub, the sister of a former Minister of Parliamentary Affairs under former President Mohamed Morsi, has remained in arbitrary detention since January 2020. Authorities recently referred her to trial on "terrorism" charges, after she had already exceeded the two-year legal limit for pretrial detention. Her trial began in October 2024.

These families continue to face repeated raids, confiscation of property, and arbitrary dismissals from public employment, as part of a broader pattern of systematic retaliation against the relatives of activists, journalists, and political opponents. Several women have also been banned from travel and had their passports confiscated as they attempted to leave the country to perform Umrah or Hajj, or to visit relatives abroad. Some were later summoned unlawfully to National Security premises and interrogated about their relatives living in exile.

During 2024 and 2025, the Egyptian Human Rights Forum (EHRF) documented at least 12 cases of *punishment by proxy* against the relatives of Egyptian activists, journalists, and human rights defenders living abroad. The data shows that Egyptian authorities have come to treat family ties as extensions of political control, using detention and harassment as tools to silence critical voices abroad by inflicting harm on their relatives at home, reflecting a dangerous form of transnational retaliation.

The undersigned organizations call on the Egyptian authorities to:

- Immediately and unconditionally release Mr Sobhy Eid, Sayed Khamis, and all other victims of proxy punishment.
- End all acts of retaliation against the families of activists, writers, and dissidents, and disclose

the whereabouts of all those subjected to enforced disappearance.

- Conduct independent and transparent investigations into violations committed by the National Security Agency and hold those responsible to account.

The continued use of families as instruments of political punishment constitutes a serious breach of legal and moral norms, underscoring how Egyptian authorities are repressing not only exiled activists and human rights defenders but also their relatives and social circles back home.

SIGNATORIES:

1. Egyptian Human Rights Forum (EHRF)
2. Law and Democracy Support Foundation (LDSF)
3. Digital Democracy Now
4. Refugees' platform in Egypt
5. El Nadeim Center
6. Sinai Foundation for Human Rights (SFHR)
7. EgyptWide for Human Rights
8. World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders
9. International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), within the framework of the Observatory for the Protection of Human Rights Defenders
10. Middle East Democracy Center (MEDC)
11. REDWORD for Human Rights & Freedom of Expression
12. Egyptian Front for Human Rights
13. PEN America
14. Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)
15. EuroMed Rights Network
16. Egyptian Commission for Rights and Freedoms (ECRF)
17. Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR)
18. Cairo Institute For Human Rights Studies
19. HuMENA for Human Rights and Civic Engagement

Published at https://humena.org/egypt-punishment-by-proxy-families-hostage-2025/
HuMENA for Human Rights and Civic Engagement · info@humena.org