

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC STATEMENT

2 December 2020 MDE 12/3419/2020

EGYPT: MACRON TO RECEIVE AL-SISI ON HEELS OF REPRESSION: END UNCONDITIONAL SUPPORT

French President Emmanuel Macron should strongly press Egypt's President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi to address human rights violations before his upcoming visit to Paris, particularly to release arbitrarily detained activists and human rights defenders, 17 organizations said today.

President al-Sisi is scheduled to arrive in Paris on 7 December 2020, for a two-day visit, just three weeks after his government's security agencies cracked down on the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), one of the last remaining independent human rights organizations in the country, arresting three of its directors. The arrests were apparently in direct retaliation for the EIPR meeting with foreign diplomats, including the French mission in Cairo, in early November. Egypt has also arbitrarily detained Ramy Shaath, a prominent Egyptian-Palestinian human rights defender married to a French national, for over a year without trial.

French diplomacy has, at the highest levels, long indulged President al-Sisi's brutal repression of any form of dissent. It is now or never for President Macron to stand up for his self-declared commitment to promote human rights in Egypt.

If Egypt does not release arbitrarily detained activists and defenders ahead of the visit, and those who unjustly imprison them are rewarded with arms deals and praise, the implication for what is left of Egypt's human rights community would be devastating and President Macron's commitment to human rights in Egypt would be undermined, the groups said.

Between 15 and 19 November, Egyptian security forces arrested the EIPR executive director Gasser Abdel-Razek, and Karim Ennarah and Mohamed Basheer, the group's criminal justice and administrative directors respectively. Prosecutors have ordered their pretrial detention pending investigations on abusive terrorism-related charges stemming only from their human rights work.

These latest detentions mark another escalation in the Egyptian authorities' campaign to eradicate the human rights movement in Egypt, ranging from asset freezes and travel bans to enforced disappearances and torture, and prolonged arbitrary detention in abysmal conditions amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has sounded the alarm, situating the newest arrests within "a broader pattern of intimidating organizations defending human rights and of the use of counter-terrorism and national security legislation to silence dissent," leading to "a profound chilling effect on an already weakened Egyptian civil society."¹ The retaliatory nature of these arrests has been publicly recognized and denounced across Europe and the United States of America.²

Receiving President al-Sisi on an official visit while not adequately raising concerns as so many activists and human rights defenders are detained over their human rights work, many on abusive "terrorism" charges and some even added to "terrorist lists", would sabotage France's own efforts to promote human rights within its partnership with Egypt and undermine France's credibility in many countries in the region, the groups said.

¹ United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, *Press briefing note on Egypt-detention of human rights defenders*, 20 November 2020, www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26523&LangID=E

² Federal Foreign Office, *Federal Government Commissioner for Human Rights Policy and Humanitarian Assistance on Egypt*, (Press Release, 20 November 2020), www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/commissioner-for-human-rights-policy-and-humanitarian-assistance-egypt/2419262

France's Foreign Ministry condemned the EIPR arrests in a 17 November statement, saying it maintained "a frank, exacting dialogue with Egypt on human rights issues." But if France's responses stop at verbal condemnation and do not rise to the seriousness of the situation in Egypt, such condemnations are meaningless. Human rights organizations have documented years of the consequences of the lack of concrete action on the increased scale and grave nature of human rights violations in Egypt and the authorities' boldness in shredding the rule of law.

Moreover, for President Macron to receive President al-Sisi in France repeatedly without Egypt releasing activists and human rights defenders, and in fact arresting more of them, would contradict significant voices within Macron's own political movement. Of the 66 French parliament members from across the political spectrum who signed a recent cross-European public letter calling on President al-Sisi to release prisoners of conscience, the majority were from President Macron's party, La République en Marche; a noteworthy number sit on Defense and Foreign Affairs Committees.³

A recent French parliamentary report on French arms sales⁴ also stresses the reputational damage and increasing political cost that France will most likely incur for continued arms and surveillance technology sales to Egypt, recognizing the country's dismal rights record and credible reports of its use of French arms for violent repression of protests and in crimes committed in the context of counter-terrorism operations in Sinai including extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances and arbitrary arrests.

France has sold many weapons to Egypt, overtaking the US to become Egypt's main arms supplier between 2013 and 2017. In 2017 alone, it delivered more than EUR 1.4 billion worth of military and security equipment. France has provided warships, fighter jets, and armored vehicles, while French companies – with the government's approval - have provided surveillance and crowd control tools, with little transparency and without adequate monitoring of the end use of these weapons supplied to the military and police involved in serious violations.

With this visit, France has an opportunity and duty to take a strong public position in line with the values President Macron asserted during his January 2019 visit to Cairo, and to signal to his Egyptian counterpart that the same level of international cooperation cannot be maintained against the backdrop of the Egyptian authorities' flouting of international law, including the unprecedented assault on one of the most prominent human rights organizations in Egypt and the values it represents.

President Macron has long justified his support to President al-Sisi's government by saying it is a partner in the regional fight against terrorism. But Egypt has made it crystal clear that it misuses counter-terrorism legislations to stamp out legitimate human rights work and uproot any peaceful opposition.

List of Signatories:

1. ACAT-France
2. Amnesty International
3. ANKH (Arab Network for Knowledge about Human Rights)
4. Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies (CIHRS)
5. The Egyptian Human Rights Forum (EHRF)
6. EuroMed Rights
7. The Franco-Egyptian Initiative for Human Rights and Freedoms (IFEDL)
8. The Freedom Initiative
9. Front Line Defenders
10. Human Rights Watch (HRW)
11. International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH)

³ Mireille Clapot, *Appeal from French and European parliamentarians for the release of prisoners of conscience in Egypt* (In French), 21 October 2020, www.mireilleclapot.fr/actualites/articles/appele-de-parlementaires-francais-et-europeens-a-la-liberation-des-prisonniers-d-opinion-en-egypte

⁴ National Assembly, *Control of arms exports* (In French), 18 November 2020, www.assemblee-nationale.fr/dyn/15/dossiers/alt/controle_des_exportations_darmement

12. Ligue des Droits de l'Homme (LDH)
13. MENA Rights Group
14. Project on Middle East Democracy (POMED)
15. Reprive
16. Saferworld
17. World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT)