

# Torture in Egypt

Basma M. Abdel Aziz, M.Psych., M.Neur.\*

## Abstract

This article is concerned with the increasing prevalence of torture in Egypt. Torture is a widespread problem in Egypt, being practiced in the majority of police stations and state security places. It has become a routine practice and is seen daily on a systematic basis. The number of people who are subjected every month to torture is unimaginable. In addition, there are deaths that occur as a result of the torture. However, the Egyptian government does not give clear answers about the issue. Everyone could be exposed to torture, and for different, illogic reasons. The case of Bany Mazar is a horribly clarifying one. The unclear political situation and the absence of democracy play the main role in the highly increasing rate of torture in Egypt.

*Key words:* torture methods, Egypt, El Shariia, police, prison

## Introduction

One of the Amnesty International reports is concerned about torture practice in Egypt, issued on the 28th of February, 2001, notes that over the two past decades (1980s,

1990s) thousands of detainees have been subjected to torture and ill-treatment in Egypt.<sup>1</sup> In May 1996 the UN Committee against Torture stated that it had received information on torture allegations mainly through reports of the UN special rapporteur on torture, AI, and the World Organization against Torture (Organisation Mondial Contre Torture, OMCT). The committee further noted that its requests to conduct a visit to Egypt had received no reply. A conclusion made by the UN special rapporteur is that "torture is systematically practiced by the security forces in Egypt, in particular the state security intelligence, since in spite of denials of the government, the allegations of torture submitted by reliable, non governmental organizations consistently indicate that reported cases of torture are seen to be habitual, widespread and deliberate in at least a considerable part of the country."<sup>1-3</sup>

## Examining prevalence of torture in Egypt

Over the last two decades, NGOs working in the field of human rights have documented thousands of torture cases in police stations, prisons and state security headquarters (Table 1). Meanwhile the human rights center for the assistance of prisoners (HRCPA) monitored 1124 torture cases in prisons (El Nadeem).<sup>4</sup>

\*)  
48, Mohamed Farid St.  
Heliopolis  
Cairo  
Egypt  
basabisso@yahoo.com

The Legal Aid Center reported about 100s case of torture between 1994 and 1995.

The Egyptian organization for human rights has documented in its annual reports<sup>5-7</sup> the continuation of torture and ill-treatment of prisoners being widespread in the majority of the Egyptian prisons, especially that of El Wady el Gedid and Abou Za'abal.

In addition to torture and ill-treatment, the absence of adequate medical care and the bad conditions of prisons led, for example, to the death of eight prisoners within the year 1999.<sup>6</sup>

In Table 2 the numbers of torture cases and deaths in 2000-2004 can be seen.

However, the report mentions that these cases are only a limited sample chosen from hundreds of other cases. The other cases the organization was informed about have not been documented for different technical reasons.<sup>8</sup>

The Egyptian Association Against Torture (EAAT) reported the death of seven persons under torture, in addition to another 38 persons who underwent torture in different police stations and state security intelligence. All of these came to be victims within only 50 days, that is to say one death

per week and approximately one live victim every one and a half days.<sup>9</sup>

Discussing systematic torture in Egypt, El Nadeem<sup>4</sup> assumes that the exact number of torture victims is in reality several times more than what has been revealed as many victims could not report on officials who tortured them. The simplest of these reasons is the fear of police threats to re-arrest and torture them and their families all over again if they dare to come forward. Sometimes if the victims try to put forth a complaint or report what happened, police authority would frame them for crimes they did not commit.

### Review of torture methods used in Egypt

Methods used to induce this suffering are either physical, like beating, or psychological, like threats. These methods are applied

**Table 2.** *The reported torture cases and deaths.*<sup>8</sup>

Year	Torture cases	Death under torture
2000	13 victims	10 victims
2001	14 victims	7 victims
2002	12 victims	12 victims
2003	45 victims	13 victims
2004 till April	24 victims	2 victims

**Table 1.** *Deaths under torture as reported by El Nadeem Center between 1994 and 2000, could be summarized as follows.*<sup>4</sup>

Name	Place of torture	Date of death
F. EB. AM.	Helwan PS	16/8/1994
R. A. M. A..	Misir Qadima PS	31/10/1994
A. I. M.		15/8/1995
A. AH. A,	Mansoura PS	6/6/1996
M. ED., M. ET. S. A. S. A.	Coast Guard PS., Port Said	6/1996
M. H. M.	Police Patrol, Kafr Al Dawar	7/1996
M. I. O. A.Z.	Mansoura PS	7/1996
S. A. B.	Al-Zawiah AL-Hamra PS	16/8/1996
M. S. AE.	Helwan PS	27/8/1996
A. M. M. T.	Omranniya PS	31/7/1999
R. S.	Fayoum PS	14/2/1999
M. A. A.	Giza PS	3/2000

PS = police station.

through specific techniques, and aim at achieving and serving the torturer's goals whatever they are.

According to the report of El Nadeem Center,<sup>4</sup> the methods used in incarceration places as described by 272 victims who visited the Center between 1993 and 2001 are:

- 1) *Beating*: constitutes the first reception ritual awaiting the victims, it is usually called "reception party".
  - Three victims died from beating on testicles while one victim had an abortion.
- 2) *Suspension*: constitutes one of the commonest methods used in police stations and jails where the victim becomes totally incapacitated.
  - Twenty-seven victims have been subjected to suspension. Most of them have suffered partial or total tearing of the nervous plexuses with the resultant motor and sensory deficits.
- 3) *Spraying icy water on the body*: ice logs may also be placed on the victim's chest.
  - Most victims were subjected to this method.
- 4) *Sexual abuse, rape*: used against both men and women, where the victim is first forced to take off her/his clothes. Clothes and parts of the body are described with obscene words while touching sensitive parts.
  - Forty-three victims were subjected to this kind of torture.
  - Seven women among them were stripped and abused by words and touch.
  - Seven have been threatened by rape.
  - One woman was actually raped.
  - One man was exposed to violently squeezing the scrotum.
- 5) *Deprivation*: the most common way is to blindfold the victim.
  - Almost all cases were subjected to blindfolding.
- 6) *Humiliation*: including verbal abuse, ridiculing the victim and her/his body, calling them humiliating names that violate their dignity and their parents and family.
  - Almost all victims were subjected to this kind of torture.
- 7) *Electric shock*: frequently electrodes are connected to genitals.
  - Thirty-six victims were subjected to the electric torture.
- 8) *Unsanitary conditions*: keeping large numbers of people in very small rooms, which are not well ventilated, dirty and dark.
  - Most victims have been subjected to these conditions.
- 9) *Threats of harming the victim's family*.
  - Twenty-four cases were subjected to these threats.
  - In eight cases the threats were actual carried out.
- 10) *Watching torture of other victims*: that might be a family member (spouse, mother, father ...).
  - Eight cases were subjected to this method.
- 11) *Dragging on the floor*.
  - Eight cases were subjected to this method.
  - One of them was dragged from his home to the police station.
- 12) *Forcing the hands into extremely hot water*: resulting in the skinning of hands
  - One victim was exposed to this method.
- 13) *Breaking bones*:
  - Four cases suffered broken bones as a result of beating.
- 14) *Burning*: by cigarettes or red hot metal tool.
  - Nine victims were subjected to this method.

- Four among them had deep burns complicated by infections.
- One victim was burnt by pouring kerosene on his body and setting him on fire.<sup>4</sup>

#### **M. Ali – 29/12/2005**

A young man who lived in one of the Egyptian villages was working as a farmer. He lived with his old parents and had two married sisters and two brothers.

One day a horrible murder occurred in the village, three families (ten persons) were killed during sleep and their genitals were cut. Each family lived in a separate house.

Nobody heard or witnessed anything around the houses, however M. Ali was accused of this crime. He was detained and tortured to confess, but he did not confess except when the officers brought his family and started to torture them ... they took first his father and sister, who left an infant behind her, then they took his mother ... starting to torture the family, M. Ali accepted to say whatever they wanted him to say ... officers offered his father a “generous” offer: (on condition M. confesses, we will prove that he is insane, admit him to a mental hospital and then he will be discharged)...

M. Ali confessed under both physical and psychological torture and was trained by detectives how to jump and to play the role of an assassinator. He was then admitted to a mental hospital where he was tied to the bed for about 100 days.

Some activists knew about the story and a case of torture was raised up in front of the persecutor general.

The medical report of the mental hospital proved that M. Ali is not insane; he has no mental illness at all.

At the beginning of September the court started to look into the case and after a few days M. Ali was judged innocent despite his

confession, because of the marked contradictions in the intelligence story. However, the whole family is still suffering severe harassment guided by the officers who tortured M. and who apparently decided to revenge the refusal of M.’s family to scarify their son.

The illogic horrible context M. had been through prevented him from seeking psychological help immediately. He chose to be isolated for a period of time. His first visit to El Nadeem Center was in 2000. Months after the first interview he preferred to write his story rather than to verbally express it.

#### **Discussion**

An understanding of why torture is practiced in Egypt may be obtained by the ideals of the Egyptian regime and what this ideology is fighting for while torturing.

In this context we may observe that Egypt is passing through a period of imbalance and disturbance. The target is not communism, nor socialism, nor liberalism, nor even the Islamic ideology. Egypt is hosting a mixture of many ideologies that reflect themselves in many aspects of life. One profound example is the presence of (Article 59) of the Egyptian Constitution,<sup>10</sup> which states that the protection, support and maintenance of the “socialist” gains are a national duty; and (Article 73), in which the President of the Republic is also expected to protect socialist gains. Those articles are still present, while the actual state policy is clearly directed towards privatisation and market economy.

A further contradiction is the following: while the state confiscates books under pressure of Islamists and maintains that Islam is the “official” religion of the state and that “El Shariaa” is the main source of legislating laws (Article 2), we find the cover of a weekly “official” state-owned magazine carrying an advertisement for alcoholic drinks

in many successive volumes.<sup>11,12</sup> In this context, Egyptian prisons and detention centres host 20,000 detainees, most of whom are kept illegally under the pretext of being Islamists.<sup>13</sup>

This mixture of ideologies leads in turn to a vague identification of the in-group and the out-group, i.e. the “enemy” and the “friend”. From this perspective, state violence and torture are not restricted to or directed toward certain groups, but, as reported, Islamists are tortured as well as communists, socialists, criminals, poor people, human rights defenders, anti-war people, and suspects, thus creating another heterogeneous mixture, this time composed of victims.

The enemy is considered to be anyone who is not clearly belonging to the system, who is not supported by the regime.

This lack of “system” results in a confusion regarding what one should or should not do to avoid becoming a victim. The result is a people who appear as “passive” to the outside observer.

Power and authority pose two deeply different meanings. While power refers to the absolute illegitimate force, authority carries the legitimate right to command others.<sup>14</sup> What in fact dominates the political life in Egypt is certainly the absolute power and not the authority, given that much of the police practices are in violation of the Constitution and the law.

## References

1. Torture remains rife as cries for justice go unheeded. Amnesty International, Egypt, 2001. AI index: MDE 12/001/2001.
2. No protection – systematic torture continues. Amnesty International, Egypt, 2002. AI index: MDE 12/031/2002.
3. Report of the committee against torture, July 1996. United Nations, 1996. Supplement No. 44(A/51/44).
4. Torture in Egypt, facts and testimonies. El Nadeem Center for Psychological Management and Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence, 2003.
5. Human rights state in Egypt. The Annual Report of 1998. The Egyptian Organization for Human Rights, 1999.
6. Human rights state in Egypt. The Annual Report of 1999-2000. The Egyptian Organization for Human Rights, 2001.
7. Human rights state in Egypt. The Annual report of 2002. The Egyptian Organization for Human Rights, 2003.
8. Torture in Egypt -- a phenomenon without restraint. The 12th report. The Egyptian Organization for Human Rights, 2004.
9. Egyptian Association against Torture. Statement: stop torture now. El Nadeem Center, 2004.
10. The Egyptian constitution. El Matabe El Amirreya, 1971.
11. Rose El Yossef 2003 (a national Egyptian magazine). No. 3915, No. 3916. Cover.
12. Rose El Yossef 2004. No. 3956. No. 3964, No. 3966, No. 3975. Cover.
13. The annual report of 2003. Human Rights Center for the Assistance of Prisoners, 2004.
14. Maritain J. Man and the state. Chicago: Phoenix Books, 1966.